

THE INCURIOUS CASE OF SABARIMALA: A STUDY OF ARCHETYPAL LEANINGS IN “WOMAN AS THE TEMPTRESS”

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Abstract

This research paper studies the historical and mythological strands of the life of Lord Ayyappa and his re-incarnation. Using history and myth, the paper attempts to understand the restriction on women of menstruating age from visiting the Sabarimala Shrine. The paper proposes that the roots of such a restriction lie in the age old belief and the archetype that a woman is a temptress. The paper studies a number of culturally diverse examples of women who have been projected as evil, manipulative and doom of 'heroes' for various reasons such as politics, gender violence, or repression. The aim of the research paper is to minutely understand the psyche that plays a role in subjugating women under power of religion and the irrational regulations. The paper also stresses upon the importance of mythopoeia in changing the world order.

Keywords: Archetypes, Woman as Temptress, Mythopoeia, Sabarimala Temple, Feminism, *Femme Fatale*, Religion.

28 September 2018 shall be remembered as a day when the Supreme Court of India pronounced the epoch-making judgement, ending the 27 year old ban on women, from the age of 10 to 50 years, from entering the Sabarimala Hindu Temple Complex, located in the Periyar Tiger Reserve in the Western Ghat mountain ranges of Kerala.

Sabarimala temple complex is an amalgamation of a number of old temples (some active, others closed) located on the various hill-tops surrounding the main Sabarimala Temple. This temple is home to Lord Ayyappa, who is believed to fulfil the wish for which a devotee has undertaken the arduous forty-one days of fasting and pilgrimage to reach the shrine. The narrative of the birth of Lord Ayyappa has both mythological and historical origins. The birth of Lord Ayyappa was contrived to put an end to the enraged Mahishi, sister of King Mahishasur. The myth is that Goddess Durga killed Mahishasur for wreaking havoc on Earth. To avenge the murder of her brother, Mahishi prayed to Lord Bramha and was granted the boon that she can only be defeated by the son of both Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu. Thinking

herself to be immortal, Mahishi took her revenge on the Earth-dwellers until she came across Lord Ayyappa.

Historically, Lord Ayyappa was found on the shores of River Pampa as an infant by the King of Panthalam, who was resting in a forest near the river. When the childless king picked up the baby, a sage appeared and prophesised that this baby will show the true purpose of his birth at the age of twelve. The king named the infant Manikandan, for he was wearing a bell in a string around his neck when he was discovered. The idol of Lord Ayyappa still carries the bell necklace. The royal household and Manikandan's teachers soon realised that this child was not an ordinary human, but a divine being. Manikandan could bring back the sight of the sightless and perform other such miracles. After a few years, the Queen gave birth to a child. Fearing for her child's future, the queen planned on sending Manikandan on a fatal adventure. She feigned illness, which could only be cured by drinking the milk of a tigress. The challenge to complete the task was taken by none, except for Manikandan. The king, who loved Manikandan dearly, tried to stop him from going on this fatal quest, but Manikandan persevered and told him that it's all in the destiny.

So at the age of twelve, Manikandan leaves the palace to fulfil the wish of his mother. As he crossed the thick forest, he witnessed the she-demon Mahishi wreaking havoc in the *Devloka*. After a battle, he throws Mahishi down on Earth and defeats her. She transforms into a beautiful woman and requests Manikandan to accept her as his consort but he refuses, citing that his destiny requires him to stay celibate and help his worshippers. On Mahishi's insistence, he promised her that the day *kanni-swamis* (new devotees) stop visiting him, he will accept her wish. Since then, Mahishi awaits Manikandan and is worshipped by devotees as Malikapurathamma in a temple at the foot of Sabari Hills till today.

After the battle with Mahishi, Lord Shiva appeared and told Manikandan that his birth's purpose is done but before he leaves his human body, he should go back to his earthly parents for a final visit. He assures him of Lord Indra's help to attain the tigress' milk.

