



Cover Page



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A FEMINIST REIMAGINING THROUGH REVISION AND REMYTHOLOGISATON IN THE STORY OF SITA: A STUDY OF ADITYA IYENGAR'S BHUMIKA

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on marginalization as well as the suppressed voice of women in form of Sita from Indian epic Ramayana. The mythological representation of the life and society reflects the male dominance and female subordination which is not recent or new, but it has its roots in the very ancient times too. This paper will highlight how Sita, the loyal wife of Rama, has been victimized under the societal convention and has been almost compelled to spend her last days of life alone in a remote ashram of Guru Valmiki. Her feelings haunt her days and nights. She thinks of what if she had not married Rama, what if she had not accompanied by him into exile, what if she had not got kidnapped by Ravana, what if she had not returned with him to Ayodhya, only to be put under agnipariksha and later to be forsaken to keep up his honor intact. This awakening of perspectives in the life of Sita has been projected in a novel mode by the novelist Aditya Iyengar who remoulds the story through revision of Sita as offered by sage Vishwamitra where he shows her who she might have been had she not met Rama and married him. She might be Bhumika, a queen of Mithila, who defies the convention and traditional male-oriented stereotypes, diverts popular image about male-female dichotomy. Ultimately, the mythic character Sita earns her redesigned feminist incarnation in the portrayal of Bhumika.

Keywords: Bhumika, Convention, Feminist, Revision, Sita.

Introduction

At present, Valmiki Ramayana consists of seven books (Kandas) with 24,000 verses. Valmiki is regarded as the first ancient poet to systematically synthesize different stories available about Rama legend in the society. Undoubtedly, there is a long gap between Ur (original) Ramayana and the popular Valmiki Ramayana. The origin of Ur Ramayana might go back to a period between 1500 and 1000 B.C. and Valmiki Ramayanawritten into heroic poetic form which has handed down from one generation to another, inflating from time to time and incorporating some characteristics of the-then society. Unlike regional Ramayana, the Sanskrit Ramayanas also differ in variations among themselves regarding Ramkathas. And with the passage of time, the Rama's story achieves various modifications and alternations motivated by contemporary societal requirements and phenomenon. Commonly, the fluctuation in narration occurs owing to differences in oral traditions among reciters of the epic. In respect of diversity of Ramayana in Indian society and history, the critic A. Ganagatharam agrees with the opinion of Romila Thapar and in his article entitled EPIC, EPISTEME AND ETHNICITY: RE-READING OF THE RAMAYANA IN MODERN TAMIL CONTEXT (2002), he says:

'The Epic, commands great respect in society for its cultural heritage and sanctity.

The Ramayana, the great epic of India has been retold in various forms and in different social locations. Stressing its plurality Romila Thapar writes, "the belong to any one moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places."Each rendering of the Ramayana has its own crystallization.'(Ganagatharam, 877)

Obviously, the Ramayana has been retold, written, rewritten, discussed, translated, redesigned anew in different versions thus to satisfy socio-cultural and political stances of its passing ages. The process continues since second century AD when it is supposed to be completed. Authors, critics, translators and theorists spontaneously involve in recreating and reviewing the Ramayana from their perspectives. Their careful and critical examination probes very deep into the characters to glean multiple societal issues which prove relevant to our present scenario. The important events help keep the critical methods go on. The present paper deals with feminist reimagining as newly projected by Aditya Iyengar in his recently published novel called Bhumika: The Story of Sita (2019) where gender discrimination plays a vital role. King Rama is presented as the embodiment of male-dominated society and Sita as its victimization.

At the end of Yudhakanda, Rama exhibits his unjust and rude attitudes towards Sita. On killing Ravana, the battle is over. When Sita intends to meet him personally, sending her reply through Hanuman, Rama asks her to take a holy bath, dress properly and wear her jewelry. Then and then only, she can turn up before him. Accordingly, Sita as desired by Rama appears before him and with



Cover Page



intense respect hails him as her lord. She speaks no more owing to overloaded anxiety and happiness. But Rama looks at her doubtfully and says that he cannot accept her until she proves her chastity and purity. To prove it, she undergoes fire test by walking into it and emerges out of it, proving her chastity. Even the fire god appears at the spot and convinces Sita's purity and pleads him to accept her without any doubts and conflicts. But Rama says that "My Lord! Agni! This Sita is pure enough to purify three worlds. She is as chaste as snow. Even as a good man can never abandon his fame, so, Sita cannot be abandoned by me. If there is one thing, I am afraid of, it is the censure of the world of men" (Subramanyam, 548-9). Quite surprisingly, Sita's undergoing the fire test does not matter to him. The utter physical and mental pains bear no significance to him. Rather he is worried about what the people will say if he accepted her. Here, Rama stands for traditional embodiment of communal cultural creeds whose prime concern hinges on firm-rooted worldly outlooks and vogues. Pathetically, he never takes into consideration the sufferings and pains at heart she has to bear owing to his drastic decision. To keep safe his dignity becomes more important than Sita's forthcoming trial. Even turning a deaf ear to the god of fire reveals his adamant mentality in disguised manner which is purely guided and operated by patriarchal society where a woman is never given her due price.

