



A Comparative Analysis of Shatparvika and Shaivali: A Modern Feminist Perspective

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1. Abstract

This research focuses on a feminist study of two modern Sanskrit works: "Shatparvika" (1988), one of the stories from the book "Ikshugandha" by Dr. Abhiraj Rajendra Mishra and "Shaivali" (2004) by Tarapada Bhattacharya. The research examines how these stories depict the social conditions and struggles of women in a contemporary context. "Ikshugandha" is a collection of short stories that offer moral messages and happy endings, one of which is my story of focus, Shatparvika. It is the story of a common man and his wife who, on the hopes of having a son, end up having seven daughters. The narrative hopes to inculcate the importance of having a girl child as a means to reduce female infanticide. "Shaivali" is a standalone story from the collection "Katha dwadashah" that conveys a very sad social message. The study aims to provide a critical analysis of these narratives, compare the authors' writing styles, and determine the relevance of their themes in the modern world. The research also delves into feminist writings from other languages, then and now, and compares them.

Keywords: Modern Sanskrit Literature, qualitative analysis, comparative analysis, historical and contemporary analysis

¹ Shukla, Hira Lal. *Modern Sanskrit Literature*. 2002.

2. Introduction

Sanskrit Literature is divided broadly into three categories. First comes the Vedic literature, then the Classical Literature and finally the Modern Literature. The period of Modern Sanskrit literature began with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (ASB) by William Jones in 1784 and lasted till 1919. The ASB was responsible for salvaging invaluable manuscripts and for inaugurating new fields of research and translation in Sanskrit. The literature from this time period was deemed modern as it involved modern and contemporary themes and narratives. It also invited global literary trends of novels, novellas, Haikus, etc., to the Indian subcontinent. It was an extremely glorious time in the history of Sanskrit Literature and witnessed a renaissance of dimensions. To understand Modern Sanskrit Literature, I first sought to understand the meaning of “modern” and found resonance in the definition given by Hiralal Shukla¹ “Modernity contains a revolt for the past and a strong fascination for the present”. Modern Sanskrit Literature saw, not only the re-emergence of notable Sanskrit works but also, the emergence of new authors with contemporary ideas. The issues of patriarchy, independence, patriotism, sexism, and so much more found voice through Modern Sanskrit Literature. It also saw the emergence of notable female authors like Dr. Roma Choudhary, Dr Pushpa Dikshit, Dr. Meera Dwivedi, Dr. Kamalaratnam and so on. This period (1784-1919) portrayed the transition from ancient proverbs to modern social messages and was not just a timeline, but a spiritual and intellectual rebirth of the feminine voice in Sanskrit. Works like Ikshugandha by Dr. Abhiraj Rajendra Mishra, Shaivalli by Tarapada Bhattacharya, Nagara-Nupuram by Dr. Roma Choudhary and Sushila by Chintaharan Chakraborty finally provided the centre stage for women and the multifaceted nature of the prejudice and bias they face.

3. Methodology

This is primarily a qualitative and comparative study, as its objective is to analyse particular stories, their language, their contemporary relevance, and compare them with other writings in the same genre. Furthermore, this research will utilise a historical and descriptive approach to study the stories and their generated reaction in the public.

4. Objectives of the research

This study aims to understand the object of feminist writings in the era of modern Sanskrit literature and their significance in society. After this research study, I aspire to uncover how modern Sanskrit authors tried to shed light on issues of sexism prevalent in society and the methods they used for the same. It will also portray the relevance and importance of these stories even today. Additionally, the Modern Sanskrit era enabled a revival of the Sanskrit language and literature, and I hope to unveil that aspect as well.

5. The Plot Of ShatparvikA And Shaivalli

ShatparvikA is one of the short stories from the book “Ikshugandha” written by Dr. Abhiraj Rajendra Mishra and published in the year 1988. Ikshugandha contains seven women-centric stories namely Jijīviṣā, Sukhaśayitaprcchikā, Anāmikā, Ekahāyanī, Śataparvikā, Bhagnapañjara, And Ikṣugandhā. All the stories portray different aspects of struggle faced by women and have a happy ending. Śataparvikā is the story of a common man and his wife who, on the hopes of having a son, end up having seven daughters namely, RamA, ShyAmA, ShyAmalA, VimalA, AmalA, AchalA and KamalA. When he couldn't have a son of his own, he adopts a boy. The narrative progresses with the father cursing his daughters and his wife everyday and asking God the reason for sparing him the happiness of bearing a son instead of a daughter. However, despite the societal conventions and her father's prejudice, the eldest daughter, RamA, wins him over. She makes him realise his faults and finally love his children despite their gender. Shaivalli, however, follows an entirely different narrative. It is the story of a girl named Shaivalli who was tormented throughout her life by her parents because of her dark skin and perceived unattractiveness. She faced taunts like “who will marry you? We don't have any dowry for you? Who can ever love a girl like you?” These jeers followed her everywhere. Despite her parents' mockery, Shaivalli eventually marries and found happiness with her husband. Yet, the story doesn't end there. Her mother, suspicious of Shaivalli's easy happiness, warns her to be cautious, believing her husband couldn't truly love someone as unattractive as Shaivalli. Paranoia engulfs her, and she worked even harder to be a devoted wife. One day, her husband returned from work with beautiful white ChandramallikA flowers for the evening pooja, while she had already placed black Aparajita flowers. She carefully set the ChandramallikA flowers beside the Aparajita ones, but anxiety overtook her. She believed her husband had chosen a fairer maiden like the ChandramallikA flower and replaced her. Over time, her anxiety worsens, and she falls ill, ultimately imagining her husband with a perfect, white woman like the ChandramallikA and welcomes death.

