

Begin from the Beginning: The Need for Reimagining and Retelling Myths in Children's Books

Tulika Parikh

Abstract

Classical myths, handed down from generation to generation, are stories about culture, tradition, lifestyles, which shape us as people belonging to communities and in extension, our ideologies. But often these stories have veiled abuse, outright violence, gender bias, injustice, rapes and murders which are often justified within the system. When a child reads these stories, they learn about the culture, the traditions and the values, but also internalizes the problematic parts assuming that it's the way the world works. Recently, a lot of Indian myths have undergone revision but this revision is meant for adults and not children. Since myths are a part of growing up, shouldn't children also have their recipe of retelling? In this paper, I argue the kind of worldview a mythological story presents for a child and the need to make additions to it.

Keywords

Indian Mythology, Children Books, Revisionist Literature, Feminist Lens

1. Introduction

Indian children's stories for a long time focused on the didactic qualities along with entertainment. The folktales like Panchatantra, Vikram and Betal, Akbar and Birbal, Tenali Raman, etc. all focus on some form of moral, behavioral code, manner and ethics or common sense. Same is the case for mythological stories. Earlier orally narrated and now a lot of it codified and written, these stories tell us and our children about traditional values, cultural values, festivals and why we celebrate them, why we pray certain deities and not others and so on and so forth. They are crucial to our understanding of our religion, customs, and culture and they are so blended in our world and land that it is very difficult to not see it as history. For example, when Sati (human wife of Lord Shiva) entered the yagna fire and died, Shiva held her charred body in his arms and performed the Tandav (a form of dance) which was about to destroy the world. Lord

Vishnu, the protector of the world intervened and cut Sati's body, parts of which landed in different places of the world, which today we know as Shakti Peeths. People go to these Shakti Peeths to pray and this story becomes the history of that land. Similar to this is the story of King Rama building a stone bridge on water from India to Sri Lanka. When we see built structures, or relics of the building mentioned in the story, we start believing it as our history and look at it as our cultural and traditional heritage.

Subconsciously then, these stories play a huge role in forming our world view and the society around us. However, these stories are not as well rounded as they come across. These stories focus more of the physical than the psychological conflict.

“The formula of myths has been comprehensible to the masses and children alike, since the story objective is mainly on the physical not psychological dilemmas, conflicts with barriers to overcome are outside rather than inside, and with significantly greater emphasis on the more obvious virtues such as bravery and loyalty.” [1]

Moreover, these stories often focus only on the actions of the main characters and not the secondary and tertiary ones. For example, Ravana, in the epic Ramayan, has space in the narrative (only as a villain) but his sister, Surpankha (whose nose was cut off by Laxman), and Madodari, his wife, does not share this space in spite of playing part in the story. When we don't hear the other side of the story, we start idealizing the main character and despising the other who is against the protagonist. This is one of the most effective way of creating stereotypes and binaries, like hero-villain, good wife-bad wife, cultured-uncultured and so on. Myths work on these stereotypes because as mentioned earlier, it is one of the tools to educate people about what is acceptable in the society and what is not.

The idea is that when a child reads stories about heroes, about good behavior, about good, ideal women, they internalize these basic, fundamental cultural values, codes of conduct and unconsciously or deliberately, these stereotypes are reinforced in them. Over time, these may show their effect in their attitudes, in their belief system and will affect the person they become. Now, these lessons would have been helpful if we lived in a simplified world where everything is either right or wrong. But we live in a complex world where ideas, terminologies, concept of justice and values keep changing, and in this scenario, the building blocks of understanding good and bad, right and wrong, have to be equipped and made relevant to the present society. Moreover, these stereotypes provide justification for injustice, violence, gender-inequality and damaging patriarchal rules and rituals which in turn is also reinforced in the child from a very young age. Let's take a look at some of these concepts.

2. Women in Myths and the Roles They Play

The stereotype of an ideal woman and an ideal wife and its opposite is perhaps present in almost all the cultures around the world. This puts a woman in the myth in a place where she is observed by both men and women and undergoes immense pressure to follow the role delegated to her.

