

Revisiting and Reinterpreting Sita's character: A Comparative Study

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Abstract- The present study adopts reconstructive methodology to engage in subversion of various hierarchical patterns of power and patriarchy and to expose gender injustice in the traditional story of the Ramayana. This paper attempts to understand Sita as she lived and conducted herself in the Ramayana's remote past- on her own terms, by her own rules.

Keywords: Sita, Ramayana, Tulidasa, Valmiki, Comparative study

I. INTRODUCTION

Many ancient and traditional texts have been thoroughly read and relooked from the perspective of gender injustice. In India, the *Ramayana*, a story of Rama, mythical King of Ayodhya is one of the most reworked stories. Sita, for instance, is viewed as the model of virtue, quality, sympathy, continuance, peace, and knowledge. She is additionally observed as the epitome of women's liberation. She has made a long journey in time and is still considered as a stereotyped Indian woman to a prototypical one, evolving into an archetypal character with endless possibilities in future since her relevance is not only social or religious but also psychological (viii). In the *Ramayana*, Sita's part is battling for her character and respect. Women in this epic are not liberated and they endeavour to free themselves from every single self-assertive conviction. Sita is notable as the ideal wife, she is neither seen as a perfect partner nor as a parent, besides from when she relinquishes her young twelve-year old sons and comes back to her mother, Earth. Most writers have struggled with her and her character depiction using her as a medium to voice their concerns and show their sensitivity to the socio-political environment they wrote in and therefore, have made an attempt to retrieve what was lost in the story, for instance, Sita's voice, her response and reactions to situations and in this manner, they have made amends to the story (viii).

The *Ramayana* was never only Rama's grand venture to fight with Ravana and get Sita back from his hostage. It was also a source to see how Sita stood firm and brave both in strength and mental power in equal comparison to Rama or for that sake against Ravana. George Grierson was fascinated by the *Ramayana* story calls Ram "The ill-starred but irreproachable prince of Ayodhya and Sita his faithful but ill-used wife" (60). Romilla Thapar avers that the role of Sita is very important in the *Ramayana* as she is the chief motivator of all action at crucial points. Her life can also be seen as denoting the rise and fall of the fertility goddess (40). In fact, Sita is in the centre and the story revolves around her, and the remark coming from the historians turn out to be progressively critical. It could be inferred that women played a significant role in the society (18).

With the time shift, Sita's depiction in the writings additionally changes. The *Kamban Ramayana* written in twelfth century portrays Sita, suspicious of Rama's character as opposed to what is universally advertised in the mainstream adaptations where Rama belittles Sita by reminding her of her time spent with Ravana and what unhealthy could have happened between both of them. Like, human Sita in Valmiki's *Ramayana* become a Goddess in *Adbhut Ramayana* written in the fourteenth-fifteenth century. Sita can be viewed as both divine and human in *SriRamacharitmanas* written in the sixteenth century. Sita in Kashmiri *Ramayana Sriramavtarcharit* written in the nineteenth century is more outspoken who is capable of thinking; she is divine because she is an avatar of *Prithvi* or Earth, Goddess *Laxmi* and *Prakriti* or nature, yet human because she is unaware of her divinity as probably every other woman in the world is. Nidhi Dawesar in the article "Reinterpreting the Myth" expressed that how Sita is evolved out of man's interpretations and later reinterpreted in the retellings of the *Ramayana*. Sita's character remained in the comfort zone of their writings and depended on the socio-cultural hegemonic status. Sita is always born according to men's writings and her reinterpretations in the Indian myths and epics. Men always portrayed Sita as perfect female times and again who suit them accordingly and complement them at ease.

The *SriRamacharitmanas* is certainly not a Hindi interpretation of Valmiki's *Ramayana* though it pursues the story however varies from it in soul. Valmiki recounts the narrative of Ram as an imperial legend,

however, for Tulsidas, Ram is held to be unified with Vishnu and with Brahman-the Supreme Lord, filling the role of an ideal man to serve humankind (47). Tulsidas also shows little admiration towards Sita. After saluting Gods and Goddesses in the first four couplets, the fifth couplet in the Bal Kand⁴² in Sanskrit is a salutation to Sita that says Sita is the one who is responsible for all creation, sustenance and destruction. She relieves all suffering and brings absolute and complete welfare hence equated to the Holy Trinity- Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh performing the same functioning: *Udbhav Sthiti Sanghar Karim, Kleshaharinim Sarvshreyas Karim Seetam Natoham Ramvallabham* (29). It is clear that at the very beginning Sita is raised to a level that is higher than the character she is depicted inside the record. She is more prominent outside the epic. In the epic, she is constrained yet risen above by her stature outside the story. She is an exemplification of the omnipotent, incredible, and altruistic female figure (47).