6. Analysis

Both stories depict different evils of patriarchy. In ShatparvikA, RAmalAla's arrogance diminishes her daughters based on gender, whereas in Shaivalli, a woman's societal status is reduced to her external appearance. The only way a woman can earn respect in society is either through wealth or her looks. Gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in society, and discrimination seems normal. Stories like Shaivalli and ShatparvikA expose the reality of our society through diverse narratives. Where the daughters refuse to accept their father's discrimination and create their own happy endings, Shaivalli is consumed by the surrounding evil. The difference in agency between ShatparvikA and Shaivalli mainly lies in the source and direction of their transformation. While ShatparvikA focuses on the internal realisation of male authority, Shaivalli highlights the resilience and independent moral compass of the female protagonist.

While both stories shed light on the stigmas associated with having a girl-child and bias faced by women, they approach distinct issues in a varied manner. In ShatparvikA, although the daughters are faced with their father's vehement hatred, they are loved by their mother. Conversely, to RAmalAla's anger, his daughters grow up to love and nurture those around them. However, both of her parents shame her in her own home. She feels so ostracised from society that she comes to believe she is incapable of love. RamA is a headstrong young woman. Despite knowing her father's disapproval, she still takes care of him thinking, “पाषाणेऽपि

राजतेऽग्निः। अस्मत् पितुर्मानसेऽपि वात्सल्येनावश्यमेव भवितव्यम्। तदहं प्रकटीकरिष्यामि” i.e., “*there is fire even in stone. Our father’s heart also should definitely have kindness. I will bring that forward.*” Whereas Shaivalli is a naïve and the victim of rigorous gaslighting. She is a simple and kind village girl who just aspires to live a quiet life full of love. She never takes her own stand and is prone to depression since the beginning. Where RamA doesn’t lose herself amidst her father’s hatred, Shaivalli does. Both stories move linearly, giving insight into each character.

What shaivalli undergoes in her own home by her parents is mental abuse. We see how her perspective shifts with the advent of time. An innocent little girl grows into someone ashamed by her own reflection. There’s a scene where we see her secretly looking at her reflection smilingly and her mother interrupts, asking if she (Shaivalli) doubts her mother’s opinions, “नासमासु विश्वासः”. It’s absolutely disheartening to see that Shaivalli’s mother doesn’t leave any opportunity to remind her daughter of her ugliness. Tarapada Bhattacharya here has portrayed parents in a very abysmal yet real light. Indian society and its culture have always provided parents with a pedestal and a moral high ground. Especially Indian society treats parents equivalent to God and in a praise-worthy position, “मातृदेवो भव । पितृदेवो भव” But we really come to question this stance in Shaivalli. We see Shaivalli’s mother criticizing her daughter solely because of her looks and instigates suspicion in her mind upon witnessing her happy married life “पुरुषास्ते, विश्वास मा कुरु”. Shaivalli falls prey to this ill-advice as she has been misled into believing herself to be incapable of unconditional love.

Through these stories, we also gain insight into the societal attitudes towards women. Shatparvika and Shaivalli focus on different issues faced by women in that time and era. RamA was a father who simply desired a son rather than a daughter and constantly dwelled on the thought, “ममैव भालपट्टे कथमिमा लिखिताः? पुत्रमेकं कामये। सप्तसंख्याका इमे जाताः। केन याचताः?” His distress causes unease in readers when it extends beyond an unfulfilled desire to contemplating death for his daughters, as he wonders, “मृत्युचीत्कृत्य इव नक्तन्दिव मां परितः कथमेताः क्रीडन्ति? कथं न म्रियन्ते? किमर्थं सर्वा अक्षता जीवन्ति?” One questions how a father could wish death upon his own children solely because of their gender. This becomes all the more heartbreaking when we realise these stories reflect the reality of society at that time. In fact, gender determination before birth (prenatal sex determination) was banned in India in 1994 mainly to halt widespread female foeticide and curb the steep decline in the child sex ratio. Statistics showed a worrying decrease in the number of girls relative to boys (e.g., from 945 girls per 1000 boys in 1991 to 914 in 2011), leading to legal action. Recently, a female foeticide racket was uncovered in the Mandya district of Karnataka². There is no doubt that the prejudice persists.

