



Second Edition

Trauma-Informed Drama Therapy

Transforming Clinics, Classrooms, and Communities

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Chapter 5

DEVI: THE USE OF MYTH IN DRAMA THERAPY WITH WOMEN SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN INDIA

ANSHUMA KSHETRAPAL

The Sesame Method of drama therapy is a well-established approach to in-depth personal exploration (Dekker, 1996). Sesame-trained drama therapists bring the collective unconscious to life by using myths and stories to explore client experiences. Carl Jung posited, "The whole of mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious" (Jung, 1960). Within the purview of analytical psychology, the collective unconscious is an inherited layer of the psyche, common to humanity. It contains the spiritual heritage of humankind, and within it, one can locate images, dreams, fantasies and feelings that may or may not directly resonate with our conscious and lived experience (Jung, 1965). The collective unconscious brings the individual into "communion with the world at large" (Jung, 1998). Through time and space, these motifs, symbols and images have common roots in myths, stories, and fairy tales across cultures. At the same time, each individual's unique personality, family, and culture are also highlighted.

The relationship between the body and the mind is also a fundamental principle that guides Sesame's methodology. "Our bodies contain our life stories just as they contain bones, muscles, organs, nerves and blood" (Halprin, 2002, p. 17). Our bodies hold memory in the form of movements, gestures or positions that remind us of specific events from our past. Theatre theoretician Jerzy Grotowski (1968) ventured that the body not only has memory but also 'is memory.' In this way, our psyches, our inner world of feelings, emotions, dreams, imagination and the ineffable mind, are inextricably linked with our physical selves. This is the connection we engage through embodiments and enactments of mythologies to access the collective and personal unconscious through drama and movement therapy.

The Sesame method allows the client to protect their vulnerabilities while still bringing the unconscious to awareness. It is an oblique way of delving into psychological processes, which allows the client an open and safe space within the therapeutic relationship. Though more direct methods and process work grounded in talk therapy are used, play, movement and myth remain central to the Sesame philosophy.

In therapy sessions – as in life – every story has its moments, plot points and characters with which one can resonate. The use of myth provides a metaphorical space within which the client can express their feelings and experiences without directly confronting the specific reality of their life. This allows the client to have some agency in how much they are willing to explore their lived realities or even imaginary perspectives. This methodology of aesthetic distance gives archetypes ‘a mirror and a mould’ (Dekker, 1996).

While myths transcend boundaries of time, culture and space, they can also be psychologically threatening if the therapist is not conscious of the implicitly maladaptive structures they sometimes reinforce (Thakrar et al., 2019). Sufficient research, reflexivity and adequate training are required to ensure clients will engage with these narratives in a safe way. This was my personal experience too, as a trainee and a domestic violence survivor from India, my personal traumas were symbolically relived in the mythic strand of the training. Subsequently, learning more about trauma theory and working in placements with other survivors from South East Asia, further helped me to create distance, resonate, engage with the work and reframe the use of dramatherapy in this context. Working with set narratives can be powerful and I have found that the choice of the mythic narrative is pivotal. To be successful in therapeutic work, the narrative must have choices embedded in them. Multiplicity of roles, settings and the representation of dualities (Jung, 1965) help make the stories open-ended and allow room for the clients’ agency. In fact, stories brought in by the clients themselves may be the most appropriate. Myths and stories that are too specific and geared towards binary moralistic inquiries may not be suitable in such cases and indeed may need to come under scrutiny for their possibility of harm.

My work in India and this chapter are the continuation of building this framework. In this chapter, I aim to bring out the perspective of a survivor’s journey through working with myth in dramatherapy both as a therapist and as a client.

Typically, dramatic projection uses material far from one’s lived reality yet which contains universal symbols beyond cultural or personal memory (Landy, 1994). Nevertheless, I use Indian mythology with my Indian clients because it makes my work more accessible to us, and helps to decolonize and reconstruct my foreign training. The context will become more apparent as I discuss the importance of reflecting on mythology in any psychological work in India (Ramaprasad & Hemchand, 2011).

INDIA, FAMILY AND MYTH

This chapter represents my work and is affected by my limitations. In no way does it claim to be representative of all the work or context of the entire country of India. I will speak to the popular oral myths dominant in the psyches of the typical demographic of my clientele: North Indian, Hindu, urban, *Savarna*¹, cisgender women. Hence, what will be discussed as Indian mythology will be the prevalent Hindu myths from North India. Several versions of these myths exist, subject to regional and cultural differences. The myths, family systems, stigmas and surveys that I will refer to may not apply to everyone but are of common knowledge within Indian society.

Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar in his book *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytical Study of Childhood and Society in India* (2012), explains this by stating, "In an apparent reversal of a Western pattern, traditional myths in India are less of a source of intellectual and aesthetic satisfaction for the mythologist than of emotional recognition for others. . . . Myths in India are not part of a bygone era. . . . Vibrantly alive, their symbolic power intact, Indian myths constitute a cultural idiom which aids the individual in the construction and integration of his inner world."

The myths and stories I refer to in this paper are steeped in our everyday life: grandmothers fondly narrate them (mine included), idioms and everyday references are based on them, moral reprimands often include a mythological character's possible response to the person's actions. The characters are referred to as though they are members of the family. Children, households, shops, streets, bazaars, even entire cities are named after them. For example, the most common names in India are related to Ramayana. In particular, naming anything after Lord Rama or Goddess Sita is considered most auspicious. Thus, myths are relevant to us every day from birth (when we are named) to death (our legacies).

