

A Comparative Feminist Study of Selected Retellings of Madeline Miller, Anuja Chandramouli and Elif Shafak

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Abstract

Écriture féminine is writing styled by a “feminine logic” which is marked by openness, inclusiveness and digression as opposed to mainstream patriarchal writings. A feminine writing must subvert classic representations. This study examines select novels of contemporary novelists Anuja Chandramouli, Elif Shafak and Madeline Miller as écriture féminine using Cixous’s The Laugh of Medusa. The question arises: what are the unique literary and narratological strategies that feminist retellings devise in their specific tradition to talk of gender and sexuality. Representation of divinity seems to be a crucial element. Selected works of Chandramouli include Shakti: The Divine Feminine and Mohini: The Enchantress. Shafak’s selected novels are The Forty Rules of Love and The Island of Missing Trees. Miller’s selected texts include The Song of Achilles and Circe.

Keywords

Feminism, Women's Studies and Gender, Comparative Studies, Culture, Novels, Retellings, Mythology, Historical writing

Objectives

To undertake a comparative feminist study of retellings of contemporary women novelists
Application of theory of écriture féminine To study unique literary and narratological strategies that women writers use in their specific tradition to talk of gender through devising divinity .

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Methodology

The research uses primary and secondary material to examine the research problem. Descriptive, interpretative and comparative literary methods are used to study the selected works as *écriture féminine*.

Review and Discussion

Écriture féminine is writing styled by a “feminine logic” which is marked by openness, inclusiveness and digression. In “The Laugh of the Medusa” French feminist Hélène Cixous posited the existence of a prelinguistic and unconscious possibility which has its roots in the mother-child relationship before acquiring the male centred verbal language. Cixous asserts that “feminine writing” manifests in written texts, that moving beyond repressions, challenge fixed signification and logic of phallogocentric language, thereby opening into a free play of meanings.

The impetus behind highlighting the possibility of woman’s language is the French theorists’ concern over women’s writing being appropriated into phallogocentric language which revolves around objective knowledge and classifications, thereby, conditioning females into linguistic marginality or even non-existence. Feminists oppose such a “masculine” writing which is marked by utilitarianism, authoritarianism and hierarchy.

Existing research looks at how contemporary retellings of classical mythology such as the novels of Margaret Atwood and Ali Smith attempt to liberate women from patriarchal representations but are heteronormative nonetheless (Kapoor 90). Even as Madeline Miller’s *Circe* is a feminist revisionist myth, it remains within the patriarchal discourse and limited to the body (Laseter 56-57). Kavita Kane’s retelling of Urmila not only explores women’s deep fears and passions but also bring out their strength and wisdom (R.H). Retellings of Ramayana are used to discuss contemporary issues but the essence of the mythology is intact (Kulkarni 11). While studies have looked at retellings from Indian mythological perspective, there is gap when it comes to poststructuralist feminist literary analysis. Elif Shafak’s memoirs have been analysed as depicting concept of motherhood in all of its complexity using Cixous’ theories (Khosravi Balalami). A Hegelian dialectical study of Shafaq’s novel revealed the self as postfeminist in a postmodern world (Abu Madi and y Al-Khalili R). Shafak’s novels have also been interpreted as postcolonial feminine

writings which challenge the patriarchal discourse from within and use shame and silence as alternative forms of communication (Sevinc).

Cross-cultural analysis of retellings across literary traditions is quite unexplored. This research examines the retellings of three contemporary novelists: Madeline Miller, Anuja Chandramouli and Elif Shafak. Texts are of various sub-genres of fiction i.e., historical, mythological and literary. Some of these writers seem to move away from binaries to embrace inclusivity. The question arises: what are the unique literary and narratological strategies that feminist retellings devise in their specific tradition to talk of gender and sexuality. Representation of divine seems to be crucial to understanding these texts.

Madeline Miller is an American writer who studied Latin and Ancient Greek at Brown University. Miller also studied at the Yale School of Drama, specialising in adapting classical tales to a modern audience. It took Miller ten years to write her first novel *The Song of Achilles* which tells Patroclus, the rejected son who Achilles falls in love with. Goddess Thetis is angry at first but helps the lovers reunite in afterlife. The honour of Achilles is linked with Briseis, a trojan woman.