In the Shatparvika, Soubhagyawati is equally to blame. Instead of standing strong with her daughters, she opts to be the silent bystander. It is rightly said that “Silence in the face of injustice is its loudest ally”. The mothers’ position is also one of the stark differences in the two stories. Mothers have always been given the higher status than father across cultures. Yet we find disappointment in the actions of both the mothers. While Shaivalli’s mother openly

² Bureau, The Hindu. “Yet Another Female Foeticide Racket Unearthed in Mandya, This Time in Staff Quarters of Govt. Hospital.” *The Hindu*, 17 May 2024, www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/yet-another-female-foeticide-racket-unearthed-in-mandya-this-time-in-staff-quarters-of-govt-hospital/article68187291.ece.

Accessed 6 Apr. 2026.

dislikes and condemns her, Soubhagywati doesn't dislike her daughters. The former verbally tortures her daughter and the latter stays silent. However, this doesn't change the status of her daughters compared to Shaivalli.

An important detail emerges in both stories: the significance of names. While society often wonders, "What's in a name?" Indian culture has always attached great importance to them. Since the dawn of Indian civilization, names are chosen with care and purpose, never randomly assigned. This is evident in the stories of ShatparvikA and Shaivalli. "ShatparvikA" refers to a particular type of grass that symbolizes positivity and auspiciousness. It grows independently yet brings good luck to those who possess it. At the story's end, RAMalAla apologizes to his daughters and calls them his "ShatparvikA," directly tying the title to the plot. In contrast, "Shaivalli" means "moss," a slimy organism that grows in darkness without love or nourishment. The hatred and disgust Shaivalli's parents feel for their daughter is reflected in the very name they give her. From the beginning, Shaivalli is the victim of this hostility, which ultimately destroys her sense of self-worth and happiness.

6.1 Importance of Stories in Society

Both Abhiraj Rajendra Mishra and Tarapada Bhattacharya take the help of stories to bring forth the persistent social evils and to inspire change. Stories are fundamental to society, acting as powerful tools for connection, cultural transmission, and shaping identity. They influence behavior, catalyse social change, and build community by fostering empathy and shared values. By mirroring human thought and creating shared narratives, stories facilitate large-scale cooperation and drive action. In a recent interview of one of the most famous authors of the world, Yuval Noah Harari, he says about his new book that³ "Stories are the greatest human invention. People need stories in order to cooperate". In the foreword to the book *Katha Dwadashah* by Professor Ramaranjan Mukherjee, he writes about the power of suggestion and denotation of stories. While stories are usually very concise, people seldom understand its broader significance. He rightly says that⁴ :

"The Short Story is necessarily to be marked by preponderant employment of the Function of Suggestion, which, naturally, is intended to bring into light several tiers of meaning. As a result of this employment of the Function of Suggestion, the Short Story does not express through Denotation whatever is intended to be presented by the artist, but leaves many things unsaid, enabling the mind of the connoisseur to interpret it in whatever way he likes".

³

Indian culture and tradition and taken the help of stories since time immemorial to impart wisdom. Some of the most famous examples include the Panchatantra and the Hitopadesha among many others. ShatparvikA and Shaivalli too take the help of power of narration to spread awareness regarding the existing evils of sexism in society. However, both the stories take very different routes. While ShatparvikA provides a happy ending for everyone, Shaivalli opts for a more realistic take by ending the story with the protagonist's death. Shaivalli's death at the end symbolises that in reality, not every woman gets her happy ending and often suffer perpetual

³ Gallo, Carmine. "The Power of Storytellers to Shape Our World." *Forbes*, 17 Mar. 2024, www.forbes.com/sites/carminegallo/2024/03/17/the-power-of-storytellers-to-shape-our-world/.

⁴ Bhattacharya, Tarapada. *Katha Dwadasha*. Sanskrit Sahitya Parishad, Dr. Smt. Ruma Bandyopadhyay, 2004.

misery. It makes the reader feeling uneasy but provokes us to understand the depth of the problem.

7. Conclusion

Modern Sanskrit literature, as exemplified by ShatparvikA and Shaivalli, serves as a powerful medium for critiquing the deep-seated evils of patriarchy. By contrasting the resilient agency of RamA in ShatparvikA with the tragic, internalized oppression of Shaivalli, these narratives highlight how societal prejudices regarding gender and appearance can either be overcome through internal realization or lead to perpetual misery. Ultimately, these stories move beyond mere entertainment, they act as a spiritual and intellectual rebirth that mirrors contemporary social struggles, provoking reading to confront the enduring realities of sexism and the vital importance of the feminine voice in literature.

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