

FIVE ELEMENTAL WOMEN

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Abstract: Indians believe that between the real and the divine worlds, there is a mid-level world of mythology. Here, mythical heroes and heroines play out stories of love, valour, courage and righteousness as well as revenge, hatred and mindless cruelty.

Five women from the epics – Ramayana and Mahabharata – have played such crucial roles in our tradition, that every Indian woman, even in this tech-savvy age, continues to be influenced by their life-graph.

Keywords: Ahliya, Draupadi, Five Elemental Women, Indian mythology, Mandodari, Tara

I. INTRODUCTION

This article projects five such legendary women including Sita, Draupadi, Mandodari, Ahliya, and Tara. All these women belong to the early Vedic times and still reserved for their extra-ordinary powers and roles. This article, Five Elemental Women, in addition to portraying the role of women in Indian mythology in general in the Preface, explains, in particular, the contributions of above mentioned women.

Are you an ‘earth’ woman? Do you feel an affinity to the element of ‘fire’ because of your passionate and temperamental nature? Do you flow serenely through life like ‘water’? Is your spirit free and elusive like the ‘wind’? Or do you dream of being light as air and vast like ‘space’? As an Indian woman, it is likely that you have a little of all these elements in you and that you combine all qualities of the five elements. If this is so, you should not be surprised, for all Indian women carry the legacy of their icons, the most celebrated Panchkanyas of mythology.

As inheritors of the Panchkanya concept for centuries, Indian women are unique, to say the least. Like their icons, they have dual personalities. They are bound by the strictest norms of society on the one hand; yet on the other hand, they are left free to prolifically use the chinks in the armour of social and traditional laws made by a staunchly male-oriented pecking order. Within the scope of social boundaries, they can still express their personalities and design their own life-graphs. The female icons set up by Indian tradition for women to follow therefore are admirable and confusing at the same time.

Among the feminine icons of Indian tradition, five epic characters stand out prominently. These are Sita, the heroine of the Ramayana and the wife of King Ram of Ayodhya; Draupadi, the heroine of the Mahabharata and the wife of the five Pandava

princes; Mandodari, the wife of Ravana, King of Lanka; Ahliya, the wife of the Sage Gautama and Tara, the wife of Bali, the tyrant monkey king who usurped the kingdom of Kishkindha.

Each of these women is described as extraordinarily beautiful and virtuous. As a matter of fact, tradition says that their character was so strong, that no calamity could diminish their spiritual power or their worshipful places in the hearts of generations of people the world over. In fact, the five women have such a powerful hold over the hearts of millions of Indians that they are called the Panchkanyas (five women) whose very names ensure salvation and freedom from all evil. It is not uncommon for devout Hindus to recite their names each morning in a Sanskrit Shloka to remind them of the power they symbolized because of their purity of character and spiritual strength.

Yet another interesting aspect of their life-graphs is that all of them are legendary beauties in their own right. Their luster and beauty caused kings, sages and sometimes even minor gods to kidnap them or covet them. Both the epics describe gigantic wars fought because the beauty of Sita and Draupadi, made evil men like Ravana and Duryodhana lust after them. It is perhaps fitting therefore, that considering their beauty, character and personality, Indian tradition links each one of them to an element.

In an uncanny way, the life-graph of each of these women is somehow replicated in the lives of millions of Indian women even today. Whatever suffering and traumas each of them went through during their lives, are repeated ad nauseam in the lives of millions of Indian women. It is clear that Indian society, at its deepest core, still thinks that man is born to rule and woman to be ruled!

Janaka, the King of Mithila, as is well known, found Sita while his fields were being ploughed. She is the wonderful daughter of the earth, stable, forgiving, patient and pure. The story of her kidnapping by Ravana and her suffering at the hands of the people of Ayodhya is read every day in millions of homes.

It continues to inspire devotion and compassion among all women. Briefly, Sita, the Princess of Mithila, was married to Ram, the Prince of Ayodhya. Soon after, she chose to follow her young husband into the forest, when he was banished for fourteen years by his stepmother. Ravana kidnapped her during this forest sojourn. A bloody war followed across the sea and she returned to Ayodhya with Rama for his coronation.



Figure 1: Sita wife of King Ram

Alas, because of the suspicions of his subjects about her purity, Ram banished the pregnant Sita once again to the forests on the banks of the Ganga. Here, she lived in the Ashram of Sage Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana, where she bore her twin sons Luv and

Kush. When she was finally re-united with Ram, she chose rather to return to her mother, the earth, than go back with her husband as his empress. In this last defiant gesture, she showed her inner strength and rejected the continued injustice she had suffered all her life. Yet, Indian men are quick to say that she asked for all the suffering she was subjected to because she did not stay within the Lakshman Rekha drawn for her protection by Lakshmana, her devoted brother-in-law. She, they say, was punished by fate for overstepping the authority of the men who were her familial lords.

Today's women are similarly expected to observe the unseen but clearly delineated Line of Control drawn for them by the men in her life. Her career, her social activities and her behaviour must be governed by strong male-designated social and familial rules. If she disobeys these rules, trauma and abandonment become her certain fate.

Draupadi was the copper-toned beauty born of fire. Fiery, gorgeous and strong-willed, Draupadi was born out of her father's prayer for revenge against his enemies. She personified this quality throughout her life. Her burning passion for revenge against the Kauravas, who disrobed her in a full assembly in the presence of her five husbands, caused the epic war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas in Kurukshetra. Draupadi's oath that she would tie her long tresses only with bloodstained hands is symbolic of her personality.

