



SEVEN FACES OF THE DEVI: STUDYING HINDU MYTHOLOGIES VIS-À-VIS THE WOMAN QUESTION

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Abstract: ‘The woman question’ is an umbrella term used for the theoretical concerns as well as the social campaigns which surround the discussion of women’s rights and issues. It is to be seen that Indian scholars and educationists depend on Western Feminist theory to understand and discuss such issues since the West seems to be taking the credit for giving rise to this phenomenon of social change. However, it is important to understand that Hinduism, in its essentiality, is not gender biased. The different manifestations of the Devi or the Goddess as portrayed in Devdutt Pattanaik’s 7 Secrets of the Goddess unleash a side of Hindu mythologies which has been hidden since the advent of the British rule. The heteropatriarchal face of Christianity contaminated the Hindu philosophies and in contemporary times we have to fall back on the Western discourses of feminism whereas women were always regarded as equal to men in Hinduism as reflected in the mythical narratives of the Gods and Goddesses. The seven faces of the Devi include Adya, the primal female deity; Kali, the violent destroyer; Gauri, the feminine principle; Durga, representing the victory of good over evil; Lakshmi, the preserver; Saraswati, the epitome of wisdom; and Vitthai, the manifestation of the principle that God is one, the feminine and the masculine fused into a single entity. Thus, this paper seeks to explore the contemporary relevance of these representations of the Goddess vis-à-vis the gender discourse. The expected conclusion will be that Hindu religious beliefs did not essentially disseminate gender discrimination. The image of the Goddess as a powerful, self-sufficient, affectionate yet destructive is what every woman today strives to achieve and hence there is a need to go back to history and re-read mythologies to find answers to our questions.

Index Terms - Feminism, Gender bias, Heteropatriarchy, Orientalist gaze

I. INTRODUCTION

‘The Woman Question’, a byword of the 20th century studies on Gender, is a term translated from the French phrase *querelle des femmes*, meaning dispute of women. It basically concerns itself with issues concerning women like political rights, economic freedom, reproductive rights, legal rights, sexual freedom, marriage, divorce and the like. Religion plays an important role in understanding and dealing with such issues because religion is a means of social control. It is an institution which lays down the foundational principles and guidelines of behavior that one has to obey. With such a backdrop, one needs to understand how Hinduism seeks to shape our minds and aids in cultural conditioning of the human mind to understand such fragile and sensitive issues. Devdutt Pattanaik, a the popular author of contemporary times, who is famous for his work on mythologies, brings to us the book 7 Secrets of the Goddess wherein he describes the seven forms of the Goddess and finds evidence to prove that Hinduism is not essentially heteropatriarchal and gender biased. The seven forms of the Devi are discussed below:

Adya, the primal female deity

Just like Gaia is the earth-mother in Greek mythology, the Hindu Tantrik tradition of India considers Adya to be the primal deity who took the form of a bird and laid three unfertilized eggs from which were born Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, following which she expressed her desire to conjugate with them. Brahma refused for he “saw Adya as his mother”, as a consequence of which Adya cursed him that no temples would be built in his honour. Adya turned to Shiva rejecting Vishnu because of his shrewd nature. Advised by Vishnu, Shiva agreed under the condition that Adya would give him her third eye to which the latter consented. Shiva, with the help of the third eye, released a streak of fire which burned Adya to ashes from which emerged Saraswati, Lakshmi and Gauri, the three goddesses who became the wives of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara respectively.

Thus, in Tantric tradition, Adya is considered the mother of the Trinity; and is worshipped alongside Shiva and Vishnu. Devi, as we can see, has established herself as an independent figure. She is the mother, sister, wife and daughter of the three Gods but does not let herself be subdued or controlled by any of them. She has a voice of her own and exercises her powers at her own whims and fancies. She is neither a product of patriarchy nor advocates for it.

Kali, the violent destroyer

Devdutt Pattanaik regards Kali as “the most dramatic form of Devi in Hindu Mythology” who is pictured as “naked, with hair unbound, standing or sitting on top of Shiva, sickle in hand, with a garland of male heads around her neck, her blood-stained tongue stretching out.” (Pattanaik 45) Kali is the goddess who has defeated and killed several asuras like Chanda, Munda and Raktabeeja. No deva could defeat Raktabeeja because every drop of his blood which fell on the ground gave rise to his duplicate as per the boon he had obtained from Brahma. So, Kali was invoked for the cause and she drank all the blood before a drop fell on the ground, thus killing Raktabeeja. “What distinguished her from all other goddesses was her nakedness, her unbound hair, her thirst for blood, her unbridled lust, her outstretched tongue and that she dominated a male form, identified as Shiva.” (Pattanaik 55) She represents the nature in its pristine pure nature, untouched by civilization. She is raw and powerful and stands by herself. She does not express herself through her male counterpart. Rather, she is untamed and wild and steps over her husband. She is also seen sitting over Shiva in some images and idols, which shows that she is the superior one even in conjugal matters. She is the active partner who controls all the realms. She is independent and being a non-conformist, does not abide by any rules. She is fierce and violent.