As Manikandan approached the palace, panic took over the whole city. He was accompanied by many tigers and tigress, which were heavenly beings or *devas* in disguise. The sage who appeared to the king many years ago at the river Pampa appeared again. He explained the prophesy he made years ago to the king and told him that the time has come for Lord Ayyappa to leave his earthly abode. Seeing the grief of the king, Lord Ayyappa granted him a wish. The king beseeched Manikandan to tell him where he could build a temple for him. Manikandan aimed an arrow towards Sabari Hills and the temple, known today as Sabarimala was built by Viswakarma. The idol of Lord Ayyappa was carved by another son of Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu, Sage Parshurama and installed in the temple.

As stated by Manikandan, only those devotees should come to the temple that had performed a forty-one day penance or a fast that involves strict abstinence from all family desires. The devotees are expected to adhere to the way of life of a *brahmachari*, not cut their hair, wear black or dark blue clothes, wear a *rudraksha mala* in their necks, carry on their

heads three-eyed coconut and other food stuff as did Manikandan on his voyage to find the tigress' milk. The devotees should purify themselves in the River Pampa and burn *ghee* filled coconuts to end their selfish desires.

The methods of worshipping vary from devotee to devotee. Worshipers of Goddess Durga, known as Shaktists, bring meat, liquor, drugs like tobacco as *prasadam*. Worshipers of Lord Vishnu, known as Vaishnavites, observe strict penance and fasting, Shaivites, followers of Lord Shiva partly follow the methods of the above two. Buddhists and Jainists follow the path of non-violence and constantly utter prayers during the pilgrimage. This pilgrimage inculcates patience, endurance and mental strength in the devotees.

A unique feature of Sabarimala Temple is that it makes no distinction based on man-made constructs like caste or religion. A Dalit can lead the prayers at the temple and a Brahmin has to touch his feet. A Mosque and a Church plays an important part in the offering of prayers by the pilgrims. Devotees are only differentiated on the basis of the number of times they have undertaken this pilgrimage. The only restriction that was placed was in the year 1991 when women of menstruating age, from 10 to 50 years were barred entry into the temple. The September 2018 Supreme Court ruling was hailed as a victory for the Constitutional rights of women by many. Though, in effect, only controversies and conflict has arisen out of it.

The devotees consider it a religious and cultural issue rather than one of democratic rights of an individual. According to the folklore, the reason behind the ban on entry of menstruating women in the Temple complex is the promise that Lord Ayyappa made to Mahishi. Many devotees believe that it would be disrespectful to Mahishi, also called as Malikapurathamma, who waits for Lord Ayyappa at the foot of the Sabari Hills. Devotees seek her blessings when they begin their pilgrimage. Also, it is believed that Lord Ayyappa himself, who follows celibacy, prohibits menstruating women from entering his shrine.

Whatever the reasons be, the root of this belief, that other women offering their prayers to Lord Ayyappa shall be disrespectful, arises from the age-old archetype of the woman as a temptress. In all the cultures of the world, women have held very specific roles. Either she is worshipped as a Goddess Mother, or shunned as a Temptress. Either she is a daughter of someone, or the wife of a man. Nowhere is a woman recognised as a complete entity which comprises various roles that she performs. This research paper aims to study the archetype of Woman as a Temptress in respect to the religious and cultural restriction that is still prevalent in Sabarimala Temple.

Archetypes are generally defined as "a very typical example of a certain person or thing". In psychoanalysis (in Jungian theory), it is defined as "a primitive mental image inherited from the earliest human ancestors, and supposed to be present in the collective unconscious." The presence of Archetypes has been theorized since Plato. Archetypes, also known as universal symbols, can be found in characters types, situations or symbols. Hero, mentor, devil figure, scapegoat, the earth mother, unfaithful wife, damsel in distress are some of the character archetypes; situations such as initiation of a hero, quest, death and re-birth, journey;

and symbols like colours, fire and ice, light and dark, heaven and hell, numbers and shapes serve as such ideas and objects whose common meaning is shared by all cultures of the world. As observed by Carl Jung, archetypes are the original prototype, from which all other images, ideas, characters have been derived or emulated.

