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Revision of Indian Feminist Mythopoeia: An Exploration of Mythological, Oppression in Anita Desai's Fasting, Feasting

Abstract

In this paper, while building upon Anita Desai's novel Fasting, Feasting (2013), I intend to explore how myth-inspired archetypal identity is an antagonistic element to revitalize Indian feminist representations, discourses and activism. Dwelling on Hindu mythology Fasting, Feasting (2013) echoes the myth of goddess Uma (Parvati), who is a paragon of sacrifice and self-annihilation, in the archetypal portrayal of the female protagonist Uma. The intertwined system of myths, archetypes and feminine identity not only poses a major threat to the individualistic identity of women but also to the domain of feminist mythopoeia. Building on Carl Jung's idea of Individuation, this research highlights that a radical social and literary change demands that women, facilitated by the Individuation process should recognize that their existence is not restricted to indoctrination imparted by the mythical persona. The re-vision of Indian feminist mythopoeia can create new and diverse possibilities of feminist narratives and representations that deconstruct patriarchal institutions such as the androcentric discourse of Hindu mythology in wake of endorsing Individuated identity of women.

Key Words.   Indian; myths; archetypes; feminist; identity.

Mythopoeia, "the conscious creation of myth," (Cuddon 2013) in the realm of literature is defined as "the appropriation and reworking of mythical material, or the creation of a kind of 'private' mythology" (Cuddon 2013). The reinterpretation of long-established myths focuses on the substitution of old with new and aims at presenting an unconventional or altered perspective to the traditional beliefs. Utilizing this potential of myths, Feminist Mythopoeia evolved as a genre of revisionist mythmaking which offers "challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth, revisionism in its simplest form consists of hit and run attacks on familiar things and the social and literary conventions supporting them" (Ostriker 1982). As a revisionist discourse, Feminist Mythopoeia, dismantles the hegemony of patriarchal myths in order to confront the issue of

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gender asymmetry. The female gaze and voice tends to redefine patriarchal myths. The subversion of stereotypes and traditional images of woman representation offers new constructions of female identity not only within the literary landscape but also in the social and cultural milieu. However, Feminist mythopoeia becomes problematic, in fact rather oppressive, when the renewable potential of myths is not properly utilized. Building upon Anita Desai's Fasting, Feasting (2013), this paper explores such mis-appropriation of myths that calls for the revision of Indian feminist mythopoeia.

Indian feminist mythopoeia refers to the gynocentric recasting and re-presesntation of Indian myths and legendary narratives such as Mahabharata and Ramayana. Interpreting myths through a feminist lens allows deconstructing the androcentric discourse of Hindu mythology in wake of creating an Individuated identity of women. Dwelling on Hindu mythology Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (2013) reverberates the myth of goddess Uma in character portrayal of the female protagonist Uma. The fictional Uma bears a strong affinity to her mythical counterpart. She is a girl who is defined by absolute obedience and remarkable sacrificial spirit for her family. It is primarily Uma's bondage to tradition that reflects the spirit of goddess Uma in her archetypal portrayal. Nonetheless, it is important to note that in *Fasting, Feasting* (2013), the employment of mythical persona leads to conflicting implications. Desai's mythical appropriation reinforces the archetypal identity and obscures the Individuated identity of women. Such representation of women in passive roles as victims and puppets, culminates in mythological oppression and calls for the revision of Indian feminist mythopoeia. Therefore, emancipation from myth-inspired archetypal deadlock is essential for the endorsement of a flourishing literary and social ambience.

This study has three purposes. First, it attempts to explore the phenomenon of mythological oppression with relevance to Anita Desai's *Fasting, Fasting* (2013). In doing so, the intertwined relation between myths, archetypes and female representations will be closely analyzed for the reason that this nexus forms the basis of mythological oppression against women. Second, this research intends to navigate the ways in which the mythical and the fictional Uma negotiate with patriarchal narratives that oppress them in their private and public spheres of life. Third, while building upon Carl Jung's idea of Individuation this perusal aims to decipher the impact of mis-appropriation of Hindu myths on the Individuated identity of women. The third purpose distills the interpretive implication of revising the Indian feminist mythopoeia.

The interwoven scheme of myths, archetypes and female representations, as depicted in *Fasting, Feasting* (2013), entails a paralyzing impact on the social and literary narratives of femininity. Archetypes are cultural artifacts. They take root from established social customs and impart cultural definitions to the universal order. Myths and legends vitalized by the oral and written tradition are significant in the formation of archetypes. Moreover, myths are integral to keep the spirit or essence of a culture alive as they highlight the ideals, archetypes and code of conduct of any civilization. However, the feminine archetype evolved out of myths is a hostile element to revitalize the feminist discourse. The exhibition of myth-inspired archetypal identity leads to obliteration of individualism and becomes a form of oppression faced by Uma, in particular and the Indian women, in general.

