

Upending Narrative/Logos: Counterfactuality and Feminine Mythopoesis in the Poems of Rukmini Bhaya Nair

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Abstract

Literature is a reflection of cultural values and ethos of the times that presents consciousness and society as mythopoetically constructed. Such narratives have been challenged by newer modes of literary interpretation, as can be seen in Rukmini Bhaya Nair's poetry. A distinctive feature of Nair's poetry is its focus on counterfactual modality of the knowledge systems—both linguistic and epistemic—to examine myths used to control this gendered world, while being keenly sceptical of its empiricist underpinnings found to be biased and essentially heteropatriarchal. This paper discusses two of Nair's poems where she goes beyond the realm of Indian canonical literature to question the stalwarts of yore. Through the use of counterfactuality, Nair deconstructs both language/logos and myths to criticize male subjectivity disguised as the positivist objective approach, simultaneously emphasizing the lack of adequate representation of women's voices. The truth-conditions of counterfactuals are put in the dock, as Nair questions set theories and logical semantics.

Keywords: Mythopoeitics, counterfactuality, logos, subjectivity, truth, knowledge systems

Introduction

According to the social theorist Roland Barthes, a myth is a belief system or story that presents a subjective truth. A myth is a pervasive force that shapes narrative and derives its meaning from the sociology of symbols and signs and representations that convey a community's values/belief

system (Barthes, 1957, pp. 155-56). In *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes argues that 'myth' is not only a medium/vehicle for the narrative but carries out a specific ideological function of "transform(ing) history into nature" (129). Mythopoesis or myth-making can be viewed as a sub-genre of speculative fiction that recreates fictionalized mythology. Mythopoesis has been long harnessed by writers to re-envision mythology and becomes a narrative genre in many modern fictional works from J.R.R. Tolkien to T.S. Eliot to movies such as *Star Wars*.

Known for her contributions to the field of critical theory and linguistics, Rukmini Bhaya Nair is regarded as one of the notable postmodern poets in Indian English. Her inventive crossover literary style is characterised by its playful polyphony that often explores the linguistic meaning and feminine identity. Nair reevaluates the world and value systems of the past through prevalent myths which are challenged and critiqued through the lens of mythopoetic imagination to offer thought-provoking, fresh interpretations of well-known myths. These essentialist readings of myths establish cultural discourses that Nair believes are subjective beliefs that tell stories from the male perspective and hide masculine biases. The poet calls for a cultural change through feminist revisionist mythmaking to "[de]construct] myths and critique notions of storytelling and different versions of the same story" (Morillo, 2020, p. 23). This is done to re-vision ancient texts that contain images of women as written and imagined by the masculine artist and the thinker through "the act of looking back...seeing with fresh eyes...an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich, 1972, p. 18).

The Use of Mythopoetic Counterfactuality in Nair's Poetic Vision

Postmodern counterfactual modality is concerned with what may or would have been but is not. This framework of semantics was first proposed by David Lewis in 1973 to read the truth requirements of counterfactual conditionals that was reckoned to have a significant impact on language, logic, and metaphysics. Albeit counterfactual reasoning can be traced back to the Greek thinkers, theorists from various disciplines today rely on counterfactual analysis to make logical assumptions. This is because humans greatly contribute to the meaning-making and self-creation of life experiences through counterfactual reflection on decisions and occurrences (Starr, 2022). While myths reflect cultural schemas, counterfactual conditions are mainly used in logical reasoning for causation analysis. In this sense,

'Mythopoetic counterfactuality' blends mythopoesis (myth-making) and counterfactuality with its aim to reproduce perceptions. Noticeably, a number of genres in contemporary cinema, fiction, and even computer games of late have begun to re-imagine mythopoetic typology to probe ontological truths behind these myths. Mythopoetic resonances are found in the writings of authors such as Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor, who use counterfactuals to critique the accepted version of myths, often to examine myths and to imply that we have outlived much mythology of the past.

