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**Down-the-Street Gods: Mythological Biographies as
Humanizing Social Identities in Praveena Shivram's
*Karuppu***

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Abstract: Mythology and myth primarily cater to a corpus of knowledge about otherworldly entities, such gods and demons. They speak of the lives and powers of such divine entities from a third-person narrative. Biographies, on the other hand, talk of humans whose record of existence is undeniable. Autobiographies add on to this facticity, since they are written by the writers themselves. Praveena Shivram's *Karuppu* contains first-person narratives about Yama, the Hindu god of death, and Yami, his sister. The text displays these Hindu divine entities being inhabitants of Earth and showcases their daily routines and desires. This contrasts with the myths concerning Yama and Yami, most notably found in *Rig Veda*. This paper aims to examine Yama in a contrasting manner – the autobiographical narrative in Shivram's text and the mythological narrative in *Rig Veda*. The paper uses Affect Theory for this analysis. Silvan Tomkins' concept of Affects, such as joy and shame, are entities immanent to humans. Thus, Yama's presence is explored both as a myth and a possible entity that inhabits Affects. The latter contributes to a humanizing effect in the Hindu god of death. In the conclusion, the paper expounds on how Affects may be used as anthropomorphizing tools to locate mythologies in the contemporary social world.

Keywords: *Biopolitics, Yama, Social Stigma, Indian Mythology, Affect*

Introduction

To be a human being, and remain so, inherently posits the presence of a human agency. More than the requisite number of limbs and mental capacity, to espouse one's capacity as a human necessitates the presence of a human agency. Athwart the concept of Free Will, "Man is neither as free as he feels nor as bound as he fears" (Sedgwick and Frank 33) is the stance taken by many theorists of Affect Theory. This involves delineating affects, such as joy, shame, and surprise, as key factors in defining what it means to be a human.

The corpus of Indian mythology deals with gods and humans alike, adjunct to non-human non-divine entities. There are also many transformations involved – non-divine entities being granted godhood, and gods being deposed and turned into humans. The Greek hero, Heracles, born a demi-god, was granted full godhood by Zeus. And whilst these transformations are myriad and expansive, this paper focuses on the shift in affects because of such a transformation, as well as the human agency contingent upon these affects.

Karuppu by Praveena Shivram explores early-twentieth century India, describing a land where Hindu gods are actively involved in human affairs. The eponymous heroine of the novel, Karuppu, is a Yamadoot. While originally being human, she is turned into a Yamadoot by Yama, the Hindu god of death. The novel unveils Karuppu's journey to unite Yama with Yami, Yama's twin sister, as well as save her own daughter, Karuthamma, from death.

What the novel cleverly uses is a mythological context as well as mythological entities in a world where Karuthamma knows "who Gandhi was and why it was such a momentous occasion to be able to hear him speak in a language we couldn't understand" (Shivram 27). Human affects openly and abundantly influence mythological entities, thereby morphing their social perception. Thus, even though *Rig Veda* posits Yama as someone who eventually is granted godhood and immortality (Jamison and Brereton 1380), *Karuppu* shows Yama saying "I wasn't born a god, you must remember that" (124). This contrasts mythological canon with a modern first-person portrayal of Yama. This research paper delves into the affective nuances erupting from the (auto-)biographical stance of mythological entities.

Biomythography

Rig Veda barely mentions Yama's mother, depicting her as an immortal sans an agency, her life contingent upon the decisions of her husband, Vivasvat, and the other gods. Shivram depicts her as the mastermind of the novel, someone who wrests control of her own future by declaring that she was "born to rule" (219). This contrasting position – where the mythological canon displays one aspect, and

the modern novel adds on to that context without changing the relations inherent in mythology – is where affects and human agency can be seen at play. Here, biographical portrayals of characters may be inconsonant with mythological portrayals, but such a conjunction is what Audre Lorde terms as Biomythography (Lorde).

