

KANYAS, VISHKANYAS AND GODDESSES: A STUDY OF THE FEMALE PORTRAYAL IN ASHWIN SANGHI'S CHANAKYA'S CHANT

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Abstract

The portrayal of women in Indian English literature has been diverse and multifaceted over the years. Authors with their idiosyncratic styles of narration and story-telling frame their female characters from being submissive and docile to empowered and independent; pious and spiritual to vile and diabolic. With the changing social trends and norms, a strong transformation in female representation is evident in post- colonial writings. Ashwin Sanghi, a celebrated Indian writer explores the genre of 'mytho-historical thriller' and presents an eclectic picture of his female characters. This paper attempts to analyse the portrayal of women in Sanghi's Chanakya's Chant (2010). The book spans across timeliness, taking the reader on a ride spanning across centuries and geographies. The journey mirrors the transformation of women, in the back drop of historical contexts, social issues and political agendas. The paper also explores the various themes like gender, caste, religion etc to understand the depiction of the female with respect to making and breaking archetypes. This is also an attempt to understand literary representation in the back drop of Archetypal Criticism and retellings of mythology.

Keywords: Female, History, Mythology, Archetypes

INTRODUCTION

Indian writings in English in the initial years of existence have presented the 'female' in stereotypical ways. One is simply reminded of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* where she says, 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman' (Beauvoir 267).

However, there are myriad strings attached to female representation. The emotions and counter emotions towards women in the Indian society have a strong bearing on the country's past. From mythological tales to contemporary culture, women have paved their own path; serpentine though. Their fight for rights, for status, for identity has been long glorified by feminists. However, as Irigaray puts it, 'But women do not constitute, strictly speaking, a class, and their dispersion among several classes makes their political struggle complex, their demands sometimes contradictory' (Irigaray 32)

The role of women in Hindu history has been convoluted, varied and pertinent. It is known that in ancient India, women enjoyed a relatively elevated status and were involved in various aspects of society, including politics, religion, and education. A good example would be *The Rigveda*, one of the oldest Hindu texts, contains hymns written by female poets, highlighting the important role of women in religious practices. The sexuality and gender of a human being is evidently classified primarily into three main groups according to prakriti or environment in Vedic literature. The *Rig Veda* claims that the world before the earth's origin was devoid of all distinctions, including those based on sex and gender (Boral, Savita). In contrast, as K. R. Vidhya substantiates, how Indian mythology often "places the female in a high place" as goddess, yet "indirectly showcases the oppressions of women" through cultural ideology.

The leap of change from ancient to modern times was gradual and witnessed in the pre independence period. Women became politically and socially active. With an active participation in the freedom struggle to taking up leadership roles in the government Post Independence, women continued to demand respect, dignity and power. However, India has always been a patriarchal society; women have barely led the forefront. The subtle hints of women being puppets at the hands of men, taking orders from their male counterparts, not having a

say in decision making and last but not the least sometimes objectified for sexual desires and fulfilments cannot be missed in post- colonial writings.

Sheelu Sagar in her study of women in Indian fiction, states, 'A woman's development, however radical it may seek to be, would thus not suffice to liberate woman's desire. And to date no political theory or political practice has resolved, or sufficiently taken into consideration, this historical problem, even though Marxism has proclaimed its importance'. The so-called development of woman is rather seen as a means of letting free her desire, but being the 'second sex', women's role in society has always been a topic of discussion.

Many post-colonial authors who write on mythology portray women in a similar light, making it a universally accepted fact that women have to sacrifice for their family. In a study on works by Chitra Divakurni, Richa Sharma mentions, 'The struggle between women and patriarchy runs in parallel with the fight between nature and the homo-centric mindset of society. In the novel, the spices sacrifice themselves to fulfil the adjurations of earthly born individuals, and likewise, the women sacrifice at every stage for the family and others. The male-controlled civilization browbeats women and nature for their requirements and profit'. The acceptance of women in a stereotypical role thus becomes difficult to challenge.

