

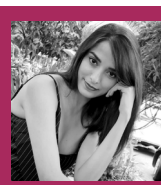
"Every great changemaker was a dreamer, someone who saw the world differently - saw potential and pursued it."

Sharanya Manivannan
Page 3



"I don't think I write books to make them famous, I write books because I like them."

Devdutt Pattanaik
Page 5



"I marvelled at the interpretation of the sequence by the writers because there is not a single weak moment for Draupadi."

Pooja Sharma
Page 5



"The only way that history can be meaningful is if we present several points of view and see the 'truth' as something that lies between those multiple perspectives."

Ashwin Sanghi
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"Part of the delight, therefore, in reading renditions of Greek myth, both ancient and modern, lies not in labelling departures as "wrong," but in comparing them with other versions and investigating why a particular detail was included or why a particular change was made"

- Thomas D. Kohn, "Tartarus and the Curses of Percy Jackson", 2015

I

Homer's *Iliad* is the major site for the analysis of Helen's character. Though Homer blames her as the direct cause of the outbreak of the Trojan War, she plays only a secondary part in the epic and only a few words are put in her mouth. Man is considered the default while woman is the 'Other' (Beauvoir). Helen's agency is regularly minimised by the characters and the narrative as a whole. There is hardly any development of her character, only a constant indecisiveness that envelops her - whether or not she is to blame for the war. Katherine Duncan-Jones rightly notes that "for the majority of writers, whether historical or literary, her appearance is essentially a blank, to be filled in - or not - by the imagination of aftercomers. And though she was celebrated for having triggered major military activity - her face launching those 'thousand ships', a phrase interestingly re-spun in modern times - she is herself essentially passive, a victim of rape and/or abduction."

However, it will be injustice to sideline her character with just these suppositions. With the vogue of feminist criticism in the 20th century, various critics have used feminist theories to scrutinise and rescue Helen's character.

The most common argument against her is her "running" away with Paris that triggered a violent chain reaction that lasted ten years. Ruby Blondell observes that Helen's elopement is presented in *The Iliad* as an assertion not of her own desire, but of Paris's or Aphrodite's. A variety of speakers - Menelaus, Hector, Helen herself, and the narrator - speak of Paris "taking" her to Troy and Helen uses the same verb with Aphrodite as subject. This verb does not exclude volition in a person who is "taken" but it can also be used, among other things, for dragging a resistant animal and for the outright abduction of women and children in warfare.

Building on the apology by Gorgias (483 - 375 BC), four main reasons are deducible for her elopement - unavoidable (divine) agency, abduction by force, Paris's manipulative power of speech (which was considered reverent) or her passion/lust. In context of the last reason, a manifestation of their (physical) love is in the presence of Aphrodite during their copulation in Book 3 of *The Iliad* (gods are but abstract concepts). However, this reason seems far feeble when more complex love is put vis-à-vis, say, Andromache and Hector - the charm of their narrative lies beyond the corporal. The assumption that Helen left her home afflicted with madness of love is actually the traditional version from Homer onwards but this point should bring us back to the first reason itself - love is birthed or rather forced in midst of a dangerous place by "divine agency".

Laurie Maguire in her book-length study of the varied depictions of

Helen throughout history, purports that between these polarized positions - Helen or someone else to blame - is the concept of joint culpability, as in *The Odyssey* when Helen says that Aphrodite "brought me to Troy . . . and made me forsake my daughter, my bridal chamber, and a husband who lacked nothing". Helen is both active and passive; she does the forsaking but is passively "made" to and "brought."

No woman in the epic is free from the unabashed reification that the narrative forces. Athena successfully spurs Odysseus into rallying the army by urging him not to let Helen, for whom so many Achaeans have already lost their lives, remain as a "boast" - an object to glory in - for Priam and the Trojans. Helen, however, fiercely uses this objectification to her own purposes.

"Agency entails responsibility, and responsibility entails susceptibility to blame and, most importantly, punishment. As long as the question is whether Paris stole her, or whether the Trojans should return her, then she cannot be held accountable: he is to blame for starting the war, and they for allowing it to continue. It is Paris who takes the blame, from Achaeans and Trojans alike, in acknowledgment of the larger scope for agency assigned to the male. In the *Iliad* itself no one directly challenges Helen's worth as a *casus belli*." (Blondell).

The objectification of Helen serves a different purpose for the men on the other side of the fight. As Blondell writes, "the theft of an object is more easily rectified than the seduction of a wife".

Hector and Priam cannot seem to blame Helen throughout the epic but this is only rightly so. Any such admission would make the Trojan refusal to return Helen inexplicable, since it is the retention of Helen - as opposed to the original elopement - that is the cause of the continuing war. As long as the Trojan leaders remain in solidarity with Paris, who refuses to return her, they cannot afford to question her value. "Her beauty is such that it blinds men to ethical concerns - a typical consequence of the influence of Aphrodite. The men mesmerized by that beauty need to believe in her innocence, even when they are fully aware of the damage such beauty causes. The attribution of blame would both call into question the supremacy of her beauty - its ability to impair men's moral judgment - and make a mockery of the heroic enterprise by undermining the rationale for fighting on both sides" (Blondell).

This power that Helen exercises

over the men who come face to face with her both explains and justifies the war in masculine terms. It also guarantees her future survival. Menelaus shall drop his sword when he sees her face and no Greek shall have reason to stone her. Her beauty is such that it erases moral concerns from men's minds.

Yet Helen is not merely an object.

"...THE FACE THAT LAUNCH'D A THOUSAND SHIPS..."

HELEN OF TROY IN HOMER & TEASDALE

Satvik Tandon



we - or Priam - to disagree? She has conveniently put herself in her place, so that they do not have to.

As Graver puts it, Helen's character is "ennobled" by her acknowledgment of past misdeeds. This form of self-disempowerment fits right with the patriarchal structures for women. "Few things are as gratifying as remorse to those in authority, since it affirms not only the behavioural norms they prescribe for their inferiors, but their original judgment of the transgressor's weakness, which in turn allows them to claim the subordinate's collusion in her subjugation" (Blondell). Her influential discourse, which becomes the audible complement of her Aphrodite-gifted visible charms, of self-blame then becomes an "exercise of power". Note how she addresses it only to Hector and Priam and not Paris - only to men who can fortify her position and her life.

Helen makes no attempt to overcome the Trojan women's disapproval by exercising her considerable personal charm. That charm is, in its essence, "both erotic and heterosexual, so it has no leverage with the women and gives them no incentive to exonerate her by viewing her as a passive object... She is outing herself as a Pandora, a beautiful woman with an evil interior, who uses her power of agency in ways that cause misery to men" (Blondell).

O'Gorman has argued that Helen's self-blame suggests a questioning, from a female point of view, of the value of the apparently futile masculine military enterprise, unsettling its very premise. If she considers herself loathsome and contemptible, how can she possibly believe that the war fought over her is worthwhile?

In the famous scene of Book 3 where Helen is asked to bed Paris, she argues with a goddess but, only naturally, loses. Helen's poignancy as a character derives in part from the fact that, unlike many of Aphrodite's victims, she remains fully conscious of the conflict between her desires and the resistance of her better judgment. In this regard, "she is more successful than most male characters in resisting Aphrodite's power" (Blondell). But why should Helen feel ashamed? Desire for one's husband is only legitimate. "It is scarcely surprising that erotic desire should win out over shame, given the awesome power of that desire, as presented here in the person of the goddess" (Blondell), bringing the argument back to a female character

but thankfully the goal of feminism was never to rescue every woman.

II

Sara Teasdale (1884-1933) was "feminine in the highest sense of that much-abused word" as Harriet Monroe puts it. Her poems present the woman's point of view as authentically, as sincerely, as those of Shelley, Byron, Tennyson, any masculine lyricist of them all, present that of the man. Naturally, as her modern apologist or some may call her an encomiast for Helen, she lifts her out from the ruins of antiquity and 'retells' her with a poetic expertise that outdoes. She presents women in a constructive light, with the power to take charge of their lives and make changes. Helen is displayed with a wealth of emotions and is portrayed as a strong, intelligent woman aware of people's conceptions of her.

*For never woman born of man and maid
Had wrought such havoc on the earth as I,
Or troubled heaven with a sea of flame*

Teasdale's Helen sounds almost tongue-in-cheek - a little proud of a beauty that was once the world's most destructive force, of a face that had burnt the topless towers of Ilium.

Yet she is so much more than visual beauty, a beauty she so knows will not be seen again - "she withers it". Her blame game starts from "the high gods" to Leda and ends at the swan that was Zeus. In the middle of the poem, however, there is a complete reversal of mood and tone, the *modus operandi* of Teasdale. Helen has decided she cannot ask for death when there are so many more springs to witness and when the "strong sweet scent" of the sea holds her here.

"Helen ponders how to save her life as she contemplates Menelaus' punitive uxoricide. Her decision is to do with more than mere self-preservation, or self-preservation as an end in itself. She wants to live so that she can make Greece love her again, rehabilitate if not her reputation, her ability to cause a Pan-Hellenic reaction: "I shall go back to Sparta on his breast. / I shall live on to conquer Greece again!". The breast changes from Helen's mammary to Menelaus' pectorals" (Maguire). But the image is odd: how does one return on one's spouse's breast rather than the expected - if clichéd - arm? According to Maguire, perhaps the phrase is an (awkward) externalization of "in his heart."

Paradoxically, the qualities of Helen in Homer of a domesticated woman of beauty and virtue are what that hold women. Famously explained first by Simone de Beauvoir in the epochal *The Second Sex*, women cannot be free unless they participate in production and give up "reproductive slavery". This Helen of Teasdale lists all her desirable qualities but she does not count her power of discourse - an exercise that likens her to both the poets - Homer and Teasdale.

Radha Viswanath’s *Ashtamahishi* or ‘the eight wives of Krishna’ claims to give the perspectives of the eight wives of Krishna whose narratives are never given an insight in the *Mahabharata* or the *Bhagavad Gita*.

I picked up this book contemplating that it will talk about what I was looking for—retelling of Indian mythology and more precisely a retelling about Krishna through his eight wives. But what this book does is that it delves into the existing hegemonial notions about Krishna, and further strengthens the pre-existing impressions of Krishna as a messiah and a doer of good deeds.

The novel though a third-person narration gives the reader glimpses of the eight wives, other significant mythological figures and Krishna himself. The novel weaves with a backdrop of Krishna as a very high-esteemed and powerful king of Dwarka, his good relations with the Pandavas and his role as a messiah and god-like figure for people of his and other kingdoms. The most prominent idea that is dealt with all through the novel is of marriage and how Krishna is seen as an ideal husband and a perfectionist. But what one can see missing is an independent and challenging perception about Krishna by these eight women. Even though Satyabhama and Mitravinda (two of these wives) assert their freedom of choice to get married to Krishna despite the men in their families disapprove because of political enmity with Krishna, it is done based on their own biases towards Krishna.

