

A MODERN INTERPRETATION OF SITA AND OTHER FEMALE CHARACTERS OF RAMAYANA UNDER FEMINISTIC LENS

Dr Shipra Malik¹

Assistant Professor

Department of English Language and Literature

Al Baha University

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Dr Anupriya Singh²

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Swami Keshvanand Institute of Technology

Jaipur(Rajasthan)

India

Abstract

Mythology has always been one of the primary components of religion, culture, tradition and social practices prevalent in our society since ages. The character of Sita from Ramayana has been one such important mythological character which has been interpreted differently in past and the present ages. In the Ramayana, Valmiki has chiseled Sita's character as a harmonious embodiment of beauty, tenderness of heart, abundance of compassion, fidelity, wisdom of the truest type, courage of heart, and endurance, that served her well in constantly surrendering her rights and interests as defined by her value-system in order to keep the mast of patriarchy high and unwavering in the society. But in modern revisionist mythological works, the character of Sita and all the major female characters like: Shuparnkha, Ahalaya, Renuka and Urmila have broken their mystified and stereotyped image as portrayed in the epic of *Ramayana*. The modern interpretation of the character of Sita however, is completely distinct from that of old and traditional one. It has been endowed with agency, self - assertiveness and power of performativity which has never been attributed to the gendered notions of a female. She has been depicted as an independent and assertive individual rather than a weak and submissive character who mirrors the stereotyped feminine qualities and attributes assigned to her gender in context of two modern contemporary works namely- *The Liberation of Sita* by Volga, aka Popuri Lalitha Kumari and *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* by Devdutt Pattanaik.

Keywords: Feminism, Feminine sisterhood, Performativity, Agency, Gender norms, Modern Revisionist-Mythology

Introduction:

Mythology has always played an important role in the social construction and the shaping of gender roles in the society. The validation of these roles has been induced in our psychology through the passive process of acknowledging and accepting mythology which has always contributed to a larger part in shaping our societal minds. The present research paper tries to bring into light a re-reading or the modern interpretation of the mythological character of Sita under a feminist lens in reference to two works namely- *The Liberation of Sita* by Volga and *Sita An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana* by Devdutt Pattanaik. In order to break the stereotyped gender roles incarcerated through ancient mythology these revisionist myth writers have brought the passive and submissive women characters to the centre by giving them voice and power of performativity.

Sita as a mythological goddess in the *Ramayana*, has been chiselled by Valmiki as a harmonious embodiment of beauty, with tenderness of heart, abundance of compassion, fidelity, wisdom of the truest type, courage of heart, and endurance, that served her well in constantly surrendering her rights and interests as defined by her value-system thereby, emphasizing De Beauvoir's concept of "one is not born a woman but becomes one" (De Beauvoir 267). According to Beauvoir gender difference is a social category rather than a merely biological one and the women are socially conditioned, trained and prescribed to assume the carved role of woman. In Valmiki's *Ramayana* the character of Sita has been presented as an ideal female who serves as an ideal beloved, wife, daughter-in-law and mother. Devi Sita, the divine heavenly goddess and wife of Lord Rama, is one of the most popular goddesses in the Hindu religion.

These mythological texts from ancient time period have always tried to carve an ideal image of a woman through androcentric or gender biased societal norms and traditions. Women who followed these set norms dutifully were given the stature of noble and ideal. On the other hand, the females who rebelled against these existing norms were denounced and treated as rebellious and outcasts. These female characters were made to suffer indelibly, to coerce the acceptability and naturalness of these carved and ascribed gendered role plays based on patriarchy. Sita was considered as an incarnation of Laxmi, wife of Lord Vishnu. Her husband Rama was considered to be an avatar of Lord Vishnu, his seventh incarnation. In the original mythological text of *Ramayana* written by Valmiki Sita has been represented as an ideal wife, daughter and mother to the Hindu people who is still remembered for her fine attributes and revered for having the noblest qualities of women. Sita is one of the chief female protagonists in the Epic *Ramayana*.

The adopted child of King Janaka and Queen Sunaina, who married Lord Rama and devotedly accompanied him when he was exiled to the forest. She was later captured, imprisoned and eventually rescued. Sita remained honourable throughout the tribulations of her

life and finally escaped the cruelty of the world by returning to the arms of Mother Earth. The character of Sita is a typical example of phallogocentric nature of myths. Mythology has always been a very effective medium of the propagation of the masculine value system which has ascribed or imposed certain set of values which ought to be followed by female gender especially. These myths have been constructed in such a manner that they legitimise and naturalise this kind of binary opposition between the genders and also justify the set of value system that have been ascribed to each gender. It is only through a female perspective i.e by giving voice to the voiceless that this prevailing gender dichotomy and politics of subjugation of the females by the males can be exposed.

