



Mythical to Modern-day Women: Analysing Texts and Films

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Abstract: *The practice of gender inequality has always been due to age old traditional practices, blind faith in religion and the domination of patriarchy in various societies. In few countries, a woman still needs a husband and a family to survive in the society. Since long, many literary texts depict such position of women. Though films have well portrayed the changes happening in the society yet the films have always been criticized for ignoring the issues of gender. In most of the films, women are given a second-tier status; they are characterized as inferior and weaker parts of the society seeking help from their male counterpart. However, there are certain films that depict women as superwoman and have focused in echoing their voice but there is still a long way to go in order to uplift the position of women characters in cinema. The paper will discuss the issues of gender inequality from mythologies to films and how society has played a major role in such depiction of women.*

Key Words: *Religion, Gender Inequality, Women, Society, films, Heroin.*

Ancient Greek philosophers knew myth as mythos. They distinguished mythos from logos. From mythos came instinctive narrations, from logos rational thoughts. Mythos gave upsurge to the oracles and the arts. From logos came science and mathematics. Logos explained how the sun rises and how babies are born. It took man to the moon. But it never explained why. Why does the sun rise? Why is a baby born? Why does man exist on earth? For answers one has to turn to mythos. Mythos gave determination, connotation and validation to existence. Ancient Hindu prophets knew myth as mythya. They distinguished mythya from sat. mythya was truth seen through a frame of reference. Sat was truth independent of any frame of reference. Mithya gave a limited, distorted view of reality and sat as limitless, correct view of things.

If myth is an idea, mythology is the vehicle of that idea. Mythology constitutes stories, symbols and rituals that make myth tangible. Stories, symbols and rituals are essentially languages- languages that are heard, seen and performed. Together they construct the truths of a culture. The story of resurrection, the symbol of crucifix and the ritual of baptism establish the idea that is Christianity. The story of independence, the symbol of the national flag and the ritual of the national anthem reinforce the idea of nation state. (Pattanaik,xvi-xvii)

Religion has always created myth, and many mythologies of the world have a religious source. The Greek, Islamic, Hindu, Chinese and the Christian religions have plaited around them a large number of myths. The difference between religion and myth is that religion has a living force and a spiritual experience, whereas the figures of the mythologies appear to us to be apparitions and relics of the past. Religion is a living mythology and develops with dogmas, ceremonial and magical practices which are the vital ingredients of a myth. In religion and myth, the delusional idea is reality. Religion is invention of faith, and had given birth to myths and canons that cannot be scientifically elucidated. Myths come from racial shared unconscious, and there may be real meaning buried beneath its surface meaning. Mythology is a cultural text.

Mythology is an integral part of religion. It is necessary for religion and national culture as the skin and skeleton that preserve a fruit with its juice and its taste. Form is no less essential than substance. We cannot squeeze religion and hope to bottle and keep the essence by itself. It would neither be very useful nor last very long. Mythology and holy figures are necessary for any great culture to rest on its stable spiritual foundation and function as a life-giving inspiration and guide. (Rajagopalchari, XX)



It can be supposed that mythology is the subsection of religion. Any given religion will reside in the demarcation of its mythological characters. Religion pacts with the establishment of certain ideas that verify the existence of superhuman powers in the form of God or Gods. On the other hand, mythology is designed at proving the certainties and faiths established by religion. This is the main variance between religion and mythology. Mythology aims to launch the faiths put forward by any religion through stories and epics. Mythological characters are fashioned in order to prove the validity of religious declarations. Religion on the other hand depends on its mythology. In all the classical mythologies the influence and authority of the Gods are far more superior than the mortals. However, when the question of the authority of gender comes in, it is clear that the female portrayed have less say in the result of matters than the males. Myths and legends written by creative men defend the role of men and depict women as the root cause of all evil or chaos in the world and throughout ages male characters are glorified and not so much attention is paid to actual noble and heroic deeds of the females, thus leading to gender politics in literature as well.

