

Motif of revenge in select novels by Indian women writers

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the psychological and narrative architecture of the motif of revenge within contemporary South Asian fiction, focusing specifically on Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *One Amazing Thing*, and Anita Rau Badami's *Tell It to the Trees*. While classical scriptures and Western literary tragedies frequently frame vengeance as a highly masculine enterprise of direct warfare or public restoration of honor, this study psychoanalyzes how marginalized female protagonists' appropriate personal agency under oppressive patriarchal constraints. Operating outside the boundaries of formal legal frameworks that fail to address deep emotional and psychological trauma, these characters deploy varied strategies—ranging from domestic subversion and systemic manipulation to impulsive physical retribution. By tracing their paths from victimization to structural defiance, the paper interrogates the binary of the victim and the villain, examining the psychological satisfaction and destabilizing moral consequences inherent in the pursuit of personal justice.

Keywords: *Revenge motif, Indian women writers, psychological agency, patriarchy, trauma, poetic just.*

“The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right.” This profound lament from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Act 1, Scene 5) encapsulates the timeless psychological burden of retribution. Revenge as a motif is as primeval and primitive as man on this planet. The intent to set some transgression right and reclaim one's peace of mind, self-respect, personal and social honor, and motive to move on in life is a common and some-what defensible wish, and has been recorded in historical and literary texts from a long past. Deeply associated with the emotions of fury, detestation and hostility, the idea and desire of revenge arise as a psychological and emotional drive in a person who believes that s/he has been a victim of some uninvited and undeserved behavior and treatment by others, causing a long- lasting damage to the person's physical, mental, emotional and social health. Though it is an all-consuming desire that keeps the avenger singeing and leaves a loop of hatred and destruction in the trail, yet a sense of justice and retribution, emotional equilibrium and psychological calm is attained only after seeking revenge. Michael E. McCullough observes that the craving for revenge is wired into

every neurologically healthy human being, and is therefore an entirely normal impulse rather than an aberration. (McCullough, 2008) On the other hand, there are thinkers, philosophers and writers like Mahatma Gandhi who emphasizing the value of non-violence and forgiveness, warn that “an eye for an eye will make the whole world blind.” Recognized for his revenge tragedies, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare also equates mercy to a godly quality that elevates humanity to divinity as ‘It is an attribute to god himself’. Kerrigan, however, understands Revengers as “questers after psychic balance as well as ethical equivalence”, tallying up their losses like careful accountants and repaying the suffering they have experienced in kind (Kerrigan, 1996) Western classical as well as modern Literature is replete with writings with the motif of revenge and a lot of research and critical work has already been done on this topic. Almost all the established religions of the world prioritize forgiveness and mercy over revenge, yet there are characters in the scriptures and classical literature who have sought revenge as strategic tool of poetic justice and self-preservation.

The present paper, however, is a limited attempt to trace and psycho-analyze certain acts of revenge taken by women characters as depicted by Indian women writers and intends to study *Ladies Coupe* (Nair, 2001), *One Amazing Thing* (Divakaruni, 2010) and *Tell It to the Trees* (Badami, 2011). Since the paper would try to locate women characters appropriating their own agency to settle scores with their offenders in the Indian context, it would be apt to refer to some of the heroic women such as Amba and Draupadi from the *Mahabharata* and Shurpanakha from the *Ramayana*, whose revenge not only proved to be monumental but also molded the course of narrative of our scriptures.

Daughter of Kashya, the King of Kashi, Amba feels slighted and rejected by Bhishma who had abducted her along with her two sisters Ambika and Ambalika during her *swayamvara* for his half-brother Vichitravirya. Upon knowing Amba’s love for King Shalva, she is released from the captivity to marry the man of her own choice, who discards her further as she has been won by another man. Left stranded, Amba returns to Bhishma and pleads with him to accept her in marriage to vindicate her honor. Since Bhishma is under the oath of celibacy, he cannot fulfill her desire and, thus, begins the tale of her never-ending hatred and austere penances to avenge her honor and reclaim her sense of justice as even her Guru Parashuram could not defeat Bhishma in a twenty-three-day duel. She takes rebirth in King Drupad’s family as Shikhandi to play her part in the annihilation of the mighty and invincible warrior Bhishma, her sinner, during the 18-day Kurukshetra War which itself was avowed, ignited and propelled by another woman character, Draupadi after her public humiliation in the court of the Kauravas during the infamous game of dice. She avows retribution to all the perpetrators of her dishonor and silent observers of her shame and disgrace, and pledges that she would not tie her hair till she washes them with Dushasan’s

blood since it was he who had dragged her by her hair to the court of Kauravas to disrobe her publicly. In addition to countless other reasons, her fury and grit to avenge the wrongs and sins committed against her, expedite the momentum of the great war. Though she herself has to face tremendously brutal loss of her five sons and mourn for them eternally, the sense of justice is restored not only for her but for all the generations to come who derives lessons of life from the scriptures.

