

Feminist Theory of Asking New Questions of Old Texts with Reference to Kabita Sinha's *Eve Speaks to God*

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ABSTRACT

Women's voices have been suppressed through mythological characters. This article aims at how women writers in the 20th century have revisited the old texts to create new ones to express their protest against patriarchal marginalization. It also presents the writings of Bengali post-colonial women poets can shake the hegemony of logocentric meta-narratives of gender. The poem *Eve Speaks to God* written by Bengal poet Kabita Sinha is taken to analyse the theory of asking new questions of old texts. It exposes that the Postcolonial Bengali women poets have taken a dynamic role in articulating the voice of the marginalized mass, and thus the gendered subalterns in their poetry have come out of the pressure of colonial silence and have learnt to speak in post-colonial plurality. This article discusses several women writers and their the method of revising myths, including retelling them entirely from a feminist perspective.

Key Words: Logocentric, Androcentric, Patriarchal Marginalization, Gendered Subalterns, and Micro Narratives.

INTRODUCTION

The new voice of protest and emancipation of women has become a strong critical discourse in Bengali literature since the 19th century. Only since the second half of the 20th century, however, female writers like Malika Sengupta (1960-2011), Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016), Gayatri Spivak (1942), Taslima Nasrin (1962) and Kabita Sinha (1931-1998) strikingly have stepped out of the shadow of marginalized status. Kabita Sinha is the first feminist poet of Bengali literature. She is noted for rejecting the traditional housebound role of Bengali women by her modernist stance. The same theme has echoed later in the work of other poets, including Maika Sengupta and Taslima Nasrin. The writings of Bengali post-colonial women poets can shake the hegemony of logocentric meta-narratives of gender. Her poem *Iswarke Eve (Eve speaks to God)* address the woman's place vis-a-vis man, which is translated into English by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. This article also compares the characterization of Eve in the Bible or Paradise Lost and Eve created by Kabita Sinha in the modern era. As Sarkar strongly supports the view of Bengal literature that

In post-independence Bengal, feminist consciousness was first pronounced in the pen of Kabita Sinha. Probably because of the same she was displaced and somewhat marginalized in the male-dominated milieu of Bengali literature. Her new voice of protest and pang, anger and challenge from a gender perspective was recognised in her lifetime. The first feminist poet of Bengali literature died unrecognized, 'banished from paradise, exiled.' (77)

Women's Narrative

Writings of Mahasweta Devi and Mallika Sengupta is compared from various angles. While Maha Sweta Devi concentrates predominantly on the issues of discrimination of tribal women, on their double or triple marginalization-the intersection of socio-cultural, ethnical and gender discriminations, Malika's analysis is characterized as a search for women's voices that have been suppressed, be it mythological characters like Draupadi or Sita, or real women who suffered discrimination like Shah Bano. According to the opinion of Spivak, both Mahasweta and Mallika have explored the space of the subaltern, silenced voices.

Sengupta avers the role of Bengali women writers that

Postcolonial Bengali women poets have taken a dynamic role in articulating the voice of the marginalized mass, and thus, the gendered subalterns in their poetry have come out of the pressure of colonial silence and have learnt to speak in postcolonial plurality. Rejecting the master code and meta-narratives of patriarchy they are creating alternative idiolect and micro narratives. (3)

To voice against the patriarchal marginalization in Indian context and gendered subaltern which reacts to this hegemony in the poems of postcolonial Bengali women poets, "Ishwarke Eve," one of Kabita Sinha's most representative poems has been taken to examine the feminist theory of asking "new questions of old texts" where she retells the Biblical story of with Eve to express her protest against patriarchal marginalization. As an alternative of just studying prior works, it is the revision of old texts to create new ones. Kabita Sinha explains how a woman is the first one to experience both joy and vicissitudes of life

RETELLING OF MYTHS

Women writers have used multiple methods of revising myths, including retelling them entirely from their point of view of the main female character and recreating the entire story in a way that she tries to break down the treatment of women and blaming them for all the downfall, and telling the story with a feminist perspective who satirically pokes fun at the flawed view of women in the original text.

Western cultural movements repeatedly incorporate mythological elements ever since the Renaissance through Novels, Poems, Drama, and music in English. Along with the Bible and the classical works of Shakespeare, the myths of Greece and Rome have been major 'touchstone' in Western Culture. In most classic mythologies, women are often portrayed as either dark characters or causing downfall to the heroes who get all the glory. Contemporary poets have begun retelling these myths by viewing them from a feminist perspective, thereby highlighting the stories of women living in the shadows of men.

Angela Carter (1979) has rewritten fairy tales from the point of view of the heroine to extract the latent content of the traditional stories. In her collection, *The Bloody Chamber*, she examines the messages about adolescent sexuality in stories like 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'Snow White' overturning the sexual mythology of simple fairy stories. Margaret Atwood questions about classic mythology, such as why they are mostly written from the male perspective, and why abused mythological women remain unheard in her following works: *The Penelopiad* (2005), *Morning Burned House* (1995), *You Are Happy* (1974), and *Interlunar* (1984). She has been criticised contemporary patriarchy and given a voice to women who are often portrayed as eternally submissive. Many of Atwood's novels present myth and legend and her most recent works are dystopian myths of her own invention and tackles the seminal Greek epic is for her a natural undertaking.

