Empowering Girlhood Journeys: Feminist Mythic Revision in Contemporary Indian Diaspora Children's Fiction

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Abstract*— There had been relatively little interest in a narrative of female individuation within mythology. Revisionist myths and legends in contemporary literature have thus addressed issues of women's identity and autonomy while redesigning the gendered spaces in these cultural narratives. The need for alternative mobility arcs within the cultural imaginary was also recognized for adolescent girls in their quest for subjectivity. This paper thus explores two works of children's fiction, viz. Sayantani Dasgupta's Game of Stars(2019) from the Kiranmala and the Kingdom Beyond series and Roshani Chokshi's Aru Shah and the End of Time (2018) as coming-of-age immigrant narratives where young girls undergo heroic adventures restructuring Indian mythology and Bengali folktales. Dasgupta's Kiranmala and the Kingdom Beyond series intertwines intergalactic science and Bengali folktales, mostly from the Thakumar Jhuli (1907), meshing different fairy tale characters aiding the adolescent female protagonist Kiranmala, who is a neoteric gutsy counterpart of the warrior princess in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder's fairy tale collection. At the same time, Roshani Chokshi's Aru Shah fantasy adventure series celebrates the Indian heritage of Hindu mythology (particularly the Mahabharata) in the diaspora, while empowering young immigrant girls to imagine and undertake non-normative feminist voyages.*

Keywords*— feminist revisionist mythmaking, girlhood journeys, diaspora, fairy tales, folktales, children's literature.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The act of feminist revisionist mythmaking as a conscious practice started around the 1970s as the fallout of second wave feminist theory. It is a social, political and literary act to critique and transform the dominant discourses of gender produced/sustained in myths. In many instances of traditional mythology with stories of conquering heroes, the feminine has been traditionally marginalized and/or repudiated in representation. For example, the myth of Perseus's victory and beheading of Medusa who is a maternal deity in Greek mythology is believed to represent the ascendancy of patriarchal society and its concomitant control of women's bodies. Since myth is a cultural touchstone, feminist writers and critics have attempted to critique gender stereotypes within these phallocentric narratives as well as engage with contemporary female experience from a fundamental vantage point. While reading the poetry of Anne Sexton ("Snow White"), Sylvia Plath ("Lady Lazarus") and Margaret Atwood ("Circe") etc, the critic Alicia Ostriker suggests that "revisionist mythmaking in women's poetry may offer us one significant means of redefining ourselves and consequently our culture" (1982, p.71).

Women centered retellings of myth have also been constructed by Indian and Indian diaspora feminist writers like Suniti Namjoshi, Kavita Kane and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Their novels like Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), Suniti Namjoshi's *The Fabulous Feminist* (2012), Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* (2014*)* and *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) have appropriated and reconstructed archetypal female heroines and minor characters from the Indian

epics and diverse folktales, raising questions about normative gender roles and identity.

1.1 GIRLHOOD QUESTS IN FAIRY TALES AND FANTASY LITERATURE

Representations of girlhood and coming-of-age stories in European fairy tales, folk tales and fantasy literature have been largely marked by ideals of passive femininity, due to widespread cultural anxieties about female agency and sexuality. Issues of mobility are a central motif within children's literature. For young boys, the road is a space for heroism, while for girls they are a danger zone. The French fairy tale author Charles Perrault's version of "Little Red Riding Hood" (1697), where a young female protagonist enters the liminal space of the woods, has been narrated as a cautionary tale for other girl children. In this adaptation, Red Riding Hood encounters the Big, Bad Wolf because she had worn a red hood (a symbol of sexual desire), trusted (male) strangers and strayed from her path in the forest. Thus young girls are held morally accountable for their victimization. Laura Hubner cites the woods as the space of "fairy tale ambivalence, where wild woodland can be both threatening and dangerously appealing" for the young female hero (2010, p. 49).Charles Perrault's fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty" also idealizes passivity, beauty and powerlessness of the young heroine, reinforcing their traditional association with femininity. Many classic fairy tales in France, Germany and Ireland are indoctrinated by the trope of the "damsel in distress" waiting to be rescued by the Prince Charming. Likewise, adolescent girlhood journeys in fantasy fiction address the issues of cultural anxiety and female independence. For example, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) describes the young protagonist travelling down the rabbit hole into an alternative surreal world, but feels reassured to finally come back to her secure home. When Dorothy's wild adventure ends in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*(1900),she learns there is nothing like her home in Kansas.