In Uttarakhand, again Rama shows his cruel behaviour to Sita. After having returned victorious to the kingdom with Sita, a gossip soon grows spreading regarding Sita's abduction and her remaining for a long time under the custody of evil Ravana. Besides, his acceptance of Sita creates different toothsome narratives among the citizens. The criticism does not sound well to Rama. So, putting much importance on gossip and almost losing self-discretion, he banishes her. His male-dominated ego prevents him from considering how Sita is sinless and beyond all kinds of rumors, gossips, and false judgments.

Iyengar's novel *Bhumika* starts from here, i.e., Sita's banishment to the ashrama of Guru Valmiki. Novelist brilliantly sheds light on Sita's thinking which are put in feminist framework. Her suffering and point of views echo the position of women in the male-dominated society in general. Totally cutting off from royal comfort and security, she has to live on her own physical labour like a common inhabitant of the ashrama. Her situation speaks of insecurity and abandoned state of women in general in community. Having discarded by husband, she feels herself as fragile as the huts of the ashrama. About her relationship with Rama, she raises the following self-imposed interrogation:

"Had we truly loved each other? Or were we merely wedded to the idea of Having a partner to provide companionship, and physical and emotional support for life? Now, the scent of the earth and thoughts of my impending death took me down a dark spiral of questions. Had I wasted my life loving Rama, following his path and living up to his lofty-- often impossible--ideals of purity and goodness? Had he ever loved me? Would I have been happier? if I had never been with him?" (Iyengar, 20)

What she raises as questions is not altogether baseless. Despite knowing Sita's purity, he compels her to undergo a trial of fire. Later on, fear of losing favors of his people, he proves his timidity and ostracizes his queen. His actions reveal his self-centeredness and self-love. He never thinks of what effects the unexpected decision for banishment will bring on her wife. How helpless a woman can be in such male-dominating environment has been highlighted in the confession of Sita who says:

"The truth was, I did not have an option. Where could I go? The forest was the only home left to me. I needed to convince myself that I could provide a descent life for my children there." (Iyengar, 24)

To restore social dignity and worth, woman is not given reasonable scope and opportunities. The confession opens up a great vista. In a male-centric society, a woman is forcefully put under submission, subjugation, torture, humiliation, hatred, underestimation and punishment with uncertain and unjust future. Still, she has no alternative but to bear the heavy sufferings of child bearing and rearing for the sake of human population. She has to manage the homely affairs without being paid for these. No option is left for her to speak of her body and mind. If she raises her voice of protest or revolt against the traditional norms of the contemporary world, conspiracy arises and her voice is being choked by domineering male power. The so-called creeds go against her. By machinations and power-ridden audacity, woman is put under victimization and contemporary community approves it. To change this pathetic situation of woman, no one but only woman has to come forward in support of all other women forgetting personal egoism and individual fantasy.

Though it is too late, Sita's self-respect and self-worth arise out of her deep thinking meted out of treatment she has experienced. In presence of sage Vishwamitra who arrives at Valmiki's ashrama, she makes her confession that "I had taken the agnipariksha to prove my loyalty to him. I believed back then that his faith in me was as solid as a rock, and the agnipariksha, though



Cover Page



demeaning, was just a public show of my ‘purity’ after my time in Lanka, where I had been held captive by Ravana. That was the greatest mistake I ever made.” (Iyengar, 33). Her feminist realization becomes visible here. She has been treated by Rama as a scapegoat to the purificatory rites of the societal blind systems. The tribal customs and her husband become almost synonymous. As customarily a woman belongs to her husband so to the tribe, she has to sacrifice all her feelings, desires, needs whether she may like it or not.

Critically Sita feels that in order to set up the highest instance of an ideal life to his Rama Rajya before his subjects, he immolates his love for her. A sense of bitterness and betrayal by her husband haunt her days and nights. She further feels that she has been used as a plaything in the hands of her husband. Her real value has been denied and instead has been crushed under his idealistic palms. She confesses before the great sage Vishwamitra that “I had given him all the love I had possessed in every fibre of my being. I had followed him, been the pillar against which he learnt when he had no hope, the rock on which he stepped when he needed to see further into the world, the soft, inviting mud in which he collapsed and cooled off when he despaired. And he let me go without a second thought because it suited some greater ideals that he believed in. I was reduced to sand in his fist. To be held close when it suited him and then, the moment it was convenient, to let the wind carry it away from his open palm.” (Iyengar, 35-6). The heart-rending confession reveals the extreme cruelty of Rama upon Sita. She has been used by her husband and has been almost treated as a commodity. Like a puppet, she has been neglected after use. Her acknowledging the harsh treatment by her lord shows her feminist understanding how a woman in a society is dealt with. A woman is not credited with due respect and merit. From homely to historical affairs, she is just regarded as a shadow besides man whose value has been minimized to near zero. Undoubtedly, here Sita’s remorseful saying speaks of today’s world scenarios where women are marginalized in respect of every human interaction. A mutual bonding and sympathetic understanding based on equalization is yet to be achieved.

