Reviving the Illusion: Residues of Patriarchy and Myth of Sheroes

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Abstract: -
Contemporary fiction often visits mythological narratives for the comprehension of the masses and attempts to discuss how cultural identities, social roles, economic roles are pre-ascribed. The tale of the female characters is however written within the patriarchal boundaries, the roots of which can be witnessed in the event of the liberation of the Shero. The idea is to examine the power dynamics in social, political and cultural spheres surrounding the shero are constructed in modern fiction, also, while analyzing from this perspective, the ‘Shero’ of the selected texts regenerates and rises from the ascribed inferiority based upon her ‘Karmic Past’ which acted as the medium of oppression. However, it is noted that despite Tripathi’s marvelous attempt at her liberation from the dreadlock, he has sustained the patriarchal ideology that is preconditioned in most of the Indian households. The study aimed to decrypt the notion of how writers and critics of the new literary tradition are stuck in an illusory trap. And how one can still identify traces of patriarchal norms in this literary canon.

Keywords: - Shero; Sati, Shiva, Deconstruct; Mythology; Patriarchy; Oppression.

Contemporary fiction is a representation of the extension of civilization. The writers of this new literary tradition often visit the mythological tales to deconstruct them for the common lot. Works as that of Amish Tripathi’s Shiva Trilogy are responses to the colonialist thought process, they tend to examine the aftermath of social and political conflicts. Such works deconstruct the social, political and cultural narratives which are handed down in the name of tradition. They study the destabilization of the subaltern and provide intellectual space and voice to the marginalized by questioning the way we know, perceive and understand tradition and also questioning the self-ascribed superiority that is exhibited in patriarchal norms.

Ericka Engelstad in her ‘Much More Than Gender’ talks about how ‘traditional archaeological interpretations of prehistory were predominantly androcentric’ (02) hence, it has always been a challenge to include women not only as a gender but also as an active agent in the succession of history. From a feminist point of view, to consider women as an independent intellectual identity has been played out by masculinity with a pre-determined difference in the engendering of the two. She further states that ‘Gender archaeologists criticize
past and current models of prehistoric society and gender roles, relations and ideologies’ and it is noted that new data is substantiated by asking ‘feminist questions’ of the existing data (02, 03). This can be seen in literature as well, as the female literary tradition dates back to merely a hundred years with independent female voices being invalid before that.

Shero as a term was first used in 1836 and it is etymologically a blend of the words she and hero. ‘Shero’ is nothing but a woman who is regarded as a hero (Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Shero. In contemporary fiction, a lot of works have been dedicated to strong female characters. Eccentric to the ground reality and dominating norms, these subversive characters stand tall against hierarchy, hegemony, and dialectics. The sheroes thus, exist in the obscurity of the patriarchal paradigm, challenging the very authority that ascribes them to the subordinate position. However, the critical treatment of these sheroes in latter-day needs to be revisited as most of the fiction dealing with strong feminine characters are often led into an abyss of patriarchy controlled dilemma which gives a tinge of the colonial psyche in it. Author Angela West in her ‘Genesis and Patriarchy’ states that, ‘It is through the acquisition of language that we become human and social beings, situated within the structures of gender and class’ (03) and hence, in most of the modern fiction do we see female characters with a strong voice. They aren’t inferior anymore, rather they speak for themselves and are liberated from the oblivious endings that usually pertained to women in prior times. The shero in Tripathi’s Shiva Trilogy is Sati who inadvertently goes onto become Shiva’s soul mate thus, progressing the story which culminates with highlighting both the ‘creator’ and ‘destroyer’ sides of Shiva. The account of Sati begins with a sheepish monotone, she is a skilled warrior princess who can ride chariot and controls horses as beautifully as she wields her sword, yet is timid in the narrative until Shiva comes to her rescue. Tripathi’s handling of the character of Sati is postmodern in the attempt, yet it comes off as if it’s embedded in the patriarchal roots. West also critiques, ‘Female gender is constituted by the process of being socialized into the sphere of privatized discourse, thus, making women largely inaudible in history and science’ (03) and hence we see Sati who is aware of her powerful voice, can stand against her attackers with a sword in a duel stance, is yet not able to use it till Shiva implores.

