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Patriarchal Hegemony and Gender Roles in Select Revisionist Texts

ABSTRACT

For ages we have been reading epics and stories that glorify patriarchal dominance and biased gender roles over the very existence of some of the strongest women in mythology in the hands of male dominated writing. Whether Valmiki or Veda Vyasa have portrayed some of these valiant women and their sacrifices in life to safeguard the honour of their families as something that is expected from them and to be taken for granted. Women have been projected to be inferior in status and in power in these larger and powerful families be it the Raghukul or the Pandavas and Kuru family. *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* for instance has grown to layers of interpretation in the hands of recent revisionist writers; be it the voices of Sita, Draupadi or even that of Kunti and Amba. These were the voices that were given very little weighting in the writings of the earlier writers. Kunti's distress in being brought up as a princess, lived as a princess, but lived in the shadow of her father and his name Kuntibhoj or Amba whose feelings were given very little importance, be it by her father, her lover or the greatest character of the Epic-Bhishma. Writers like Devdutt Pattanaik present the character of Sita and Draupadi, tracing their early days of being a daughter of well known and powerful kings like Janaka and Drupad, without allowing the original tale to go through too many revision from the original version or tale. However, writers like Amish Tripathi, Volga and Pratibha Ray, Sita and Draupadi take a different stand and a variant perspective of these very same characters. Thus, revisionist texts like Amish, does not hesitate to present Sita as a warrior and the minister of Mithila or Pratibha Ray projects Draupadi as one who is weary of cooking for Bhima or is threatened constantly by the presence of the different husbands and their preferences that she has to adapt herself to, admires Karna as a warrior and equal to Karna,

as the oldest but rejected son of her mother-in-law, has a soft corner for Krishna and does not hesitate to oppose her mother-in-law when it comes to her pride and esteem being hurt. While Sita and Draupadi are central characters to these Epics, other smaller characters like that of Bhanumathi, the wife of Duryodhana is given no importance, her feelings for her husband, his misdeeds and her affection and friendship with Karna is paid no relevance in the entire epic. Likewise are the feelings of Urmila, the sister to Draupadi, who is the only one who objects to Rama who accepts exile and later banishes her given no significance in the pen of the earlier writers. The feelings of Ahalya and the agony of Shanta, surfaces only in the writings of Volga and Devdutt Pattanaik. Very few are even aware of their lives, their contribution and sacrifice in the earlier versions of these Epics. Ahalya, silently but stoically opposes the judgement of society and her husband in protest for what she felt was wrong done to her. Shanta refuses to go back to the palace even though her mother and brothers come to meet her. The treatment of these characters in the hands of the earlier writers proves the existence and pre-dominance of patriarchal hegemony in varied ways. This paper is an attempt to study the feminist strands in the stories of Sita and Draupadi and their connect with the lesser known women like Ahalya and Shanta in select revisionist texts, while exploring the common strands of gender inequality and patriarchal subordination that they are subjected to. This paper studies the different phases in the lives of the most popular women characters like Sita and Draupadi as compared with the lives of the lesser known and felt for characters like Shanta and Ahalya and traces the pattern that they follow as women who go through various phases of their lives right from their birth, to their upbringing and marriage, their lives before marriage, their abduction and humiliation in the hands of society, their banishment and rejection and their ultimate effort towards freedom, reaction and fight against some of the prevalent practices of society.

Keywords: feminism, patriarchy, gender, birth, marriage, abduction, exile, anticipation, rescue, freedom

As we move back to the study and writings of the 18th century, society witnessed an organized movement of Feminism as a protest against certain social evils, such as, the practice of 'Sati', 'Child Marriage', etc. This was the time in India when Feminists demanded equality in gender roles. The growth and prominence of revisionist literature witnessed several writers like Devdutt Pattanaik, Amish Tripathi, Kavita Kane, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Volga, Shashi Deshpande and Pratibha Ray, emerging as authors, who indulged in retelling tales from *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata* as well as many other popular myths, breezing in a new voice to

