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## Rethinking Status of Goddesses in Greek and Indian Mythology: A Prefatory Comment

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### Abstract

*Myth is a folklore genre in which characters are usually gods, demigods, or supernatural humans. Myths are endorsed by rulers and priests and are closely linked to the way a religion is practiced. In referring to their remote past many societies invoke their myths, legends or history to make an evaluation of their present. Indian and Greek mythologies are very ancient and share some startling similarities. However, mythological history across civilizations has been largely recorded by male sages, poets or philosophers like Aeschylus, Homer, Sophocles, Valmiki, Kalidas. A closer scrutiny of goddesses in various mythological traditions clearly shows that every culture was dominated by male gods although goddesses were elevated to the status of mothers or deities. In both Greek and Indian mythologies gods, who we worship, have ill-treated goddesses. The present paper highlights sufferings faced by goddesses or their subjugation in Greek and Indian mythologies.*

**Keywords: mythology, goddesses, folklore, subjugation, gods, culture, discrimination**



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Indian and Greek mythologies are two very popular ancient mythologies known to the world. Both mythologies have no settled connections with one another yet these share some startling similarities. Devdutt Pattanaik, an Indian mythologist, draws links between Indian and ancient Greek mythological practices. He draws parallels between Greek and Indian mythologies—‘Dionysus and Shiva’, ‘*Illiad* and *Ramayana*’, ‘Hercules and Krishna’, ‘Indra and Zeus’, ‘Sita and Persephone’, ‘Mount Olympus and Kailasha’<sup>1</sup> and many others. Mythologies have given variety of sacred and spiritual ideas and thereby manipulated social and cultural life of societies. Worshipping goddesses as mothers is one such idea which has trickled down in the present societies wherein women are revered as mothers. In all societies Ahmed Rasool argues “The responsibility of women for the preparation of food, reproduction and maintenance of children creates this meaning for the human community at a time that the female is guarantee of the survival of the human community. Based on this conception the image of women, they gained more power in society, the persistence of life by women, turned into a sacred matter... they were sanctified to the extent that they were praised as Goddesses and mother-gods” (24). Perhaps the most important reason of treating them as Goddesses was the fertility and reproduction (25).

History is written by men—Indian, Greek or Persian sages, poets or philosophers like Aeschylus, Homer, Sophocles, Valmiki, Kalidas recorded or created myths. All the goddesses that we revere or worship have been invented or discovered by men. In “Unearthing the Goddess Within” Christine C Keating suggests “a discourse that has been established by a patriarchal myth. We were given such characters with their beauty and flaws, by men” (486).

Martha Beck in ‘Using the Greek Goddesses to Create a Well-lived Life for Women’ says:



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People's behavior, that how should one act and behave is mere a personification of Gods and Goddesses of Greek, Hindu and other mythologies. This pattern or behavior is followed by every person. Gods are embodiment of each thing they do. Our myths clearly show how every culture is male dominating 'patriarchal'. And men eventually use their power to abuse women. They are exposed and condemned in myths and suddenly we realize, gods who we think to be sacred, actually treated their women in similar abusive manner, they made their women to suffer for what they did or not, knowingly or unknowingly. (1)

In any mythology one finds plethora of stories in which goddesses are humiliated or punished by their male counterparts. Irrespective of any religion or culture a society imitates their gods and goddesses to legitimize their social or personal conduct. One takes examples from their life and tries to follow them. On a closer view one can easily find that the goddesses were generally subjugated in various mythologies. They rarely had an independent voice. In real life there is no practical equality between man and women in any society. Women might appear to be happy and rejoicing their honorable status but in real life they are subject to all sorts of maltreatment and misconduct. "Make her Lakshmi" and set boundaries for her—is one of the commonly spoken lines in India.

Sue Blundell and Susan Blundell in *Women in Ancient Greece* describe:

...Evolution of patriarchal divine power and of an orderly cosmos are seen to be inextricably linked. Thus male domination is represented as an essential ingredient in the stability of the universe and the justice of divine rule... Uranus tried to block the birth of his children, and it was from his genitals that the Aphrodite was born. Cronus swallowed his children and then disgorged them through his mouth... Zeus is the ruler, he produces a daughter, Athena. this means he



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completely usurps the woman's reproductive role; and birth now takes place from the head, the seat of wisdom. (21)

Aphrodite being born from the genitals of Cronos and Eve from the ribs of Adam--by this they seized the mother's reproduction. The male takes the role of a creator. Every single culture and religion glorify the magnificence of gods alone while goddesses are given a secondary role of child bearing and child rearing. Everyone is aware of the fact that fertility is in women's nature. That is why earth is worshipped as a mother because of its productive nature.

