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## REREADING THE MYTHS OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY: A COMPARATIVE CRITIQUING OF M. SAJIDA'S "MATSYAGANDHI" AND SNEHALATHA REDDY'S "SITA"

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### ABSTRACT

Ancient or modern, the society is always male oriented and views women as objects for pleasure. Even when the government advocates policies to protect women, their safety, integrity and honour are consistently being questioned and violated. The problem lies in the collective psyche of the society, which includes both men and women. The sensibility is fashioned according to the male norms and thus the females in our society either witness or participate in their own subjugation process. This article tries to analyse the questions of female subjugation in M.Sajida's *Matsyagandhi* and Snehalatha Reddy's *Sita*. It attempts a comparative critiquing of these plays to find how the myth of subjectivity is challenged and redefined by the playwrights.

**Keywords:** Female Subjugation, Patriarchy, Male Domination, Matsyagandhi, Sita, Gender, Myths, Femininity

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### INTRODUCTION

The story of subjugation of women had its roots in the myths and legends which are popular in India. The celebration of womanhood by epitomising the mythical or legendary Indian women like Sati, Sita or Savitri is common in the society. Women are expected to be passive or submissive. If they have to show resilience it is supposed to be for a noble cause, of which the "nobility" is defined by the dominant patriarchal perspective. In mythology, Sita is seen as the ideal woman. There is a long tradition of the Indian girls being advised to be Sita or Savitri who were the examples of "pativrata" (the one who is devoted to her husband). Grandmothers were successfully accomplishing the task of inculcating the "woman like" qualities in the girl in their families through stories which celebrate the purity and chastity these mythical women embody. In the process of making a Sita, the society silently colonizes the woman's

mind and her body. The rules and regulations for her to think, to behave and to believe are defined and she unconsciously follows them. Today, the mainstream modern women reject the notion of being an embodiment of the so-called feminine virtues exemplified through the Sati, Savitri, Sita stories. However, the majority of Indians still resides on the traditional pattern of role definitions. This article tries to analyze two literary/ theatrical attempts to reconstruct the myths of passive women who were obedient to their protectors.

### 2. The Notion of Chastity and the Construction of 'Pativratas'

In the Indian Hindu epics, Puranas, and Upanishads there was a major emphasis on the power of female chastity. Only the chaste women are adored and projected as the epitome of virtues and values. *Manusmriti* advocates the importance of women being protected by the males in her family. Manu asserts that a woman should be

protected in her childhood by her father, in her youth by her husband and in her aged days her son should protect her and in this way the woman does not deserve to be free. This dictum invoked a debate especially based on the last line which is often viewed as a proclamation against the individual freedom and rights of a woman. The notion of protection here is used to create a woman who is sexually passive and pure. The passivity and purity are constructs outlined by the dominant patriarchal rules.

There are conflicting views regarding the interpretations offered to the Hindu scriptures. Largely, the principles proposed by the epics, Puranas and Upanishads are used to teach women the quality of being passive and thereby being adored. All the women in the epics or Puranas are obedient to their husbands. It is through this obedience and unquestioning attitude that they receive a position which is dominant and decisive in their clan. *Manusmriti* further argues for the need of women being devotees to their husbands even if their husbands do not deserve respect. Such constructs of chastity and obedience are reflected in the mythical stories and even in folklores. Even though there are representations of strong women in the epics and Puranas, these women are also subjected to the patriarchal rule which they cannot deny.

There are women who belong to the so-called lower class and caste like Mandodari (the wife of the demon king Ravana), who has been placed as one of the five most chaste and reputed women. She is given a space along with Sita, Tara, Anasuya and Droupadi. Hence, when one woman does not question or defy her husband's attitude, regardless of her class or caste she is given the reputation and she gets worshipped. The story of Sheelavathi exemplifies the chastity getting asserted by fulfilling even the sexual expeditions of the husband. Sheelavathi and Ugrathapasu was a happily married couple who were tested by the Lord Siva and goddess Parvathy. The husband had leprosy and he started behaving indifferently to his wife. She was once even asked to take him to a concubine. She obeyed him and carried him in a basket on her head. On the way, his leg touched the

head of a sage Mandavya, who then cursed him to be dead by the next sunrise. Sheelavathi pleads to the sun not to rise and the sun had to obey her because of the power of her chastity. The story further describes how she was pacified by the gods and goddesses and how she withdrew her prayer, (rather a command), to the sun. This story of Sheelavathi is narrated to portray the power of devotion towards one's own husband even if his demands are unruly and illegitimate. It shows that a woman's prime aim as a wife is to serve her husband and fulfil his desires without questioning his intentions. The legend of Satyavan and Savitri also asserts the importance of chastity which made Savitri to fight for getting her deceased husband back.

