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Redefining *Pancha Kanya* and Reimagining Mythical Narratives in *The Sati Series* of Koral Dasgupta: A Subaltern Reading

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Abstract

This paper examines how Koral Dasgupta gives voice to the voiceless and marginalized women through her *The Sati Series.* It explores the complexities of reinterpreting and retelling classic stories with a contemporary sense and sensibility. It investigates how the mythical narratives support *pancha kanya* to reclaim their autonomy and agency in the 21st century. It analyses the impact and relevance of revisiting and recontextualising the mythical narratives in the patriarchally orchestrated society and seeks to delve deep into the minds of female psyche and evaluate the dreams and desires of *pancha kanya* in psychoanalytic perspectives. Using textual analysis, it evaluates myth as a shifting paradigm of feminism in the contemporary society. The paper explores how Dasgupta delves deep into the moral ambiguities and psychological depths of her characters and how her narratives are often deeply rooted in the socio-cultural contexts of ancient India, while also having relevance to modern day readers.

Keywords: Mythical narrative, subaltern, feminism, psychoanalysis, *Pancha Kanya*, subversion, mythical stereotypes

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Introduction

Koral Dasgupta is a prolific and prominent author, successful entrepreneur, popular painter and above all a committed storyteller. She has questioned, transformed and revolutionised Indian mythical narratives particularly *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* through her *The Sati Series* that include *Ahalya* (2020), *Kunti* (2021), *Draupadi* (2022), *Mandodari* (2023) and *Tara* (2024). There has been paradigm shift in the mythical narratives through retelling Indian mythological stories, particularly through her *The Sati Series*. Her novels often focus on giving voice to the female characters from these epics, exploring their perspectives and complexities. The central aspect of Dasgupta's writing is to re-examine traditional narratives from the viewpoints of women. She delves deep into the inner lives, struggles, and strengths of characters like Ahalya, Kunti, Draupadi, Mandodari and Tara and aims at providing autonomy and agency to them moving beyond their often passive roles in the original texts. Dasgupta engages with well-known Indian epics, but she offers fresh and modern interpretations, highlighting the nuances and often overlooked aspects of these stories. Her novels explore how women navigate power dynamics within their societal contexts. Her portrayals go beyond simplistic good-versus-evil narratives as myth is known for.

Myth is the metaphorical mirror of our culture and civilization in which we can reflect on our contemporary realities. The author makes use of myths to highlight plethora of present-day problems and expose the dominant evils prevalent in our surroundings. Myth becomes a magnetic conduit to satirise and comment indirectly on the concerns which may make the society better in all possible ways. "Myths are reservoirs of new meanings…Myths when employed by modern writers acquire a new lease of life. The contemporary literature, hence, continues to dig into the world of past experiences. This can be one of the reasons for mythopoeic vision of the contemporary writers." (Balachandran 115).

Myth has emerged as one of the most dominant themes in Indian English literature which captivates the readers with its subversion approach to the age-old mythical narratives. Revisiting and rewriting myths have attracted the attention of a number of writers, such as, Chitra Banerjee, Devdutt Pattnaik, Koral Dasgupta, Kavita Kane, Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakantan, and Ashwin Sanghi. They have given new dimensions and directions to our ancient myths with their shifting approaches and attitudes to popular and prevalent myths. The female writers have explored psychological concerns to the silenced and suppressed characters, such as, Ahalya,

Draupadi, Tara, Kunti, Sita, Mandodri, Urmi, Urmila and Surpnakha. These female characters have never been given due agency and autonomy in literature but now they are getting their due place and being appreciated and treated as humans by the critics and academicians. There has always been the blend of mythology and literature to mirror the socio-cultural challenges that we face. Kirtikumar Vitthani states:

> This confluence of mythology and fiction has become a trendsetter in Indian Writing in English. The emergence of mythological novels in the present century and its tremendous popularity need attention and require exploration. The ancient myths are used in such a way that accommodates the very objectives that accumulates the need for the research. (2021)

