

Epic: Culture and Misogyny

A couple of years ago, in the depths of a Midwestern winter, just after the birth anniversary of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and just before the winter solstice, the world woke up to the horrific news of the torture and murder of a young girl, a bright medical student, returning from the movie *The Life of Pi*, with her fiancé. They had climbed a bus. She was raped and tortured. What followed was a chain of events more revealing than concealing the underlying problem.

Those who saw or read the concept of Pi in the movie and the book will have seen that Pi was a metaphor for the Universal Consciousness, unending and omnipresent, in addition to the mathematical and quantum physics component more commonly recognized.

With the ongoing celebrations of the birth anniversary of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and her importance as the Earth Mother of the Americas, I wrote this essay : in a moment of Time, as an inverted pyramid, carrying the weight of this enormous burden, pinpointing to the NOW, when the young girl was brutally murdered.

Rape has been used in extended history to subjugate people, both men and women. The reasons for the rape of the men and reasons for rape of the women are different. I am restricting my comments to the rape of women because of the frequency, and because of the sheer physical strength of men over women; because, as well, the belief in scriptural text and the influence of epics with myth that, then, becomes permeated in the culture carrying the particular text.

What does it show of us, as the civilized, in civilized societies, when some epics or scriptural texts clearly specify the humiliation of women? Rape, then, is imbedded and factored in without reservations. In our current times, now, in America, this question needs to be revisited keeping in mind the solution I have at the end of this essay.

I restrict my written thoughts, in this essay, to the Indian subcontinent. For that is what I know quite well. Other cultures and the other myths interwoven in their cultures are for another essay. Or for another person to examine.

At the outset, in the period of Time, let me separate the word 'India' from the Veda. India was a word introduced to identify a land on ' that' side of the Sindh River: the word Sindhi, the people living there, which became Hindi then Hindhustan after the Muslim onslaught, and then India, with the invasion of the British. Somewhere before that the land was known as Bharat. We can lump all of those names in one for our purpose. What is important is to know that during the Vedic period, that region was known as Aryavarttha : the land of the Ayra. Or Aryan. This Aryavarttha was centuries before our common era. The story imbedded in the culture of that time revered women.

It is important to keep this Time as a span in your awareness through this essay.

A religion is how it is practiced. Not so much how it is written. Myth, which often overlaps religious and scriptural texts, is interwoven with its practice as seen in the culture that carries the story. Myths have layers of interpretations. Much like scriptural texts. A reader understands these interpretations according to their own level of insight and awareness. All of these together make the culture that carries the messages of myth and the instructions of scriptural text. At a certain level, and closer to our Time in the inverted pyramid, it doesn't matter much where the concepts come from. They are ours. And it is how we see our Universal View.

There are two statements and one incident in the current epics and scriptural texts of India which are the underlying cause for the abuse of women; and, quite simply; need to be removed:

First: is the couplet from the Bhagvad Gita: Chapter 9 verse 32 quoted below in Sanskrit, with its transliteration and translation.

Second: is the sentence attributed to the poet Valmiki who wrote the epic, The Ramayana. Quoted below.

And:

The one incident: from a full episode in the epic of the Mahabharata.

A brief background of these epics: The two epics are intrinsic to the culture of India today: the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Known as the longest Epic in human history, the Mahabharata is deeply interwoven in the culture of India, from which the Bhagvad Gita, the scriptural and philosophic text of India, is extracted. The Ramayana is the story of the ideal man, a noble man, and the ideal woman, a noble woman. To this day these characters inform the people of India. Additionally, they inform those cultures in the Far East where the Ramayana and the Mahabharata had spread.

Of the two sentences I am highlighting, the one in the Bhagavad Gita is the more serious, since it is from a text worshiped by many and read by most on a daily basis. Although the Gita was first mentioned in the Epic Mahabharata, the Gita, itself, has become a scriptural text in the culture of present day India.

The second, by the poet Valmiki, poet of the Epic Ramayana is spoken by the sea deity : Samudra to Ram, the ideal man of the Ramayana.

Read by the poets T.S.Eliot, Yeats, and the philosopher Emerson among others, the title for Oppenheimer's autobiography of The Atom Bomb is the line from the Gita that describes the awesome power of The Universal Deity, in this case

Krishna. This text is widely read. This text, with and without that couplet denegrating women has persisted over those Time blocks making this inverted pyramid we are examining here today.

This couplet from the Gita is to be removed. It is as simple as that.

The opinions of the people about women will not change nor will their improved status, treatment as well as their basic safety be achieved with this couplet being read daily to reenforce the denegrations and humiliation of women.

The second sentence and its brutality can only be ridiculed to reduce its impact.

The one episode I refer to is too intrinsic to the epic to be removed. I can only suggest a separation of time as is the case of many myths carried in many cultures, now dissolved.

