

EXAMPLES OF ATROCITIES TOWARDS WOMEN CAN BE FOUND RIGHT FROM OUR EPICS AND SADLY THESE ATTITUDES HAVE BEEN PASSED DOWN THE AGES. WHILE WE MAY REVERE DURGA LAKSHMI AND SARASWATI AS GODDESSES, THERE ARE MANY WOMEN IN OUR ANCIENT TEXTS WHO WERE NOT ONLY MISUNDERSTOOD BUT ALSO ILL-TREATED AND NEGLECTED

Bruised heroines of the epics



BY NAGALINGAM KUMARAKURUPARAN

Our revered epics are filled with instances of atrocities against women as several modern-day Indian authors are quick to point out. “Over the past few years, the media has reported many cases of violence against women. As a kneejerk reaction to this, we see politicians blaming Western culture for the new cases of rape and domestic violence that emerge almost every day. But the irony is that this culture of misogyny is centuries old,” said Namrata, a reputed columnist, in a recent article.

Examples of atrocities towards women can be found right from our epics and sadly these attitudes have been passed down the ages. While we may revere Durga Lakshmi and Saraswati as goddesses, there are many women in our ancient texts who were not only misunderstood but also ill-treated and neglected. Starting from Sita, Urmila and Mandodari of Ramayana to Kunti Madhavi Draupadi of Mahabharata, every woman was a victim of some type of violence.

Sita, for instance, followed her husband Sri Ram when he was exiled to the forest. What is outrageous is that she was abducted by Ravana and then asked to prove her chastity twice.

Rama and Sita

Later because a man had questioned Sita's purity and to prove her innocence and maintain his own and the kingdom's dignity, Rama sends Sita into the forest and leaves her near sage Valmiki's ashram. Years later Sita returns to the womb of her mother, the earth, for release from a cruel world and as a testimony to her purity she reunites her two sons, the twins Lava and Kusha with their father Rama.

Take the case of Kannaki (Paththini) in the epic Silapathikaram. Kannaki is described as the chaste woman who stays faithful to her husband despite his unfaithfulness. In the epic, Kannaki's husband Kovalan meets a dancer Madhavi and has an affair with her, which prompted him to spend all his wealth on the dancer.

In the meantime, Kannaki, the only daughter

of a rich merchant and herself a beautiful young woman waits for her husband's returns. At last, penniless Kovalan realises his mistake and returns to his wife. Kovalan hopes to recoup his fortunes by selling the precious anklet of Kannaki in Madurai, the capital of the Pandya Kingdom.

Madurai was ruled by Pandya King Nedun Cheliyan. When Kovalan tries to sell the anklet, it is mistaken for a stolen anklet of the queen. Kovalan is accused of having stolen the anklet and is immediately beheaded by the king without trial. When Kannaki is informed of it, she becomes furious and sets out to prove her husband's innocence to the king.

The palace guards inform the king that a beautiful young woman who looks like the celestial dancer Menaka, but raging like Goddess Kali, has come to see him. When the king asks the guards to let her in, Kannaki enters the king's court, breaks open the anklet seized from Kovalan and shows that it contains rubies as opposed to the queen's anklet which contains pearls.

Realising the mistake, the king commits suicide in shame. After having caused such a huge miscarriage of justice, Kannaki utters a curse that the entire city of Madurai be burnt. The capital city of Pandya is set ablaze resulting in huge losses. However, at the request of Goddess Meenakshi, the presiding deity of Madurai, she calms down and later attains salvation. The story forms the crux of the epic Silapathikaram.

Kannaki suffers for the misconduct of her husband Kovalan. The story, though with a slight deviation from the original version, was made into a film in Sinhala by Sumathipala Films. It was directed by Prof. Sunil Ariyaratne. In the film, Pooja has given her best to the character and dialogue delivery. Yet Kannaki's strong character and the miseries and mental agony she underwent were not adequately portrayed.

