

## **The Woman in Goddess : Radha and the Confluence of Divinity and Sexuality in the Making of Modern Romantic Selves**

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*Sociological analysis of sexuality has made remarkable progress in enabling the rethinking of history, politics, gender roles and the self. This paper attempts to deal with literature which have been conveniently dubbed 'erotic,' 'mythological' or even 'mystical' from time to time within the cultural context of Northern India to either 'justify,' 'make sense of,' or even further 'political or cultural agenda.' Particularly looking at the famous literature of Gita-Govinda, the paper maneuvers and examines associated texts on the complexity of the character of Radha as depicted in mythological legends and its role in the creation of imagination of 'popular sexuality.' The paper focusses particularly on the narratives of Radha in different texts in the backdrop of the time and space when it was written, published and consumed vis-à-vis the narratives accumulated through empirical research of*

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*working middle class women in Delhi NCR area. Radha has been a complex, confusing and powerful figure in the imagination of Indian popular culture. The historical emergence of Radha predates the incoming of mass-cultural consumption. Her appearance in the mythological sites as Krishna's lover dates long after Krishna surfaced as the 'duty-bound', 'righteous' hero within the Indian socio-cultural psyche. So then how did Radha become the image of Krishna, an enigma without whom Krishna could no longer be imagined. And what did this mean for the cultural understanding of sexuality and its expression (or repression) in the imagination of one's self and that of a lover.*

[**Keywords** : Power, Sexuality, Intimacy, Mythology, Lover, Love]

## 1. Introduction

The latter was a model wife, modest and devoted to Jayadeva, and very different from Radha, who is the typical heroine of classic Sanskrit poetry : proud of her heavy breasts and hips, consumed with longing, sulking, jealous, tempestuous and despairing. Krishna is the eternal male : urgent and charming and uncommitted. Radha submits to his entreaties, but feels abandoned when Krishna returns to his other women (Holcombe, 2008 : 2)

writes Holcombe in his translation of Jayadeva's poems on Krishna and the cowherdess Radha, in 'Gita Govinda by Jayadeva.' In the above passage, he is distinguishing between Jayadeva's wife whom he calls a 'model wife' from Radha who is 'Krishna's lover' (Pauwels, 2008). Distinguishing Radha from another 'model wife' Sita, is Pauwels who writes :

If Sita is Rama's wife, Radha is Krishna's lover. If Sita is chastity incarnate, Radha is sensuality incarnate. [...] If the mutual love for Ram and Sita is an example of happy monogamy, Radha's relationship with Krishna is famously fraught with the issue of his unfaithfulness and her jealousy of his other lovers and wives. If Sita is a queen, aware of her social responsibilities, Radha is exclusively focussed on her romantic relationship with her lover. Thus, we have two opposite role models. Hindu women then have to navigate between ideals from both ends of the moral universe: the loyal, chaste wife and the adulterous lover (Pauwels, 2008 : 13).

Both the above passages elucidate the range of values which differ in examining, understanding and positioning the two prominent mythological role models, i.e Sita and Radha in the lived

experiences of women and in their intimate interactions (sexual, emotional) with men.

Following the enquiry of this paper, the attempt is to shift the view of these mythological characters from their identity as only 'righteous women' to possible romantic heroines. This attempt follows Pauwels's (2008) comment on the influential capacities of these characters on impressing young Indian women. She writes "many of the heroines of those stories set illustrious examples for a women's duty (stri-dharma). Few women will actually quote the Dharmasastra with regard to why they act the way they do, but many will cite inspiration from mythological examples" (Pauwels, 2008 : 7). It is this mythological framework of reference that I borrow to attempt an analysis of romance as both these characters of Radha and Sita are recollected in memory alongside their 'divine' partners Krishna and Rama, and hardly ever in solitary. Their image as ideals is pervasive in all spheres.

Being an ideal woman encompasses the ideal mother, daughter, sister, wife and lover.

One might agree that the neo-liberal population has been familiarized with the notion of the 'ideal wife' in Sita and how she epitomizes 'devotion' in romancing Rama through the nationally televised Ramayana.

The aspect of devotion in the romance of Rama and Sita has revealed the peculiarity of romance within North-Indian heterosexual Hindu marriages alongside the notion of "gendered divinity" (pati-parmeshwar) where the man (husband) assumes a god-like position. The task of this paper is to deliberate upon the romance of couples outside of the Hindu conjugal alliance, and hence the focus of this paper will be on the lover. Through textual analysis of commentaries on Jayadev's Gita Govind by Holcombe (2008), Somsundaram and Raghavan (2019), Verma (1968), Das (1920), Pattnaik (2018), Paranjape (2018) this paper also tries to explore whether devotion coexists with erotic pleasure in a fulfilling romantic partnership, in India.

## **2. Legends of the Lover : Kinship in Tradition, Innovation and Romance**

Radha-Krishna as we know is the epitome of the image of the lovers. According to Pauwels (2008), in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the genre of

courtly poetry secularised the imagery of Radha Krishna and made the pair an archetype for ideal lovers. The appeal of their romance is greater as it is a product of 'forbidden love', where Radha is other than Krishna's wife. Meaning, other than Krishna's kin. The non-conjugality of this partnership allows scope for a more holistic enquiry and analysis of romance. The question which follows this, is what this aspect of 'non-conjugality' and/or extra-conjugality makes of romance? Is the nature of this romance any different here? Keeping in mind how conjugal relationships in India are equated with divine union, could its absence mean different things for couples outside of it? Pauwels's observation of conjugal relations (marriage) through Ramanand Sagar's innovation of a scene in the televised version of Ramayana clarifies on the importance of divinity in Indian Hindu marriages. Describing the scene, she writes :

Satrughna then teasingly asks Rama where he got his love-education (prem ki siksa), given that gurus don't teach prem-sastra. Rama's answer is dead serious. He lectures about "primordial love" (pahle se hi nirdharit), saying that it cannot be forced by man (jo manusya ke banana se nahin banta). Rama insists that his love for Sita came about in the same way that nature (prakriti) teaches mothers to love children, brothers to love brothers, and the waves of the ocean to be attracted by the moon. Love for a spouse is preordained by God. [...] (Pauwels 2004 : 180).