Shurpanakha takes revenge upon Ram and Lakshman inciting her brother Ravana's greed and lust through her portrayal of Sita's matchless beauty and coaxes him to abduct her which would damage beyond repair the reputé and honour of Ram and the Raghuvanshi Clan. During their exile, she happens to see the two brothers and is charmed by their grace and valor. Her marriage proposal is rejected by them and in an attempt to attack Sita, she goes overboard and gets her nose chopped by Lakshman. This dishonoring would definitely entail revenge and she goes to her brothers Khara and Dushan who get killed along with their armies by the two brothers. Finally, she goes to Lanka to seek revenge through her all-mighty brother Ravana. The popular retellings of the *Ramayana*, however, seek and attest that the actual motive of revenge was plotted against Ravana himself who had killed her secretly wedded husband Vidyutjihva who was from a rival clan. Knowing full well the limitations of her own agency to take revenge upon her unconquerable brother, she intentionally manipulates Ram and Lakshman into a war with Ravana, leading to the latter's total annihilation. The event is detailed in the Uttara Kand, Sarga 23 of the *Valmiki Ramayana*.

In the epics, men ordinarily settle their scores on the open battlefield, whereas women, hemmed in by social constraints, are compelled to work obliquely: they voice their anger and press their demand for retribution through weeping and public mourning, through curses, through the sacrifice or endangering of their own bodies, through threats of self-destruction, and only in the rarest cases through arms. (Anil & Kishore, 2026) Seen in this light, lamentation is not merely the helpless overflow of sorrow; it becomes a calculated and disruptive instrument of protest, by which the powerless turn their very grief into a public weapon that unsettles authority, presses the claim of justice and goads others towards retribution. All the three women characters discussed above are by no means sidelined as understood in common parlance, yet their marginalization in the context of their own socio-political setting speaks volumes about the embedded and inherent gender biases cutting across all the echelons of society. All of them initially resort to public grieving, lamentation and curses to keep their injured past and mortifications alive, expressing their grievances and directing the action of revenge, it is Amba as Shikhandi who takes up weapons directly against Bhishma to avenge her honour. J. A. John pertinently remarks that the very qualities for which one half of humanity has been branded the

‘weaker sex’ prove, in the fullness of time, to be the instruments of women’s empowerment (John, 2020).

Woman as nurturer and preserver is mostly perceived as endowed with compassion, forgiveness, perseverance and a sense of sacrifice, and “...revenge is frequently depicted as a man’s job: women incite and men act, performing the killings that establish their masculinity and protect their honour. Yet, while conceptualized as a quintessential masculine activity, revenge simultaneously unleashes the female Furies and the violent, ‘feminine’ emotions which threaten a man’s reason and self-control. (Dawson & McHardy, 2018) In the case of both Draupadi and Shurpanakha, it is the women who keep the motif of revenge enflamed in the hearts of their men and the dutybound men go to war to avenge their honor. “...scholars are divided as to whether female avengers should be interpreted as honorary men, heroes in their own right, monstrous inversions of gender norms, or conduits through which male subjectivity is formed” (Dawson & McHardy, 2016).

Another significant question that needs to be addressed is whether law completely fails to deliver a sense of justice and to the revenger or the nature of offence is such that it falls beyond the overview of state and law. In patriarchal societies where women find themselves stifled by the gender-biased legal and social structures that do not address their psychological and emotional hurt and traumas, they take recourse to their personal revenge to restore their sense of justice, often not too overtly. The novels under study portray such women characters whose sense of justice and righteousness is contrived sometime to tickle and nudge the readers leading them to savor the ‘sweet-revenge’ while at others their remorseless and coldblooded confession leaves them awestruck and horrified. In narrative terms, ‘sweet revenge’ names that pattern of getting even in which the victim out-thinks the oppressor and inflicts a punishment so exactly deserved that it strikes the reader as poetic justice. Such plots ordinarily take root where the formal guarantors of justice—the law, the state, the family hierarchy have failed; and even while relishing her triumph, the avenger usually senses the hollowness of the prize and the self-destructive trap concealed within it. The revenge remains ‘sweet’ only so long as the punishment stays proportionate to the offence; the moment it overshoots the mark, the reader’s sympathy curdles and the erstwhile victim hardens into a villain.

