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The Archetypal Identity of Laxmi in Sakhārām Binder

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It has long been accepted that in the imagination of man certain images occur again and again to represent the elements of existence. As an individual finds these images in the myths of his culture, he knows their symbolic meanings intuitively, although he may not be able to articulate those meanings. In literature, which is a play of two constructive principles, system and creativity, the presentation of these mythic images is very common. The images themselves serve as a semiotic system and their presentation, usually unconscious, in art is the creative principle. A study of such archetypal images contributes to the understanding of a piece of literature. In *Sakhārām Binder*, a Marathi play first produced in the spring of 1972,[1] we see that Laxmi, one of its main characters, represents the archetypal figure of Sāvitri, the heroine of a mythical episode in the Hindu epic, the *Mahābhārata*.[2]

The first principle of archetypal study is that literature grows out of itself, that poems and plays are made out of other poems and other plays. In this theory, which maintains the self-perpetuating nature of literature, poetry is looked upon, not as a mass of mutually independent, discrete literary artifacts, but as a continuum of 'the body of poetry as a whole.'[3] The links within this body of poetry are provided by literary conventions, genres, and archetypal symbols, a study of which reveals the interconnectedness of the literature of a community

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[1] Vijay Tendulkar, *Sakhārām Binder* (Poona, India: Neelakantha Prakashan, 1972). All subsequent references to the pages of this edition are given in the text in immediately following parentheses.

[2] A brief summary of the plot of *Sakhārām Binder* is included as an appendix for the convenience of those who do not have access to the play.

[3] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 99. Consult pp. 95 through 192 in Frye for illuminating comments on archetypes.

sharing the same culture. An archetype possesses a strong power of communication within a culturally homogeneous community. It is part of the consciousness of a culture. The function of archetypal criticism is to discover these images and lay bare the interconnections among the works of literature produced in a culture. In most modern literature, the links provided by archetypal symbols with the literature of the past are more or less hidden or displaced. It is commonly observed that the transparent character of the archetypes of ancient myths gets increasingly opaque, and complex ironic overtones begin to show up in works of art as we move from the early periods to the modern periods of art history and literature. Most archetypes in *sophisticated* literature can, therefore, be established by sensitive critical investigation alone.[4]

Archetypal symbols occur again and again in the literature of the world—in their pure or undisplaced forms as well as in considerably displaced forms. To cite examples from the Western world, what is known as typological criticism in orthodox biblical exegesis is similar to archetypal criticism. Types of Christ, who is the ante-type, are established in the characters of the Old Testament, just as archetypes are established for the characters of modern literature. Moses, Abraham, and Samson are, for example, thus identified as the types of Christ. In modern American literature we have Tom Joad from *The Grapes of Wrath*, a Christ figure, and Miss Lonelyhearts in a novel of that name, an inverted or displaced type of Christ. The narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a Christ figure as well, though not immediately recognizable as one. Similarly, the Adonis myth can be traced in the rich Western tradition of the pastoral elegy where the archetypal lament for the brutal and tragic death of the protagonist starts the elegy. The archetypal apotheosis in the myth is also found in displaced forms in all the chief practitioners of the pastoral elegy, among whom are included Theocritus and Virgil in antiquity and Spenser, Milton, and Shelley in English literature. It is also observed that the archetypal identity of Hero in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* and of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* is with Proserpina (Gk, Persephone) who, kidnapped by Pluto, is allowed to return to the earth for six months every year. Hermione and Hero, after disappearing for a while and thought to be dead, return miraculously. Again, the mythical polarity of black and white is a common convention of character portrayal in nineteenth-

[4] The term *sophisticated* here distinguishes modern literary classics from folklorist or popular art forms, such as the ballad and the folk tale. The archetypes in popular art are so transparent that a majority of its uncultivated consumers can easily identify them.

