



Social Sciences Spectrum

A Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, HEC recognized [Y-category](#) Research Journal

E-ISSN: [3006-0427](#) P-ISSN: [3006-0419](#)

Volume 03, Issue 04, 2024

Web link: <https://sss.org.pk/index.php/sss>



Check for updates

Goddesses from Hindu mythology in fiction by Pakistani women writers

Dr Ambreen Salahuddin

Assistant Professor,

Department of Gender Studies,

University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

Correspondence: ambreen.dgs@pu.edu.pk

Article Information [YY-MM-DD]

Received 2024-11-23

Accepted 2024-12-27

Citation (APA):

Salahuddin, A. (2024). Goddesses from Hindu mythology in fiction by Pakistani women writers. *Social Sciences Spectrum*, 3(4), 435-442. <https://doi.org/10.71085/sss.03.04.192>

Abstract

This research discusses the archetypes of Hindu goddesses used as symbols and metaphors in fiction by Pakistani women writers. Their integration of Hindu mythology in contemporary narratives gives the texts a profound depth. The significance of this study lies in the fact that even after the partition of Indian Subcontinent and disconnecting from living in a multi-religious and multi-cultural society, the previously shared culture; i.e., the factors that shape the shared consciousness of the women of this region, including mythological narratives and social norms evolved through centuries, is still embraced and used in an inspirational manner. Different religious identity as Muslims does not pose as a barrier in using mythological narratives of the other religion i.e., Hinduism, as these are part of a shared culture and collective memory. It is also concluded that women writers do not deconstruct or appropriate the patriarchal narrations and notions, and retain the interpretations stemming from patriarchal hegemony over pen.

Keywords: Pakistani women writers, Archetype, Feminist archetype, Women fiction writers, Hindu mythology, Mythology.



Content from this work may be used under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share-Alike 4.0 International License](#) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgment of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.

Introduction

This paper talks about only those few goddesses that are discussed in fiction included in this study. Otherwise, the number of goddesses, according to Hinduism and the worshipper of goddesses, is in millions. There is the one all-encompassing creator, Brahman, who is neither female or male, and all the gods and goddesses have emanated from this higher being, whose characteristics, like Parmenides' being can only be listed by stating what that creator of all creations is not. Although, Hindu mythology is a rich source, but in comparison with male gods, there is dearth of research on the goddesses (Kinsely, 1988; Tobler, 2001) from Hindu mythology. Also, the presence of goddesses in mythological narrative does not mean that mythology has become matriarchal or egalitarian. It stays patriarchal.

Also, it must be kept in mind that symbols, metaphors and archetypes are still relevant and are used in everyday communication as well in arts and literature. There is also the question of reimagining the goddesses, in the same manner Cixous urges women to reimagine Medusa (1976) and purify her from the patriarchal shades and hues (Cixous, 1976; Salahuddin, 2024). There is a complexity in the relationship between mythology, religion and culture. The culture of this region contains the diversity coming from Hindu mythology, multiple religions, onslaught of foreign invaders, colonialism and later on postcolonial critique etc. The partition of Indian sub-continent in 1947 did not cut the ties of shared cultural consciousness. We may see a Muslim Pakistani woman still referring to the multifold Sari of Daraupadi when she is talking about protecting honour of women, and in the same conversation she may refer to a most English and lady-like demeanor required from a young girl i.e., not putting her elbows on the dining table. One reference in her conversation is coming from Hindu mythology and the other from coloniality. These elements have enriched the culture of this region and also there is a patriarchal angle to all these multiple contexts; how Daraupadi's honour is saved as per Hindu mythology and what is an expected lady-like behaviour of women in English tradition.

So, in the fiction by women writers, the symbols and archetypes are used as per the peculiar characteristics (Barman, 2020) of goddesses. For example, the model of devotion amongst these goddesses is Sita (Moodley, 2020) and the reflection of maternal instinct is Parvati (Pinto, 2014), thus where ever such characterizations are intended, not only the characters portray these goddesses i.e., the archetype is visible, but the reference is also visible as a metaphor or an example. These goddesses also depict the feminine (Salahuddin, 2023; Salahuddin & Ahmed, 2017) and female forms of women's consciousness in abundance.

