

Exploring Agency, Empowerment, And Identity In 'Rukmini: Krishna's Wife' By Saiswaroopo Iyer

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Abstract

Revisionist mythological fiction is an attempt to remember and celebrate the past in a different light. Mostly written from a female perspective, mythological revisionist fiction challenges the dominant narratives and perspectives embedded within ancient myths, offering alternative viewpoints that address issues of gender, power, and social justice. This paper focuses on the revisionist portrayal of Rukmini, as depicted in *Rukmini: Krishna's Wife* (2021) by Saiswaroopo Iyer. Departing from traditional narratives, the novel portrays Rukmini as a formidable and resolute woman who challenges the prevailing societal norms and patriarchal constraints of her era. Through her actions and choices, Rukmini becomes a symbol of empowerment, transcending the boundaries set by a patriarchal society. Her defiance of gender-based expectations and her resilience in adversity are testament to her remarkable agency. Indian feminism, as a theoretical construct, recognizes the complex dynamics of gender, power, and cultural norms within the Indian context. It seeks to challenge and redefine traditional gender roles, emphasizing the agency, autonomy, and empowerment of women. This research delves into themes such as female empowerment, self-discovery, and the breaking of societal norms, shedding light on their resonance with contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: Revisionism, Mythological Fiction, Women's Voices, Agency, Empowerment.

Introduction

For a long time, women were kept away from all significant arenas of power. They hovered somewhere around the margins or remained veiled in the background, silenced and powerless. Virginia Woolf in her seminal text, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) mourned the absence of women-centric stories and anecdotes before the eighteenth century. She encouraged the students of Oxbridge to fill in the gaps:

I thought, looking about the shelves for books that were not there, to suggest to the students of those famous colleges that they should rewrite history, though I own that it often seems a little queer as it is, unread, lop-sided; but why should they not add a supplement to history, calling it, of course, by some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety? For one often catches a glimpse of them in the lives of the great, whisking away into the background, concealing, I sometimes think, a wink, a laugh, perhaps a tear. (Woolf 49)

In response to Virginia Woolf's request to 'rewrite history', women writers started revisioning and rewriting the classical texts from the female perspective. They amplified and gave voice to the earlier 'silenced' mythological women, providing them with the required space to grab creative liberties and facilitate the production of cultural memory. Earlier, women feared writing about their innermost desires, feelings, and aspirations—they feared that they would be belittled, scorned, and laughed at. So, they carefully masked their true selves and as Muriel Rukeyser shared in her poem, were 'split open, unable to speak, in exile from their own selves.' The engagement of women writers in rejecting old myths and patriarchal ideology was a celebration of newfound freedom:

No more masks! No more mythologies!
Now, for the first time, the god lifts his hand,
the fragments join in me with their own music. (Rukeyser)

Women writers experienced relief in debunking the old traditions and actively indulged in feminist revisionist

mythmaking. They celebrated the discovery of this remarkable writing style that demonstrated radicalism and posed a challenge to the conventional mindset. They envisioned fruitful togetherness and solidarity. In her poem 'Incipience', Adrienne Rich shared the vision of a glorious future awaited eagerly by the female writers: Outside the frame of his dreams, we are stumbling up the hill

hand in hand, stumbling and guiding each other
over the scarred volcanic rock (Rich)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni talked about similar solidarity in an interview with Mansi Shah, Digital editor in ELLE India, at the Jaipur Literature Festival, on 19th January 2023:

I realised that all of our great mythological heroines were always shown to us from a male writer's perspective. And the stories were always interested in the men. The women characters were there, but they were kind of pushed to the side. Their complexities were not explored, their voices are not heard. So that became really important to me. For me to imagine them in the centre of the narrative, telling their stories, in their own voice. And to show them as complex women with flaws. Because that's what we all are. (Divakaruni)

Grand narratives produced by patriarchy viewed women through a limited and prejudiced lens. Feminine reality in these stories is often unreal. Women writers often undertake a journey from passive submission to patriarchy to a position of maturity and voice their thoughts, experiences, and innermost desires. They bring their 'self' to the fore— the self not carved by the patriarchal burden of responsibilities, the 'self' she was born with. This enables them to expand their intellectual horizons and build their own architectures of knowledge.

Saiswaroopaa Iyer, with an MBA degree from IIT Kharagpur, is working hard to bring the real feminine reality to the readers. She weaves her stories around strong female mythological characters who believe in unconditional love, are unashamed of their desires and refuse to be eclipsed or fade away into the larger epic. Talking about her inspiration behind the book, Saiswaroopaa says:

Rukmini Kalyanam is a very auspicious episode of Bhagavatam. Unmarried girls are traditionally

encouraged to read this episode before they or their families start looking for a suitable groom for them. The story is not only a landmark development in the story of Krishna but also changes the macro-political scenario of the Mahabharata. (Chakravorty)

Rukmini, a prominent figure in Hindu mythology, is revered as the principal wife and devoted consort of Lord Krishna, the revered deity. Hailing from the kingdom of Vidarbha, she fell in love with Krishna, hearing tales of his divine qualities and heroic exploits. During her swayamvara, she sent a secret message to Krishna, seeking his help to elope and escape the clutches of her ambitious brother, Rukmi. Honouring her love and devotion, Krishna swiftly arrived, and they eloped together, eventually getting married in Dwaraka. Rukmini symbolizes the epitome of devotion (bhakti) to Krishna, exemplifying unwavering faith and love for the divine, and her union with Krishna is cherished as an eternal bond of divine harmony and love, inspiring countless devotees in their quest for spiritual connection.

