

Revisionist Mythmaking in Varsha Adalja's *Mandodari*

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Abstract

The patriarchal and male-centred discourse of mythology has been a matter of concern for the revisionist feminist writers. Therefore, they revisit and re-read patriarchal myths and thus sensitively portray the awakened women protagonists, who through their resistance, and self assertion, deconstruct their “The Angel in the House”, victim or mute observer identity. Revision of myths is thus an attempt to erase the misinterpretation of female identity that the myths continue to provide and propagate.

This paper seeks to examine how the feminist revisionary framework in Varsha Adalja's *Mandodari* brings to light, the women protagonists' struggle, and capacity for intense ambition, freedom and anger, regarding which the epics are silent. Playwrights represent the protagonists as women of immense knowledge and intelligence, who seek their revenge from the patriarchal set-up, through exertion of personal will. Through this process of revision, the playwrights challenge and effectively deconstruct the mute-observer and *pativrata* image of the mythical women and help them establish and gain their own voice.

Keywords: Varsha Adalja, *Mandodari*, Feminist-Revisionist, Mythmaking

Research Objective

The Objective of the present study is to critically analyse the English translation of *Mandodari* by Varsha Adalja. The play depicts revisionist mythmaking which Indian playwrights have adopted to provide agency to the mythical women character, Mandodari, who has been rendered voiceless since ages.

Further, this paper aims to analyse how the redefining of the female protagonist's image lends more stage space to women and helps them demonstrate their ambition, power, self-reliance and resistance against the patriarchal mythological set-up. The play vehemently creates a character who defies dominant ideologies and resists the impositions, thus effectively deconstructing the voiceless-observer identity, which myths lend to her.

Introduction

Myths as the “primordial images” that human beings inherit from their collective unconsciousness have been regarded as a powerful tool by feminist critics who view it as a language of patriarchy to subjugate and marginalise women. Myths lend women, a constructed identity that holds her as weak, suppressed and inferior. Kate Millet in *On Lies, Secrets and Silences* observes: “Patriarchy has a still more tenacious or powerful hold through its successful habit of passing itself off as a nature”. Thus, Millet holds mythology as a system that reinforces superiority of man over woman.

Feminist re-vision has become a potent tool to revise the subjugated identity that myths lend to women, by reviewing the discrimination and suppression that women have experienced since ages.

Thus, the feminist writers have revisited myths to revise the strangle hold of Patriarchy, in an attempt to erase the misinterpretation of female identity that the myths continue to provide and propagate. The female characters in this revisionist process find their faded identity and a strong voice which had been long suppressed and subjugated.

The feminist revisionary framework in Varsha Adalja’s *Mandodari*, brings to light, Ravana’s wife, Mandodari’s struggle, capacity for intense ambition, freedom and anger, regarding which the epic *Ramayana* is silent. Adalja represents Mandodari, the daughter of demon Mayandev and *apsara* Hema, the queen of the King of Lanka, *asura* Ravana, as a woman of immense knowledge and intelligence, Ravana’s war strategist, well-versed in “saam, daam, dand, bheda¹” who in the end, intentionally brings about her own husband’s death. Through this process of revision, Adalja challenges and effectively deconstructs Mandodari’s mute-observer and *pativrata* image and helps her establish and gain her own voice.

The patriarchal and the male-centred discourse of the myths, sidelines the bravery, ambition and determination of the women by focussing entirely upon the valour and grit of the mythical heroes. “The message is clear: heroes are brave if they fight their enemies; heroines are brave if they sacrifice themselves²” Through the depiction of Mandodari as a woman of “extraordinary knowledge and understanding³”, Adalja attempts to view myths from the women-centred angle and to create a counter mythology, effectively deconstructing the traditional mythology that underestimates woman’s ability.

¹ Tutun Mukharjee, *Staging Resistance; Plays by women in translation*. Oxford University Press India (2005), (107).

² Shodhganga. *Chapter III Re-visionist Mythmaking*

<http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/40724/8/08-chapter3.pdf>

³ Tutun Mukharjee, *Staging Resistance; Plays by women in translation*. Oxford University Press India (2005), (107).

Mandodari, Draupadi, Seeta, Savitri and others are worshipped in the Hindu mythology as *pativrata* women, embodiments of wifely duties, obedient, ideal “angels in the house” with no voice of their own. Against this authoritative and patriarchal discourse of myth and its retellings, the play *Mandodari*, provides more stage space to Mandodari than *asura* Ravana, or Prince Rama. Contrary to the stereotypes of *demoness* or the ideal wife, Adalja presents a feminist ideal by highlighting the neglected traits of Mandodari’s personality, her strength, wisdom and strategy: “Saam daam dand bhed⁴” Against the earlier representations of Mandodari as a submissive, ideal and devoted wife, Adalja’s Mandodari is presented as a queen devoted to her Kingdom, asserting national *dharma*. As an attempt to save her Kingdom the *Lanka*, from the death and destruction that the battle between Rama and Ravana would lead to, she even recommends Seeta to submit to Ravana.

