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REVISITING MYTHS: A READING OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE, THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER, WIFE, THE HOLDER OF THE WORLD AND LEAVE IT TO ME*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to analyse the function of myth in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee with special focus on *Jasmine, The Tiger's Daughter, Wife, The Holder of the World and Leave It to Me*. In these novels Mukherjee primarily makes use of the Durga and Sita myth to explore and explain the psyche of her protagonists. Mythological characters provide the author a means to delve deep into the predicament in life of her protagonists. By drawing on an ancient myth, an author can summon a prefabricated frame of meaning which the reader will recognize. Thus myths represent archetypes which a discerning reader can easily identify with. And Mukherjee draws from our ancient epic *The Ramayana* and from the mythological story of Mahishasuramardini the goddess who vanquished the buffalo demon. These mythological figures are familiar to her readers. From mythology these characters seem to acquire aggressiveness and power. Use of myth as a narrative device is effectively employed by Mukherjee in these novels.

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Bharathi Mukherjee has carved out a niche for herself among the writers of Indian diaspora. An Indian immigrant married to a Canadian writer, Mukherjee has in her novels depicted the experiences that she has accrued through different cultures and citizenships. Her Ph.D thesis on Indian mythology in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* bears testimony to the fact that she was fascinated by myths.

This paper attempts to analyse the function of myth in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee with special focus on *Jasmine, The Tiger's Daughter, Wife, The Holder of the World and Leave It to Me*. In these novels Mukherjee primarily makes use of the Durga and Sita myth to explore and explain the psyche of her protagonists. Mythological characters provide the author a means to delve deep into the predicament in life of her protagonists. Use of myth as a narrative device is effectively employed by Mukherjee in these novels.

In *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology and Scholarship*, Bruce Lincoln "demonstrates that the idea that myth is an ideologically weighted narrative about figures or events from a remote past which shape contemporary ideologies comes down to us from about the seventh century BC, through Homer and Hesiod" (qtd in Aparna Halpe 3).By drawing on an ancient myth, an author can summon a prefabricated frame of meaning which the reader will recognize. Thus myths represent archetypes which a discerning reader can

easily identify with. And Mukherjee draws from our ancient epic *The Ramayana* and from the mythological story of Mahishasuramardini the goddess who vanquished the buffalo demon. These mythological figures are familiar to her readers.

In *Jasmine*, one of the archetypal images that Bharati Mukherjee uses to bring out the protagonist's feminist quality is that of Kali, the Goddess of Destruction. In Hindu mythology Kali is an incarnation of Durga, the Goddess of Strength. Sudhir Kakar reflects that, "in her gracious (*sundar-murti*) manifestations of world-mother (*jagadamba*) and world-nurse (*jagad-dhatri*), Kali awakens an intense nostalgia for the abundance and benevolence of maternal nurturing, approval, and reassurance." But he also notes that she can also assume the "hideous (*ghorarupa*) form, as the bone-wreathed lady of the graveyards" (203) symbolising the portentous aspect in every Hindu's maternal imagery.

Jasmine converts into Kali the goddess of avenging fury in order to kill her rapist Half-face, when she turns into —Death incarnate, the killing becomes effortless. Through the burning of her sullied clothes she enacts the death of her own self.

Mukherjee employs the image of the broken pitcher to describe her emotions after killing Half-Face:

I said my prayers for the dead clutching my Ganpati. I thought. The pitcher is broken. Lord Yama, who had wanted me, who had courted me, and whom I'd flirted with on the long trip over, had now deserted me— My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for. (J 120-21)

The pitcher is busted, there is no distinction between the inside and the outside and her soul, locates a fresh locale.

As C. Sengupta points out, "Jasmine in a truly feminist gesture decides to kill the Devil Incarnate and Bharati Mukherjee brilliantly fuses two archetypal images to enact this killing: of Kali the Goddess of Destruction and Strength and the broken pitcher." (Dhawan 156). "When a clay pitcher breaks ... the air inside it is the same as the outside ... there were no insides and outsides. We are just shells of the same Absolute." (J 15)

After Half-Face's death Jasmine decides to live instead of committing sati as planned previously. She "didn't feel the passionate embrace of Lord Yama that could turn a kerosene flame into a lover's caress. I (Jasmine) could not let my(her) personal dishonour disrupt my(her) mission. There would be plenty of time to die.... I extended my tongue and sliced it." (J 117-118)

Kali, the incarnation of Durga, the goddess of strength is an appropriate image to refer to the strength of a woman like Jasmine who encounters various perils in her journey to an alien world. When Half-Face rapes her she kills the rapist outside the motel and burns her clothes. This represents the symbolic burning of her former self. In order to show this kind of death Mukherjee evokes the image of the broken pitcher. By employing myth the novelist effectively retains Jasmine's Indianness.

The image of Sita's trial by fire in compliance with her husband's wish is an archetypal image used to prove the chastity of a wife and Mukherjee uses this image in her novel *Wife in a* sarcastic tone. In Dimple's dreams she became Sita "who had walked through fire at her husband's request. Such pain, such royalty, seemed reserved for married woman" (W 6).

The reference to Sita is in the form of a reader's response to an editorial titled "Divorce-Delhi-style."

