

Racist Aesthetics and Slave Women's Resistance: A Study of Kevin Missal's Durga

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Abstract

Kevin Missal is a promising Indian mythology novelist who is writing in English. Missal's Durga is the first part of his planned Devi duology. The novel takes the major characters and subject from the Devi Mahatmya - consists of chapters 81–93 - of Markandeya Purana, one of the eighteen major Puranas of Hinduism. The narrative is based on the popular myth of the Nine Nights battle between Durga and Mahishasura, ending with Mahishasura's death. The novel doesn't incline to recreate the myth, but rather it addresses the issues of crime and oppression of women. The chief narrative revolves around Durga and Mahishasura's conflict. Some mini-narratives are craftily intertwined with the main narrative. Gauri's revolt against Mahishasura's devilish empire is one of them. This paper aligns with Mary Wollstonecraft's statement "Many are the causes that, in the ... corrupt state of society, contribute to enslave women by cramping their understandings and sharpening their senses" (510). The paper examines the causes prevalent in the corrupt society of Mahishasura's kingdom, which Missal has effectively used as a symbol of the present society. The chief objective of this paper is to present how Missal has inverted racist aesthetics through the mini-narrative of Gauri, and how a spark of hope from the ashes of fear cultivates a sense of sisterhood among slave women. Gauri's mini-narrative is analysed to decode the archetypal motif of the oppressed rebelling against their oppressors.

Keywords: Racist aesthetics, slavery, myth, archetype, mini-narrative, and analepsis.

Introduction

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत ।

अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ।

[When adharma is dominant in society and dharma becomes fragile, God will come to restore dharma and eradicate evil.] (Bhagavad Gita, ch. 4, verse 7)

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Numerous narratives have been formed deploying this mythological archetypal structure. All the avatar myths of Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma, Shakti etc. replicate this archetypal motif. It resembles what Northrop Frye calls “Myths of the birth of the hero, of revival and resurrection, of creation and ... of the defeat of the powers of darkness, winter and death” (1258). The anatomy of avatar myths presents a structure in which an avatar is shown restoring dharma by ending the extremity of devilish power exercised on people by a demon blessed with some invincible powers. The demon dethrones Indra, the king of Devas, and represents himself as a new supreme power. The rise and expansion of devilish power leave little space for Devas to survive and follow spirituality. Devas do not lose hope. They have faith in avatar philosophy. A God’s avatar comes to rescue them, kills the demon, and restores dharma in the world. Durga and Mahishasur's myth replicate this mythological archetypal structure which Missal uses to frame the surface narrative of the novel.

Durga and Mahishasur Myth

Durga is not a character, but a spirit – a spirit that fights for dignity, right, and dharma. Durga is a metaphor that represents the courage and boldness of a woman. In Hindu mythology, there are nine forms of Durga. Each form is worshipped on nine different days of Navratri. The nine forms of the goddess Durga are:

1. Shailaputri: Means "Daughter of Mountain"
2. Brahmacharini: Means "Mother of devotion and penance"
3. Chandraghanta: Means "Destroyer of demons"
4. Kushmanda: Means "Goddess of The Cosmic Egg"
5. Skandamata: Means "Goddess of motherhood and children"
6. Katyayani: Means "Goddess of Power"
7. Kalaratri: Means "Goddess of Auspiciousness and Courage"
8. Mahagauri: One of the nine forms of Durga
9. Siddhidatri: One of the nine forms of Durga

The nine forms of Durga are named differently in the novel.

The Nine Forms Character in the Novel

Shailaputri	Shaila
Brahmacharini	Charini
Chandraghanta	Chandra
Kushmanda	Khushi
Skandamata	Mata
Katyayani	Katya
Kalaratri	Airavati
Mahagauri	Gauri
Siddhidatri	Tabita

Since this paper analyses Gauri's character and her mini-narrative, the other eight characters representing the different forms of Durga are excluded from the range of the study.

Mahagauri is the eighth form of the Hindu goddess Durga, worshipped on the eighth day of Navratri. She is honoured as the embodiment of purity, serenity, wisdom, and spiritual enlightenment. The name Mahagauri translates to "extremely white," and she is typically depicted wearing a white saree and riding a bull.