Biomythography can be seen as a possible fill-in-the-blanks approach to mythology, where fictional biographical details are added to either explain motivations of characters or merely enhance their depiction. And while these additions are fictional, it should be noticed that Yami saying “I was furious” (Shivram 119) puts a first-person emphasis on such details. This, opposed to Yami being described someone forcing Yama for incest (Jamison and Brereton 1388), is more believable due to its biographical and confessional nature. Thus, biomythography explores how biography adds to mythology. It resembles a layering of sorts, where these biographical details are not mere speculation. Kate King, expounding on biomythography, outlines it as “layers of meanings, layers of histories, layers of readings and re-readings through webs of power charged codes” (68).

Yama is shown to have a habit of sniffing while crying (Shivram 149). While this detail in itself can be decried as inane, since it has absolutely no allusion to references to Yama in *Rig Veda*, such a tic may be relatable to reader. Yama as a powerful god of death may elicit reverence from the readers and believers alike, but a sniffing Yama may excite empathy. This is where the affects of joy and surprise may be invoked, however with different triggers and intensities. Moreover, Yama as a sniffing and powerful god of death – a circumstance where both biography and mythology are present – may beget stronger or different affects altogether. Another corroboration is “Shiva actually had a basket full of snakes and he liked to choose a different one to wear around his neck every day” as well as “Ganesha...didn’t have an elephant head when we [Yama and Yami] were in heaven” (Shivram 122). The former adds to extant mythology because Shiva is always depicted with a snake around his neck, and the latter does not detract from mythology because Ganesh did have a human head for some time before it was replaced by an elephant head. This behind-the-scenes paradigm followed by biomythography may encourage the affect of excitement in society. This, then, may add to the affects of interest and joy that mythology already did. Thus, biomythography is inextricably linked to affects and their sustenance.

Shivram uses biomythography as a chronological sense. She describes Earth as the result of Brahma’s Project Earth, where Earth was created for recreational purposes so that gods may experience mortality through the manifestation of avatars (51). The novel chronologically begins with Brahma deciding to end Project Earth – essentially, destroying Earth – because “most of the gods...were severely addicted to earth and were on their 25000th round on earth” (Shivram 53). Chronologically,

the novel swings between times before the conception of Earth and the pre-Indian-Independence era. This strikes a parallel with other mythologically re-interpretive works, such as *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Immortals of Meluha* by Amish Tripathi, and *Karna's Wife* by Kavita Kane. The works cater to mythological figures such as Draupadi, Shiva, and Uruvi, respectively. The highlighted reasoning is that all these three texts are revisionist texts, aiming to depict either variegated perspectives or mutated social contexts. Divakaruni and Kane follow the mythological context, but change the social context. Tripathi, on the other hand, doesn't change any social context at all, since he considers only mythological figures in a world of his own making. He depicts Shiva getting his blue-throat not due to divine poison, but due to a medicine applied on his neck during his infancy. Tripathi even shows the Brahmastra – a divine weapon – as a nuclear missile. He plays with such modern inventions, without showcasing the modern-era. Shivram, however, uses both a morphed mythological presence as well as social context. She places the novel in twentieth-century, and depicts Yama as a jokester who is fond of breaking the fourth-wall. Yama often addresses the readers directly, involving them in his journey throughout the novel, yet ensuring that they have no effect on his decisions, as is exemplified by “You don't have to physically open the door; you know that already. What you don't know is this” (Shivram 125).

Shivram is quite clever in using biomythography in a novel that is primarily based in the twentieth century. This ensures that most of the mythological corpus remains extant and untouched, with the biography part of the biomythography detailing merely the time duration that mythology does not cater to. In such a way, since the biography is imputed to mythological characters, mythology itself is manifested and brought into the modern era.

Myth Made Manifest

Biography part of biomythography may also be seen as added-on mythology. “However, the Gods forgot about Yama's biggest strength – his twin sister, Yami, who was left behind on earth” (Shivram 52) does not impugn on any mythological premise or circumstance. It does, however, provide a motive for why the gods were blindsided, as depicted in the novel. This biomythography effectively can be thought to create an affect that worked “as a motive, by which we [Kosofsky and Frank] mean immediately rewarding or punishing experience...activated by the individual's own responses” (Sedgwick and Frank 45). In this way, as long as the biography and the mythology of a certain biomythography is complementary, there is enhancement of affects involved therein.