century novels, such as Scott's *Ivanhoe* or Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*. In the latter, Miriam, the dark woman, contrasts with Hilda, the fair one. In such novels, the dark woman regularly symbolizes passion, mystery, and temptation while the fair one stands for purity and virtue. The parallel contrast of good guys and bad guys and the 'archetypal' bold and admirable hero of the typical western movie are displaced in modern spoofs, such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, and *The Sting*, the stories with antiheroes. In James Bond, we have the modern descendant of the archetypal Zeus combining in him power—muscular and sexual—and wily machinations. An ironical twist or displacement of this archetypal hero is found in the protagonists of movies like *Camino Real* and *The Return of the Pink Panther*, the stories of fumbling detectives. In *Huckleberry Finn*, we have a picaresque hero, an energetic adventurer, in quest of the self as much as of the reality beyond, a displaced type of Sir Galahad in search of the Holy Grail. Another well-known example in this line of questing heroes is Don Quixote. A displacement of Prometheus is to be found in the character of Ahab of *Moby Dick*. All these observations are commonplaces of archetypal criticism.

The examples of such archetypes in both their pure and displaced forms in Western literature can be easily multiplied. The same structural principle applies to Indian literature as well. The great storehouse of undisplaced myths and archetypes in Hindu culture consists of the two great Sanskrit epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, and the mythical tales in the *Vedas*, the *Upaniṣads* and the *Purāṇas*. It is for this reason that Sāvitri of the 'Satyawān-Sāvitri episode' in the *Mahābhārata* can well be considered the archetype of Laxmi, Sakhārām's first mistress in *Sakhārām Binder*.

The story of Sāvitri is well known to the Hindus. The sage Mārkaṇḍeya tells Yudhishthira this story, which occurs in *Vana-Parva* (the 'forest section'), the third book of the epic. Sāvitri is the ideal or archetypal wife in Hindu mythology. She is a beautiful princess sent by her father to choose her own husband, whom she finds in Satyawān, the son of an exiled king, living in a hermitage in a forest. Even though warned that her spouse was not destined to live beyond a certain day fixed a few months from then, Sāvitri goes ahead and marries Satyawān. She serves her husband and his blind parents with extreme devotion and leads a frugal woodland life of self-negation. Before the day of disaster, she fasts and does hard penance and accompanies her husband on the dreaded day to collect fruits and roots. When Satyawān faints while working, Sāvitri takes his head in her lap and awaits Yama, god of the

dead. She follows Yama when he carries off the soul of the dead Satawān. Yama tries to dissuade her from her futile pursuit of him, but to no avail. Sāvitri shows her forensic skills, arguing with Yama, who is finally lulled into granting her, not only gifts and eyesight for her in-laws but also a century of sons for herself, a boon which cannot be fulfilled, as Sāvitri quickly points out to Yama, unless her husband is revived. Sāvitri, through smartness and sheer devotion to her husband, thus pleases the god of the dead, who gladly confesses that she has outwitted him and releases her husband promptly from his clutches.[5]

This is the model of the ideal wife we find in a highly displaced form in Laxmi, the first of Sakhārām's two mistresses in *Sakhārām Binder*. It might seem strange that Laxmi, deserted by her husband and living as a kept woman with another man, is suggested to be the type of Sāvitri, but a careful examination of Laxmi's attitude towards Sakhārām proves the validity of this suggestion. For Laxmi, Sakhārām is husband. When Laxmi's legal husband deliberately snaps her wedding necklace (p. 77), he ceases to be her husband in the spirit of matrimony. Her *de facto* husband, as far as she is concerned, is Sakhārām, who gives her shelter. Laxmi herself is not tired of emphasizing this point as in her following words:

> My ritual marriage didn't work out. So, I began looking upon Sakhārām as my real husband, worshipped him and adored him even after he forced me out. (Taking out the wedding chain from her blouse) See, I put this on for him because I am his. . . .When I die, I'll die in his lap as his true wife. (pp. 66–7.)[6]

On a previous occasion while taking leave of Sakhārām as he throws her out, she has similar things to say:

> What the gods and priests gave me [my formal husband] I couldn't enjoy. He didn't want me. So I came here and regarded you as my own [husband] and became your wife for all practical purposes, didn't hold back a thing. (p. 29.)

