

Feminist Analysis of Adaptations of the *Ramayana*

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ABSTRACT

Ramayana and *Mahabharata* have seen many adaptations down the centuries. Recent ones like Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* or Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* take up the woman question and reinterpret the story from a feminist perspective. This paper attempts to discuss the above nuances with reference to feminist critics like Wollstonecraft and Butler while also referring to other reinterpretations of the epic. I will discuss the short stories of Volga through a feminist lens and focus on the questioning of the caste system in Tripathi. Not only will I use Western texts but also refer to Indian texts like the Manusmriti to give a theoretical grounding to some of the basic understandings obtained. I will base some of my opinions on the popular reception of *Ramayana* across the country as documented by Madhu Kishwar. Other texts by Kavita Kane or Nabaneeta Dev Sen will also be taken up to get a better understanding of the woman writing about another woman. It will come up through these discussions that the love for *Ramayana* is not only based on an unequivocal worshiping of Ram, but an equal questioning of his acts and a sympathetic identification with Sita.

Keywords- *Ramayana*, Indian epic, feminist text, feminist critical theory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Amish Tripathi while talking about the various versions of the *Ramayana*, mentioned, "We need to be intrinsically comfortable with the multiple truths." A.K. Ramanujan in his essay "Three Hundred *Ramayanas*" writes there are as many *Ramayanas* as the number of rings found by Hanuman when he went to the King of Spirits to look for his Ram's ring. Devdutt Pattanaik talks about the archetypal nature of the plot and characterisation of *Ramayana* which is created to accommodate the various interpretations throughout history. From the different writers mentioned above one common point can be drawn, there is no one "original" *Ramayana*, but all are interpretations of a common plot passed down generations through storytelling, music, paintings, sculpture and so on.

In the context of this wide scope provided by the epic story we can find authors rewriting the *Ramayana* from various perspectives. One of these is the feminist point of view through which recent mythological studies have found new grounding. Women characters in both the

Ramayana and the *Mahabharata* are portrayed as pawns in the world of men having little agency or control over their own lives. Recently, authors like Amish Tripathi and Volga rediscover the potential of these characters to give them greater literary resonance. Thus, works like Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* and Pattanaik's *The Girl Who Chose* among others are born.

This paper will look into the way the women of *Ramayana* are portrayed taking into consideration Volga and Tripathi's book and using Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* which in his words brings Sita to the forefront, starting with her birth, not Ram's.¹ While Volga's book questions the treatment of five women, Urmila, Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka and Sita and through a feminist lens upturns the patriarchal society's hypocrisy, Amish's *Sita* is a warrior who defends herself, is elected the next Avatar of Vishnu and is a woman of indomitable courage and will; the book raises several questions about the political choices and also criticises the caste system, another patriarchal convention which Sita challenges. While these aspects are

discussed, Pattanaik's retelling of the *Ramayana* will serve as the basis of discussion as he not only includes his storytelling but also discusses the various versions of the text found in India and beyond.

II. VOLGA AND THE WOMAN QUESTION

A.K. Ramanujan in one of his examples from the *Ramayana* talks about the treatment of Ahalya. Ahalya was blamed for being adulterous by her husband Gautama when Indra came to their home in Gautama's disguise and made love with her. She was turned into stone and only Ram could free her by stepping on that stone. In the Valmiki *Ramayana*, this episode is portrayed in such a way so as to imply Ahalya knew that the man who had come was Indra, and yet gave into his advances unable to control her desire.

*"She knew it was Indra of the Thousand Eyes
in the guise of the sage. Yet she,
wrongheaded woman, made up her mind,
excited, curious about the king
of the gods.
And then, her Inner being satisfied,
she said to the god, "I'm satisfied, king
of the gods. Go quickly from here.
O giver of honour, lover, protect
yourself and me."*²

Volga questions whether this is the *truth* or it was interpreted so by Gautama. In her conversation with Sita, Ahalya asks her "Do you know whether I knew this (that it was Indra in disguise) or not? Does anyone know?" She then questions, "Each one to their own truth. Does anyone in this world have the power to decide between truth and untruth?" Only when Ram walks on the stone, is she liberated or her fertility revived. Sita firmly tells her that her Ram is not like that. "Rama's love will be entirely mine without the interruption of politics"³, only to later realise the universality of the doubt about women's purity.

Volga's Ahalya speaks about the treatment of women as property by the men, and the idea that aspects of purity and pollution are beyond the notions of truth and untruth. The Brahmanical patriarchy prevails above all and does what suits their needs. Sita is further surprised when Ahalya in her contended self tells "Pity, that is his loss."

