

Gender Parity in Indian Mythology: A Feminist Reading of the Texts on Shiva

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Abstract

Several measures are often taken to minimise the molestations and crimes faced by women. Female feminists are actively seen taking cudgels opposing the unjust behaviour being conducted against women. However, the accounts of males promoting the notion of feminism are still lacking or hardly find any pertinent in contemporary society. Some characters from Indian mythology too are portrayed as strong believers of gender uniformity. Feminist studies have already been conducted on female characters, for example, Ahalya, Sita, Draupadi, etc. This paper focuses on the character of Shiva, who being in the somatic body of patriarchy stood up for the rights of women and affirmed the idea of gender parity. He sets an example for contemporary men, encouraging gender equality. By the dint of his various life incidents, the way he treats his consort and values the individuality of women around him, this paper analyses Shiva through the lens of feminism.

Keywords: Equality, Feminism, Gender, Indian Mythology, Retellings.

INTRODUCTION

The fight for justice of human rights has travelled a long way and is a never-ending process. In every society, there exist two major divisions, i.e., the oppressor and the oppressed. Voices against the persecutor are raised and the struggle for attaining freedom of thought and expression continues. People who revolt against inequality are, most probably but not always, the one who suffers. A few people belonging to the party in power sympathise and support the victims. Women's fight for freedom is not a new concept. Feminism has been controversial for ages, though the forms have been changed and the scenario differs from its initial days. Several women belonging to different ages and from diverse backgrounds such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Savitribai Phule, Ismat Chughtai, etc, came forward and created a revolution where a need for empathy toward women was felt. Such figures rebelled against the system and supported the victims of patriarchy and society. But has it always been women who have fought against the injustice done toward them and their folk? Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* said that "men cannot be feminists because of the intrinsic differences between the sexes" ("Men in Feminism" 2023). But men too are seen favouring the rights of women in many aspects. But being on the other side, their actions have not received enough light to focus upon. Pro-feminism is a term used for "men who actively support feminism". They focus on the "equality of women with men" ("Pro-Feminism" 2023). Charles Fourier, Francis Hutcheson, John Neal, William Thompson, John Barmby, etc are some pro-feminists of different ages who have tried to bring a balance in human society in terms of gender.

It is widely believed that men fail to understand what feminism is trying to say for so long. According to Luce Irigaray, a well-known French philosopher, "[W]hat women say appears to be of little importance to them...No need to listen to women" (Lodge 2000, 414). Their life experiences, pains and traumas are considered as petulant. Their demands for basic human rights are also shrugged aside. Feminism has been misunderstood across the globe for years. It is a lot more and different than what it is believed to be. One doesn't have to be a female to become a feminist. Feminism talks about the famous personalities that stood up for female sex and their rights, quoting examples from divergent modes, from reality as well as fiction and myths. Young men of the contemporary generation get inspired to be humble and humane towards their treatment of women from

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not only the real-life historical models but also the fictional characters who create an impact on the readers and help to mend the collective consciousness of society.

The mythology of any country acts as a soul leading the people, subconsciously, to follow the rightful path. It is believed that "myth tend to shape and condition our thoughts and could serve to promote certain ideology in society" (Mathew 2018, p. 3). Right from childhood they provide people with various life lessons. "Hindu texts and Hindu philosophical arguments have also frequently been used, both in pre-modern and in modern India, to legitimize egalitarianism and freedom." (Vanita 2003, p. 90). The mythological knowledge is acquired from grandparents in the form of folk tales or short stories; prayers at the time of festivals; or through moral science lessons in schools and so on. But old notions are always questioned and so are the mythologies. Writers from every age bring a change in their mythological retellings and mould them in a way that fits their society better. The retellings of Indian mythology by contemporary writers such as Anand Neelkanthan, Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee, Volga, etc., showcase a new ideology by displaying narratives of distinct characters which helps to understand the present world in a better way. They have brought forth the suppressed emotions that had no outlet in the past. Volga's Sita, for instance, in *The Liberation of Sita*, understands the wrong done towards women around her and the way she too suffers at the hands of patriarchy. Her character grows throughout the novel which makes her understand the way she became a prey to the false ideology portrayed by society. Predominantly, it is the female character who protests. There are very few works that focus on the male narratives that championed the rights of women. Contemporary mythological writers are coming up with such men who are strong protectors of women's rights. One such character is Ravana, from Anand Neelkanthan's novel *Asura*, who protested for his beloved daughter, Sita, who was mistreated by the societal notions of Ram's territory. He lost everything to save his daughter from the devas and dreamt of giving her a more comfortable and happy life. Even after knowing the fact that his people will mock his actions, he accepts his wife, Mandodari, after being raped by the monkey men. The other character who is the central focus of this article is Amish Tripathi's Shiva who is a firm believer of gender parity. Issues of gender inequality are not necessarily presented only through women characters; male characters too can play the role pleasantly. There is no denying the fact that men created patriarchy and being the victims, women too supported it time and again. But there have always been the few who dream for a utopian society in terms of gender. There are ample stories where men stood up and revolted against the patriarchal notions, but they are kept hidden by patriarchy itself, to fulfil their evil intentions of maintaining a hold on society. The mythologies and stories of Shiva are replete with instances in which he is depicted as a supporter of women. Additionally, he is constantly motivating his wife and is cognizant of her power, respecting her independence. Nevertheless, his character is rarely examined from a feminist perspective. Therefore, his character is also viewed as a pro-feminist deity, who advocates for the rights of women.

Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* portrays the character of Shiva who is modelled on the famous Hindu god worshiped by most people in and around India. In Indian Mythology Shiva "is the only god in the polymorphous monotheism of the Hindus who is given the title of the Lord (Ishvara) par excellence. He is given a higher status by being called "Great Lord (Mahesvara)...designated as Ishvara, Mahesvara, Paramesvar, or Maha-Deva." (Chaudhari 1979, p. 240). Maybe he has been given such a high status because of the sense of equality he possesses within himself which the other mythological gods fail to do. In this modern retelling of Shiva's story, he is, in terms of gender equality, all that a man should be. He is the most open-minded and chilled out God with an abundance of love and respect for his wife.

Feminist Reading of Contemporary Texts on Shiva

Shiva has been a symbol of power for ages. In contemporary times, he is seen as a metaphor for strength, anger, love, and truth. An important aspect of Shiva's character is that he is a feminist too which is evident in the concept of *Ardhanarishvara* meaning "Lord Who Is Half Woman", a composition of "Hindu god Shiva together with his consort Parvati" ("*Ardhanarishvara*" 2023). This concept is said to be "the union of Shiva and Shakti and expresses their oneness" (Koushik 2019, p. 1). This form is not just a symbol of gender parity, but it acts as a "personification of a universal spirit divided into masculine and feminine" and this form also reminds of the splendours and delights of both genders displaying, vividly, the integrity among the sexes (pp. 1-2). Society needs to investigate the structure of patriarchy and examine characters from history, literature, or

mythology who might give a more comprehensive perspective upon life. Although numerous feminist readings emphasise the victimisation of women by men and the discourse surrounding female patriarchs, we must redirect our attention to men who support the rights of women and favour gender parity. They should be acknowledged in society not merely as generalised patriarchs, but as genuine individuals who are endeavouring to provide support to one another in the struggle of life, despite the oppressive structures of society. Although Shiva's persona might be seen as imaginative to certain people while to others he is a God, it represents the ideal male that feminists have long aspired to in society: an individual who regards women with respect and pride, rather than sympathy. He effectively illustrated gender equality without causing the readers to perceive any distinction. He maintained a neutral stance towards both genders and demonstrated empathy for those who were vulnerable, irrespective of their gender. This method provides a more comprehensive approach to the resolution of gender-related issues

Shiva, as a Hindu god, is known for his belief in the equality of women and his treatment of both genders was neutral. Contemporary feminists are trying to build an equal world where oneness is evident in terms of gender. This notion is generally not dug out as it would threaten the system of patriarchy which channelises its control over men as well as women. Amish Tripathi, through his novels, has inspired numerous people not only in India but all over the world. His famous work *Shiva Trilogy*, a unique blend of fiction, reality, science, and mythology, talks about the titular character as not only a benevolent human being but is also strongly empathetic towards women around him. He was brought up by his mother and a maternal uncle who subconsciously played an important role in building up his character. Shiva is portrayed as a normal human being by Tripathi and not as a supreme God of Indian Mythology, whom numerous people across India and the neighbouring countries worship. Being a human, he embeds within himself the values which the generation of today ought to learn for a better living. His treatment of women makes one forget the ongoing gender disparities in the world for centuries. This article will determine the feminist nature of Shiva with the help of incidents of his life.