the otherwise salient and suppressed women voices in classical literature and epics. In this paper, the focus is on exploring the impact of patriarchal hegemony and its impact on characters of Sita in selected texts like *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the The Ramayana* (2013) , Prathibha Ray's Draupadi from *Yagnaseni - the story of Draupadi* (1995) and Volga's interpretations of the lives of Sita, Ahalya and Shantha from *The Liberation of Sita* (2016). All of these women go through identical situations in life be it when it comes to their birth and upbringing, their marriage and the circumstances under which they are married off by their fathers, the banishment to the forests where they learn to survive in nature and support their families, the vicious eye of their abductors in the forest, thus creating a situation of glory for their spouses, empowering them indirectly to prove their power and valiance, at times at the cost of their sufferance. Finally, the paper keeps in focus the sense of freedom and silent reticence of these women as they move into a realm of their own freedom. What is noticeable and to be closely scrutinized is that the pattern not only applies to strong characters like Sita and Draupadi, but also applies to lesser known characters like that of Ahalya and Shanta in these retellings. From a Sita who was revered as a Goddess, Bhumiya and Janaki Devi to a Yagnaseni, also called fondly as Krishnaa, the female version of the Lord Krishna we trace their feelings to be similar, their lives shadowed by the men in their lives, their inner rooms that had tapestries of stories of their suppressed dreams and thoughts and feelings only to be curbed by the patriarchal society which suppressed their goodness and sacrifices. Sita's kitchen gets spoken about but not her courage and wisdom, her culinary skills take prominence in the palace, but not her knowledge in administrative and state affairs. Yagnaseni is the wise one, but has very little say in kingship and matters of the kingdom; while her docility towards the various mood swings of her husbands is emphasized upon.

Devdutt Pattanaik in *Sita* has been subtle in his treatment of women like Sita or Shanta while he traces their lives through the various poignant touch points in the novel. He draws a pattern of Sita's life as she courses through the novel by bringing into focus the princess with all her happy childhood memories and learning along with her sisters in the palace and in the gurukul, making her an equal to her Lord Rama in wisdom and warfare. Prathiba Ray's Yagnaseni has no trace of childhood memories as she emerges from the fire, but goes through her adolescence immersed in her infatuation for Krishna and her penchant for dressing and impressing him as a friend. Taking these subtle stories and tales from their lives as a point for reference, the paper explores their lives and the impact of the patriarchal world in contrast with the world that they would have otherwise created for themselves, their mission in life, their equal and parallel role

in the lives of a Rama or the Pandavas as do the characters and lives of Ahalya and Shanta who are shadowed by the men of their lives.

If Birth denotes destiny, then does mission denote sufferance

Sita is not born from a mother's womb which makes her 'ayonija' (*Sita* 10). Her story of birth begins with a destiny from Mithila where Janak had found her amidst the fields, abandoned by the mother who gave birth to her. The human Sita is saved by Sunaina from the clutches of wolves that had surrounded a solitary vulture fighting to protect this little born as per Amish Tripathi in his book *Sita, Warrior of Mithila*. From the time Sita enters the lives of Janak and Sunaina, starts the weaving of a new destiny which brings along with it sufferance as witnessed in the struggle between the vulture and the wolves. She thus grows to be a silent warrior throughout her life as she is in war with her family, with the Asuras, with the values that her husband stood for and with society. Sita's tale begins with a Janaka of Mithila who found her while ploughing the land in Devdutt Pattanaik's book. It is Janaka who finds her tender and susceptible to nature's wrath in the fields as he ploughs the land. It is patriarchal instinct in him coupled with the fact that he and his wife Sunaina had no issue in their marital life that makes him proclaim proudly that "she was found in a furrow, she who chose me to be her father." (*Sita* 10). Contrary to Sita, who embodies nature, Yagnaseni is born from the sacred flames of the fire that is a part of the sacrifice that Drupad offers in order to ask for a son who could kill Drona, his friend now turned enemy. Hers was a birth with a defined mission. She emerges from the fire after her brother Dhristadyumna. Unlike Sita, Yagnaseni does not experience childhood at all, but is born as a young girl, "sculpted by the world's greatest sculptor, with unblemished beauty of face and matching loveliness of figure." (*Yagnaseni* 7). The presence of maternal love that Sita experienced in the care of Sunaina, is missing in the life of Yagnaseni who is forever shadowed by her father's mission. Even as she dresses up as a young maid to meet Krishna, the presence of any woman amongst the wives of Drupad is missing in her life. Forever conscious of her colour and her long tresses, Yagnaseni is "blue lotus-coloured gem, dark beauty-shyama". (*Yagnaseni* 7). On the other hand, Devdutt's Sita is beautiful like a goddess, an equal to the handsome young prince Rama and is fair in skin. Sita grows up along with her sisters in the palace, in the ashram, amidst nature; while Yagnaseni's older sibling Dhristadhyumna does not even have time to spend with her or understand her feelings. She is described as "impatient as mustard seeds, spluttering in oil" (*The Palace of Illusions* 3) and is born with the mission of changing the course of history, moving the world from adharma in which the world is seeped in to dharma that will change the

