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**Tracing The Voiceless Mythological Woman Characters and Liberating Them  
Through Revisionist Mythology**

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**Abstract**

Myths have silenced several voices and categorized them as blasphemous or profane, when they go against the norms of mainstream. The free willed woman had always been one such threat to the patriarchal system, for she questions, rather than blind confirmation. Such females were degraded, considered as volatile and deemed as spawns of the devils or as witches who does the forbidden, that is to seek knowledge, think and reason out. Therefore, these systems limited her physical, mental and sociocultural space. The feminist movement of twentieth century brought limelight to these victims and resorted to retell their stories in their own voices. Thus, began a new era, where literature celebrated these once vanquished characters as its protagonists, in a new genre called Revisionist Mythology. The article skims through the myths across the world and looks for the long-lost female characters, whose voices were silenced and overpowered by the phallogocentric narrative. Through this, we can arrive at a collection of experiences of women from varied cultures and belief systems, yet connected by a commonality. This commonality is a portrait of subjugated suffering, discrimination, the oppression and the overshadowed individual voice through eons of time. This is where the revisionist mythologists work and they look for victims of phallogocentric myths to liberate them and recount their tale by providing them with an individual voice.

**Keywords:** Revisionist mythology, Phallogocentric narrative, Female voices, Patriarchy, Feminism

## **Introduction**

In contemporary times, the birth of a female child is proclaimed with the shade of pink, foreshadowing that her palette of life is going to be confined within this single shade. Thus enslavement of womankind within a structure, begins even before birth and this assertion of colour can be one of many such instances. This gesture of categorization which is seemingly inconspicuous, may later adversely result in conformation to the patriarchal structure and instrument the assertion of gender role. Every other convention associated with being the perfect socially accepted woman, is thus impregnated into the mind of a girl child from very early stages of childhood. The role of myths in this process can be monumental when children are exposed to them. At the macro-cosmic level, myths become the cornerstones of the sociocultural institutions such as religion and derive a sanctity, as well as an unquestionable authority from those institutions. In a microcosm, they are the elemental factors that aid in the construction of the cultural identity of a person and influence their social outlook. Thus, it is agreeable that myths have communicative function at various levels. Therefore, the manner in which the notion of ideal feminine is expressed in myths should be keenly analysed. This is because myths form the basis of a value system that had been constructed by males who are in the top most hierarchy. This can give an idea on the mythopoeia and the development of patriarchal social structures being interlinked.

## **Revisiting the mythical femininity**

The Greco-Roman myths and the Indian Hindu myths are known for their vast cosmogony and theogony. The Greco-Roman classics and the classical heroes were much sought after by the western literature after the renaissance, for they were the embodiment of valour and romance. Moreover, they served as an abundant stock reserve of character-types. The Indian Hindu myths similarly had an extensive polytheist narrative. The holy scriptures of Vedas and their interpretations in Smritis combined both the mythical and the social, by providing a detailed value system that controlled the working of society. They became models for individual life and listed the code of conduct for individuals' interaction with the society. These myth-scapes are suitable places to begin this probe of lost female voices and elucidate the aspects of patriarchal dominance over them.

Every culture has a cosmogonic myth and the Greek genesis tale of the human race has the character, Pandora. If we look at the tale of Pandora described in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, we can find several clues for this construction of female identity in mythical scapes. Prometheus is said to have created the human kind and

went to the extent of stealing the Olympus fire to help them. This earns the wrath of gods, and in order to punish the overreaching human race, they fashion the first female Pandora out of earth, she is created as a punishment to bring them down and she is called as beautiful evil who would torment mankind.

To set against the fire I shall give them an affliction in which they will all delight as they embrace their own misfortune. Because all the dwellers of Olympus made her their gift- a calamity for men (Hesiod ,39).

