

'VAMP' OR VICTIM?
: REVISITING THE VILLAINOUS WOMEN



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EDITOR'S NOTE

The theme for this issue was suggested by our young student editors and that perhaps is part of the reason why we were inundated with submissions. The idea behind the theme is to reconsider the stories we have heard from our childhood (fairy tales, moral stories and precepts) or those that are in circulation around us today and think through the labels of the protagonist and/or antagonist. This is especially true for how women in stories are represented. For the most part, the women we hear/read about have been categorized into either the Angel in the House or the Madwoman in the Attic, forcing them to conform to the norms of (sexual) purity or impurity.

In literature, the first literary, and life skill we learn is to critically analyze. It is imperative to headlong challenge such patriarchal constructs which force women to abandon individuality in favour of unidimensional roles. Every person, every woman, is more complex and nuanced than any label can suggest. Very often, good and bad behavior are not intrinsic categories but contingent on factors like the focalizing lens of the narrative. Who gets to decide what is wrong and what is right? Who is a 'vamp' and who is ostracized for not playing the damsel in distress? In this edition, try to understand this by giving a voice to not the *Janes* but the *Berthas* in and around us.

As always, many thanks to the student editors and the student contributors for making this issue possible by devoting their creative energies and time. Thank you, Dr. Suprita Jha for your consistent support and encouragement; without it we would be lost. Last but not the least, heartfelt thanks to Ms. Shikha Kothiyal for taking the time to share her thought with us. We wish her good luck for her upcoming book.

Avantika Pokhriyal
(Faculty Editor)

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THE FIGURE OF THE ACTRESS IN POPULAR HINDI CINEMA

(The writer, Ms. Shikha Kothiyal, is currently teaching English at University of Delhi. Her M. Phil research looked at the poetry and politics of incarnated women in the US. Other areas of research interest include African-American literature, feminist theory, and speculative fiction)

One of the most recent examples of cinematic representations that display a fair degree of self-reflexive engagement with ideas of femininity and performance, and proved to be a huge commercial success, is Milan Luthria's *The Dirty Picture* (2011). Loosely based on the life of Silk Smitha (Vijayalakshmi Vadlapati), a successful 'vamp' figure of South Indian cinema in the 1980s, the movie follows the spectacular rise and fall of the protagonist Reshma, aka Silk (Vidya Balan) as she navigates her way in an industry which profits from the commodification of women's bodies even as it chastises them for being "vulgar" and "dirty." Due to her subaltern caste origins and modest family background, Vijayalakshmi was denied entry into conventional mainstream cinema (reserved for chaste, upper-caste women) and typecast as a 'sex siren' embodying certain primitive sexuality. In an interview with Film fare magazine in 1984, she relates, "I wanted to become a character actress like Savithri, Sujta and Saritha. But in my second film 'Vandichakram', I was put in a glamour role... It led to more and more glamour roles. I cannot afford to displease my producers and directors so I continue to accept them." In *The Dirty Picture*, as a lone woman from a "small-town" struggling to get a break in the industry, Reshma internalizes the values of the patriarchal culture within which she functions and turns them to her advantage in order to land her first role as a dancer in a highly sexualized song sequence. Silk's unabashed and overt expression of her sexuality enables her to secure her place in an industry where women have little to no decision-making power and she grows into an overnight sensation. [. . .] The film refuses to fully "uphold the values of the... middle classes, exposing rather the secret desires (and ensuing hypocrisies) of this group" (Dwyer 80). The death of the sexually transgressive woman, then, can alternatively be seen as the logical consequence of a structurally unequal society founded on a coercive regulation of female sexuality which displaces its own moral conflicts on to the body of the actress it both desires and repudiates. The cinematic techniques employed in *The Dirty Picture* consciously reinforce the sense of the actress's body as an object of the director's and

audience's gaze, and play upon socially established structures of desire, fantasy and anxiety. While Silk's body-image on display is commodified and functions as an erotic object, it is interesting to note that Vidya Balan's performance itself has been lauded for being a type of "self-aware embrace of fetishization" which "transforms the fetishized image's content and meaning" (Dutta 194). In refusing to conform to the hegemonic ideal of 'size zero' body type and reconstructing the stereotypical role of the 'vamp', Balan has managed to counter some of the dominant moral assumptions about actresses in the Hindi film industry.

- Shikha Kothiyal

RUTH OF THE ENCHANTRESS

How many times have we heard people using profanities aiming at each others' sexuality? More specifically, the women's sexualized body becomes a site of patriarchal contestations and abuse (both literally and figuratively). Thus, pushing

the prostitutes at the edges of the society, but is it fair to label them "unchaste" or "characterless" even when it is a business which cannot thrive but for the patronage of men.

The brightness
Of the full moon
Makes the sequins
On my dress dazzle

The moths in my belly,
Challenging a hummingbird,
I still have to get used to this feeling.

The red hue of the light
Setting the scene,
Making our troop
Feel lethal.

We know,
It's show-time.
The rising moon screams,
It's show-time.

Like a platter of sweets,
We rely on our flowing fragrances
To lure the flies in

But is it really our fragrance
Or their inept hunger
Which makes them?
Come to us,
Come for us,

Come with us.

Come for the comfort,
They never get a taste of,
At their "respectable" home

Like an elixir,
With an abundant supply

A pot
Full of affirmations
We gather.
Showering them lavishly

Until,
A king they are, we believe.
A king they are they believe.

A king who showers us with love
Love, as those
Bundles they keep
Possessively in their wallet,

A king, who forgets
About his companion,
Calling her a jilt,
The minute he's sure of himself.

A king who's sad
At the thought of sharing me
At least, that's what I'd like to believe.

A king, who'd come
Running back, the minute,
He is ridiculed by
'His' people

A king who'd
Need his jilt
To handpick it all
From the bottom

Because
Who better than
Us puny creatures,
Can remove
Stains left by the Gods

But, only for the ones
Who showers us
With love
At least , that's what
Our master taught us.

