

Feminist Subversions of Mythology: A Study of Twenty first Century Women's Poetry in English

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Radha Kumar¹ writes that an attempt was made during the early eighties to re-appropriate women's spaces by reinterpreting myths, epics, and folktales. The poets being dealt with in this paper also subvert and reinterpret traditional women's roles and symbols.

Judith Butler in chapter 1 of *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*² writes that reinterpreting a story, myth or tradition is also a kind of performativity. When one derives an alternative or subversive meaning from a normative event, tradition or story, one makes a chink in the way the normative tradition is perceived. This act of subverting meaning from the normative and creating an alternative view in place of what exists, can be termed as a performative act, just as breaking away from the gendered normative in one's daily routine actions is termed a performative act. I will now discuss poetry by Karthika Nair, Priya Sarukkai Chabria, Meena Kandasamy, Anindita Sengupta, Nabina Das, Nitoo Das and Uddipana Goswami which rework myths and fairytales, and refashion them from an alternate, feminist perspective.

In 'Maariamamma',³ Kandasamy appeals to the goddess Mari, the goddess of rain who is believed to mostly frequent rural areas and slums and is worshipped by non-Brahmin priests. That the vegetarian, virgin, upper caste gods do not visit the poor and lowly households which would probably pollute them, may be understandable but why does Maariamamma, to whom they offer sacrificed hens and goats, not visit them anymore.

'Ms Militancy'⁴ is based on the figure of Kannaki, the heroine of the Tamil epic *Cilappatikaram*, who has been wronged multiple times. Her husband has an affair with another woman, but she forgives him for it. She gives him her red anklet to sell to start a business but the court executes him. Seething in anger, Ms Militancy goes to the royal court and throws the other red anklet to them. They

see 'red,' (18) which refers literally to her anklet and to the woman's rage as well. The king dies of shame and the queen of shock, while Ms Militancy, still not satisfied with her revenge, hurls her left breast as a bomb and blasts the city. The woman who, in the beginning of the poem was shown as a pale, sickly thing, has now transformed into a fighting warrior. Ms Militancy's sexual attributes have been emphasised in the poem all along such as her 'tender-as-tomato,' (3) breasts and her 'monthly drip,' (9) that 'wetness with its lunar reek' (8) which is shown to have stopped at the beginning of the poem, but which towards the end, returns with all its power. Tomatoes and blood are also red.

'Six hours of chastity'⁵ is a revenge by the mythical Nalayini upon her husband. The original story shows a sage who went to extremes to test his wife's chastity while visiting brothels and being an infidel himself. *Kandasamy's Nalayini* goes to the brothel which he had frequented in the past. There, she is mistaken for a slut herself and has intercourse with six men in six hours. Ironically, Kandasamy titles the poem 'six hours of chastity' instead of 'six hours of infidelity.' An infidel man does not deserve a chaste wife. The sixth man who visits her is a priest in guilt and cowardice. This is a condemnation of religion which preaches chastity and has to slyly and underhandedly visit brothels. Nalayini's husband, who is a sage himself, is shown to be frequenting brothels.

In 'Dead Woman Walking',⁶ Kandasamy overturns the story of *Karaikkal Ammaiyyar* who was a woman devotee of Shiva in the sixth century. According to the original story, *Karaikkal Ammaiyyar* deserted her husband in favour of Lord Shiva. Kandasamy's *Karaikkal Ammaiyyar* however was a beautiful wife of a 'shifty-eyed' (8) husband who, unable to recognise her love, left her for a fresh, new wife. *Karaikkal Ammaiyyar*, in turn, wept and wailed and turned all her attention to Lord Shiva for consolation. *Karaikkal Ammaiyyar*, in the poem, represents all women who are rejected and abandoned by their husbands, and is shown to be in a death-in-life situation as she walks,

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wailing, hair flying, with faltering step, bulging eyes and hollowed cheeks, bruised wrists, wrinkled skin, with a single story between her 'sobbing, pendulous breasts.' (6) Society could not even understand the devotional music she made, nor her sorrow at being deserted, and ultimately colluded in forming 'a land of the living dead.' (26)

'Passion becomes piety'⁷ shows the intense guilt-glazed love between Andal and her Lord which society does not understand or allow and thereby she learns to treat every rumour as a 'love-bite.' (14) The end of the poem shows why Andal's murder was masqueraded as 'marriage (17) to her Lord and all that remained of her were her poems which 'celebrated those fucks/he doled out for her frantic devotion.' (20)

