

REWRITING MYTH AND WOMANHOOD: A FEMINIST STUDY OF SHABARI

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21417755>

ABSTRACT

This paper explores Baraguru Ramachandrappa's novel Shabari through a feminist lens, focusing on how it reimagines a wellknown mythological figure to foreground the experiences of a marginalized woman. The study examines the intersections of gender, caste, and devotion, revealing how Shabari challenges the rigid social and cultural expectations traditionally imposed on women in Indian literature. By portraying Shabari as an active, thoughtful, and morally strong individual, the novel resists conventional portrayals of women as passive devotees or silent observers of religious life. The paper situates the narrative within feminist and subaltern theoretical frameworks, demonstrating how Shabari's voice disrupts dominant narratives and creates space for alternative perspectives on womanhood. Furthermore, the analysis highlights how the novel addresses issues of social hierarchy and exclusion, emphasizing the role of personal agency and moral integrity in challenging oppressive structures. Ultimately, Shabari presents a transformative vision of femininity that values dignity, resistance, and self-determination over submission or obedience. By bringing attention to the experiences and perspectives of marginalized women, the novel not only reinterprets a traditional myth but also contributes to broader discussions about gender, caste, and empowerment in contemporary Indian literature.

KEYWORDS: *Marginalized Woman, Feminist Retelling, Gender and Caste Oppression, Dalit Feminist Discourse, Identity and Selfhood, Cultural Resistance.*

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Introduction

Indian literature has often drawn inspiration from mythological stories, where women are frequently portrayed as obedient, self-sacrificing, and silent. One such character is Shabari from the Ramayana. In the traditional version, she is remembered mainly for her devotion to Lord Rama, especially the story in which she offers him tasted berries. Her role is limited, and her personal identity, thoughts, and emotions are largely unexplored. In his novel *Shabari*, Baraguru Ramachandrappa presents a fresh and nuanced portrayal of this character. The novel gives Shabari a voice, emotions, and an individual identity beyond her devotion. She is depicted as a strong, reflective woman with her own struggles, desires, and moral choices.

This paper explores how the novel reimagines Shabari using feminist perspectives. It examines the ways in which her story challenges traditional gender roles and questions caste-based discrimination in Indian society. By analyzing the intersections of gender, caste, and devotion, this study highlights how Shabari presents a transformative vision of womanhood—one rooted in agency, dignity, and resistance rather than passive obedience.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore the feminist reinterpretation of Shabari
- To analyze the intersections of gender and caste
- To investigate the shift from passive devotion to active agency
- To examine the representation of marginalized voices
- To redefine womanhood in Indian literature

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in feminist literary criticism and subaltern studies. Feminist criticism examines how women are represented in literature and how patriarchal systems often silence or limit their voices. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir argues that women are frequently treated as the “Other,” seen as less important and denied full independence and agency within society. Such frameworks help analyze the ways in which literary texts reinforce or challenge gender hierarchies.

Subaltern studies, particularly the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, extend this discussion by questioning whether marginalized groups—especially women from oppressed social positions—can truly express themselves within a society that routinely ignores or suppresses them. Shabari, as a woman from a lower caste, embodies this double marginalization, making her an ideal subject for exploring both feminist and subaltern perspectives. Her experiences illustrate how caste and

gender intersect to shape social exclusion and limit opportunities for self-expression.

By applying these frameworks, this study investigates how Shabari reclaims the voice of a historically silenced character. The novel not only challenges traditional portrayals of women in Indian mythology but also foregrounds issues of social hierarchy, resistance, and agency. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how literature can both reflect and critique societal inequalities.

Rewriting Myth From Devotion to Agency

In the traditional Ramayana, Shabari is remembered primarily for her devotion to Lord Rama, with little attention given to her personal life, feelings, or struggles. Baraguru Ramachandrappa's novel *Shabari* reinterprets this figure by focusing on her inner life and personal journey. In the novel, Shabari is portrayed as a thinking, emotional individual who reflects on her circumstances and questions social rules. Her devotion is depicted as a conscious choice rather than blind obedience. This transformation is significant because it shifts Shabari from a passive symbol of piety to an active agent capable of shaping her own destiny. By doing so, the novel uses myth not simply to retell familiar stories, but to challenge traditional ideas and social norms.

Gender and Caste Intersectionality

A key strength of *Shabari* lies in its depiction of the intersection between gender and caste. Shabari experiences oppression both as a woman and as a member of a lower caste. The novel highlights the dominance of upper-caste patriarchy, the exclusion of lower-caste women from respect and recognition, and the normalization of women's suffering. Through Shabari's life, it illustrates how caste and gender together create more complex and pervasive forms of oppression, reflecting contemporary feminist ideas about intersectionality.

Voice, Silence, and Resistance

In many traditional narratives, women like Shabari remain silent, existing only in relation to male characters such as Rama. Their thoughts, emotions, and perspectives are rarely expressed. In the novel, Shabari speaks for herself; her reflections and feelings are central to the story. She actively participates in shaping her life and resisting social injustice, embodying Spivak's question of whether the subaltern can speak. Here, Shabari not only speaks but also challenges the structures that seek to silence her.

Redefining Womanhood

Shabari presents a transformative and empowering vision of womanhood. Rather than portraying women as weak, submissive, or defined solely by their devotion, the novel depicts them as strong, self-aware, and capable of independent thought. Shabari exercises her own moral judgment, makes conscious choices, and challenges unfair social rules, demonstrating that true strength lies in agency and self-determination. By foregrounding Shabari's autonomy, the novel questions traditional notions of femininity that emphasize obedience, self-sacrifice, and passivity. It presents womanhood as a flexible and dynamic category, one that can encompass resilience, critical thinking, and resistance against social hierarchies. This perspective aligns with feminist theories that argue for women's empowerment through self-expression, moral agency, and the ability to redefine societal expectations.

Ultimately, Shabari shows that womanhood is not predetermined or constrained by patriarchal norms; it is a space where dignity, agency, and resistance coexist. Through Shabari's journey, the novel encourages readers to rethink the roles and identities of women in both mythology and contemporary society, offering a vision of femininity that is assertive, reflective, and transformative.

Research Findings

- Shabari's agency and individuality
- Intersection of gender and caste
- Active resistance
- Redefining devotion
- Transformative vision of womanhood

Conclusion

Shabari by Baraguru Ramachandrappa is a significant work that reinterprets a mythological character through a feminist lens, giving voice to a historically marginalized woman. By highlighting Shabari's thoughts, emotions, and struggles, the novel challenges traditional portrayals of women as passive, obedient, and silent, while also addressing issues of caste-based discrimination.

The study demonstrates that literature can serve as a powerful tool for questioning social hierarchies and reimagining cultural narratives. Shabari's transformation from a symbol of devotion to an active, self-aware individual underscores the potential of story-telling to foreground marginalized perspectives and challenge dominant ideologies. Ultimately, the novel offers a transformative vision of womanhood—one that emphasizes

agency, dignity, moral judgment, and resistance rather than submission or self-sacrifice. Shabari's story remains relevant in contemporary discussions about gender equality and social justice, illustrating how mythological narratives can be reworked to reflect modern feminist and subaltern concerns. Shabari not only revisits a canonical epic but also inspires readers to reconsider the roles, rights, and voices of women within both literature and society.

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