“This pattern, which leaves out women as individuals, extends from high culture to popular mythology: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only the relations of men to women, but the relation of women to themselves.” Critic John Berger’s well-known quote has been true throughout the history of Western culture, and it is more true now than ever.” [2]

The important women in Indian myths, Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Madodari, Tara, Ahalya are all high caste, Kshatriya or Brahmin women and daughters, wives, sisters and friends of important men. Their agency comes from their role related to the men in their lives and yet, in true sense, they are not in fact in control of their lives. They are bound by the roles they play in the larger narrative and in some cases, exist to aid the main character and the event than for their own. Ideals of sacrifice, love, care, motherhood, beauty, jealousy are more emphasized in them than others. If they are outspoken, bold, and have leadership qualities, they are portrayed as dangerous women whereas the same qualities are applauded in a man.

“Women are either angels or monsters. Myths at one both reflect as well as dictate how a typical woman should be. Powerful women are constructed as evil, ugly, ill tempered and abnormal. Being powerful is always associated with being unwomanly.” [3]

For example, Draupadi, in Mahabharat, known for her boldness and intelligence is outspoken and not scared to speak her mind and yet she had no control over her swayamvar, her marriage to five men, the Pandavas, her kingdom and her home. In fact, for the same reasons, she was stripped of her clothes and dignity when the Pandavas wagered her in a game of dice like a piece of property and lost her to the Kauravas. Similarly, Sita, in Ramayan, was a princess and still didn’t have control over whom she would marry. A king/prince, nevermind the age, temperament, compatibility, who accomplished the task of lifting a bow that belonged to Lord Shiva would be her husband. Rama married Sita and brought her to Ayodhya, his kingdom, setting forth a series of events which led to her abduction by Ravana, her rescue and her being pregnant and abandoned in the forest.

However, both women are held somewhat responsible for the wars that happened. In the mainstream version, if Draupadi didn’t insult the Kaurava king, she would have never been stripped of her saree in the crowded court and in turn, never cursed the Kauravas which forced her husbands to go on the war. However, other versions say that they fought, not only for Draupadi’s honour but also for their birthright as kings. In this light, was Draupadi the cause? Similarly, Sita was abducted and didn’t go on her own accord. She crossed the Laxman rekha (Laxman’s circle of protection) out of kindness and compassion and was tricked by Ravana.

Both these stories have elements of victim blaming. Moreover, they show the actions but not the psychological conflict the characters would have gone through because of which, the reader is quick to judge and pronounce good and bad. It's not that women are completely powerless but they are given power of a kind which is related to men again. They are given boons to become mothers, powers that ensure their husband’s and brother’s protection and so on.

Kunti, another very important woman from Mahabharat was given a boon by sage Durvasa that enabled her to call upon any God for a child. Out of curiosity, she called on the Sun God before she was married and this resulted in her first son, Karna, whom she abandoned. Karna was left in a basket in the river to die.

“Out of curiosity, Kunti called Surya. The god came and granted her a son. However, she floated him down the river, as she was not yet married.” [4]

If Kunti would have kept Karna, she wouldn't have been considered pure, chaste and worthy of marriage to any king and there her role of a motherhood is not questioned. Motherhood is a role only related to marriage and not to the child in myths.

For, if it were related to the child, the apsaras (celestial dancing girls) in heaven should also be considered as mothers! However, that is not their role. Their role is to be forever beautiful, graceful and lure men away from their goals when needed.

Though sexually aware, it will be erroneous to think that apsaras have sexual agency being free of the other roles that earthly women have. In one such story, Ravana molested the apsara, Rambha, who was on her way to meet her lover and in some versions betrothed, Nalkuber. When Rambha asked Ravana to leave her and treat her as his daughter in law since Nalkuber was his nephew, he readily replied

“You are nobody's daughter-in-law!” sneered Ravan. “You are a dancing girl of the gods. You cannot have any one person as your husband.” With this, he pulled Rambha over to him.” [5]

Rapes, victim blaming, lack of agency are very common in myths and in the real world. But since the focus is more on action, the narrative robs the space to question, to unveil the underlying understanding of the world and the way it functions, such as, what Ravana did was wrong, but it is conceivable because he was brought up to believe that it is alright to misbehave with an apsara or abduct people for any reason.

