

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH



Impact Factor : 5.7

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

UGC Approved Journal



Volume 6, Issue 10, October 2018

www.ijellh.com

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Demystifying Sita: A Study of the Portrayal of Valmiki's Heroine in Alternate Readings of
The Ramayana

Abstract

Valmiki's heroine, Sita, not only occupies a central position in the ancient Indian epic, but also in Indian culture and every Hindu household. She is the ideal woman and the role model - the very personification of the 'pativrata' - that the patriarchal society expects all women to look up to. In such a context, it is interesting to note the various alternate readings of Sita's portrayal which have emerged in contemporary times from the numerous retellings of the *Ramayana*. One thing which is common in these texts is the central focus on Sita; the entire narrative revolves around her, her choices, her decisions, which lend her the much-required voice not found in Valmiki's epic poem. Another interesting aspect of these retellings is that the portrayal of Sita moves from being a victim to the one who is in complete control over her life and destiny.

This paper takes into account six such contemporary retellings of the *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective - Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* (2013) and *The Girl Who Chose: A New Way of Narrating The Ramayana* (2016); Samhita Arni's graphic novel *Sita's Ramyana* (2012); Vayu Naidu's *Sita's Ascent* (2012); Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* (2016) and Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (2017) – all published recently, to explore the various dimensions of the character of Sita as presented by these authors. The present study involves an examination of the contemporary feminist contexts in which authors, such as, Pattanaik, Arni, Naidu, Volga and Tripathi place Sita to enquire if such representations make her character more human-like and thus, better perceived for ordinary readers.

Keywords: Sita, Ramayana, food, nature, choices, revision, myth, retelling

Revision of existing texts is a fertile area for research in today's time. Many contemporary authors have been exploring the unheard women's voices in our ancient epics and mythology. Commenting on the roles of women in epic narratives, Nabaneeta Dev Sen says, "The ideals of the epic world obviously do not have much to share with women, nor do the women enjoy the heroic values. There is little they can do there – other than get abducted or rescued, or pawned, or molested, or humiliated in some way or other." (Sen 18) Retellings of the epic narratives seem to be concerned mainly with such a perspective and therefore, seek to present alternate readings. Writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Pratibha Ray, Devdutt Pattanaik, Amish Tripathi, Sharath Kommaraju, Kavita Kane, to name a few, have presented under-represented voices from these ancient texts in order to subvert mythical stereotyped images of women. This paper seeks to explore Valmiki's heroine, Sita, represented in various revisionist texts. The primary texts which will be taken for study are Devdutt Pattanaik's monumental work *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* (2013) and his more recent one *The Girl Who Chose: A New Way of Narrating The Ramayana* (2016); Samhita Arni's graphic novel *Sita's Ramyana* (2012); Vayu Naidu's *Sita's Ascent* (2012); Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* (2016) and Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (2017). All these texts were published in the last six years and present Sita in a different light, bringing out various unheard portrayals of Valmiki's prima donna. Sita is not just an ordinary woman mentioned in the ancient Indian epic, she is the ideal woman recognized in every Hindu household as well. Sudhir Kakar rightly says:

"For both men and women in Hindu society, the ideal woman is personified by Sita, the quintessence of wifely devotion, the heroine of the epic *Ramayana*. Her unique standing in the minds of most Hindus, regardless of region, caste, social class, age, sex, education, or modernization, testifies to the power and pervasiveness of the traditional ideal of womanhood. Sita, of course, is not just another legendary figure, and the *Ramayana* is not just another epic poem. It is through the recitation, reading, listening to, or attending a dramatic performance of this revered text (above all others) that a Hindu reasserts his or her cultural identity as a Hindu, and obtains religious merit." (Kakar 1978:73-74)

A study on the revisionist texts of *The Ramayana* focusing on its heroine, written in today's time, thus, becomes imperative to explore the contemporary feminist contexts in which the authors place Sita.

