

THE TYRANNY OF IDENTITY

ANALYSING GENDER IDENTITY THROUGH FOLKTALES

ABIGAIL SHANNON KELLOGG*

ABSTRACT

Folklores, myths, literature, theatre and cinema form the narratives of any society. They also have the ability to shape and mould society. In this paper I analyse a few of these narratives to ascertain the identity ascribed to women in the Indian society and its propagation. It would be an understatement in the least, to say that India is a patriarchal society. A woman's identity lies only in relation to her father or her husband. Being an ancient civilisation, ancient religious traditions, myths and folklores have been used to propagate and establish a Phallic-Centred society. The Vedas, Puranas, Manusmriti and other Hindu scriptures also state the same hierarchy associated in the man-woman relationship. Since these scriptures and their knowledge remained in the confines of the Brahmin community for centuries, the propagation of the religion and its values has been done through myths and tales. In this paper, I investigate some of the myths, proverbs and folktales from Indian context. Here I examine and analyse the inherent man-woman relationship in these folktales in light of Hindu religion and the current state of gender relations.

Keywords: Gender Identity, Sexuality, Manusmriti, Folktales, Myths, Hinduism

* Abigail Shannon Kellogg, an alumnus of St. Stephen's College, has been a student of Philosophy. Having worked in the social sector for a few years, she understands the social-political climate of India. Her core focus is on discrimination, exclusion, sexuality, identity and gender concerns. She could be contacted at abishann91@gmail.com

Man-Woman relationship depicted in Folktales and Myths

Simone de Bouvier's¹ (1949) famous statement that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'², is apt for India's culture and traditions. Indians promote a gendered society with roles and responsibilities divided along rigid gender lines. Popular stories, myths and proverbs only reiterate this misogynistic ideology along the length and breadth of India. Many folktales and proverbs justify the less than equal treatment of women, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the constant male-female struggle wherein the male is forever victorious (Kakar 1989: 52). The female sex, in these depictions is constantly lacking both sexual morality and intelligence. A Gujarati saying goes, *Strini akkal edi ma* (the intelligence of a woman is in her heels). The Malayalis similarly warn *Penachollu Kalkunnavanu peruvalli* (One who heeds the advice of a woman will be reduced to beggary). In Hindi, we hear *Ghoda aur aurat ran tale* (The place of a horse and a woman is under the thighs) and in Gujarati *Usi jawar bajri muse nar padhri* (Barley and millet improve with salt, women through the beating by the pestle).

These popular sayings not only justify the ill-treatment of women but also justify the use of force and physical chastisement to correct perceived female shortcomings. These sayings along with the myths and tales which we will be seeing in a greater detail, form the popular narrative on female identity becoming part of the cultural psyche of the people (Kakar 1989: 12). In this paper, I review two folktales, 'Sona and Rupa' a Malwi folktale from Madhya Pradesh and 'The Wife Who Refused To Be Beaten' from Kashmir. Reviewing these narratives in the light of the Hindu scriptures, proverbs, myths, historical events and the current state of gender relations will help piece together the bigger picture of gender identity and gender roles in India (Ramanujan 1994).

1. Sona and Rupa

The first story Sona and Rupa, is written in Malwi, a north Indian dialect spoken in the state of Madhya Pradesh. A prince while returning to his palace saw a few strands of silver and golden hairs floating in the river. He gets infatuated by these hair strands and decides to find and marry the girls who have the same hair as the strands. The palace is frantically looking for these mystery girls, lining up all the girls from the kingdom, only to realise that the mystery girls were his own sisters. Having realised this, the queen mother tries to convince the prince to change his mind, so do the council of ministers and eventually the king himself, but to no avail. The prince was relentless. Hence everyone decided to organise the wedding. On the day of the wedding Sona and Rupa realise that they are the ones marrying their own brother. They ran and took refuge in a sandalwood tree that the two sisters planted together. The tree grew with them. When the council of ministers found them and asked them to come down, they

¹ Simone de Beauvoir was a French author and existentialist philosopher.

