

## An Attempt to Reformulate Traditional & Cultural Ethics

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### ABSTRACT

Feminists have developed a wide variety of gender-centered approaches to ethics, each of which addresses one or more of the five ways traditional ethics has failed or neglected women. Some feminist ethicists emphasize issues related to women's traits and behaviors, particularly their care-giving ones. In contrast, other feminist ethicists emphasize the political, legal, economic, and/or ideological causes and effects of women's second-sex status. But be these emphases as they may, all feminist ethicists share the same goal: the creation of a gendered ethics that aims to eliminate or at least ameliorate the oppression of any group of people, but most particularly women. Indian drama in English translation has been increasingly turning to history, legend, myth and folklore tapping the rhythms of Indian collective psyche. It has forged a link between East and West and various Indian languages and contributed towards the contemporary literary horizon with marvellous results. This paper aims at analyzing critically the use of myths in Indian drama & the theory of feminist ethics with special reference to the play *Mandodari* by Gujarati writer Varsha Adalja. Despite the strength of her [Mandodari] character critics do not pay enough attention to her. She gets lost in the grandiose of Valmiki's Ramayana. She is the one who persuades her husband to keep Sita in Ashok Vatika. Varsha Adalja's portrayal of the inner dilemma of Mandodari as a wife, a woman and the queen of Lanka is creditable. Mandodari maintains a judicious balance between ethical duty and practical humanity. Adalja employs myth as a mechanism to question the false morality prevalent in her age and prevalent even today. Mandodari becomes an epitome to criticize the irrational patriarchal values in Indian society. Myth, tradition and modernity are major dimensions of Indian drama. Myths are born, reinvented, and preserved in a culture that values continuity. Again, myths create an alternate reality. The story of Ramayana has been handed down to us in various forms from prehistoric times but enough attention has not been paid on the character of Mandodari. Her psychological dilemmas remain untouched. Varsha Adalja revisits the myth of the Ramayana from fresh perspectives. By indulging in a dialogue between Sita and Mandodari, she rewrites the stereotyped notions about duty and morality. Mandodari's character integrates public and private space with her agency and subjectivity intact. Adalja successfully employs the poetics of myth to

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**Received: September 25, 2023; Revision Received: September 29, 2023; Accepted: September 30, 2023**

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scrutinize the contemporary notions about morality and womanhood. In this way, women can relocate their centre in a fast changing world and can assert their own space.

**Keywords:** *Myth, Drama, Ethics, Duty, Morality, Womanhood, Valour, Self-Esteem*

**N**ow the blindness in human beings.....is the blindness with which we are all inflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from our selves...Hence , the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with the significance of alien lives. Hence the falsity of our judgments, so far as they presume to decide in an absolute way on the value of other persons' conditions or ideals....It absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; and it commands us to tolerate, respect and indulge those whom we see harmlessly happy and interested in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us.

(William James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings”1899, 229; italics added)

William James’s quote is applicable to all endeavours that take human beings as their subject matter. It is a plea of empathy and respect in the face of ‘difference’. Above all, it is a reminder that there is never only one narrative, a reminder that we must bear in mind as we look forward and backward at the challenges of re-reading women’s texts from the cultural [which includes social, ethnic, folk & traditional] standpoint too. The philosophy of Feminist Ethics is the befitting theory applicable to the present research paper. The assertion has turned into an attempt to revise, reformulate, or rethink traditional ethics to the extent it deprecates or devalues women's moral experience.

Plays written in various Indian languages are being translated into English and other languages as they are produced and appreciated in various parts of India and abroad. The energy and richness of the Bhasha texts cannot be easily transferable in English language. However, translations are indispensable as literacy in India is invariably bilingual. Regional drama in India is slowly paving a way for a national theatre into which all streams of theatrical art seem to converge. Indian drama in English translation has been increasingly turning to cultural history, legend, myth and folklore tapping the rhythms of Indian collective psyche. Broadly speaking myth is not a story told as history, but history told as story. The reality of the myth is close to our ordinary lives. The story of Ramayana has been handed down to us in various forms from prehistoric times but enough attention has not been paid on the character of Mandodari. Her psychological dilemmas remain untouched. The reality of the myth is close to our ordinary lives. They are re-arranged in such a manner as to suit the needs of present reality. Gujarati writer Varsha Adalja uses her writing to establish a dialogue between the past and the present, between myth and reality to explore the present Indian society. Her play Mandodari presents a woman's struggle with fate and the hovering clouds of war. The eponymous character from the Ramayana

becomes the mouth piece of all wives and mothers suffering from war that men fight to satisfy their greed and egoistic pursuits of love and lust.

