Feminist 'Re-Membering' and 'Re-Visions': Vaidehi's "An Afternoon with Shakuntala" and Mannu Bhandari's "Swami"

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The Feminist movement in India is, undoubtedly, a direct outcome of the British rule and the consequent nationalist struggle for independence. The ideology of nationalism in postcolonial India constructs the Indian women’s need to locate their tools of self-reliance and self-hood. Indian feminism, in this sense, nuances the postcolonial act of ‘re-visioning’ the notions of self-identity and freedom. Re-visioning for the postcolonialists and the Indian feminists becomes a way of creating self-consciousness of who and what ‘they really are’ instead of relying on ‘external agencies’ to define it for them. This external agency for the Indian feminists, unlike the Indian postcolonialists, is not the English colonizers but the Indian traditional/patriarchal structure itself that has preceded and continues after colonialism. The process of decolonization, thereby, is also manifested in the female demands for equality.

This paper by analyzing the ‘revisions’ of two male texts, namely, Kalidasa’s Sanskrit play Abijnanasakuntalam (5th Century AD) and Saratchandra Chatterjee’s Bengali story “Swami” (1918) by two postcolonial women writers, Vaidehi (Janaki Srinivas Murthy) and Mannu Bhandari respectively, tries to establish that postcolonial Indian feminist criticism offers us radically altered readings of male texts. It is the patriarchal Indian tradition that furnishes the backdrop to the resistant and ‘insurrectionary’ readings of contemporary Indian feminist writers and critics. The focus of this analysis, therefore, is to show how Vaidehi, in her Kannada story entitled “Shakuntale Yondige Kaleda Aparahna” (1986), translated in English as “An Afternoon with Shakuntala” (1993), and Mannu Bhandari, in her Hindi story, “Swami” (1982), refashion the earlier two male texts
by subverting the plot and the characterization to pave the way for greater self-reliance among women and to contest readings that do not allow women agency, self-determination, and freedom. This subversive revision, according to Adrienne Rich, is “an act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text [patriarchal text] from a new critical direction...and knowing it differently than we have ever known it, [so that we do not] pass on a tradition but...break its hold over us” (35). Feminism, in the context of these two revisions, “could [also] be described as narratives about the discovery of representation itself” (John, 19).

Women’s histories in patriarchal societies have either been ignored or recorded partially, in the sense that they omit the voices of women and tell women’s stories from the male point of view. As traditionalists, both Saratchandra Chatterjee and Kalidasa present stories and images of erring women, neglectful of their duties, who must suffer to repent their mistakes. Their reformation restores the traditional order of a patriarchal society. The two postcolonial Indian women writers, Vaidehi and Bhandari, negate these images of erring women. Gerda Lerner in her book, The Creation of Patriarchy (1986), describes this tension between women’s actual historical experience and their exclusion from interpreting that experience as “the dialectic of women’s history”. According to Lerner, this dialectic has moved women forward in the historical process and she says, “This coming-into-consciousness of women becomes the dialectical force moving them into action to change their condition and to enter a new relationship to male dominated society” (Lerner 5). Vaidehi revises the representation of a traditional Indian woman and shows how Shakuntala and her story are misrepresented by Kalidasa. Bhandari revises the representation of a modern Indian woman, the so-called ‘new woman,’ and shows how Saudamini, as an educated woman, is mistreated by Saratchandra Chatterjee. Both the women writers, through their revisions, illustrate what Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan in her book, Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism (1993), asserts that
in the postcolonial Indian society, (a) ... the female [continues] to be constructed, (b) ... the terms of such construction are to be sought in the dominant modes of ideology (patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism), and therefore (c) ... what is at stake is ... the politics of control that representation both signifies and serves. [Hence] the task of the feminist critic becomes the critique of male discourse (Rajan 129).

Kalidasa’s play, Abhijnanasakuntalam, can be fruitfully studied in the light of the dramatic conventions compiled by Bharata in his Natyashastra. Kalidasa’s play, in terms of characterization of the male and female protagonists and the technical details of the plot, is tailored to the traditional requirements of the Sanskrit nataka. So, in that sense, Kalidasa’s Abhijnanasakuntalam is contextualized in a very traditional framework. But Kalidasa’s innovation lies in his treatment of the mythical story of Shakuntala and Dushyanta, and in his use of a rich array of images and metaphors. Vaidehi (b. 1945) in her short story “An Afternoon with Shakuntala” subverts his treatment of the story of Shakuntala and Dushyanta, his imagery and the characterization. Her inversion questions the cogency of the traditional norms and codes of behavior laid out for male and female characters. Commenting on the relationship between Feminism and ‘revision’, Chandra Talpade Mohanty in the “Introduction” to her book, Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism, says:

Feminist analysis has always recognized the centrality of rewriting and remembering history. This process is significant... because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of....consciousness and self-identity...It becomes a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself (34).