Margaret Shanthi, née Paulraj, is one of the six female passengers sharing a female coupe with Akhila, the protagonist of Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupé*, aboard the Kanyakumari Express. Belonging to different age groups and boarding at various intervals, these women form a unique bond, sharing their innermost thoughts and lived experiences truthfully without anxiety of being judged, given their complete anonymity. Bound for her home in Coimbatore, Margaret boards the train from Bangalore after dropping her husband at a health clinic to manage his body weight and regain control over his life—an annual exercise he must

perform. Then comes her confession: "God didn't make Paulraj a fat man. I did." (Nair, 2001, p. 96) Margaret, going back to the memory lane starts narrating to Akhila, how as a brilliant student of Chemistry with a gold medal in M.Sc, she could have pursued higher studies from America and excelled in life as her parents desired and how swept away by the Ebenezer Paulraj's charismatic persona and mellifluous voice at their chance meeting at Church, changed the direction of her life. A renowned Vice-Principal of a prestigious school with a solidly impeccable family background and Mills and Boons handsomeness seemed a precious catch not only to Margaret but also to her family. Within two months they got married and their honeymoon lasted the whole year and the next till Margaret got pregnant. Sacrificing her talent and idea of doing Ph. D, she did B.Ed. as suggested by her husband and joined in his school as a teacher of Chemistry. She got her long hair shorn after his liking and instead of attending Church services every Sunday, started visiting posh restaurants of his choice without any twinge of guilt or resentment. Their married life was nothing less than a fairy tale in the beginning and no-one as joyful and delighted as she was. The first signs of crack in their blissful relationship, however, starts appearing with Ebenezer's insistence on aborting the 'zygote' against her will and without any remorse it being an anti-Christianity act. He coaxes her saying: "Let's wait till we're both settled in our careers before we have our baby. We have each other. What more do we want?" (Nair, 2001, p.105) Not to displease and hurt her husband, she agrees and undergoes the necessary procedure against her wish. She could never forget how her parents tutored her to be a good and obedient wife to him, and how her share of accountability to maintain the peace and integrity of her married life would be greater than that of her husband. Her father had suggested: "You have to take care of him and take care never to hurt him. He won't be able to bear it if you hurt him" (Nair, 2001).

During this ordeal, Margaret recognizes the bigoted nature of Ebenezer who can't accept any challenge to his authority. Just a week after her abortion, she is further exposed to the still darker side of her husband's personality when he proclaims: "My Darling child...My little darling. My lovely girl. With no big bouncy breasts and horrible woman's bush. I never want you to change. I want you to remain like this all your life." (Nair, 2001) before making passionate love to her. This fervent declaration unveils the real intent behind her forced abortion and raises deeply troubling questions regarding her identity as a woman. She becomes terrified thinking about her husband's reaction when age would start leaving its marks on her body and she would no longer be his 'little girl'. Post-abortion, depression takes over, and the intense guilt of consenting to abort her child begins to gnaw at her. Over the years, her fears prove true, and the fissure in their relationship widens. She finds solace in food, losing her youthful figure, and her husband subsequently dismisses her as "someone of no significance" (Nair, 2001). Moving to Coimbatore, where her husband assumes the principalship of another prestigious school, she becomes nothing more than an

ignored household facilitator, despised by him and pitied by his social circle as a misfortune in the life of the accomplished Ebenezer.

Isolated from her parents-who refuse to understand her plight or provide emotional support-she feels utterly alone as her husband renders her invisible and insults her publicly. Her mother unsympathetically preaches that : “with all... numerous faults, overweight and barren, and given to long morose silences and a melancholic disposition,... [she] ought to go down on ...[her] knees every day and thank the heaven that he,..[her] husband is still stuck by ...[her].”(Nair, 2001) To her parents, he remains a respectable, high-achieving community member who generously tolerates a failed wife. Margaret realizes that social reputation and personal peace are far more important to her parents than her own happiness. She grows full of quiet hatred when her husband dismisses her academic subject, Chemistry, as non-significant and unimaginative in front of guests, and even his flirtatious glances toward other women fail to ignite her jealousy. Recognizing how much she loathes her controlling, manipulative, and hypocritical husband, she finds herself trapped in an insufferable marriage. A sudden insight regarding how to escape this oppressive quagmire dawns upon her following the death of James, one of a pair of goldfish her husband keeps at his bedside. Her husband presumes the fish died of disease or over-eating, but observing the surviving fish, Joyce, floating sleeker and happier, Margaret suspects that Joyce managed to eliminate her partner. This inspires her secret strategy: she decides to tantalize her husband’s taste buds and indulge his ego, declaring that her cooking will now have an explicit purpose.