One of the premises of feminist ethics has been that what seems to be the neutral language of ethical discourse is not gender-neutral at all. It focuses, for instance, on the so-called “public” sphere from which women have traditionally been excluded; it assumes that people are primarily rational agents; it tends to emphasise isolated unrelated individuals; it works with a model of a free, rational deliberator. Following are few important aspects on which feminist ethics emphasis

- care as well as (or instead of) justice
- the need to develop ethical attitudes such as empathy & affection; emphasis on terms like dependence and responsibility
- the fundamental significance of relationships in moral decision-making
- the significance of special ties that bind when making moral decisions – one may have different moral responsibilities to people one is close to than to others
- the unique, context-bound and specific nature of each moral decision.

Theoretically, the distinction between justice and care cuts across the familiar divisions between thinking and feeling, egoism and altruism, theoretical and practical reasoning. It call attention to the fact that all relationships, public and private can be characterized in terms both of equality and in terms of attachment. And that both inequality and detachment constitute grounds for moral concern. Since everyone is vulnerable both to oppression and abandonment, two moral visions – one of justice and one of care – recur in human experience. Broadly speaking myth is not a story told as history, but history told as story. It debunks the hegemony of history and becomes a narrative of real experience in the past. What we call myth today is not an imaginary tale but a real life experience of the primordial society. There is a constant need to negotiate cultural myths which are a part of the socializing process of any individual and to retell and reinterpret them. Each rewriting in the form of myth becomes a form of negotiation between the foreign and the native, between tradition and modernity.

Varsha Adalja makes a determined effort for a portrayal of the epic character and brings to the surface the broader and deeper aspects of Mandodari's mind that lay submerged in the majestic sweep of the grand Ramayana. Her character is an interface between literature, myth and culture. The present paper will try to analyze the innermost recesses of Mandodari, her misery, her suspicions, the ethical issues that the epic was silent about. Adalja portrays her as the blend of tradition and modernity. Mandodari uses her wholeness of body and mind to make a delicate balance between the public and the private space, leaving no stone unturned in preventing the war between Ram and Ravan. She is a woman of substance with the wholeness of body and mind. Despite the strength of her character critics do not pay enough attention to her. The present paper will scrutinize how Adalja revisits the myth of the Ramayana and views her character in a new light. She becomes an archetype to criticize the society tainted with irrationality, sham