The fact that this scene was an innovation and not part of the original texts of Ramayana by either Valmiki or Tulsidas suggests that it was set up with a specific intention which conflates love, romance and marriage into each other. That love and romance much like marriage is also 'pre-ordained' and monogamous in practice, emphasizing the role of the Gods in the union of two people and thereby establishing it as a sacred sanctum. Along with many other purposes, conjugal unions then also serve to legitimize the romance shared between other than kin and pre-kin. I use the term pre-kin to refer to those members in some form of union who hold the potential and possibility of entering into kinship relation with one another; ritually and/or legally; while the term extra-conjugal is used to refer to relations established by people outside of marriages with partners other than their wife or husband.

Since the specific subject-matter of this paper attempts at an investigation of romance other than conjugal, I turn to the most

celebrated imagery of the romantic couple outside of their marriages in India, Radha-Krishna. The bonds that this couple represents revolve around the legends of kinship (or rather non-kinship) shared by the two.

One of the popular legends is that their relationship was outside of the marital union of their respective spouses. As Archer (2004 : 96) notes, "Radha, for this is the girl's name, is recognized as the loveliest of the cowgirls. She is the daughter of the cowherd Vrishabhanu and his wife, Kamalavati, and is married to Ayana, a brother of Yasoda". And as for Krishna, according to Bhagavata Purana was married to Rukmini, daughter of King Bhishmaka of Vidarbha. However, the dominant and popular opinion within the kinship relations in North India does not favour relations between two people who are married but not to each other. On the mortal plane, according to the reading of the cultural/religious texts, such a union is considered to be adulterous. As for Radha-Krishna's relation, Bose (2004 : 142) writes, '[...] for she is no more than a human heroine in an adulterous relationship (she is parakiya, married to another man) with a man half her age, who is socially related to her'. According to Bose, their love story is both at once, 'illicit and intense' (142).

For the purposes of clarity, it might help to briefly refer to the reading of Manu Smriti (1959), the Hindu Law book (8.356) and its instructions on the issue of adultery, 'he who addresses the wife of another man at a tirtha, outside the village, in a forest, or at the confluence of rivers, suffer (the punishment for) adulterous acts (samgrahana)', also 'to meet with other's wives in unreasonable (solitary) places, and at unreasonable hours, and to sit, speak, and amuse oneself with them, are the three gradations of adultery.' While the legal debates around adultery have seen shifts in the recent past, from being considered as criminal to this law being deemed as simply unconstitutional in 2018. This shift has ensured that adultery can no longer be penalized; however, under the Hindu Marriage Act (1955), it is still very much a legitimized ground for either of the party, man or woman to seek for separation or annulment.

As we can see, both Manu Smriti (1959) and the legal provisions for Hindu marriage recognizes relations by both man and woman outside of the sanctity of marriage as illegitimate and adulterous. Precisely because the institution of marriage is a sacralised union and

establishing relations outside of it breaches its sanctity and consequently challenges the moral landscape of the community.

In the popular debates as well, there exists an equal mystique around their relationship.

As Sengupta (2018 : 38) writes on this mysticism, '[...] the 'quest' for Radha concerns her growth from obscurity to inseparable union with Krishna over the centuries, despite the explicitly transgressive, adulterous and incestuous elements of her erotic attachments to Krishna.' Further, discussing the nature of Radha's relationship with Krishna and what it meant for Indian women, Varma (2009 : 59) states, '[...] the secretive, illicit and adulterous nature of her affair with 'Krishna provided a particularly apt framework for them to identify with.'

Paranjape (2018), tracing the shifts in Radha's imagery concludes that the drastic social changes which arrived with the dawn of modernity, began to situate Radha as representing 'illegitimate sexual desire,' and that she and her 'dalliance with Krishna proved an embarrassment to the agenda of social reform that the proponent of Hindu mythology espoused.'

Given the fact that Radha had been an issue of concern in Hindu mythology and what she symbolized, mentioning the nationalist project of situating Indian women within the gamut of values culturally considered of greater moral order would prove helpful and will be taken up in the course of this discussion.

### **3. Becoming a Lover : Questions of Legitimacy, Divinity and Adultery**

In conjunction with the concept of romance and its possibilities within the Indian (Hindu) prototypes of love, the nationalist framework did a great deal in contributing to both Sita and Radha's image. As discussed above, Radha symbolized both 'illegitimacy' and 'sexuality'; qualities which resonated with the image of the Western woman. As Parameswaran (2002 : 834) writes on the nationalist argument on Indian morality that it was 'characterized by a distinctive morality which was absent in European culture.' This distinction rested upon the notions of 'chastity and fidelity' which became foundational to 'the nationalist rhetoric in colonial India' (834). The locus of this ideology was situated in Sita who held these values up in all kinds of narrative.