One can notice in the above lines, that the very birth of Pandora itself revolved around men without any individual say for her. It also hints that pleasure that men derive from women is destructive. Her creation or the creation of womankind or her descendants had only the purpose that is to punish men. Jane Ellen Harrison, a renowned classical scholar, noted that it indicates the shift from matriarchal to a patriarchal cultural paradigm in Greek culture, where Pandora becomes a mere handiwork of Zeus. Pandora was given a jar, as a gift from gods when they created her. She curiously opens the jar which was instructed by her husband as forbidden to touch and when she does the forbidden, all evil sprang out from the said jar causing the destruction. She allowed herself to be corrupted and the race of humanity that originated from her is said to have sinned. Both Pandora and Eve did the forbidden and caused the downfall of mankind accordingly. Both are mere pawns of a greater scheme, wherein Eve is manipulated by Satan and Pandora is the creation of Zeus to put men in their place. It can be seen that both myths deem the female as naive and that her curiosity is a catastrophe. No wonder curious cats are mostly associated with females. In a different dimension, it could point to the anxiety of the patriarchy towards women accessing knowledge so that it created an image that her inquisitiveness or quest to know more can only cause destruction. Thereby, successfully establishing that women cannot be left alone to decide and needed constant monitoring by the male. One aspect that can be seen here, is the way how the patriarchal religions and their value system operate, limiting the societal functionality of womankind. The myth of Philomela and the tyrant king Tereus is another tale that sparks serious questions. Philomela is the sister of Tereus's wife Procne. Tereus lusted after his sister in law and deceives her father in securing her hand in marriage while his wife is still alive. He then molested her on an island and cut her tongue to prevent her exposing him to his wife. Philomela being deprived of her speech, signifies the lost female voice in literal and metaphorical levels. This

forceful silencing of Philomela indicates that the victim narrative was never given a say and this can be connected to contemporary sexual violations. This also reflects the lack of power of women over her body and the consequent exploitation they would face. Philomela was violated with sheer physical might and she is pawned off to another kingdom by the same perpetrator. Ultimately, herself and her sister became a nightingale and sparrow, to save themselves from the wrath of Tereus. Her voice is muted like that of the female nightingale she becomes at last. The character of Daphne being pursued by the Greek god Apollo is a similar narrative. Apollo questioned the power of Cupid's arrow to cause love and was cursed by Cupid to fall mindlessly in infatuation with Daphne. Daphne, being a river nymph, spurned his advance and ran to save herself from Apollo. She was unable to outrun the pursuer and prayed to the river god to transform herself into a Laurel tree and thus escaped Apollo's pursuing grasp. Apollo later realised this and deemed the laurel tree as a sacred symbol of great achievement and its leaves are ceremoniously worn by victors. The delayed justice is as good as a denied one.

The character Callisto was punished similarly to be transformed into a bear. Callisto was among the nymphs of Artemis, who had sworn an oath of celibacy. Zeus lusted her and embraced her by disguising himself as Artemis herself. When the unknowing Callisto gave in to Zeus she became pregnant. As Artemis recognized the act, she banished Callisto. Hera, consort of Zeus changed her into a bear in anger. Though the aspect of victimisation in all the above myths is evident here, there is another concept that cannot be neglected. This being the conception of virginity, chastity and the associated notion of purity with it. It is a prejudice that this conception is applied only to the female, despite the fact that the male is equally involved in a physical union. Accusation of losing one's chastity or purity is a common paradigm, that is repetitive in myths and has charged several females with blame of infidelity.

The Hindu myths have several such cases and at this instant it is inevitable to scrutinize them. The character of Sita being the titular character in Ramayana, garners attention in the above terms. Sita, abducted by the Asura king Ravana, spent her imprisonment in his palatial garden surrounded by female demon guards or Rakshasis. She averted his advances with rigor until the ultimate defeat of Ravana in the war. When Rama had to take Sita back to his kingdom, she was asked by her beloved husband to walk through the pyre of wild flames, in order to prove her morality and purity to the world. If she manages to survive the trial by fire, it was an

indication of purity and that Sita is still chaste. Notably, this is a highly one-sided narrative. Though Sita complied to it and emerged unscathed, in the later part of the story she is again sent to forest, because of the accusation of infidelity by the subjects. Rama being the iconic king, sent his pregnant wife to suffer alone in the wilderness. The extent to which a phallocratic state and a phallocentric society restrains the mobility of females can be noticed. Sita was praised as virtuous and epitome of patience, for silently enduring all the injustice against her. It can be seen that Sita's tale acted as a model for women. It repeated itself in the patriarchal households, totally in Rama's perspective and romanticized all the pains Sita endured as a symbol of her compliance to dharma. The character of Sita ceased to be a character and evolved into a metaphor for a virtuous woman. The painful injustice and the suffering of Sita was submerged beneath this largely masculine narrative.