Her anguish at being disrobed and humiliated in the Kaurava court led to her curse that a country where women are reduced to such ignominy, would never prosper. Even today, many Indians believe that women's anguish and their cries against monumental injustice have left India with centuries of suffering, slavery and bloody conflicts. Draupadi's anguish and anger are a commonly used theme in many dance ballets, music renditions and poetic compositions in all Indian languages.

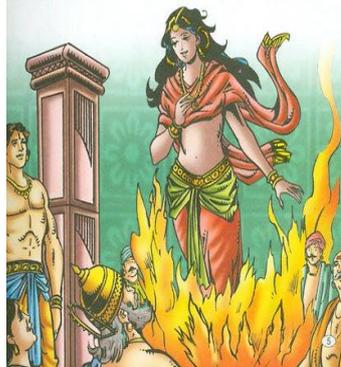


Figure 2: Draupadi wife of the five Pandava

Famous research scholars like Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy and Dr. Irawati Karve, who believe that gentleness and vengeful anger are just two sides of Indian womanhood, have juxtaposed her character with that of Sita. Here, orthodox Indians and researchers believe that Draupadi asked for the humiliation piled upon her because she not only rejected Duryodhana as a suitor but ridiculed him by calling him "the blind son of a blind father". Most Indian women would agree that like this passionate heroine of the Mahabharat, millions of women are publicly humiliated and even raped as a punishment for challenging the male will or for 'talking back' at a man. Many men are known to use violence against wives merely because they 'back-answer' them!

Mandodari, the wife of Ravana, is associated with the element of water, turbulent on the surface yet deep and silent in her spiritual quest. The beautiful Mandodari tolerated the misdeeds of Ravana till his death. Ravana, it is said, abused numerous women and

kidnapped Vedavati, daughter of a sage, whom he wooed with vigour till she, in disgust killed herself, saying that she would be reborn as Sita, who would be the cause of his annihilation

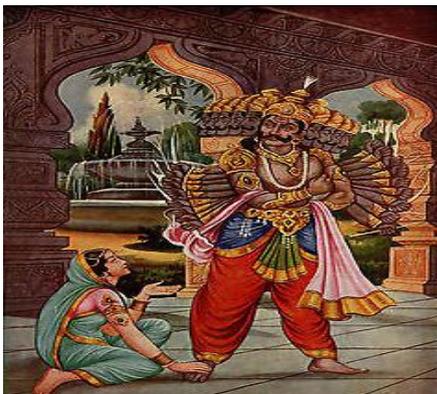


Figure 3: Mandodari, the wife of Ravana

Mandodari was a woman of character, virtue and relentless faith and tried her best to make Ravana mend his ways, though she was unsuccessful in the end. Mandodari's fate is shared by millions of women today. A staunchly male-oriented society overlooks the affairs and illicit liaisons of a husband and expects the wife to love and honour him despite his misdemeanors.

Ahilya is the beautiful wife of a Sage Gautama, whom Indra, the chief of the gods, coveted. He cheated her by assuming the persona of her husband and seduced her. Angry beyond reason, Gautama cursed her and turned her into a rock.

Upon hearing the truth, he pronounced that Rama, during his banishment in the forest, would touch her with his sacred feet and would bring her back to life. Ahilya, admired by women for her forbearance and ethereal nature is likened to the freshness and active nature of the wind. Though Ahilya's seduction was a fraud, she suffered for by being turned into a stone. This story too, applies to modern Indian women. Whoever, falters or is offended in the family – husband or children – she is held accountable and bears the brunt of the misdeeds.



Figure 4 Ahilya, wife of a Sage Gautama

Tara, wife of the monkey king Bali, was also a woman of great virtue. Bali was a tyrant who usurped his brother Sugriva's kingdom and abducted his wife Ruma. He died a valiant death at the hands of Rama and left Tara to live piously for the rest of her life. Tara is associated with space and has the quality of intelligence, compassion and large-heartedness. There are two other Taras in mythology: Taramati, the wife of king Harishchandra and Tara or Rohini, the consort of the Moon god and mother of the planet Mercury or Buddha.



Figure 5: Tara, wife of the monkey king Bali

The theme of Panchkanyas may include any of these three women, all equally lustrous and virtuous. All the three Taras show that women were considered the ‘property’ of men in India for millenniums. They were kidnapped, punished, abandoned, left to live miserable lives as widows and even sold as slaves by powerful men. Things are not much different today. Women suffer the same humiliations even in modern India.

II. CONCLUSION

In spite of this, the Panchkanya theme has inspired Indian women for ages. They believe that even today, they have great affinity to each elemental woman by the way they look, feel or react to the world around them. Most Indian women believe that they tolerate and accept the worst kind of injustice like Sita and remain steadfast in their duty and devotion to their husbands and families. Yet, surprisingly, like Draupadi, they also hide storms of anguish, anger and revenge in their hearts. They believe that the curse of a virtuous, strong woman can ruin the most powerful of men. Like Mandodari, they live a life of duality, with the turbulence of varied experiences on the surface and a deep, silent core in their souls, where wisdom originates. Like Mandodari, they have an inherent gift of distinguishing between right and wrong. In a crisis, they know how to insist on doing what they consider right. Like Ahliya, they have a dormant power buried deep down in their psyches. They have the strength to move like the wind and the compassion to forgive wrongs done to them. Like Tara, they seek a special luster of their own. They seek a sacred place - which is their right - in the vastness of space. From this niche, they spread their compassion and tenderness.

It is for every woman to study the life-graphs and personalities of the Panchkanyas and decide which element they empathize with. However, in truth, every Indian woman has shades all the Panchkanyas within her soul!

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