² Quoted from her 1949 treatise 'The Second Sex'.

refused and went up higher with the tree. The same happened when their mother came to call them and their father the king too. Sona and Rupa asked the tree to take them higher, every time the tree grew taller taking the higher. Eventually when the prince himself came to ask them to come down from the tree, as the hour of the wedding grew closer, the tree split up and took both of them inside. Before the family's eyes, Sona and Rupa vanished deep within the tree (Ramanujan 1994: 14).

Analysis of the story

In the above story, the Prince impulsively wants to marry the girls who have silver and golden hairs, whose strands he found floating in the river. He was asked no questions and no explanations were expected from him. The entire kingdom got busy trying to fulfil their prince's desire. On the realisation, that the girls in question were his own sisters, he was persuaded to change his mind but to no avail. Finally everyone gave in to the wedding. Thus, wedding preparations began without anyone being happy about it (Ramanujan 1994:14). Now, had a princess made a similar audacious request to marry her brother, the situation would have been not just difficult but entirely unimaginable. Luce Irigaray³ (1978) in 'The Language Of Man,' asserts that our language, our ability to comprehend and express are confined to the patriarchal realm. We cannot conceptualise a woman's perspective through a male dominated language. It is therefore difficult even to imagine that in a girl's wedding, only the girl is happy, but everyone including the groom isn't. Such an occurrence would be deemed rare in a patriarchal society such as India.

Not only were Sona and Rupa not consulted, their acceptance to the alliance was also not sought. They did not have any knowledge of the wedding, only to know about it on their wedding day. Trying only in vain to convince their parents and the people they trusted to stop the wedding, Sona and Rupa have no option but to annihilate themselves to save their honour. This is a common theme in India, women giving up their lives to save their honour. These acts are then masqueraded as heroic acts of women, as seen in the tradition of Jauhar and Sati. Here the women were lauded for giving up their lives to save themselves from being raped and keeping their virtues intact. Popularly it is also claimed that women committed suicide by jumping into the well of the Jallianwala Bagh during the massacre⁴ (Harlan 1992: 185).

What the society is doing is putting more emphasis on guarding the sanctity of the woman's genitalia than her life, a life rendered meaningless in the event of her rape. 'Saving her honour' is in reality not only her own honour, but also her father's or her husband's honour, which would have been tarnished had she

³ Luce Irigaray, is a Belgian-born French feminist, philosopher, linguist, psycholinguist, psychoanalyst and cultural theorist.

⁴The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, took place on 13 April, 1919, when a crowd of non-violent protesters, who had gathered in Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, Punjab, were fired upon by troops of the British Indian Army under the command of Colonel Reginald Dyer.

been raped. Even today women are held responsible for being raped, expected to hold dear to their honour more than their lives (Doniger and Smith 1991: 115). These narratives have become part of people's psyche in the subcontinent. These ideas penetrate deep within the fabric of our society being perpetually relevant (Kakar 1989: 2).

2. The Wife Who Refused To Be Beaten

The second story, 'The Wife Who Refused To Be Beaten', is a Kashmiri folktale. In the story, a rich merchant sends his ignorant and stupid son to perform a difficult challenge. Luckily for him, the son runs into an iron smith's daughter who helps him. When the merchant decides to marry the two off, meddling folk opposed to the match, advise the son to beat his wife. On the wedding night, the merchant's son picks up his shoe to beat his wife, to which she replied that it would be a bad omen if they quarrel on the first night of the marriage. The rich merchant's stupid son decided to wait for another day and then every time he tried to beat her, she would intelligently cook some story to evade her impending thrashing. In the end, it is she who rescues him yet again, this time from the wiles of an expert gambler, thus proving that 'she is too good for him' (Ramanujan 1994: 79).

Analysis of the story

In the second folktale 'The Wife Who Refused To Be Beaten' from Kashmir, reminds of The Arabian Nights⁵, the legendary stories cooked up by the Scheherazade to evade execution at the hands of Shahryar her husband and the King. In this story the wife employs superstition of good and bad omens, to save herself from being thrashed by her bridegroom who seems to eagerly wait for an auspicious hour to perform the deed. The story is about how the bride uses her charms and intelligence to not get beaten. The narrative praises the bride for her intelligence and ridicules the groom for his foolishness. But it strongly establishes that it is normal for a husband to beat his wife. Here the only inappropriate thing was that the groom is extremely stupid and wants to beat his wife for no rhyme or reason (Ramanujan 1994: 79). Having done that, the narrative establishes that if a man is intelligent and prudent, he has the right to beat his wife for her shortcomings to discipline her.