destiny of mankind. Her role is to redeem the world from adharma. Drupada like Janaka becomes a father to Draupadi and both are not biological fathers to these characters. They are born with a purpose in the land of the mortals. On the other side is the story of Shanta, the biological daughter of Dashratha, the King of Ayodhya, who is given away to Rompada so that she can seduce the sage Rishyashringa and also bless Dasharatha with sons as illustrious as Rama and his brothers. So where Sita is abandoned in the forest as a child, Shanta is sacrificed happily by her father in return for his craving for sons. We seldom hear of the presence of Shanta in the lives of Rama and his brothers or that of Dasharatha. She grows to be the forgotten daughter, sacrificed so as to bring them to Earth. Ahalya is also created by Brahma as a beautiful woman like Draupadi to be married to Gautama and from there her story begins. Her life is devoid of feelings, devoid connect with her maternal home and to be lived as a curse. All these four women go through the same pattern in birth and are shadowed by the first men in their lives: their fathers who define their destiny and the life ahead for them.

Marriage makes man a grihapati, for a woman it is a trap within thresholds

Childhood very quickly leads to marriage with Sita while Yagnaseni is thrust into marriage very early in life. Yagnaseni's stay is evidently a very short term stay as the story develops and she is well aware of the fact that there is a mission to be accomplished away from her maternal home in order to establish a new order. Sita is groomed by Sunaina to face her life after marriage be it in household chores over the learning that she has gracefully acquired in her father's home. Menon rightly says, "We need to recognize that this form of the family----nuclear, patriarchal and patrilineal (that is descent traced through males and property inherited through males)---is not natural, nor is it something that has always existed in all parts of India. A key feature of this form of marriage (Hindu form) is patrilineal virilocality, in which the woman has no rights in her natal home (the home into which she was born) and leaves it forever after marriage, moving to her husband's home, with limited rights as a wife." (Nivedita Menon 23). The superior status that their finding by their fathers or birth confers on these women changes with times and marriage. Sita grows up to be a beautiful woman, accomplished in knowledge, warfare and also household chores. She was also strong and capable of bending the bow of Shiva. However, it is Janaka as the father who decides that anybody who can string the divine bow of Shiva could marry Sita. It was Rama, prince of Ayodhya who rises to this challenge and wins Sita's hand in marriage. This marriage and the bending of the bow is crucial to the story even if it means the suppression of the strength of Sita, equally good at archery in order to ensure that this marriage takes place with Rama emerging stronger and mightier than Sita. With her, are married her sisters too, to the other siblings so that the family stays together

and there is no rivalry from within due to a girl's coming into the family. The brothers and the family are strewn together due to this alliance and there is no power struggle from within the family. Thus her marriage to the Raghukul is the establishment of a new home, a new family away from her family. While Sita is won by Lord Rama during the swayamvara; Draupadi has to fight her own battle of winning her destiny, Arjuna, by insulting Karna so that Arjuna can walk away with his prized possession. While Rama and his brothers come dressed as young princes with Vishwamitra, the five Pandavas came to Draupadi's swayamvara as disguised brahmins. Yet she accepted the young Brahmin to be her husband - "Even if he was a poor Brahmin, it was with this youth respected by Krishna that I would walk harmoniously on the path of life." (*Yagnaseni* 47). By the time she has hardly recognized the identity of the brahmin in disguise, she becomes wife to five men. "Don't ever try to separate them," (*The Stone Women* 26) warns her mother-in-law on the very first day that she enters home as a beautiful bride. Swayamvara' ('swayam' – self, 'vara – groom', literally meaning the choice of one's own groom) actually as a practice which is otherwise thought of to be a liberal practice, in truth had the fathers deciding or scheming that their daughters marry the men of their choice and not out of respect for their daughters. The practice showed the power of the father over the daughter and it was his decision that mattered when it came to the man in the life of the daughter. Women actually had no choice thus when it came to the pre-planned and arranged swayamvara. While Sita's swayamvara was more of an orchestrated one with her father putting a clause of bending Shiva's bow, Yagnaseni's swayamvara was hardly one which offered her a choice at all. Marriage in the lives of Ahalya and Shanta is no different - a trap that has been manouevred by the Gods themselves and by the patriarch of the family. Ahalya was created to marry Gautama who was much older than her while Shanta was given away by her family with the hope of sons of Raghukul to seduce a Rishi who could in turn help Dasharatha father sons. Patriarchal domination is also witnessed in their lives prior to marriage.