In ancient Greece several restrictions were imposed on women. They married off their daughters as soon as they attained puberty and gained sexual awareness. Many scholars claim Draupadi was married to five Pandavas as she attained her puberty at the age of sixteen; Sita was married to Lord Rama at the age of six. Similarly, Helen of Troy was married when she was seven or ten years old. P. Walcot, in "Greek Attitudes towards Women: The Mythological Evidence" says "Marriage was arranged at this age so that they could not easily be tempted by all other suitors. In the course of time, it has become propensity of a man to devalue woman and they viewed her as an object of entertainment "(38). Another important factor of the passiveness of Indian women is they prefer to suffer and be dutiful to their husbands rather than submit themselves to others for the sake of pleasure and love. A popular example is of Washerman's wife in Ramayana, who remained truthful and dutiful to her husband after all his atrocities, she remained loyal to him. Persephone, who was the daughter of Demeter, the Goddess of grain, was abducted by Hades, the God of under-world. She pacified her mother that she would live with him and remained faithful to him.

There are many stories in Greek or Indian mythology where one finds issues like rape or abduction and there is no doubt that the female body is frequently made susceptible to sexual assault. In *Mahabharata* one witnesses the plight and agony of Draupadi, who had five



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husbands, walked through fire to restore her virginity before she went to the next husband. Men desire pure, virgin and dutiful yet quiet women. To use a Keatsian phrase in “Ode to Grecian Urn”, “unravished bride of quietness.” Nobody can measure the trauma of Draupadi when she was called a ‘whore’ in the gambling hall of Kaurvas. Similarly, Menelaus, King of Sparta used to call his wife, Helen of Troy, a whore, and curse her beauty.

According to Manu a woman’s most important duty is taking care of her children, husband and the extended family as protector and supplier. According to *Manusamriti* Verse 9.3 “Pita raksati kaumare bharata raksati yauvane|raksanti sthavire putra na nari svatantryamarhati||3|| “The father guards her during virginity, the husband guards her in youth, the sons guard her in old age; the women is never fit for independence” (258). Manu in *Manusmriti* again added guidelines for men, “even if man’s mind is unable to resist and is full of desires, he should avoid to have sex with a woman who is on menstruation; he should not even sleep with her in the same bed. A man who has sex with a woman flooded in menstrual blood loses his wisdom, energy, strength, eyesight and long life” (255). The ideal Indian womanhood has often been transmitted through the highly popular expression ‘Sati-Savitri’. The figure of Sati and Savitri constitute imitable standards of Hindu womanhood passed on by Indian mythology. Sati has been seamless in strengthening ideal of Hindu womanhood in which a wife stood by her husband’s side in every situation and Savitri brings the husband back from the kingdom of dead. In *Iliad* Homer describes the role of women as a mere toy or object over which men fight with each other. Sharon L. James and Sheila Dillon in *A Companion to Women in Ancient World* say there is a constant “Conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles for the ownership of the captive Briseis” (57) and in *Ramayana* Tara, wife of Bali felt crushed between two brothers Bali and her brother-in-law, Sugriva, for the throne of Kishkindha.

Devdutt Pattanaik in his book *Sita: An Illustrated retelling of Ramayana* retells a story of Renuka. She was so faithful to Jamadagni that she could collect water for him from the river in



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unbaked pots. One day Renuka saw a Gandhrava bathing in the river. She forgot the purpose and got late to return home. Jamdagani accused her of adultery and ordered his sons to cut-off their mother's head. Four out of five refused, but the youngest one swung his axe and did the needful. He used the axe in so dreadful manner, thereafter he is known to the world as Parushrama (n.pag.). Devdutt Pattanaik in *7 Secrets of the Goddesses* explains "Sita proves her fidelity by going through a trial by fire. A Sati's fidelity allegedly offered her protection from widowhood. *The Puranas* tells the story of Shilavati, who carries her leper husband on her shoulders to prostitutes. A sage is so disgusted by her husband that he declares he will die when the sun rises next. Shilavati then uses her power of chastity to prevent the sun from rising" (25).

In biblical mythology Eve is tempted by the serpent and eats the fruit from the tree of knowledge and also compels Adam to do so. For this act of transgression, both Adam and Eve are cast out of Paradise and Eve is made subservient to Adam. Before the creation of Eve, god is said to have created Lilith with hairy legs, but she refused to be subservient to Adam and so was cast out, and eventually she became the mother of Monsters.