In her review of the Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern by Patricia Waugh, author Joanna Price states that Waugh has discussed subjectivity in her work and how women writers writing in the postmodern canon draw upon a different textual tradition than that of the postmodernist male writers as they approach the issues and challenge the ‘dominant social and aesthetic constructions of identity and gender’ (02, 03) thus, Tripathi who’s writing from a postmodernist idea though discusses Sati as a warrior, tends to overlook her existence. She is indebted with a karmic past that outs her as a ‘karma’ and though her ferocity and lioness like courage are treated with conviction, it falls short of securing her the right to articulate till Shiva initiates the process. Tripathi has consciously made an effort to critique the ideologies of gender that exist in our
narrations of the tradition, yet he subtly fails at the social criticism in the manner in which the conventional arcs are still led by the male protagonist.

Motherhood has always been seen as the prime of a woman’s life and Tripathi in his text chronicles the account of Sati’s motherhood concerning both a ‘Naga’ child as well as a normal son that she bore to Shiva. Her actions are written well within the guidelines of the patriarchal idea of a good mother. It is fascinating to see her consciously take a stand for the naga son in front of Shiva, she is bounded to him by love and Shiva’s threat of separation doesn’t deter her from loving the son, she once thought was dead, but her decision costs her the love of her husband. Shiva cleans the air by removing him and his biological son from the scene causing a rift between the two. Tripathi unconsciously hands Shiva the baton of her fate and the mother in Sati is torn in two halves. In his review of *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* by E Ann Kaplan, author Steven D. Williams states that Kaplan in the work discusses how ‘The woman not bound by love and/or family represents an intolerable threat and must be brought into the system’ (03). He also discusses how Kaplan tells us that, ‘Mothering was the last female role, historically to be questioned’ (04) based on this it can be critiqued that the role of a mother has been always looked through the lens of either good or bad. The desires of a woman are closed shut after she transforms into a mother and these eventually get overshadowed by other responsibilities. This is also evident in Tripathis’s text, his Sati is a dedicated wife and mother whose individuality is torn between the two roles. Her warrior pride is not restored until the battles which are fought many moons later.

In her work ‘Woman as Caretaker: An Archetype that Supports Patriarchal Militarism’, author Laura Duhan Kaplan mentions how ‘Women’s psychological development prepares them to be connected caretakers. Men’s psychological development prepares them to be individuated competitors.’ And also, ‘the prevalence of this masculine mentality is a major psychological cause of war (02). Tripathi’s hero Shiva travels across lands and at the end declares a holy war when his orders are not met with the actions they require. Though the plotline reveals it as necessary and the decision is aided by the shero of the story too, yet the sole action of raiding Devagiri and facilitate warlike activity was done on the behest of Shiva. The hero is ascribed with elite powers and thus, devalues the powerless Sati; Tripathi intricately weaves the idea of Sati being the caretaker as she is in constant service of Shiva, the kids and the Mahadev’s efforts of waging the holy war. Though Tripathi adorns Sati with immaculate command over her troops and skills of war in the battlefield, yet her character not only loses to a wicked male figure, she is also scarred physically which becomes the constant reminder of her inadequacy to win a battle subtly hinting at the power dynamics and hierarchy. She is not only scarred physically on the battlefield but also, mentally, as she believes she failed at what her husband entrusted her with. The handling of this debacle by Sati also subtly reiterates the fact that embellishing a war-horse is more
of a man’s thing. There is a dualistic constructed dichotomy that renders Tripathi’s modern presenting of Sati helplessly caught in an illusory trap of being in control of her actions and subsequent destiny. Like Kaplan states, ‘caretaking is a form of relating to others which involves feminine forms of spending time (by deferring one’s needs to those of others), making a living (in crucial but not well-paid professions such as nursing and teaching), and addressing others (with particular emphasis on listening carefully) (06). Hence, we see Sati relegated to being the divine feminine, she becomes the epitome of a woman that patriarchy conditions one to see, her warrior persona that is introduced in the initial text is taken over by a subordinated figure whose innate talent for the sword is replaced with being a shadow of Shiva. Her characteristics are subtly rewritten as she begins to prefer the pleasures of makeup and beauty over her strong-headed will and zest for fighting for truth. Tripathi procures the ideals of femininity and remolds the character of Sati subconsciously into something which shall please the patriarchal norms, even though he started with the making of an exemplary shero.

