



SITA- THE PROTECTED THREAT: A READING OF TORU DUTTS'S POEM "LAKSHMAN"

MEENAKSHI T

Assistant Professor, Department of English
New Horizon College-Marathalli, Bangalore



ABSTRACT

Sita is the only woman who captures the attention of readers and audience in the Indian epic poem Ramayana. Sita has been interpreted several times for the way her life had been. She is born of the earth and gets consumed by the earth. Sita's biological parents are not known. But the mother of Sita is a God. While living the life of a human, this God incarnate figure of Goddess Lakshmi is the foster daughter of King Janaka who takes care of her and brings her up with all the love and care but then finally offers her in marriage after the swayamvara. Looking closely at this, we find that Sita even though without biological inheritance could not be outside the patriarchal realm where the daughter would be offered to a man in marriage selected by the father or whom the destiny has chosen for her. Toru Dutt captures the responses of Sita at a crucial time in her life when her husband is sensed to be in danger in the forest. This poem focuses on a small segment of exchange of dialogue between Sita and Lakshman and Toru Dutt through her diction brings out the latent fears and anxieties of Sita which in a way contradicts the goddess Sita against the humane Sita. The poem interestingly depicts the intersection of the attributes of the creator and created.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

Toru Dutt was born in India but had her education for four years in Europe. In addition to the formative influence of French literature and culture, Toru's work also reflects her deep desire to read and reconstruct the Hindu views and tradition. This becomes an interesting area of study as Toru Dutt was doubly distanced from her native land geographically and then she started interpreting the mythologies even after following Christianity. The present poem provides a vibrating context of reading the aspect of gender hierarchy as it is Sita and Lakshman and most of the times Sita bombarding Lakshman with the allegations on Lakshman and more than that Toru Dutt situating Lakshman as her subject in her poem. This paper attempts to read the dilution or the thin line of intersection between the ethereal and the humane

through a dialogue that nurtures the perspectives of gender.

The poem begins with the anxiety of Sita:

Hark! Lakshman! Hark, again that cry!
It is, -it is my husband's voice!
Oh hasten, to his succor fly,
No more hast thou, dear friend, a choice.
(Stanza 1)

This kind of words from Sita expresses her heightened anxiety as a woman who is scared that her husband and her master is in danger. Added to this, it also surfaces the insecurity that Sita has within her of her protector being in danger and the subsequent calamities that might fall on her in his absence. The identity of the woman being very frail and fragile is thus created not only in the mythology but also in the poem. In other words, Toru Dutt has

reconstructed the same Sita appearing in the mythology and focused on her speech.

The way Sita has been constructed as a delicate, fragile woman is also evident from the narrative in the *Ramayana*. The birth of Sita in the *Ramayana* places her instantly in the mystic world. "She was born of the earth and raised amongst the sages" (Patnaik, 2013). Sita as a young girl had remained and lived the life of a "protected daughter" in the palace of King Janak. King Janak being the father and the controller and the care taker of Sita decided that she should be given all the wisdom and knowledge and tutored to hone her wisdom and intelligence; it is he who decided that she has acquired the right age for marriage; it is he who decided that the husband of Sita should be powerful, potential and mighty and this can be checked with the bow (Shiva Dhanush, presented to King Janaka by Shiva's pupil, the great warrior-seer Parashuraama) as whosoever wanted to marry Sita had to lift the divine bow and string it.

On the day of the Swayamvara, there were hundreds of suitors lined up who came to lift the divine bow but only Rama (the Incarnation of Lord Vishnu) could lift and string it. The intention of the father was to give Sita to someone in marriage who could "protect" her throughout her life which becomes evident from *the Swayamvara*. But then the problem comes up when Rama gets enchanted by the tricky deer in the forest and loses his wisdom and becomes captivated with the thought that he has to know who is in the guise of the golden deer. Rama's potentiality fails to judge that the trick is an impending danger and he doesn't leave the place even after the ascetic starts crying "Sita, Lakshman". Rama's delay becomes the reason for Sita's abduction. Rama fails.