Royston Greenwood and C. R. Hinnings highlight the importance of archetypes in bringing about a strategic change and assert, "An archetype is thus a set of structures and systems that consistently embodies a single interpretive scheme. . . . Structures and systems, from our perspective, are not neutral instruments but embody wittingly or otherwise-intentions, aspirations, and purposes" (1993). It is important to deconstruct or decode the archetypal constructs in any system or organization which underline "an interpretive scheme, or set of beliefs and values, that are embodied in its structures" (Greenwood & Hinnings 1993). For that matter, the archetypal portrayal of women in social and cultural narratives is not a neutral design. In fact, the propagation of archetypal identity of women manifests the politics of representation. The employment of mythological archetypes for the construction of female narrative underlines and perpetuates a code of conduct for women. Uma's portrayal as a Hindu mythical goddess prescribes a guideline for her that is indoctrinated by the society. While following this prescribed guideline, Uma strives for becoming an ideal sister and daughter, who resigns herself to the benefits and well-being of her family and thus she establishes the connection with her mythological equivalent Uma. Mira Masi, who emerges as the voice of conventionality advises Uma to identify herself with the persona she is wearing "You are the Lord's child. The Lord has chosen you. You bear His mask" (Desai 2013, 59). The mask worn by Uma refers to her mythical analogue i.e. the goddess Uma, who is a paragon of sacrifice and self-annihilation. This conferment imposes certain liabilities on her. These words of Mira Masi explicitly project the burden of an *a-priori* identity that Uma carries upon herself and shed ample light on the inconspicuous and insignificant state of her individual identity.

Such primitive and divinely inspired representation of women leaves traumatic imprints on their psychological well-being. Uma, is a spinster, who has to bear the burden of myth-motivated archetypal identity. She devotes her life to domesticity at the expense of her education and personal grooming. She is not allowed to work, travel, socialize and even to assert her opinion. As a result, Uma's clumsiness and moronic nature springs from her underprivileged education and grooming. This deprivation leads to slow learning capabilities and lack of confidence. "There was not a thing Uma put her hand to that did not turn to failure" (Desai 2013, 21). Her intellectual growth is inhibited in the stifled and tradition-stricken environment she lives in. An uncritical adherence to primitive ways of looking at things poses resistance to human mind's search for reality and creates a state of imprisonment in surviving set of ideas.

Feminine representation in traditional and passive roles with no illustration of female prowess and heroism is indeed a form of oppression faced by women. The myth-stimulated archetypal illustration of women is exploitative as it usurps all possibilities of asserting individual identity of women. This form of oppression is as demoralizing as other atrocities and inequalities to which women are subjected since it effaces the individual identity of women and fosters the one stimulated by myths. Mythological oppression needs to be countered by the subversion of ingrained gender ideologies and the propagation of Individuated identity of women.

Vrinda Nabar draws attention towards gender asymmetries weaved in the Indian social and cultural fabric and states that "it is therefore necessary to 'discredit some of the legacies of tradition' both in social consciousness and in the

Collective Unconscious, to adopt a different set of paradigms before any consciousness-raising and a consequent reform could take place" (as cited in Volna 2005). While discrediting and questioning some legacies of tradition, there is a dire need to redefine and reconstruct the archetypes which are employed in the discourses of feminine representation. It is now upon the Indian feminist writers to enunciate their suppressed voice and thereby construct new definitions of femininity. Hence, paradigm shift is the solution to break away with the myth-stimulated archetypal deadlock that leads to oppression. Such paradigmatic change in literary discourses and narratives will dismantle the stereotypical identity and facilitate in the formation of an Individuated identity of women. In order to understand the importance of replacing the archetypal identity with the Individuated identity, it is integral to look at the points of convergence and divergence between the mythical and the fictional Uma. These similarities and differences have strong interpretive and theoretical importance.