Throughout his life Shiva lives with a heavy heart for not being able to save a woman from being raped. He witnessed it when he was a child. This incident always haunted him in the novel, and he cursed himself for his tender age and the inability to stand up in her protection. It became the major reason for his insecurities of not being able to accept the title of next Mahadev in the beginning and often made him doubt his capabilities. His failure to save that woman made him underestimate his powers and he needed constant motivation for the same. He doubted his strength of saving an entire nation when he thought about his inability to save merely a single person who was constantly asking for his help. Though it was not his fault, he blamed himself entirely. His sympathy for that woman never settled. He dreamt it many times which reminded him of his helplessness and made him regret each time. He wanted to “go back to that dreadful day” so that he could save the woman (Tripathi 2010, p. 224).

Meluhan society and its rigid laws were new to Shiva and the way Meluhans followed every law blindly, without ever questioning, surprised him. Sati, an intelligent woman, too was a victim of this society, who was later rescued by Shiva. He appreciated the Meluhan way of living and was amazed at their lifestyle, architecture, organisations, and a lot more when he first came to the place as an immigrant. But when the novel is all about good and evil, everything comes with pros and cons. Shiva was against a lot of things, especially the somars. There were also specific laws such as the Vikarma system which he disagreed with. He was stunned when Nandi explained to him the various reasons for a woman to be a Vikarma. Punishing a woman for giving birth to a stillborn child, calling it as “sins of her previous birth”, seemed “ridiculous” to him (Tripathi 2017, p. 96). It was logicless to consider it as her fault. Still, in our society, many women are held responsible for the sex of her child, while they have no role in the play. If a woman is unable to bear children, she is called by different derogatory names and is ashamed. She is seen as a child producing machine. The concept of mother is linked with motherhood and the failure to do so makes her useless for the society ruled by patriarchy. Such a society needs people who could stand up against these notions and help to mould the ideology of people. Shiva made various attempts and was successful in diminishing the Vikarma law, not just to marry Lady Sati, but for the welfare of the entire community. Sati was a firm believer of Meluhan laws and strictly followed every rule until she met Shiva, who opened her eyes and made her realise that it is not the sins of her past life but the superstitiousness of her people which made the innocents suffer like hell. It helped not only Sati, but all the

Vikarma women to retain their freedom once again. Still, in many parts of the world, people curse women who are not able to give birth or face any complications. And most of these people are believers of God. Therefore, he can be a perfect ideal used against such people.

As a consort Shiva can be considered an ideal companion who understands his wife at every stage in life and looks at her as an individual. According to Nirad C. Chaudhari, he “remained on the plane of divine love” (Chaudhari 1979, p. 241). In *The Ramayana* the incident where fingers were pointed on the character of Sita after her abduction and trial by fire is a well-known concept. Questions were raised against her chastity. Though Sati too gave the “Agnipariksha” when Tarak blames her for defiling “the yagna with her presence” (Tripathi 2010, p. 226), she was encouraged and motivated by her husband, “Shiva looked at Sati with a confident smile” (p. 234). Sati’s treatment by her husband was completely different from that of Sita by Ram. Shiva breaks the stereotypes of marriage by marrying a widow, who was much older than him. Though her identity as a mother of her first husband’s child was known much later in their marriage. When Sati informs him that her son from Chandandhwaj is alive, he is rather happy than jealous or sad. He accepted him as his own son and instantly wanted to meet him. Patriarchy would not have treated such a woman and her son with the kind of love and humanity that Shiva displayed openly. He places both Ganesh and Kartik on an equal platform. Shiva loved Sati ardently even after she got her beautiful face burnt in war. “Shiva keeps telling me I’m beautiful as ever, scar or no scar”, she says (Tripathi 2013, p. 346). He even supports her decision of not getting her face scar operated on. He loved her not for her looks but for the kind of person she was. He respected her as a fighter and always remained awe struck whenever he saw her fighting skills. He was confident enough to send her as a leader in the battles. Shiva comforted Sati at times of hardship and always motivated her for doing best during life. Nowhere in the entire trilogy one witnesses any disrespect towards his wife. He is unlike the patriarchs who take it as their duty to protect their wives and mothers from the world, making them believe themselves as feeble, rather he stands by her side and lets her fight for herself, encouraging and motivating each time. His happiness lies with his wife, and he is not even ashamed to embrace her in public. He fits into the notion of an ideal husband who has a deep understanding of his consort.

