

**OF THE 'MALE' BORN: MASCULINE FANTASY APPROPRIATING
FEMALE REPRODUCTIVITY**

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Abstract

Myths have always played the central role in the collective imagination of people all over the world. They have great psychological significance as they carry out multiple functions simultaneously—they explain the unexplainable (in the sense that they provide the rationale for such phenomena—natural & manmade—for which scientifically proved explanation is not yet found), fire the imagination, structure the rituals, provide a moral perspective & radically alter the reality itself (or at least the perception of that reality). One such myth pervading the whole world is the myth of 'male' god. Whether there is a god (creator of this world) is a philosophical question. But if we accept that the world is created by someone as propounded by most of the religions, then most often that creator is assumed to be a Man. This myth of a 'male' god is the direct inversion of reality, a type of defense mechanism on the part of men, as in reality it is the women who are the creators of new life. However there are certain myths where men literally give birth to children. In my paper, I will focus on three such myths from Vedas—birth stories of Mamdhata, Agasti & Dronacharya who are born directly from men. These myths collectively reflect the male desire to appropriate the female reproductivity. In spite of the scientific advancement, this desire has not subdued but rather intensified. The recent news of single & unmarried Tusshar Kapoor begetting a son through surrogacy is latest manifestation of this desire. Now against the backdrop of these myths created *by* the men, *of* the men & *for* the men, we come across a novel '*Frankenstein*', written by Mary Shelley in 1817, which presents an entirely different picture of this masculine creation. Unlike the three myths in Vedas which narrate the triumph of male creation, here we find a curious interplay between this male desire to appropriate female reproductivity & a woman writer's response to it which both supports & subverts it.

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It is said that all literature is vulgar literature in the sense that however innocent a piece of writing may appear, it does have a political agenda of its own. The difference between the so-called propagandist literature & canonical/artistic literature is that the second one is so well naturalized in the minds of people that they fail to see its political nature. The same is all the more applicable to the sacred literature. People are *taught* to see the sacred literature as the given entity beyond questioning.

The sacred literature of almost all religions in the world, advocate the *male God*. HE is the *Creator*. HE is the omniscient, omnipresent & omnipotent *controller* of the whole universe. This idea of *Creator* as a *male* has pervaded our minds so much that we fail to see its reality as a male fantasy, as a type of defense mechanism.

Biologically creation of a new life i.e. reproduction is predominantly a female domain where role of a male is limited only up to inception. Even that was unknown to the primitive people who considered a woman's ability to reproduce as a divine power & so worshipped the Mother Goddess. However as the time passed & animals were tamed & domesticated, people realized the link between sexual intercourse & child birth. This stripped the aura of divinity surrounding the female body but gave no solace to the masculine mind which still had no alternative but to depend on women for progeny. It was at this stage that men started to control the sexuality of women through force & through the idea of virginity. However the power that men gained through sexual control was still elusive as it didn't confer upon them the power to *create*. So ultimately in this vacuum of frustrated masculine desire to *create* new life emerged the fantasy of the male progenitor of entire universe—the God. The myths of creation (of how the God created this universe) found all over the world differ significantly in details yet contain two major similarities: first, God *willed* this world into being i.e. HE created this world through his wish, from himself without any external means & second, the meticulous details of exclusive male genealogy.

Within this *langue* of masculine God, we can find many *paroles* of specific male progenitors. In this paper I will focus on three myths from Vedas where a male child is born literally from the father's body.

I

In the first myth, Yuvanashwa, a king of great Ishwaku dynasty was childless for many years. Finally he decided to perform Indrayag (sacrifice to Lord Indra) to appease Indra & gain a son from him as a boon. The sacrifice was very elaborate & taxing. It lasted for months & during that period, king & queen had to fast. On the last day of the sacrifice, at dawn, the king woke up feeling very thirsty. Looking for water to quench his thirst, he entered a room & drank the water kept in a special pot (*kamandalu*). He had never tasted such cool & sweet water before. He was too pleased & went back to sleep. But his action played havoc in the morning when it was discovered that the holy water sanctified with herbs & hymns, specially prepared for queen to drink so that she would get pregnant, was missing from its *kamandalu*. When king realized his mistake, it was too late. As he had drunk that water, he himself instead of the queen, became pregnant, bore the child in his belly for nine months & then delivered an auspicious son whom they named Mandhata. Mandhata became a great king, the first '*Chakravarti Samrat*' of Ishwaku dynasty.