Another striking point in the majority of popular Indian myths is the lack of female friendships and stories that focus on female friendships altogether. We have very famous stories that glorify male friendships like Krishna and Sudama, Drona and Drupad (before Drona went to him for help), Karna and Duryodhan but there are none that represent women bonds of friendship. We see women in relation to the men in their lives. So if a child is asked about the identity of Sita, she was the daughter of King Janaka, wife of Lord Rama, mother of Luv and Kush and so on and so forth. By herself, her identity is not important in myths.

On top of that, women, though not seen as companions are trained to see each other as rivals. Kunti, the mother-in-law, saw Draupadi, the daughter-in-law, as a rival for her sons' love. Draupadi saw other wives of her husbands as rivals. Sita had conversations with other women but these women were mere acquaintances in her life. There is one bond of woman-man friendship, of Krishna and Draupadi where Krishna is the Sakha (male friend) and Draupadi is Sakhi (female

friend) but this bond, in some versions, is justified by the fact that Krishna is an incarnation of Lord Vishnu and Draupadi and incarnation of his wife, Goddess Lakshmi.

Since there is a lack of bond among women and their identity depends on the men in their lives, we often hear stories about a woman being judged and condemned by other women. This idea that a woman is also going to be observed by women and judged by them keeping the damaging patriarchal ideals in mind is not a very safe space to have and moreover reinforces the idea that women are the first and true oppressors of women and not men.

3. Men in Myths and Their Role

It is also wrong to believe that since the myths are created by men and for men that they are not damaging to them. The ideals that it glorifies for men like valour, power, leadership, strength, intelligence, perfection etc. are not easy to achieve and often the psychological conflict they go through is not given much importance except in the case of Arjun in Mahabharat.

For example, Rama left his kingdom and went in exile for 14 years because his father asked him to and he is an obedient son. He then left Sita in the forest after returning because a fisherman (symbolizes people of his kingdom) accuses Sita of being impure for living in Ravana's palace without her husband. He took actions because he was bound by duty, bound by the role he plays as a king but in that process, the psychological conflict he goes through, of leaving his wife, or leaving his kingdom, of never seeing his sons grow up is not focused on.

Similarly, the conflict Pandavas faced growing up fatherless in an unwelcoming kingdom is not portrayed. The Pandavas fought with the Kauravas for Dharma (justice), but their agony of killing their brothers is not focused on in many mainstream versions.

Love, compassion, empathy in men are portrayed in certain relations like grandfather and grandsons, Bheeshma and the Pandavas, and between the teacher and the student, Drona and the Pandavas, or compassion for the people, for sages and women, but in the face of duty and justice, all of these take a backseat.

The manner in which these emotions take a backseat depends on the class and caste hierarchy, which plays a huge role in Indian myths. Krishna and Sudama's friendship is glorified because Krishna, a god, is compassionate towards his childhood friend, a poor brahmin but the same bond between King Draupad and Drona is not glorified because King Draupad, a human, does not want to be ridiculed by his court members for being friends with Drona, a poor brahmin. For his honor, he denies knowing Drona, leading to an event where a very humiliated Draupad is forced to give half of his kingdom to Drona.

Drona, a very compassionate teacher to Pandavas and Kauravas is not the same for Eklavya, who is not a Kshatriya. Eklavya wanted to learn archery and when denied by Drona, given his caste and class, makes a statue of him and practices on his own. A self taught boy could have easily said that Drona was not his teacher, but morally, he did consider him as his teacher and for that Drona asked him to cut off his right thumb (essential for archery).

Similarly, Karna, a Kshatriya by birth but not by upbringing is cursed by Parsurama, his teacher, after his education that at the time of need, he will forget his knowledge. Karna's lack of knowing his real parents haunted him for life and because of that sole reason, he was denied respect, status and dignity on many occasions. In fact, in Karna's story, the reader empathizes with him and understands that merit matters more, but at the same time is very aware of the fact that the society doesn't work that way. The patriarchal construct provides reasons for every injustice and thus justifies it.

