SYMBOL OF POWER OR VICTIM OF PATRIARCHY? REVISITING THE FEMALE CHARACTERS FROM INDIAN MYTHOLOGY AND EPICS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO "PANCH KANYA "

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Abstract

Mythological stories are timeless and universal across all cultures. Interestingly, Mythology, since time immemorial, has played an important role in the construction of social norms and societal structure in India. Myths and legends, transmitted from generation to generation, on one hand, contributed to the continuity of culture, and on the other, became instruments of control by encouraging conformity to accepted social norms, often discouraging social deviance. Myth and legend have become a pervasive element in the consciousness of our society, often engendering proverbs and aphorisms. The grand narratives of Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharatha are embedded in the collective consciousness of the Indians. The representation of women in Indian mythology is an interesting and equally important area of study because such representations are often used as a reference in our contemporary society; enforcing how women should behave in society. They also impact the social norms specially created towards women. These tales from epics form a popular part of entertainment in the world of films and television in India. A large number of stories in television and films are derived from popular mythological sources. Such adaptations are immensely popular among viewers.

It is also vital to study the manner in which women have been constructed in the cultural discourse at different times through mythological tales and how the representations have been affected by the changing times vis-a-vis with socio-historical contexts. It has also been observed that the misinterpretation of Indian mythology has tended to serve the purpose of patriarchy. Feminists

all over the world find the marginalisation of female characters and the dissemination of female stereotypes in the classical myths. In the Indian mythology the feminists question the grand narratives of patriarchy which impose masculine superiority over the women characters. To explore and understand women's present location in our society, it would be useful to explore the traditional cultural heritage most prominently embodied in myths and legends of Indian mythology because historical narratives of the past continue to affect contemporary consciousness in its conceptual constructs as well as social practices. This paper will be an attempt to study the representation of women in Indian mythology from a perspective of questioning the gender dichotomy established in patriarchal norms and their strong reflections in contemporary time.

Introduction

Mythology is a collection of stories about legends, Gods and Goddesses of a particular religion and culture. The mythological stories are timeless and universal across cultures. Mythology has been playing an important role in the construction of social norms and social structure in India since time immemorial. Indian culture is deeply influenced by Indian Mythology. Myths and legends, transmitted from generation to generation, on one hand have contributed to the continuity of culture and on the other have become instruments of control by encouraging conformity to accepted social norms and often discouraging social deviance. Myth and legend from mythology has become a pervasive element in the consciousness of our society, often engendering proverbs and aphorisms. By connecting individuals to their social, collective past, they have the full potential to become vehicles for carrying awareness of the past into the future, and as such act as determinants of our present. The representation of women in mythology is an interesting and equally important area to study as such representations are looked up upon and often used as reference in our contemporary society even now to decide how an ideal woman should be and what role she must play in the society. Moreover, the social norms specially created towards women are influenced and enacted accordingly. It is vital to study how women were constructed in the cultural discourse of different times through mythological tales and how the representation got affected by the changing time with socio-historical context.

Indian mythology more than often has tended to serve the patriarchy, placing the woman at the lowest level of the social ladder, even below the lowest

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caste - the shudras, as per the hierarchy of caste system in Indian society – Nari Narak Ka Duyaar, which literary means women are the doorway to hell! Yet it is equally interesting to see that women are also considered to be "Devi", the ultimate deity of power and motherly protection. Feminists all over the world, who are vocal about the equal rights and dignity for women, right from Simone de Beauvoir to Betty Friedan to Judith Butler, Kate Millett and others, have always questioned the representation of female characters in texts, that re-enforce the ideas and feelings of patriarchy and male supremacy among readers. Contemporary female writers from India like Lalitha Kumari, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, among others, question the marginalization of female characters and the dissemination of female stereotypes in the classical myths. In Indian mythology feminists question the grand narratives of patriarchy which impose masculine superiority over femininity. To explore and understand women's present location in our society, it would be useful to explore the traditional cultural heritage most prominently embodied in myths and legends of Indian mythology as historical narratives of the past continue to affect contemporary consciousness in its conceptual constructs as well as social practices; for example, in the Vedas the prayers that were resonant in all directions were for being blessed with a son, "putram dehi," an idea that is equally prevalent even today.

