

**Pleasers to Rejectors of patriarchy: understanding nature in Pattanaik's works****Vidya Shankar Shetty**

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**Abstract:**

Many cultures revere land as their Mother and give their motherland a feminine form. Probably because, land and mother earth is the giver, the nurturer and the provider. All mankind needs are fulfilled by her. As a woman, Mother Earth goes through enough atrocities and surfaces stronger. From her are born the virtues of patience, generosity and buoyancy. She bounces back after all the hardship that she goes through. Indian mythology also holds nature in high reverence. All places of worship are located close to nature, beside rivers, near lakes and with ponds around, near the sea or in the hills and valleys surrounded by trees. Rainfall, floods, drought, storm and other natural calamities are at the will of the gods. While scientists look at the planets for their functional aspect, mythology attributes certain characteristics to nature, which cascades as a pattern in the life of women. All planets, constellations are personified and some of them are distinctly personified as feminine forms. The rivers like mother earth are personified as goddesses and they are considered as magnanimous as the mother earth. The rivers in their due course, journey through land, absorb most of the pain of mankind and when angry can be harsh. The world of plants is no different as they are revered and considered to be close to the gods and hence worshipped. This paper will string together the tales of the rivers, with focus on Ganga, the tale of the celestial beings, with focus on the constellations and study the tale of plants, with reference to one plant, the Tulsi; which takes a feminine form. It will further explore how Pattanaik in his works attributes and brings out certain distinct characteristics of nature and draws a parallel between the lives of the epic women who draw a pattern of similarity from nature. In a male-dominated world, even nature has to go through suffering and how nature conquers it all and emerges powerful is the essence of the paper.

**Keywords:** Nakshatras, Ganga, Feminism, Nature, Gender, Patriarchy, Epic, Woman

**“The man is like the pillar in the house, the woman like the beam. All the weight falls on the beam, it is the pillar that everyone talks about”** (*Kali Ganga* 211)

Taking this strand of thought further, the bubbly Ganga is linked to Shiva from whose tresses she flows to the Earth, cleansing on her way the sins of mankind. Shiva is considered the pillar who traps her in his matted hair, while Ganga takes on herself the weight of the world as she flows cleansing the earth of its sins. Like her sisters Yamuna and Saraswati, Ganga is personified as a woman. The river is always given a ‘feminine’ role in Indian mythology. She is at once revered and at the same time excluded from complete freedom. The river is the nurturer like the mother who rears and oversees the welfare of mankind. However, it is the destructive side of the river that one has to be cautious about for in its destructive form it can cause great floods and famine. Like the river, a woman has the power to annihilate life and move away or create life and nurture it without much fuss. Like the rivers, the *nakshatras* are also addressed as feminine forms. Indian mythology has twenty seven *nakshatras* and there is a family that they are connected with. Like the *nakshatras*, some of the stars are also considered feminine. Plants which have medicinal value or those that are close to some gods and hence offered to gods are also feminine. The rivers, the *nakshatras*, the stars, the plants have a very important role to play in Indian mythology. Apart from the great value that is assigned to vegetation in India as these plants, fruit or trees are connected with worship of the divine, it is interesting to note that many of these forms are feminine. Rituals are not considered complete unless and until the water from these rivers and plants and their flowers are offered to the Gods. The sky derives its pattern from the position of the *nakshatras* and the stars. What is noted across the study of the rivers, *nakshatras*, stars and plants is that they are associated with womanhood. It is but natural that they have a tale connected to their lives just as the feminine characters like Kunti, Draupadi, Sita, Gandhari or the Goddesses have. The rivers, the plants, the *nakshatras* have emotions, their habits, their suffering or their joy is a tale by itself. Like human beings and the epic women they are raised to be pleasers, who go through disappointments in their life, are punished or have to suffer under patriarchy, react to the situations in their life, overcoming hurdles and obstacles only to reach the stage of rejection. Kunti, Gandhari, Sita and Draupadi are all raised as pleasers. They are devoted to and doted on by their parents in the beginning of their journey of life and thereafter are doting wives to their husbands and docile daughters-in-law to their respective families. This paper focusses on the journey of the life of some of these epic women in comparison with the journey of the rivers, the *nakshatras*, the stars, the plants and flowers interestingly drawing a parallel between the lives of all these feminine forms. Pattanaik in his narratives speak of these rivers, trees, *nakshatras* and their feminine forms which serves as inspiration to the modern society as they rise above the traditional assumption of

womanhood. The attempt is to compare them with the modern world women and study how women cope with patriarchy rejecting some of the anchors and rafts that hold them back from progress with specific focus on the works of Devdutt Pattanaik.

