PORTRAYAL OF SITA AND HELEN IN INDIAN AND GREEK MYTHOLOGY: A COMPARISON

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Abstract: This essay is mostly built on a scaled comparison of Sita and Helen, two outstanding female characters from mythology. It seeks to explain how women were portrayed in Eastern and Western tradition using popular female characters from the Indian epic 'Ramayana' and Greek epic 'Iliad',' Helen of Troy' and 'Sita'. Despite coming from very different literary and cultural traditions, the Iliad and the Ramayana share the same plot. The significance of mythology and how feminist characters are given the touch of feminism are covered in the first section of the paper. The second part of the paper addresses how Sita and Helen are used in literature and how fresh plot lines give these characters new life. People from both the cultures have idealized versions of these two figures. While Helen, who was the pinnacle of beauty, was also revered as Dendritis (the tree Goddess) and had a temple in Rhodes, Sita is revered as a Goddess in India and is worshiped in India. The focus of this paper is on similarities and differences between these two people. Despite the fact that they all have separate languages and religions, they have amazingly similar myths with the same themes, motifs and characteristics.

Keywords: Mythology, Feminism, Ramayana, Iliad.

Objective:

The main objective of this paper is to compare two female characters from Indian and Greek mythology- Sita and Helen. To show their strength and weakness and how patriarchal society has victimized them. It also shows how these two popular characters are presented in new form with different storyline.

Introduction

Sita or Helen- who do you prefer? These two are the one of the most undaunted female characters we have come across. The fact that these two characters comes from two different regions of the world; one was written in Indian context and other was Greek. These are characters from ancient mythology that holds a great importance in their respective culture. Mythology reflects societal organizations, cultural norms, and prehistoric beliefs. Despite living in distinct civilizations and using different languages, there are amazingly striking parallels in their mythologies and themes. Sanskrit language was used to write the Ramayana, which was done around 300 BC, while Iliad and Odyssey were written in Homeric Greek in late 8th century. These two epics can be compared since their ancestors might have experienced the same thing or travelled to a different place. Homer frequently compares the Ramayana with the Iliad since they share a similar plot. The "heroine" of the play was the primary cause of the conflict in both storylines. Hindu mythology depicts women as traditional "*pativratas*" and calls for submission to their obligations as a wife and daughter-in-law, just as Sita. Whereas Helen on the other hand, violated gender roles in the Greek epic because of her aggressive sexuality and lack of parenting responsibilities. One was a devout wife named Sita, and the other was a less devout wife named Helen. This essay also deals with how women are portrayed in literature with fresh plot lines.

Literary Review

The role of Sita is one of the most influential characters of mythology. She is idealized by most of the women in India whereas Helen of Troy is a woman who is sometimes applauded and sometimes doomed for being sexually active. 'Sita Warrior of Mithila' by Amish Tripathi serves as the best example of how Sita is introduced to us but with a fresh plot. Here she is more empowered version of herself as she has gained the knowledge of different subjects and has learnt martial arts. She is made the Prime Minister of Mithila and is financially stable which was not the case in mythology. She is shown as the hero or a warrior which definitely is something which today's generation women would relate to. In current times women have become financial stable. Anita Desai has portrayed a new form of Sita in her work "Where Shall We Go This Summer?" In which the main character Sita is pregnant does not want to deliver her fifth child because of her surrounding environment. She does not want her child to be spoiled in the doom of luxury. She was bored for her hectic, fast and modern lifestyle and needs some time to spend with nature. She decides to go to the island of Manori and was mesmerized by the scenic beauty. She relived her childhood days. At the end she goes back to city with her husband. In the original epic Sita was shown as someone who is deeply connected with nature. She uses to spend most of her time in the lap of nature and knew everything about it that's why she was known as '*Bhumija*' which was not the case here in Anita Desai's novel. The character of Helen of Troy appears in Homer's Iliad. The story of Helen is

fascinated and criticized for ages. Is it the war that grabs the attention of the readers or the fascinating beauty of Helen? Helen of Troy has been damned for being sexually active and accused of being unfaithful to her husband but what if her husband did the same thing? It would be considered as a "Love Story" and praised by all, but here Helen is accused of being unfaithful and doesn't have the right to raise her voice against it. Was she abducted and raped by Paris or she was an adulteress is still unknown. In 'Nobody's Princess' by Esther Fisher, he presents us an undaunted, powerful and strong headed woman who wants to learn to fight and wants to go on adventure. She just does not want to be epitome of beauty but also courage. She learns to fight with bow and arrow and sword. She wants to make different choices which stereotypical women do not make. She wants freedom of making her own decision and living life on her own terms. All these qualities were not inculcated in the character of Helen in Greek mythology. Here Sita and Helen are portrayed through different angles of them to the reader according to the modern thinking. Authors tried to make both the female characters 'Hero' of the story which was not done earlier.