-Nandini Dogra, II Year

STREE: THE UNFORTUNATE PHANTOM

The beauty of theatrical form lies in the fact they give us the freedom to imagine the unimaginable, to explore the unexplored and to fantasize about the what-ifs of life. One such work is the movie *Stree*. In the movie, the unnamed woman/ghost is initially portrayed as a negative character who has a vendetta against the village folk. Everyone believes her to be malicious and evil. But through her character, the movie depicts the flaws in our patriarchal system bringing forth a strong message of feminism. *Stree* is the spirit of a prostitute who fell in love but was not allowed to get married because of societal pressures and biases.

Now, every year, 'Stree' comes to haunt the men of Chanderi village in the four days of the annual puja. In these four days, Chanderi spends the evening worshipping the goddess and the nights requesting Stree to 'come tomorrow'. The women in the movie are free to go out after dusk, they take care of their homes, the women protect their men. "Come back soon. I feel scared without you," cry the husbands as their wives ask them to bolt the doors. The men here can only go out if they dress up as a woman to protect themselves. The woman who was compelled to live in adverse conditions because of men now gives them a hard time.

The wives are showcased as the protectors while the husbands are portrayed as vulnerable. *Stree* is a film from the horror genre, only on the surface, beneath that it has a very interesting message about the way gender relations unfold in our society. The film has an important message: the evil of treating women as inferior needs to be exorcised completely from society. The 'evil' in *Stree* is a woman who was denied love and respect, a physical manifestation of the evils of patriarchy in our minds.

Even in exacting revenge from a society that shunned her and banished her, exploited her and killed her, *Stree* is civil, graceful and considerate. She is the victim who is seen as a villain. She is not black inside out. *Stree* is an equalizer that no women's right movement could have believed possible. And that is where the problem lies. As you get of the theatre, back into the world of the men where *nari par vaar* is routine, you realize that *Stree* is a fantasy. A fantasy, you wish were true.

With revisions from the editorial board,

Avleen Kaur

I Year

THE MURDEROUS GAZE ON THE 'HITCHCOCKIAN BLONDES'

Hitchcock is widely known as the master of suspense. His works were based on the themes of murder, crime, psychology and gaze. He was writing in a time when there were clear-cut binaries between black and white characters, but he chose to display the ambiguity of morality in human beings and the metaphysical quality of his work made people reflect and talk about his work. All his female heroines were blondes and were therefore referred to as 'Hitchcockian Blondes'. Earlier, the term had derogatory prejudice relating to blondes but today this idea has changed.

The master of crime and suspense in cinematic history -Alfred Hitchcock- brought a

revolutionary change in cinema by giving the villains the spotlight, who were not just the typical anti-heroes but also psychotic. His film *Psycho* (1960) marks an epoch in the world of cinema as it was unarguably the first slasher movie ¹ever made. It also began the phenomenon of psychotic villains in films. Before Patrick Bateman², Hannibal Lecter³, Anton Chigurh ⁴and The Joker⁵, there was Norman Bates. Here, the audience begins to sympathize with Bates as the movie switches to his viewpoint in the narrative. The effect was to toy with audiences' sympathy in a way mainstream thrillers had not done before.

But, what about the victims in Hitchcock's movies who set standards of the perfect victim for the psychopath?

The 45-second shower murder scene of the character Marion Crane in *Psycho* is possibly one of the most famous scenes in cinematic history. *Psycho* "opened the floodgates" for screen violence, says Mr. Brooke, screen-online curator at the British Film Institute. It paved the way for the slow-motion bloodshed of *Bonnie and Clyde* in the late 60s, leading up to today's torture porn of *Wrong Turn* and the *Saw* films.

The killer was always a male and the victim a female and Hitchcock subverted the angelic virgin victim trope found in most other films of the time and made his female victims morally ambiguous or even villainous. This was done not in order to give power to those characters but to make their murder look more justified in the eyes of the viewers so that evocation of sympathy for the killer could be achieved. Hitchcock was known for his problematic behaviour with his female actresses, he was accused of sexual misconduct too, but whether he wanted his female characters to be victims or vamps is not clear. However, what became clear is that his female characters were neither simple vamps nor victims. A more feminist reading of these characters has now revived interest in these vamps/victims of Hitchcock.

¹ A horror film, especially one depicting a series of violent murders or assaults by an attacker

² The villain and protagonist of the film and book of the same name "American Psycho"

³ He is a cannibal who is also a psychiatrist from the famous book series by Thomas Harris as well as the famous film "Silence of The Lambs".

⁴ One of the main antagonist's of the film, "No Country for Old Men"

⁵ He is a cannibal who is also a psychiatrist from the famous book series by Thomas Harris as well as the famous film "Silence of The Lambs".

In the movie, Marion Crane (a character) is introduced as a semi-naked body lying on a bed, a detectable object for the camera's eye, an envelope of money—Tom's \$40,000—lying on Marion's bed. The camera then pans over to a suitcase filled with Marion's clothing, revealing Marion's intention: she stole the money as a means to solve the problems that threaten her relationship with Sam (a character). In just over ten minutes, Marion appears half-naked twice in the film and is once also associated with a phallic symbol, i.e. the bundle of money waved in front of her face. But then a remarkable thing happens: Marion takes over the narrative and the way we see the film changes, as does the way we look at her. "Refusing to be defined by her sexuality, Marion conceals her body in a grey blouse that buttons up to a tight-fitting collar that eliminates her neckline", says Jason Haggstrom (a film critic). She pauses briefly on a photograph of her parents hanging on the wall then sits, giving her crime one last thought before finally committing it. When Marion is awakened by a police officer the following day, Hitchcock films the officer looking directly into the camera as he questions Marion. After enabling us to watch Marion in a voyeuristic fashion, Hitchcock forces us into the uneasy position of being looked at—as the object of the extra-diegetic gaze of both Mr. Lowery and the police officer—as we experience the story from her point of view. Afterward, when she meets Norman Bates, the narrative shifts from Marion's point of view to Norman's. Norman peers through the aperture, catching Marion as she disrobes. He watches her with scopophilic pleasure as she undresses, unaware of his presence. But, unlike the film's opening scene, these shots are subjective. We see what Norman sees and recognize his perversion even if we don't recognize it as an uglier version of our own. For both Norman and the audience, Marion is once again reduced to nothing more than a sexualized image projected onto a screen. Having decided to return to Phoenix with the money, Marion steps into the shower to cleanse herself of the crime and now her narrative and Norman's narrative are completely at odds with each other. The infamous shower sequence in *Psycho* represents the ultimate collision between the film's two narratives.