Given the prevalence of the mythological idiom in India, a therapeutic case study narrative could easily describe the client's intrapsychic conflict in terms of myths, especially since the overarching structure of Indian communities, castes and families are drawn from mythology (Chakravarti, 1993). In this way, every person is born into a form of determinism, dependent on factors of belonging to a particular caste and family. "In India, family has been the dominating institution both in the life of the individual and in the life of the community. There is virtually no scope to exist without being a member of a family" (Sonawat, 2001). Various studies on Indian families have suggested that even as the more traditional forms of joint families, where two

¹ *Savarna*: people who fall within the hierarchical caste system: in the four main castes of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. As opposed to *Avarnas*, or 'outcasts' of the caste system

to four generations of the family lived together, are transitioning to a more nuclear setup, the ideals of family life and conduct remain collectivist. "For more collectivistic societies like ours, the self is defined relative to others, and is concerned with belongingness, dependency, empathy, and reciprocity. Relationships with others are emphasized, while personal autonomy, space and privacy are considered secondary" (Chadda, 2013).

One common linguistic symbol of this, which is most commonly used as an adage to pause any individualistic action, is "*log kya kahenge?*" (What will people say?). This commonly used phrase is a sign of the philosophy pertaining to reconsidering volition, an individual is asked to take the focus away from the personal and bring it to the viewpoint of the collective (Rahman, 2021). In Indian mythology and folklore, adverse consequences follow those who set out to be individualistic, even if they are Gods, and especially if they are Goddesses (Balodhi, 1996). It is believed that "mythic explanations narratively differentiate and merge the realms of the deities from the mundane domains of mortals and offer clarifications of roles and rules by which to live" (Morrison, 2012).

INDIAN WOMEN AND MYTH

Hinduism is a way of life. Underlying guiding principles of self, family and society are offered through the ancient texts, the Vedas, Puranas and Upanishads. The Itihasas (histories) of Ramayana and Mahabharata give room for debate, discussion and multiple interpretation. Because these myths are polyphonic and polysemic, teachers at Takshila and Nalanda's (oldest universities in the world, 895 AD) promote discussions on dichotomies and subjectivities through these stories and myths. However, more linear understandings of the texts have gained popularity over time, shedding the nuances toward the more moralistic and binary, even modern-day textbooks erasing some of the diversity of cultures. At times questioning or interrogating the text may be considered anti-Hindu or anti-national (Truschke, 2020).

Some skewed versions of the narratives are repeated as dogmas that judge an individual's right or wrong behavior through guilt and shame (Das, 2006). Many youth including myself came to view mythology merely as a means of reprimand. For example, Goddess Sita came to haunt me as the symbol of the ideal, pious, self-sacrificial woman I thought I could not be. She was used as an archetypal image to magnify the guilt I felt for having walked away from abuse (Figure 5-1).



Figure 5-1. A typical image of Princess Sita, shown here, taking care of her husband Ram, having chosen to follow him on his exile, into the forest.

Further, in Indian mythological discourse, women are placed within a strict binary division: either the woman is placed on a pedestal, elevating her to a goddess-like entity, guardian of universal power, wealth and knowledge; or she is placed below the lowest caste, as property or worse (Sarvesh, 2018). This binary representation of women is endemic within Indian mythology as well as ancient legal texts such as the *Manusmriti* (Patwari, 2016). One example is the *Cheer Haran* – a definitive moment in the story of Mahabharata, where queen Draupadi is gambled away by her husbands and the protagonists of the story, the *Pandavas*, to the antagonists, the *Kauravas*. The *Kauravas* then proceed to strip off her clothes and goad the *Pandavas* to use her as an object to humiliate them. While the act of the *Kauravas* is condemned in the text, the reverence for the *Pandavas* remains unaffected by their mistreatment of Draupadi. Common everyday language incorporates examples of normalized violence perpetrated against women and the shame that is brought upon the men. For example, in some myths when a woman is molested, the narrative that follows is about how the husband will be coping with the dishonor.

Another commonly used phrase in everyday language is “*Naak kat jayegi*” (Nose will be cut off), drawing from a story within the Ramayana. Abridged versions of the Ramayana may have one believe that the war between Ram (the ideal man/protagonist) and Ravana (antagonist) began when the latter kidnapped Ram’s wife. But actually, that came to pass only because Ravana’s sister Shurpnakha had proposed to Lakshman (Ram’s younger brother) and tried to seduce him. Lakshman promptly chopped off her nose using his sword for being ugly and shameless enough to propose to a man. Ravana had thus come to seek revenge by kidnapping Sita. Lakshmana is fiercely defended and lauded for this act. Once again, violence against women is a subplot to further the main plot point of men achieving victory and honor. Honor Based Violence (HBV) has found much space in Indian mythologies that negates women’s rights and suffering.

Women are elevated to the ranks of Goddesses when they demonstrate certain ideals of behavior such as: suffering in silence, sacrifice, submission and giving up on personal desire for collective or familial goals. Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar (1989) notes a variation on this mythological image within the Indian context, that of the mother-goddess or the maternal-feminine, who is asexualized and self-sacrificial, accepting of physical abuse or even death to save or protect her family. The equivocal terms ‘religion’ and ancient ‘scriptures,’ in turn, legitimize these norms of oppression and suppression, especially within Hindu culture. “Of the three ancient myths studied (Hindu, Greek and Chinese), Hinduism presents us with the strictest and most restrictive roles for women” (Strippoli, 2017).

Myth has gained particular relevance in client work in India, as current sociological and anthropological research is showing an alarmingly increasing regression to dogmatic norms influenced by myth and religious text (Jaffrelot, 2008). The movement toward feminism, social justice, and liberalism has provoked a reaction among many religious groups (Vanaik, 1997). “In this process of competitive de-secularisation, regaining control over women becomes a religious imperative” (Sarvesh, 2018).

