

Revisionist Mythmaking and Feminist Malayalm Poetry

N. Prasantha Kumar

Writers, irrespective of their gender, use the male-centred language for literary creation. Throughout history a woman writer has had to state her self-definitions in a language which she is not entitled to decode. A woman writer, therefore, is confronted by the problems of language and style in her task to contact with herself. Women writers find themselves as captives of a discourse they despise. Their use of the phallogocentric language is a fatal choice which finds a parallel in the colonial situation where the colonised uses the language of their rulers. The expression "fourth world" used with reference to women points to this reality of sexual colonialism. Adrienne Rich's phrase "oppressor's language" is most significant in this regard¹. Women writers find this language inadequate to express women's experiences. Their silent approval of the male-oriented language is construed as a sign of their meek submission to the dominant sex, as a mark of their subordination and marginalisation. Women writers, therefore, encounter the immediate necessity of evolving a female language, separate but equal to the male language. The split-self motive or the schizophrenic division evident in women's poetry, often portrayed as the conflict between the creative artist and the domestic woman, is often attributed to the use of traditional language in the context of the fact that the true writer is assertive while the true woman is submissive. The construction of a female language is related to the question of the poet's quest for identity. As obsolete words are revived and attributed new meanings, women writers can employ traditional images associated with femininity but with a different sense. They must retain the gender identification of the images; but they should transform the attributes of the images so as to truly represent modern social reality. The concept of revisionist myth-

making offers a significant means of redefining women and consequently rediscovering our culture.

In women's poetry there is an identification of the poet as the protagonist and as the oppressed woman. The poetry of many women poets has the status of autobiography in which the female speaker is the authoritative subject and usually the author in disguise. This rules out the possibility of much displacement of emotions. The women poet makes up the lack of displacement by mystifying the poetic process. One of the methods of mystification is revisionist myth-making. The various processes of mystification indicate how the meanings of a text can be constructed, altered or even manipulated to suit the needs of the woman poet.

Myth is an uncomfortable field for a woman poet. There is hardly any realistic representation of woman in any myth. In traditional myths women are falsely portrayed: they are mythically represented by the dichotomous labels of paragon or monster-the virtuously passive one or sexually wicked one. Despite Simone de Beauvoir's exhaustive case against myths, women poets do find the need of some sort of myths for their art². One of the early women poets who realized the inherent danger of traditional myths is Muriel Rukeyser. In "The Poem as Mask", she rejected the traditional myths from the point of view of woman's subjectivity³, Adrienne Rich also expresses similar view in her poem "Diving into the Wreck": the persona carries with her a "book of myths" in which women's "names do not appear."⁴ She plays upon the androgynous nature and gender ambiguity of the pronouns "I," "We," and "You" to underline the necessity of the myth for a creative artist⁵. Susan Gubar emphasizes the usefulness of some myths for women poets. She illustrates how a redefined Goddess can be constructed from a feminist point of view to celebrate the female consciousness⁶. Margaret Alwood points out the depersonalizing effects of myths on characters as well as authors in her "Circle/Mud Poems."⁷ The contemporary woman poet deconstructs a myth only to reconstruct a new myth which includes and not excludes herself.

A figure or a tale previously accepted and defined by a culture can be called a myth. When a poet explores a myth in such a way as to converge the textual meanings with the meanings acceptable to

the culture, the use of the myth is just ordinary and not revisionist. The use of the myth becomes revisionist when the myth is appropriated for altered ends so that the textual meanings are at variance with meanings accepted by the community. It is the classic case of an old vessel filled with the new wine. The age old tale of fixed co-ordinates is given a new interpretation or the primitive figure is reimaged to suit the need of the poet. The revisionist mythmaking satisfies the immediate need of the poet, but it ultimately seeks to change cultural perceptions. In this sense the historic figures are as mythic as the figures of folktales, legends and scriptures. Local myths and personal myths can also be revised and reinterpreted, especially in the context of political poetry, as Yeats or Heaney does. The mythic figures provide the poet with a double power. As myths, which belong to a well-knit culture, are handed down through generations by cultural institutions, they provide an element of objectivity to the readers and confer on the poet an element of authority. This is an advantage unavailable to a poet who indulges in a subjective representation of the private self. Myth is also an intimately private material which, like a dream, has a psychic existence that is unreal to rational consciousness. Myth-making may, therefore, appear to be an irrational discourse to the public intelligence. But, it is a method of self-assertion based on experiences of the self which are otherwise inexplicable. Contemporary poets exploit myths as a means to defy the rational and the materialistic elements embedded in consumerist culture by expressing a nostalgic longing for a golden age of a pristine culture. But women poets explore mythmaking as a means for female self-projection and self-exploration. It is an ingenious device to literally assimilate the materials dangerous to the history and culture of the female gender. As Alicia Ostriker observes, myths are changed by "female knowledge of the female experiences."⁸ The revisionist mythmaking is a method of correcting the myths which have long been the source of collective male fantasy. The revised myths, according to Ostriker, represent the "retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered"⁹. As representative of the divine and the demonic in the female, they often function as a mechanism of women's survival.

