Feminizing Myths, Re-writing Identity: Assessing the Deconstructive Potential of Smita Agarwal's 'Lopamudra', Revathy Gopal's 'Yashodhara II' and Sampurna Chatterjee's 'Conversation'

Basudhara Roy

> "The transfer of political power from oppressor to oppressed brings in its wake the appropriation and reworking of mythological material. As new governments rewrite their people's history, so too do their novelists and poets recover and re-vision the cultural identity embedded in their people's myths." (Chait 17)

> "Women live their social existence within the general culture and, whenever they are confined by patriarchal restraint or segregation into separateness (which always has subordination as its purpose), they transform this restraint into complementarity (asserting the importance of woman's function, even its 'superiority') and redefine it. Thus, women live a duality – as members of the general culture and as partakers of women's culture." (Lerner 52)

The fostering and perpetuation of a 'women's culture' outside the regulation of patriarchy has, for long, been a fundamental agenda within feminist thinking. Taking their cue from the deconstructionists and the postcolonial critics, feminists have learnt to read into the constructed-ness of all discourses propagated by a hegemonic male culture and recognized the necessity of questioning, subverting, dismantling and often re-scripting them in order to create an independent, self-defined space for themselves within history. The target of the feminist movement since the 1980s has been to psychologically empower women who, so far, had been devalued within the hierarchies and historical annals of patriarchy by re-membering their constructed images and perpetuating empowered versions of female identity in order to counteract the patriarchally-transmitted cultural memory of women's subordination and subservience. In the Indian context, feminism has had far greater to contend with in the shape of a complexly ambiguous mythological machinery that has been wielded by a patriarchal culture to scripturally, and therefore, unalterably and unquestionably entrench Indian female identity within a canon of stereotypes – Savitri, Sita, Draupadi, Ahilya – all of whom are looked upon as symbolizing the female strength that is finally conducive to patriarchal cultural values. In recent years, there has been an extensive re-reading of the Vedic texts, scriptures and mythologies by feminist scholars and varied shades of interpretation have emerged that challenge the general notion of an 'Indian womanhood' as characterized by weakness, docility, passivity and sexual coyness. There has been a deconstruction of the patriarchal interpretation of these stories and their recreation in the light of a new set of values, thereby making an attempt at what Mary Louise Pratt calls 'transculturation'. Pratt states that ethnographers have used this term to describe "how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture." (Pratt 6) Such transculturation becomes then, not merely an epistemological and academic but a political act, necessary in order to revision history and to build an empowered cultural memory for Indian women.

Myth, states Allen W. Watts, is "a complex of stories – some no doubt fact, and some fantasy- which, for various reasons human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life." (Watts 7) Claude Levi-Strauss looks upon myths as repositories of the collective values and aspirations of a culture and yet unequivocally warns us about the thin line between mythology and history:

> "…the simple opposition between mythology and history which we are accustomed to make – is not at all a clear-cut one…. Mythology is static, we find the same mythical elements combined over and over again, but they are in a closed system, let us say, in contradistinction with history, which is, of course, an open system. … When we try to do scientific history, do we really do something scientific, or do we too remain astride our own mythology in what we are trying to make as pure history?" (Levi-Strauss 40-1)

