

## RE-VISIONING SITA: REWRITING MYTHOLOGY

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### Abstract

*The diversity of its retellings suggests that the Ramayan holds different meanings for different audiences. Its representational multiplicity marks it as a hegemonic social text on the one hand and as a platform for resistance to that hegemony on the other. This essay focusses on selected feminist literary retellings of The Ramayan with the purpose to reject the traditional notion of imagining Sita as a docile and submissive character and re-vision her as a strong woman. In the process of revisiting mythology, I will also emphasize that these retellings by women not only tell Sita's story, but also tell the story of minor women characters of The Ramayan and the tale of every other woman suffering insult and indignity without any fault of her own. Thus, these texts become re-membering of the collective voice of women.*

**Key Words:** Rewriting Mythology, *The Ramayan*, Sita, Samhita Arni, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Volga, Vayu Naidu

### Introduction:

“I didn’t set out to tell THE Ramayana, only MY Ramayana,” says Nina Paley in *Sita Sings the Blues*. The plurality of the *Ramayan* tradition has been unanimously recognised and acknowledged by scholars. As Goldman puts it, “It is a multivoiced entity, encompassing tellings of the Rama story that vary according to historical period, regional literary tradition, religious affiliation, genre, intended audience, social location, gender, and political context” (Richman, ed. 16).<sup>1</sup> The representational diversity of the *Ramayan*, both in the literary texts and in non-literary forms, such as dance dramas, oral narratives, stage plays, songs, films, and the visual and plastic arts, marks contradictory manifestations—as a hegemonic social text on the one hand and as a platform for resistance to that hegemony on the other. The feminist retellings have occupied an important part of this enlargement of the critical perspective. Though the Bengali *Ramayan* of Chandravati is one of the earliest rewritings from woman’s point of view and in many places Sita is the hero of the story, Chandravati does not make Sita blame Rama. But most of the modern retellings are voices of resistance and construct the *Sitayan* as opposed to the *Ramayan*.

This essay attempts a nuanced analysis of the contemporary presence of Sita in two parts. Part-1 centers on a theoretical examination of her story to offer resistance to the existing system in general. Part-2 purports an investigation of some of the contemporary creative interpretations of the story of Sita which include Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* (2016), Vayu Naidu's *Sita's Ascent* (2012), Samhita Arni's graphic novel *Sita's Ramayana* (2012) and short stories like Vijaya Lakshmi's "Janaki," Mallika Sengupta's "Sitayana," with the purpose to establish Sita as a strong woman and reject the traditional notion of imagining her as a docile and submissive character.<sup>2</sup>

### Part 1- Re-visioning Sita:

In this section, I seek to engage with the contemporary presence of *The Ramayan* on many levels of its existence. I do not profess to be an authority on *The Ramayan*. I admit that I have not made any exhaustive survey of all the *Ramayans* in India nor do I believe that it is feasible (in view of its extensive plurality as quoted from Goldman in the introduction). But Sita's story is my story too as much as it is the story of every other Indian woman. As a child, I grew up listening to her story from the village Pundit reciting the Odia *Ramayan* to a group of enchanted listeners which included me and my grandmother.<sup>3</sup> I started imagining her as the role model, not because my mother told me to be like her, but for the praise and admiration her sense of duty and sacrifice emanated from both men and women.

Growing up in an era with so much dialogue on women empowerment subsequently changed my perception of Sita. She is still a role model, but for a different reason. I read Adrienne Rich's essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" which talked about "re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." Rich asserts, "We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (18-19). Traditional interpretations of Sita's story focus on her self-sacrifice and obedience to the men that direct her life. This essay posits a re-vision of her story for feminist appropriation and a positive construction of femininity.

The gaps and flaws in Sita's story have been supplemented and re-interpreted in different ways by critics as well as creative writers. Nabaneeta Dev Sen in her article "When Women Retell the *Ramayan*" talks about the retelling of *The Ramayan* in contemporary rural women's *Ramayan* songs in Bengali, Marathi, Maithili and Telugu. She analyses the songs and derives and lists ten common sub-themes from those songs which are highly relevant to women's lives in India today, especially rural women:

1. Sita, the foundling. The girl child as the essential orphan.
2. The worry of the parents over getting their daughter married.
3. Child marriage and its concerns.
4. The giving-away songs.

5. The in-laws and the bride, the nature of domestic abuse.  
6. The golden deer. Blaming the victim. The ‘she asked for it’ mentality.  
7. The woman’s desperate need to bear a son to keep her place in patriarchal society  
and

the value of male life.

