
The Threads of Creation: Nature Worship and Feminism through the Silk Route

Sakshi Shukla, Meenakshi Jha

Students of Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi
Contact: shuklasakshi2005@gmail.com, jhameenakshi2005@gmail.com

Article Received: 02/10/2024

Article Accepted: 14/11/2024

Published Online: 15/11/2024

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.11.21

Abstract

What makes us and what we are made of is a subject of wonder culturally universal to every religious community. Across continents and customs, the answer to these fundamental questions lies in their myths of creation. Be it the Book of Genesis or the Enūma Elish, creation myths symbolize what values community treasures. In the present times, however, there has been a sudden imperviousness when it comes to the revival and survival of these myths, consequently shedding light upon the degradation of our civilizational assets due to an alarming ignorance of the myths that define us. In addition to the disinterest in creation myths, the marginalization of women in mythology (especially of minor goddesses from "pagan cultures") is also a pertinent problem that needs to be discussed, especially now that advocacy for women's rights is extremely significant. This paper, written in two parts, marks a confluence of mythology, its purely masculine construction, and the patterns of feminine power in traditional societies by analyzing creation myths prevalent throughout the Silk Route. The paper also correlates them to the contemporary subjugation of women by consulting relevant statistical and theoretical data.

Keywords: Nature Worship, myths, Feminism, Silk Route.

Power of Nature

Nature is understood as a breathing and living entity on its own, not just an avenue for sustenance for the rest of human civilization in Japan, Egypt, India, and Persia. These areas were connected by the "Silk Route," a trade network extending from the Middle East and Asia to the West. Apart from promoting economic prosperity throughout the region, this trade route was also responsible for the trade of

ideas. The free flow of ideas through trade also influenced the cultures of these areas that were connected by the Silk Route.

Perhaps this cultural exchange is why, in the mythologies of India, Egypt, Persia, and Japan, we can witness a fascinating trend of identifying nature with women, both negatively and positively. The mere presence of nature being regarded as a deity in these mythologies affirms the high esteem that is bestowed on nature in these cultures. These goddesses serve as a reminder of the powerful and paradoxical aspects of nature and femininity's collective ability to nurture and annihilate vital life forces.

The existence of goddesses that personify natural elements also unlocks the perspective that women in the region wherein these mythological lores were prevalent could probably be regarded as symbols of power. This alludes to the admiration that was reserved for women before the contemporary times in regions that colonialist historiography has categorized as "uncivilized." Merlin Stone, in her seminal research work "When God Was a Woman," argued that the gender of the deity in power would probably reflect the gender in the power of the time and how the stories of most of these deities have been lost over time due to patriarchy in organized religions. Hence, to demonstrate the power of nature and the power of feminine values that were exemplified by some myths of the Silk Route, we firstly begin by delving into goddesses like Usas and Ratri.

In Hindu mythology, Usas and Ratri are twin sisters representing dawn and night. More than forty of Rigveda's hymns are dedicated to Usas, and she is identified as a young maiden who brings light to the world. She is responsible for driving away darkness and evil demons. She rouses the whole of mankind to fulfill their duties and set things in motion. She moves with the Rta (the cosmic, social, and moral order) and, along with her twin sister Ratri, signifies the coherence of the created order. She serves to function as the eye of the gods since she is a skilled huntress. Usas is also associated with death in the sense that her role as the mistress of time reminds people of their limited life on earth. Even though she is referred to as the goddess of the light of dawn and the mother of the Ashvins, she is still celebrated for her role as a skilled huntress and showcases the duality between life and death. With her roles as a skilled huntress and her reverence as a sacred mother, she represents the balance between conventionally masculine and feminine attributes. The myth of Usas encourages the idea that women can be both breadwinners and birth givers in a society that benefits from reducing them to just their biological functionality of reproduction.

Ratri, on the other hand, allows human beings to perceive dangers in the dark and is the Vedic depiction of the night. She is mentioned in the Rigveda's Ratri Suktam (127th hymn, 10th mandala). Unlike Usas, she is considered infertile since she is incapable of giving birth. Yet, along with her sister, she is considered the mother of eternal law. Even though Ratri cannot be a mother, she is still respected in Hinduism as a nurturing force, unlike the contemporary trend of outcasting women who choose not to give birth.