Saiswaroopo Iyer's retelling of mythology stands as a remarkable tribute to lesser-known female characters, illuminating their captivating tales of bravery, courage, and empowerment. In her narratives, Iyer delves deep into the annals of ancient scriptures to resurrect these unsung heroines, long overshadowed by more prominent figures. With a masterful blend of historical research and creative imagination, she brings forth the stories of formidable queens, valiant warriors, and resilient sages, whose voices echo across time.

Iyer's portrayal unveils the strength and spirit of these women, whose actions and decisions shaped their destinies and influenced the course of history. From the audacious Vishpala, the warrior queen who defied gender norms to lead her kingdom to glory, to the resolute Lopamudra, the Vedic sage who challenged traditions and sought knowledge, each character radiates an aura of empowerment. Through their trials and triumphs, Iyer emphasizes the transformative power of courage and resilience in the face of adversity. In an interview with Nikhil Narkhede published in his blog titled "Saiswaroopo Iyer Interview – Abhaya Book", Saiswaroopo Iyer says:

Let me confess my love for Lord Krishna, Meerabai being an early inspiration during my teens. As I grew up, Bhakti failed to impress me and I felt myself drawn towards Jnana and Karma. There were characters contemporary to Krishna like Rukmini from our epics. She starts out as a fiery character, full of defiance. But the focus after her wedding shifts to the Mahabharata and she is eclipsed. I dreamt of someone who dreams of unconditional love, believes in adventure, and refuses to fade away into the larger epic to tell her own tale. (Saiswaroopo Iyer Interview – Abhaya Book)

In her retelling, Iyer goes beyond the surface to explore the complexity and vulnerability of Rukmini, unearthing her fears, doubts, and insecurities, making her more relatable and real. Her journey serves as a beacon of inspiration, encouraging readers to recognize their own potential and find strength within. By shining a spotlight on Rukmini, a lesser-known female character, Iyer's work champions gender equality and inclusivity. She underscores the importance of honouring and celebrating the often-overlooked contributions of women in history and mythology, fostering a sense of pride and identity among readers. Iyer's retelling of mythology is aimed to act as a guiding force in illuminating the rich tapestry of female empowerment.

Through her words, Iyer breathes life into Rukmini, the forgotten heroine, enabling the female character, silenced in mythology to transcend time and inspire generations with their indomitable spirit and unwavering resolve. As the story unfolds, Rukmini's personal universe becomes almost as expansive as that of Krishna. She is adventurous, extraordinary in many ways and responds to challenges, often, without comprehending the enormity of her actions. Shivakumar GV in his review of *Rukmini: Krishna's Wife* (2021) wrote:

And Rukmini's rising up to the challenge is how a brave Dharmikaa of Bharatavarsha would have faced atrocity bravely, without letting the challenge subdue her and emerge victorious. Rukmini's response to her situation is an archetype of Bharatavarsha. (GV Shivakumar)

This revisionist fiction, it appears, is a fit response to the anxiety of feminists who had invested a huge amount of time and energy to bring in a social change. Rebecca Solnit in her book titled *"Men Explain Things to Me"* (2014)

describes how the silencing of female voices is an infringement on female liberty and an abuse of power:

Some women get erased a little at a time, some all at once. Some reappear. Every woman who appears wrestles with the forces that would have her disappear. She struggles with the forces that would tell her story for her, or write her out of the story, the genealogy, the rights of man, the rule of law. The ability to tell your own story, in words or images, is already a victory, already a revolt. (Solnit 71)

In her novel *Rukmini: Krishna's Wife* (2021), the author Saiswaroopo Iyer presents a captivating portrayal of Rukmini's journey, offering a fresh perspective on her life and character. Iyer focuses on Rukmini's journey as one designed by a deluge of bold choices, unwavering determination, and resilience, highlighting her inner strength and agency in shaping her destiny beyond her love for Krishna. She navigates her life with conviction and purpose, making decisions that shape her destiny. Rukmini's character evolves into a resplendent goddess, symbolizing the divine feminine. Her unwavering devotion to Krishna and her ability to stand tall in the face of challenges earn her a place as a fitting partner to Lord Krishna, who is considered the most beloved god in the land. This portrayal of Rukmini emphasizes her divine qualities and her position as an equal and cherished companion to Krishna, rather than merely being a passive wife. Aravindan Neelakanthan, author, and historian, in his praise of this novel, wrote:

The novel (*Rukmini: Krishna's Wife*) rings out the dimensions of Rukmini hitherto unspoken about in popular imagination. What we have in Rukmini is the continuation in the process of building through literary discourse an attempt to bring the Dharmic Feminine in all her traditional independence, intelligence, dominance, love and patience to the modern generation of girls. (Iyer i)

Rukmini from her childhood always desires to live a life free from the clutches of patriarchal domination. This desire differentiates her from other girls of her age and sets her apart from her contemporaries. As a skilled horse rider, she takes every opportunity to break free from the suffocating royal guard in both Avanti and Vidarbha. She refuses to be confined by traditional gender roles and yearns for personal freedom and autonomy. In a society where women typically had their future decided through *swayamvara*, Rukmini's

perspective was revolutionary. She rejects the idea of someone else determining her life's course and firmly believes in taking charge of her own destiny. Rukmini's mindset aligns closely with the author's intention of instigating change and taking charge, as she states, 'If we don't make the first move, someone else will do it, sealing our fates for their narrow ends' (Iyer 5). Nikita Gill, a British-Indian poet, playwright, writer, and illustrator based in South England, has shared the same angst in her poem "An Ode to Fearless Women":

Defined by no man, you are your own story,
blazing through the world, turning history into her story.
And when they dare to tell you about
all the things you cannot be,
you smile and tell them,
"I am both war and woman and you cannot stop me" (Gill)

This act of choosing her path showcases her strong will and determination to shape her life as she sees fit. Rukmini's fearlessness is demonstrated on various occasions. Guru Sandipani, who is responsible for the education and well-being of Krishna and Balarama, expresses his concern about Rukmini's intentions. He worries that, as Rukma is allied with Jarasandha, those in the forest may grow suspicious of Rukmini's intentions and take her to be a spy to harm Krishna. This concern arises due to the threat posed by Jarasandha, a powerful and patriarchal figure known for his hostility towards Krishna. In order to dispel any doubts and prove her loyalty and genuine intentions, Rukmini decides to take bold and courageous action. She chooses to venture into the forest alone, in the middle of the night, to find Krishna and Balarama. This action demonstrates her fearlessness in the face of potential danger:

So did the resolve to prove to Sandipani that she came with no malice. And to make everyone around her realize that she was no puppet in the hands of the men of her family. (Iyer 11)

While it was uncommon for women to venture alone into the wilderness at night due to the inherent risks involved, Rukmini defied these gender norms and societal expectations, showing her independent spirit and willingness to take charge of her actions. By going into the

forest alone and carrying food, Rukmini seeks to evince her care and concern for Krishna and Balarama. Rukmini's decision to venture into the forest, knowing the risks involved, showcases her immense courage and determination. Taking food to feed them further highlights her caring and nurturing nature.

Even when confronted by a dangerous cobra while being unaware of Krishna's identity at the time, Rukmini remains undeterred. Instead of retreating in fear, she boldly inches closer to Krishna and attempts to wake him up by shaking his leg. This incident exemplifies her fearlessness and determination to face challenges head-on. This act of courage symbolizes her refusal to be intimidated by challenging situations. Later, despite knowing that revealing the family's plan is not right, Rukmini decides to do so because she recognizes that her brother, Rukma, is allied with the malevolent forces. Her fearless actions aim to protect Mathura from falling into Jarasandha's clutches:

She gathered herself enough to say, 'Stay in the ashram for another year. At least. The King of Magadha plans to attack your Mathura soon. I overheard my Brother Prince Rukma talking about this. (Iyer 14)

Rukmini's empowerment and refusal to be silenced are further evident when Krishna jokingly refers to her actions as espionage. In response, Rukmini highlights that sharing life-saving information should not be belittled and undervalued. Saiswaroop's female-centric narrative opens new spaces within the existing patriarchal narrative and reveals gynocentric perspectives. Rukmini makes informed choices and asserts herself, thereby, clearly transcending the threshold of marginalization and 'otherness.'

Rukmini firmly believes in equality, seeing no distinction between her maids and royal women. She stands against any form of mistreatment or discrimination, emphasizing that all individuals deserve respect and dignity regardless of their social status. Rukmini's love and care for her maids are depicted as genuine and profound, treating them like her own sisters. She acknowledges their service and believes in their protection. This attitude creates a strong bond of trust and camaraderie between Rukmini and her maids, making them feel valued and respected. Rukmini's fierce protectiveness towards her maids is evident as she stands up for them when they face adversities. When her close

friend and maid, Malathi, is threatened by Shishupala, the prince of Chedi, Rukmini takes immediate action to defend her. In this way, she protests against the authority which according to Rashmi Luthra '... subjugates the weak and defenceless, including women and lower caste people.' (Luthra 143)

Rukmini confronts Shishupala and demands an apology for his inappropriate behaviour, refusing to let the injustice go unaddressed:

I may be unaware of the way women are treated in your place, but here at Vidarbha, holding a woman against her will is a crime. But as a guest who may be unaware of what we may consider a given, you can get away by apologizing to my companion. (Iyer 20)

