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**DEPRIVATION OF MYTHICAL WOMEN IN THE SELECT PLAYS OF UMA
PARMESHWARAN, MALIKA SARABHAI, C.S. LAKSHMI AND GOURI RAMNARAYAN**

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doi.org/10.33329.joell.8.1.14**ABSTRACT**

Myths are appeared in worlds mythology in the form of historical revelation or sometime it basis on the fictitious construction. It sometime appears in both forms as historical facts and mythical fantasy. The epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana have been remained the treasure trove of arts. These epics depicts about Indian legendary or historical heroes (not women prominently) written in grand style. Rustom Bharucha captures attention in regard, with the Mahabharata's manifold representation. Indian Feminist playwrights have left no life's section untouched to resist against patriarchal dominance in the sphere of drama and theatre world. At their earliest phases of writing plays, they honestly and sincerely imitated the patriarchal tradition of drama and theatre. Gradually, with their collective conscious feelings and strong resistance they attempted to shackle patriarchal theatre tradition and created their own theatre tradition and dramaturge to expose misrepresentation of women's issues on the stage. They became bold enough to voice against patriarchal ideologies of theatre tradition and presented women's concerns on centre stage vehemently. In the later phase of drama creation, women playwrights highlighted their concerned issues emphatically and made it entirely of their own theatre tradition. For bringing their issues on the centre stage, they exploited Indian mythical stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to raise question why mythical women were misrepresented and unnoticed by male historians and epic writers.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Dramaturgy, Epical Women, Marginalized, Milieu, Humiliation



Indian Feminist playwrights have left no life's section untouched to resist against patriarchal dominance in the sphere of drama and theatre world. At their earliest phases of writing plays, they honestly and sincerely imitated the patriarchal tradition of drama and theatre. Gradually, with their collective conscious feelings and strong resistance they attempted to shackle patriarchal theatre tradition and created their own theatre tradition and dramaturge to expose misrepresentation of women's issues on the stage. They became bold enough to voice against patriarchal ideologies of theatre tradition and presented women's concerns on centre stage vehemently. In the later phase of drama creation, women playwrights highlighted their concerned issues emphatically and made it entirely of their own theatre tradition. For bringing their issues on the centre stage, they exploited Indian mythical stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to raise question why mythical women were misrepresented and unnoticed by male historians and epic writers. The present paper attempts to highlight some queries of how and why mythical women characters were ignored and unsecured the right spaces even being preserved the equal status of male characters in epical representation. They intend to ask why some of the mythical women are overshadowed and sidelined in the name of Goddesses and demonesses and pativratas frame of cultural product. The paper makes a determined attempt to bring them together who splintered from every states of India and tries to represent them together under the umbrella term of 'feminist dramaturgy'. Also the paper is a sincere attempt that would be recognized as a bird's eye view of the women dramatists and their plays brought them on centre stage which is portrayed in women's perspective.

It is well known fact that the supreme creation process of literature rely on the three basic aspects that is the real world and fictitious, myth and mythology, and the writer's individual genius and creative impulse. There is another a branch of writings, basis on rational and impartial in thinking to find-out explorative facts, which opposes to marvelous tales and supernatural elements such as ghost, witches, and other genres of fantastic

representation that is called 'Science fictional and dramatic world'. These four basic elements of literary spectrum may be called the four pillars of constructive literary works in different genres that are poetry, fiction and drama. Writer may choose any one of these aspects to construct the timeless works which impact over the readers mind forever. The choice of any one aspect out of these depends on writer's area of interest, imagining power, his individual creativity and conceivable ability. And writers construct the literary master-pieces with their ablest inner voice. Most of the writers owe much to the mythology and stories of myth. Mythology has been an influential and a perennial source of inspiration for sensitive and staunch believer in nations past history and mythical heroes and heroines, who remain iconic preservance and great reverence. It created timeless and influential impact on creative writers have paved way to construct perpetual literary works of stage performances. Mythologies have provided many unprecedented, but the most revered imagined stories told in narrative form to rebuild mythical characters to bring on stage. The western nations too have inherited the base from the classical mythology. Greek and Roman utilization also had owed myths and legends which have been perennial source for literary creation in their native languages. Homer's Iliad and Odyssey are the great treasure of Greece. The myth of Sisyphus, The myth of Tantalus which is considered real works of Greek mythology. In addition to that mythical stories like The myth of Aphrodite and Adonis, The myth of Pygmalion Odysseus are critical among alternate mythologies.