Another Vedic goddess who is considered to be an archaic conceptualization of nature is Aranyani. She speaks through the forest, never kills unless provoked, and makes her presence known in the evening. In the later Indian tradition, she resembles the Yaksis. Yaksis are the benevolent but mischievous spirits of nature in Hindu mythology. She has one of the most descriptive hymns dedicated to her in the Rigveda called the Aranyani Suktam (10th Mandala, Hymn 146). In the hymn, she is described as being unafraid of remote places and wandering away from civilization. She showcases the power women hold to sustain civilization and their desire to also remain independent while doing so. Aranyani also highlights the potency a woman's voice holds when she speaks out against injustices.

Chinnamasta, a form of goddess Bhavani, is a deity that requires special attention. Her legend is found in the Prantosini Tantra, an eighteenth-century tantric text that has developed from an esoteric yogic tradition of Hinduism. She is indirectly connected to nature, as according to the legend in the text, she went to bathe with her two servants in the Mandakini River. She was overcome by sexual desires, but her servants started nagging her for food, even though she had told them to wait. The servants told her that it was the duty of the mother to satiate the hunger of their children, and the goddess had to ultimately decapitate herself to feed her ravenous servants. Chinnamasta symbolizes the intertwining of matronly love and sexual desires and the breaking of social norms with her anthropomorphization as a goddess with disheveled hair who walks around nude. She also appears above Shiva in some versions of the lore, signifying that she symbolically controls the masculine energy of her spouse by exerting her own agency and controlling her own desires.

The figure of Draupadi is also essential to decode the conceptualization of nature in Hinduism. Considered one of the Pancākanyas (the five maidens who are revered to be the most pure in Hindu epics) and born out of the fires of revenge, Draupadi is a direct personification of nature in the epic Mahabharata. She is the

architect of the Pandavas' glory but is also the agent that destroys their stature in society. Hence, she embodies the duality inherent in nature, creation, and destruction, like most goddesses who preceded her in this paper. Draupadi was disrobed in front of her in-laws by her own family members, and she seeks vengeance for the same by cursing her entire clan. She speaks out as the oppressed Prakriti (the Sanskrit word and depiction of nature) against the injustices meted out to her. Her act of marrying the five Pandavas portrays one of the earliest instances of a woman's sexuality being controlled by those around her instead of her own choices.

The contemporary issue of ecocide is also represented in the Hindu epic Mahabharata. The episode wherein Arjuna and Krishna decide to burn the forest of Khandavaprastha so that the Pandavas can build their opulent palace has incurred great wrath not only in the epic from the gods but also in real life by various experts who want to scrutinize the selfish plundering of natural resources by man in today's time.

In Persia and Egypt, goddesses Anahita and Sekhmet were also associated with things termed “dark” like plagues and deaths just like some of the Hindu goddesses we have mentioned above. Sekhmet in Egyptian mythology is the goddess of plague, chaos, war and healing, with the head of a lion. She also serves as a protector against the enemies of Re, the sun God.

Anahita is the goddess of water, fertility and war in Persian mythology. She is both a protective force and a nurturing force. According to the Roman historian Strabo, daughters from noble families were required to perform sacred prostitution at her shrine in Anatolia. It is interesting to note that a goddess so revered was worshipped in tandem with something as seemingly incongruous as prostitution.

The Japanese creation myth begins with the union of Izanagi and Izanami. Izanami's name means "the goddess who invites ."She is both a creator and destroyer as she has the power to create rocks, trees, forests, islands, and other natural elements for the land of Japan. After her death, while birthing her son, Kagutsuchi (the god of fire), she also becomes the goddess of death. In the Nihon-Shoki, it has been said that she gives birth to the three noble children of the Japanese pantheon, Amaterasu (the sun goddess), Tsukuyomi (the moon god), and Susanoo (the wind god).

Amaterasu is the most powerful out of all Japanese deities, and a testament to her invincibility is showcased by a disagreement between her and her sibling, the wind god, Susanoo. After a physical altercation with her brother, Amaterasu

withdraws from the world. As soon as she withdraws, a prolonged season of winter overtakes the entire world. Her myth showcases what perils follow if femininity in the world is ignored and wronged by masculinity, which often just looks out for its own selfish motives.