According to Haggstrom, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* is a unique film, as he structures its diegesis around the perspective of Marion Crane only to have her

violently murdered halfway through. In her role of subjectivity, Marion was able to overcome her construct as a scopophilic object before being reduced to a debased state by the voyeurism of Norman Bates, an act that criticizes the audiences' own voyeurism early in the film.

Hitchcock's obsession with the almost constant demise of his leading ladies shows, as if their own beauty caused their destruction and that somehow they deserved it. There are others, too, like Miriam Joyce Haines (a character), who is strangled to death in an amusement park and we, as the audience, are made to feel that she deserved the cold death by her earlier transgressions in the film, *Strangers on a Train* (1951). In his five decades of filmmaking, Hitchcock had worked with at least 40 different leading ladies, and the majority of these women had two things in common: they were blonde and they were bad. If he did not kill his female characters, they were always taught a lesson, for a woman was seen as a perfect combination of stereotypes - cunning and stupid, landing in major troubles, weeping and at last getting saved by the male protagonist. Hitchcock's female characters commonly are misinterpreted due to one-dimensional interpretation. By further discussing some other famous female characters from his classics, we can see the complexity of his heroines who are much more than they seem at surface level. Closer re-reading of films like *Rear Window* (1953) and *Vertigo* (1983) threaten to upset the classic split between active/male and passive/female. According to Anett Koch, Hitchcock's technique of storytelling is simultaneously zooming in and tracking out, combined with point-of-view shots and extreme close-ups, which helps the audience assume the protagonist's perspective along with a sense of vertigo, guilt and pleasure. Thus, as a director, Hitchcock is like a criminal who makes the audience his accomplice in a crime that is about to unfold in front of their eyes. Mulvey (a film critic) elucidates that scopophilic pleasure is based on "using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight", in particular, a person who is not aware of being watched, since this gives the viewer the illusion of power or control. The woman embodied the erotic object not only for the characters on screen but also for the male spectators in the auditorium, by means of identifying with the main male protagonist, the male spectator can fulfil his fantasies through the gaze of his screen surrogate and

Hitchcock used this illusion to earn profits by “playing the audience like a piano” (Hitchcock's quote from an interview). There is a clear gender role reversal when Lisa Fremont in *Rear Window* takes charge and invades the home of a possible murderer along with Stella another female character from the film, while, Jeff (a character) is the passive damsel in distress. The film addresses and simultaneously criticizes society's voyeuristic tendencies, presents strong female characters, creates an unlikable stereotypical male gaze, and ultimately blinds that gaze literally and metaphorically. Mulvey says, Jeff's “enforced inactivity, binding him to his seat as a spectator, puts him squarely in the fantasy position of the cinema audience.” Hitchcock recognizes this and responds by cleverly diverting Mulvey's definition of the male gaze to the film's two unlikable foils, Doyle (a character) and Thorwold (a character). The film ends with Lisa reading a book about the Himalayas, seemingly changed into the type of ready-to-travel the world woman Jeff would like; however, she peers out the window as if looking toward the male gaze she knows is watching her, drops the book, and picks up a copy of *Harper's Bazaar*, thus she maintains her identity in spite of the male gaze.

With a re-reading of these texts, we can rise from labelling female victims as just being victims or vamps. However, it would be wrong to state that Hitchcock is the first to use female victims in horror genre; they always existed whether it's the vampire who lusts for the virgin woman's blood to enhance his vitality or the female character whose body is the perfect vessel for the ghost.

Therefore, Hitchcock's female characters are not just simple characters that can be put under the water-tight categories of being either a vamp or a victim, for they are as complex as the male characters.

- Shruti Gupta

III Year

MADE WITH CRIMSON

Since time immemorial, the society has forced women to come to terms with their inability to make decisions about their own bodies and lives. This poem draws its references from the Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood, where she showcases how the society works on the model of a typical dictatorship: "shaped like a pyramid, where all classes of men and women are defined by the colors they wear, drawing on color symbolism and psychology", through the characters of two handmaids – Offred and Ofglen.

Red and white,

I see a woman

A woman in red, a woman who bled.

A woman on the street, stuffed in a cape, she had a story before she escaped

A maiden they say, running in the woods

A Handmaid ⁶she is!

This maid is unlike any other
Offred is her name, Ofglen is her friend.

In her story, there are no survivors,
There are women of Steele
Sisters in Crimson Capes,
Wearing our future.

If violence against women
Remains unaddressed
You could be an Offred and I an Ofglen
"Nolite Te Bastardes carborundorum"⁷
Is what she writes under the cupboard

Under his eye, no one survives
Fear breeds intolerance,
A woman is a slave
This is a Handmaid's Tale.

⁶ These Handmaids were women who were declared as fertile and used as mules by society.

⁷ Don't let the bastards grind you down.

Her womb is a basket for fruits,
Eaten by the rich, given to the cruel
Her respect is reduced to a rat
A woman she is
But never is allowed to feel like that.

A puppet,
Pulled by strings
But now, she builds an army,
An army of Crimson Caped women
Striving for a better world,
Before hers comes shattering down

I see a woman. I am her.
I wish I don't become what they made her
A woman who cannot breathe unless told to,
Who cannot work unless allowed.