But, post colonization, perspectives changed. Shyama Sangeet sees Kali’s outstretched tongue as a sign of embarrassment as she steps on her husband. This is the patriarchal notion brought about by the Europeans. But in the contemporary post-colonial period, Kali is viewed as a symbol of rebellion: “In her nakedness and refusal to submit to the male gaze, she became a symbol of women’s freedom... She was seen to embody raw female energy before it was forced to conform to patriarchal norms. She was also seen as female energy that will ultimately triumph over masculine hegemony.” (Pattanaik 77) Thus, Kali can be considered the symbol of a new woman, who is indifferent to male gaze and rises above it, veering away from repressive patriarchal cultural conditioning in order to establish herself as an autonomous individual who is equal to men in all aspects and can, in fact, prove to be more powerful than men.

Gauri, the feminine principle

Gauri is Brahma’s daughter. Brahma, being a patriarch, expects her to obey him; and in the process, seeks to derive pleasure from her which is the reason he is not worshipped. Hence, he has been attacked by Shiva who beheaded the former and has been accused of brahma-hatya-paap. Brahma is the patriarch who believes that he has dominion over his creation. But Shiva, the hermit, rejects such an assumption. Though modern man views woman as the ‘Other’, yet Shiva, seeks to condemn the male gaze of Brahma. Brahma is the torchbearer of patriarchy who, as every other man thinks that woman “is the incidental, the inessential, as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute- she is the Other” (Beauvoir 26)

Gauri is popularly known as Parvati, lord Shiva’s wife. She was Sati in her previous birth, daughter of Prajapati Daksha. Daksha, being the caretaker of human beings, ensured that rules are followed by everyone so that society remains intact; because disobedience would lead to collapse of the system. He embodies the male head of every family who sets rules that are followed by other subservient members of the family, and anyone who breaks the set patterns is punished. Being under the “rule of the father”, Sati’s predicament was somewhat similar. (Mitchell 409) When she was adamant on marrying Shiva, she disobeyed her father; and since the latter did not give his consent for this alliance, Sati left the house. This punctured Daksha’s male ego and what he did next led to his doom. Daksha conducts a grand yagna wherein he does not invite Sati

and Shiva deliberately. Sati, despite Shiva's warning, goes to the yagna wherein Daksha insults Shiva: "He follows no rules. He is covered with ash. He drinks poison and narcotics. He has no family or friends. Alone, he wanders naked in crematoriums in the company of dogs and ghosts. He is unfit for civilization." (Pattanaik 99) Sati tries to explain to her father that Shiva is a hermit and is beyond the mundane and the worldly but in vain. Angry, she leaps into the yagna fire. Learning of Sati's death, the Rudra form of Shiva is aroused and he tears away locks of his hair and throws them on the ground from which emerge Virabhadra and Bhadra-kali, the manifestations of Shiva's anger, who behead Daksha.

On Vishnu's request, Shiva restored Daksha's head replacing it with a goat's head, as "a reminder that a more worthy offering in a yagna is his own desire to dominate and control the world like a dominating alpha goat" (Pattanaik 99) Shiva wanders the world weeping, with the charred body of Sati in his hands. From a hermit, he has turned into a lover who laments the irrevocable loss of his beloved. Disturbed, Vishnu, through his Sudarshan Chakra, cuts the body of Sati into tiny pieces, which when fall on earth become Shakti-peethas, the centres of Shakti (Goddess) worship. After many eons (yugas), the Goddess is again evoked to become the Shakti of Shiva so that the asuras can be killed. The goddess is born as Parvati, the daughter of Himavan, the mountain-god. Parvati brings life to the lifeless world of Shiva. She makes him realize that the ones who serve him are not tapasvis, hence they cannot satiate their hunger through Tapa. She domesticates Shiva and thus is born culture or civilization in Kailash. But her perspective of culture is not based on dominance, but affection and care. It is the eternal feminine which is in action. Hence, Shiva "declares her to be Annapoorna, goddess of food, the ideal wife for the hermit who has no hunger." (Pattanaik 111) Gauri's take on culture is not selfish like Dakshabut empathetic. She does not expect Shiva to follow her ways, rather she makes changes which create a better environment for everyone to thrive harmoniously without Shiva having to forcefully make sacrifices.