Sita says, '*Janaksuta Jag Janani Janaki, Atishay preey karuna Nidhan Ki. Take Jug Pad Kamal Manavaun, Jasu Kripa Nirmal Mati Pawaun*' (Janaka's daughter, the world's mother, Janaki is very dear to Ram, I touch her lotus feet and with her blessings I will be blessed with good sense and discretion) (48). This reflects a marked difference in Sita's stature from her first reference. She has been limited in implication, scope, and area of existence and function; from divine she has become human, from almighty she is now Ram's consort. The reason the writer established this internal contradiction could be that prior to marriage, she had a different status and marriage probably subjugated her. Ram is referred to as *Sitanath* or the master of Sita. Tulsidas seems to suggest that a man can own a woman as an object. He then rushes to Sita *Swayamwar* in the first canto apparently a hasty gesture as the reader feels. Sita is mostly described as a princess, young and beautiful desirable for hoards of men. The reader was now curious for the beautiful princess and more information about her birth, childhood, favorite pastimes and her likes and dislikes. Sadly, none is to be found in the text. She certainly deserves better portrayal (48).

The similes, metaphors, and synonyms employed by Tulsi for Sita are *Janaksuta* and *Janaki*-daughter of Janak, *Sayani*-reasonable, *Lochanmag*-the doe-eyed, moon-like, flawless, unique, *Sumukhi-Sundari*-delightful, *Vama*-the one on the left, and *Prithvikanya* or daughter of the earth, etc. This may recommend Sita's birth, however, just secretly. No immediate mention of it exists in the text (48). Tulsi introduces Sita in a royal palace, described palace in an appropriate way, and forgot about Sita's introduction to the readers. The further reference clarifies Tulsi's narration of Sita who lived in a beautiful palace and that's Sita's introduction to the readers. "White royal residences were screened all over by bejeweled gold woven artworks of different wonderful plans; while the flawless castle where Sita lived was extremely stunning for words to depict" (211).

Tulsi's Sita is a very beautiful woman. His Sita is defined and outlined by her beauty and her gender and she functions in accordance with the space she is found in, at different stages of her life. Her education and childhood are not mentioned, she is a princess in waiting for the right man to show up as decided by Janaka, her father. She seems to be a bystander and does not have a say in it; she may be an exquisite, desirable princess...but she behaves, responds and reacts according to tradition practiced norms, is an obedient daughter, conforms to customs and deeply religious (52).

Sita's beauty repeatedly compels the audiences to think that the physical or visual appeal of women has been considered an important aspect of her personality and has emphasized probably in the reference period of the epic. Appearance and looks are the first mentionable factor when the subject is a woman (61). Here a deliberate attempt of the writer to make demon salute Sita and Ram both is obvious. Sita's lamentation 'I have been punished for my anger' is the writer's ploy to make Sita responsible for her own fate by sending Ram to capture/kill the golden deer, Laxman to ensure Ram's safety and finally to cross the line or the *Laxman-rekha* which is mentioned in the Lanka-canto later. It also suggests that anger is an emotion women can do without as according to the poet when a woman is angry she ends up harming herself. No elaboration exists about Sita's psychology here but it is safe to conclude that she though discarded her silks, jewellery, and finery; she was a princess who grew up amidst splendour, wealth and grandeur. Her regal temperament got the better of her when she asked Ram to get the golden deer. Sita blames herself for everything in the latter part of the dialogue.