I see them in crimson capes
As I relate to the fear in their movement
Their quick steps, their hushed voices
Their covered breasts, their poker faces
As the darkness comes,

They turn into these different creatures,
Wary of their surroundings at each step.

Are the Handmaidens of tomorrow, us? The women today
In a time when "Me Too" echoes, I remember the opening scene

As she runs through the woods with her child
Leaving her life behind

Like a rat in a maze, free to run
As long as it remains in the maze.

Individualism is their goal
Independence is their right

Striving for them

Oh! It might not be so hard

But this place has boundaries, seemingly impossible to transcend.

These women are not extraordinary

Their lives are. Their words are. Their stories are

Their story is yours, you might be living it right now

As we yearn for a future,

Where power is free, free from subjugation

I see a woman, women not one but many
All of them, tired!
All of them are waiting, until one rises
Rises to throw it all off,
And become the center of the galaxy
And gravitate the thoughts of everyone
Who wishes for freedom
From themselves, from the prisons, they live in.
In the name of gender, In the name of caste
In the name of colour, In the name of age
Wearing their own specific chosen capes coloured in varied hues
Marching towards a better future,
Where a woman, or a man
Or anyone with a heart can walk through the darkness
And through the light,
Remembering pain
But not causing it
Realizing that best does not mean better for everyone!

-Krati Garg

III Year



TESTED BY FIRE-LIFE STORY OF SITA by Dr. SETHI

A VIXEN, A VAMP- A WITCH and WHAT NOT!

When I am walking down the street,
Thoughts running through my head, repeat.

It's hard to believe that I am all alone,

Tossed in a dark zone

What have I found?

The same old bearings,

The same old smearing

A Vixen, A Vamp- A witch and what not,

My weary soul tears like a cloth.

When I did everything for you,

I was accepted. But I was used.

When I stood silent, I was an angel.

But I rebelled. I walked away,

And I was termed a 'cold devil'.

This is the audacity of them

Who will never see the hell I came back from

A Vixen, A Vamp- A witch and what not...

Yes, I have been to hell created by a man,

A soldier upfront, the coward trailing behind

I have been to hell

Where love can never dwell

Alas, I have been to hell,

Where promises were broken and can never mend.

I have been to hell

Where adultery resonates like a ringing bell.

Yes, I have been to hell.

Oh don't worry, I didn't die,

But I got wounds to verify.

A Vixen, A Vamp- A witch and what not...

Oh, I had to, I had to...

I had to kill you,

To rise from the abyss you drowned me in; anew.

You and your hollow soul,

Colour of the dark burning coal

Poisoned my grieving bosom,

Stripped the life out of my bones,

Drained the colour out of my eyes

When I am walking down the street,

Thoughts running through my head, repeat.

The same old fears

And the same old memories pervade

Tears rolling down my cheek

I question again,

Can I still be the Angel?

Or the same old freak?

My flesh is willing but my spirit is weak.

These labels are engulfing me.

A Vixen, A Vamp- A witch and what not...

With revisions from the editorial board,

-Ishita Sahni

III
Year

MORRISON'S SETHE: GOOD OR BAD?

Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is one of the most complex characters one can come across. Caught in the atrocities of slavery, Sethe's life unfolds in a series of complex choices and conundrums. As readers, we find it difficult to hold onto our sense of traditional morality and the water-tight distinctions between Right and Wrong has numbed the readers' senses towards any concept of morality. She is ostracized by her community, has no support from her black sisters, and is later condemned as villainous because she kills her daughter. This last choice, for her, was a result of a fiercely protective motherly instinct but, according to the society she had no right to do it. Or did she? This killing led to a violation of the trust between a mother and her daughter. We can say that Sethe herself wasn't nurtured by her mother and therefore, wasn't able to nurture her children reliably.

She is seen as a villainous creature by her daughter. She committed a crime in the frenzy. She committed a crime in a fit of emotional frenzy. Sethe is considered a criminal because she killed Beloved and this launches her into a spiral of guilt due to which she is unable to take care of Denver as well as her other children. Her boys run away because she couldn't provide them with any protection from the ghost in the house. And afterwards, she was too proud to ask for help. This is the reason as to why she and her family were alienated from their community.

But the question that arises here is: 'Does she kill Beloved to protect the child or to protect herself from re-entering slavery?' Sethe's motivation seemed dichotomous. She displays her love by mercifully sparing her daughter a horrific life of slavery. Yet, she refuses to acknowledge that her show of mercy was murder. The selfishness of her act is in refusing to accept her responsibility for Beloved's murder: "If I wouldn't have killed her, she would have died, and that's something I couldn't bear to happen to her." Her motherly love eventually becomes a curse. She loved her children too much and thus, her actions cannot be explained logically. The incident stands outside the logic of words and justification of cause and effect. Her act was a physical and emotional reaction. However, in spite of this, she can't be labelled a villain. What she did was her way of protecting her child from the misery she had

herself gone through. Sethe's maternal love was immediate, raw and urgent. It was outside the ethical limits of society. Like Paul, D says, "to love anything that much is dangerous, especially if it was her children." As a mother, her first instinct was to protect her children from a ghastly future as slaves. Therefore, she attempts to murder all of them. We see her love to be so thick because she goes against the system where African women weren't allowed to be mothers; they were only 'wet nurses' who fed children long enough to ensure the survival of the next generation of slaves. Throughout the book, Sethe suffers a lot due what she has done. She is not just a villain but a victim too. She is alienated by her community, her boys leave her. And she lives in a house tormented by the ghost of her angry dead baby. Like all her guilt wasn't enough to punish her, Beloved comes back as an embodiment of her past.