The Sati Series, based on the lives of *panch kanya* namely, Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari by Koral Dasgupta, is a fascinating take on these subaltern women that provides new twists and turns in the age-old narratives. These marginalised women had been the victims of patriarchal systems and male egos. The unique treatment and positive portrayal of these characters in *The Sati Series* peep into their dreams and desires, aspirations and ambitions, love and lust, physicality, intellectuality and spirituality. She has humanised them with profound sensibility and sensitivity. Dasgupta blends cultural memory, mythology and contemporary concerns in her innovative art of story-telling which fascinates as well as forces the readers to challenge the unjust cultural and social beliefs that dehumanize half of the population in the name of caste, class, creed and gender.

Koral Dasgupta, being an influential voice in narrating the retellings of ancient Hindu mythology, is also known for her diverse and innovative narrative style which explores the inner thoughts of characters with profound societal themes. "Dasgupta elaborates complex issues, from gender biasness to cultural themes, providing the reflection of mythological characters as human beings with societal issues. Her retellings provide an outline for problem-solving by shedding light on different perspectives and making a way for the readers to question societal and cultural norms." (Deshmukh 52-53).

Literature Review

Gaurav A. Shrimali's article "Indian Mythology and Symbolism in the Select Works of Gita Mehta, Koral Dasgupta, Kavita Kane: An Analysis" is a comparative study of three female writers who try to depict the other side of the coin which have not

been delved deep into the issues which affect the very identity, autonomy and agency of the marginalised characters from the greatest epics of India. It also highlights the role and relevance of Indian myths in shaping literature, culture and society.

Anju's PhD thesis, *A Study of Transmogrified Women Characters in Select Works of Koral Dasgupta, Amish Tripathi, and Devdutt Pattanaik,* discusses the subversion of patriarchal beliefs and systems which exploit women through various channels at multiple levels and treat them as commodity. The thesis delves deep into the lives of these marginalised characters and try to reimagine their new roles in the contemporary society by providing agency and identity to these characters.

Kritikumar Vitthani's *Myth in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English* examines the Indian English novels that deal with the proliferation of myths in the 21st century. It explores how the texts thematised on mythical narratives have gained currency in an era of globalization and women empowerment. The writer has examined Indian English novels selected in this book with multiple lenses and it has been found that the authors of the texts depict various views on the characters and incidents, and use mythology to mirror the "predicament of the present".

Mondira Deshmukh's article "Stories as Knowledge Systems: Exploring Narratives for Problem-Solving in Koral Dasgupta's Works" examines how narrative styles generate knowledge and that knowledge can be used as a powerful tool to counter prevalent cruelty, atrocity, agony and violence against women. It also evaluates how story telling as historiography can be effective in mitigating discrimination and inequality, and promoting inclusive and accommodative society. There is also an emphasis on stories as the eternal source of knowledge system that helps individuals to take better decision and deconstruct suffocating societal and cultural norms.

Nilima Pandey in her seminal book *Stri: Mithak aur Yatharth* investigates the status of women in the society since the inception of human civilization and how myths, rituals, customs, cultures and traditions have helped in making women as secondary agents and marginalized creatures in the community. It also highlights how socio-cultural constructs affect and sabotage the gaze and image of a woman in the patriarchal society.

Research Gap

An in-depth analysis of the literature review concludes that *The Sati Series* by Koral Dasgupta has not been explored from subaltern perspectives. The voices of

Pancha Kanya have been silenced since the inception and conception of mythic tradition. These mythical narratives need to be evaluated and interpenetrated from psycho analytical framework. Hence it is essential to bring *pancha kanya* in the centre of the dominant and prevalent narratives so that they should get their due respect and recognition.

Research Questions

- Is woman myth or reality?
- Can the present mythical narratives transform the gaze and image of women in the society?
- Will the society accept and accommodate with the new perspectives on women?
- Can the subversion of age old myth change the lives of women in our patriarchal society?