Fortunately, a progressive movement has emerged on the sidelines that promotes an alternative re-telling of mythology through a feminist lens. These rewritten mythologies are widely available in paperback forms. For example, *Sita’s Ramayana* by Samhita Arni or *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Divakaruni. Rewriting these mythologies into modern-day fiction with female characters as protagonists is being used as a tool for subverting the status quo and challenging the discourse that patriarchal myths have established. The emergence of these books reflects a shift in the Indian unconscious that finds a voice in this new literature. Yet the old discourse remains firmly rooted in the fabric of Indian society. Many women are caught in the conflict between these two realities. Nevertheless, the essential point is that the use of Indian

mythology in psychotherapeutic work can be a double-edged sword and idealized assumptions about myth must be carefully questioned.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND THE INDIAN FAMILY

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS), released by the Union Health Ministry of India, is a nationwide, large-scale, multi-round survey conducted in a representative sample of households throughout India. It is a critical component in policy development and family law development.

The latest surveys, both NFHS-4 (2016) and the partially completed NFHS-5 (2021), confirm that domestic violence is deeply entrenched and widely prevalent in India (Agarwal, 2021). They report that one in every three women surveyed has faced domestic violence. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA), comprehensively defines domestic violence. It includes all forms of physical, verbal, emotional, economic and sexual violence and covers the actual acts of violence and threats of violence.

The survey showed that many women in India are supportive of domestic violence. The surveyed women between the ages of 40 to 49 were the most supportive of domestic violence, with a majority (55%) of them in agreement. Even younger girls between the age of 15-19 agreed with domestic violence, with only a marginally lower 48% justifying the same (Saaliq, 2018). It is interesting to note that while the survey showed that both men and women are aware that domestic violence is morally and legally offensive, they choose to ignore this common knowledge. This could be because our societal norms have normalized the tolerance of domestic violence. The phenomena of "*log kya kahenge*" or placing collective ideals before personal choice is deep within the culture.

An article on a famous news site The Wire described one harrowing tale of an individual who escaped her husband who beat and raped her, but then had suffered abuse all over again when her parents forbade her from speaking the truth. They urged her to return and fix her marriage even as she told them of her trauma. Everyone's chief concern seemed to be what society thought of her and how best to maintain her social reputation (Taniparti, 2018).

"Individuals in communities that value honor are not just motivated by a desire to obtain and maintain honor but are equally concerned about avoiding shame" (Gill, 2014). In a culture where the vessel and container for this honor are the family's women, HBV is considered acceptable.

In popular culture, there is an acknowledgment of this social malpractice and its roots in myth, and media messaging overtly acknowledges the rampant

issue. One of the most controversial and popular PSAs was the Abused Goddesses ad campaign run by the TapRoot ad agency in 2013. "In place of their usually serene expressions, the three Goddesses (Lakshmi, Saraswati and Durga) were instead bruised and crying" (Edoho-Eket, 2019). The use of subversive religious imagery to bring attention to social justice issues proves how the problem resides in the cultural fabric. However, the ads received criticism for having an anti-Hindu bias since domestic violence is not only a Hindu issue. TapRoot was sued for blasphemy, and other charges were levied for the defamation of mythology. "For many devotees the abuse of women and the worship of Goddesses does not represent hypocrisy. That women are powerful does not necessitate bowing to that power, it may reinforce the notion that powerful women should be restrained at all costs" (Edoho-Eket, 2019).

It is widely known in the discourse of abuse that the violence begins well before the visceral act of physical violence, with the victim being primed, and the perpetrator alternating between violence and apology (Rakovec-Felser, 2014). Consequently, the victim is made to believe that they deserve this treatment, and, subjected to the denigration of women who protest, the woman is rendered helpless. Agency only exists when the choice is between one form of abuse meted by the family or the other meted by the larger society. These norms are often justified using mythological references.

METHOD AND MYTH

As a counselling psychotherapist, before my dramatherapy training, I noticed the statistics around domestic abuse reflected in the clinical work. I worked in the female ward of a private hospital, and the referrals were primarily adult women. Each client inevitably revealed some abuse or trauma related to intimate partner violence. It was shockingly rampant: even in a generic psychological health support group offered for the women in the outpatient department, 15 out of the 17 women revealed an abusive ex- or current partner. The group was primarily psychoeducational and not geared towards exploring violence. These experiences led me to dramatherapy. "Trauma is a psychophysical experience, whether or not the traumatic event causes direct bodily harm" (Rothschild, 2000, p. 5). Traumatic body memory (Koch, Fuchs, Summa, & Muller, 2012) emerges in bodily symptoms without an explicit connection between the present moment and the past experience. Creative processes such as drama, movement, or other art form help us explore and deepen the relationship between psyche and soma (Jones, 2010).

For someone who has undergone domestic violence, restoring a trusting relational space, safety, boundaries and a connection with the body in itself

is a large part of the work (McFarlane, 1996), but the road ahead also means understanding core belief systems that had led the client into the violent relationship in the first place. These maladaptive belief systems are forms of transgenerational trauma that become internalized.

Though many of the survivors I worked with were from educated, liberal and modern urban families, they still held onto ideas that normalized this violence. Though they understood that what was happening was wrong, they found leaving their partners impossible. The implicit stigma of not being able to make the marriage work or being the home breaker rendered them powerless. They expressed fear of punishment or social rejection. In India, girls are often told that their real home will be with their husband, that you are "*paraya dhan*" (someone else's property) (Agnes, 2016). This creates uncertainty in whether their parents will accept them if they left their abusive husbands.

My work with survivors of domestic violence developed out of these encounters and then was informed by my dramatherapy training: Beginning in explorations of the body through movement and drama techniques, then through images that help create resources for safety, and finally moving into material related to the abuse through aesthetically distanced methods often utilizing myths with a relational focus. I will now describe some client journeys and include my own countertransference experience. The work has been nuanced and unique to each individual; their names have been changed to conceal their identities.