Female Gender Roles Redefined:

Patriarchy formulates the image of woman as a self-sacrificial wife and mother thereby confining her to the realms of marriage and domesticity. The conventional mythological character of Sita has been represented as a supreme example of this image of woman cast into the mould of an ideal female as designed by patriarchy. The main role of Sita as shown in Valmiki's *Ramayana* is that of a dutiful wife and devoted mother only. However, the modern interpretation of Sita depicted in Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita* and *The Liberation of Sita* by Volga, breaks these age old patriarchal and mythological notions of an ideal female. The character of Sita described here is different from the conventional character of Sita as her realms are not limited to the world of domesticity. She has a broader knowledge of both the feminine and the masculine world which has been clearly demarcated through the world of mythology:

Sita's father never knew of the world that was the kitchen. Sita's mother never knew the world that was the court. But Sita realized she knew both. This is how the mind expands, she thought to herself. This is how Brahma becomes the brahman. She was a brahmin, she realized, a seeker of wisdom as well as transmitter of wisdom. And that thought made her smile. (Pattanaik22)

This modern interpretation of Sita's character unlike the traditional and old mythological character is very much aware of her mental intelligence and individuality. According to the feminists there are social values that have been attributed to biological acts. Woman's biology and biological functions are evaluated, determined and governed not merely as biology but from the social values attributed to them. Gender is a system of roles and values assigned to the biological traits and functions. The woman is made to accept the idea that her only purpose that can make her life accomplished is that she should prove herself to be a good mother and wife. Her birth is only to fulfil the ulterior motive of life which is to procreate and to nurture.

The modern character of Sita unlike the traditional mythological character of Sita is not depicted as a helpless and fragile female who require male support at every step in her life. She

is one, who is capable and powerful enough just like the powerful male characters. During her exile in the forest, she not just brings up her children single handed but also performs the role of a father by teaching her sons Luva and Kusha all the expertise and skills required to be known to a Kshatriya. Thus, when she gets an opportunity to display her skills and prowess, she asserts her identity as a powerful woman who is complete in herself. But in Valmiki's *Ramayana* there is no mention of any such incident or event as the character of Sita presented here reflects the image of an ideal female whose world is limited to the domains of domesticity as and was expected from the gender roles ascribed to the female characters. She suffers the pangs of sorrow and she is shown as fragile and vulnerable being alone in the forest, always lamenting for the loss of her husband and her family life. However, Pattanaik's Sita is self-sufficient and independent enough to carve out ways for herself and her children. When her sons question from her that in the absence of their father who can teach them these skills, she replies very confidently that she is capable of teaching them as she is also a kshatriya woman:

Sita couldn't suppress her smile, seeing their anxiety. You want to master kshatriya skills. Is that all? I'll teach you.

You?

'Of course. I'am a kshatriya woman, am I not?

'But women don't fight wars, do they?

'When necessary they will do anything. I am adept at all those skills. From tomorrow, I am not only your mother but also your teacher.'

When what you have to teach us is completed, will father come and teach us the rest?

Sita laughed.

'When I have taught you all that I can, there'll be nothing left for your father to teach.'

'Does that mean you know more than father does?

'It's not about more or less, son. There used to be a great bow at one time. There were very few who could lift it and shoot arrow with it. Your father and I were equally adept at that'.(Volga 57-58)

The choice of words used in these lines- 'I can' and 'I were equally adept' shows the confident and powerful character of Sita who does not require a male to represent or complete her identity. In another incident, when she in the forest after being abandoned by Ram, a Gandharva offers her his companionship and love saying that since she has been abandoned by her husband she might be in search of support as being a woman she can't survive alone. But Sita replies, "It is not whether he binds me or not. It is whether I want to or not. And I do not want to. I do not need to. With or without Ram, I am complete in myself. Ram reflects my completion as I reflect his. You, who are incomplete, should not assume my incompleteness, just because I am alone in the forest"(Pattanaik293).

She alone is capable to fulfil the roles of both the parents i.e mother and father for her children. She proves that gender roles are assigned only in human societies and not in forest which is the manifestation of God who has created both the sexes alike. The forest is natural and free from all kind of biases or traditions which bound both the genders to their ascribed role playing. Even in animals the mother is capable and sufficient not just in giving birth to her children but in bringing them up and their protection from the dangers of forest. But in human society we are bound by the gender norms which have been engrained in our psyche right from our birth and which determine the life course and expected social roles to be performed by each sex.