For India, ancient mythology has proved as the rich heritage and inspirational influence for many stakeholders like writers, playwrights, anthropologists, scholars and researches and so on. Even foreign scholars also have been influenced by Indian myths from the years long preserved treasure-trove and it has been remained a perennial source of inspiration to pen down the monumental works. The ancient Indian epics – the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Vedas and the Upanishads religious scriptures, legends which are proved to be the stock-house of Indian values, customs, rituals and belief for the next generation. These bygone aged treasures of



Indian philosophical, ethical and moral legendaries are still quite relevant to contemporary resonances and idiom. Many of foreign scholars have been fell in love with this Indian tradition long unfaded treasure. Suchi Smita Sharma writes how foreign scholars attracted towards Indian mythologies and what works they produced: "The foreign scholars like Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American author of the 1800, composed' Brahma, a lyric praising the inventor of the God. In the same period, the western world got to be acquitted with the legends of Savitri and Satyavan through Edwin Arnold's sonnets 'Savitri or Love and Death'. Bertram Shapleigh an American director composed 'Vedica Hymn' additionally in view of content from the Rigveda." (Mishra Suchi Smita: 9). No region of India have been remained untouched by the writers those who are not exploited these perennial mythical stories. Mythologies have made great impact over the Indian writers specially the male and female playwrights.

The words 'myths' and 'mythology' are used sometime as synonymous words for its contents and structures. Originated Greek 'mythos' myth has passed through various stages of explanation and interpretation. The word 'myth' interrogates whether it is epical or historical relevance Romila Thapar in a Wednesday interview of The Hindu makes clear difference between myth and history. She explains, History and mythology both try to explain the past but while history relies on evidence, myths rely on fantasy and must be examined differently". (Thapar, Romila: The Hindu. 9) Rabindranath Tagore observes that myths are epics as well as history. He says, "It would not be enough to call the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as great epics. They are history as well." (qtd in Kulkarni Prafull : 3) Even though the myths are treasure trove record of the past which basis on fictitious, it is quite relevant to present scenario. Nandkumar observes, "Myths need not be blatant tale of some fictitious past however it can be a memory of the past, told in a fictitious way." (Nandkumar: 2). In this regard, Joseph Campbell asserts about mythical characters blend in human conditions," Myths are stories of our search through the age for truth, for meaning for significance. The story of human suffering, striving, living – and youth comes to knowledge of itself what it has to go

through." (qtd in Mitra Saoli : 10). It makes clear that myths related to the past. Simultaneously it amalgamates the present necessities. Monica Dhillon writes, "Since myths are open ended and unlike history they have no pretensions of objective reality, they can be reinterpreted in a number of ways upon the present necessities". (Monica Dhillon: 2).

Myths are appeared in worlds mythology in the form of historical revelation or sometime it basis on the fictitious construction. It sometime appears in both forms as historical facts and mythical fantasy. The epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana have been remained the treasure trove of arts. These epics depicts about Indian legendary or historical heroes (not women prominently) written in grand style. Rustom Bharucha captures attention in regard, with the Mahabharata's manifold representation. He writes, "The Mahabharata is not merely a great narrative poem, it is our 'itihas', the fundamental source of knowledge of our literature, dance, painting, sculpture, theology, stage craft, sociology, economy – in short, our history in all its detail and destiny." (Bharucha, Rustom). It has all seasonal aromas blending with 'Amrita' or 'divine nectar' which spread through nation's culture. Soila Mitra quotes, "The words of Mahabharata are ineffable like amrita in every age, there unfold, new meanings from the old." (page.6)

