

How Amruta Patil's Rakshasi Shook My Living Room

December 14, 2017 <http://theladiesfinger.com/amruta-patil-hidimba/> [The FAK](http://theladiesfinger.com/category/the-fak/) [About](#)

By Rashmi Patel



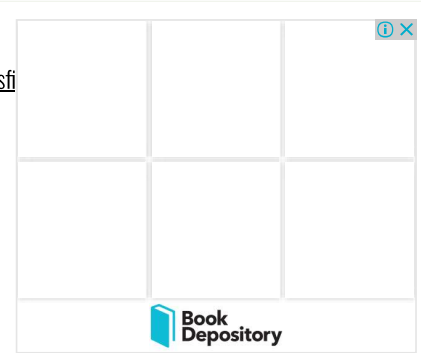
Amruta Patil's Hidimba in Rashmi Patel's living room. Photo courtesy Rashmi Patel

Five women of Indian origin sit in a dark warehouse-themed cafe in Melbourne, guzzling variants of coffee-laced drinks and reading letters that they have addressed to Sita, Ram's wife, the goddess of virtue and sacrifice, who baffles many a modern Indian woman.

I am one of the five women. I have written my letter—an exercise in understanding the mythology of my belief, an excuse to meet other feminists of Indian origin, and a genuine attempt at understanding what our values really mean. After all, I am mother to a six-year-old daughter and I better get unconfused about my values before I pass on my confusion to her.

But my mind is wandering, because Sita cannot hold my attention. She is too unknowable, her values are too other-worldly, and all our letters are filled with so much anger, grief and perplexity. Instead, I am thinking of Hidimba, who is sometimes also called Hidimbi, the demoness in Mahabharata who — how else do I put it — seems to have a great deal of attitude.

I am thinking of a particular Hidimba, the one that unflinchingly stares back from the walls of my living room. The one that has been created by Amruta Patil for her book *Sauptik*.



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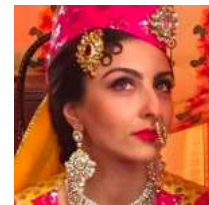
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You don't need to know much about Hidimba. She is a forest-dweller, a rakshasi — a demoness — who despite her brother's orders to lure Bheem in order to have him killed, falls in love with him and immediately reveals her intentions and her true feelings.

Take a moment to appreciate this fact, this flagrant violation of orders from an elder male member of her family and clan. Bheem is a prince, one of the five Pandavas, son of Kunti, and a vital hero in many stories of Mahabharata. It is an unlikely match— a woman of the wild and a prince destined for greatness. And yet, Hidimba is adamant. She bears Bheem's child and chooses to stay back when the Pandavas leave for Hastinapur, knowing well enough that she and her child will have no place in the power-driven corridors of the famed city.



Hidimba Devi Temple, Manali. Photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons

She may have a famous temple in Manali dedicated to her but for all practical purposes of middle-class Indian homes, she is a vile-looking character, a side-story that can only teach women what not to do, and a woman who is redeemed later in the story only by the presence of a son who fights on his father's side in the great war of Mahabharata. She may be found in illustrations as a large, uncouth woman, dressed in tasteless, short clothes with long canines jutting out of her mouth.

But this particular Hidimba is different. The moment I lay my eyes on her on Patil's blog I was smitten. And yet I was not ready for her when I unrolled the A1-sized print from the sturdy case.

I had a stinging feeling that she was going to cause a stir in my living room.

I was right.

I considered rolling it back until the elders left. I considered putting it up in my bedroom where it would not cross paths with traditional eyes. But then I remembered, this is exactly what my mother had done—rolled up bright watercolours filled with women and flowers and village fairs and kept them locked in the cupboard to make way for more sedate and acceptable art for walls. I was going to right this wrong. I was not going to hide this Hidimba.

"Didn't you get any other painting?" asked an older relative as soon as I put it up on the wall.

I laughed, mostly to stifle my anger.

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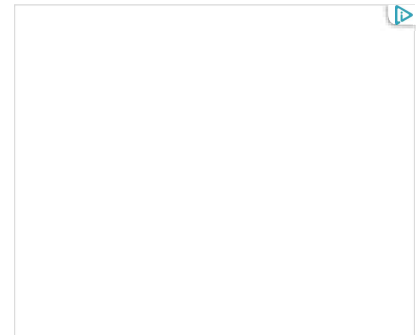
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And then, one by one, friends, relatives and visitors, revealed in whispers, questions, and comments, how they could not get a grip on why the hell I had a dark-skinned rakshasi staring at them from my wall.