Margaret Atwood's (1939) *Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing* retells the modern 20th century version of the famed beauty of Helen of Troy. This poem suggests that most women of the 20th Century feel disgust and hate towards those that sell their bodies and degrade the veracity of females worldwide. Atwood's poem deals ethereal power and incomparable beauty.

Natalie Haynes (2019) *A Thousand Ships* retells Greek epic Homer's *Iliad* from the women's point of view is a panoramic portrait of the true cost of conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans. Madeline Miller's (2011) retells of the *Iliad*, *The Song of Achilles*. If *The Song of Achilles* recovered a half-buried homosexual love story of the *Iliad*, *Circe* gives us a feminist slant on the *Odyssey*. Natalie Haynes (2017) previously retold the story of Oedipus in her novel *The Children of Jocasta*. She recounts that the Trojan War is a woman's war and it also draws the attention of the pain of the women who have always been relegated to the edges of the story, victims of men, survivors of men, slaves of men.

Pat Barker's (2018) remarkable *The Silence of the Girls* retells the *Iliad* through the character of Briseis as feminist *Iliad*. Briseis ponders how the war will be remembered as the enslavement of women and girls. They won't want to know we were living in a rape camp. Judith Butler (2002) in her non-fiction Essay *Antigone's Claim* uses Sophocles' myth of Antigone to explore feminist concepts of kinship and citizenship. Javairia Nousheen states in her essay that there are multiple methods of retelling and revising myths, such as:

- Re-telling a tale entirely from the point of view of a female character – *Wide Sargasso Sea* by *Jean Rhys*.
- Recreating the story in a way that attempts to break down the treatment of women as inactive objects – Reading *Lolita in Tehran* by *Azar Nafisi*.

- Telling the story through a feminist narrator who satirically pokes fun at the flawed view of women in the original text – *Eve O' Eve* by Taslima Nasreen.
- Changing the entire storyline or portraying the tale in a whole new setting, to emphasize on the women characters – *Indulekha* by Chandumenon.(2)

Jean Rhys an African writer retells the story of Jane Eyre written by British Writer Charlotte Bronte. The name of the characters, incidents and female writers are the similarities of the novels. Themes of colonizer and colonized are newly added in the Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys.

MILTON'S BLAMEABLE EVE

Eve is looked upon as the woman who caused the fall of mankind. She is the one who not only herself was influenced by Satan; but also influenced Adam. These two were innocence until Eve yielded to the temptation of the evil serpent and Adam joined her in eating the forbidden fruit. Immediately, God recognised their transgression and proclaimed their punishments. This shows the act of disobedience towards God, the creator. Milton paints Eve to be a temptress and a vain woman, who was never as good enough as Adam. Being his mate, she is described as inferior to Adam. He depicts her in a negative light; for instance the first thing she does upon coming to life is stare at herself in a lake, like Narcissus until God leads her away. She surpasses Adam only in her beauty. She falls in love with her own image where she sees her reflection on water. Then he blames her for being unable to resist Satan, who just happens to be the most eloquent speaker in English Literature. The major fault he finds with her is her sense of curiosity.

Ironically, her greatest asset produces her most serious weakness of vanity. After serpent compliments her on her beauty, he easily persuades her to eat the fruit of knowledge. Her intelligent is tested here. Woman is viewed as weak in will and thought. Eve is the source and symbol of many of the negative traits assigned to women; the story of Eve has been used to justify the punishment of women throughout history. According to Frank Eve has long been advanced as a prototypical woman. There have been allegations to the effect that Eve was ignorant, and easily duped into eating an apple by a wily serpent. She then used her feminine wiles to seduce her husband, Adam, into eating the fruit as well. In so doing, Eve is said to have brought about the fall of humanity. (79) The binary oppositions presented in the religious text are such as : God and Man, Man and woman, bone and flesh, Adam and Eve, ashamed and unashamed, naked and fig leaf or apron cover. Ordinary reading of the Bible or Paradise Lost will make its androcentric nature which is self-evident. Woman is made out of man's rib though it is the mother who gives birth to a baby. God created man in His own image. Therefore, God is male. Man is created first. One can see the deep-rooted gender-bias which has become part of the historical and textual tradition. Spender (1981) points out that masculine gender in English writing has not only been stable but also dominant.

KABITA'S REBELLIOUS EVE

Instead of merely accepting the ideas suggested in the myths, fairy tales, and the Scripture, Kabita retells the story of Eve from the Bible in a new perspective. She creates a new revised version of Eve by retelling the classic work of the Bible or Milton's *Paradise Lost* in a whole new light. Kabita Sinha retells of the biblical story of Eve who is a defiantly a rebellious woman which can be connected to her personal life as a rebellious spirit, she was involved in dissidence movements in the 1950s. She has given a voice to the famous mythical woman, Eve; one who is said to cause the fall of man. Revisionist writing allows the woman writer to share her side of the story and defend her actions if required. Kabita's Eve emerges as a strong and intelligent woman, who refuses to blindly surrender to patriarchal structures. Kabita's creative use of narrative theory provides a defense for Eve. She has vindicated Eve, for instance, forces a reconsideration of the negative traits assigned to women on Eve's behalf.