Society located its honour in woman's body. Thousand Greek ships sailed to bring back Helen, the wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta, who eloped with Paris, Prince of Troy. Greek epics described her action brought shame to all of Greece. After Troy was torn to the ground, the wives of Trojan Warriors were brought back to Greece as concubines. Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks, who had sacrificed his daughter Iphigeniah, to ensure good winds as they sailed to battle, returned with the Trojan princess Cassandra by his side. Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra was so angry that she murdered her husband and his concubine

In these stories one finds a woman stops being a person; she is dehumanised and turned into a symbol of masculine honour. This transformation from prized possession to venerated object marks the triumph of patriarchy.



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If Gods are true symbols of infallibility, then why did goddesses suffer irreparably and immensely in *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Iliad*, and *Odyssey*? Standards of morality had been set by Gods: as Rama is known for his ‘righteousness’, Shiva for his ‘impartiality’, Brahma for his ‘justice’, Zeus for his ‘mercy’, and Poseidon for his ‘friendly nature. That’s why they are worshipped. But even gods failed to sustain ‘dharmic’ conduct. Following are a few examples of goddesses from Indian and Greek mythology of goddesses who have been subjugated and victimized? Most of the goddesses in great epics like *Ramayana*, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Mahabharata* suffered immensely at the hands of gods or sages.

Goddesses are generally linked with beauty, love, motherhood and fertility whereas gods are linked to valour, strength, masculinity, saviours of women, warriors—a clear binary.

## II

### **Helen and Sita**

Both *Iliad* and *Ramayana* are always glorified with the tales of heroism and hyper masculinity. Amidst the glory of men depicted in these epics lies a woman who’s sacrifice and fidelity is always neglected and marginalized. In “How *Iliad* and *Mahabharata* have depicted Woman as Catalysts of War” Divya Godbole says women were harbingers of war simply because they were silent or were silenced in the course of the narrative. These muted characters and their positions were presented as catalysts of war... Their beauty was a weapon in their arsenal that they apparently used to bring the down fall of great men”. Madhu Kishwar in “Yes to Sita, No to Ram” says “Sita’s proof of being a chaste, by coercing her through ‘Agnipariksha’ was a sudden whim of an unreasonable and dubious husband” (23). When Sita came back to Ayodhya, she was not welcomed there and they called her impure. Rama sent pregnant Sita to the forest against her will and she suffered her entire life. Helen, who was daughter of Zeus and wife of Menelaus suffered similar fate. Margaret R. Scherer in “Helen of Troy” says “how Zeus made a plan with



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Themis, Goddess of order, to bring about the Trojan War. And it was him who made Helen to run away with him and this resulted into Trojan War. Helen was mere a puppet of Zeus and Aphrodite's conspiracy. When Helen came back to Sparta, Menelaus in undignified manner used to call her 'whore'. Gods were the reason why these two women wailed all of their life" (369-70).

## **Diti and Gaia**

Stories of killing foetus in a mother's womb or murdering new born babies out of fear either of castration or usurpation of the throne is quite common in different mythologies. In Indian mythology one finds examples of Diti (mother of Asuras, Marutas) and Devaki (biological mother of Krishana) whose brother Kamsa killed her seven sons. And in Greek mythology one finds Gaia (Earth-mother) and Rhea (daughter of Gaia) who also suffered same pain as their husbands Uranus and Cronus swallowed their own children and controlled parturition.

Diti is the mother of both the Marutas and the Asuras and sister of Aditi and Sati. Many sons of Diti were killed by Indra. In her grief Diti, pleaded with sage Kashyapa, her husband, that she should be blessed with a heroic son. Out of fear Indra managed to splinter her foetus into several pieces who became devas known as 'Maruts'. Whenever she asked her husband to have intercourse. He avoided her by saying, women should control their desires. According to *Srimad Bhagavatam* in Canto 3(3.14.23) women (only women) need to control her sex desires. "the difference between a married wife and a public prostitute is that one is restrained in sex life by the rules and regulations of the scriptures, whereas the other is unrestricted in sex life and is conducted solely by the strong sex urge."<sup>3</sup>

One finds a similar situation in Greek mythology. Gaia is personification of Earth in Greek mythology. *7 Secrets of Goddesses* of Devdutt Pattanaik tells a story of Gaia: her mate Uranus, the starry sky, clung to her intimately and gave her no space to deliver her children. After



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castrating Uranus, his father Cronus declared himself king and ate his own children to prevent them from overpowering him as he overpowered his father. Gaia saves one son, Zeus, from the brutality of Cronus, and eventually Zeus attacked and killed Cronus. In triumph Zeus declared himself the father of Gods and takes residence atop Mount Olympus. Gaia remained the earth-mother, respected but distant (3). One can't say whether relations between Earth and other Gods was ever amiable. Donald J. Hughes and Frank Richard in "Gaia: Environmental Problems in Chthonic Perspective" say "The Gods, warrior of sky are mostly males. Sky gods became Olympians, by dominating and exasperating Gaia" (95). Woman has always paid for a man's greed.