Women in the Shiva Trilogy are evenly treated by the protagonist. He always kept all the women on an equal pedestal to men where one could hardly find any indifference in the treatment of gender. He admires Ayurvati, the doctor, calling her “a giver of life” (Tripathi 2010, p. 182). For Shiva, Ayurvati is a skilled woman who mastered the art of saving lives. He believes that there is no wound that she cannot heal. Though he is also aware of the fact that she too is human and was not able to save the life of his beloved wife. He even understands the feelings of Tara and says to her, “I’ll take you back to your Bharaspati” (Tripathi 2013, p. 393). He deeply empathises with her situation of being apart from her beloved thinking him dead. He appreciates the bold character of Anandmayi and Kali. He was aware of the way Daksh treated his deformed and abandoned daughter of Kali and saw her not as a Naga but as a replica of his Sati, who seemed to him as beautiful as she was just varying in complexion. He rejected the discrimination made based on skin colour. Women still are expected to possess bright skin. The one having a dark tone is demeaned and belittled. Being born as a Naga and having been rejected by her father in childhood, she was afraid of being shunned by her sister’s husband, too, which might result in separation from her sister again. When Sati tells Shiva about Kali’s waiting for his acceptance of her, he replies saying, “She’s your family. That makes her my family. Where’s the question of my not accepting her?” (Tripathi 2011, p. 271). Shiva and Kali were good companions when it came to strategizing for battles. Anandmayi was a Chandravanshi, and their lifestyle contrasted with that of the Suryavanshis. He was astonished to see the colourful life of the Chandravanshi.

Shiva, according to Sadhguru, was a mortal who descended from Mount Kailash approximately 15,000 years ago. This modern Guru demonstrates the evolution of individuals’ beliefs towards a more liberal perspective, which has resulted in the eradication of superstition. The concept of ‘Shiva’ is elucidated by Sadhguru in *Shiva: Ultimate Outlaw*. The term ‘Shiva’, according to Sadhguru, is derived from the Sanskrit words ‘shi’ meaning ‘energy or power’ and ‘vama’ meaning ‘mastery’. He intends to assert that this power, i.e., ‘shi’, represents the feminine power, which is Shakti, Shiva’s spouse. However, Shakti’s energy is excessively potent and necessitates regulation. Consequently, the energy is stabilised by the master ‘va’ (Sadhguru 2014, p. 45). If the intense energy within us is regulated, we can all embody Shiva within us. A modern woman with an increased workload, both

at home and office, is no less than a superhero containing within herself immense power. Here Shiva is a symbol of balance between the two genders, regulating the power held by his female consort.

These instances, among others, illustrate the gender parity inherent in Shiva's character, positioning him as a viable exemplar for contemporary youth and generations to come. To challenge the prevailing societal norms by emphasising the deficiencies of the current system could turn out to be a difficult task, as rectifying these errors could hinder the recovery process. It is vital to dissuade gender divisions and to work towards changing people's perspectives. Tripathi's depiction of Shiva emphasises his egalitarian stance towards women, distinguishing him from others by demonstrating his unbiased character. He demonstrates compassion for women, advocating for gender equality by confronting discriminatory laws like *Vikarma* and honouring women with equal regard and admiration.

Exploring Gender Equality in Translated Works on Shiva

In vacana 703 of Ramanujan's *Speaking of Śiva*, Basvanna asserts, "Sometimes I am man,/sometimes I am woman." (Ramanujan 1973, p. 69). This devotee saint of Shiva attempts to substantiate the notion that a human possesses both masculine and feminine energy by identifying himself with them. Furthermore, he declares, "I'll make wars for you/ but I'll be your devotees' bride." The devotee is prepared to fulfil the various responsibilities that society has allocated to each gender. His sole responsibility is to serve Shiva, and he is unconcerned with the divisions that the public has established. Dasimayya inquires, "Did the breath of the mistress/ have breasts and long hair?" which implies that the gender disparities are rooted in physiological factors and have nothing to do with the degree to which one is more or less human. The same air is inhaled by all individuals (p. 87). In Vacana 133, he discusses the biological divisions, stating, "If they see/ breasts and long hair coming/ they call it woman,// if beard and whiskers/they call it man" (p. 92). He is discussing the biological sex in these lines, not the gender construct. Additionally, he adds, "but, look, the self that hovers/ in between/ is neither man/ nor woman" (p. 92). The self that resides within each individual is beyond the constructs, as it reflects the human being with both feminine and masculine traits distributed unevenly in individuals, despite the divisions that society has made between men and women, designating their gender roles. In Vacana 144, Dasimayya compares man and woman to bamboo pieces, asking, "tell me now,/ the fire that's born,/ is it male or female" (p. 92). In this open-ended stanza, the saint discusses gender parity and aims to dispel any preconceived notions about gender constructs that may exist among individuals.