We can gather from the earlier proverbs that chastising a woman is considered actually a necessity. 'Neither the husband nor the brother-in-law can control a pugnacious woman' goes the famous Telugu saying (Kakar 1989: 12). Women are held to be uncontrollable, unpredictable and doorways to sin and unrighteousness. They should be held on a very tight leash lest they get loose and run wild. Therefore this folktale establishes the hierarchical man-woman relationship prescribed in Manusmriti (Doniger and Smith 1991: 198). These stories act like subliminal messages which get stored in our subconscious mind.

⁵ The Arabian Nights, is a collection of Middle Eastern folk tales compiled in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age.

Folktales are like an ever expanding medium travelling from mouth to mouth, from generation to generations, percolating the message. Thus in time these stories become part of the narratives of our families, our societies and eventually our nation (Kakar 1989: 2).

Relevance of folktales and myths: Today!

In a country like India with high levels of illiteracy, where for centuries over 90 percent of its population was not allowed to be educated (Ambedkar 1990:49); it is but natural for the word of mouth to be held true and to be adhered to, by the people. These stories then get a life of their own, becoming a living and breathing reality which is almost tangible, even assuming a supernatural or divine sanction at times. In today's times when we have every kind of information at our fingertips we may not feel that these ancient stories have any place in society. However, these tales and myths act as our lens through which we can understand the psyche of the Indian society and the problems therein (Ramanujan 1994).

In India, while the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and technological prowess grow and expand every year (World Bank, 2016), the sex ratio of our country remains skewed (UN 2014), with high rates of Dowry Deaths, Rapes, Child Sexual Abuse, (GoI 2015) infanticide of female children and sex selected Abortions (UN 2014). We still need campaigns like 'beti bachao, beti padhao' (P.M.) or programmes to give food supplements to adolescent girls to make up for the discrimination that daughters face in their homes at the hands of their parents and relatives.

The answers to these problems lie in understanding the narratives of the people and in understanding the acceptable man-woman relationship in the Indian society. Women are either viewed as immoral, foolish, selfish, conniving and full of contempt or they are seen as mothers who sustain and nurture this world. Women have to fall in these two categories alone, they can either be a motherly figure who loves unconditionally or they are selfish, greedy, conniving, sinful deceivers and sexually immoral creatures. There is no third option. As goes the famous folk saying *Triya charitra na jane koye, Khasam mar ke sati hoye*, meaning 'no one can know the character of a woman, she can kill her husband and then mount his funeral pyre as a sati.' In this proverb, one can see the author's sheer exasperation in trying to ascertain the character of women. Commenting on a woman's character (sans her motherly nature or even it's potential) the author finds it devious and unpredictable, viewing the female gender with suspicion and contempt as if they are guilty until proven otherwise. Women are often battered, abused, violated and humiliated for no reason of theirs' but only to keep the woman-kind in check (Kakar 1989: 51). The Manusmriti mandates the complete control of women, as they are not considered fit for independence. 'A woman is under her father's control in her childhood, she is guarded in youth and by her son in her old age' It is the supreme duty of all husbands to exert total control over their wives. Even

physically weak husbands must strive to control their wives. If they are not controlled, then due to their inherent passion for men, immutable temper and natural heartlessness, they will not be loyal to their husbands and would start running after men like whores' (Doniger and Smith 1991: 197).

On one hand the Manusmriti regards women as sinful and deceptive beings, who should not be trusted and on the other hand she deserves all reverence for her maternal ability, actual or potential. 'Between wives who [are destined] to bear children, who secure many blessings, who are worthy of worship and irradiate [their] dwellings and between the goddess of fortune [who reside] in the houses [of men], there is no difference whatsoever' (Kakar 1989: 17).

