

JOURNEY OF MANDODARI FROM A MERE SPECTATOR TO A VOICE RECLAIMED IN
SUNDARI HARAN'S *MANDODARI'S RAVANAYANA*

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ABSTRACT

Myths often have a universal allure and significance because they alter the original and evoke certain associations regarding human nature. The epics that best capture Indian society's social, moral, political, cultural, and spiritual aspects are the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. These two epics illustrate the lessons of the texts through relatable incidents that are simple for the layman to understand. Folklore, which is a component of mythology, epics, and tales, has a significant impact on everyday people's lives.

Women's characters though significant often exhibit passivity and subjugation in the metanarrative, *Ramayana*. Through Sita, the ideal woman, they are compelled to accept the idea of the divine feminine. However, despite the fact that Mandodari from the ageless epic *Ramayana* is also the perfect wife like Sita, our society has failed to recognize or even remember her. Mandodari's universe revolves around Ravana in all of the different adaptations and versions of *Ramayana*. She was a helpless, silent observer of the destruction that Ravana brought upon himself and his realm. This paper seeks to examine Sundari Haran's *Mandodari's Ravanayana* as an assertion of the 'pativrata' not only to reclaim the voice of Mandodari and reflect on her mettle as a survivor of assault but also acceptance of imperfections of Ravana.

Keywords: Myth, *Ramayana*, Mandodari, Voice, Rereading

India, incredible in its cultural heritage with its fascinating history, myths, and epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. These epics are the 'Itihasa' of India, in Sri Aurobindo's words, "Itihasa is [...] an ancient historical or legendary tradition turned to creative use as a significant myth or tale expressive of some spiritual or religious or ethical or ideal meaning and thus formative of the mind of the people" (285). The stories of Rama, Krishna, Hanuman, and many other legends imbibe in the children these ideals of purity, loyalty, obedience, justice, and all other similar good qualities that are honoured by society. Hence *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are cherished as it satisfies the intellectual and moral quest and encompasses the everyday reality for Indians.

Mythology, in every culture, helps to re-interpret past experiences and provides a fresh perspective on human existence. The mythic characters play a crucial role in forming perspectives, attitudes, beliefs, and viewpoints in the society about the roles assigned to each individual in the society concerning his/her class, caste, race, religion, and gender. Myths allow us to look at the possibilities of enhancement and evolution through its re-interpretation and re-contextualization. Myths also aid in enquiring basic questions about human existence, and hence they are relevant in the study of humankind and its advanced ages. "Myths maybe both the agents of cohesion and continuity as well as instruments of articulating protest" (Chauhan 49).

In colloquial terms, myths are stories that facilitate imagination; these are the stories that are narrated by the grandparents as bedtime stories and have been passed down from generation to generation through oral narratives. These oral narratives create a world of wonder and mysteries and have become part and parcel of human lives. Also, myths do not remain static. With changing trends and times, they are open to re-interpretation. Malinowsky asserts-

Studied alive, myth [...] is not an explanation in satisfaction of scientific interest, but a narrative insurrection of primeval reality told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements. Myth fulfils in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of rituals and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom (199).

Myths, hence, deal with the supernatural and are different from legends with historical background to reinforce it. Myths often are about Gods, deities, evil, demons, and their powers beyond human comprehension. According to Roland Barthes, a French literary theorist, and philosopher, everything can be a myth. Flying objects, disappearing objects and things become subjects of mythology and attain the status of myth. Thus, one finds that myths have always played a key role in society and human psychology. Because myths are deeply rooted in society and culture, they explain mystifying experiences or natural phenomena.

Joseph Campbell opines, "[A]ll myths and epics are linked in the human psyche and that they are cultural manifestations of the universal need to explain social, cosmological and spiritual realities" (415).

One of the most potent archetypes is that of a 'hero.' The archetypal hero symbolizes transformation and redemption. Furthermore, he is found in all mythologies, religions, and epics. He appears everywhere as he is the manifestation of our collective unconscious. This archetypal hero has specific characteristics which are common throughout the world mythologies. In his work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell defines a hero as "the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms" (14).

With the changing times, the development of the hero also has changed. Essentially, the hero takes up a long journey during which he encounters roadblocks, fights against evil, performs impossible tasks, and finally, in the end, is transformed into a changed person. Thus, throughout the world mythologies, as the hero traverses the world, the hero undergoes the inner and outer transformation. Achilles, Hercules, Odysseus, Beowulf, Robinhood, Rama, Krishna, and many more are examples of a hero from the treasure of literature.

The journey of the hero remains similar, more or less depending on the cultural and racial attitudes. Since time memorial, the myth has been an intrinsic element of culture, leading to the development and progress of culture, which can be studied with the help of interpretations of myths. The relationship between myth and culture is essential and exciting for analysis since, through myths, one can comprehend the complex web of culture.