The justification of Krishna’s infidelity comes from his own discretion to marry every time and not much light is thrown about what his other wives think about the same. It is only Satyabhama who challenges Krishna’s polygamy. On the contrary one can see how his wives compromise with their

insecurities and are seen adjusting with Krishna’s multiple partnerships by justifying his womanising behaviour as an upholder of dharma, a concept that is very exclusive, privileged and brahmanical

The novel does throw light on other Indian mythological events which makes it informative, also the author coherently weaves these events with the main plot, for instance the way he dissolves the enmity between Drupada and Drona and the rivalry of Pandavas and Kauravas even though it dwells in the existing idea of evil Kauravas versus virtuous Pandavas.

His second wife Satyabhama comes out as quite a strong and determined character, she goes against her father and also forces a change in the plan of Krishna when they venture out for a war. Further Satyabhama says “I am not like Krishna....I do not give up.... I never lose! I never accept defeat! I get what I want!” Thus, one can see her comparing herself with Krishna and asserting her will and strength of self-efficacy. She also shows her lack of maturity and arrogance which comes out as a result of Krishna’s multiple partnerships. On the other hand, Rukmini is too sacrificing and submissive. A very few of the eight wives exhibit elements of emancipation and assertiveness. There is no insight into his other wives like Jambavanti, Nagnajti, Bhadra Devi and Rukmini: one does not see their personal feelings but their political responsibilities and adoration for Krishna because he is busy in marrying and fulfilling the desires of women. Thus, they act more like fillers in the novel.

Before Mitraminda marries Krishna the men in her family undermine her freedom of choice of marriage because of political reasons and even her mother is not given any opportunity to have any say in it. Also, Mitraminda feels Krishna’s marriages are problematic and

why should she bear the burden of these marriages. But once again Rukmini is seen as the benchmark of a good wife because she happily accepts all the wives and undermines her own discretion.

Moreover, there is a positive reflection on class, caste and patriarchy. For instance, Satyabhama is seen very aristocratic when she thinks lowly about Rukmini for not having great lineage so how Krishna could marry her.

Even though Krishna propagates that marriage should be based on mutual love and respect and not for political gains he self-contradicts it by his own actions.

On the contrary, there is a section in the book in which one can see Krishna in self-doubt of his several marriages but he validates this

decision as not in his hands rather he is forced to fulfil their desire to marry him thus his god-like attitude is quintessentially paradoxical.

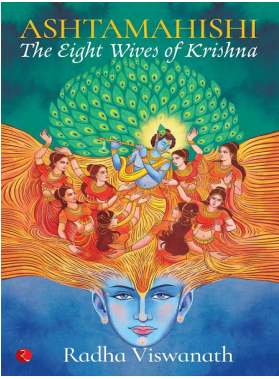
In the end, although one can see his wives other than Satyabhama coming and pointing out Krishna’s behaviour it might have had a more consequential effect if they were portrayed in the similar fashion throughout the novel. Hence the novel is a good beginning to a natal reading when trying to understand the conventional notions of Krishna but it is definitely not a good beginning to understand the retelling of mythology.

Paramita Baishya

BOOK REVIEW

Ashtamahishi: The Eight Wives of Krishna

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FEMALE PERSPECTIVES: DRAUPADI IN THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS

Bhavya Verma

The feminist writings of the contemporary era make efforts to point out the oppression and undermining situations of women that have lived in a society like India. Through symbols and characters that were a part of the stories of a world that existed centuries ago, an effort is made to revisit the past and rewrite the nuances of history.

The stories that depict a world so different, a time frame well-known yet so far away, might be of fictional nature but are seen as stories of the past, representing the lives of the people that lived here, where we live now. Reading and writing about these stories brings in the concept of then and now where we tend to relate to these stories, which seem to be real-life incidences and make sense of them in this 21st century.

Stories of the human struggle against Fate and Destiny have existed since the earliest times. The unceasing geographical movement of people across continents carried such accounts to other regions where they took on newer, local aspects. The Supernatural, wars against men and gods, heroism, and many more elements enhanced the basic story. Tales turned into legends and in time myths were born.

These myths remained confined within their territorial boundaries, occasionally transforming as contexts changed, but despite obvious parallels their common structures stayed undiscovered and unexplored across cultures till fairly recently.

Retelling of mythologies have always been of utmost interest for writers across different cultures as these stories never get old or lose people’s interest. However, in the recent past there have been many writers who retold such mythical stories with a different perspective altogether. These recently explored perspectives changed the whole outlook of the characters and their identities which have always played a major role in the being of folklore.

There have been many writers like Devdutt Patnaik, Kavita Kane, Irawati Karve, Shanoli Mitra who have rewritten these folklores from the perspectives of Sita, Draupadi, Menaka, Ahalya, Surpanakha and other female characters. These writings bring a fresh edge that questions the toxic patriarchal domain of the egalitarian society we live in. The ideals like “motherhood”, “ideal wife”, “virtuous woman” are all questioned in the lines of the events that once happened and those that counterpart in the present context. The establishment or exploration of identities of these characters tends to emphasize a different perspective of a tale that is being told for the millionth time. We always have been seeing Sita with the characteristics of ideal womanhood. The number of allegations and questions on her chastity answered through silence and agnipareeksha

makes her the ideal woman who loves her husband and who tends to prove her purity without a word. Draupadi who accepts her marriage with the five brothers as her fate, and proves to be a good wife for each of them, to have no one to stand for her at the time when her dignity and self-respect is being robbed away is seen as an example of a strong, virtuous wife who would still as her duty wouldn’t leave the side of her husbands. But these recent retellings look at the world through the eyes of these female protagonists, focus on their agony and disgust, their sufferings and sacrifices.

In Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions*, we look at the Mahabharata, the great war through a strong, stoic character of Draupadi. All through various books, television serials and movies, we have simply known Draupadi as the one with five husband, somebody who was mocked and harassed during her menses in front of her husbands unable to do anything for herself. Some people only know Draupadi due to this incident. We have also known Draupadi as Krishna’s friend and as the one who became the cause of the great war. The Palace of Illusions however takes us on a journey where we see Draupadi as a child growing up inside her father’s palace, known for her beauty. As a child who always rebelled with the feminine ideas of learning the household skills and art and craft, who always was more interested to learn about *arthashastra* and read books and get education like her brother. We see Draupadi as a rebellious child, not following the norms, and questioning her identity as a woman. Draupadi’s intrinsic thoughts, about why she cannot learn what her brother does or why does she have to follow certain norms and stick to the ideals and not her brother, always kept her going? The book eventually takes the plot forward with growing up of Draupadi as the one who questions the idea of her father and her

brother choosing a perfect groom for her. Draupadi eventually gets insight of how a woman should behave and why she has been warned about the evils like jealousy and angst. With growing up mentally and physically, the book focuses on her growing emotional turmoil. With the unfolding events of having to accept marriage with five husbands, an arrogant mother-in-law, living in forests in the worst of conditions we see Draupadi go through a lot of angst and discomfort. We get to notice the emotions and feelings she must have gone through.

The boon of becoming a virgin each time she will be passed on to another husband mirrors her thoughts about it as a curse rather than a boon. This boon she feels should rather have been about her memory being afresh everytime she goes to another husband.

This importance of virginity and chastity of a woman in this society remains at the pedestal more than that of a woman’s hardships of being a wife to five brothers. Draupadi as a princess was never asked if she accepts to marry all five

brothers; she was never asked of how she feels about it.

This book also gives an insight about Draupadi’s unnoticed strong feelings for Karna, and how they kept growing. Amongst the story of Pandavas struggle against their cousins, Kauravas, and Kauravas plotting against them, we see a woman as a major character of the story, her emotional distress, desires and longing for a happy life as a queen.

Draupadi feels a sense of belonging with *The Palace of Illusions*, and for the first time feels assertive and important. From the time when she gave her opinions about “Mayamehal” when demon Maya asked for them, she started feeling worthy of herself. Draupadi’s helplessness and anger at the time of her humiliation in the Dice Hall brings before us the reason of her vow to avenge it.

The book unravels various emotional barricades and traumatic experiences Draupadi went through while her husbands, her father, brother and sons were at war, and she was the one who was majorly blamed for the same. Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni’s story of the *Mahabharata* brings before us the aforementioned heroine, Draupadi and her life through the onset of the great war. Devakaruni lets Draupadi, the protagonist, decide the flow of the plot and talks about in detail of her ambiguous thoughts. As a feminist writer Devakaruni portrays Draupadi as a heroine greater than the Pandava heroes and pans the narrative towards a missing angle of love and anger of a woman and how strongly it can affect the plot and characters and mold the truth that cannot ever be justified.



DHARMA OR ADHARMA?

“The God is cursed” said the synopsis on the cover of Devdutt Pattanaik’s *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*. The idea of lord Krishna being cursed was an astounding turn to the old tales of Mahabharata. “How can god be cursed?” was the question that started to fire up the curiosity in the orthodox mind of an Indian. The first book describing the war of Kurukshetra written by Vyasa was named ‘*Jaya*’ and Pattanaik has attempted to provide unique insights into the lifestyle and beliefs of the people of 8th-9th century through his version of Vyasa’s ‘*Jaya*’.

Pattanaik’s version is not only about Krishna and the war of Kurukshetra between the two clans but the narrative includes the story of the women like Satyawati, Kunti, Gandhari and Draupadi. The queer narrative like that of Aravan, Ila, Budh and Shikhandi have been narrated in equal limelight. There are Duryodhan temples in Uttarakhand and Draupadi temples in Tamil Nadu, for example.

While the country has been traumatized with the issues related to women and queer communities, such retellings of these traditional narratives that the conservatives look back to, needs to be written through the lens of these marginalised sections. The contemporary stories might not bring changes in the mindset of the traditionalists as much as the stories they look up to for the footprints of righteous living will. For example, the stigma around homosexuality being a mental disease and/or unnatural for many conservatives can be challenged with tracing the existence of characters like Aravana

or Shikhandi in the holy narrative.

While we have grown-up with the idea of Adharma associated with the Kauravas and the Dharma was established by the Pandavas, this book’s ending raises a question on Dharma. This book has an ending that has never ever been told in any retelling of the *Mahabharata*. This ending is the reason the book was originally called *Jaya* by Vyasa. Devdutt Pattanaik has portrayed the both sides of the war in the same light and never has made presumptions about the ‘in-built’ righteousness of any one clan.

