

THE POLITICS OF DISABILITY CONSTRUCTING FEMININITY IN HINDU MYTHOLOGY: A READING OF REPRESENTATION OF MANASA AND GANDHARI

Dr. Nilanjana Sen

Assistant Professor in English, Kishore Bharati Bhagini Nivedita College (Co-Ed), Kolkata, West Bengal, India

ABSTRACT

In an attempt to renegotiate the boundaries between theoretical perspectives, the present paper will venture to initiate an investigation into the points of interception between the two major issues of gender and disability through a re-reading of two characters from Hindu mythology: mother Gandhari of Mahabharata and goddess Manasa in folk pantheon of Bengal. While the former imposes blindness willingly to satisfy the required criteria of suttee, the latter is disabled physically as a punishment for denying the gender norms, and both examples expose how the phenomenon of visual impairment gets problematized when it is burdened with multiple significances beyond itself.

The devotion which, in case of goddess Manasa, is a product of sheer fear as well as disgust surrounding this controversial disabled goddess of Hindu pantheon, forms part of a strategy of keeping this threat of the Other woman or even a possibility of matriarchy outside the ambit of “normalcy”. While the physical blindness of Manasa is abhorred as symbolic of the innate crookedness, the self-imposed blindness of Gandhari is endowed with iconic status of “satitwa” (woman’s fidelity to her husband). Throughout the earlier portion of the ‘Padmapurana’, Manasa gets closely associated with sex and sexuality and, very conveniently, to feminine bawdiness: her own father, Lord Shiva, desires her, her step mother Chandi transfers the resentment helplessly on her, and Manasa gets blinded by torture. As a result, she is banished from the pantheon of able-bodied gods and is given in marriage to Jaratkaru, an impotent sage whose sexuality is aroused temporarily to preserve patrilineage. Manasa’s protest vilifies her. In contrast, in case of Gandhari, the bride’s personal moral grandeur is invoked to reinforce unaltered allegiance to the sacred institution of marriage. The newly wed bride takes an unexpected and unprescribed decision: since her husband and lord cannot see the world, she refuses to enjoy the blessings of vision and blind-folds herself for life. Gandhari’s avowal readily situates her in the pantheon of Suttee – her action is interpreted as a token for her devotion to her husband denying any possibility of its being an unregistered silent protest. In fact, so far as the representation of “blindness” is concerned, it finds ample scope of merger with the idea of “suttee” denying to allow a perspectival lens distinct from her husband.

Although a member of the Hindu pantheon having an alternate glorious image in Vedas and Puranas, Manasa degenerates in ‘Mangalkabya’s, consequent upon her position as independent of man, and, with increasing frigidity of the binary between masculinity and femininity, she becomes the reservoir of the gender-defying qualities. On the other hand, among all great women figures in the great Mahabharata, Gandhari alone is blessed with the divine power, which obviously is nothing but the halo (“teja”) of the suttee. The special feminine virtue gets eulogized since any counter discourse would identify a woman as an independent moral entity dismantling patriarchy, which is a greater threat to the hegemony than the war itself. And this is the exact reason for which the rebellious goddess’s divine affiliation gets cancelled and repulsiveness of her image gets multiplied with the imposition of physical blindness. But in both cases the phenomenon of “blindness” releases an extra-ordinary potential for subversion.

KEYWORDS: *Disability, Femininity, Sex Object, Motherhood, Suttee, Self-Imposed Blindness, Gender Defying Characteristics, Subversion.*

Article History

Received: 19 Jul 2019 | Revised: 25 Jul 2019 | Accepted: 31 Jul 2019