The first part of this study focuses on Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* which retells the ancient epic from the perspective of Valmiki's heroine. Pattanaik's book records Sita's life, right from her childhood days to her final refuge inside mother Earth. The book explores the character of Sita mainly through two significant metaphors that she is associated with – nature and food. He brings out Sita's association to vegetation, especially grass or 'kusha'. Believed to be found in a furrow by King Janaka, Sita's link to nature and fertility is established right at the beginning. She is also called 'Bhumija' which means the daughter of the earth. Her most popular name, 'Sita', signifies the fact that she was found in a furrow. Her connection to nature is highlighted by Pattanaik during the exile, her banishment to the forest, and of course her final refuge inside Mother Earth. In conjunction with nature, Pattanaik traces Sita's connection to food. In fact, Sita's depiction in this book is mostly from the perspective of her being known as Annapoorna, the Goddess of food. Pattanaik traces the importance of food and its preparation in every household. While discussing the supreme place of kitchen, he says, "...Indian thought, while valuing thought, also values food. Food is nourisher, healer as well as happiness provider. Thought may be God but food is the Goddess. One cannot exist without the other." (Pattanaik 2013:22) The author explores the well-known metaphor of 'Sita-ki-rasoi' or Sita's kitchen, a part of many Indian folklores and shows Sita's instant connect to food the moment she steps inside her mother's kitchen. However, her connection to food no way diminishes her intellectual prowess. Pattanaik draws attention to Sita's dual roles in the kitchen as well as in her father's court:

"Before long, Sita found her feet around the kitchen: peeling, cutting, churning, pickling, steaming, roasting, frying, pounding, mixing, kneading, experiencing various textures, aromas, flavours and chemistry. Her senses became familiar with the secrets of spices, and every kind of nourishment provided by the plant and animal kingdom.

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." (Pattanaik 2013:22)

Sita gets her feet firmly rooted to her mother's kitchen and takes her interest to her husband's home after marriage. She carries with her "the seeds of pulses and grains, vegetables and fruits, herbs and spices" which would "be grown in her husband's garden to remind her of home. For when a bride enters the husband's house she brings with her not just the promise of a new generation but also new food, a new culture..." (Pattanaik 2013:61) Pattanaik

stresses on the Indian cultural scenario where it is deemed auspicious for a newlywed bride to visit the kitchen on her entering her husband's house. Sita and her sisters too are taken to the kitchen and made to customarily touch the various utensils which were being used for cooking. With this initiation, Sita's link to food starts in her new household and she carries it forward to the forest too, where she spends a large part of her years. The book traces Sita's association to food all throughout her exile. Ram, Lakshman and Sita meet Sage Agastya and his wife, Lopamudra in the forest. While the sage gives the brothers many weapons to assist them, his wife spends many hours with Sita in her kitchen garden, giving her practical wisdom on various "spices that enable digestion and heal wounds." (Pattanaik 2013:114) In the forest, Sita is not just a companion, but plays an active role in providing nourishment to Ram and Lakshman. Her association to nature becomes manifold in the forest and she starts observing plants and animals minutely, learns how to communicate with animals, and thereby, discovers various hidden elements in nature. Through this unique bonding she is able to "find the most succulent of fruits and berries", gets to know "where the best tubers could be pulled out from the ground....found leaves that were edible and bark that was nourishing." (Pattanaik 2013:115) Sita, thus, turns into the true daughter of nature during her life in the forest. Sita's image as the nourisher is explored further in her accepting risk to provide alms to Ravana in the disguise of a hermit. She is aware of the fact that she is vulnerable outside the 'Lakshman-rekha', but still steps out so as not to give rise to any possible malignity to the Raghu clan on account of inhospitality. As the eldest daughter-in-law of the family, her link is thus established to the reputation of the family on one hand, as well as, being the nourisher on the other. A more complex association of Sita to food from the perspective of patriarchal hegemony is brought out in Pattanaik's book where Sita, on hearing Hanuman's account of Ram eating Shabari's tasted berries, says, "I am like Shabari's berry. I belong to Ram but Ravana wants to taste me. Will Ram still accept me when I am thus contaminated?" (Pattanaik 2013:164) This question and doubt in Sita's mind set the ground for future course of actions and the ultimate fate of Valmiki's heroine. Sita's link to food is further explored by Pattanaik during her exile in Lanka. In her captive's land, she held a special position because of her supreme knowledge of the intricate details of culinary skills. Her suggestions on the proportions of spices in the food being prepared in the kitchens of Lanka made such a drastic change that rakshasa cooks from the kitchen started coming to the Ashoka grove to take further advice from her. Sita's expertise in the preparation of food was such that even without tasting the food, she could give her best advices just by smelling what had been prepared. Her suggestions brought about drastic changes in the food being cooked in Lanka's kitchen and

led to an environment of such festivity and contentment that the Lankan men forgot all about the war and started conversing only about food. Pattanaik's book lends a meaningful insight into Sita's portrayal in various roles as daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, prisoner, and mother and link all these positions intricately to her association to food. In Valmiki's ashram, Sita trains her sons on the food habit and forest culture of the animal world. The boys grew up watching their mother's culinary expertise. Sita trained her sons on basic skills like making fire and hunting for food. Pattanaik's Sita is truly the Goddess Annapurna who is the source of nourishment to everyone and the book primarily highlights Valmiki's heroine's link to food in all the roles that she plays.