Beloved comes as the sufferings and guilt of the past. Critic Pamela F. Garnett says, 'Beloved was like a succubus figure' who wanted revenge from her mother. She became an all-consuming devil- child who forced Sethe to suffer over and over again with the pain and shame of the past. She wasn't nurtured by her mother; after she had lost her mother at a very young age, she was sold to the Garners as a slave. At the Garners, she had to endure mammary rape and brutal thrashing at the hands of the school teacher and his nephews. They took her milk denying her of motherhood and scaring her mentally. As if that wasn't enough, they scared her physically by scraping the chokecherry tree on her back. After seeing all that she had seen how could she let those people take her children back to the hell of slavery? "It's the ultimate gesture of a loving mother, it's the outrageous claim of a slave", Toni Morrison says in response to Sethe's actions.

With revisions and suggestions from the editorial board,

-Muskan Saxena

III Year

DAENERYS TARGARYEN: *MHYS*A OR THE MAD QUEEN

(Analyzing the Dragon Queen, Dany, from the *Game of Thrones*)

Thunder roared as Daenerys Stormborn (Dany), the daughter of the great king Aerys II (of the Targaryen family), was born. But the joy did not last long as her father was assassinated by the very people who swore their lives to him. She grew up in exile with the constant fear of being killed by the people who took their throne and spent all her adult life struggling to find a family, seeking support and love and failing each time.

Her life in exile is turned miserable due to her cruel and ambitious brother. He not only abused her physically and mentally but even sold her off to secure a political alliance. In spite of all the horrors, she remained optimistic as she believed in herself and her destiny to make this world a better place. Eventually, she finds love and stability with the Dothraki horselord Khal Drogo, her husband. But her happiness is short-lived as in a tragic turn of events she loses both her unborn baby and her husband.

Her faith in her destiny seemed to be a far cry as she walked into the funeral fires of her husband. But fate had something else in store for her. By the first light of dawn, Dany was reborn as the Mother Of Dragons. She perceives this as an opportunity to take back what is hers and not just stop the wheel of injustice but to break it. She sees herself as the saviour, a godly figure who will fight injustice. Here, her extreme confidence and brutal anger makes us question whether she will turn out to be a tyrant, like her father.

But we are convinced that she is her moral self when she buys an army of the unsullied and frees all the slaves in the Slaver's Bay. Dany tells the slaves that she is not their enemy instead the masters standing beside them are. Some might say that this was a tactic to get an army to fight more fiercely for her but we choose to believe in her goodness. The slave masters, after quite a struggle-free all slaves who happily and proudly give Dany the title *Mhysa*, The Mother. Dany proudly rules the Slaver's Bay and appears to be fueled to stand strong due to her growing accomplishments. During her stay in the Slaver's Bay, Dany established herself to be the ideal queen who cared deeply for her subjects.

But once again a series of misfortunes and betrayals follow. By the completion of the show, we see her transform into an exacting tyrant. She is not the Dany who shows remorse or sympathy for anyone. She appears as a ruthless warrior who gives chilly responses to the death of her enemies. At the dawn of the battle day, she rides her only dragon, torching the enemies aflame. While sitting on her dragon witnessing the surrender of the enemies the whole world turns red for her. All she could see was

everything she has lost till now and all she wanted was revenge. Betrayal by her near and dear ones and the death of her loved ones burned the fields of tranquility inside her. After all that she has been through, flying high up in the sky on her dragon, and saying "Dracarys" to extinguish the fire burning high and perpetual inside her seemed to be the best thing to do.

Having played the role of the victim for long enough, she now exerts her dominance. All she wanted to give was love but she was forced to choose fear. No, burning alive thousands is not justified but by her final act, we can clearly see that she is giving the world the hell she had been living in. All her life is spent trying not to be like her father, the Mad King, but she has been wronged. She has been sold like a broodmare, chained, raped and defiled. It holds right to say that the world was able to transform a little girl who just knew how to count to twenty and could only marvel at the thought of a throne made of a thousand swords into a tyrant.

-Ankita Sharma

II Year



"I AM A DRAGON - DAENERYS TARGARYEN" by SHRUTI GUPTA

THE RISE OF 'VAMPS'

A sightless desire for fame,
Maybe a desire for love
The game begins
Here come the Villains.

The black dresses,
Too dark for this world
The light in their soul
Lost in the dark world

“Hela” from Asgard,
“White Witch”, from Narnia
Both are evil in black and white,
Colour conventions they defy.
Their story untold
Only their vengeful plots are known.

Revengeful and evil minds,
With negativity in the eyes
A story they want to write
But bloody ink chastise,

The wordless white
The heroes must come & stabilize
They must snatch their pens
& save us from the bloodshed.

The story will always be told
From a winner's perspective!

-Harleen Kaur Sandhu
II Year

...AND HER NAME WAS MALEFICENT

Maleficent is a character in Charles Perrault's (1628-1703) fairytale 'Sleeping Beauty' which has also been popularized by Walt Disney, first in its 1959 movie 'Sleeping Beauty' and more recently, in 2014, in the live-action film starring Angelina Jolie.

Following is the analysis of Jolie's character from the 'Maleficent' movie series

Maleficent is the protector of a peaceful kingdom that lies next to (or hidden from) the bellicose world of a power-hungry king and his army. Her "true love", a human named Stefan, clips off her wings, to fulfill a condition necessary in order to become a King. Later, when Stefan and his queen beget a child, Maleficent decides to seek vengeance and puts a curse on the little girl, Aurora, that the child will grow on to become a beauty but will prick her finger at the age of 16 and fall into a death-like sleep. In an ironic twist Maleficent adds that the spell will only be broken by the kiss of her one true love.