Purpose of Research

Mythology and epics play a crucial role in shaping the customs of Indian society. Characters from Indian mythology are used as a point of reference to build up social norms to abide the lives of the common people. People feel a kind of cognition, resonance with these characters. Even now many television serials and films are being made in India based on themes from Indian mythologies, which are quite popular among the viewers. Therefore, it is important to study how women were portrayed in Indian mythological tales, as even now in our contemporary times people look up to these women characters to decide what should be the social status of a woman and what role she should be playing in the society.

Theoretical framework

For this research paper, it is important to understand what the tendency of representation of women is in mythological texts and what can be the probable effects of such representation on readers, both psychologically and socially. Therefore, to conduct this research study, reference has been drawn from Feminist theory as all kinds of representation of women in texts come under close examination under this theory. The main aim of feminist theory is to understand gender inequality, the reasons behind this inequality and the social role of women. In order to understand how people engage with mythology,

and the cognitive approach, the model of cognitive poetics is essential. As Mittell explains: "According to this model, viewing (or reading of literature) is understood by drawing upon our knowledge of cognition and perception, and then positing how the formal elements in a text might be experienced by such a viewer—while viewers are not reduced to their mental mechanics, the insights of cognitive science informs how we imagine the possible ways that viewers engage with film or television".

Research Questions

1. What is the discourse of representation of women characters in Indian Mythologies and the two Indian epics?
2. What can be the effect of such representation on the status of women in contemporary society?
3. Is there any evolving new trend of countering such representation and retelling the mythologies from the female perspective?

Research Methodology

To conduct the research and reach a conclusion, an empirical approach will be followed. Qualitative method of textual analysis will be followed to study the text and qualitative understanding will come through in-depth analysis of the female characters from Indian epics – case study will be done on the "Panch Kanya".

Representation of Women in Indian Mythology and Epics

The two epics of Indian origin – *Ramayana and Mahabharata* have been the source of inspiration and information for social construct for generations. In texts from Indian mythology there is a vast range in characterization and representation of female characters – strong, bold, educated to manipulative, scheming to meek, and a demure self. But in the tales one aspect remains constant, that the position of women is much inferior to that of men.One reason could be that these mythological tales are mostly written by men, be it in the patriarchal set up like Valmiki's Ramayana, Vyasa's *Mahabharata* , Kalidas's Abhigyan Sakuntala and so on. More than often, women in these tales are left with little choice to make a decision which could be beneficial for them;rather, they have to sacrifice a lot to save their father, family and husband. For example, Gandhari from *Mahabharata*, who lived her life blind folded because she was married to the blind king Dhitarasta, did not do so willingly. She did it to save her father, family and kingdom from the Wrath of Bhisma, who would have destroyed her kingdom if she had refused to marry Dhitarastra.

The famous *"Panch kanya,"* from the two Indian epics of *Ramayana and*

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Mahabharata, are being taken as a case study, to consider the various aspects of the representation of female characters. "Panch kanya" is the name given to the group of five most popular and glorified women from the two Indian epics. Their names are so powerful and pious that it is considered that if their names are recited it shall eliminate any sort of sin. The women are Ahalya, Mandodari, Tara, Draupadi and Kunti. While Ahalya, Tara and Mandodari are from the epic *Ramayana,* Draupadi and Kunti are from *Mahabharata.* They are highly praised in the hymns.

The unique yet common aspect of these women are that they are presented as ideal women and re dedicated wives; their chastity has always been highlighted as their power. These women are highly educated, bold, vocal about their dignity, yet often the victim of male dominance. They are all beautiful, and, mandatorily bear at least one son for their husband. By choice or by force they had association with more than one man and often the rule breakers of traditions in some cases. In our Hindu society even today their names are taken with respect and are often considered to be the image of what an ideal woman should be. *"ahalyā draupadī kunti tārā mandodarī tathā | pañcakanyāḥ smarennityaṃ mahāpātakanāśinīḥ"*

Ahalya: Ahalya, the wife of sage Gautama Maharishi, was known for her extraordinary beauty and it is interesting to note that she was placed in the care of Gautama after her birth, until she gained puberty and finally she was married to the elderly sage himself!