Since the last two decades, feminist writers like Angela Carter(*The Bloody Chamber, 1979*),Margaret Atwood ("Bluebeard's Egg", 1983)and scholars like Christina Bacchilega(*Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies, 1997*) and Marcia K. Lieberman("Some Day My Prince Will Come", 1972) have deconstructed the gender stereotypes and restrictive mobility associated with womanhood/ girlhood. Contemporary children's literature has addressed the cultural norms in epics, fairy tales and folk tales which influence the development of gender identity in children as they grow up. Alternative revisionist myths for children where both heroes and heroines are equally independent are thus being constructed to modify the gender socialization process according to the needs of modernity.

II. EXPLORING BENGALI FOLKTALES, STRING THEORY AND DIASPORIC FEMALE IDENTITY IN SAYANTANI DASGUPTA'S GAME OF STARS

New York Times bestselling children's writer Sayantani Dasgupta's *Game of Stars (2019)* is the second book of the *Kiranmala and the Kingdom Beyond* series. The novel reconstructs the fairy tale narrative of the Indian warrior princess Kiranmala, by inextricably intertwining it with other fantastical characters in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli*('Grandmother's Bag of Tales') collection. Most fairy tales in the *Thakumar Jhuli* collection transmit the gendered values found in the fairy tale narratives of Grimm brothers or Hans Christian Anderson, such as passive princesses in a trance/ deathlike swoon (in 'Ghumantapuri'), active heroic princes and the demonization of powerful women as witches and ogres (in 'Lalkomol Neelkomol'). The story of Kiranmala, on the other hand, reverses some of the gender roles dominating the collection. Even though the narrative starts off by validating normative gender stereotypes where brothers study scriptures and the sister submissively attends to domestic chores, it takes a dramatic turn with the latter's active quest to find her lost brothers. Bansari Mitra writes about this remarkable subversion of the patriarchal discourse surrounding the fairy tale princess; "The passive, sleeping princess enveloped in a deathlike swoon, is capable of action; she takes some responsibility for her life, and often acts on her own, even defying words of caution" (2002,p.38).

In Dasgupta's narrative, the twelve year old Kiranmala is a sixth grade student living in Parsipanny, New Jersey. Her journey into an alternative dimension revisits her Bengali folk tale heritage and her destiny as an immigrant straddling the hybrid cultural space. In fact, the author allegorises the concept of diasporic hybridity through the projection of a multiverse as the setting, where characters effortlessly travel between dimensions (and between cultures). The first book of the Kiranmala series, *The Serpent's Secret*(2018) introduces the girl protagonist living a quiet life in America until her adoptive parents disappear and a ravenous "rakkhosh" demon intrudes into her kitchen. At the same time, Indian princes wishing to rescue her take her through an intergalactic travel space. This magical dimension aptly referred to as the 'Kingdom Beyond Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers' is a fluid subterranean fairy tale space steeped in childhood desire and immigrant nostalgia. It is populated with winged

horses or the 'pakkkhiraj ghora', talking birdslike Bangoma and Bangomee, half-animal siblings like Buddhu and Bhootom , Rakkhoshi Queen and the bloodthirsty "rakkhosh", "khokhosh", "doito", "danav" which fill up the repertoire of Bengali fairy tale and folk tale collection. Kiranmala's heroic quest not only parallels several fantasy coming-of-age fictions like J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, but it also reconfigures several gender stereotypes where the female protagonist slays demons and solves riddles while empathizing with her new world.

