

## **PORTRAYAL OF SITA: A STUDY OF SELECTIVE RETELLINGS OF RAMAYANA**

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### **Abstract**

This paper proposes to analyse the ways in which Sita, a goddess born as a human is often portrayed as a passive, self-sacrificing figure and an exemplar and role model for women in traditional epics. However, the recent Retellings on Ramayana, such as Pragya Agarwal's *The Renunciation*, Sini Panicker's *Sita: Now you Know me*, Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* and Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* have re-examined this archetype and portrayed Sita as a challenging woman, who uses her free will not only to reflect on whether she needs to reconcile with her husband or not, but also in questioning the ways of men in the name of dharma. Agarwal's *Renunciation* and Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, have been chosen for analysis, as these works align and give more scope for empowerment of women, as the need of the hour. Sita's transformation from a passive, self-sacrificing woman to a resilient, self-willed woman reflects not only the adaptability of modern retellings, but also the changing perspective among the upcoming Indian readers.

### **Key words:**

Retellings, Mythology, Feminism, Female Agency, Subjugation, Free Will, Resilience, Renunciation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Retellings of recent times appeal to the current readers owing primarily to its familiarity and secondly owing to the freedom given to recreate the past. Women who have often played the role of a puppet in the hands of men, are slowly trying to free themselves from their clutches, so as to express on their behalf, exhibiting free will, resilience and autonomy. In the words of Thakkar:

“In this book, Sita is not just the calm and silent figure many narratives portray. Instead, she emerges as a fearless woman with a mind of her own — someone who faces every challenge with strength, dignity, and quiet determination. The story presents her as both a fierce individual and a deeply compassionate mother. We often see her through the lens of devotion and sacrifice, but here we see her thoughts, her doubts, her strength, and her quiet resilience and courage of continuing to live, to nurture, and to protect her children despite everything she has endured.” (Thakkar)

This study examines how female agency operates within selective Indian Retellings of Ramayana through a Feminist perspective. Focusing on Agarwal’s *Renunciation* and Divakaruni’s *The Forest of Enchantments*, the research explores how women from time immemorial have been subjugated and denied equality in the name of dharma. Using textual analysis and intersectional feminist theory, the paper identifies recurring motifs of autonomy and free will of Sita, in selective retellings.

## **SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN**

Sita, a goddess born as a human is often portrayed as a passive, self-sacrificing figure, an exemplary role model for women, in traditional epics and T.V. serials. Millions of viewers had watched T.V. serials and movies on Ramayana helplessly, when Sita is questioned regarding her purity and asked to take Agni pariksha not once but twice. Most of the women viewers must have felt a pang in their heart at the unfair treatment met upon a woman in a very helpless situation, while being abducted by Ravanna, in her husband’s absence and later when Rama questions her sanctity and refuses to take herein, even after he wins Ravanna over the war. Since time immemorial, Sita is portrayed as a docile woman of no free will, a woman being torn away by fate, a symbol of endurance and role model. However, recent retellings have taken a huge shift and have begun to portray Sita as a woman of free will, autonomy and resilience.

As Beauvoir mentions in her work *The Second Sex*, “Fidelity and loyalty are the greatest human virtues of the female vassal. Mild, humble, resigned as woman, she is proud and indomitable in the name of her race, lineage...” (238)

## **Methodology**

The research uses a qualitative, interpretive design. Primary texts include *Renunciation* and *The Forest of Enchantments*. Supplementary materials consist of author interviews, scholarly articles, book reviews and theoretical texts on retellings and feminism. The method of **close textual analysis** identifies recurring themes of subjugation of women. Through cross-referencing multiple sources and scholarly validation of theoretical frameworks, reliability is ensured. Ethical practices include accurate citation and acknowledgment of secondary data. The present study adopts a qualitative approach and close textual analysis of primary texts and secondary resources.

### **Analysis and discussion**

The story of the ancient epic namely Ramayana, where Sita, the earth born daughter of King Janaka is married to Ram, the Prince of Ayodhya is well known. On the day of coronation of Ram, as the King of Ayodhya, Kaikeyi's demand to King Dasaratha to grant her two boons as promised earlier, serves as a thunderbolt not only to Dasaratha, but also to the people of Ayodhya. In order to fulfill his father's promise, Ram renounces his kingship and walks to the forest to live a life of exile along with Sita and Lakshmana and the later abduction of Sita by Ravanna, King of Lanka is also well known. While most of the traditional narratives fail to depict the hardships, torments, free will, resilience that Sita exhibits, recent retellings focus on Sita as a woman of resilience and empowerment even during her adverse moments. For instance, when Rama kills Ravanna and meets Sita after her abduction, he says:

'I have rescued you, Sita', said the voice. 'I have built a bridge over the ocean and crossed over it with my allies of the monkey nations. My followers and I have suffered greatly in the process, for the rakshasa army was a powerful one. Now we have slain Ravan, and set you free. Here ends my duty to you, and my responsibility. Go where you will to live the rest of your days.' (Divakaruni 242)