Maleficent, the protector of the moors, avowed to hate the little child, but she ended up becoming her protector. She sent her crow Diaval to feed the infant when the three pixies, who were entrusted with her care, fell asleep on the job. Maleficent saves Aurora as a toddler when she was about to fall off the cliff while the same pixies wrestled each other in the grass, provoked by Maleficent's own giddy spells on them. For the world, Maleficent was a villain who cursed an innocent girl but to Aurora, Maleficent was her "Fairy Godmother". Maleficent tried very hard to revoke her curse for eventually she began loving Aurora as her own, but all her attempts were in vain. When Aurora falls asleep on her sixteenth birthday, it is Maleficent's kiss of true motherly love that awakens her. In return, Aurora helps Maleficent get back her wings which were unjustly hacked off by her own father, Stefan. Following a battle with the king and his men, the film *Maleficent* ended with the union of the two worlds and Aurora was named the queen at the behest of Maleficent; unlike the original Disney's Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty* who got married to Prince Philip (who remained in the background this version) and had no role to play in the political sphere. This live-action series has worked hard at retelling the story from the perspective of the anti-heroine, as it were, of the narrative. It is an interesting departure from the stories revolving around male protagonists (whether as heroes or as anti-heroes) and their bonds with the other characters in the story. This plot focuses on the relationship between Aurora and Maleficent ("the one who was both a hero and a villain", as the former puts it).

Maleficent is a complex, grey character but, she is still presented as a devilish figure even before Stefan's betrayal of her. Her iconic horns (which Disney artist Marc Davis, who designed Maleficent, said was inspired by the traditional look of the devil, to "frighten everybody half to death") mark her off as 'evil' right from the commencement of the film. Her raven is called Diablo which is a clear reference to 'diabolic' and/or 'devilish'.

The movie humanises Maleficent. She is not innately evil. In fact, she is the one who has been wronged. The act of Stefan stealing Maleficent's wings is to be read as an act of male sexual aggression. Angelina Jolie, the executive producer as well as the actor who played the titular character in the movie, gave an interview in which she confirmed that both she and the screenwriter, Linda Woolverton, were very conscious of the force of Stefan maiming Maleficent by hacking off her wings as "a metaphor for rape."

Maleficent is not a paragon of moral virtue, but she is wise, and she wants no sufferings to come to anyone, for no reason other than the obvious: witnessing the pain of others is horrible. In this, she is more advanced than most humans alive today. Disney has not just debunked the mythology of the Evil Queen, as they did in *Frozen*. Here, they have also rewritten her history – they have included the flaws that make her perfect, and they have built a human. The original Maleficent didn't have a history, much the witches in *Macbeth* who appear out of nowhere and have no real purpose except anarchy and malice.

Maleficent displayed her authority and power throughout the story and has stood against patriarchal discourse. She finds her redemption rather than liberation in the climax of the story. This is conveyed through her monologue. When the kiss of the prince does not awaken Aurora from her deathlike sleep, a crushed Maleficent appears at Aurora's bed and expresses her sorrow and regret: "I will not ask for your forgiveness. Because what I have done to you is unforgivable. I was so lost in hatred and revenge. Sweet Aurora! You stole what was left of my heart. And now I have lost you forever. I swear no harm will come to you as long as I live. And not a day shall pass when I won't miss your smile". This monologue is followed by a kiss that

Maleficent places on Aurora's forehead which breaks the spell and revives her back to life. As the audience, we witness Maleficent's growing love and devotion for Aurora from the very beginning of the film. These lines by Maleficent, therefore, confirm the dynamism of her character and the changes that result in her development. Thus, as the narrator of the story suggests in the end, Maleficent is depicted as a multi-dimensional character, a villain as well as a hero. It all depends on how one perceives her.

-Shruti Gupta

III Year

A SIREN

Untamed, malicious and wicked,

A Siren she was

She could sing like an angel

But they had caged her voice

Inexplicable dreams echoing in her big dark eyes,

Deep thoughts entangled in her soft black curls
The strands of never-ending emotions lingering on the waist,
Singing a song of her own,
She came close to me.

Ah, the mellifluous voice
Chants sublime poetry,
The stories of her innumerable wounds
Should have made me run away
But drew me closer
Unwrapping the box full of heroic tales,
A rebel at heart,
Courageously carrying an ambitious heart,
Rebel, oh, rebel!
In her mellifluous voice, she whispered,
Amidst the screeching of Sirens,
I couldn't stay sleepy,
Ah! The contagious strength,
Futile efforts couldn't thaw her soul,
They could never touch her pristine role,
Rebel flows in her touch,
Did she ask for too much?

Oh, my Siren
She's our wakeup call
In this dystopic world
Where lie rises and truth falls.

- Nitika Chopra
III Year

RE-FOCALISING SITA AND DRAUPADI

Indian mythology is as vast as an ocean, with an equal number of Gods and Goddess sharing the limelight. It is known that more than 330 million deities are worshipped in India. In many tales, Goddesses are deemed more furious and lethal than even the gods. The best and renowned examples are Durga and Kali, worshipped with a fervour that only few can boast of. They are a force that even gods fear. They are both, the nurturers and the destroyers. But this is because they are divine and their actions rather than being questioned are celebrated. This is not the case for most other women found in the pages of Indian myths and legends.

Draupadi is a name that we are all familiar with. She is the most memorable of the characters who voiced the injustice and public humiliation she faced at the hands of her male counterparts. Feminists around the globe look upon her as a strong female character because she was defiant and did not shrink back from standing up for what was right.

But if seen through the pages of *Mahabharata*, the dynamics of gender notions of the patriarchal society are so deeply ingrained in our minds, that these very notions which give an underhand position to woman are actually upheld by the same women. Even Kunti does not falter on the fact that she unknowingly agreed on, Draupadi, being a 'wife' to 5 men. She was treated as an object during the well-remembered *game of dice*, by those 5 men, who had sworn to protect her and today is commonly referred to as the 'cause of the great war'. She was publically disrobed by the Kauravas to make her pay for the disrespect she showed towards them. If any woman, in our times, faces the same humiliation as she did, will there be a divine intervention now, as it happened back then?

It should also be noted that the later days of her life too were filled with misery, tears and suffering. Her sons and her relatives died in the war. She was also the first one to fall and go to hell when Pandavas were making their final journey to the Himalayas. Of course, this was termed as her redemption for 'causing the war' and for speaking up for herself. It seems like she was supposed to fall before 'her husbands' as she is

a female (a reiteration of the celebrated notion that women are inferior to men) and also because she wanted vengeance for her mistreatment. But aggression and revenge are not the 'ideal' qualities for an 'ideal' woman to 'cultivate'.