Miller felt troubled by the “muting” of women, slaves and unconventional men in classical mythology. In her novel *Circe*, Miller narrates the story from Circe’s point of view who is a minor character in the *Odyssey*. Greek world is inhabited by Titan and Olympian divinities as well as mortals. Miller challenges the seductress narrative about the witch; criticises the hierarchy of Gods; shows a sisterhood between Penelope and Circe and highlights sexual assault as reason for Circe turning men into pigs. Rejected in love, Circe turns a nymph into monster after she discovers witchcraft. After she is exiled for her crime, she learns to harness her powers. In the end, Circe rejects the “dead” immortality in order to live her life as a mortal, travelling around the world with her love Telemachus.

Anuja Chandramouli is a new-age Indian classicist who has written twelve books in the genres of fantasy, mythology and historical fiction. Chandramouli holds a bachelor’s degree in Abnormal Psychology and completed her master’s in English. Selected works include *Shakti: The Divine Feminine* and *Mohini: The Enchantress*. *Shakti: The Divine Feminine* examines the various, contradictory facets of the Mother Goddess who restores balance to the universe. “The End of Buffalo Demon” recounts Durga’s encounter with the demon Mahisha who blinded by rage and pain

blames her “obsession” with him on penis-envy. After initial resistance, Mahisha feels guilty about inflicting pain on others. In the end, his demons are slain and death is seen as a way of merging into the compassionate Goddess.

Like Miller, Chandramouli also critiques the hierarchy and patriarchy among Gods, particularly, the witch hunt of goddess worshippers carried out by lokapals. In reality, the king of heavens, Indra lacks knowledge and contentment of Vritrasura who was executed. The text criticises men for rewriting goddess narratives to serve their needs; ensuring women remain dependent on them; and killing rebels. The narrative resists this as flesh eating dakinis and sakinis escort Indra to fearsome Kali. Radical feminism is voiced through the goddess as she believes a woman is more than a childbearing machine. She is described as horrible, unlike apasaras. Ultimately, the misogynist Indra is like a child in Kali’s arms.

In “The Endless Game” Vishnu nudges Shakti to heal herself from her troubled past and resolve things with Shiva. Durga, Kali and Parvati are all seen as part of each other as well as manifestations of Shakti. Through devi’s many forms, Chandramouli interprets Shiva and Shakti’s relationship like that of a human couple marked by respect, passion, anger, maternal instincts and possession. Interestingly, it is Parvati wins over Shiva’s hand in marriage after years of penance. Even supreme goddess Shakti’s physical body is a victim of moral policing, slut shaming and torture. Shakti who rejected other male gods is seen as untamed woman who distracts Shiva, who is an outcast himself. Agency comes as Shakti refuse to stoop to the level of those who violated her. Instead, she becomes a warrior who embodied maternal compassion. Love wins in the end as the couple are inseparable.

In *Mohini: The Enchantress*, Chandramouli creates women-friendly myths through Anasuya who is subjected to a shameful test of virtue by the trinity who are re-born as her babies only to learn about women’s rights. The narrative of the novel is as elusive and enchanting as Mohini who on the surface seems to be symbolic of maya but is revealed to be consciousness which remains detached. Chandramouli reveals the greed of society who worship Mohini when she heals them from diseases and proves to be a balm to the sorrows of mind but as the spell broke call her a pisacha

who devours men and has organs of both man and woman. Soon, large scale carnage follows in which Mohini is brutally killed. Shame seeps through the society which mourns the loss of beauty, magic and enchantment.