Revisionist mythmaking, which is most useful in women's poetry, offers women writers a context to challenge and rectify female stereotypes.

embodied in myths. Women's poetry can be directed to attack familiar images and social and literary conventions justifying them. It is a means to reverse and expose male aesthetic pretentiousness and to assert the identity of female sexuality and female creativity. Women poets can exploit the myths to rediscover and reconstitute female-female relationships in family ties and to redefine the female in relation to the suppressed dimensions of her identity. In this regard many myths can be demolished and reconstructed as allegories of female creativity. Women can retrieve a mother figure from the myths. She is a female version of the father god, who oscillates between creativity and destructiveness, who is at once delicate and violent in female sexuality and female art. The retrieval of such a figure is a source of sacred joy which creates a poetry of wholeness. Inactivity or powerlessness inherent in the cultures to destroy what is destructive in the work and in the self is a motif in women's poetry. The demonic represented as women in culture is a misrepresentation of the female gender. This is motivated by the female power to do evil, which, as Margaret Atwood observes, is a direct function of her powerlessness to do anything else¹⁰. Women poets challenge our concepts of gender as well as concepts of reality. Her task is difficult as she is both the writer and the written in myths. Her quest operates at two levels: spiritual and psychological. At the spiritual level she seeks to decipher the symbols by which she is represented in culture. At the psychological level she tries to recover her splintered selves. One woman's quest epitomizes the struggle of every woman. A myth reconstructed with rational objectivity is a playfully innovative means to portray self-transformation. A reconstructed myth is an attempt to redeem a female language from the patriarchal discourse. It can also be a subversive reading of traditional plots, characters and morals, and the portrait of the artist as a female. A women poet can contemporise and desentimentalise the myths; she can demolish the fairytale conventions of femininity and feminine virtues.

Revisionist mythmaking is a poetic technique seldom explored in Malayalam poetry. The only notable exception is Kumaran Asan's *Chintavishtayaya Seetha* which can be interpreted as a radical but subversive reading of the epic Ramayana. If feminism is a retroactive term, this poem may be considered a feminist trial of the *dharmopurush*, Rama,

at least from the thematic angle. But this technique has been skilfully exploited in Malayam novels like P.K. Balakrishnan's *Ini Njan Orangattee* and M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham*. It is masterly explored in C.N. Sreekantan Nair's plays, the Ramayna trilogy. The two budding feminist poets in Malayalam Vijayalakshmi and Savitri Rajeevan have made commendable attempts to employ revisionist mythmaking in their poetry.

The poem "Kousalya", the second poem of Vijayalakshmi's first anthology *Mrigasikshakan* deals with the feminist theme of the relative position of women in multiple relationships,¹¹ Motherhood, especially in the Indian context, is a standard of social acceptance. With the birth of a son, a woman attains social recognition which she fails to evoke as a wife. But motherhood alone will not make a woman's life fulfilled. Her discontent is all the more intolerable when she fails to gain the love of her husband. Her life is completely wrecked when she finds that the rival "other woman" takes whole of her husband's love. In the epic Ramayana, Kousalya is the mother of the Lord incarnate, Rama. She found contentment and *moksha* in her motherhood. But in this poem, Vijayalakshmi substitutes the great mother of Lord Rama with a modern woman for whom life extends beyond the fulfilled motherhood. The poem vividly brings out the destiny of a woman who is forced to content with her motherhood alone even as she is ungraciously edged out in love by the "other woman" and ignored by her husband in personal life as well as the power structure of the family.