8. Pregnancy—the cravings, the desire to be spoiled a bit.

9. Childbirth under dire conditions.

10. Abandonment. Facing rejection and dispossession of one’s social identity. (20)

This much observed truth hardly needs citation that a girl is an essential orphan who is treated in a father’s house as the property of others and is never fully accepted in the house of the in-laws. Moreover, the obsession of the parents to get their daughters married is an integral part of Indian social structure. The custom of child marriage, the issue of domestic abuse, the social pressure to bear a son, blaming the victims (i.e. she invited it with her scanty dress, she should not have gone alone, final and worst of all, after all, she is a girl), and the rejection of the victims are the themes which register their persistent existence to disturb and sometimes, devastate the lives of Indian women—rural or urban.

I often muse on the question, “What would *The Ramayan* tell if narrated by a woman?” Sen has an answer to my question: “When women retell the *Ramayan*, Sita is the name they give themselves: the homeless female, the foundling, unloved, rejected and insecure” (27). Nevertheless, Sita’s story is a story of every woman suffering insult and indignity without any fault of her own. Pertinently, Nilimma Devi in her Kuchipudi rendering of Sita’s story has the following musical score:

I entered the depthless embrace

Everyone calls me ‘Sita’

But I have other names too

Seema, Sara, Sophie. (Lal and Gokhale, eds. 114)

The carefully chosen names in the last line show that beyond geography and language, Sita exists within every woman. Abandoned by a mother, discovered in a furrow in King Janaka’s field, Sita stands for all those girls who are abandoned by their parents due to poverty or by the unwed girls due to fear of shame. Also, she is the one who dares to cross the *Lakshmana rekha*—an archetypal symbol of woman’s accountability to the laws of man. The transgression condemns her to confinement, self-exile and/or death in a man’s text, but when women retell *The Ramayan*, it is an act of assertion of one’s own free will. Sen is careful to reiterate the positive impact of Sita’s story on the rural women, “It is not hard to see what purpose the Sita myth serves in the life of rural women. It offers them a persona and a voice. . . . They do not complain about hard work or poverty; all the songs complain about neglect and denial of their rights” (20). Here, lies the importance of re-vision.

**Part 2 - Rewriting Mythology:**

*Sita speak your side of the story.*

*We know the other too well...* (Bina Agarwal's "Sita Speak")

Significantly, many of the contemporary versions of the *Ramayan* by women are first person narration by Sita. Samhita Arni's *Sita's Ramayana*, which combines her texts with Moyna Chitrakar's illustrations in traditional *patua* art, is narrated by Sita. It starts from Sita's exile and then presents the narrative in flash-back through her voice. The book explores how she responds to other women in the epic—such as Trijatha, Kaikeyi and Surpanakha and how she empathizes with the suffering of others.

Chitra Benerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Forest of Enchantments*, too, is a first person narration by Sita. In the beginning of the story, Sita complained Valmiki that he has not understood a woman's life, her despair when she was alone under the Ashok tree, nor even her exhilaration when she was the most beloved woman in the creation. Thereupon the sage urged her to write her story herself for only she knew it (2-3). As she dipped the quill into the inkpot to write, she heard Kaikeyi, Ahalya, Surpanakha, Mandodari and Urmila whispering, "Write our story, too. For always we've been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten—or maligned and used as cautionary tales" (4).

Volga's Sahitya Akademi Award-winning book *Vimukta*, translated as *Liberation of Sita* comprises five interconnected, but independent stories that draw from *The Ramayan* and has Sita as the central character. In Volga's retelling, Sita, after being abandoned by Rama, embarks on a strenuous journey to self-realization. Along the way, she meets minor women characters of the epic like Surpanakha, Renuka, Urmila and Ahalya—extraordinary women who have broken free from all that held them back: husbands, sons, and their notions of desire, beauty and chastity—and they direct Sita towards an unexpected resolution.

In Vayu Naidu's novel *Sita's Ascent* also, an abandoned Sita compels Valmiki to reimagine her as "he had so far chronicled events; he now had to tell the history of the heart" (12). Naidu makes the different characters of the *Ramayan* narrate different episodes giving the story a multiple point of view.

What is common to all these narrations by women is that they not only tell Sita's story, but also give voice to the minor and often forgotten women characters of *The Ramayan*. All these retellings, thus, become re-membering of the collective voice of women. Sita in Naidu's story makes a noteworthy observation, "Stories, apart from giving hope, must be told and shared so everyone can try to understand the experience of life from another point of view" (24).