Using 'mythopoetic counterfactuality' as a literary stratagem, Nair also resorts to counterfactual analysis in her poems to question certain age-old empirical assumptions propagated through dominant mythologies, knowledge systems and prevailing ideologies. A distinctive feature of Nair's poetry is her ability to intuitively interpret truth-claims through believable counterfactual reflections, through the effective use of which she alters a past event and then fictionally assesses the effects of its change to rewrite the truth-claims. Nair's use of counterfactuality through mythopoesis to question the theory and semantics of myths/logos can be studied in her poems *Gargi's Silence* (2004) and *But Where There Are No Rules, Who Rules?* (2021). At the nexus of feminism and sociolinguistics, the poems deal with a semiotic examination of language that has sidelined experiences of women in the past; something that would require changes in language/discourse itself. Both the poems emphasize the counterfactual modality of the knowledge systems to critique the linguistic and epistemic domains, thus challenging popular mythologies/knowledge systems/philosophies. The technique helps Nair question the literary canon whereby she addresses luminaries such as the grammarian Bhartrhari and the wise Yajnavalkya of the Upanishads. In her verses, Nair approaches myth with a postmodernist perspective to offer a divergent understanding of the archetypal myths for which she draws on the complex Upanishadic figures of Yajnavalkya and Bhartrhari, intending to take these giants outside the purview of canonical literature by employing counterfactuality. By doing so, she also creates feminist mythopoetics of her own in an attempt to "remythologize the male" (Plain & Sellers, 2012, p. 197). This approach helps in exposing masculine subjectivity that is passed off as positivist objectivity, while also questioning 'logos' to highlight the inadequate and biased portrayal of women's perspectives in literature.

Gargi's Silence: Akshara as Logos

Gargi's Silence opens an inquiry into the patriarchy defined nature of the feminine through a myth. The poem uses the Upanishadic tale of Gargi Vachnakavi, a renowned *brahmavadini*, a woman scholar in the court of King Janaka of Videha. As the story goes, when the other learned pundits in the king's assembly had given up, Gargi challenges sage Yajnavalkya to a philosophical debate and poses a barrage of questions to Yajnavalkya. Gargi holds her own, as the exasperated savant discourages Gargi to not lose her mental balance by asking him more questions. Nair's poem thus largely draws on this dialogue between the two. However, in contrast to the Upanishadic narrative where Gargi submits to the guru's greater knowledge and bows out, Nair counters by retelling the story in her poem, making Gargi fall silent instead before the ascetic upon realising that the sage does not have all the answers.

Nair's mythopoetic imagination becomes a means of offering alternative myths using counterfactuality. The opening imagery of Gargi wandering barefoot to explore the universe through her "untamed silence" is complicit with nature reverberating in its own wild silence. This imagery of Gargi's atavistic journey through the landscape brings together disparate images from nature and puts/conflates them with Gargi's probing questions on the nature of the universe. Gargi's untamed silence is found in its deepest "recesses (of nature) ...among sea anemones... (and) mushroom woods" (lines 4-5). Far-reaching, unknown places imbued with such silence in the feminized landscape is a part of nature. Gendered as female, Nature is presented as mute and unassertive, evolving slowly, steadily but surely.

Gargi's questions range from subjects concerning the erotic nature of desire to esoteric metaphysics that exasperate Yajnavalkya, whose hegemony and intellectual hubris stand shaken by Gargi's interlocution. The lionized predation and hierarchical dichotomy are clearly implicit in Yajnavalkya's response to the woman who threatens the sage's brahminical hegemony. From challenging the sage to falling silent, Gargi's untamed stillness that permeates the natural world is seen in stark contrast to the linguistic paradigm based on male reason. The quiet wild of the natural world and its unclaimed silence contrasts the language model based on masculine reason and rules to expose the deficiency of words in conveying all experiences. In the end, admitting that even a savant's "wisdom has limits" (line 31) outside the logocentric

reasoning, Yajnavalkya concedes to the polyphony of meaning and partial deductions.