In the second myth, gods Mitra & Varuna who were fast friends once saw the naked nymph (Apsara) Urvashi bathing in a lake. Seeing her naked beauty, both of them were aroused & both deposited their seeds in a pot. Nine months later, sage Agasti was born from that pot.

Guru Dronacharya, teacher of Kauravas & Pandavas, was born in the similar fashion. Seeing, nymph Ghritachi bathing in a river, sage Bharadwaj was aroused & ejaculated in a pot made of leaves (*dron*) from which eventually a son was born.

All these three myths date back to a period, when such unnatural things could be *naturalized* under the labels of miracle or supernatural powers. One workable definition of myth is myth is a story that explains the unexplainable (in the sense that they provide the rationale for such phenomena—natural & manmade—for which scientifically proved explanation is not yet found). In this sense myths are not true but they have profound psychological significance. These three myths in particular, distort the reality to such an extent that they reverse the roles played by male & female in reproduction, to give the male the centre stage. In case of both Agasti & Dron, the nymphs were nothing more than the mere catalysts & sons were *created* entirely by the fathers. Agasti was moreover the joint venture of two gods expressing not just homosexuality but also the desire to have an offspring from that union. The myth of Yuvanashwa goes one step further as there is no role of queen at all in begetting the child. Moreover unlike Mitra-Varuna & Bharadwaj, King Yuvanashwa himself undergoes the pregnancy & delivers the child.

A striking feature common to all three myths is that the offspring is always a male who later in his life achieves great heights of success. Mamdhata became '*Chakravarti Samrat*', Agasti became the great sage to whom 6th Mandala of Rig Veda is attributed. Dronacharya, as we all know, became famous as the renowned teacher of Kauravas & Pandavas in Mahabharata. In short, these myths celebrate the triumph of masculine creation.

II

Now against the backdrop of these myths created *by* the men, *of* the men & *for* the men, we come across a novel written in the 19th century by a woman who presents an entirely different picture of this masculine creation. It is Mary Shelley's '*Frankenstein*' published in the year 1817.

'*Frankenstein*' is a gothic novel which tells the story of a young, idealistic student of natural science who, finding the secret of giving life to matter creates a living being. The monstrous creation, though tender-hearted & gentle in nature, inspires fear in those who meet him & must hide away from the society. Increasingly lonely & isolated, the monster becomes embittered & cruel, taking a hideous revenge on his creator. In a dramatic denouement in which Frankenstein pursues his creation to the end of world in order to destroy him, Mary Shelley reveals the terrifying consequences of playing god.

There is hardly any chance of Mary Shelley knowing the above mentioned myths from the Vedas. She grew up in a Christian milieu where Milton's '*Paradise Lost*' was a profound influence on her. She also lived in a period when science was making steady progress. Moreover it was a century of imperialism. There was supposed to be no bounds for Man & accordingly Frankenstein, the protagonist of the novel attempts to achieve the highest aim of becoming the *Creator* of new life. Unlike the Vedic myths, his means to achieve his aim are not miracles & supernatural powers but scientific experiments; yet his desire to appropriate the female reproductivity is as primordial as Vedas. The twist in the story comes with Shelley herself who at

the time of writing this novel was undergoing the bizarre personal experiences of pregnancy, abortion, childbirth & death.