The similar conventional idea was also broken in Dharamvir Bharati’s play ‘*Andha Yug*’. In *Andha Yug*, Ashwatthama has raised questions on the Dharma of the Pandavas and their clan when he said “Dhrishtadyumna violated Dharma when he killed Dronyacharya. Bhima violated Dharma when he killed Duryodhana.” Later, he takes revenge against the Pandavas by killing Abhimanyu’s unborn child, Pandavas’ grandson, and violates another Dharma.

In present day context, these retelling of history and mythology make the most sense that no party is completely right or completely wrong and how the repercussions of war will gradually destroy both the clans involved. The corruption, commodification of women and the politics of hypocrisy brings a stirring feeling amongst the hearts of the readers that connects them to the similar issues of the present-time situation and its relevance.

Fiza Haider

The Q&A

SHARANYA MANIVANNAN

“Every great changemaker was a dreamer, someone who saw the world differently – saw potential and pursued it.”

Sharanya Manivannan is the renowned author of the short story collection *The High Priestess Never Marries*, which won the South Asia Laadli Media and Advertising Award for Gender Sensitivity (Best Book – Fiction) in 2015-16 and was shortlisted for the TATA Lit Live! First Book Award (Fiction) and longlisted for the Atta Galatta – Bangalore Literature Festival Book Prize. Her debut novel, *The Queen of Jasmine Country*, was longlisted for JCB Award earlier this month. Manivannan's impressive presence cuts an angelic figure. Almost every metaphor of her is twined with the imagery of earth, both local and distinct.

You have published poetry before. The narrative of *The Queen of Jasmine Country* has a melancholic poetry of its own. Do you think poetry comes more naturally to you? Are there any disadvantages of this narrative style?

The Queen of Jasmine Country is one poet's homage to another. I saw Kodhai as a poet, primarily, and this is the story of how she became that poet, what went into her lines. In her lifetime, my Kodhai never knows that she will become Andal. The historical deification also happened long after her lifetime. I don't think poetry necessarily comes more naturally to me, although it's my earliest love. What remains true is that in my creative work, a poetic use of words is ever present, no matter the form of the writing. There are no disadvantages that I can see to this style.

Sita, Innana and Lucifer belong to three different cultural contexts. How difficult was yoking the three together in *The Altar of the Only World*? How did you manage to articulate these collisions?

It was because I saw them as in sympatico, and not in collision, that I was able to bring them together. It was a very natural and intuitive progression for me. I began with Sita, and as I went along, the story of how Lucifer was exiled because he refused to bow before anyone but his true Beloved (God) seemed to me so much like Sita's own story. So Lucifer entered the manuscript, and brought with him the cosmos – brought supernovas and analemmas and the dark silences of the universe, as befitting his name (Latin: “light-bearer”). They joined Sita's mud and tree-roots, blossoms and ferns. Following Lucifer into research led me to his connection with Venus, and thus with Innana who enters the underworld and ascends from it. So the manuscript, which I wrote over 8 and a half years, grew greater dimensions. It is not only about Sita's grief and the way she finds solace in nature, but also about the courage with which the composite character formed by the three mythical figures confronts themselves, the truth of who they are, what they've done, what was done to them – and how to rise above it. How to embody grace.

Given that you draw from a variety of mythologies located in various contexts, do you aim to bring out a universal narrative about women?

All my work concerns itself with the multiplicity of narratives, so it's not a universal narrative that I am interested in as much as the points where experience is universal and relatable.

How has the emergence of publication houses such as Zubaan allowed for a more accommodative space for an array of diverse women's writings in a male-dominated canon? How does revisiting Andal challenge this?

Zubaan (and before it Kali For Women) and other independent publishing houses do amazing things just by existing. The books they produce are as varied as any other publishing house's, and this is a good thing. I've loved and intensely disliked different books they've done, and that's the whole point. To bring to the market as many different kinds of titles as possible, from a diversity of voices. There are a few things which I see my body of work



doing, in the context of contemporary publishing. One is that my writing unabashedly centres the female experience. The second is that it seamlessly weaves in my Tamilness, which comes from being of a minority (and so has nothing to do with stereotypical or Brahminical iterations of the same). I'm from Sri Lanka and I grew up in Malaysia, countries which have experienced race-based civil war and constitutional racism, so being Tamil is culturally and politically of importance to me. At the same time, I am deeply resistant to and truly abhor any kind of ethnocentric chauvinism which invariably slips quickly into misogyny, casteism and other bigotries. There were plenty of readers who disliked the Tamilness of *The High Priestess Never Marries*, and I took it to the next level by writing an entire book about a Tamil poet in medieval Tamilagam. These are very personal expressions but have a powerful effect. When I read Subramania Bharati's poem to a stunned silent bar in Kuala Lumpur in 2007, when I published an English book in the UK with an almost entirely Tamil title (*The Ammuchi Puchi*), as small as they may be these gestures still ripple the water. They assert my hybrid existence, claim space that isn't allowed to those like me, and make room for more.

Subjugation of women also happened by labeling them as ‘witches’, a term you use as a title for a short story collection. What do you think is the value of reclaiming such terms? Also, how apotheosis also does the same in denying women their humanity, as happened with Andal. What do you think then is the way to engage with this?

Witchcraft is the title of my first book, a poetry collection which came out in 2008, and that was one of the main reasons why I titled it that way – the ways in which women are stripped of their power. And absolutely, this is what happened to Andal too. More accurately, the refashioning of Kodhai into Andal was a religious project. So she is seen as goddess, not poet – even when her poetry is used liturgically. What Queen does is to restore her humanity to her. It is far more complex and more precious than the elision that comes with pedestalisation. This is not to say that she didn't attempt it herself; in her poems, she describes herself as the daughter of a king, for example. But anyone who does not read those lines and not see equally her self-possession and the sense of alienation she experienced from what was around her is lacking in compassion. It's funny, as I respond to this I'm reminded of an whom I met personally but who literally could not see

experience I had earlier this year with an obsessive fan, whom I met personally but who literally could not see a person in anything I spoke or wrote. Even my most personal sharings on social media would be met with some grandiose, irrelevant comment that had the effect of erasing what I had actually said. This is what a lot of people have done to Andal over the centuries. It is a form of violence, and it can happen to anyone. We can engage with such violence when it comes to figures in the collective imagination by exploring alternative narratives, which centre, complicate or marginalise them. In doing so, we don't just make the popular story more nuanced. We also help ourselves, as ordinary people, by bringing more nuance and perspective into our own lives and choices.

You mentioned somewhere about how a couple of dreams inspired you to write *The Queen of Jasmine Country*. What do you think is the role of dreams in not only remaking this world but also in how dreams transcend to the works themselves?

Dreams were a huge part of what made me create *Queen*, but they are an equally important part of the stories it includes. For instance, the dream that leads to the founding of Pudukkottai, the dreams that Vishnucittan (Kodhai's father) has through his life, and which influence both his and his daughter's careers, and her own dreams and especially her daydreams. She dreams herself into the mythical landscape of Ayarpadi, “wayfaring on the hallucinogenic of words”, as she composes her poems. Dreams that come in sleep influence us subconsciously, but daydreams provide a compass for how to move forward. Every great changemaker was a dreamer, someone who saw the world differently – saw potential and pursued it.

Is there a subversive aspect in portraying Kodhai's sexual desire focused on the divine? How does this and the absence of a corporeal lover add to the poetry of longing?

This subversion comes from Kodhai-Andal herself, not even from me. I urge readers to go to her poetry – her finest translation in English is *The Secret Garland* by Archana Venkatesan. You will see how closely I aligned my prose to her poetry. That deeply sexual longing is all there, in her own words. Imagine how subversive it was for a teenager in the 9th century to write this way, and you'll see just how brilliant a coup it was – through the sheer beauty of those verses – that her work became canonized.

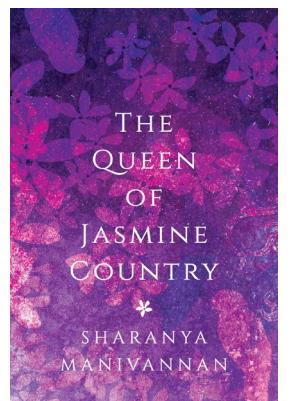
Queen opens on pleasure, not just desire, as is only natural. Kodhai has no lover, but her longing for one is absolutely situated in her body. It's a disservice to her to say her poetry is purely metaphorical, as various people have over the centuries. The fire in her body was real, and it scorches her words. Her body was real. Her voice was real, even if her myth was not.

What is one story, myth or fable you'd love to do a retelling of? Why?

I have cards up my sleeve, so to speak. But let me say this: when I work with a voice, I honour that voice. Whether she is a goddess or an unnamed woman without agency doesn't matter. I value her just the same. Many years ago, I began to recognize that some of the stories and voices that came to me were ancestral or ancient, and that I needed to understand my writing as a rebalancing of silence and silencing. So I sit with them, the characters who come to me, and ask them what they want. I've thus far not approached a character in a dispassionate way. It's an exercise that an author friend suggested I take on (to write about a character I couldn't identify with and even loathed), but it is not yet for me at this time.

The Queen of Jasmine Country has been nominated for the JCB Prize for Literature 2019. Similarly there are other retellings too which have made it to other long and short lists of prestigious awards. Many have also emerged as best sellers in the past. What makes the retellings so popular and fascinating?

The interesting thing about retellings is that they somehow appeal to a cross-section of social, political and cultural perspectives. I've experienced this firsthand with *Queen*. I had been terrified that my book would be met with an unpleasant reception from the Brahminical elite who control every aspect of Tamil Nadu, where I live. It was only in late 2017 that Andal was the subject of a vile misogynistic and casteist controversy in this state. So it's been amazing to me how many readers of this background have loved and embraced my telling of the Kodhai-Andal story. My story is not a classical one, and is sown through with subversions. The reception to my book so far strengthens my hope in the power of literature to create a better world. I think some of the things that make mythological retellings so popular are: familiarity, childhood sentimentality, a sense of alienation from traditional narratives, and a true desire to re-enter these stories in a way that challenges sociopolitical realities.



