

Many Stories, Many Lessons: The Plurality of Draupadi, Sita and Ahalya

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Abstract: The relationship between life and literature is a dialogic one. Life inspires literature and literature in turn influences life. Various genres in which literature is manifested reflect on the orientation, significance as well as the place of the text in its social environment. Mikhail Bakhtin proposes that genres dictate the reception of a text. Yet the same text could be interpreted differently in different times and contexts and be rewritten to reflect the aspirations of the author and her/his times. The many life stories of the feminine figures from the epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* assert not only the inconclusive nature of myth and the potency of these epics, they also tell us that with changing political and social milieu the authors reinterpret and record anew given stories to contribute to the literature of their times. Draupadi as the epic heroine of *Mahabharata* has been written about popularly and widely and in each version with a new take on the major milestones of her life like her five husbands and her birth from fire. The motifs of her disrobing and her hair have been employed variedly to tell various stories, sometimes of oppression and at others of liberation, each belonging to a different time and space. Each story reflected the political stance and aspiration of its author and read by readers differently as per their times and contexts. Through an examination of various literary renditions of the feminine figures from the epics, like Draupadi, Sita, and Ahalya, this paper discusses the relationship between life and literature and how changing times call for changing forms of literature.

Keywords: Draupadi, Sita, Ahalya, retelling myths.

“In India and Southeast Asia, no one ever reads the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* for the first time. The stories are there, ‘always already.’”
(Ramanujan 46)

“Mythological references in literature establish our psychological origins or the structure of our collective unconscious: we all know how a single reference to a character or situation in an episode of the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* suddenly illuminates a whole personal or social context and unleashes a flood of associations in the readers or listeners.”
(Satchidanandan)

“...It is because women are never fully incorporated into the normative structures of their societies that subversion becomes an archetypal feminine activity.”(Chatterji 5)

Draupadi, Sita and Ahalya – three mythic heroines from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* – have been re-imagined and narrated, performed and remembered diversely.

While there is a basic storyline to their multiple tellings, the famous motifs of their life stories have been variously imagined and re-produced. The various tellings of their life stories are a product of different times, spaces and political positions of their authors. In the larger narrative universe, the diversity of their connotations merges together as a collective memory of each of them, a memory which is not static but fluid, which can be borrowed from and added to as per the authors and readers who receive them. The very nature of myth being open-ended, every effort at particularizing it through a new story, location or purpose widens the scope for more alternative storylines for its characters, situations and objectives.

Interestingly the etymology of names of these mythic figures has also been a source for these multiple tellings. For example 'Sita' in Valmiki's *Ramayana* is supposed to have been found in a furrow by king Janaka who adopted her. This story of her birth is usually justified as the word 'sita' means 'furrow'. In a Laotian *Ramayana* telling '*Gvay Dvohrabi*' Sita is born in Ravana's house as a reincarnation of Indra's chief queen Sujata, who seeks revenge on Ravana, for seducing her in Indra's form. On the advice of astrologers, the infant Sita is put in a golden casket and set afloat on a river. Janaka finds the casket and as he opens it, the infant girl is rubbing her eyes, so she is called 'Sita', where in 'si' means rubbing and 'ta' means eyes (Singaravelu 239). Similarly, in the Kannada oral telling of *Ramayana*, Sita is born out of a pregnant Ravula's (Ravana's) nose as he sneezes, in Kanadda 'sita' means 'he sneeze' (Ramanujan 36). 'Ahalya' means 'flawless' and 'one who cannot be ploughed' – a virgin, which could also mean one who cannot be tamed as her marriage could not contain her sexual desire. Draupadi has been named as Krishna, Yajnaseni, Paanchali, each of these names defining a different aspect of her life. The potential of their diverse life stories lay latent in their names as also in their mythic trajectories. Ernst Cassirer (2-33) has argued that language and myth share a solidarity. Language is both specific as well as ambiguous. One word could refer to more than one thing, its potential is ceaseless. Similarly myth with its tendency to be inconclusive belongs to the negative side of language: when science, reason and logic cease to please man, myth takes over as the predominant force, propelling many political and social motives hitherto condemned or rendered illogical.[‡]

The ability of these mythic feminine figures to transcend and connect the three realms of the divine, the mythic and the mortal, makes them relevant in the contemporary times and all the other times and contexts that they have been rekindled in. They act as a link between the mortal woman and her ideal self in the divine realm, the Great Goddess. William Sax (134-156) in his study of the '*Pandava Lila*' in Garhwal, describes Draupadi's identification with Goddess Kali. The *Pandava Lila* performance and especially the part played by Draupadi in it, who is both a Goddess as well as a wife and a daughter-in-law, highlights the significant link between the figure of a Goddess and that of an ordinary woman who is a wife. The two figures are intimately connected by their primary duty of protection of the male lineage. The *lila* is performed during a '*shraadh*' (annual rituals for the dead ancestors) ceremony, wherein the daughter-in-law of the

