

Defining Manhood: A Study of Ramamoorthi's *Hey Parashuram*

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Abstract: Often, we ponder over issues like what makes a man or a woman. But we have never come up with answers that offer us a total sense of satisfaction. Ramamoorthi makes a great attempt through this play in redefining manhood. Often, most writers are obsessed with the idea of redefining womanhood and get carried away by the concept of the new liberated woman. But, Ramamoorthi's case is different. He goes a step ahead. He clearly illustrates that man is incomplete without the feminine in him through the myth of Parashuram.

Keywords: Yin, yang, womanhood, feminine, patriarchal, mythopoeic

Manhood refers to the state of being a man. Generally, this is associated with valour, rational thinking, and determination. Womanhood is generally defined as the state of being a woman and this in turn is associated with docility, obsequiousness, empathy, and infinite patience. This brings us to the concept of female, feminine, and feminist. While the word *female* is related to biological aspects, *feminine* concerns itself more with sociological and *feminist* with political aspects. The focus of this paper is to discuss the feminine phase that not only goes towards making a woman but also a true man. **Hey Parashuram** by Parashuram Ramamoorthi is a recreation of the Parashuram myth interspersed with episodes from **The Mahabharata**.

The play is divided into twelve scenes and Ramamoorthi employs dramatic techniques like the use of the *vidhushaka* (comedian) and musicians. The *puranic* story is narrated by the vidhushaka, while Parashuram narrates the mythopoeic version. According to the Puranas, Parashuram is extolled as an ideal son, a *suputra*, who, at his father's bidding, cuts off his mother's head. But here, although the incidents are the same, the reasons attributed to the characters' actions are different. When Jamadagni asks Parashuram to sever Renuka's head, he is depicted more as an authoritative patriarch for whom the woman is no more than a maid who takes care of the household and the children.

Parashuram: Father, I will definitely obey you. Is this what you want me to do?

Jamadagni: Yes. Kill her.

Parashuram: I shall. But tell me why.

Jamadagni: She betrayed her god.

Parashuram: She does not even know that word betrayal, father.

Jamadagni: She betrayed me.

Parashuram: Father, please don't accuse her like that.

- Jamadagni: She betrayed me. I gave her four sons. She betrayed me.
 Parashuram: Father, tell me what happened.
 Jamadagni: I don't want to tell you anything. Just kill her. That is all. (Sc. 2: 17-30)

Finally, Parashuram relents to his father's wish only because his mother has instructed him to do what his father asks him to do. Ramamoorthi begins to weave his mythopoeic version with Parashuram's soliloquy. According to him, his mother was his teacher who taught him to cook and to sing. But he has no choice but to obey Jamadagni. When Parashuram finally traces his way to Renuka, he finds her surrounded by tribal women. He is all the more astonished when one of the tribal women protects her and even defends her action. She states that Renuka was sexually aroused on seeing a *Gandharva* and that it was only a passing fancy. Further, she blames Jamadagni for Renuka's action.

I Woman: Your father does not know that Renuka has a body as well. He forgot she exists in flesh and blood. He has turned her into a servant. 'Fetch water.' 'Get me flowers.' 'Cook for me.' That is all. She has no other existence. But her body is alive. Look at her. She is still fresh as a flower and in full bloom. One who does not care for her body has no right to expect her to be faithful to him. (Sc. 2: 107-116)

For the first time, Parashuram realizes the true significance of a woman. The tribal woman becomes his 'teacher' in the true sense because she tells him how the body is very important and needs to be taken care of. At the same time, moral values such as chastity that society swears by are matters pertaining merely to the mind.

Renuka, however, unlike the tribal woman, is a person of few words. When Parashuram asks her why Jamadagni told him to kill her, she in turn asks him.

Renuka: If I tell you what happened and if you feel that I am right, then will you disobey your father? Not kill me? (Sc2: 55-57)

Parashuram is tongue-tied as Renuka's question raises a vital issue: Does a person act according to his conscience or according to the instructions of his parents or guru? Finally he follows his mother's instructions and kills her along with the tribal woman who tries to protect her.

The revival of Renuka brings along with it a major transition from wife/mother to goddess. Parashuram is wonderstruck by the fact that although he is unable to restore the tribal woman to life, the other tribal women are hardly incensed. They see the goddess in Renuka and call her 'Yellamma!' Renuka however refuses to have anything to do with her past life and tells Parashuram to stay away from her. Ramamoorthi's mythopoeic narration also brings to our awareness the fact that the patriarchal world sees Yellamma only as the goddess of *devadasis* or prostitutes. It is but apparent that generally there is no room in androcentric myths for the 'rebel' woman.

Edward C. Whitmont sums up this idea in his book **Return of the Goddess**:

The devaluation of femininity is an intrinsic feature of the dominant culture during the epoch of patriarchal ego development. Women have been regarded as second-rate human beings at best, and often as something less than human. Owing to its religious nature, this devaluation has characterized woman's own self-image as strongly as it has men's views of her. And women have been as guilty of repressing their own feminine nature as men have been or repressing the feminine component of their psyches. To see the problem only in sociological terms would miss the core of the issue. (122)

Parashuram realizes the true significance of womanhood after his encounter with Renuka and the tribal woman. To crown it all, Renuka blesses him with womanhood so that he can feel like a woman and be both male and female. While a hermaphrodite is generally a subject of curiosity and ridicule, Ramamoorthi reinforces the concept of yin and yang through the hermaphrodite sage-warrior Parashuram whose transformation is not merely biological, but also psychological. Joseph Campbell describes this concept vividly in his **Myths to Live by**.