However, in certain cases, biomythography may become contrasting. The affects that, then, arise would be just as different. In mythology, Yama is associated with two dogs that are “four-eyed and brindled” (Jamison and Brereton 1392). These dogs, in *Karuppu*, are described to be a part of a

pack led by a dog named Bhairava, with all these dogs being described as “The dog’s eyes flashed in the distance like twin lamps...the big, black dog” (Shivram 91). While the changes may seem overtly superficial, a four-eyed dog would be construed as an abnormality in human society. Hence, any affects evoked due to its presence might involve disgust and fear. With Yama being biomythograph-ised with a pack of two-eyed dogs adjunct to Shivram’s description of Yama as a fourteen-year old child who despite being “big built, but...was still a child in their [Yamadoot’s] eyes, pretending to be a god” (Shivram 185), the affects invoked might predominantly be that of pity, interest, and joy. The affects of joy and embarrassment would erupt from picturing a lanky, dark-skinned child astride a buffalo, while being flanked by a pack of *normal* black dogs. Here, biomythography is not directly challenging per se. It is, on the other hand, questioning the reification of facticity of mythology – this means that, since Yama is a god, it need not be necessary for him to always have four-eyed dogs. Given the presence of divinity, and since all gods have otherworldly powers, it may be possible to speculate Yama having morphed his four-eyed hounds into two-eyed ones. Not only does this line of thought place the prerogative with mythology, but it also creates the availability of a human agency with a god. The consequent relatability with the inhabitants of a human society can cause turbulent shifts in the perception of these gods, favouring either end of the spectrum.

Another such instance is Yama’s transformation into a mortal. Per mythology, Yama is said to have willingly chosen death, despite being born immortal, in order to establish mortality on earth as well as establish the ritual of sacrifice and oblation for the gods (Jamison and Brereton 1386). This may essentialize reverence for Yama and the entire pantheon of gods. In *Karuppu*, however, Yama is shown to be an impulsive mortal born to gods, who breaks the tail of a snake in the realm of the gods and gets bitten by the same snake, in an act of vengeance, after he comes down to Earth, leading to his death (145). Shivram proceeds to describe Yami’s grief and consequently being granted immortality by the gods, with Yama being assigned as the god of death. This might elicit the affects of anger and shame, even embarrassment, on behalf of the readers. With Brahma’s decision to destroy Earth, in *Karuppu*, speculations of affects of shame and anger within Yama and Yami also hold ground, with Yama confessing “My last visit to her [Yama’s mother] was after the prophecy was released by the Gods, soon after the Council, when I left in anger” (183). It may be construed that the social institution of religion and worship of the divine is based on the reasoning of gods being superior to humans. Shivram shatters this hierarchy by drawing parallels between gods and humans. Gods being depicted as greedy and rampantly violent and selfish, with Yama’s mother being shown as opining “How does it matter? Let them destroy the earth” (Shivram 183) not only humanizes gods by showcasing similar affects in humans, but makes capacious the ensuing mythology. In this way, biomythography not only adds to mythology, but removes essentialism in it, rendering alive the possibility of more speculation.

Furthermore, it provides an independence to mythology, making it so that humans would never truly know the minds and ways of those whom they consider gods.

Concomitantly, human restrictions and taboo may not be applied to the gods. In fact, it can be said that human ethical caveats and moral creed are not granted by or in service to the gods.

Transforming Affects

Imputing human social restrictions to divine diktat may no longer be feasible. Were it so, affects of shame and anger may be paramount, as corroborated by the taboo of incest. Mythology depicts Yama and Yami as the first mortals:

This justly famous (and much discussed) hymn presents a tense dialogue between a pair of twins, the male Yama and female Yami...who become the first mortals. Yami, who speaks first, urges her twin brother to have sex with her, so that they can have children and continue their line in the approved manner. Yama indignantly rejects her advances, outraged by the idea of incest and certain that the divine guardians of moral order will see the act and punish them. (Jamison and Brereton 1381)