These highly ineffable mythical stories are constructed on the basis of patriarchal mindset and one could find it as 'a no woman's land'. The great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata mainly constructed legendary heroes and not given possibility places to women for their hopes. These powerful epical heroes are reconstructed at the utmost care by many popular writers like Raja Rao, Devdatta Patnaik, and Amish Tripathy in their respective novels where as Girish Karnad, T.P. Kailasum, and Vijay Tendulkar. Asif Currimbhoy and other playwrights brought some of the towering mythical heroes on the stage. The mythical women like Sita, Draupadi, Gandhari and Kunti are portrayed as five models of perfection and 'pativratas'. They are all stereotypical images and sacrificing, devoted wife. Husband was for women a divine incarnation a god gained through the ritual of marriage. These mythical women are brought on the Indian stage by keeping



them into the traditional images and stereotypical presentation by male playwrights for the centuries. The conscious feminist playwrights attempted to raise objection over the representation of these mythical women in traditional images of goddesses and archetypes which always kept them in circle of glorification as mother, daughter, wife and daughter-in-law.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, women playwrights began to voice against the patriarchal representations of women on the stage being in secondary and subordinate position. Their plays initiate is not confined to the domestic sphere nor are love and romance their interest only, - these being the usual charges lay at their door by the dismissive patriarchal attitude. Few talented women playwrights challenged to the male dominancy in theatre presentation of mythical women and they constructed their own theatre space to raise their voice against patriarchal constructions. There is hardly domain of lie that is left untouched in their writing. They deliberately fore-grounded their space a new dramaturgy in a womanist theory of drama that rejects as the aim of drama both the notion of Aristotelian 'Catharsis' and Bharata's 'Stayibhava' as the feelings raised in the audience. Through their constructive efforts in writing plays on women's issues, laid its foundation of feminist theatre that would celebrate, women's concerns on the stage and would break the cage of male domination to ensure the manifestation of women's image and the unacknowledged creative impulse of women. They totally reject the male dominance in drama and theatre space, and set up their own feminist dramaturgy- their entire theatre ideology basis on women's concerns. There are some dominant feminist playwrights who wrote on contemporary issues. Some are exploited their plots and characters from myths, legends and ancient classics and put forth the characters in contemporary idiom. They borrowed the ideas from distant bygone ages to present women's images into the present scenario.

Ancient myths have been remained great advantages to the patriarchal ruling class to subjugate women and keeping them within specified circle and kept women as inferior or subordination in patriarchal world. The radical feminists raise

objection and expressed their strong protestation of words through ground breaking writings. Siemen de Beauvoir, Kate millet and other revolutionary thinkers or feminism have expressed their displeasure on the women's subjugation, oppression and suppression. They feel mythic version also is the main cause of women's inferior representation in plays. Siemen de Beauvoir in the second sex asserts: "Few myths have been more advantages to the rule class than the myth of women – it justifies all privileges and even authorizes their abuse. (atd. in Singh Anita, 164). Kate millet, a revolutionary thinker and authoritarian speaker on women's subjugation, holds mythology responsible for women's subordinations, even having all sorts of potentialities and capacity in expressions. Kate Millet expresses", mythology is the root cause of the human suffering, assigned inferior status to women: Patriarchy has God on its side." (atd. in Surinder Kaur : 1). Roland Barthes calls myths are an ideological abuse.