As per the legend, fascinated by her beauty, the king of Gods, Lord Indra, visits her in the disguise of Gautama, when the sage was away and goes for sexual intercourse. In some verses it is mentioned that though Ahalya could recognize him, his true identity still complies out of curiosity. In some other versions however, it is mentioned that Ahalya falls prey to Indra's trickery or was raped by him. As per the narratives, Ahalya and Indra were cursed by Gautama, and the former becomes a stone. She is finally purified by Ram after severe penance, when Ram's feet touches her (Ram being an avatar of the god Vishnu). The point that gets highlighted through this narration is that a woman should always be loyal to her husband and the husband is empowered to punish the wife at any point of time, with or without any reason. Another point is that only a male God could turn up as a saviour. There is little choice left for any woman to take a call.

Tara: Tara was the Queen of Kishkindha and wife of monkey King Bali. They had a son named Angad. Tara had to marry Sugriv, Bali's brother, when Bali was presumed dead in a battle with a demon, as per norms and had no choice

in the matter. However, Bali, being alive, returns and accuses his brother of treachery, and sends him to exile. Sugriv in turn challenges Bali to a duel, which Tara wisely advises Bali not to accept because of Sugriv's alliance with Ram (Avatar of Lord Vishnu). But Bali does not listen to her and deceptively gets killed from Ram's arrow. While dying, Bali advises Sugriv to follow Tara's wise advice in all matters. Tara's lamentation formed an important part in many versions and as per most of the vernacular versions, Tara cast a curse on Ram by the power of her chastity. After Bali died, though Sugriv was at the throne, the real power was always in the hand of his chief queen Tara. Being the chief diplomat, Tara was known for her tactful nature and expert knowledge of diplomacy. Tara was highly educated and was a beauty with a brain.

Another important female character named Tara was the wife of Brihaspati, the guru of Devas and the god of planet Jupiter. According to the Puranas, as her husband used to spend most of his time solving the problems and dealing with the matters of Devas, she felt ignored by her husband. Chandra, the moon god, visited Brihaspati, saw Tara and was captivated by her beauty. A mutual attraction developed between them. Chandra kidnapped her and refused to return Tara. He even sought help from the Asuras to prevent her return. The Devas and Asura were about to fight a war, but Lord Brahma, the creator, stopped them and convinced Chandra to return Tara to Brihaspati. In some versions, Lord Shiva stopped the war. Tara mothered a child named Budh, through Chandra and also had a son named Kach through Brihaspati.

Mandodari: Mandodari was the Queen of Ravan, the king of Lanka. In Ramayan, she is described as beautiful, pious and righteous. Ravan, while visiting the house of Apsara Hema and Mayasura, the King of Asuras and father of Mandodari, falls in love with her and marries her. She had three sons with him: Meghanada (Indrajit), Atikaya and Akshayakumara. Mandodari always advised Ravan to follow the path of righteousness. Her love and loyalty to Ravan are praised in the Ramayan and she is considered to be a sati – the ultimate pious lady. In some versions, after the death of Ravan, in grief Mandodari curses Sita that Ram would abandon her, and she will also have to live a life of loneliness just like her. Sita herself is considered to be the greatest among the satis, she being the ultimate figure of love, loyalty, sacrifice and dedication towards her husband. Even now married women in India from Hindu backgrounds are supposed to follow the footsteps of Sita to become an ideal wife and daughter-in-law. She is considered as Maha Sati along with Anasuya, Sati, Damayanti and Savitri. The Panch Maha Sati had given enough tests defying even death for their husbands, sacrificed everything for their husband's well-being and they all were pious, meek and

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totally devoted to a single man till their end. They never had a voice or life of their own, everything in their life was dedicated towards their husbands orders or wishes or choices.

Draupadi: The most famous, popular and powerful women character from *Mahabharata* is that of Draupadi. She was the common wife of the five Pandava brothers and the queen of Hastinapur. Born to Drupad, king of Panchala from a fire-sacrifice, Draupadi was headstrong and beautiful. In her swayamvara, Arjun, disguised as a Brahmin, wins her. Though in early versions it is mentioned that as per Krisna's advice she refused to marry Karna in the swayamvara on account of his low caste, but later, in many verses it is mentioned that she regretted this decision, especially when Yuddhisthir used her in the game of dice. Draupadi was compelled to marry all the five brothers on the command of her mother-in-law Kunti, against her will. As per the agreement Draupadi always remained the chief consort of all the brothers and always the empress. She had a personal union with one pandava every year and bore them children. Draupadi mothers five sons from each of the Pandavas. In some later verses it has been mentioned that she also had daughters with the Pandavas. She had the blessing of regaining her virginity after every year. Now the point that can be noted over here is that while the men can have multiple wives and their chastity doesn't matter, a woman on the other hand, even if married to five men must regain her virginity every time before going to the other man, after having intimacy with one man. So is this a blessing or curse, rather an insult for a woman?

