

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

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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.*

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INTRODUCTION

The present era which puts firm faith in shifting the centre or even creating multiple centres, naturally renegotiates the boundaries to accommodate new perspectival lens and, there remains no difficulty to merge the theoretical frameworks deployed by both the gender study and disability study. The present paper will venture to initiate an investigation into the points of interception between the two major issues of gender and disability in an attempt to re-read two characters from Hindu mythology: mother Gandhari of Mahabharata and goddess Manasa in folk pantheon of Bengal. Here is an exploration of the meanings, motives and significations encoded in our unintended even unconscious “normal” perspectives emanating from so many given frames of references. Actually, the phenomenon of visual impairment gets problematized when it is burdened with multiple significances beyond itself: as a stereotypical image, it is often treated as a metaphor for lack of intellect/reason/rationality since eye is considered to be the primary organ of perception of light which, within another colonial discourse, symbolizes intellect and order. A similar pattern could be found in narrativizing women, chiefly represented as a vessel of patriarchal ideology in the literary tradition of India frequently associating femininity with metaphorical disability (instinct and emotion rather reason) while it has exhibited strong antipathy towards the actual impairment and even burdened the disabled bodied female with multiple unwelcome significations.

An amateur reading of both the authorial and the readerly version of ‘Manasamangal’, especially the version of Bijoy Gupta and that of the lived experience of mother Gandhari as depicted in ‘Mahabharata’ brings out how the mythology embody the special traits of the nation’s vast collective unconscious, which mirrors and gets mirrored in popular imagination. However, a reading of *Padma Purana* and some of its receptions may justify how a project of demeaning and degenerating a definite category of women (disabled and and/or unwomanly) can be fractured through subverting the impositions of significations. 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”. The dangerous disabled deity thus functions as a margin shaping the contour of an able-bodied patriarchy which could be imagined through intuition and irrational emotions. 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). The very act of equating the fidelity with blindness releases subversive potentials, loaded with all its negative implications.

A rudimentary overview of the evolution of goddess Manasa from the age of Purana to “Mangalkabya” (literary representation of Hindu myths in Bengal during Medieval period), records the history of the degeneration of a glorious goddess into a disgusting, fearful, vindictive yet powerful deity – the spiritual degeneracy coinciding with the physical, being one-eyed or blind. In older days, the image of Manasa was influenced by that of goddess Saraswati along with Lakshmi, brahma Patni Sabitri & even Shivashakti Durga/Parvati, although she does not find place in Vedic literature & major puranas except for the “Arbachin” or novel puranas like “Brahmakaibartya” & “Debibhagabat”. Sometimes Seated

on the lotus like Saraswati, she is imagined as having the complexion of white champak, wearing gem studded ornaments and fire-purified clothes, snake “yagnopobito” (hanging like a necklace). She possesses the “mahagyan” (primal knowledge), and is benevolent to fulfil the wishes of her devotees. Raghunandan Bhattacharya describes her as the mother of snake family and goddess of riches, having golden complexion and moon-faced, beautiful & gracefully seated on a duck like Lakshmi, wearing blood-red clothes and graced with golden & gem ornaments & snakes, as well as endowed with kindly gentle feelings. Ramai pandit also highlights her beauty, snake décor and the wish-fulfilling image as well. Though invariably associated with snake in every image, since snake connected associated with Visnu, Shiva, kali, Lakshmi and even Saraswati, it should not be considered as a mere non-Aryan totem or specific to Manasa. Learned and intelligent, she is an expert in poison science, and like Ganga, healer of disease and deceased by poison; and like folk goddess Shasthi, a goddess of fertility.

The resemblance does not exhaust with endowments alone, it gets extended to more minor points. Commenting on the similarity Sukumar Sen remarked, Saraswati is unmarried, Manasa is also a free woman - her marriage with Jaratkaru being only social face-saving. The former was desired by the Creator brahma, while Lord Shiva got attracted by the latter. Both goddesses have very close connection with dance and music (worship of Manasa, herself an excellent dancer, gets never completed without musical performance & Behula appeased her by her dancing and singing). The identity of Manasa & Lakshmi was sometimes interchangeable especially before Islamic period: both having alternative nomenclature like kamala & Padma, both originating in waterbodies, both deities along with Saraswati being daughters of Shiva. “Brahmakabartya” purana portrays Manasa as “singhabahini” (lion-carried) with Ganesha in her lap – the image supports the theory of goddess Chandi and Manasa being created by splitting the same divine spirit. Another explanation situates her birth from mind (“manas”), produced by yoga. In Rik Veda Maona is anger (“krodha”) & “divine glow (“Teja” or “Birjya”). The sun and fire gods are destroyer of poison, preserver of food, drink & whole world; In Rik Veda Saraswati, Rudra & Aswinikumardwoy cure diseases; according to Atharva Veda Saraswati dissolves poison. The power of multiple divinities is condensed in Manasa. The confluence of Kadru & Astik-mother in imagining Manasa occurred probably after the rise of Sena dynasty in Bengal & the “Brahmakabartya” & “Debibhagabat” attested it.