There are many goddesses from Hindu mythology in Veds, Upanishads, Ramayana and Mahabharata (Chandra, 1998). In fiction by women writers of Pakistan, alongwith other goddesses, Parvati, Sita, Daraupadi, Kali Mata, Yashodha, Radha, Swaroop Nakha are seen as strong archetypes.

Popular goddesses from Hindu mythology

Sita is the most popular goddess from Ramayana of Hindu mythology. She is the wife of Rama who is the hero and King from Ramayana. She is dedicated, devotional, loyal and pativrata (devotional perfect wife). These characteristics have actually made her a favourite of many from this region as she is the personification of a feminine woman as per the patriarchal expectations. She is known through Rama. Rama was exiled by his father for fourteen years and wanted to leave Sita in Ayodhya. She refused to stay back and was ready to bear the hardships of forest with her husband. She relates herself with Savitri, "who followed her husband through the realm of dead" (Kinsley, 1988, p. 72). Sita was abducted by Ravana as she crossed the Lakhshman Rekha

(Salahuddin, Zakar & Usman 2016); the one time she exercised her choice. When she was rescued by Rama, she had to prove her virtue. As her ordeals were not ending, she prayed to Mother Earth to take her back and thus she returned to earth, leaving Rama in a state of remorse (Delaye, 2012). Parvati is a powerful goddess but she is, however, seen and defined in reference to her husband Siva. Siva had a first wife named as Sati and various texts imply that Parvati is a reincarnation of Sati. Parvati lured Siva to marry her and ended his ascetic state. Parvati is the ideal wife and ideal mother of Hindu mythology (Kinsley, 1988). Her power is creativity and potency. She appears in Ramayana and Mahabharata both (Bhattacharya, 2004).

Radha, like Parvati and Sita, is also known in relation with a man, Lord Krishna. These characters also came from Mahabharata. The difference is that Radha is in an adulterous relationship with Krishna. Sita is the personification of chastity and Radha that of sensuality (Talukdar, 2023). This also points out the age-old archetypes of women as either good or bad. The good is the one who does not exercise choice, does not disobey and does not cross Lakshman Rekha i.e., the threshold of the house (Salahuddin, 2019). The bad woman is the one who is not so obedient, who crosses the threshold, and who exercise her choices. Radha, however has one characteristic that does not push her into the domain of a bad woman; her devotion to her lover. So, she is also a role model for women as per patriarchy, as an ideal lover. Radha is loyal to Krishna despite his flirtation with gopis, group of cowherd women.

Sarasvati comes from Vedas and stays in later Hindu mythology as well. She is known as a river goddess in earlier myths and her characteristics include fertilizing, cleansing, culture and poetry. She is known to be associated with Brahma. Unlike Parvati, she is not a domestic goddess. Kali has been described as having a frightening appearance. She is a goddess of destruction, chaos, frenzy, blood and death. Kali brings the contrast of how most goddesses of Hindu mythology are described i.e. benevolent, fertile, giving, loyal and devotional. She is all destruction and aggression (Wadley, 1977).

Methodology

This is a qualitative study where grounded theory as methodology of textual analysis is used. As grounded theory involves induction i.e., moving from particular to general, it is basically theory building (Straus & Corbin, 1990). Analysis and data collection grow together in grounded theory, so it was the most apt method to opt for this particular study. For the current study, fiction by Pakistani women writers, writing in English, Urdu and other regional languages was explored. The sampling strategy for this study is theoretical sampling because theoretical sampling is basic element in developing theory. It is essential for grounded theory and helps in reaching theoretical saturation as is basic for grounded theory.

The theoretical lens of feminist theory is used for this study, as the goddesses are thought to be perfect and glorious deities. The accepted and approved status of a god is of the one who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent; creator, sustainer and all-powerful, but the goddesses of Hindu mythology are not so. These goddesses are dependent, they face constraints, punishments and they are exiled and captivated; both physically and mentally, and above all, they are patriarchal as they accept the authority of male gods. Feminist theory presents a critique on patriarchy and takes a political position on suppression, oppression, discrimination and violence against women.