The imagery of Gargi's quest for this "unclaimed *akshara*" and "unnamed star" is exteriorized through her "untamed silence" (line 35). Nair questions the nature of Gargi's/nature's "silence": the fact that this unclaimed alphabet/logos/*akshara*/letter-word signification does not behave according to a universal law. This silence is pregnant with meaning and is largely interrogative. The poet also believes that in this *akshara* "in the soundless lanes... you'll hear voices yours, his, mine, his and then—the last unclaimed *akshara*" (line 35). The "unnamed star" debunks the myth of a single voice, ultimately challenging the male discourse that constructs the world through words and refuses to acknowledge the unclaimed polyphony of minority voices and marginalized silence. By stripping the sign *akshara* (letter) of the signifying process that attributes it some kind of totality, the poem disrupts the totalitarian system of language/logos. This *akshara* is read using Derridean discourse analysis to interrogate the nature of logos/language where this unclaimed letter/word/*akshara* is personified through silence and defines the schism between language and knowledge (Derrida, 1976). This *akshara* represents plural subjectivities rather than a single one, the kind of indecipherable silence challenging the creation of words and the universe in which women are acknowledged as part of reality but are linguistically distinct from males.

The poem ultimately questions the origin of language, and if language preceded the concept, finally questioning "whose word is it?" (line 36) after all. Was language brahman's creation or ours? Gargi's searching for a new frame of reference vis-à-vis language is Kristeva's pre-oedipal semiotic order: representing the very act of nomenclature. While Kristeva presented the symbolic function as essentially phallogocentric that governs unity and totalitarianism of logos, the semiotic function demonstrates the heterogeneity of its meaning. It is the semiotic function that precedes the creation of subject and is chronologically anterior to the sign/*akshara*. Gargi's untamed silence "dissolves the linguistic sign and its system (word, syntax) ...and moves out of the enclosure of language in order to grasp what... logically precedes the constitution of the symbolic function" (Kristeva, 1998, pp. 134-40). Gargi's silence is thus a provisional articulation of the meaning contained in the *chora* where nature's silence is a kind of aporia, defined by Kristeva as the pre-

linguistic space of interaction, in which the unclaimed *akshara* presents the unconscious, pre-linguistic potentiality that exists in nature/universe.

Gargi's silence is as much about her marginalization as it is about questioning the word/logos, where she questions the cosmic order that is taken to be phallogocentric, ultimately choosing to fall silent in her tacit understanding of the silence that embodies the wisdom of nature. In her silence, that is nature's own, Gargi reminds us of the limits of the ascetic Yajñavalkya, where she rather chooses to "hold her peace" (line 37) than being compelled to keep silent. Counterfactually, Gargi's silence reimagines the myth where her silence is in fact her 'knowing' by which she moves beyond the bounds of logocentric reality. Nair questions the mythic paradigms that create our phallogocentric reality, by not contesting the truth value of the questions posed, instead focusing on different competing views to question the marginality of sidelined narratives.

But Where There Are No Rules, Who Rules?—Challenging Ontological Realities

Nair's poem *But Where There Are No Rules, Who Rules?* is an open apostrophe address to Bhartrhari (CE 570- 651), a great Indian poet-grammarians, credited to be the creator of Vākyapadīya philosophy of language and work on ethics and polity called *Nītiśatakam*. According to Bhartrhari's theory of language, the ontological concept behind the word-principle explains how people express their knowledge of the world around. Language is understood in formalist terms where syntactical rules are used to create meaning. However, language is not merely referential but goes beyond referentiality to define categories through its essentialist interpretations. Subjective cultural discourses are determined by these essentialist readings where the laws also apply to many aspects of women's lives.

