

**THE EARTH, THE PILLAR AND THE STONE: DOES TESTING THE  
FEMALE MEAN EMPOWERING THE FEMALE IN VALMIKI'S *RAMAYANA*,  
SHAKESPEARE'S *THE WINTER'S TALE* AND THE TURKISH TALE *SITTI  
NUSRET*?**

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**Abstract:** This chapter discusses three memorable female characters: Sita from Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Hermione from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and Sitti Nusret from the eponymous Turkish fairytale. It will focus on the universality of the many trials that the characters have to undergo, in order to prove their innocence, chastity and capacity to endure, both in front of their male counterparts and society at large.

**Keywords:** female, gender, individuation, trials

### **Introduction**

In *Aspecte ale mitului (Aspects of the Myth)*, Mircea Eliade, referring to the novel as an extension of the mythological narrative, claims that:

In both cases, the aim is to tell a significant story, to relate a series of dramatic events which occurred in a more or less fabulous past . . . What should be emphasized is the fact that the narrative prose, particularly the novel, in modern society has come to take the place that once upon a time was occupied by the act of reciting myths and fairy-tales, in traditional and popular societies. Moreover, one can recognize the "mythical" structure of certain modern novels and argue for the literary survival of great themes and mythological characters (this is particularly obvious regarding the initiation theme, the theme of the trials that the Redeeming Hero is submitted to and his battles against monsters, the mythology of Woman and Richness) (178-79, my translation from Romanian).

Bearing in mind the particularity of Eliade's statements which concern the novel genre, I nevertheless posit that such shared features can be extended to other genres and literatures, situated at various poles, in terms of chronology as well as geography. Eliade's *common themes and motives*, passed down from the ancient past, had been previously acknowledged by Jung, in the field of psychology, as *archetypes*; more recently, comparatists like Adrian Marino and Paul Hogan used the terms *invariants* and *literary universals*, respectively. Jung, Eliade, Marino, Hogan are just a few of the many scholars who focus on universality as a constructive reading strategy. Mostly, this present study is conducted with Hogan's definition of *literary universals* in mind. According to Hogan:

... literary universals are properties and relations that are found across a range of genetically and geographically distinct literatures, which is to say literatures that have arisen and developed separately at least with respect to those properties and relations. More exactly, a property or relation may be considered a universal only if it is found in distinct bodies of literature that do not share a common ancestor having that property or relation (228).

Taking my cue from the above-mentioned theorists (Hogan, in particular), in the present study I will refute many of the tenets that inform contemporary literary theories. As such modern theories thrive on and gleefully celebrate *difference, cultural and historical specificity*, using them as interpretational lens would have refuted the claims to universality that the present reading makes. This does not mean that particular contexts will not be touched upon; however, the acknowledgement of particulars will be read as sustaining the existence of cross-cultural themes, motives, and plots precisely in spite of the many differences and peculiarities. On the whole, this study willingly evades the obsession with particularities, and consciously assumes the risk underlined by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* where they refer to the notion of universality as a "hegemonic European critical tool" (149). Instead, this paper urges for a reappraisal of *universalism* as the only remaining option that we are left with if we are ever to reinstate the benign domination of rationality, empathy, and peace, in an age ripped apart by so many *particular* conflicts, *historical* traumas, and *cultural* divisions.

This is not to affirm that the unjust, humiliating, and absurd tests that the female characters in discussion here (who can very well be extended to represent the category of *woman* as such) can be conceived of as a datum, as universally inescapable, and thus vital for

the recognition of the ‘positive’ characteristics of femininity, wherever and whenever it was under scrutiny. Sita in *Ramayana*, Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale* and Sitti Nusret in the eponymous Turkish tale share a problematic sisterhood defined by (generally) male preconceptions and paranoid tendencies to see *woman* as the very embodiment of betrayal, improper behavior and even as the murderess of her own children (Sitti Nusret). It is this universality of misconceptions regarding woman that constitutes both the focus of my criticism and the narrative thread that joins the literary texts of my choice, which belong to remote cultures and civilizations.

To further clarify this distinction in my reading of universals, besides Hogan, I am also borrowing from Lalita Pandit’s differentiation into “hegemonic” and “emphatic” universals (*Caste, Race and Nation* 207). Although Pandit applies such distinction to Tagore’s works, I claim here that it may also facilitate the interpretation of other masterpieces of world literature. In Pandit’s vision “Tagore’s universalism ... refers to a moral/intellectual/emotional discipline based on the principle of empathy” whereas “the imperialistic notion of universalism, in contrast, is nonempathic, fixed and hegemonic” (207). For the scope of this paper, Pandit’s distinction will be applied to *gender*, although I am quite aware of the fact that I may also be blamed for the essentialism of such quick adaptations. Thus, I am reading Pandit’s “hegemonic” universals as the *male* gender universals, imposing on the *female* its own set of beliefs, laws, standard practices, and class or caste interests, so as to ensure its undisputed domination and oppression. Such universals are the focus of my critique. In contrast, Pandit’s “emphatic” universals, assume that all people (in the present reading “all women”) share a type of benign subjectivity that can enrich experience and ethics and thus may constitute “an antidote to this annihilating, nonassimilative, separatist universalism” (207). Such universals (*female* in my reading) have a double significance for the aims of this study. On the one hand they are the underlying foundations and the justification of my choice of texts and their consequent analyses; on the other, they invite a celebration of *womanhood* and its capacity to survive in all its historical, cultural, social and political avatars.