Yama is shown as increasingly indignant and irate towards Yami's suggestion, so much so as to plead Yami to take another lover. This is quite ironic, given that those two were the only mortals and Yami could not have found another lover, had she wanted to. Though the hymns in *Rig Veda* do not explicitly state Yama's eventual, if reluctant, acquiescence, the earth is populated by mortal humans. The thirteenth hymn of the tenth *mandala* describes Yama as "For the sake of the gods he chose death and for the sake of the offspring he did not choose immortality" (Jamison and Brereton 1390). The affects of disgust, embarrassment, and anger thus arisen might influence the human social scenario, in lieu of holding the answerable.

Shivram, however, takes a different stance. She charts out Yama and Yami as two precocious yet neglected kids, begrudged by their mother for having been given the opportunity to become the first mortals, since "The first mortals need to be on the cusp of adulthood, neither too young nor too old" (145). Yama and Yami together never conceive any children. Yet, Yama avers "Anyone who knows me (or my story) knows that all roads out of my body always lead to Yami. She is the other half of my words, the other part of my reality" (Shivram 111). The romantic undercurrent is splayed beautifully, without any acknowledgement or reference to the incest taboo. Moreover, Shivram delineates the final aim of Yama and Yami to be together in the world of dreams, in the form of their fourteen-year-old selves – the forms with which they first came on Earth as mortals. This insistence on

preserving their innocence and virtue is quite in tangent with the socio-cultural norms of a human society, especially the modern norms.

Rig Veda's Yama and Shivrām's Yama are not extensions of each other. Surprisingly, they aren't even adversaries. They merely exist – mythology is sans all evidence and biomythography is but sheer fiction. The consequent invocation of affects, however, is quite vivid and insistent.

Affects are essentially biological in nature, yet they are somewhat associated with a feedback system (Sedgwick and Frank 35). So, no matter the unreal nature of the conflicts arising between mythology and biomythography, the affects formed are real. Human reception of biomythography is processed by the feedback system of the mind. The mind processes the information, either creating a new corpus of knowledge or adding to an existent one, that is, to mythology. Thus, affectual delegation of mythology and biomythography is irrefutable.

The thirteenth hymn of the tenth *mandala* of *Rig Veda* elaborates about two soma carts, with references to Indra, the immortal king of the gods, and Yama (Jamison and Brereton 1387–90). The emphasis is on how both such entities are necessary to maintain balance – an allusion to naturally dichotomies such as mortal-immortal, male-female, and the like. Such a duality is, then, imposed on the human society. This research paper contends the avowal of such a displaced duality. Affects have shown that these dualities are different, each catering to their own social circumstance – human dualities to human society, and divine dualities to mythology. The influence of affects between the two, however, may lead to a change in the rules and guidelines of these societies. However, in light of the insurmountable lacunae catering to biomythography and mythological characters – in terms of validating and proving their existence – it can be posited that biomythography itself is a slave to human affects and human society, as shown by Shivrām's Yama's refusal of incest. Thus, fiction created by a human, leading to affects that cater to humans, may lead to creation of a human agency of mythological characters.

Conclusion

Biomythography is a product of human thought and action. It only, then, follows that biomythography would be bound by human laws and perspectives. Any deviations would be evidence of an underlying deviation and mutation in those very social rules, in the first place. In *Karuppu*, Pandian is one of Yama's agents, a Yamadoot. He is tasked with creating false narratives about Yama, to show Yama as a fearsome and stellar god of death. However, given Pandian's past as a human farmer and love for a prized buffalo, he uses his extensive knowledge of farm animals to portray Yama as a god astride a

huge black buffalo (Shivram 146). Such is the drawback of biomythography – it is limited by human affects.

It follows, then, that the role and ability of affects may be severely bordered. Different ways to overcome such an obstacle need to be ruminated upon. More than that, however, there may be ways to compensate for such a lack by elaborating the ways how affects work or indulge the possibility of shrouded affects. An affect of disgust towards a biomythography from a human's perspective might be different from a god's perspective. Regardless of the conflicts, affects offer human agency to both mythology and the entities therein.

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