In a sub-plot of the same epic, another intriguing instance of silenced female voice, can be witnessed through the tale of Ahalya . She was a devout wife of sage Gautama and was known for her alluring beauty. This got the attention of god Indra and he lusted after her. He went to an extent of distracting the sage to a river for his ceremonial bath and in the meantime, he disguised himself as the sage to get intimate with the unsuspecting Ahalya. The wife of sage, believing Indra in disguise to be her husband, offered herself willingly. When the sage returned and found the debauchery committed by Indra, he retaliated by cursing both Indira and Ahalya. The curse that befell on Indira was befitting his mindless act. Yet the curse of Ahalya to be turned into stone and wait for her redemption till Ram steps on her is seemingly unjust. Moreover there seems to be a variety of versions that even puts blame on Ahalya, telling that she recognised that it was not her husband in the middle of physical union , but ignored it at the heat of the moment. Another one states that Ahalya voluntarily asked sage Gautama for punishment. All these versions could point to the unfair treatment Ahalya experienced in the hands of male-centered narration and the extent her tale has been meddled to suit the needs of patriarchy, in solidifying the notions of chastity and purity in the social setup. It was more of a tale to establish Ram as an unparalleled virtuous hero and assassinated the character of Ahalya in the due course.

An almost similar essence is noted in Renuka's tale. Renuka is the mother of Parasurama, the renowned avatar of vishnu and the wife of sage, Jamadagni. Being known to be ardently devout and chaste, she manages the impossible task of furnishing a pot out of river sand. She fetched river water in the new sand pot for her husband's daily prayer rituals. This pot reflected her mind that was virtuous and in

control. Once when she is in this process of making a sand-pot, she notices a gracefully adorned Gandharva or divine being flying past her, in the reflection of water. This momentary distraction is said to have made her impure in mind and she failed in making the pot. The sage realised it and exiled her. When Renuka sought forgiveness, the sage ordered his son to rather behead her. Parasurama beheads her and later asks his father to redeem his mother. This story points out the extent to which chastity was enforced on women and the rigidity behind its construct, in making the violation so heinous enough to sentence death. It is implied that even the mind of women must work within the boundaries that men delineated or allowed. This tale is an epitome of depriving women of their mental and physical autonomy. One cannot miss the treatment of women like a perishable good which is spoilt when touched or allowed with external interaction. If the epic Mahabharata is studied, several characters spark interest. Firstly, the physical violation of Draupati and her being bet like property in the court of Gauravas. She is disrobed and verbally abused by Gauravas. Yet she was not meek and questioned the assembly and the esteemed courtiers. But when probing deeper through the layers of this character, it can be concluded that Draupati was still within the constructs of state and patriarchy, wherein her character is constructed within the idea of chaste woman and being born out of fire, she symbolised purity. One may put forth that she was independent with sexual plurality. But scrutinizing it could reveal that it was still a controlled process and she was required to cleanse in fire-bath before shifting between her five husbands. Among the various other wives of Pandavas in the epic; Chitrangadha, Hidumbi, Ulupi are minor characters. They have roles merely as potential political alliances and are expected to willingly bid farewell like a dutiful wife, when the husband left them. Yet they gain attention by showing a similar pattern in all their character sketches. They are deemed as outcasts, savage tribes and marginalised by state. They were deemed to lack accepted beauty standards and were believed to have seduced their husband because of it. They are criticised for having married them in a deceived or disguised identity. They lose significance once they deliver an able child, who would eventually help Pandavas in war against Gauravas.