### Sita

*Ramayana* is one of the foundational texts of Hindu literature. In Sanskrit only there are twenty-five versions of this text, and about three hundred in different other languages and genres. Over the centuries, many Hindu poets and playwrights focused on this beautiful epic

poem, following the path opened by Valmiki in 200 B.C.E.-200 C.E. Bhavabhuti (sixth century, *Uttararamacarita*), Kamban (twelfth century), Tulsidas (sixteenth century, North India), as well as the novelist R.K. Narayan who, in 1972 wrote a shortened modern prose version of the *Ramayana* (based on Kamban). All the above authors were in turn fascinated by this story of love, war, betrayal and death and added new layers to its already rich content. The epic still speaks to Hindus of all castes even today, as it can be inferred from a huge number of cinema adaptations, as well as the famous *Ramlila* (a North Indian performance tradition, enacted every year) (Hess, 1999 3).

Although universally praised in India, Indian critics themselves did not fail to notice the elitist message of this sacred text, and denounced it as a work which “excels in aesthetic transformations of the ideology of dharma, an ideology that politicizes religion and provides moral, spiritual, and mystical justifications for systematic disenfranchisement of women and lower castes” (Pandit *Patriarchy and Paranoia* 105-6). More recently, drawing on Mukherjee, who made similar remarks some three decades ago, Khair also pointed out that *The Ramayana* “is the wellspring of upper-caste, largely Brahminical value systems in India” (150).

Briefly, *Ramayana* tells the story of a war led by Rama, the god-hero and his many allies to free his wife, Sita, from the hands of her demon abductor, Ravana. When Ravana is killed by Rama, husband and wife are finally reunited, at the end of eleven months of painful separation. Paradoxically, the said reunification does not ensure the couple’s happiness, as Rama, plagued by doubt, acts like a jealous husband who refuses to believe that his wife’s celestial beauty did not trigger her defilement at the hands of her abductor. Sita’s only recourse to prove her chastity is to demand for a funerary pyre to be erected so that she can submit herself to the *agnipariksha* (the trial by fire) in order to prove her innocence. Agni, the Vedic god of fire performs a miracle and allows her to emerge from his flames as she entered it, resplendent, even more beautiful than she was before the divine embrace of Agni. Not only does Agni protect Sita’s physical shape from harm, he also joins his voice in the chorus of all the other gods and goddesses, who demand that Rama acknowledges the innocence of his wife and accepts her next to him as the most virtuous queen that has ever lived, close in stature to a goddess. After a few months of happiness in Ayodhya, when Sita is already pregnant, Rama again unreasonably plagued by doubts raised by the gossip of his subjects, banishes his wife to the forest where she lives for twelve years in the care of Valmiki (the author of the epic himself) and the wives of the other sages. Sita gives birth to two boys who twelve years later make their way to their father’s palace, in Ayodhya. Upon hearing their

story, Rama summons Sita to his palace and demands that she prove her innocence and fidelity once more. Although she seems to obey, Sita, tired of the burden of repeatedly having to prove her chastity, asks the Mother Earth to swallow her. A golden throne carried by snakes appears from the bowels of the Goddess Earth, Sita is placed on it, and she is swallowed never to be seen again. The unconsolated Rama understands his mistakes when he twice doubted his wife's purity; he is now left to live the rest of his days on earth next to his two sons, his brothers and a golden statue of Sita.

Sita's destiny bears exceptional traits from the very beginning. We learn that her birth is not an ordinary one and her very origins are divine. She is accidentally found by King Janaka in a furrow of the earth, at the time he is plowing the field, in preparation for a sacrificial ritual. Her magical birth—*ayoniya*—places her character in the goddess tradition, not born of a womb, but part of the *numinous, the taboo, the magical*, a fact that her husband, Rama, although himself an incarnation of Vishnu, fails to understand. Sita, as *archetype of fertility* and her consequent myth bears similarities to that of the Demeter-Proserpina, Ceres-Proserpina, and Kore-Proserpina (Pandit, *Patriarchy and Paranoia* 127). Besides her divine birth, there are other characteristics that connect Sita with her divine sisters from the Graeco-Roman pantheon. Valmiki and subsequent writers who approached the *Ramayana* myth depict Sita as a nature-lover, fond of gathering flowers, a woman/goddess in tune with the life of the earth that gave birth to her. Even more significantly, at the very moment she is kidnapped by Ravana, she gathers flowers, in an image close to that of Pluto's abduction of Proserpina (Golding 491-5).