Vaidehi’s ‘revision’ creates the feminist space that struggles to retrieve ‘reality’ that has been repressed by the dominant ‘other’ and it does so by documenting a woman’s awareness of her ‘self’ and its contradiction by the way it has been perceived by the ‘other’. This documentation echoes the postcolonial critique of the ‘civilized’ colonizer’s justification for colonizing the native who appears to be ‘barbaric’ because the colonizer blindly
fails to understand the native’s mind and culture. Vaidehi fulfills the task of eradicating this misunderstanding by allowing Shakuntala to reveal the other side of her story, as things ‘really’ happened to her, to a sympathetic (feminist?) visitor from the twentieth-century, to correct the presentation of the events of her life as depicted in Kalidasa’s play. Vaidehi’s story is presented to its readers from the outset as a text ‘written from memory’ and is meant to show Kalidasa’s account of Shakuntala’s life as inherently flawed and misrecorded. According to Vaidehi’s Shakuntala, the poet has concealed the “truths” by using supernatural interventions in order to justify Dushyanta’s actions as a righteous king. By allowing Shakuntala to tell her story, Vaidehi points to the women’s need of demythifying traditional representations of women and involving themselves in a revolutionary myth-making process where women do not get depicted as helpless, erring beings because that is not the way they ‘really’ are. The awareness of what they really are or are capable of being, inevitably, initiates a journey into the historical past which has created and defined the woman’s self. Hence, it is not a coincidence that both the feminist ‘re-visions’, discussed in this paper, re-search the mythical and the historical representations of female characters.

Kalidasa borrows the plot of his play from the story of Shakuntala and Dushyanta from the longest Indian epic, Mahabharata by Muni Vyasa, where Dushyanta has been afraid to send for Shakuntala, and as the years passed the memory of the hermit girl has slowly faded away. But when she appears before him with her grown-up boy, he remembers alright, but afraid of incurring the blame of his subjects, he pretends not to know her. Anticipating the reasons for Kalidasa changing this story, Robert Antoine S.J. in his essay “The Curse in Oedipus Rex and Abhijnanasakuntalam” says:

Kalidasa [perhaps] felt that the stature of the king lacked in dramatic dignity. The repudiation had to be genuine, that is, based on a genuine lack of memory. If, at the same time, it could be shown that the king’s oblivion
was the result of some failing inherent in the love-situation of the protagonists, the nataka would have a plot of rare dramatic density. The curse of Durvasa becomes the pivot of the drama and ... transforms a rather insipid epic story into a well-knit and highly dramatic action (3).

Kalidasa’s *Abijnanasakuntalam*, thus, turns out to be a tumultuous love story of the two mythical characters, Shakuntala and Dushyanta, caught in the net of a capricious fate, with its various painful and joyous twists and turns. Several supernatural events intervene to sublimate the excessive earthly love of the young couple into a balanced purer love. For Vaidehi, Kalidasa’s *Abhijnanasakuntalam* is not a story of love but of delusions and its consequences on Shakuntala.

Through a rich collage of metaphors and imagery, Kalidasa develops the love situation of Shakuntala and Dushyanta. Intentionally, Vaidehi uses many of those metaphors and images to subvert the character of Dushyanta and thereby sets the stage for Shakuntala’s negation of the curse and all the supernatural interventions.

The first image that Vaidehi subverts is that of the well-noted bee that buzzes around Shakuntala, at the beginning of the play. In Kalidasa’s play, the bee is the motif that allows Dushyanta to approach Shakuntala, while in Vaidehi’s story the bee becomes “a snare of illusion” and, among other things, symbolizes Dushyanta himself as Shakuntala tells her visitor:

...people ascribed stories after their own heart to it, but was it the bee that circled around me or did I circle the bee?..... He [Dushyanta] encircled me. Like the bee, weaving circles of illusion.
Or was it I who bound myself secure in those circles? (536, 538).

The idea of the bee as a symbol of illusion is also seen in Kalidasa’s play in the sixth act when Dushyanta imagines the ‘unreal’ bee, in his portrait of Shakuntala, as the ‘real’ bee. But for Kalidasa, the theme of illusion operates on a cosmological level. Life on earth, from the Hindu point of view, is an illusion where the ‘unreal’ is mistaken for the ‘real’. (This is the illusion
from which Dushyanta seeks freedom at the end of Kalidasa’s play). For Vaidehi, the theme of illusion works on a psychological level, depicting the love situation of Shakuntala and Dushyanta and what is interesting in her use of the image is that, along with Dushyanta, the bee also symbolizes Shakuntala’s ‘self’ which, unlike the curse in Kalidasa’s play, is the pivot of Vaidehi’s story. In fact the juxtaposition and ambiguity of the bee (Dushyanta) ensnaring Shakuntala or the bee (Shakuntala) weaving circles of feelings for Dushyanta point to the delusion and uncertainty inherent in their relationship. Shakuntala begins her story by saying:

He came like the very splendor of spring. Who was he? I did not know. But the moment I set eyes on him, it felt as if I had known him for eons. Shall I say that was the first illusion? I just floated away. As if I had been made only for him (535).