How are women portrayed in Mythology:

Mythology is the study of myth. Myth plays a vital role in any culture; it helps us to understand how their civilization came into existence. The word 'mythology' is derived from the Greek word "Mythos" which means story of people and "logos" for word or speech. It tells us about the tales of our ancestors and origin of the world, humans, Gods, supernatural beings etc. The stories of Hindu mythology teach us moral and ethical values. Women were always portrayed in stereotypical role of wife, daughter and daughter-in- law, mother, sister and their blind obedience towards the duties of these roles. Women have never been portrayed as an individual or rather powerful individual in mythological stories. There are five *pativratas* in Hindu mythology - *Ahalya, Sita, Draupadi, Tara and Mandodari*. Out of which Sita is idealized the most in today's times also. Women characters were either ideal or negative. Women have often been seen as representative of life, growth, and fertility. Many of the female figures in Indian mythology are associated with these themes, making them particularly important in the context of the mythology. Additionally, women in Indian mythology often possess powerful qualities such as strength, sacrifice and determination, whereas in Greek mythology women were portrayed as deceitful, manipulative and responsible for downfall of men. They were also the victims of male dominance and patriarchal society. They were not given freedom of choice and were only a tool for seducing a man. Women were always subordinate to men. Helen King says "For Greeks, women is a necessary Evil, an evil because she is undisciplined and licentious, lacking the self- control of which men are capable, yet not necessary to society as constructed by men, in order to reproduce it." He explained why women were always given the duty of household and men were in charge of other works. In household women are easily molded by men to be obedient, submissive and subordinate to them. Some women were portrayed as Goddesses like Helen of Troy, Aphrodite etc. Women in mythology become who they are because of the situations they were put in by the patriarchal society and dominance of patriarchs in their lives. Women in Greek mythology are described as jealous and cunning creatures who plot against Gods and human beings. Female goddesses are described as the products of the male deities who support the survival of men. She is considered unfaithful as she has an active sexual life. In Indian mythology there is mention of unfaithful women who are active in their sexual life,

such women are punished and discarded by the society. Surpanaka, sister of Ravana is one such character whose nose is cut off due to her feelings for Rama. The goddesses in Hindu mythology are epitome of Chastity, the three Goddess who are considered as sacred are Saraswati, Durga and Lakshmi. In any mythology we can find stories of Goddesses that are punished by their male patriarchs.

Similarities between Sita and Helen of Troy:

The two most famous figures of Hindu and Greek mythology are Sita and Helen of Troy. These two are the most idealized characters in their civilization. Feminism plays an important role in Indian mythology by helping to subvert traditional gender roles and promote gender equality. Feminism can help to highlight the importance of female characters and narratives in Indian mythology, which can be important in breaking down traditional gender stereotypes. There are a few similarities between Helen of Troy and Sita, both the female characters. Both 'Ramayana' and 'Iliad' are epic stories that are based on the life of a legendary figure. Both stories are quite long, and are filled with action, adventure, and romance, both stories are considered to be religious in nature. Sita is one of the most popular and important characters in the Hindu epic Ramayana. She is known for her extreme dedication, strength, and sacrifice. she is an integral part of the Indian women psyche. Helen was considered the most beautiful woman in the world, and as a result, she was pursued by many men. She was eventually abducted by Paris, who took her to Troy. This started the Trojan War, which lasted for 10 years. Helen was too obsessed with external appearances. Helen of Troy is an integral part of the women psyche in different ways depending on the individual. Some women may look up to her as a symbol of beauty and femininity, while others may see her as a cautionary tale of the dangers of being too consumed by outer appearance.