Before submitting herself to the presumably final ordeal of the *fire test*, Sita reproaches Rama his unworthy behavior, invoking in her defense the fact of her divine birth, in itself undisputable proof of the nobility of her conduct, under any circumstances, and hence the impossibility of her sinning:

Why do you talk to me like that, oh hero, like a common man talking to an ordinary woman? ... You, lion among men, by giving way to wrath and passing premature judgment on a woman, have acted like a worthless man ... I received my name from Janaka but am the daughter of the earth. You have failed to appreciate fully the nobility of my conduct... (Valmiki 335-36).

Agni's refusal to devour Sita, although miraculous in essence, may also be understood as the intervention of one divinity in order to save another; thus, it is symbolic for less the classical *deus ex machina* and more for the inter-deities fraternal cooperation meant to

preserve the superior essence of gods. However, if we also bear in mind that Rama and Sita are human incarnations of the divine, then they are also expected to embody those human values that can render their characters as exemplary for eternity. As mentioned by Endl:

The Rama story, more than any other sacred story in India, has been interpreted as a blueprint for right human action. Although the Ramayana is a myth that can be approached on many levels, it is the human level that has had the most profound effect on the Indian people. Certainly Rama, much more than Krishna, Shiva, Durga, or other popular Hindu deities, has been held up as the exemplary ethical deity, as dharma personified (167).

The worshipping of Rama has been a continuous phenomenon, especially, but not only, within the Brahmins' cast. However, such a uninterrupted celebration of Rama as either the perfect man or God supreme can only be maintained, I think, through an equally strong suppression of the *female* character and its casting into an impossible mould of virtue. Extrapolating, there seems to be little doubt that for the human audience of *Ramayana*, the act of consigning to the flames the body of "a living woman's body" represents the "culmination of her career of perfect devotion to her husband" and also the "final test of her sexual and psychological purity" (Hess 6). Apart from the dangers of implicitly encouraging women to emulate extreme behavior and submit to inhuman tests in order to demonstrate and sustain their 'value' even after the death of the husband (see the *suttee* ritual, forbidden by the British as late as the nineteenth century), Sita's character is nowadays politically commodified. Recently, the mythical character has been reclaimed by a certain segment of the Hindu population, keen on obliterating other influences (like the Moghuls', for example) from the formation of the present identity of the subcontinent's inhabitants. Thus, although by comparison with Rama, read as an embodiment of an exemplary life led according to the precepts of *dharma* Sita's character is of secondary importance, she nevertheless is included in the mythology of the *Hindutva* movement—the hard-core, right-wing nationalist extreme of the Indian political spectrum, "the promoters of a narrowly Hindu view of Indian civilization" (Sen ix). The *Hindutva* adherents often invoke *Ramayana* to justify their politics of exclusion and their acts of aggression against practitioners of different religions (x). Such apologists conveniently seem to suffer from collective amnesia, and interpretational blindness, as further argued by Sen:

Similarly, the adherents of Hindu politics—especially those who are given to vandalizing places of worship of other religions—may take Rama to be divine, but in much of the *Ramayana*, Rama is treated primarily as a hero—a great ‘epic hero’—with many good qualities and some weaknesses, including a tendency to harbor suspicions about his wife Sita’s faithfulness (xi).

Instead of reading *Ramayana* the way Tagore did, not as “a matter of historical fact” but “in the plane of ideas”, as a “marvelous parable of “reconciliation” (10), the *Hindutva* movement has been attempting to enforce the idealization of the *male* hero, treated as God and as such, placed above sin, guilt and mistakes:

... many Hindu political activists of today seem bent on doing away with the broad and tolerant parts of Hindu tradition in favour of a uniquely ascertained—and often fairly crude—view which, they demand, *must be accepted by all*. The piously belligerent army of Hindu politics would rather take us away from these thoughtful discussions and would have us embrace instead their much-repeated public proclamations, for example that Rama, the epic hero, is an *incarnation of God*, that *all Hindus worship him*; and that he was born on a well-identified spot ‘nine lakh (900,000 years ago) (48, emphasis mine).

Sen’s view of the *Hindutva* movements adherents clearly resonate with Pandit’s definition of *hegemonic* universals. In this unilateral gender perspective focused on glossing over the man’s faults and minimizing the woman’s sacrifices, and extraordinary capacity for endurance, the lethal power of *hegemonic* universals is revealed, and so is their non-engagement with the principle of empathy. Thus, my own translation of *hegemonic* universals into *male* universals (mentioned at the beginning of this study) is particularly applicable to nowadays Indian realities. Unconditional glorification of Rama can only imply the eternal consignment of both the mythological female principle and the living bodies of real women to the metaphorical and/or real fire of recurrent sacrifices.

From this perspective, Sita’s decision to ask for Mother Earth to offer her eternal shelter appears not so much as resistance to absurd male power and refusal to embrace *testing* as guiding life force, but as refuge into death, oblivion and self-annihilation. Agency still reads as suicide, regardless of its liberating powers. As Pandit also argues, although “death is constantly represented in metaphorical terms as Sita’s return to her mother” this “myth of her continuity in the timeless womb of death does not contradict the occurrence of physical death” (*Patriarchy and Paranoia* 126). The recourse to *ekphrasis* through the detail of Sita’s golden statue which Rama keeps next to him after losing the corporeality of Sita, notwithstanding the masochistic implications, nevertheless reads as the ultimate reifying act.