This perspective reflects her progressive and empowering outlook. Rukmini's courageous nature is evident in her willingness to stand up against injustices. When Shishupala refuses to apologize and mocks her, she takes it upon herself to uphold justice by slapping him and instructing the guards to escort him out. This act shows her fearlessness in challenging powerful figures to protect those who are vulnerable: Her resistance ushers in the notion of 'sisterhood' and solidarity towards other women. (Beena 2019: 166)

When her father rebukes her for her actions, Rukmini does not back down. Saiswaroopa's Rukmini, as if totally under the influence of Virginia Woolf's 'peroration' (116) where the great writer reminded women:

I should remind, you how much depends upon you, and what an influence you can exert upon the future. But those exhortations can safely, I think, be left to the other sex, who will put them, with far greater eloquence than I can compass. When I rummage in my own mind I find no noble sentiments about being companions and equals and influencing the world to higher ends. I find myself saying briefly and prosaically that it is much more important to be oneself than anything else. Do not dream of influencing other people, I would say if I knew how to make it sound exalted. Think of things in themselves. (Woolf 116)

Rukmini, likewise, decides to be herself—individualistic, strong and indefatigable. She refuses to bow down before patriarchy. Her conviction and her sense of personal values

are to her more important than anything else. She voices dissent at every instance possible:

Shishupala nearly molested poor Malathi. And this imbecile son of yours, Rukma... Don't even make me say what his reaction was! In your place, Father, I would have disowned him." (Iyer 22)

Her courage, self-will, determination, and fight against oppressive forces showcase her empowerment and independence. Patriarchy refers to a social system or organization where men are seen as the primary decision-makers and leaders, while women are often relegated to subordinate roles. Women, burdened by their domestic responsibilities and also because of their economic dependence, are left with not many choices. With restrained freedom, they were further humiliated because they were looked upon as dangerous competitors:

In proving women's inferiority, the antifeminists then began to draw not only upon religion, philosophy, and theology, as before, but also upon science—biology, experimental psychology, etc. At most, they were willing to grant 'equality in difference' to the other sex. That profitable formula is most significant: it is precisely like the 'equal but separate' formula of the Jim Crow laws aimed at the North American Negroes. As is well known, this so-called equalitarian segregation has resulted only in the most extreme discrimination. (Beauvoir 23)

Rukmini as a remarkable and strong-willed woman, refuses to conform to the societal norms and patriarchal expectations of her time. When Jarasandha announces Rukmini's marriage with Shishupala solely for political gain, Rukmini refuses to be a pawn in their political games. Despite facing pressure from powerful figures and having her own father not protesting against the marriage, Rukmini boldly raises her voice. She firmly states, "I don't consent, I don't," (Iyer 38) which showcases her unwavering determination to keep herself free from being used as a tool for political manipulation. Rukmini's courage reaches new heights when she decides to open up about her true feelings. She fearlessly approaches the king of Chedi, Damaghosha, and confesses that she is in love with Krishna, making it clear that she cannot marry Shishupala:

King Damaghosha. There is nothing left for me to say except for what I made clear just now. I am in love with another man. How can I wed your son? How can I step into the household of Chedi with my heart given to someone else? Forget me, would feel secure with a daughter-in-law who is not prepared to swear by your family? (Iyer 57)

This act reveals her strong will and her refusal to bow down to societal norms that dictate her fate. Despite the king of Chedi wanting to stop the marriage due to Rukmini's confession, he succumbs to the fear of Jarasandha's wrath. However, Rukmini does not back down even when faced with the possibility of rebellion against Jarasandha's forces. Her determination and resolve to be with the one she loves prevail over the fear of potential consequences. Rukmini's courage is further displayed when she criticizes those who fear Jarasandha:

I now blame not Jarasandha, but you. All of you who failed the household of Shoora. All of you who let this monster go from strength to strength under your watch. For had you shown the commitment to your dharma then, I would have been studying about your heroic deeds instead of hearing the story of your failure from your own lips. (Iyer 59)

She refuses to be intimidated by his power and stands firm in her belief that love and freedom are worth fighting for. Her criticism reflects her defiance of oppressive forces and her strong-willed nature. Determined and strong, Rukmini fearlessly defies dominant forces and stands up for her love and happiness. In her book *Feminine Journey of the Mahabharata: Hindu Women in History, Text, and Practice* (2021) Lavanya Vemsani's statement elicits the strength and resilience of women like Rukmini:

Even though the feminine leaders have limited roles and opportunities they excelled in meeting the challenges on their path. However, in the matters of their choice, how independently they exerted their mind is amazing and helps understand the women in numerous perspectives. (Vemsani 11)

Rukmini's decision to elope with Krishna, despite the presence of huge opposing forces and the threat of Jarasandha, showcases her fearlessness and determination. She refuses to succumb to the pressure of societal norms and the influence of powerful figures who want to control

her fate. Instead, she takes matters into her own hands and chooses to be with the man she loves, Krishna. By eloping with Krishna, Rukmini successfully defies Jarasandha, one of the most dreaded men in Bharatavarsha. Jarasandha's influence and power are significant, but Rukmini's courage and determination enable her to break free from his grasp and assert her own agency in choosing her life partner.