Treating her like his personal property, when the eldest Pandava Yudhishthir loses her to Kauravas in the game of dice, Dushasan tries to disrobe her in the royal court and none of her husbands tries to protect her. However it was the divine intervention of Krishna that saved her dignity by wrapping her with cloth infinite in length. She never forgets this insult and never lets her husbands also sit calmly until she gets her revenge. Time and again attempts were made to dishonor her, when she was in exile in the forest with her husbands. Every time she made it a point that she got her revenge as she made her husbands kill all those who tried to harass her. The killing of Kichaka, the brother-in-law of King Virata, in the 13th year of exile, when Draupadi and her husbands' spent a year incognito in Virata's court is a case in point. She had to serve as the maid of the queen also at this phase. After life in exile, her insult was finally avenged when the Kurukshetra war broke out between the Kauravas and Pandavas, in which all the Kauravas were killed, but in the process Draupadi also loses her father, brother and sons. When Draupadi and her husbands set off to walk to heaven, Draupadi falls in the middle for her sin of loving Arjun more than her other husbands. It was tragic to note that

she was left alone by her husbands once she fell. She never had a happy life ever – from being a princess to being a queen, she had to cover a long journey filled with pain but never played the victim card. She was a fighter, who stood against all the odds of her life bravely and boldly. She had five husbands, but still none to love, respect and protect her solely, it was rather always Krishna, her best friend who came for her rescue in times of need.

Kunti: Kunti, born to Yadava king Shurasena, was adopted by the childless king of Kuntal Kingdom, Kuntibhoja, and was the first Queen of Pandu, the king of Hastinapur. Sage Durvasa was pleased by her service and granted her a mantra by which she could summon a God and have a child. Though she was unmarried, she invites Sun-god Surya, out of curiosity to test the boon and she was granted a son by him - Karna, whom she had to abandon after his birth. In her swayamvara, Kunti chooses Pandu. When Pandu was cursed by a sage that union with a woman will result in his death, he abandons the kingdom and goes to spend his life in forest with his two wives. As being cursed Pandu couldn't go for a physical relationship with his wives, he requests Kunti to use Durvasa's boon and then Kunti mothers Yudhishthir from the god Yama, Bhim from Vayu, and Arjun, from Indra. Then she teaches the mantra to her co-wife Madri and she bears the twins Nakul and Sahadev, from Asvin Kumars. Madri commits sati on the same pyre with Pandu when Pandu dies while getting intimate with Madri, while Kunti returns to Hastinapur and takes care of the five Pandavas.

She was a very diplomatic and intelligent person, always ready to take a call. Her brain ruled her heart. Once when Kauravas, the cousins of Pandavas, tried to kill Kunti and her sons, they escaped. On her advice Bhim married demoness Hidimbi and begets a son, Ghatotkacha. It was Kunti who instructed the pandavas to share Draupadi among themselves as if she was the prize that Arjun had won in her swayambhara. Later she admitted that she took this decision because she did not want any rivalry among her sons as Draupadi was irresistible in all aspects and a jealousy may come among the brothers because of her. When Pandavas were sent to a total of thirteen years of exile, when defeated in a game of dice by the Kauravas, Kunti stayed in Vidura's refuge. When Kurukshetra war started between Pandavas and Kauaravas, to save the lives of pandavas, Kunti reveals to Karna - then a Kaurava general - about being his mother, so that he doesn't kill any pandava brother. After the war, Kunti left for the forest with Gandhari and Dhitarastra to spend the rest of her life in prayers. She was never weak in her life, while facing all the difficulties and was even a good manipulator at the times of need.

These "Panch Kanyas" are women from Indian epics who suffered the most in

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their lives and who had to follow the dictates, norms and regulations prescribed in the patriarchal structure for women. The fact is that these characters were constructed and edited to suit the needs of a patriarchal society, keeping the women at a subjugated level. Each of them are portrayed as exceptionally beautiful to satisfy male gaze and suffer tragedies and are used by men but they never give up, rather fight on with life and society, they face challenges in their lives with dignity.