[‡] Elsewhere I have argued that Jung's idea of the archetypal feminine, the anima, arising out of our collective unconscious is manifested in the mythic and the divine feminine, rendering the former its potential for multitude of interpretations (Verma 62-63).

family performing the 'shraadh' gets possessed by Draupadi, who is also looked at as Kali in the region. This woman possessed by Draupadi/Kali is offered a goat kid sacrifice on the last day of the *lila* performance to quench her 'thirst for blood' (reminiscent of a popular belief that Draupadi was responsible for the Mahabharata war).

As these mythic heroines occupy a flexible, abstract and pervasive space between the sacred divine and the profane mortal/everyday, they can guide, dictate, be guided and dictated to, reflecting subject positions of their authors and their desirable readers. This paper is an attempt to study some of the varied connotations of these mythic feminine figures through some popular motifs of their lives, the deployment of their sexual agencies and their connotations in the larger narrative universe which presupposes the continuum of mortal, mythic and divine spheres for human life.

Popular Motifs of the Mythic-Divine

According to the *Mahabharata* by Vyasa, Draupadi was born from the *yajna* fire, unwanted, uncalled for, to destroy the order of the Kshatriya, hence her birth was preordained to bring about the destruction of the warring clans. In some of her renderings she has been looked at as Kali, the Goddess of destruction for her role in bringing about the war. As the story of Barbareek (Ghatotkacha's son) goes, his decapitated head witnessed the eighteen day war of *Mahabharata*. When he was asked who really slew the Kauravas, he answered that he saw only the 'sudarshan chakra' (Krishna's discus) flashing everywhere and Draupadi roaming the field, drinking the blood of the enemies (Bhattacharya, *She who must be obeyed* 29). She has a thriving cult in the South of India and temples devoted to her as a deity where her devotees celebrate her as a virgin Goddess, the Amman. In 'Bheelon ka Bharath' – an oral telling of Mahabharata among the Bheel tribe of Gujarat (transliterated and translated as a collection of the episodic songs of Bheel *Mahabharata* carried out by the Sahitya Akademi), Draupadi has been described as a goddess, who controls and threatens lives of Pandavas and does this in collaboration with Kunti, who is also a Goddess.

Sita has been interpreted as the goddess Lakshmi, as an earthly consort to Vishnu as Rama. She has been looked at as the goddess Kali in *Adbhut Ramayana* (the Ramayana of wonders) – written somewhere in the 15th century in the *shakta* tradition (Coburn 5-7). In many regional telling of *Ramayana*, Sita is supposed to have taken birth only to kill Ravana, as per a divine plan. Ahalya was created by Brahma as the most beautiful woman in the universe. Her divinity is established through her unnatural celestial birth. Though she is closer to the mortal woman than Draupadi or Sita, having been punished and suffered as a mortal for a mortal sin, her unusual trajectory, her birth and her survival of the curse for an exceptionally long time (mostly recorded as 60,000 years) bring her close to being divine whereas her suffering for a mortal sin makes her the perfect role model for the mortal woman. Valmiki describes Ahalya in Rama's words as follows:

The Creator, it seems, with utmost care
had perfected this form divine, enchanting.
Like a tongue of flame smoke-shrouded,

Like the full moon's glory ice-reflected,
Like blinding sunlight mirrored in water
(Bhattacharya, *Panchkanya: The Women of Substance* 16)

Sita is popularly appropriated for her temptation for the golden deer and her abduction, her loyalty to Rama and her strength of character, both for defending and challenging patriarchal control on women. The popular motifs of her life story are her birth, which has multiple versions, her *agnipariksha* (trial by fire) and her disappearance into the Earth. Draupadi's most appropriated life event is her disrobing in the hall of men, her birth from fire, her dark complexion, long hair and her marriage to five men. Ahalya's infidelity to her husband Gautama, her coitus with Indra and redemption by Rama have been the life events popularly picked up and retold, mostly pivoting around Ahalya's knowledge of Indra as an imposter and her regret or defiance of the act. Their stories are both in conformation to and questioning patriarchal norms for women.