There is a galaxy and cluster of women playwrights in Indian theatre who exposed the patriarchal misrepresentation of women's issues in lower position and their prejudiced mind set regarding women's concerns. Even they exploited the mythical characters and stories to subvert the dominant ideology's hidden male bios. Several women writers have revised the old myths in contemporary relevance and brought on the centre stage. They determined to abolish the ideology – laden representation and presentation of mythical subjugated marginalized and exploited, women through their women perspectives. Earlier these submissive women in epics are portrayed in the 'man-made mythic gaze' views woman as fragile entity to be taken care of and protected by man. They made use of myth not as a legitimization of subjugation but as a major tool of expression over the women's suppression in mythical world. They fought courageously and emphatically to establish their own theatre conventions of women's problems once it was ignored and within short span of their writing, they put forth the cultural history of India, through women characters. This tradition of writings began to be known as feminist dramaturgy and theatre. Tutun Mukharjee assets: "Their dramatic world, once ignored, trivialized as hidden from



history gain in significance as profoundly affecting the landscape of social inequalities. The women playwrights of India have contributed substantially towards this endeavor of rewriting our cultural history." (Mukharjee, Tutun: 1 to 11). Feminist theatre has come up as a far reaching impact in the process of re-storing high deals of human suffering as well as become a major weapon to resist their protest against the male biased representation of mythical women on the stage who were over looked and over showed in the midst of great warrior-husband and brothers in epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and legendry characters.

Several women writers from India and other foreign land have revised the old myths include Anne Saxton, Anne Rich, Barbara Walkex, Marina Warner, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood in the west, while in India notable writers include Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Gita Hariharan, Kavita Kane and Devdatta Patnaik and Prasanna who wrote extensively on epical characters. The Women playwrights like Snehalata Reddy, Malik Sarabhai, Poile Sengupta, Umaparmeshwaran, C. S. Lakshmi, Gouri Ramnarayan, and Varsha Adalja are the prominent in writing plays. They borrowed epical characters to highlight their subordination depiction in the grandeur epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. They all projected epical women in rebellious and resistance stance.

The epical characters – Sita, Draupadi, Kunti and Gandhari, Savitri are mostly celebrated and preserved as Goddesses in Indian Society but at some level these women in epics are Side-lined and kept outside as soon as their work is ended. Then what about the other epical characters like Mandodari, Shoorpankha, Manthara, Urmila, Tara, Shanta, and Uruvi – Karna's wife. Those were totally neglected, ignored and marginalized in the vast panorama of the great epics which were written in Patriarchal perspectives. These all women portrayed as weak grief-stricken and dependent characters. The women playwrights have made proper and significant space for these characters and represented them on the centre stage as mutinous, system changer, resilient, a metaphor for prakriti and revealers of their deprivation and negations. They become central to the story of plays in contextualized position. Feminist

playwrights foreground the suppressed female voices in epics constructed to present them in contemporaneity.

Sita, the iconic and the most idealized of Indian womanhood comprises of tolerance, silent sufferer, stoic, ideals preserver and worshiping woman through all ages. These are the manifold qualities of Sita portrayed in the epic Ramayana. When her chastity was measured in the trial of fire-ordeal episode, this event was struck to the conscious playwrights and Sita is brought in her new avatar on the stage by some major playwrights. Snehalata Reddy, C.S. Lakshmi and Gouri Ramnaryan constructed Sita character in new form of her rebellious and fighting for her self-respect nature. Snehalata Reddy is social activities, theatre practitioner and the founder of Amateur theatre group of Madras. Reddy's Sita is entirely different woman, a woman of not silent sufferer, subjugated or oppressed but self respected human being, endowed with exceptional sensibility. She rejects the illusionary idealism of martial sanctity; she rejects Ram and also his all ideologies. She feels more comfortable and free in Ravan's world than the Maryada Purushotam but Rama's illusionary Palace. She sees Ramrajya is a hallow façade of the ideal husband-wife relationship. The fire-ordeal episode reveals of Rama's weakness of mind, even though Rama defends of the fire trial as it was a wish of subjects of Ayodhya. He calls himself a Maryada Purushotam, he is weak in mind and he cheats and betrays Sita. He is cruel tyrant and murderer of her hopes and dreams. Sita finds egotism in Rama's behavior and she feels Ravan's actions and treatment to her is more justifiable than those of Rama. Reddy's Sita is transformed from mere sufferer into rebellious, independent one. She rejects the authority of Rama – "It's I who reject you! I reject you as husband, as a lover, and above all as the father of my unborn children, and I go to my doom gladly, with glory in my heart! but not for you. But for Ravan". (qtd in Enact, 8). The playwrights raise questions over the depiction of woman in the epics and history, and it never given full scope and space in power-mongered Royal family men. Snehalata Reddy comments, "History has never recorded the whole truth – it has always projected those in power –