Here is the couplet or shaloka from the Bhagavad Gita, chapter 9 verse 32

here is the Sanskrit in romanized script:

maa he partha vyapasritya
ye pi syuh pap-yonayah
striyo vaisya thatha sudras
te pi yanti param gatim

transliteration:

maa - of Me(the godhead) he – certainly, for sure; partha – Arjuna, or Partha, vyapasritya – taking shelter; ye – those who; api – also; syuh – are; papa-yonayah – born of low birth; striyah – women; vaisyah – business people; sudra – low caste; te api- even they; yanti – go; param – to the supreme/ highest; gatim- destination.

translated in English: Krishna, the godhead, says: born of low birth women and animals and sudra even if they think of me, they will come to me.

In more recent texts, the word 'animal' has been changed to the business or the vaishya caste.

A brief thumbnail sketch of the concept of Caste : based on division of labor, it was the concept of the workings of Divine Creation in the form of a human being:

the head being the Brahmin, or philosopher; the arms of the human form being the kshatriya or the warriors; the stomach, the vaisya or business persons, and the sudra are the legs and the feet of the human or the service person or the manual worker, usually associated with mindless manual work. Caste was based on job performance. It was not watertight, in its original intent. It was a fluid division of labor.

Animals, of course are considered inferior beings in India, although they have the godhead in them.

According to the Gita, which takes pains to make this very explicit, the lower birth are the vaisya and the sudra. Women are put into that 'low birth' category.

Historically, the chances of Krishna saying these words in a text couplet is not possible. It is my estimate that certainly the words were inserted by people, probably the Brahmins, during the Mughal times with their Muslim regime in India, when the rape and abduction of women was rampant. Historically and factually, the original Gita was a very slim text containing far fewer couplets than the one circulated today. It is very difficult to find the original text at this time in history. I have looked and looked, but, thus far, have been unable to find the original text.

The second sentence is the one attributed to Valmiki. This sentence is brutal in concept and informs the brutality of India towards its women. Historically, I believe this sentence, too, was written during the time of the Muslim rule of India, the Hindustan phase:

" Dhol , Gawar, Sudra, Pashu, Nari.

Sakal tadan ke adhikari. "

Translation: " Drums, the uneducated/ uncultured, the Sudra/ low -caste, animals, women.

All are subject to being beaten.

In some texts, or colloquialism commonly circulated quotes, it's reduced to:

"Women and drums are subject to beating. Only then they can perform."

The word ' adikari' means domain. That beating is their domain. In other texts, the word " adeen" is used which I have translated as 'subject,' as 'in to be subjected to'.

Women are ' adeen' to 'tadh'. 'tadh' is slapping or beating, much as you beat a drum.

The general populace reaction is: it is in our scriptures, therefore, it must be right.

Epic, myth and scriptural texts, over time, become deeply interwoven in a culture.

After this killing and brutality made public to the world through the outrage of the mass national demonstration by young girls of India, bringing the capital and its administrative headquarters to a lockdown, the country to a standstill, the world to a state of shock and disbelief, I believe I must mention this cultural component since nobody else has spoken of this as yet, in all the discussion I have read thus far. Please keep in mind that brutality, in one form or another, has occurred before this recent public outrage at the end of the past year which brought the country to a standstill, and brutality against women has continued after this public outrage, although the wheels of the country have begun to turn again. Keep the burden of the inverted pyramid in mind as we see the moment in Time.

It is possible the reason these couplets have not been discussed is simply because they are in religious texts. Some public media channels of distribution may not be able to discuss this matter openly.

Since I have always believed that society has the ills it tolerates, the option of silence is no longer valid. The reasons for this brutality, and persistent brutality at that, are as appalling as the brutality itself. Unless the underlying causes are removed the situation cannot, and will not, improve.

Will the world get sensitized to this? The more sensitized we get the more this horror will grow. I believe the time has come to highlight these and other atrocities in epics, myths and their scriptural texts, and shame the readers into rejecting those words, no doubt inserted to 'control' women during the time when ALL women were considered fodder for the Muslim rulers.

Please keep in mind that Suttee, or the custom of burning the widow in the pyre of the dead husband, a custom illegal since the 1800s; was a practice that developed ONLY during Muslim rule in India. The women, at that time, preferred to burn themselves alive, on their husbands pyre, than to be subjected to the abduction and rape by the Muslim men who believed that all women were their legitimate 'wives'.

Suttee was unknown in India before the Muslim era.

I support my words referring to the power of culture with mention of a suttee that occurred as recently as the 1970s. The girl (widow) was 17 years old. Her parents considered the girl's in-laws to be murderers, forcing her to 'become suttee; (as the phrase is used in the cultural context) thereby saving the family of the 'disgrace' of having a young widow in the house. The parents of the girl filed

complaints in the legal system. They took the case all the way to the Supreme Court which ruled IN FAVOR of the murderers, the plea being that the girl loved her husband so much that she chose to 'become suttee'. Her suttee had become a huge event, with hordes of people coming to see the goddess or Devi, as the young widow was now being evolved into 'becoming' by social pressure. Her photo was put on postage stamps. The police treated her as a goddess too. Not one of them enforced the law: suttee is illegal and has been illegal since the 1800s.

Suttee is intense social pressure. The victim is drugged so she does not feel the agony very much. There are elaborate rituals constructed around the death atrocity. If the drugs failed and the victim began to run away, often she would be thrown back into the flames.

