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SITA THROUGH DIFFERENT LENSES: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY FICTION

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Abstract

The portrayal of the female character *Sita* in the great epic Ramayana have enchanted women of all classes. It is undoubtedly one of the iconic characters which have led to the questioning of the identities of women across the globe and the misinterpreted stereotypes that still prevails in the contemporary times. This paper attempts to discuss the character of Sita and the various adaptations in the recent works of the contemporary authors like *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chita Banerjee Divakaruni, Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* and *Sita: An illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* by Devdutt Patnaik. These texts put up a better understanding of the woman character by subverting the patriarchal society leading to the portrayal of the women power through the marginalized Sita in their stories giving her a voice of her own.

Keywords: identities, misinterpreted, stereotypes, marginalized, patriarchal

Introduction

Mythology has adhered to the portrayal of various characters, especially women characters who are prevalent in the current times and are being discussed time and again in forms of various works of the contemporary authors. Ramayana and Mahabharata are two of the major works of epic which have formed a new supremacy amongst the readers of the current era. Readers across the globe can relate to the stories and the characters of these two epics which have turned into a pre-eminent streak amongst the book lovers. Taking into consideration of such works of few contemporary authors through a feminist lens we can see and deal with the issues related to women and their lives, their place and status in the society. When we look

at the intersectionalities of the marginalities of women and the place assigned to them and the responsibilities they bear in the social set up, it has been questioned time and again. Feminists interrogates about the freedom, rights and justice for the female in the social order and hierarchy. In the Hindu Culture the trend of the virtuous woman or pativrata dharma resides on the married women. It is evident that the stories from these two major epics Ramayana and Mahabharata the female characters are portrayed and shaped as the marginalized women who lack any kind of strength and had meagre access to power and recognition in the tales. In few of the retellings of the Ramayana the character of Sita is deployed where she serves the total opposite of the meek and docile character

as we all have seen. Rather she is seen as the protagonist in the novel, *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni where she is represented as a rebel and trailblazer in the story. Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* is a reverting tale of the sacred feminine of the epic Ramayana. Amish Tripathi reconstructs the character of Sita in this book as someone who incarnated whenever there is a rise of Adharma and fights boldly and fearlessly with a great intellect to save her kingdom. Devdutt Pattanaik in his book *Sita: An illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* speculates on Sita through Rama's character. Why she was called Janaki, even if she had not been given birth by King Janak and how come she was called 'Sita'. In her essay, "On Gender, Wives and 'Pativratas'" Shalini Shah, a professor in the department of history at the University of Delhi who has been researching ancient history of the Hindu Culture from a gender's perspective, has described the views of R.C. Majumdar, who, in his essay, "Ideal and Position of Indian Women in Domestic Life" (1953) says how the statuses of the married women in the Indian Culture is supposed to be that of an obedient wife, loving and caring but lowered and non-idealized in the social hierarchy. She has mentioned in her essay about the Feminist Indologist Sally Sutherland's (1989) work which studies the characters of Sita and Draupadi concluding that both the characters are aggressive but in their own ways. In her essay, "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behaviour and Female Role-Models in the Sanskrit Epics" she asserts that Sita's character criticizes Rama's decision to leave her in Ayodhya and cut her off from the forest exile. She further added that it is not Sita's devotion and pure self-sacrificing act of insisting Rama to take her along with him to the forests. Madhu Kishwar in her essay "Yes to Sita, No to Ram!" from her *Manushi Journal* concludes that Rama's conduct towards Sita is perception of the character of Sita across religions and genders in which she asserts that Sita is seen as more superior and sublime than Rama. She is being identified by many as someone who proclaims emotional strength rather than subjugation. The expectation that are put on the ideal wives of the Hindu Tradition is considered unreasonable and