The poem involves meditations on the nature of *nīti* that is largely the writ rules on conducting oneself in the society. Originally in Sanskrit, the poet's magnum opus *Nītiśatakam* comprises verses on moral values passed down through the ages that critically analyzes the behaviour that must be upheld in society. The epigrammatic poetry that forms the theme and subject matter of the *Nītiśatakam* is on one's bearing, desirable moral virtues and criticizes women as frail and their love as transient. However, Nair declares that the subject matter of *Nītiśatakam* is neither 'poetry' nor 'noble conduct', but the 'tragedy' of overlooking

those ‘others’ whose “tastes are different” (line 7). She interrogates the nature of *niti*/man-made laws that are highly subjective and bound to become archaic with time. The world has moved on, mutated to evolve a new aesthetics of punk rock and Picasso’s modernist art that speak of the changed times. Even our personal ethics, based on our preferences are subject to change. The poem daringly questions Bhartrhari’s poetic prowess, revered to be an erudite savant of his era with his treatise on *niti* (rules/policy) that has endured through the ages. Nair’s mode of inquiry exposes the limitations of Bhartrhari’s knowledge, only to dismiss his *niti* as outdated.

Nair proves the limitations of Bhartrhari’s knowledge base by interrogating whose “fragrant kitchens” (line 3) cooked delectable victuals that nourished and sustained Bhartrhari while he was engrossed in creative processes that immortalized him for posterity. Seamlessly segueing into delectable foods, Nair points out the limitations of the linguist’s knowledge of the humble ‘potato’ that was unknown back then, introduced to our country by the Portuguese centuries later than Bhartrhari. Contending the counterfactuality whether the taste of potato be known to us today if not for the Portuguese, she links the potato and the Portuguese to present personal and political domains as interdependent, to make a constructionist argument by emphasizing a specific socio-historical context and how it can be interpreted.

Recording a linguistic transition between Bhartrhari’s reflections on the past and our fast-paced, inquisitive era, Nair cheekily, almost flippantly, calls Bhartrhari ‘Brat’. By this, she deliberately truncates the effect of his towering presence in literature; similar to what Gargi did to Yajnavalkya, thus undermining his position. This deliberate linguistic turn signals the evolution of language. It offers the disquieting notion that literature when subjected to textual scrutiny, can be revealed as “punitively regulated cultural fictions” (Butler, 1990, p. 140) rather than containing the natural inherent truths of linguistics. The political imaginary reinterprets Bhartrhari’s work as incomplete for it ignores the knowledge of the ‘other’ half of the human race by re-envisioning it counterfactually.

Both the poems analyzed above are a reaction against the dominant discourses that draw attention to the empirical presumptions through their counterfactual analyses. Nair effectively rejects thinly veiled hetero-patriarchal hegemonies in her subject associations of poetry by

questioning: “O Bhartrhari, how would your *niti* handle the sad 21st century” (line 10), and goes on to declare that her “tastes are different” (line 3). Both the poems rebuff the thinly disguised hetero-patriarchal hegemony that promote “male subjectivity” as “scientific objectivity” (Caplan, 1988). Thematically linking the two poems, Nair grieves this “tragedy” of lost systems of knowledge while challenging the existing knowledge systems that are required to be reinterpreted in a new light. What she implies is that interpretation is subject to one’s comprehension abilities and skills must evolve with the changing times to develop new modes of enquiry. Reading Nair’s poems in the light of Foucauldian theories provides a critical framework to examine the way women’s identities have culturally regulated their subordination to produce a skewed social reality where women are often underrepresented. Foucault rejected objectivity contending that ideas of reality and belief are actually a subjective act of identifying and meaning-making—an attempt to see from a certain perspective and use it to impose definitions on subjects. Nair discredits any model of reality as truth and views all interpretations in a political and historical context of power—values imposed by patriarchal and logocentric attitudes (Bora, 2008, p. 37).