Assertion of Feminine Identity and Independent Will:

The modern character of Sita desires and knows how to express her free and independent will. She acknowledges and asserts her independent identity and is even ready to pay any price for it. She asserts her independent will which has always been denied to women. Her desire for freedom from the rules and traditions is very well reflected in her conversation with Ram-“Sita could not help herself and said, these days in the forest, I am sure you think they are bad. But I think they are good. There is so much of freedom here in the forest, no rules and rituals and rites that bind us back home” (Pattanaik122). She knows how to take her own decisions. She doesn't allow anyone else in her life to take decisions for her including her husband Ram. Her decision to go to forest with her husband was also her own choice. Unlike Sumitra who silently follows her husband's decision and order to stay back in the palace, Sita chooses her independent will:

I do not need your permission. I am your wife and I am supposed to accompany you, to the throne, into the war and to the forest. What you eat, I shall taste. Where you sleep, I shall rest. You are the shaft of the bow that is our marriage; you need the string to complete it. My place is beside you, nowhere else. Fear not, I will be no burden; I can take care of myself. As long as I am beside you and behind you, you will want for nothing. (Pattanaik82)

She realizes the completeness of her individual identity. She is ready to play the role of a wife not because she considers herself to be dependent and weak but because she sees herself as an equal partner capable of providing support and strength.

Strong Bond of Feminine Sisterhood:

Not just Sita almost all the other major female characters in the modern interpretation of *Ramayana* namely Shuparnkha, Renuka, Ahalya and Urmila etc. know and very well acknowledge the strong feminine aspects of their personality and in no way consider themselves inferior than the males in their lives. They fully embrace their weaknesses and refuse to be moulded to the conditioned modes of patriarchal system of beliefs. Beside this, they also share an invisible and strong bond of sisterhood with each other. They not only

support each other during their periods of struggle against the patriarchal society but also carry the bright torch of femininity upright and high by asserting their individuality and seeking the power of performativity which has been long denied to females since ages. Women have always been treated like property in the name of dharma, politics and power. They were acquired and exchanged and owned just like property, land and kingdom by the powerful males against their wishes. But the modern interpretation of these female characters from mythology brings in a new perspective and hope for freedom from these stereotyped and preconceived notions of patriarchy expected to be fulfilled by each gender.

Ahalya, in sharing her sad story of seduction by Indra in disguise of her husband with Sita enlightens Sita's mind by telling her not to surrender to the injustice caused by anyone even if the person is your husband:

It is difficult to bear with women who talk like me, Sita. It becomes easier if I accept that I have made a mistake. Then there is a atonement for every sin. If I argue that I have made no mistake, they will take pity on me. They will take my side, seeing me as the victim of an unjust allegation. But if I say, "Right or wrong, it's my business, what has it to do with you? Who gave you the right or authority to judge, then nobody will be able to tolerate it.

Are you saying that even Maharishi Gautama does not have that authority? Sita was unable to understand Ahalya.

Society gave him that authority. I didn't. Till I give it, no one can have that authority over me.

But he has disowned you.

Pity, that's his loss.

And you.....they say you lived like a lifeless stone for years.

That's what you think. I have spent all these years thinking about my identity in this universe.(Volga 27-28)

Women like Ahalya, are the enlightened modern feminists of today who know how to stand for their rights and individuality. They want to take back the control of their lives in their hands. Ahalya advises Sita to never agree to any trial or bow down to any authority other than herself. The character of Renuka also as mentioned in traditional mythological texts suffered punishment and injustice not only at the hands of her husband sage Jamadagni but also at the hands of her own son Parasurama for a very trivial act of looking at a man and thus thereby being said to violate her paativratyam. But in Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* she is shown as a strong female who overcomes all these struggles and shares her thoughts and strong feminist beliefs with Sita:

A woman thinks she doesn't have a world other than that of her husband's. True. But some day that very husband will tell her that there is no place for her in this world. Then what's left for her? She thinks giving birth to sons is the ultimate goal of her life. But

those sons become heirs to their father, and even before we realize it, they leave her hands and go under the wing of their father. They submit to his authority. Or they begin to legislate our lives. Why bear such sons? Nobody will experience this as harshly as I have.....(Volga 52)

The old mythological character of Lakshmana's wife Urmila who was ordered by her husband to stay back at the palace while he would be away from her for fourteen years, to fulfil his duties towards his elder brother Ram, has also been presented with changed perspectives and strong feminine voice:

I knew Akka that you would understand. That's why I broke my silence today. But, Akka, if you ever have to face the kind of trial I did, do not respond in a predictable manner. Do not allow the situation to force you into mundaneness, into nastiness. Do not let it burn you up in anger, hatred. Save yourself. Assert yourself. Assert your right over yourself. Give up your power over others. Then you will belong to yourself. You will be yourself. It's not easy to be ourselves -trust me, Akka! (Volga 78)

In these lines, she clearly mentions that it is more important to discover one's own feminine identity first rather than losing yourself and surrendering your power while playing roles for other people in your life. The sacrificial image of a woman has been clearly questioned here.