If food had been the central metaphor linking to Sita in Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, his presentation of the heroine in his recent book on Sita is entirely from a different perspective. The second part of this study focuses on two visual narratives – Pattanaik's *The Girl Who Chose: A New Way of Narrating The Ramayana* and Samhita Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* – which are unconventional ways of chronicling *The Ramayana* from Sita's perspective. A cursory glance at the graphic novel, *Sita's Ramayana*, may make readers feel that it is a children's book because of its vivid illustrations. However, a thorough reading will help to comprehend that this book cannot be side-lined merely as a children's read. As the title itself suggests, the book is not just a retelling of the great epic but presents the story from Sita's perspective. Another interesting fact is that Arni's book starts from Sita's banishment to the forest and then presents the narrative in flash-back through her voice. The book highlights the patriarchal hegemony to which Sita is subjected to in her course of journey in life. Arni's book looks at a fresh way of narrating the story from Sita's viewpoint and certain situations which always have been looked at a conventional patriarchal way have been (re)visioned from a woman's perspective. Living in the forest, Sita has been craving for human company. The graphical representation in Arni's book showcases Sita's happiness on the arrival of Ravana disguised as a hermit. Sita, leading a lonely life in the hermitage, is rather satisfied at the chance of performing her worthy duty of providing nourishment to the mendicant and does not hesitate to step out of her safe enclosure too. Arni's book highlights the effect of Sita's goodness and how she is captured by Ravana who offers her palaces, jewels, attendants and every comfort veiled in patriarchal shackles to forgo her love and devotion towards Ram. Sita not only resists all such temptations but also literally lets go off all bindings as she drops her gems and ornaments to leave a trail for Ram to find her. Samhita Arni's portrayal of Sita is extremely poignant from the point of view of her essential goodness of nature. Speaking about Lakshmana's treatment towards

Surpanakaha, she says, “Violence breeds violence, and an unjust act only begets greater injustice. Rama should have stopped him....INSTEAD, HE SPURRED HIM ON.” (Arni & Chitrakar 2015:16) She feels morally responsible for Tara’s grief when Ram kills Vali. According to the customs, Tara had to be married to Sugriva immediately after the death of Valin. Hearing Hanuman’s account of her lament thus, “I have just been made a widow and now I am to be a bride!” (Arni & Chitrakar 2015:47) Sita is devastated and holds herself accountable for Tara’s grief. Even in Lanka she befriends women like Trijatha, Vibhishana’s daughter and laments the death of Kumbhakarna as well as the death of the several Asura men along with the women of Lanka. She is not even happy with the death of her captor, Ravana, for similar reasons. Arni, in her book, highlights the impact of wars on women. If war and death signifies honour for men, it brings endless grief for women. Narrating the epic from the perspective of Valmiki’s heroine, Arni’s book highlights Sita’s point of view in the *Ramayana* and can be looked at as a powerful contemplation on the fate of women caught in the mire of political wars and deaths.

Revisionist texts on the *Ramayana* taken for this study focus on different aspects of the epic but from the perspective of Sita, lending her a voice and making her an active participant in the course of actions. Pattanaik’s *The Girl Who Chose: A New Way of Narrating The Ramayana* retells the epic with reference to five choices that Valmiki’s heroine makes and in the process highlights Sita’s prerogative in decision making for herself. The text also showcases Sita’s choices vis-a-vis the obligation of Rama towards family duties and honour as well as to keep up being the ‘maryada purushottam’ which does not offer him any scope to have a choice of his own. On a different league all together is Ravana, devoid of any moral scruples, unwilling to respect anybody’s rules or choices. Pattanaik takes up Sita’s choices as five distinct phases in the epic which set the future course of action in the plot rolling. The first choice that Sita makes is to leave the luxury of the palace, even though she was not the one banished, to follow Ram to the forest in order to take care of his needs. The second choice she makes is to step outside the safe confinement of the boundary line to feed the poor hermit. In that, she is aware that it may bring about danger for her but she gives more prominence to helping a needy person than protect her interest – “Sita understood that her choice would help someone and so she decided to take the risk. In the forest, an animal only thinks about its own safety. Not about protecting another animal. This was the difference between animals and humans.” (Pattanaik 2016:42) The third choice she makes is not to agree to leave Lanka with Hanuman, even though things would have been much easier for her if she had done so, but she chooses to remain so that Ram’s royal reputation is restored by

saving her. The fourth choice that she makes is to go back to Ayodhya with Ram and even though deeply pained, she steps into the fire to prove her chastity. Her final choice is to go inside Mother Earth in order to seek her final refuge. Even though worshipped as the consort of Lord Ram, Sita is generally overlooked as a primary character in the epic notwithstanding the fact that the story is mostly about her; primary importance is given to Ravana's cruelty and Ram's valour, thereby taking away her voice and her ability to act on her own. Pattanaik, in this book, transforms the usual passivity of Sita's character, thereby, focusing on the five important choices that she makes in the epic, without which the story would not have progressed or reached its due conclusion.