By intertwining Dushyanta’s love and the ‘circling bee’ with the notion of ‘illusion,’ Vaidehi not only undermines the nobility and the dignified stature of Dushyanta, she reveals, simultaneously, the innocence and sincerity of Shakuntala’s ‘self’ which is damaged (her discourse itself is a product of this damage) and hence undergoes many transformations as the story continues. This also becomes a subversion of Kalidasa’s intention in his play which aims at showing, in part, the sublimation of a lower kind of love in Shakuntala into a higher love, purged of its dross through suffering.

In the third act of his play, Kalidasa uses the image of the angry Shiva burning Kama to ashes to symbolize the anguish of lovers. Dushyanta, overwhelmed by his love for Shakuntala, understands how Kama, by tormenting lovers, vents his anger against Shiva:

Shiva’s fiery wrath must still burn in you like Fire smoldering deep in the ocean’s depths. Were it not so, how can you burn lovers like me, when mere ashes is all that is left of you? (Kalidasa, Abhijnanasakuntalam 200)
Vaidehi uses the image of Shiva, as Nilakantha, to reveal Dushyanta’s attitude towards Shakuntala at the time of their parting in the hermitage. Shakuntala, as she expresses her emotions, finds “his voice ... choked with venom, like Shiva’s when he swallowed the poison from the churning of the ocean” (539). While Dushyanta in Kalidasa’s play is the victim of Shiva’s wrath on Kama, in Vaidehi’s story Shakuntala becomes the victim of Dushyanta’s retraction symbolized by Shiva choked with venom.

Finally, in the sixth act of Abijnanasakuntalam, Kalidasa uses the image of mountain as a symbol of ultimate strength, power and control when the Vidusaka (the court jester) tells Dushyanta, “Such weakness is unworthy of you. True men never yield to grief. Do not mountains stand unshaken in the raging storm?” (Kalidasa, Shakuntala 259). Vaidehi uses the image of mountain to symbolize Dushyanta’s rigid coldness toward Shakuntala in order to emphasize the sense of recoiling, conveyed in the metaphor of Nilakantha, that has perhaps crept in Dushyanta as a response to his impulsive love for Shakuntala.

Soon after their marriage, Shakuntala finds, “Dushyanta turned cold, rudely cold. Frozen like an immense, icy mountain” (537).

Through all these images, Kalidasa valorizes Dushyanta while Vaidehi uses the same imagery to undermine Dushyanta’s valor, and by doing so she reveals the celebrated romance of Dushyanta and Shakuntala as a façade. The subversion of Dushyanta’s character prepares the reader for the subversion of the plot.

Dushyanta departs from the hermitage with the promise to send someone to bring Shakuntala to his capital. In Kalidasa’s play this reunion is prevented by Durvasa’s curse. So when Shakuntala is repudiated in Dushyanta’s court, it is due to her own fault of ignoring her duties as a hostess, by being lost in her dreams. Kalidasa’s Shakuntala remains unaware of Durvasa’s entrance into the hermitage which provokes him to curse her of being forgotten by Dushyanta. Shakuntala, in Vaidehi’s story, informs us that she was never cursed by the sage. “Why would
Durvasa have cursed me? He was an extraordinary sage respected and admired for his anger against all injustice" (541). Instead, it is Shakuntala who prevents Durvasa from cursing Dushyanta for forgetting her.

He closed his eyes, fixed his inner vision on something, and blazed with wrath. My senses rushed back to me even as his lips quivered with speech. ‘No, no, not that, ... He should live long as a protector of virtue,’ I cried out, and he fell silent (542).

Vaidehi’s ‘revision’, thus, subverts Durvasa’s curse on Shakuntala, of being forgotten by Dushyanta, to Shakuntala preventing Durvasa from cursing Dushyanta for his forgetfulness. Explaining the rationale behind Kalidasa’s concoction of the curse, Shakuntala says:

Those ... who watched his [Durvasa’s] arrival from afar, saw him speaking to me, turning fiery and departing abruptly, painted the scene with their own garish colors. ... With some story of a curse, the poet hid man’s careless debauchery (542).

Her reinterpretation of the curse not only exposes Dushyanta’s betrayal but also emancipates her from the patriarchal image of being an ‘erring woman’.