## **Persephone and Saraswati**

According to the Bible Eve was born out of Adam's ribs and is technically the daughter of Adam. In certain versions Adam and Eve are viewed as siblings born like two parts of single fruit. Therefore, the relation between them can be called incestuous. *Rig Veda* also tells a story of Dyaus, who had an incestuous relation with his daughter Usha. Devdutt Pattanaik in *7 Secrets of Goddesses* retells a story in which son of Brahma tried to rape his own daughter. There are many similar stories of rape and incest in different mythologies. Zeus, the lord of gods and impersonator was notorious for his libido. He had secretly seduced wives and daughters of many kings. He took the form of Swan and made love with Leda. He took the form of a beam-light and made love to Danae. He made love to Alcmene, disguised as her husband Amphitryon. Michael L. Morgan in "Plato and Greek Religion" explains that "In the shape of a serpent Zeus violently raped his mother Rhea and sired Persephone then he raped Persephone and sired Dionysos (237). In Indian mythology Brahma is considered to be the first amongst Gods. Saraswati came out from his mouth and he created human race. *Shiva Purana* tells us that when Brahma's daughter came into being Brahma desired her. In *7 Secrets of Goddesses* Devdutt Pattanaik is of the view that disgusted by the incestuous craving of father, Shiva beheaded brahma and took upon himself



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the great burden of Brahma-hatya-paap. *Vishnu Purana* tells us that Ravana, a brahmin, abducted Ram's wife, Sita, not remembering that she is actually his daughter whom he had abandoned long ago (91-93).

## **Surapnakha and Medusa**

In various mythologies the pain of goddesses remains unsung and unhonoured. There are many female characters in male epics who are misunderstood, ignored and almost forgotten. Those women are always seen and understood through this patriarchal vision. Both Surapnakha and Medusa are examples of those misunderstood characters and have been portrayed as demon, ogress and bad women. A dominating, vocal, sexually aggressive woman is seen as a threat to patriarchal society. Athena originated from Zeus's head, and was devoted to her father and usually did things that pleased him. Patriarchy here works this way. The name Medusa originated from a Greek word meaning 'Guardian'—was one of the three Gorgons sisters and after rejecting her childhood lover, she chose to be a priestess of Athena's temple. One day Poseidon in a fit of rage raped Medusa in the temple of Athena. Athena found Medusa guilty for seducing Poseidon cursed Medusa and turned her into a monster and transformed her hair into serpents. William S. Duffy in "Medusa as Victim and Tool of Male Aggression" says, Ovid was the first author who recognised Medusa as a rape victim. In Greek mythology one finds Gods routinely having non-consensual sex with mortal women without sustaining its consequences and without losing their status and prominence. And women were reprimanded badly for attracting the gods (5-6).

In Indian context there is a story which revolves around the most misunderstood character of *Ramayana*, Ravana's sister, Meenakshi, who was innocent, naïve, and sweet. In her childhood because of her ugliness, she faced the ignorance of her mother and later she fell in love with Vidyujiva and married him, soon after the death of her husband, on the orders of Ravana, she metamorphosed from sweet Meenakshi to ogress Surapanakha, one with sharp nails. In Dhanak



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forest, Rama ordered his brother Laxamana to slice off Surapnakha's ears and nose. In a revenge Ravana abducted Sita. The alternative story of Surapnakha's describes her as a strong independent woman, who is able to fight for her own rights. She is equally strong as any man. She was a victim in the hands of patriarchal dominance and a gender biased society. She got punished merely for showing interest in another man. While Rama is shown as protector of women and he is seen as commanding Laxamana to mutilate Surapnakha's nose. Beautiful face of a woman is an asset to her because it captivates one and all. If her face is disfigured, her strength and existence is broken. Both Medusa and Surapnakha are examples of beautiful maidens. One suffered the lust of a God, the other suffered the humiliation of a God.

