

Rewriting Culture through Rewriting Myths and Legends: A Study of Rashmi Bajaj's Nirbhay Ho Jao Draupadi

Meenakshi

Research Scholar CMJ University, Meghalaya

Indian women writers have obtained critical praise for their brilliant literary skill and making social issues a key part of their work. Indian women authors writing in English such as Kiran Desai and Arundhati Roy have earned international renown. But a number of Indian women writing in regional languages such as Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Malayalam and Kannada have gained wider recognition due to a strong and growing market for quality Indian fiction in translation. "Regional language literature has always been a vast reservoir of wealth waiting to be explored and no matter how much of it is translated into English; only the tip of the iceberg emerges. Hindi writing, in particular, holds an embarrassment of riches that is just begging to be tapped." (Basu 6) In the multitude of such Hindi writings, Rashmi Bajaj – a bilingual poet and writer in Hindi and English, stands out with her poetry collection Nirbhay Ho Jao Draupadi for its amalgamation of fierce sarcastic articulation of feminism and silky serenity of person's voice. She is dissatisfied with the given world and wishes to transform it by redesigning the very cultural construction which forces a human to become woman.

The simplest way to think about culture is to think about the distinction between [nature](#) and [nurture](#). We have a particular form and certain abilities because of our biology and genetics. But our biological nature does not exclusively determine who we are. For that, we need culture. Culture is the non-biological or social aspects of human life, basically anything that is learned by humans is part of culture. Anthropologist Edward B. Taylor offers a broad definition, stating that culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Edward B. Taylor, Culture 1)" (Quoted in

Frischmann). Myth and legends are common to all cultures. The very fabric of how we view ourselves, our society, and reality itself, is governed largely by these two factors. Myths deal with various aspects of a culture, some are meant to simply tell a story, most have a deeper meaning hidden within the tale for the listener/ reader to consider. It gives a religious explanation for something: how the world or a particular custom began. A legend, on the other hand, is a story which is told as if it were a historical event, rather than as an explanation for something or a symbolic narrative. The legend may or may not be an elaborated version of a historical event.

Rashmi Bajaj's en-route to feminism deals with Indian myths and legends in a novice way. She instigates a dialogue with mythical and legendary characters and questions the stereotypical construction of the dependent and helpless woman. The collection opens up with the anguish of being helpless in dealing with the relations that have proved oppressive for woman. In the poem "Parajay", she explains to Abhimanyu that one does not lose in fighting with enemy; what vanquishes woman is when her own family turns into foes:

Suno Parthsut!

nahi hoti/ kabhi parajay

shatru se/ kar yuddh

Parajay/ hoti hai tab

shatru/ ho jaye jab

apna hi/ sainya bal

aur/ garbh ban jaye vadh-sthal...

(“Parajay” 16)

She becomes the spokesperson of all the married women from ancient times till date and complains against the eternal tradition of women being tormented for the false sense of pride and respect of the family:

Ek rahe/ ya/ paanch huye/ tum

kauno sukh/ naahi/ tumhri sharan

mere baate/ agnipariksha

mere hisse/ cheerharan.

(“Sukh Naahi” 18)

Men have always used destruction as a means to solve issues. She chuckles at this trait of men:

Hey pati!/ Hey pita!

kyun tumhara/ nahi chalta/ bin tode-fode?

gath-bandhan bhi/ judwate ho tum/ to tudwa kar/ dhanush

kya/dhawans mein hi hai nihit/ pourush?

(“Pourush” 36)

As Arjuna in Mahabharata, she finds herself confused in revolting against her own family and urges Lord Krishna to write another Gita for the women stuck into the choice between affection and conscience:

Hey yadunandan!

Meri sthiti mein/ kahan vibhajan

kaurav-pandav/ adharmi-dharmi

paap-punya ka?

Tumhara Brahmgyan

mujhe/ moksh nahi de sakta

Bolo,/ likhoge mere liye

Bhagwati-Gita?