It is through these stories and the justifications it offers the readers, that we understand and internalize the caste and class system, understand the religion and dharma (duty) of a person and pronounce right and wrong of an action.

4. The Need for Change

Myths have many versions and many variations depending on the author, the community, the caste, religion and class of the audience but these versions are not that readily available in children's books. The books on these shelves still largely focus on the mainstream version where a very simplified tale is narrated that focuses on the difficult ordeals, the trials and tribulations and not the psychological conflict. Since myths play such an important part in our culture and construct of society, shouldn't they also undergo certain necessary changes to become relevant for our times? This does not mean that we take away the essence of the myth and nor does it mean that we change the entire story and introduce modern elements in the tale, but we can definitely retell it, keeping certain characters in mind, fill the gaps in the narrative and question where necessary.

In recent times, a lot of myths have undergone retelling and reimagining. When you re-imagine a myth, you add to the gaps in the narrative. *Liberation of Sita* by Volga does that. According to the mainstream version; and note that I am using the word mainstream and not original because these stories have undergone so many changes over time, Sita's conversations were not recorded. Volga re-imagines Sita's relation with other women in the epic (Surpankha, Ahalya, Renuka Devi etc.) and narrates it.

Whereas, a retelling narrates the same event from another character's perspective. This included re-imagining the myth but does not change or create events. For example, *Palace of Illusions* by

Chitra Divakurni Banerjee narrates the Mahabharat from Draupadi's perspective and that will include some form of re-imagination to present what she was thinking and going through.

These kinds of stories change our ideas of myths. Both these tools are a part of the revisionist feminist literature, where the person not only recognizes the problematic parts, the violence, the injustice and the gender bias, but also revises it and equips the readers with the right tools to question, to understand and to connect to the characters.

This, as mentioned earlier, is in practice but only for adults and not children. If we do the same for children books, the young readers may be able to learn to question, to empathize and to recognize the abuse at an early age, and there might be a significant change in their idea of the world, their perspective and their understanding of the society. This will also help one get a better understanding of the culture, the tradition and help one to connect to the roots at a deeper level.

5. Conclusion

The idea is to revise, not dismiss. Myths, as mentioned earlier, are a very important part of our culture and a significant part of growing up traditionally in Indian and Indian families but it is also the beginning of an exclusive narrative that doesn't give voice to the already marginalized (Karna, Eklavya, Shabari, etc.) and a one-sided narrative that focuses on the ordeals of the hero and not anybody else. If it does focus, it's out of pity. It is also the foundation of the categories like a virtuous hero, a learned sage, an ideal wife, an obedient son; and its counterparts, that build our society and in extension, our understanding of the world and the function of the system. Hence, revision of these values is important. Today, we live in a much different world, with much different infrastructures and systems. To follow the same values, learn the same system presented in the myths will not help us and our children and over time, children may also lose interest in these traditional stories because they are not able to connect to them. It is wise then, to revise and make these stories relatable than lose an important part of our heritage. If revised at an early stage, myths have the potential to change that and help us form a more inclusive and less violent worldview. In recent times, authors have started revising but it not at a desirable scale for even today bookshelves in children's sections are loaded with the same narratives with just different pictures. Some of the revisions are not even available everywhere. We need more and at a larger scale for an effective impact.

Bibliography

- [1] I. Saxena, "Folktales – The foundation of children's literature in India - Progressive School", *Progressive School*, 2019. [Online]. Available: <http://www.progressiveschool.in/folktales-the-foundation-of-childrens-literature-in-india/>. [Accessed: 03- May- 2021].
- [2] N. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*. New York: Morrow, 1991, p. 58.
- [3] D. Ramya, "Resisting the Fables of SunitiNamjoshi", *IRWLE*, vol. 11, p. 2, 2015. [Accessed 1-May- 2021].

- [4] S. Bansal, *The Long Suffering Queen and Other Stories*, 1st ed. Mumbai: Shree Books, 2013.
[5] S. Bansal, *The Accursed Apsaras and Other Stories*, 1st ed. Mumbai: Shree Books, 2013.

Author

Tulika Parikh

Teaching Associate at CEPT University

MA in English Literature

Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India