Such words from the most loved husband, doubting the virtue of his wife in front of the others, would upset any woman, but Sita soon gets over her shock and reacts with her strength and resilience:

‘It’s not in your power to free me’, I said to Ram, and I, too, spoke calmly. ‘The gods bound us at our wedding, with Agnidev, the holy fire, as witness, and they know that I am pure and blameless...’ ‘Ravan stole me away forcibly’, I continued, ‘but even he didn’t insult me as you’ve done here today. He respected me enough to not violate my body. And over my mind he never had control. But you– you’ve violated my heart, which I’d given to you in love.’ (Divakaruni 243-44)

Sita, when she realizes that she had been disowned by her own love, decides to end her life with dignity by stepping into the blazing fire, which is the Agni Pariksha. However, Sita is untouched by fire and Agni, the fire-god himself appears and declares Sita’s purity by placing her hand in that of Ram’s. Thus after the Agni pariksha, Sita is taken back by Ram and soon they reach Ayodhya to claim their throne as king and queen. However, Sita’s happiness and peace is short-lived. Soon, gossip spreads among the people regarding her chastity and King Ram asks his brother Lakshmana to leave Sita, who is pregnant, in the ashram of Sage Valmiki, located in the middle of the forest.

When Lakshmana leaves Sita helplessly in the middle of the forest, she brings out the irony in her remarks:

‘You had been our companion for fourteen long years during the exile’, Sita said to Laxman, her eyes still pinned on the dipping sun. ‘Never slept a wink to watch over us. Now that protector leaves me in the forest. All at a time, when I am due with the future heir!’ A sigh escaped her lips. ‘The same protector who once insisted I remain indoors when he left in search of Ram, now ushers me outside. This time it’s not the bounds of home, but an entire kingdom.’ She let out a little laugh, ‘But what causes me greater pain is that look of pity on your face– for me.’ (Agarwal 178-79)

Thus, even during one of the most testing times of her life, Sita isn’t defeated but moves forward and with determination sets out to live the rest of her life for the sake of her two sons who would be born soon to dissuade her misery and loneliness. Soon her twin sons namely Luv

and Kush are born and they grow up in the ashram learning Vedic scriptures from the sage and the skill of archery from their mother Sita.

In fact, they soon excel in their skills, to the extent of capturing the Ashvamedha horse of King Ram and retaining it. They refuse to release the horse and this makes King Ram himself appear in the ashram in order to meet Luv and Kush. When the women in the ashram call out to Sita, who is now known as Vandevi to come and meet King Ram and apologize to him for the sake of her sons, she finds herself unable to move. It's been Eleven years since Ram banished her without even disclosing it to her. She finds herself immersed in deep turmoil and thoughts of the past. However, she quickly recollects herself and sets on to meet King Ram, who is startled to meet his wife Sita and gradually learns that the twins are indeed his own sons. Sita's indifference and referring to him as "Maharaja", makes him feel uneasy. He appeals to her again, trying to defend his act of banishing her in order to save her from an uncomfortable situation of being questioned by the people of Ayodhya on her chastity. He adds "--But it's not too late. You can still appear for the Ordeal.", only makes matters worse and Sita retorts "Wasn't my justification in Lanka enough? I was naive to think that you had believed me." When Ram tries to justify his ways as a king, she confronts, "Deny it for all you want, but the truth is — you killed my honour to save yours!".

Her act of free will and defiance is quite clear when Sita expresses her suppressed emotions of agony:

'Ravan taking me by force was bad enough, but you forcing the verdict was worse. The evil I managed to keep at bay with a single blade of grass... yes, that was my weapon in Lanka...my own strength of character...No! I refused to give in then, and I refuse to give in now. Accepting your request is much worse assault on my self-respect...And to return and find the welcome worse than abduction. Raavan was a known evil. But you were my husband... (Agarwal 285)

Ram consistently appeals to Sita and expresses his yearning for her, asking her to return to Ayodhya and wishing for a happy reunion of the family. One can find Sita's calmness, resilience and free will at it's summit when she says:

'If it was just for our sake, Ram, I could have come back to you. But now this cause has a collective bearing. My right decision today will avoid recurring harm to others.' She folded her hands. 'With all humbleness I say that the decision for renunciation will be mine this time. I must sacrifice my individual joy for collective benefits. We both must. You only said, I have supported you in your duty. Allow me to carry mine. Allow me, Ram, allow me with a happy heart.' (Agarwal 286)

## Conclusion

As Beauvoir rightly points, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (273) holds good not only to the current times but to women in mythologies and retellings too. Sita, though born as a princess and married to a Prince, later undergoes female subjugation and injustice on the pretext of Ram trying to be a rightful king unlike his father, who favoured one of his queens. As per Ram's order, When Lakshmana leaves pregnant Sita, in the middle of the forest, Sita points out to the injustice met upon her, 'He sentenced me to banishment because people were whispering that I might have betrayed him. But he's the real betrayer. Who's going to sentence him?' (Divakaruni 317). Thus, in modern retellings, Sita rises up from a victim, who has to be rescued to a woman of resilience, free will and renunciation.

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