Following the cultural/religious and legal understanding of adultery along with the range of values associated with the romance of Radha and Krishna, it can be located within the purview of what in the physical plane is understood as an adulterous relationship.

However, there is more than one legend which surrounds and adds to the mysticism and dynamism of their relationship. Where in one of the legends, Radha appears merely as the lovely cow-girl in love with a boy from her neighbourhood, the other popular legend can be derived from Archer's (2004) biography of Radha as stated earlier. And this legend follows the kin relation they share of aunt and nephew. As interesting an inquiry this legend presents itself with, exploring it, I believe will require greater space than the line of question this paper intends to follow. And hence, I intend to follow and limit my inquiry of romance within the legend of their adultery and whether and how it's invoked in the popular cultural memory.

Aarti, 35, a bio-medical engineer in Gurugram's top multinational corporation discussed a few of her past relations with me. Most intriguing however, is her current relationship with Ranjeev, where Aarti described a pattern where she believed she is a 'third party'. Ranjeev and Aarti met in University of Delhi and begun a whirlwind romance. Aarti commented, 'it was everything a young girl could expect from a love story. He was the generic college hero. Like Shahid Kapur in Kabir Singh, you know. But it was only after two months of our relationship where I found out that he was involved with another girl from his football sessions.' Aarti's voice, raised a little higher as she tried to mask her distress. She said :

"it was humiliating for me. But my friends in college said that I must act cool, it's not like he is my husband! I mean what does that even mean? you know. I could not make out from his behavior of whether he even cared that his illicit relation with her bothered me".

At this point, Aarti apologized for using the term 'illicit.' She went on to ask me if technically it was in fact illicit. I obviously could not have responded to her feelings at the time. And she carried on about Ranjeev. Aarti had given Ranjeev over four chances, she said. These chances, she categorically mentioned were given out of her love and respect for him. But in all those four times, Ranjeev was involved successively with more than six women. 'But I have evolved', Aarti said to me. Now Ranjeev and I are better. Aarti said

she understood however that it was Ranjeev's charm and in effect 'it was who he was', so she had to reconcile with it if she wanted to continue the relationship. Aarti wrapped up with a laugh saying, 'you know after all, he is a guy... and I love him. Whenever he is with me, the matters are different. He focuses all his loving energy towards me. He sets up the perfect dates, vacations and has the best choice in shopping!' While narrating her story, Aarti acknowledges that she was always aware of the 'other woman' who probably got some time with him, but she asserted that she also knew that they were only temporary. And that made her feel special.

"Guys will always have choices; you just have to wait it out. In the end, they come home, you know, I am Radha to his Krishna. And in today's day and age, when you have so many kinds of relationships to choose from, I don't need to conform to the basic standards of monogamous relationship".

I then asked Aarti if she would want to engage in relationship with someone else while being steady with Ranjeev. Aarti said :

"I know a lot of my colleagues who are in such relationships, open relationships, they say. But I think what I have with Ranjeev is special in its own way. I know, I know he has flaws. But who doesn't? I know his flaws, and he knows mine. His past-times give me an upper-hand and I enjoy that power. This doesn't mean we don't love each other. And that gives me comfort and I am fully happy in it, so no. I do not think I am looking for anything other than Ranjeev now but who knows about the future?"

Here, the evolution Aarti notices in herself indicates a mix of acceptance of the divine charm of Ranjeev, her movement towards a more "modern self" and her claim to feminism rooted in the understanding of Krishna's personality and Radha's status in his life.

This aspect of divinity when attempted to understand surrounding the couple of Radha-Krishna has been subject to various interpretations and deliberations. The assertion of the nature of their relationship within the quotient of divinity acquires a different kind of legitimacy; which is endowed with heavy symbolic narratives. As Archer (2004) writes :

Radha's sexual passion for Krishna symbolized the soul's intense longing and her willingness to commit adultery expressed the utter priority which must be accorded to love for



God. [...] In deserting their husbands and homes and wilfully committing adultery, Radha and the cowgirls were therefore illustrating a profound religious truth. [...] By worldly standards, they were committing the gravest of offences but they were doing it for Krishna who was God himself. They were therefore setting God above home and duty, they were leaving everything for the love of God and in surrendering their honour, were providing the most potent symbol of what devotion meant (63).

Here, the legitimacy of the lover is established by foregrounding the explanation of divinity which resonates with the narrative of 'devulgarizing the erotic' and enshrine the notion of devotion. However, one important line in the excerpt from Archer's (2004) book, not to be missed here is '[..] By worldly standards, they were committing the gravest of offences but they were doing it for Krishna who was God himself' (63), the 'gravest offence' here was adultery which by worldly standards was not acceptable.

In the human plane, the aspect of adultery is two-fold, meaning it could either be an act of passion alone i.e. lust, on the other hand it could also involve an elaborate process of romance between two people in love or in attraction. It is the latter of the two that I intend to explore below.

The notion of adultery being a taboo emerges from the assertion that as a society we value the principles of commitment, loyalty, devotion and honesty with one another. And while this holds true for all human relationships, the institution of marriage in India demands it fundamentally owing to its sacralised position. Having said that, it might surprise one to know the detailed chapters dedicated in Kamasutra (Burton, 1883 : V) titled 'about the wives of other people' offering advice and tricks for romancing and consequently establishing authority over the wives of other men. Further, ritually too, the text of Gita Govinda by Jayadeva (Holcombe, 2008) can be read from this position where the accounts of Krishna's dalliance with Radha could serve as an entry point to analyze romance within the extra-conjugal sphere of relationships in India.