NATHAVATI ANATHVAT

THE ONE WHO STOOD FOR HERSELF

“A kshatriya woman’s highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, husband and sons.” tutors a sage to Draupadi’s brother. From behind the curtains Draupadi retorted “And who decided that a woman’s highest purpose was to support men?” These lines from Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee’s *The Palace of Illusions* shed light on the character of Draupadi. Draupadi has always been a favourite of authors, her portrayal a battleground when it comes to retellings of the *Mahabharata*. The myriad retellings attempt to correct the mythology by a strong portrayal of an otherwise weak woman in traditional sense or the mainstream narrative. This article tries to highlight the strength of character displayed by Draupadi in the toughest of times especially the dicing game and the way in which she stood up for herself when nobody else did along with presenting her character as imagined by Divakaruni in *The Palace of Illusions* and the Star Plus television adaptation.

After Yudhishthira loses Draupadi in his last bet against the kingdom and Duryodhan’s wife Bhanumati, Duryodhan sends an usher to convey Draupadi his order calling her to the assembly. Draupadi refuses and uses her wit, asking usher to return and question the Kuru *sabha* that if Yudhishthira had lost himself before wagering her in a bet, how he could still stake her in a bet. Divakauni’s Draupadi, in *The Palace of Illusions*, here quotes from the *Nyayashastra* and says, “If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife.”

Duryodhan was surprised to hear Draupadi’s questions as, Mehendale argues in an essay, published in *Journal of Oriental Institute*, because he thought by hearing that her husband had lost her and that she was not a queen anymore, she would breakdown but by asking such a question and returning the usher, not following the orders, she had shown that she still considered herself to be free. Alf Hildebeitel in his essay “Draupadi’s Questions” brings forth her refusal to accept slavery and her choice to consider herself a free woman until she receives an answer from Yudhishthira whether he staked “self or me” first.

Draupadi after being dragged into the court, challenges all the well-learned, *shastra*-knowing males to answer her questions. Angered by the treatment she received at the hands of Dushasana, who pulled her hair and dragged her into the sabha, she questions all the male warriors including the patriarch Bhishma on the practice of their idiosyncratic Dharma, adding if it is their knowledge of individual Dharma that allows these stalwarts like Bhishma, Drona, Vidura and Yudhishthira to let a woman be dragged and disrespected in the hall (society). Here in this moment, Draupadi becomes every female, unapologetically voicing their concerns, unabashedly questioning an all-male assembly when patriarchy was deeply rooted in the society. Draupadi reminded the *sabha* with equanimity of her position not only as a daughter-in-law of the Kuru clan but also as a woman. She delivered a monologue citing the concerned Dharma of an individual. Being the only one who was looking for answers in that assembly, she attempted “to transform the situation of ordered violence into one of discussion” as pointed out by Kevin McGrath in his essay “Speaking of Truth”. The *sabha* was unable to resolve her query and bowed down their heads

n silence. Panchali is often praised for her role as a woman speaking not only for herself but representing all women of her times, “I have shed tears of all women in this world, in the assembly today” one hears her saying after the disrobing sequence in the 2013-14 television adaptation of the *Mahabharata* by Swastik Productions aired on Star Plus.

Shilpa Prasad in her article “Exploring Draupadi with a Feminist Lens” published on the online platform Feminism in India writes, “She spoke up for herself in full awareness of the consequences of such boldness and wittily explained the ideas of right and wrong to the kings when she was wronged. The role of quiet suffering and submission is the one she rejected.” While Draupadi is praised for her wit, knowledge and legalities of issues, her understanding of Dharma and voicing her concerns in a male dominated society, some have criticized her for these qualities. Iravati Karve in her collection of essays on *Mahabharat as Yugant: End of an Epoch* writes, “Draupadi was standing there arguing about legal technicalities like a lady pundit when what was happening to her was so hideous that she should have only cried out for decency in the name of the *Kshatriya* code. Allowing their daughter-in-law to be dragged before a full assembly, dishonouring a bride of their own clan in the hall of men, was against all human, unwritten laws that quibbling about legal distinctions at that point was the height of pretension”. Karve adopts a conservative approach to view Draupadi. While Krishna’s voice emerges as a strong force not submitting to the patriarchal notions and orders in that assembly, Karve wants her to submit to the same male forces that dragged her into the assembly neglecting the cause of the action which was not Panchali’s questions but jealousy and egoist approach of the Kauravas towards their cousins. Calling her questions “foolish” and “terrible”, that had put the *Dharamraj* into a “dilemma and unwittingly insulted him”, her position “desperate”, Karve ignores the fact that it was Draupadi and her wit as a “lady pundit” that enabled her to free her husbands and kingdom from impending slavery when given a boon but Yudhishthira lost the kingdom in the final challenge bringing upon his brothers and Panchali an exile of thirteen years. Karna, remarks on Draupadi’s decision to free her husbands and kingdom, “Like a boat she saved the Pandavas when they were about to drown in a sea of disgrace.”

Pradeep Bhattacharya in his essay, “Panchkanya” talks about the use of knowledge by Draupadi not only in course of the dicing game but also in working of the kingdom. He mentions that Panchali used to give Pandavas advices in the political matters, kept an account of wealth, a track of Yudhishtira’s tours, made arrangements for his trips, checking his retinue and other requirements herself. Draupadi emerges as one of the strongest voices from within the Indian Mythology who not only refused to submit to her circumstances but also used her knowledge and wit to come out of her situations, not only saving herself but her husbands, becoming a queen of all women of her times, providing a strong voice of justice and registering her protest within a patriarchal society.

Parusharth Chawla



Nalanga

THE COLOUR OF LOVE

Shivangi Sinha

The colour of love

The colour of love is the intoxicated red of wine, illuminating and appealing,
It grows to breathe a splendid adventure or so they say-
But I render, it was no adventure for Daphne whilst Apollo
drunk in the feverish piety of consumed frenzy chased her,
trying to sweep her off her feet with no consultation of her volition.

They say there is a madness in love and I wonder where the reason in this
madness disintegrates?
can't love understand that it can't always be accepted?

It wasn't the footsteps of love that Daphne was running from,
it was the footsteps of shrouded darkness entailing her innocence.
The colour of love is red like roses that blossomed with Persephone's touch
but sweet naïve
Persephone forgot to thorn her roses so the keeper of souls, devoid of his own
in sunless depths,
where hope despairs and warmth weeps shackled her feet.
He dragged her to the underworld, made her the queen of death.

For Hades, love is the red of pomegranates that made Persephone a captive,
tied her down to a crown of bones.

When Tereus saw Philomela, a heedless cyclone of desire seized him,
he lost his senses, committed the offences 'cause apparently the cousin of love,
lust lunged its hold onto him.

It turned the king in him into a barbarian, the man in him into a rapist
When the metal of his sword clanged against Philomela's tongue, besmirched
in the red of her blood
he didn't just mutilate her, he muted her
but he forgot that while the feathers of her wings were upheaved,
her claws were still there.

When you try to silence a woman, you will find out that we're doubly
equipped.

Our voice has an echo that can trigger an avalanche to any misogyny,
the prowess to uproot any patriarchy
but even without our voices, we are an avalanche in ourselves.
Try to take us down and you'll be the one coming undone.

Red isn't just the colour of love, it's the colour of vengeance.
Procne knew to deliver hell, you need to unleash your own demons first
'cause if you don't, fact is that in today's world.

The pointing fingers might just drop down to the length of your dress.

You and I have apparently progressed from sleeping in caves
to the humble abode of our bed amidst the clatter of high-speed internet
but our carnal instincts wrapped around the blindfold of a rigid mentality
reclines us back to eons ago.

Not much has changed, we are quick to blame and victim shame.
Medusa remains a monster, the venom though didn't drip from the fangs of
the serpents coiled around
her head – the real venom springs in misguided structure of society.
That's the thing about society, it thrives on double standards, the fault falls
onto our attires.

Society calls out a random stalker 'Romeo' whom I refuse to play Juliette for.

Funny how it's all fun and games until knives and stabs are involved,
in cases like these, where there is a blurry line between a love letter and death
threat,
love doesn't blossom, love infects.

So, tell society not to mistake 'molestation' with acts of endearment
'Cause only then the females of our world wouldn't need to cry out #Metoo.

STRONG FEMALE CHARACTERS THROUGH THE TIMES

“A woman is a full circle, within her is the power to create, nurture and transform”, wrote Diane Mariechild. Women have always been an integral and prominent part of our rich history but they have also always been marginalised and disregarded. The society has always put down women and treated them as inferior to men but, through the years we have seen some strong, female figures who have refused to give up even in the face of adversity. Draupadi, the heroine of the *Mahabharat*, an epic in Indian Mythology is a fearless role model who was born from a sacrificial fire, changed the status of women during her times. At a time when women were considered to only stay within the four walls of the house, she was the only one to stand up for her rights, beliefs and virtue. After being stripped of her dignity in front of a full court of people, her desire for revenge became stronger and she rarely passed an opportunity to complain about her ill-treatment and bad luck for having such a lot for husbands. The Pandavas never failed to do anything for others in order to help them but sat quietly in front of the gathered nobles as they watched Draupadi getting humiliated and did nothing to stop it or avenge her. She stood for herself. Another very interesting story is of Medea who is a character in a Greek play by Euripides. She was a former princess of the ‘barbarian’ kingdom of Colchis. She was married to Jason, another king, but soon found her position in the Greek world threatened by a princess of Corinth

second wife. Medea took revenge on Jason by murdering his new wife and their two sons and became an antidote to a motherly figure. She displays her strength of character by not only deciding to take revenge on her husband but going to an extent of killing her own children in order to provide herself with justice as she wishes it to be. She not only comes across as assertive but also as a strong female who refuses to accept injustice being imposed on her. Another tale is of Philomela and Procne, two courageous sisters. Philomela was Tereus’s sister-in-law but was raped by him. He cut her tongue and hid her so that she couldn’t tell anyone what had happened. After it came to Procne’s knowledge, she killed her son with Tereus and served it to him for dinner in the name of revenge. When it comes to Greek goddesses, Artemis is a huge inspiration and is one of the most respected of all Greek deities. Artemis, being a virgin drew the attention of many men. Actaeon and Siproites tried to rape her but she punished them because she wanted to remain chaste for eternity and punish them for their attempt to do wrong. Even in the recent times we see strong, independent women like Rani Lakshmi Bai, Michelle Obama, Sushma Swaraj, Lilly Singh, Priyanka Chopra, Kalpana Chawla, Laxmi Aggarwal, Mary Kom and Oprah Winfrey shining in their own respective fields of expertise and profession and giving inspiration to young girls to aspire and achieve whatever they can dream of.

The Q&A

DEVDU TT PATTANA I K

“I don’t think I write books to make them famous, I write books because I like them.”