Hidimba, by Amruta Patil. Image courtesy her website

Unlike other usual depictions of scenes from Hindu mythology, Amruta Patil's illustration of Hidimba and Bheem is not illuminated by the sun, but is engulfed in a bewitching, deep ultramarine night. Every element, down to the snappy tendril, is lurching in a swirl of sexy darkness. Bheem's stare is ghostly and untethered, but Hidimba makes unapologetic eye-contact with you. This is not just a painting, it is a call into the wilderness, and an invitation to loosen up the weave of life. It is a not-so-subtle jibe thrown at you in luscious colours that makes no bones about what you are missing, sitting there in the midst of civilization, staring at yet another neon screen, walking the tightrope of daily routine.

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“Do you know what it is to be wild and in the wilderness?” Hidimba seems to ask, and then with her eyes, answers her own question with, “I do.”

Maybe it is this confidence in her gaze that scares the women, frustrates the men, makes mothers uncomfortable, and incites a loved one to say: this painting should not be hung in the living room. You see, here is a woman who knows what you are supposed to not know. You are not supposed to know that you can tell a man to his face, “You are sexy”. You are not supposed to know that you can get away with loving a man of another class, making love to that man and getting impregnated by him, and finally choosing to let that man go. You are not supposed to revel in the wild, in surroundings and at times that rouse your senses, that unmoor you from your family and values, and leave you with offspring who must be brought up without a male guardian.

Take a look at her. No wan smile. No imperial tiara. No weapons or symbolic objects in hands. No, we are still not offered the mundanity of empty hands hung straight down from the shoulders. We are offered a view of her soft, vulnerable palms, smothered in red, shaped in a mudra that brings forefingers and thumbs together, the negative space between them vulva-shaped, taut and inviting. And yet, if there is anyone unhinged here, it is Bheem, not Hidimba. This Hidimba—brown, dark, and supremely confident—is the bane of my living room for most visitors.



How a particular pigment materializes in the physical place of a painting is a complex story that starts with the artist's many intentions (beauty? acceptance? experiment?) and ends when the pigment makes its mark. A new story starts when the pigment is perceived by a viewer who looks at it through the lens of their past experiences, biases, and expectations. So what do people's reaction to this Hidimba say about the hue called brown, for brown is, and has always been, a troublesome shade for Indian women?

Haay Kaali chamdi—damn black skin—my friend and I have a habit of exclaiming every time we are faced with racial microaggressions.

“Please don't say kaali,” says another friend, “say brown. We are not black, we are brown.”

But what is the word for brown in Hindi, or Urdu, or Gujarati, we wonder aloud. We belong to diverse regions of the subcontinent—Mangalore, Gujarat, Bangalore, Lahore, Bombay. Such a wide stretch and yet we scratch our heads to find a word for brown.

We were always called kaali when we were kids. We Google it. It throws up *bhoora*. “Brown = *Bhoora*”, it says confidently in extra-large font. But growing up, *bhoora* meant light brown and was usually used for light-brown eyes, not for the colour of skin. Then there is *gehuwaan*, *ghauaano*, the colour of wheat, but what about all of us darker than wheat?

We were, for all practical purposes, black—easy targets for Fair and Lovely.

In ads, in films, in paintings, in everyday language, brown was, and still is for most parts, a forbidden entity. Even Krishna is called Shyam—black—and at best, painted blue.

What does it mean to have a colour banished from so many forms of expression despite its everyday presence and then to see it manifested as a complex mix of several hues on a painting that covers half a wall? It is disturbing to most, to say the least.

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It may be okay to have brown skin but it is certainly disconcerting for many to have a large painting in a middle-class home that depicts brown skin in all its, mind you, brownness, not blackness or blueness or beige-ness.

Staring at the brownness of this Hidimba, I begin to ask more questions. Who were the rakshasas, or the demons? Who inspired these creations? Why is Hidimba usually depicted as an obese woman wearing a shapeless skirt? What does that say about people’s perception of ugliness, fatness, and uncouthness?

While I offer no answers, I am grateful to Patil for painting that brown, for depicting a rakshasi who demands respect and attention and for not shying away from putting Hidimba squarely in the center of the frame. If Hidimba is gutsy, Patil matches her with her own courage in acknowledging her not as a hastily formed caricature, but as a lovingly drawn woman, with shades of green, blue, and red wrapped inside and around her.