Archetypes are understood, interpreted and modified within the human context. Since genesis of various cultures of the world, women have been fit into certain “roles” which humans understand and accept comfortably. Various archetypes for woman characters are the Goddess mother, the earth mother, the evil step-mother, the goodly wife, the unfaithful wife, the temptress, damsel in distress, the lover and the warrior princess. ‘His-story’ has been more comfortable with presenting women in such fragmented roles. Either a woman is a mother, or a wife; either she is a good wife or an evil witch. Women characters feature in shockingly contrasting roles in a number of narratives. The character portrayal of most of woman characters since the beginning of stories has been limited to her relationship with the man. A woman can only be celebrated as a mother, as in Mother Mary or a good wife such as Penelope who waited for the arrival of her husband Ulysses from his long adventures while keeping herself chaste or she is a witch that must be burned at the stake to save all humanity.

This paper deals with the archetype of women as the temptress. The seductress, also known as the *femme fatale* (the fatal woman) is one of the oldest and most common forms of archetype in our mythology and other literature. Though a temptress is presented in a variety of forms, certain traits remain common among various representations. The temptress is selfish, manipulative, cruel, goal-oriented, ambitious, intelligent and a survivor among other things. She has few female companions, is a sceptic and more often than not, uses her sexual prowess to waylay the “hero”.

Mythologies of all cultures, literature, films, and real life events, all acknowledge the temptress as an obstacle for the hero to achieve his destiny. Mythology is replete with women characters which are necessarily not villainous, but they definitely act as a road-block for the hero or an opportunity to prove his glorious character. *Mohini* is perhaps the most popular and archetypal example for a temptress in Hindu mythology. The name *Mohini* itself generates from the verb root *moha*, which means “to enchant, perplex, or disillusion,” and literally means “delusion personified.” She is portrayed as an enchantress, who maddens her lovers, leading them to their doom. She is little presented as the slayer of demons in popular culture. *Mohini* is the female incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Since it was through her union with Lord Shiva that Lord Ayyappa was born, it is the most appropriate example to state for the present research paper.

Another popular temptress from Hindu mythology is Shurpanakha, the cause of the battle of *Ramayana*. She is represented as an ugly woman, with thinning hair, disproportionate body and a grating voice. Her name literally means, ‘she who’s finger-nails are like winnowing fans’, in short, a she-devil. Shurpanakha was a bold, sexually assertive woman, who proposed

marriage to Laxman. Disgusted with her appearance and behaviour, Laxman cuts her nose to teach her a lesson, which caused the battle between Lord Rama and King Ravana.

Menka is another popular temptress/seductress figure in Hindu mythology. She is bid by Lord Indra to seduce Sage Vishwamitra, who is becoming powerful through his penance. She is successful in her task but suffers throughout her life. She is forever labelled as a seductress. In a ballet, Menka says, "I was no seductress seeking to distract men and gods from their intellectual and spiritual pursuits...I was the test they failed..."

Christian and Greek Mythology is replete with such images and narratives as well. Delilah is a character from the Hebrew Bible, who is tasked by the Philistines to trap Samson, the Israelite hero, with her beauty. She seduces Samson to reveal his weakness to her, which she passes on to the Philistines. It leads to the downfall of Samson.

Circe, the goddess of magic, was the most popular *femme fatale* of ancient Greek legends. She would seduce men sailing on the seas, tempting them to come to her island. Driven mad by the desire to touch her beautiful form, they visited her island. Circe would transform them into hogs, eternally trapping them on the island.

Images of mermaids, nymphs, sirens, *rusalkas*, etc. have been used symbols of human temptations and desire in countless narratives. All of them are beautiful women, sometimes part woman and part fish, as in the case of mermaids; sometimes part woman and part bird, as are the sirens, which lure men to their deaths with melodious songs. *Rusalkas*, in Slavic mythology, are female water spirits that leads handsome men to their deaths underwater. Nymphs are a mythological spirit of nature, thought off as beautiful maidens who inhabit woods, mountains, oceans or rivers. Notable example is of Daphne, who transformed herself into a Laurel tree to avoid Apollo's sexual advances. Calypso is another well-known name of a nymph which symbolises selfishness and sexual aggressiveness. She kept Odysseus a prisoner on her island, hoping to win his love.

