

“Beyond the Good, the Bad and the Ugly”: Exploring Various Narratives on Ahalya, Surpanakha, Shikhandi and Aravan

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Abstract:

Mythology and mythological narratives are at the very base of the literary cannon across the world. In India, the two great Epics Ramayana and Mahabharata have played a pivotal role in shaping up the socio-cultural discourse in the country. Narratives and anecdotes from these epics are told and retold and they are a source of primary texts for various popular cultural retellings of the same. There are certain texts of the Ramayana or Mahabharata that have been considered as the central sources and the other narratives are often labelled as “versions” of these central sources. Characters like Surpanakha, Ahalya, Shikhandi, Aravan are often not included in mainstream discourse either. This paper aims to stress on the relevance of revisiting mythological texts to derive meanings that are relevant to the society in the given space and time and questions the concept of absolute truths while striving to encompass diverse narratives within mainstream discourse. The characters of Surpanakha, Ahalya, Shikhandi and Aravan are explored to achieve the above mentioned objective.

Keywords: Mythology, popular culture, re-reading, social conditioning, mainstream narrative

Part I: Introduction:

Mythology has been the base of literary tradition and entertainment for centuries. In India, The two greatest epics Mahabharata and Ramayana have been told and retold in different parts of the country, in diverse languages with minor changes in the plot line depending upon the cultural experiences of the society from which the tale is derived.

As a member of the 90's generation, the stories that dominated my childhood are that of the Hare and the Tortoise, the Thirsty Crow and the Boy Who Cried Wolf. These stories have been used as bed time or meal time baits by parents and adults across the country. They've either been read out or simply narrated in various languages.

It is an established *truth* after various retellings of the Hare and Tortoise tale that the slower but the steadier contender, the tortoise has won in every retelling but the race in itself, the expression of victory and defeat, the focus given to the characteristics of the hare and the tortoise is definitely different in every narration, depending of course, on the understanding, imagination and socio-cultural background of the story teller. Children often accept the narratives provided by parents, teachers and the graphic story books that highlight the moral in the end. Their memory of the story is a collective recollection of all experiences combined. Why then are children conditioned into claiming the absolute truth of one “version” as they grow up?

A series of discussions with peers regarding the relevance and importance of popular cultural retellings of mythological texts and their astonishing disapproval of the same compels me to explore few problematic questions through this paper.

Who decides which “version” is the one true version of a literary text or oral narrative?

Has truth ever existed as an independent, objective entity untainted by the bias residing within a human mind?

Is a text, specifically the Ramayana and Mahabharata in this case, rigidly representative of the author's ideology? Or is it a reader's/narrator's portrayal of the same?

The Ramayana and Mahabharata have formed certain archetypes in society. There is a section in society that promotes these archetypes as the epitome of Indian Culture and there is a section that is constantly involved in contradicting these archetypes. There is a minority of critics who go beyond these archetypes and look for the representations that help us understand the gender/power dynamics that existed in society.

A.K. Ramanujan's study titled “*Three Hundred Ramayanas*” which elaborates various retellings of the Ramayana is proof of the fact that the story, although same is different every time when told from the perspective of the narrator who has a different ideological and belief system. It is an example of the different power dynamics that function in the society. These retellings must thus be revisited often to grasp the understanding of how a society must function. Focusing on the narratives of the minor characters in various retellings of the epics often helps to gain perspective on how these narratives are constrained within a time and space unity. They evolve on the basis of various factors. The age in which they were created, the place, the author's ideological beliefs, are some of the influencing factors that shape a narrative, specially an oral narrative. Through this paper, I aim to elaborate on the importance of generating, accepting and re-reading mythological texts with a focus on the narratives of Surpanakha, Ahalya, Shikhandi and Aravan.

Part II: Understanding what Surpanakha and Ahalya represent:

Surpanakha or Lanka's Princess is an important character in Ramayana. Ravan's sister and the daughter of Vishravas, the grandson of Brahma, She is half Asura and half Rishi kanya. Like her siblings Raavan, Kumbhakarna and Vibhishan she is depicted to be more comfortable with her Asura blood line than the other. Born as "Meenakshi" Surpanakha is renamed so because she has nails that are akin to sharp claws which she often uses for self defence. In most Ramayana narratives, Surpanakha appears in the tenth year of Ram, Lakshman and Sita's exile. Their paths cross in the Dandak forest, where she resides along with her cousin Khara and Uncle Mareecha who are guarding the forest for their king, Raavan. In *Valmiki's Ramayana*, Surpanakha is depicted as an ugly Rakshashi who is driven mad with lust when she chances upon Ram in the Dandak forest. She appears before Ram and Lakshman and attempts to seduce Ram. Ram and Lakshman are amused by her behaviour. Ram, catching the humour in the situation, dissuades her suggestive attempts and directs her toward Lakshman. Lakshman, who is also amused by a lady who is openly approaching men, directs her back to Ram. For a few minutes, they indulge in some fun at the cost of Surpanakha who is incensed when realization strikes. Surpanakha aims to strike Sita and punish the two men for her humiliation but realizing her intention, Ram and Lakshman capture her and Ram orders Lakshman to punish her by maiming her. Lakshman then chops off her ears and nose to remind her of the fateful day for the rest of her life.

