

Vyasa's Draupadi, Sophocles' Antigone, Euripedes' Medea, Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth Aeschylus' Clytemnestra and Valmiki's Sita: A Feminist Approach

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Abstract: *This paper brings together six women characters whose names are firmly etched on the sands of time: Vyasa's Draupadi from the Mahabharata, Sophocles' Antigone from Antigone, Euripedes' Medea from Medea, Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth from Macbeth, Aeschylus' Clytemnestra from Agamemnon and Valmiki's Sita from the Ramayana. They belong to the past, yet they have profound influence upon the present experiences, and upon hopes for the future. The objective of this work is to relate the reality of their womanhood to concepts of feminism, not as it is strictly defined today as a movement, but as a manifestation of a woman's desire or her right to do whatever she wants to do, to consider right whatever her heart dictates her to deem right, to live as she wants to live and to find happiness in whatever she feels is conducive to her happiness.*

Women are the same everywhere, they say ... of the same flesh and blood.... In fact, womanhood is universal rather than global. Yet, six women broke free from the traits of this very universal womanhood to establish their individual identities. Draupadi, Sita, Lady Macbeth, Antigone, Medea, and Clytemnestra are epitomes of the virtues of femininity; yet they do not let either their femininity or their womanhood deter them from their destined and determined paths- the paths of the realizations of these selves, and to eternal name and glory, with the tales of their softer virtues their beauty, dignity and womanliness and the sterner justice, strength, vigour, and defence of their own rights.

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All mother goddesses spin and weave... Everything that is comes out of them: They weave the world tapestry out of genesis and demise, threads appearing and disappearing rhythmically...

Mothers and Amazons
Helen Diner (Diner 16)

This work brings together six women characters whose names are firmly etched on the sands of time, from six magnum opuses by six phenomenal writers whose fame crossed the thresholds of cultures, languages, and nations. Six characters who are not goddesses; yet they cannot be categorised among ordinary mortal beings, for theirs are stories which transcend the barriers of mundane human existence, which have created histories ever since, and which have remained inscribed on the hearts and minds of readers across the globe since time immemorial. The lives and careers of these six women characters, Vyasa's Draupadi, Sophocles' Antigone, Euripedes' Medea, Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, Aeschylus' Clytemnestra and Valmiki's Sita, within the narrative texts associated with them, adumbrate the same cyclicalities of events and influences, movements and stasis, diversions and extensions that can be witnessed in women across the globe, and pave the way for female aspirations and expectations, to establish individual identities in a world which is till now male-dominated and distinctly patriarchal. They belong to the past, yet they have profound influence upon the present experiences, and upon hopes for the future; for past, present and future are inextricably bound, and their encounters with a tangible but complex web of experiences, feelings, thoughts, consciousnesses, visions, fantasies, and prophecies, display a marvellous multiplicity of existences and freedom from very oppressive ambiances. Their moral temperaments and creative moods and attitudes vary from silent aberration, to eloquent affirmation or passive subjugation; from ambiguous moments of irony, to helpless moments of despair; from thought-provoking moments of cynicism, to quiet moments of pragmatic contemplation; from objective and indifferent dispassion, to deeply felt moment of heart-felt emotions; from impulsive states of unfaithfulness to loyal commitment. But taken together, they gloriously orchestrate an imaginative, yet so realistic version of one basic reality – the reality of womanhood. And the objective of this work is to relate the reality of their womanhood to concepts of feminism, not as it is strictly defined today as a movement, but as a manifestation of a woman's desire or her right to do whatever she wants to do, to consider right whatever her heart dictates her to deem right, to live as she wants to live and to find happiness in whatever she feels is conducive to her happiness.

Feminism has always been interpreted and understood differently in India than in the west. Historical circumstances and social values in India make women's issues different from the western feminist theory. Indian feminist scholars and activists have had to struggle to carve a separate niche for feminism in India. For, Indian women negotiate survival through a wide gamut of oppressive patriarchal family structures: age, ordinal status, relationship to men through family of origin, marriage and procreation as well as patriarchal attributes, dowry, bearing sons, etc, kinship, caste, community, village, market, and the state.