Critic Sukumar Sen spotted her as a pre-puranic goddess who did not find a place in puranas but survived in folk literature in changed forms. if the word “chyangmuri” could be translated into head of the “Chyang” fish & “kani” as one-eyed, then the influence of non-Aryanization could be identified., But according to Kshitimohan Sen, “Chengmur” is a Dravidian ayurvedic book: “chyang” is bamboo & “kani” is a piece of cloth referring to the clothed bamboo tree or Manasa tree having snake-like leaves. Interestingly, any stone idol does not represent her as one-eyed or small-headed, yet the disgust remains glued with her image. In the age of Yajur Veda, the snake-lore was considered as a branch of learning like music, & the promoting goddess was accorded dignity; but in subsequent Vedic learning, this non-Aryan element was discarded. Vedas adopted Saraswati & Mahajanis Janguli, & they became estranged.

The reading of this rather unusual history of the evolution of goddess Manasa may occasion interceptions of various theories in several points, and the Disability theory may take up the narrative as a fine case study. During different stages of receptions, the goddess shared, both in her appearance and accomplishments, grounds with many other goddesses (in some cases with gods) of Hindu pantheon, but while the latter ones are so gloriously embellished with such socially valued positive significations, the Padma of *Padma purana (the lore represented in Bengal Mangalkabya)* bears the legacy of the undesirable even evil aspects of human existence. The problem arises as the overall structure of her life and activity presents a powerful critique, or even subversion, of patriarchy.

The very myth relating to Manasa's birth out of the sperm of Lord Shiva fallen onto the lotus leaf is an obvious embodiment of the male fantasy of reproduction outside woman's womb, a product of womb envy. The fantasy of excluding the woman even from an instrumentality -- since the agency and possession are mostly possessed by man in a patrilineal and patriarchal social structure --, gets realized in society's overt denial to accept the role of a disabled woman as a mother. Her imagined unalterable dependence expels her from the regime of care-giver, and by implication, motherhood. However, what able-bodied community refuses to an ordinary disabled woman, the epic confers that very glory in a magnified portion on to the suttee Gandhari who chose blindness (blind-folded) by declining vision in an attempt to ensure her inferiority, otherwise the physical blindness would even destabilize the male superiority of king Dhritarastra. However, the manly authoritativeness of the king is attested by his capability of fathering hundred sons and a daughter (though often considered unworthy to perform other masculine duties).

Throughout the earlier portion of the narrative, Manasa gets closely associated with sex and sexuality and, very conveniently, to feminine bawdiness. The unusual circumstance (born without a mother and nurtured by Nagas in Patala away from and unknown to Heaven even after being the daughter of Shiva himself) makes her a cause of displacements of notions solidified down the ages by practice and propagation: the F/father lord Shiva proposes incest¹ to his own daughter. The folk recreation of Shiva is very much distinct from Vedic Maheshwara. He is presented as a patriarch with undisciplined and uncontrollable sexual urge, with almost the inclinations of a rapist and paedophilic. Charmed by the youth and beauty of Manasa, he is almost paralysed with an irresistible sexual arousal ("bikal")² establishing instinct, especially the sexual instinct, as the overpowering force disempowering the divine to follow the norms of control and judgement. It is also remarkable; the omniscient Creator of the world mysteriously cannot recognize his own daughter. The situation divulges number of possibilities, whether the ignorance is a cover for the uncontrollable desire or it implies a sex/knowledge dichotomy (knowledge eclipsed by sexual desire), it may be the willing transgression or privilege of the highest stratum of the universe to be a/immoral.?

The Lord deploys the ploy of imposing his own perverted greed ("lobh") on to the Other, the non-Aryan Asuras³ (he warns Manasa against them and prevents her going back to the place she was reared with love and care. Instead, he asks her to come under his protective shelter of "home" established through the institution of marriage⁴. The wife goddess Chandi helplessly takes recourse to feminine trappings like disguising herself as a sexy rower or other forms to satisfy her husband's lust for different women or expression of anger without any possibility of refusing to continue such humiliating status. The hegemonic helplessness leads to shifting the repulsion onto the weaker object with willing suspension of reason, & the betrayed daughter Manasa becomes the recipient of her transferred resentment. Thus, the perpetrator of exploitation, the man, escapes attention, accountability, stigmatization & consequence and, the victims fail to unite against their common cause of suffering. The torture surpasses all bounds to destroy one of her eyes and, the moment she gets blind, Manasa is banished from the arena of the able-bodied pantheon of gods who will easily deny its own role in disabling her.