DHARMA OR DESIRE

From the Sanskrit word *dhri*, meaning to uphold, Dharma can be translated as religion, law, or ethics. It stands for the principles and purposes, influences and institutions that shape the character of individuals and members of society. It is Hinduism's moral law, or the rules and roles by which all of society must function. It can even refer to inanimate objects and their purpose. For example, it is the Dharma of the sun to shine and the water to flow. In this way, it also denotes the status of universal law: mythology is therefore both the source of Dharma and the justification of the Dharma.

The dharmic women in the mythologies are represented by obedient daughters, sisters, mothers and wives. They generally act according to the wishes of men in their lives and are, therefore, regarded as good, noble, virtuous, even divine. In the rare circumstances where they act on impulse, out of curiosity or fail to obey orders, they meet with tragic events. The role is their Dharma. They rarely have descriptors or storylines of their own, as if they cease to exist outside of the relational spaces. They are the custodians of superego ideals (Freud, 1923) for the family or even entire kingdoms.

Sita represents the most common image of an ideal woman in society (Guzder, 1991). She is the reincarnation of Goddess Lakshmi, but her role in the myth is deemed ideal because, at every step, she chooses to sacrifice her personal desire for the common good or for the good of her husband, Ram. She chooses to leave her princess status to follow Ram into the jungles after he is banished from his kingdom for 14 years. Despite being capable of freeing herself from captivity, she waits for Ram to save her so she does not hurt his ego.

This is the version of the myth my client, Shraddha (41, cisgender, female), was told when she was getting married. She was one of my first referrals as I moved to private practice in India. A psychiatrist referred her to my practice for insomnia and anxiety and our work together spanned over eighteen months of weekly sessions. In our first few sessions, Shraddha talked about destiny and how the suffering of a woman is what defines her because "it is in the suffering that she is a woman." Versions of this statement were repeated while she recounted her husband's physical abuse against her.

She was comfortable with conversation, but every time Shraddha connected with her body through movement or drama, she became emotionally dysregulated. This usually resulted in her abruptly ending our sessions. After almost a year of building rapport, resourcing and this repetitive behavior, we began to work with specific images related to her issues.

Shraddha believed that Devis who were worshipped had successful marriages with their husbands because they knew how to be strategic. She believed that she did not understand how to be strategic, was too vocal, and therefore paid the price with violence. In her opinion, the only way to circumvent the violence was to have biological children, but since she had an inoperable condition that rendered her infertile, she wanted to learn better ways of reducing her everyday anxieties. One day, she picked up some postcards that had characters from myths on them. She showed me one of Mahabharat depicting the story of Karna. Karna, the illegitimate son of Queen Kunti in Mahabharat, is never entirely accepted into the family. He works hard to prove his belongingness to the family but, in the end, is sacrificed in the war.

She said she was like Karna, someone who was on the fringes and never truly accepted by her family of origin because she was too sensitive.

Sh: Kunti should have aborted Karna. It would've been kinder. Or he could've just gone away and never come back to the kingdom. All this sense of duty and his Dharma killed him.

Me: So, he had an alternative but chose to return? Why do you think that is?

Sh: Destiny! I guess Dharma also gives you purpose. Otherwise, you're floating, not knowing your place in the system. But he was a man. He could've changed all that. He was foolish. He had a choice.

- Me: Having choice seems gendered. Without that gendered privilege, is Dharma's suffering inescapable?
- Sh: I am going to die tied to my husband. I know this. I was born with this curse, like Karna. This infertility of mine means I am as powerless as him but even more so. The world would've forgiven him his a-dharma. I'm a woman, I wouldn't find any place in the world. (Tearing up) My daughter was supposed to be my way to some power, but she's adopted. I am constantly reminded by my husband how she's not really mine. But she is! She is!
- Me: (After a pause) I hear you. That sounds very difficult. Would you like to stay in the role or step out and talk about it?
- Sh: What benefit would it be to stay in this role?
- Me: It is bringing some resonance, but we could explore alternatives. Maybe we could also see what stepping out of that pre-determined destiny could feel like?
- Sh: What good would that do? (Pause) Let's just do our breathing, de-role thing. I should go.

Over the next few weeks, she canceled, rescheduled or was late for a number of sessions, and in general was less engaged, especially in the play. Eventually, she asked to discontinue because the work "unnecessarily brought up things that she could not do anything about." We scheduled one last session, in which she said, "Look, my destiny is to suffer, even if I know why, it won't change anything. Women like me don't have a place to go in the world, but I will make sure that this daughter that I am raising, will be an example of a stronger woman." She spoke about how the insight and awareness from the sessions will help her continue with her Dharma. It had made her belief in her destiny, clearer and her decision to stay in the marriage, stronger. She no longer "wasted time imagining an alternative." She stated how happiness is overrated and how her Dharma will help her survive. "I'm not fighting anymore. My body feels okay with this. I'm okay with this. Even Sita, through all the suffering, never left Ram. Why would she? Where else could she even go?"

The women in mythology, who desire, are ambitious and seek power, cannot excel in relational spaces. In the myths as they have existed, women who desire have not been central characters; they are either marginalized or vilified (Talwar, 2018). In the rare case that they are central to the mythology, their desire is marginalized as a temporary impulse, unless they were rendered as Goddesses or *Avatars* of Goddesses outside of the purview of how real women behave. If they are sexually assertive, they are depicted as worthy of punishment at the hands of the ideal men, e.g., Shurpanakha (Figure 5-2). They are dismissible as immature or id driven (Freud, 1923) and therefore disgraced.