Even though these myths developed in different regions of the world and at different times, some commonalities bind them. Firstly, all of these myths showcase a clear subversion of the man-made world/ the patriarchal world by natural instincts harbored in the female deities. These myths also celebrate the duality of femininity and its potential to create and destroy simultaneously. All of these myths also showcase a clear-cut evolution of nature-worshipping and the possibility of women speaking out against their oppression.

The power of these female deities in modern times has been encapsulated in the philosophy of "Eco-feminism ."The term was coined by French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. The ideology links the oppression of women with the subjugation and over-exploitation of nature and functions on the idea that women are closer to nature than men. The most well-known advocate of this philosophy in India is Vandana Shiva, who understands that technology and modern science are a Western, patriarchal, and colonial project.

The myths that we have discussed so far showcase the power of nature. Using the concept of ecofeminism as our guiding light, we now discuss the forceful subjugation of this power in the next part of our paper.

Power over Nature

Desire is the primary motivator of actions. All that a human does is a result of this intense need to fulfill his desire, and the strongest form that this desire can take is power. Going back to Stone's assumption about gauging the reflection of power wielders through myths, we realize that there has been systematic marginalization of such stories by the patriarchy in the current context, just so the world functions to benefit only half our society. History stands witness to man's numerous attempts to achieve power, some of which ended in chaos and utter destruction while others took him to the pinnacle. Over time, man has developed a number of strategies to achieve, even snatch, power, but none has been as effective as establishing power over nature and demeaning cultures that celebrate the power of nature.

The paramountcy of nature has long been established among humans, as evident by the prevailing practices around the world. The manifestation of different forces of nature as females, as discussed in the previous section of the paper, meant that the subjugation of women would ultimately mean the subjugation of nature, resulting in the ultimate triumph of man. One of these strategies is using reproduction as a means to subjugate women. Using the emotional connection with her child is one of the most infallible ways of getting a woman to do your bidding. A prime example of this would be the draconian abortion laws found in many countries across the world. In the United States of America, according to the Center for Reproductive Rights, fourteen states have enforced a total ban on abortion while it is legal in only ten states after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v/s Wade* in June 2022. According to a report by the Human Rights Watch, Latin America is home to some of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world. Abortions are illegal in three countries, and women have severely restricted access to safe abortions due to a lack of regulation and political will. millions of abortions are performed across the region every year under unsafe and clandestine conditions, resulting in thousands of women losing their lives. While the situation is not as bleak in Europe, the mandatory counseling and the waiting period are highly discriminatory towards women and harmful to their physical, mental, and emotional health. The existence of such laws and restrictions on the reproductive rights of women is a clear testament to the impact of using reproductive rights as a means to subjugate women. Although we have made our position with respect to reproductive rights clear, we also acknowledge that the abortion debate is complex, with diametrically opposite views put forward by the pro-abortion and anti-abortion groups, neither side entirely wrong, even if we do not agree with one of these.

While control of reproductive rights is one of the most ineffable methods of subordinating women, it is not the only way. Sexual assault serves the same purpose and is a tool used unhesitatingly by the warmongers of the past and the chauvinists of today.

Even industrialization has turned out to be one of the most efficient ways of taming nature to serve our selfish interests. Over the years, the rapid exploitation of natural resources in the name of development has resulted in humans harming our ecosystems to the extent of changing weather patterns in various places. This has induced multiple plagues and natural calamities as well, and they stand as an open declaration of nature's wrath.

While examples of nature's punishment to mankind for its role in its destruction are many, we would first like to highlight the predicament of India's Uttarakhand in the last decade. The Kedarnath Flood of 2013 is still fresh in people's memories. In the span of ten years, countless lives and livelihoods have been lost in the flood's aftermath. Towns like Chamoli, Pithoragarh, and Uttarkashi are most prone to floods, and the unrelenting construction projects to "develop" the state has made the situation of these towns even more precarious. This view is also supported by the Free Press Journal, which observed that unplanned development and an increased number of vehicles on mountain roads contribute vastly to environmental disasters. The want of development has resulted in the death of thousands. In November 1980, 2,000 women encircled the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, demanding "no more amazing inventions for death." We now need to think along the similar lines. We need to make sure we do not make decisions that guarantee environmental degradation. After all, "progress" does not remain progress if it derives legitimacy by preying on our planet.