Who deserted whom is very important for Laxmi. In fact, it is the

[5] The story of Satyawān and Sāvitri is given in a summary form here. This mythical tale accounts for the vow of fasting and penance undertaken by Hindu married women to ensure long life for their spouses. The vow, called *Vaṭasāvitrivrata*, is, as it were, a symbolic enactment of a reality and a belief of the Hindus, which is perpetuated and kept alive through this annual ritual.

[6] The translations as well as the summary of the plot are mine. I have learned that an English translation of *Sakhārām Binder* has been made by Shanta Shahne and Kumud Mehta and published by Interculture Associates, Thompson, CT., 1973, but I haven't seen it. My translation is not literal, since my aim is to capture the spirit and theme of the original.

chief criterion on which she judges questions of marital fidelity. This is the basis on which she distinguishes her case from that of Champā, the second paramour of Sakhārām. He brings Champā to his house after he kicks Laxmi out. In the eyes of Laxmi, Champā is immoral because *she* has deserted her husband. Nobody could accuse Laxmi of having deserted her husband. This simplistic, yet clear-cut, distinction makes Laxmi feel very self-righteous and lets her consider herself as chaste and Champā a tramp. Witness, for instance, what she has to say in this regard:

> Poor little him [Champā's husband]! She kicked him out. She married him at the holy altar in the presence of gods and priests. He wants her; that's why he keeps coming here, after her. But *she* doesn't want him. . . .that bitch! I'm innocent, a proper woman, a true coin. I've always behaved piously. (p. 71.)

Since for Laxmi an irrevocable marriage bond exists between Sakhārām and herself, she, like a good wife, exerts a wholesome influence on him. Not just a sexual companion for Sakhārām, she begins and continues with steadfastness a process of reforming him. Even though Sakhārām often mistreats her, she is soft-spoken and submissive. Through these traditional means of an unassertive chaste wife (*Pativratā*), she brings about Sakhārām's slow reformation. He confides to Daud, his close Moslem friend, that, contrary to his expectations, Laxmi affected him in an uncanny, mysterious way as none of his previous mistresses did (p. 29). Sakhārām becomes aware that under her meekness Laxmi conceals a tenacious strength of will. He expresses the feeling that she is somehow different and has subtly influenced him:

> Haven't I cut down on drinking over the past year? Say, don't I totally stay away from alcohol on holy festivals? I smoked pot only two times during the last month, didn't I? Don't I worship the household gods and take a bath every day before worship? Now, answer me, don't I? (p. 24.)

While talking to Champā, Laxmi refers to the transformation Sakhārām went through when she was with him. Daud similarly reminds Sakhārām of the reformed way of life he had when Laxmi lived with him. The change brought about by Laxmi in him struck so deep a root within him that Champā's impious behaviour in getting drunk even on Dasrā morning, a sacred day, shocks him. This would have hardly bothered him before Laxmi entered his life, but now it revolts his sensibilities (pp. 50–1). What Laxmi does to Sakhārām, the bringing about of his spiritual regeneration, parallels Sāvitri's service to her husband and to his parents, the gifts she procures for them from Yama.

It is the total commitment to the husband and to all that he holds dear which is the common factor to both the women.

While Laxmi reforms Sakhārām, Champā degrades him. The polarity between the roles of Laxmi and Champā, in relation to their effects on Sakhārām, is significant because it makes conspicuous the points of contact between Laxmi and her archetype, Sāvitri, both of whom save their consorts. When Champā enters and Laxmi is pushed out of Sakhārām's life, he begins a descent into an orgy of excessive drinking, of smoking marijuana and making love out of season. As usually happens, his relapse into vice is worse than his earlier viciousness. The sensuous beauty of the domineering Champā gradually enslaves him and begins the process of his emasculation. He is often in an alcoholic stupor and neglects his job; he is often too drunk to even play his drums, the one artistic outlet he ever had in life, the one pursuit of love which he really was committed to. Gradually he finds to his utter humiliation that, though he has a desire to make love to Champā, he often cannot, because he has become impotent. His emasculation under Champā's rule is thus both literal and metaphorical. By the time he strangles Champā to death when Laxmi reveals to him her infidelity, his degradation has become complete. It is the stage of his spiritual death, the death of his identity as an independent, proud, and self-respecting individual.