There is inherent danger in passing off mythological facts as history for as Strauss points out, the function of mythology in primitive societies was "to ensure that as closely as possible – complete closeness is obviously impossible – the future will remain faithful to the present and to the past." (Levi-Strauss 43) As modern societies, however, we crave futures that are both different from and an advance on the past and present. The machinery of mythology, therefore, must be constantly reworked and subject to re-assessment so that the changing present may find its reflection in the culture's storehouse of myths. That myths do not embody universal ideas or ideal standards of behavior is clear from their localized identities. Further, the anonymity as regards the origin of these myths leads us to put forth certain questions – Who creates myths? Whose culture do these myths propagate? Whose values do they uphold? The answer, indubitably, is that the dominant group orders, selects, remembers and forgets material from the past to script a mythology conducive to the maintenance of its own superiority and status quo. Much of Indian mainstream mythology, therefore, bears the stamp of an aggressive patriarchal culture within which the woman is either trophy or vassal and in either ways, a subject to control and ownership. As Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith assert, "What a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender." (Hirsch & Smith 6) An urgent re-reading and feminization of such mythological material thus helps in establishing an alternate cultural framework within which women are no more subalterned or silenced but speak out against their historical and religious representation in patriarchally pre-determined terms. It is precisely this angle of feminist engagement in the three selected poems that the present paper seeks to explore. The poets in all three cases are women who attempt to look upon the various mythical stories of their culture from startlingly independent viewpoints and to thereby subvert patriarchally-transmitted interpretations of them. Smita Agarwal's *Lopamudra*, Revathy Gopal's *Yashodhara II* and Sampurna Chatterjee's *Conversation* – all part of the E.V. Ramakrishnan and Anju Makhija edited volume *We Speak in Changing Languages Indian Women Poets 1990-2007*, voice well-known episodes from the scriptures from the core of experiential female understanding, thereby imparting to them dimensions hitherto unexplored.

Smita Agarwal's poem *Lopamudra* is a monologue by the mesmerizingly beautiful legendary maiden Lopamudra who was believed to have been created by sage Agastya from the most beautiful parts of various animals and later on married to

him in order to further his lineage and save his ancestors from hell fire. In the *Mahabharata* we are told that Agastya, the ascetic, did not wish to exert his energies in marriage and family, using all his physical and spiritual energies instead to generate *tapa* in the forest. But he was troubled by the vision of his *pitr* or forefathers suffering from the ceaseless cycle of birth and rebirth in the land of *Put* beyond the borders of life:

> Produce children and help us be reborn. If you don't we are doomed to oblivion with no chance of entering the land of the living, no chance of interacting with *samsara*, no chance of discovering our true identity, no chance of being released from the cycle of rebirths. You owe your life to us. Now repay the debt by giving us life. (Mahabharata) (Pattanaik 77)

It is in order to fulfill this responsibility that Agastya creates Lopamudra so that she may stimulate his senses and spur a sexual union which might grant them children and ensure thereby, the liberation of his ancestors. Within the framework of Hinduism, it is this concept of *Put* which makes procreation an integral moral responsibility within the institution of marriage, thus defining sexuality in almost exclusively religious and social terms. In *Lopamudra*, however, the proud and insistent feminist voice of this mythical beauty registers a loud protest against such suppression of her natural biological self in opposition to her patriarchally-ordained religious worth. The poem is replete with erotic imagery and innuendoes which express Lopamudra's sexual vitality, her craving for physical affection from her husband and her outright dismissal of all his asceticism and penance as dry and worthless in the absence of an all-consuming sexual fire. By stressing on the woman's animal charms, her full-blooded passion and her desire for physical intimacy as overriding the functional need for reproduction, the poem subverts the patriarchal concept of female sexuality as inert, secondary and functional. Roger Horrocks, in pointing out the socially-stereotyped difference between male and female sexuality, points out, "Male sexuality is conceived according to the norms of masculinity, constructed as 'mastery', 'domination', 'activity', and so on; female sexuality is seen as akin to femininity, understood as 'passivity', 'masochism', 'docility' and so on." (Horrocks 132) Elizabeth Grosz reiterates the same idea when she writes, "Women's bodies and sexualities have been constructed and lived in terms that not only differentiate them from men's but also attempt, not always or even usually entirely successfully, to position them in a relation of passive independence and secondariness to men's." (Grosz 202)