Are you forgetting the unforgettable Sita of legends? Can you not recall how she walked through fire to please Ram, her kingly husband? Did Sita humiliate him by refusing to stroll through fire in front of his subjects and friends? Let us carry the torch (excusable pun!) of Sita's docility! (W 27)

Stanley M Stephen suggests that this reference highlights 'docility,' a treasured virtue of an Indian wife. 'Docility' of a woman is another trait used to suppress women. Sita stands for sacrifice, self-abnegation and self-effacement. She is a model for Indian women for emulation. And in keeping with this tradition Dimple follows her husband like Sita to the US.

In the Sens' apartment Sita's myth again resurfaces:

Through the open door behind Meena Sen's head was a framed batik wall hanging: King Ram and his court in splendid array, and off to the left, in the background, fighting for attention with the trees, mountains, monkeys and holy men, a small bonfire and a short, voluptuous Sita hip-deep in pale orange flames. (W 53)

While referring to the Sita myth, Stephen elaborates that Mukherjee uses "flippant language"(40) and gives a disapproving description: "Sita of the rounded hips" (W48) or the "voluptuous Sita hip-deep in pale orange flames" (W53)." It is evident that Mukherjee has used the Sita myth as a narrative device. In her article "Rereading Indian Womanhood: A Note on the Narrative Structure of *Wife*" Meera Manvi notes:

The narrative structure of *Wife* is conceptualized through Mukherjee's evocation of the Sita Myth at strategic moments in the narrative; the examination of the myth is further strengthened by the opposition that is successfully manipulated between passive resistance/violence, female desire/male authority, enclosure/freedom, marriage as bond/female eroticism, reality/after dream, love/marriage. (141)

Tara Banerjee Cartwright in *The Tiger's Daughter* is also influenced by the belief system of our rich and cultural heritage. She admires her mother's traditional beliefs in prayers and rituals and the tranquility it endows her. At Vassar when she remembers about the array of gods and goddesses her mother worships, especially the Hindu Goddess of power- Kali, she could thwart many awkward moments. It is the strength of Kali which sustains her at the moment of crisis:

She prayed to Kali for strength so she would not break down before these polite Americans and Kali who was a mother nursing her infant serene, black, exquisite and Kali, who was a mother devouring her infant, furious, black and exquisite, who sat under silk saris in suitcase at Vassar, smiled out her mischievously. (TD11)

The loss of rich cultural heritage occurs when she fails to remember the rites and rituals of prayer. This leads to a lot of anguish in Tara.

Debbie Di Martino the protagonist of *Leave It to Me* is an immigrant born to an American mother and Asian father but she is adopted by Italian parents and was brought up in America. She tries to trace her bio-parents and her search leads her to discover the unpalatable fact that her Indian father has avenged her bio mother by making her an orphan through this illicit relationship. Debbie assumes the role of Mahishasuramardini and kills her father like Devi Durga who killed the asura.(.Buffalo demon). Mukherjee through the skillful use of Devi Durga of Indian mythology drives home the point that the protagonist meets the challenge of her cultural diversity and decides to resolve it by adopting the role of the avenging goddess to address her dilemmas in life.

In *Leave it to me* Mukherjee seem to synthesis Greek and Hindu myth. According to Stephen she has used the Electra myth in the triangular love relationship between Ham Cohan(lover) ,Jess Du Pree (mother) and Devi Dee (daughter). The basic difference between Greek and Hindu myths is that in Greek, humans are at the centre whereas destiny is at the centre of the Hindu myths. Mukherjee resolves the problem of fusing the myths as she says in an interview "Debby is convinced that she is at the center of her universe, but the reader –having started out with the prologue-is always aware of divine providence"(qtd in Stephen 106).

In *The Holder of the World*, Mukherjee beautifully blends Mughal India along with mythological illustrations from the *Ramayana* with the modern day computer technology. The search for identity of her protagonist leads to the past and to the rich cultural heritage which affords a base to hold on to. The protagonist, the modern American woman Beigh Masters does 'assets research 'and it connects her to India. Mukherjee as a diaspora writer uses myth in cross cultural context. Moreover any reader can relate to myths whether it is of Greek or Indian origin because myths often deal with archetypes which represent the conflict between good and evil.

Nalini Iyer discusses how effectively Sita myth is subverted in *The Holder of the World* to provide potency to the characterization. For Bhagmati Sita's story represents ideas of ideal woman hood which she wishes to give to Hannah to familiarise with the Indian culture but with a different cultural experience Hannah

connects to Sita in a different way. Hannah is not abducted like Sita but was rescued by Jadav Singh and unlike Sita, Hannah is not chaste and she seduces Jadav Singh. Gabriel Legge, Hannah's husband is also not faithful to his wife. Iyer further elaborates that Bhagmati's story is also in contrast to Sita's story. Bhagmati was raped where as Ravan could not even touch Sita and she was chaste. Bhagmati was disowned by her family but Sita was abandoned by Lord Ram in order to convince his subjects regarding Sita's purity. Hannah chooses her own sexual partners like a typical western woman. Both Hannah and Bhagmati try to adopt Sita's story to achieve their vested interest. The Sita myth is used by Mukherjee to depict how an alien and a native react and reconcile with their predicament in life.

Parikh and Garg state:

Perhaps the role models of the cultural lore are internalised as deeply as the universe of identities is interjected. The three significant and persistent models running through mythology and history are the virtuous woman who suffers, the virtuous and assertive woman who fights, and the one who escapes into religion.(153-54)

Mukherjee's protagonists do not take recourse to religion but they do exemplify Parikh and Garg's statement by being assertive. Jasmine and Debbie fight and seek revenge for the injustice done to them by the society like the mythical Indian Goddess Devi Durga. From mythology these characters seem to acquire aggressiveness and power.

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