However, as the limit of suffering breaks bounds, the non-Cinderella-like step daughter hits back the approved step-mother. Manasa now assumes the venomous destructive form in self-defence, & resultantly, the powerful woman, who protests & resists torture, easily gets vilified as poisonous. The protesting counter-action is readily categorized as disobedience both in order to keep up the family structure & hierarchy as well as to obliterate the direct contribution of society at large in creating clinical disability. The father, though absent to save his daughter from being blinded, commands her to undo the act of counter attack. She is further condemned by other gods invalidating her narrative⁵, advised to withdraw her spell as well and even, is threatened to become infamous otherwise.

Ironically, this dazzling beauty occasioning the arousal by her mere presence in gods and is beaten up mercilessly by her step mother falsely alleging incest, now loses her value in the marriage market. Although useful as an alluring sex object, Manasa does no longer has the right to enter into the institution of marriage and domesticity. She is given to a sage in marriage who is impotent and whose sexuality is aroused artificially only for a short span of time to ensure family lineage. In a patrilineal rubric, it is highly required to guaranty the licence for his forefathers for securing entry into heaven. According to “Adiparba” (introductory episode) of Mahabharata, sage Jaratkaru accepted a wife in condition that Basuki, the brother, will take responsibility of her cost of living & she will never make him annoyed. This over-simplified equation can be seen even in a modern play like “Tara” by Mahesh Dattani, where the “normal” Roopa, though herself attracted to disabled Chandan, suggests him to find a girlfriend from amongst some autistic or other kind of disabled persons as a counterfeit of former’s lameness. Expectedly, in the folk lore, we get no clear indication of natural consummation of the bride in nuptial night, rather by a fine transference of the husband’s incapacity, this self-conscious and self-confident woman is held responsible for showing unwifely arrogance leading to her desertion by the sage. He leaves Manasa with an excuse of being awakened by her in evening leaving not a single opportunity of penance and returns to the forest. However, before leaving he performs his duty by the blessing of reproduction and confers upon her the boon of having a son, beaming like sun-fire, Astika.

The extreme social injustice and the consequent shame which could have bulldozed any other woman, in case of Manasa, creates a subversive narrative: the wife does not play the role of Ahallya⁶. Being deserted by her husband, she lives a more or less contented life with her children. Her long loving association with Nagas makes this exceptionally talented lady excel in the branch of poison science; she even saves the life of lord Shiva, the god of gods. But when goddess Chandi, the mother of two sons, threatens to leave home, the father guiles his own daughter and leaves her in the forest along with another woman. However, away from man’s association as well as his domination, in this lonely idyllic land of wild nature, these two women continued to live a self-contented life unitedly which somehow emulates a lesbian fantasy.

A version of Mahabharata reads that Gandhari was in ignorance about her would-be husband’s blindness before marriage. Any disruptive possibility, however, of protesting against deception is kept outside the bounds of imagination since, according to Hindu faith, marriages are predetermined and the bonding must fulfil seven cycles in seven human incarnations of the soul. The political implication of any discontinuity apart, 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.

Society also determines an unconventional space for this great exemplar of wifely dedication. While Manasa is deserted by the slightest provocation by her husband (of course unjustified), Gandhari is privileged enough to criticize her husband’s biased attitude towards Pandavas and his unethical act of supporting his son Duryodhan in all his immoral activities verging to crime. The very stand she takes against Dhritarastra, clearly exhibits her as a person with deeper insight, better judgement, brighter intelligence and sounder morality. Yet, assigned to the role of the suttee, she could not take any step which would destabilize the institutional hierarchy of marriage. In fact, so far as the representation of “blindness” is concerned, it finds ample scope of merger with the idea of “suttee”: what a blind person does on technical level, following foot step of the escort, the suttee metaphorically performs the same act of following her husband, she

acquires only a second hand perception of the world outside her restricted domain -- in her case the dependency being more imprisoning and restricting, since, in physically impaired persons, the comprehensive/reasoning faculty remains liberated. Again, since the perspective/view point is metaphorized as eye sight, the suttee is expected to wear the perspectival glass of her lord. Hence, it was obligatory for the ideal wife to tie up the blindfold which is a strong signifier of her denial/sightlessness/rightlessness of any independent vision.