Gender stereotypes are recognized in Greek myths, especially through patriarchal and misogynistic depictions of women, continued to exist and were formed in the Old Testament and the New Testaments. Greek myths establish most popular body of myths and their impression on western culture is incredible and continuous. Myths in which women are unmistakably subordinate in importance can be considered indication of patriarchal canons of cultural background. Negative portrayal of women whose roots go back to Greek mythology has been used in the conceptual narratives by patriarchy throughout centuries. Women in Greek myths are portrayed according to patriarchal conventions. For instance, Penelope waited many years for her husband Odysseus to return from the Trojan War so she is recalled as a loyal wife while on the other hand Helen is remembered as a seductress for her association with numerous men though she was taken by these varied men by force. This picture of women from men's point of view is taken even further by Christian tradition. In the Old Testament Eve and Lilith are associated to Helen for being evil. Before Christianity came into existence it is alleged that the creator, the almighty God had first made man through his own shadow and later he made women to maintain the needs of man. The *Genesis*, the *Bible* and the *Exodus* give similar accounts of the formation of the universe. Male dominance can be evidently seen in the myths and religions who moulded all the customs and guidelines to be followed in a culture, the place of female gender has always been of a secondary importance, it is impossible to distinct their position of women in a religion from the time and place in which the religion was born. Our history and myths have chronicled women as inferior in comparison to man. Even our own Goddesses from various myths and legends have agonized the gender discrimination which unfortunately still exists in the society. Even in the twenty first century, when man has acquired greater power than ever before to alter the natural works, the old myths continue to haunt us in many common assumptions about human experience. The notions now presumably obsolete than a man should be active and aggressive, and a women passive and subject to the control of man in her family and the society, after the supreme male god the power of making rules transferred to man and woman suffered a huge set back in their roles, this has continued from the ancient mythical times and is experienced till date.

It is believed that, Lord Brahma is the creator, Lord Vishnu the preserver and lord Shiva is the destroyer according to the Hindu myths. Here again we see the male Gods as the supreme leaders taking care of the worldly affairs. These main Gods then allocate the power to other Gods and Goddesses forming the customs and rules of the religion. Mythology is an essential part of religion because it provides a spiritual foundation to a particular culture. According to C. Rajagopalachari, "Ramayana is a part of hindu mythology, we cannot understand Greek life and Greek Civilization without knowing all about Zeus, Apollo, Hercules, Venus, Hector, Achilles, Ulysses and others. So also one cannot understand Hindu dharama unless one knows Rama and Sita, Bharat, Lakshman, Ravana, Kumbhkarana and Hanuman" (XI)

For a long time, religion has administered all human activities. Be it Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, or Buddhism, it has been an all-pervasive force, whether consciously comprehended or sub-consciously adapted, in the lives of people universally in the world. According to Kraemer (1999), "religion was a society's main source of law used for purposes of social control (e.g., the *Ten Commandments*, Moses's Laws, *The Koran*, Buddhism's Five Precepts, and the Laws of Manu) and supervising daily life".(web) When the roles and position of woman in a society are deliberated, the issue of religion and its influence on their position has not been enclosed sufficiently. Religion or more specifically, religiosity, folk religion, or popular religion has been used to defend the prejudicial treatment of women. In fact, the *Ten Commandments* tell us that women are property. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house; thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, or his man servant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is thy neighbor's."(Barker 107). Wife and ox are represented as same thing. Women were often sold or given away, even to servants. Since long the male religious leaders have had and still have possibility to interpret holy teachings either to promote or subjugate women. Each religion existing today discriminates in some way or the other in contradiction of women. The scriptures of all religions reduce and denigrate women, put them down and designate women as being



substandard to men. This is not the fault of the original prophet who created that particular scripture, but of men who later on over the years reread the text of these scriptures and interpreted to suit their own vested interests. The great philosopher and spiritualist, P.R. Sarkar, has written:

If you analyse human history in all its aspects in a new way, in a new light, you will find that attempts were made to exploit others by injecting a fear complex in their minds.... What a nasty psychology it was to inject the fear complex in people's mind in the name of God! And here lies the difference between religion and *dharma*. You will find that everywhere in religion, the fear complex has been created in human minds. For women so many rigid rules and regulations were framed so that they would respect men and stand before them in awe with folded hands. But for men, there are no such rules and regulations. (35)

In the *King James Version Bible*, book of *Corinthians* St. Paul wrote: "As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church" (KJV. Cor. 14:34). Deuteronomy declares that if a woman does not bleed on her wedding night, "the men of her town shall stone her to death." (KJV. Deut. 22:13). An Orthodox Jewish prayer thanks God, "who hast not made me a woman." (Web). *The Koran* stipulates that "a woman shall inherit less than a man, and that a woman's testimony counts for half a man". (Rodwell 100:4). Today, when religious institutions exclude women from their hierarchies and rituals, the inevitable implication is that females are inferior. The Hindu scriptures too have been just as cruel to women as the Abrahamic doctrines which exist till date. According to Manu, the great Hindu law-maker, "If a wife, proud of the greatness of her relatives or (her own) excellence, violates the duty which she owes to her lord, the king shall cause her to be devoured by dogs in a place frequented by many." (Web)