Linking the myths in Vedas & Mary Shelley's *'Frankenstein'* is like putting two mirrors face to face which infinitely reflect each other. As we have seen earlier, the very concept of 'male' god is an attempt (& a very successful one) to appropriate female power to create. Then a man's aspiration to 'play god'—starting from Lucifer & Adam in Christian theology & coming down to present day genome scientists—reflects itself in his attempt to control 'everything' (which includes both nature & women) around him either through force or through camouflage/conviction. Writing indeed serves dual purpose in this process—firstly, it is the means of conviction & secondly, it bestows upon the writer the hallucinatory power of being the *creator*. The writer 'creates' the world as he wants through his writing. In 19th century, writing was considered an exclusive male domain & any woman attempting to enter it was very much conscious of her *trespassing*¹. Her attempt to write was deemed as an attempt to appropriate the masculine role & springing directly from her 'penis envy'². So when Shelley wrote a novel about a male scientist creating a living being, she was also concerned about her *creating* a piece of fiction & knowingly or unknowingly, her actual experience of pregnancy got infused in her writing. For her, as a woman, pregnancy & childbirth did not carry just the positive '*image*' of being a *creator*. It involved labor, pain, fatigue, anxiety, depression & fear of death—the constant threat of total annihilation of self—the flip side of the exalted image of being the *creator*.

As a result, when Shelley narrates Frankenstein's experience of creation, it is neither the calm & soothing experience (of Yuvanashwa) nor the stimulation (felt by Mitra-Varuna & Bharadwaj) but rather an ambivalent response of excitement & anxiety:

After days & nights of incredible *labor & fatigue*, I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation & life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter. (50)

No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a *hurricane*, in the first enthusiasm of success...A new species would *bless* me as its *creator* & source; many happy & excellent natures owe their being to me...These thoughts supported my spirits, while I pursued my undertaking with unremitting ardor. My cheek had grown *pale* with study...Who shall *conceive* the *horrors* of my secret toil as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay? (51-52)

[M]y *enthusiasm* was checked by my *anxiety* & I appeared rather like one doomed for slavery to toil in the mines...Every night I was oppressed by a slow fever & I became *nervous* to a most painful degree...I shunned my fellow creatures as if I had been *guilty* of a *crime*...my labors would soon end & I believed that exercise & amusement would then drive away incipient disease & I promised myself both of these when *my creation* should be complete. (54)

¹ For instance, the authorial anxiety found in Mary Shelley's contemporaries like Bronte sisters & later day Victorian writers like George Eliot who used masculine pseudo names in order to get published.

² Term coined by Sigmund Freud at a much later date in his 1908 article '*On the Sexual Theories of Children*'.

Elizabeth Bronfen comments, ‘If he can create a new race out of lifeless matter, the success of his experiment will engender his own renewal as an immortal being... Yet flip side of this perfect duality is that if the other does not reassure completely, it turns into the total cancellation of the self.’¹ & that’s what exactly happens. Frankenstein’s intention behind all his efforts was to gain eternal glory. Instead he is condemned to eternal horror because the creature that he creates is hideously ugly & deformed. Frankenstein himself is so much terrified by the monster’s appearance that he flees from him & returns home to marry Elizabeth. It seems that he has finally abandoned his improbable & impossible project of male creation. But it is not so. His aim remains the same, only the means change. When his attempt to *create* a new species on his own fails, he turns to the time-tested method of patriarchy i.e. marriage. Through marriage, he wants to *possess* Elizabeth as a commodity which he would use for (re)production. For him Elizabeth is his rightful property & that’s why he bothers neither to confide in her nor to ask her consent for marriage; he simply takes her for granted.

“I fear, my beloved girl,” I said, “little happiness remains for us on earth; yet all that I may one day enjoy is centered in you. Chase away your idle fears; to you alone do I consecrate my life & my endeavors for contentment. I have one secret Elizabeth, a dreadful one; when revealed to you, it will chill your frame with horror & then far from being surprised at my misery you will only wonder that I survive what I have endured. I will confide this tale of misery & terror to you the day after our marriage shall take place, for my sweet cousin, there must be perfect confidence between us. But until then, I conjure you, do not mention or allude to it. This I most earnestly entreat & I know you will comply.” (183)

However, monster destroys Frankenstein’s last hope by murdering Elizabeth on the very night of wedding because Frankenstein refused to *create* a female mate for the monster, as Eve was *created* for Adam & as Elizabeth was (as Frankenstein feels) for Frankenstein. Frankenstein reasons his refusal as follows.