It is relevant to mention here that in the Note to *Sita's Ascent*, the author Vayu Naidu talks about the three inspirations behind the undertaking. The third one, she mentions, is "the function of memory as a metaphor for re-membering a dismembered story because it is told to us infrequently and in parts, and for experiencing culture through its epic characters" (170). This act of re-membering was a trigger of cultural memory for the writer, "A retelling

gives us new insights that could, and should be allowed to, make meaning of what is valued across cultures, in spite of different traditions” (171). Sita continues, through change, to haunt our imagination. Naidu comments on Sita,

In one sense, Sita is an inheritance and a legacy for many women, not an imposition. While reimagining Sita and her story, it was an enriching journey to enter into the idea that Sita is exiled and adopted—both literally and metaphorically—by the country endorsed as ‘marriage.’ 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. (Emphasis added 182)

Sita is always construed as an epitome of endurance. Often this is equalled with submissiveness, obedience and meekness and cited as an example in the socialisation of girls in Indian society. Her wifely fidelity to her husband under any circumstances has been upheld as an embodiment of cultural conservatism. But, Naidu, here, inscribes a new meaning to the word “endurance” and identifies it with strength. One thing worth observing in the context is that “we rarely see her in the safe interiors of palaces for long; wilderness and abandon is where she triumphs” (174).

Divakaruni, too, makes Sita define endurance. In her novel *The Forest of Enchantments*, we find at Valmiki’s ashram, the pregnant Sita had a dream. She caught Sunaina, Ahalya, Mandodari, Sarama, Kaikeyi, Tara, Shabari, even Surpanakha looking at her with wise and compassionate eyes—eyes that had known suffering and they seemed to say, “Endure as we do. Endure your challenges” (322). Meaningfully, afterwards, Sita ponders over the word endure, “It didn’t mean giving in. it didn’t mean being weak or accepting injustice. It meant taking the challenges thrown at us and dealing them as intelligently as we knew until we grew stronger than them” (322). Thus, the author imparts a new connotation to the term to empower women to fight against challenges and resist injustice. In fact, all the stories discussed in this essay are replete with instances of Sita questioning the injustices she witnessed and portray her as a strong woman.

Pertinently, Bose views that the transformation of an independent, articulate, and decisive Sita that Valmiki created into an exemplar of uncomplaining acceptance is a fascinating act of literary manipulation serving religious, social and, above all, patriarchal ideologies (Lal and Gokhale, eds. 143). The two instances which stand testimony to her decisiveness and independent behaviour are that she opted for a life of forest privation leaving a life of royal privilege and when asked for a fire test for the second time, she chose to enter Mother Earth according to her own free will. Undoubtedly, in *The Ramayan*, Sita was not passive; rather she was making choices all along.

It is essential to state here that I am not concerned with re-imagining Sita under Western eyes and portraying her in the mould of Simone de Beauvoir or Betty Friedan. Instead, I



intend a shift in focus from her suffering and patience to the strengths of her character. It is time to emulate her qualities of inner strength, dignity, self-sufficiency and self-determination which helped her to follow Rama to the forest or raise Lav and Kush alone. The first known single mother of our culture, she exhibited remarkable self-determination and valour to confront cruelty, pain and humiliation imparted by her husband. I do not want Sita to change, instead I advocate for a change in the attitude of Rama as well as that of men in general.

While going through these reinterpretations what I eagerly looked for was the elucidation of the fire scene and the demand for second fire test. Purification of a woman's body had to be attained by standing in the fire because fire has traditionally been referred to as a symbol of purgation. Vijaya Lakshmi in her story "Janaki" beautifully replicates the story of Rama and Sita—the episode of Sita's banishment after hearing the words of the *dhobi* (washerwoman). But Lakshmi writes a different ending to the story. After Sudhir Saab's suspicious outburst, Janaki Memsaab walks out of the house. The author relocates the fire test to the climax. The narrator of the story, a boy servant who is treated like a son, informs, "I learnt that Memsaab's car had crashed into an oil tanker and caught fire. She was still alive, still untouched by the fire, when they pulled her out of the burning car. On her way to the hospital, however, before Saab could reach her, she died" (Lal and Gokhale, eds. 217). The Memsaab remaining untouched by the fire is an affirmation of her purity. Naidu interprets Sita's trial by fire as follows, "She not only knew what the truth was, but wanted to stand in for every other person who was challenged about their innocence, whether it was within relationships or for the sake of social opinion" (18). But, I believe, proving one's chastity by remaining untouched inside the flame signifies robbing her body of the desire, passion, feelings and even protest.