Eve is the first to break the shackles of luxurious pleasure and that she is the first rebellion on earth, as the first in a tradition of awakened woman who dares to transcend the inviolate and inviolable boundaries to reach personhood. She has used the refrain "I was first" for fourteen times in the poem to indicate the sense of pride and protest. She takes pride in being the first person to know that there is life and there is death. She claims that she was the first to know the meaning of happiness and sorrow, obeying and disobeying, grief and joy, good and evil. She was the first to touch and taste the forbidden fruit. She was the first to know the light and dark which symbolize the knowledge and sinful life. She claims that she is the first person to disobey the master's command revealing her rebellious act. As Sengupta asserts the voice of Kabita's Eve "Through Eve's speech to God, we actually hear a Bengali woman's voice raised against moral policing and social restrictions (2)."

Further, she feels proud that it was she the first who tasted forbidden fruit and the first to gain knowledge. She was the one who understood what shame was and thus established modesty by raising a fig leaf to cover her.

The following line speaks about her notion of modesty:

"I was the first, first-first to distinguish between modesty and immodesty
by raising a wall with a fig leaf"

Kabita talks about how women are taught to dress and behave in the name of modesty and shameless. She also asserts that the very idea of modesty was introduced to the world by Eve when she raised fig leaf to cover herself.

She further states in the following line that it is she who discovered the first pleasures the body could offer and also the first to experience pain in the act of giving birth.

"I was first, first pleasure my body consoled the first sorrow."

The following lines from the poem show her rebellious nature:

"I was first to know, obeying you or disobeying means the same."

"I was never a puppet to dance to your tune like meek Adam."

She realizes that she can decide to obey or not to obey the God/man, and she herself can decide what to do and what not to. Coming out of her subaltern marginalized position, the Eve in Kabita Sinha's poem finds a new voice of protest. Towards the end of the poem, Eve states that:

"I was first to break the golden shackles of luxurious pleasure."

She is defending her action by stating that even though it was golden and luxurious, the Garden of Eden was nothing but a jail. By making her own choice, she becomes the first rebellion that God has ever seen, and thus she is first to be punished by him; however, she states that she has no regrets for her actions as they have taught her that a human life on earth is better than that of a lifeless paradise.

Sinha on the other hand, portrays Eve as a woman strong enough to face the consequences of her own actions. She in fact, says that what God considered a punishment for Eve, actually turned out to be the best boon she could have asked for. Here revisionist writing has provided Sinha a chance to give the infamous Eve a chance to tell the world the tale from her side.

TASLIMA'S WOMANKIND EVE

On the other hand, Taslima Nasreen retells the same story Eve in her poem 'Eve O' Eve' in a different way.

"Because Eve did eat of the fruit, there is sky and earth."

"Eating of the fruit, Eve made a heaven on earth."

She opines that it is because Eve has eaten the fruit, there is the sky; earth and heaven, there are moon, sun, rivers and seas. It is because of Eve, there is joy on this earth. This is the attitude of a new woman who showcases the point that Eve and women in the past are not to be misunderstood and blamed for no fault of theirs. We should probably thank her for the action's repercussions and then gives advice to all women and humanity in general.

Taslima also questions why Eve should suppress her desires and thirsts by not eating the apple. The Eve of Nasreen is compared to the battle facing every woman in society today. She also talks about how women now are taught how to dress and behave; all in the name of modesty whereas, the very idea of modesty was introduced to the world by Eve when she raised a fig leaf to cover herself. Towards the end of the poem Nasreen addresses all womankind as Eve and states that

"Eve, if you ever get hold of the fruit don't ever refrain from eating"

If the reader, as a woman, comes across a forbidden fruit, one forbidden by society or by a separate cultural pressure, she should take that fruit and devour it, rather than watch it hang upon its branch because who knows what fantastical

realizations will result from the eating of such fruit. One may even uncover a bluer sky than that which presently exists. One may even uncover paradise. Frank states that men in Western culture have used this story for millennia to explain and justify the subservient position of females in society. They have claimed that women, like Eve, are easily duped into committing wrongful acts and should therefore be under tight control of their husbands or fathers. Many also view women as dangerous temptresses who will lead men into wrongdoing. (79) On the contrary, Kabita's Eve is portrayed as an intelligent woman, curious enough to investigate and bold enough to take risks. She refuses to be shackled into any cage as a slave under any master.

CONCLUSION

There are different ways to voice out against the marginalized state presented a woman as mythical character which give new dimension to the readers to look at it. The retelling of the old texts into a new one would bring huge difference by breaking all the old structure, practices, ideologies of the society and emerge as revolutionist writing. There is still a lot of scope when it comes to feminist revisionist writings. There are various other women characters in literature unheard and remained silent and weak and voiceless.

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