In Kalidasa’s play the curse remains unmitigated for a while due to Shakuntala’s loss of the ring. Durvasa had relented when pleaded by Anasuya and had added that the effect of his curse will be nullified at the sight of the ring that Dushyanta had given to Shakuntala. Shakuntala, on the other hand, in Vaidehi’s story, tells us that she refused to “beg for love with the show of a ring”, that she had never lost the ring. Rather, she had “pretended, duly upset, that it had been lost” because, according to her, how could “a ring ever be an antidote to a memory so conveniently erased” (544). Dushyanta’s betrayal signals her refusal to speak which in a way conveys that which goes without saying. According to Kamala Viswesaran in her article, “Betrayal: An Analysis in Three Acts,” “we should be attentive to silence as a marker of
women's agency...[because] resistance can be framed by silences” (90).

By revealing that she never lost her ring, Shakuntala negates all the supernatural interventions and brings the story down to an earthly, realistic plane of human discourse. So, in Vaidehi’s story, after being repudiated by Dushyanta in his court, Shakuntala is not whisked off by the nymph Sanumati to a heavenly abode. Instead, Shakuntala asserts her independence and accepts her responsibility of giving birth to her child by taking refuge in the sage Maricha’s hermitage. In doing so, she refuses to become an object of pity. Her disavowed identification with Kalidasa’s Shakuntala becomes the means through which she is able to articulate some agency and control over her destiny.

As she proceeds to repeat the experience of the other traditional/mythical female figure, Sita (in the Indian epic Ramayana by Valmiki), who is also abandoned by her husband Rama, Vaidehi’s Shakuntala ironically discovers and affirms an emotional independence and love for her unborn child as a combative force against the repetition of women’s abnegation. She confesses, “In the womb, a joy grew that spat defiance at the very world. It anointed the cracked walls of the broken heart with a sublime thrill. I learned to live” (544). Independence and courage as tools of survival, by enabling her to understand her experiences, lead to the birth of her own “self”. Shakuntala not only negates her story as told by the poet Kalidasa, she also negates the behavior of traditional women like Sita and her mother, Menaka, when she says: “I would not desert the little one in the deep woods, [as her mother had done] and I would not cry out for the earth to scream and swallow me [as Sita does in the Ramayana]” (544, parenthesis added). In all the above examples, one notices women’s association with Nature. Sita is abandoned in the forest, Menaka, when abandoned by her husband Vishwamitra, deserts her daughter Shakuntala in the deep woods, and finally Sita, to prove her chastity for the last time, begs the earth goddess to take her back. Nature, in all these myths, offers solace and refuge to women when human contact and trust has failed them. Kalidasa’s play
also portrays Shakuntala’s closeness to Nature, to plants and animals of the hermitage, who are her playmates and confidantes. This relationship with Nature reveals Shakuntala’s passivity and nurturing ability. Like many equality feminists from liberal and socialist traditions, Vaidehi is also “wary of discussing women in connection with nature, because it is precisely this loaded truism that men have used over centuries to keep women in their place as ‘close to nature’” (Salleh 13). So in her story, Vaidehi, deliberately, links this closeness to Nature to Shakuntala’s simplicity and innocence. Later, through her exile into Nature (Maricha’s hermitage) as a refuge from patriarchal repudiation, Vaidehi shows how this alienation actually provides Shakuntala with special insights into her ‘self’ and life, in general, and thus reveals not her passivity but her growing strength and maturity.

At the end of Kalidasa’s play, Dushyanta is united with Shakuntala after the miraculous recovery of the ring. Symbolizing the patriarchal control, the male god Indra and his charioteer Matali aid in their reunion. In Vaidehi’s story, Dushyanta comes to Shakuntala, primarily, to take his son Bharata, the heir to his throne. Even though he invites Shakuntala to join them, she, unlike in Kalidasa’s play, rejects his offer of reacceptance. The differing conclusions of the two works demarcate the patriarchal and feminist orientations of the authors. Kalidasa’s Shakuntala blames her repudiation on her sins in a previous life (just as Sita, in the Ramayana, blames her banishment to the forest on her sins in past lives). She forgives Dushyanta by justifying his actions:

It must be that I had to reap the consequences of some wrongdoing on my part in a former birth; otherwise how could my noble lord, so compassionate by nature, have acted in such an unfeeling manner towards me (Kalidasa, Abhijnanasakuntalam 276).