The title poem of Vijayalakshmi's second book, *Thachante Makal*, is the masterpiece of her poetic art¹². It is a classic illustration of revisionist mythmaking. In the popular myth of the *Perumthachan* (master carpenter), the well-versed young son, who excelled the well-established father, met with a premature accidental death. The prodigious young craftsman was killed by the broad chisel of his father. The poet creates an imaginary younger sister to the ill-fated youth. Women poets often create imaginary relatives to symbolize certain aspects of the self. The fictional daughter of the *Perumthachan* symbolizes the feminine aspect of a creative mind. Vijayalakshmi daringly makes this imaginary character the speaker of the poem. The narrator's voice, which almost merges

with the poetic voice, not only reinterprets the myth but also rationalizes the old tale of fixed co-ordinates in the context of modern social reality. The speaker and her brother were two industrious disciples of the master craftsman who was a demi-God. The accidental death of the brother figuratively represents the death of the masculine part of the speaker's self. This metaphoric death is a turning point in her life as well as her career. She resolves to liberate herself from the tyrant father and to find her own destiny both in her career and her life. The speaker liberates herself from the vicious influence of the patriarchal father whose broad chisel has been a perpetual terror in her life. This poem is a strong indictment of the paternity theory of art and a censure of women's marginalisation in literature. The poet tears away the veil of the speaker and reveals herself towards the end of the poem. The poem ends with an emphatic declaration of independence from andro-centric aesthetics and ethics which are equally applicable to the speaker as well as to the poet.

Savithri Rajeevan seems to be sceptical of the inexhaustible poetic potential of myths and folklores. The poem "Enik Mohamundu" reflects the view that myths, epics, legends, folktales and even history are all exhausted as poetic materials¹³. In the poem the speaker desires to sing a love lyric on a heroine of history or legend with accompaniment. She wants to sing about the love-lorn beloved who gets lost in the cascade of music played by the eternal flute player of the Brindavan or about the maiden who wants to unite herself with the cloudy forms that bring the epistles heavy with the unburdened bosom of an exiled hero. But nature as well as the society has undergone a seachange. The vales and hills are deserted; there is neither the shady palms nor the grazing cattle. There is no cowherd or his magic flute. There is hardly any frenzied prince imploring before an adamant beauty with a red, red rose. Odes have been lost among the dried up trees and barren clouds. And the speaker finds it difficult to sing the song. The speaker then expresses her desire to sing heroic songs. She wants to sing adulatory songs about princesses who led armies and queens who reigned the land, about the sword of Lakshmi Bai or the sabre of Oonniyarcha. But old poets have already sung hymns about them. They have been deified, iconised and

idolised. The heroines have lost their swords or sabres; they have forgotten their heroic deeds and the battlefields. They become saints and idols and bless us with their hands. The speaker, finally, expresses her desire to sing elegiac notes. She wants to sing about heroines not of history or epic, but about the unchaste, disrobed Droupadis. However, she finds some difficulty even in this attempt. Many new poets have waded through their tears and have erected poetic monuments for them, songs smithed with ornate phrases. They have, thus, lost their robes and dreams, souls and feathers. They smile on us from the headlines of the dailies. Savitri Rajeevan underlines the fact that woman has always been wrongly portrayed in poetry. Not only the heroines of myths, epics and histories but also the unsung, ordinary women have been misrepresented in literature. The speaker wants to sing a different song to tell their story differently. The narrator finds in elegy an honest medium for the representation of the culture and identity of her gender.

The poem "Aranyakaandam" is a classic specimen of revisionist mythmaking¹⁴. The poem is a parody or a mockheroic version of the great epic Ramayana. The title of the poem itself is drawn from the epic; it is same as the title of a part of the Ramayana. The title, which recalls to our mind, the period of exile of Lord Rama, brings the context of the poem to ridiculous depths. Savitri Rajeevan uses the epic setting to satirise the predicament of the ordinary man with a view to shocking the public conscience. As the poet transplants the setting to the realistic, modern social context, its epic significance is almost lost. Ultimately the poem resembles the epic only in titles. Its semantic significance is radically different from that of the epic. Like the epic, the poem is also a third person narrative; the narrator is the poet herself. The gender difference of the poet needs be emphasised. She tells the old tale differently in the context of the changed social reality. The first part of the poem is a parody of the mythical birth of Sita. In this poem Janaka is not a king, but an ordinary mortal whose social status is represented by the euphemistic phrase "below poverty line," an economic term that stands for the vast majority of people who lead a hand-to-mouth existence. Fatherhood, in Savitri Rajeevan's view, is an easily attainable honour for the poor. Despite his penury, Janaka (the word

also means father) effortlessly becomes the father of a girl, Sita who resembles the epic heroine only in name. His predicament is obvious; he can neither abandon nor rear her. She, somehow, manages to grow in poverty and misery. Still she easily gets a husband, Rama who belongs to the same class of Sita and Janaka. He need not triumph any physical contest in archery or duel to wed her. Marriage for the poor is an insignificant ceremony; but it is an inescapable trap to misery and suffering. There is hardly any apprehension of an anointment being disrupted; for Rama has no crown to repudiate. Nor has he any paternal pledge to uphold. Still the couple loiter in the wilderness. They don't have any mission of incarnation. There is no mystery about their births. They wander aimlessly as they have no shelter. The couple who resemble the couple of the epic only in name wander about without any serious purpose in life.