'Princess in Exile'⁸ shows Sita was walking out on her husband and vanishing of her own choice instead of being spurned by him. 'Random Access Man,'⁹ for which RAM is an acronym, but which actually refers to *Ravana* in the poem, shows Ram to be a husband who keeps secrets from his wife and denies her sexual pleasures. As she sends him off to chase a golden deer, a 'random man' (16) in the shape of *Ravana* comes and beguiles her. He makes her aroused and 'hot and forever hungry' as Ram had never made her. He teaches her about the secrets of her own womb and waters. Kandasamy ends the poem with 'Mamasita,' (33) a Spanish term which, according to the urban dictionary, refers to a hot babe".

In 'Firewalkers,'¹⁰ Kandasamy shatters the traditional image of *Maariamamma* as a goddess for the poor, low caste people and instead shows *Maari* as an oppressor, much the way the higher castes oppressed the lower castes; who devours human pain, blood and sacrifice, blood-splattered, whip-wrapped, self-flagellating people, instead of the blood of chicks and goats. *Maari*, here in her exploitative role, is seen as a stone-hearted, unforgiving goddess interpreting people's pain as prayer. Viewing religion as something which strangles women and which also forms the very basis of the caste system, Kandasamy repeatedly tries to downsize gods and to show them to be much like ordinary mortals.

In 'When the God Drank Milk'¹¹, Kandasamy portrays Ganesha as an idol of plastic, ceramic, clay or black stone sucking at a woman's breast. The woman then goes on to feed other gods with mouths 'full of white teeth.' (24)

Karthika Nair's rendering of the Mahabharata is through the voices of marginalised women characters, and even Shunaka, a canine. Nair's *Until The Lions*¹² is not told by Vyaasa, but by Satyavati. In what seems similar to Uddipana Goswami's poems, Nair enunciates a women's view of the world which is anti-war and violence, and which can clearly see that the result of revenge is only to further 'stoke' the violence, and not resolution or

peace. Nair's women lament the fact that human beings become mere pawns within grander, overarching designs of dynasties and alliances. Marriages are made only to secure the support of other powerful kingdoms. Children are prized only if they are sons, and sons too must go to war and perish for the honour of their kingdom and dynasty. Nair's women wonder why innocents must die to avenge what their forefathers did. In a language which rises heroically to the occasion, Nair links individual stories with larger human emotions of grief, pain and futility, and the cycles of birth and death, thus bringing it closer to us as well as bestowing the universality of an epic on the story. Nair also, in epic fashion, employs metaphors so that the natural world reflects the human world, where joy is marked by the blooming of spring flowers, violence and anger are depicted through red, bloodshot skies, loud thunder, a malevolent moon and the like.

Further, in epic fashion, Nair usually has long lines, with ten to twelve syllables each which make it weighty and grand, though occasionally she does experiment with shorter lines of six to eight syllables as well. Her choice of words is equally grand and varied; she does not use commonplace vocabulary to describe historic events and feats of valour. Nair shows the extreme exploitation of lower caste women and *dasis*, who were treated as concubines for the king, merely to produce a male heir. These children were taken away from their mothers in their babyhood itself and were not even allowed to meet them. Women thus become mere pawns acting as either reproductive machines or as tools for the unification of men of two different kingdoms. *Satyavati* recounts her own story; how she was born to a king, but was given over to a fisherman because she was not a son, but only a daughter who was of no use to royal families. Brought up by a foster fisher-family of low caste, she began to smell like fish. As she went out on a boat once with the sage *Parashara*, he raped her, his hormones getting the better of him, even though she tried to dissuade him from consorting with her fish-smell and low-caste status. In return, he gave her the boon that she would henceforth smell heavenly, and that she would become a queen. It was out of their intercourse that the prophetic sage, *VedVyaasa*, was born, who was to tell the entire story of the *Kuru* dynasty. This story, however, is told by *Satyavati*, who later consents to be King *Shantanu's* second wife, once his son *Bheeshma* promises her that she will be the queen, and her sons, the heirs to the throne. *Bheeshma* himself takes a vow of celibacy. *Satyavati* and *Shantanu* have two sons, *Chitrangada* and *Vichitravirya*. The former dies, while the latter seems to show no interest in kingship and is only interested in dallying with women. The King of Kashi has a *swayamvarato* which *Vichitravirya*

is not invited. Enraged, Bheeshma goes and ransacks the kingdom, bringing the three princesses, *Amba*, *Ambika*, and *Ambalika* back to Hastina. *Ambika* and *Ambalika* are made to wed *Vichitravirya*, while *Amba* is escorted to the king of another kingdom whom she wants to marry. *Satyavati* is scared of what *Amba's* rage would result in if her desires were thwarted.