#### **4. Who is a Lover : The Problem of Radha and Mira in Questions of Kama and Bhakti**

Discourses around Radha-Krishna vary, with some discouraging the romantic lens of viewing their relationship. They

instead suggest that their relation and dalliance must be viewed as an example of Divine-Human relation. As Somasundaram and Raghavan (2019 : 2), write on Gita Govinda, 'the religiously and the spiritually minded considered this work as the union of jeevatma (individual soul) and paramatma (soul of the cosmos) and overlook the physical aspects.' The literature on Radha-Krishna which emerged around the sixteenth-seventeenth century revolved around this twin image and focussed on 'devulgarizing' their relationship. One of the keys to this attempt was to glorify the 'divine' and downplay or disown the 'erotic.'

The framework for this project positioned Radha as a manifestation of Krishna's internal pleasure potency who was brought to life as and when Krishna wished to exhibit it. As Prabhupada (n.d.) writes, 'the object of Krsna's pleasure potency is Radharani, and He exhibits His potency or His energy as Radharani and then engages in loving affairs with her' (4). Elaborating further on the aspect of divinity in the romance of Radha Krishna, he adds, 'Radha and Krsna are one, and when Krsna desires to enjoy pleasure, He manifests himself as Radharani. The spiritual exchange of love between Radha and Krsna is the actual display of the internal pleasure potency of Krsna' (Prabhupada, n.d. : 6). The central idea of this body of literature on Radha-Krishna is to establish their union on the divine plane so that their romance be set apart from the possibilities of mortal imagination. That the nature of love and romance shared between them is not to be expected in the material plane of the physical world. Pandey and Zide (1965) citing the works of the poet Rajjab, discuss the dichotomous themes which persist in the Radha-Krishna literature.

This dichotomy also reveals the differences in the notions of love stressing upon the fluidity of its expression. As the distinctive character of the Krsnaite poems from that of the saint poets on Radha-Krishna suggest; love and romance are not monolithic, in nature and in form.

Kritika, 29, CEO of a popular candy start-up in Ghitorni commented upon the relationship of Radha-Krishna :

"I can't believe with all honesty that any woman today will identify herself with Radha. I mean look at her, in the living realities of people, such a woman would be called delusional with no self-respect. And really, there is no need to mimic

everything we hear about these women, Radha, Sita...they are not real people. They had only one thing to do; serve the man!"

However, the overarching theme of the texts that surround the Radha-Krishna union provide a host of possible dichotomies to interpret. And this theme can be delineated into two categories where, amongst the saint poets the focus is that of *virah* (separation) and amongst the *Krsnaite* poets it is of *sanyog* (union). Their widespread prevalence and circulation indicate the acceptance of both these kinds of narratives around love and romance. Further, adding on to the former notions is Rajjab (1963; Pandey and Zide 1965 : 66) who writes, 'prem, which is the basis of bhakti has no quality of kama'.

I would like to quote Kritika here again as she goes on to give her insights about Radha vis-à-vis her last relationship with Vibhur. Kritika and Vibhur began dating in 2019 a little before the lockdown and while during that time of their courtship, they were head over heels for each other, things took a turn during the period of lockdown. Kritika said :

"during the lockdown, we developed a system, where post our work commitments we would skype with each other and dine together. However, only a few weeks had passed and we began to realize that we were drifting apart. He began dodging our dinner dates on Skype stating that due to 'work-from-home' culture, his working schedule had become erratic. But please, could we have not negotiated any other time. It was clear to me that he was no longer interested. But I was okay with it, I mean, no matter how great the guy is, I am not gonna wait around. Who is going to? He didn't, so why should I? I am not Radha who will sulk around in waiting. I have my needs just like him and I will go get mine. Show me a woman in her right mind who wouldn't".

Kritika's criticality of Radha comes from her commitment to modernity and feminist debates of claim over one's own personhood. There is no need to think of Radha as one of us, as her realities are dramatically consumed by the one man in her life. And so, we can see that as the Saint poets have tried to drown Radha and her complexities in a framework of the 'Divine-Human,' and thus making her untouchable, the modern women may have dismissed her altogether in an attempt to self-assert and emancipate themselves and thus muffling her voice and undermining her potential.

However, upon following the interpretations of Radha-Krishna's love story, it is observable that they unfold different kinds of Human-Divine romances. The literature developed by poets like Jayadeva and Vidyapati (Pandey and Zide, 1963) invoke the erotic union of their dalliance, for example, the latter's work depicts Radha as the typical 'nayika (heroine) who enjoys her love deeply and suffers the pain of separation in the same manner', while his Krishna 'does not rise above the typical hero of Indian literature who, in loving a woman, makes every attempt to satisfy her carnal desires' (61-62).

Here, an account of Moumeeta, 32, a graphic designer in an MNC located near Ajamgarh becomes relevant. In our discussions about intimate relationships, and the Radha-Krishna legend, I shared the above the interpretation with her, upon which she responded laughingly :

"where have you ever seen that? Tell me. I mean who talks about Radha-Krishna like that? We know Krishna is a philanderer and Radha is the girlfriend who is devoted to him. Now, I can slide a few of Raul's lapse of judgement in casual flirting but I wouldn't be okay if he has an affair, obviously".

When I enquired about their long-distance relationship where Raul works for an investment company in Mumbai while Moumeeta resides in New Delhi NCR, Moumeeta said :

"of course, when we are apart from each other, there is a lot of anxiety and worry surrounding him and us in general... but with time I think one gets adjusted to that distance and the many other things involved in life help us to cope with it, nothing like Radha though".