morality and devastating passions. Varsha Adalja's Mandodari shows the protagonist as a woman of extraordinary knowledge and intelligence. Mythical Mandodari was the daughter of Mayadanav and Apsara Hema. In the play, her character overshadows all other characters. She is a woman of substance with the wholeness of body and mind. Adalja's portrayal of the inner dilemma of Mandodari as a wife, woman and queen of Lanka is commendable. She tries her best to show reason to Ravana but his male ego goes beyond his reasoning faculty. Unlike Sita, who rigidly sticks to her code of honour, Mandodari maintains a moderate balance between moral duty and practical humanity. In the opening scene of the play, Ravana's golden throne is described as the „seat of pride and ego“ (99). Mandodari reprimands Ravana's act of abduction of a helpless woman. According to her, it is neither an act of bravery nor a trivial matter. For Ravana, a woman is an ornament to relish male pride. A woman is the object of pleasure, a mere plaything to be used like a piece of linen that can be thrown away when it is soiled. To have power over a woman is the right of man. More than passion, Sita's abduction becomes a question of Ravana's pride. It is a great opportunity to fulfill old desires and to take old revenge. Subjectively, the theme of male ego provides the main action of the play. Mandodari's attempt to fail the scheme of Kaal Devta, who has come to devastate Lanka, is the counter theme. The conflict between male ego and a wife's attempt to save her country and her husband is the focus of the playwright. Mandodari's character is the blend of tradition and modernity. She is a devoted wife but never at the cost of her self-esteem. She is a demon's daughter and the queen of an Asura devoted to the path of truth. As a wife and a queen, she stands by the side of her husband but as a woman she never refrains herself from warning Ravana about the consequences of his wrong decision. She is not only limited to wifely duties but will go to any extent to save her country from the annihilation of war. She knows that kingdoms built on oppression and exploitation never last. Mandodari proposes Sita to surrender before Ravana so that the lives of hundreds of men could be saved. In doing so she is not defying ordinary morality. Her path of truth is higher than any abstract notions of womanhood. The concrete lives of hundreds of men are more important than any ridiculous abstract notions. Through dialogues between Sita and Mandodari, Adalja rewrites the myth of patriarchy which relegates women to false notions thereby distancing her from her essential feminine core. Humanity is bigger than any prescribed abstract notions. Dialogues between Sita and Mandodari question the validity of prescribed codes of honour for women who are relegated to household domains. She teaches to Sita the true meaning of sati.

Sati? Does a woman become a sati by washing the feet of her husband? No Janaki sati is the one who follows the path of truth (110)

For Mandodari the light of reason is truth. Through the character of Mandodari Adalja calls into question the patriarchal Hindu society. When Sita asks her, if women get no respect in Asura culture and boasts of Aryan tradition of worshipping women as goddess, Mandodari laughs at her and says:

*“O Sita, the daughter in law of the Suryavamshis, don’t you think there is ambiguity in the treatment of women as goddesses? When the victorious kings confiscate kingdoms, don’t they also take women folk of the defeated kings? The gods keep apsaras for enjoyment. Your father-in-law has several queens.” (110)*

Mandodari is caught up in a cruel dilemma. If Ravana wins the war and Rama is killed then Ravana will marry Sita. She will become his queen and Mandodari will become her attendant. If Ravana is killed then too her future is bleak. She has to wander like a mad woman among the ashes of the burnt city with her children and husband dead, her city destroyed, her people killed. Wars happen and destroyed civilizations. Innocent people become the victims of needless violence. Women are left behind to lament the loss. A dejected Mandodari laments the loss of her country and loved ones. Mandodari’s dialogues with Kaaldevta are not only symbolic of a woman’s rebellion against the social and cultural forces but also against the divine which made women to suffer in every case. Mandodari’s truthful attitude towards life and her wisdom make her worshipped by future generations. In the play, though the war is the result of cultural presumptions of two men, its effect is still in the hands of two women; Sita and Mandodari. Sita remains in the private space by clinging to the notions ordered to her by patriarchal society but Mandodari takes the command of the public. By using her own agency she reinvents her own notions about duty and morality. She challenges the Kaaldevta and debunks the traditional definition of wisdom and bravery ordained by men. Courage is not limited to men. Her act of challenging the Kaaldevta is an act of valour.

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, Varsha Adalja attempts to project women in their own consciousness. Rejecting the gender deception, diligently observed in every community, she further attempts to empower the long suppressed and sharply marginalized women by giving her voice, sovereignty, individuality, altogether her agency. The effort to deconstruct the patriarchal metaphysics recently has accumulated a vast new mass of testimony, of new comprehensions as to what it is to be female”. Mandodari is the perfect combination of, to obey and not to yield. Ravana’s personal rivalry and pride of power is the ultimate cause of the plight of Mandodari still she persuades him not to indulge in war. There is an unemotional detachment between her opinions and her duties.

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**Acknowledgements**

The authors profoundly appreciate all the people who have successfully contributed to ensuring this paper in place. Their contributions are acknowledged however their names cannot be mentioned.

**Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

**How to cite this article:** Patel, K. J. (2023). An Attempt to Reformulate Traditional & Cultural Ethics. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 8(3), 125-130. DIP: 18.02.014/20230803, DOI: 10.25215/2455/0803014