



NARRATIVES OF IDEAL WOMAN: A STUDY OF MYTHICAL CHARACTER IN C.S. LAKSHMI'S *CROSSING THE RIVER* AND A. MANGAI'S *FROZEN FIRE*

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Abstract: In our society, women are often asked to follow the Ideal woman like Sita. But the question is, does society really value them? And if a woman is unable to follow or become the ideal, she is not worthy of respect or equal rights? Woman is being considered as the "Object" and "Other" in the society ruled by patriarchy. The system of patriarchy created barriers and constraints for woman, and chained her down in the name of custom and tradition. Commodification and suppression of women is not the problem of present time only but it was prevalent in the age of Mahabharata and Ramayana. Women have been objectified, suppressed and marginalized since then. It is evident in Indian mythology, which is a significant part of India. Therefore, it becomes important part of Indian theatre practise. This paper would focus on retelling of mythical characters by C.S. Lakshmi (Ambai) and A. Mangai in their plays *Crossing the River* and *Frozen Fire* respectively, both the plays belong to Tamil theatre and originally written in Tamil. This paper has taken up English translation of the plays. It would discuss character of Sita and Shikhandi and their psychological trauma. The paper will explore the way playwrights have used mythical character to portray life of women in the past which is relevant to present time.

Keywords: Mythology, patriarchy, commodification, suppression, liberation

I. INTRODUCTION

Mythology is a vital aspect of Indian culture and civilization. It has been an important part of Indian literature, in all genres including theatre. Theatre, being the best medium of conveying message and bringing change in society, has also used mythology to enhance its creativity and impact by showing its relevancy in present time. Karnad spoke in the programme 'Meet the Author' organised by Sahitya Akademi and the India International Centre (16 Nov.1988), if a play is only about the past then it is not worth it. According to him the story can be from the past or based on mythology. "But the play must be about present", which means the play should be relevant to present time (Karnad 14). Similarly, the playwrights of both plays, which are focus of this study, take characters from Indian mythology to show dominance of men over women since the age of Mahabharata and Ramayana till present. At the same time playwrights portray liberated and empowered women who try to break the barrier, raise their voice against gender disparity and make their own world.

Women since ages are facing gender discrimination in all fields of life, personal as well as professional. Literature and Theatre is not untouched. In such a long tradition of Indian Theatre women didn't find much space for them either as character, playwright or director. The reason being as Carolyn Tilghman says,

Women as either too good or all bad and where, in both cases, their portrayals fell wide of women's lived experience...depictions of women typically lacked psychological depth and nuances, instead women were repetitively portrayed either as angelic mothers, domestic goddesses, or blushing maidens or superfluous spinsters, shrieking sisters, or fallen women. (Tilghman 345)

This genre is like woman's personal corner in the house of literature. Women playwrights, Mahashweta Devi, Dina Mehta, Poile Sengupta, Manjula Padmanabhan, Bharati Sarabhai, and others, through this genre express their lived experience and present different shades of woman, the woman who is suppressed, the woman who is empowered, the woman who is mute spectator and the woman who rebels. Their description is not only limited to the injuries on the body but also includes the scars imprinted on the heart, mind and soul, which includes psychological depth.

This paper is a study of mythical characters in two selected plays. The selected women playwrights C.S. Lakshmi and A. Mangai have deconstructed mythical women characters and have given them voice to speak and revolt against their sufferings, oppression and barriers. The 'reworking of mythological subject matter through new modes of expression has proved to be an

effective strategy that connects one to the cultural past on the one hand and helps to assert the present cultural and socio-political identity on the other'(Nivargi,2014). The characters from Indian mythology like Sita and Draupadi have been presented as monuments of sacrifice in front of male- dominance in the society and men typecast women as sacrificing mother, loving wife and obedient daughter.