But Sita protests when she is asked for the second fire test. Mallika Sengupta's "Sitayana," a more radical interpretation of Sita's story, scathingly critiques Rama's demand for the second fire test. The author first records Rama's impression of Sita after her second exile in the following words, "On beholding Sita's lusterless appearance, he felt that his honour was at stake before all the monarchs who were present. Rama's discontent rose to the surface" (Lal and Gokhale, eds. 219). The author is critical of Rama's attitude and intention—his obsession with imperial honour and obligations, absolute disregard for the duties of a husband, and his decision to remain single being motivated by compassion, not by love for Sita. At Rama's insistence to take the oath of purity, Sita bursts out,

Before whom will I take the oath . . . Before that lord who had secretly deserted his pregnant wife? That lover who lacked the courage to deliver the news of exile, but put the responsibility on Lakshmana's shoulders and himself remained concealed like a coward? That husband who did not bother to enquire if his children had a safe birth? That king who left his wife and sons to beg at the Brahmin's hermitage? He had commanded my exile without any fault of mine; but for what offence he punished his sons? If a woman asks for

justice on these grounds from a king who is famed worldwide for his wisdom, will Rama be worthy to sit on the throne of that judge? (221)

She summarises all his acts of injustice and raises the fundamental question of feminism, “Are women not subjects?” (221). Still, an indignant Rama persists in his demand for “oath of chastity, of the purity of a woman’s body.” An infuriated Sita sharply retorts and powerfully asserts, “The sin is not of the body; the knowledge of sin is a psychological one. I have no awareness of it. If Ravana had touched me when I was helpless, the fault lies not with me . . . the loss of chastity is a mere accident, a physical assault just like your and Lakshmana’s entrapment in the coil of the Nagpash in the battle of Lanka. The body of the woman does not alter after an assault, nor does her mind” (222). The quote above is a vigorous contention for the rights of the rape victims to have an honourable existence. It is no secret that most of the women who suffer violation of their bodies commit suicide in fear of social rejection.

In Divakaruni’s novel also, Sita rejects Rama’s claim of being a dutiful king as he failed to extend justice to women. She refuses a second fire test for the reason that, “society will use my action forever after to judge other women. Even when they aren’t guilty, the burden of proving their innocence will fall on them. And society will say, why not? Even Queen Sita went through it” (357). She declares, she lived for her unborn sons. Before embracing death by entering Mother Earth, she prays for her countless unborn daughters and counsels them to use their hearts as well as their heads, understand when they need to compromise and know when they must not. Here, she leaves a powerful message for contemporary woman to integrate “heart” and “head” (traditionally associated with woman and man respectively) while taking action and throws the dichotomy to the wind.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen terms Sita’s entering the Mother Earth as suicide and relates her to women who commit suicide after being subjected to abuse of their bodies (24-25). Though the episode of Sita seeking shelter inside the Mother Earth to avoid replaying the pattern of betrayal and abandonment is sometimes interpreted as the Mother Earth providing protection to her daughter, such connotation assigned to the episode seems to me ironical as the Mother Earth becomes a place for burial of the alive here. Velcheru Narayana Rao in his essay “When Does Sita Cease to be Sita” draws attention to the resistance inherent in this act:

In choosing to return to the earth, she has accomplished two things: she has proven her chastity and demonstrated her independence, as well. It is both a declaration of her integrity and a powerful indictment against a culture that suspects women. It is difficult not to interpret this as Sita’s protest against the way she was treated by her people and by her husband. (Bose, ed. 226)

No doubt, Sita’s entering the Mother Earth is an act of resistance, but from the perspective of empowerment, a question worth pondering is: Should Sita be sent inside the Mother Earth as a mark of protest? Does protest equals empowerment? I believe that now any woman would like Sita to walk out like Goddess Lakshmi or Ibsen’s Nora. Protest can initiate

empowerment, but does not lead to it always. In the context of the problematic of protest and empowerment, Ambai's novella "Forest" offers a resolution by providing a different finale to Sita's journey. The retelling juxtaposes the life stories of two women characters in two different time periods: that of Chenthiru who is a contemporary Sita; the other of the *Ramayan's* Sita, who however "rewrites" her story. While Valmiki presents Sita as returning to Mother Earth, Ambai depicts Sita embarking on a new phase of life. Looking back on many years of self-sacrifice, Sita sees how she let others control her life and realizes that it is time to cultivate artistic fulfilment of her own. In a parallel narrative, Ambai imagines how the incidents would have occurred if they took place today rather than in ancient times through the story of Chenthiru. Chenthiru, a middle-aged educated business woman with grown up children, makes an unconventional choice of leaving everything behind—her home, her husband, the city and wants to escape into the tranquillity of the forest. She is compelled to take this radical step because of her husband's neglect of her abilities. This leads her on her own voyage of self-discovery and she turns to writing, imagining Sita rewriting *the Ramayan* from her own perspective.<sup>4</sup>