A Sita turned into a beautiful golden statue is but a Sita who can no more raise doubts related to her chastity and thus ‘torment’ her husband; instead, she can be safely and from a distance worshipped as a magnificent work of art.

### **Hermione**

Shakespeare’s female characters have been analyzed by critics of different formations. Particularly in the twentieth century feminist critics’ opinions embraced a multitude of perspectives, ranging from Ann Thompson’s interpellation: “Miranda, Where’s Your Sister?” (155-67), to Sexton’s more or less overt accusations of authorial and personal misogyny in *The Slandered Women of Shakespeare*. Co-existing with this harsh criticism of the Bard’s treatment of female characters, there have also been critical voices emphasizing Shakespearean “female protagonists” as “remarkable for their totality of being that eludes and defies, disrupts and subverts male constructions of the female” (Lyons 126). No less than a stern refusal of employing fixed coordinates in the creation of characters can be expected from an author situated at the very center of the Western Canon, who “surpasses all others evidencing a psychology of mutability” (Bloom 48). Like father, like fictional daughters.

Having emphasized Shakespeare’s generous treatment of his female characters in allowing them to ‘mutate’, “elude”, “defy”, “disrupt” and “subvert male authority”, I also wish to discuss a very different perspective. Thus, I posit that the said acts of female resistance stem from a similar root, that is the necessity of resisting and surviving the *tests* to which male authority feels entitled to submit the female characters. The curious male propensity for doubting female characters’ purity and marital chastity, dully followed by a series of trials and tests is particularly noticeable in Shakespeare’s tragicomedies, although tragedies like *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear* may be said to revolve around the same theme. What changes in the tragicomedies is the outcome of such trials; if Desdemona, Ophelia and Cordelia do not survive the maelstrom of emotions that they unwillingly set in motion and fall victims to their male counterparts’ (husband, would-be husband and father) misjudgments, Marina from *Pericles*, Imogen from *Cymbeline* and Queen Hermione from *The Winter’s Tale* are allowed to celebrate social and personal harmony at the end of strenuous hardships and trials.

The pregnant queen at the heart of *The Winter’s Tale* is falsely and irrationally accused of adultery by King Leontes, her husband, driven mad with jealousy when, at his own request, she persuades his childhood friend to prolong his stay at their court. An absurd trial



follows, during which Hermione collapses and is taken for dead. Sixteen years of hiding follow, enough for her husband, prompted by Paulina, one of her ladies in waiting to understand the extent of his mistakes, and attempt to atone for the loss of a most virtuous queen. Away from her husband, Hermione gives birth to Perdita, Leontes' daughter, who is raised by shepherds in an idyllic forest. After sixteen years, Paulina stages a reconciliation scene and, pretending that she will show the king a statue of his lost wife, she brings the real Hermione to her repentant husband. What follows is a happy reunion of parents and daughter, the classic happy ending of fairy tales.

Like Sita, whose origins are divine, Queen Hermione also belongs to that elevated class of women who, although compelled to obey the dictates of male authority (as daughters and wives), nevertheless enjoy a preferential status in a gender confrontation. In Renaissance and Middle Ages, various authors focused on the age-long issue of female virtue and attempted to offer models of ideal femininity. Tasso and Castiglione mostly, perhaps in an attempt to dissolve preconceptions regarding the *evil* to be found at every woman's heart, the subordinate and inferior position of women, claimed that feminine virtue should not be conceived as a quintessence of static characteristics, but rather as determined by *class origin*, *class status*, *social role* and *function* (Maclean 62). Although elitist in purpose, their analysis of high rank women's behavior and roles in both the domestic and the public sphere represents the incipient stage of a fairer appraisal of women by comparison to former assessments. Thus, for both Tasso and Castiglione, a princess or a queen could not be expected to conform to the same standards as a woman belonging to the bourgeoisie or lesser nobility; codes of conventional morality should not be applied to women of royal status (Maclean 62), whereas the traditional virtue of silence--*taciturnitas*--was even presented as a fault in a woman of high rank, who should instead display wit, eloquence and flamboyance in her social interactions (Maclean 64).

The element that sets the Shakespearean play in motion and causes Hermione's misfortunes is specifically her awareness of her role as a queen, a role which ideally performed, has to fuse the *personal* and the *political*. Queenship, as elevated position, is defined, in a fair measure, by the witty and skilful employment of language, through which Hermione persuades King Polixenes (Leontes' friend) to prolong his stay at their court. Although her conduct is both innocent and determined by her husband's request, Leontes reads in her words betrayal and transgression of marriage vows:

*Leon: (Aside)* Too hot, too hot!/To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods./I have tremor cordis on me; my heart dances,/But not for joy, not for joy. This entertainment/ May a free face put on; derive a liberty/From heartiness, from bounty, fertile bosom/And well become the agent (Shakespeare 1.2.105-115).