The third part of this study focuses on Vayu Naidu's *Sita's Ascent*, Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* and Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* to highlight various alternate representations of Valmiki's heroine in contemporary revisions of the epic. Naidu's book places Sita in the centre of the narrative and the story flows "...through the remembrances of the people with whom she lived in the time of the epic." (Naidu 2012:172) The story is located at a point of time when Sita and Rama have already returned to Ayodhya and Sita is expecting their child. Naidu's book presents an alternate reading by focusing the readers' attention to 'Sita's story' in the epic through the perspective of characters like, Urmilla, Valmiki, Lakshmana, Mandodari, Soorpanakha and so on. Drawing subject matter on Sita from various sources, such as, an English translation of the Sanskrit *Adbhuta Ramayana*, Naidu presents a more multidimensional Sita than we find her in Valmiki's epic. In fact, as the author rightly puts it across, the character of Sita in this book definitely "goes beyond Valmiki" (Naidu 2012:173) and more than being a goddess-like figure, she is an everywoman – her sufferings, her stoic endurance, her motherly affection, and her final decision to go inside Mother earth, become the saga of common women. Naidu's book stands out primarily for two major reasons – first, it portrays Sita and her condition as a more human condition than divine. The psychological perspective presented in the book transform the reading of Sita as the story of a victim to that of an epic hero with immense capacity to endure. Naidu sums up the portrayal of Sita thus –

"...Sita is an inheritance and a legacy for many women, not an imposition....In our times, endurance in women is precariously interpreted as the attribute of a 'victim', but Sita has resourcefulness, fortitude, cheerfulness and an ocean of love despite being placed in circumstances not of her choosing, as an orphan and an exile....She is never dour or tragic, and she is increasingly spontaneous and defiantly compassionate." (Naidu

2012:182)

Thus, Sita and her situations are more human, and comprehending her becomes easier in that platform. The second reason for the unique portrayal of Sita in Naidu's book is the perspective of the women in the epic, specifically the ones who are rendered almost voiceless. So, when the story unfolds from the perception of Urmilla (who had been sleeping most of the time in the epic), Mandodari (who is overshadowed by her husband), and Soorpanakha (whose only presence in the epic is that of an evil rakshasa woman, may be remembered only for the severing of her nose), Naidu presents a voice to these important women in the epic, thereby establishing a connect to Sita through their perceptions and their narration.

If Naidu's book stands out due to these stories of different people in the epic from their perspective centred on Sita, Volga's *Liberation of Sita*, goes a step further by presenting an alternate reading of Valmiki's heroine as she connects to the 'minor' women characters in the epic in her journey towards self-realization. In Volga's narrative, Sita on an arduous journey towards discovering her own self, after being abandoned in the forest by Lakshmana as per the directive of Rama, meets some extra-ordinary women – Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka and Urmila – who steer her towards understanding her own self in a better way. She strikes a bonding of sisterhood with Surpanakha, who after her mutilation and humiliation, has taken refuge in the forest and is completely involved in cultivating a beautiful garden. Moving away from her desire to be beautiful and loved, Surpanakha accepts her mutilated face in a positive way and is able to conquer her rage and revenge. In this alternate reading, Sita and Surpanakha are in the same platform, "...not as victims of patriarchy but as two mature women in pursuit of self-realization." (Volga 2016:108) A similar bonding of sisterhood is achieved with Ahalya and Renuka, both again victims of masculine honour and patriarchal notion of 'purity of women'. Similar to them, Sita is also a victim of suspicion and must repeatedly prove her innocence to the entire world. Discussing Sita's situation, Nabaneeta Dev Sen terms it as the "she deserved it" attitude of the society towards a woman who has been molested. Dev Sen also adds that

"(t)he fact that Sita was in fact not raped is a mere technicality. In the eyes of society, she has lost her honour. As it happens all over the world to this day, the victim is blamed and the injustice is thus doubled. The rape victim must suffer not only the pain and humiliation of violation but the pain of social and even familial rejection." (Sen 24-25)