In this light, the poem *But Where There Are No Rules, Who Rules?* raises questions regarding the understanding of ontological realities guided by rules and ideologies of *niti*—envisaged as a framework of knowledge production of ethical ideals and doctrines that govern social life and—offers epistemic privileges to men and demands compliance from women is hierarchical at its core. All knowledge is socially produced and influenced by one’s personal experiences and position within hierarchically organized power structures (Wylie, 2004). In a Foucauldian sense, the poet introduces an epistemic break in the historical processes through her comparative counterfactual imaginaries. Bhartrhari’s *Nitisatakam* is cast in the dock, seen as outdated and archaic and unsuited to current times, while seeing his *niti*/rules as something not cast in stone but written in sand that can be washed off with newer waters of interpretation.

The mode of investigating alterity through counterfactuals underlines the unexamined teleological assumptions of various discourses. The poems theorize alternative approaches of reading history by rethinking the indeterminacy of dominant narratives. The verses provoke a conflict over interpretation that contrasts a more conventional teleological

interpretation with the hermeneutics of doubt. For Nair, any attempt at interpretation is bound to principles of selectivity and will eventually be tainted by subjectivity. Drawing on mythopoetic counterfactuality to explore feminist and linguistic concerns, Nair explores the role mythic narratives play in social identity and self-formation through the lens of a feminist political imaginary. She delineates the ways in which women's mythos can transcend the limitations of male logos to give rise to newer methods of interpretation through alternative mythmaking.

Meditations on Language

As a poet-linguist, Nair's meditations on language, its nature and meaning-making is reflected in her poetry. Language is identified as a fictitious construct in and of itself that does not have a predetermined meaning. It signifies things we want it to imply instead of having a set meaning. Language, as it is conventionally used, belongs to men and undervalues or negatively defines women.

Identifying *niti* as one of the writings that shaped society, it can be pointed out that the presumptions made about women were not based on natural realities; rather, they were specifically based on certain socio-political and historical contexts to define patriarchal reality through the subjective medium of language (Hammett, 2018, p. 4). This corroborates Kate Millet's assertion that patriarchy's universality and longevity/hold is "through its successful habit of passing itself off as nature" (2016, p. 58) and where modifications in language could benefit women and are desirable.

Nair undercuts meaning-making by questioning the fictional nature of language first and the possible corrigibility of 'man-made values' from the perspective of both as "a methodology for interpreting literary texts and as a socio-political ground for acting in the world" (Morgan & Davis, 1994, p. 189). Seeing the 'world as text' produced by language, she declines to assign any "ultimate meaning to the text...Refusing to be fixed in or by the monolithically authorized 'meaning' or regulatory fiction of gender", as the employed counterfactuality denaturalizes the imposed identities to "promote new forms of subjectivity and realise new social realities" (Plain & Sellers, 2012, p. 198).

Conclusion

The poems acknowledge women's experiences in a culture where

logocentrism remains unquestioned. They look into the limits of language and the discrimination inherent in society where the significance of “mother tongue” is stressed while mother’s significance is undermined (Nair, 2015, p. 51). In both the mythic narratives, patriarchal prototypes are upturned and reconfigured through the revisionary counterfactuality that becomes a means of rewriting knowledge systems/myths to offer alternate narratives, through which Nair implies that “mythos and logos are mutually implicated” (Patomäki, 2019). The reconstituted myths are critical in terms of ethical, political and epistemological plurality, where similar to language, beliefs are presented as fictitious constructs even when they serve as the basis for actions, traditions and institutions. Gargi’s untamed silence questions minority voices/thoughts on which women have either been suppressed or denied for long whereas Bhartrhari is accused of taking the logic of his *niti* as definitive and superior.

Questioning discourses by delving into the very foundations of myths and sociolinguists with the aid of mythopoetical counterfactuality, Nair—a postmodernist in her examination of assumptions—interrogates “whose truth” it is that predominates and finds no centrality but a multitude of truths. Her poems ultimately expose the inadequacy of the linguistic framework in male-authored canonical texts and discourses, through its nuanced intersectionalities to look at the way literature is written, perceived, and interpreted, only to mirror the limits of our meaning-making linguistic ability, with Nair’s poems signifying Ludwig Wittgenstein’s assertion: “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (1922, p. 52).

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