The depiction of Sita is very human. She is dressed traditionally and elaborated description of her

jewellery like anklets, bracelets, and bangles follows. She is presented as an epitome of Indian heroine. The poet also mentions of Sita getting scared on getting late and she finds herself existing under the authority of her father psychologically, normatively internalizing patriarchy. Here, the poet implies that “a girl is not her own master belongs to the father till she is married ‘*Dhari Badi Dheer Ram Ur Phiri Apan Pitubas Jane*’ (53). She has a tremendous outreach, she not only connects with humans but also with celestial Goddesses that Goddess is controlled by her love and devotion and speaks to her, also blesses her to get the desired man. (*Binay Prem Bas Bhayi Bhawani*). In spite of Sita’s divinity, the poet underscores her human aspect. The poet also places her above celestial figures as the moon, Goddess Saraswati, Rati and Parwati as she is a storehouse of perfect beauty and creation who appeared out of her own greatness in the world. A mysterious birth is attributed to Sita suggesting divinity. This could be deliberate as what is less said maintains the mystery and its impact is larger in its efficacy.

Tulsi’s description has established Sita as a dedicated, committed wife suffering in separation, rebuffing and rebuking Ravana for all his advances and attempts to tempt or scare her. Her personal power is obvious by the fact that she is loved, protected, looked after and consoled by the two female demons Trijata and Sarama and others touch her feet. Tulsi puts her on a pedestal. She is beyond herself with joy at the sight of Ram’s ring and bombards Hanuman with questions that depict a suffering but virtuous wife. Out of sheer ecstasy, she falls into a trance unaware of her body in a state of gratefulness and love of her ‘Lord’ (*Prabhu Sandesu Sunat Baedehi, Magan Prem Tan Sudhi Nanhi Tehi*). This also implies women were expected to be aware of their bodies at all times. Time and again, Ram being referred to as her lord, suggests she is made almost a devotee by the poet. Hanuman’s words suggest as if all is a conspiracy on the part of either the epic writer or the divine powers to make Ram the saviour of *Dharma*. When he talks to Ram it is an attempt to convince him that his wife still loved him and should be rescued. Somewhere between the lines it appears to the reader that Ram wants to ensure if Sita is still loyal and at this point he is relieved to hear so. Whether he doubted her or not, is not clear but it is certainly a latent thought. Sita has a sixth sense and gets a promotion about Ram starting for Lanka. Tulsi is in tension again here between Sita, the divine and Sita, the human (65).

Did Tulsi not know enough about Sita as he learnt the tale from multiple sources that he mentioned in his text or did he not feel the need to write in detail about her because Sita was perceived by him as playing a secondary role to Ram and every character around him is only employed to serve Ram’s purpose? (49)

Tulsi’s narration of Sita is different from that of Ram’s. Sita does not have her own personality, she is repeatedly given a divine status, or her qualities were overshadowed by posing that it is because of her father’s good actions. The poet again shows the divinity of Sita and Ram. All the celestial figures are present at the occasion to welcome the clan of Dasrath at Sita’s command. Only Ram knows about it that it is because of Sita the celestial powers are present. Here the poet calls Sita a result of Janaka’s good actions and a personification of her father’s great Karma (*Janaka Sukrit Murati Vaedehi*). Hence, a daughter is glorified as a reward of a father’s benevolence, so good daughters were considered divine gifts or assets. Sita being a young excited princess cannot contain her excitement and looks at Ram repeatedly (*Punhi Punhi Ramahi Chitar Siya*). The writer cleverly interchanges the divine Sita with the human one. At the time of her *Bidai*, Sita’s mother instructed her that she should serve her in-laws, should gauge her husband’s mood, and accordingly as this was her *Stree Dharma*. Therefore, living in accordance with the husband seems to be the prime objective of a married woman in the contemporary society (54).

In Tulsi’s text, Sita is presented majorly in her roles of a daughter, a wife, and a daughter-in-law, or a sister in law and so on. Sita, the person is just caught in glimpses where she slips out of the poet’s pen at very few places. It is the poet speaking through Ram and his ideas seem biased that a woman is illusion personified and is the cause of great distress. Woman bashing is a characteristic trait of Tulsi and it is ironic that while Ram is hunting for Sita, lamenting as a human husband about a near perfect, loving and beautiful wife with admirable qualities, how much she is missed and what difference it has made in his life, that was used to overpower the weaker sex. Tulsi decides to warn his readers not to get taken in, be alert of women if possible and distance themselves as they bring misery. Here Tulsi sounds self-contradictory. The reader wonders why he remembers in spurts that he has to criticize women (63).