She weaponizes his love for food as a tool of her revenge and indulging his ego feeds him rich and oily meals. Ebenezer had maintained his physique his entire life with zealous pride, forfeiting food and fasting weekly to maintain his image. So, she has to be patient to execute her sweet revenge and “Almost a year later... The sleek lines began to blur. The breath shortened and the pace slowed. Folds appeared around his neck. A second chin. A belly that jiggled...Ebe slowly became a fat man. A quiet man. An easy man...whose fondness for eating blunted his razor edge.” (Nair, 2001) He became entirely dependent on his wife whom he earlier loathed for her flabby and unattractive body. His desire for food and sex would be satisfied only through her. Earlier merely an adjunct, she became an indispensable part of his life and he became a man with whom she could live once again as she confesses in the very beginning “I, Margaret Shanthi, did it with sole desire for revenge. To erode his self-esteem and shake the very foundations of his being. To rid the world of a creature who if allowed to remain the way he was, slim, lithe and arrogant, would continue to harvest sorrow with a single-minded joy.” (Nair, 2001) Margaret’s innovative revenge is designed as an emotional mechanism to rebalance her life, regain lost control, and salvage her dignity without inviting public ignominy or legal complications. She is eventually blessed with a daughter and maneuvers a contented married

life, delivering a powerful message that an educated, intelligent woman cannot be treated with casual cruelty indefinitely.

The second notable character whose revenge can be categorized as impulsive and vitriolic is Malathi from Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *One Amazing Thing*. Her narrative unfolds when nine diverse characters are trapped by a catastrophic earthquake in the basement of an Indian visa office in the United States. One of the characters, Uma, suggests storytelling as a collective survival strategy to provide cathartic relief and dismantle cultural barriers in the face of impending death. Malathi, an ambitious young consulate employee, is a complex individual caught between her desire for independence and a complicated relationship with her married boss, Mangalam. Back home in India, Malathi had failed her tenth-grade exams twice, prompting her parents to seek a marriage match as the only alternative for a Brahmin girl of her background. She revolted against her family and began working at Miss Lola's Lovely Ladies Salon, where she was initially taken to be groomed for a bridal photograph. Fascinated by her own aesthetic transformation, she decided that instead of being a bride herself, she would "rather be a bride maker" (Divakaruni, 2010). She quickly excels and becomes the most sought-after beauty therapist for the wealthy and haughty Mrs. Vani Balan, the wife of a rich industrialist in Coimbatore, who is routinely accompanied by her docile, young village maid, Nirmala.

The central conflict arises when Mrs. Balan's son, Ravi, returns from America with idealistic notions of philanthropy and a classless society. Ravi establishes a charitable school, Vani Vidyalam, to provide free education, meals, and uniforms to destitute girls, and insists on teaching English to all household servants. While the older servants resist, Nirmala emerges as a highly persistent and intelligent pupil. Gossips begin to circulate, and one evening Mrs. Balan is shocked discovering "Ravi and Nirmala sitting side by side, heads almost touching, his hand guiding hers as she traced letters into her notebook...and she saw Ravi put his arm around the girl and gave her a hug" (Divakaruni, 2010).

Beside herself with rage, Mrs. Balan slaps Nirmala and threatens her, but is stopped by Ravi, who threatens to return permanently to America if Nirmala is dismissed. To defuse the situation and present a deceptive facade of acceptance, Mrs. Balan brings Nirmala to Lola's salon under the pretext of preparing her for a family celebration in Chennai, giving her used silk sarees and a fake ruby set. Malathi treats Nirmala in a private room, sharing the young girl's innocent hopes for a happy future with Ravi. However, Mrs. Balan actively connives to beguile the innocent girl, presenting her to her fifty-year-old, still single womanizer cousin Gopalan, a wealthy hotelier. "Long before Ravi and his father joined the festivities, Nirmala was moved from the servants' quarters to a suite of her own... Her fake jewels were replaced with real ones, her hand-me-down clothes with designer saris...it was clear to his guests that Gopalan had found himself a new girl" (Divakaruni, 2010).