Devdutt Pattanaik is a well known writer, columnist, illustrator and a mythologist, who has incorporated Vedic knowledge into human resource management. Some of his renowned books include *Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*; *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*; *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*; *Business Sutra: An Indian Approach to Management*; *Shikhandi: And Other Tales they Don’t Tell You*; *Shiva to Shankara : Giving Form to the Formless* where he shows his groundbreaking work. He writes columns for not only *Scroll.in*, *Midday* and *Daily O* but also for *Times of India*, *Swarajya* and *CN Traveller* too.

Your works largely focus on retelling mythology. Would you see your works as rediscovery or as parallel world-making of a grand narrative?

You are confusing mythology with mythological fiction, which is rather common. Mythology focuses on what the ancients were trying to communicate with the present generation while mythological fiction re-imagines old stories, restructures them in a manner that communicates the viewpoint of the author for the current generation.

How would you define mythology?

Mythology is the study of stories, symbols, and rituals. You decode

stories, symbols, and rituals to figure out how the past is communicating with the present.

There has been a lot of debate over Hinduism’s treatment of women, queerness and sexual fluidity. Works like *Sita and Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don’t Tell You* challenge heteronormativity. Can looking back to the scriptures help strengthen those who are still marginalised on the argument of cultural purity and patriarchal hegemony? Modernity invents tradition. So, modern-day writers and activists tend to think of themselves as saviours and cherry-pick stories from the past to show the past was wrong and they are right. However, when you start a deeper understanding of these stories and look at all texts you will realise that all ancient cultures have multiple points of view, some positive and some negative. Words like cultural purity and patriarchal hegemony [are] construction[s] of modern-day writes who cherry-pick data from the past and it is not true whatsoever and that is what I am trying to show.

Do works like *My Hanuman Chalisa* and *My Gita*, that aim to demystify their sources, also attempt retelling?

Let us first understand what demystification is. Many people chant hymns or read books without quite understanding what they say. When you translate these books, and contemplate how they are



relevant to day to day life then it is demystification and there is nothing magical about it. It is trying to help people understand what the stories are all about.

How do you see the accounts of Shambuka and Eklavya that highlight the problematic aspects of mythology?

If you talk to the left-wing they will always see Hindu narratives as misogynistic, patriarchal, therefore they will cherry-pick stories like Shambuka’s and Eklavya’s. If you talk to the right wing they will say these are false stories, misinterpreted and everything in Hindu scriptures is good. However, let’s look at the *Ramayan*

and the *Mahabharat*, they both talk about the treatment of lower caste people badly [sic] as in the case of Shambuka and Eklavya, but they also talk about the killing of Brahmins who do not treat human beingz with respect. So Ravan is killed. Dronacharya is beheaded. So, the story is not favouring one caste over another. This is called modern-day reimagination of the past: in

mythological fiction, left turns the past into evil and right turns the past into very noble.

You have also retold Greek mythology from an Indian perspective. What are some of the parallels you have found most intriguing?

Superficially Greek mythology is very similar to Indian mythology because there are many gods. However, structurally it is not. Because Greek mythology deals with one life and Indian mythology deals with rebirth. We can find stories similar between Achilles and Duryodhan because the mother tries to save the son from weapons but leaves one part vulnerable. But these are superficial connects. One can even find such

connects between the Bible and the Quran, but the point is to see the structural and psychological foundation of these stories which are very different.

The literary sphere is bustling with retellings and re-imaginings globally. Some of them, including your works, have been ranked as bestsellers too.

What do you think is the reason behind the popularity of these retellings both amongst the authors and the readers?

I have written only one re-imagination i.e. *The Pregnant King*. Every other book is a retelling of stories trying to figure out what they are trying to tell us. I don’t think I write books to make them famous, I write books because I like them. I make money from my lectures, whether books are bestsellers or not is irrelevant to me. I have been writing on mythology for the last 20 years long before mythology became a fashion.

Is there an aesthetic universe in which mythology and its retellings operate? What does it look like?

Aesthetic universe depends on the culture we are talking about. The aesthetic in South India will be very different as compared to North India. In North India, the aesthetic is dominated by the Nautanki traditions. In South India, it is dominated by classical traditions. But there are street plays which have different traditions. So, there are many aesthetics. Unfortunately, today we are overwhelmed with the aesthetic of Bollywood and the traditional aesthetics are being overshadowed.

What is one story, myth or fable you would love to do a retelling of? Why?

I have retold the *Ramayan* three times, I have retold the *Mahabharat* three times because there are layers and layers of meaning that often escape modern storytellers who have presumed notions of the past, and that is why I stick to the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat* continuously.



The Q&A

POOJA SHARMA

“I marvelled at the interpretation of the sequence by the writers because there is not a single weak moment for Draupadi.”

Pooja Sharma is an Indian model and television actress. She is known for her role of Draupadi in *Star plus’s ‘Mahabharat’* and as Parvati in *Color’s ‘Makhali-Anth Hi Aarambh Hai’*. She made her acting debut in 2012, with *Star Plus’s ‘Teri Meri Love Stories’* and much later in 2018-19, she voiced over for a show and narrated three shows. Sharma was also listed in *The Times of India’s Top 20 most desirable women on Indian Television* in 2017.

Draupadi in Swastik Productions’ adaptation of Mahabharata comes out as a very fierce and an unapologetically strong woman. What’s your take on the character?

What I love about Draupadi in our *Mahabharata* is that she is a well-rounded character who goes through a wide gamut of emotions. In my opinion, she is unapologetic not just of her strengths but

but also her weaknesses, the ability to courageously endorse every emotion is what being a human being is all about. So yes, she loves, gets angry, fears, gets worried, gets anxious, nurtures her family and lambasts them when the time comes and depicts her innate strength too.

How did you prepare for the role and how did reading and reinterpreting literature help in the preparations?

As an actor I largely go by my instincts. What helped greatly was the superlative writing of our show. Kudos to the writers for such a sensitive interpretation of different volatile characters. Swastik Productions also provided us with a lot of reading material.

Cheerharan sequence and Draupadi’s questions in the male-dominated Sabha of your show was much talked about; also, you have called it a taxing sequence in your interviews. How did it tax you as an actor and as an



individual?

The sequence was a very rewarding experience. I still reap the reward (thanks to my

audience). I marvelled at the interpretation of the sequence by the

How do you think Draupadi as a character is relevant in the modern times?

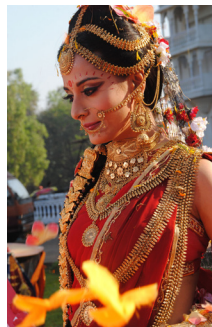
As I mentioned earlier, she was almost like the first woman who raised such valid questions about patriarchy, misogyny and Dharma. Even today most of the women face such subtle and brazen attacks Draupadi teaches us not to take it. Someone may overpower you physically but spirit should remain indomitable and this same can be understood in the contexts of social, religious and ethnic minorities.

the writers because there is not a single weak moment for Draupadi; even though she is at the receiving end of such shameful choices by her kith and kin. Dussahasana overpowers her physically and even though she cries she shows indomitable spirit in this challenging situation. She does not take this lying down and raises questions that are thought provoking for people until this day. I loved every bit of the shooting of this sequence. We shot about 22 days. To maintain such heightened emotions for such a long period of time was the taxing part. It did not tax me emotionally but even today my heart swells with pride over how Draupadi behaves in this unprecedented situation. It seems like the first woman

who spoke out against sexism and raised questions that are valid till date.

What is that one mythological or historical character that you would like to portray on-screen and why?

I feel Blessed to have already portrayed the best...first Draupadi then Mahakali/Parvati and hopeful to portray more such avatars.



PAROXYSM

Virginia to Vita

You tell me my mind is magnetic; it is a sun - all-consuming
I've swallowed it whole; it is stuck in my throat
I now speak of nothing but you.

I have loved the man like nobody can; I have emptied myself now
So, you give me the love, that is enough just for tonight
Watch the moon with me but not tomorrow's sun.

God, the nights have so many stars to show me; autumn has never looked more
ecstatic
And I want to be everything that makes you feel infinite; so, I will
remember my name again
No longer will I write poetry about how sad I am.

We have the money and the room at last; fiction seems
cosmopolitan
But I hope you know that I'll come back to this; I was
only born yesterday
I am still a child of six.

There is a dangerous love inside of us; the veins
quiver
The blood stains the walls; the claw marks are on
the furniture
And there is too much to clean before someone
comes over.

You reek of art and sunshine; I shall diminish
you no longer
I know you wanted to save me
But, Vita, I've filled my pockets with too
many stones already.

Satvik Tandon

Rainbow

I abhor myself for breathing in grey,
When I wish to come out as a rainbow.
But they say it's erring,
They make me feel mortified of some delinquency I have
never performed,
They glower,
They call me horrendous things.
They take me to the temple,
To sponge off everything they think is wrong,
And do not realise god has more significant issues
Than a girl lying curbed in a closet.
My mind is anxious,
My body is insecure,
I am ashamed,
For, I do not have the nerve to bolt their mouths with my
fist,
It feels that this society will never let me escape,
Some call it a phase that will just pass,
Some call me confused.
But in real, it's there mind what's fused.
The hole I am confined in,
Is small and suffocating,
I am unable to breathe.
Oh dear, when will I stand in light
With my head held high with pride?
Getting accepted is much more than getting a prize,
More lovable than being a gay.
But I will rise,
I will rise from this,
And will feel glad and proud for who I am.
I am freaking rainbow!

Khushi Batra

My brain too, hums with scraps of poetry and madness, Virginia

These poems do not live-
And die,
As soon as they come to life.

These poems are war cries
And lullabies,
That put me to sleep every night.

These poems throw a feast
And celebrate
All those who gifted hurt.

These poems are all forms of glory,
And ache
For all the times there was no healing.

These poems are the proof that I existed
That I was here,
Even when I thought I wasn't.

These poems are a child's cry,
Naive and pointless
But God, so pure.

These poems are ecstasy
In times of grief
That one cannot help but succumb to.

These poems are
What Plath meant when she said
"I am, I am, I am."

Kashish Gupta

Take Me Away

Across the ocean
I keep standing
For hours
And wait
For that tide
Wait for it
To take me away
My existence
In this nonchalant world.
I cry a wry,
At the moon
Looking away,
Looking away from my awkwardness
I try,
I try my sound best
To tell him
I need his calm
I need his light
To look away from my scars
I take a deep breath
Every time I go near the water
And ask it to take me away
Take me away because
I can't take a stand
Because I can't decide what's harder
To swim in
Or let go.
That boat
I was unable to take
Took me away with it
Took me away with people I loved
With people I knew not for very long
But loved.
I couldn't take a stand
To take it or leave it
And now I'm standing here
Clueless
Wrying at the moon
Longing for its light.