Tulsi's depiction of Sita largely is as the wife of his Lord. She is an exquisitely divine princess, moving with feminine grace in *SriRamcharitmanas* from one role to another – daughter to daughter – in-law, to a naive and gullible victim of a palace conspiracy, to a wife in wilderness ... to a woman spoken harshly to, questioned and doubted and then accepted and placed on the left side of the throne as tradition prescribes. Later she lives in accordance with her husband's moods and bears two sons in a story which seems to have come full circle. She apparently seems secondary. Her characterization is minimum possible, only as much as required for Ram's story. There is an abrupt end to her story when Ram is appointed as king of Ayodhya, giving a very brief piece of information about Sita and her children which makes the reader uneasy (68).

In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Sita emerges out of the pyre and Ram informs all. He knew the truth of her purity but it becomes essential for Ram to prove it publically to save *Dharma*. Tulsi's Ram does a *Lila* and no one realizes, not even Laxman that the real Sita is being returned by the God of Fire who was hidden all along, while her *chhaya* was abducted. Sita is described here as pure in thought work and action (66). Tulsi by condensing this episode has turned into a joyful one, altering it altogether as the real Sita comes forth from within the fire hidden within all the time and as ocean gave up Laxmi, the Fire of God gave up Sita. So the real Sita was never abducted and was absolutely safe as it was Sita's mirror image *Chhaya* or replica that was taken by force by Ravana. Here again she is stereotyped as Laxmi's incarnation. The handling of the fire episode is titled in Ram's favour denying Sita the significance of her agency in the whole story that actually moves because of her (67).

It confirms to the reader that if Sita were not beside Ram he would not have looked half as great, glorious, strong, righteous, almighty, successful and complete. It is she, who is the source of all things bright and beautiful and from whom all things great and glorious emanate. She is the source of all Rasas, glory, greatness and heroic element Ram is associated with. (67)

This particular episode is missing in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. It does exist in *Adhyatma Ramayana* and it could be a device to establish the fact that the heroine or the queen is beyond any doubt, free from any blemish for what was abducted was her replica. Hence she (the real Sita) needed to be brought out and reinstated next to Ram. Ram always knew about her purity and since he could do no injustice, the "Uttarkand" was muted (67).

Tulsi with his best writing skills lessened the value of divine Sita he initially began with, to an object to be used by Rama and his family, not being motivated behind her life other than that. He skims subtleties of her married life and bounces over to the way that she gave birth and brought up two children. All appear to assemble an image, which is ideal for the writer's motivation to reinterpret and rewrite the character again as a central figure.

The conventional writings such as Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Tulisdasa's *SriRamacharitmanas* are two major *Ramayanas* widely read and used in assessment of the *Ramayana*. Aartee Kaul Dhar, a *Ramayana* Scholar wrote in the Preface (vii) to her book *Sita in the Ramayana Traditions* that:

No text is written in isolation, but in a given socio-cultural and historical environment which a writer consciously and subconsciously imbibes. ...The story may be the same with its minor differences but the plot, tone and characters seldom are. Their behavior is guided by the moralities and belief system of their times. They function within a particular set of values. So does Sita. She exists in a large variety of depictions and portrayal as a character...Time and again she inspired authors to explore her, re-think and re-position her and hence most poets, writers and dramatists re-wrote her from time to time. The uneasiness with certain issues in the *Ramayana*, Sita's potential as a character to be looked into and experimented with and a different approach- that Sita and through her *Ramayana* can be re-thought are some factors responsible for this phenomenon.