Game of Stars proceeds with the subversive narrative of the initial story by humanizing the Rakkhoshi Rani/Rakkhoshi Queen.The Rakkhoshi Rani within the Bengali fairy tale genre takes after the trope of the 'wicked stepmother' in European folklore. Sutapa Chaudhuri examines the dehumanization of the Rakkhoshi Queen in the *Thakumar Jhuli* as a strategy by patriarchal society, which feels threatened by female power and sexuality. According to her:

> The most common supernatural agent in Bengali Rupkatha is the 'Rakshashi', a demonic female who changes her appearance to entice unsuspecting males into marriage, thus integrating herself into human communities and families. The Rakshashi Rani (Demonic Queen) hungers for power and control. This demonic woman is portrayed as the threatening wife who paralyses and stupefies her husband, rules his kingdom and intends to devour the male heir to the throne - she is also depicted as ferocious mother who does not hesitate to destroy her own son in order to fulfil her own desire (Chaudhuri, 2012).

Kiranmala's revisionist quest projects the maternal instincts of the Rakkhoshi Queen who seeks her help to rescue her son Neel from an "underwater fortress" (Dasgupta, 2019, pg. 7) in the "Honey-Gold Ocean of Souls" (Dasgupta,2019, p. 282). According to Carl Jung, water is the most common symbol of the unconscious (pg.40). Thus the female protagonist's journey into the liminal space of an underwater terrain epitomizes her psychic descent into the collective unconscious of myths, to seek alternative hermeneutical possibilities from the normative narrative. Early in the novel, she is swept off her feet by the legendary birds of Bengali folklore, Bangoma and Bangomee, who hurtle her into a "wormhole" of her imagination. Kiranmala experiences the magical feeling of floating in zero gravity space, in an auto rickshaw which traverses the "rip in the fabric of space-time" (Dasgupta, 2019, p.101). The (auto) rickshaw is one of the most pivotal low-cost modes of urban transport in

India, and also a cultural symbol in Bengal. It is no wonder that Kiranmala is thrust into a space of her cultural memory and history through an invigorating rickshaw ride. Quite aptly, she also witnesses the mythical churning of the ocean of milk by gods and demons in space-time to derive the elixir of immortality. This is a reference to the "Samudra-manthan" process, a crucial event referred to in Hindu mythology which is often read as a macrocosmic reflection of the "image of the microcosm, the human consciousness" where "the spirit rises along an inner psychological axis towards enlightenment or release" (Williams, 1992,p. 148). Thus Kiranmala's journey is also an interiorized struggle within her consciousness, where she has to fathom her identity as a woman and as an immigrant.

Concurrently, Kiranmala's quest is about understanding the concept of heroism, which has become the by-product of a patriarchal capitalist society. The novel critiques the commodification of comic superheroes by entertainment franchises which dish out traditional images of muscular superheroes like Superman, Ironman, Spiderman etc. for global consumption. In the novel, she enters a reality game show "Who Wants to be a Demon Slayer" in order to search for Prince Neel. This game merges war and entertainment for mass media consumption. It reminds the reader of the interaction of the global capitalist system and the entertainment market which thrived on the market value of violence in Suzanne Collins' dystopian trilogy *The Hunger Games*. Further, in her heroic mission to rescue the prince, Kiranmala has to contend with verbal riddles and deep seated enigmas like identifying one's true allies and enemies. While she starts off as an advertised demon slayer in her journey towards individuation, she develops an empathy with the "rakkhosh" community who aid her in crisis. As she realises later, much of the vilification and demonization of the community had been driven by racial antagonism within dominant myths of conquest. The narrative also emblematizes the myth of racial integration and assimilation (since Kiranmala herself is an Indian immigrant to the United States) in her climactic last battle with Sesha, her biological father. With the power which dissipates from the yellow and white Chintamoni (Thought stone) and Poroshmoni (Touchstone) jewels, she feels magically uplifted into the liminal space of relativity. She triumphantly declares; "I too was losing my borders and boundaries, I too was becoming one with the others- until the distinctions between us all seemed to dissolve" (Dasgupta, 2019, p. 351). Thus Kiranmala's quest not only revises dominant cultural narratives privileging the politics of gendered spaces, but also helps to blur the boundaries

between hero/monster, human/rakkhosh, black/white and male/female.