Research Objectives

- To explore the subaltern perspectives in *The Sati Series* by Koral Dasgupta.
- To examine how the writer negotiates with dominant mythical narratives and how they deconstruct the myths to question the hegemonic tradition which establish the superiority of male over female.
- To delve deep into the psyche of marginalised and misrepresented female characters in the selected texts.
- To critically analyse and evaluate the silenced and suppressed female characters from feminist and subaltern perspectives.

Research Methodology

This paper employs subaltern theory to analyse the marginalized characters in *The Sati Series*. It creates theoretical framework based on feminism and psychoanalytic criticism. Apart from theoretical approaches, qualitative method of research has been applied to critically and comparatively examine the texts. The following texts have been selected for examining the silenced characters who have been misrepresented in the culture, literature and society.

1. Ahalya (2020)
2. Kunti (2021)
3. Draupadi (2022)

4. Mandodari (2023)
5. Tara (2024)

Redefining *Pancha Kanya*

The myth of *pancha kanya* (Five Virgins) is age-old and it has helped in the subordination and subjugation of women in the society across the country. Koral Dasgupta, in her *The Sati Series*, tries to shift the paradigm and take creative liberty to deconstruct the traditional gaze and image of all the five characters so that they can breathe in the free air without unjust patriarchal pressure. As a creative genius and master story-teller, she highlights the purity and beauty of the mind rather than the body in the case of Kunti and Ahalya. In case of Draupadi, her dreams and desires, aspirations and ambitions, regrets and loyalty have been explored from psychological depth and feminist lens. She feels all the scars and torments given by men - Pandavas and Kauravas. She also realises that she is being treated as an object and commodity to satisfy the carnality of her five husbands. She remarks:

> I felt dirty. I felt guilty, for reasons I could not explain. I felt responsible for everything that was happening to me. [...] Under such invasion, I experienced the helplessness of a woman - hopelessly compromised before the wicked, wriggling to hide herself, ashamed of nature's bountiful giving to her, constrained to believe that her biggest strength was her worst weakness. Even if I discarded the body, would the soul ever forget this encroachment? (Draupadi 176 – 77)

Mandodri and Tara have been also been portrayed from modern lens so that their characters and personalities may be clearly visible and free from the clutch of callous patriarchy. Harshita Tripathi observes the paradigm shift in the mythical narratives to give the voice to the voiceless:

> Through Ahalya's defiance of spiritualized patriarchy, Mandodari's negotiation between artistic agency and political subordination, and Tara's refusal to disguise compromise as choice, these women emerge as complex figures — neither wholly liberated nor wholly subjugated. Their power lies not in a miraculous overturning of mythic structures, but in their capacity to speak within them, unsettling their stability from the inside. (96).

Subaltern Reading of *The Sati Series*

Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak in her seminal critical essay raises a fundamental question "Can the subaltern speak?" It is generally considered that the subalterns can speak

but they cannot be heard. But here in the case of *pancha kanya*'s mythical narratives, the subaltern characters can speak and they will also be heard if they will be given narrative space to exercise their autonomy and agency. The *pancha kanya* are the subaltern characters in true sense since they occupy the position of slave or servant or sometimes it is less than that in the patriarchal epic narratives. The subaltern position is beautifully expressed through the poem "The Slave" by Hira Bansode

> Where the doors are decorated with mango leaves
> Where the houses are ornamented with little flaming oil lamps
> In that country a woman is still a slave.
> Where Sita entered the fire to prove her fidelity
> Where Ahilya was turned to stone because of Indra's lust
> Where Draupadi was fractured to serve five husbands
> In that country a woman is still a slave. (1-7)