Leontes' sudden and irrational jealousy appears difficult if not impossible to comprehend, especially in the context of the royal court where wit, word games, and exercises in flamboyance were quotidian past-times, during the Renaissance. However, we should also remind ourselves (as Shakespeare probably did), that not so long before *The Winter's Tale* was written, not one but two living Queens were put to death by their royal husband. Among others, the reason for their beheading was their presumably having committed adultery with other young men from the court. In reality, both wives (maybe more so Anne Boleyn) displayed exceptional abilities to 'perform' in court and make their royal presence the center of attention. Nevertheless, those exceptional abilities that had earned Anne Boleyn a throne also caused her demise. As Fraser explains, evoking the gruesome parody of a queen put on trial by her royal husband:

The Queen was tried first. She arrived in a calm frame of mind. According to the herald Charles Wriothesley she gave 'wise and discrete answers to her accusers', excusing herself with her words so clearly 'as though she was not actually guilty'. But the evidence was hardly of such a convincing nature as to bring about a volte-face and a confession. Queen Anne never admitted to any offence and the evidence against her was a patchwork of half-truths and outright lies. All this, however, is less cogent than the sheer psychological improbability of the Queen endangering her position by adultery, let alone attempting to destroy the one man on whose favour she was totally dependent-the King (141).

Although the impossibility of providing justifications for the murderous madness of Henry the eighth and its fictional correspondent in *The Winter's Tale* needs no further reinforcement, both Henry's and Leontes' otherwise incomprehensible jealousy can be interpreted through the lens of one of the most relevant Renaissance texts, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. According to Burton:

... the atmosphere of royal courts is a breeding place for the sexual jealousies of bourgeois men, because courts present a lethal combination of "opportunity and importunity", a combination that might lead to violations of sexual morality. More importantly, courts facilitate impudent deviations

from specific manners and gestures that function as reassuring signs of prudence and chastity among the bourgeoisie (qtd. in Pandit, *Patriarchy and Paranoia* 121-2).

When unjustly accusing his Queen, Leontes conveniently forgets not only the noble, but also the *foreign* origins of Queen Hermione. Leontes unreasonably treats Hermione, as Rama treats Sita that is, as a “common woman.” As the daughter of “the emperor of Russia”—we are somehow encouraged to believe—she may be expected to exhibit even more freedom of speech. Hermione is after all, a foreign woman of royal rank who could not have possibly been brought up to conform to the same restrictions as those from the kingdom of Sicilia. However, as Burton is fond of repeating “Italy is hell for women” (qtd. in Pandit *Patriarchy and Paranoia* 122), a hell which as Hermione will be soon to discover, is the oeuvre of her own husband. What follows is, as mentioned above, a mere parody of a trial, bearing uncanny similarities to the historical one of Queen Anne, the second wife of Henry the eighth, but also the mythological one of Sita when Rama mutely agrees to his wife’s *agnipariksha*. As Pandit notices:

As a king invested with sovereignty, Leontes merges paranoia with legal justice, the private with the public. Hence, he drags his wife to a public trial in open air right after she has given birth inside the confines of a prison, before she has “got strength of limit”, as she puts it ... The conflict between public/political (royal) virtue and domestic (bourgeois) virtue occurs when the passion of jealousy causes Leontes to see the queen only as his wife; he imposes domestic limits to the permissible largesse of her royal behavior (*Patriarchy and Paranoia* 123).

The gratuitous accusations of infidelity thrown at their wives by husbands of elevated/non-elevated status stem from the age-long and deeply ingrained male belief in the female potential for evil and betrayal. They can be safely situated within the categories of the “nonempathic” *hegemonic universals (male universals)* in the present reading. Like Sita who while reproaching Rama the unawareness of his divine origins and hence his denial of the same prerogatives for her, nevertheless accepts his judgment, Hermione both rejects Leontes’ accusations *and* agrees to submit to her unjust fate. Thus, both Sita and Hermione, in fulfilling the duty of obedience to their husbands, become the victims of the *hegemonic universals*.

Although painfully aware that his “tyranny” (Shakespeare 13.2.28) has branded her as a fallen woman, “proclaim’d a strumpet” (3.2.99), “The child-bed privilege denied”(3.2.101), Hermione agrees to be “condemn’d /Upon surmises (all proof sleeping

else/But what your jealousies awake”(3.2.110-111). Not even the divine intervention of the oracle of “the great Apollo” (3.2.132), attesting Hermione’s chastity can alter her destiny and free Leontes of his paranoid beliefs.

At the unexpected news of her first born, Mamilius’ death, Hermione faints and is declared dead by Paulina, one of her ladies in waiting. For sixteen years, Hermione is hidden by Paulina, the play strangely silent on the details of her hiding place; in the meantime, Paulina acts as the queen’s *alter-ego*, engaged in daily interaction with Leontes, with the sole purpose of extracting his painful repentance and remorse. Hermione’s metaphorical death of sixteen years bears remarkable similarities to Sita’s twelve years spent in the Dandaka forest, protected by Valmiki and the wives of the other sages. Both Sita and Hermione, while still alive, nevertheless pass for dead to their husbands and the world, but they both preserve the quintessential female power of childbearing. As Sacks claims, Shakespeare’s heroines of the tragicomedies possess a “natural ability to better the human condition” (95). Their miraculous children, who are born and who survive against all odds, in the protective and *female* bosom of nature rather than in the corrupted (and *male* society), are endowed with a regenerative force, capable, to a certain degree, to purge their fathers’ sins.