Throughout this paper, we have established the long-accepted supremacy of nature through myths and beliefs followed by people inhabiting regions connected by the Silk Route. We have also, through these myths, established how nature was manifested in feminine forms and how controlling nature meant absolute power. People in ancient times recognized nature's power of creation, manifested in the form of females and knew the perils of attempting to subjugate it.

Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it. All the myths and legends that we have talked about in this paper are a part of the legacy and the very soul of the places from where they originate. Over time, they have done us great service by warning us through these stories against trying to impose our obstinate will on nature. Hence, there is a need to look at the contemporary landscape and analyze the rules and norms humanity has created for itself to see the direction we are moving in and realize the consequences of our actions.

However, looking at the contemporary trends, we are unfortunately going against everything our ancestors stood for. The observation begs the question - where did we go wrong? What development took place at some odd point in history that we have forsaken the traditional practices that held spiritual and scientific significance and instead deliberately opted to walk the path of obvious destruction? Objectively, the Weber thesis would help explain the contribution of Calvinism and Protestantism all over the world to rapid industrialization, which has resulted in people, especially

in the West, exploiting nature to fulfill their aspirations without giving much thought to the consequences of their actions. This rapid industrialization, which led to the creation of various industries, has contributed to the ever-growing materialism and is responsible for the growing consumerism in the world today, a cause of many environmental issues today, including pollution.

We are not pointing fingers through this argument because almost all the countries along the Silk Route, India in particular, have partaken in the process of industrialisation and we also acknowledge that it is indispensable for the development of humankind. However, one needs to make a clear and unbiased assessment of the chain of events that may eventually trigger nature to the extent of absolute destruction, a point of no return.

Conclusion

Through this paper, we have attempted to gauge the people's perception of nature through myths and lores- the oldest resource indicating the popular sentiments available- specifically along the silk route, and tried to understand the evolution of their attitude towards nature and its manifestations in the form of females, over time owing to various developments throughout history. We began by talking about the prevalent myths and traditions and tried to ascertain the root cause of the adverse changes against nature and women taking place in our society today, concluding that the desire for power and control is the chief reason for the aforementioned problem. This paper is an attempt to analyze the changes in perception throughout history in order to determine the mistakes mankind has made and their possible consequences.

References:

- Hinnells, John R.. Persian mythology. New York, P. Bedrick Books, 1985.
- Mark, Joshua J.. "Ancient Persian Gods, Heroes, and Creatures - The Complete List." *World History Encyclopedia*. World History Encyclopedia, 16 Jan 2020. Web. 30 July 2024.
- Lythgoe, Albert M. "Statues of the Goddess Sekhmet." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 14, no. 10, 1919, pp. 3–23. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3253827>. Accessed 31 July 2024.
- Kinsley, David. Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition. India, Motilal Banarsidass, 1998.
- Old-World Japan. United Kingdom, Aegitas, 2015.
- Mahalakshmi, R. Tantric Visions and Local Manifestations Inventing and Reinventing the Goddesses, pp.199-216

Brandmaier, Grace. Patriarchy and the power of myth: exploring the significance of a matriarchal prehistory. United States, Bard College, 2015.

Stone, Merlin. When God was a woman. United Kingdom, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.

Women and Life on Earth Records, Sophia Smith Collection, SSC-MS-00132, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, Mass.

After Roe Fell: Abortion Laws by State. Centre for Reproductive Rights <https://reproductiverights.org/maps/abortion-laws-by-state/>

European Abortion Laws: A Comparative Overview. Center for Reproductive Rights, 2020 <https://reproductiverights.org/european-abortion-laws-comparative-overview/>

International Human Rights Law and Abortion in Latin America. Human Rights Watch, 2005

https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/wrd/wrd0106/index_old2384523.htm

<https://www.freepressjournal.in/india/2013-kedarnath-flood-disaster-how-a-cloudburst-killed-6000-people-9-years-ago>