III. READING REVISIONIST HINDU MYTHS AND GIRL POWER IN ROSHANI CHOKSHI'S ARU SHAH AND THE END OF TIME

Roshani Chokshi's novel *Aru Shah and the End of Time* (2018) is the first part of a fantasy adventure novel series, commonly known as the Pandava Quintet. It features the eponymous female hero Aru (or Arundhati) as a seventh grade student in Atalanta, America who lives with her single working mother in the Museum of Ancient Indian Art and Culture. As a lonely child, she is desperate to impress her classmates, and resorts to tackle her crisis by bluffing them. However, as the narrative registers, this dubious act is also the pivotal base of storytelling and reveals her imaginative potential. The idea that stories or "mythoi" were an imaginative and hence fallacious construct had been discussed as early as in Plato's *Republic* II, where the philosopher condemns the stories of Homer and Hesiod as the poets are found to speak falsehood like the truth (Brownson, 1897, pg. 6). Chokshi's revisionist myth thus consciously plays with the ideological principles surrounding mythmaking, while suggesting that mythic ambiguities engender altered possibilities of signification. Aru's girlhood journey deconstructs the androcentric assumptions of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata,* where she finds herself to be the reincarnated soul of Arjuna, the third Pandava (brother) mentioned in the original epic. In her reconfigured quest, she is accompanied by another young girl, the germaphobic and acrophobic Mini (or Yamini Kapoor-Mercado-Lopez) and their assistant sidekick Boo (or Subala) who turns out to be their greatest antagonist in the past tale, Shakuni. As a revisionist myth, Shakuni is humanized and projected as a victim of circumstance. Like the 'rakkhosh' community in Dasgupta's novel, the latter narrative redeems the mythological figure of Shakuni and subverts the binaries of good and evil latent in the epic.

Aru Shah starts off as a reluctant quester, who has accidentally lit a cursed lamp of Bharata in the museum where her mother works (and they live). This frees an ancient demon, the Sleeper, who will freeze time for nine days till he reaches Lord Shiva. The latter will perform a cosmic dance of destruction to ultimately wipe out time. Appalled by the prospect of her mother being frozen in time, she journeys to the "Otherworld" with her soul sister, Mini. She paradigmatically crosses the threshold of ordinary life, into the world of imaginative possibilities through an elephant figurine's mouth. She is escorted by her mentor Subala/ Boo to the "Court of the Sky" (Chokshi, 2021, pg. 31) where they meet the "Council of Guardians" to formally begin their quest. Aru and Mini are first verbally examined by the legendary guardians, Urvashi and Hanuman and then further tested by gods, the fathers of the Pandavas. At the "Claiming" which is about finding one's divine identity (Chokshi, 2021, pg. 56), Aru realizes she is the daughter of Indra, king of the heavens (Chokshi,2021, pg. 63) and the reincarnation of Arjuna while Mini is the daughter of Death or Dharma Raja (Chokhi, 2021, pg. 67) having the reincarnated soul of Yuddhistira. Together they voyage to the Kingdom of Death armed with celestial weapons, a golden ball and a small purple compact. They are also aided by magical keys they have searched for, "a sprig of youth", "a bite of adulthood" and "a sip of old age" (Chokshi, 2021, pg. 72). Like Carroll's Alice, they descend through hidden tunnels and corridors, which is emblematic of their feminine journey into the realm of the collective unconscious. In the midst of their travels, Aru and Mini are also assisted by the spirit of the Six Seasons at the "Court of the Ritus" (Chokshi, 2021, pg. 133).They are gifted with a magical diamond bracelet from the spirit of Winter, refreshing cakes from Spring, a gray pendant which can hit any target from Monsoon, and a headband of forgetfulness from Summer. Thus Chokshi's mythic revisionist fiction envisions an eco-feminist journey where the Pandava sisters connect and align themselves with nature.