Myths are part of the lives of common people. According to Carl Jung, these myths are the expressions of the collective unconscious that constitutes memories and experiences shared by the human race. The primordial images that are the elementary structures of the collective unconscious form the archetypes. From the Jungian perspective, Literature is the expression of the author's collective unconscious but not merely the personal unconscious. Carl Jung believed that bringing unconscious things (the repressed memories) to the consciousness could build one's personality positively. He also observed that human psyche is androgynous. Hence he said, "The anima is a personification of all feminine tendencies in a man's psyche… In women, the compensating figure is of a masculine character and therefore can be termed animus". (Dr Winmayil, 2020). Simply speaking, animus (Yang within the Yin) is the archetypal image of the male in the female psyche. A positive expression of the anima (Yin within the Yang) includes sensitivity and empathy, capacity for loving relationships, a feeling for nature. The animus contains the personification of masculine tendencies such as strength of conviction, assertiveness, courage, strength, vitality, and a desire for achievement. The anima and animus seem to be the gender stereotypes yet the mythopoeic fictions humanize the animus within the female protagonists by activating its positive aspects. In the Jungian standpoint, feminine energies are passive and receptive whereas masculine are active and propelling.

Recent Development

In our recent times much work is being done towards the retelling of mythological tales, with a new balanced gender perspective. This provides the marginalized characters in the narratives to speak up their version of stories and thereby dismantle the mainstream narrative and generate a discourse of their own. It is a story with mythological characters being recontextualised to the modern times yet depicting a faithful version of the epic.

For example Valmiki's Sita is known for her meek nature, sacrificing self, wisdom and chastity whereas Amish Tripati's Sita emerges as a warrior of Mithila. Tripati is a well-known writer of re-telling the Indian myths with contemporary sensibility. In his book *Sita: Warrior of Mithila'* , Tripati

completely put a topsy-turvy story of the epic Ramayana in his mythopoeic fiction which introduced Sita as an orphan found and fostered by King Janak and his queen Sunaina as a brave masculine undaunted warrior. She learnt Nyayasastra and other Indian School of Philosophy to have good discretion and administration. She is good at martial arts in a way to lead a troop as chief. Tripathi points out, "Our epics are not one book, rather, a collection of books, written by different people at different times, and so sometimes values prevalent in that time are reflected in the portrayal of women characters." He also adds "The further one goes back in time, the more one finds that women were strong feminists,... he articulates." For instance, he shares, "Parvati (Shiva's consort) is no pushover. She has a mind of her own; she takes her own decisions and follows them." (Biswas, 2016).

Some authors in recent times have passionately taken up the cause of feminist revisionist of Indian mythology like Kavita Kané, Utkarsh Patel, Saiswaroopa Iyer .

A tale about the apsara, Menaka, who was sent by Indra to stop sage Vishwamitra from achieving his spiritual goals, Kané wrote "Menaka's Choice". In a unique take Kané wrote about Menaka as a common woman who chooses to be a mother, and then depicts her anguish when she was forced to leave her child behind and return to the celestial realm. Then again, in her book *Lanka's Princess,* Surpanakha, the widow sister of Ravan, is more than just a lustful demoness, eyeing Ram and hence whose nose was cut off by Lakshman. It actually builds upon the narrative of feminism, where it is being highlighted that women who are vocal about their desires and sexualities are always stamped as being evil by a patriarchal society like in India.

Based on the myth of Narakasura and Krishna, a new feminist voice has been raised by Saiswaroopa Iyer, with her novel Abhaya, where Iyer refashioned Satyabhama's character as *Abhaya* – which literally means the fearless one.

In Utkarsh Patel's debut novel Shakuntala: *The Woman Wronged,* the heroin Shakuntala is not the poor little woman of Kalidasa's play *Abhijñānaśākuntalam,* who goes to Dushyant begging him to remember her and give her a place in his life. Rather, here, the heroine dares to be loved, accepts the consequences bravely, and keeps her pride intact.