In his book *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010) is the interesting story of Ganga with who began the tales of one of the greatest epics of the country. Ganga is depicted as a beautiful woman by all writers. Pattanaik also describes Ganga to be beautiful and fair complexioned in his writings. Generally the images of Ganga have her depicted as a voluptuous woman riding a crocodile. On one hand of hers Ganga is seen carrying a pot while the other hand has a white lily. Some images and sculptures also have her carrying a vase in one hand. Always painted in white, Ganga is considered pure and holy and plays a very powerful role in the epic. She is fair skinned and is beautiful with long tresses. Pattanaik describes Ganga in his book *Devlok with Devdutt Pattanaik* (2016) as:

You will see her idols at the doors of nearly every temple and beside city gates. She is described as a very beautiful woman, voluptuous and fecund, carrying a water pot, ghada, in one hand. She is also depicted in the symbol of Makara rash, Capricorn. The makara, a sea creature with the tail of a fish and the head of an elephant, is her vehicle. Rationalists say the creature is probably the indigenous dolphin found in the Ganga, which is now an endangered species. (*Devlok* 96)

The river personified as a woman, flows without fear on Earth and is the most revered river in Indian mythology. Associated with water, it is believed that the waters of the Ganges cleanses the body of sins and liberates the soul. The descent of Ganga onto Earth has a connect with the *Bhagavata Purana* where on request of Bhagiratha, one of the descendants of Sagar who prayed and implored that Ganga flows down to the Earth. Ganga is piqued at the way in which she is sent to Earth and is insulted and agrees to flow to Earth with the aim to drown the entire Earth in her waters. It is then that Bhagiratha prays to Shiva to trap Ganga in his tresses and let her flow in small streams on Earth. Ganga, as we read about her in the *Puranas* is arrogant and harsh. The tale of this Goddess of purity and purification is an interesting read in Pattanaik's writing too. Her story in the book *Jaya* begins with the tale of Mahabhissha who was granted entry into Swarga and where he stares at Ganga when her upper garment falls and exposes her breasts. This unpleasant action of Mahabhissha has him banished to Earth. What is rather ironical to note here is that Ganga is also instructed to follow Mahabhissha to Earth and ensure that she breaks Mahabhissha's heart before returning to *Swarga*. From here begins the tale of one of the greatest epics in Indian mythology, *The Mahabharata*. Mahabhissha takes birth as Shantanu and is enchanted by the beauty of Ganga

and falls in love with her. Ganga agrees to marry him on condition that she is not questioned on any of her actions. As years pass by Ganga gives birth to seven sons, all of who she drowns in the river. It is only when she is about to drown the eighth child, that Shantanu accuses her of cruelty and questions her. As soon as Shantanu questions her, Ganga is upset that he had broken his word and vanishes with her son with the promise that she would raise him as a warrior of much renown. It is only towards the last part of the *Mahabharata* that Ganga reappears in the *Mahabharata* when Vyasa calls all the warriors who were slain in the war for a final reunion and they are seen emerging from the river, purged of all their sons. Thus Ganga as a pleaser is the Goddess who flows in the Heavens, flows on Earth and flows in the underworld as Mandakini, Bhagirathi and as Bhogvati or Patala Ganga. She has supernatural powers, is maternal in nature; yet is arrogant and independent and with life giving properties. To this day Shiva temples have her statue along with the statue of the Yamuna at the entrance to the *garba griha*. Ganga is worshipped first before worshipping Shiva. It is only the patriarchal outlook that subdued her role in nature. Her residing in the matted hair of Shiva is looked at as the male controlling the female and her following Mahabhisha to Earth is seen as a curse on Ganga, while her leaving Shantanu is seen as a punishment for having placed a condition in his life.

While Ganga rejects the heavens, she agrees to flow down to earth and it is her turbulent force of waters that needs the channel of Shiva's matted hair and by vanishing from Shantanu's life, she creates misery in the life of Shantanu. She is both a pleaser and a rejector of society as she comes out strong as a freestanding woman with several forms and who is the most powerful life-giver on Earth. The crocodile that she rides on is an animal that is considered an object of fear, while on the other hand she carries the vessel, the *kumbha*, which is the vase of plenty and the lily symbolises peace. Ganga carries in herself the bliss of the waters which is pleasing and the power in her murky depths of waters to either flood and destroy or refuse to flow and create famine. She is the pleaser and the rejector of patriarchy, thus breaking the myth of men being the providers and women being the homemakers.