never the downtrodden – always the powerful.” (qtd. in Enact magazine -8).

Uma Parmeshwaran is an Indian Diaspora playwright who has settled down Canada, but she has the great attraction of mythical women characters specially ‘Sita’. Her Sita’s Promise dance drama is of eleven scenes of elevated Sita and Shows her different dimensions of her character. Parmeshwaran depicts Sita in feminist point of view although the major focus of the play is on the character of Rama. Rama in the play is shown more moderate and considerate towards Sita’s innocence and the majesty of Goddess Shakti. Sita reminds Rama of his duty and love. Like Snehalata Reddy’s Sita, she is not an aggressive and turbulent in her tone, but she keeps Rama in her hand with love and affection. She has been portrayed as mother earth comprises of peacocks, crows and copies. In Sita’s Promise there is an ample description of nature and its beauty associated with Sita’s psyche.

Malika Sarabhai is another revered name in the feminist theatre. She conceived the plot based on myths and religious scripture. She has constructed a one-woman – dance drama to interpreted and evaluate the women from myths. She wrote and presented mythical women characters on the stage in women’s perspective. Sarabhai reconstructs Draupadi, Savitri and Sita of the medieval into a modern feminist slant. Her Sita’s Daughters is one of the popular plays wherein Sita as a strong woman caught in a predicament because of her husband. Sita describes Rama as, “the delicate prince who needed my support in coping with life in the forest, the weak man who had gather an army to fight his bottle, a chauvinist who needed proof of his wife’s virtue, a king who fails in his duty as a husband”. (qtd. in Sita’s Daughter). This modern Sita is vocal and raises objections and made Rama being a weak prince. She is banished by Rama and proclaims, “I am glad today to be free of you. Now I shall bring up my children alone. I shall bring them to up to be free and honest.” (cited. 3). She decides to write story of Ramayana differently in her next birth. This epical character transforms in modern Sita as the model and rebellious representative woman in modern time. The title Sita’s Daughter symbolizes of modern women who suffers for many causes. Anita Singh in

her article expresses that modern women are related to the epical Sita: “All women are Sita’s daughters carrying her agony and deprivation. The play documents the voice of the modern Sitas who say ‘no’ to the oppression meted out by the tyrannical Patriarchal system which considers her as the other and hence equal.” (Singh Anita: 02). Sarabhai’s Sita is more vibrant either vocally or in action to protest against patriarchal representation of hers.

C.S. Lakshmi, popularly known as Ambai is made new changes in Tamil theatre brining mythical women who were silent and invisible in Indian Epics. Her play Crossing the River that was originally written in Tamil under the title Aatraik Kadaththal exposes the pathetic cry of Sita. Through the image of flowing of river Ambai presents invisible conflict and female subjugation and emancipation. By adopting theatre innovative techniques, she laid bared open of inner consciousness of feminine sensibility through modern Sita. The hollowness of Sita in modern time is expressed: “I am Sita the pawn, I am Sita the cheated I am Sita who has nothing”. (Mukharjee, Tutun: 434). Sita is the only epical women who is much admired and put on the pedestal of honour but at the same time she is subjugated and remained the mouth piece of all wives and mothers suffering from inner voice. In her play Mahabharata, Malika Sarabhai, constructed mother epical woman character Draupadi. In medieval Mahabharata Draupadi was projected as the image of power and sacrifice. She is publically humiliated and assaulted with disrobe, she is shown as stoic women, who put on the trial of insecure and physical thrash by power-mongered patriarchal hegemony does injustice towards woman as a human being. But Sarabhai’s Draupadi is not like the conventional. Her Draupadi is endowed with the will to make affirmation of her unexpressed resistance. She rejects the arranged marriage concept which process or the will of parents and asserts her own choice. She makes declaration: “Not mine the decision, whom to marry, my heart was pledged to bow and arrow. My life is an offering to the shooter of the fish.” (qtd. in Sarabhai, Malik:2) In Search of Goddess is another play of Sarabhai wherein, she constructs the myth of Draupadi and Savitri. She reconsiders Savitri in the notion of