SANGHI AND THE FEMALE PORTRAYAL

The historical problem still persists, but writers have attempted to give a new dimension to it. Ashwin Sanghi, a post-colonial, 'myth-thriller' writer makes one such attempt in *Chanakya's Chant* (2010), by not evoking sympathy but respect for his women characters. He takes the reader on a journey depicting two different eras. The Magadh empire, of the 2nd BC and the contemporary India (post-independence). In both the stories, the protagonist is a man, who controls, regulates and even moulds the women characters. Sanghi dexterously crafts his male heroes as characters who although exhibit dominance, yet come out to earn respect for their encouraging attitude towards women. Chanakya, the wise old sage, is the driver of the era. He wishes to unite Bharat and promote his protegee, Chandragupta Maurya by overthrowing the brutal and dishonest Dhanananda. All this appears tough, but tougher is managing his love interest Suvasini.

Daughter of Shaktar, the PM in the Magadh empire, Suvasini is introduced as Chanakya's childhood friend. She is a docile, demure and grounded girl, quite in contrast to the cunning and Machiavellian Chanakya. Sanghi carves Suvasini's character as symbolic of the inner conscience. She becomes a trump card in the hands of Chanakya and thus metaphorically decides his fate. Though a two-sided love, Chanakya decides to sacrifice it for his political aims of unifying Bharat. So, he sacrifices love for strategy while Suvasini had to pay the price.

Suvasini acts a foil to Chanakya's calculating and rational temperament. She being the Queen of Dhanananda has easy access to the king and his secrets. While on one hand Chanakya or Vishnugupta as she fondly calls him, is guided by manipulations and mental acumen, Suvasini is driven by love, loyalty and also self- respect. The irony is that she is loyal to her King too. However, this juxtaposition of two different personalities brings to focus the stereotypical depiction of woman in fiction. Despite being the Queen, she holds no power, despite being Chanakya's love interest she cannot mould his decisions. Sanghi shows how the difficult choices in her life reflect the condition of women in ancient times. In her own right, she is always a pawn in the hands of a male figure, be it her lover or be it her husband

Suvasini embodies what feminist theorist Luce Irigaray might describe as "the matrix of memory," shaping spiritual and emotional resolution. Tragically enough, her death portrays the fatal end a woman meets being left with no chance. However, the twist in the tale is when Suvasini incurs a strong curse upon Chanakya saying, *'You would hold a woman that you love as prisoner because she's a pawn on your chessboard?' she howled. 'O lord of anger and incarnation of death! I consign you to hell for a thousand years- to suffer tortures for the murders and villainies committed by you in the name of politics! You shall have no lineage to carry forward your name and the knowledge that you so lust after shall have no useful application for anyone. Both you and your accused philosophy bedamned to oblivion!'* (Sanghi 426)

While Chanakya chooses to disbelieve her curse, it actually comes true. In Joseph Campbell's hero-cycle terms, she is both the "love interest" in the early "call to adventure" stage and the "threshold guardian" whose curse shapes the hero's return.

Sanghi meticulously and deliberately shows the soft side of a woman's heart here; a woman filled with exasperation and wrath, a woman who feels cheated, a woman who goes to the extent of cursing her beloved and yet offers a way to redemption.

'However, because I love you, I shall offer you a means to redemption. Several thousand years from now, if someone meditates upon a mantra, he shall be able to use Chanakya's knowledge once again, but only if he uses it to advance a woman!' (Sanghi 427)

Sanghi could have used this to bring a metaphysical link between the two timelines, the ancient and the modern. And then happens Chanakya's reincarnation as Gangasagar Mishra happens, and the introduction of the woman whose success happens by the chanting of 'that mantra'Suvasini's words come true!

With the introduction of Gangasagar, Sanghi brings the focus on Chandni Gupta, the demure and meek daughter of a local paanwala, an archetype of the weak and powerless. Chandni's father thus becomes what Campbell addresses as "helpers" whose meekness or apparent weakness often conceals latent influence. With Chandni's strings in the hands of Misra, she goes on to become the PM of the country, defying all odds. Misra leaves no

stone unturned in clearing her path to success. From eliminating her one- night affair with an English boy, to killing her assistant who dared to confess his love for her, Misra meticulously plans Chandni's rise in politics. However, the Oxford educated girl, who carries an opinion and has an authoritarian demeanour is always a symbol of constructed empowerment. She is turned into a popular saree clad leader, (a stereotypical image for women leaders in India), and her femininity is used as a tool to gain votes.