## **Indra's Wife (Sachi) and Zeus' Wife (Hera)**

As a symbol of patriarchal society one finds 'pativratas' like Sita, Anasuya, Arundhati, Savitri, Mandodari, Damayanti celebrated as ideal women, who half-heartedly served their husband in spite of their treachery and impertinence. These are women who sacrificed their all and mutely suffered all throughout their life and were considered as the epitome of womanhood. In any mythology sexuality of every goddess was totally controlled by their husbands. According to *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, Hera, daughter of Rhea and Cronus, wife of Zeus and queen of the Olympians is frequently represented as the faithful wife of Zeus, but she is more famous for jealousy and revengeful nature. Hera constantly caught her husband's infidelity as he was always in a chase to find a voluptuous maiden. She always remained worried and insecure for her husband. Laura Kennelly in *Is Zeus a Boundary Breaker?* suggests "Zeus in Greek mythology has been always known for his sexual voraciousness; his illicit affairs; and for his chameleonic instincts. Zeus also disregarded the paramountcy of his marriage to Hera through his countless affairs" (17). Hera was so insecure that she punished all lovers of Zeus and made them to suffer as she was suffering the agony of not being loved.<sup>2</sup> As W.J Wilkins in *Hindu Mythology* refers to Indrani also known by another name Sachi: "She is the Goddess of beauty in



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Hinduism. She is the daughter of Asura, Puloman. She is famously known for her wrath and jealousy” (62). But like Hera she was sick of Indra’s infidelity. Emily West in “The Transformation of Cyavana: A Case Study in Narrative Evolution” argues how Indra, seduced the wife of sage Gautama, Ahalya, by disguising himself as her husband (95). Both Zeus and Indra had many affairs with mortal women as well as goddesses. Apalla , Tilottama, Menaka are the names of some apsaras who had been seduced by Indra. Renate Sohnen in “Indra and Women” says “Indra being impish, was always ready to make love with a human woman, regardless of she be a virgin, married, or a paramour” (71). One of the mythological novel *Menaka’s Choice* written by Kavita Kane discusses that he couldn’t resist himself after seeing Menaka and took her to Amaravati. He wanted all the pleasures from her solely. Aishwarya Javalkar in her “Indra, Zeus, and Thor: A Comparative Study of Indo-European Mythology” describes “Indra is a phallic God and a dancer. In one of the myths, Indra is castrated by angry Shiva, and is given testicles of Rama instead, which are much more potent than those of a human or anthropomorphic god” (10).

To conclude, one finds that internalization of patriarchy is very strong in women and it could be traced back to mythological goddesses who suffered silently at the hands of gods. Mythology has been always a play of men by men. In mythological space women generally did not play any significant role; they were treated as side actors in both Greek and Indian mythology. They have either been treated as an auxiliary or appendage and rarely had a voice of their own. That’s why Sita’s testament, Surapnaka’s mutilation, Eve’s elimination, Circe’s expulsion and Medusa’s disfigurement is showcased as the right thing they deserved. Women are portrayed as troublemakers. Pandora being a curse is blamed to bring all the bad luck and problems to the human kind. Helen is generally blamed to bring Trojan war and Draupadi for Mahabharata. Adrienne Rich has defined “re-visioning” is the act of looking back at things with a fresh perspective and Jacques Derrida has given the concept of “deconstruction” which could be used



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to reinterpret centrality of mythologies, patriarchy, supremacy of men, domination and restore dignity of characters like Sita, Ahalya, Helen, Draupadi, Kunti, Mandodari, Tara, Aphrodite, Helen, Semele Surapnakha and Medusa who have been labeled as unfaithful, preludes to war and bad omens. A reinterpretation of their lives can liberate these goddesses from their afflictions and sensitize societies and cultures about treachery and abomination inflicted upon them by gods.

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## **Web Resources**

<sup>1</sup>[https://www.google.com/search?q=devdutt+pattanaik+simmlarities+between+greek+and+indian+mythology&rlz=1C1CHBF\\_enIN871IN874&oq=devdutt+pattanaik+simmlarities+between+greek+and+indian+mythology&aqs=chrome..69i57.74968j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=devdutt+pattanaik+simmlarities+between+greek+and+indian+mythology&rlz=1C1CHBF_enIN871IN874&oq=devdutt+pattanaik+simmlarities+between+greek+and+indian+mythology&aqs=chrome..69i57.74968j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)

<sup>2</sup><https://www.ancient.eu/Hera/>

<sup>3</sup><https://vaniquotes.org/wiki/Diti>