The propensity for self-accusation in the female characters of these male texts interiorizes for them the untaintedness of the patriarchs’ actions in all circumstances. In addition, what we also confront here is the image of the “good wife ... who knows how...
to wait - wait for love, wait to be needed, wait to be seen, wait to be recognized, wait to be accepted. [In fact] the waiting woman has been the dominant image of [most traditional] songs, stories and anecdotes" (Lakshmi, “Bodies called Women”, 2955). Vaidehi’s Shakuntala rejects the passivity of Kalidasa’s Shakuntala and through an introspective understanding of her experiences matures into a self-reliant individual. The psychological and philosophical growth that Kalidasa confers on Dushyanta is transplanted on Shakuntala in Vaidehi’s ‘revision’. Dushyanta in Kalidasa’s play seeks freedom from ‘illusion’ while Shakuntala in Vaidehi’s story destroys hers:

Dushyanta disappeared, holding Bharata in his arms. Always happy? All his contradictions may be found in poetry, to appreciate and contemplate, and to justify his existence to the whole world. Not to protect truth (546, italics added).

By revising Kalidasa’s Abijnanasakuntalam, Vaidehi presents a narrative of resistance which by correcting the representation of a traditional Indian woman brings to surface truths and inconsistencies that are unknown and would otherwise disappear. Yet, pertinently, she also asks: “Will the world today believe Shakuntala as it does Kalidasa?” (541). Through this question, she acknowledges the difficulty of erasing traditionally inscribed images that are embedded deeply in the cultural memory of a patriarchal society. Symbolically, unlike Kalidasa’s Shakuntala who brims with bliss in her reunion with Dushyanta, Vaidehi’s Shakuntala is left ‘alone’ to face her aging existence. The silver strands “on either side of the parting of her hair” (546), the “billowing breath” (547) denote the painful consequences of expressing one’s true self “where everything put conveniently in one’s life and one’s society may have to be negated and rearranged so that something more meaningful can be created” (Lakshmi, Face Behind the Mask, 238).

Mannu Bhandari’s (b. 1931) ‘revision’ of Saratchandra Chatterjee’s (1876-1938) story “Swami,” corrects the representation of the ‘new Indian woman’ who emerged at the interface of
colonial subjection and the incipient nationalism. The struggle towards decolonization encouraged the preservation of Indian traditions as a way of negating westernization. Yet, it was also felt that to overcome domination, the ex-colonial people must master the superior scientific powers of the West. According to Partha Chatterjee’s article, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman’s Question,” the domain of culture was divided into two spheres, where:

The world is the external domain of the material; the home represents our inner spiritual self, our true identity. ... The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world—and the woman is its representation (238-239).

He defines the new woman as the creation of a reformative patriarchy who allows her to acquire “cultural refinements afforded by modern education without jeopardizing her place at home” (246). Thus, the so-called emancipated Indian woman remains subjected to the newly independent patriarchy and it is this built-in contradiction between bondage and liberation in the twentieth century feminist reforms and its repercussions on women’s lives that Mannu Bhandari criticizes in her ‘revision’.

The plots of both the stories revolve around the story of Saudamini, who is in love with Narendra but due to unfavorable circumstances (the death of her uncle and Narendra’s illness) is married off to Ghanashyam. Unable to forget Narendra, Saudamini cannot reconcile herself to this marriage and the plots revolve around her life with Ghanashyam in a traditional, extended family. To aggravate her detachment from the family, Saudamini finds herself pitted against painful and unjust accusations by her in-laws. Ghanashyam, on the other hand, encourages her to rise above the pettiness that he sees in his mother and sister-in-law. Slowly, he is able to influence Saudamini who then begins to see him in a different light.

In both the stories, Saudamini’s newly awakened feelings for Ghanashyam put her in a psychological bind. She is caught between her love for Narendra and her newly emergent feelings
for Ghanashyam. At this point Saudamini herself is confused about her contradictory feelings. When Narendra suddenly appears at her husband’s home, Saudamini does not understand her own state of mind. To compound her problems, her mother-in-law accuses her of breaking the marriage vows. Saudamini, out of all the frustrations accruing from these misunderstandings and Ghanashyam’s reticence, leaves home when Narendra invites her to. From this point onwards, Saratchandra turns the story into a traditional issue. It reveals the conflict between a humanist and a traditionalist who insists that the patriarchal order must not be disrupted. In order to make the ends meet, Saratchandra turns the characters into puppets in his hands. The sudden act of converting Saudamini and Narendra’s love relationship into a sister and brother relationship reveals that the author himself is as bewildered and confused as the characters he has created. Narendra is turned into an evil character who is bent on harming Saudamini, who then perceives her blunder and realizes that her heart is with her husband and that Narendra has no place there. However, it is interesting to note that it is Narendra, who throughout the story, is depicted as inculcating the women’s cause. Commenting on the plight of women in a patriarchal society, he tells Saudamini:

[... our scriptures, full of falsehoods, are only fetters intended to keep woman in bondage. ...they are the means to force woman to serve the society. ... Doesn’t she deserve freedom too? Has she come to this world only to serve?]5 (292)