(“Bhagwati-Gita” 14)

From Ramayana, the poet chooses less discussed characters like Ahilya, Mandodari and Urmila. In “Mai Ahilya”, she gives Ahilya a chance to articulate her suffering. It is only Ahilya who is considered defiled

while Indra and Chandra cheated her and still remained god; her husband cursed her fiercely and continued to be called great sage. Ahilya registers her resentment against Lord Rama by asking him why he touched her by his toe instead of blessing by hands in the act of obliging her. Ravan's wife Mandodari puts into words her failure to rescue Sita from confinement by saying that she was not the queen but a captive herself. She throws a new light over the characters of Manthra and Kaikeyi and sympathises with the otherwise considered negative characters:

Manthra ho/ ya ho Kaikeyi

naari, tu/ chir/ mudhmati

maang/ purush hetu/ satta

apne sar/ kalank liya!

(“Chir Mudhmati” 85)

Women writers have often proclaimed against the cultural and social conventions that have constrained woman's freedom and perpetrated a sort of institutional subjection of women. But the poet goes a step further by reconstructing the culture. She does not wait for any lord or scholar to write legends from woman's point of view and decides to rewrite the legends in order to redesign the culture. In this attempt, she gives female legendary characters a chance to change their decisions. Gandhari now regrets her decision of blindfolding herself as a gesture of love for her husband:

Kaash! maine/ baandhi na hoti

apni in aankhon par/ patti

dene ko/ tumhara sath

Dekh sakti/ mai/ paar tumhare

badal deti khooni itihaas...

(“Pashchataap” 88)

And Urmila, who suffers due to her husband Lakshmana's decision of accompanying his brother during vanvaas while leaving the newly wed wife alone at home, stuns Lakshmana by asking:

Hey Arya!

Chale gaye van/ sang agraj tum

chod peeche/ navvivahita/
aur kahlaye/ aadarsh bhrata
Sumitranandan!
Sochti hai/ Urmila/ kai baar,
Kya kahlati wo/ chali jati jo/
jeeji ke sang/ chod peeche/
tumhe/ v/ tumhara parivar?

(“Sochti Hai Urmila” 46)

In this rewriting of the legend, Sita too gets a chance to answer back Rama in the poem “Sita-Rekha”:

Mere Ram,/ aashwast raho/ tum!
kahin bhi aao/ kahin bhi jao/
Dhobi-dhobin ke peeche lag/
nahin mangungi agni-pariksha.

(“Sita-Rekha” 103)

Nirvana is the supreme goal of many Indian religions and hence of culture. The poet redefines the concept of Nirvana in her poem “Suno Tathagat” as:

Suno Tathagat!
Nahin hai/ nirvan/
chale jana/ patni, putr/ v sansar/ ko tyag
Nirvan hai
“sab mithya hai/ kuch mera nahi”
jante huye bhi/ muskura kar/
har pal/ jeena
aur chukana/ har ik/ rishta
Kintu Buddh!/ aisi tapasya
kar sakti hai/ kewal Yashodhara.

(“Suno Tathagat!” 53)

Authors of various legends have played the most important role in shaping the false image of woman. Tulsidas has categorised woman with “dhol, ganwar, shudra” and “pashu”. Kabira who is known worldwide

for his notion of humanism calls woman “sarpini”, “sherni”, “pains churi”, “agni ki jhaal”, “vish ki bel” and “mahavikar”. Rashmi Bajaj in her much acclaimed book *Women Indo-Anglican Poets: A Critique* opines, “India is a land with a long poetic tradition. Our earliest scriptures and literature are expression of man’s mind in verse” (Bajaj Critique 9). She comes out openly and boldly in reprimanding them one by one and brings to a close saying, “Tum bhi mere nahi Kabira”. Finding all these false notions taking the shape of eternal truth, she reveals acute awareness of the conspiracy of construction of culture as a means of subjugation. In “Shadyantra”, she uncovers the scheme:

Is/ janm mein/ tumhara/
ekmatr/ mahakarm hai:/ Vivah
mahadharm hai:/ pati, patiparivar/ ki sewa
In sadharan karyon ko/ mahimamandit karti
yeh shadyantrik paribhasha/
tay ki thi/ un logon ne
jo nahi chahte the/ ki tum
kabhi bhi niklo/ is paridhi se
V aa khadi ho/ unki pankti mein/ unke samkaksh