However, *Amba* is rejected by the king because her 'honour' has been defiled as she has already been taken by another man. Once again, we see how women are used as pawns and have no subject-hood of their own. *Amba* then spends six years waiting outside *Bheeshma's* door, wanting to be his consort, but in vain. *Bheeshma* does reciprocate her desire, but sticks firm to his vow of celibacy taken years ago. He is haunted by guilt and regret when, one day, *Amba* vanishes without a trace. And then, *Vichitravirya* dies, leaving no offspring. Consternation then reigns as to who will succeed him to the throne. *Bheeshma* still refuses to go back on his vow of celibacy. *Bheeshma* and *Satyavati* then hit upon the idea of asking the sage *VedVyaasa*, *Satyavati's* son from *Parashara*, to copulate with *Ambika* and *Ambalika*. *VedVyaasa* is a sage who has no idea about matters of love and he blunders, thinking sex to be an emotionless and mechanical act which all creatures must perform. Moreover, he smells and stinks because *Parashara* had granted the boon to *Satyavati* to remove the fish smell, but not to their offspring. *Ambika* and *Ambalika* are scared of him, and cannot hide their fear, revulsion and disgust. This makes *Vyaasa* angry and he shoots off two curses, one which makes their offspring blind, *Dhritarashtra*, and the other which makes their son impotent, *Pandu*.

The Mahabharata then enacts itself out as the rivalry between *Dhritarashtra* and *Pandu* for the throne. Nair's *Satyavati* is far from ideal, she does however have the capacity for self-reflection. She admits that when she forces *Ambika* and *Ambalika* to have intercourse with the scary and hideous *VedVyaasa*, she has lost her humanity, her womanhood, and has become a queen, dowager, thirsty for successors to the throne and oblivious of all else. It is what *Ambika* terms as 'sanctioned rape.' Nair's language is implicitly feminist in stray lines such as while describing a king's hunt, she writes 'he thought of his wife, his favoured sport and pastime, and felt a sudden surge of sperm', or while describing *Satyavati's* birth: 'Well, boys, said the king, can rule/even if they smell like tombs but I have no use/for a girl, unless she can be my consort—no/with daughters, it's safest to abort.' Although the epic is not written in rhyme, Nair does use rhythmic, internal rhymes throughout the text. Nair brings out the pathos and abject condition of women at every step, be it *Satyavati* being discarded as a girl child, *Amba*, *Ambika* and *Ambalika* being forced to come to Hastina, and the

latter two later being forced to copulate with *VedVyaasa*, much against their will. *Amba's* tragedy at being rejected by the king she had given her heart to simply because he sees her as another man's possession is painfully clear.

Poorna, a *dasi*, is made to be *VedVyaasa's* concubine and bears him the son, *Vidura*. *Poorna* describes how he separates her labia and how they perform coitus which is compared to music. He may be a sage and she a *dasi*, but during their intercourse, they lie together, flesh on flesh as if there were no difference. Another *Dasi*, *Sauvali*, whom *Dhritarashtra* chooses during *Gandhari's* pregnancy tells us of her experience of rape without even once mentioning the word which she cannot bear to mention: 'it is time: say it, say it, say it, say the word, a voice resounds in my head. Not yet though.' This is repeated several times within the text to emphasise it. The king owns the whole land and kingdom, it is impossible to escape if he wishes you to be his concubine, while onlookers crow 'It is an honour... An honour we are so grateful to be spared. A great honour you must not avoid. Another repetition in the text is the description of how the king owns your body: 'from navel to nipple to eyelid, insole to clitoris.'