The play opens up with the God of death, Kaaldevata’s unalterable decision to destroy the golden Lanka as “the reign of Ravana and the power of his mighty Kingdom are over⁵” As a rebellion against Kaaldevata’s decision, Mandodari, in a tone of resistance proclaims, “Stop, O Kaaldevata. I invite you to accept my challenge, that your task will remain unfulfilled⁶”. Mandodari, as a supplement to her resistance, draws Kaaldevata’s attention towards the acts of resistance of other women, of extraordinary will and determination.

I remember that Anusuya too was an ordinary woman, but she stopped the sun from rising! And yes, you were forced to return Satyavan to life because of Savitri; she too was an ordinary woman⁷.

Demonstrating her wisdom and immense knowledge Mandodari reminds Kaaldevata that it is she who has “invented a game that can be played with pawns⁸”. Unlike the submissive Mandodari of the *Ramayana*, Adalja’s Mandodari is presented as Ravana’s war strategist. Mandodari warns Kaaldevata “You may not know that I have helped Ravana’s war strategy... I have devised this game with such designs in mind⁹”.

Ravana’s declaration of Seeta’s kidnapping in the guise of a *sadhu*, as an act of valour, invites Mandodari’s condemnation. She strongly disapproves with his decision and avers:

O lord, what have you done? Abducted Devi Seeta? That is impossible. Who does not know of Lord Rama’s valour? It is easier to snatch the gem from Vasuki, the king of snakes, than Seeta from Rama. This is impossible...what shall I say?¹⁰

⁴ Ibid.,107

⁵ Ibid.,101

⁶ Ibid.,102

⁷ Ibid.,102

⁸ Ibid.,102

⁹ Ibid.,102

¹⁰ Ibid.,102

Adalja effectively deconstructs the *pativrata*, the ideal housewife image of mythical Mandodari as she lends her strong disapproval to Ravana's actions; "Kidnapping a helpless woman cannot be an act of valour. I do not see any bravery in it"¹¹. Ravana's abduction of Seeta is in fact Kaaldevata's first move to bring Ravana closer to death. In her reply to Kaaldevata's first move, and his advice to accept defeat, Mandodari, unlike the *pativrata* ideal, pressurizes Ravana to give up his lust, and his desire for infinite power; "Please listen to me O Dashanana. Return Seeta to Rama immediately and seek pardon from the kind-hearted Rama"¹². Making him confront his error in evaluating Seeta, Mandodari reminds Ravana of his defeat at Seeta's *Swayambara*, "This is the same Seeta who used to play with Mahadev's bow that you could not lift, remember? Do you think she is an ordinary woman"¹³? She warns Ravana that "kingdoms built on oppression and exploitation never last" and makes an appeal to return Seeta as "a woman is not an object to be used to settle neither enmity nor a victim of lust"¹⁴.

Kaaldevata's counter move, resulting from Ravana's futile attempts to convince Seeta to succumb to his advances, involves sending Jatayu to inform Rama about Seeta's abduction, and setting up of entire Lanka in flames by Hanuman. Mandodari remains unperturbed and asserts her intelligence and genealogy and refuses to accept defeat:

I am the daughter of legendry Mayandev and an *apsara*. I am Ravana's wife and also his war strategist. I am well versed in *Saam, Daam, Dand, and Bhed*. I can put these to use too. This time I shall surely be successful with my moves, you will see¹⁵.

It is through Mandodari, that Ravana is reminded of his defeat by Shahasrabahu and Bali raja. Unable to convince Ravana, Mandodari, as her next move, sends Bhibisana as an emissary, in order to persuade Ravana to free Seeta to maintain the kingdoms "Safety, prosperity, unity morality"¹⁶.

In her last move, Adalja presents Mandodari, making herself the pawn, and persuading Seeta, to surrender before Ravana, in order to save the kingdom from death and destruction. She avers, "If Ravana gets you, he will not fight, and many lives will be saved. Surrender to Ravana Seeta and stop this war. This is the only way to the war, Seeta"¹⁷. Mandodari becomes Adalja's mouthpiece to target Hindu Patriarchal society and the prevalent gender oppression in it when, in response to Seeta's question if women were not respected in *asura* culture, Mandodari responds,

¹¹ Ibid.,103

¹² Ibid.,104

¹³ Ibid.,104

¹⁴ Ibid.,105

¹⁵ Ibid.,105

¹⁶ Ibid.,108

¹⁷ Ibid.,110

O, Seeta, the daughter-in-law of the Suryavamshis, don't you think that there is ambiguity in the treatment of woman as goddesses? When the victorious kings confiscate kingdoms, don't they also take the woman folk of the defeated kings? The gods keep *apsaras* for enjoyment. Your father-in-law has several queens¹⁸.

Adalja represents Mandodari in complete contrast to Seeta. Whereas Seeta embodies the typical Sati ideal, Mandodari epitomizes, strength, power and wisdom that woman possess. Criticizing the patriarchal authority in Seeta's remark, "I worship Rama as a Sati¹⁹", Adalja, through Mandodari, raises a valid argument, questioning the patriarchal setup, "Sati? Does woman become a Sati by washing the feet of her husband? No, Janaki, Sati is the one who follows the path of truth²⁰".