Issues of domestic violence; exploitative marriage; and toxic masculinity are explored through Tara's relationship with her husband Brihaspati, the preceptor of Devas. In contrast to this, Chandra and Tara share a beautiful but adulterous relationship for which they face the wrath of society who slut shame her and wage a war. Tara's plight is representative of women who are branded traitors and rejected by society. Chandramouli consciously rewrites the myth by having Shiva give refuge to Chandra and his baby Budha after Tara wilfully surrenders to stop the war. "All will bear witness to your shame and learn what happens to those who rape and raise their hands against women" says Shiva after cursing Brihaspati with a rotting phallus. On the other hand, Chandra is accorded an exalted status among the devas for helping a woman in distress at great personal cost. Interventionist action allows for justice to the wronged characters such as Tara who is content to live in a hermitage with her happy memories in an otherwise miserable life.

Chandramouli's novel ends with the tale of Shastha (Ayyapa) whose parentage is kept hidden by his father, King Rajashekara. Later on, Shastha learns of his birth which is a result of "most potent of unions" or coming together of Shiva and Mohini. Bhumi Devi has blessed the hermaphrodite to serve as a "beacon of hope" for the downtrodden who face obstacles just because they were different. Chandramouli explains through Narada the evolution of third gender; various kinds of sexuality mentioned in the scriptures; and "self-sufficiency" or blissful unity that he represents. Shastha goes on to be accepted as a Senapati of ostracized such as the buffalo-demon's wife.

Elif Shafak is a British-Turkish novelist and the most widely read female author in Turkey who has authored nineteen books. Shafaq holds a PhD in political science and has taught at universities in Turkey, the US and the UK. Shafaq has been an advocate for human rights.

Of the many themes in Shafak's works, multi-cultural identity stands out.

The Forty Rules of Love retells the story of 13th century Sufi poet Rumi and his spiritual guide Shams Tabrizi linking it closely with the 21st century which is also a time religious clashes and insecurity.

The narrative brings together Ella Rubinstein, a married Jewish woman living in Northampton and Aziz who is a Sufi who loves traveling. The prologue reveals that Ella would walk out of her dysfunctional marriage with her husband David for love. Ella reads Aziz's manuscript *Sweet Blasphemy* which is about the companionship of Rumi and Shams. On a deeper level, the novel is about quest for love and is interspersed with Quranic teachings. Shafak holds divine timing or fate crucial in bringing companions together. However, Shafak criticises hatred in the name of religion. Among the few who understand Shams' message of love, is Desert Rose, a prostitute who runs away from a brothel to devote herself to spirituality.

The novel is women centric as it gives voice to women like Kimiya. Shafak interjects to place Rumi's wife Kerra as questioning Shams as he throws into water the books dear to Rumi. Also, death is not shown as defeat but as a possibility of spiritual ascending. Inclusion comes as the narrative tries to connect the three Abrahamic religions; views Shams as a Christ-like figure who is willing to sacrifice himself for well-being of all; and is structured around the five elements of nature.

The Island of Missing Trees uses folklore and oral traditions to explore the trauma and devastation caused by the Cypriot civil war of 1974. Shafak gives voice to nature using a wise female fig tree's narrative which interconnects stories of butterfly, ant and honey bee etc. The tree becomes symbolic of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and its fruit seduced many creatures. As the fig tree is sacred in every religion and culture, it brings humanity together. Defne and Kostas are a Turkish Muslim and Greek Christian couple in a divided Cyprus who meet at "The Happy Fig" which is owned by an inter-faith gay couple. Paradise is lost with the murder of these two men who risk their lives to protect the pregnant Defne.

Ada, the couple's daughter who is coping with the death of her mother has inherited trauma and finds it difficult to fit in as she is bullied online. Ada forms sisterhood with her traditional Turkish aunt, Meryem who visits them in London. Defne merged with the fig tree to remain close to her family. The novel is Ecocentric as it contrasts human capacity for violence and ultranationalism with that of the peaceful existence of other species. Shafak explores the convergence of science and intuitive knowledge.

Conclusion

While Miller's humanising of Circe depends upon negative characters, both Chandramouli and Shafak are more nuanced in their characterization of demons and killers respectively. For Chandramouli, Hindu mythology is a source of empowerment and it shows in her treatment of women and transgender characters. Similarly, Shafak uses Judeo-Christian, Islamic and indigenous knowledge to create women-centric and inclusive narratives of humanity.

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