The same pattern can be seen in Penelope of Odyssey and Urmila of Ramayana. Penelope was to wait for Odysseus till he returned from the war, battling lonely to save herself from suitors and bringing up her son, Telemachus to ascend the throne. She bears the weight of the kingdom and yet she is inconspicuous. Urmila similarly, was the wife of Lakshman of Ramayana who left her to follow his brother and assist him in his exile to forest. Urmila even received a boon that she would be

bestowed with Lakshman's sleep , so that he alertly can guard his brother even at nights. She had to sleep for herself and her husband for fourteen long years , until her husband returned back to the kingdom. Both the characters had the same grit and fought their inner individual battles while being largely overshadowed. Ambai from the epic, *Mahabharata*, is a character that garners attention for her slightly liberated characterisation. She is the one who speaks back against being controlled . She asks to marry the person of her choice when Bhishma is captured by force as a souvenir and challenges the greatest warrior Bhishma to redress her dream is shattered because of his actions. Yet she had to be reborn as Sigandi to fight him back and even then Sigandi couldn't defeat him in her female self despite being capable. She could kill him only when she transformed into a male , temporarily through divine power. Even the comparatively most outspoken character of the epic, is portrayed to assume the male identity to achieve a feat. She fought against the mistreatment of a female in the hands of the state or monarch and its rigid codes . Yet another common character type that myths use is Seductressor the enchantress, who lured oblivious unsuspecting males with their beauty . They entranced them into their traps for their sexual rendezvous. They are typically portrayed as the female characters who are vile and often play as antagonists with a greater scheme. This stock character is often termed as *Femme fatale*. They are often witches or enchantresses with power to create illusory traps. Circe ,Medusa and the Sirens of the Greek myth; Shoorpanaka of the *Mahabharata*; Mohini etc fall under this character type. They are deviants or misfits of mainstream and show zero inhibition to flaunt their sexuality and are conscious of their identity.

### **Liberating the Voiceless:**

All the above discussed characters found new spotlight in twentieth century women poetry and became titular characters in women writing of this era championing the cause of liberation and taking back their rightful place from the margins. There are many more characters, yet to be re-visioned and voiced out. Judith Butler, Sandra Gilbert, Adrienne Rich, Elaine Showalter, Julia Kristeva and others were monumental contributors in developing the ideology of this generation of women poets and identified with these poets, in their essence of the feminist consciousness and feminist values. Gynocriticism , Post structural feminism, *Ecriture feminine* were few new ideas that developed as a result.

“Re-vision- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in history . It is an act of survival.” ( Rich,35)

This highlights the need for a separate framework to look at and create literature from the eyes of women that is freed from male perspective. They encouraged women to write in their own style, developing their own discourse. Looking at a few feminist revisionist works could elaborate the actual working of these schools of thoughts, where they materialize as poems, fiction, dramas and other works of art like sculptures, paintings etc. As Adrienne Rich would put it as an act of re-seeing, the characters were seen in new light and the aspects that had been missed earlier were analysed, to understand and overpower the submergence under the masculine narrative.

A notable example is Sylvia Plath's poem, *Two sisters of Persephone* (1957), took the myth and alluded to the stereotypical roles of women during her life. Persephone's double life in underworld and earth and her power of controlling nature's vegetative and reproductive phase, is exploited here. Plath used it to portray the two contradicting binary selves of one female, a maths geek and a pregnant mother. Plath's anthology, *Ariel*(1965),explores similar themes and asserts a female identity . Margaret Atwood's, *Penelopiad* (2005), narrates the Trojan war from Penelope's point of view. Her twelve maids who were hanged by her son Telemachus, are given a voice and they speak about various struggles as women. Penelope comments on various gods and expresses her opinions which are different from the mainstream version of it , especially of Hades . Carol Anne Duffy wrote *The World's Wife* (1999), an anthology of poems . Each has a speaker, who is the spouse of renowned men of fields ranging from myth to pop-culture. Some of them are Circe, Medusa, Penelope etc. It is a treatise of speaking back to the male dominance, that had the women locked and exposes the exploitation of women. Each female persona in the poem urges the fellow women to shred their inhibitions and stop bending to the oppressive hand .The tale of Circe had also been retold by Madellaine Miller in her fiction, *Circe* (2018), beginning from her life as daughter of titan, her being an outcast and her wrath against the gods. The story is noted for the portrayal of Circe as a single mother and her defiance as a retaliation to the gods. The book is also set to be adapted as a HBO television series .The most recent one is *Wake , Siren ; Ovid Resung* , by Nina McLaughlin published in 2019 . It is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* re-imagined in the voice of thirty Ovidian female characters , who boldly speak against the physical , sexual