Yagnaseni: the Story of Draupadi by Pratibha Ray and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions,* also about Draupadi, are an interesting retelling of the story of the epic *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective and how time and again she was wronged. Divakaruni's heroine, even without

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any hesitation or denial, unabashedly craves for the love of two extraordinarily powerful men – Karna and Krishna, none of them her husband. It showcases the inner desires of a woman, who is often neglected.

"Many of us don't understand these stories completely and thus have a false assumption about these ladies. If you read up however, you will find that both Sati and Savitri were women who had their own minds and made their life choices independently without any pressure from their father or husband," explains well-known writer Devdutt Pattanaik, (Srivastava, 2019), who has written many books deciphering the various Vedas, Puranas and other mythological tales, narrates many stories of female characters from Hindu mythology to illustrate how women back in the days were strong and independent.

Many strong female characters are often neglected and are not focused in tales from epics. Amba, who vows to be the reason of Viswa's death; and Chitrangada, the warrior princess, who chooses to rule her kingdom like a king are two such examples. Chitrangada raised her son single handedly and was not so submissive, but instead the strong and vocal third wife of Arjun from *Mahabharata.*

Naari shakti or woman power has been given great importance in Indian culture. While the Adi Shakti, the Primordial One, has been portrayed as the Sacred Feminine, who gives birth to the whole world from her womb, Indian mythology does chronicle the existence of powerful women, who have been responsible both for great victory as well as the great downfall of mighty rulers and their legions, but not as much as is needed. More focus is always on the submissive ones.

Observation

It is interesting to note that though the tales of *"Panch Kanya"* have been written in a patriarchal tone throughout, yet the five female characters were not at all weak or meek. They were victims of patriarchy or circumstances, yet they were all headstrong and most importantly educated and fighters in true sense. It is also interesting to note that to suit our patriarchal society's needs their sacrifices are always highlighted and glorified but their revolts or protests are not! This is mainly because patriarchal society wants it's women to be meek and submissive in nature and hence tries to draw such references from mythological texts.

In ancient India, the woman's place in rituals was as important as the man's. There was an arrangement that a man could not perform a ritual without his

wife, which made sure women had an equal place. A man could not receive blessings without his wife. A man could not go to heaven without his wife. A man could not attain salvation without his wife. As per narration even Ram had to build a statue of Sita before conducting a yagna because Sita was not present at that time as because she was sent to exile by Ram himself.

It cannot be denied that in Indian mythology, mostly those women are considered to be ideal who are submissive, obedient and faithful, follow their husband's orders blindly and worship their husbands as God. These women were described as if they have no existence apart from that of their husband. The mythological tales we are so used to hearing from our early age always resonate about strong male characters portraying the religious anecdotes of Hinduism. But how many of us can recall a portrayal of a strong female character not being the victim of patriarchy from those tales? Women characters were placed as either 'Good' or 'Evil' based on patriarchal parameters. They were either obedient mothers, wives, or vamps. But there is much more to the vulnerable characters, much depth. Some of them had a mind of their own, they were highly intelligent with sharp acumen and they trusted their sensibilities.

But the tables are finally turning now. The contemporary writers like Kane with deep feminist insight are creating a new feminine myth where there is no grievances for gender discrimination, as they are giving the much needed voice to the female characters. Now in these texts they are shown to be physically and mentally strong characters, bold decision makers, rather than the silent, fragile spectators. The juxtaposition of legendary narratives with their recent reconstructions in literature and other media adaptations are yielding fascinating results. This is evident in the form of rewriting tradition from the woman's point of view and often in her own voice, even though the texts may be getting written by male authors as well. Mythological heroines as sheroes are breaking the patriarchal narratives and creating a counter-myth or a female epic which is acceptable in the contemporary period and is expected to get naturalized in the forthcoming years. The process of new myth-making is necessitated as per the social, cultural and anthropological needs of the society. The myth when recreated adds eternity to the older version as well as the newer one so that unravels the underlying meaning of the grand narratives. It could break the dichotomies and stereotypes, opening up a way for an inclusive narrative with multi-linear threads which is essential for the growth of a society and its development.

Conclusion

It is often correctly said that women are perhaps one of the most misunderstood

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and misrepresented figures in the course of history. This stands particularly true in patriarchal societies, including their depiction in mythologies, where women are either completely ignored or mostly seen as carriers of men's community values – the flag bearers of chastity. The case is no different in Indian mythological tales – the main products being the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Although not all the female characters from the mythologies succumbed to notions of patriarchy, there is always a male domination involved.