One of the striking parallels between Uma and her mythical equivalent, the goddess Uma (also known as Goddess Parvati) is the spiri of self-sacrifice. Desai's female protagonist Uma donates her all life to the upbringing of her younger brother Arun, who is the son and "surely an object of pride" (Desai, 2013, p. 31). "Proper attention" (Desai, 2013, p. 30) is the criteria for Arun's nurturing as prescribed by her mother and Uma becomes an agent to ensure it. After Arun's birth, she is forced to terminate her education and assist in childcare and housekeeping. Such tremendous spirit of sacrifice emphasizes Uma's divinely inspired character. In Hindu mythology, the goddess Uma is defined by relentless passion for sacrifice. The mythical Uma ignored her individual needs and practiced extreme self-denial in order to win her husband Lord Shiva's love. However, for a long time Lord Shiva remained indifferent to Uma's love and the labour she bore to get his attention and affection. "Parvati [the other name of goddess Uma] in order to have Shiva as her husband went through much rigorous self-mortification and achieved a state of asceticism almost akin to that of himself. So impressed was he by her self-sacrifice that he immediately agreed to make Parvati his consort" (Temple Purohit 2016). By responding to others' needs and looking over their own desires, both Umas prove to be an incarnation of self-sacrifice.

Internalization of the feminine archetype comes out as another point of convergence between the mythical and the fictional Uma. Within the respective domestic domains, Uma and her mythical equivalent have to internalize the archetypal roles of an ideal wife and a daughter which ultimately eclipse their individual identity. The goddess Uma interiorizes the social narrative of wifehood and thus her identity is formed and asserted only in relation to her husband, Lord Shiva. For that matter, the denial of conjugal bliss triggers her journey towards self-effacement. The myth behind the name of goddess Uma reflects her undertaking of an ascetic flight towards self-annihilation. "Her name is said to have been given to Her by Her mother, who upon learning of Parvati's [another name for goddess Uma] plan to practice extreme self-denial, cried out, "U! Ma!" which means "Oh! Don't!" (Thalia Took 2004). Uma's name itself becomes a protest against the slavery of traditional practices. On the other hand, in *Fasting, Feasting* (2013) Uma feels claustrophobic due to the domineering presence of her parents, who, on the other hand, swatted at their daughters "as if they were a pair

of troublesome flies" (Desai, 2013, p.7). However, Uma takes utmost care of her family and "presents thus almost all the features of the Victorian archetype of an angel in the house" (Volna 2005). The characteristics of Uma such as being passive, meek, unconditionally serving her family and above all fasting in wake of her brother's feasting substantiate her presence as 'The Angel in the House'. Education is considered a futile pursuit for Uma and her attention is drawn towards stereotypical roles associated with women. "We are not sending you back to school, Uma, You are staying at home to help with Arun" (Desai 2013, 18) "Girls have to learn these things too, you know" (Desai 2013, 28). It depicts that care, affection and nurturing are considered only as feminine virtues. As being a girl, it is incumbent upon her to live for others and take care of others' needs. The predicament of the mythical and the fictional Uma highlights how women are well programmed by the collective unconscious to be ideal wives and daughters.

While building upon the myth-inspired archetypal identity of women, it's important to note that there also exists a divergence between the mythical and the fictional Uma. This departure relates to the outcome of the spiritual voyage undertaken by both Umas as a response to the patriarchal and tradition-stricken world. The goddess Uma's intense self-mortification which according to some sources was at par with Lord Shiva's asceticism culminates in their union. "Uma finally got tired of being ignored by Her husband, and left her home to become a wandering hermit. She practiced such harsh self-denial, that eventually her husband, as god of ascetics, had to receive her as his most devoted worshipper, and they were reconciled" (Thalia Took 2004). Ever since, they lived in conjugal harmony and are known as the ideal couple. Furthermore, this matrimonial alliance in Hindu mythology is seen as a symbol of love and devotion. The Book I, chapter 35, verse 21 of Valmiki Ramayana, one of the great epics of India, describes the ultimate reconciliation of Lord Shiva and Uma, "as for Uma who is unified with her rigorous sacrament and who is adored by all the world, that best one among mountains Himavanta gave such a daughter to the unique god Rudra" (Valmiki Ramayana 2002). However, in *Fasting, Feasting* (2013) the unattractive and unsuccessful Uma does not qualify for marriage and this non-conformity to the tradition of marriage gives her the position of an outcast in the Indian society. She continues to live as an aging spinster and despite several attempts for marriage; her unmarriageable status becomes a burden for her family. At last under the supervision of Mira Masi she joins an ashram and embarks on a spiritual journey which is like an escapist flight leading towards self-annihilation. Thereby, she arrives at a point where asceticism leads her to an ecstatic state. She appalled the people around her at the ashram, who had to intervene and cry "O! Dont". While some interpreted her ecstasy as induced and driven by god. "she is possessed. The Lord has taken possession of her" (Desai, 2013). The cathartic semblance of this disharmonized harmony was overlooked and it was merely perceived as a divine manifestation. The ultimate end met by both Umas highlights the grotesqueness of reality in comparison to the myth as Lord Shiva comes to rescue the goddess Uma, however, Uma in Desai's novel is rescued by none.