there have been a lot of discussion and analysis made on the same context. The character of Sita is always represented as an ideal wife and the injustice done to her is approved by most of the people who come across the incidents depicted in the epic. She is the daughter of earth who inspires and consequently have a widespread approval in the social layers. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni creates an almost different world for her readers through her novels. *The Forest of Enchantments* which narrates the untold story of Sita through her eyes. This retelling is what she calls as 'The Sitayan'. She includes the struggles, sufferings and bravery of not only the character Sita but also the lost voices of Mandodari, Sunaina, Urmila, Kaikeyi which were unheard of. Brought into light by the author through symbolizing all the characters in a creative and unique manner, *The forest of enchantments* is a retelling which is arranged in a way which sticks to the original plot as well is drawn towards the powerful narrative about the 'feminine world of Sita'. The novel is written in an autobiographical mode. Divakaruni in one of her twitter post of December 1st, 2019 has said that, "This was exactly my hope in writing *The Forest of Enchantments*-let's truly see the women of our epics for the strong, complex beings they are...". In the UNESCO Digital Library's article "The Collective Dream of a continent", Ajil de Silva says that though the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana are born in India, they are retrieved and re-awakened within the courses of history by substantially filling the human psyche. The character of Sita is described in the Valmiki's Ramayana as wise and courageous. Why should we study Sita through different lenses is a different reconstruction of the history of women characters. The central role of Sita in the *Forest of Enchantments* serves the purpose of contemporarising the voice of Sita and blending it with the modern woman. Romila Thapar's work, "Tradition versus Misconceptions" analyses Sita and describes that she behaves in a non-conformist way. She says, in a way... "I am different. I was born of the earth. I have been through all this and have proved myself. But now I go back where I belong. I don't belong to you". (Thapar, 1987, 6) Uma Chakravarti in her essay, "Development of the Sita

Myth: A case study of Women in Myth and Literature (1983) states that the stereotypical ideal woman suggests a patriarchal portrayal of the women. Whether be it the fire ordeal at the very end or the 'laxmana rekha' which either says she need to adhere to the norms or else she should end her life. She further argues, "... The text was a potent instrument for propagating the twin notions that women are the property of men and that sexual fidelity for women was life's major virtue." (Chakravarthy, 1983, 71) However, the completely quiet and compliant character of Sita which is projected in these retellings is quite the opposite. She is depicted as a confident and ardent woman who has her own raging voice. She comes out as a compassionate and caring woman who is idealised since the day she has been brought into scenario. The concept of Sita has been spoken about in a different manner with the use of illustrations in the book "Sita: An illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana" by Devdutt Pattnaik. The author has tried to bring into attention a tale of Ramayana that represents terms of endearment, love, avarice, desires, malevolence in a suggestive manner.

The author does not give any new interpretations and only retells the story from the stand point of Sita by presuming that the tales are also told with a nip of western elements. Sita's abduction is also seen in a solemn manner by Ravana. The author has added illustrations while recounting and dispersing the events and characters in his narrative. Sita has been a character who have enchanted people of all ages. She was a delightful woman, devoted to her husband and was not a woman of whats and nots. It is justified time and again that the character of Sita went through various tests and ordeals whether be it when she was abandoned by her husband Rama or when she was asked to prove her chastity or last but not the least when she went into the biggest test of her life to prove her purity. Of course women have been pointed out time and again when the society treats and blame for the things, they don't commit. Through the works of these authors which surely suggests a need for change in the way the society suspects women. At the hands of such contemporary authors, they make use of their

retellings and rewritings to build a stronger influence on the readers across the globe and current societal reforms.

The Sita in the second book of the Ram Chandra Series- Sita: Warrior of Mithila is not a victim but a strong warrior who performs all her roles as a daughter, wife and mother with utmost dedication and devotion. She speaks her mind and is not afraid to straight up ask questions to her husband Rama. In the book, in chapter 21, after the wedding or Swayamvar takes place Sita and Rama had a conversation about her childhood and Rama asked her about her adoption. To which she replied that she was too young to remember anything when she was found by her adoptive parents. She was not afraid to be blunt while concluding her statement, "Will you also judge me by my birth?" She considered herself as the daughter of the Earth and felt that birth is not important as it was just a means to enter the world of action. She said, "Karma is all that matters. Karma is divine." Written in a multi-linear narrative, unlike the Valmiki Ramayana, the exile in the book happened but in a different site of exile. Ram, Sita and Lakshmana settled around the banks of the Godavari putting camps with fences rigged with an alarm system. When Vibhishana and Shurpanakha visited their camp called Panchvati, Sita took charge of interacting with them. In a scornful voice, Shurpanakha says "So the great descendant of Raghu lets his wife make decisions for him, is it? Amish Tripathi has given a powerful voice to Sita in his novel. There have been countless rewritings and retellings of the Ramayana in which she has always lost into the myth of the devoted wife. Amish describes the journey of the warrior of Mithila who rose from being an adopted girl, the to become the prime minister and ultimately a goddess. It definitely gives a glimpse into the sacred power of the feminine through the character of Sita.

