



DEPICTION OF RESILIENCE AND FORTITUDE OF FEMALE PROTAGONIST IN SAISWAROOPA IYER'S NOVEL RUKMINI: KRISHNA'S WIFE

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary post modern era, authors are writing about lesser known characters of mythology in an attempt to give different dimension to the subject. Rukmini's character has not been written much, except the fact that she took a bold decision to marry Krishna and acted against the patriarchal forces of the time. The wheel of mythology moves on variegated spokes and the need to retell mythology from feminist point of view has gathered ground. Feminist revisionist mythology engages the subject of feminist revision of the myth, language and spirituality. The novel weaves a touching persona of strong willed queen of Krishna, who stood her ground and maintained her charismatic demeanor with fortitude and resilience during the testing times. The paper is an attempt to unravel the character of the protagonist as woven by Saiswaroopa Iyer. The novel is analytically studied and interpretively explored through feminist view point which answers the context of female power and fortitude.

Key words: *Mythology, feminist, fortitude, resilience, patriarchal.*

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INTRODUCTION

Saiswaroopa Iyer has written five books namely *Abhaya: The destroyer of Adharma* (2016), *Draupadi: The Tale of an Empress* (2018), *Rukmini : Krishna's Wife* (2021), *Avishi: Warrior queen from the Rig Veda* (2021) and *Mauri: The Woman who challenged Krishna* (2021). As the names with the subtitles depict the characters are strong willed women. Indian mythology is predominantly woven around male view point and the popular female figures of it have been Draupadi, Sita, Gandhari, Kunti. These women have been shown as ideal women who are devoted to their husbands and are epitome of ideal woman hood. In the novel Rukmini has been depicted as paragon of strength with will power that matched that of Draupadi. She has the strength to stand up and resist the adverse forces and speaks with conviction. Mythology has depicted this queen as a rival of Radha and in certain stories she is placed inferior to the later. The author has given her the position that makes one think twice that the woman who decided to be with Krishna against all odds in mainstream mythology was definitely strong. She can be kind, womanly and sensitive and on the other hand she can fight the demonic forces without any help. She secures her position in the democratic set up of Yadav parliament with her intelligence and fills the space created by the absence of Krishna through her insightful decisions. The Yadu clan believes that she is Krishna only. Revered by all the queens of Krishna she has the stoicism to protect her people during the destruction of Dwarka. Her unmatched love and devotion for Krishna has touching and sensitive overtones while on the other hand she is invincible through her intelligence and fighting skills.

Feminist Revisionist Mythology

The huge reservoir of Indian mythology has its roots in the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Mythology is an integral part of any civilization in the world. It shapes the cultural belief as it introduces the reader or the listener with various aspects of human condition: good and evil; the meaning of suffering; human origin; the origin of place, names, animals, cultural values and traditions. Joseph Campbell viewed mythology as which explains, empowers, stabilizes and elevates the life of a believer from mundane existence to one imbued with external meaning. Mythology is an art form that was used in the ancient era to explain everything from the seasons to the origin of the universe to life and death. Myth Revisionism, is an influential stream in the post modern literature which aims at foregrounding the concealed elements of the mythical literary artifacts, casting them the shades of contemporary relevance.

Mythology is male-centered and revolves around masculine strength and ideals. Being androcentric the myths are largely based and constructed on men, women are allowed the role subservient to men. Women representation is stereotypical as repressed and docile puppets. They are portrayed largely to assist the goals and aspirations of male counterparts and to



support them unconditionally. Feminist writers in the post modern era have given voice to the female protagonists of mythology by employing the strategy of revisionist mythmaking and by subverting the patriarchal ideology by bringing the lesser known characters from the periphery to the center. Through these characters an alternative approach of gynocentric view of myth and mythology has been handled.

Rukmini: Krishna's Wife

The annals of mythology celebrate the relationship of Krishna and Radha as the unparalleled paradigm of love. At the same time the charm of Krishna made women of Vrindavan and beyond desire him as their husband and lord. Hindu Mythology ascribes 16008 wives to him. Of these 16000 were rescued princesses and eight were principal wives-Rukmini, Jambavati, Mitravinda, Kalindi, Lakshmana, Bhadra and Nagnajiti.

The novel has unraveled the character of Rukmini as a bold daughter of king Bhishmaka. Beauty, intelligence, brave and curious, she defies the traditional role assigned to a woman by the forceful patriarchal powers of the time when kingdoms were expanded on the basis of power and matrimonial alliance. She listens to the conversations held in her palace in eaves dropping manner and does not shy away from hitting back at her brother Rukma. In mythology she is addressed as Vaidarbhi because she belonged to the city of Kundinapura in the Vidarbha kingdom. The storyline as created by the author Saiswaroopa Iyer is intricately and perfectly told within the framework of traditional knowledge.

The writer begins the foreword of the work by writing that Rukmini Kalyanam episode of Bhagavatam is a part and parcel of every household of her part of country and is considered as an auspicious read and traditionally, unmarried girls are encouraged to read the episode to be blessed with the suitable spouse. But her story, post her wedding, is overtaken by the engulfing plot of the Mahabharata (Iyer). The narratives of Bhagvatam and the Mahabharata are constructed to justify the persona of the woman who was much bold than the women of today.