She might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate & delight for its own sake in murder & wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighborhood of man & hide himself in deserts but she had not; & she who in all probability was to become a thinking & reasoning animal might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation. They might even hate each other; the creature who already lived loathed in his own deformity & might he not conceive a greater abhorrence for it when it came before his eyes in the female form? She also might turn in disgust from him to superior beauty of man; she might quit him & he be again alone, exasperated by the fresh provocation of being deserted by one of his own species. (160)

This passage is deeply misogynist in nature. Here Frankenstein projects all his fear of the feminine on the yet uncreated figure of the female monster. It is notable that his speculation of her wickedness is not only the binary opposite of his earlier speculation of his creation’s brilliance but also too exaggerated & totally baseless. In one general sweep, he makes the self-contradictory claims about her. On one hand he accepts that she will have the higher mental abilities of thinking & reasoning characteristic of human beings but on the other hand still condemns her as an animal with baser instinct for murder & wretchedness. However on a closer

look it appears that he is rather more disturbed by her chances of being turning out superior to monster than her supposed threat to mankind. Here is reflected his own (& also of men in general) trepidation that a woman can supersede a man & given a chance, his own mate may desert him for a better match & in such a case, a man has little control over her sexuality & reproductivity resulting in a deep sense of vulnerability.

Elizabeth Bronfen rightly points out, ‘...what is at stake in *Frankenstein* is the aspect of failure inherent in the project of masculine creation. As another aspect of the ‘anti-Pygmalion’ topos of 19th century culture, Victor Frankenstein fails not only to create the ‘excellent natures’ surpassing humanity because with the ‘flaw’ of mortality, he also fails to create & resists creating feminine. In his attempt to reverse man’s creation by woman he succeeds only in creating by displacement the inanimate feminine body & preserving the dead mother. His monster, a conglomeration of different corpse parts forbidden to reproduce, produces instead a series of feminine corpse, returns the animate to its primordial inanimate form & as such is representative of the pure death drive as counterproductive as Victor Frankenstein’s desire to obviate death’s presence in life.’ⁱⁱ

III

In his ‘*Work on Myth*’, Blumenberg propounds that the function of myth is to help human beings cope with the inexorability of given reality, a need that is not outmoded by scientific advances & rationality; that myths evolve according to a ‘Darwinism of words’ with those forms & variations surviving that prove able to cope most effectively with the changing social environment & that myth is best conceived not as a collection of fixed & final stories but as ‘a work’—an ongoing & ever-changing process that is expressed in oral & written narratives & includes the diverse ways in which these narratives are received & appropriated.ⁱⁱⁱ

If examined accordingly it seems that time has come when we consciously strive to alter these myths of masculine creation as they have turned out to be doubly nasty. On one hand, they marginalized women to such an extent that the sole aim of women’s very existence became reproducing men & *only* men; which didn’t change with the advance of science but resulted in the misuse of science with widespread epidemic of female infanticide in last few decades. On the other hand it neither made men authentic *Creators* of new life nor really provided a workable solution to heal their perceived susceptibility & utter dependence on women for progeny. The recent example of single & unmarried Tusshar Kapoor begetting a son through surrogacy^{iv} not only perpetuates the delusion of Yuvanashwa, Mitra-Varuna & Bharadwaj but also points to the bleak fate of Frankenstein where the mother (i.e. feminine) is displaced & murdered. If this trend becomes popular, the world will soon degenerate into a dystopia where a separate class of women is created for reproduction, a form of new sexual slavery like prostitution as envisioned by Margaret Atwood in ‘*The Handmaid’s Tale*’. So let’s explore the yet untapped gold mine of our collective imaginative *creativity* to *create* new myths of *Creation* (which are not necessarily biological) that will provide both men & women with the genuine sense of being *Creators*.

ⁱ Bronfen, Elizabeth, ‘*Over Her Dead Body*’, Manchester University Press, 1992

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Abrams, M.H., *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7/e, Harcourt College Publishers: 2001. Pg 170-1

^{iv} <http://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/tusshar-kapoor-becomes-father-to-baby-boy-using-surrogacy-2878996/>