Volga creates a narrative of sisterhood between all the women she focuses upon. All are tied together through the common string of injustice and patriarchal domination. This does not necessarily make them failed victims. With an acute understanding of the oppression they undergo, these women live on with a supreme knowledge and self-dependence. Sita in her initial years encounters them, asks them questions and then becomes confused as to the wide difference between what they experienced and her own life. In the later sections of the chapters Volga shows her in the forest living in Valmiki's

ashram slowly realising how similar her experience has become and striking a new friendship with them.

In the essay, "When Women Capture the Narrative Space" Gopika Santhosh talks about the Manusmriti in impacting the impression of women's power in the Vedic Ages. The Manusmriti villainises "quarrelsome" women, that is women who question without docile submission.

"A barren wife may be superseded in the eighth year, she whose children (all) die in the tenth, she who bears only daughters in the eleventh, but she who is quarrelsome without delay."⁴

This portrayal of questioning as an unfeminine trait is found in Western knowledge systems as well, one which in the 18th century is heavily criticised by Mary Wollstonecraft in her essay "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792). She asks who made man the exclusive judge of that if women share with him the gift of reason? She declares that any statement regarding women's irrationality is itself made from a position that is inconsistent. In other words, rationality should not be the domain of the men.

"If, I say, for I would not impress by declamation when Reason offers her sober light, if they be really capable of acting like rational creatures, let them not be treated like slaves; or, like the brutes who are dependent on the reason of man, when they associate with him; but cultivate their minds, give them the salutary, sublime curb of principle, and let them attain conscious dignity by feeling themselves only dependent on God."⁵

Volga's women rightfully make a mark in that domain and she gives them a certain ownership of their lives.

Surpanakha is surprisingly a self-actualized character in *The Liberation*. On one hand she expresses sorrow for her humiliation and struggles with a feeling of resentment for Lakshman. On the other hand, in the present, she is living in the forest with her partner Sudhir and has grown one of the most beautiful gardens that Sita has ever seen. Sita wonders "Are these flowers a manifestation of the tenderness of her heart?" Surpanakha realizes that nature of beauty is subjective. "I struggled a lot to grasp that there is no difference between beauty and ugliness in nature...I searched every particle in nature and in the course of that search, my own visions changed." Sita feels an immediate bond of sisterhood with her.

Levi Strauss questions in her essay, "What makes Sita's abduction unacceptable, but the cutting off of Surpanakha's nose praiseworthy?" Volga draws our attention to the system of discipline and punishment which the society engages in, in order to rule over the ones considered lesser. The mutilation of Surpanakha for desiring Ram is not one ancient incident. Volga tells us that the acid attacks which happen across the world today are a result of the same mentality. Whenever women cross the *Lakshman-rekha* which society builds for them, they are evil and hence needs to be punished into obedience or death. Levi Strauss also brings in the historical

villainization of Eve and hence the entire female sex in Christianity into context to hint at a universal commonality of myths.

Men are burdened with manhood; they cannot function beyond their expected role. Pattanaik uses the metaphor of the caged bird and the free bird to illustrate this burden.⁶ Ram is stuck within the expectations of the patriarchal society while Sita has the will to choose. Going to the forest, choosing to cross the Lakshman Rekha, choosing not to return with Hanuman from Lanka, going to Ayodhya even when Ram dissuades and finally going under the earth. Every action is her choice and Pattanaik sees the *Ramayana* as a narrative based on Sita's choices in the book *The Girl who Chose*.

The burden of manhood can be theoretically explained through Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity. In her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), she defines gender identity not as an inherent essence but a performative construct. We do not belong to a gender, rather we do a gender. Our identities get shaped by our enacting of our gender. The patriarchy in the *Ramayana* is not in a single character like Ram or Gautama, it is the entire nature of the society and the mental make-up of its people. Characters like Ram are so bound in performing that role that they internalise those conventions and become enforcers of patriarchy. Ram thus thinks of Ayodhya before he can think of Sita.

Volga also throws light on the character of Urmila who is left alone in the palace of Ayodhya without her husband or her sister. While the entire family sheds tears for Ram and Sita, Urmila's plight is overlooked. Pattanaik tells the story of the fourteen-year-old sleep into which she was sent to.

"If I sleep, who will protect my brother and his wife? No, I wish to stay awake.' He begged Nidra to go to his wife Urmila in the city of Ayodhya and tell her to sleep on his behalf. 'Let her sleep all night for herself and all day for me.'"