Unlike Sita, who deserts her husband in favour of eternity spent in the protective bosom of Mother Earth, Hermione is restored to her husband by Paulina’s plot:

Music; awake her-strike! *Music/(To Hermione)* ‘Tis time; descend; be stone no more;/approach;/Strike all that looks upon with marvel-come;/I’ll fill your grave up. Stir – nay, come away;/Bequeath to Death your numbness, for from him/Dear life redeems you./(*To Leontes*) You perceive she stirs./*Hermione descends* (Shakespeare 5.3. 98-103).

Although Barkan reads in Hermione’s resurrection “the central dream of all ekphrasis” which “can be finally realized, that is, that the work of art is so real it could *almost* come to life” and the fact that “Theatre removes the *almost*” (343), other critics (Meek, particularly) and myself do not entirely agree with this over-optimistic interpretation of the final events of the play. Quite the opposite, the Shakespearean text seems to invite an ambiguous reading regarding the possibility of Hermione’s miraculous resurrection, since, in Paulina’s own words, the ‘statue’ only “*appears* she lives,/ Though yet she speak not” (Shakespeare 5.3.115-118, emphasis mine). Meek, while discussing others’ readings of this scene, claims (as also clear when perusing the OED) that there are enough alternative definitions of the verb “to appear” (ranging from the straightforward “to become visible” to a

possible suggestion of deceptiveness of appearances) so as to sustain “that only a “superficial observer” would be wholly convinced by the appearance of Hermione” (404).

Even if we are to fully believe in this miraculous resurrection, the fact remains that it only occurs at the end of sixteen years, that it leaves behind a visibly-aged Hermione and that, after the suffering of many indignities at the hands of her royal husband, a happy reunion between a victimized queen and her victimizer (albeit softened by remorse) *appears* less than plausible. I would therefore, tend to consider the end of the Shakespearean play more in terms of a wish-fulfillment of the author himself, or perhaps, a fictional, Elizabethan reparation for the gruesome death of the unhappy Anne Boleyn.

### Sitti Nusret

The richness of Turkish folklore results from a harmonious mixture between Central Asian traditions, and Anatolian ones, Anatolia being the land where the Oğuz Turks from the Kayı tribe settled in the thirteenth century. Both Anatolia and Central Asia are famous for the extreme variety of overlapping cultures and civilizations, which constitute even nowadays a focus of interest for many anthropologists, folklorists and ethnographers. Oral/popular Turkish literature [Türk Halk Edebiyat] consists of three distinct branches: *Saz şiiri* [creations of the wandering bards of Anatolia], *Halk tasavvufu* [popular mystic/lyric genre] and *Sözlü edebiyat* [oral, anonymous literature] (Dinescu v).

One of the masterpieces of popular Turkish literature is the epic poem called *The Book of Dede Korkut* [Dede Korkut Kitabı] whose final form was crystallized some time between the thirteenth and the fifteenth century. At its heart lies/acts the valiant figure of a female character who disguised as a man, takes her father’s place and goes into battle. This model of the warrior woman, the Amazon-type who does not hesitate to act like a man, either when pressing social issues needs resolve and the male character is somehow incapacitated, or when a passive attitude would lead to the loss of one’s true love can be found in many Turkish fairy-tales [masal]; moreover, it can also be found in early Turkish novels, such as Ömer Seyfettin’s *Yalnız Efe* [The Lonely Efe]. Co-existing with the type of the fighter woman, the Amazon, Turkish folklore displays the opposite model of the ideal woman, the *peri* [fairy]-like in appearance, blessed with all the traditional virtues that define perfection. Such a woman (always a young girl or wife) is pure, faithful, sensitive and sensible at the same time; under the most hostile of circumstances she knows how to persevere and her exceptional qualities never fade. As Dinescu notices:

Patience is the fundamental attribute of the female character in Turkish tales. It is so limitless, that it surpasses the very embodiment of this virtue, the patience stone [*sabır taşı*], very often being—as in the case of Sitti Nusret from the eponymous fairy-tale—, the only modality for the heroine’s survival in a world of hostile, implacable circumstances (xii, translation from Romanian mine).

As mentioned above, the story of Sitti-Nusret is centered on her endless capacity to endure the misfortunes of life; submitted to numerous gory tests, apparently necessary for her true value to be revealed, Sitti Nusret barely survives, her human identity is almost obliterated, and she is only saved at the very last moment by the very male character who designed the network of her multiple trials. A happy-ending is supposed to follow and it does so in the text, but the memory of a contorted and distorted female destiny at the hands of may be read as the Turkish equivalent of Old Testament’s capricious/and *male* God lingers long after the act of reading.