The original textual presentation of the *"Panch Kanya"* has been patriarchal throughout, yet with a hint of the characters being strong in one way or the other, fighting their way in the men's world. It will be very effective if these tales of the *"Panch Kanya"* are presented subtracting the patriarchal elements and highlighting the strong sides of the female characters; the tales being told from their perspectives, matching our contemporary needs. Time is changing, so is the social structure, so it's high time that a proper healthy spin is given to these tales of the *"Panch Kanya"*. That will be healthy for society. Girls need to protest against any type of atrocities that are meant against them.

The Vedic texts are comparatively liberal in their presentation and portrayal of women. While a woman's authority in the family and the society was below that of a man in the Vedic ages, still she was an individual in her own right, could choose to remain unmarried, her chastity was not questioned randomly and she had the right to be educated. References to Brahmavadinis or female composers of the Vedic hymns, women of flesh and blood and not mythical figures, like Lopamudra, Gosha, Apala, Maitreyi, Gargi, Indrani, Mudgalini and Vishvara are present abound in ancient texts.. Other career options, apart from literary activities and household economy, also appeared to have been extended to women including teaching, music and dancing. Even women would choose martial pursuits and there is mention of female warriors like Shashiyasi, Vadhrimati, Vishpala, Danu and Sarama, taking active part in actual fighting in the battlefield.

However, in the *Ramayana,* women somehow begin to be regarded as the upholders of the male honour, submissive, meek, self-sacrificing, and obedient, having no individual identity of her own and also the reason behind crimes. While the depiction of the female characters from the *Mahabharata* was, to an extent, much diverse. Here the women were much stronger, bold and had their own voice and had the power to change the course of history.

Manusmriti holds an important place in the Brahmanic tradition. Manu, the author of *Manusmriti,* is often considered to be fanatical in his support for

the fourfold varna division of the Hindu society and subjugation of women. *Manusmriti* describes the role that should be performed by the four varnas in a Hindu society – The Brahmins, The Kshatriyas, The Vaishyas and The Shudras, Shudras being treated as the outcast. *Manusmriti* makes it clear that Shudras do not have the right to study the Vedas, nor do women. According to it, inter- caste marriages are a severely punishable offense. Women are not supposed to act independently. A woman's father takes care of her in her childhood; her husband takes care of her in her youth; and her son takes care of her in her old age. "*Manusmriti* has been single-handedly responsible for the derogatory position accorded to women in the post-*Vedic* period. The watertight dichotomization of the public and private sphere and the confinement of the women in the former has found its requisite justification in a text like *Manusmriti*. The ubiquitous presence of women in Hindu texts can never be overlooked." (Ghosh, Sreyashi, 2018). *Manusmriti* seems to have emphasized what a pure woman ought to be like. This normative approach of these texts, towards trying to describe the ideal woman, and the failure of women to do so, would lead to disgrace and downfall, actually highlights the patriarchal nature of the epics. This is bound to have a negative impact on the receivers of such texts, if they use these female characters for their reference in real life and accordingly figure out the position of women in the society.

The mythological tales have a great influence on the opinion building process among the common people in our country. So it is very important that the messages conveyed through the female characters from mythology should not be distorted or manipulated to fit the need of patriarchal society in India. There is often a tendency to even manipulated with the true character traits of female Goddesses, like for example it is often advised that a girl should be like Goddess Laxmi, very cool temperamental, beautiful, homely, bringing luck and food for the whole family, most importantly obedient to the husband, but as per Vedic description, she is actually very whimsical in nature and never tolerates any kind of insults and immediately leaves a place if she feels to be neglected and it actually takes a lot of dedication and efforts from her husband (Lord Vishnu) to please her.

The positive side is that now many counter tales are also being written, giving an alternative perspective to the tales and such retelling of the mythologies are going to have a positive effect on the society. It is important to change the mindset of the common people so that they think rationally before taking reference from a character from mythology in their real life. Proper, duly dignified and respectable status should be given to women in our society if the society wants to truly flourish in our contemporary time. If there has to be gender equality in our contemporary time, such must be presented in the

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textual context as well, through proper portrayal of the female characters because text plays a vital role in shaping our mind and society.

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