Fortunately, the young girls born after this atrocity would not consider the alternative of suttee or self-immolation as a path of dealing with the death of the husband. However, just as the feeling of caste exists, even after caste, as a practice, was made illegal, with its own word coined: 'casteism' ; the feeling of suttee exists after the custom of suttee was made illegal. Over 50% of the deaths of women in India today are suicides or ' honor killings.'

Scriptural texts, myths, epic and story effect us at a deep subconscious level. Additionally, they have perimeters and instructions at a very basic conscious level. The treatments and the actual instructions on the treatment of women, are not at a subconscious level. They are very palpable and very real in our conscious world.

On review and in deep thought over time, I see the treatment of women in both the texts: the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as grossly substandard: the women are tortured and abused. Sita, the wife and queen of Rama, in the Ramayana, in effect, committed suicide. She was disgusted by the humiliation she had to endure in her husband's court and in the society in their kingdom. She buried herself in the earth, returning to ' her mother earth' . Hindus, to this day say: it was her Karma!

Draupadi, of the Mahabharata, was dishonored in public, won as a bet in gambling and sold as a bet in gambling. Her additional dishonoring was the attempt of her being denuded in public, in the royal court, when the court was in full session, and in the presence of the king and his adviser, the old sage Bhisma, who taught morality and ethics to the king and his kingdom. I am not exaggerating. That was his job: teaching morality, ethics and governance to the king. What saved her was the godhead Krishna who gave her a blessing in the form of protection in that the cloth, or Sari, wrapping her did not end during her dishonoring. Understandably this is symbolic. However, this does not change the depth of the dishonoring and its disgrace. Their intention of dishonoring her remains intact, to this day, in the culture that is informed by the epic. That she

had extra powers since she was in her menstrual period and in prayer when she was dragged, by her hair, to the court to be further dishonored by being denuded in the full court in public, is a separate consideration. Perhaps it is to prove to the readers that a woman, when blessed, cannot be humiliated. This, however, is not the reason why the men in the epic wanted to humiliate her. The man who wrote the epic, obviously a brilliant Brahmin, cleverly wove into the epic a deep control syndrome. A syndrome that has lasted through the centuries.

According to the text, Draupadi cursed at the moment when the guards began to dishonor her and pull her Sari from her body. This was her curse: any country that cannot respect their women will never prosper.

This is important to acknowledge. India is in a delicate balance. The atrocities against women are increasing in frequency with the anger expressed at national level. A year or so ago, before the bus incident, a woman was beaten up for going to a bar in the state of Karnataka. She was 34 years old. She was with friends. The entire episode was caught on a citizen's video. The men at the bar were unable or unwilling to protect her from the attackers. Again it became a national issue with Delhi and the central government being involved.

I repeat: society has the ills it tolerates. This 'habit' of denuding a woman in public has happened on repeated occasions in the Indian subcontinent culture. The public reaction of seeing a woman thus humiliated is informed by the story of these epics and their texts. These epics are repeated yearly on TV rebroadcasts as well as in story form, informally, and at cultural venues where culture is propagated in all countries. At one level this may be the practice of shadenfreude. At another, it is an instruction on how to live, what perimeters are placed by society and how to uphold those values in their moral and ethical preferred messages of the texts.

It's a bit of a chicken and egg question with reference of the Mahabharata, keeping in mind it's antiquity, if the atrocities mentioned in that epic actually predates the Muslim rule of India.

Regardless of that chicken and egg question, and direct reference of the offensive couplet from the Gita, the extract from the Mahabharata: let us ask these very relevant questions since so many people read the Gita daily:

*How many people reading the Gita skip the couplet?

*How many read the couplet and attempt to disregard it as 'of the times when the Gita was written'

*How many read that couplet and believe it to be true?

A method for solution: 21st C updated copies of the Gita. This is a somewhat simple and an easier solution:

At least in America. We will be unable to influence the laws of India directly.

My idea is not that bold or unusual. It just happens to be the first time a woman has suggest this. There are already over 3,500 versions of the Gita. When a president retires from the Rastrapati Bhavan, he writes his version of the Gita. Various philosophers write their version of the Gita. Swamis and Yogis write their version of the Gita. We have a version do the Gita being sold, INCLUDING the offensive couplet, in Fairfield, Iowa. It's the version by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who started the University in Fairfield. I am merely adding to the body of volumes, by having a new, and improved, Ameican version. New and improved, is after all, a quintessential component of our beloved American culture. Why not this? And this New and Improved gets to save a lot of women's lives.

The advantage of making a law in which all American copies of the Gita, circulated in America, must have this couplet removed, before circulation, is obvious.

The entire world is influenced by American culture. This influence is true in one form or the other. Having a 21st C American edition will, on one hand make the readers question the older copies; and on the other, increase ownership of the American version. The effect would be the proverbial ripples after a stone is thrown in a still mirror-like lake surface. It will take a while for the ripple effect to be permeated and cemented in the culture of the lake, but it will occur, over time.

In the meantime, the women in India have only one recourse: learn self-defense.

Glimmers of an uprising bringing light is in the horizon.

In the meantime, we must block the darkness. Step by step.

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*presented by  
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At  
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