Ganga faces pressure from the Gods as she is instructed to descend on earth, is betrayed by Shantanu who breaks his vow of silence, but faces it all with resilience and grit. Sita is promised by her husband Ram that he would be faithful only to her and that he would love only her. This promise is forgotten when he gives precedence to the thoughts of the subjects of his kingdom and does not hesitate to send his pregnant wife to the forests. Like Ganga, Sita nurtures her two sons all alone in the forest and makes them great warriors. Like Ganga, Draupadi is betrayed by Arjuna as he stays quiet when Kunti asks them to share her amongst the brothers. Like Ganga they descend

on earth to bring about a change in the society and they are effective changers of society as we interpret their actions through the eyes of Pattanaik.

The river is like the umbilical cord of the womb, the *garba* that nourishes flora and fauna and hence most of the plants and flowers are feminine and personified as women. In Pattanaik's books *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* (2013) and *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, we see that the forest has a very important role to play in the lives of Sita and Draupadi. Half of their lives is spent amidst flora and fauna in the forests. Trees come alive as they speak to these women, under the trees and amidst flora and fauna Sita spends her entire captivity in Lanka. Under the tree in the forests, we see Draupadi taking her true form as Kali and hence these women have a strong connectivity to flora and fauna. Trees and plants have a revered position in Indian mythology and the *Puranas* and other religious texts accord great importance to trees and plants. In fact some plants are given a special status in Indian mythology and in Pattanaik's article "Under the Banyan Tree" he writes about how trees are also associated with gods and goddesses. He further writes about how trees are not worshipped for their medicinal value but also form a part of a deity's symbolism. In his book *Devlok* Pattanaik takes this thought further as he writes about how the Indian culture is seeped in the forests and of how if all the values of trees were combined, it would yield Amrita. He further writes about how plants are used to create similes and metaphors while describing gods:

Vishnu is called Kamalnayan, one with lotus-like eyes. There's a story from the *Krittivasa Ramayana* of Bengal. Rama worships Durga and says he'll offer her 108 lotus flowers. She wants to test him so she steals one flower. Seeing there are only 107, he wonders what to do. He remembers the his mother compared his eyes to the lotus and so offers one of his eyes to Durga. There's a similar story in the *Puranas* where Vishnu does the same for Shiva and thus acquires the Sudarshan chakra. So, eyes have been equated with the lotus. (*Devlok* 173)

Thus each of these flowers and trees are given forms and most of the plants and flowers used for worship of these gods are feminine in form. One such plant is the Tulsi plant without which worship of Lord Vishnu is incomplete and is given a feminine form. The Tulsi, according to Hindu scriptures was a beautiful princess Vrinda and was born into a family of demons. She was a great devotee of Lord Vishnu. When she was married her husband Jalandhar, who was born out of fire from Shiva's third eye, it is believed did not like the Gods. With Jalandhar's marriage to Vrinda, he grew very powerful due to her chastity and he defied Lord Shiva. This threatened all the Gods and they appealed to Lord Vishnu for support. Lord Vishnu takes the form of Jalandhar and approaches Vrinda, while her real husband was engaged in war with Shiva. He tricks her to believe that he is

her husband Jalandhar and she greets him as her husband. It is when she touches the body of the disguised Lord Vishnu that she realises that it is not her real husband and her chastity is shattered. Due to this, her real husband loses power and he is killed by Lord Shiva. Devastated, Vrinda curses Lord Vishnu that he would turn into a stone before ending her life. Lord Vishnu blesses her with a boon before she dies saying that his worship would not be considered complete till his devotees worship him with Tulsi leaves. Vrinda is reborn as a plant. The young Vrinda grows up pleasing her favourite deity Vishnu only to be tricked by him later in life. She is treated unfairly as her most beloved God does injustice to her. She is silenced by the vested interests of the Gods and chooses to reject the God who she was so devoted to by cursing him. From being the pleaser of Lord Vishnu, Vrinda rejects Lord Vishnu and protests by cursing Vishnu and killing herself. Both patriarchy and hegemony play an important role here. Vrinda being transformed as Tulsi and worshipped at the feet of Lord Vishnu is exerted on by the male-dominated system in the current world. The fact that Vishnu has remorse that he had tricked her and defeated her leading to her curse on him is underplayed.