Here, Moumeeta's perception of distance does not automatically turn into a 'suffering' as she acknowledges the presence of other worldly duties and obligation she is surrounded with.

Similarly, Alankrita, 30, who is Moumeeta's colleague in the same office and has been in a long-term relationship with her boyfriend Kshitij, who is placed as a lawyer in a private firm in California says :

"initially I and Kshitij were apprehensive to live elsewhere without each other. Physical proximity was an integral and fundamental issue for us with which we were not ready to negotiate. To that end, we tried our best to find placements which could help us remain at least in the same city, however,

two months into his job here in Delhi, he got a very prestigious offer to further his law degree from a university in the US, it broke our hearts to part but obviously, I won't ever want his ambitions and aspirations to be hindered and the only logical next step was to deal with the separation so that he could pursue his dream without added anxiety. The first few months were the most challenging but gradually we figured it out. We developed a system and feel secured in that. The point is you are not the same even a month later as you were a month before. Kshitij and I have also evolved in our relationship and the time in which have been dating, helped us develop trust and confidence on each other. And the move only strengthened our bond".

Following the conversation further on the erotic image of Radha, both Moumeeta and Alankrita responded that while they were not aware of Radha being a symbol for any kind of sensuality or sexuality, in the context of long-distance relationship, they agreed that sexual longing is as challenging as emotional yearning. 'It makes it difficult, the thoughts of other people surrounding your partner can test your patience,' they said as they agreed with each other.

These conversations indicate that while Radha-Krishna in the popular imagery maybe a profound symbol of love, the idea of Radha as an erotic being in herself is not a common knowledge. The legend of Radha-Krishna can be seen reflecting only in some aspects of lived experiences of intimate relationships. The expectation of 'devoted monogamy' is no longer a male dominated privilege, and while most women have not put much effort to recognize Radha's patience in her longing for Krishna, they have agreed to negotiate with the promise of love by enduring a period of separation only in return for equal devotion and respect. In a twist of literary fate, the experiences and insights from these conversations resonate as much with the principle of 'non-erotic prem', as much as with the framework of 'erotic prem.'

The idea of a non-erotic prem can be found in the contribution of poets like Surdas and Jiva-Goswami who highlight the possibilities of a non-erotic 'prem' which is fueled with the passions of longing and separation rather than union. One example of such an interpretation is made possible through the examination of Mirabai's relationship with Krishna. And while the Bhakti tradition does discuss a form of union as is done in the Caitanya sect; it is important

to note that this discussion revolves around the union of the soul (atma) with the divine (paramatma).

Mirabai's accounts of her relationship with Krishna is non-physical and thus non-erotic. The Lord is absent from the physical and the material plane substituting the probable 'lover' with the 'devotee'. And transforming this 'love' to 'devotion'. To elaborate on this, I would like to cite one of Mirabai's poems :

"I don't like your strange world, Rana  
A world where there are no holy men and  
All the people are trash  
I have given up ornaments and given up braiding  
my hair; and I have given up putting on Kajal.  
Mira's lord is Girdhar Nagar,  
I have found a perfect husband" (Pandey & Zide 1963 : 57).

What is noteworthy in the Mira-Krishna relation is that Mira considers Krishna to be her husband. And it is by this status that her involvement with Krishna can be said to take the form of devotion. While in the case of Radha, she regards Krishna as her lover; all the while acknowledging that he is the husband of another. But, as the writings in the Bhakti tradition will show, the latter is also an example of the human-Divine relationship where Radha is a mortal and Krishna is a God. The overwhelming emphasis on rejecting the romantic view of their relationship however raises pertinent questions viable for complexities in the understanding of romance.

The observation which follows the aforesaid textual accounts show that there have been concerted efforts to position Radha-Krishna's romance within the notions of the 'love for the divine'. This throws light on the probable assumption that considered erotic pleasure as 'vulgar,' 'scandalous', and/or 'sin'. To this, Scott's (1988, n.p) writing explains, '[...] here passionate love became sacralised as an expression of bhakti: the loving- woman's longing became devotion and love-making became worship...' According to him, the Radha-Krishna legend is '[...] an invocation and an elaboration of the here-and-now of passionate love, an attempt to capture the exciting, fleeting moments of the senses and the baffling ways in which loves' pleasures and pains are felt [...]' (1988, n.p).

However, the conversations I had with the women for the benefit of this paper, complicated these frameworks. While on one

hand there is a subtle hint of admiration for Radha or Radha-like conduct by some, on the other, there was little to no information of her erotic imagery as opposed to the awareness around Krishna's legends of being a philanderer, to which one can note a lukewarm acceptance at best. However, the complications to these textual narratives are presented in the form of skepticism in acknowledging Radha as a symbol of passion and sexuality. In fact, as some of the conversations narrated above have shown, it is Krishna's audacity that captures the young female imagination as a symbol of historical emotional oppressor, whose inevitability lies in their subversion of his role by channeling their inner Krishna.

## **5. Understanding the Lover : Radha in Separation and in Union with Krishna**

Bose (2004) engages with the character of Radha along the lines of separation and union to understand her operative value as a 'role model' for Indian women. Kumar (2003) referring to Sisir Kumar Das's commentary on Gita Govinda and Jayadeva writes that Jayadeva's greatest achievement has been in creating and positioning Radha as a central figure in Indian love poetry insofar as setting her eternally into 'the symbol' of a 'lover.'