(“Shadyantra” 86-87)

The woman who was not allowed to study holy scriptures and was destined to recite “dhai aakhar prem ka, padhe so pandit hoye” only, is no longer satisfied with it. The closing lines of the poem ‘Karz’ make it very clear to the culture founders that they can no longer fool her:

Ae saudagar!
Seekh rahi main/ ab/ dhai aakhar se zyada
lo sambhal
apna bahi-khata

(“Karz” 100)

The poet also takes into account the contemporary contexts of Eastern as well as Western worlds. In her poem “Laash”, she finds a striking parallel to Eastern Lord Rama in Western Prince Charles. She satirizes:

Congratulations/ Prince Charles!

Diana/ DNA pariksha me/ utri hai/ khari
Tumhare hi/ ansh hain
Prince Williams/ Prince Harry.

(“Laash” 42)

She shows concern for the social evils too which are incorporated into the Hindu and Muslim cultures. The poem “Mahasatya” compares the custom of girl leaving her home after marriage with the much despised concept of “ghar jamai”.

In the new culture being written by Rashmi Bajaj, Saniya Mirza and Taslima Nasreen have been portrayed as the new archetypes of modern woman who need to be looked upto by those who want to be something else than a stereotyped woman:

Saaniya/ hai bagawat/ har aurat ki
Tumhari us/ nazar ke khilaaf
Jo kar undekha/ uski himmat/ uska hunar
Ja tiki hai/ sirf uske/ jism aur libaas/ par
Saniya khat hai aane wale/ inqalaab/ ka

(“Saaniya” 81)

And

Ae meri/ Taslima aapa!
Nahi ho tum/ hargiz bhi tanha
Tumhara fatwa hai/ mrityu patr
Har us stri ka
Jo hona chahti hai
Deh se kuch zyada...

(“Taslima Aapa” 84)

In the poem “Aathvan Ajooba”, she summarizes her viewpoint regarding Hindu and Muslim customs and retorts:

Saat jute/ daalti hai
keemat/ meri asmat ki
tumhari islami panchayat

saat phere/ lagati hai
keemat/ meri zindagi ki
tumhari Hindu ravayat

Denge/ ek din/ jawab/ tumhare saat ka
mera ghunghat/ mera burqa
aur ye jawab/ hoga/ kaynaat ka
aathvan/ lajawab/ ajooba...

(“Aathvan Ajooba” 102)

Hot-blooded nature of her poetry finds voice in a poem of Gopal Das Neeraj revised by the poet herself:

Ab to mazhab koi aisa bhi chalaya jaye
jisme aurat ko bhi insaan bataya jaye
Jalayein sati chitayein, tandoor jhulsayein
koi batlaye, kahan ghar ye basaya jaye...

(“Paati – Neeraj ke Naam” 60)

The poet's optimism of establishing a new culture does not get intimidated at any point and she directs every mother not to suppress her daughter's voice, the reason being:

Sun ae maa!/ Isko na dapatna
kaun jane ban jaye/ ye palna
jhoola
ek nayi sanskriti ka!

(“Jhoola” 73)

In the rewritten Hindu mythology, goddess Parvati will not be dependent upon Lord Shiva. She pronounces:

Is baar maine
badal di hai vyavastha
mujhe pane ko ab
tum/ karoge tapasya
aur main/ karungi wohi

jo kahegi/ Sita

(“Kya Kahegi Sita” 89-90)

The poet warns man against getting infuriated when they will be faced by the new myths and legends which will be focussed upon woman's sufferings and her oppression. Goddess Parvati talks to Lord shiva:

Mai janti hun/ yeh

ikkiswin sadi hai

aur yugdharm/ nibhane ki bari

ab meri hai

Hey trinetra!

hai meri bas/ ek hi shart

Nahi karoge/ tum taandav

jab padhega yug/ ‘Parvatisutra’

(“Parvatisutra” 97-98)