Similarly to the other two fictional heroines discussed in this paper, Sitti Nusret’s origins secure her position among the ranks of divine children. She is begotten not as the routine consequence of the act of physical love between a man and a woman, but at the miraculous intervention of a *dervish* [the Turkish holy-man of many a fairy tale]. A rich merchant and his wife are blessed with a beautiful baby girl as the result of a chance encounter with a dervish and the many prayers that accompanied their wish for children. This apparent act of generosity and divine intervention has its high price though, the little girl herself. After seven years, the dervish’s house will become hers, as he will be taken from her parents and made to live in the care of the real author of her birth, the dervish himself. Significantly for the *objectification* of the female marked by the traditionally patriarchal stigma of anonymity, the girl has no name during the first seven years of life.

The dervish’s *konak*, a sumptuous residence with many rooms, far from a safe heaven, is an authentic Bluebeard’s castle. One day, opening the only door forbidden to her, Sitti Nusret witnesses a Gothic horror scene, with both cannibalistic and necrophiliac accents, a scene featuring her protector surprised in the act of eating the liver of the dead, in a cemetery. True to her patient and pious upbringing, the girl does not act upon her macabre discovery; instead, when interrogated by the dervish she confesses her full confidence in him and the appreciation of his many qualities, among which parental care, piety and the ritual reading of the Koran reign supreme. More tests follow, the dervish metamorphoses successively into her father, mother, and nanny, attempting to extract the truth regarding Sitti

Nusret's true opinion of him but she stands firm by her initial confessions. A reverse journey occurs and after eight-nine years she is returned to her parents, as a completely docile, beautiful and pious maiden, who constantly avoids human company. Her exceptional beauty and her piety attract the prince's [*sehzade*] attention who asks for and obtains her hand in marriage.

Nevertheless, this love-based marriage does not end Sitti Nusret's misfortunes. While her husband is away to perform the sacred pilgrimage to Mecca, she gives birth to a beautiful child; immediately after birth the child is taken away from her, again by the same dervish, the implacable patriarchal figure in control of her life, but only after he smears her mouth with blood, so that she is believed by her mother-in-law to have devoured her own child. Although interrogated by her husband's mother, she refuses to disclose the truth, in what appears to be an act of extraordinary patience, endurance and loyalty to the dervish, the source of all her misfortunes and the initiator of bizarre tests. When the same occurs twice, with two more children, her mother-in-law, believing that her son has married "a human-looking beast" (*Sitti Nusret* 20), reveals what she believes to be the truth of her grandchildren's disappearance. As a result, Sitti Nusret is banished from the palace and starts her new life, imprisoned in a small room, among the servants of the lowest order. Years pass by, a new wife is looked for and found, and the royal wedding is supposed to proceed as soon as the groom will return from yet another journey. Everybody will get a gift, so will Sitti Nusret, who asks for a comb, a dagger and a *sabır taş* [a patience stone]. To that stone, alone, in the *hammam* [Turkish bath], Sitti Nusret pours her heart out and tells the story of her misfortunes. Interestingly, while acknowledging her cruel treatment at the hands of the dervish, she never expresses resentment. As she is telling her story, the patience stone is gradually swelling and at the end of the story, it suddenly breaks into a thousand pieces. Upon seeing this, Sitti Nusret grabs the dagger with the intention of killing herself; at that moment, miraculously the walls of the *hammam* part, the dervish appears and prevents the suicide by congratulating her and telling her that he is the artisan of her misfortunes and that they were only meant to test her character (*Sitti Nusret* 23). Now that she has proved her value, she is like a daughter to him and she will be allowed to get reunited with her children – who are all alive and well – and her husband. Happy ending, but not quite; at least, not for the readers troubled by the bizarre set of inhuman tests that a woman has to pass in order to confirm her value in what is obviously a cruel and very patriarchal world, albeit situated in the land of fairy-tales.

In her *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontes*, Diane Long Hoeveler argues that female gothic novels written between the end of the seventeenth century and the middle of the eighteenth century were instrumental in propagandizing the type of ideal femininity. Hoeveler focuses on “professional femininity”—a cultivated pose, a masquerade of docility, passivity, wise passiveness, and tightly controlled emotions” (xv); her concept of “professional femininity” is inspired by Rachel Brownstein’s “female heroism” which has at its center “the young woman perfectly chaste, dutiful, obedient, religious, useful, orderly, charitable, thrifty, and kind”, who “acts and requires others to act according to a firm ethical standard” (qtd. in Hoeveler:xv). Although both Hoeveler and Brownstein apply such characteristics of ideal femininity to the historical context, the rise of the bourgeoisie and the need to strictly define gender distinctions in a nascent world, in my opinion their concepts of “professional femininity” (Hoeveler), “female heroism” (Brownstein) and even “victim heroism” (Naomi Wolf, qtd. in Hoeveler:xiv) can be applied to other, remote geographies and eras. Thus, Sitti Nusret’s extraordinary qualities, among which her capacity to endure without ever complaining, or rebelling against fate, people, and the dervish himself, bear an uncanny resemblance to those of an Emily St’Aubert, an Emmeline, an Ellena, the staple gothic-heroines who are allowed to secure domestic happiness only after surviving incredible adventures and repeated attacks on their virtue, innocence and sense-of-being in the world. The Turkish fairy-tale heroine, like her English Gothic sisters is constantly victimized by the strange dervish, the failed father-figure, expected to survive the worst of circumstances (*male-created*), while graciously displaying the best of *female* qualities.