Findings and Discussion

Women fiction writers have more metaphors, symbols and archetypes from mythology when compared to other sources of symbols and archetypes they use in their works. These other sources of symbol may include and are not limited to religion, natures, culture, classic texts, folk wisdom and fairy tales etc. Goddesses from Hindu mythology are usually perfect women in all their imperfection, and women of this region are seen ideally as a reflection of those goddesses. The ideal goddesses include Sita, Parvati, Sarsvati and Radha, along with a few other minor goddesses. When these women come symbolically in fiction by women writers, they become manifestation of a certain character, or things from their stories point to rightful or wrongful acts that needs to be adopted by women. It is noted that the authors who have used archetypes of Hindu goddesses, have not deviated from the same interpretation of the goddess that is prevalent since centuries and that is the patriarchal interpretation, as mythology is also written by a patriarchal pen or created by a patriarchal god.

Sita from Ramayana is the perfect manifestation of constraint and ultimate sacrifice. Ramayana is the story of Rama and Sita. As mentioned in introduction of this study, Sita had to pass number of tests to prove her loyalty. Sita was kept in constraint. Lakshman, who was Rama's brother, marked the Lakshman Rekha outside Sita's abode in the jungle. Sita crossed it and as penalty, she was kidnapped by Rawan. It is actually emphasized in the story that had she not exercised her liberty and right to mobility, she would not have been kidnapped. Later on, she also had to tread on fire as Rama needed proof after proof for her devotion and loyalty. But as she was still charged with being impure much later in her life, she asked Earth to swallow her and end her ordeals (Datta, 1998).

In Mastoor's novel *Aangan* (2008), she has used the archetype of Sita for the depiction of various characters and situations. Kariman Bua is an old maid of the house and she would not leave the place. She was told, "Sita set foot outside the line drawn by Rama so Rawan kidnapped her. Sita disobeyed the order of Rama in his lifetime, but you Kariman Bua, you cannot disobey your dead owner." (2008, p. 778)

Sita is a powerful image from Hindu mythology. It has become the pure reflection of the restriction on women's mobility. Eminent writer Bano Qudsia also used this archetype at many places in her works. Qudsia writes (2003, p. 18), "Just as Maharaja Ram Chandra marked a line outside the cottage of Maharani Sita, crossing which was not ordained." In her novella *Shehr-e-Bemisaal* [Unmatchable city] (2004) A main character, Rasho, becomes a symbolic representation of Sita. This story is about Rasho who comes to the city from the village to study at a university. Qudsia (2004, p. 464) writes, "First step outside home is difficult. Once Maharani Sita crosses the boundary line, then the journey till Sangal Deep was crossed in the blink of an eye."

Daraupadi and Swaroop Nakha are also seen in works of these writers as strong symbols. In Qudsia's short story *Amar Bail* (2009, 216), she writes, "Had Chanakya (teacher to the first Maurya Emperor Chandragupta) been alive, he would have humbly requested, Sire! It is against the plan to embrace such a damsel. She is Swaroop Nakha of Srandib (in ancient times, Arabs referred to Sri Lanka as Srandib)! She comes bare-footed at Cupid's abode! Such a damsel has no nose (no ego) and if there is any left, it is better to cut it"

Swaroop Nakha was Rawan's, sister. She proposed to Rama and then Lakshman. Lakshman got angry and in response he chopped off her nose. Second reference in the given excerpt comes from Roman Mythology. Excerpt says that as Swaroop Nakha came barefoot in Cupid's abode, she had left her ego behind. It is thus concluded that she has no pride in such matters of heart. Similarly,

in the Indian myth, Lakshman chopped her nose. Both myths have been used meaningfully to stress on Swaroop Nakha's state. In the following extract from Jamila Hashmi also uses the symbol of Daraupadi, "I know that in your thoughts you take me as Daraupadi and yourself as Bheem. You want to adorn my hair with the best and most fragrant flowers of Heaven, but just like Bheem, you do not want to cover the distance of Hell and Heaven (1973, p. 40)."

In the myth, Daraupadi's Saree was being removed from her body in Pandavas's court. Yudhishtira was removing it. As Daraupadi prayed to Lord Krishna, the Saree became too long to unfold. So whenever there is a need to refer to something as never ending, Daraupadi's saree is used as a metaphor, for instance, "Hussain and Siddique slept right after eating, but for Saleem night became the Sari of Daraupadi" (Mastoor, 2008, p. 73).