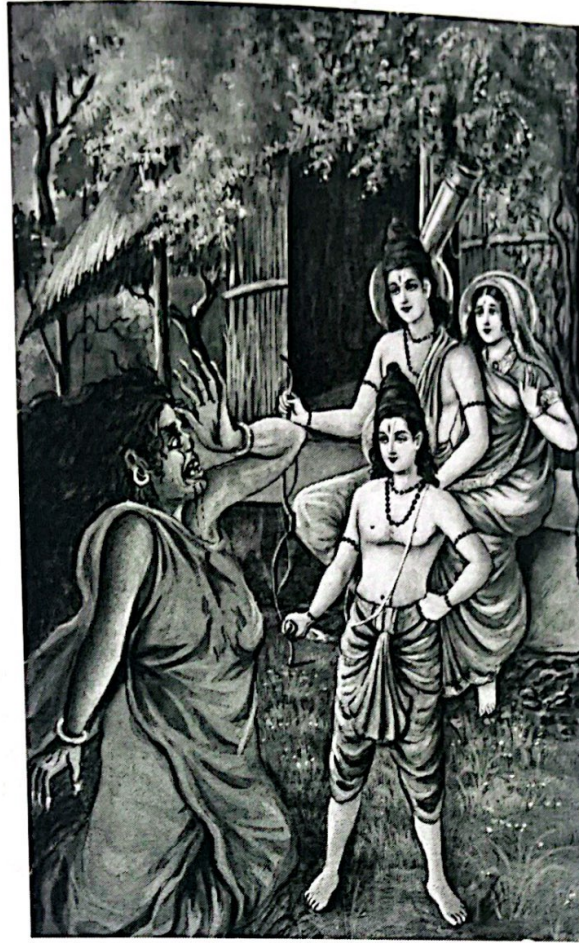


Figure 5-2. *Laxman cutting off Shurpanakha's nose.*

Just as in mythology, desire is pathologized in women in India (Puri, 1999). Humiliating them when they display these untoward desires of power is the man's Dharma to restore her femininity. This is accomplished through HBV, honor killings, or teaching a lesson through public humiliation, even molestation. A woman who expresses desire, sexual or otherwise, is considered perverse, aggressive and dangerously subversive. In her book *Women, Body, Desire in Post-Colonial India*, sociologist Jyothi Puri describes this through the hyper-fixation of Indian society's demand for a virgin bride. A torn hymen is a signifier of a woman who has desire, and desires that lie outside the purview of marriage and motherhood are viewed as threats to society's family systems and collectivist ideals. Both perpetrators and victims use the subjugation of dangerous desire for the good of the collective as an argument to normalize and legitimize domestic violence.

Meera (35, cisgender, female) had become disillusioned with therapy, considering that every therapist she had gone to seemed to echo her parents' words. She said, "Is therapy supposed to be a moral blueprint for me to follow? Everybody keeps saying I should stay with my husband, even the therapists."

Several months were spent working on rapport and trust in the therapeutic relationship and process. Once Meera opened up about her dreams in sessions, she started having flashbacks. She recounted sleeping in her car, afraid to go home, or locking herself in the bathroom and sleeping propped up on a bucket to use her body to push the door closed, afraid her husband would break the latches in his anger. These visceral images appeared after a fair bit of psychosomatic exploration since they had been repressed. But when these images emerged, she reacted with anger, lamenting, "What does it mean that I don't remember? Why don't I remember? Am I making this up?" However, gradually upon their release, she reported that her dream material changed. She slept better, but now in her dreams, she was a young child and being chased. Even in enactments, she occupied small spaces. She used images like cocoons, rabbit holes from Alice in Wonderland, tunnels or being Sita, swallowed whole by the Earth after the *Agni Pariksha*.

Ram had rescued Sita from Ravana but soon became concerned about her chastity since she had been abducted. To test her purity and virtue, Sita was asked to endure a trial by fire or Agni Pariksha. She was asked to step into flames, and if she came out unscathed, she would prove herself worthy of being his wife and deserving of being the queen by his side. Although Sita does go through the trial and passes the test, she then chooses to be swallowed by the Earth, having had to bear this humiliation.

Meera asked me to place cushions around her and chose to speak from within this womb-like space for the rest of the session.

- Me: How are you feeling about being there?
Meera: It's safer to be small. No one sees you. No one judges you.
Me: How does it feel to be outside of this space then?
Meera: Judged but the problem is, I think I do it more to myself. Whether I am outside or in. I know that I did this to myself. I allowed it to happen. Ram may have set up the fire pit, but I walked through it. I deserve this now.
Me: How can you escape the judgment then? It sounds like both versions of you are in the pit together, the smaller one that wants to be safe and the one who is judging her.
Meera: Yes! That's good because smaller me will only be safe as long as she is kept in check. Never again. I will not allow it. Love is negotiable, intimacy is negotiable, but respect is non-negotiable. It was all weaponized against me. I wanted love, so I became vulnerable. Go ask Sita. Even she'd rather go into the Earth than get abused and insulted.

I reflected that I was struck by how she subverted what she had proclaimed was Sita's fault to becoming Sita's bid for self-respect. After a few sessions of

working with this image, I asked if Sita had any other choices than being swallowed by the Earth. Meera asked if I had heard of the version in which she leaves the kingdom to live in a nearby village for the rest of her days. When enacted, she became positively gleeful, "Is that an option? Can a woman really just live by herself? Would it be allowed? I would love to own a small apartment." She then described what her home would be like, full of little trinkets and joys. Allowing herself to get in touch with her desires was perhaps the first time she had thought of owning and deserving something. It felt as though in embracing desire, she embraced her humanity and allowed herself to step off the pedestal of the Devi. Soon after, she expressed a desire to move away from the predetermined script of an abused person by working more with desire. Currently, she is writing a script about her life as it might be transformed if she embraced her own desire.