Exile which brought beds of grass and stretches of forests

The coronation of Rama as the heir to the throne of Ayodhya remains a dream to Sita as their banishment to the forest is announced. The second Queen Mother Kaikeyi ensures that her desire to have the boon granted to her once upon a time by King Dasharath has the dutiful prince Rama ensuring that the Raghukul honour of fulfilling their vow is guarded. Sita is banished from Ayodhya not once but twice so that kingship and reputation is not tainted. She follows Rama into the forest as a dutiful wife, but brave and adamant: "You are the shaft of the bow that is our marriage; you need the string to complete it. My place is beside you, nowhere else. Fear not, I will be no burden; I can take care of myself." (*Sita* 82). As Yagnaseni, born

of fire and fearless of flames, this prized possession won by Arjuna and shared by all brothers, spends most of her life out of the palaces where the inner rooms waited on her and lives in forests and battlefields. The short respite in her life, be it in Hastinapur or in Khandavprasth, converted to an Indraprasth has her kill the sensations in her body and her mind as she is dragged as a pawn to be lost by her gambling husband at Hastinapur and a lost Indraprasth only to be banished into exile into the forests and the stretched trees. Like Sita and Draupadi, Shanta stays in exile perpetually in the forests alongwith her Rishi husband, sacrificing all the pleasures of Ayodhya to fulfil her father's dream of fathering the Raghukul sons. Ahalya is wife to Gautham, but for a short while, as despite her beauty, her charm and her wisdom, she is treated like any other material possession that a sage is expected to despise in his life. Her feelings, her expression of thoughts are killed by the wrath of her sage husband who is immersed in his meditation in the forests. She is exiled from his life for ever, for no fault of hers.

Alien hands on the body but not the mind and the heart

Marriage does not bring bliss and security as has been tutored by the maternal home to these young ladies. While Yagnaseni is seen weaving her dreams of marrying Krishna's shadow Arjuna, the valiant, Sita's heart lies with the young Prince Rama. With five husbands, where a woman should have felt secured and strong as Yagnaseni foresees her bond with the Pandavas, each known for a skill and the best in warfare; Sita cannot even imagine life without her Rama and is confident about being protected and safe in the midst of a Rama and Lakshmana. Contrary to this, their lives are changed and the happiness is a shortlived one as Duryodhana and Dushasan, and Ravana lay their cruel grip on these young princesses. "Alien hands on me, cruel, hard and hurting. With an effort greater than I have ever made in my life, I take hold of myself." (*The Stone Women* 63). Amidst the wilderness of the forest where life is not so easy and secure for a young Sita, the evil Ravana disguises himself as a hermit and approaches her. Forceful abduction by the evil Rama in the final year of exile in the forests, leaves her screaming for help, yet resisting Ravana in disguise as she battles her abductor. It is her quick wisdom that has her spotting a Jatayu and it is her alert that makes her take out her jewels to leave behind a trace for her husband to identify her abductor. Staying captive in Ashokavan her silence is her greatest weapon and her resistance to provocation but devotion to Ram. Similarly, as Duhshasan tugged at the clothes round her waist, shaming her in court in front of her elders, Yagnaseni does not give in so easily to the tormentor. It is her faith in God and the will power and piety that she armours herself with that protects her from Duhshasan. As a lost possession to the Kauravas by her valiant husbands, standing in front of her watching her

humiliation in the court, she does not lose her sense of balance and is not seen as a helpless woman; but a Yagnaseni who fights like the fire that she is born out of. As she implores for help from her husbands and her elders in the court; she is quick to realize that she has no one else to stand by her or help her and prays to her saka, Lord Krishna for her protection. Here is Yagnaseni who is won by Arjuna as a prize at the swayamvara only to succumb to the power of patriarchy. Her spirits are undeterred as she seeks revenge throughout the epic against the Kurus. When she is forced to ask for boons and she asks not for her freedom, we see her strength as a woman as she says, “My husbands are courageous. My absence will not prove any obstacle to their happiness and prosperity. Had it been so then Yudhisthir would not have staked me in the dice game.” (*Yagnaseni* 244). Yagnaseni has the courage to flare up and speak her mind at court. Ahalya stands up to the wrath of Gautama. Ahalya whose name means ‘land untouched by a plough’ (*The Liberation of Sita* 19); finds herself lured by no other man but the Deva himself, Lord Indra. She is punished and cursed for no fault of hers. Stoically she accepts her fate as she says to Sita, “All men are the same, Sita. Especially in the matter of their wives.” (*The Liberation of Sita* 27). The presence of mind of these women and their undaunted spirit is the turning point of these stories. They are dehumanized by the rule of patriarchy, but they emerge triumphant as their spirits are not deterred by the action of these cruel tormentors in their lives and the helplessness of their husbands.