Celebrated poet and writer Fehmida Riaz (2013, p. 125) writes, "They could see the highest mountain of the earth from windows of plane. Covered in snow, shinnig in sunlight. Somewhere there, was Shiva sitting, with his wife Parvati, in manner of some universal communion." In a similar pattern, Qurat ul Ain Haider (2013, p. 20-21) talks of the goddess of music, Sarsvati, "There was a grand orchestra of musical instruments, on which Sarsvati was playing the Megh raga. Raga of peace and serenity... Megh..." Kali Mata [Black mother] is mentioned by Qudsia (2009, p. 145), in this manner, "Kali Mata, thirsty for blood, with her red tongue out, was putting the crops ablaze. Coconut and Palm trees were falling on their faces. Damsel, under its curse, were growing fatherless children in their dead bodies. Old women with bonny hands, were mourning the deaths of young sons."

In one of her most celebrated stories, Lodhi tells the tale of a woman named Parvati. She crosses over to Pakistan from India as a spy and when she returned, she had remarried in Pakistan as a Muslim woman named Parveen and was pregnant. Her husband, an army official, wanted her to abort the baby. Goddess Parvati is nurturing, caring, life-giving and is the symbol of life-giving earth. As Parvati from the short stories is pregnant, Lodhi used the archetype of Parvati the goddess. She (1996, 55) writes, "She was neither Parvati at that time, not Perveen. She was just a woman; fond of abundant love, the earth bearing fruits and flowers."

One interesting finding is about the recurring notion of sisterhood emerging through depiction of prominent women from mythology. Perveen Atif (2003, p. 165) writes, "You have the shade of Daraupadi, queen of Jhansi, Razia Sultan and Heer of Sayals, who, despite being women, fought the fight of their identity by themselves in such a way that their names were written in golden word in the book of life."

This sisterhood is actually a realization of the constraints and problems faced by those women as well. Hashmi (2003, p. 165) writes, "The souls made from the soil of the burning hell, cannot find peace and calm anywhere. Because no one, Anarkali, Roopmati, Radha, Cleopatra, none could find any comfort as well."

Conclusion

As seen in given narrations of Hindu goddesses in Introduction, there is a focus on women as wives in Hindu tradition. Secondly, it is evident that women's relation is seen in association with men only. Thirdly, all goddesses usually do not possess maternal side though they are called mothers i.e. Kali Mata (mother), Durga MaaN (mother) etc. Fourthly, unlike many religions with patriarchal nature, Hindu mythology has a 'matriarchal worldview' (Rajan, 1998), but the matriarchal goddesses are chained in patriarchal notions of the good and the bad woman.

Women fiction writers have used many symbols and archetypes from mythology. Mythology and religion are treated as one in many traditions and critical approaches (Salahuddin 2018), but in this

paper, these are not grouped in the same fashion, rather these are all elements which shape the collective culture of this region. Interestingly, apart from Hindu goddesses, there are many other symbols, metaphors and archetypes in Hindu mythology, but the symbolic and archetypal representation of Hindu goddesses is mostly used. Goddesses that can be seen again and again in these texts include Sita, Parvati, Sarasvati, Meenavati, Yashodha, Daraupadi, Swaroop Nakha and Kali Mata. It is observed that the manifestation of these archetypes is in the similar patriarchal pattern as they appear in mythological narratives. None of the archetypes or symbolic representation is changed in nature and essence, which leads us to the conclusion that most of the women writers have retained the prevalent patriarchal usage and interpretation associated with the usage of symbols, metaphors and archetypes coming from mythology. There are few exceptions where women writers have raised questions about the patriarchal hegemony of pen.