Durga, symbolizing victory of good over evil

Durga is a more domesticated and less violent form of Kali. In her riding of lion, she defies domestication. She can, thus, be considered as a more balanced feminine form, who, when provoked, can be as violent as Kali, but at the bottom of her heart she is as affectionate and motherly as Gauri. As Dr. Pattanaik rightly points out, "Her unbound hair reveals that she is still wild like Kali, but her nose-ring reveals she is domesticated like Gauri." (115) she is affectionate yet her softness should not be taken for granted. Her multiple hands equipped with weapons stand for the fact that she is a warrior as well. She can protect as well as punish: "She is Brahma's defiant daughter, Vishnu's protected and protective sister, and Shiva's affectionate wife." (Pattanaik 115) However, she is an independent form or entity, who has protected the devas from the mighty Mahishasura and her own dignity from Bhairava, since the latter wanted to make her his wife forcibly. Durga represents every woman who has both a violent as well as an affectionate side to herself. She possesses the power to fight all evils, the greatest being fear. Durga teaches us to fight fearlessly because it is courage which ennoble us. The need of the hour is to evoke the Durga in us because she "comforts, protects and empowers the frightened." (Pattanaik 155)

Lakshmi, the preserver

Lakshmi is known as the Goddess of wealth and prosperity. She is the provider of food (anna) and wealth (dhana). Lakshmi is called chanchala or whimsical because "no one is ever sure who the goddess of wealth and fortune will favour. She can appear suddenly without reason, and leave without warning." (Pattanaik 171) that is why Indra is always insecure as Lakshmi might leave him when she gets someone worthier. Lakshmi embodies the insecurity that comes with wealth. The poor sleep peacefully whereas the rich always worry about their wealth- either to expand it or prevent it from getting stolen. Indra, notorious for his drunken state and womanizing nature, once insults Lakshmi and she leaves Swarga in a huff, withdrawing her "Kalpataru, the wish-fulfilling tree; Kama-dhenu, the wish-fulfilling cow; Chinta-mani, the wish-fulfilling jewel; the Akshaya-patra, the cornucopia, the pot that is always overflowing with grain and gold." (Pattanaik 167) But her absence leads to the absence of such luxurious abundance. The only way to bring back prosperity in the world was to bring back Lakshmi by churning her out from the ocean of milk. After churning for eons, Lakshmi comes back bringing a pot of Amrit, the elixir of immortality.

She now selects Vishnu as her life partner because he is not selfish like Indra. Moreover, though Indra is the king of the Devas, he fails to defeat the Asuras. It is Vishnu who helps him do so. Lakshmi has two forms- Bhudevi, the goddess of the earth who is the source of food; and Sri-devi, who provides us with wealth or glamour. Without the two, survival is impossible. This is well delineated in the Jagannath lore. Lord Jagannath is but an incarnation of Vishnu who is worshipped along with his elder brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra. When Balabhadra finds Lakshmi entering a sweeper woman's house, he does not let her enter the temple considering her polluted. Since Lakshmi is not allowed, food and water disappear from the

temple pantry and the market, leading Jagannath to apologize and beg for her return. This establishes the power of Lakshmi, and also brings to light the fact that she condemns social hierarchies which discriminate people. She adorns the life of anybody who pleases her and would leave when displeased.

Saraswati, the epitome of wisdom

Saraswati, like Lakshmi, is also an independent goddess. She is seen to be holding a Veena, a stringed musical instrument and a book symbolizing arts and wisdom. She embodies both entertainment and enlightenment. If Lakshmi symbolizes glamour, Saraswati stands for simplicity. Human beings need both. One should not show off much letting their wisdom speak for them. Wisdom should make one humble while wealth should teach self-control. If wealth overpowers wisdom and makes one proud, s/he is sure to be doomed.