Bose's (2018) analysis contributes to the efforts of this paper in understanding romance in India, extensively. Following this theme of separation and union, she writes, 'Jayadeva's Radha is tormented by viraha, or love-in-separation. Her world-forsaking urge to be with him compels her to follow him as an abhisarika (a woman who goes to meet her lover, ignoring social censure) [...]' (4).

The interesting aspect that can be noted here recurring throughout the discussion is the duality of separation and union as an integral feature of romance between the partners; here, Radha-Krishna. As Pattnaik (2018 : 8) writes, 'it was always described as a turbulent shift between separation and union, jealousy and surrender.' This separation is fueled by the situations and circumstances which present themselves as hurdles which need to be overcome to finally be able to unite with one's lover.

To be able to persist through these situations, the mythology of Radha-Krishna offers what may be called a uniquely Indian resolve for the lovers. This resolve appears as 'devotion', towards the other partner. As previous discussion shows, the imagery of Radha-

Krishna in association with the notions of adultery and/or extra-marital affair were quite unsettling for many.

Tracing the shift in the symbolic representation and association of this particular couple sheds light on the possibilities of what constitutes Indian romance and how it has come to constitute it as we know of it, today. Paranjape (2018), discussing this shift, attributes it to the changes in the ideas and notions around sexuality and erotica. In the beginning, Radha-Krishna's relationship 'embodied a sexpositive mystical cult in which sexual fulfilment was very much a part of self-realization' (7). But the association of their imagery with the idioms of adultery and extramarital relations were unsettling for many devotees and spiritual leaders. In this light, the Bhakti revolution urged the 'serious practitioners' of spirituality to abstain from sexual engagement and its consequent gratification. It was a successful project which placed them in dichotomous relation; where spirituality on one hand was a virtue to be practiced in isolation from sexual pleasures which was deemed as a vice.

According to Paranjape (2018) and as the body of Bhakti literature shows, the couple of Radha-Krishna represented love which was simultaneously both, 'erotic and devotional'. As he refers to Seigel (2009) who writes on the symbolism of Radha-Krishna in Gita Govinda :

the Gita Govinda is not so much an allegorical work as an allegorically interpreted work... the Gita Govinda is literally about carnal love but it is also literally devotional. There was no contradiction... The need to read the poem allegorically, to interpret the sexuality as a mere analogy for the spiritual relationship, wholly differentiated from it, arises only when celibacy is idealized, when sexuality becomes a transgression against religious ideals (6).

Pattnaik (2018 : 5) explaining on the matter of interpretation of Gita Govinda's allegorical appeal, writes, 'As one moves from verse to verse, one is transported from the physical to the spiritual realm. The erotic longing becomes the cry of the soul for union with the divine.'

Such interpretations became necessary following the movement of Indian spirituality post colonization which took a turn towards celibacy (Pattnaik, 2018). The feeling of cultural inferiority from the British gave rise to the project of 'devulgarising' and 'sanitizing the embodiment of sexuality' (Gokhale and Lal, 5). Prior to Jayadeva's



Gita Govinda, Pattnaik (2018) notes that the issue of erotica and love revolved around the god of lust, Kama and his consort, the goddess of love, Rati. However, with the emergence of monastic orders like Buddhism and Jainism, Kama was demonized and equated with Mara. The idea was that those seeking spiritual enlightenment must conquer over Kama to attain it. 'All things sensual, came to be seen as fetters that blocked ones' spiritual growth' (Pattnaik, 2018 : 6). But the Gita Govinda was revolutionary in changing that.

Gita Govinda made the imagination of romance with the practice of devotion possible. Romancing with Krishna became a form of devoting oneself to him, as the song captured the heart of both the erotica and the divine in the romantic framework of Radha-Krishna. As Pattnaik (2018), writes on Jayadeva, 'through his song he made sensuality and romantic emotion the vehicle of the highest level of spirituality. His Krishna was a reformed Kama. His Radha was a reformed Rati. He turned kama (lust) into prema (romance)' (6).

Radha's love and romance were in itself a form of devotion to her lover who was also her god. This understanding can be seen in the heart of many young lovers today.

Shalini, 28, a post-graduate medical student who has been in relationship with Saroj for over a year now, says :

"definitely it's a challenge to begin a relationship from being apart, especially in the initial times, when you are just starting out. I and Saroj are very exclusive. He is just the kind of man I had been waiting for all my life. Once I complete the degree, we are going to get married. We are really serious about each other".

When I asked how they manage long distance relationship, as Saroj's practice is in Madhya Pradesh, Shalini replied :

"if you truly want to be with someone, you will have faith. I mean, we no longer are in the ages where one will sacrifice more than the other but that does not mean you do not want a relationship. If you are committed, what or who else could occupy your heart. If you are skeptical about the person, even close proximity cannot save your relationship. It's all about faith, trust and commitment".

Similarly, Adrita, 30, who is a content creator located in Chattarpur area, New Delhi, and has been in a four-year long relationship with Rajdeep says :

“no relationship is easy. Mine particularly tested us because Rajdeep and I were not stable financially and were not clear on a lot of things about our future. But we were sure of each other, we did hit a few bumps on the way with my ex especially who kept reappearing now and then. We were determined still and Rajdeep really handled these issues maturely. No matter what time you live in, relationships need submission and dedication of each partner towards the other”.

