

ABSTRACT

Although there has been extensive scholarship and literature on the figure of the warrior woman and the gendered metaphors to disseminate hypermasculine nationalist narratives, this figure has been dominantly used as a masculine tool, as and when required, to sustain the narratives of nation and nationalism. This warrior woman is dominantly perceived and depicted as the Virangana in cultural and historical narratives in India. These representations of the popular Virangana trope also suggest how the figure, apart from being a portrayal of the once assertive pre-Aryan formation of the Mother goddess, is also stereotypically graceful, beautiful and sometimes sensual. She appears as the mother-in-pain as well as the wrathful warrior on the battlefield. The hyperbolic myth that the Virangana is made to be has found increased reproduction in popular literature, culture and media. Such reproductions claim to be essentially feminist revisions of both fictionalised history and historical fiction, thus catering to the contemporary market and “the need of the hour” narrative spin and debates.

However, the academic work and literature concerning the Virangana is limited and selective. The category of the Virangana excludes certain female figures based on their deviant identities. Even in the case of those included, the category limits itself to attributes associated with traditional roles of women in India, and the ideas of nation and nationalism. In most cases, the figures’ more personal choices and even silences are not of much significance in the way their public personas are shaped. It is fascinating how simplistically such complex gendered associations are layered to shape the female figure in popular currency. Furthermore, making this figure larger than life lays bare the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Most fictional literary and cultural texts on the Virangana seem to fall into two over-arching rubrics: one caters to the male gaze, with their portrayals as exoticised/ eroticised objects of desire and fantasy, and the other

oversimplifies their depictions through the feminist lens. Therefore, there is perhaps a need to trace the trajectory of such literature on the Virangana to examine how the discourses of nationalism, subaltern feminism and capitalist publication markets have influenced the perception of the figure across time.

Thus, this thesis attempts to disentangle the narratives around the figure of the Virangana while analysing their socio-political and spatio-temporal locations. Through a study of contemporary historical fiction, this thesis will attempt to bridge the lacunae mentioned above in academic research, literary criticism and cultural studies. It will analyse the construction of the dominant myths of the popularly known warrior women in the making of the nation. The alternative narratives of the marginalised women will be examined to interrogate the hegemonic narratives. By focusing on selected novels, plays, poems and films produced on the warrior woman in India, this thesis will attempt to examine how different discourses across time in India have affected the perception of the figure of the Virangana. The thesis will thus try to decipher the politics of the changing times that have deployed the figure. In the process, this thesis will also explore the nuanced politics of the everyday choices the Virangana, as a flesh-and-blood woman, makes.