Yang is of the sunny side; yin, the shady. On the sunny side there is light, there is warmth, and the heat of the sun is dry. In the shade, there is the cool ...and the earth is moist. Dark, cold, and moist; light, hot, and dry; earth and sun in counteraction. These are associated, further with the female and the male as the passive and active principles. There is no moral verdict here intended; neither principle is "better" than the other, neither "stronger" than the other. They are the two equally potent grounding principles on which all the world rests, and in their interaction they inform, constitute, and decompose all things. (119)

As mentioned above, yang is associated with men and yin, with women. But most writers and philosophers fail to see the union of the two and describe these 'qualities' as purely masculine or feminine. But Ramamoorthi clearly emphasises that it is this union of the man and woman in Parashuram that makes him a good human being who is able to perceive the problems and difficulties of both men and women. Unlike most patriarchs who enrol only male pupils in their *gurukula*, Parashuram sees no gender bias and in his ashram, Amba receives education with Devavrath (Bhisma) and Salva. The pivotal point of Parashuram's education is to fuse the *Agni* and the *Ganga* or the yang and the yin in them. Agni is associated with masculinity and symbolizes strength and energy, while Ganga symbolizes creativity and love, an important aspect of femininity. This is again reminiscent of Carl Jung's concept of the *anima* and the *animus*. But Jung's anima is more submissive and obsequious unlike its yin counterpart that claims equal significance.

The What is not-I, not masculine is most probably feminine, and because the 'not-I' is felt as not belonging to me and therefore as outside me, the anima-image is usually projected upon

women...biologically speaking, it is simply the greater number of masculine genes that tips the scales in favour of masculinity. The smaller number of feminine genes seems to form a feminine character, which usually remains unconscious because of its subordinate position. (27-28)

At first one sees a perfect fusion of Agni and Ganga in Amba when he indulges in rational debates and dances rhythmically. But, when Devavrat carries her and her sisters away from the *swayamvara* to become Vichitra Veeriya's brides, matters take a turn. Spurned by Salva on account of being won by another man, and rejected by Devavrat on account of his vow, Amba unleashes the Agni in her and marches angrily to Parashuram's ashram to decide on the next course of action. According to **The Mahabharata**, Parashuram was ready to fight for Amba, but was checked due to divine intervention. Here, Parashuram makes no attempt to defend Amba who is in an utterly confused state of mind, but merely asks her to strike a balance between the Agni and the Ganga in her. He senses Agni seething and boiling in Amba and advises her to cool down. But Amba is in no mood to listen.

Amba: But what about my humiliation? Salva says he cannot marry me, because I am the prize of Devavrat. Devavrat says that he is a Brahmachari. What should I do? Sit and pine and cry.

Parashu: Peace. Peace be with you.

Amba: My blood boils. You are asking me to be peaceful. I want to marry Devavrat. (Sc. 8: 54-61)

In spite of Parashuram's attempts to reason with her, Amba marches out angrily vowing to kill Devavrat and ultimately puts an end to her precious life in the present *janma* by engulfing it in flames.

The story of Karna is another episode that provides food for our thought in the play. *The Shanti Parva*, which forms Book Twelve of **The Mahabharata**, clearly describes the attempts on Karna's part to gain mastery over weapons, particularly the various astras, in order to quell Arjuna in battle. Knowing fully well that a *shudra* will not be entertained in any gurukula, he lies to Parashuram that he is a brahmin. But Karna is caught red-handed when a worm bores its way into his thigh. Fearing that his guru who was lying on his lap would be disturbed, Karna bears the pain quietly. But when blood flows from his thigh and touches Parashuram who is asleep, he wakes up and understands at once that this forbearance is characteristic of only a kshatriya. When Karna confesses, Parashuram curses him. The curse is well described in **The Mahabharata**-

Unto the cheerless and trembling Karna, prostrated with joined hands upon earth, that foremost one of Bhrgu's race, smiling though filled with wrath, answered, 'Since thou hast, from avarice of weapons, behaved here with falsehood, therefore, O wretch, this *Brahma* weapon shalt not dwell in thy remembrance. Since thou art not a Brahmana, truly this *Brahma* weapon shall not, up to the time of thy death, dwell in thee when thou shalt be engaged with a

warrior equal to thyself!

(<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m12/m12a003.htm>)

But in the play, Karna is a different person who is readily accepted in Parashuram's ashram after admitting the fact that he is a charioteer's son. At first, Parashuram teaches him the basics of warfare. Then he realises that Karna is a noble being and is not fit to wage war and destroy. So he tries to stabilise the Ganga in him by asking him to cook gruel and play the table. When Karna asks him why he is not taught the nuances of warfare, Parashuram only tells him to go back as he is not fit to destroy. But Karna appeals to Parashuram to teach him how to wield various astras and is wise enough to request him to remove all traces of that knowledge once his education is complete. In other words, Karna's quest for knowledge is complete once it is gained. He does not want to use it for *naasha* or *samhara* (destruction) unlike his Mahabharata counterpart whose main aim is to vanquish Arjuna in the battlefield.

Parashu: Karna is not born to wage a war. Because no war ever ends on a victory or defeat. He is born to give everything, like the river. The Agni that was glowing was only raging at some points. Discovered the Ganga. I don't know whether he fused them. But he was great when it came to giving away everything, like the knowledge he acquired. Even possession of knowledge is an obstacle to Self-realisation. Karna was set on that road. He, I think, won at the end. Self-illumination. (Sc 12: 14-26)

To sum up, the feminine element is not static, but is a wonderful blend of the static and the dynamic. The feminine element teaches us how to empathise and view every situation with adequate poise and stability. Every man, according to Ramamoorthi should discover the feminine self in him in order to emerge as a true human being.

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