Bhavya Verma

Smooth Dissonance

A break in this state of being
Shall make all detestable winds
Stay while the light that's seeing
Shuts on me with my musings

While it blinkers and fades away
A forceful peace abounds in me
My physical being ceases to sway
My mind's eye no more does see

Our minds heavy, our bodies hollow
Invisible chains ensnare us all
We trudge through life, it's meaning shallow
Incessantly waiting on the divine call

Feigning smiles, demeanors , manners humours
Splashing colours of inebriation in our hearts
Trying to cure our emotional tumors
Invading destitute homes for our apple tarts

Singing through this state of torment
We shall live through, only to sleep
Committing innocuous crimes, never to relent
Sleeping through eternity, never to weep.

Saloni Mirchandi

The QA

ASHWIN SANGHI

“The only way that history can be meaningful is if we present several points of view and see the “truth” as something that lies between those multiple perspectives.”



Ashwin Sanghi—entrepreneur by day, novelist by night—has all the usual qualifications of an Indian businessman. Schooling at the Cathedral & John Connon School, a B.A. in Economics from St. Xavier’s College, and an MBA from Yale School of Management.

Besides being a businessman, Ashwin manages a parallel career as a writer of fiction. He ranks among India’s highest selling English fiction authors. He has written several bestsellers like *The Rozabal Line* and two bestselling crime thrillers with James Patterson, *Private India* and *Private Delhi*. Dr. Shashi Tharoor calls Ashwin’s second novel, *Chanakya’s Chant* “an enthralling, delightfully-interesting and gripping read with historical research that is impressive.” Sanghi has been included by *Forbes India* in their *Celebrity 100*. He is a winner of the *Crossword Popular Choice 2012*, *Amazon India Top-10 eBook 2018*, *Bangalore LitFest Popular Choice Award 2018*, *WBR Iconic Achievers Award 2018* and the *LitOFest Literature Legend Award 2018*. He also mentors, co-writes and edits titles in the immensely popular *13 Steps* series.

In an interview you humorously called yourself a ‘rewriter’. What is your modus operandi for ‘rewriting’ ancient stories within a contemporary framework?

I was talking of ‘writing’ and ‘rewriting’ in the context of having to go through multiple drafts of the same work before it is actually readable. I have always considered myself to be a poor writer but a fairly good rewriter. Regarding ancient stories, I am not interested in retelling them. This is a country that has 300 versions of the *Ramayana* so what is the need for an Ashwin Sanghi to retell that story? What I do is use mythology, history, philosophy and science to make for an interesting modern tale.

I am an obsessively organized person. A decade ago I was a businessman who was also a writer. Today I am a writer who is also a businessman. I usually write in the mornings from 5am to 9am. My evenings are usually spent reading and researching. I spend several months on research, so for a typical book like *Bharat Series* it could take six to twelve months. I then spend around three months on the plot. Usually the plot will have twist and turn in the story planned chapter-wise. It is only after these two stages that I start writing. Detailed plotting ensures that I do not allow the pace to slacken except of my own choosing. Since I am not a great writer but a decent rewriter, I rewrite the manuscript several times before it goes in for editing. All in all, two years is the average from beginning to end.

Most of the mythological retellings that are written are based upon a writer’s particular ‘assumption’ on the subject. How does one negotiate the thin boundary between fiction and history here?

I like to think of the process as the construction of a house. Your first priority is to dig the foundation and create a grid of columns and beams. This skeletal structure is the history, mythology, theology, anthropology and science that you spin your tale around. After the skeleton is up, you fill the spaces with brick and plaster and that is your fictional narrative. I maintain a clear boundary between fact and fiction, but then, I am a conspiracy fiction writer and it gives me scope to question the usually accepted narrative. Three important riders though: first, I do not call my books anything other than fiction, there is no attempt to say that there is anything remotely factual about my books. Second, I provide exhaustive references at the end of each book so that a reader may satisfy himself regarding the sources from which I have drawn my material. Third, I approach each subject with a sense of respect—be it Jesus, Krishna, Chanakya, Buddha or Hanuman and that respect comes across very clearly in my writing.



Your book *Chanakya’s Chant* reimagines a historical event. Can a retell-ing be used politically to also recorrect a historical wrong?

The Mahabharata started as a story of 25,000 verses called the *Jaya*. Several hundred years later it morphed into a work called the *Bharata* that was 50,000 verses long. That eventually became the *Mahabharata*, an epic of 100,000 verses. I can bet you that every author along the way added his own spin to the story. The same thing happened with the *Ramayana*. We have over 300 versions of the *Ramayana* and each of them gives a unique spin to the epic. Frankly, what is happening now is not something new, it is simply a continuation of an age-old tradition. What makes it new is the language of choice—English. The Spanish novelist George Santayana famously said “History is a pack of lies about events that never happened told by people who weren’t there.”

I was fascinated by history during my school years but began to question what one was expected to take as the “gospel truth” in later years. In that sense, both mythology and history are coloured by the view of the writer. And that is precisely where the challenge lies—providing an alternative view. We would be fooling ourselves if we think that history is ever free of personal opinions, biases or prejudices. How else does one explain the fact that what is taught as “The Great Rebellion of 1857” in India is taught as “The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857” in England? The bigger question that we must ask ourselves is this: should anyone have the absolute, unfettered and unchallenged right to write our history given these inherent biases? The only way that history can be meaningful is if we present several points of view and see the “truth” as some-thing that lies between those multiple perspectives. As is often said, there are three versions to any story: mine, yours and the truth.

Often ‘best-sellers’ and popular fiction is relegated to the margins by elitism of literary critics. How does one respond to such literary snobbishness?

Popular fiction (not just the mythological popular fiction

sub-genre but the entire popular fiction genre) did not take off for many years in India primarily because of the condescending attitude of publishers in the subcontinent to such writing. Publishers believed that Indians were best left to write literary fiction and non-fiction. This is precisely the reason that bestseller racks at Indian bookstores in those days were dominated by foreign authors. If one wanted a quick read, there was Jeffrey Archer, Sidney Sheldon, Tom Clancy and countless others. But no Indians were on this list. In those days the average first print-run of a book penned by an Indian author would be 2500 copies. As a complete contrast, writers of Hindi pulp fiction (authors such as Surendra Mohan Pathak, Ved Prakash Sharma and Gulshan Nanda) used to sell in the hundreds of thousands. Frankly, English publishers seemed to be more interested in promoting their foreign authors to Indian audiences than searching for Indian writing. All that changed with the release of Chetan Bhagat’s first book, *Five Point Someone* in 2004. Suddenly it became possible to think of an English popular fiction novel written by an Indian author outselling books by foreign authors. I think that the subsequent volumes clocked by popular Indian authors in the commercial genre speak for themselves.

Since your stories are based around characters historical and mythological, what other types

of texts do you approach to embellish the novel as a whole regarding any one character, apart from a primary text that may have inspired the crux of your novel?

As I have mentioned earlier, I spend several months on research. The nature of the research varies according to the book. For example, *Chanakya’s Chant* simply involved multiple readings of the *Arthashastra* and the *Mudrarakshasa*. Whereas *The Krishna Key* involved travel to Mathura, Dwarka, Somnath etc. and a good reading of *Kalki Purana*. *The Sialkot Saga* involved interviewing people who had lived through Calcutta and Bombay of the fifties and sixties and looking at modern history books. *Keepers of the Kalachakra* involved teaching myself quantum theory.

In terms of the craft of writing a retelling, do you think there are certain tropes that find themselves repeatedly in novels like these?

Of course! An ancient secret, a long-forgotten relic, a secret society, an archaeological dig... the list is endless. But then, the reason one reads commercial fiction is precisely because of these expectations. How many tropes do you see in a murder thriller or police procedural? The brooding investigator with a dysfunctional personal life... need I go on?

What is that one story that you would want to do a retelling of? Why?

Ponniyin Selvan based on the early days of the great Chola emperor Rajaraja Chola I.

Fiction which retells mythology and history is in vogue presently, both internationally and nationally. What according to you led to a resurgence of interest in tales as old as time?

The spurt in the sub-genre of mythology-related popular fiction by Indian writers in English was the result of a few parallel trends by the new millennium.

- Emergence of home-grown publishers such as Rupa and Westland.

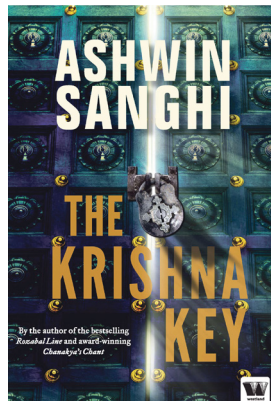
- Success in English commercial fiction by Indian writers such as Chetan Bhagat.

- Growing interest in Indian mythology inspired by writers such as Ashok Banker and Devdutt Pattanaik who brought the epics and related stories to English readers in simple language.

- The coming of age of urban children who had grown up watching *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata* TV serials and had read Amar Chitra Katha comics.

- The success of mythology, theology and fantasy inspired media in the West such as immensely popular *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown and *The Lord of the Rings*.

- The emergence of writers such as Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelkanthan or myself who combined commercial fiction with mythological, theological or historical themes.





Hozier sings about the immense themes of redemption and love, and especially their intermingling with death and hopelessness. Particularly in the world of today, in the face of chaos and its overwhelming nature, Hozier—a contemporary Irish singer-songwriter—seeks rapture through his lyrics that employ everything from Classical to Christian, Irish and contemporary mythologies: and perhaps this is what provides him with purpose in the midst of this volatile world.

Hozier has been most inspired by the works of Seamus Heaney and WB Yeats, both of them Irish and both of whom themselves attempted to retell mythology through their poetry. As Eliot writes in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” for a writer to be aware of their place in time and their contemporaneity, they must have a perception of not only the pastness of the past but also

of its presence to make their writings timeless and temporal at once. This is what gives Hozier his extremely acute ability to encapsulate the current turmoil in his special apocalyptic way.

Much of Hozier’s poetry endeavours to make his love outlast his individual mortality, and using myths aids in this imagery, created using the cultural memory molded by his creative imagination. The power of his images lies in their facility for transformation: using myths allows emotions located in certain specific boundaries to jump space and time and take on entirely different contexts. Take this lyric for instance

*I’d be the voice that urged Orpheus
When her body was found...
I’d be the choiceless hope in grief
That drove him underground...
I’d be the dreadful need in the devotee
That made him turn around
And I’d be the immediate forgiveness*

LIMITATIONS OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA

“Teaching is a very noble profession that shapes the character, caliber and future of an individual. If the people remember me as a good teacher that will be the biggest honour for me” is well said by A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. The central and the state governments, in their hurry to increase the number of educational facilities, granted licenses to private investors to open schools, colleges and universities. However, there is a lack of quality checks on these institutions. Hence, the teaching methods used never get questioned. Also, these educational institutes hire almost anyone, without testing their teaching skills. As a result, students are unable to learn properly. And coaching classes are ever ready to capitalize on this situation.