The prologue of the novel starts with the destruction of Dwarka after the death of Krishna. Arjuna the famed warrior is shown as the shadow of his previous self. Dwarka is in peril with waves hitting ferociously the walls of the palace and the Abhiras, the merciless barbarians have attacked. From this helpless condition the story moves backwards to Avanti, where Rukmini visits the ashram of Guru Sandipani and befriends Mitravinda, princess of Avanti. Rukmini is shown driving the chariot at a great speed that equals her spirit and boisterous nature. In the ashram she overhears the concerns of Guru Sandipani and his wife Sangosha regarding Krishna and Balram. Braving the weather she moves out of ashram to find them to prove that she has no political malice and is no puppet in the hands of men of her family

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(Iyer,11). Krishna is introduced in the story as an avatar of Lord Vishnu, the knowledge that is shared with the readers by the author. The meeting of Rukmini and Krishna and her sharing about the evil plans of Jarasandha, King of Maghda, regarding the attack on Mathura sets the stage of their association. Part one of the novel depicts her as brave princess who slaps Shishupala to protect her maid and friend Malathi. Her open confrontations with her brother, father and even Shishupala's father portray her as a strong character. She displays stoicism where the men of royal birth buckle under the threat of Jarasandha "Rukmini eyes blurred, not at the stinging pain in her cheek when Rukma slapped her but at the way her own family acted like hers was a life that could be bartered to suit interests" (Iyer, 38) Her friendship with Draupadi, princess of Panchala and her deterrence when she declares her love "I said I am in love with your enemy. The man who you, your emperor and his worthless minions can't even dream to vanquish" (Iyer,49)

Part one ends with the marriage and two opens with her declaration that "Coyness and I don't go together."(Iyer,79), she enters the role of devoted wife but keeps her head and heart in place. She becomes a strong voice of Sudharma, Yadav parliament which believes both in equality and is democratic in working. Behind a strong demeanor is also a woman who feels insecure when she feels that Krishna might wed Draupadi. She feels she has no problem if Mitravinda and Bhadra become Krishna's wives but she feels pangs of jealousy for Draupadi and Satyabhama. Her sensitive self gets uncovered when she contemplates on "the realization that life with Krishna was going to be filled with not just political intrigues but also uncertain emotional ones". (Iyer,101) When Krishna asks her to invite her brother Rukma for Subhadra's and Arjuna's wedding she refuses and gives a politically correct reason to her husband "Let us not forget that Jarasandha is still at large.... After he is eliminated, perhaps we can consider reconciliation with some of or relatives."(Iyer,129) As a perfect stateswoman she shares escape routes with Satyabhama if Dwaraka comes under siege. In a dialogue with Draupadi she praises all the seven wives of Krishna in a selfless manner. Reference of 1600 wives comes up when Satyabhama informs Rukmini that Krishna is coming to Dwarka with abducted women after killing Bhauma. In order to give those women normal life, he had to marry them all and declare them as wives.

The inferious attack of Shishupala on Dwaraka to cripple the economy, abduction of women, death of Shishupala, her encounter as a warrior with Dantavakra, a friend of Shishupala that gave her grave wound, Game of Dice and Mahabharata make their way in the story line with a different perspective. The end narrates Dwaraka after the Kurukshetra war, bloodshed of Yadav clan at Prabhasa, death of Krishna and refusal of Rukmini to accept the same "Dark....that was the hue of her beloved, her Krishna! He is everywhere." (Iyer231) The Epilogue of the novel is linked to the prologue. Vajra, the grandson of Krishna, the sole survivor of bloodshed attacks Abhira settlement when he hears the jingle of bangles. He



meets Rukmini and tells her that he is going to be crowned as the King of Indraprastha by emperor Yudhishtira before renouncing the world with empress Draupadi and his brothers. He forces her to follow her back home but she refuses and blesses him to establish dharma so that “he (Krishna) is not forced to take birth in his human form again”. (Iyer, 235) The last lines of the novel depict Krishna and Rukmini as timeless forms.

The name Rukmini means ‘radiant’. She is regarded as the incarnation of goddess of prosperity, Lakshmi but the novel traces her as a path breaking woman who in one go broke two beliefs in choosing Krishna as her suitor. First, by rejecting the patriarchal powers and second by following her heart as a woman. Her move was radical and brave. In the novel when Krishna jokingly says that she has made a mistake by choosing him, she faints only to make him realize the pain she underwent by his joke. Kavita Kane the author of *Karna’s Wife : The Outcast’s Queen, Sita’s Sister, Lanka’s Princess, Menaka’s Choice* in praise of the novel termed it as “Engrossing...seamless blending of the original text and the layered portrayal of an indomitable, extraordinary woman.”

CONCLUSION

The findings prove that the author has delved deep into the psychology of the woman who has no other identity in mythology than being the first wife of Krishna. Her character in the novel moves from youthful gaiety to mature sensible and intelligent queen. Her strength is witnessed not only through words but also through actions. The author has charmed the readers by giving her protagonist a well-crafted image that is equal to her husband. To conclude, Rukmini epitomizes all the qualities of contemporary womanhood in this retelling. She challenges the traditional portrayal of woman and allures as symbolism of independence, determination, power, fortitude, resilience, indomance and above all as nurturer of love.

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