In Koral Dasgupta's *The Sati Series*, the journey of *pancha kanya* is depicted from "silence to speech" and through this transformative and revolutionary journey they also reclaim autonomy and identity to exercise their physical, intellectual and psychological desires, challenge mythical and patriarchal stereotypes, decentre dominant male characters and recognize their subjugation and slave position, and redefine the concept of purity, virginity, morality, and creativity. Traditionally, *pancha kanya* are defined as women who will be known through their bodily devotion. Despite their loyalty and chastity, they have been tortured and tormented without their own faults and flaws through traditional stereotypes. Dasgupta recognises the silence and sacrifice of these women and tries to redeem them from the patriarchal narratives. She uses first person narration to provide autonomy to tell their own tales from the feminist subaltern perspective. Reclaiming their subjectivity, their identity is possible through the mythic narrative style 'I'. The writer also uses confessional mode and interior monologue so that they can voice their own journey which has long been silenced, subdued and side-lined from the mainstream. Cultural memory, myth and modernity have been interwoven to assert agency and reclaim what has been lost in the course of time. Liberty and loyalty have been redefined through retelling: "In these rewritten narratives, female characters are no longer passive recipients of patriarchal decrees but active agents in defining their own identities. They possess the autonomy to make choices over their own bodies and exhibit the courage to determine their own sense of pride or shame." (Debnath 12)

Dasgupta, in her *The Sati Series*, applies subaltern theoretical framework through countering the dominant patriarchal discourse, questioning the mythical representation

in the epics. She humanises the *pancha kanya* who have been treated as "the other" in the mythical and realistic world order. Their journey is depicted from the passive recipient of suffering, curse, abuse, fate, and slavery to active agents of literary and socio-cultural change. Debnath blames the male-dominated discourse for misrepresenting women in the epics:

> Male perspectives, historically burdened by biases and ulterior motives, fail to capture the true essence of womanhood. Women's identity cannot be authentically represented through a patriarchal gaze that is intrinsically tied to systems of exploitation and repression. The act of writing, therefore, becomes a political and emancipatory tool, enabling women to reclaim their voices, narrate their own experiences, and challenge the dominant ideological structures that have historically silenced them. (13)

Ahalya is not regretful or shame of her encounter with Indra. This is not perceived as sin and adultery but flow of desire which was denied to her by her husband Gautam. She asserts her desire and says "but my precious, was his sin!" (Dasgupta 160). Despite this, she contemplates "What you are talking about is pure human instinct. That is what keeps the world and its beings together. Affection isn't disgrace, attraction isn't sin" (Dasgupta 168). She further opines "Could there be a bigger insult to a man than an obstinate, ambitious wife unwilling to yield to unfair sacrifices?" (Dasgupta 182). This is how myth of sin, guilt, desire and human instinct has been redefined. Through this narrative the subaltern can speak and they will be heard empathetically. "In reimagining Ahalya, Mandodari, and Tara, Dasgupta not only restores their voices but challenges the authority of the epic itself, opening space for future tellings where women are neither ornaments nor warnings, but full narrators of their own histories' (Tripathi 97).

Koral Dasgupta has been successful in her endeavour to providing voice to the voiceless subaltern characters through her *The Sati Series*. The subaltern positions of these virgin women have been transformed into the narratives where they use their voice to express their profound silence, severe suppression and endless suffering so that the other side of the story may come to the ears of the readers and the society. Mandodari asserts when Ravana confronts Sita "Raising arms against an unarmed is the sin" (Dasgupta 263). She also fumes when Shurpanakha assaults her. "I was seething with anger, an emotion I hadn't known much about before. Was it something in the air of Lanka, or did being Ravan's wife bestow certain defiance as a wedding gift?" (Dasgupta 141).