Volga wakes her up from this long slumber and tells the story of struggle and attainment of a supreme knowledge which happens in these fourteen years. Urmila takes the power in her hands, not to impose it on anyone else but to belong to herself and not depend on others for her life. She transforms her anger into a search for truth. She thus realizes the chemistry of power⁸ and advises Sita to liberate herself from Ram.

Upon returning to Ayodhya after the 14 years stay outside society, Sita initially cannot fully fathom the implication of this, but once she is left alone in the forest by Lakshman, she realises the true meaning of her words. Urmila says

"Each of those 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."

Kavita Kane in her novel *Sita's Sister: Tragedy of the Rejected Queen* takes this up on a large scale as she narrates the *Ramayana* through Urmila's point of view.

She explores the notion of "you shall reap what you receive, not reap what you have sown." The question of dharma is raised. If Ram and Sita were performing their dharma towards each other as husband and wife, then what about Lakshman's dharma as a husband. Does a brother's dharma exceed a husband's?

III. POPULAR RECEPTION

Linda Hess in her seminal essay "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of his Ideal Wife" brings up the question of the fire ordeals and abandonment of Sita. The "anxious discomfort with the scene" as she notes is visible in the lauders of Ram as the ideal of every virtue.

"I have often heard people suggest that the abandonment episode is inauthentic, a later addition to the text. 'Rama couldn't have done that.' some have said to me, or more poignantly, 'My Rama couldn't have done that.' An elderly Brahmin priest, interviewed in a documentary film, eloquently conveyed by his sparse words and strained expression the difficulty that these episodes cause to religious *Ramayana* enthusiasts."⁹

Sita's name is sometimes associated with the tradition of Sati or fire ordeal. Both signify a purity and devotion to the husband and are "iconized as resting with divine serenity in the blaze, smiling as the flames envelop them". Ram's reaction to this is described in different ways in the different versions of the *Ramayana*. For instance, in the Kamban *Ramayana*, Ram is depicted with a cruel speech and indifference. His words reflect a direct blame and a clear doubt about Sita's purity.

"But when the time for the fire ordeal comes, Kamban does not soften the harshness of Valmiki's version. In fact, he makes it worse. [...] He inverts the universal assessment of Sita as the embodiment of chastity and perfect womanhood, hurling this condemnation: 'Womanhood, greatness, / high birth, the power/ known as chastity, / right conduct,/ clarity and splendour/ and truth:/ all have perished by the mere birth/ of a single creature such as you.' Finally, he says plainly that she should die- 'or, if you won't do that, / then go somewhere, / anywhere,/ away.'

This has, as David Shulman observes, and as Kamban himself suggests, the taste of madness. At the end of this exercise Rama does not even say, as he does in Valmiki, that he had to go ahead with the fire ordeal for the sake of public appearances, though he always knew that Sita was pure. Rama says nothing."¹⁰

Tulsidas on the contrary, mitigate Ram's cruelty and as Hess says, explains him away with an elaborate plot device. He totally omits the cruel speech present in older texts so that there is no speck on Ram's character.

Madhu Kishwar who conducted extensive interviews of the popular reception of *Ramayana*, records that this incident along with Ram leaving Sita in the forest and asking her to do a second fire ordeal are looked at

with suspicion by the people. People consider Sita as their ideal not because they endorse female slavery but sees her as a woman who refuses to accept her husband's tyranny. Ram despite his indomitable sense of dharma towards his subject is a flawed character in their eyes for being cruel to his wife. Kishwar records women tell Ram had no right to reject and humiliate Sita or to demand the fire ordeals. They stand with Sita for having to go through all the suffering despite the purity of her body and mind. People question Ram may have been a good man but what good did he do to Sita? Ram may be an ideal son or an ideal brother but nobody wants to have a husband like Ram. These opinions reflect that there is a logic behind the resonance of the epic in the country till date. Although a significant proportion of people like to domesticate Ram as a godlike figure, there are questions being raised not only in the academic sphere but in the minds of the women who identify with Sita's plight and hence looks at the epic through her tears. These views can also be found in the folk songs of various regions.