Nevertheless, being born as a woman is considered payment for the bad karma of the previous birth. A woman's only redemption then lies in giving her all to her husband and his kin. A virtuous wife should constantly serve and obey her husband as god, even if he behaves badly or indulge in sexual immorality and sexual perversions, even if he lacks virtue and devoid of any good qualities (Doniger and Smith 1991: 115).

Similar is the popular myth from Mahabharata, where the goddess Uma lays down the guidelines of right conduct for wives described as the *Pativrata* which goes one step further and asks the wife to commit wrongs if asked by her husband, even if it is unrighteous or one that may lead to destruction of life itself. In other words, if a husband asks his wife to spend a night with someone, to pay a debt or kill someone, then the wife without any hesitation should accomplish the task. As for the wife, only her husband alone is her god and there are no other gods except him. Her only redemption is in serving her husband, by which she can enter heaven and be exalted and in bearing male children. As goes the famous blessings, like *Sada Suhangan Raho* (May you always be married) and *Sau Putravati bhava* (May you give birth to a hundred sons). They refer to the reason women were created, 'to bear children..' This shows that the only things required for a woman is being married and having male children (Kakar 1989: 67).

Apart from these, there are no other desired roles for a woman. All other aspects of a woman are viewed with suspicion or disdain. In several lores, woman is often depicted as the tempter, the seducer, the evil doer and the manifestation of pure evil. In the story of Menaka, she is depicted as the temptress trying to seduce Vishwamitra so that his meditation is broken. She is seen as the evil doer in this tale, though she was sent by Indra, a god, to distract, tempt and seduce Vishwamitra (Kakar 1989: 17).

Female gender has traditionally been viewed with suspicion and contempt. The quotes from Manusmriti, gives us a glimpse of the status of women in our society 'It is the nature of women to seduce men in this world; for that reason the wise are never unguarded in the company of females. Women, true to their class character, are capable of leading astray men in this world, not only a fool

but even a learned and wise man. Both become slaves of desire.’ These quotes give society, a divine sanction to ill-treat and mistrust women. Making them easy targets, they often get battered, abused, violated and humiliated at the hands of men while at the same time, maintaining the patriarchal status quo of society (Doniger and Smith 1991: 38).

Gender discrimination still thrives in India and its roots can be traced back to these folktales, myths, various folk proverbs and Manusmriti. The scriptures itself sanction gender discrimination, oppression and misogyny as divine providence. These ideologies are kept preserved and alive through folktales, myths and popular public proverbs, making them entities propagating gender discrimination, oppression and a misogynistic society. Our country's technological progress will not transform our society into one with egalitarian values, till we do not change our narratives.

References

- Ambedkar, B.R. (1990). Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches. Vol.-7. Pune: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra.
- Bouvier, S. (1949). *The Second Sex*. London: The Random House Group Ltd.
- Doniger, W. and B.K. Smith. (1991). *The Laws of Manu*. Gurgaon: Penguin Books India.
- Government of India [GoI]. (2015). *Crime in India: Statistics-2015*. National Crime Records Bureau. New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs.
- Harlan, L. (1992). *Religion and Rajput Women: The Ethic of Protection in Contemporary Narratives*. California: University of California Press.
- Irigaray, L. and Carlston, E.G. (1989). *The Language of Man*. *Cultural Critique*, 13:191-202.
- Kakar, S.(1989). *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality*. Delhi: Penguin Books India.
- Prime Minister of India [PMI]. (2015). *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao: Caring for the Girl Child*. January, 22. Accessed from http://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/government_tr_rec/beti-bachao-beti-padhao-caring-for-the-girl-child/ on September 14, 2017.
- Ramanujan, A.K. (1991). *Folktales from India*. Gurgaon: Penguin Books India.
- The World Bank. (2016). *Annual GDP Growth Rate*. Accessed from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG> on September 14, 2017.
- UN Women [UN]. (2014). *Sex Ratios and Gender Biased Sex Selection*. New Delhi: UN Women. Accessed from <http://india.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/SexRatiosandGBSS.pdf> on September 14, 2017.