The mythical and the fictional Uma are linked with the juxtaposed images of light and darkness respectively. In Hindu mythology, the goddess Uma is presented as a beacon of light amidst all adversities. "She represents the power of light, which illuminates and makes understanding possible" (Thalia Took 2004). Being the

goddess of light, she stimulates sight and renders things discernable. Furthermore, this illumination not only relates to vision but also to the insightful capacities of the mind. Thus, the goddess Uma is a manifestation of sight as well as insight. In comparison to it, Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (2013) offers diametrically opposite capabilities of the female protagonist Uma. She suffers from vision impairment as her eyesight rapidly worsens. However, Uma's predicament only meets her father's indifference and he refuses to consult an eye specialist in Bombay. For him it was an old age factor that ought to be left unaddressed, "everyone's eyesight grows weaker as they grow older" (Desai 2013, 126). Uma's inability to see metaphorically implies to the impending blindness of her sensation and perception. The looming effect of social indoctrination casts a shadow over her emotive and cerebral tendencies. In addition to it, her father's refusal to seek medical advice suggests the forcible imposition of darkness and ignorance upon Uma. Even her mother's interference and insistence upon consulting a doctor is only responded by his apathy and indifference. Unlike her mythical analogue, the un-illuminated Uma in *Fasting, Feasting* (2013) suffers from literal and metaphorical blindness that impairs her ability to think and act.

Keeping forth the similarities and departures between the mythical and the fictional Uma, it seems evident that mythological re-appropriation in literary narratives becomes problematic when it only projects the archetypal image of women and casts a shadow over feminine heroism and prowess. Therefore, the unilateral representation of mythical women in traditional roles of silent victims, docile puppets and passive observers is actually the mis-appropriation of myths that entails mythological oppression. The mythological re-appropriation in *Fasting, Feasting* (2013) focuses on the fossilized archetypal feminine identity and eclipses the dynamic side of mythical Uma. It is evident that there is much more to the archetypal bearing of mythical Uma, she had a mind of her own and a sharp insight. Although she is exposed to patriarchal domination, her demeanor particularly the "rigorous sacrament" (Valmiki Ramayana 2004) shows traces of resilience and fortitude. This facet of mythology delineating feminine heroism should be brought into light and it is precisely this individuated identity instead of archetypal identity that should form the cornerstone of Indian feminist mythopoeia. Therefore, Indian feminist mythopoeia should encompass a temporally-negotiated and an ambivalent convergence between the mythical and the fictional characters that gives vent to the Individuated identity of women.

The Individuated identity of women can be achieved through the process of individuation proposed by Carl Jung. "Individuation means becoming a single, homogeneous being, and, in so far as 'individuality' embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self. We could therefore translate individuation as… 'self-realization" (Jung 1928). Self-realization, the ultimate outcome of the Individuation process, is achieved by the integration of three distinct but inter-related elements or archetypes i.e. persona, shadow and self. It involves analysis and discovery of the Self by reconciling the internal (personal psyche) and the external (life) world. Building upon this idea of individuation, I will emphasize that the Indian feminist mythopoeia should redefine female identity and thus forge the culturally-restricted form of this genre into a culturally-negotiated-one. In Jungian psychology, persona is a facade that facilitates us in social interaction. "Fundamentally, the persona is nothing real: it is

a compromise between the individual and society as to what a man should appear to be . . . In a certain sense all this is real, yet in relation to the essential individuality of the person concerned it is only a secondary reality, a product of compromise, in making which others often have a greater share than he. The persona is a semblance, a two-dimensional reality" (Jung 1928). Uma's fasting is symptomatic of the persona or social mask she wears as being a woman. It underscores a particular code of conduct for her. This secondary reality or identity is not constructed by her own self but forms as a result of social indoctrination. She is told what the society demands from her, "You are the Lord's child. The Lord has chosen you. You bear His mask" (Desai 2013, 59). The myth-inspired archetypal identity is a persona that leads to the erasure and effacement of the individualistic identity of women. Moreover, Uma suffers from the inflation of persona, she over identifies with the social mask which leads to the detriment of the other parts of the psyche. The over-identification with persona leaves traumatic imprints on her physical and mental health. The process of individuation yields the understanding that persona is not the totality of one's existence rather it is one of the components of the psychic makeup. The deconstruction of persona coupled with reconstruction of a harmonious persona is necessary for individuation.