Sita, best known as the 'ideal' wife of Ram, is the benchmark of how an 'ideal' woman should be. She was an intelligent woman and was considered a good wife, who would follow her husband wherever he goes. But again she, in a way, was termed as the cause of the events of the *Ramayana*. Had she not have crossed the *Lakshman Rekha*, she wouldn't have been abducted and Ram wouldn't have to undertake the tedious journey to Ravana's Lanka.

When she finally returns from Lanka, she was interrogated about her chastity by everyone, including her 'ideal' husband. She had to walk through the holy fire to prove her honour. If she was proved 'impure', she wouldn't have had the right to live among them. No one cared about her mental anguish; instead, they made her the culprit of the events. As if this single test was not enough, she had to go through this same humiliation when the people questioned her. After seeing that her character would forever be questioned she decided to live away from her husband and raise her kids alone. No-one stopped her, or offered an alternative or had any intention to accept her. Sita is still questioned about whether what she did, was her submission to or her defiance of, the society.

As we trace history, we see that since time immemorial, women's liberation has been seen as a threat by the society. Later interpolations to the stories of our oral epics and also canonical texts like *Manusmriti* were an attempt to control the 'second sex', the unequal sex and any voice against these authoritative patriarchal voices was thwarted, making the rebel an outcast, a demoness. Sita was labelled as an ideal woman because she endured the unjust treatment silently. Many feminists criticize Sita's self-sacrificial act, but I see it as a last attempt to make society listen to her. Though when she realized that even her husband would not support her, she stopped and lived her life as she deemed to fit. Many would think it as unfair but she did what she considered best for herself and her children.

We would like to believe that we live in better times now; that the feminist movement has changed our lives for the better but is it so? We, as women, still judge each other,

sometimes, even without even realizing it. Women are frequently pitted against each other. From our clothes to our conduct, we are always under surveillance. Today, instead of judging how they are maintaining their household, they are judged on how they are dressed and how much makeup they have applied or how late they are coming home. The reason for being late is unimportant. The glances of the past, on those uncovered faces who dare to not wear a veil over their heads, have now turned to unmarried women who are past their 'prime age' to marry in a respectable house. Both are still labelled the same, 'too liberated'. The question is still the same "Isn't she too aggressive for a female?" Most of these feelings come to surface unconsciously while having a nonchalant conversation, daily gossip. The idea of patriarchy has been passed down to us for so long now that women have internalized it. They don't seem to suspect the effect of this hidden influence.

It is easy to judge and label a woman as a vamp or victim, but to be a human; it requires an empathetic mindset to understand why they did what they did. It is easier to judge than to understand each other.

-Sonali
III Year



IN THE EYE OF THE STORM by Dr. SETHI

MANTOIYAT

They say," Manto's filthy lens
Captures a reality too vulgar, too absurd
Are you sure it is my lens?
Or is this the reflection of a crude world?

işmat-farōshī, men thump on the door.
Women luring them away to sin
Then why is she the one who is devoured?

Staining her character
They call her pretty.
Spitting on dump trucks, your sore throat
She is that dump truck.
Humanity to hawkishness
Didn't you fumble crossing that thin moat?

A grave sin, an ungodly trade
Charred by your fire ablaze
And you call her unchaste.
Priestess of your sexual salvation

Trammeling her in this dubious wordplay,

You dub it prostitution.

You wonder, "What wonder does this filthy

Woman instills?"

You charred her character

But the bereft soul is a woman still.

Your fire blazing trams her doors.

Satiated, you moaned.

But she has no leftovers from the night before.

Her love did claim no ceremony,

No Garland of flowers.

Bearing the brunt of men's infernal love

She claims her scars.

You staked sanity at her alter that too without bargain.

She has just tainted her body.

But her soul lies beside you off all the stains.

So who is more commoditized in love's foul play?

It is you, charred like cigarettes.

She is just an ashtray.
And in your satiated salacity
The vivacity of her city gets drab by the night.
You then condemn her market
And cry of entrapped men's plight.

From my room's window at Faras road
I picture her world.
'An abode for men's hungers'

So you put darts of obscenity on me
And say, "Manto Kya likhta hai,
Yeh Kya fizool jazbat hai?"

I retort, "Agar aap mere afsano ko bardasht nahi kar sakte,
Toh ye zamana hi nakabil-e-bardasht hai."

-Ashmeet Kaur
II Year



BRING OUT THE KALI IN YOU by ASHMEET KAUR

SAKURA

Sakura, in the poem is symbolic of strength, beauty and undying spirit of a female even though they are chained by the societal norms.

Under the blooming cherry blossoms,
She stands with Grace upon the Thorns.
The Zephyr blowing her hair away,
Showing the Wisdom lost to all.
The earthen pot anchors her ship,
Filled with Nectar promising power
Even though promising beauty Peacock holds,
Yet it eats poison for its Grace.
Still, she stands with her Blood worn feet,
Head held high towards the Blooming Blossom,
From a muddy pond is a Lotus-born,
Free of all, shining with outlandish chastity.

-Tenzin Nyidon
II Year

SHURPANAKHA

Shurpanakha -a vamp or a victim? Was she the misunderstood demoness or an outspoken woman of her times? Popular retellings of *Ramayana* have portrayed the young princess as the epitome of an evil, vile woman. She is the seductress, the 'Other Woman'. But today, many writers have begun reassessing such perceptions around the so-called evil women of Indian epics. One such writer is Kavita Kane (an Indian author known for her unique interpretation of many side-lined women characters in Indian Mythology) who in her book *Lanka's Princess* (2017) challenges the conventional interpretation of Shurpanakha as an evil character. She notes that at her birth, Lanka's Princess was named Meenakshi because of her beautiful eyes. This name is also associated with goddess Parvati, Lord Shiva's consort.