In Hindu mythology, Mahagauri achieved her fair complexion after undergoing intense penance to please Lord Shiva. On the contrary, to tease her Shiva called her Kali, as she had dark complexion. Agitated by Shiva's teasing Parvati went on another penance, this time to please Brahma to get a fair complexion. Pleased with Parvati's penance, Brahma appeared but explained his inability to grant her the boon; instead, he requested her to end her penance and kill the two asura brothers Shumbha and Nishumbha. When she stepped into the Ganga to take a bath before going after the two asuras, her dark skin was washed off. She got a beautiful golden skin, which gave her the epithet Mahagauri. This story represents the journey from darkness to light.

Racial Aesthetics

Racial aesthetics is not universal, but a socially constructed practice which legitimates the suppression and exploitation of those who are identified as others based on their colour, belief,

profession, and social and cultural practices. Inspired by the Mahagauri mythology, Kevin Missal dexterously created the character of Gauri and put her in a war with racial aesthetics and discourse. Gauri's character is endowed with Mahagauri's iconic qualities, such as purity, serenity, wisdom, and spiritual enlightenment, but has abnormal skin. She is often embarrassed because of her skin colour "it was the way she was born. Extremely white and wide glittering red eyes. She was called a natural-born monster by the kids" (Missal 29).

Analepsis seems to be Missal's favourite narrative technique. The story is set in 1450 BCE when all the Durgas are in their twenties. To narrate the cause of their joining the mission Nine Night Missal uses analepsis to recount the past of the protagonists. Gauri's mini-narrative also lurches between her past and present. The analepsis of Gauri's mini-narrative shows Gauri's childhood. Gauri is an eight-year-old orphan who has joined a gang of thieves led by Shashtri, another orphan. She is the only girl in the group. She performs better than Shastri in the missions, which makes her favourite among many gang members. Her growing popularity makes Shashtri insecure. He creates racial aesthetics to tame Gauri and denigrate her. "Shashtri soon realized that she was doing better than him and his friends had begun to like her. So Shastri turned her and belittled her for her uncommon skin colour, he made her feel small, and relentlessly bullied her, because he was an insecure little brat" (82-83). She believes the only disadvantage she has is her skin colour for which she is always positioned outside the mainstream: "She was a ghost, they said. She was white like a ghost" (29). Gauri is conscious that she is living in a world of others. People like Shastri, have created a discourse to enslave her in the racist wilderness of society. Gauri's childhood experiences turn her into a rebel.

Gauri joins the mission Nine Night. She becomes a servant in Mahishasur's palace since it is a part of her mission. She is assigned to wipe Mahishasur's room, clean his clothes, sweep the floors and cook for the ministers and palace soldiers. She also assists Shukr, the head priest, in the daily chores. Gauri, a slave with abnormal skin colour, becomes an easy target of racial exploitation. She precisely describes female slave identity: "We are servants. We can't have an independent life. We do what others tell us to do. But the most important thing is, we can't do what we want to do" (201). This identity obliteration is made possible by the systematic enslaving of all female slaves. The "reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order" (Althusser 1287)

Female Slave Identity and Power Hierarchy

Slave aestheticism on the one hand empowers masters and on the other hand leaves victims pregnable. The emissary meeting scene is a testimony to this racist wilderness. Shukr organizes a meeting with envoys to establish a strong international relationship, especially with the Pharaoh. Gauri, along with Airavati, was serving the guests. Dhat Lapis, the Pharaoh emissary, notices Gauri and stares at her. After the meeting, he comes to her and shows interest in sleeping with her, as he thinks that sleeping with a diseased slave girl would be a different experience: "I would love to bed you, girl. A diseased woman will be different for me tonight. I have always been with fit women" (36). Lapis dares to touch her and licks her hand with his serpentine tongue. Gauri finds herself in an embarrassing and helpless situation. She wants to cry, but she knows it will not help her because nobody will come to rescue her. A master enjoying a slave girl is a common and acceptable practice since a slave woman is considered as property. Crypto-racial ideology has systematically excluded slave women, like Gauri, from the category of free women who possess social dignity and sexual honour.