Thus, this research paper, attempts to reflect on how myths and culture becomes a meeting point and conduit to trace the framing of female identity and how the notion of self and gendered identity was shaped and formed and punctuated with language, class, caste, socio-economic and many other factors especially in Indian context. Indian woman is a complex product, a second-class citizen, never mind whether she would have

been a princess or a queen. She is always seen or rather expected to be the archetypal image of 'good mother', 'faithful wife' and 'disciplined daughter'.

Mythology in India being a dominant source of cultural hegemony, the epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* provides a broad canvas to deconstruct this dominance and rewrite the myth to repose all that was neglected. The polymorphous nature of Indian epics provide diversity and are open to all who wish to retell, and reinterpret them. Each reinterpretation highlights what was missed in the metanarratives and offers a new, revitalised point of view. The perspective of the voiceless, marginalised, and underrepresented women is explored in modern rereading of epics. Mahashweta Devi asserts, "It is essential to revive existing myths and adapt them to the present time and, following the oral tradition, create new ones as well. While I find the existing mythologies, epics and Puranas interesting; I use them with a new interpretation" ("Untrapped Resources" 17).

Here is an attempt to re-read and review one such woman character from the metanarrative, *Ramayana* who is worshipped as one of the five holy virgins in Hindu scriptures, who was as ideal as Sita and who was a 'hero' in her own ways, Mandodari, the queen of Lanka, a pious woman. She is known as a beautiful woman who is pious and stands for truth and righteousness. In Valmiki *Ramayana*, she is almost invisible, she appears only to warn Ravana to send Sita back and then when she laments his death.

Mandodari, as one of the 'Panchakanya,' is equated with water. Her power of chastity and devotion towards her husband is celebrated at Sri Tirth of the Jains in Rajasthan. The legend narrates-

Ravana, the king of Lanka, observed the vow of taking meals only after worshipping God. Once, he was going on a plane to a foreign country. When it was time for lunch, he landed near Alvar to take a rest. He remembered the vow of worshipping God, but he had forgotten to bring the idol with him. To keep the vow, Mandodari made an idol of sand and installed it with life by reciting the mantra of Namaskar. Having worshipped God with devotion, Ravan and Mandodari kept their vow. Under the vow and Mandodari's chastity, the presiding deity made the idol adamant. Thus, the idol of Parshvanathji worshipped by [M]andodari and Ravan began to be known as 'Shri Ravan Parshvanath' ("Shri Alvar Tirth" Exp 1 L1).

She is the Queen, her status is high in the society, but she is a woman and hence subject to exploitation. In Allan Johnson's words:

What drives Patriarchy as a system –what fuels competition, aggression, and oppression – is a dynamic relationship between control and fear. Patriarchy encourages men to seek security, status, and other rewards through control; to fear other men's ability to control and harm them, and to identify being in control as both their best defense against loss and humiliation and the surest route to what they need and desire (95).

Hence, to control, defeat and humiliate Ravana and put a stop to his wrongdoings, Mandodari's honour and chastity are put to task.

Sundari Haran's *Mandodari's Ravanayana*. is a narrative that reclaimed the notion of 'pativrata' by reinterpreting it from the perspective of the 'pativrata' herself to subvert the gender roles imposed to preach domesticity and subordination to women. Mandodari in this story is not just Ravana's wife. Sundari Haran's asserts-

The stories that have been written before patronising Ravana. But, this book is different. This is the first text to give Mandodari's version of *Ramayana*. It is from a woman's point of view. Women are one of the strongest creations of God. I am a feminist, but not the kind that always tries to prove that they are better than men. I support confident women who realise the strength they possess. Mandodari is one such woman. She is very calm and patient like Devi, but when the situation arises, she is able to bring out the Kali in her (Exp2 L5).

This story weaves all the roles Mandodari performs in her life. The narrative vividly describes her childhood, her faith in Mahadev, her intense love for her parents and grandmother, her protective sisterly love for Tara and Bagira, her trust in her only confidant, The Bearman, her relationship with her mother-in-law and

her bond with Vibhishana and her maid, Trijata - all these speak about a strong, confident, matured, courageous yet sensitive, caring, spiritual and emotional Mandodari. It is a beautiful rendition that has rooted Mandodari at the centre and others around her and not otherwise. Her son, Indrajit, cares for her immensely and her relationship with Ravana is full of love and respect with some valid dislikes. "He stood up as soon as he saw me, and I was a little pleased by his respect for women" (127). When Surpanaka plays games against her own brother, Ravana and tries to trigger anger and hate in Mandodari, her faith, trust and her 'pativrata' is reflected in her statement, "Surpanaka, even if whatever you say is true, let it be. I will never question my husband. I will always be a loyal wife to him. I will support and protect him in all ways I can" (174).