Here the self-imposed blindness acquires metaphoric dimension as was in case of her husband's clinical, therefore symbolic, impairment. The sacrifice surely did not have anything to do with tolerance to, sympathy or respect for the issue of disability. The myth, described in another epic Ramayana, assigned the son Shraavan the role of being the provider, guide and care-giver to his blind parents. But in the present story, the author is reluctant to allow Gandhari perform the same role. Though never unfolding herself in rest of her lifetime during any crisis of the family, state or religion to use her special preternatural power, she does it twice: first she weaves a talismanic shield around the almost naked body of her son Duryodhan by her divinely empowered glance that will keep him inaccessible to any mortal armoury and finally, to have a look of the earthly remains of her children and the fire of her eyes burns down some body portion of even divine Shrikrishna. In both instances she only replicates, on the superhuman level, what her husband does on human plain. The safety measure taken up by Gandhari is a version of the protective machineries mobilized by Dhritarastra with his socio-political stratagem, while her passionate rage against the designer of the destruction of her sons complements her husband's. Very Interestingly, while the classic's commitment to justice and truth requires Dhritarastra's failure in order to destroy the evil ("vinashayacha duskritam") and to preserve justice ("dharma"), For Gandhari, however, a different ethico-relegio formula is sought, since, as a suttee, her singular moral obligation amounts to keep obliged to her husband. Hence, she is absolved from any moral responsibility for not opposing her husband in an effective and assertive way.

On the other hand, although a member of the Hindu pantheon having an alternate glorious image in Vedas and Puranas, Manasa degenerates into a semi-divine entity frantically hankering to register Chand Sadagar's devotion and torturing cruelly in the process in 'Mangalkabya's, and this representation gets imprinted firmly in popular psyche. Maybe, 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. The idea of this disruptive woman incurs fear in the collective subconscious and she gradually loses divine affiliation. Now the Puranic Manasa – the fountainhead of "Mahagyan"⁷ (primal knowledge), is shown to be strategizing to steal away Chand's "mahagyan" in guise of an attractive dancer taking advantage of his slippery morality. Apart from excluding the possibility of the goddess's decision to withdraw her gift to Chand being offended by his ingratitude, the paradigm shift creates a sex-knowledge dichotomy endorsing the association of sex with woman and knowledge with man. If the compact iron bridal chamber commissioned by man symbolizes the omnipotent, self-sufficient and exclusive rationality, the tiny hole through which sneaks our Id/ "Kalnagini" (a fatal snake symbolizing both death and sex) is the handiwork of the woman make safe passage for our suppressed desire, fear and other irrational instincts often termed as blind instinctual forces. Now this liberated, self-conscious and capable woman fighting independently to acquire dignity incurs terror and is levelled as dangerous. Unsuitable to be situated within the circumference of household or being identified with the archetypal maternal affection, Manasa becomes emblematic of the sexual appeal of the woman body without incurring any romantic desire or emotional attachment. Thus, her blindness becomes the embodiment of all these undesired implications.

In fact, even a superficial deconstructive reading of the depiction and reception of the two female figures of Hindu mythology may expose how the meaning is given and value is conferred to our notions and functions to fulfil the aim of legitimizing the interest of the mainstream at the cost of the multitude margins. The map of marginalization of goddess Manasa leaves us to confront an alternative history of degeneration of the abstract divine power into the mere poison-healer and “chyangmurikani” with the non-Aryanization of the Vedic Maona. On the other hand, among all great women figures in the great Mahabharata, it is Gandhari alone who 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.

NOTES

- “Kaambhabe mahadeb bole anuchit. / Laje byakul Padma shuniya kutsit” (Gupta, 23, 152). “Enamoured crazed Mahadeb proposes unfair. / Shame overcomes Padma listening to such heinous thing” (Translation mine).
- “Padmare dekhiya Shiva hoilo bikal” (Gupta, 21, 146). “Gazing at Padma Shiva gets paralysed” (Translation mine).
- “E bone asura chore / Nari nahi tumi pore / Heno rup besh ke na lobh kore....” (Gupta, 20, 148) “Here asuras lurk / No woman you apart / Such beauty such apparel who does not the hunger feel” (Translation mine)
- “Koribo gondhorbo bibha loiya jabo Kashi.” (Gupta, 21, 143) “Shall arrange Gandhorbo marriage / And take you to Kashi:” (Translation mine).
- “Baap hoiya stuti kore / Uttar na dao tare / Tumi boro abodh chaoal... Apodos kolonke / Chandika jiyaiya de / koutuke rohuk debogon.” (Gupta, 439-441) “Despite being father prays / Yet nothing you say / you’re a very disobedient child ... Stigma of shamefulness will follow / If do not rejuvenate Chandika / Gods may live delighted” (Translation mine).
- Ahalya is the mythic character petrified at unjustified curse of her husband sage Gautama and waited long to be redeemed with the touch of Lord Rama’s feet.
- “Mahagyanajutanchoibo proborang gyaaninang sotim/ Siddhadhishtharidebincho siddhansiddhiprodang bhoje” (Brahmabobortyo Purana quoted in Bhattacharya). “And in possession of prime knowledge, the wisest amongst wise, the suttee / The goddess of fulfilment, the achiever and the conferrer of fulfilment, I invoke you” (Translation mine).

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