Chandni resonates with Suvasini's words, *'In the new age, Shakti must trump Shiva!'* (Sanghi 427). She is a good example of how a female figure can be oblivious to the patriarchal tropes and yet be under its impact. Chandni aligns with Meenakshi Mukherjee's description that says, *'the woman in the Indian English novel is often the site where tradition and modernity contest most visibly.'* (Sanghi145)

After the human female figures, comes the story of the Vishkanyas or poison maidens. Sanghi with his craft of story-telling begins the story with Vishaka's description and her poisonous kiss that killed Paurus, the emperor of Kaikey and Magadh. Many ancient texts have mention of these girls who are fed poison not to kill them but to make them immune to poison; Chanakya does the same here, as the lines from the text describe,

The ancient seers of Magadha had observed that birth under specific positions of the moon made certain women extremely unlucky for the longevity of their partners. Girls born on Tuesdays during the seventh lunar day of Vishaka possessed unfortunately potent horoscopes that guaranteed that any man they cohabited with would die. They were Vishkanyas- poison maidens. (Sanghi 388)

Jivanji Modi, a prominent Zoroastrian Parsi-Indian priest and scholar has a special mention of these Vishkanyas in his paper with a noteworthy inclusion of their role in medical treatises. According to him, 'this designation was sometimes applied to women who administered poison to their victim concealed in food or drink. More dramatically, the phrase signified women whose bodies had, over time, through small but incremental doses, become so impregnated with poison as to be fatal to any man who lay with them or even came into close physical contact. Such toxic embraces formed part of Indian legend and yet the idea was considered sufficiently plausible to be included in Sanskrit medical treatises like the *Sushruta Samhita*, dating back to well before the start of the Common Era.' (Modi, 226-39)

Sanghi's poetic description of these poison maidens does not demean their role in the society; rather elevates it. The omniscient author showing the wise old Chanakya as the master mind of training the Vishkanyas, also places them at a threshold, where the reader starts sympathising with them. At no instance in the text, Sanghi mis- represents this 'community', for their role, their femininity, their strategic actions and last but not the least their venomous brilliance. The femme fatale tag associated with the Vishkanyas evokes catharsis. The poison maidens are at the mercy of their master; willingly or unwillingly and symbolic of human agency being moulded for statecraft.

She (Vishaka) was as deadly as the snakes that had bitten her. The principal knew that Vishaka was the one she would offer to Chanakya. The founder of the school could not be offered anything less. (Sanghi 388). These poison maidens become an offering; their body thus becomes a biological weapon, used for political manoeuvrings.

Finally, in contrast to these maidens who are a deadly muse, comes the Goddess; the element of divine. Sanghi meticulously uses the ode to Adi shakti, the symbol of feminine power to denote not just spirituality but also the source of creation. This is the mantra that Suvasini recites; the mantra that would help Chanakya redeem himself.

'Adi Shakti, Namō Namah; Sarab Shakti, Namō Namah; Prithum Bhagvati, Namō Namah; Kundalini Mata Shakti; Mata Shakti, Namō Namah' (Sanghi 427)

Patnaik's reference to the feminine divine can be used to understand Sanghi's recurrent motif of Adi Shakti. Patnaik frames goddesses as embodiments of shakti, the cosmic feminine energy, noting that "without Shakti, Shiva is a corpse" (Patnaik 176), thus subtly showing the interdependence of male and female principles.

The mantra comes as a means of bridging the gap across timelines, a gap of 2300 years, a gap of culture and ideologies. It probably reflects the hand- over of charge from one male patriarch (Chanakya of the ancient India) to the other (Pandit Gangasagar Misra of contemporary India). Used as a recurrent theme, Pandit Misra recites the ode at every milestone victory of his protégé Chandni Gupta. It shows Misra's inclinations towards the spiritual and also sets the mood for cultural resonance in modern times. Also, Sanghi intends to highlight how the metaphysical can challenge the patriarchal hegemony in modern times; the male protagonist invoking a cosmic feminine force shows his obeisance and alacrity to accept the female as the supreme power, or an omnipotent entity.

CONCLUSION

Ashwin Sanghi does an exemplary work in depicting the different aspects of the female gender. By underscoring women's voice, he tries to inform or preach the transformative hierarchy of women in society. Tales from history vis a vis those from contemporary Indian are resonant of the suppressed voices and social injustice.

Sanghi brilliantly defines his feminine characters, not demanding sympathy but a plethora of respect for their actions, will, strength and perseverance. The archetypal portrayal of women in literature changes path in Sanghi's narration. He tries to present the feminine from being emotional counterparts to politically

constructed tools. His aim to bring to the forefront the importance of women across centuries opens up avenues for readers to retrospect the same.

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