Malathi feels intensely culpable for Nirmala's tragic fate because she failed to see through Mrs. Balan's intrigues and warn her. After achieving her cruel objective, Mrs. Balan returns to Lola's Salon, boasting about her son's new engagement to a wealthy real-estate tycoon's daughter, and demands a private hair treatment from Malathi to make her look youthful and elegant. Viewing this unexpected encounter as a divine sign for retribution, Malathi deliberately applies corrosive chemical mixtures that leave Mrs. Balan partially bald, disfigured, and raving in madness. Though Malathi sways "between terror and exhilaration" (Divakaruni, 2010) and is immediately dismissed from her job, she achieves her revenge. While vengeance can enhance status and frequently "coincides admirably with calculations of expediency", serving a man's financial and political self-interest, female revengers are typically represented negatively by patriarchal structures. (Herman, 1987) The inherent gender bias does not provide a formal agency for women to settle scores on behalf of marginalized friends, yet Malathi takes up cudgels regardless of being labeled monstrous. Warned by Lola that Mrs. Balan's structural power could prove fatal, Malathi flees Coimbatore for Hyderabad, eventually learning English and migrating to America. This forced exile contests the ultimate 'sweetness paradox' of revenge, demonstrating that personal retribution carries heavy, destabilizing consequences.

A far darker manifestation of revenge occurs through the characters of Bhagirathi (Akka), an old, bedridden grandmother, and Varsha, her thirteen-year-old granddaughter, in Anita Rau Badami's novel *Tell It to the Trees*. Settled in an isolated, custom-built home at Merritt's Point, the immigrant family consists of Akka, her authoritarian son Vikram, his second wife Suman, and two children, Varsha and her half-brother Hemant. The novel opens with an investigation into the death of their tenant, Anu Krishnan, whose frozen body is discovered near the house. Akka had shared with Varsha that her late grandfather, "Mr. J.K. Dharma, a small man with a big ego, froze into a pillar of ice right outside our front door when he was forty-seven years old" (Badami, 2011) Anu Krishnan, an old classmate of Vikram, had rented their backyard cottage to focus on creative writing, forging close bonds with Suman and Akka, while Varsha remains highly suspicious and resentful of her presence. Varsha and Hemant frequently spy on Anu and read her personal notebook, discovering that she is documenting their highly dysfunctional family dynamics.

Varsha has been burdened by her abusive, short-tempered father with the absolute responsibility of keeping the family name unblemished and ensuring that Suman never abandons them, as her biological mother Harini had done before dying under highly mysterious circumstances. In this household, family honor is paramount, and children are conditioned to share secrets only with 'trees' to prevent public scandal. Akka tells Varsha that her grandfather deserved to die because he was a chronic drunkard and a stain on the family name,

enjoying the memory of his death: “He was a bastard... He had bad genes... I am delighted he is no longer with us” (Badami, 2011). She recounts with an impish smile how he came home late and highly intoxicated one freezing winter night, and because he could not wake her, turned into an ice sculpture. While the family attempts to project an ideal image, the persistent sounds of domestic violence and hidden physical bruises raise Anu’s deep suspicions. Suman eventually confesses to Anu the severe physical, mental, and emotional abuse she endures from Vikram, alongside her inability to escape due to financial dependence and lack of support from her family in India. Anu promises to assist Suman in escaping this oppressive domestic sphere.

Eavesdropping on this conversation, Varsha experiences a profound survival panic, believing that Anu is going to steal her stepmother and brother, leaving her entirely alone with her brutalizing father. Children of abusive parents frequently grow up inside a rewritten reality, for the abuser denies or re-describes his cruelty until the victim herself comes to accept the blame for her own mistreatment. Varsha’s survival mechanism has created a powerful, trauma-bonded emotional attachment to her abusive father, whose rare moments of affection offer temporary relief. She had already lost an unborn sibling due to her father’s violent nature, yet she remains fiercely protective of him and her half-brother Hemant. Suman and Akka both fear Varsha’s obsessively jealous and possessive streak, which she inherited from her father; even at thirteen, she is remarkably adept at playing malicious mind games. When Akka falls seriously ill and is hospitalized, Vikram leaves the children in Anu’s care for the night. That very night, Anu dies of hypothermia. Suman notices Hemant’s severe trauma and coaxes a confession from him. He reveals that Varsha deliberately turned off all the lights, drew the blinds, and locked Anu outside when she stepped out for a smoke without her keys. Ignoring Anu’s desperate tapping and frantic banging, Varsha dragged her crying brother away, whispering: “Shh, shh, it’s okay Hem, she needs to learn a lesson, that’s all... If anyone asks, just say we were fast asleep” (Badami, 2011).