The Queen of Panchala, mother of *Draupadi*, woman without a name, laments how her husband *Dhrupada* had raised children as 'battlements, as lethal weapons.' Hate is thus inherited and passed on from father to son. He makes *Draupadi* marry the champion warrior, *Arjun*, in the *swayamvar*, to ensure his own victory in war. And yet *Arjun* is the prize pupil of *Drona* against whom *Draupada* seeks revenge. 'Honour must bleed' for its own revenge in the end. *Gandhari*, also reduced to being a mere pawn in the larger designs of getting alliances of kingdoms, tells us her experience of marrying the Kuru king, *Dhritarashtra*, when the Kuru clan had killed her own father. She was forced to marry her father's murderer so that the kingdom of *Gandhar* may plan designs to destroy the kingdom of the Kuru. She begs her brother *Shakuni* not to kill all her sons, but he is adamant that they must be killed for the Kuru clan killed their father. *Gandhari* pleads with him in vain and tries to reason how killing her hundred sons would beget peace in any sense. Nair writes that *Gandhari* did not tie a cloth band around her head because she was a dutiful wife to *Dhritarashtra*, but because she could neither bear to see him nor the world which had ordained such a terrible fate for her.

Nair redeems even the *rakshasa Hidimbi* as she writes that it was her brother *Hidimba*, who was a cannibal and who had ravenous hunger, and describes how *Hidimbi* spent her life in mortal terror of being killed and eaten whenever he wanted food. Thus it was her task to fetch him food for which she had to kill huge numbers of animals as well as people, to appease his enormous appetite. *Hidimbi* has a son by *Bheema* after a brief liaison

and further laments as a woman that she has to relinquish *Bheema* back to the *Pandavas*. Nair's *Hidimbi* keeps up a correspondence with Kunti where both talk of their sons. Nair's *Dusshala*, *Gandhari's* daughter born after a hundred sons, remembers all her brothers because 'They must be remembered. Mourned. Reclaimed.' *Dusshala* goes on to lament the need for her brothers to go to war, like all the other women in Nair's *Mahabharata*. *Ulupi*, a naiad, is the Naga queen who rules the water kingdom and grants *Arjun* the boon of invincibility in water. She gives birth to *Aravan* after a sexual liaison with *Arjun*, brings him up and reluctantly relinquishes him to go and fight in the war with *Arjun* though she tries to persuade him to stay back. She laments why:

... for sons will slash their lifelines for distant fathers, to please kin who've disdained them all along while mothers and lovers and life, in an instant, are forsaken for combat, for the swift, brilliant death or painless triumph they believe lies ahead.

Uttaraa, *Abhimanyu's* wife, laments over *Abhimanyu's* death. Nair brings out the sexual desires and memories of a woman who has lost her husband:

the dreams I dream are yours that spilled and stained shared silken quilts and nights like auroral dew. And when the taste of your tongue—nutmeg brewed With lust—still teases my mouth, when your heart through My beat does echo yet...

She addresses her yet unborn son and tells him of his father's bravery and valour and how the *Kauravs* outnumbered him and killed him. She tells him that she, who knew *Abhimanyu* the best of all, knew that he really wanted to be father, not warrior, even though after death the crowds would elevate him to the status of a martyr: '...Here, he lies, he that most wished to be/not hero—this, they will not tell you, child—but father.' Similarly, *Vrishali*, *Karna's* wife, comes to *Duryodhana* after *Karna's* death and tells him how much her husband worshipped *Duryodhana*, how he gave his life to him and pledged faithful allegiance to him. Now that he is dead, *Vrishali* asks *Duryodhana* to stop the war, to spare the few that still live, to not let *Karna's* death become a mere death but something that stopped the great war. For her own self, there is neither world nor life to be lived anymore: she, who has watched eight sons die and brothers too, wants to forsake her youngest and to commit sati on *Karna's* pyre to whom she would be faithful in life and death. In this way, Nair makes a feminist reading even of a patriarchal practice such as *sati*.

Nitoo Das, in '*Matsyagandha*'¹³ uses mythology, which we generally see in a more romantic sense, in a very unromantic manner and shows the stark social and economic inequality in society through these myths.