Vitthai, the fusion of the feminine and the masculine into a single entity

Vitthai or mother Vitthal, as Lord Krishna is also known as, condemned toxic masculinity eons ago, something which the society is striving hard to get rid of. Krishna is considered feminine and is worshipped in the feminine form at certain places as well. A sage named Dyaneshwar in his book Dyaneshwari, talks of Krishna as “the affectionate cow”, “the mother turtle” and uses many such feminine metaphors to address Krishna. Krishna, being an incarnation of Vishnu, has feminine traits or tendencies like the latter. He is not masculine enough in the strict sense of the term. Krishna loves cross-dressing and is quite soft spoken and calm, traits attributed to women. Once when Krishna stole the clothes of the Gopis (milkmaids) when they were taking bath in the river, they punished him by dressing him up as a woman. To their dismay, Krishna was deriving pleasure out of it instead of being sad or angry: “He enjoyed it, insisting they give him the best clothes and best jewellery and they paint his face perfectly.” (Shikhandi 138) Krishna even dressed like Radha to pacify her when she became angry in an aim to exchange roles thereby giving her the superior position yet Radha complained, “you can dress like me, talk and dance like me, but you can never feel what I feel for we can never exchange hearts” (Shikhandi 139).

Such gender fluidity is respected in scriptures but rejected in human society wherein is revealed the hypocrisy of the Indian minds. In fact, an in-depth study of the scriptures would bring to light the fact that “the essence of all male gods is female. But the opposite is not true.” (Pattanaik 239) The Goddess is so important that if the god is worshipped without her, it might lead to utter destruction as found in the story of Bhringi who refused to worship Parvati as he was a devotee of Shiva. So Parvati cursed him that he would lose those parts of his body which he got from the female seed following which he lost all flesh and blood. This is the reason Shiva's form Ardhanarishvara emerged in order to remind people that the God and the Goddess or Shiva and Shakti are one. They are parts of the whole though they are whole in themselves. They complement each other and without Shakti, Shiva cannot exist.

Toxic masculinity is a Western phenomenon. The thick gap between the masculine and the feminine never existed in Hinduism. God is essentially is a Christian notion. The Europeans, during colonization, mocked Hindus calling them effeminate to which the Hindus responded by masculinizing themselves. This veering away from the worship of the Goddess and essential Hindu culture which did not discriminate between the male and the female in exclusive terms sowed the seeds of patriarchy in the minds of the Indians. After changing the mindset of the people, when patriarchy exhausted itself, feminism arose and there is a clarion call to examine Hinduism from a neo-Orientalist lens as writes Devdutt Pattanaik, which does not retrieve the real values put forth by the scriptures but a literal and fragmented reading twists facts by bringing them out of context. It is forced upon the Indian scholars to think that a Western revolution is necessary to redeem India and reshape the Indian minds.

However, an intensive reading would lead us to understand that our scriptures exhibit gender fluidity, androgyny and gender equality. Adya is the creator of the world unlike Christianity which preaches that God is essentially male. Kali is a female goddess who is not passive and emotional, she is violent and powerful. Durga is more balanced, who is calm and composed but when necessity arises, does not refrain from taking weapons and fighting battles. Gauri is the eternal feminine principle who teaches us motherly affectations. Lakshmi establishes herself as the source of life without whom the entire world can come to a standstill. Saraswati is the epitome of wisdom and simplicity while Vitthai stands for gender fluidity. There is so much to learn from our scriptures. There is defiance as well as assertion. Kali defies all notions of femininity while Gauri subtly rejects motherhood as being an essential duty of womanhood.

Gauri is not a mother in the conventional sense of the term because neither Kartikeya nor Ganesha was born of her womb. In that, she is not completely feminine. She defies the basic social expectation of becoming a mother yet that does not deprive her of motherly instincts. She is a symbol of defiance and we should learn from her the fact that no woman is barren if she does not give birth to a child from her own womb. As

Adrienne Rich points out, “Women’s status as childbearer has been made into a major fact of her life. Terms like ‘barren’ or ‘childless’ have been used to negate any further identity. The term ‘nonfather’ does not exist in any realm of social categories.” (11) Motherhood should not be forced upon any woman. Though feminists point this out in the 20th century, Parvati, eons ago, had rejected such stereotypical notions.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, a re-reading of the Hindu scriptures would unravel newer avenues and perspectives to understand gender issues. Gender inequality and heteropatriarchy can be eradicated with the help of a novel and holistic understanding of Hindu scriptures. There is a need to go back to our roots and revive our classical traditional beliefs and customs unaffected by colonization and reinterpret our culture and religion, thereby rescuing it from the toxicity of the rudimentary readings based on the Western philosophies. The seven faces of the Devi asserts the fact that a woman has several forms or shades to her personality and a woman needs to understand that and establish herself as an independent entity.

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