Rukmini's character is defined by her strong will and bravery, which lead her to rebel against societal expectations and make choices that are true to herself. Her actions earn her admiration and respect from others, as they recognize the value of her determination and resilience. Rukmini's valour is lauded and admired by Agnidyotana: 'But I am sure your strong will and grit are going to help you face whatever destiny throws at you' (Iyer 53) and also by King Damaghosha 'Wish some kings of my generation had half your courage in our times'. (Iyer 58)

Her ability to stay firm and resolute in the face of adversity is commendable and earns her praise from others. Rukmini's character serves as an inspiration to those around her, as she fearlessly follows her heart and makes decisions based on her own convictions. Her actions demonstrate that one can break free from societal norms and make choices that align with their true desires and beliefs.

The administrative skills of Rukmini are evident in her ability to understand and appreciate different forms of governance, her strategic thinking in forming alliances, her decision-making process based on dharma (righteousness), and her focus on the economic aspects of the Yadu confederacy are exemplary. Iyer's Rukmini is the true representative of the female population described by Ashapura Devi, who left a legacy of challenging the status quo of many social inequalities until there is a better version, a better story:

...whether in education, knowledge, or work efficiency she has traversed a hundred years in one generation. She has acquired her right to participate in the activities of the outer world and it has not taken her long to establish her ability to do so. In many activities, women are not just as good as men, but better. And so, in a single generation, the caged birds have learned to wing their way to the sky. Surely this is no mean achievement? (Devi 20)

Unlike the traditional monarchy in Vidarbha, Rukmini finds herself welcomed and valued in the governance system of Dwaraka. She expresses her respect and fascination for a form of governance where everyone's voice is heard and valued. Her appreciation for democratic principles showcases her understanding of the importance of inclusivity and collective decision-making. Rukmini's suggestion for Satyaki to participate in Draupadi's swayamvara to form a perfect alliance demonstrates her strategic thinking.

She recognizes the significance of forming alliances through marital relationships to strengthen the Yadava clan's position and influence. When the time comes to decide whether to help the Pandavas or not, Rukmini's voice is heard expressing her support for aiding them. Her decision is guided by the principle of dharma, emphasizing the importance of upholding righteous conduct and valuing relationships, be they marital or otherwise, within families:

Relationships, whether marital or otherwise, are never undervalued in families where dharma reigns, noble Satrajit,' she replied with an unaffected smile. 'The five Pandu brothers and the family of Panchala stand for that.' (Iyer 114)

Then she also adds by upholding the dharma 'Gratitude is the one quality that the sons of Aunt Kunti possess in abundance. Our wealth shall find a worthy recipient who will value it and flourish the empire.' (Iyer 114)

Her suggestion to help rebuild a new city for Pandavas near Mathura and take the battle to Magadha showcases her strategic planning abilities in military matters. Her proposal reflects her understanding of the importance of taking proactive measures to safeguard the Yadu Confederacy. Rukmini, along with Mitravinda and others, is involved in focusing on the economic side of the Yadu confederacy. Her attention to economic matters highlights her understanding of the importance of financial stability and prosperity for the overall well-being of the clan.

Rukmini's large-heartedness and selflessness shine through in her response to Mitravinda and Vadra and later Satyabhama's wish to marry Krishna. Instead of reacting with jealousy or possessiveness, she shows respect for parental decisions and supports her friends' feelings. Her

genuine concern for their happiness and her prioritization of Krishna's decision reflects her maturity and depth of character. Rukmini's actions in this situation exemplify her ability to rise above personal desires and prioritize the happiness and well-being of those around her, making her a truly remarkable and compassionate individual. Rukmini in this way, as Asapurna Devi says in her article titled "Indian Women: Myth and Reality", 'liberates herself from the narrow confines of self-interest, the strength to tear apart that veil of false consciousness and to stand out in the splendour of one's own dignity' (Devi 22)

This indicates her understanding and compassion, even in matters of love and emotions. Iyer presents Rukmini as a character who can see beyond personal emotions and is capable of making decisions with a broader perspective, making her a remarkable and admirable figure. Rukmini's response to Krishna's question about why she did not protest his intention of remarrying highlights her character's depth and maturity:

The day when I would have to fight with you for my rightful position, this marriage would cease to have any meaning, Krishna. I trusted you to have a good reason, for whatever you did. Not only that, I trusted you to tell me about whatever you believed in, whatever you sought out, and whatever you strived for. But you blocked me out, Krishna! If charade is what was needed to be carried out for a strategic reason, I would have acted better than you! (Iyer 104)

Rukmini's reply showcases her understanding of strategic decisions and the bigger picture. She demonstrates a remarkable ability to prioritize the welfare of the larger community and accept that certain actions may be necessary for strategic reasons. Her response indicates that she is willing to go along with such charades if it serves a greater purpose, even if it involves personal sacrifices.