Feminism in India is not a single theoretical notion: it has changed over time with changes in historical, cultural and social realities, levels of consciousness perceptions and actions of individual women and women as a group. The widely used definition, is "An awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation". To create an equitable society for both men and women, it is necessary to recognise sexism in daily life and attempt to challenge and erase it through deconstructing mutually exclusive concepts of femininity and masculinity as biologically determined categories.

The concept of men and women as polar opposites with the former oppressing the latter at all times is refuted in the Indian context because it was men who initiated social reform movements against various social evils. In India, patriarchy is just one of the hierarchies and relational hierarchies between women within the same family are more adverse. Here women are pitted against one another. Not all women are powerless at all times though. The polytheistic Hindu pantheon provides much-revered images of women as unique and yet complementary to those of male deities and male legendary figures.

In the Ancient Indian epic Mahabharata, Draupadi is the daughter of King Drupada of Panchala, who becomes the wife of the five Pandavas. When Yudhishthira becomes the king of Hastinapura, Indraprastha and the Emperor of India at the end of the war, Draupadi becomes his Queen. Draupadi is also known by her demonym, Panchali, and as per Narada and Vayu Puranas, in one of the earliest recorded protests against a male dominated world and society, Draupadi's characteristic fight against injustice reflects one of the first acts of feminism – a fight for one's rights; in this case, the right to avenge the wrongs inflicted on her. At other times, reflecting acute feminine helplessness, Draupadi was docile and even waited to be rescued (as in case of Jayadratha and Jatasura). Other times, she showed astuteness in hiding her true identity as the composite Avatar of powerful goddesses and asking Vayuputra Bhima to kill the evil Keechaka. A composite avatar of Kali, Parvati, Sachi, Shaymala, Usha, Bhaarti, Shree Swaha, Draupadi is regarded by most Hindus as the exemplification of Bhakti to God, but in this work she is exemplified as one of the earliest feminists, be it in terms of polyandry, regarded as a matter of censure by society, then and now, or in terms of her thirst for revenge.

Defining Shakespeare's Macbeth in terms of feminism requires a keen insight into the Macbeths' relationship, which clarifies the upheaval in the kingdom, its direct effect on the king, the cause of Macbeth's fall and disintegration, and allows us to delve into the effects of conscience and remorse on the human psyche. In all cases, Lady Macbeth's character with her perfect and inseparable blend of femininity, so obvious in her role of a committed and loyal partner in supporting her husband through thick and thin, and feminism explicit in her indomitable striving to reach her goal, an inflexibility of will, a single-minded intensity that holds in check her emotive qualities and gives her strength to overcome all negative and malign circumstances and to believe in herself.

Lady Macbeth is fired by a soaring ambition, but for her it is not just a sheer lust for power. She is ambitious for her husband who, she believes, is best suited for the throne of Scotland, and her ambition springs out of her love for him and their combined dream of Macbeth's aggrandisement. She is intelligent enough to recognize her husband's weakness, for, he is "he is too full of the milk of human kindness" and scruples "to catch the nearest way" to achieve his desire, and sets herself, without any doubt or conflict in her mind, to rid him of his weakness. She is determined that things would turn out just as predicted, and just as she wants—"Glamis thou art, and Cawder, and shalt be what thou art promised". For her, there is no separation between will and deed. Through her sheer force of will she instigates her vacillating husband to commit the gruesome murder of Duncan, and her passionate courage sweeps him off his feet.