Such mythical women, who are chaste and who stand for the cause of their husbands, get appreciated and praised by the society which consumes these epics and legends. Interpretations are from different angles and the stories are used in the folklores and fables which are popular in India. Such mythical female characters, who are praised as the examples of chastity and its immense potential, have got representations even in the modern Indian films. Much acclaimed as a political, romantic film released in 1992 in Tamil language, the movie *Rojais* an example of the replication of the Savitri myth. The film shows that to claim the life of her husband back, the woman needs the will-power to be chaste and focussed in her vision. Class, caste or education is not seen as anything that helps or impedes the wife's mission of saving her husband from an ignoble death. Such indirect representations of mythical women, who are classified as 'Pativratas', are plenty in any Indian art or literary forms. This notion of chastity is considered as a part of the pristine Indian culture which is different from the western culture which does not create a lot of differences between men and women.

### 3. Rereading the Stories of Subjugation

There are many myths associated with the sexual purity of women in India. It is possible to deduce that the folk literature, in a way, is inspired by the legends and epics which praise the importance of a woman being pure in her mind and

body. The notion of purity associated with the body is used as a sharp weapon to control the women. From childhood onwards a fear is implanted in the minds of the girls so that they know where their freedom ends. Women are treated as the 'other' who has got comparatively less power in the society. The muscle power and the equations of strength are used cunningly to make the women believe that they are subordinate human beings.

It is true that such conventional notions have undergone changes as in the modern Indian society. However, it cannot be ignored that the society still resides on certain value system it acquired from the past. In this value structure, the role of women is asserted but as a supporting figure who is subordinate to the men in the society. Her roles are defined by the males or the spokespersons of a male-oriented society. Things have changed a lot; however, it is not a radical change. When the *Nirbhaya incident*<sup>1</sup> shook the country, there were different perspectives emerging regarding the passivity a girl should have been taught and should have followed. The atrocities towards women are increasing everyday but the modern society also indirectly hints at the vulnerability of women to such unfortunate incidents because of their nature of not following the Indian culture. Here, the Indian culture is also defined by the popular male dominated ideology. When the question of caste structure is raised within these contexts, the more the issue becomes complicated and pertinent.

The society has been trained to think in favour of the patriarchal ideology. This ideology asserts the importance of female sexual purity and vulnerability. Similar apprehensions are reflected in literature and other art forms from time to time. When the norms are set by the dominant ideology which is male-centered, the women participate in

the process of their own subordination. Consciously or unconsciously they too become victimised as passive consumers of this theory and practice of male domination. Certain female writers react to the supremacy of male oriented themes in literature by reconstructing the female question within the structure. Attempts are made from the part of certain writers to write about the unheard voices of women within the male narratives about women. Here, they consciously raise the question of invisibility attributed to the female characters. Snehalatha Reddy reconstructs the legendary woman Sita as a bold woman who dares to question before she voluntarily chooses her ultimate destiny. Sajida juxtaposes the story of Satyavati and problematises the identity crisis she went through without protesting or voicing her agony against it. She tries to reread the story of Satyavati in the light of modern reality which repeats the same old tradition of subjugating women and uses her for fulfilling carnal pleasures.