The twenty seven constellations are known as *nakshatras* in the Vedic system of astrology. 'Naks' means the sky region and most of these *nakshatras* have feminine names like: Krittika, Rohini, Mrigashira, Ardra, Punarvasu, Purva Phalguni, Hasta, Chitra, Vishaka, Anuradha, Dhanistha, Shatabhishak, Uttara Bhadrpadapa and Revathi. Each of these *nakshatras* are associated with a deity. The story of the *nakshatras* in mythology reads as to how these *nakshatras* are considered to be daughters of Daksha Prajapati and of how he marries them all to the moon god. However, it so happens that the moon god prefers Rohini above the others which angers the father who curses the Moon that he would lose his shape and disappear into the darkness. The curse is minimised by the intervention of Lord Shiva who mediates and ensures that the Moon regains his shape and accordingly goes to all the *nakshatras* who are his wives. What is to be noticed here is that even the constellations have gender as per Indian mythology and the feminine form of the *nakshatras* are shown as dependant on the male, the moon god in this instance. The gods and the planets and the stars are also interpreted as having a rigid social construct, where the feminine forms of the *nakshatras* are differentiated on gender and beauty. These celestial beings are also reduced to gender divide and they are subjected to patriarchal domination. Some of these *nakshatras* are considered pleasing and some are considered to be harsh. With deliberating on the white middle class women, Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) refers to women's complicity and their passivity and questions women on accepting gender inequity and accepting meekly their defined domestic sphere. These are women who are unaffected by their condition or state in which they survive. Social hierarchy and patriarchal hegemony define their position.



Aligned with this observation, the feminine *nakshatras* also accept the mantle of submissiveness upon themselves like Kunti and Gandhari. However, it is interesting to note that they are vocal about their feelings and voice their agony to their father who initiates action against the moon god. There is an essential sensibility here, where these feminine *nakshatras* assert their identity, demand their rights and defy male supremacy as they protest being ignored by the god who had married them all. Pattanaik in his article, “Tears of Gandhari” writes about how Gandhari after the war looks back at her life and regrets that she had to prove being the noble wife and blindfolded herself. She grieves over the fact that she had not seen the childhood of her children. She feels she was responsible for the greed of her children. That Gandhari accepted her life as the queen of a blind king and thrust herself to the fringes draws a parallel from the story of the *nakshatras*. In doing so, she was pleasing society and her family. The only difference here is that the *nakshatras* after realising that the moon god spent more time with Rohini, protested and demanded equal rights for all thus rejecting patriarchy. Gandhari never appealed or protested against the status of her life.

Mary Ellmann’s *Thinking About Women* (1968) and Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (2016) has them vehemently oppose patriarchal constructs and they write about how sexual differences creates prejudices and stereotypes of women in our society. Pattanaik being a male writer, uncovers these stereotypes as he writes about Ganga being arrogant, defiant and how she rejects subordination of women. Women are compared to Ganga as being beautiful, graceful, virtuous and lively; while seldom do we come across women being compared to Ganga as being arrogant, destructive, defiant and independent. Likewise Pattanaik sees the forest as a goddess and hence most trees and plants are equated to a goddess. In both *Jaya* and *Sita*, forests play a predominantly important role. These are the forests where Sita thrives as a survivor, a strong woman who defies all society rules to be with plants and trees, where she spends her captive days amongst plants and trees in Ravana’s *Ashokvan*. Draupadi sets foot into the forests and the hut in the forests as a new bride. It is in the forests that she gets to know her family better, it is to the trees and the plants that she cries out her woes. While these women are amidst the trees and plants, there are no society rules for them. They create a kingdom of their own as they learn the ways of the forest and grow to be adaptors and survivors. Pattanaik writes about the importance of forests and trees in his article, “The metaphor of the forest” as he personifies the forest to be a woman:

In the Rig Veda, the forest is associated with a goddess called Aranyani, who is described as wearing anklets and is a dancer. She is never seen, only heard. One wonders how she lives so far from human settlement and can feed all manners of living creatures without ever having to till the soil. This is the first understanding of the forests that we find in Hinduism.

He further writes in the same article about how the forest is the only space where there are no rules or regulations and where everything is fair and that the forest is a place of natural justice. This is perhaps the cue for modern society to take, that the forests along with celestial beings like the *nakshatras* or the rivers have a spirit of their own. They are not to be taken as pleasers alone as they have been labelled for generations, they are rejectors of the wrong as well. In conclusion, Pattanaik's portrayal of the Ganga, the trees, the *nakshatras* or the women in his writings throws a different spotlight on the lives of these women. His writings clearly decipher how these women struggle in circumstances that they are placed in, face societal pressures, face gender subordination and yet face them all with resilience and grit.

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