### Conclusion:

I am fully aware that this essay employs a number of quotes, advances a number questions and does not fully answer those. This is deliberate and the purpose would be fulfilled if it succeeds in instigating critical insights in the readers by not to reject Sita as too meek and docile by modern standard, but to view her from a fresh perspective and identify themselves with her strengths. In re-visioning Sita, I agree with Anamika in her "Sita in My Dreams," "The questions raised by Sita will remain perennial. Each woman will answer them differently, but meaningfully, and with relevance to her time and place" (Lal and Gokhale, eds. 238). She quotes and paraphrases from Archana Verma's story "Tyohar" which writes of a young girl who is given the role of Sita to play in the local *Ramlila* which is a kind of street play mostly popular in Indian villages on the life of Rama. The girl argues with her brothers and friends that she wants to be Hanuman rather than Sita: "to sit under a tree and cry the day out! Never!" she says (238). Like Anamika, I would also dedicate this essay to that little artist of "Tyohar" and thousands of spirited girls like her with the hope that they will discover the strong Sita within them.<sup>5</sup>

*After all, Sita's story is my story, and your story too.*

### Notes:

1. Paula Richman's *Many Ramayanas* is a collection of twelve articles, including A. K. Ramanujan's "Three Hundred *Ramayanas*". The book is divided into three parts that cover the discussion on the *Ramayan* in both North and South India, with some mention of East Indian texts as well. The articles investigate a host of major issues,



including textual variants, oral traditions (principally in South India), the influence of the epic on religious and sectarian development, and its contribution to shaping Indian attitudes on women. Ramanujan's article is a comparative study of the various *Ramayana* texts. He compares details of the Ahalya episode as described by Valmiki and Kampan; shows the rational nature of the Jaina tellings; considers non-Indian versions of the epic; and discusses oral traditions. Although Ramanujan sees a "structural relation" between different texts, he believes that "on closer look one [version] is not necessarily all that like another" (44).

2. The short stories chosen for discussion—Vijaya Lakshmi's "Janaki" and Mallika Sengupta's "Sitayana"—have been included in *In Search of Sita*, edited by Lal and Gokhale. The book is a collection of short stories, essays, conversations and commentaries which revisit the story of Sita by reopening the debate on her birth, her days in exile, her abduction, the test by fire, the birth of her sons and finally her return to the earth offering fresh interpretations of this enigmatic figure and her indelible impact on our everyday lives. See, Malashri Lal, and Namita Gokhale, eds. *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology*. (Gurgaon: Penguin Books India, 2009).
3. Balaram Das' 16<sup>th</sup> Century *Jagamohan Ramayana*, also called *Dandi Ramayana*, is popular in Odisha. Several Odia poets successfully emulated classical models, the most admired of them being Sarala Das' 15<sup>th</sup> Century *Vilanka Ramayana*, 18<sup>th</sup> Century poet Upendra Bhanja's *Vaidehi Vilasa*, a long poem, every line of which begins with the consonant V, and Gangadhar Meher's long poem *Tapaswini*.
4. There have been more radical reinterpretations of Sita's story. One of the most powerful counter *Ramayans* is from the mid-nineteenth century in Bengali blank verse, the *Meghanadavadha Kavya* (1861) by Michael Madhusudan Datta, who mourns Ravana's defeat and his son Meghanada's death at the hands of Rama. In Ambai's "Forest," Sita encounters Ravana again and is learning the veena, a musical instrument, from him. In Telugu writer Chalam's hands, the test by fire is actually Sita jumping into the pyre with Ravana, who she thought loved her more.
5. That I have chosen texts by women for discussion does not mean that men are not feminists. In fact, I find Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (Book 2 of the Ram Chandra Series) one of the most feminist renderings of the story. In this novel, by assigning the task of Vishnu to both Sita and Rama, the author visions a society based on man-woman equality. Even he makes Sita more assertive and decisive than Rama. The author makes Sita express a post-feminist kind of idea in conversation with Rama's brother Bharat, "The Masculine way is ordered, efficient and fair at its

best, but fanatical and violent at its worst. The Feminine way is creative, passionate and caring at its best, but decadent and chaotic at its worst.” She goes on to add, “Freedom is good, but in moderation. Too much of it is a recipe for disaster. That’s why the path I prefer is that of Balance. Balance between the Masculine and the Feminine” (280). Bharat begs to differ and takes a feminist stand, but becomes a voice of postfeminist thought. He believes that the Feminine way is superior as it allows freedom which in turn allows regular readjustment and this magical solution is not available to the Masculine way which is based on law and compliance (281).

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