The Sexual Agency of the Mythic Feminine

The use of feminine figures through their sexualities to symbolize the ominous in the epic tradition has many precedents, most famously in the case of Helen of Troy. Helen, who is remembered more for her seduction by Paris than any other event of her life, was both the cause and the price of war. Medea, another popular Greek epic heroine is remembered for having killed her children in order to avenge herself against her infidel husband, Jason. Jason is emotionally shattered by this event. Medea's identity as a 'lover' overpowers her identity as a nurturing mother as she kills her own children, hence exposing the ominous and destructive potential of her sexuality, which connotes different things in these two identities. As a mother in a patriarchal society who uses her children as means to avenge herself, she shatters the stereotypical image of the ever protective and nurturing mother. On similar lines the attempted disrobing of Draupadi's menstruating and therefore potentially reproductive body is understood to have caused the bloody war for kingship. As described in the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi, brought to the hall of men, while she is menstruating, is ritually impure and wearing a single garment, her sexual and reproductive powers are exposed to the public eye. The humiliation and rage caused to Draupadi, is avenged through the Great War which killed thousands of people. Her sexuality also like Helen's and Medea's therefore holds destructive potential, unraveled in the event of the war. The process of her disrobing was never complete. However, the threat of that which could potentially be robbed off her spelt destruction for the *Kshatriya* order.

Similarly it is the abduction of Sita by Ravana, and her confinement in his palace that brings the *Ramayana* to its climax and calls for the final destruction of evil. Sita becomes the crucial link in the chain of events, which, according to many *Ramayana* tellings (for instance, the *Adbhut Ramayana* and the Kannada oral telling referred to above), were pre-ordained and part of the divine scheme of things. In both cases it is the impending 'rape' or the threat to these heroines' sexual honor that brings about destruction. Draupadi and Sita remain untouched but they suffer; they have to pay a price for something which is not their doing. Ahalya on the other hand, succumbs to the actual act of coitus, which makes it inevitable for her to be punished in order to uphold the

institution of marriage. Draupadi as 'Dopdi', in her famous rendering as a tribal naxalite woman in a short story by Mahashweta Devi, turns the tables by questioning the very concept of shame and honor attached to a woman's body. After being raped by Senanayak and his men, she refuses to be clothed again, accosts him with her naked body and asks, "Are you a man? There is not a man here that I should be shamed!" (Devi 37)

Sita, in some of the tellings of Ramayana, has been given a past life. A chaste woman called 'Vedavati' (a manifestation of Sri Lakshmi), desirous of marrying Vishnu and while undergoing penance for it, was approached by a lustful Ravana. He tried word and force but could not have Vedavati, who promised to be reborn to destroy him and jumped into fire (Doniger 22). In two of the Laotian telling of *Ramayana*, *Rama Jataka* and *Gvay Dvohrabi*, Sita is born as a reincarnation of Indra's wife, who was seduced by Ravana in the guise of Indra and seeks revenge in her birth as Sita (Singaravelu 239). Whereas Sita is given this sexual past in some versions, in 15th century *Adhyatma* (spiritual) *Ramayana*, we see the insertion of an illusory Sita – Maya/Chhaya Sita (Hess 9). It is said that it was actually this Maya Sita whom Ravana abducted so that the celestial plot of his doom could be unfolded, while the real Sita stayed safe with the fire god (Agni). After Rama, won her back from Ravana, he forgot about the duplicity of Sita and ordered *agnipariksha*. The fire God took in the Maya-Sita and gave him back the real one. This version absolves any possibility of sexual pollution of Sita, even by the sight or touch of Ravana. According to a local bard, Bacan Singh Rawat of Toli, Garhwal, whom Sax interviewed, it was this Maya Sita who was later re-incarnated as Draupadi (137).

In her elaborate analysis of the motif of Sita's *agnipariksha*, Hess highlights the embedment of this episode in the cultural and social memory of India. She argues that while the fact of the 'trial by fire' is pervasively retained in the Indian psyche, the concept of Maya-Sita, which brings in some justice to Sita as a woman and does away with the absurdity of the 'trial by fire' episode, is largely forgotten (even though it was shown in the popular TV series on Ramayana by Ramananda Sagar). While *agnipariksha* is popular, remembered and often quoted, the concept of 'Maya-Sita' is far less known. This reflects the patriarchal order's preoccupation with sentencing and maintaining prescriptions of behavior and conduct for married women. Hess argues that the memory of *agnipariksha* is deeply embedded in the Indian psyche, and is manifested in so many sacred patriarchal events like vows of marriage, where agreeing to jump into fire at the husband's command in order to prove one's fidelity and subordination to the husband is taken as the ultimate test of virtue.