Chokshi plays with the textual plurality of mythic discourses and challenges the traditional gendered association of heroism where men journey, fight and go on to become heroes. Subala's caustic words refer to the girls as unlikely heroes; "Until now, the Pandavas have always appeared as fully grown people, not squished bundles of hormones and incompetence" (Chokshi, 2021, pg. 25). Unlike their male heroic counterparts, the Pandavas sisters (as Aru and Mini are named) are physically fragile, insecure and unresolved, but also refute ideals of stereotypical femininity like passivity and obedience. The immigrant/ diasporic nature of the girl protagonists evidenced in Aru's Gujrati and Mini's multi-racial background also provide the basis for an inclusive, diverse narrative which diverge from popular discourses of girl power in mainstream literature. Indeed traditional female warrior narratives in Western cultures have been largely represented by white, heterosexual beautiful women(like the American superhero in DC comics, *Wonder Woman*),which marginalize girls who depart from the norm. Aru and Mini's collective quest towards empowerment address these inequalities in popular culture.

Characteristically enough, Aru Shah's journey culminates in her visiting the subterranean fluid realm of

the mythical unconscious or the "pool of the past" (Chokshi, 2021, pg. 273), where she discovers her biological father is Suyodhana/ Sleeper, and her arch-nemesis. When she is confronted by her father in an epic battle, he persuades her to join him, the masculine figure of authority who promises power and fame to the heroine. This plot mechanism is startlingly similar to Dasgupta's *Game of Stars*, where Kiranmala battles her biological father, the serpent king Sesha as her antagonist. Both the young female protagonists thus fight against the oppressive paternal function, contesting the Law of the Father[1] within mythological discourse. In their journey towards the formation of their distinctive, individual identities, they interrogate and resist patriarchal metanarratives and hegemonic centers of knowledge for alternative liberating experiences. Simultaneously, they also celebrate their mother-daughter relationship and their maternal lineage, restoring the lost feminine within mythmaking.

IV.   CONCLUSION

Steeped in Indian mythology, fairy tales and folklore, Chokshi and Dasgupta's immigrant fantasy fictions are stories of the diasporic community connecting with their "imaginary homelands"[2]. Kiranmala and Arundhati's journeys acknowledge their diasporic tensions and go on to assert their multi-cultural Indian-American hyphenated identities. They navigate multi-racial and cross-cultural relationships, symbolically projected through their part supernatural crushes and celebrate ethnic differences which epitomize the structure of contemporary cosmopolitan, global societies. At the same time, their migrant consciousness is also inflected by the politics of gender. Thus, Dasgupta and Chokshi's revisionist mythic fictions seek to eschew hegemonic masculinity and reconstruct new identities from the margins of the mythological tradition.

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[10] In a series of lectures offered in 1950s, Jacques Lacan had noted that there were three major structures of the psyche, i.e. the "Symbolic", 'Real' and the "Imaginary" guiding subject formation or the psychosexual development of the individual. (*Psychoanalysis: A Very Short Introduction* by Daniel Pick, 89-90.) According to Lacan, the Symbolic Order is governed by one's acceptance of the Law-of-the-Father, setting social rules which regulates desire (pertaining to the Oedipus Complex) and which is irretrievably driven by the play of language.

[11] Salman Rushdie wrote a collection of essays titled the *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) which describes an immigrant's sense of loss and nostalgia for an idealised space (home) of no return.