
Karma's Echo: Amba's Vengeful Odyssey in Sharath Komarraju's 51 Lesser-Known Tales from The Mahabharata

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Abstract.

The study delves into the character of *Amba* in Sharath Komarraju's book titled *51 Lesser Known Tales from The Mahabharata*. As the name of the book suggests, the author illuminates the fifty-one lesser known characters from the age-old epic—*The Mahabharata*. Overlooked and unrecognized characters like *Barbarika*, son of *Ghatotkacha*, *Uttanka*, sage of Maru Desert, *Satyavati*, the first Queen of Hastinapur gained immense importance in his writings. Sharath's unique art of storytelling not only infuses life into these age-old stories and mythological characters but also creates an ever-lasting upon the readers' mind. *Amba's* story bears a timeless appeal, for it focuses on enduring themes like love, betrayal, vengeance and the intricacies of destiny. It aims to elucidate how *Amba* is subjected to the politics of the state. It also throws light on the fact how men control the destiny of women in a patriarchal society and shamelessly justifies their acts. Finally, it concludes by portraying how *Amba* accomplishes her revenge against *Vishma* and poses a challenge to the patriarchal society, thereby situating the text in the domain of a revisionist mythology.

Keywords: Destiny, Society, Vengeance, Women.

1. Introduction

Literature, showcasing the diverse spectrum of human existence and broadening the scope of human perception, holds a superior position amidst other branches of knowledge. It is Literature's fictional essence that enables readers to perceive the imperceptible and experience the intangible, elevating its appeal. Myth and mythology, serving as reflections of the vibrant cultural heritage of ancient times, persist in shaping and impacting the Indian mindset, particularly through the narratives and personas found in the grand epics—*The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. In *Myths of Light* Joseph Campbell exemplifies: “Mythology is composed by poets out of their insights and realizations. Mythologies are not invented; they are found. You can no more tell us what your dream is going to be tonight than we can invent a myth. Myths come from the mystical region of essential experience” (5).

Mythological writings timeless sagas that have held an enduring appeal for writers across the ages and geographical boundaries. These timeless tales, renowned for their grand narratives and profound philosophical insights, have inspired countless interpretations and retellings. Writers from diverse backgrounds have embarked on journeys into the depths of these epics, seeking to unravel their enduring significance. Through their creative endeavors, they have illuminated the complex themes embedded within these works, shedding light on issues of race, class, gender, and power dynamics. Writers of the present day landscape have made remarkable contributions to the realm of mythological interpretation. Their diverse perspectives and creative approaches have broadened our outlook about these ancient narratives, expanding the existing body of knowledge. The enduring allure of the epics lies in their ability to transcend time and space, speaking to the human condition in profound ways. These stories, with their universal themes and captivating characters, continue to inspire and challenge readers, offering timeless lessons in morality, ethics, and the human spirit.

Contemporary writers who explore the realm of the rich tapestry of mythological tales are Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Devdutt Pattanaik. Sharath Komarraju, among them, stands as a distinguished figure who writes encompassing themes like mystery, historical fiction, and mythology. Moreover, his storytelling is a vibrant tapestry interwoven with the expansive landscape of Indian mythos, historical narratives, presented in compelling and modern perspectives. He focuses on the shadowed and marginalized characters of Indian mythology. His novels spotlights the complexities of human experiences against the backdrop of mythology.

Amba, the eldest daughter of King *Kashya*, lands in trouble and faces unforeseen circumstances due to *Bhishma* who abducts her from her *swayamvara* against her will. Her life's course, thereafter, takes a new turn, for she gradually emerges as an unyielding woman and becomes a foil to the patriarchal society. She even takes her unforgettable revenge against *Bhishma*.

2. Method

The researcher has conducted a thorough examination of the text, carefully scrutinizing individual words, phrases, and literary devices to uncover the underlying meanings, symbols, and intentions embedded within the text. This meticulous approach, known as textual analysis, allows for a deeper comprehension regarding the text's intricacies and nuances. Additionally, the researcher has considered relevant secondary sources to accommodate a broader context for the text. By combining textual analysis with contextual information, the researcher aims to present a compact analysis of the narrative's subtleties, cultural references, and authorial choices. This holistic approach guarantees the researcher's interpretations are well-grounded and insightful.