The ancient myth of Pandora appears in several distinct Greek versions. In all literary versions, the myth is a kind of theodicy, addressing the question of why there is evil in the world. In the seventh century BC, Hesiod, both in his *Theogony* (wherein Pandora is not named) and in *Works and Days*, gave the earliest literary version of the Pandora story. As part of the punishment of humanity for Prometheus' theft of the secret of fire, angry Zeus decides to give humanity a punishing gift to compensate for the boon they had been given. He commands Hephaestus to mould from earth the first woman, a "beautiful evil" whose descendants would torment the human race. She was the first human woman created by the Gods, specifically by Hephaestus and Athena on the instructions of Zeus. Each God helped create her by giving her unique gifts. Hermes gave this woman a name: Pandora – "All-gifted" – "because all the Olympians gave her a gift." (Hesiod, 81). She brought with her a jar (which, due to textual corruption in the sixteenth century, came to be called a box) containing burdensome toil and sickness that brought death and misery to mankind. Prometheus had warned his brother Epimetheus not to accept any gifts from Zeus. But Epimetheus did not listen; he accepted Pandora, who promptly scattered the contents of her jar. As a result, Hesiod tells us, "The earth and sea are full of evils." (101). In this myth, similarities with the Christian story of Adam and Eve can be observed. Just like Pandora in ancient Greece, Eve was known as the first woman on earth in Hebrew history. Even the creation of the two women is similar: Pandora was made of earth and water and Eve from the rib of Adam, the first man on earth, who was in his turn made of clay. Another similarity is that they both disobeyed God: Eve tempted Adam to eat the forbidden apple, against God's will and some accounts maintain that Pandora tempted Epimetheus into opening the box. Hence, patriarchal thinking is perpetuated that both women brought ruin and misfortune upon men who had so far lived in a paradisiacal world, free from all sins.

Adam and Eve were both similarly responsible for the sin they committed. Though Adam knew about God's warning, yet without reluctance he succumbed to Eve's offer to share her disobedience. When interrogated by God, he blamed it all on Eve which made her the root cause for man's downfall. The image of woman is characterised by convinced stereotypical ideas and traits, sanctioned by the institutes of power, which coalesce into discourses in the form of advice manuals or sets of written rules. As Kate Millett points out, "Evidence from anthropology, religion and literary myth all attests to the politically expedient character of patriarchal convictions about women" (Millett, 46). Manu, the progenitor of mankind in the Hindu tradition, declares in the *Manava Dharamshastra*, the laws of mankind, 'Day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their (families)... Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence' (Manu IX 2–3). The two great epics of ancient India, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the upholders of the great Indian tradition, propagate the concept of the ideal woman as a devoted and docile wife. Looking back at our Indian myths, Draupadi is often projected as responsible for the war of *Mahabharata*, but the truth remains that her own husband betrayed her by using her as a property to be lost in gambling. The men gambled but she suffered the insult



and later when she demanded vengeance which led to the war, she was the one who was blamed for it like Helen was liable for the Trojan War. If we peep over *Ramayana* we yet again find the similar predicament. Sita was so beautiful that Ravana could not sojourn himself from kidnapping her which led to a battle between Lord Ram and Ravana, though the main reason behind Sita's abduction was a revenge Ravana was seeking from Rama and Lakshmana for the offense of his sister Shrupnakha. It was Sita who agonized for no accountability of hers. Many innocents lost their lives, Lanka was set on fire. Sita was liberated and brought back home. But that was not the end of her torment. She was forced to undergo the "Agnipariksha" to prove her chastity. Later, she is made an outsider from her own society and family due to the pressures of the society. It is very discouraging to perceive the tragic history of women who were close to the Gods and yet were denied of their rights and status. The females in myths have remained ethereal figures, their thoughts and reasons mysterious, their emotions represented only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately submissive to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers and sons. The face of religion bares a mask. The viciousness of religion is that for women know that their only option is obedience or lose everything. It is the fault of the male dominated religion and the theories of men which have made women inferior. Today men continue to dominate the structure of all religions. "However much people might indulge in tall talk, in no country or age were women given full freedom in religious and social matters, nor are they given their rights even to this day." (Sarkar17). Time has been changing and the society along with it but religion has persisted the similar manner. If we read the mythologies one can say that in some way or the other it is religion which paves way to the attitude of all societies which hold women back and fails to give her due recognition.