But again, the intrusion of the ethereal Sita cannot be negated. Sita's interpretation and acceptance has been ambiguous. Sita has been first interpreted as an ethereal mythological character and then as a dutiful wife who had always obliged to remain as a loyal and a caring wife. The birth of Sita was mysterious as she was found on the lap of earth by King Janak. Since there was no-one around Sita, she had been declared as the daughter of mother earth. As we have seen Sita had been brought up

with lot of love, care and groomed well with knowledge and wisdom. Except the event of her birth, Sita had been looked upon or depicted as a human born child.

However, the godly attributes of Sita is expressed when at the end she gets consumed by mother earth. The entire episode of Sita being rejected by Rama even after Sita stringently and vehemently opposed Ravana and resisted his approaches towards her is an insult to the bravery and courage that Sita had shown in the absence of Rama to Ravana.

Sita had been always kept close to earth and mother nature another important aspect to note. The goddess incarnate fails to project her potentiality as a Goddess. She stays back within the *lakshmanrekha*, further making it evident that incarnation has no significance and the earthly woman is in need of protection. This frail act of Sita at that moment nullifies the power of goddess incarnate and emphasizes only on the earthly frail nature of women or the "weaker sex" is highlighted. Sita fails.

Sita gets deeper and deeper into the circles of patriarchy. The *lakshmanrekha*, the supreme metaphor for women's restricted movement.

According to the diasporic perspective the mythological figure of Sita projects an ambivalent function of a subservient wife and a powerful symbol emanating resistance to maintain her obedience till the end. (Vogt-William, 2014). Sita instructs Lakshman in the beginning to go and protect her husband as depicted in the poem and then when Lakshman does not abide by her, she is seen as a transfigured human entity of a woman rather than an ethereal entity of supernatural attributes has been worshipped for ages by the people as a goddess.

Lakshman logically tries to assure the safety of Ram to Sita:

Oh Calm thyself, Videhan Queen,
No cause is there for any fear,
Hast thou his prowess never seen? (Stanza 4)

And a little later, Lakshman gives the examples of Ram's emphatic and strong presence:

The lion and the grisly bear

Cower when they see his royal look,
Sun-staring eagles of the air
His glance of anger cannot brook,
Pythons and cobras at his tread
To their most secret coverts glide.... (Stanza
5)

Lakshman's convincing segment is full of strong images of the ferocious animals like lion, bear, pythons and cobras. He does a comparison which is established based on Ram's potential to fight back such images of strength and fear. But all his assurance gets objected and denied with the sentiments of the wife. More contradictory to this, is the fact that the goddess herself fails to exhibit an omnipotent figure by suppressing her anxieties. This also directs to one more important fact that the treatment of women in mythology or society had been deeply rooted in this hierarchy of male/female, strong/weak and intelligence/sentiments.

And then, when Sita does not get convinced by Lakshman about the safety of her husband, she fails to send Lakshman out for Ram, her anxiety changes to doubt which gets expressed through the allegations on Lakshman:

He perishes-well, let him die!
His wife henceforth shall be mine own!
(Stanza 11)

This also throws light on the fact that Sita as well as women in the society have started to accept them as possessions by men and that underscores their fear as well as losing their husbands as exhibited by Sita. The place symbolizes loneliness, a hermitage and a void where one cannot think of possessing anything worldly and Sita imagines herself to be an object which can be possessed by Lakshman.

Lakshman obeys Sita's instruction and hence forgoes what his brother Rama had instructed. In a way, Lakshman's wisdom is subjugated by the sentiments of Sita. Sita's words castrate Lakshman's wisdom much as the way the Medusa's laugh castrated those who looked at her. (Cixous, 1972). Even though Rama is so mighty that he can never be a victim even then, Sita's ardent persuasions changed into intolerant remarks compelled Lakshman to leave her and search for Rama.

Sita, Rama, Lakshman all fail in spite of being wise and knowledgeable. Sita's protection comes under question. Ravana abducts her and she remains as a mere symbol of possession for Ravana to defame Rama.