The systematic analysis of contemporary writings dealing with revisionist politics divulges the fact that explicitly or implicitly refers to argument related to metaphysics of existence and ontology of consciousness and ideology. For instance, the philosophical underpinnings of feminist discourse highlight the complex process of revisionism, which finally rescues the individual characters from the complex web of social constructivism. The contemporary writers do not put on a show to have any genuine objectivity. They composed affectionately of their zones and lives, and in all their work there was a certain want to deliver the liberated female characters whose qualities are ignored in the past. None of these writers regardless of how covetous they may have been feminist compositions – was opponent towards the resorted characters, unquestionably, none wished to remember the times of Reconstruction. Never again, did feminist writers feel obliged to shield all organizations; the common war of writing, and additionally of history, was considered past, and prominent writers did not form polemical fiction. They are authentic as they do justice to, and they authenticate in the other way round by reflecting the *modus operandi* of human live experiences by means of suitability (19). Authenticity lays claim to a direct and immediate link to a realm beyond symbolic representation, while meta- reference can disrupt the clear-cut ascriptions and hierarchies of reference within a work of art' (8).

Authenticity always entails a degree of attribution. Contrary to traditional forms of subject and object authenticity, however, the arbitrator, which in the case of literature means the reader, is not invested with absolute powers of ascription (65). If, however, the point of reference for attributions of authenticity is located in the aesthetic object itself, this means that the reception or attribution is construed as structurally inherent to the aesthetic act of communication in question. The reader becomes a quintessential constituent of the authenticity of the work in question and not merely its detached adjudicator (65).

Sita makes a plunge and takes the most daring decision of leaving her husband. She sets an example for other women. The message is clear. A woman has her own individuality, her own identity. She is not an inferior being. She possesses every capability to stand on her feet and can achieve whatever goal she has set her eyes to. Stories and myths are to cripple her, to keep her in a dependent position. But once a woman recognizes the coveted patriarchal phenomenon, she is ready to stand up against it. Unleashing her real potential, she can soar "higher still and higher" and nothing can stop or cut short her flight of living her dreams (9). Sita, in the *Ramayana*, explores her character as a model of woman's consciousness and to end the age-old martyrdom of women in the name of religious doctrines and customs.

Sita's character, for example, expounds the historical realities of formation of the subject in which she is conditioned by all social apparatuses and finally is interpellated by experiencing the hegemonic order of the oppressive power structure. The socio-historical realities of Sita's subject formation and oppression are represented in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. The successive revisions of Sita's story in contemporary writings allow Sita to get disillusioned in the centre process of her newly discovered experiences. At the complex process of subversive formation and certain ways of libation in which primary focus is laid upon socio-historical realities, cultural materialistic conditions, and linguistic determinism. Further, at the very outset, a close reading of Sita's subject formation is located through socio-historical realities and cultural conditions as represented in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Sita's significance was more articulated, for she depicted more prominent energy of continuance than some other character, with the exception of conceivably Rama. Hers was not the perseverance of the stone, with no outside articulation for the internal workings. Hers was an uncommon limit, in the midst of the moaning and protestations to utilize her segregation to confront her difficulties in a noble way. Therefore, Sita was the 'Hero' in the epic who had each nature of it.

Notes

⁴² Bal Kand is the first book of *Ramayana*, which discusses Rama's birth, childhood, and adolescence period.

⁴⁶ Sitanath means the master of Sita

⁴⁷ King Janaka organized a *swayamvara* where other kings and princes' would visit the Janaka's court to beseech Sita's hand in marriage, but only the competent would be preferred.

⁵⁶ *Bidai* is farewell to the bride at the time of marriage in Hindu tradition

57 Drawing on Sita's following Rama to the forest could be construed a strict adherence to the stree-dharma, would not be practical to implement in the current times. <https://amaruvi.in/2018/02/10/countering-fundamentalism-hindu-perspective-prof-lipners-talk-my-take/>

61 In Hinduism, *dharma* signifies behaviors that are considered to be in accord with *Rta*, the order that makes life and universe possible, and includes duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues and "right way of living".

62 Lila or Leela, (Sanskrit: "play," "sport," "spontaneity," or "drama") in Hinduism, a term that has several different meanings, most focusing in one way or another on the effortless or playful relation between the Absolute, or *brahman*, and the contingent world. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/lila>

63 In some adaptations of the Hindu epic Ramayana, Maya Sita (Sanskrit: माया सीता, "illusional Sita") or Chaya Sita (छाया सीता, "shadow Sita") is the illusionary duplicate of the goddess Sita (the heroine of the texts), who is abducted by the demon-king Ravana of Lanka instead of the real Sita.

https://wikivisually.com/wiki/Maya_Sita

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