

A STUDY OF SITA AND SHOORPANAKA AS THE SOUL SISTERS IN MEENA KANDASAMY'S SELECTED POEMS

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As the young poetess pens her poems raging against the patriarchy and the contemporary society, she describes herself as 'an angry young woman'. Meena Kandasamy, the contemporary Dalit poet from Tamil Nadu believes that the world has not seen enough of their rebellious kind. The society does not let these rebellious young women exist. They are labelled as hysterics as it is unfeminine for a young woman to show her rage. The society asks them to subdue and they must be tamed. How can she forget that 'one is not born but rather becomes a woman' (Beauvoir 68).

This socialisation renders her a woman with 'inherent' qualities like weakness, feeble mindedness and patience. She must be like 'Sita', the perfect emblem of womanly virtues, faithfulness and purity. Being a devoted wife, she faced the hardship of her husband's exile bravely. During the exile she is abducted by Ravana, but eventually she succeeds in preserving her chastity. Yet after she is rescued, she had to give the 'agni pariksha', the challenging task of proving her sexual purity before the world. In her book Ms Militancy, Kandasamy retells the Hindu mythology through a feminist perspective. In the poems 'Princess in exile', 'Random access man' and 'Traitor', she brings alive two mythical women Sita and Shoorpanakha who become soul-sisters at one point of time.

In Ramayana, Sita is the ideal obedient wife whom all women must seek to emulate. But reading between the lines of the epic one becomes aware that in fact Sita was the first one to step across the Lakshman Rekha or the line of control. She crossed the line drawn by the patriarchy. She is abducted but Meena Kandasamy tries to imagine a scenario where she might have walked away of her own free will. During the Victorian period there were two types of images of women by which they were categorised in writings and paintings. One is the 'angel in the house' and another is 'the devil in the flesh'. Unlike Sita who is the angel in the house, Shoorpanakha is the manifestation of the devil in the flesh. Shoorpanakha is the symbol of sexual hunger and rage due to which she is banished from the society since it is unfeminine and immoral for a woman to speak her mind. A woman cannot speak her mind and therefore her passions are labelled as 'hysterics'. The 'animal aspects' of womanhood are severely repressed by the society. She becomes an incarnation of flesh.

Shoorpanakha (in Sanskrit means sharp, long nails') becomes a pivotal character in the epic. She is described as 'pot bellied', 'cross-eyed', has 'a grating voice that is harsh on the ears' and 'oversized breasts' which can be translated to mean a heart full of wickedness. However Shoorpanakha was not her real name, her name was Minakshi at birth. Being widowed and a lonely figure she was charmed by the youthful charms of Ram and Lakshman. Her advances were spurned and she was ridiculed by the brothers. Her sexual jealousy caused her to

attack Sita and in return she was physically assaulted by Lakshman. The society did not pay any heed to this sexual assault and this is seen as a form of punishment that must be given to an evil creature.

Sita must be the docile self and should not reveal the angry aspects of womanhood as perceptible in the form of Shoorpanakha. The society tries to discipline a woman by destroying her individuality and sexuality. The society urges them to transcend the excess passions of their bodies. Her sexuality and desires must be subservient to that of the males. In the poem ‘Princess-in-exile’ Meena Kandasamy defines her as a person who being scorned by her husband and society chooses the life of a recluse :

As the poem ‘Princess-in-exile’¹ goes:

Years later, her husband won her back
But by then
She was adept at walkouts,
She had perfected the vanishing act.

Even after she is won over by her husband, the society questions her again . Another ‘agni pariksha’ is demanded. But as she was adept at walkouts’, she preferred to vanish away or move away eternally from these filthy earthly tortures. In the poem ‘ Random access man’, Sita is shown as a woman who is always deprived both physically and emotionally by her husband. It was she who had demanded ‘ the testicle of a golden deer’ so that it might help her to rouse the manhood of Ram . However it was the second man from whom she learnt the words of love and which left her ‘ hot and forever hungry’. Kandasamy has deconstructed the myth of pure Sita in this poem. Here Sita is a transformed woman.

In the poem ‘ Traitress’, Kandasamy looked at the epic from the perspective of a violated woman Shoorpanakha . She is disfigured by Ram and his brother Lakshman as she speaks about her desires. As the rules of socialisation are laid down every woman must fit in that social frame. The society says that if you want to fit in this social frame then you should forget the ‘I’. She must abide by the rules of patriarchy. In this poem , Shoorpanakha is described as one who had been ‘ widowed , forsaken and ordered to exist in erasures’. Being deprived of love, she wanted to offer her body to the foreigners (in this case Ram and Lakshman). They mistreated her and tore away her ears, nose leaving her an ugly creature. To the world however they defined her as ‘sharp clawed’ , long –nosed, big – Buddha ears, pot-bellied and cross eyed’ , who must be punished for her excessive wants.

