

REVERSAL OF ROLES IN MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S "EXILE" AND "THE OTHER WOMAN"

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Speculative Fiction is as old as written mythology and possesses high entertainment value. It is a vital genre of literature that encompasses the more fantastical fictional elements. Amardeep Singh in his essay "Contemporary Indian Speculative Fiction" states that "speculative fiction" is an umbrella term, which includes sci-fi, fantasy, horror, and alternative history" (2006, Web. n.Pag.) Entertainment along with sociological and cultural issues of the day has made Speculative Fiction appealing to the readers.

Manjula Padmanabhan, a famous Indian English fiction writer has carved a niche for herself in this genre. She has written a number of short stories and plays that open up her imagination that is very refreshing and wild to the readers. Her short stories contain interesting characters who experience strange and bizarre situations. She shocks her readers by bringing up "morally complex issues, often invoking morbid realities" (TVS: 1). She calls her writings as being with "somewhat freak-infested dimension" and her characters are "all rude, unsightly wretches who belch and pick their noses and expose themselves in public" (TVS, Introduction: vii).

Padmanabhan's collection of short stories *Three Virgins and other Short Stories*, published in 2013 consists of ten short stories, each evoking a kind of inhibition in the readers that leaves an indelible impression in them. At times there is also a daring attempt by the author when she subverts the existing, revered popular myths in a way suitable to modern society. The stories "The Other Woman" and "Exile" exemplify this. These two stories are "speculative fiction based on *the Ramayana*" (TVS, Introduction: ix) and have been designed from a feministic point of view. Women in these stories, unlike the original epic are shown as powerful, and controlling the entire saga of their lives and nation. Mandodari of "The Other Woman" is brought to the readers with a different perspective and the main characters of "Exile", Rashmi, Lakshmi and Siddhangshu, their genders reversed from that of the original epic from Ram, Lakshman and Sita respectively show the thirst of the author to subvert the subdued role played by women. She has not only created women playing leaders but has also shown them as being older to men, if married. These stories are dominated by women, women who play a major role and as being more than equal to men who are intellectually and technologically sound, with healthy body and mind. These women are shown as sensible, talented, poised and rational. They lead the men of their lives, guide and guard them, and even save them from dangerous situations. These stories show a tradition of foremothers, instead of forefathers who rule the domestic and public sphere.

The protagonist Rashmi in "Exile" is the reversed role of Rama of *the Ramayana* and represents "Ideal Womanhood" (TVS: 155). She is always very "poised" and "rational" ((TVS: 155). She is exiled to the Planet's Surface for fourteen years by her mother Damini, the Chief Administrator of I-Udia. She does this in order to satisfy the selfish request of Rashmi's step-father Kailash. When everybody else is angered at the injustice caused to Rashmi, Rashmi

understands her mother. She takes the banishment not as a punishment or calamity but as an opportunity, and immediately leaves I-Udia. Before leaving, she makes it clear to her husband Siddhangshu who accompanies her that during the 14 years of their exile they would have no physical relationship. She makes this decision keeping in mind her sister Lakshmi who joins them. Team spirit is dominant in her while making the decision. The story also shows matriarchal rule in the nation. Women's freedom is emphasized at and even the building up of a nation and administering it rests with women. Although role reversal has taken place, the author has still kept up the power of the issue of children with women. She has portrayed women as being kind, able, sensible, and men as spit-fires (TVS: 146). Men are shown to be complaining, lacking common sense and difficult to be fulfilled. They are repressed and suppressed, and are "kept under tight social restraints" (TVS: 159). They are meant only for soft jobs and in this exile, Sid is portrayed as being fit only to play endless solitaire games. While Rashmi was busy in keeping records of the direction of their movement, and Lakshmi devoting her time for the spectacular scenery for their camps, Sid is idle, playing games since he is of no use in this other world. He is in fact portrayed as being voiceless and a person who is scared of expressing himself. Sid is also shown as suppressing his desires. Rashmi, on the other hand, encounters disputes with the other dwellers, mostly women and occasionally inorganic foes and manages to turn them off. A year later when Sid and Lakshmi grumble about the banishment and want a reexamination of their meek acceptance of it, she refuses to budge. She is not convinced by the explanations that they would face many deprivations in life because of this alienation.

In the twelfth year of their exile, Rashmi attacks a mysterious freakish man who tries to molest her and that set off the abduction of Sid by the creature's family. Leaving Sid in the hut with strict instructions not to leave the field area, the two sisters go in search of the minibot and it is then that Sid is kidnapped to L-Nka. There he is confronted by the 11-headed L-Nka Chief Administrator Raveena who forces him to accept her caresses. It is from Raveena that Sid learns that the mysterious man whom Rashmi attacked out of self defence is Suresh, the brother of Raveena. Raveena desires Sid and argues with him every day and asks him to submit to her will. At the end of every day being furious at his refusal to submit, Sid would be knocked out with a sleeping potion that would deprive him of thoughts. It is during these days that one of Raveena's brothers takes pity on Sid and offers him food that is not drugged or poisoned, and thus enables him to remain in his senses throughout the night.