Similarly, Shuparnkha also shares her sad story of overcoming the struggles in her life. She tells Sita that after her mutilation and insult by Rama and Lakshmana due to her sexually assertive character, she lost her confidence and started to hate her body. Women have always been 'objectified'. They have always been viewed as a physical body and an object of love, lust and beauty. According to some feminist thinkers women in our society are more identified and associated with their bodies than are men, and, to a greater extent than men, they are valued for how they look (Bartky; Bordo 143).

In order to gain social acceptability, women are under constant pressure to correct their bodies and appearance more generally, and to make them conform to the ideals of feminine appearance of their time, the so-called 'norms of feminine appearance' (the standards of appearance women feel they should be living up to) (Saul144). Some feminists also believe that, in being preoccupied with their looks, women treat themselves as things to be decorated and gazed upon. But the character of Suparnkha as depicted by Volga challenges this notion by breaking away these shackled notions of patriarchal society of objectifying female's body. She is completely different from the traditional mythological character of Shuparnkha who loses her identity after her mutilation and rushes to her brother Ravana to take her revenge. She has been portrayed as a Rakshasi because of her free expression of her sexuality and promiscuity. But

the modern interpretation of her character is completely different as here she finds the real and complete truth of feeling comfortable in her own skin even being a Rakshasi and an ugly woman. She doesn't need anyone else's eyes or opinion to see herself as now she knows how to love and appreciate her own self and her own identity:

I struggled a lot to grasp that there is no difference between beauty and ugliness in nature. I observed many living creatures and understood that movement and stillness are one and the same. I discovered the secret of colours. I had no guru in this matter. I pursued it on my own. I searched every particle in nature, and in the course of that search, my own vision has changed. Everything began to look beautiful to my eyes. I who hated everything including myself, began to love everything including myself. (Volga 12)

Patriarchal Notions Challenged:

The modern character of Sita has been portrayed as a free- spirited and self- assertive lady who is in fact hard to be accepted by her patriarchal husband Rama as he tells his brother Lakshmana:

She never listens, snapped Ram. When I told her to stay in the palace, she insisted on accompanying me to the forest. When you told her to stay inside the hut in the forest, she insisted on stepping out. When I was rude and tried to set her free from the obligations of marriage after I killed Ravana, she insisted on walking through fire, displaying her chastity and walking to this city with me. If I tell her she is the subject of gossip and so cannot be associated with me in any way, she will ask complex questions that I will not be able to answer. It is best this way. She will understand. She has to understand. (Pattanaik274)

Here, Rama like a typical husband wants Sita to be dependent upon him for everything. Though he is well aware of her extraordinary powers and strengths, still he wants her to be dependent on him for everything. Rama like the other people of society is very much bound by the gendered notions of patriarchy. He considers himself to be the scion and torch bearer of Raghukul lineage and Arya Dharma. He like a king and a typical patriarchal figure wants everyone to follow the rules of society like a typical male chauvinist. He wages war with Ravana more for the protection of his male ego than out of his love for Sita. Had he loved and trusted Sita in reality, he would never have asked her for chastity test twice even under the pressure of society. He abandons her in the forest while she is pregnant just to prove to her and to the society that if a female tries to cross the 'Lakshman Rekha' which is symbolic of the carved patriarchal norms and traditions, she has to suffer infinitely.

Conclusion:

All the major female characters of *Ramayana* including Sita very well assert their individual identities and rights by regaining the lost control of their lives. These women maintain their balance and composure in overcoming all the oddities and hardships with grace.

They encounter difficulties in their lives due to their rebellion against the expected or carved notions of gendered roles of patriarchy. Thus, the failure to adhere to the order established for women by mythology, leads to downfall or disgrace of the woman. But these strong female characters refuse to surrender or bow down to any external power or authority other than themselves. They do not forget their true identities for the sake of customs, traditions or family as is expected from them by the gendered notions of an ideal female. They assert their rights and choose their individual ways to lead their lives just like the independent Patriarchal characters carved by the traditions and mythology. Sita fulfils her duty of a mother and an ideal wife without losing her individuality. She surrenders her children to her husband by detaching herself from them and refuses to give any kind of chastity or purity test again in order to be accepted by society or her husband. Thus, she gives value and importance to her own self than anybody else. She decides to return to her mother Earth by rejecting the traditions and customs of a shackled patriarchal society and thus by setting herself free by forging a new path for posterity. She gives herself the power to choose and thereby the privilege which has long been denied to her by the society.

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