After he kills Champā, Sakhārām is close to death even in a literal sense, for now his life is forfeit to the law. If his crime is discovered, he will be subject to capital punishment. In this situation of mortal danger to Sakhārām, it is Laxmi who readywittedly hits upon a plan to save him. Just as she proved the savior of his spiritual life before, now she proves the savior of his physical life. When he is dazed and unable to act after his murder of Champā, Laxmi takes the situation in hand and makes a daring suggestion:

> Let's bury her. . . . Nobody would ask. I'll say 'she left here of her own accord.' God is witness. He knows I'm good and holy. He'll stand behind me. He won't condemn you as a sinner and murderer. *I'll intercede on your behalf* [italics mine]. I'll ask Him to save you on the strength of my righteous deeds. (p. 77.)

This is reminiscent of Sāvitri's intercession with the god of the dead for the life of her husband. Both Laxmi and Sāvitri plead to God on behalf of their mates. The merit is in the wife, on the strength of which the 'husband' is to be released in both the archetypal myth and *Sakhārām Binder*.[7] Laxmi thus reclaims Sakhārām's life just as the

[7] Laxmi has undoubtedly quite a few unsavory aspects to her character. She is narrow-minded; she wants to prevent Daud from attending the Gaṇapati worship since he is a Moslem. Her piety makes her disgustingly self-righteous and, above all, she is ungrateful to Champā who has given her refuge out of the generosity of her heart. Laxmi in a mean spirit informs Sakhārām of Champā's affair with Daud, to get rid of her. The blend in Laxmi of admirable and ugly traits is an example of the ironic displacement of one-dimensional mythical archetypes—a phenomenon often occurring in modern literature. Laxmi is a character in the twentieth century drama while Sāvitri is a figure from primitive myth.

archetypal wife, Sāvitri, does her husband's. Yama's release of Satyawān's soul can be equated to Laxmi's confident assurance to Sakhārām that God will pardon and protect him through her mediation.

It is interesting to see in connection with Laxmi's identification with Sāvitri that there is a reversal in our play of the usual iconographical representation of the dead Satyawān lying in Sāvitri's lap. Instead, Laxmi insists that she is going to die in Sakhārām's lap (cf. pp. 61, 77), an expression of the common wish on the part of a chaste Hindu wife to die before her husband. Laxmi's insistence is, indeed, a demand for Sakhārām's recognition of her as his true 'wife.' This reversal is one of the many forms which the displacement of an archetypal symbol assumes in modern literature. The very excessiveness in modern eyes of Laxmi's reverent attitude to Sakhārām is the means used by the playwright to call Sāvitri's model before us.[8]

Another reinforcing factor of the resemblance of Laxmi to Sāvitri is in the choice of their spouses. Sakhārām has great pride in the integrity and truthfulness of his way of life. There are numerous instances in the play where Sakhārām's plain dealing and candor are laid bare. Sakhārām says on one occasion that he has all sorts of vices, but 'the only thing I've never done is to lie' (p. 2). When Daud says that he often forgets God's commandments and commits new sins every day, Sakhārām answers, 'They are sins in the lower court of man; in God's eyes, there's only one sin and that is falsehood. Hypocrisy and lying are crimes that call for life-imprisonment' (p. 18). Throughout the play he reveals his strong attachment to the practice of truth and honesty (cf. pp. 6, 50 and 74–5). The emphasis on openness or truthfulness as the basic principle of Sakhārām's conduct of life is so insistent in the play that it is hard not to be struck by the echo of Sāvitri's husband's name which is Satyawān, meaning 'truthful.' There is thus additional corroboration of the connection between Sāvitri and Laxmi. Ironically,

[8] Sāvitri's symbolic essence is her unswerving loyalty to her husband, a loyalty which gives her the readywittedness to vanquish the god of the dead and retrieve her deceased husband. In this essential quality Laxmi totally resembles Sāvitri. It is various alterations, chiefly ironic, in the mythic essence of archetypes which, however, mask the characters of modern classics in such a way that they emerge metamorphosed, almost beyond recognition of their 'originals.'

however, Laxmi's assistance to Sakhārām, her attempt to hide the murdered body for his sake, makes him abuse his principle of truthfulness. The dramatist in allowing the compromise of Sakhārām's principles is, however, thus emphasizing Laxmi's archetypal function, which is to save her spouse. Laxmi's savior-of-Sakhārām role takes precedence over his attachment to truth. This is one more ironic twist given by the playwright to the myth of Sāvitri.