When I asked her what did she mean by ‘time’ here, she replied :

“you know, like our parents, they met and married at a different time. The notions around love and marriage may have been different, obviously we have more choice now. The ability to fall in love and exercise one’s freedom wasn’t an easy deal. My aunt had a difficult time reconciling with the fact that she had to marry as per her older brother’s choice. She wasn’t allowed to just follow her heart. While this may have changed quite a lot today, the fundamentals of a successful relationship hasn’t much changed, in my opinion. And those fundamentals are rooted in the ideas of true companionship; patience, devotion and respect. But of course, to each his own. What works for me and Rajdeep might not work for my brother and his girlfriend.”

Adrita’s account touches upon several points of conflict in the post-modern philosophy of love. While there is an acknowledgement of a degree of emotional emancipation across generational movement, there is also an acceptance of skepticism in the standardization of ethics in intimate partnerships. It can be noted here, that while with modernity and emergence of a female educated workforce, the paradigm on emotional labor might have moved a needle, notions of devotion and dedication are not lost upon this generation of lovers as values of the past. In fact, with the complicated settings in which these romantic subjectivities are located today, one might argue these very values provide some structure and a sense of safety to endure the multiple challenges they face.

## **6. Possibilities of a Lover : Debates around Radha’s Symbolism**

It is the ideas of ‘divinity and devotion’ associated with Radha-Krishna’s otherwise ‘scandalous’ (Pattnaik, 2010) image

which much like in the conjugal relations of Ram and Sita seem to reappear in their romance as well. So far, the notions of the divine and devotion seem to couple with the erotic image of Radha and Krishna. As Pauwels (2008) notes, the significance of these images go far in their capacity to inform, influence and guide human behaviour and relationships. Following this then, what kind of love and romance does this particular couple cast an image of?

Acknowledging Radha's emergence in both Krishna's life and in the popular and spiritual Indian literature, Sharma (2018) writes :

“unlike Sita, she is not a consort, a crowned queen seated on a throne by her husband. In many mythological stories, she is said to be older than Krishna, and a married woman. Her relationship with Krishna is fraught with danger and intrigue. [...] Radha always meets Krishna in the forest or in some secret grove hidden from the prying eyes of her family and the people of the village” (8).

Here, one can gather an idea about the clandestine nature of their relationship and how it challenged the social codes set aside on love and romance for men and women differently. The intensity of their passion is met with resistance as is evident in their relentless persuasion for each other even and beyond the times of 'danger and fear.' As Sharma (2018) notes an account from a popular Bengali tale and narrates it :

“Radha walks quietly through the dark, lonely forest but she is not afraid as she knows Krishna is waiting for her in the grove of trees. Soon they will be together in ecstasy. [...] Her mother-in-law, Jatila, is there too, glaring at her with angry eyes. 'Where are you going, Radha, at this late hour? Who are you going to meet in the forest?'” (8).

As the account follows, Radha is seen to lie to her mother-in-law and the group of women as she rushes off into the forest to meet Krishna where upon meeting him, trembling with 'fear' she says :

“I have lied to the women of my family. I told them I was going to pray to Goddess Katyayani in the forest. They will follow me here and soon find out that I lied” (Sharma, 2018). To this, Krishna assures her that nothing will happen by transforming into the Goddess of Katyayani himself as the women folk

approach them. On seeing that Radha had in fact spoken the truth, they leave her alone, “in the forest to be with her beloved for the rest of the night” (8).

Some of the key highlights of their romance is found in the nature of its performance and its classification as put forward by Keshav Das (1920) who identifies that *shringara* (love) is of two distinct types i.e. *samyoga* and *viyoga*. The former refers to ‘love-in- union,’ while the latter refers to ‘love-in-separation’. In the literature available on Radha-Krishna, one will find both. In her love for Krishna, Radha is seen to take up the various roles of the ‘*nayika*’, as demonstrated by Das (1920) in his treatise on erotica, *Rasikapriya*. Along with the six others categories, she is also, the ‘*Utkantitha*’ (one who yearns for her lover) and the ‘*Vasaksajja*’ (one who waits in readiness with the bed made for the return of her lover) (Das, 1920 : 97).

A reading of the *Gita Govinda* reveals this theme as well, underlying both the depiction and the imagination of their romance. As Varma (2018) notes :

“the story of *Gita Govinda* is both simple and complex. It is simple because the essential plot is structured, as in the *rasa leela* of the *Bhagavata*, on the unitary theme of separation (*vipralambhasringara*) and union (*sambhogringara*) of love. The theme is complex because of the qualitatively new emotions it unleashes. The joy of union with Krishna and the unbearable pangs of separation from him [...]” (24).

Following this theme portrays Krishna in similar light as Radha and the other *Gopis*. Meaning, this theme makes the ‘humanization’ of Krishna possible where he ‘is no longer the detached lover’ but instead, ‘suffers and agonizes like Radha’ (Varma 2009 : 24).

Here, the love-in-separation takes the form of devotion, while the love-in-union takes the form of erotic pleasure. The Radha-Krishna mythology engages with both these forms of loving and hence suggest the possible intertwining of both.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper attempts a discussion of India’s one of the most celebrated and legendary romantic icons; Radha-Krishna. Thorough and elaborative discussion of their influence across classical and popular art forms, debates and contentions around the legends

surrounding them have helped to examine and explore the aspect of the lover.

The notion of lover in India brings with it many questions, of fidelity, chastity, devotion etc. keeping in mind the archetypical role of lover as illustrated by Radha and Krishna, we see that their several interpretations have both clarified and provided manifold explanations for the same. Following the inquiry of the paper, in depth analysis of the literature on Radha-Krishna from across various point of view (Bhakti, post-colonial literature, classical and lived narratives) bring out both points of confluence as well as departure. While some scholars and poets have stressed on the adulterous aspect of Radha and Krishna's alliance, some have forwarded a more de-sexualised version of the legend where the efforts had been to establish their relationship as the union of the soul and the divine.