Her openness about her thoughts and feelings towards Krishna marrying Draupadi reflects her honesty and transparency. She does not hide her initial thoughts, even if they might have been uncomfortable or conflicted. This honesty strengthens the trust between her and Krishna and emphasizes her authenticity as a person. Rukmini's response demonstrates emotional maturity and a strong sense of self. She is not afraid to acknowledge her feelings,

nor does she let them define her actions or decisions. Instead, she seems to have a balanced and level-headed approach to complex situations. It highlights her emotional strength and authenticity.

Rukmini's character is exemplified by her immense courage and fearlessness in the face of danger, even when she is pregnant. When confronted by the assassin Kritya, Rukmini does not succumb to fear. Despite being pregnant, she stands her ground and fearlessly responds to Kritya's demands for information about Krishna. Her bold response: 'Who sent you? (Iyer 106) and then 'Whoever it is, they have doom coming upon them' (Iyer 106) displays her unwavering courage and determination. Rukmini's bravery continues as she takes matters into her own hands to protect herself. When Sudakshina attacks her, she bravely wields her dagger to hold off the blow after saying "Not when the mother of the child is capable of finishing off her husband's enemies, you lowly rat." (Iyer 106)

This action reflects her determination to defend herself and her unborn child from harm, even in the most perilous situations. Despite Kritya's initial intent to harm Krishna, Rukmini shows compassion and gratitude towards her for saving her life. "And your family is welcome at Dwaraka. They will be protected there." (Iyer 108) Rukmini acknowledges Kritya's struggle and bravery in protecting her, even at the cost of her own life. She displays empathy and understanding, acknowledging the complexities of the situation.

To 'become' is a turbulent journey. It is often like walking across arid deserts on a starless, moonless night. EE Cummings, one of the most daring and powerful poets of the 20th century, rightly said:

To be nobody-but-yourself — in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else — means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting. (FAENA aleph)

When a woman, who has led on the margins of a patriarchal society, discovers her 'self' attired and composed of her feminine thoughts, emotions, and perceptions—she decides to nurture it. She understands that meaningful pursuits will keep the 'self' alive. Octavia

Butler, with the motive of encouraging all seekers of the 'feminine self' had resonated similar thoughts in a journal:

If you want a thing—truly want it, want it so badly that you need it as you need air to breathe, then unless you die, you will have it. Why not? It has you. There is no escape. What a cruel and terrible thing escape would be if escape were possible. (The Marginalian)

Iyer portrayed women in sync with their true 'self' and those who never think of escape. With their strength and energy, they are ready to contribute and make their own existence more meaningful. When Rukmini is attacked by Dantavakra and his men, she does not cower in fear. Instead, she displays immense bravery and fights back against her attackers. This showcases her determination to defend herself and her willingness to take a stand in the face of danger. She refuses to be a passive victim and takes action to protect herself, asserting her right to safety and security. When Rukmini is in danger and fighting bravely against her attackers, Abhaya's courage is evident as she steps forward to defend Rukmini. Abhaya fearlessly takes on the assailants, risking her own safety to protect Rukmini, showcasing her unwavering commitment to her friend.

A woman's consent was rarely sought in marriage. Even if given a choice, women knew that they could not exercise their agency. Pateman in her text *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory* (1989) wrote: "Only if women are seen as 'free and equal individuals is their consent relevant at all" (Pateman 74)

Because women are not seen as such, then, their dealings with male lovers cannot be egalitarian: Consent must always be given to something; in the relationship between the sexes, it is always women who are held to consent to men. The "naturally" superior, active and sexually aggressive male makes an initiative, or offers a contract, to which a "naturally" subordinate, passive woman "consents." An egalitarian sexual relationship cannot rest on this basis; it cannot be grounded in "consent." (Pateman 84) Pateman offers a solution: "Unless refusal of consent or withdrawal of consent are real possibilities, we can no longer speak of 'consent' in any genuine sense" (Pateman 72).

In Saiswaroop's text *Rukmini: Krishna's Wife*, Rukmini not only deals with the issue of a woman's consent and withdrawal in marriage contracts but also advocates the need to make choices practically. Her motherly love, wisdom, and intelligence, were seen in her actions and words. When the topic of Subhadra's marriage arises in the *Sudharma*, Rukmini expresses her deep motherly love for her younger sister-in-law by pointing out that Subhadra is still young. Rukmini's wisdom shines through as she advocates for giving importance to Subhadra's choice in her marriage "But what about Subhadra's choice? Shouldn't we talk to her about this?" (Iyer 127).

Instead of making decisions based solely on political alliances or clan interests, Rukmini emphasizes the significance of Subhadra's personal preferences and desires. This shows her belief in the importance of individual agency and the right to choose one's, life partner. When Subhadra elopes with Arjuna, Rukmini's intelligence and diplomacy come into play. Instead of reacting negatively to the unexpected situation, Rukmini suggests that they give the couple a proper ceremonial wedding. This approach not only maintains the dignity of the Yadava clan but also showcases her ability to think strategically and find a solution that aligns with the broader interests of her family.