There is, therefore, strong evidence in *Sakhārām Binder* to make a case that Sāvitri of the *Mahābhārata* is the archetype of Laxmi. The ironic displacement of the archetype, of course, adds to the complexity of Laxmi's character, without, however, completely submerging her identity with Sāvitri. Throughout the play, the writer's concern has been with the preservation in Laxmi of Sāvitri's archetypal essence and it is this concern which is thoroughly reflected in the character and the structural function of 'husband-Savior,' fulfilled in this play by Laxmi.

Appendix

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE PLOT OF *Sakhārām Binder*

Sakhārām, working as a binder in a printing shop, is a confirmed bachelor. He regularly drinks, gambles, smokes pot, and keeps mistresses, though one at a time. He is, however, very proud that he is not hypocritical like other people who try to hide their vices. He is open and candid. When the play begins he gets himself a new mistress, a middle-aged woman named Laxmi, who has been deserted by her husband. He explains to her that they will only live together as long as they want each other and that she will have to live with him as a wife but with no strings attached. He is a tyrant but they live together for almost a year. Her religious fervor affects him gradually and he begins worshipping the household gods after a daily ritual bath. He also cuts down on drinking and smoking. He beats her savagely, however, on the day sacred to Gaṇapati (Gaṇeshchaturthi) when she refuses to let Daud, his close Moslem friend, join in the worship. Soon he breaks up with her and throws her out.

The second act opens with Sakhārām bringing in a new mistress, Champā, younger and a great deal more voluptuous than Laxmi. Champā is aggressive and outspoken; she uses as much foul language as he does. She has recently deserted her husband, a drunken, impotent, and whining police officer, fired from his job for negligence of duty. When Sakhārām wants to make love to her, she says she is not that kind of woman, but threatened to be kicked out of his house, she reluctantly submits to him, though she can bring herself to be made love to only during half-drunken stupors. Champā's drinking only spurs Sakhārām to alcohol, the intake of which he had drastically reduced under Laxmi's influence. Sakhārām often stays away from work to indulge in intercourse at any time of the day when both he and Champā are intoxicated. Sakhārām's friend, Daud, is also attracted by Champā's sensuous charms but he warns Sakhārām of the deterioration of his life and tries to remind him of the old days, of the decent kind of life he had when Laxmi was with him. One day Champā's husband comes to Sakhārām's house, seeking his wife, who, finding him there, gets into a fit of rage and sadistically attacks him. She mauls him badly and throws him out. Sakhārām and Daud are amazed and quite a bit afraid of the wrathful aspect of Champā. One night Laxmi returns and begs Sakhārām to be allowed to live with him and Champā. He beats her for coming to him again and wants to drive her away but Champā intercedes out of pity and allows her refuge. When Champā's husband comes back again a few times in her absence, Laxmi feeds him and cajoles him. Laxmi and Champā decide on a division of labor between them: Laxmi does the household chores and Champā takes care of Sakhārām's sexual appetite. Laxmi sleeps in the kitchen at night. Her presence in the other room, apparently, damages the virility of Sakhārām who, stung by Champā's accusation that he has become impotent, walks into the kitchen in a rage, beats Laxmi, and demands that she leave instantly. Laxmi then tells him that Champā has been carrying on an affair with Daud. Furious at Champā's infidelity, Sakhārām strangles her to death. When he is stunned after the murder, Laxmi gives him courage, props up his failing spirit, and calls Champā an unchaste tramp. She suggests that they secretly bury her in the kitchen and tells him that God is on their side. Sakhārām is still dazed and cannot move, so Laxmi starts digging a hole by herself. While she is digging, Champā's husband appears outside the closed door and begins his sick whining that he wants Champā to beat him to death. The curtain falls as his masochistic wailing continues.