The first play is *Crossing the River* written by C.S. Lakshmi or Ambai. It is a poetic and short one act play. Originally written in Tamil as *Aatraik Kadaththal* in the year 2000 and later on translated into English by the playwright. She has been working in creative writing, culture studies and women's studies. Themes of her work mostly explore the area of space, silence, coming to terms with one's body or sexuality, and the importance of communication. She considers herself as a "feminist who has lived without compromise".

In the play, *Crossing the River*, Ambai has portrayed a character of Sita but not similar to the one we are familiar with. She talks about the events happened in her life, and its impact on her and her life. Most importantly she shares her perception that what she thinks about different situations in her life. The Sita who is considered as an ideal for the women of India may question her identity, not as Sita of Ramayana but as a woman. Like Sarabhai's Sita and Mangai's Ambaa are not silent sufferers. Similarly, Sita of Ambai is also not a mute spectator or follower of whatever is being told in the name of customs and norms, instead she speaks and questions about her identity which is constructed by society. Sita of *Crossing the River* says,

Which Sita I am
Which is the real Sita
and which
the false? (Lakshmi 435).
I am Sita brought up
With words,
Be this way
Stand this way
Sit this way
Lie this way
Think this way (Lakshmi 436)

Ambai in the play have deconstructed the ideal character of Sita, through which she sheds lights on problems of women. The women of Indian society are supposed to follow the values of the mythological female characters. Raised issue of patriarchal dominance and showed that it is not only prevalent in contemporary society but always had been a major part of our society. Whatever man says woman have to follow it, "You go to the forest/ if he wants it" (Lakshmi 436) but then also "Your purity is for the fire to prove" (Lakshmi 436). Such incidents explain the humiliation of women by males. These lines explain the pain of a woman, whether Sita of Ramayana or present time woman.

Throughout the play Sita is on this side of the river which seems barrier for her. The side where she like other women is oppressed, marginalized, asked to follow her husband, asked for her identity and character. At the end of the play, Ambai's Sita thinks to cross the river and says "I shall cross the river/ To see the new world" and "to create a new Rajya" (Lakshmi 439) where she can live her life on her own terms. This suggests liberation and empowerment of woman.

The second play is *Frozen Fire* written by V. Padma or Arasu Mangai. She declares her plays as feminist plays and says, "I am a feminist and like to explore women's issues in my plays". The play *Frozen Fire* was originally written in Tamil as *Pani-t-Thee* and later on translated in English by the playwright and V. Geetha. In Tamil production Mangai was the director. It is a one act poetic play.

This play is based on the mythological story of Ambaa who later on becomes Shikhandi in the Mahabharata. Ambaa was a princess of Kashi. Her father arranges swayamvara for her and her two sisters Ambikaa and Ambaalika but didn't send invitation to Hastinapur. Bhishma planned to take revenge of this insult. So, he went with his brother Vichitra Veerya and abducted the three princesses to get them married to his younger brother because he himself sworn to celibacy. Ambaa's sisters agreed to marry but Ambaa resisted because she loved Salva, the king of Saubala, who tried to stop Bhishma but was unsuccessful. When Ambaa revealed her love for Salva, Bhishma allowed her to go back but she was rejected by Salva also with the argument that kshatriya cannot accept a woman lost to another man in a war. Then Ambaa returned to Bhishma and asked him to take her responsibility because he is responsible for her situation, but Bhishma refused. Ambaa had nobody to go to. So, she took a vow to avenge Bhishma and penanced for twelve years on the banks of the Yamuna. She again took birth as a girl in the house of Drupada, the king of Panchal, but underwent a sex transformation to acquire a male body, known as Shikhandi, to be able to fight Bhishma in Kurukshetra war.