“A sheet of paper cannot decide the future of a student” (Thomas A Edison), but here in India, the future of a student is decided by the marks scored by a student in class 10, class 12 and the three years of undergraduation. The education system in India lays extra emphasis on scores rather than education. Students scoring low marks suffer everywhere. They do not get admissions in well-known universities. In a race to score high, students usually memorise things rather than learning them. After the exams are over, their minds get vacuous about their subjects to a great extent. Students are forced to

neglect recreation while making time to attend coaching classes which also focussing on scores rather than actual learning. The grind between school/ college and coaching kills their creativity, making studies a boring race instead of an opportunity to learn.

The words from a song from the 2009 movie 3 Idiots very accurately describe the morbidity of the Indian educational scenario and the plight of the students’ suffering: “Give me some sunshine, give me some rain; give me another chance, I wanna grow up once again.”

Students in higher classes hardly get any time for outdoor activities and sports. The education system in India encourages flock mentality-first through parents and then through the society. Since it is the parents who decide the career of a child in India, they tend to follow the flock and opt for traditional favorites. Invariably the most favored courses remain engineering, medicine, and management. Parents pay more heed to prestige than skills and trends. They want to join that growing flock which claims their child is a doctor, engineer or has done MBA. According to India Skills’ report 2019, researches across India prove only 47% of engineers are employable. Similarly 93% of MBA degree holders are unemployable because they graduate from substandard business schools and lack skills.

*In Eurydice
Imagine being loved by me.*
 (“Talk”, Hozier)

As the chorus makes it plain, the myth of Orpheus as adapted by Hozier becomes a means for the poet to seduce someone he finds appealing, taking up entirely different connotations as they are transposed to the modern world of dating. Hozier, then, has the ability to draw from classical legends, and inhabit those perspectives to raise his love to those revered standards: “No grave can hold my body down/ I’ll crawl home to her” (“Work Song”, Hozier) , whether that home is in earth or in hell.

Like Heaney, Hozier uses bogs as an objective correlative to unravel the intrusion of the past into the present. The bogs act as residual memory, for within them lay buried countless generations with their individual stories and aspirations, and then these bogs bare them to the present to be found

About 55% of medicine graduates cannot find proper jobs, and get underpaying jobs or cannot open their own clinics. Moreover, these problems occur despite paying a high amount of money as fees, donations, and other charges. A student is left with no other choice, but to follow the flock. The education system of India not only lacks the framework or procedures to identify the innate skills of a child, but also kills those talents by failing to recognize them. The system forces students to study subjects they are not even remotely interested in but also score high marks in those subjects. The education system in India expects parents to counsel their children. In most cases, this does not work. A parent might not be qualified to counsel children on certain issues or the child expects parents to counsel their children. In most cases, this does not work. A parent might not be qualified to counsel children on certain issues or the child could hesitate in asking something from the parent. In such situations, a counselor plays a valuable role; yet most Indian schools do not have one.

Consequently, it is usually parents that pick up a course or profession for their child. Parents decide a career on two basic criteria: prestige and income. And usually, children do not go against the wishes of their parents, even if that means life-long suffering.

by people through seasons. Hozier reconciles his poetry to the terror of living in this society:

*We lay here for years or for hours
Thrown here or found, to freeze or to thaw
So long, we’d become the flowers
Two corpses we were, two corpses
I saw
And they’d find us in a week
When the weather gets hot
After the insects have made their*

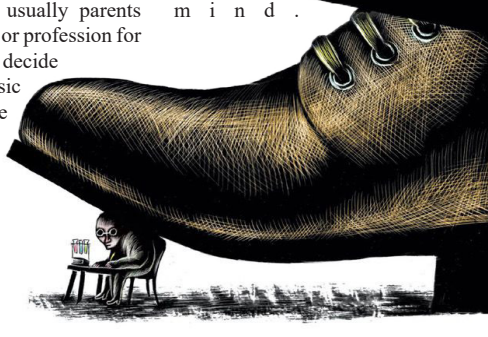
I’d be home with you, I’d be home with you.
 (“In a Week”, Hozier)

Heaney had laid down the bog as an important Irish myth, much like the frontier or the West in the American consciousness (*Preoccupations*, Heaney). Layers and layers of images of unattenuated terror and violence lie submerged as more are added; the bogs become a metaphor for the Irish resistance. Hozier uses this motif. “In a Week” is located about the Wicklow Mountains, usually in public imagination for the number of bodies retrieved thence. Interestingly, Wicklow Mountains were also a stronghold for Irish clans in the struggle against the English rule. The Irish motherland causes devastation to its own people. Referring to Joyce’s metaphor that compares Ireland to the “old sow that eats her farrow” (Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man), Hozier writes:

*Oh but the farrow knows
Her hungry eyes, her ancient soul
It’s carried by the sneering menagerie.* (“Run”, Hozier)

Nietzsche argues for a cyclical nature of time: if time is infinite, what has happened will happen again. Myths, then, are cyclical too: “Oh, the tale is the same/ Told before and told again” (“Sunlight”, Hozier). And therefore, our historical hunger and desire for knowledge signifies a yearning for “the mythic womb” (Nietzsche). Dreams are personalized myths (Campbell); and myths are collective dreams, representing the aspirations of a collective humanity:

Students do not know how to deal with failures. There is a dire need for revolutionary changes in India’s education system, not just the syllabus and pedagogy, but also the attitude of the society towards learning, otherwise India would not be able to utilize its vast human resource. The way the education system is implemented is wrong and the Indian society is to be blamed. Sly investors wanting to loot these parents get emboldened by the overall apathy on the part of central and state government authorities. It would need efforts from all parents, students, investors and the government to bring about a sea-change in the education system of India. Failing to bring such changes, threatens the brilliance of a student’s mind.



*“Know that I would gladly be
The Icarus to your certainty
Oh my sunlight, sunlight, sunlight
Strap the wing to me
Death trap clad, happily
With wax melted I’d meet the sea
Under sunlight, sunlight, sunlight”.*
 (“Sunlight”, Hozier)

In Icarus’ longing for the sun, we find reflected our most precarious desires. This is also in consonance with the Jungian idea of myths representing the primal collective unconscious, manifested through symbols and images. But secondly, this conflates Hozier’s love for his beloved and his mortality; he is absolutely ready to sacrifice himself to get closer to the person who is his sunlight. Yeats’ “Leda and the Swan,” borrows from Greek myth and its theme of annunciation operates to give a deterministic view of history through the violated mythological girl. Yeats weaves a communion of god, bird and girl, not for its intrinsic imagery but to depict a violent transformation; Hozier, too, entwines the imagery of the bird, the mutability of language, and love as a backdrop for violence in “Shrike”, using the legend of the shrike bird that impales its prey upon a thorn before feeding on it, as he “couldn’t utter [his] love when it counted”, buthe “sing[s] like a bird ‘bout it now”:

*The words hung above
But never would form
Like a cry at the final breath that is drawn
Remember me, love, when I’m reborn
As the shrike to your sharp
And glorious thorn.*
 (“Shrike”, Hozier)

This draws a striking parallel to Yeats’ “A terrible beauty is born” (“Easter, 1916”); in both Yeats and Hozier, love—which is amorous in Hozier but reverential in Yeats—and violence collide to give birth to a sacrificially consuming change.

Hozier expresses human passage through the continuum of time by linking the natural with the supernatural and by extension his humanity with it. “NFWMB” is a nod to “The Second Coming” by Yeats; Hozier

Myth is a past with a future, exercising itself in present. It is but with a passage of time that a myth evolves from merely being a fable into a part of our cultural heritage and national history. It gets engrained as a part of national identity. “The discourse of history as well as of myth is simultaneously a discourse of identity; it consists of attributing a meaningful past to a structured present” (Jonathan Friedman).

In this sense, Greek identity as a cultural phenomenon disappeared in the successive onslaught of the Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman empires. This led to the subsequent establishment of European identification of Greek national identity. Greek literary and artistic forms shaped Europe - the nude in art, for example, was as central to the Renaissance as it was to ancient Athens. Even the mythology of Greece and its gods survived the rise of Christianity to decorate Europe’s palaces. History, then, is very much a mythical construction, as it is a representation of the past linked to the

draws on Christian mythology to invert the stereotype of the man protecting his love. In the face of the Second Coming, his love just enjoys the chaos and is genuinely terrifying: for his love hurtles the end sooner as it “slouch[es]” “to Bethlehem”. Hozier subverts the Christian doctrine of charity, as the purest expression of love, and explores the compulsive nature of fear and arsonry:

*If I was born as a blackthorn tree
I’d wanna be felled by you
Held by you
Fuel the pyre of your enemies.*
 (“NFWMB”, Hozier)

Singing about myths not only adds current contexts to them, but also allows for the reverence they hold in public imagination to be used for the liberation of the voices of those who have been marginalized and denied spaces. For instance, his lyric “there is no sweeter innocence than our gentle sin” (“Take Me to Church”, Hozier) has multiple implications. Disturbing the hegemonic structures that demarcate supposedly correct behaviour and punish deviancy—for instance, homosexuality—as morally heinous, Hozier’s lyrics are inherently subversive. Love is transgressive. And Hozier retells the legend of the Original Sin, and paints it as defiant and rebellious, instead of it being the root of corruption or evil: “And when the earth is trembling on some new beginnin’/ With the same sweet shock of when Adam first came” is continued with, “Be like the love that discovered the sin (Lover, be good to me)/ That freed the first man and will do so again” (“Be”, Hozier).

Hozier does not simply allude to mythology. He builds his poetry around myths, inhabiting those moments, and retelling them from a current first-person perspective to suit his ends, no matter how subtle the metamorphoses. As Auden wrote, “I’d swear/ Men have always lounged in myths/ as Tall Stories”, and not because they provide escape from the sheer burden of time, but because in spite of knowing about their fabulousness, they allow humans to truly find themselves and others, so do we find Hozier as a “shred of truth in the lost myth of true love” (“Talk”).

establishment of an identity in the present. The case of Greece is perhaps, extreme for Europe, a real case of “le regard de l’autre,” of the definition of self by means of the other. For the Japanese, the mythological influences are prevalent in their graphic novels – Mangas. For instance, the world-wide popular manga Naruto includes supernatural elements from the tale of Amaterasu – the goddess of the Sun, Tsukiyomi - the god of the Moon

and Susanoo – the god of storms. Mythology here becomes a source material for entertainment. Therefore, consciously or uncon-

sciously we have transformed the ancient myths and folk tales and made them into the fabric of our lives by weaving the narratives of myth and folk tale into our daily existence.