It is the sense of fear and suppressed anger that unites Gauri and the other slave women. Being slaves, they are treated as objects. They are not allowed to do what they want; rather, they always receive instructions. Their silence in the face of bullying normalizes this behaviour. Gauri states, "You know, this ...this bullying towards us has become so normal that we rationalize it and feel lucky that we are here. But it's not true" (203). Gauri raises the fellow female slaves' consciousness and invites them to join her in her mission and "to start fighting for what we believe in. For what we deserve" (130) so that they can get their freedom from Mahisha's tyranny, which symbolizes the cornerstones of racism:

What do you think we are? We are cattle for these men.... We do what they want while they rule over us and we let it happen. We just keep letting it happen because we think we deserve it. But no ... We don't deserve hatred and the system of oppression that we are subjected to ... it is easy to stay quiet, but difficult to stay silent for me (129).

Gauri is set to expose Mahisha's crypto-religious and social ideologies which are created to subjugate people. Oppressive policies and corrupt religious practices necessitate reform.

Missal does not claim to retell the Mahishasura Mardani myth. Instead, he embroiders some contemporary events on the mythical narrative. Gauri's mission of religious reform and "to do everything that would result in complete and absolute disarray when it came to Mahisha's religious order" (79) resemble some contemporary racial issues. She commences her mission

by exposing “Doodh Abhishek” vices. Shukr has set some religious rituals and practices to establish Mahishasur’s identity as a god:

Shukr had created a wonderful system. He had made long, bronze statues of Mahisha around the city where people could go and pray to him... He spread rumours amongst the people that Mahisha was a god and his powers came from Lord Brahma – that he was undefeatable (79).

People believe that they have a walking god amongst them. They exercise all the rituals set by Shukr to appease their god, Mahisha. One of the rituals is ‘Dood Abhishek’. Civilians pour milk at the feet of Mahisha’s fifty-foot-tall statue to attain his blessing. The milk civilians offer is stored and sold in the market at a high price. Gauri is aware of this corruption, and she unveils it in public, standing at the feet of Mahisha’s statue: “The milk you waste is the very milk they sell back to you for more money. This doesn’t give any goodwill to Mahisha” (85). Gauri is imprisoned for violating the Doodh Abhishek ritual but succeeds in raising people’s consciousness.

The Sabarimala Temple case 2018 in Kerala is a contemporary issue closely related to Gauri’s final blow to Mahisha’s religious order which prohibits women’s entry into the temple “which Shukr often used to live in where the female slaves weren’t allowed. In fact, no women were” (33). Gauri, along with Aravati, Mata, and her entire band of women slaves attacks the temple and breaks Mahisha’s statue, which symbolizes the eradication of Mahisha’s religious order.

Conclusion

“Gender inequality and religious inequality are both underpinned by deeply systemic power hierarchies” (Tadros and Shutt 4). Whereas, racial aesthetics is a by-product of gender, religious, and social inequality. Victims of racism are at the bottom of the power pyramid. The structure of the power hierarchy is dependent not on the racist ideology or aesthetics, but on the silent submission of the persons who are at the bottom of the pyramid. Gauri and the other female slaves have endured their suppression silently for a long being at the bottom of Mahisha’s power hierarchy pyramid. Gauri knows all the female slaves are walking volcanos, their eruption can burn down everything which strengthens racial ideology and aesthetics. She ignites their spirit of revolt and gains their support for her mission. They formed a symbiotic relationship. Gauri’s act of violating the Doodh Abhishek ritual, rescuing Om, burning the farm, and breaking into the forbidden temple comes as a blow to Mahisha’s social and religious power structure.

The state of female slave is often considered as a negation of free woman. However, they both are on a common ground in terms of dichotomous practices against women. Gauri's mini-narrative exemplifies the freedom struggle of female slaves and their fight against racial aesthetics. "Indian society celebrates womanhood through its stories, epics, rituals, and festivals like Navratri and Durga Puja, often attributing divine qualities to women. Still together with these celebrations, cultural practices rooted in inequality, marginalization, and servitude continues" (Kaur, 309). Missal through the myth of Mahishasur's assassination loads that Durga is not a person or goddess. Durga is an idiosyncrasy with which every woman is endowed. A woman is Lakshmi, Saraswati, Sita, and Savitri for those who respect women, but they are Durga and Kaali for Mahishasurs.

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