Hence the notion of the lover is multi-faceted as it stands to get socially sanctified through marriage. Similarly, extra-marital affairs have been attempted to be studied within the contours of 'union with the divine' theme, where Radha's adultery was explained as an expression of devotion.

This analysis follows the various forms of representation of the romantic couple of Radha-Krishna; to closely elucidate the symbolic value associated with the couple. One of the understandings which surfaces in this analysis vis-a- vis the social acceptance of lovers and notions surrounding the location of the adulterer/adulteress is that socially amongst human relations, these come as ambiguous positions. Positions which do not receive too much respect and are to be pursued (if at all) within the limitations set by the family, which is to say the society. Questions of religion, class, caste, modesty are to be taken into consideration (Parameswaran 2002). However symbolically, Radha and Krishna have been depicted as star-crossed lovers and have not only been acknowledged but also accepted in the cultural arena of Indian classical and popular expressions of art. Their longing for each other, seduction of one another, playful teasing, have all been used and developed to create cultural forms of various kinds in a bid to feel closer to God. Radha's love and romance were in itself a form of devotion to her lover who was also her god.

In congruence with the idea of a conjugal partnership, certain findings in exploring Radha must be accounted for in this conclusion. One can see that, within the conjugal union, the notion of 'pati-parmeshwar', equates the husband with God and love for ones'

husband is coupled with the character of devotion which outlines the conjugal behaviour. It is this idea which can be seen as being transported into the understanding of love and devotion even amongst a couple outside of conjugal boundaries.

So as the narratives show, the acceptance of the lover in the arena of performance is greater as it is carefully woven within a divine narrative providing it social legitimacy. We see then, that as complex as the textual narrative around Radha is, so is the understanding of love and romance in practice and performativity. Roles and behavior are perceived and lived complicatedly, negotiations around expectations of romance show an evolutionary pattern which can be explained through Srivastava's (2009) concept of 'retractable modernity'. Srivastava's (2009) retractable modernity refers to a particular pattern of consumerism which addresses the anxieties of capitalist consumption's relationship with 'Indianness'. Capitalism in India took solid roots in the 90's through mass production of material, ideas and images. It opened the gates to modern era of lifestyle where 'individual ideas of personhood' emerged as a national crisis to 'cultural morality'. The research on pop cultural production of mythologies, cinemas and romantic literature (Bose, 2008; Pauwels, 2008; Archer, 2004; Narayan, 2004; Parameswaran, 2002) of the early nineties reveal these anxieties and strategized resistance to these 'wild west' idioms of individuality and sexuality.

The narratives in this paper show an emergence of reflexive consciousness of one's moral and cultural context vis-à-vis the capitalist settings of spaces, where the opportunities for a settled livelihood is not passed over for stability in partnership and further describes a degree of emotional emancipation where the limitations and abilities of the partners are renegotiated with an acknowledgement of time, history and ones' own self. The female working middle-class youth have responded to the anxieties of aspirations, ambitions and the need to strike it out on their own by recalling values of morality from the frameworks being pushed in resistance to western module of intimacy.

However, the notable observation here which departs from the simple arguments of text over practice, self and individuality, oppression or subjugation is the very essence in the how of these recollections. These are values and notions which are no longer simply recalled to keep discipline in roles but also in expectations, performance and experience. Further, it is also noteworthy that these

standards are valued from both partners, not just the women. Speaking of standards, these accounts provide a nuanced understanding of how 'standards' in a relationship are viewed. There is a univocal opinion in viewing oneself as a dynamic person meaning that standards are not simply viewed as a static manual for choosing a partner or maintaining a relationship. Experientially, they have concluded that standards change; the essential point is to be willing to work with it. This idea is radically different from what the moral texts on women's role in India pursue and indicates a movement towards a more nuanced feminist position where accountability of role-performance, self-awareness and sexuality are not automatically assumed from one partner but instead efforts are engaged in understanding one's own self in relation to the partner.

This brings together the understanding of Radha as a romantic mythological heroine, where through these accounts, one can note how there is a careful selection of her characteristics which resonate with women today. The most striking revelation however was the degree to which they relate with Krishna's image as well. So, while they have picked and chosen from Radha, they have also negotiated with the image of Krishna. While the center of Radha's sexuality was demurred within the framework of devotion, Krishna's freedom to engage with his own sexuality in his own terms spoke to the educated, empowered women who have let both these images cumulatively set their specific definitions of what being a lover is.

From this, one can gather that change in symbolic representation does not affect the overall structure which guides the lovers in India, in marriage and/or outside of it and that it is two-fold.

Following the textual analysis depicts that, in the face of one's lover, one sees God. In a heterosexual relationship, it is the male partner who assumes this face of God. Secondly, while both the partners are devoted to each other in their love, it is the female partner whose role as a devotee is more pronounced. Thus, we see that following this model, ascertains a typical nature of relationship where one is the God and the other is a devotee. And that this devotion becomes a fundamental character in defining the romance of a couple.

However, the lived experiences of intimate relationship operates this very model not without awareness of their situatedness vis-à-vis their individuality, aspirations and ambitions. The need to love and be loved is not clouded by simple emotional dependency rather accepted with emotional emancipation where romantic roles

and behaviour are met with critical acknowledgement and appreciation of morality and freedom of personhood.

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