She is courageous enough to question and give her piece of mind to the mighty Ravana when she gets to know that Ravana has abducted Sita. "So you kidnapped her Ravana? You kidnapped another man's wife and have brought her here. Is it not a shameful act? Do you realize what you have done?" (273)

Furthermore, she stands by her husband when she realizes that her husband, the mighty, Ravana will be defeated with trickery as Vibhishana has let out the secret of Ravana's immortality, she becomes more determined to save him and stand by him like a true warrior, responsible queen, and a committed wife. Mandodari being tricked and ill-treated by Hanuman and the Foucaultian General of Rama's 'vanar sena,' the Angada, Mandodari is 'used' to prevent Ravana from performing a ritual which would have made him victorious. Vibhishana lets out the secret and advises Rama to prevent the completion of the ritual. Hanuman was sent to disturb Ravana but in vain, so Angada drags Mandodari by her hair and tears off her clothes. Here, the oppression and exploitation are seen wherein Mandodari's body is used to defeat Ravana, highlighting gender hierarchies. Though from a monkey clan, Angada is the male who uses his force of power (Rama's army) and domination as a male to fight another man by using a woman as an object. But, she does not tolerate the lustful words of Angada and strikes him on his face embarrassing him. One is reminded of Mahashweta Devi's Dopdi and her form of resistance. Dopdi rips off her clothes and walks towards the officer who is embarrassed and shocked at her defiance. She states, "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me - come on, counter me-?" (Devi as quoted in Spivak's *Critical Inquiry* 402). She becomes the voice of gendered resistance. Similarly, Mandodari subverts Angada's oppressive power by the physicality of her body as powerful resistance-

Your mother dreamed of having a very brave son, who would make all proud. Look at your bravery - all you can do is attack a helpless woman. You want to shame a woman in public" I slapped him again. "You want to grab my breasts? You want to fondle them? Sure, come on my boy." [...] Why do you hesitate now? He was trying to escape or avoid my blows [...] I had my right hand behind with the bear-claw. I brought it with force and gave a hard blow on his nose. A completely shocked Angada fell backward. "You will never again disrespect a woman. Will you? [...] His whole face was damaged and streaked with the claw marks. He was withering in pain. I almost fell because of the exhaustion. Hah! He was wanting to make me scream all the while, but then he was the one screaming in pain (350-351).

Angada tries to use 'coercion' and 'control' to defeat Ravana, but as Foucault claims, "Where there is power, there is resistance [...] These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network [...] by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations" (*The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* 95-6). She is not a meek, docile woman but a fierce woman. Her life, honour, and identity are crucial to her; thus, instead of being self-relegated and pushed to the margins by others, she comes to the centre with her power of strength, faith, and assertiveness.

In the metanarrative, *Ramayana* her identity, existence, foresightedness, and persuasions made no difference either to the mighty Ravana or to the subjects of Lanka. She was a queen with no power vested in her nor did she have any say in the choices and decisions that Ravana implemented. She had to surrender her life to a fate decided upon by somebody else for no fault of hers. Tears and silence were her only faithful companions, making her yet another marginalised woman.

Mandodari in Sundari Haran's *Mandodari's Ravanayana*, states, "Do I worry for Tara? Do I worry for Sita? Do I worry for Ravana? I would realize later that the person whom I should have worried about would be me! I

would be the most damaged!" (285). With this realisation she stands out as a powerful woman who ardently believes in righteousness and stands for it; she is opinionated, fearless, and shows a mirror to Ravana to make him realize his mistake. It is her constant reminders of reality checks to Ravana that becomes Sita's cloak of protection. She through the agency of her assertive voice narrates 'her' story by subverting the narrative of *Ramayana*. bell Hooks aptly articulates-

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals that makes life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words that is the expression of our movement from object to subject- the liberated voice (9).

The contemporary re-reading of *Ramayana* which is life, and soul of Indian culture through different narratives becomes a fertile and potent ground for representations of women in present times in the society to reclaim their voice, speak, and be heard. Such 'reading against the grain' retellings can still challenge the hegemonic ideologies and dislodge the dominant mode of representation. Representations often affect how individuals are perceived in society. Thus, in conclusion, the representation of the underrepresented is necessary, especially when it represents mythological characters and, more so, gendered characters. They serve as archetypes and are constantly found in all the avenues of life, personal, or social.

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A Brief bio of corresponding author

Dr. Madhavi Arekar (MA, SET, Ph.D.) has been working as the Assistant Professor of English at VPM's Joshi-Bedekar College (Autonomous), Thane for the last 15 years. She has earned her doctorate degree in English from the University of Mumbai. She is an avid researcher with her research papers published in referred and peer-reviewed journals. With the majority of her research exploring the nexus between literature, mythology, and contemporary society, she also has to her credit a Minor Research Project fully funded by the University of Mumbai. Presently, she also serves as a member of the BoS of her institute for Mass Communication, Business Communication, and Communication Skills in English, Journalism, and English. Dr. Arekar's social responsibility is reflected in her continued English Language Acquisition sessions for rural students at Takipathar Aashram Shaala in Shahapur, Maharashtra. Apart from academia, she has successfully completed the Masters Course in Reiki and is a certified trainer for the 'Transform your life course' with Diana Cooper School, London.