The way women have been treated since the age of Ramayana and Mahabharata till present, she has not been looked upon as human or as an equal partner in creation of this world, but as a commodity. Her body is used only as an object. According to Ritumbhara Trivedi and Rekha Tiwari, "Women are treated like an object for pleasure" (Trivedi and Tiwari 2). Similarly, Mangai through her play asks:

What are women's bodies
But rounded pots to hold man's seed?
What are women's bodies
But playthings, forced to a king's bed
To keep alive his lineage? (Mangai 452)

Mangai has not only talked about one incident of Mahabharata but many other. Through Ambaa, she has discussed about Ambaalika and Ambika, sisters of Ambaa, Draupadi and Gandhari as well which shows that women's bodies are used as commodity. When Draupadi's, princess of Panchal and wife of Pandavas, clothes had been stripped off and she begged for help to learned people. The great Bhishma said, "Woman! Your Yudhishtira gambled and lost you" (Mangai 450). It is similar to what Simon de Beauvoir has described that woman is looked at and considered as 'Other' and 'Object'. Further in the play Mangai attacks on commodification of woman and says "A man can sell his wife, give her away as a gift". Man shows their masculinity only by suppressing women. Bhishma could have fought a battle to avenge Ambaa's father on not getting invitation for swayamvara. Mangai puts a question mark on hypocrisy of patriarchy through the character of Ambaa in which she says:

Bhishma- a man who had sworn never to touch a woman
 A divine man, possessed of a divine vow
 A brahmachari.
 Yet, he came to my father's court
 And abducted me.

He- a brahmachari! (Mangai 456)

"The characters from Indian mythology like Sita and Draupadi have been presented as monuments of sacrifice in front of male- dominance in the society" (Trivedi and Tiwari 3). So, men expect same characteristics in every woman. Gradually these expectations have become boundaries for woman. Woman who doesn't fulfil these expectations or tries to break these boundaries becomes matter of hate and abuse, like Ambaa who doesn't surrender herself to situation created by male dominance. She takes vow to avenge Bhishma. After twelve years of penance, she gets a boon to be born as Shikhandi in the house of Drupada, the king of Panchal. Born as a girl she undergoes transformation to acquire male body, so that she can face and defeat Bhishma with same strength and power. When in the battle field of Kurukshetra Bhishma lies on the bed of arrows. He doesn't accept that Shikhandi's (Ambaa) arrow pierces him first and makes him fall. He says, "Ambaa! Your arrows can't hurt me. These are Arjuna's..." (Mangai 448). Male self-pride cannot even accept to be killed by woman's arrow. This shows men's psyche. Men don't accept, agree or listen what women say. Women's voice is unheard since age of Mahabharata and Ramayana. Ambaa says "When I spoke as a woman/ no one heard me out" (Mangai 459).

Like Ambai's *Crossing the River*, Mangai's *Frozen Fire* also ends with a hope of better world for women. World where woman can feel free to speak, ask, act and live in light.

Let us clear a path
 That women step out of their homes
 Out of the darkness, out of silence
 And into the light of reason
 Let us clear a path
 For women to walk free. (Mangai 461)

Women want their own free space where they can breathe and act without being judged by this male dominated society. Having one's own space helps to find one's identity and to know one's existence.

II. CONCLUSION

French feminist Simon de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (1949) says that woman is considered as 'Other' (Beauvoir 2015). The select plays portray woman as 'Other'. The 'otherness' is evident since the age of epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana to present time. The characters which are considered as ideal woman, ideal for women in the society and being told to be their mirror image are presented as shattered identity which is being questioned either by the society or by themselves. This shows their suffering at physical as well as psychological level.

Men consider himself as 'Subject' and claims to be right. To hide their mistakes, they blame women. To prove their masculinity and satisfy their pride they exploit women. To be heard they suppress women's voice and sometimes they don't even listen. Playwrights like Varsha Adalja, Mallika Sarabhai, Kamalini Mehta, Manjula Padmanabhan, Dina Mehta, C.S. Lakshmi and A. Mangai tried to bring change in characterization of women in our society.

Sita of *Crossing the River* and Shikhandi (Ambaa) of *Frozen Fire* represents today's woman who breaks the image of an Ideal woman by breaking their silence. They express their anger and raise questions on their suppression and commodification. They want to cross/ break this barrier to create a new world where all are equal. The world where they get the freedom to act, to express their feelings and to speak out their mind. Both play end with a hope and power to change society's perception and to create a better society.

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