Das makes us realise that subjects in themselves may not be necessarily romantic or modernist per se, but it is through the treatment of these subjects in different ways that they acquire such characteristics. *Matsyagandha* is *Satyavati*, character from the *Mahabharata*, who is the mother of *Vyasa*, and the great-grandmother of the *Pandavas* and *Kauravas*. She is born of an *apsara* who was cursed to become a fish called *Adrika*. In the poem, the fish-woman *Satyavati*, who was adopted and brought up by a poor fisherman family, gives a retort to the high-caste king *Parashar*, with whom she gives birth to *Vyasa* out of wedlock. Karthika Nair also discussed *Parashar's* rape of *Satyavati*, or rather, *Matsyagandha*. *Matsyagandha* tells *Parashar* that she has grown up with fish, loves fish and smells like a fish herself. She tells *Parashar*, who lusts after her, that she works for a daily wage whereas he can afford not to. He has the luxury of leisure while she rows and fishes and sweats with her father. *Parashar* hates her fish smell and yet covets her, so he gives her boons of perfume. *Matsyagandha* indignantly claims that the 'fake skin smell' (30) of jasmines never fades away now, and she hates it as she paces palace halls alone, longing for her fish smell. The poem resonates at a deeper level as Das herself is from a fishing community in Assam, which gives a slight personal and autobiographical touch to the poem.

Anindita Sengupta also uses a few characters from the *Mahabharata* in order to address contemporary issues. *Madri*, a character from the *Mahabharata*, is endowed two sons by the *Ashwini Kumara* gods as her husband *Pandu* had a curse on him that he could not have sex. Sengupta pities *Madri* because she could never go through a pregnancy and could never have the pleasure of rich foods like eggs, oil and cheese 'dark foods that havoc the corridors/of your body.' (2-3) *Madri* sharpens her greed, longing for all the foods denied to her. Sengupta compares *Madri's* case with her own consumption of 'salami slices pink as/tongues' (4-5) and Mysore Pak, becoming an 'expanding mound' (13) of meringue fluff, her mouth so wide and elastic that it could consume the entire world. The second image is of a woman who fulfils and pleasures herself while the first indicates yearning and abnegation. '*Satyabhama*'¹⁴ refers to *Satyabhama*, *Krishna's* second wife who believed he loved her more than anyone else. When the sage *Narada* arouses her by saying that *Krishna* loves *Rukmini*, his first wife more, *Satyabhama* rises to the challenge of producing enough gold and wealth equal to the weight of *Krishna*. *Satyabhama* fails in her endeavour whereas *Rukmini* miraculously places a *tulasi* leaf on the scales and it proves equal to *Krishna's* weight. Sengupta in '*Satyabhama*' shows *Satyabhama's* grief at being separated from her husband, as he became cold and unloving. She lost hair and grew lines on her forehead. She slumped on

the bed, imagining other girls living out their pleasures and desires. She walked the night streets alone and rode the local trains, trying to find release and escape. She is compared to 'the earth in thirst.' (16)

Surpanakha, a character from the *Ramayana*, is *Ravana's* sister and is spurned by both *Rama* and *Lakshman* when she makes sexual advances towards them. Taking the basic theme of adultery, Sengupta in '*Surpanakha*'¹⁵ transposes this to a modern setting. As she makes advances towards another man's wife as they 'skate on the same rink' (6) while the man watches TV. The poet hints at the fact that 'Bonobos' monkeys share their lovers. However, her advances, like *Surpanakha's* are spurned as the woman makes an excuse of going to pee, and as she gets up, knocks down the poet's water glass off the table.

Anindita Sengupta makes a universal statement about women in 'The Migrant's Wife,'¹⁶ through *Parvati*, whom she shows as waiting, hurting, and growing old. Through wildness and grandeur outside such as the howling of the wind and coconuts falling like meteorites, *Parvati* lies patiently on a mat on the floor, arms outstretched, waiting. Countless women like *Parvati* are confined within their houses, waiting, patiently accepting all that comes to them as inevitable, with their outstretched arms. They have no part in what goes on outside, as their husbands roam the world. In her quiet, writes Sengupta, there are cries of marauding elephants which have been suppressed and silenced. The woman is used to hard work and even her hands are described as being 'hard.' (11) The woman's waiting is like a gaping wound which never gets closed, her body seems hollow and empty with the void that fills her as she 'singes in the slow burn.' (18)

In '*Medusa*'¹⁷ Sengupta deals with the passion of the young, beautiful woman who was punished by *Athena* for sleeping with *Poseidon*, the god of the sea, at *Athena's* shrine. Sengupta addresses her poem to the woman who was punished for no fault of her own, caught in a feud of jealousy between *Athena* and *Poseidon*. Sengupta asks *Medusa* if she ever got used to her gleaming snake-like coils, thick and hard as rope, if she still remembered her joy and passion as a young girl as she jumped into and played in the sea, or whether she liked being this fearful, monstrous creature, totally unloved, yet magical and potent? Sengupta wonders if the old passion ever comes back to haunt her at night and whether she softly weeps. This can be seen as the fate of a lot of beautiful women who are punished for no reason except that they fell in love.