In *Kamban Ramayana*, or *Iramavataram* the Tamil poet narrates the same incident in a slightly different manner. Surpanakha takes the form of a lovely, beautiful, young woman who has the gait of a peacock and fawn like eyes. She approaches Rama and asks him to marry her. When she notices the ethereal Sita, not knowing she is Rams wife, she accuses her of being a Rakshasi who has shape shifted herself into a beautiful young woman. Mad with lust, Surpanakha tries to abduct Sita, is caught by Lakshman in this process and punished for her act. Valmiki's narrative is missing the vivid depiction of bestial passion that is evident in Kamban's narrative. The Tamil poet's narrative is not as discreet about sexuality as Valmiki's narrative is.

In *Kavita Kane's* book, "*Lanka's Princess*", the readers find a shockingly vivid insight into Surpanakha's psyche. Kane traces Surpanakha's journey from Meenakshi, Vishravas' beautiful daughter with eyes that are fish-shaped to the untamed, scorned and vengeful woman as hard as her nails, hence named Surpanakha. Kane depicts Surpanakha in all her true light. Her jealousy towards Raavan for the attention he receives from their parents, her intelligence with which she sees through Raavans selfish pretences, her lust for handsome men, her desire to live amidst nature and succumb to all things natural, and her crazy thirst for revenge from Raavan and ultimately planning his death and Lanka's subsequent destruction. Kane's depiction places the power in Surpanakha's hands.

In *Kamban Ramayana* and Kane's book *Lanka's Princess* Surpanakha is described as a dusky woman with high cheekbones and a broad waist and huge breasts as opposed to Sita whose beauty and its depiction is always petite and demure. Writers over the years have always brought out Sita's boldness through her eyes where as her body has always been indicative of subdued, angelic beauty radiating innocence. Surpanakha on the other hand, representative of Asura women, is aware of her sexuality, has a fuller figure and is bold enough to use the power of her sexuality when she feels the need to. In Kane's book, Sita and Surpanakha have an important conversation in the Ashok Vatika when Sita is abducted to Lanka. During the conversation Sita admits an important truth to herself.

"Sita bit her lip. She lost her poise and looked uneasily at Surpanakha. She had no words of defence. How could she explain to Surpanakha that in the world she lived, there was a deep suspicion of women's power and desirability flaunted so openly and when unchecked by male control." (*Lanka's Princess*, 240, Kane Kavita)

Kane's Surpanakha is not praised or glorified. She does not justify the actions of her protagonist neither does she present her in a heroic light. She simply describes the life of a woman who realizes the power she holds in a world that is politically dominated by men, fights with a zeal for revenge and embraces her sexuality without being ashamed of it. For this, she is scorned. Through Kane's book one also realizes that every character in the epic is flawed. Every character has fallen prey to lust, ego, greed for power or need to prove oneself at the cost of the other including Ram, Sita, Lakshman and the Devas and Asuras.

Ahalya, is the adulterous wife of Sage Gautama who is punished by the sage for indulging in the act of sex with the God Indra. Ahalya is turned to stone for years together till the feet of Ram touch the land where she lies as a stone and free her from the ruthless curse. Indra is cursed with a hundred vaginas all over his body, but the sage, changes it to a hundred eyes instead, realizing the cruelty inherent in his curse. Why does he fail to grasp the cruelty inherent in his curse on Ahalya? There is no mention of this in any mainstream narratives. Ahalya is aware of the fact that Indra is trying to seduce her but she chooses to overlook it, perhaps because her husband has been celibate for years to keep his penance? Does his celibacy invariably extend to her then?

Sujoy Ghosh in his 2015 short film titled "*Ahalya*" presents a beautiful retelling of the myth. The sage is an artist in this film and his wife is portrayed as the ever so beautiful seductress. Indra, a police officer in this story is seduced by Ahalya and her husband plays a vital role in leading him into the trap. Falling prey to the trap devised by husband and wife, Indra is then turned into a statue and his soul is captured within the same just like numerous other men who have met the same fate. The artist proudly displays the statues in his living room and claims his wife is his muse. Ahalya's sexuality is thus portrayed to give a fresh insight into the story where she is no longer the victim, but holds the power to use her sexuality to serve her purpose.

Part III: Understanding what Shikhandi and Aravan represent:

Hindu mythology often makes reference to queerness, the third gender. A concept in between masculine and feminine which seems lost to the majority today. There are also many words in Sanskrit, Tamil and Prakrit such as *Kliba*, *Napunsaka*, *Sanda*, *Panda*, *Pandaka* and *Pedi* that suggest the familiarity with the third gender instead of just clubbing them under the umbrella term of "Third Gender" as is often done in the contemporary times.