The poem "Oolpahi" bears testimony to Savitri Rajeevan's faultless craftsmanship¹⁵. Woman is subordinated and marginalised in all civilisations which are patriarchally structured. The poet skilfully blends Indian and Christian myths and this hybrid pattern is used to underscore the fact that Indian and Semitic civilizations have been equally guilty in marginalizing woman. The alternate mythical references to the Old and New Testaments convey the idea that woman's position as a domestic drudge remains unchanged in the past or in the present. Ironically the mythical women referred to in the poem are all selfless, sacrificing, suffering women like Gandhari of the Mahabharata, heroines of the Apocrypha and Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ. The style and tone of the poem remind us of many books of the Bible. The title itself is drawn from the Bible; it is same as the title of the first book of the Bible. The narrator is a domestic woman who is capable of many commendable missions in life. What Savitri Rajeevan portrays is the genesis of a domesticated woman.

The speaker replies to the queries of the public whose outlook is conditioned by patriarchy. Like a ballad the poem is structured into a series of questions and answers. The people, who are patriarchy-sentimental, ask her what she does while the children smile by day,

the youth dream by sunshine and the mothers long by night. She replies that she has prepared a thousand loaves and wine the kitchen. The speaker begins her life as a domestic drudge and she passes through various experiences. The poet refers to the patriotic heroines of the Old Testament, the battles won and the banquets celebrating victories. While the armies win wars and revel in the triumphs what does the woman do? The speaker-woman releases white doves to herald peace and harmony. The poet refers to Christ's famous parable on the seeds sown and he harvest reaped. The speaker seems to be indifferent to the seeds harvest and the harvest festival. Like blind-folded Gandhari, she stands aloof from all festivals. The poet now returns to the Old Testament. She brings forth the victorious kings returning in triumphant frenzy after massacre of the enemies and the last rites of their deceased. The speaker waits for them with the tables laden with mutton and wine. The poet emphasizes that the woman is not yet exhausted. Even after eulogizing the throne and the cross, the sacrifices and the doves, she remains untired. The poet establishes the indomitable power of woman. The final image emerging out of the poem transcends the speaker from a domestic drudge to a great mother. The speaker is transformed into the Mary of the Pieta. She emerges as the brave mother of the Son of Man who is betrayed by the disciples, let down by the rulers and repeatedly crucified by the enemies. In spite of her transformation and transcendence, she has no identity of her own. She finds an identity in her son. This subservient position of woman is best reflected in Simone de Beauvoir's words :

She [Woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – She is the Other¹⁶.

The poem is not a revision of any particular myth. But the various myths fused in the poem are all given new meanings. Savitri Rajeevan reweaves the myths on her feminist loom so that they fit perfectly into the texture of the poem. The speaker attains an exalted position in the end. Still her lot is misery and suffering. Irrespective of the social position a woman enjoys, the various roles she plays are all

subordinated and marginalised and her power is always undermined in a society. Savitri Rajeevan skilfully moulds an imagistic structure on different myths, cleverly reinterpreted and appropriated. It is a magnificent example of her two inches of feminist ivory.

References

1. Adrienne Rich, *Poems : Selected and new, 1950-1974* (New York : Norton, 1974), p.151.
2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Tr. H.M. Parshley (New York, Boutom Books, 1970), pp. 157-223.
3. Muriel Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* (New York : Mc Graw Hill, 1978), p.435.
4. Rich, pp 196-98.
5. Rich, p. 198.
6. Susan Gubar, "Mother, Maiden and the Marriage of Death: Women Writers and Ancient Myth, *Women Studies*, 6, No.3 (1979), p.302.
7. Margaret Atwood, *You are Happy* (New York : Harper and Row, 1974), pp.45-70
8. Alicia Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language : Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking", *The New Feminist Criticism*, Ed. Elaine Showlater (New York : Pantheon Books, 1985), p.14.
9. Ostriker, p.14.
10. Atwood, p.51
11. Vijayalakshmi, *Mrigasikshakan* (Calicut : Mulbery Publications, 1992), pp. 16-17.
12. Vijayalakshmi, *Thachante Makal* (Kottayam : D.C. Books, 1994) pp. 56-63.
13. Savithri Rajeevan, *Chariv* (Trivandrum : Pakshikoottom Books, 1993), pp. 62-64.
14. Rajeevan p.37
15. Rajeevan, p.17-19.
16. Beauvoir, p.16.