In Sophocles' Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus breaks the social norm by going against the government. In the beginning of the play, the sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polynices are pronounced dead, having killed each other due to a bitter fight over the throne. Polynices was angry that his brother had been named next in line for the throne, and proceeded to send soldiers to fight against Eteocles and Thebes. Creon, the current ruler, declares Polynices as a traitor to Thebes, and a man of dishonor. Because of this, a proper burial of Polynices is forbidden. Antigone, who believes that an improper burial will anger the gods, decides to bury Polynices herself. When Creon learns of this, he holds Antigone captive, and threatens to bring death upon her. In her defence, Haemon, who is both Creon's son, and Antigone's fiancé, confronts his father. Haemon threatens his father that if Antigone were to die, someone else would die as well. Infuriated, Creon locks Antigone in a cave, and leaves her to starve to death. The prophet, Tiresias, then informs Creon that if he were to kill Antigone, death would fall upon his own flesh and blood. Creon then decides to free Antigone, and give

Polynices a proper burial. However, despite his change of mind, Creon is too late, as Antigone had already hung herself in the cave. In response to Antigone's death, Haemon proceeds to bring death to himself. Creon ultimately suffers great loss and sadness at the sight of his dead son.

Antigone is believed to have shown signs of early feminism, since in times it was against the norm of a typical ancient Greek woman to rebel against a male authority, as there was always the fear that rebellion against male authority would lead to serious repercussions. In such a society, Antigone went against the orders of Creon and showed definite female power. She followed her beliefs strongly and ignored the threats of higher powers telling her to do otherwise. She took responsibility for her actions and rebelled openly. Also, the fact that Antigone commits her own death at the end, shows her unwillingness to accept male conquer. Although there have been two separate viewpoints, "Antigone the Feminist" proves to be stronger. Antigone can absolutely be said to be an early example of a feminist because she is a manifestation of qualities seen in both historic and modern day feminists.

The Rama myth has been extensively exploited by the patriarchal Brahmanical system to create an ideal Hindu male; Sita, too has been built up as an ideal Hindu female to help serve the system. The impact is far reaching. Although Sita's life can hardly be called a happy or peaceful one, she remains the ideally feminine woman through whom the patriarchal values may be spread far and wide, through whom women may be taught to bear all injustice silently. But of course, there are always alternative ways of using a myth. Certain aspects of Sita's character have been emphasized more than others to suit the political and social norms of the day. Most have focused on the negative interpretations of Sita, not the positive. Ramayana is merely understood as Ram Charitmanas, a character study of humans and emotions. However, in a world where the role of women is still being redefined, Sita's character teaches us valuable lessons for the contemporary society.

Perspectives on Sita are many. Some see Sita as Pativrata, the Ideal Woman, who lives and dies for her husband. Others see her as victimized. Yet, there are also those who see a more liberated Sita, outspoken, yet fiercely loving her husband. She was always faithful to him, served him well, did not get seduced by the affluence in Ravana's palace, faced an angry and suspicious husband later, tried to appease him, reconciled her marriage, later accepted her separation and raised well-balanced children as a single mother- the mark of an independent woman, free from the shackles of a patriarchal and male-dominated society. Sita revealed her greatness wherever she was placed.

Aeschyles's plays revolved around ethics. And Agamemnon is no exception. However, it is not really about Agamemnon as much as it is about Clytemnestra, his wife. Whether Aeschyles desired to present her as a feminist figure we do not know, but readers over the world will definitely agree to view Clytemnestra from this perspective. Clytemnestra tells us early that she has suffered immensely in her life and mentions the loss of her beloved daughter Iphigenia. In spite of all the heinous crimes she commits to avenge the death of her daughter by the hands of her husband, we sympathize with her. Agamemnon was leading Greek forces in the Trojan War in Troy, when consistently weak winds were preventing his ships from sailing, and he was asked to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, to the Goddess Artemis, to set sail again. He persuaded Clytemnestra to send Iphigenia by deceiving her into believing that the purpose was to marry her off to Achilles. When Iphigenia arrived, she was sacrificed to ensure her father's safe return from Troy, with Cassandra, his concubine. When Agamemnon arrived home, Clytemnestra treated him almost like a god, ensuring a non-existent struggle before she stabbed him three times. If feminism is a fight against injustice perpetrated by a male figure, Clytemnestra is indeed a true feminist figure. For, although Agamemnon looked upon Iphigenia's death as a public necessity, Clytemnestra saw her death as a private loss- any mother would- and consequently could not forgive it. Aeschyles thus creates a woman with whom his audience could sympathize, and whose pain felt real to them. This was no small effort, considering the fact that in ancient Greece women were looked upon as slaves. In Agamemnon, we understand why Agamemnon did what he did, the need for Agamemnon's action, but yet we feel that Clytemnestra was completely justified in planning ten years worth of bitterness against the man who killed her child. And under the circumstances, we completely sympathize with her desire to kill that man and we understand Clytemnestra's view, and excuse her intrusion into an area normally reserved for men, seeking vengeance. In ancient Athenian society, women had no legal rights; their function, aside from motherhood, was to see that home ran smoothly and the lives of their men were secure and comfortable. Clytemnestra broke free from these shackles- this is what makes her an exemplification of the earliest attempts of feminism.