One hardly knows what to read into this victimization/self-victimization and the recurrence of fantastic tests to which Sitti Nusret--the *female* principle is subjected by the *male* one. A possible interpretative lens is offered by Von Franz, who, in her analysis of fairy tales observes that “in his attempt to sever the woman’s connections with the outside world, the *animus* may take on the aspect of a father” and that “the *animus* appears first as an old man who then turns into a youth, which is a way of saying that the old man—the father image—is only a temporary aspect of the animus and that behind this mask is a young man” (170-1). Although my analysis here is not Jungian, I find Von Franz’s observations highly relevant for an attempt to comprehend Sitti Nusret’s non-engagement with life, her internalized refusal to actively participate in the creation of her own destiny and her compliance with annihilating behavior. Read from this perspective, Sitti Nusret is simply a woman whose path to adulthood



is marked by her objectification at the hands of patriarchy, safely but in effect lethally disguised as father (or father-figure) and husband.

In this bizarre capacity for endurance, Sitti Nusret's character surpasses even Sita and Queen Hermione. My first two heroines, notwithstanding the gruesomeness of their own trials, are at least sheltered from the ghastly test of witnessing their respective husbands engaged in acts of cannibalism and necrophilia while embracing the female virtue of *taciturnitas* and not shouting the horror for the world to hear. For, although the Turkish tale ends with a happy resolution, we are never actually *told* whether the dervish, did indeed, vampirically consume human flesh, or he merely made it *appear* so, in order to test Sitti Nusret's infinite patience. Not that it matters much, except for arguing that, among others, professionally 'playing the woman' may also imply complicity with one's own private, patriarchal tormentor. From this perspective, the happy-ending of the tale also appears as unconvincing. On the one hand, it is very unlikely that the "broken" woman, having suffered enormously and unjustly, in the name of a bizarre code of ideal femininity designed by patriarchal forces can be so easily reconciled with the artisans of her misfortunes. On the other, since neither the male arbitrariness (the dervish's), nor the male passiveness (the husband's) are satisfactorily justified – at least not from a feminist perspective – the so-called restoration of order and the reconciliation of male and female principle lacks authenticity.

### Conclusion

The present study offered a comparative reading of three texts belonging to remote geographies and chronologies, where a clear history of literary influences cannot be traced. However, as previously argued, there are obvious similarities between *Ramayana*, *The Winter's Tale* and *Sitti Nusret*, in terms of protagonists, settings, plots and gender implications.

The three heroines are women of elevated status, either divine or noble. Their origins are comfortably and paradoxically 'forgotten' by their male counterparts, who, while very much aware of their own growing power, can only conceive of it in terms of depriving their wives/daughters of the privileges of their extraordinary birth. All the three heroines are subjected to recurrent tests, fashioned by their patriarchal counterparts; the aim of such tests is to prove their *ideal femininity*, centered on qualities of chastity, virtue, patience, resilience and ultimately forgiveness. Although there are differences between the said tests which can be explained through the particular eras, geographies and ideologies which constituted their

background, the principle remains unchanged. It refers to the implacability of male verdicts regarding the fate of the women they are supposed to protect, as either husbands or fathers. As mentioned by Pandit in her discussion of *universals*: “The imperialist universalist expects to see only its own reflection in the Other, tests the value and validity of the Other solely in terms of an already established normative self. In its most aggressive forms, it seeks to annihilate the Other” (*Caste, Race and Nation* 207). If Pandit’s categorization of universals in terms of the colonizer/the colonized can expand borders—as I have suggested here—and become significant for *gender* issues as well, then it follows that the three heroines underwent a monstrous correction of self (female) so as to fit the norms of the other (male). Such tests obviously stem from a universal/patriarchal assessment of women as potential sinners, adulteresses, even murderous of their own children. To this *politics of testing* consisting of *hegemonic/male universals* the *emphatic universals* can be opposed, and they consist of women’s resilience, power of endurance, boundless fertility, and even capability to “forgive and forget”, as an antidote to “this annihilating, nonassimilative, separatist universalism” (Pandit, *Caste, Race and Nation* 207).

I would like to end by drawing attention to the question mark contained in the title of the present study which is meant to raise doubts regarding the benign potential of counteracting the male universals with the female ones. My chosen heroines (except Sita, who will end her life on earth, and will have to wait for many hundreds of years to be reunited with Rama as God Vishnu and herself as Goddess Laxhmi) appear to have gained their right to happiness by employing their female virtues *par excellence*. However, Hermione is old by now and “wrinkled”, perhaps in spirit as well as in flesh and Sitti Nusret was only returned from the gates of death at the very last moment. Considering these ‘happy’-endings, can we truly claim that *testing* the female means *empowering* the female? It seems that the title’s initial question mark is here to stay.

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