To Shraddha and Meera, the choice between Dharma and desire is dichotomous, and hence, one system must break for the other to survive. In the mythologies, we rarely find examples of how to bridge, negotiate or even survive these dichotomies. In other words, the choices are presented as between superego idealism or id-driven recklessness, with no room for the ego to negotiate. Each person must make that room ourselves, albeit with consequences.

ANGER OR RESILIENCE

With many of the women I work with, the archetype of the self-sacrificial, desire-free Goddess will not allow for ugly emotions like sadness or anger (Madhavan, 2019). In moments of reconnecting with repressed memories of extreme events, these clients will have an abrupt and conscious change in affect and compose themselves.

Savitri (37, cisgender, female) was an accomplished artist, dancer and poet, and she came into my dramatherapy practice to learn how to channel her artistic expressions for self-development. She said she was not particularly sad but did not want to be so agitated and irritable anymore. She felt anger was an uncouth emotion to display, particularly for a woman of her stature. In our work together, she began by expressing herself using large and aesthetic movements, using the whole room to dance and tell her story, often using many objects. She imagined herself directing an entire healing Center using the arts and drew a floor plan spanning several acres. Simultaneously, she said it could never happen. "It is impossible, who is going to give me the land, the time and the choices to be able to do this? I have children now. Also, because I gave birth to two daughters, I have no power in the house now, I can make

my art, I can make my floor plans and be excited about it, but I don't think I should be dreaming this big."

Over time, she revealed that her husband was verbally and emotionally abusive and went missing for days on end refusing to tell her where he had been. He told her not to ask unladylike questions and that since he did not interfere with her role, she should not interfere with his. She described feeling powerless at such times and asked if I could prescribe her an activity or give her a pill that would help her maintain her ladylikeness.

In her explorations, she asked for music and danced around the room until she stopped from exhaustion. She said she felt reckless, like in a trance, and sometimes, in a rage. Whenever anger surfaced, she talked about images of Goddesses like *Kali* or *Durga*. Although popular and representative of feminine anger, these myths also speak of the Goddesses leaving their dharmic states in an altered state of anger. These were always temporary states, at times of extreme impingements on their integrity, and controlled by their male partners. Such was the case for *Kali* when *Shiva* stopped her when he felt her anger was out of control.

Me: Is that the fear? What if anger was really felt or expressed, you wouldn't be able to control it?

S: It's dangerous. Anger controls him. I have seen it. Also, anger is not healthy. *Kali* nearly killed *Shiva*. I don't want to be that out of control. How does that help? I'll lose my higher ground. Some days, that's all I have. I meditate, I do yoga, I pray every day, to evolve me away from such emotions. Express them out of my system.

Me: What about our work together? When you feel angry here, what about that?

S: Yes, I get angry here, but I leave it here and when I can't, I hate myself for it. I know I can express it in other ways. Sometimes, I want to walk away. But isn't leaving also violent? I would be no better than him, then? I just need to learn how to stay resilient and not keep dwelling. How would anger help me?

Refusing to engage with this further, she spoke of her Centre again. She spoke of building a commune for women who have not gotten married and have spent their lives as *Brahma Kumaris*.² She said that to be happy, the princesses and the queens in myths and stories had to give up on the world like *Shakuntala*, who spent her days shunned from the palace but happy in the forest. She was jealous of all the *daasis*³ who stayed in the palace and had fun and shared

² *Brahma Kumaris*: A commune of women committed to living a spiritual life outside of material pleasures such as ownership, marriage or family.

³ *Daasis*: Hindu women, typically of a lower caste who were slaves or servants in kingdoms.

secrets together. "Queens and Princesses cannot have these. Connections and the emotions are actually for the lower class and lower caste women."

Savitri, of upper caste, was bestowed the responsibility of being equanimous and forgiving even when she was being bruised. Goddesses, queens, and princesses can not have anger, however righteous, or defy social norms for their own selfish reasons; otherwise, they would be facing the *Agni Pariksha* and have to leave the kingdoms.

Devis cannot appear as victims. The therapy space was a space of rebellion, an anger and rebellion circumscribed by her gendered helplessness. But here too, by not stating her feelings verbally, she held on to the emotionlessness as a defiant state toward the rebellion. As long as anger was expressed through the body and movement but not consciously admitted to, she did not have to admit her powerlessness or victimhood. If her anger found verbal confirmation, it would place even the therapy space in the realm of unreal along with the Goddesses. She was split between her resilience and her need to express her anger, a split I felt as well in my countertransference.

Savitri brought in poems or dream images in which I appeared as a symbol of the maternal-feminine who was to emancipate her (Kakar, 1989). In my supervision space, I voiced this split in my countertransference: I wanted to be an activist, get her in touch with her anger and save her, versus wanting her to be a grown up and show her resilience by tolerating these social pressures. I believe we both felt a combination of being stuck, impatient, and uncertain. In the end, we chose to stay with and tolerate this unsolvable conflict together, with its impossible choices. In this way, our therapeutic work resonates with society and provides space for some safely experienced dissonance.

HOME

Preeti, 27, cisgender, female, was constantly being told from a young age how beautiful she was and how she would marry well. She married at the age of 18 and endured eight years of emotional and physical abuse at the hands of her in-laws and husband. As an affluent, politically affiliated family, they had her beaten up by the police when she tried to file a complaint against them. They sent her to therapy to 'correct' her which meant they expected me to reprimand her.

Preeti: Whenever I confide in someone, they ask, how can you let this happen?

Me: Is that how you think, too, that you're letting this happen?