The well-known Greek Tragedy, Medea, written by the Athenian playwright Euripides was set in 413 BC. During this time, many civilizations across the world had a patriarchal society, or a society in which the men dominated over the women. This characteristic of a culture, in which men were the more powerful of the two genders, was also prevalent in ancient Greece at the time. Women were often discriminated against and were not deemed as important as the opposite sex. Through Medea, Euripides invites his audience to criticize the unfair treatment of women in Greek society by stating points which argue that physical size, shape, and body chemistry do not make men naturally superior to women. Euripides' portrayal of the protagonist Medea with a complete disregard for patriarchal stereotypes, her contradiction to Jason's sexist remarks, and her ignorance of

the feminine role of nurturing and motherhood, makes the play one of the few that undermines patriarchy rather than enforces it.

After Jason's betrayal, Medea decides to take revenge. It is evident, through the way she manipulates the other characters within the play and takes control of her present situation, that she is quite intelligent and rational. Medea's self-will and determination to accomplish her own goals further portrays her as the complete opposite of a typical patriarchal woman who has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy in the Greek society. It was not believed feminine for a woman to be extremely intelligent, have strong opinions, or assert one's rights. Despite this, Medea is portrayed as an incredibly strong, intelligent and courageous woman, undermining the patriarchal belief that women are weak, vulnerable, irrational, emotional, unassuming, and submissive.

Medea's most shocking display of feminism is shown when she suppresses the "normal" instincts of motherhood and in order to be able to make her husband suffer, murders her own sons. This act of violence which is usually only considered applicable to men demonstrates how different she is from "every woman". Medea, during her scheming for revenge, utterly ignores the patriarchal stereotypes she was expected to follow. Furthermore, she argues against Jason's sexist remarks even though men were believed to be superior and always right. These actions and her obvious "unwomanly" traits such as strength, cunning, and bravery, and her ignorance of the feminine role of motherhood led the play to undermine patriarchy in Greek society. The play successfully conveys the message that patriarchal society is unfair and that the common belief that men are superior to women is completely untrue.

Women are the same everywhere, they say ... of the same flesh and blood.... In fact, womanhood is universal rather than global. Yet, six women broke free from the traits of this very universal womanhood to establish their individual identities; six women who dared to break free from the restrictions imposed by a hostile society to create history. In a patriarchal culture what we get is a masculinise definition of ideals and image of women. These ideals and visions are not the creations of women. They are born out of their own experiences. This work presents these very experiences of six phenomenal female literary figures, and views them from the perspective of ancient as well as contemporary views of 'femininity' and 'feminism'. Draupadi, Sita, Lady Macbeth, Antigone, Medea, and Clytemnestra are epitomes of the virtues of femininity; yet they do not let either their femininity or their womanhood deter them from their destined and determined paths- the paths of the realizations of these selves, and to eternal name and glory, with the tales of their softer virtues their beauty, dignity and womanlines and the sterner justice, strength, vigour, and defence of their own rights.

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