From a traditionalist’s point of view, this is not very hard to explain. The Indian Renaissance (nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) was a period of feminist reforms that abolished Sati, child-marriage and encouraged widow remarriage and formal education for women. By depicting Narendra as an unreliable character who advises Saudamini to leave her husband, the ideology of feminist emancipation is shown to be the cause of women’s fall from their status of purity. “The traditional is [thereby] represented as the timeless ... while the modern is viewed merely as a transitional phase which disguises the permanent
Jyoti Panjwani

essence’ of timeless tradition” (Rajan 134). Saudamini’s education and freedom, according to Saratchandra, have become the sources of her misery and humiliation because they have not been able to hold her securely to the service of her husband. Instead, they have made her succumb to dangers that appeared in the form of love and friendship and only true repentance can lead to her reformation. Although the story is narrated by Saudamini, the authorial voice often interjects the narrative to condemn Saudamini as a ‘fallen woman,’ ‘sinner,’ and ‘weak woman’. The last pages of the story are moral lectures, depicting the duties of a virtuous and chaste wife and thereby upholding the sanctity of marriage as an institution. Saratchandra’s instructiveness attests to how “at various points in history, many persons, specially men, have chosen to tell a woman what it is to be a woman. These attempts have been done with kind notions of ‘uplifting’ women, telling them how to make their life worthwhile” (Lakshmi, “Bodies called Women,” 2956). By portraying the ‘new woman’ as a grievously blundering individual who must be rectified, the traditionalist Saratchandra turns a blind eye to the fact that Saudamini is a victim of her circumstances and the primary concern that Bhandari highlights in her ‘revision’ is that Saratchandra’s story “denies the conflict that women existentially register as an aspect of their lives” (Rajan 129). The questions that arise in the readers’ minds, as S.C. Sengupta rightly points out in his book Saratchandra: Man and Artist, are:

If Saudamini is, indeed, so deeply attached to her husband, why does she elope with Narendra? Is it a mere passing caprice reinforced by family squabbles or is it possible that a woman may be drawn to two men at the same time, that Saudamini adores her husband for his goodness and nobility but that her heart yearns for Narendra’s daring, passionate love? (44)

The denial of this conflict in Saratchandra’s “Swami” shows that his analysis of Saudamini’s problem is dominated by his zeal for conservatism. The factors that may have contributed to Saratchandra Chatterjee’s conservatism could be explained by his
(i) experiences in Burma, where he worked as a clerk in the early part of his life, (ii) adoption of literary writing as a profession, and (iii) revolutionary/nationalistic ardor.

Observing the life-styles of emigrant Indians in Burma, Saratchandra saw how the dissipation of social beliefs and customs could exaggerate the manifestation of, the otherwise controlled, human passions:

They [meaning the Indian emigrants] discarded the pattern of social behavior to which they were accustomed to at home, but built up in its place no new uniformity of conduct. The result was a relapse to a social atmosphere in which selfishness and sensual pleasure were the dominant elements. Libertinism and sexual promiscuity of every type was the order rather than the exception. Double standards of life and morality were maintained side by side (Kabir 23).

Saratchandra’s strict adherence to traditional norms show that he saw their key role in the maintenance of domestic order and peace. This belief grew rapidly when he took over the vocation of literary writing. Saratchandra was, perhaps, the first professional writer of Bengal. His livelihood depended on winning the hearts of the masses, mostly middle-class, and not just the intelligentsia. This dependence on the average masses, perhaps, forced the literary artist to suppress the social rebel in him and to adjust his orientations to popular ideological tendencies which during the early twentieth century were of those of cultural revivalism. The political climate of revolt against British imperialism led to the fervor for a total regeneration of the national culture as a way of retaining the Indian identity, the kind that one finds expressed at its height in the writings of the nineteenth century Bengali writer Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-1894). Saratchandra could not have remained untouched by this political and social consciousness which perhaps makes him a defender of the traditional ideology. The urgency to reach the masses and the politically oriented revolutionary urges inextricably merge into conservatism that dominates in the form of conflict between the moralist and the artist in Saratchandra. The chief characteristic of
most of his fictional work like, “Alo-o-chhaya” (Light and Shade), “Pathanirdesh” (The Direction of the Road), *Grihadaha* (The Fire), *Shrikanta, Dena-Paona* (The Debit and the Credit), *Charitraheen* (The Fallen), *Biraj Bou* (Biraj’s Wife), and the list can go on, is to project the triumph of traditional injunctions, however irrational, over the natural and humanistic instincts and this precedence is especially emphasized in his depiction of the traditional values of Indian womanhood which he did not want to be supplanted by the ‘new’/western values of feminist emancipation. Aptly, the story “Swami” ends with the reunion of Saudamini and Ghanashyam. The traditional ideology is restored as Saudamini falls at her husband’s feet, seeking forgiveness for her sins. The author attests the traditional image of the husband as the god/lord for the wife who must serve and worship him and the title of the story is justified.