Author P Anjanamol (edited by Deivasigamani, T.) in her article New Image of Women: A Comparison between The Heroines and other Female Characters of Amish Tripathi and Jaishree Misra talks about how the current literary tradition is bringing a significant change in the cannon of how women are portrayed. In recent times we have seen that women and myths are often intangible positions when it comes to writing, and also, how courageousness and ferocity have become elements of existence along with other attributes that were primarily adorned in men alone. However, as compassionate and bold as the character of Sati was, Tripathi ends her arc at the hands of a man who doesn’t respect women (03). The narration of the scene is built on seemingly gruesome details that sketch the battle between Sati and Swuth, the nemesis from Egypt, yet the macabre at the end does no justice to how Sati, a strong warrior, loving mother, devoted wife, gracious daughter and adored chief meets her fate. Even though, it can be argued that the trope was necessary to impel the ‘destroyer’ side of Shiva without which the character arc for him wouldn’t have to come to a full circle but, with Tripathi’s genius about the subject matter and thoughtful deconstruction of the same the author could have chosen to rewrite the incident much like the whole premise. The demise of Sati isn’t only at the hands of Swuth, a male patron of patriarchy, it can also be noted that that the incident occurs as a result of Sati’s rebelling against Shiva’s direct orders of not engaging in the battle. Another facet of this central tenet to be added to the myriad is that Sati not only did defy Shiva’s orders, she also ran away from Daksha’s palace before meeting her fate. Daksha, her father, is another epitome of the residue of patriarchal norms. He married Sati to Shiva to become the father in law of the holy Neelkanth, expecting Shiva to fall at his feet. His wish to become the conduit of facilitating the ‘Ramrajya’ in his empire is the sole reason of his search for the Neelkanth and upon realizing that the Neelkanth has feelings for Sati, he exploits the fact to arrange for his supremacy amongst the rulers of his fellow ruling clans. Right before Sati is killed, Daksha tries to restrain her from participating in the conflict but fails to do so, thus, elucidating the underlying venerable remains of how a woman defying all odds is still accountable for her actions and, deservingly so answerable, if she hesitates to agree with roles predetermined for her.
In the work *Handbook of Hindu Mythology* author G.M Williams searches for the truth behind multifarious nature of Hindu mythology and how concrete the concepts behind various practices found in the tradition are, amidst all, he also answers the question of the origin and transcendence of the myth of who Sati was, she is the goddess of purity or faithfulness, daughter of Daksha and wife of Siva. She ended her life as a protest at her father’s rejection of Siva. In another version of the tale, she commits suicide in the Brahmanical fire pit (261). The tale of Sati has been handed down in all verbal forms across generations. She is the epitome of love, faithfulness and dedication and, is looked upon as a devout wife who became the symbol of piousness and is revered as a household deity spanning across a lapse of time lasting forever.

It is evident that Sati’s death was inevitable in the building of the plot in the text however, Tripathi culminates her journey in an excruciatingly painful manner, though she is a warrior till her last breath, she fades out of the story with bitter memoir left behind. Tripathi pejorates her existence in the final moments unconsciously, hinting at how women are still looked upon as the inferior sex and irrespective of how much she has achieved, she still cannot be fathomed as an equal. The character of Sati suffers not only at the hands of male figures in the text but also at the hands of its male author who unwillingly pours into the exorbitant amount of anguish and torment.

The mythical figure of Sati and her refreshingly new take in the contemporary literary tradition thus serves as a lesson even in the modern times, that a woman who is capable of being a force to be reckoned with is doomed. The reviving of such myths only to be deconstructed for the layman is a fresh attempt in literature produced in current times. However, this attempt often lacks the conviction that is the driving force behind reimagining such epic characters and their stories. The nurturing of these new ideas and fresher concepts is not only a chance at reinventing our lost history but is also a way at how things can be transcribed differently. The new medium of expression can assure the diminishing of patriarchal aspects that have been handed down via rigid interpretations of the history and glorious mythology over the ages. Authors of the new literary canon like Amish Tripathi who make attempts at the liberation of feminine characters often have residues of resistance in their creations. They highlight the collective ideology that is propagated in the name of tradition and is in dire need of dismantling. Tripathi made a brave stride by writing astounding characters like that of Kali, Anandmayi, Veerini, Tara and even Krittika but with every character, he could not sever the ties of the benign concept of womanhood that has been disseminated over eras of storytelling. His presentation of Sati is undoubtedly full of fantastical moments, as she rises to her full potential in all spheres, be it a warrior, daughter, sister, mother or a wife but her story winds up like most of the women of today, where she is answerable to men from all walks of life and ends up paying the price of defying one with her life.
Works Cited:

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