They are both considered to be archetypal female characters in their respective works. Firstly, they are both considered to be symbols of female strength and power, victims of betrayal and violence. Sita was adopted daughter of King Janaka and Sunayana, she was not born from her mother's womb but she appeared in a furrow when King Janaka was ploughing the field. She emerged from Mother Earth. While Helen of Troy was the daughter of Zeus, who disguised himself as goose and raped Nemesis (Goddess, who didn't wish to mate with Zeus so she changed her shaped into goose). Helen was born from an egg which was produced by Nemesis. Both Sita and Helen were not born from their mother's womb. Sita got married to Rama who was prince of Ayodhya, while Helen of Troy was married to King Menelaus of Sparta. While Sita was *'Pativrata'* and was very loyal to her husband and also accompanied him in his exile, Helen of Troy was seduced by Paris and later carried off to Troy. Even Sita was abducted/ carried off by Ravana, the King of Lanka but she was not seduced by Ravana. In reality it was not Sita who was carried away but her shadow, whom Ravana considered as Sita and abducted her. In the same way Helen of Troy was not carried off by Paris but her phantom was carried to Paris. Another common point between these two figures was that because of Sita and Helen of Troy there was a major war in these two epics. In Ramayana Rama waged a war against Ravana as he abducted Sita, whereas in Iliad *'Trojan War'* was waged by King Menelaus to find Helen, who was abducted by Paris. Sita and Helen both have temples in their respective culture. Both were considered as an epitome of beauty.

Apart from similarities they were some differences between them. During the time of abduction Paris raped Helen while Ravana could not even touch Sita. Sita was being sent to live in forest after returning from Lanka as she was considered unchaste and at last Sita requested Mother Earth to take her and free herself from these allegations of unchastity, while Helen blamed Goddess Aphrodite for her seduction by Paris and was hanged by the *Rhodian Queen of Polyox*, in revenge for her dead husband. While Sita was loyal to her husband, Helen at the same time was unfaithful to her husband. Ramayana was written in 5th century while Iliad was written in 8th century. In this way though these epics were written during different time periods, by different authors but the way of portraying women was the same; their story line was the same. These two had quite a few things similar and dissimilar between them.

Observation

This paper tells us about how females were portrayed as submissive and naive, stereotypical roles of housewives. The two great epics 'Ramayana' and 'Iliad' are examples of how society prevails as 'patriarchal' and not as '*matriarchal'*. Men have always been at the center of the social system and women are considered as subordinates. In ancient times women were only confide to the four walls of the house. Though she was called a Goddess she was not empowered. She was not given the power to make her own decision and if she would make a bold decision, she was termed as characterless. Men have the freedom to talk about their sexual desire openly but women cannot. Times have changed women now are financially independent and can make their own decision. They are not only '*Pativratas*' but also handles big business. Respect and love and have not changed just showing what a true Goddess can do. It is good that women in India are seen as Goddess, a mother, sister, wife, teacher but they should also be seen as an individual and as normal human being. Though Sita is worshipped for her love and sacrifice for Lord Rama but she should be seen as an individual, capable of taking her own decision. Why should only women sacrifice, why not males? Women and Men both are strong individuals and both should have equal number of duties, rights, compromise, love, respect and sacrifice. Helen should have been vocal about her sexual desire just as men. Helen should have made bold decision in order to live her life. Women are not just symbol of fertility, sacrifice, spirituality but also strength, power, courage. They should have proper education and should know how to fight for herself which Sita and Helen did not have. If they would know how to fight with sword and arrow they could have fought against the villains.

Conclusion

This paper mainly deals with the comparison of two phenomenal female figures of mythology - Sita and Helen of Troy. Sita and Helen both are epitomes of beauty and strength. They both were the victims of male dominance and patriarchal society. Both these figures have great importance in the lives of people as they both were revered and worshipped in their own culture. Sita is considered as *'Sita Maa'* in Indian Culture. She is known for her sacrifice, courage, and purity. She also refers to the goddess of agricultural fertility. Some view' Sita as '*Pativrata'* while some view her as a victim. Same applies for Helen of Troy Some view her as a sexually active woman while some view her as a victim of abduction. Sita and Helen both are very strong mythological characters and definitely more research should be conducted on them. There has not been any research yet

conducted on comparison between these two. More detailed research should be conducted on this topic to understand two strong feminine personality. A whole thesis should be conducted on the in dept comparison of their personality, circumstance and other factors of their life.

Choose wisely who you want to be Sita or Helen!

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