Desiring someone and to evince that liking is not shameful. But that expression of sexual interest has become the basis on which Shurpanakha is reviled by the public. More than anything else such perceptions speak about the way our society has fixed the role of passivity for women to the extent that some of the most elemental forms of self-expression are taboo for them.

Shurpanakha (literally meaning 'long nails') should be given credit for being self-reliant, independent and an educated woman. She was beautiful, courageous and was skilled in the art of sorcery. She could stand shoulder to shoulder with her brother Ravana- who was believed to possess wit of ten people. Perhaps, Lakshman had regretted his decision, later on. However, since time immemorial, powerful women are seen in a negative light. But the male counterparts make everything revolve around their own worlds and the women are just seen as either damsels or demons. They are not considered as equals or as having the same emotional or intellectual complexity as men.

Many women are vilified based on the stance they take, largely because it defies patriarchal discourse. In *Ramayana*, this can be best seen from the roles Manthra and Kaikeyi played in the epic. Similarly, Satyawati in the *Mahabharata* is regarded as an evil step-mother.

Many people typecast women as 'sarv-gun-sampan', 'pati-vrata-naari' and believe it to be the only normative way. If Gandhaari hadn't blindfolded herself, undoubtedly she might have been perceived as a vamp today. However women like Shurpanakha, Manthra and Satyawati did what they felt was right, they made their own choices in a patriarchal world.

These strong women, who did and said what they believed in, without any inhibitions show that one might be a vamp in everyone's eyes but it is always better than to be a victim for life.

With revisions from the editorial team,

-Binish

III Year

FEMME FATALE

Nefarious, obtruding nosed women flocking

Around a cauldron of boiling concoction of spells

Peep into the world of fiction

And see what the chronicles of witches tell!

I hereby declaim the origin of witches,

To see their history, rather dark and deadly!

Uncertain is why they came into existence,

As far as the biblical history advocates

About their occupancy in the book of Samuel!

MALLEUS MALEFICARUM! Published in Europe

To cure witch hysteria,

To identify and hunt the hags

The obsession for witches took a turn when

The new world faced the 'Salem witch trials',

To execute girls accused of witchcraft.

Griffins and gargoyles, a book of shadows

Sinister spells and incantation

Are seen relative to Wiccans of the west!

Nevertheless, we are madly in love

With the stygian beauty of witches

With the intrigue, the power, the allure

I believe witches are a quintessential fantastical treat

To the ones greatly driven by

Necromantic escapades and curiosity.

-Ishta Handa

II Year

My Way

I unfolded my wings,

And tried to fly,

To see the rainbow colours of life!

I broke the invisible shackles,

I rose.

Surpassed the hurdles,

Shaped my formlessness,

Activated my passivity,

And lifted the veil of my ignorance

Modesty! Don't scorn at me,

I was no transgressor,

I was flesh & blood,

My hopes were confined no more.

Compliance! Don't complain,

I weighed

I decided

I was tired of the supporting role.

I took the reins

Tried to change myself, and the world

I shrugged off the given roles

I resisted ...

I invented my character, you see!

Labelled as a wretch,

I stood in morality's court.

Tut, tut there were no stains on my hands.

You're not used to letting me choose

Was I still your hope

Or your ambition?

But I've added my hue to it,

I did it my way.

I'm the heroine of my story!

I felt the grass

Smelled the earth

Reached for the stars

I did it my way!

-Gurseerat Kaur

I Year

NO LABELS DEFINE 'ME'

I wonder when I hear those whispers

like a hubbub of bugs

"She's a maniac, don't look!

You may become her clone"
Alas! I ask: can you dare to be me?

What is my sin,
that I express my desires?
Will you rip my nose apart,
if I refuse to submit?
Will you brand me a 'witch',
if I don't toe the lines you draw?
Will you lock me in bondages,
if I want to tread the path less chosen?
If I follow my belief,
Will you tonsure my hair?
I guffaw at your antics
couldn't you bear that I'm me?

I'm sitting on the pedestal
You have fashioned
Out of your fears and insecurities
Is it so difficult to believe?
That I desire too
Why should I couch in euphemisms?
My appetites for power and the flesh
Call me a whore, if you will, behind my back
But I ask: can you dare to be me?

With revisions from the editorial board

-Jasmeet Kaur Vedi

III Year

The Forgotten Black Widow

(The Black Widow here in the poem is symbolic of how everything a female does needs to follow the tune of the societal norms. It also talks about those who cannot voice out the domestic abuse they suffer in the name of love and marriage, and gradually end up becoming the prey to the Black Widow Spider.)

The cold winter breeze blew my hair

While I stood beside that frozen river,
Blood dripping on the snow-white banks,
As I held those shattered memories in my hand.

I can see your reflection in that frozen river,
A Lost smile playing slowly,
On the solemn tune hummed,
By that Forgotten Black Widow.

The cold winter numbing my senses
Yet it eerily felt like how you used to be,
Harsh and greedily sucking in my warmth,
Leaving me cold and detached
Oh...those high notes,
Isn't this just like your temper? That icily hot anger of yours,
And that arrogance sturdy as the Mt. Everest.

Still, I dance drunk on that Black Widow's tune,
Careful to not miss any notes, for the repercussions
I dare not suffer, which always ends with me bathed in blood
Like a sacrifice on your altar.

Yet what I failed to notice, was the web
Weaving around me, as I was too lost pining after the tune,

I forgot I was just another prey to that Forgotten Black Widow.

-Tenzin Nyidon

II Year

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From L-R: Shreya Gupta (II Year), Ankita Sharma (II Year), Nandini Dogra (II Year), Dr. Suprita Jha (Patron), Ms. Avantika Pokhriyal (Faculty Editor), Shruti Gupta (III Year), Krati Garg (III Year), Sonali (III Year), Ishta Handa (II Year)

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