Tara also exercises her agency when she is being compelled for forced marriage. She angrily reacts "So Bali wants to punish me for life? The tribe… did they see it and still not mind sacrificing one girl for everyone's security? What an enormous betrayal" (Dasgupta 83). She challenges the authority of power and patriarchy and she is not ready for marriage which is just a political sacrifice and compromise. Why would women pay the price of the ego which results in war and vengeance? She clearly expresses her defiance but is not able to dismantle it. Draupadi also attempts to defy the stronghold of male-dominated social systems when she is brought to the courtroom. She protests against Dushasana's misconducts. "His eyes were vulgar, hovering over my body. Clumsily, he clutched the back of my head and tried to pull me towards himself. I slapped him hard on the face. His escorts stepped behind, horrified (Dasgupta175). Dasgupta uses menstruation as a feminine force and energy to counter the atrocity of powerful patriarchy. It is no longer considered as taboo and impurity as it has been created by the traditional stereotypes. Dasgupta writes at the site when Draupadi is being brought to the courtroom and records how people look at her femininity: "The man flaunted his masculinity by dragging a woman by her hair through the open corridor, hauling the chaste like an accused, shouting perverted profanities about her upbringing and femininity" (175). Draupadi feels and receives the inhuman torture and torments by the patriarchy but she also realises her helplessness as a subaltern character although she is a wife of five Pandavas - great warriors of the time. Her portrayal of character can be perceived from the subaltern lens when she herself expresses her agony:

> My attire was wet with menstrual blood. Drops of red stained the floor, which I had been hauled across. Inhuman force pulled me to immodest, merciless display of womanhood, in cruel violation of privacy. I crumpled under that touch, feeling small and spent. I squirmed to set myself free from the monstrous grasp. I felt dirty. I felt guilty, for reasons I could not explain. I experienced the helplessness of a woman - hopelessly compromised before the wicked, wriggling to hide herself, ashamed of nature's bountiful giving to her, constrained to believe that her biggest strength was her worst weakness. Even if I discarded the body, would the soul ever forget this encroachment? (Dasgupta 176-177).

Simone de Beauvoir beautifully captures the universal reality when she writes "one is not born a woman; rather one becomes a woman" (Beauvoir). The fate and future of a woman is sealed in the family and society by patriarchy before she is born. The culture of nurture and nourishment starts showing its impact gradually. It

is also true in the case of Kunti who has to pay the exorbitant price in the form of abandoning her first new-born baby due to her family disgrace and social prestige and personal humiliation. Like other four *pancha kanya*, Kunti also attempts to go against the prevalent social norms but she couldn't defy it. She states her concerns after the birth of Karna. She speaks emphatically: "Why couldn't I live in the present like them? Why was I born to be a perennial caregiver? Why did I hear obnoxious voices in the air? Why was I fed with every minute information, all that I was better off knowing" (Dasgupta 173).

The subaltern reading of *The Sati Series* allows the readers to view the marginalized positions and subservient roles of *pancha kanya* although they are the wives of the great kings and renowned saint. Through reimagining the *pancha kanya*, Dasgupta has been able to narrate their tales from feminist, psychoanalyst and subaltern lenses to counter and deconstruct dominant narratives which consider wives as sex objects and children-producing machines. Dasgupta's portrayal treats them as pure and pious since her focus is on their prodigious intellects and superior spirits rather than on their physical bodies.

Myth has been prevalent in Indian culture and inherent in our hearts through religious books and epics. But as readers, we should also question the politics of portrayal so that all the characters should get fair representation in literature. The prejudiced patriarchal presentation in the ancient texts established superiority of male over female characters that led to inequality, exclusivity, subalternity, misery and agony in the society we live in, the culture we practice and the literatures we read. The subaltern reading of *The Sati Series* provides counter narratives and offers agency and autonomy through which women may reclaim and re-centre their female subjectivity.

Ultimately, these stories insist that mythology is not a fixed inheritance but a living archive — one that can be reinterpreted, contested, and rewritten to reveal what has been strategically forgotten.