The poem is a direct and unambiguous statement of a woman's passion that desires satisfaction in its own right and reveals the duality that underlines patriarchal thinking about female sexuality. While on the one hand, the enchanting beauty of Lopamudra was created so that it could propel the ascetic Agastya to physical love and lead to the advancement of progeny and the salvation of his dead ancestors, on the other hand, the patriarchal idea of reproduction denies and refuses to acknowledge the potency and vitality of this female sexuality which is to be an instrument of reproduction. In the poem, *Lopamudra*, Agarwal refuses to let her heroine be a mere instrument for the furtherance of Agastya's lineage. Agarwal's Lopamudra is a self-conscious *femme-fatale* drawing attention to her physical charms and fearlessly asserting her right to demand sexual satisfaction in her marital life:

> …you created me – fashioned me/out of the most graceful

parts of different animals…/The exact complement to

your moments of lust?/ Now, when I purr,

like a lioness in heat,/you turn away. (Eds. Ramakrishnan & Makhija 30)

Full of the thirst to participate in the sheer vitality of life and procreation, she equates asceticism to lifelessness and passivity and insists that her husband revitalize himself by partaking of *soma*, the eternal drink that flows through the heart of nature. The poem contrasts Agastya's quest for knowledge, salvation and immortality through celibacy as isolated from and dead to the vibrant pulsations of the physical world all around him. The poet, in her last stanza conjures a boldly sexualized female vision of the natural world:

…the Earth-Woman

having parted her thighs, and, from the cleft within

gushing out, a stream of

immortalizing *soma*… (Eds. Ramakrishnan & Makhija 31)

This natural world symbolized as the 'Earth-Woman' is dominated by the life principle of love and physical passion and one in which the ascetic, renunciant male stands out as anomalous and the 'other'.

Similar in spirit is Revathy Gopal's poem *Yashodhara II* in which the deserted wife of Lord Buddha questions the overwhelming male desire for a salvation away from the flurry, cares, responsibilities, affection and warmth of domestic and social life. The poem puts forth through the voice of Yashodhara, the idea that the Buddha who was deified in the eyes of the world for his great renunciation was only a common man, running away like all men from a domestic life weighed down with the duties of a parent and a householder. It subverts the concept of salvation itself, looking upon it as a patriarchal epithet masking male aversion to and willful abdication of the responsibilities and duties of mundane everyday living. Yashodhara discounts the wisdom that was attained by her husband after several years of the strictest penance and looks upon his renunciation as being spurred solely by her perhaps-unplanned maternity – the suddenly added responsibilities of parenthood, the loss of her physical beauty, the loss of the wife and the birth of the mother.

What was it then,/the usual male revulsion/at what you had wrought

Gross inconsequence/of a moment's pleasure?...What was it then,

Amplitude of flesh,/or my nerve-shredding cry/or the child's pitiful wail? (Eds. Ramakrishnan & Makhija 119)

The ascetic's quest, urges Gopal, holds no meaning for the woman wrapped up in the active world of everyday, for rejection of life and its intimate relationships are to her, beyond the borders of humanity:

We prefer the pain/of being human,/the bonds of attachment/that you flee.

We prefer the endless cycle/of birth and death/ to your inhuman

And unavailing quest. (Eds. Ramakrishnan & Makhija 119)

The poem ends with a significant play on the word 'deliverance'. Yashodhara states that what her husband attained was not salvation but riddance from all the domestic worries and responsibilities that a woman can never bring herself to neglect,

let alone abdicate. It could not be called deliverance for there was actually nothing in this world to seek deliverance from: "Deliverance from what?/ What else is there/ but to be human?" (Eds. Ramakrishnan & Makhija 120) The poem, thus, very powerfully makes way for the lodging of the mini-narrative of the workaday female life and domestic experience in historical memory alongside the so-called grand narrative of the male hero's spiritual achievement, pointing out persistently that the male god-seeker's rites-of-passage of renunciation, spiritual victory and deification, hold no meaning for the woman whose quest lies in the celebration of her everyday life and humanity.