Suman is utterly stunned by this calculated, cold-blooded murder executed by a young girl who would rather see her stepmother dead or trapped than permit a family scandal. It was Varsha who hid Suman’s passport and engineered a false facade of dependency to manipulate her. Although Suman determines to break free from this psychopathic environment, Varsha remains equally resolved to maintain absolute control over her family, declaring: “I will find a way... I am cunning as the snow. I am sharp as the winter wind. I am strong as Tree. I can find a way. I am Varsha Dharma... This is my house, this is my family” (Badami, 2011). The novel ends on this chilling note, leaving the reader horrified regarding Suman and Hemant’s ultimate fate. Suman loses her allies and is left defenseless against a step-daughter who surpasses her father in unmitigated cruelty and bestiality. While Akka’s historical revenge on her husband is merely hinted at, Varsha’s lethal retaliation against Anu represents an

entirely uncalled-for, unjustified act of personal malice rooted in psychological insecurity. Juby and Farrington emphasize that disturbed and broken family relationships are frequently the earliest breeding grounds of delinquency in children; their 'trauma theory' holds that the loss of a parent wounds the child precisely because it ruptures the deepest bond of attachment, leaving lasting damage upon the child's emotional constitution. (Juby & Farrington, 2001) We may conclude with Francis Bacon's classic warning: "Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out." Varsha's terrifying path of retribution exemplifies a destructive force that society and the legal order must aggressively weed out, as it is neither sweet nor admissible.

Conclusion

The three novels examined here, read against the epic prototypes of Amba, Draupadi and Shurpanakha, reveal that the revenge of women in Indian women's fiction is less a single motif than a whole spectrum of moral possibilities. At one end stands Margaret Shanthi, whose patient, invisible campaign-waged with cooking oil and flattery rather than sword or writ—rebalances a marriage that neither the Church, nor her parents, nor the law would repair; her retribution is bloodless, proportionate and, within the economy of the narrative, genuinely 'sweet'. Midway stands Malathi, whose corrosive vengeance is exacted not for herself but on behalf of the voiceless Nirmala; impulsive and disfiguring, it gratifies the reader's hunger for poetic justice even as it exiles the avenger, and it demonstrates how heavily a woman must pay for an act that a man of standing might have committed with impunity. At the darkest end stand Akka and Varsha, in whom vengeance has ceased to be an answer to injustice and has curdled into inherited pathology: the grandmother's murderous negligence is handed down to a thirteen-year-old for whom cruelty has become simply the family dialect. Arranged upon this scale, the three narratives disclose the anatomy of the motif itself: revenge in these texts is born where institutions fail; it is executed obliquely because the open channels of redress remain closed to women; it restores agency, dignity and psychological equilibrium to the avenger; and yet it never comes free of cost-guilt, exile, or the perpetuation of the very violence it set out to end.

What finally distinguishes these Indian women novelists is their refusal either to glorify or to flatly condemn their avenging heroines. Nair, Divakaruni and Badami grant their women the full moral status of agents-capable of calculation, of error and of wrong and thereby dismantle the ancient binary that permits women only the two roles of patient sufferer or unnatural monster. Like their epic foremothers, these protagonists convert the so-called weaknesses of their sex—patience, service, tears, the kitchen, the salon chair—into instruments of power. The reader, moreover, is made complicit, we savour Margaret's triumph, flinch at Malathi's chemicals, and recoil from Varsha's snow-cold cunning, and

in doing so we are compelled to ask at what precise point the settling of a score ceases to be justice and becomes a fresh crime. The novels endorse neither Bacon's demand that the law weed out this 'wild justice' nor the avenger's own conviction of righteousness; they suggest, instead, that so long as law, family and society remain deaf to women's injuries, women will go on writing their own verdicts—and that the true indictment lies not against the avenging woman but against the order that leaves her no other court of appeal.

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