Right from the commencement of the Indian film industry, the Hindu tradition and beliefs are clearly represented in the films. During the silent era, the films like '*Raja Harishchandra*' projected mythology, and then arose the films based on drama filled of fantasy and melodious songs. Music and songs became the vital elements of filmic skill. The 1930s saw the emergence of a fascination with the social themes that affected day to day living. By the 1940s, however, a winning formula for success at the box office had been bogus, consisting of songs, dance, spectacular images, rhetoric and fantasy. In 1950s, the issues of nationalism, independence and ethnic and religious visions emerged as themes. The popular film making took a distinct 'artistic' shape with Satyajit Ray's '*Pather Panchali*' (1955) which displayed realistic and sensitive chronicles or the adversity encountered by a Brahmin family. By the 1960s, hindi cinema loosened its emphasis from social concerns to a spate of romantic musicals, westernized themes, flashy acting styles, fascinating heroes and dancing styles. In the 1970s the genre of middle-of-the-road films and low-budget films were produced. The early 1980s saw young filmmakers making films based on the harsh realities of the society with sophisticated narrative elements. Though the Bollywood films have well portrayed the deviations happening in the society the films have always been disparaged for disregarding the issues of gender. In most of the films, women are specified a second-tier status; they are branded as inferior and weaker sects of the society always in search of support from their male counterpart. The only status they are given is as an item girl or a one-dimensional catalyst for the hero's expedition in the film. The heroines are harassed and embarrassed in terms of casting couch and issues like sexual assault and rape have been shown regularly in films. Further, the films are totally insensitive and ignorant of depictions about transgenders and homosexuals. The films devote a great deal of time in focusing on women related matters or socio-economic problems faced by them. But a very diminutive time is devoted to appeal to the development of women and upgrading their self-esteem. The imprint of women created in films by Bollywood popular cinema is of personality related issues and problems of existence. Women are subjected to indignities in both real and celluloid life. The treatment of women in films are either as domestic dolls pandering to the whims and fancies of the dominating husband and in-laws is another cliché that we come across. Young women and girls are depicted as persons having just one goal in life-to get married to someone who will meet all their expensive habits. Women are generally shown as mere decorations in the house. Most mainstream films portray the man-woman relationship in the mould of one social activity, namely, falling in love and either getting married or jilted for money or family prestige bestowed by birth. The conventional films of the Bollywood are known for treating the female of the species as physically frail and mentally weak. Doting mothers are willing to pardon any wrong doings of their pet sons but not those of their daughters! There is a gender bias in real life, and movies are reflecting the reality. After any crime is committed against a woman, a negative role is played by the society, police, and judiciary. The women only need to be honorable, watched over, less interactive and self-contained. If they do not do this, they are eligible to lose their womanhood. Hindi and regional popular cinema is playing mainly reinforcing role in this field. Due to the social conditioning of women from the beginning of their birth and deep societal perception of the woman as someone subordinate and inferior to the man society condemns a victim and in turn de-humanizes and de-empowers itself. This type of propaganda makes it difficult to secure women's rights in the society. The impact of these teachings is that accept marital violence as something acceptable and normal. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-2) conducted between 1998-99 by the International Institute of Population Sciences, 56 per cent married Indian women think that there is nothing wrong if their husband resort to physical violence.



The issues involved could be as trivial as going out of the house without informing the husband or her inability to cook properly or failure to respect her in-laws.

Film heroines also face gender inequalities regarding equal "pay cheques" in film industry. The Hollywood films continue to marginalize women both in front of and behind the cameras and display a worrying trend of sexualizing teen girls. Many films like "Transformers 2," "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince," and "The Twilight Saga: New Moon," and found only 32.8 percent of the 4,342 speaking characters in the films were female. That represents a ratio of 2.05 males for every female role. Action based films are always thought to be made for actors not actresses. The film 'Salt' was actually written for Tom Cruise. And Angelina Jolie was actually the second choice; it wasn't Brad Pitt or anyone else. In India, there's no such choice. However, Vidya Balan's success story in 'The dirty picture' and 'Kahaani' has given actresses the hope for a brighter tomorrow in the Indian film industry.

The media especially films are conceived as a culture industry, which manufacture and sell images of masculinity and femininity. But the image of women portrayed by the media through TV serials, pop shows and films, is not to be found in real life. The projection of women in the popular Bollywood has repeatedly damaged their very image. At least for a change, we should hope that films will be made to show women as capable of thinking independently, choosing their own careers. The future films would treat the men and women even-handedly. Again, women characters should not only remain either objects of worship or objects of pleasure, and never equal partners of partakers of the economic management of the household. The films should refrain from portraying women as commodities and sex objects and the cinema should get rid off the gender discrimination against women.

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