References

- Atif, P. (2003), *Mein maili, piya ujle* [I am impure and my beloved is untainted]. Lahore: Al-Faisal.
- Barman, V. (2020), Hinduism: An overview of the religion. *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology*, 17(9), 3661-3667.
- Bhattacharya, P. (2004). Five holy virgins, five sacred myths. *Manushi*, 4-12.
- Chandra, S. (1998). *Encyclopaedia of Hindu gods and goddesses*. Dehli: Sarup & Sons.
- Cixous, H., (1976). The laugh of the Medusa. Cohen, Keith., & Cohen, Paula. (translators). *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4. 875-893.
- Datta, A. (ed.) (1988), *Encyclopedia of Indian Literature, Volume 2* India: Sahtiya Akademi.
- Delaye, A. (2012). *That's what She Said: Sita in the Lives and Imaginations of Hindu Women: Choice, Ideals and the Oral Tradition* (Doctoral dissertation, Concordia University).
- Haider, Q. (2013), *Aag ka darya* [River of fire]. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel.
- Hashmi, J. (1973), *Apna apna jahannum* [everyone's own hell]. Lahore: Maktaba-e-Jadeed Press.
- Hashmi, J. (2003), *Talash-e-Baharaan* [search for spring]. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications.
- Kinsley, D. (1988), *Hindu goddesses: Visions of divine feminine in the Hindu religious tradition*. California: University of California Press.
- Lodhi, F. (1996), '*Parbati*', *Shehr ke log* [People of the city]. Lahore: Universal books, 1996.
- Mastoor, K. (2008), *Majmooa e Khadija Mastoor* [Collected works of Khadija Mastoor] Lahore: Sang-e-Meel.
- Moodley, D. (2020), 'The ideal Hindu woman? Representations of Sita in Yael Farber's Ram—The Abduction of Sita into Darkness', *Agenda*, 34(3), 52-61.
- Pinto, S. (2014). *Daughters of Parvati: Women and madness in contemporary India*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Qudsia, B. (2003), *Hasil Ghaat*. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel.
- Qudsia, B. (2004), *Aatish zer-e-pa* [Fire under feet]. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel,
- Qudsia, B. (2004b), *Chahar Chaman* [Four Gardens]. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel.
- Qudsia, B. (2009), *Naqabil-e-zikr* [unmentionable]. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel.
- Qudsia, B. (2009b), 'Amar Bail [Air creeper]', *Amar Bail* [Air creeper]. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel. pp. 49-73.
- Rajan, R. S. (1998), 'Is the Hindu goddess a feminist?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 44, WS34-WS38
- Riaz, F. (2013), *Hum Log* [We people]. Karachi: Oxford university press.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990), *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Salahuddin, A. Zakar, M. Z. & Usman, A. (2016), 'Threshold: A Spatial and Ideological Barrier in South Asian Fiction-A Case study of Pakistani Women Fiction Writers', *South Asian Studies*, 31 (1), 175-185.

- Salahuddin, A. & Usman, A. (2017), 'Beyond the Threshold: Emancipation or Entrapment? The Feminine Archetypes in Pakistani Women Fiction Writers', *Journal of Research (Humanities)* Vol. LIII, 15-29.
- Salahuddin, A. (2018), 'Usage of traditional symbols in Pakistani fiction', *Journal of Islamic thought and civilization*, 08(1), 84-92.
- Salahuddin, A. (2019). Pakistani khawateen ke fiction mein Lakshman Rekha ko paar karne ki alamat: Iradi aur gher iradi amal ka qazia [Crossing Lakhshman Rekha in fiction by Pakistani women writers: The debate of intentional and unintentional act]. *Mayar*, Vol. 21. Jan- June 2019. 143-152.
- Salahuddin, A. (2023). Feminine or Patriarchal: Story of Adam and Eve in Urdu Novels by Women Writers. *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, 13(2), 231-241.
- Salahuddin, A. (2024). Medusa ka qehqaha: Tarjuma aur maroozaat [The laugh of the Medusa: Translation and Discussion]. *Bunyad*, 15(1). June 2024. 293-324.
- Talukdar, N. (2023). The Woman in Goddess: Radha and the Confluence of Divinity and Sexuality in the Making of Modern Romantic Selves. *Contemporary Social Sciences*, 32 (1), 111-135.
- Tobler, J. (2001). Goddesses and Women's Spirituality: Transformative Symbols of the Feminine in Hindu Religion. *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 14(2).
- Wadley, Susan S., (1977), 'Women and the Hindu tradition', *Signs*, Vol. 3, No. 1, *Women and National Development: The Complexities of Change*. USA: The University of Chicago Press, 113-125.