- P: It doesn't fit my script. For my friends, I am this strong, young, working woman, childless. Why am I sticking around with these guys?
- Me: What's the script for staying then?
- P: Where would I go? "Paraya dhan hun. Kahan jaungi? Parents ki naak katwani hai kya?" (I am someone else's property. My parents will have to bear the brunt of my shame.) I can't be that woman, the home breaker, the unmarried one. When I tried telling my parents once, my father had told me, 'Devi bheji thi, sarv gun sampan. Hamara kaam ho gaya. Ghar hai woh tera, arthi niklegi ab teri wahan se, dabke reh ja, khush rahegi. Baaki tera karam hai, teri kismet hai.' (We sent a Goddess to them, intact with all the best qualities. We have done our bit. That is your home now. You will only leave it when you're dead. Don't create any trouble, daughter, and they will keep you happy. But if they aren't, that's your Karma and kismet.)
- Me: Is that how you feel? That the abuse is your Karma, your kismet?
- P: Deviyon ki toh kismet bhi nahi hoti. (Goddesses are not afforded even their own Destinies.) Even our kismet is dependent on the men or other custodians. Tell me what to do? Where to go?
- Me: It feels like you want me to be the decision-maker here. Am I also a custodian here?
- P: Let it be anyone but me. I am not equipped for this. No one ever taught me how. I own nothing – no fallback options. I was told this is what life is supposed to be about. I did everything right. It's not fair, but at least the abuse in this (marital) home is blatant and not hidden like at my parents', where it is disguised as care. Till 13 years of age, I was Devi; they prayed for me during Navratri⁴ and then suddenly, I was dirty when I got my period. Asked to fast, taught how to cook, embroider, do make-up, they got rid of me as fast as they could.

Preeti is referring to a ritual in parts of the country during *Navratri*, young girls who have not yet had their period are given gifts and prayed to. In many parts of India, customs and rituals mark the beginning of the menstrual cycle in girls. Pre-menarche, their participation in rituals is from the perspective of being a young goddess, whereas menarche marks the end of their time in their parental home. Although this does not remain true in urban spaces, where the minimum legal age of marriage (18) is typically adhered to, nevertheless the rituals have prevailed. "Particular attention has been given to the opposed duality between the Goddesses' unmarried and

⁴ *Navratri*: It is a festival that spans nine days and is celebrated every year in the autumn, in honor of the nine prominent goddesses of the Hindu religion.

married forms; characteristically the former are malevolent and destructive goddesses while the latter are benevolent and subordinate" (Lambert, 1994). For Preeti, remaining married means taking on the virtues allocated to the married women and being treated well in society even as she names feeling homeless internally. This state is tolerable as opposed to the loss of home, guilt and the shame of being divorced.

Our work in therapy is about finding home. We continue to build several versions of home in the therapy space. Huts, castles, gardens, palaces from mythologies, just about anywhere but her parental home or marital home is home to her for now in this in-between space.

DRAMATHERAPIST DILEMMAS

Roles and Resonances

My own subjective experiences and shared culture meant that I am navigating these psychological transitions in society and culture just as much as these women. Simultaneous with this work, my personal life reflects these themes and intrapsychic conflicts, and my personal work and supervision helps keep and maintain the distance I need. The modality itself, dramatherapy, also helps in this regard. Even as my own abuse, divorce, and societal perpetrators are reflected in the client's narratives, their subjective interpretations, departures and subversions differentiated their journeys from my own.

I am pulled by the public dialogue around these narratives and my own disposition, choices and feminism to bring these stories to a fitting end. It was tough when my clients came into sessions with broken bones, teeth, scars and bruises. I had to fight my own urge for justice or refrain from projecting my needs for emancipation onto them. My activist self found voice sometimes in questions or through play, but I held to my role as their dramatherapist throughout the process.

I battle questions of self-worth as a battered victim and have been silent when I was called *adharmic* and not a fitting wife or daughter-in-law. In fact, it was this resonance that allowed my activist self to subside. I empathized with my clients' helplessness and the choices they made to manage their intrapsychic conflict and face the real-world repercussions of what standing up for oneself entailed.

Besides my subjective position, even the practice of therapy in India is sometimes painted in the same moral law perspective. In my practice, it is not uncommon for parents to bring children to counselling, telling me to make them understand the error of their ways and comply with society. Thus,

thrusting me into the role of guru or custodian of culture. Within this tradition, clients wanted direct answers to *what is the correct behavior?* Psychoeducation around therapy being a space for the client to build resources or draw roadmaps is met with frustration and criticism. The position of Guru has its seduction, but my training, self-work, supervision and reflexivity have been the saving grace thus far.

NARADA MUNI: SUBVERSION AND AGENCY

Given all the dilemmas and realities of domestic violence survivors, I often feel stuck in the work. Theoretical underpinnings from Sesame's approach, such as "being over doing" (Hougham & Jones, 2017) and understanding the psychological, social and dramatic roles (Johnson, 1992), helped me reflect on and move through these impasses. In keeping with working with the mythologies, I found myself in the role of *Narada Muni*. Although given a bad reputation, Narada, a child of Brahma, the creator himself, was a travelling storyteller. In several tales, he plays the role of the facilitator when stories get stuck. He changes narratives and allows for movement through word play and deconstructing social ideals. As I reflected on this role, I unpacked how this role had allowed me to subvert my own learnt helplessness. This role became my container (Bion, 1967) so that I could operate as a facilitator for my clients. When in this role, my dilemmas, judgments, activism, and rescue fantasies subsided, and I could concentrate on asking questions, simple, open-ended questions designed to explore the work in depth.