A few years later, Prof Ariyaratne made another movie on the life of Princess Yasodara, the wife of Prince Siddhartha who later became Gauthama Buddha. Though much has been written about the life of the Buddha, very few people know what his wife went through after he left her and their new-born child Rahula. The Buddha's sermons would have enlight-

ened many, but a young woman with a child would have longed for her husband's return.

For a long time, epics and mythologies were told by men both orally and in the written form. So, it is not surprising that a lot of the tales put women in the background. No one really cared for what happened to Yasodara when her husband left her. “All that matters is that the prince eventually became the Buddha,” said Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan who is in writing a series of books on the women of Mahabharata.

Mental distress

Sunil Ariyaratne's movie glorifies Princess Yasodara's sacrifices and right conduct, but does not speak much about her isolation and mental distress after the separation from her husband. Unfortunately, Yasodara was not the only woman who found herself in such a situation. “Given their situation, every woman in the epics - be it Draupadi, Sita, Urmila or Mandodari - was spirited and they lived their lives with unusual courage and conviction,” said Kavita Kane who has written the book ‘Sita's Sister.’

“The role of women in mythology has usually been either that of a helpless woman who needs a man's help or of a temptress who is there only to bring out the ‘inner strength’ of the man. Barring the occasional traits of strength, most tales typically revolve around men,” Meenakshi said.

“Often the only agency a woman had in a patriarchal society such as ours was her sexuality. Some of the women are depicted as using their sexuality to get to positions of power and privilege. Of course, they are stories, but all stories have a basic to hold in something that once happened, no matter how long ago.”

Draupadi is another mythological heroine who suffered a lot. Explaining her life, novelist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni who wrote ‘The Palace of Illusions’ said, “Draupadi was brought to Duryo Dhan's court to be humiliated and disrobed in the open, with the entire Kuru clan present. Because she was unable to give up her longing for vengeance she became a catalyst for the war in which she lost all her sons. She was indeed a very strong woman. Without Draupadi's vow, there would not have been a Mahabharat war.”

Recounting the sad episodes of a forgotten character from the Mahabharata, Utkarsh Patel in his book ‘Shakuntala - the Woman Wronged’ - said, “Madhavi is one forgotten woman from Mahabharata, but her story is heart-wrenching.”

According to the story, Madhavi, the daughter of King Yayati, was blessed with the ability to bear only male children who were guaranteed to become conquerors. Her story begins when Galva offers to pay his guru, sage Vishvamitra, a ‘Gugurudakshina’ (an offering to the guru) later asks for 800 white horses with black ears. When Galava approaches King Yayati for the horses he hands over his daughter Madhavi instead. Galava exchanges Madhavi for 200 horses with three kings and then hands her over to Vishvamitra along with 600 horses. He keeps her in lieu of the remaining 200 horses.

“After a year Madhavi is sent back to King Yayati. Later she leaves to lead the life of a celibate. At the end of the story, a woman gives up her life to uphold the ideals of a bankrupt king, a pauper of a disciple, lusty king and a guru, who probably forgot to teach his students the most important lesson of not treating women like cattle,” said Utkarsh, author of ‘Tripathi.’

However, he takes a different view of the subject. The writer, who has always portrayed his female characters as strong and independent, feels that misfortunes are a part of everyone's life. Our epics also tell the tale of men being ill-treated. Dashratha is one of the biggest examples where he was forced by his wife to ask his beloved son to leave the palace and go into exile. Amish said, “All our divine beings represent a different way of life and each one has its own pros and cons.”

The Buddha or Lord Rama represents a life of laws. Such a way of life is good for society, but not for one's family life. While they were good leaders, there were challenges in the personal realm and that is what we learn from their lives. As the Buddha said before accepting anything as the gospel truth, meditate on it, debate and analyse it. That is the way to proper understanding and acceptance. It is also true in the case of our epics.

The writer is a freelance journalist and Indologist based in Hyderabad, India.