Jean Martin Charcot (1825-1893) regarded as one of the greatest neurologist of his day, described hysteria ‘ as a genuine disease , not merely a form of malingering’ (Dictionary of Critical Theory , 143). However Freud propounded that the origins of hysteria was sexual in nature. Memories which are repressed are reactivated with traumatic effects. The repressed rage is equivalent to repressed sexuality which is more dangerous for the order of the society. . Showalter’s important study of the ‘female malady’ of Hysteria (1985) examines the history of psychiatry from the reforms of the Victorian period to the Anti-psychiatry of Laing. Showalter looks at both clinical and literary materials and argues that the relationship between women and psychiatry is dominated by a dual imagery. On the one hand it is considered to be one of the wrong’s of women, and on the other it becomes an essential female nature which unveils before scientific male rationality. Psychiatry thus becomes an important factor in the characterization of women as irrational, silent, natural as opposed to men who are rational , cultured and intellectual.

The Grimm tale version of ‘Little Snow White’ also dramatises the essential and equivocal relationship between the ‘angel in the house’ and the monster woman. The tale itself surrounds around these two women and their complicated relationship. Snow White, the epitome of beauty is pure, fair, young, ignorant and passive, just what the society wants women to be. The other woman, who is much older, fiercer, artful and demoniac is her stepmother. Here also the voice of the enchanted mirror is the patriarchal voice who finally declares that it is the angel which is more beautiful than the monster.

In Meena Kandasamy’s poems however these contrasting dual images are unified in their rebellion towards the patriarchy. The society failed to see that from the very beginning, Sita and Shoorpanakha were soul sisters. They were the women who spoke their minds and let their bodies speak. They did not abide by the rules of patriarchy. The woman is thus ‘naturalised’ with the qualities that are granted to her. A woman can never become what she wishes to be as she has to curb her individuality. Shoorpanakha is dangerous for the society as she challenges and contradicts the contemporary notions of femininity and female subservience. The germs of ‘madness’ or passion which is found in the image of Shoorpanakha is associated with female sexuality. The aggressive sexuality and the unbridled passion are terrifying in its form. Therefore she is punished as the signs of femininity are torn away from her leaving her a dejected being. She is given the example of the ethereal ‘other’ Sita, the docile one. She must abnegate her hunger for love and transform her passions into servitude.

While reflecting on the gendered form of language that obstructs the creativity of women, the women poets say that they must stop looking at themselves through the eyes of men. A different women’s voice is needed. Their individual voices must be heard as Eunice de Souza says :

What I am as a poet is a result of what I am in all the aspects of my life. I am different from other Indian women in my form of expression; what is individual is that I am willing to take the risk. But women’s experience and socialization as a whole is different (In Their Own Voice, introduction).

As an ‘angry young woman’, Kandasamy is against the social conditioning. The society who labels the young women as ‘hysterics’ says that women must be grateful for all the things they have. She attacks the language which is itself gendered. For the sake of survival in this poetical platform which is a male domain, many women poets write like a man which eradicates their language. The social expectations for women are different. A woman is trained not to express her anger, dissatisfaction or offer strong opinions. Their poetry should never show the institutional social version of women. Gauri Deshpande observes that women become very angry with the language because it is handed to them by men. They are forced to write in a language that has already been used by their male counterparts.

Critics, poets and feminists are of the opinion that women must have a separate language which might suite their way of expression. Filmmaker / poet Beheroze Shroff argues that they need a special language :

To expose the lives women have been living. There is a constant trivialization of women in India, whatever they do, but the whole area of experience that males have not touched and have refused to consider is important (e.g. the unpaid labour of motherhood). But women poets are frequently dealing with anger against a world which brutalizes women,

whether it's the space being taken away from them on the streets , or the mental / psychological space taken from them (e.g. you are always expected to do your 'duties' as a daughter , wife etc) ...we need to stop seeing each other through men's eyes and language ; we have to have a different 'women's voice' speaking to our problems in a phallogocentric society (In Their own Voice , Introduction).

Therefore women need to find their voice and their poetry must above all be a discovery of truth. When Meena Kandasamy speaks about the contemporary issues of her native India , she reveals the societal assumptions that assign certain roles to people based on caste and gender. She deconstructs the mythical heroes and shows how the epics can be read between the lines. She believes that there is immense discrimination and violence in today's world. The writers must select a language which can vehemently protest against the tragedies and indiscriminations. And above all this language must voice their grievances and their voices must be heard. Kandasamy wanted her writing to be uncensored and the feminine elements must not be suppressed . Like the French feminist writer Helene Cixous she too believes that 'Write yourself . Your body must be heard'.

ⁱ The poems of Meena Kandasamy including ' Princess-in-exile' 'Random access man' and 'Traitor' have been taken from <http://www.sampsoniaway.org/literary-voices/2012/02/02/retelling-the-ramayana-poems-from-meena-kandasamy/>

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