#### 4. Mythical Women and Their Modern Counterparts

The plays *Matsyagandhi* and *Sita* record the oppression two celebrated mythical women had undergone. Both the plays, written by women writers, in two different ways indicate the attitude of the society to female oppression. *Sita* is the story of Sita of the Ramayana, but told from a different perspective in which Sita sees more virtue and justice in actions of Ravana than Rama. *Matsyagandhi* narrates the story of a fisherwoman who is struggling because of the tourism project the government brought forth and other such steps for 'sustainable development'. The fisherwoman who is the central character of this play voices the angst and agonies she and other fisherwomen undergo. As the play progresses it becomes clear to the audience/readers that the 'sustainable development project' is actually uprooting the people who are living in harmony with the nature. The fisherwoman also speaks about the "big trawling vessels" which usually cause accidents at the sea. She mentions how she lost her husband who went in his small traditional boat to catch fish but got hit by the trawling boats. Slowly, the tragic plight of the fishing community gets unveiled. As an

<sup>1</sup> Nirbhaya Incident- On 16 December 2012, in New Delhi India, a 23 year old female physiotherapy intern was gang raped while she was travelling on the bus in the late hours with a male friend. Six people, who were on board, including the driver, brutally raped her after beating her friend with an iron rod. After the rape, the victims were thrown out of the running bus. They were hospitalized by a passenger who sought help from the Delhi police. The rape victim died thirteen days later while she was undergoing emergency treatment in Singapore. Initially the name of the victim was not revealed and she was addressed with different pseudonyms of which the most notable one was Nirbhaya which means 'the fearless' in Hindi.

underpinning to the main plot, the playwright uses the myth of Satyavati and juxtaposes her with the fisherwomen at the seashores in Kerala. Also, the playwright brilliantly tailors the popular myth among the fishing community of Kerala, about the importance of chastity of the fisherwomen, to the main plot.

Sajida portrays the oppression the fishmongers face in the present world. The government designs policies which are double-edged swords which finally result in the financial oppression of the fishermen. Among them, the women are double oppressed. As part of a community which is being neglected of basic human rights and the right to have a comfortable living condition, the fisherwomen are subjugated. Being women they are twice oppressed as they are considered as the "second sex". Violations of human rights also reach a point where the fisherwomen are sexually molested. Sajida speaks about a real incident and to make the agony of rape reverberated she uses the protagonist of the play as her mouthpiece. Towards the end of the play, the protagonist also mentions the impacts of tourism on the lives of the people who live at the seashore. The protagonist says that the tourists are more interested in the women who are working hard to make both ends meet. She refers to the sexual tourism that is getting fostered and how brutally both the young and old women in their clan get abused by the visitors who come to enjoy the 'God's Own Country'. She narrates the story of Satyavati and compares how similar the situations and predicament are, even today in the modern society. The mythical characters that are oppressed by the brahminical supremacy are getting replicated in the real life. Satyavati became an object of desire for the sage Parasara who approached her and asked her to row the boat to the other shore of the lake. However, in order to enjoy her and have his pleasure granted, he changed her into Kasthurigandhi (the one who smells of musk). Even though the sage was enticed by her beauty, he was bothered by the smell of her body. She was Matsyagandhi (the one who smells of fish) owing to the occupation she had. The smell of the fish is an emblem that represents her caste and occupation.

The sage tactfully fulfilled his cravings for sexual gratification and ignored the identity crisis that he embossed on her persona by 'gifting' her with the smell of musk. This gift of the smell of musk is actually dishonor for Satyavati who was a fisherwoman and the smell of fish her body carried had been the most natural thing associated with her. Sajida uses this myth to bring forth the ancient and modern attacks on the fishmongers. The violation is not only at the level of physical molestation but also at the psychological level. The identity of a woman gets disfigured and it posits a question towards her self-esteem.

Similarly, Snehalatha Reddy's Sita is a wife who is brutally ignored by her husband. Rama was a king who wanted to get his subjects' approval. He asked Sita to go through the test of fire, to prove, not to him, but to his people that she is not physically corrupted. Being kept at the premises of a demon king, Sita was accused of losing her purity. To prove her chastity is imperative for Rama to have his people's trust. He seldom gives a second thought to the psychological damage it can cause to his wife. This play begins with a conversation between two soldiers, one being very positive about Sita whereas the other one gives a distorted image of all women including Sita. Here, she is like an object which is open to public interpretations. She worries on the loss of lives in the battle and thinks that she is responsible for all the tragic events. She thinks that she should have gone back with Hanuman. Then, she has been told that the master's honour will be protected only if she is taken back by Rama after killing the abductor and winning her as the 'price of victory'. Again she is treated as an object to protect the prestige of the Kshathriya clan.