"The root of every tree that enters the earth whispers a name: Sita. Who is she? Do you know?"

- Devdutt Pattnaik, Sita: An illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana

Another contemporary author, Devdutt Pattnaik has taken up elements from the Ramayana

in different forms and figures and combined them with prominent illustrations from the epic. One can find countless untold stories, trivias and facts that keeps the readers hooked. "Many modern renditions of the Ramayana focus on Sita's banishment by Ram, but do not even refer to Ram's refusal to remarry and even his refusal to live after Sita's descent. Such incomplete narratives, often qualified as a woman's perspective, strategically reveal a very different Ram. These have won many admirers in the West, perhaps because they reinforce a particular image of India and Indians. (pg. 305) Various renditions over a period of time that describes the concept and image of 'Sita' is vast. Pattnaik brings out the story as a love story and how doomed was their relationship because they had to follow certain norms and principles.

The strongest attributes of the character Sita are described by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in 'The First of Enchantments' (2019). Widely known as nature's own child, Sita spent her exile in the forest in her painful entrapment while she drew the source of her strength by nature. The novel showcases the empowerment of her and all the women's relationship with the environment. The identity of a woman and how it is exploited by the civilization of man. The forest or the nature plays a vital source of empowerment to the feminine. Karen Warren advocated for the rights of women's eco feminist spirituality. This branch of feminism deals with the relationship between earth and women. The analysis of gender with the natural world is discussed in her 2000 work, "Eco feminist Philosophy: A western Perspective on what It is and Why It matters." Warren claims that eco feminist spirituality helps in healing the wounds of the feminine inflicted by the abusive patriarchal system. It is a tool for overcoming the systems of oppression." (Warren, 2000, p, 125). Divakaruni has kept the core identity of Sita intact in her story. She is an epitome of strength and endurance. Along with the other female characters of the epic such as Ahalya, Mandodari, Sunaina, Kaikeyi, Tara and Shurpanakha who also undergo several trials and tribulations in the story. This is perfectly described in "All the way back, I pondered the word ensure, what it meant. 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 with them as intelligently as we knew until we grew stronger than them." The silent power in the garb of the suffering and sacrifices sets an example for the woman of today. The dignified tolerance or sahan-shilta embodied in the discreet silence turned out to be her strength for which her name always goes in advance of that of Lord Rama (Sita- Ram or Siya ke Ram or Jai Siya- Ram).

Conclusion

Sita is one of the most marginalized characters of the epic who has been misunderstood and misjudged time and again. The old Sita has died and she doesn't exist anymore in order to let the woman of today live. She gives a clear message that no one should be authorized to decide how a woman must lead her life. There has always been a one-sided vision to the women in the epics which is challenged when Divakaruni positioned Sita as an equal and empowered character and not a weak and delicate woman who is an epitome of a devoted daughter, wife, daughter – in-law and mother. The story certainly educates women to think and re-think and ultimately questions the phallogocentric thoughts. The several versions of Ramayana along with the retellings and reworkings circulated in the contemporary times with its unique versions of the story of Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Shurpanakha. The epic has been rarely attempted from Sita's perspective and she is presented as the companion of Rama or from any of the female characters in the epic. The section of Uttara- Kanda is completely dedicated to Sita and her struggles. The essence of Sita's character is located in very few places where she is portrayed as a fierce and strong-willed woman rather than a weakling who faces everything that life throws at her way. There is a chronology of events that shapes her life and she detaches herself from the existing social structure. She battles with the patriarchal order and shows that she can stand outside the structure with her own identity. Sita's character is generally either viewed as apprehensive and modest or fierce and free – spirited. Somewhere she is represented as a symbol of sacrifice whereas in other texts she appears as the most potent character. As the reader relates to her, she is

elucidated suitably which is either glorified or marginalized in the various renditions of the epic. There are traces of Sita in every woman of today's times.

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