In Bheel Bharath, Draupadi's sexuality is deployed as a preamble of destruction of the powerful king of serpents, Vasuki. Draupadi lives in her seven-storied palace in Hastinapur. While her handmaidens are grooming her one day, a golden hair falls from her head and is carried away by the wind to the 'Patal lok', the underworld. Serpent king Vasuki, who is in deep sleep is awakened and gets intrigued by the golden hair. He becomes desirous of making love to the woman whose hair it is. In spite of his wives' effort to restrain him, he mounts his horse and after wandering on Earth for some time, finds Draupadi sitting on a swing with her golden hair loose, shining in the sun. He carries Draupadi to her bedroom and ignoring all her protests he seduces her. Draupadi initially resists and tells him that he will be killed if the Pandavas were to find out about

this, but eventually she gives in. She then cooks for him a thirty two course meal, serves it on a golden platter and feeds him, heats water for his bath and bathes him. Afterwards she asks him to leave, lest her husbands find out. Vasuki insists on spending the night with her. As Arjuna enters, he is beaten up by Vasuki and is hung on a nail on the wall tied by a hair from Vasuki's moustache. Vasuki and Draupadi then have sex on the bed under Arjuna's gaze, who cries all night in pain. In the morning Vasuki cuts the hair string with his sword and Arjuna falls from the wall with a thud. After Vasuki leaves, Arjuna whimpers and tells Draupadi that Vasuki's visit would now be an everyday affair. He expresses the intense pain he might have to go through physically if Vasuki's visits continue. He then asks her to find out from Vasuki how he can be killed. The following night while Vasuki is asleep, Draupadi crawls into his stomach and finds out the secret of his destruction. Draupadi tells Arjuna that the only man who can save them from Vasuki is Karna, son of the Sun God. Then follows the revelation of Karna being the son of Kunti and consequently also a Pandava. Karna agrees to help his brother and sister-in-law in distress. Next time when Vasuki comes to the palace, Karna fights him and burns eight of his nine hoods. As the fire catches his body, Vasuki pleads for his life and Karna being kind-hearted, spares his life and lets him go with his one hood intact.

While Ahalya's sexual agency has been deployed to create a role model for the ideal, chaste married woman, it also exposes the male privilege within a patriarchal social order especially through the institution of marriage and Rama's ability to free her from her curse. Her later renditions have been around the question of her sexual will as a woman, her dilemma as a married woman succumbing to Indra and her internal conflict of emotions especially after being released from the curse. In a poem by Pratibha Bhat (51-52), written from Ahalya's perspective, after being punished and petrified as a stone, she expresses her innocence and the agony of waiting. Manorama Mahapatra (34-35) vindicates Ahalya of any wrong-doing in her poem, "Ahalya: the Self-fulfilled". She establishes her as a woman with her own mind, her own choices.

She is what she is! Herself Her Time present Her Time future;
She manifests now To fulfil herself. She needs the touch Of no holy feet
Any longer!(35)

The author establishes Ahalya's agency as a woman in an unapologetic manner. Without getting into the question of what she did and whether it was correct or not, Mahapatra attempts to disconnect her freedom as a woman from her actions vis-à-vis her patriarchal environment. The author says that Ahalya, who stands for the modern Indian woman in this poem, shall now define her own present and future. Her time is now, or whenever she chooses it to be. She will no longer abide by her social or physical boundaries (from the symbolism of Ahalya being bound as a stone, made immobile for centuries), because her time to find herself as a person is here and she shall cease the moment. So, this new Ahalya shall find her freedom, assert herself and be whoever she wants to be in the present or in future and she does not need any 'holy feet' any longer. Here the 'holy feet' stand for both religious and patriarchal institutions which are socially sanctioned ways for women to assert themselves, but actually keep women from achieving their potentials as persons in their own rights. The author borrows from the myth of Ahalya, to bring her closer to the modern Indian woman, who might be suffering a similar fate vis a vis her

social environment and exclaims that time has changed and so Ahalya's trajectory needs a change as well, meaning, the lives of the modern Indian women need to change and that change can only be brought about by themselves.

The Kannada short story 'Ahalya' by Yashwant Chittal (76-86) is a poignant reminder of Ahalya's merciless treatment by Gautama. Though conforming to the ancient fate of Ahalya, it presents a chilling description of her predicament, her position and desire as a woman. *Ahalya*, a short film, by Sujoy Ghosh is an interesting take on the myth. Here, whoever makes love to Ahalya in guise of her husband is arrested into the frame of a little wooden doll, looking like the man originally did. Trapped, suffocated, screaming at the top of their lungs, yet not being heard by anyone, clueless about their mistake, they are left for an indeterminate time to ponder over it as well as their fate – exactly how Ahalya must have felt while suffering her punishment as an 'invisible stone woman'.