In Mannu Bhandari’s ‘revision’, the predicament of a woman in love with two men is depicted as a human problem, which Bhandari allows Saudamini to resolve through introspection. Subverting Saratchandra’s representation of an emancipated woman as an erring woman, Bhandari depicts her as capable of resolving her dilemma independently. Unlike in Saratchandra’s Saudamini, there is no hint of self-loathing in Bhandari’s Saudamini for her actions. Neither is her love for Narendra shown as a sin, nor do Narendra and Saudamini become brother and sister at the end of the story. Both, Bhandari and Vaidehi, erase the attribution of sin from the actions of their female protagonists and replace it with proclivities that reveal their courage and integrity. In the introduction to her story, Bhandari, in commenting on her ‘revision’, writes:

[I could never instill the feelings of self-disgust, self-loathing in my Saudamini, in which Sarat’s Saudamini always remains enmeshed. Neither the ex-lover’s act of taking Saudamini to Calcutta and locking her in a room was acceptable to me, nor the hilarious/ridiculous act of turning a lover into brother. This is why I have completely changed the last part of the story. Unlike Sarat, I have not portrayed Saudamini in the image of a lost wife who falls at the feet of her husband, begging him to forgive her]
In my view, Saudamini has committed no sin. Instead there are some psychological problems and confusion in her relations with Narendra and her husband. Being unable to solve them, she goes on becoming more and more confused. Familial disturbances and insults have wounded her self respect to such an extent that she decides to leave her in-laws' home. But her capability of making independent decisions prevents her from going to Narendra's house. Instead, she goes to her maternal home] (ii-iii).

Thus, in her story, Bhandari alters the conclusion. When Saudamini resolves her conflict and decides to go back to her husband, Narendra tells her:

['I have never seen any godly men in my country who would give shelter to a runaway woman. Even Rama could not accept Sita'. Saudamini stared at Narendra's face, unwaveringly, then said slowly, 'You are right, Rama could not do it but he (Ghanashyam) will do it'] (109).

The first point that needs to be mentioned, in the context of this quote and in the context of this paper, is Vaidehi's and Bhandari's recurring references to the central characters of the Ramayana, the epic of traditional ideals, which to this day, in India, continues to be a living tradition. Therefore, a critique of the characters of this epic for both the postcolonial female authors is an act of challenging, "the existing levels of oppression often inscribed within the most revered traditions...[and] patriarchy that inscribes the concept of womanhood" (Katrak 173). Their revisionary readings delegitimize the traditional texts as timeless documents. Also, their representations of women in myth and history are not "made to serve as harmonious symbols of historical continuity" but "as conflictual subjects and sites of conflict" (Rajan 135). The second point, that one notices, in this quote is the fall of Narendra's character in the eyes of Saudamini as well as the reader, who is left to question Bhandari's feminist intentions. Why must the feminist Narendra suffer the same fate that he suffered at the hands of Saratchandra? Why must Saudamini prefer the traditional Ghanashyam to the modern Narendra? Is Bhandari complicit to the traditional structure? It is
true that Bhandari, unlike Vaidehi, does not completely subvert the original plot in her version and the reason for the retention is that Bhandari rewrote the story as a script for the Hindi film ‘Swami’ at the request of its maker, Basu Chatterjee. This may, in part, explain the restrictive revision and like Vaidehi, who doubts the acceptance of Shakuntala’s version, Bhandari also adds, as a footnote in her introduction to the story, that the Hindi film version rejected her revised conclusion:

[In the film version, Basuda has completely omitted the concluding episode of Saudamini’s visit to her maternal home. Instead, the movie ends at the railway platform with Saudamini falling at the feet of her husband. Perhaps, Basuda’s interiorized, traditional, patriarchal tendencies and Bengali sentimentality overpowered him and his sympathies also eventually ended-up merging with Saratchandra’s] (ii).

