

Lilamani as Sita: An Ideal Idol of Indian Womanhood and Wifehood

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ABSTRACT : *This research article is an attempt to glorify the Indian model of feminine, wifely fidelity and self sacrifice and admiringly pointed out that the Western woman has as much to learn from the Eastern woman. The self sacrificing native woman and the devoted wife is an exemplary womanly ideal for Western woman to emulate. Maud Diver's Lilamani posits Lilamani as an embodiment of the true Indian woman idol, Sita. Through the heroine, Lilamani, Diver brings out all the virtuous qualities needed for an Indian woman and these qualities make her acceptable even in an Anglo Indian scenario. It is not the valorization of Anglo-Indian values and the superiority of whiteness, but the collapse of the boundaries and highlighting the culture and customs of India renders Lilamani fascinating to the readers.*

Keywords- *Anglo-Indian, Epic, Fidelity, Mythology, Paradigm, Wifehood, Womanhood.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The most enduring legacy of the British Raj in India has been the literature it occasioned. While Kipling, Forster and Orwell may have become household names, there are other lesser-known writers whose contribution is equally important. It is these writers who make Raj fiction a genre of its own. Raj literature offers a vivid portrait of colonial India from the time of Kipling to Indian Independence. They trace the changing relationship between the rulers and the ruled from the heyday of the empire to its demise in 1947.

There is currently an enormous interest in post colonial fiction in general and Indian English fiction in particular. This interest extends to Raj fiction which preceded the work of Indian authors in English. The works of well-known writers such as Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster and Paul Scott have remained accessible when compared to lesser known Raj writers like Rumer Godden, Geraldine Halls, John Masters, Maud Diver, Margaret Wilson and Charles E. Pearce. The works by the lesser known Raj writers evoke the interaction between the British rulers and their Indian subjects through a mix of ironic, entertaining and eerie tales.

II. LILAMANI: A STUDY IN POSSIBILITIES

In *Lilamani: A Study in Possibilities* (1911), Maud Diver describes the meeting between an English aristocrat, Nevil Sinclair and a beautiful high-caste Rajput, Lilamani and the events that lead up to their interracial marriage. Despite the novel's apparent non conformity, Nevil is nevertheless always cast as the dominant partner and Lilamani as the submissive or dependent one. Lilamani maintains the coloniser - colonised relationship depicting Britain as the dominant partner and India as the submissive one. The novel reinforces it in the marriage portrays between England and India. If Lilamani is presented as an ideal woman, it is because only an ideal Indian woman could possibly be worthy of an English husband. Diver depicts Lilamani as an embodiment of "all the feminine qualities that were under threat in England" (64).

Lilamani is exoticized throughout the novel as a pale lotus bud, a purdah lady and someone who combines a "peculiarly eastern mingling of demure aloofness with a delicately direct appeal to the senses and the heart" (141). Despite Lilamani is an Indian, her femininity and later her worship of her husband makes her more acceptable to Anglo-Indian. Diver insists that Lilamani rather than Nevil Sinclair is the one who makes the sacrifices, giving up her home, her religion and her family in order to marry an Englishman. Thus Lilamani becomes a true embodiment of a saga of sacrifice as Sita in the Indian epic *Ramayana*.

One of the traditional virtues of the faithful Hindu wife was worshipping the husband as an incarnation of Vishnu. The wives from Hindu mythology like Sita, Savithri and Sakuntala are synonymous with wifely fidelity. Sita in the epic *Ramayana* showed great wifely patience and forbearance; Savithri went to Yama, the God of Death and brought her husband, Satyavan back to life; while shakunthala remained faithful to her husband who had forgotten her. Another faithful wife from Hindu mythology is Sati (Parvati), the wife of Siva

who burned herself in protest against an insult to her husband. Sati, later, became synonymous with the practice of sati or widow burning. Through the heroine Lilamani, Maud Diver highlights the female model of the devoted wife which was a female paradigm that deeply fascinated the colonialists. Lilamani's ideal is Sita and she also glorifies the concept of Sati and aspires to be a Sati, which she tries to achieve by burning her finger and enduring the pain. She says: "Sita is like patron saint to me, like a piece of my own heart" (158). "Sita is still ideal for all true Indian wives today" (254).

Indian wives are said to be the paragons of obedience. Lilamani is taught to love, serve and obey her husband in all things: to her, he is to be as a God. She says: "In my country-husband of every true woman is even as her God" (143). The general principle, Lilamani observes, is that "Husband is God of the wife, what seems right to him, she must do even at cost of life" (167). To an Indian woman, the faults of the husband do not excuse any failure in her duty. She is taught to be the ideal wife whether he be the ideal husband or not. Through the husband come to the wife all the blessings of the God, while her devotion and piety keep firm the foundations of the home. Lilamani is submissive towards Nevil proclaiming that the measure for an Eastern woman's submission is the measure of her love.

Being a typical Indian woman, Lilamani's concept of marriage is different from that of a western woman. "For the Indian woman, religion is all and marriage is the chief part of that religion" (116). "It is not just to the pleasure of two people. It is to union of families, of same religion, same caste" (96). To her, betrothal is not merely a personal promise but a religious ceremony. "It is, in fact, true marriage, sanctifying union-if consummated or no-through all lives to come" (141).

Lilamani, the 'Jewel of delight', is the pearl of womanhood who helps her husband in all his endeavours and awakens his talent to greater heights. Lilamani, in her loveliest sarees, poses herself as Sita for Nevil Sinclair's paintings and she has been the constant source of inspiration in his world of paintings. Nevil has imbibed the spirit of the *Ramayana* through the spirit of his wife. His pictures serve as a background for unveiling a woman's soul, triumphant in purity and renunciation. He regards his wife as an angel of god because she has a good personality and a rare spiritual power that enable her to transcend the limitations of race.

In addition to translations of her country's sacred books, Lilamani acquaints with the Holy Book of Nevil's country. She chooses her favourite Gospel of St. John and St. Paul's dissertations on wifely submission and womanly modesty. Her study of St. Paul culminates in a form of prayer to Sarasvati, Goddess of Wisdom or Mai Lakshmi, Goddess of Fortune. Her prayer is to entreat her as "a wife perfect in devotion and mighty in renunciation than Sita, the ideal woman of Hindu legend and heroine of India's great Epic *Ramayana*" (136). Thus Lilamani has been crowned as little Sita Devi, as her father calls, for her noble deeds as an Indian woman and a faithful Indian wife.

III. CONCLUSION

As a good wife, Lilamani devotes herself to her husband's welfare through her performance of religious ritual, household duties and chastity. Through self sacrifice, duty and honour she accrues virtue which protects the family. By delineating the qualities of Indian wives from Hindu mythology, especially Sita, Maud Diver was successful in depicting Lilamani as a deity and as an epitome of Sita.

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