The Tamil short story "Saba Vimochanam" (The Redemption) by Pudhumai Pithan (Saravanan) deals with Ahalya's life after her curse has been lifted by Rama. She and Gautama go through the pangs of questioning their actions in the past. While Gautama is secretly remorseful, Ahalya wants to stay away from the very shadow of another man. Her curse has traumatized her; her only emotional anchor are Rama – Sita and the ideal relationship they have. Then she learns about Sita's *agnipariksha*, which the latter describes as something she had to undergo regardless of what she believed, as her husband commanded it. Disillusioned with the marital terms of the most righteous man and woman she knew and bewildered by the sense of justice of Rama, who was (now) the same as Gautama in her eyes, she goes back to being a stone. As if the numbness of the cold stone were better, more reassuring, more peaceful than the vehemence of human emotions that cause pain and hurt repeatedly.

Connotations of the Mythic Feminine

The meaning and connotations of Draupadi, Sita and Ahalya in the cultural memory of India and South Asia, owing to the inconclusive nature of their figures, can best be termed as a bricolage. Draupadi is indeed viewed as '*nathawati anathawat*', having husbands but still as if alone, a sad, unfortunate and ominous symbol. Her condition also simultaneously sets the standard for an ideal Sati (virtuous woman). On the other hand it also evokes the fact of her multiple marriages and thus sets her 'sat' (virtue) in the realm of suspicion. Alf Hildebeitel (297-363) argues that as the cult of 'Sat dharma' grew in Rajasthan, the followers of Pir Shams Ali appropriated Draupadi's story to reflect the glory of the Pir as the savior, while it sets a model example of sati through the figure of Draupadi. Pir is said to have ten lives, the eighth of which is that as Krishna, "Luckily he came as Krishna! He protected Draupadi with reams of clothes (347)." The ninth life of the Shams Pir is as Budhha, whom Draupadi recognizes as she is 'fixed in concentration'. It is this Budhha who later saves the Pandavas, destroys Kauravas, kills Duryodhana and brings the Pandavas moksha (348).

In the Kritayuga Renuka was Kritiya,
In the Satyayuga Sita was Kritiya,

In the Dvaparayuga Draupadi was Kritiya,
And in the Kaliyuga there are Kritiyas in every house.
(A Kritiya is a bloodthirsty, demonic female)(Karve 92)

While Draupadi and Sita are considered ‘Kritiyas’, as they spelled the doom of two very powerful empires in wars that took many lives, Ahalya’s sexuality having been realized and punished, is an example for infidel wives, so in a way, it is a destruction saved, of many other women, who may ‘stray’ from their marriages. The recognition of Ahalya’s sexual desire and agency in later texts, also exalts her as the ideal of modern Indian woman, who wants to assert control on her own sexuality. In contemporary wedding rituals in Sri Lanka, Ahalya is portrayed as a black stone that the bride appropriately touches with her foot (Doniger 39).

In the same regional context (South India) where Draupadi is hailed and worshipped as a virgin Goddess, we have popular metaphors like ‘*Ati Keshi Pati nasha*’, meaning – women with long hair spell doom for their husbands. Draupadi is polyandrous and therefore not the ideal wife in the contemporary times. In Garhwal her polyandrous status is understood as the original precedent to the social practice of polyandry in the region which also signifies her hypersexuality (Sax 142). The most popular motif of her life-story, which is her disrobing and challenging of Dharma in a hall full of men, is used to both evoke patriarchal succor as well as render it needless and overhyped. In “Dopdi” (short story by Mahashweta Devi), Draupadi overturns her subjugation and blame of shame (Verma 73-74).

Sita is remembered most popularly as the ideal, chaste wife of Rama. She also has connotations as the ‘fickle feminine,’ as the one who fell to the temptation of the golden deer and landed her husband into trouble and then questioned the intentions of her brother-in-law, Lakshmana, inviting trouble for herself and all others. Ahalya symbolizes the ominous and the brave simultaneously. She is an unchaste adulterous woman but at the same time and context she is also the one who represents a woman’s free choice of asserting her sexual agency. Their plentitude denotes not only women troubled deeply by their patriarchal world order, but also women who have challenged it and in some cases rejected its prescriptions for their lives.

Their life stories have been opened up at various subsequent times to be given new colors and trajectories by authors according to their aspirations and contexts. This has given them newer politics and newer social connotations, all of which exist together, merged in the larger narrative imagination. The more they are written about the more the scope of their meaning widens. The space of myth and the instrument of the feminine figures of the mythic tradition facilitate a platform for negotiating power, social structure and cultural change for authors, performers, readers and audience/participants alike.

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