Perhaps, ambiguous beauty and ambiguous virtue are not deemed fit enough to be showcased on a wall. To be honest, I am not in unconditional love with this Hidimba. There are times when I want to scratch through the dark shadows beneath her nose and lips. I want to reshape her heavy eyelids and center her irises. But unlike those who find her unacceptable, I find her striking.

“Too dark,” says an acquaintance.

“The colour of her skin, you mean?” I probe.

“No, the painting, overall,” he says defensively.

What is it about darkness that makes us so uncomfortable?

“It’s her hands,” says another, forming the same mudra with his hands, “See, hers are way too big for her body.”

“Look at her hands,” seconds another elder, nodding and mumbling at all the red.

She can’t accept that red, the colour of fertility, is not constrained in a straight line of sindoor or a perfect round bindi, but is smeared all over her palms. How shapeless, shameless and exposed!

“Okay, allow me to say what everyone wants to say but won’t. She is ugly,” says a neighbour. Does beauty lie in the eyes of the beholder, or can something or someone really be ugly? In any case, if a two-dimensional form can be treated with such contempt, what

happens to people who are labelled “ugly” in real life? If I could be pressured to banish a painting from my wall, does the world play similar games to banish certain people from real life? What happens of them? Are they able to hold ground like Hidimba?

“Alright,” I say, “she may not necessarily be beautiful, but isn’t she striking?”

A few close friends who instantly fall in love with the painting make it a point to not mention Hidimba. Even the admirers are shy of admiring her. What is it about a self-assured woman who doesn’t live by the world’s rules, who doesn’t look the stereotypical beauty, and who has it in her to look you in the eye, that scares the world? Why do the power-bearers feel so unsettled on encountering such a woman?

So how do you dismantle patriarchy? If one of the answers is: one image at a time, I offer you this Hidimba by Amruta Patil. I offer you her sensuality and wild streak that is not necessarily pleasant at the first encounter. Come, meet her gaze, admire her brown, replicate her calm, for in a world dominated by male power, your compass is more than just a external device. It is also an internal, steady heartbeat that revels in who you are, what you want, and where you aspire to be.

Rashmi Patel is a writer, business analyst, Bangalore-lover, and an avid urban sketcher currently settled in Melbourne. She tweets at @rashmi_patel.

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aditi jha

December 14, 2017 at 3:15 pm (<http://theladiesfinger.com/amruta-patil-hidimba/#comment-27442>)

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Lovely article.I had visited the Hidimba temple in Manali .
I wondered then why I hadn't heard about her being worshipped.
The discomfort that some people feel on looking
at her picture expose their own demons.

Zainab Kagzi

[December 15, 2017 at 4:50 pm \(http://theladiesfinger.com/amruta-patil-hidimba/#comment-27632\)](http://theladiesfinger.com/amruta-patil-hidimba/#comment-27632)

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In love with hidimba because of your article! Amazing!

Timehin (<http://overtimehin.com>)

[December 17, 2017 at 12:40 pm \(http://theladiesfinger.com/amruta-patil-hidimba/#comment-28141\)](http://theladiesfinger.com/amruta-patil-hidimba/#comment-28141)

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I'm not Indian, so some of the context of Hidimba's story/place in society is lost on me. But the woman in this story is a woman I can't help admiring. The lack of apology, the boldness, the decisiveness—those are all attributes I fight to gain/hold on to in my own life, and of course the consequences are as you describe. There's so much truth in this piece. Thank you for writing.

meenal shah

[December 19, 2017 at 4:04 pm \(http://theladiesfinger.com/amruta-patil-hidimba/#comment-28399\)](http://theladiesfinger.com/amruta-patil-hidimba/#comment-28399)

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thank you for sharing the beautiful thought behind the painting of Hidimba n reminding her greatness.
u totally changed my view of looking at that painting..



Dwiji Guru (<http://dwiddly.wordpress.com>)

[December 23, 2017 at 9:21 am \(http://theladiesfinger.com/amruta-patil-hidimba/#comment-28869\)](http://theladiesfinger.com/amruta-patil-hidimba/#comment-28869)

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Growing up in an intercaste family (though both very much सवर्ण) I would hear stories of the model women in Hindu mythology – the पंच कन्य. As I started finding my own feminist ally footings, I would think back and try to identify who were the really free/liberated women in Hindu mythology. And they would all be dark skinned and/or rakshasis.

Reading this article reminded me of those days when I did try to find something meaningful in mythologies ... and that it is time to get the young voracious reader at home a few stories about some of our 'rakshasi'es.

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