Sampurna Chatterjee's poem *Conversation* similarly presents a re-reading of the Gandhari-Dhritarashtra relationship in the *Mahabharata* in radical feminist terms. It is well-known that Dhritarashtra, the father of the Kauravas was born blind because his mother Ambika, terrified by the dreadful and forbidding appearance of her brother-in-law Vyasa who was ordered by his mother to grant a son to the wife of his dead brother, kept her eyes closed during the sexual act. Chatterjee in the poem subtly questions Gandhari whether her decision to willfully blindfold herself and be devoid of vision for the rest of her life was prompted by her idealized wifely love and fidelity for a dearly-loved husband or by her sheer hatred of and physical repulsion towards the man that she had been unwillingly forced to marry. A true and honest love for her husband, the poet urges, should have led her to share her sight with him, to be his eyes – both physical and moral, but instead of that she had offered him a grating companionship in self-willed darkness:

> What made you, Gandhari,/ put out the light/ that was your right
>
> He could have seen through you….
>
> Instead of this implacable love,/ you should have given him sight. (Eds. Ramakrishnan & Makhija 88)

Could it possibly be so because, like her mother-in-law, she too found her husband revolting and blindfolded herself to make life and love with him more endurable?

"Did he seem more demon than lover to you?" (Eds. Ramakrishnan & Makhija 88)

Her hundred sons, testimony to her innumerable and distasteful conjugations with Dhritarashtra have been begot not out of love but a deep seething hatred while her husband, proud father of his hundred sons, looks upon her as her faithful friend and guide. The poem describes Dhritarashtra as "twice doomed to darkness" (Eds. Ramakrishnan & Makhija 89) – as being blind both physically and in his psychological understanding of Gandhari's character, subverting thus, the patriarchally-transmitted description of Gandhari as the dutiful, sacrificing wife and portraying her as an independent woman who exploits the norms of the dominant culture to suit herself. She cannot break free from the obligations that the institution of marriage has chained her to, but if control over her body and life has to be granted unwillingly, it has to be done by metaphorically and literally embracing darkness, nothingness, a state bordering almost on lifelessness.

These different poems thus present alternative feminist views of the various myths that frame Indian religious and moral discourse and, through them, put forth images of women that counteract accepted patriarchal versions of their character and identity. By giving a voice to these silenced mythical women and re-constructing their stories

from their own points of view, these poems attempt at re-visioning the past and re-scripting an empowered cultural memory for Indian womanhood. Luce Irigaray in her attack on patriarchy, blames it for its exploitation of the constructed gender of womanhood stating that it creates "a culture feeding off the earth and useful matter, simply to draw apart from them without paying its debts… in the name of a heaven that is simply a construct to overcome the chthonic order." (Irigaray 27) If this exploitation has to come to an end, women and womanhood need to be redefined and re-constructed in terms that empower the woman not just socially and economically but also historically and culturally. It is only when the past is re-visited and re-written, when the patriarchal structures of domination and control are broken down, when our myths are feminized and our mythological women speak rather than being spoken for, that a hopeful feminist future can be looked forward to.

Works Cited

Chait, Sandra. "Mythology, Magic Realism, and White Writing After Apartheid". *Research in African Literatures* 31.2, 2000. Print.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. Print.

Hirsch Marianne, and Valerie Smith. "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction". 'Gender and Cultural Memory', special issue of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28:1, 2002. Print.

Horrocks, Roger. *An Introduction to the Study of Sexuality*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997. Print.

Irigaray, Luce. *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*. Trans. Alison Martin. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Lerner, Gerda. *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. Print.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Myth and Meaning*. USA: Schocken Books, 1979. Print.

Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Myth=Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*. India: Penguin Books, 2006. Print.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London & New York : Routledge, 1997. Print.

Ramakrishnan E.V. and Anju Makhija eds. *We Speak in Changing Languages: Indian Women Poets 1990-2007*. New Delhi : Sahitya Akademi, 2010. Print.

Watts, Allen W. *Myth and Ritual in Christianity*. London: Thames and Hudson; 1954. Print.