Toru Dutt's Lakshman captures this moment of failure in all the three characters of Ramayana. Sita accuses Lakshman for his delay in going out to save Rama. Sita's mind changes and she accuses Lakshman of being disloyal to his brother" she accuses Lakshman by telling him that he wanted to marry his brother's wife. There is a parallel narrative like this in Ramayana where Bali, the ruler of the *vanara kingdom* Kishkindha ostracized his brother Sugriva from his Kingdom and forcibly took Sugriva's wife Ruma.

Sita's character in the poem 'Lakshman' may not be strictly in keeping with her portrayal in the Ramayana, but it is in accordance with human nature, and shows the working of a woman's mind. In the poem she does not appear as an idealized queen, but as a woman, who behaves as a woman in her condition ought to be. She acts impulsively and easily falls in the trap laid down for her by Ravana, the tricky and mighty king of Lanka.

In the beginning Sita is mild, gentle and unsuspecting and has full faith in Lakshman's sincerity and loyalty towards her and Rama. But later on her temper changes and she becomes wild and fierce in reaction to Lakshman's lethargy in action. Instead of feeling convinced by Lakshman's arguments, Sita becomes suspicious of his words, begins to doubt the very sincerity and truthfulness of his feeling towards her and Rama. Sita thinks that Lakshman has an evil eye on her and is an enemy in disguise. Further, she thinks that he wants Rama's death, so that he may possess his wife for himself. She begins to hurl bitter sarcastic words at him, and openly accuses him of treachery, deceit, guilt, insincerity and cowardice. Side by side with Rama's safety, she now begins to think of her own safety from the enemy in Lakshman.

On the contrary, Lakshman has nothing but sympathy and respect for her. He has high sense of duty and firm faith in Rama's superhuman prowess. He knows that his brother is unconquerable. He has a remarkable control over his mind and does not

feel any ill-will against Sita. Lakshman's character shines all the more brightly in the face of Sita's accusations against him. Lakshman's calm composure even in the deepest mental agony only shows the strength of his character. He knows that he has a mission in life- that of serving his brother. The charges Sita levels against Lakshman are humiliating and degrading. Nevertheless, Lakshman stands noble and sublime. Perhaps, this is what has made Toru Dutt to title the poem "Lakshman" than titling it "Sita" though she plays the role of a protagonist in the poem.

Govin Chunder, Toru Dutt's father attracted by Western ways of life, accepted Christianity as his religion. The whole family had to convert into Christianity. All this happened when Toru was very young, she also remained a devout Christian throughout her life. But Hindu religion, myths, and ways of life continued to attract her, and she chose stories from Hindu mythology for her poetic presentation. Though a Christian by upbringing and training, Toru did not forget the glorious traditions of her own country. She rather loved them deeply, and was capable of becoming a part of the Hindu themes of which she wrote. She wanted to interpret the spirit of the East to the Western readers and the present poem is an evidence of the same when she has constructed the image of Sita in as "protected" threat who was given wisdom, luxury and protection but these were not sufficient to make her take the right decision and even overcome her sentiment.

WORKS CITED

1. Patnaik, Devdutt. "Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana", New Delhi, India, Penguin Books. 2013.
2. Vogt-William, Christine F. Bridges, Borders and Bodies: Transgressive Transculturality in Contemporary South Asian Diasporic Women's Novels, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014.
3. Kundu, Sreemoyee Piu. Sita's Curse: the Language of Desire. Gurgaon. Hachette India. 2014.
4. Cixous, Helene, Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. "The laugh of the Medusa". Signs. Vol.1, No.4 (Summer, 1976), pp.875-893. The University of

Chicago Press. Stable URL:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>.

5. Lodhia, Sharmila. "Deconstructing Sita's Blues: Questions of Misrepresentation, Cultural Property, and Feminist Critique in Nina Paley's *Ramayana*". Feminist Studies. Vol 41, No. 2 (2015), pp. 371-408. Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15767/feminist_studies.41.2.371