This attitude of the patriarchal society on notions of masculine honour is shared by Nivedita Menon too:

“For patriarchal forces, rape is evil because it is a crime against the honour of the family, whereas feminists denounce rape because it is a crime against the autonomy and bodily integrity of a woman....In this understanding, the raped woman is responsible for the crime against her because either she crossed the *lakshman rekha* of time (by going out after dark) or the *lakshman rekha* of respectability (by dressing in unconventional ways or by leaving the four walls of her home at all).” (Menon 2012:113)

Sita's abduction is thus, viewed as her own doing and therein, starts her saga of repeated proofs of chastity. In Volga's narrative, both Ahalya and Renuka are able to share their ideas of 'female chastity' or 'paativratyam' (fidelity of a married woman) with Sita which as Renuka remarks is as fragile as a sand pot. It is through her connection with Ahalya and Renuka that Sita is able to see beyond her immediate situation and arrive at peace with herself. Later, it is Urmila who further counsels Sita on how to arrive at a state of inner peace. She tells Sita: “You must liberate yourself from Rama...Each of these trials is meant to liberate you from Rama. To secure you for yourself. Fight, meditate, look within until you find the truth that is you.” (Volga 2016:81) The idea of the necessity for Sita's liberation is triggered by the gross injustice done to her by none other than her own husband. It is rightly noted that “...Sita's sufferings at Rama's hands have been so hard to stomach even for Rama's devotees that since Valmiki's time, every reteller of the Rama story has had to invent some rationalization to blink away their discomfort.” (Lal & Gokhale 2009:145) Thus, it is essential for Sita to gain a complete insight into her own situation. It is this teaching of Urmila as well as the guidance of the other three wise women which finally help Sita to be emancipated and liberate herself from Rama.

The last text taken for study in this paper is *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, the second book in the Ramachandra series by Amish Tripathi. It is a true representative of the genre of revisionist writings. The author portrays Valmiki's leading lady as a fierce woman unlike the classical text wherein the character of Sita is docile and suppressed without a voice of her own. In Tripathi's narrative, she is practical and intelligent and has the habit of taking decisions on her own during her adolescence. She is completely opposed to the caste system practised in India that acts as a hindrance in the progress of the country where people blindly follow the rigid caste system, giving utmost importance to their caste and not to their skills or karmas. Tripathi projects the carefree and adventurous character of Sita skilled in various

arts. The undeviating nucleus of the story by Tripathi rests on Sita's journey from her infancy to her youth. Bestowed with the ardour of a warrior she was no less than any man of her kingdom; in fact she exhibited the militant qualities of a soldier which she inherited from her mother Sunaina along with the masterly account of philosophy from her father Janaka. Unlike in other exegesis of the *Ramayana*, Amish moulds the character of Sita in such a way that it is nearly impossible to view the text without her presence. In this alternate reading, the entire plot revolves around Sita who is pronounced the seventh Vishnu by sage Vishwamitra and thus, the revision becomes more of a 'Sitayana' with Valmiki's heroine in the centre stage.

This study of the selected alternate readings of *Ramayana*, thus, highlight that contemporary authors are inclined towards revising the portrayal of Sita as we find in the epic poem. Sita, in these retellings, is more of a human figure rather than a goddess and her trials and tribulations, the saga of everywoman. Interesting facts, like her association with nature and food, are brought to the forefront. She is not the docile and subservient one in these narratives; instead she occupies centre stage and all the threads of the plot connect to her. It is not only in the alternate readings selected for this study, but various others, such as, K.L. Srinivas Iyengar's *Sitayana*, Chandrabati's *Ramayan* in Bangla, Molla's *Ramayanam* in Telugu and many folk literature which have come from several pockets of our country where Sita is in the centre stage instead of Rama. Even then there exists a viewpoint that Sita is not the right influence on today's women and it is the Kali figure or Draupadi who can be equated with the modern woman and her requirement. In this context, founder editor of *Manushi*, Madhu Kishwar, rightly says, "Sita is wrongly seen by some feminists as a harmful role model which culturally enslaves women, conditions them into accepting subordination and maltreatment at the hands of men and leaves them without the courage to protest or retaliate." (Lal & Gokhale 2009:110) Moving in the similar direction, this paper too highlights the portrayal of Sita who has a voice of her own, makes choices central to the plot of the epic and thus, is transformed from the 'goddess figure' found in mainstream Sita myth to that of a 'woman' in the feminine world-view.

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