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Hindu Mythology: An Inherent Analysis of Shanta and Menka

***Anjali M. Machhi**

ABSTRACT:

'Femme Fatales are usually mysterious characters who bring destruction to men by using their sexual prowess.'

In Hindu mythology, Menaka and other apsaras have frequently been employed as weapons to divert men from their quest for greatness. They embody the pinnacle of male fantasies—beautiful, youthful, and constantly ready to entice. They are extremely powerful and attractive opponents due to their sexual promiscuity. In the instance of Menaka, Indra sent her specifically to woo Vishwamitra, whose burgeoning strength was giving him anxiety and insecurity. To preserve one kingdom and bring a successor to another, Shanta was sent in this case as part of a bigger plan and a collaborative arrangement between two kings and father figures. Therefore, both of these women received support from the state and were assigned a task. They weren't acting by their preferences. They were only exploiting their sexuality to carry out orders from the state. We do not stigmatize them or consider their behavior to be excessive or transgressive for this reason.

(*Anjali M Machhi, Research Scholar, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Parul University, Vadodara, Gujarat, India. E-mail/Contact: anjaliben.machhi19818@paruluniversity.ac.in/ 7383023928)

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The narrative of Risyashringa's seduction by Rama's older sister Shanta is the second instance that we do not typically encounter and that is frequently left out in the dominant retellings and oral discourses in religious spaces of the Ramayana. The story claims that the famine-stricken kingdom of Rompada or Lompada can only be freed from its curse by the austere rishi Rishyashringa. But to do this, he must first be released from the control of his father, the rishi Vibhandaka, who has kept him chaste and inside a space where no female of any species is permitted to enter. It is agreed that Shanta, the foster daughter of Rompada and the biological daughter of Dasharatha, shall go to the ashram and seduce Rishyashringa when his father is away, captivating him with her voice and forcing him to leave the confines.

This episode's narrative storyline oddly prefigures the Sitaharan episode, in which Ravana devises a similar scheme to force Sita to leave the perimeter that Lakshmana had set around her. As a result, the origin of the Lakshmanarekha, or line of confinement, may be traced back to Vibhandaka, who did this to protect his celibacy and maintain his unchallenged rule through his son Rishyashringa.

Rishyashringa is lured by Shanta, who then gets him to leave his prison. The two engage in sexual activity, and Rishyashringa then performs a yajna that brings rain to the kingdom of Rompada. This is followed by another series of rituals, the Putrakameshthi yajna, which causes the queens of Dasharatha to become pregnant and give birth to Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, and Shatrughna.

Menaka is excused because she is not a human and does not fall under the purview of the moral framework within which humans are supposed to operate, whereas Shanta's role in Rama's birth through her seduction and subsequent union with Rishyashringa remains largely invisibilized and barely finds a mention, making it easy to miss unless one delves deeply into certain versions of the Ramayana. Menaka is an apsara, a celestial entity, and Indra's consort. As such, she cannot be expected to act or adhere to the same moral standards as a mortal woman. Therefore, the construct of typical motherhood cannot be pushed upon Menaka in the same way that the label of sexual promiscuity cannot be assigned to her to regulate or judge her behavior.

By that reasoning, however, it follows that even Soorpanakha's conduct cannot be evaluated by using a moral standard designed for humans because she is a non-human, a rakshasi from a different clan, and perhaps guided by a different moral sense. Even in the dominant renditions of the Ramayana, such as the Valmiki Ramayana and the Kamban Ramayana, Soorpanakha is nevertheless given a very brutal deal after being made fun of by both Rama and Lakshmana.

“We are but a Gandharva and an apsara, destined to give pleasure to all but ourselves. And it is in such a heaven we live” (Kane, Menaka’s Choice 36).

The absence of any right to their desire implies the sustained usage of a hierarchized social framework that seems to guide earth and heaven alike. Kane deconstructs the picture of heaven with dexterity bringing before the unsuspecting readers the flaws that were forever present in its conception but were always overlooked. Menaka makes us face the truth with her stinging words directed at Indra,

“Say it lord. Admit it. And that’s what I am, a reluctant seductress. To make love, to lure but not for my own pleasures. A woman of lust but who cannot love, wed or conceive. Your land of great wealth and wantonness does not favor social equality!” (Kane, Menaka’s Choice 46). The other heavenly world, known as an ideal society, permits the chance of assault of the other apsara, Rambha, polluting it with the certainty of mistreatment. The human paradise is consequently just about as flawed as the human world (a reality that is likewise reminiscent of the defect of human encoded folklore).

Menaka, a character created by Kane, cleverly depicts the conscious presence of 'female' desire in the category of common human emotions. She portrays the universal human desire for love in an unbiased manner, regardless of orientation: The initial sight contact is where love starts. Then, when both the hearts and the personalities are in transition, the craving strikes, filled with incredible thoughts and expectations, followed by the confidence that you would be able to make the love of your life happy. The end of that attachment, obviously, is via separation, treachery, or the passing of the darlings. By all accounts, the highly appreciated concept of complete freedom is halfway to turning thinking comparable to realizing one's desire. Any consideration of choice is generally thrown out the window, even if this is typically due to a female expressing a desire. However, the story of Shakuntala offers one illustration of a woman’s execution of complete freedom.

Kane gives due accentuation to Shakuntala's episode in Menaka's Choice. Shakuntala's words, advocate the deeds performed by her as a captive of her craving. The uprightness of Shakuntala's perspectives is frightening when she guarantees: I am an offspring of the backwoods, mother,' made sense of Shakuntala. Here we are administered by the intuition of endurance, of choice. We know the excellence and awfulness of nature, its power, and its safeguarding. We regard it and love it. What's more, it has made me solid... I met a man, fell head over heels for him, and gave myself to him in all trust and joy. He didn't respond, he took off. However, presently I will have his youngster exclusively for myself. Not on the grounds that it is required from me. Not on the grounds that it is finished. It is neither a demonstration of disobedience nor a conciliation. It's a choice I decide for myself. From a young woman, I turned into a woman and presently will before long be a mother. It's my choice and I need it as I would have needed it. I would prefer to remain in the backwoods and make my kid a champion and researcher, be it a young woman or a kid, better than any ruler or princess in the realm! (Kane, Menaka's Choice 260)

A woman's potential distinctiveness is further expressed by her acculturation. Kane abandons the potential for an inner voice that her previous central characters possessed in Menaka's Choice. Menaka is not an example of acceptance in terms of the duty at hand and profound quality, in contrast to Uruvi and Urmila.

Conclusion:

The issue is not sexual agency or female agency; rather, it is about what authority, power, or sanctioning body ratifies this conduct. This institutional validation can allow women to carry out otherwise immoral and unethical behaviors because they are done for the good of the state. Acts that initially give the impression that these women were truly independent, autonomous, and liberated only serve to reveal that, despite their frequent occurrence to convey the tension between the hermit and the householder, these sexually assertive acts were sanctioned by higher patriarchal authorities.

And now that I think about it, I find it fascinating how myths have a peculiar way of appearing in popular culture. Shanta and Menaka resemble the lead characters in the movies Raazi and Toilet: Ek Prem Katha in that their seeming transgressions and rebellious behavior are portrayed favorably because they are advancing the cause of the patriarchal state.

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