Shivangi Sinha

MYTH THE DISCOURSE OF IDENTITY

The month of September 2019, which the government spent fighting dengue, attending international conferences and placating the public over the rising onion prices-witnessed two atrocities which went largely undiscussed. On 15th September, a Dalit youth was burnt alive by his neighbor who couldn't bear the thought of his niece being in a relationship with the former. "Sometimes a man has to do something to save the dignity of his caste and family," he replied after being arrested. A few days later, two Dalit children were hit on their heads by a man for defecating in his fields, leading to their death on the spot. Even in such turbulent times to assert that 'caste is now a thing of the past or we have long abandoned that primitive practice' would be to remain not only naïve but also blindfolded to the horrors that keep on unfolding everyday. "To those who say that these things do not happen here...I say that only those who have suffered this anguish know its sting" writes Om Prakash Valmiki in the preface of his much acclaimed biography *Joothan*.

Joothan, written by Dalit activist and writer, lacks the playful nostalgia and a bitter-sweet remembrance that is traditionally associated with autobiographies. On the contrary, Valmiki's account of his life (even

childhood) are far from hunky dory. Autobiography as a medium thus becomes in Valmiki's hands a medium not to relive his memories, but to revisit trauma and overcome it. The title, which points towards the tradition wherein the leftovers or *joothan* of the upper-caste members of the society were consumed by the Dalit families, becomes a wider metaphor to encapsulate the leftover and outcaste status of the Dalit community under the *savarna* hegemony. Valmiki, thus, is not only chronicling his story, but of all those whose legs have been ensnared by the caste system.

The youngest child of his family, Valmiki is encouraged by his father and brothers to receive an education. But his school experience proves to be a nightmare as he is mocked by his classmates for wearing ragged clothes and is castigated by his teachers if he attempts to look clean. Worse, his new casteist and sadistic principal, unable to bear the idea of a Dalit child studying, makes him clean the entire school- making it a demonic everyday ritual. But this is where *Joothan* differs from other Dalit texts, written by non-Dalit writers. Rather than making it a testimony of suffering, Valmiki makes it a testimony of protest. As he is cleaning the school one day, Valmiki, weeping and crying, is

spotted by his father who lashes out at the principal for making his child work despite continual threats from the latter. Protest, a leitmotif of Dalit Literature, finds its first articulation here. Further, he narrates the account of his being put out from the chemistry laboratory everyday which led to his failure in the subject, bullying by upper-caste children, the rituals of his own community and the solid family solidarity in the unit. Valmiki also details his realization of the 'Dalit consciousness' on reading Ambedkar, a person he had never heard of before: "Reading these books had awakened my consciousness. These books had given voice to my muteness."

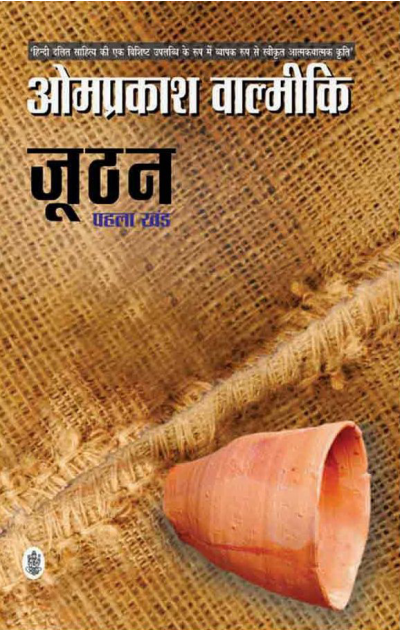
As the narration proceeds and details Valmiki's economic and educational advancement, the horrors of untouchability are replaced by the subtle ways in which casteism functions and perpetuates itself. A simple act of asking one's surname in a colloquial conversation or keeping different cups of tea for people of different castes in one's house- *Joothan* shows how prejudice and bigotry functions in a supposedly modern urban setup. The narrative of *Joothan* is simple, lacking any flamboyance- the language is rooted in the anger and angst of trauma and features explicit profanity and grotesque descriptions,

to which Valmiki himself draws attention to, comparing his literature to those of *savarna* writers. In a text as political as this, language, story and narration naturally take a backseat, where it is impossible to divorce the writer from his art.

But even a text as hard-hitting and incendiary as this leaves some gaps, especially in the treatment of its female characters. We aren't given much information about Valmiki's sister who never got to go to school, his sister-in-law who sacrificed her jewelry for his studies or his mother who wouldn't let her son go and kill the pigs even if it fetches money necessary for survival. But, such gaps are natural in any text and can only be filled via a retelling, which is where feminist Dalit accounts come into play.

Joothan's status as a seminal text in Hindi Dalit literature is not because it presents the sorry plight of people living in deplorable circumstances. It is because it collects all those voices and articulates them into a scream so that it becomes a weapon against the giant tentacles of caste, still lingering in Indian society.

Parth Pant



BOOK REVIEW

Joothan: The Testimony of A Community

Written by: Om Prakash Valmiki
Genre: Non-fiction, Autobiography
Publishers: Radha-Krishna Paperbacks
Language: Hindi

PHOTOGRAPHY



Prakhar Varshney



Prakhar Varshney



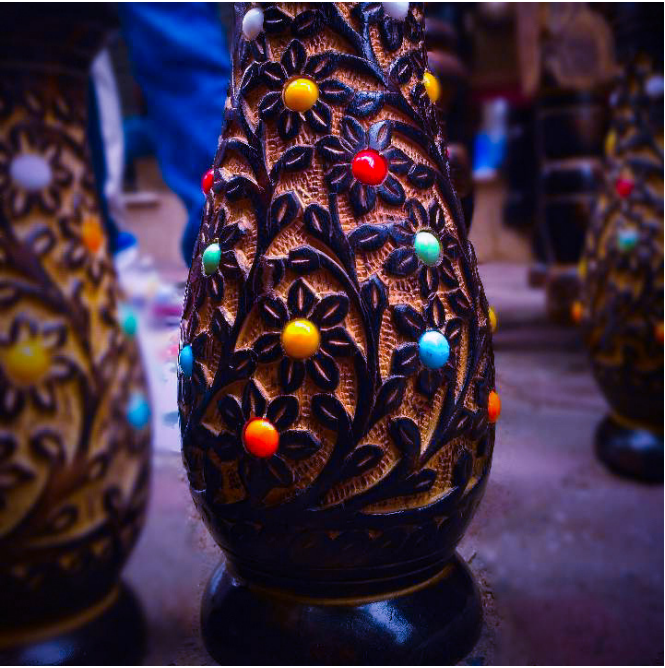
Prakhar Varshney



Kumar Mangalam



Eram Jasmine



Kumar Mangalam

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITORIAL TEAM

Why did Achilles weep inconsolably to the point of indescribable destruction at the death of a putatively ordinary man, Patroclus? What state policies did Jahanara Begum introduce in the Mughal Empire with the imperial seal she wielded? Is it an image of sheer monstrosity that Duryodhana has of himself and his brothers as portrayed in countless adaptations?

Enchanting as these questions might seem, the one that we need grapple with before answering these is why does it all matter? Why should those myths and legends and histories from times long gone by demand our interest and attention today?

This edition of *The Carrel* endeavours to confront these questions and many others. Traditionally, the words logos (Greek for “verifiable truth”) and mythos (Greek for “authoritative promulgation”) have been in constant tension—proponents of each trying to dismiss the other in a quest for the dominant perspective. Generally, myths are relegated to the fantastical other from the self of history as it actually happened by those with the power to establish it as the truth, for instance the effacement of gender-fluidity in Ancient India. In the Postmodern Age, however, history itself is nothing but, as William H. McNeil puts it, the result of belief systems with unquestioned assumptions: blurring the lines to what we call mythistory. Myths and legends, histories and perspectives from the past have an undying power to them: smouldering embers that put to fire the instincts of anyone with an eye for them.

As deferential we might be for these stories, the most impactful way to feel their power (and perhaps to ensure their immortality) is to tell them and tell them again. For these stories are not inviolable monoliths that to reshape them would be heresy, but their brilliance lies in their flourishing despite, and most importantly because of, the mutation that happens through retellings. As it were, nobody tampered with the Greek or Indian myths more than the Greeks or Indians themselves.

In that regard, attempts at retelling myths are not sacrilegious attempts to supplant the originals, but as Madeline Miller says, "to bring balance to the original perspective". For far too long, our heroes have been homogenised into unimpeachable figures. We learn about Einstein's Relativity or Picasso's Cubism without any thoughts to the people who helped them become what they did, many times at huge costs for themselves: hardly anyone is aware of the physicist Mileva Marić, Einstein's first wife, who made invaluable contributions to his research, nor do people know or care about the women—lovers, muses, and wives—who bled for Picasso's art. Retellings attempt to atone for that: investing authors with the power to give agency to the sidelined, help understand the misunderstood, ground adequate psychology for seemingly erratic actions, and cast reasonable actions in different lights.

From James Joyce's *Ulysses* to Jean Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine*, or Madeline Miller's *Circe* to Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, the history plays of William Shakespeare or Girish Karnad, to Devdutt Pattanaik's oeuvre, some of literature's greatest works, as well as its most popular—Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* or Amish Tripathi's *The Ramchandra* series, or Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology*, or the countless shows on Hindu mythology and film adaptations of Greek mythology—have drawn on myths and histories.

In light of the aforementioned, this edition of *The Carrel* invites an exploration of a diverse array of retellings, with a special emphasis on interviews that help us learn about the way these writers approach these retellings and what do they think about the society's fascination with myths. Featuring answers from the likes of Ashwin Sanghi, Sharanya Manivannan, Devdutt Pattanaik and Pooja Sharma, the newsletter also reviews books that attempt to retell mythology as well, as well as offers insights into the importance of history and mythology in our lives. Characters like Draupadi, Helen, Medea and various others have been brought back into the spotlight, erasing margins. From pop culture to politics, from feminist to subaltern studies, from prose to poetry – this edition of *The Carrel* is a kaleidoscope of fresh ideas.

The Department of English wishes to compliment the student editorial board of *The Carrel* for their untiring efforts & unflagging zeal in putting together the various features, creative pieces & interviews for this special edition on a topic which is of perennial interest to all. We wish them a lot of success in all their future endeavours!

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