Rukmini's character exemplifies valour, sheer wit, and strategic thinking. Her proactive approach to addressing potential threats and her selflessness in protecting her loved ones make her a strong and capable leader. While the members of the Yadava clan are enjoying themselves after the death of Jarasandha, Rukmini stands apart with a different mindset. Her concern lies in the vulnerability of Dwaraka, as the soldiers and militants have left to assist Yudhishthira's rajasuya yagna. Despite the festive atmosphere, Rukmini's courage allows her to see the potential dangers and take proactive measures. Rukmini's wisdom is evident when she approaches Ratnasena, who is knowledgeable about ships, and asks him to keep the ships ready whenever necessary. "Perhaps it was better to be paranoid than be caught unprepared." (Iyer 142) This strategic decision showcases her ability to think ahead and be prepared for any potential attacks.

Her quick thinking demonstrates her intelligence and resourcefulness. When she sends Mitravinda and Vadra to

Vadra's natal home under the pretext of taking rest, her true intention is to keep them safe from potential harm. This action reveals her selflessness and willingness to take necessary steps to protect those dear to her. When Satyabhama repeatedly asks about her concerns, Rukmini chooses not to keep things to herself. Instead, she openly shares her worries with Satyabhama, recognizing the importance of collaboration during times of crisis:

Satya, now you are a bride of Krishna Vasudeva. You need to get used to taking the blame for doing good to people. You know, it is a part and parcel of our lives now. (Iyer 145)

Together, they arrange to keep the valuables in a secure place and send all the citizens to safe locations. This collaborative effort demonstrates Rukmini's leadership and her ability to work with others to ensure the safety of the community.

When Rukmini learns about Shishupala's looting of Dwaraka and the abduction of Babhru's wife and little daughter, she does not hesitate to take immediate action. Her courage enables her to confront the dangerous situation head-on, without delay or hesitation:

Follow me. We are going in pursuit of those imbeciles!' She thundered, calling out to the guards, 'Satya, take as many guards with you as you need to lead these towards the port of Prabhasa. Gather whatever warriors you can there and meet me on the highway towards Avanti. I bet that is the route this monster has taken.' (Iyer 149)

Her swift and resourceful action in the face of Shishupala's attack and the abduction of Babhru's family showcase her unwavering commitment to safeguarding innocent lives. Rukmini's proactive approach in taking Revati's horses and going after the abductors herself illustrates her sense of responsibility and leadership. Instead of waiting for someone else to take action, she takes matters into her own hands, showing her strong sense of agency and responsibility. Rukmini's fearlessness and willingness to take personal initiative make her a remarkable and admirable figure, inspiring others to stand up for what is right and protect those in need.

Rukmini's immediate response to Krishna's decision is one of trust in his wisdom. She believes that Krishna never makes decisions without due deliberation, which reflects

her faith in his judgment and decision-making abilities. Her trust in Krishna showcases her deep connection and understanding of him as a person. While other co-wives like Satyabhama, Mitravinda, and Vadra view Krishna's actions as "sheer stupidity," Rukmini approaches the situation differently. She is open to understanding the reasons behind Krishna's choices and does not immediately condemn them. This display of empathy highlights her compassionate and understanding nature. Rukmini's perspective on Krishna's actions shows her deep concern for the well-being and dignity of the abducted women "No decision of yours is made without due deliberation, Krishna. I trust your wisdom." (Iyer 157)

As a woman, Rukmini is sensitive to the plight of the victims, having witnessed the suffering of Babhru's wife after Shishupala's assault. Her empathy for these women emphasizes her caring and compassionate nature. Rukmini's actions reflect her caring and proactive nature. By joining hands with Abhaya, she demonstrates her commitment to empowering the abducted women and giving them a chance to start anew.

Rukmini's character portrays a strong sense of responsibility and determination to make a positive impact in the lives of others, exemplifying her as a compassionate and capable individual. Although her brother Rukma has committed various wrongdoings in the past, but when he genuinely asks for forgiveness, she chooses to see his real emotions and forgives him. This act of forgiveness reflects her compassionate nature and willingness to let go of past grievances when presented with sincere remorse.

When Rukmini hears about the Pandavas' exile due to losing the game of dice, she immediately senses that there might be some deceit or foul play involved. Her intelligence and perceptive nature allow her to see beyond the surface and question the circumstances surrounding the Pandavas' predicament

I can't understand why Eldest does not accept everyone's suggestion to challenge the sons of Dhritarashtra in the battlefield! (Iyer 189)

Her caring nature is evident in her concern for Draupadi's well-being during the thirteen years of exile. She worries that the initial sympathy and camaraderie shown by other

kings towards Draupadi and the Pandavas might fade over time, leaving them vulnerable to potential harm or manipulation by those with ill intentions. She offers her support and companionship during their challenging time, demonstrating her willingness to stand by them in solidarity.