The first step in the discovery of the unconscious, according to Jung, is to approach the shadow archetype. Shadow is "an unconscious aspect of the personality which the conscious ego does not identify in itself. It is the entirety of the unconscious, i.e. everything of which a person is not fully conscious. In short, the shadow is the dark side" (Gitter 2018). Owing to its constant repression, a person usually remains ignorant of the shadow archetype. However, its dark and shadowy nature continues to cast a significant impact on an individual.

In *Fasting, Feasting* (2013), Uma's encounter with the shadow or unconscious side of her being is triggered by her escapist visits to the ashram. It gives vent to her desires and attitudes that she has been holding back for years. After years of silence, Uma at last recognizes the secret and deep chambers of her individual life. Uma's traumatic experience at the holy river especially her near-drowning incident implies plunging into the dark side of her being or the aspects of her personality that she has been ignorant of. "Uma thrilled by this suspense, simply sprang off the prow and plunged in without hesitation, as if this were all what she had been preparing to do all her life. Immediately she disappeared into the water, having leapt not onto the sandbar where the others stood splashing but into the deep dark river itself. She went down like a stone when the women screamed, 'Uma, Uma!'" (Desai 2013, 113). The deeper and the darker she goes, the more illuminated she feels. For Uma this encounter with the shadow archetype was in fact a cathartic process. It served as "a refuge from the demands of life" (Jung 1928). The assembling and re-assembling of the psychic contents is a continuous process. Mainly, this re-grouping based on the unification of conscious (persona) and unconscious (shadow) leads to the achievement of the complete Self (Jung 1928). Although Uma discovers her "subliminal dispositions" (Jung 1928) yet she has to reject them in order to fit into the dominant social structures. She is not able to integrate shadow into the conscious mind due to her over-identification with the persona. Under the massive pressure of social indoctrination, she rejects her latent dispositions and thereby fails to revitalize her individual identity. She is unable to

achieve the harmonious integration of the persona and the shadow archetype that is integral to the discovery of the Self.

Jung identifies Self archetype as the nucleus of the psyche. It acts as the integrating force of the psyche by reconciling the opposites such as the conscious and unconscious, and persona and shadow. According to Jung, the individuation process that leads to the identification of the Self is integral to the development of a healthy individuated personality. Moreover, it is important for the interests of the society. Jung believed that in conformist societies people suffer from the inflation of persona which eventually leads to the upsurge of oppressive power structures. (Jung 1958). The over-identification of women with their mythological persona gives rise to mythological discourse as an oppressive patriarchal power structure. This mythological oppression against women can be countered by the process of individuation. A society that consists of women as individuated individuals would not succumb to the hegemonic influence of myth-inspired identity. It is essential for radical social change that women facilitated by the process of individuation tend to discover more about their existence than the societal position prescribed by the mythical persona. While focusing on Uma's predicament, primarily her un-individuated self, in *Fasting, Feasting* (2013), this paper has tried to emphasize the importance of Indian feminist mythopoeia as a re-visionist discourse based on the affirmation that women are not led by patriarchal myths anymore. Thereby, this research has attempted to reinvigorate the Indian Feminist Mythopoeia as a postmodern phenomenon that exhibits "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard 1984). Pivoted on the intersection between feminism and postmodernism, this genre aims to dismantle the totalitarianism of mythological representations by inducing multiplicity of narratives within the dominant discourse. The process of re-invention unshackles Indian mythology from the influence of hegemonic structures of patriarchal power which galvanize its flow. Indian Feminist mythopoeia should generate critical and unmonolithic narratives that re-present the misrepresented feminine identity in conventional mythology. Moreover, it must question the legitimization of 'the truth' by offering multiplicity of perspectives. Within the grand narrative of mythology, feminist mythopoeia has to evolve as a non-linear discourse where the subaltern has acquired the power to speak and challenge the androcentric knowledge production.

In addition to it, this research ascertains that myths are the best place to contest patriarchal ideologies because myths are the birth place of asymmetric gender portrayal. Hence, in creating new possibilities of Individuated identity of women, these ancient paradigms of mythology should be rewritten. Rewriting the Indian Feminist mythopoeia from a new perspective that challenges *a priori* social and cultural definitions of femininity is a counteractive strategy against mythological oppression. It is now upon Indian feminist writers to throw off the yoke of archetypes and assert the dynamic individuated Self of Indian women in the realm of feminist myth-making.

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