One of the most potent examples of *femme fatale* is the tale of Medusa. Medusa was a beautiful young girl, who caught the eye of sea god Poseidon, who raped her in the sacred temple of Goddess Athena. Infuriated at the sacrilege of her temple, Athena transformed the beautiful Medusa into a monster with snakes for locks. Medusa received the lethal power to turn whoever glanced upon her visage to lifeless stone. More popular re-telling of the lore however focuses on how Perseus decapitates Medusa. It is due to this male-centred hero narrative that Medusa became a popular choice for monstrosity. The earliest known paintings, carvings and sculptures present Medusa as a beautiful woman, endowed with the power to both destroy and redeem. Medusa's head was even used as an apotropaic symbol, to ward off evil. It was only by Renaissance and due to the play of politics that Medusa was turned into a *femme fatale* or a fearsome figure, bringing about the downfall of heroic men.

The literature written is informed by its precedents and mythologies. Hence, figures like Helen in Homer's *Illiad*, Madame Bovary in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Anna Karenina in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the woman in John Keat's "La Belle Dams Sans Merci", Samuel

Coleridge's "Christabel", Scarlet O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*, Mystique from *X-Men* series, Catwoman, women in James Bond films, *Film Noir* genre from early 1940s to late 1950s, and more recently, Amy Dunne in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* have showcased the woman as a temptress archetype to whole of its depth and breadth.

As Campbell mentions in his book *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949):

Not even monastery walls, however, not even the remoteness of the desert, can defend against the female presences; for as long as the hermit's flesh clings to his bones and pulses warm, the images of life are alert to storm his mind. Saint Anthony, practising his austerities in the Egyptian Thebaid, was troubled by voluptuous hallucinations perpetrated by female devils attracted to his magnetic solitude. Apparitions of this order, with loins of irresistible attraction and breasts bursting to be touched, are known to all the hermit-resorts of history. (Campbell 104)

The enchantress, usually given a female form, can penetrate anywhere. The archetype professes that sex brings death and destruction to the hero by leading him astray from his path. The temptress is used as a plot device to prove the worthiness of the hero. Her beauty and sexuality is the evil that the hero must resist to reach the Holy Grail. She is the Vampire ('Vamp') that sucks the hero dry of his virtue and vitality. The temptress is a damaged woman, exploited by the masculine world, who rarely tastes a happy ending, unless she regrets her actions and reforms. She is mostly pitted against the archetype of a virtuous woman, a good wife. For instance, Calypso is presented in contrast to the ever virtuous Penelope, wife of Odysseus and *Shurpnakha*, in contrast to *Sita*.

The trope has, however underwent certain changes in recent years, as seen in Flynn's character of Amy Dunne, who is no longer just a wronged woman or the evil temptress. The audience and the readers can identify with Amy Dunne, some might even root for her and be impressed with what her character is able to do. A number of re-tellings of mythological narratives as well have brought about a change in the archetype of the woman as a temptress. Most modern narratives have now assimilated the "temptress" in the fold of main-stream respectable society.

The various critiques have pointed out the misogynist attitudes of men towards powerful women. The fear and burning of witches at the stake, the slut-shaming of confident women, discrediting women as vamps for being ambitious or as seductresses for being bold, intelligent, independent and sexually sure show a fearful response of men towards strong and powerful women. Calling such women as evil temptress on such a large scale, at all levels of society strengthens the archetype.

The ban on women from entering the Sabarimala Shrine stems from the archetypal fear of men from the temptress. The transformation of Mahishi into a beautiful woman is again a test for the hero to resist and overcome. Lord Ayyappa's promise and the subsequent ban on menstruating women from entering the temple is a thrust to the age-old archetype of women leading heroes astray. Supreme Court's order to revoke the ban is taken in the right spirit,

which calls for de-sexualisation of women; and to consider them complete, comprehensive individuals. Though the judgement hasn't yet been practically applied, it has started a dialogue in the arena of religious sacrosanct circle, which applies a lot of restrictions on women due to similar reasons. Writers like Gillian Flynn, George R. R. Martin and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have sought to break the age old archetypes by re-working the previously ignored aspects of a character into a more comprehensive 'human', presenting to a more accepting and modern audience. The act of mythopoeia (creating new archetypes) is reverberating throughout the world, producing brilliant literature and giving voice to the previously voiceless.

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