Shikhandi is a very important character in the Mahabharata. Amba, a woman wronged by Bhishm is reborn as Shikhandi, King Drupad's daughter to bring about the death of Bhishm the great warrior. Drupad, wanting his first born to be a son raises his daughter like a son and marries Shikhandi to the princess of Dasarna, daughter of the famous King Hiranyavarna. Shikhandi, confronted with the problem of proving her manhood to her bride comes across a yaksha, who agrees to lend her his manhood. Kuber, the kind of Yakshas is angry with

the Yaksha for doing so decides to lend the male organ to Shikhandi for as long as he lives. Bhishma has vowed that he will not raise his weapons on anyone who is not a man. Knowing that Shikhandi was born a woman, he does not raise his weapons on her when they confront each other on the battlefield during the battle of Kurukshetra. Shikhandi rides Krishna's chariot along with Arjun and Arjun, taking advantage of Bhishma's vow fires a volley of arrows on him, pinning him to the ground for the rest of the battle. Amba, reborn as Shikhandi, thus avenges herself.

In Shikhandi we find the presence of queerness boldly explained in the Mahabharata. Shikhandi is a female to male transsexual who undergoes a sex change in the epic. There is also mention of Shikhandi's wife who knows her husband had female genitals on their first night together and then switches to the male organ later. Although their relationship has not been explored in any text one wonders how the dynamics of that relationship might work. Shikhandi's sexuality stands in stark contrast to Bhishma's celibacy in the narrative. In the battle between celibacy and sexuality, sexuality wins.

Another important character that marks the turning point in the battle of Kurukshetra is that of Aravan or Iravan as he is referred to in some retellings. Aravan is Arjun's son by the Naga princess. During the battle the oracles advice the Pandavas to offer a human sacrifice to the Goddess of War to ensure their victory. Three most suitable warriors are chosen for this task: Krishna, Arjuna and Aravan. Since Krishna and Arjuna are indispensable, the Pandavas decide to sacrifice Aravan. Aravan asks that he be married before the sacrifice as that would entitle him to proper funeral rites and offerings. Since he is sacrificial bait, no woman agrees to marry him. Krishna then takes the form of Mohini to wed Aravan and mourns his death after his sacrifice like no widow ever has.

Every year near Pondicherry in the village of Koovagam the story of Aravan is enacted Aravan is linked with the village deity Koothandavar who is also associated with Shiva. The men of the village dress as his brides or Aravanis and mourn his death after the sacrifice.

The Aravanis or the wives of Aravan are transgendered but are not obliged to castrate themselves. The Hijras of India, have a huge festival in the name of Aravan. They dress as his brides and then mourn his death as his widows. The word *Thiru-Nangai* meaning "Sir-lady" is being increasingly used for them.

This story of Aravan and his wife Mohini who is a feminine representation of the masculine God also shows the fluidity present in Indian mythological narratives. The idea of Krishna or Vishnu or Shiva embracing the feminine form is also commonly narrated anecdote in Indian Mythology.

Part IV: looking Beyond the Good, bad and the Ugly- Conclusion

It must be noted here that each retelling is a reflection of societal trends and also a tool to create new trends in the society.

Valmiki's narrative creates clear cut distinctions in society. Since Valmiki's narrative and Tulsidas's *Ramcaritmanas* even more so, have prominent religious significance, the archetypes created in his narrative have rigidly fixed themselves in the minds of people who derive religious sentiments from the epics. For instance, the ugliness that is attributed physically to some characters is a way of bringing out the evil residing within the depicted character. It serves the purpose of distinguishing the good from the bad at an age where our mind is unable to form opinions. The same distinction though, creates rigidity when as adults; we refuse to peel through the layers of what the text means beneath the cover of words.

In an attempt to seize ones culture, in the realm of a civilization established by the Europeans we stick to these shallow representations of mythological characters, often tainted with colonial bias and fall prey to the very same, stunted *homogeneous* ideology that we're trying to resist.

Are our texts, especially Mythological narratives, as biased, deeply patriarchal and rigid with respect to depicting and encouraging a society that is fluid in its mindset and behaviour patterns? Have the texts not represented the existence of multiple genders and the subsequent power entailed by all? Has a generation of readers, refused to read what the texts suggest? Is it only the writing or the narrative that holds the power to construct the story or is it the mind of the reader too?

Why is it that a European philosopher's work emphasizes on our identity as a land of *ars erotica*? Why is it that the very people who claim to be the torch bearers of our culture succumb to the literal meaning of these texts and fail to interpret what is left unsaid? We are a civilization of acceptance. We have a folk tradition, the tradition of the people that reflects how well informed and aware we were of gender dynamics. What purpose does the deliberate ignorance serve in the contemporary society then? It appears that the European *ideological state apparatus*, the same that the post-colonial empire is trying to write back to, has sadly worked on the minds of many. It is time we, together, as a community of re-readers and re-writers changed that.

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