Narada Muni is the embodiment of the trickster archetype: mischievous, even manipulative, in his shadow self (Jung, 1965); my own embodiment of the role was being an enabler of subversion and agency. Therapeutic work is not necessarily geared towards emancipation as much as awareness, which begets agency. Though many survivors chose to stay in the same situations, being aware of the reasons behind their choices kept them more in touch with themselves. For some survivors, this awareness helped them subvert set narratives.

For example, Charu, 32, cisgender, female, came to dramatherapy 'to get over her divorce.' She was aware of her past as a child of a broken home as well as an adult of a broken marriage. Her mother, a woman of great repute and stature in society, had had a considerable impact on her. Even as her parents had an extremely abusive and violent relationship – which Charu witnessed – her mother maintained the false albeit reputable status of a widow rather than the lower status of an abuse victim or a divorcee. Charu was expected to keep up the lie, and she did for a long time until she spoke

freely about her own divorce: "Divorce is now like my badge of honor, a defiance, something that sets me apart, even though it hurts."

During an experiential exploration, while walking around the room, we looked at various postcards lying on the floor and moved from image to image while talking about her feelings. She chose to embody an image of an emancipated Sita in the forest, having walked away, post the agni pariksha:

C: I am so glad she got rid of that guy, Ram; she must be happy now.

Th: What makes you say that?

C: She is free. She did her wife part. Now she can do her own thing.

Th: So, what do you think it was like for her as a wife?

C: Being a Hindu wife is a full-time gig. Plus, everyone suddenly has a right to weigh in on everything. I am sure she was told what to wear, when to get up, and how much to eat, when to talk, especially when not to talk. God forbid if this Goddess ever put on a single ounce...

Narada Muni via Th: That sounds exhausting. She had to be hypervigilant then. What would happen, though, if she did her own thing anyway?

C: You're mad! They already are ready to pounce, one more excuse, and they would have definitely burnt her alive. It's best to just keep your head down and keep the peace. That was my mantra anyway.

Th: What was your mantra?

C: Do what they say. Keep the peace! That's why I never understood why he still hit me. I was really rather good at it, the keeping of the peace.

Th: So, even if Sita did everything asked, why did she still suffer?

C: That's what it's like, being a Devi! Nothing you do can ever be enough.

Narada Muni via Th: So what should Sita do?

C: Stop carrying shame. Why should she prove anything to anyone? Channel that Goddess. These helpless b*****s of the past can really s**k it! We need to stop worshipping them for all the wrong reasons. I'm sure they've been poorly written. No plotlines, no character development. You know what she should do, get up, walk out. That's what I did. Why should I carry his shame?

When she was married, Charu stopped travelling, writing, cooking, doing photography, and other things her husband disapproved of. Her everyday life was planned around his schedule. Even if she normalized the abuse, this struggle to be herself in that persona of the wife finally led her to walk away. The part of her that felt impelled to fulfill these social obligations had become Other, and she worried less about meeting other people's expectations. Currently, she is on a mission to collect stories. She is making the effort to meet new people in her new location, exploring new ways of inquiry "to find

out where I belong." She uses these real-life stories to strengthen her inner dialogue and find resonance. "We need to rewrite these myths and reconfigure them to represent this side of things. The side where we can be happy without men, without marriage. Where are the women in our mythology who are menless and happy? They certainly exist in the world." Her passion for writing is now redirected to subverting some of these mythologies, and she wants to continue working in dramatherapy to create a new Devi.

TRANSITIONS: OLD DEVI VS. NEW DEVI

The use of myths in sessions was not to create any one roadmap to emancipation but rather bring life to these images to reveal personal insights and meanings. The reenactments and embodiments of these myths created intensity, laughter, tears and allowed clients to express a myriad of emotions. These familiar symbols and characters provided some distance and at the same time, an emotional charge: they were not alien or empty. Re-creating meaning engenders new perspectives and insights into their own experiences. The clients' choices to create a playspace through these mythological images help them look past their religious connotations and deconstruct previously held notions, without causing offense or belittling nostalgia. Grounding the work in the body resourced the relational space with compassion and boundaries. "Unless the body knows there are inner loving arms strong enough to contain it, however fierce or broken it may be, it will hang on to its own rigidity in order to survive" (Woodman, 1985). For long periods during the therapy, these myths remained unchallenged, and subversive shifts became possible once the clients felt safe to take a risk in the relational and personal space.

The therapist found themselves playing many roles including witness, co-actor, director, side coach, leader, guide or shaman (Johnson, 1992). In such a space, attuning to the here and now was essential. I worked to remain aware of my own feelings about the client's stories, and in my countertransference to their personal histories. I found it most important to remain *protean* (Lifton, 1971), shifting shapes so as to hold, challenge, survive or encourage different aspects when required. If I found myself getting stuck in any one role, it was important that I reflect on my own transference or countertransference with the story, character or client.

However, even as Devis equip themselves with compassion, awareness and insight, their outer worlds too often remain the same. Even as we create trust and safety within therapy, the powerful mythology of the outside world constrains us within the same roles. Systemic injustices continue to pull these Goddesses down, raising the question whether there is any point in revisiting

these myths and working through their meanings in therapy. But I remind myself: "The body has a wisdom of its own. However slowly and circuitously that wisdom manifests, once it is experienced, it is a foundation, a basis of knowing that gives confidence and total support to the ego" (Woodman, 1985).

The awareness and agency once experienced cannot be unseen. The therapist's role involves providing a holding and safe therapeutic space where the client can continue to explore. The essential act is to encourage this awareness; to produce a change in the client's behavior can follow.

My faith in working with mythologies is reinforced when I witness an increasing amount of book shops containing the works of writers who offer new, subversive yet acceptable and respectful lenses to look at these mythologies, such as gendered, racial, or systemic/cultural lenses. These new currents give me hope for my clients, my work, and myself.

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