3. Results and Discussion

Storytelling: Myth and Mythology

The late 20th century witnessed the emergence of a literary movement that dared to challenge the traditional portrayals of women in ancient myths. This movement, known as revisionist mythology, sought to subvert the patriarchal narratives that had long dominated these tales, giving voice to the silenced and marginalized female characters. Alicia Ostriker in her book *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* identifies myths as: "sanctuaries of language where our meaning for 'male' and 'female' are stored; to rewrite them from a female point of view is to discover new possibilities for meaning" (211). Thus, the essence of a revisionist text is found in its capacity to transform the prevailing narrative, offering readers an alternative viewpoint and a new understanding.

Mythology spans a broad spectrum, not solely encapsulating our illustrious history, culture, and civilization but also rendering it pertinent to contemporary times through its portrayal of relatable human experiences. M. H. Abrams states: "Myth is one story in mythology- a

system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives” (Abrams 170).

Character Revitalization

Sharath treatment of *Amba* breathes new life into a character often overshadowed in traditional retellings of the Mahabharata. Through meticulous storytelling, *Amba* emerges as a complex figure, embodying resilience in the face of adversity. Her portrayal transcends the archetype of a victim and evolves into a symbol of defiance against societal injustices. *Amba's* wish to marry her lover, *Salva* remained unfulfilled after her abduction by *Bhisma*. On the other hand, her two sisters, *Ambika* and *Ambalika* married *Vichitraveerya*, second son of *Satyavati* and achieved the status of Queen of *Hastinapur*, *Amba's* destiny changed from bad to worse, for no one showed interest to marry her: *Salva* refused her stating that *Bhishma* won her and rejected her. *Vichitraveerya*, on the other hand, was disinterested to marry who is rejected by someone else. *Amba* attributes her predicament to *Bhishma*, as he disrupted her marriage with *Salva* during the *Swayamvara*, neither allowing her to wed him nor assuming responsibility for her situation. With an intense loathing towards *Bhishma* and consumed by a desire for retribution, *Amba* departs from *Hastinapur* and ventures into the forest.

Exploration of Timeless Themes

The narrative's emphasis on timeless themes like love, betrayal, vengeance, and destiny resonates deeply. *Amba* becomes a vessel through which these enduring motifs are explored, offering a poignant reflection on the human condition. This exploration engenders a sense of reliability, allowing readers to connect with the character on a profound emotional level. Through her journey and experiences, the story reflects the complexities of these themes, offering a poignant and relatable portrayal of the human condition.

Amba's narrative serves as a mirror reflecting relatable emotions and struggles. Her experiences of love thwarted by circumstances, betrayal inflicted upon her by external forces,

the burning desire for vengeance, and the intricacies of an inescapable destiny resonate deeply with readers. By portraying these universal emotions and challenges through Amba's character, the narrative transcends the bounds of time and culture, inviting readers to empathize and connect with her on a profound emotional level.

Unveiling Patriarchal Constructs

Ken Dowden (1992) states: “. . . mythology is by and large a man's mythology, describing a world from a man's point of view. Women are seldom considered in isolation from men and seldom have scope for action on their own initiative” (161). Amba's story was hardly paid any attention by other writers. Sharath Komarraju parallelly portrays both the masculine and feminine ideologies: *Bhishma* justifies the act of abduction as a political move to strengthen the vulnerable *Kuru* dynasty. He even justifies ‘abduction’ of the three princesses as the famous ‘Rakshasa’ form of marriage which is one among the eight forms of marriages. The analysis brings to light the systemic control exercised by men over women's destinies within a patriarchal society. Amba's plight serves as a potent commentary on gender dynamics, shedding light on the unapologetic justifications provided by the male-dominated power structure for their actions.