“Lanka desired her submission. Ayodhya demands her innocence” (*Sita* 203)

The golden deer, the only distraction during her entire living with Rama in the forest in exile, costs Sita her peace of mind, her chastity, her family and her beloved. The cruel grip of Ravana disguised as a hermit in the forest is the grip of undesired passion, a move of vengeance against the two brothers who had insulted his sister and the cause for the trigger of Ravana’s anger giving Rama the opportunity to provoke his enemy and prove his might as God. Thus Sita becomes the pawn in the hands of Ravana and the excuse for Rama to prove his valour. Trapped in the gardens of Ravana, the only demand from Ravana was that she submit herself to becoming his Queen. However, the difference between the perception of the two valiant heroes is that one waits for her submission, while the rightful husband Rama even after winning over Ravana considers her a trophy that he has achieved by killing Ravana to be taken home. By killing Ravana he proclaims that he has restored the honour of his family’s name more than having saved his chaste wife – “Let it be known this was the reason this war was fought, not to save you. Let it be known that your presence before me does not bring me any joy; you are like grit in my eye, a blot on my family name, for you have chosen to live under the roof of another man through the rainy seasons instead of killing yourself.” (*Sita* 251). Sita politely but firmly

refuses to go back to the kingdom that had rejected her and doubted her honour. She prefers to go back to Mother Earth where she was found from and where she rightfully belonged, free in spirit and thinking. Sita is thus very traditional and yet modern in her thinking. She fights her fear, her hatred towards loneliness, bitterness towards her husband and Ayodhya, her Lord's kingdom as she abandons her husband and his family choosing the furrow over Ayodhya.

“He remained trapped in culture, but nature set her free” (Sita 255)

Listening to the gossip of common people of his kingdom, Rama, the great and noble King sends his brother Lakshmana to take Sita to the forest and leave her there. With this decision of his, he casts her off as his Queen. Janaka's daughter comes back to the furrow where she belonged, to the forest that she spent most of her married life in and to being just that Sita that she grew up to be: proud and strong. This Sita does not cry, does not reproach her fate, does not clamour for help unlike her husband Ram who could not ignore the gossip of the people, was concerned about the pride of the Raghu clan, considers it his duty to listen to his people even at the cost of the suffering of his wife and instructs Lakshmana to leave her in the forest. Here is a man trapped in his culture who abandons his wife to wallow in the admiration of his people, who fears to do wrong even if it be at the cost of doing wrong to his wife – “what happens to those who are crushed under the chariot of his righteousness?” (*The Stone Women* 68). Sita sets herself free from the shackles of society, from the society that called her Queen but speculated about her chastity, she frees herself from her husband and his love as she says to Lakshmana, ‘Would it then been socially appropriate and legally justified for a husband to throw his woman out of his house? A jungle is preferable to such an intolerant society.’ (*Sita* 78). Like her, Yagnaseni, comes back to the inner rooms after she has been shamed in public and in front of the eyes of her slave husbands. Her silence, brings back only Kunti who attempts to enter her room to comb her undone hair as a gesture to console her inner wrath. None of her valiant husbands, including Arjun, who she chose as her friend and companion, even dared to come close to her. Where lied their valiance and heroism as she suffers alone that shame; her spirits undeterred as she frees her husbands from slavery of the Kurus. The five Pandavas were trapped in the principles of Dharma at the cost of their wife who they had silently and individually vowed to guard and protect all their lives. Yagnaseni's freedom comes from her silent nurturing of the insult to which Krishna grows to be an ally and a friend. Ahalya chooses to suffer all by herself and does not even protest to the Gods or to her husband as she chooses to go through the repute that she has to live by rather than succumb to the society. Shanta does not even voice her thoughts to Rama or to his brothers or to Raghukul that she was in a way

responsible for growing by her sacrifice and her anguish and suffering is preferred to by her over the desire to go back to Ayodhya as the rightful princess.

What we realise through these stories of Sita, Yagnaseni, Shanta and Ahalya is that these stories were told by men and they presented these women and the circumstances that they lived in, which forms a pattern right from birth to childhood to marriage to children, in the same way, underplaying the freedom that these women acquired after all their travails. Women were seen individually or collectively as meek, docile, powered by their Lords and Kings, subject to the decisions taken by their elders be it their father or their husband, living under the shadow of patriarchy which suppressed their ideas and expectations from life. This pattern and inference that we have drawn about these characters: Sita or Draupadi or a Savitri, continued to be a part of our psyche until recently when revisionist writers started retelling these stories with a different perspective breaking the hardened stereotypes of women.

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