According to Andrew J. Nicholson's *Lord Śiva's Song: The Īśvara Gītā*, "the ultimate god Śiva is an androgyne, containing both masculine and feminine characteristics" (Nicholson 2016, p. 7). In the work, he is referred to by his female counterpart at various moments, such as "the husband of Parvati", "Husband of the mother goddess," and "husband of Uma," (pp. 41-81). Shiva declares, "I am the householder" in *Lord Śiva's Song: The Īśvara Gītā* (Nicholson 101). The text discusses the various phases that an individual undergoes, as outlined in the majority of Indian legal texts. The first stage is that of a celibate student, followed by that of a householder, a forest-dweller, and a renouncer. It is noteworthy that the householder stage is celebrated as the highest, "since elsewhere the *Īśvara Gītā* extolls the life of the renouncer, or even suggests that it is possible to transcend the four *āśramas* entirely." (p. 173). Even Swami Vivekananda, in his essay "The Secret of Work," asserts that the task of being an ideal householder is far more challenging than the task of being an ideal Sannyasin; the actual life of work is indeed just as demanding, if not more so, as the life of renunciation, which should be considered equally difficult. The responsibilities of householders are never regarded seriously. Their family's unity is maintained by their diligence and efforts. Shiva, a householder, suggests that the labour performed for the family and home should be equally respected.

Vanamali's *Shiva: Stories and Teachings from Shiva Mahapurana* is replete with examples of Shiva's pro-feminist nature. Shiva's devotion and affection for his wife are widely recognised, as numerous women in India continue to observe Monday fasts in order to secure a spouse like him. Shiva and Shakti are "the ideal couple." (Vanamali 2013, ch. 5). The yogi that he was previously "seemed to be bound by the loveliness of her face and her charming, provocative ways." (ch. 6). The work treats both of these characters equally, as it is stated that "Shiva will become *Ardhanareeswara*, or half-male and half-female, with Parvati forming part of his body" (ch. 9). He asserts to Parvati during a conversation that she is "the form of the words", and he "the meaning of the

words.” (ch. 13). The absence of the form would render it impossible to establish the meaning. Consequently, he denies his existence in the absence of her. “I am destroying Prakriti with my penance. In reality I am without the attributes of Prakriti.” (ch. 9). Parvati is also cognizant of her power, as she asserts that Shiva is “actionless, attributeless, and qualityless” and “incomprehensible.” (ch. 9). Shiva's consort plays a substantial role in the formation of his character. He also imparted to her all the sacrosanct knowledge associated with “sciences as astrology, medicine, herbal lore, palmistry, and so on” (ch. 6). Shiva “was never bored of her company, and she was always enchanted with his... now delighted only in Sati”. Shiva: Stories and Teachings from Shiva Mahapurana by Vanamali demonstrates the process by which the character Shiva became a householder. When I am a yogi, she must be a yogini, and when I desire her, she must be a wife. She should refrain from approaching me when I enter samadhi, as she will be consumed by the flames of my austerity. I will abandon her if she does not accept my assertions. O Brahma, contemplate all of these factors and then inform me if such a woman is present among your creation. (ch. 5). Shiva was initially a yogi and subsequently transitioned to a householder. It did not wish to compensate for the materialistic aspects of his ascetic form. However, in this work, he is also the cosmic father, and as a result, he agreed to become a householder under the aforementioned conditions at the behest of the gods.

CONCLUSION

It is time for society to go deeper into the system of patriarchy and search for the people and characters in history, fiction or mythology who might provide a broader perspective of life. Where most of the feminist readings mention the victimisation of females by men and talk about the women patriarchs, it is time to look at men, who deserve to be acknowledged in society not as generalised patriarchs but as true humans trying to help each other in the battle of life despite the rigid systems of society. Though Shiva's character is fictional, it depicts the kind of man that the feminists had always wished for in a society; someone who looks at women not with pity eyes but with admiration and pride. He was successful in portraying gender parity without even making the readers feel the difference. He remained neutral towards both genders and sympathies with the helpless, be it, man, or woman, thus providing a new way to handle gender issues more vigorously.

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