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* considers women as “the elementary silence of truth” (196). Amba silently nurtures her vengeance against *Bhishma*. She even achieves the boon of killing *Bhishma* in her next birth as *Shikhandi* in *Drupada* race from Lord *Shiva* pleasing him by performing severe austerities. In Papuri Lalita Kumari's (popularly known as Volga) feminist revisionist narrative *The Liberation of Sita*, Ahalya generalizes the fate of many women in their discussion and says: “Aren't many women in this world wrongly accused, Sita?” (Volga 21). Amba, who was reborn as *Shikhandi* in her next birth in the human world kills *Bhishma* by employing *Arjuna* in a war with him and satisfies her quest for vengeance. Amba's actions and experiences within the narrative disrupt traditional patriarchal structures. Her defiance against the male-dominated system, particularly regarding the control and determination of women's destinies, serves as a force that challenges established norms. Through her quest for justice and retribution, Amba emerges as a symbol of resistance against the prevailing societal constructs that limit women's agency and perpetuate gender-based

control. Her narrative highlights the inequities and injustices inherent in patriarchal systems, contributing to a deconstruction of these entrenched power dynamics by showcasing the repercussions and struggles faced by women within such societal frameworks.

Revisionist Perspective

Revisionist mythology has transformed the landscape of myth retelling, granting women their deserved position at the center of these narratives. By shedding light on the agency and complexities of female characters, this movement has not only reshaped the stories but also redefined our cultural perception of women's roles in these tales. Kavita Kane points out: “If the Indian epics - *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* - had not been re-imagined and retold multiple times, they wouldn't have existed today” (*The New Indian Express*). This literary movement has demonstrated the power of storytelling to challenge societal norms and promote gender equality. By giving a voice to silenced women and reshaping their portrayals, revisionist mythology has enriched our insights into the human experience, revealing the multifaceted nature of female identity and the strength that lies within. Adrienne Rich on her essay, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision* remarks: “Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction— is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (18). Re-vision, the process of retrospectively examining, perceiving with a renewed perspective, and engaging with an old text through a novel critical lens, holds significance beyond a mere segment in cultural chronicles. It stands as an imperative act of survival for us.

Komaraju's portrayal of *Amba* operates within the sphere of revisionist mythology, challenging established norms and power structures. *Amba's* pursuit of vengeance against *Vishma* embodies defiance against the societal norms of her time, positioning her as a catalyst for change within the patriarchal framework. The marginalized and silenced *Amba* is “removed from all lines of social mobility” (Spivak 475) is re-visited here with the courage and conviction to counteract against discrimination and inequality faced by women in patriarchal society that has been deemed as irrelevant in the traditional narratives.

Devdutt Pattanaik in his *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of The Mahabharata* observes: “The unclothing of *Draupadi* is not merely the unclothing of a woman, it represents the collapse of a civilization, the move from field to forest, from *Gauri* to *Kali* when Dharma is abandoned”

(75). Sharath Komarraju's depiction of *Amba* presents her as a modern, empowered woman who challenges conventional norms and asserts her agency in a patriarchal society. *Amba's* portrayal transcends traditional boundaries, showcasing her as resilient, determined, and unafraid to confront the injustices she faces. She embodies strength and resilience, standing as a beacon of empowerment by refusing to conform to societal expectations and actively seeking retribution for the injustices inflicted upon her. Komarraju's *Amba* exemplifies a modern archetype of strength—a woman who refuses to be confined by societal constraints and strives to redefine her own destiny, embodying the spirit of empowerment and resilience that resonates with contemporary audiences.

4. Conclusions

Amba emerges as a strong and powerful woman. She is the symbol of strength against all kinds of social injustices. The story delves deep and not only foregrounds the plight of the overlooked marginalized characters but also foregrounds the inherent gender dynamics and power struggle in the patriarchal framework. *Amba's* journey encapsulates universal themes of agency, retribution, and the consequences of a society dominated by male authority. Her pursuit of justice against *Bhishma* challenges the status quo, offering a poignant reflection on the enduring struggle for autonomy and redefining societal norms. Sharath's nuanced portrayal of *Amba's* tale serves as a compelling reminder of the timeless relevance of her story, resonating with audiences by questioning entrenched power structures and advocates empowering the marginalized voices.

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