Finally, the third point, that we observe in the earlier mentioned quote is that, unlike Vaidehi’s story, Mannu Bhandari’s story deals with the burden of female roles in urban environments which she handles by revising both the male and female role models. So, Ghanashyam, the model of Mannu Bhandari’s ideal husband, rises above the traditional model of Indian manhood, the mythical, epic hero Rama, who had refused to accept his wife, Sita. But Ghanashyam, true to Saudamini’s anticipation, goes to fetch her, even after hearing the story of her past relationship with Narendra and her leaving home with him (unlike Sita who was abducted against her wishes and had proved her chastity by going through the fire-ordeal). This is the trait that has, gradually, built and affirmed Saudamini’s trust, respect, and love for Ghanashyam whose strength of character, unlike Saratchandra’s Ghanashyam, does not spring from his strict adherence to traditions but from his transcendence from traditional expectations. Saudamini goes back with him but she does not seek any kind of forgiveness, nor does she find her right place by falling at his feet (and this explains why Bhandari retains the same title of the
Bhandari’s feminism, as we see in this story, “opposes women’s subordination to men in the family, along with men’s claims to define what is best for women ... thereby offering a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization and control mechanism” (Singh 29). Although Bhandari seeks to dismantle masculine hierarchy, her vision is not anti-male because she also negates the view of women being the sole subjects and initiators of feminism. Through the character of Ghanashyam, she points to the need for men to cultivate the necessary vision of seeing “from another’s point of view” for “this may even be the only way to recognize their own implication and accountability within the gendering process” (John 19). If Vaidehi’s ‘revision’ is ‘revolutionary’, Bhandari’s becomes ‘transformational’. These dimensions of their ‘revisions’, thus, explain their varying treatments of the principle male characters who are both glorified in the male texts.

Karen Offen, in her essay, “Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach,” has grouped different strands of feminism into two arguments: “relational” and “individualistic”. Mannu Bhandari, like Saratchandra, glorifies the image of Ghanashyam, but she does so by altering his attitudes toward Saudamini and her actions. This revision attests “the relational feminist thought which proposes a gender-based but egalitarian vision of social organization and features the primacy of companionate, non-hierarchical, male-female couple as the basic unit of the society” (Singh 27). In contrast to Bhandari’s, Vaidehi’s revision debases Dushyanta by retaining his image as an irresponsible husband throughout the story and thereby projects the “individualistic feminist thought which emphasizes the concepts of individual human rights and celebrates the quest for personal independence, dismissing all socially defined roles” (Singh 27). Despite the differences, the axial point at which their visions converge is in the belief that feminist empowerment can emerge only through a process of re-membering, a necessarily inventive tracing of the mythic representations of male and female characters. The feminist critique of the patriarchal edifice of knowledge,
in this context, provides the ground on which women of 'visions' can stand. The varying visions of feminist emancipation in Bhandari's and Vaidehi's re-visions, however, point to the fact that the vision of Indian postcolonial feminism is by no means a homogeneous concept and that Indian women, let alone Third World women, cannot be categorized monolithically. This study, thereby, attests to the need of looking into the visions of other Indian postcolonial women writers, which can then lead to a more comprehensive understanding of postcolonial Indian feminism.

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NOTES

1. Kama, the god of love had shot his arrow of love at Shiva to break his yogic trance. The disturbance created a spark from Shiva's third eye, the inner eye of wisdom, and reduced Kama to ashes. Kalidasa describes this myth elaborately in the third canto of his poem Kumarasambhavam.

2. The Vishnu Purana narrates the myth of how the gods and the demons churned the ocean to obtain amrita, the drink of immortality. They used the mountain Mandara and Kurma, the 'tortoise', who was Vishnu in his second incarnation/avatar, as their churning stick. The churning, along with the ambrosia, also produced poison that threatened to destroy the universe. Answering the prayers of Brahma and Vishnu, Shiva drank the blue poison and held it in his throat which as a result turned blue. Hence the name Nilakantha, the blue throat. Although this epithet, traditionally, symbolizes Shiva's compassion, Vaidehi uses it to show Dushyanta's recoilment.

3. Shakuntala's representation by Kalidasa as an erring woman responsible for her suffering reminds one of the representation of several women characters in the Indian epic literature. The most notable among them is Sita, the heroine of the epic The Ramayana, whose suffering at the hands of the demon, Ravana and her husband, Rama are blamed on her desire to possess the skin of the golden deer. One sees the inconsistency in the depiction of the character of Sita in this part of the epic. Sita has consistently been shown throughout the epic as a person who has given up all the materialistic luxuries of the kingdom to be able to accompany Rama in the forest. Her stubborn desire to have the golden deer stands out of her character. But it allows Rama to fulfill the divine mission of killing Ravana and also provides the grounds for banishing Sita to the forest because she was...
abducted by Ravana when she had sent Rama away, against his wishes, to get the deer.

4. There are many versions of the epic Ramayana in India. One of the most popular, well-known versions and the one referred to in this paper as well as by the two authors discussed in this paper, is the Ramayana composed by the sage Valmiki.

5. Since the English translations of Saratchandra Chatterjee’s Bengali story, “Swami” and Mannu Bhandari’s Hindi story “Swami” are unavailable, the English translation of passages from these two stories are my own.

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