In '*To Shakti*'¹⁸ Sengupta addresses her poem to *Shakti*, of whom *Parvati*, *Kamakhyia* and so on, are avatars, known for her power and the agent of all change, creativity and fertility in *Hindu* mythology. Sengupta writes that she

had imagined the goddess of power and agency to be like a cyclone in the sea:

face beautiful as a cyclone
glowering at the salty rim
or crying havoc at the beach,
tearing up arms and legs, tossing them to sea
faster than any wave can catch. (3-7)

Instead, Sengupta is surprised to find her face depicted as smiling and cheerful in a temple. Met with the outstretched hands of beggars just outside the temple, she paradoxically prays to the goddess of unending memory to give her the strength to forget. It is not clear what Sengupta wishes to forget, which could possibly be the outstretched arms of beggars.

Nabina Das too shows us another consort of *Shiva* in '*Shiva, She Will Rise*'¹⁹. Addressed to *Shiva*, the poem is about the power and potential of his consort, the blue goddess *Kali*, variously known by different names such as *Kamakhyia* and *Parvati*. The legend goes that the goddess *Parvati* had married *Shiva* without the permission of *Daksha*, her father and had thrown herself into the fire when her father conducted a *yagna* where he did not invite *Parvati* and *Shiva*. *Shiva* had then thundered all over the world with *Parvati's* body on his shoulders and fifty one shards of her body are believed to have fallen in different places where temples have been built for *Parvati*. The most famous of these is the *Kamakhyia* temple in Assam, where the goddess's yoni or vagina is believed to have fallen. Das, in the poem, appears to be telling *Shiva* that the goddess with the hissing snake coiled in her hair, her nine twisted hands with their lotus palms, and balancing the moon on her shoulders, will rise again. She is shown as having three eyes like *Shiva* and with her mouth open, in an eternal chant of hunger and desire.

Nitoo Das, in '*Ambubasi*'²⁰, focusses on the *Kamakhyia* temple where *Parvati's yoni* or vagina is believed to have fallen. Naturally, the place has connections with menstruation. *Ambubasi* is the annual yearly festival when the goddess is believed to menstruate, and the temple is closed for these three days in the year. Even a goddess needs seclusion and isolation to menstruate! Das writes that the goddess, unlike us 'lunar women' (3), has the luxury of bleeding only once a year. She writes of the men, hunting amidst the 'blood shit piss' (8) of the animals that were sacrificed and to-be-sacrificed at the temple. She writes of the goddess as 'wide-bottomed, spread-thighed' (13), emphasising her sexual, and moreover, menstrual attributes. However, the goddess's vagina is also described as being dead. The priests chanted and sang and fed the goddess, and, Das ends on a satirical note here, waited to see the waters in the sewers turn red

with blood. Perhaps it is implied in the poem, though not explicitly stated, that the blood would actually be the animals' rather than the goddess's.

Usha Akella too in 'Desecration'²¹ narrates the story of *Shiva*, the god with the matted locks who danced in madness and grief, *Parvati's* corpse in his arms. *Parvati's* body split into fifty one parts, each marking a holy spot at the place where it fell to earth such as Kalighat, Manikarnighat and so on, the holiest being *Kamakhyia* where her womb fell. Akella compares this with modern day versions in Playboy and X-rated films where naked female flesh becomes carrion to be feasted upon, a breast here and a thigh there, for strip teasers, pole dancers and child prostitutes as the screen vicariously simulates the body's desires. This naked female flesh too is, in its own way, worshipped, much like the parts of *Parvati's* body. In 'When *Kali* Speaks for Us,'²² Nabina Das aptly brings in the mythical figure of *Kali* to speak of hands, faces and voices protesting, out of poverty and need, with neither beginning nor end, similar to the sound emanating from *Kali's* mouth 'A mesh of roots with no origin.'⁽²⁵⁾