Adalja emphasizes woman's self-reliance and construction of a self-identity through the episode where Mandodari serves coconut, covered in a basket, to Seeta, claiming it to be Rama's head. She pinpoints the self-identity that Seeta lacks, when just at the suggestion of her husband's death, Seeta breaks down, despairing and broken-hearted. A "Hope for humanity is seen in Mandodari's plea: "All these people scattered in different fractions, forever fighting each other, could be united and could at last live happily in one kingdom under one emperor²¹".

In the final confrontation of Mandodari, with her inner voice, she introspects if she was jealous of Seeta and conceals the thoughts of killing her. Adalja's play provides a "spacious agency to women by casting them as the moral guardians of both the private and the public sphere²²" Mandodari examines her fate-become Seeta's attendant if Ravana wins the war or become a Sati, a madwoman or even Bibhisana's wife, if Ravana loses in the battlefield.

After the quick review of the events that ultimately lead to Ravana's death, Adalja highlights the feminist overtones of the play, when in response to Kaaldevata's declaration of Mandodari as "great Sati²³" she sarcastically admits that "You have lost the game and I have won²⁴". She brings to light, her "agony of being the wife of such a lustful yet blind man²⁵?" and admits that;

¹⁸ Ibid.,110

¹⁹ Ibid.,110

²⁰ Ibid.,110

²¹ Ibid.,111

²² Shodhganga. *Chapter III Re-visionist Mythmaking*

<http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/40724/8/08-chapter3.pdf>

²³ Tutun Mukharjee, *Staging Resistance; Plays by women in translation*. Oxford University Press India,(2005), (114).

²⁴ Ibid.,114

²⁵ Ibid.,114

Through Seeta's abduction and ensuring the war, I sought redemption of my clan. The arrow that killed Ravana actually released his soul and gave the egoistic man his salvation. Though I am widow now, I am a happy woman. I have succeeded in what I set out to do, ha ha ha²⁶".

By speeding Ravana's death, making herself the reason of it, Mandodari deconstructs the self-sacrificing image of the mythical women. Adalja's Mandodari is the exact anti-thesis of Seeta who accompanied her husband through exile and Savitri, who pleaded the gods to bring Satyavan back to life. For Adalja, "...revising myth is about stripping new ways of interrogating them²⁷".

Towards the end of the play, Adalja effectively highlights Mandodari's Nationalist element. Sushila vijaykumar in her paper notes that to avoid war, eradicate death and destruction, she suppresses her familial ties, her inner emotions, and emphasizing the outer rational world of public values of citizenship. She laments the loss of her country, her loved ones, and becomes the "mouthpiece of all wives and mothers suffering from the battles that men fight to satisfy their greed and their egoistic pursuits of love and lust²⁸". She laments:

War! Why do wars happen? What do they achieve? The annals of time record, many civilisations have been wiped out by these wars. How long will innocent people continue to be the victims of needless violence? ... Why should women be left behind to lament their loss²⁹?

Although the play follows the structure of the epic, but Mandodari's manipulation of Kaaldevata ultimately leading Ravana to his death, is a representation of the feminist overtones of the writer. Deconstructing completely the *pativrata* ideal, the play highlights the suppressed and marginalised identity that myths lend to women and effectively reconstructs Mandodari as a woman of immense knowledge, strength and wisdom. Mandodari's choice of *Rashtradharma* over *patnidharma* highlights the feminist and the nationalist vision of the playwright. Mandodari challenges Kaaldevata and redefines the traditional description of wisdom and bravery, prescribed the patriarchal society. In this context, Shreyasee Dutta holds:

Modern Mandodari left her mythic submissive counterpart behind and takes a step ahead towards liberation from puppet-hood. Deviating from the conventional tracks of stereotyping and generalising the image of woman, Varsha Adalja attempts to project women in their own consciousness. Disavowing the gender masquerade, diligently observed in every community,

²⁶ Ibid.,114

²⁷ Shodhganga. Chapter III Re-visionist Mythmaking
<http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/40724/8/08-chapter3.pdf>

²⁸ Ibid.,236

²⁹ Ibid.,237

she further attempts to empower the long suppressed and sharply marginalised women by giving her voice, sovereignty, individuality, altogether her agency. The effort to deconstruct the patriarchal metaphysics recently has accumulated a vast new mass of testimony, of new comprehension as to what it is to be female³⁰”

In the hands of Adalja, Mandodari, an eponymous character from the *Ramayana*, becomes the mouth-piece of all wives and mothers who suffer the consequences of the battles that men fight to gratify their “egoistic pursuits of love and lust”. In the hovering clouds of war, Mandodari’s choice of her kingdom over her wifely duties brings to light the strength, ambition and determination in her character that the epic fails to highlight. Presenting Mandodari as a complete contrast to Seeta, an epitome of wifely duties, Adalja emphasises the construction of a self-identity and self-reliance.

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