Deeply moved by Sita’s irrefutable realization, to have her visualized her mental reality, the great sage Vishwamitra who feels remorse too as he had taken Rama to that great swayamvara held in Mithila for the hands of her, offers her a vision meant for what her “life would have been if”, she “had not married Rama” (Iyengar, 44). In that projected scheme, Sita’s alter-ego Bhumika from the very beginning of her life experiences gender stereotypes and raises her voice against the convention “why the boys were being taught how to go out into the world, while the girls were being taught how to make the home their entire world.” (Iyengar, 56). One day in a playing mood, she easily picks up Pinaka, quite contrary to the myth. Knowing this, her father asks her to “Speak no word of this to anyone” (Iyengar, 66) as it can hurt the ego of other men. Her father’s warning not to disclose her ability of lifting the Pinaka reverberates the male-dominated scheming against women in fear of having broken the house of cards. Her father, being an effigy of patriarchal society, tries to nip her spirit at the buds in vain. From her early childhood, she shows her exceptional temperament and retains her inner impetus in everything she comes into contact. She refutes on common disparity which is indifferently abided by almost all in a community. Her anomalous thinking stirs everyone near to her. Gradually, she becomes grown up enough to take her own decision about life. Firstly, she denies to marry anyone as “If no man was willing to be my equal, I would not try so hard to be their equal, I had decided.” (Iyengar, 94)

Regarding the passing judgment on agnipariksha where still the obstinate washerman claims to test the purity of his wife, Bhumika says that “Perhaps the washerman should provide us a test of his purity. If he is indeed pure, then he has every right to test the purity of his wife.” (Iyengar, 104). Listening to such unconventional judgment, he recedes back and his wife shuns him and takes a job in army under Bhumika’s consent who believes that “If a goddess can take up arms to destroy evil, then a woman must too.” (Iyengar, 122). Right from the beginning of her enthroning as a princess of Mithila, she tries to uplift the societal position of women as reflected in her new verdict that “A woman had equal right to her husband’s property and the daughter had as much right to her father’s lands as the son.” (Iyengar, 125). Over the years, generation after generation, the so-called social tradition has been so firmly rooted in the mental practices of men and women equally that inequality along with marginalization becomes a common customary system about which almost no one raises questions. Consequently, a divisive notion prevails in a society and gender discrimination carries on. Here, Bhumika essays to her utmost energy to ameliorate the societal whereabouts of women in general. In the process, she takes her position in such a way that the ego of both the genders remains unwounded. Her action is equally welcomed by both men and women in her kingdom.

Clearly, she is not a male-hater or against the men in society. Also, she has no intention to wage a war against gender division. She says that “I was not here to make war between the genders but to create a system that would benefit both equally...” (Iyengar, 126). She clearly unfurls that her gender system prefers man and woman alike, no more no less. Her voice distinctly pronounces that “I would not create another version of a system favouring one gender over another. No woman would be at the mercy of a man in Mithila. They would have access to the same jobs, rights, privileges and resources.” (Iyengar, 126-7). Undoubtedly, owing



Cover Page



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to her age-changing rules, Mithila becomes “Free of their previous social shackles’, and the men and women in her kingdom “respected each other more.” (Iyengar, 131)

Conclusion

Ultimately, Sita, being “immediately transported from Bhumika’s reality to” (Iyengar, 175) her own self, in a conversation with Bhumika, learns that “All women ever want is to make their own choices. I was simply enabling them to find it by removing the harness of patriarchy and the rules that worked against them.” (Iyengar, 178). Thus, being teeming with unconventional realization, she achieves a novel stance which helps her in revising the societal norms and encourages her to elevate herself from community-bound obligations and convivial limitations. To have newly revitalized her inner self and worth, she takes her own decision how to lead a happy life without being a subject of male-oriented domination and molestation. Retelling the story of Sita “shows the supreme embodiment of femininity as much womanhood” (Hazarika, 295). Thus, feminist reimagining of the story of Sita and remythologisation speak of the gender discrimination, gender bias and remedial ways. Sita represents the suppressed female voice from the position of myth and fiction, and “from Indian feminist discourse today as well.” (Richman, 17). Here, Bhumika stands for updated female version whose voice is charged with recontextualizing the phenomenon and views applicable in modern setting. The repressed and marginalized tone of the woman like mythic character Sita gets revitalized in the portrayal of Bhumika, the redesigned feminist incarnation.

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