rejection of burning widows at their husband's funeral pure.

Mythical women Sita and Savitri are fully covered up in their majestic position and put on the pedestal honour and fortitude, and result of it, many of women in the epics are remained unearthened ignored and side-stepped when their roles are come to an end. The conscious women playwrights deconstruct and revisit epics to expose their insignificant representations and made determined efforts to shed limelight on these neglected women of two Indian epics. "Mandodari" is one of the dominant Queen of Lanka in the Ramayana who blends high human values – a committed queen, the most beautiful queen and revered position in the kingdom of Lanka. But Mandodari is overshadowed in the monumental power, arrogance and lust of Ravan. Catching this insignificant representation of Mandodari in epics, Varsha Adalja, a Gujarati playwright brought this character in centre stage through her play *Mandodari*. Adalja's Mandodari is presented a protagonist as a woman of extra ordinary knowledge and intelligence. She is a notion of truth and morality. She is portrayed as a part of her wisdom and philosophical insight into the nature of things. Adalja draws a fresh perspective from Mandodari. This modern Mandodari discards her mythic submissive counterpart behind and takes a step ahead towards liberation from puppet hood. These mythical women in modern contexts have made to change from the old notion of womanhood. They cross the marginalized and victimized, conceptualized notion and retain their autonomy. Adalja celebrated the divine dignity of feminine grace.

Gouri Ramnarayan, perhaps the first woman playwright one, who dugout many women ignored characters from Ramayana and brought on centre stage. The Ramayana have a lot of wonderful stories which are represented through women characters such as hunchback Manthara, Shoorpankha, Urmila, Mandodari, Tara and Shanta. These are lesser known women who have become muses to playwright Gowri Ramnarayan for her play 'What she said'. Gouri Ramnarayan has made strenuous efforts to shed light on these unsung heroines. These six unheard women are presented in six scenes wherein

these women reveal their inner anger, anguish and resentment. The play focuses flood light on these overlooked, and whose stories went unheard, distraught women. Urmila, Sitas sister expresses her insignificant place: "Sita was in the sun while I in the shadow". The play What she said represents the modern women's isolation, alienation, but their struggles remain unique. Each of the monologue reveals of their sufferings, struggle in contemporary reality. These Six sidelined women are presented on centre stage through feminist perspectives.

Polie Sengupta, the foremost playwright who also fore grounded the mythical character in her plays *Shoorpankha*, *Thus Spake Shoorpankha* and *So said Shakuni*, Two characters. Shoorpankha and Shakuni are neglected and marginalized whenever their function is ended in epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. They were presented in villainous stance. But, in her play, Polie Sengupta represents Shoorpankha as a rebellion, staunch believer in modern milieu. In her modern and stylish attire, she encounters on the airport with Shakuni. Both are shown as maligned characters who humiliated, and assaulted. They are filled with anger and their revenge motif leads them towards thinking of the destruction of airport with bomb-blasting. They had resentment of their humiliation, ill-treatment in the epical world. So, they think to destroy the whole world. In the end, they compromised with the present situation and gave up their idea of destruction.

This is attempt of analytical survey of Indian mythical Women who are brought on the centre stage in the form of feminist theatre and put-forth them for critical endeavor and space.

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