Iyer's Rukmini is a deeply faithful and loving woman, with an unwavering belief in Krishna's return despite uncertainty. She expresses her faith in Krishna's promise to come for them even after his supposed death. Rukmini's love and concern for her co-wives are evident when, devastated by Krishna's demise, they want to ascend his pyre, but she tries her best to stop them, understanding the consequences of displeasing him:

He has not gone anywhere, little one. It is a promise he would not fail to keep! What more can I say to convince you all? (Iyer 230)

Her actions reflect her strong sense of duty and responsibility towards her co-wives, displaying emotional resilience and maturity in supporting them during their vulnerable moments. Rukmini's unwavering faith in Krishna and her devotion to her co-wives make her a pillar of strength and compassion in the face of adversity.

Charlotte Bunch in her work *Class and Feminism: A Collection of Essays from the Furies* (1974) expressed her anxiety over the scarcity of intellectual women. She urged women to assume responsibility and combine organizational skills to overcome the anti-intellectual bias of the feminist movement. It seems Saiswaroopa Iyer's Rukmini is the answer to Bunch's recommendation when she says:

Critical thinking is the antithesis of a woman's traditional role. Women are supposed to worry about mundane survival problems, to brood about fate, and to fantasize in a personal manner. We are not meant to think analytically about society, to question the way things are, or to consider how things could be different. Such thinking involves an active, not a passive, relationship to the world. It requires confidence that your thoughts are worth pursuing and that you can make a difference... (hooks 114)

Rukmini thinks analytically and performs all her responsibilities selflessly as a leader in saving the people of Dwaraka from an impending flood. With her keen intellect

and wit, she anticipates the disaster and promptly orders the transfer of valuables and wealth to the mainland under heavy guard. Unexpectedly, the flood strikes earlier than expected, but Rukmini remains composed and directs the guards to an inconspicuous door leading southward to safety. Her intimate knowledge of the city's layout and past successes in protecting her people instil trust in her leadership:

Rukmini raised her hand to gather themselves and led the way through the corridor. 'The pillar triads will hold the palace walls in place for a while. We shall reach the southern creek from where we can wade into mainland Saurashtra. Others, too numb to give in to any emotion, followed her. She had led them all to safety once, this way. They could trust her to save them once again. They had to.' (Iyer xiii)

Rukmini's quick thinking, resourcefulness, and calm demeanour ultimately ensure the safety and survival of the entire city during the devastating flood, making her a heroic figure and a beacon of hope for the people of Dwaraka. Rukmini is a remarkable and strong-willed woman who refuses to conform to the societal norms and patriarchal expectations of her time. Her courage, self-will, determination, and fights against oppressive forces showcase her empowerment and independence. Rukmini emerges as a trailblazing figure who carves her own path and stands as an inspiration for others to assert their own agency and make their voices heard.

Feminist revisionist mythmakers remain deeply concerned with creating/ recreating a meaningful past to etch a glorious future for their sisters. Van Wyck Brooks showed a deep concern for 'creating a usable' (1918) while Mieke Bal termed it as 'helpful memories'(1999). Remembering the past in a different light will restructure feminine identity, and change society, and the human race. Helen Cixous in her text critical feminist essay "The Laugh of the Medusa", originally written in French as *Le Rire de la Méduse* in 1975 declared that 'the new woman is to come into being: by knowing her and by jointly giving birth to her.' (1975: 41) and Adrienne Rich had shared similar thoughts in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision":

One thing I am sure of: just as woman is becoming her own midwife, creating herself anew, so man will have to

learn to gestate and give birth to his own subjectivity — something he has frequently wanted woman to do for him... Women can no longer be primarily mothers and muses for men: we have our own work cut out for us. (Rich 25).

Women writers are continuously transgressing the confines of gender and subverting patriarchal texts with ease. They are well versed with the universal appeal of myths and they are relentlessly crafting stories—myths and their limited experience being their only raw material. They explore their spaces and are determined to push their limits so as to make meaningful, relevant contributions. Saiswaroop Iyer, an author equally anxious to instil positive changes in society by erasing the misconceptions propagated by patriarchy, portrayed Rukmini who is tranquil, completely at peace with herself— also playful, clear-sighted, intelligent, strong and resilient. Iyer's portrayal is like a breath of fresh air and opens new dimensions which were totally missing from the texts produced by patriarchy. Shashi Deshpande shared the experience of an author in her essay titled "Writing from the Margin: And Other Essays" (2003):

When I start writing, I begin with leaving a huge margin, a large blank space which I know I will soon fill up with alterations, corrections, new ideas and so on. And sure enough, in time the margin is full, the words begin creeping into the centre of the page, the margin and the text merge and finally...the margin takes over and becomes the real text. (Deshpande 165)

The unsaid, veiled and 'othered', with years of struggle, suddenly find themselves beyond the control of the dominant value system. They are reaffirming their bonds with their ancient mothers and exposing the falsity embedded in the construction of the feminine 'other' infamously propagated and naturalized by patriarchy. Feminist revisionist mythmaking brings to the fore those perspectives and aspects that had been ignored, overlooked and even hushed under the carpet. These writers successfully strive to instil the feminine principle that had earlier been kept away from the dominant, normative culture and practice.

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