When she reunites with Rama, she finds him to be cold in his reciprocation of her love. She questions him whether he loves her or not and whether the long separation means anything to him. The emotionally agitated Sita believes that he abused her love. Then she thought about the respect and reverence Ravana showed towards her. She then thinks that Ravana could sense her inner self in a better way than her husband. For her, love was important. For Rama, power was important.

Reddy's Sita is able to think beyond the 'traditional - ideal wife perspective' and she asserts her individuality when she questions the *shasthras* which demand a fire-ordeal for a woman who had been taken away from her husband. The sages try to appease her by pointing out that nobody should question the doctrines. She questions the indisputability of the *shasthras*. Sage Vasishta tries to calm her down by reminding her that for a woman, her husband is the god whom she should never question.

The mythical female figure Sita accepts her passivity and goes back to the Mother Earth after facing all the humiliations and subordination Rama inflicted on her, during his attempts to construct the Ramarajya. The refiguring of Sita by Reddy is a bold attempt to redefine the female self which was not read or seen in the Ramayana. In fact, what Reddy sketches is a Sitayana (the journey of Sita) where she encounters a number of questions and issues raised by the chauvinistic society. She revolts against her subjugation and questions the hitherto unquestionable rituals and norms. Rama's demand for a fire ordeal was justified by the saints in two different ways. They emphasize the rules of the doctrines one should subordinate oneself to and they point out that the people must be convinced of their Queen's chastity. Here, the morality of the mass is also shaped by the customary patriarchy as the people believed that the even the sheer gaze of a corrupt and immoral demon king can violate the purity of their queen. When Rama asks for a fire ordeal, he does not realize the questions of identity and integrity of the human being that test itself tests. Sita is another woman, a human being, who was victimised by the dominant and sexually vibrant male. Reddy's Sita silently presents a question; who is the true villain of her story? Sita does not make her question obvious. Neither does she answer it. However, when she thinks about the honour and care she received at Lanka, she dares to compare it with the indifferent attitude Rama held for her.

Myths and *Shasthras* are the weapons the society uses against the women who dare to assert their existence and identity. Sajida talks about the myth of Kadalamma (the sea-mother), who would devour her sons if they have an unchaste wife at the

sea shore. To assure the safe return of the fisherman from the sea, his wife should remain on the shore as a 'pativrata' without her mind or body getting blemished. In a similar way, the Brahmins advocated Sita about the passive role a wife should play in order to make her husband a respectable ruler. Whether it is Satyavati, Sita or the fisherwoman, all of them have been instructed to become good women by silently accepting a destiny the dominant class has designed for them.

### 5. Conclusion

Female subordination itself is a recurring myth. The dominant, conventional patriarchy defines the roles a woman can assume. It furnishes a platform where women can act according to the will of their male protectors. They are objects, usually beautiful, to be kept, looked after and enjoyed by the dominant males. Outside this definition, if a woman speaks or acts or dares to assert her individuality she will be silenced either by power or by customs. This silencing act is not exercised only by the males in the society. There are women mouthpieces who will instruct the women to accept the patriarchal norms without questioning it. Sajida and Reddy here did not claim any centrality to the females. They explored the world of male domination in which the woman is defined, shaped and judged by the males. The myth of Satyavathi who is stained by the fragrance of musk is a victim just like *Flory*<sup>2</sup>, the fisherwoman who was gang raped in the daylight. The protagonist of Sajida's play and the fisherwomen at the seashore are all struggling to find a safe place where their physical as well as inner attributes are not violated. Similarly, Reddy's Sita tries to come out of the shell of passivity, the patriarchy stamped on her. She is resolute enough to claim her independence. Both the plays, when read again, emphasize the need to reconstruct the myths of female subjectivity not to fight the dominant male class or to get centrality in the society, but just to remind the society that a woman is a human being too.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Flory- Flory is the fisherwoman who was gang raped in the day light while she was selling fish at Pongumoodu market in Trivandrum. She was taken away by the gangsters and was brutally raped. Although, she cried for help, knocking at the doors, nobody opened the doors because of fear of being attacked by her molesters.

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