The poem which summarizes the whole collection, which defines the poet's own concept of feminism, which portrays the sufferings of woman who are under threat of female foeticide, who are burned alive with her dead husband, who are suppressed irrespective of her country or era is “Mrityorma Jeevanam Gamya”. In this magnum opus of the poet, she alludes to Meera Bai, Sylvia Plath, Taslima Nasreen and other women writers who have been tortured enough to commit suicide; who are eternally homeless. She also refers to the secondary role of legendary characters Shabri, Shrutavati and Arundhati. But now ages after, the woman has learnt that it is she who must pioneer the way to writing woman's own history. She expresses it thus:

Mera itihaas/ sada auron ne likha hai

mera jeewan/ sada auron ne jiya hai

(“Mrityorma Jeevanam Gamya” 114)

Gandhari of this rewritten history decides to unfold her eyes and see the reality:

Aaj/ tumhara sath dene ke liye

apni aankhon par bandhi patti

maine hata di hai v sab kuch spasht deekh raha hai
–

tumhara mrigmaarichiki/ mayamrigi mohpash...

(“Mrityorma Jeevanam Gamya” 115)

In the same way, Sita resolves not to be tempted by any means:

Is baar/ mai/ raah me/

swarnfal v swarnrig ke chalawe me

nahi aaungi

nityaprati deti rahi hun agnipariksha

jalti rahi hun rom-rom

v ban gai hun/ raakh ki matr ek dheri

Bheetar ki sulagti chingari ne

kintu mera sath diya hai

aur maine/ raakh se

swayam punarjanm lene ka

kaknusi dharm seekh liya hai

(“Mrityorma

Jeevanam Gamya” 115)

She unambiguously makes it very clear:

Swa-manthan kar aaj maine

paa liya hai apna/ amrit kalash

v nirarthak hain ab kar daale –

tumhari chitaon ki agni

tumhare vish ke pyale

(“Mrityorma Jeevanam Gamya” 116)

The new enlightened woman exposes the duality of sages to the ancient woman writers:

Janti ho

Surya, Savitri, Ghosha, Vishwawra

kaise gaya

tumhe v tumhari jati ko/ chala?

Udatt chintan ke pramanswarup

vedon me jab sammilit ki ja rahi thin

tumhari virachit richaen

tab bhi goonj rahi thi sarvdik

‘Putramdehi’ ki prarthnaen...

(“Mrityorma Jeevanam Gamyā” 111)

But now when she is learned about all the conspiracies and is no more in delusion, she without any fear of Shankaracharya, chants the prayers :

Kaal ki yagya vedi par baith

karti nirbhay vedmantroccharan

saahas ki anjuli me

bhar jagriti ka jal

le sankalp ki havi

daal rahi hun main aahuti

v kar rahi hun aahvan aaj

ek naye yug ka –

Kanyaam dehi/ kanyaam dehi/ kanyaam dehi

(“Mrityorma Jeevanam Gamyā” 116)

If a culture is to be reshaped, the male pschye too has to be enlightened. The poet is hopeful that someday man will also get aware of the scheme of the authors of scriptures and will pronounce:

Aaj tyag/ saari kunthaen

aaj bhula/ sara itihaas

mai/ aa gaya hun

dhara ke paas

Ab shiv-shakti/ purush-prakriti

Rachenge milkar/ nutan srishti...

(“Purush ‘?vin’ Shatabdi Ka” 121)

To express her resolution to recreate the world through rewriting culture, the last lines of the collection need to be mentioned:

Nirbhaya bhav twam Draupadi!

Is baar/ mahagranth

rach rahi/ hai

Vyas-putri

(“Vyas-Putri” 123)

Recreating the myths; questioning the classics, grandmasters and metanarratives is a very effective strategy as worked out by the poet to rewrite the culture. It is a woman writer’s appreciable effort of recreating the wor

WORKS CITED

Basu, Kankana. “Evoking Deep Emotions,” Literary Review The Hindu.5 June, 2011.

Bajaj, Rashmi. Women Indo-Anglican Poets: A Critique. New Delhi: Asian, 1996.

---. Nirbhay Ho Jao Draupadi. Bhiwani: Nikhil Publications, 2006.

Frischmann, Brett. Defining Culture. 10 Jan. 2012 <<http://madisonian.net/2006/12/20/defining-culture/>.