"What is it that they are rejecting? In a cultural environment where Ram and Sita are widely and fervently believed to be real, both historical and divine figures, we can say that most of them are not claiming to reject the "real" Sita. Swimming in an ocean of texts, knowing that all textual Sitas are chhaya Sitas, rising and disappearing between the covers of a book or the opening and closing of a performance, they are rejecting the Sita of patriarchy"¹¹

This identification with Sita's plight has given rise to a number of retellings by women for instance the Chandrabati *Ramayana*. Nabaneeta Dev Sen in her essay, "Rewriting the *Ramayana*: Chandrabati and Molla" draws to the fact that Sita provides a voice to the silent suffering of women. Chandrabati fell in love with her childhood friend Jayananda but he married someone else. This broke her heart and she decided to never marry, spending her life in the worship of Lord Shiva as advised by her father. She then re-wrote the *Ramayana* from Sita's point of view. Sita who is the narrator of the tale narrates her story in the form of a *baromasi* which is a woman's song belonging to the folk genre describing the hardships of a woman for twelve months. The war is condensed from its epic proportions as she imagines Sita who did not see the war herself but constructed her own narrative of violence from what she heard. Here her feelings and her suffering get the highlight which makes it appealing to a woman similarly stuck in a patriarchal world.

"This section is most interesting because in an epic the epic battle is of central importance. But in Chandrabati *Ramayana*, twice mediated through feminine sensibility, once by Chandrabati's as the composer, and once by Sita's as the narrator, the epic battle loses all its glory and gets only a few lines to itself. Maximum colour and space are spent on the interludes of Sita and Rama in the forest..."¹²

IV. TRIPATHI'S WARRIOR IN SITA

Finally, we will turn to Amish Tripathi's Sita who considerably redeems herself from the bondages of her society and is portrayed as a warrior who fights her own battles quite literally. Inspired by the *Advut Ramayana* also attributed to Valmiki where Sita as Kali kills the elder Ravan, Amish's Sita is a warrior trained in martial arts and chosen as the next avatar of Vishnu. What is unique about his telling is that Sita gaining so much importance and power is not a matter of patriarchal confusion or awe but is naturally received by the other characters. Thus, he establishes a different outlook for the position of women which is radical considering the time and space where he locates his tale.

Tripathi points out that the 16th century *Ramcharitmanas* onwards the rigidity of adhering to the gender roles became apparent. In the Valmiki *Ramayana*, Sita is portrayed as a strong character if not a warrior. The idea of a *Lakshman-rekha* or drawing a line of delimitation is also a later innovation, it doesn't figure in Valmiki. Amish notably not only upholds the woman question but also subverts the caste system through questions about its logic and rigidity. "Both teacher and student agreed that the form in which the caste system currently existed, deserved to be completely destroyed. That it corroded the vitals of India. In the past, one's caste was determined by one's attributes, qualities and deeds. It had been flexible. But over time, familial love distorted the foundations of this concept. Parents began to ensure that their children remained in the same caste as them. Also, an arbitrary hierarchy was accorded to the castes, based on a group's financial and political influence. Some castes became 'higher', others 'lower'. Gradually, the caste system became rigid and birth-based. Even Vishwamitra had faced many obstacles when, born a Kshatriya, he had decided to become a Brahmin; and, in fact, a rishi. This rigidity created divisions within society. Raavan had exploited these divisions to eventually dominate the Sapt Sindhu."

Hence there is a questioning of the normative and a search for answers. This is important in a discussion of feminist interpretations as this social model as well is a child of patriarchy. Patriarchy functions by subordination and it unleashes various ways in order to make this complete and unchangeable. Hence Tripathi's *Sita* not only is a feminist retelling but also a socialist one doubly dethroning patriarchy.

V. CONCLUSION

From this discussion what I would like to conclude is first, mythological tales are relevant due to their infinite scope. The fact that so many authors and critics are trying to reinterpret them from various perspectives is a proof of that. This tradition of reinterpretation is not new, but centuries old. The basic plot line continues to remain the same while the

storytelling keeps on changing. The dual importance and subversion of the women in these stories are often considered as archetypes of the ideal Indian woman. That is being questioned increasingly to understand them as individual characters not in respect to a man. The search for the original essence, if at all any text can be termed so is also gaining importance due to the recognition of the differences. Valmiki *Ramayana* for instance cannot be understood through Tulsidas's *Ramayana*, just because the story is the same. The teller is the prime factor here. Finally feminist retellings are making use of the potential which these stories inherently contain to comment upon. No version disagrees with Sita's refusal for a second fire ordeal, but many tend to eliminate that episode all together and that elimination in itself is a proof of the discomfort it generates. Authors like Volga and Tripathi tap on these issues and more to narrate a tale which aims to address important questions and looking at the women for what they are. *Ramayana* then transcends from being just a text to being a "cultural idiom".¹³

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