and mental oppression they faced in the hands of men, gods or kings alike from Greek myth. Each character contrasts their individual self from what has been assumed of them. Nina argues that the men were actually the Sirens who trap and distract.

The idolised image she had for Rama is broken and she begins to reconsider her life. She recognises that her redemption is meaningless when it is provided by such an idol. In the end, Ahalya became a stone again, rather than living by the stone-like constructs of Patriarchy and its misogyny. Mahashweta Devi's *Breast stories* (1997) stands alone in this genre. It is a collection of three stories that deals with the societal constructs of the female body, especially the breast. *Dopdi* is one among them and is a retelling of the tale of Draupathi of *Mahabharata*. Unlike the epic, *Dopdi* is not a queen, but a tribal woman and a comrade, a rebel who fights the system. She is not rescued by any Krishna here, yet stands in her naked glory boldly battling the male gaze and becomes a weapon to rewrite what patriarchy advocated about the female body.

Meena kandaswamy, an emerging Indian English writer from south is known for her poems which are a bold subversion of the patriarchal myths and legends. She frees these women of myth, giving them mouths to fight their sexual repression and flaunt their sexuality with no virtuously enforced inhibition. Her poem *Six hours of chastity*, subverts the story of chaste Nalayani, who originally carried her husband in a basket to a whorehouse daily and took him back home in the morning. The alarming extent of patriarchal expectations from a woman, to willingly sacrifice her individual emotions and act like a puppet, which channeled through this myth is self-explanatory. The poets' Nalayani is a depressed victim, who is tormented by her state and her retaliation is by her playing as a prostitute every night. Kavita Kané's *Karna's wife: The Outcast Queen* (2013), is a notable novel bringing the marginalized to the forefront. It deals with an unexplored minor character in *Mahabharata*, Urvi who is the spouse of Karnataka and retells her tale in a fresh limelight. *The Palace of illusion* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni recounts the epic with Draupadi as the protagonist. All these literary works are a breath of fresh air in the mythical literary scene, shedding limelight on the voiceless characters. They are the need of the hour to liberate the female narratives entrapped within the patriarchal framework of culture and mythology.

### **Conclusion:**

The myths undergo metamorphoses throughout the ages of history, telling the stories that suit the needs of those in the seat of authority. As a result, the mentality

of the general population also changes over time to conform to those narratives. Roland Barthes believes that myths are these illusory representations that are prevailing in society, which is then gradually accepted as natural. This could be the modus operandi of how patriarchy works its way, to enslave the female by constructing her world thereby influencing her perspectives, thoughts and action through myths. If we apply this concept of naturalisation of myth, to the construction of female identity that is defined as natural by the masculine society, we can see that the law of the father creates virtue based social structure that completely ignores the will or wants of women and demands unquestionable confirmation. In addition to this, it renders the language itself as a masculine one, having womankind devoid of their individual voice and making sure that the woman herself could not comprehend the subjugation by the deeming of it as natural. The need, to free women from the shackles of such sociocultural and linguistic enslavement, was felt like never before and the developments in the realm of theory critical thought were also conducive for the rise of a new discipline, that is feminist revisionist mythology. This article traced such anecdotes from renowned myths from Greco-Roman mythology and the Hindu mythology. Thus the liberated voices of the female can be heard loud and clear through these works without the constraints of a phallogocentric narrative. They stand tall and proclaim a new age, where history is rewritten with the women as participants rather than silent bystanders.

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