Usha Akella in 'Not Merely in Dakshineswar'²³ shows *Ma Kali* saying that it is not only in Dakshineswar, 'glittering black on passive white' (3) that she stands, amidst conch bangles, hibiscus, sindoor, sandal paste, *arati*, lamps and incense, but that she resides in every person, in the pupils of their eyes as sight, in their bodies, in their poems, and in the flaming vermilion mark on every Hindu woman's forehead which celebrates menstrual blood. Akella ends the poem by saying that ~~god is within us~~—'declaring 'ahambrahmasmi'): I am identical with the Brahman.'⁽³⁴⁾

Nabina Das, in '*Ahalya's* wish,'²⁴ takes a character from the *Ramayana* and shows the visit of this low caste, old woman who was revived from stone to life as *Rama* touched *Ahalya* with his big toe. Upper castes regarded this woman as untouchable as kids were not allowed to play with her. Mothers and aunts give her a separate 'special' (2,3) plate and glass which are later rinsed separately. She weeded, threw the dead skunk in a ditch and cleaned up. Later, Das's *Ahalya* is asked by the children what name would she choose so that they would be allowed to play with her. She says that she would like to be made flesh and mocking *Rama's* act, to touch everything 'Feet First.'⁽²⁷⁾

Barnali Ray Shukla in 'An Untold Story'²⁵ hints at the fact that *Sita* has an untold story which has never been told. So she strung *Shiva's* bow and found a husband and they had a bond 'for life or maybe just for the wife' (6) thus indicating that bond becomes bondage for a woman in matrimony. There was exile and a voyage, and then another voyage for her, etched with fear and heartache. And they found themselves in an epic but Ray Shukla

hints at another story, *Sita's* story, which has never been told.

Aditi Rao in 'If women marry their fathers, do they also give birth to their husbands?'²⁶ shows *Sita* as the narrator saying that walking into the fire was of course stupid, but sometimes we are so much in love that we cannot spot violence. Rao completely humanises *Sita* and makes her akin to any other woman. It was easy to abandon, of course, the excuse could be a brother's message, a waiting carriage, or no time for conversation. What hurt, says Rao's *Sita*, was the demand to raise her sons like good kings. She wanted to bring them up as good human beings, good husbands, but not as kings. Also, although Rao does not directly say it, the demand does gross injustice to *Sita* as it rejects her and refuses to acknowledge her as her rightful place of the queen, and yet is presumptuous enough to lay claim to his sons whom he had from her, as his descendants. What hurts, she says, was that she brought up bloodthirsty sons just like him, who waged war like their father, their eyes following him whereas they had never known lust before. What hurts, she says, is that three thousand years after the story, he is still seen as god.

Rao's 'There is No *Bhadra* in this *Kali*'²⁷ implicitly refers to a South Indian idea of a *Bhadra Kali* which translates into good or decent *Kali* who does not stick out her tongue and who is considered a relatively graceful form of the goddess. But there is no *Bhadra* in Rao's *Kali* who sticks out her red tongue in welcome, like a red carpet. Home is seven steps away but one must walk into the mouth and trust that one will not be chewed to bits. The pink corners of her tongue curl in dryness and disgust. This demonic tongue is a mocking of gentle devotees. At the end, she writes that she lied. It is not a doormat. But it is red. Red can denote bloodthirsty desire, anger, or rage. The tongue is red, but it is not a carpet. It is not a welcome. *Kali*, the subversive goddess, is only desire and rage.

Nitoo Das in '*Alakshmi*'²⁸ writes about the goddess of misfortune, who is considered to be the sister of *Lakshmi*, the goddess of beauty and wealth. *Alakshmi* is older and darker. A short sound, writes Das, separates her from riches, fairness and prosperity. She is seen as being born out of her father's ass, and *Lakshmi* from his face. She has hostile teeth. *Alakshmi* is sculpted out of cowdung and even arouses the disgust of cows. She is shown to scurry around her sister, trying to burn her down with her anger. She always fails. She is always depicted as sitting on a donkey, or a crow, staring with beady eyes. She is an outsider. She is only fit for being married off to Death. But Das tries to redeem her at the end of the poem, writing that marriage does not kill her. As Death encircles her in his arms, her charms and her staring-eyed power only grow.

This paper has attempted to see how these poets have interpreted and reinterpreted mythology subverting these stories and creating performative chinks in normativity. Patriarchal stories and myths are cleverly turned on their own heads and subverted and are used to show their own misogyny, while an attempt is made to understand the pathos in the lives of mythological women marginalised and undermined by the myths themselves.

Notes

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