In *The Sati Series*, Koral Dasgupta reconstructs *pancha kanya*- Ahalya, Kunti, Draupadi, Mandodari, and Tara through an explicitly subaltern theoretical framework that counters patriarchal and canonical representations. This paper is profoundly grounded in the discourse of Subaltern Studies, particularly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interrogation in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Dasgupta's mythical narratives attempt to restore voice and agency to mythic women who have been historically silenced or misrepresented. In the greatest epics like the *Ramayana* and the

Mahabharata, pancha kanya are often perceived through patriarchal perspectives and restricted within the strict moral codes of virginity and loyalty. The author subverts these traditional serotypes by allowing them to voice their own version of triumphs, truths, aspirations, ambitions, and "to be or not be" situations. Dasgupta, in her narratives, make each *pancha kanya* the protagonist and self-reflective narrator who deconstructs social desires and moral duties thrust upon women since their inception, thereby metamorphosing the myth into a site of protestation. Through the interior monologue and poetic contemplation, Dasgupta recreates and reimagines "Sati" not as a metaphor for subordination and subjugation but as a symbol of defiance, subversion, moral strength, spiritual power and psychological insight. Reclaiming agency and autonomy, and bringing the subaltern characters from margins to the centre of literary discourse and academic discussion the author subverts the ancient narratives in *The Sati Series*. Through her numerous novels, Kavita Kane has also given voice to the voiceless and brought the subaltern characters like Urmila (Sita's Sister) Urmi (Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen), Shurpanakha (Lanka's Princess), and Hidimbi (Bhima's Wife) from the marginalized position to the centre of discourse in literature, culture and society. By revisiting these *pancha kanya*'s tales, Dasgupta not only sabotages patriarchal mythmaking systems but also seriously involves in a larger postcolonial framework of restoring obliterated histories and reinstating identity through narrative autonomy.

Relevance and Scope of Study

The growing relevance of myth in Indian society, culture and literature is shaping the young minds and changing their approach and attitude towards theage-old myth. The paradigm shift in narratives make readers aware of injustice and atrocity to female characters in various forms. The female writers through their fascinating narrative styles and subversion of stereotypes give us new portrayal of the characters. These rewritings provide broader and multiple perspectives to view reality from different lenses so that the truth can be established. This research serves twin purposes - social and academic. The social responsibility of this research is to deconstruct myth and dispel the negative beliefs inbuilt in human beings. It is high time to see mythical narratives critically and rationally not emotionally.

The scope of this research paper is confined to *The Sati Series* of Dasgupta. It does not include all the novels based on the reinterpreting and recontextualising of mythology. Dasgupta's objective is to highlight the wrongdoings done against *pancha kanya* deliberately marginalised, misrepresented and miscommunicated by male

writers in their mythical stories which are based on the patriarchal exploitation and domination.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the mis/representation of female characters who have been marginalised and were treated as subaltern, lacking autonomy and agency. Koral Dasgupta's *The Sati Series* provides a powerful deconstruction of the *panch kanya* by emancipating these mythic women characters from the conservative moral binaries and patriarchal systems that have historically confined them into the four walls of subalternity. Using the subaltern theory the paper has explored the inner lives, emotional conflicts, and ethical agency of figures such as Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari, metamorphosing them from symbolic ideals of virginity or transgression into complex, self-determining individuals.

This paper has postulated that subaltern discourse does not seek to demystify mythology rather it revitalizes it by interrogating inherited narratives and exposing the silences surrounding female desire, suffering and resistance. By situating the *panch kanya* within contemporary discourses of gender, autonomy and justice, this paper has argued that *The Sati Series* bridges the mythic past with present feminist consciousness. It has highlighted how Dasgupta challenges the patriarchal glorification of female endurance and sacrifice, replacing it with narratives that emphasize choice, voice and selfhood. It has underlined how reimagining of Dasgupta invites readers to reconsider the cultural memory of the *punch kanya*, not as static embodiments of virtue or vice, but as women whose stories continue to resonate with contemporary struggles for identity, dignity and empowerment.

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