He is filled with a sense of abandonment and feels it hard to suppress his feelings. It is during moments of these thoughts that he gets a gadget that brings a message from Lakshmi that emboldens him. This makes him courageous and after a month, he is saved by Rashmi and Lakshmi. They return to I-Udia, and Babs, Kailash's daughter who acted as Rashmi's regent had arranged for the celebration of their return.

Meanwhile, Lakshmi listening to the rumours circulating around the kingdom about the purity of Sid during his sojourn at L-Nka, asks Rashmi if Sid should be tested for chromosomal contamination or brain scans in order to determine whether betrayal of trust has happened in him. But as is typical of woman and totally opposing the myth of what Rama did to Sita, Rashmi shrugs with a grin and pronounces that she absolutely has no doubts about Sid and that she would not put him to any ordeal that the great Rama threw Sita to.

This story is a charming one, especially with the reversal of gender and roles, which is different from that of *the Ramayana*. It has pictured the new woman who is more idealistic, least submissive and very talented. This story upholds the dignity of women and has pictured them

with intellectual strength combined with goodness, faith and trust that lends a sweetness and greatness to it.

In “The Other Woman” Mandodari, the woman kept voiceless in the *Ramayana* is treated with great significance. She, who “had always been one of the spouse-in-the-background.” and “the faceless bed-warmer” of Ravana, and who was portrayed as “a sniveling nag”, “noble-not-quite-cuckoldee” (TVS: 42) feels that “something had change” (TVS: 41). She is eager to tell her side of the story and so makes an extended journey to the mortal dimension. She wants to investigate the earth herself and the more she travels, she finds herself craving more for company. She manifests herself physically despite being a divine being and understands that she is now capable of feeling jealous and frustrated. Her trip to the mortal’s world in the midst of deep forests ended in dissatisfaction twice and the third time she makes a visit to the city to a shopping mall. This time she chooses to appear like the pop-rock singer Lady GooGoo and does not think it would invite attention. When she tries to clothe herself from a store in a mall, she is disturbed by the two security guards who do not understand her archaic Sanskrit. She is irritated by their lack of respect and their hue and cry, and so eats them. Later, with an urge to tell her side of the story and to make herself known she meets the famous television anchor Basra Dott and tells her to interview her. Though Basra knows that interviewing an immortal would be fraught with the dangers of the other worldly kind, she decides to make the immortal appear on television.

Mandodari called as Mandy confessed to the anchor that the immortal life with nothing to do or “to be” (TVS: 52) and the insignificant role she was given in the great epic has filled her with agony and pain. Her being in the background in that great epic with her husband running after the other woman whom he abducted frustrated her. She feels that after centuries of slavery and suppression, women in the current era are freer to express themselves. So in this age “when womans is free to speak out her heart” (TVS: 59) she planned to use the television media, a powerful channel to tell about herself. She tells that the whole epic has uttered lies with regard to the heads of Ravana, the banishment of Sita and even why Ravana’s sister was cut off her nose. She feels it foolish to have a court case at all. She also confesses that her husband was an invincible warrior. She nullifies the fact of his death by saying that he as an immortal never faced death and that only felt “disgusted, insulted and humiliated” (TVS: 54) when it was declared that he lost in the war and “died” (TVS: 54). Mandy even says that war did not take place and that Sita’s accompaniment with Ram and Laxman itself is a myth.

By telling her side of the stories after centuries, Mandodari asserts herself. Having been treated as the other woman and the silent woman in the great epic, she, by voicing out her agony and pain and by attempting to voice out the truth, as she had witnessed has made herself the woman in the center. However, her attempts go futile when Basra insists on evidence to believe her story which she is unable to produce. So the entire episode of Mandy’s visit to the mortal world fades “into the un-memory of forgetting” (TVS: 60). The story, although is very unbelievable, after the indelible impression that the great epic has made in us, it still is successful since it has thrown at our doorstep a completely new and fresh perspective, and has made us think of multiple opinions and points of view.

Thus, Manjula Padmanbhan has subverted the stories in the *Ramayana* to analyze things from a woman’s point of view. She has revisited the myths of Ram and Mandodari and has transformed the stories by reversing the genders, transforming the situations and places that are more suited to the technology-dominated modern world. She has created a fresh point of view with her liberated imagination and has reinterpreted the myths different from the original

perspectives. She has centralized the originally marginalized characters Mandodari and Sita and has made Rashmi more superior to Rama in many aspects. Mandodari's version of the story shows Ravana to be cheated and manipulated by the brothers. Mandy in the story says that Ravana only wanted to avenge the injustice caused to her sister Soorpanaka who was chased by the two men in the forest. Thus giving voice to the long suppressed and marginalized character Mandodari, Manjula Padmanabhan provides fresh thinking, new insights and of course guides the readers to think in different points of view.

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