

Reconfiguring the 'Self': The Trajectory of a Woman's Trauma and Triumph in Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*

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Abstract

The Indian nationalist models of reform and 'development' from the last two decades have made women writers rethink about the status of women in India. Alongside, it discards the idea of woman. In this way, considerably, gynocritical writing has displayed the "inner" world of woman. There is a space for awful memories, introspection, retrospection, flashback, and foreshadow that are colored by pain, wound and trauma. This study offers a rising hunger to interrogate, re-investigate, recast and revisit the old myths and reinvent new myths in order to construct the idea of 'self'. It further explores how women saw their roles as contributing (or not) to her identity and meaning, the complex ways to articulate their subjectivity, and challenge the societal roles, negotiate the traditions and formulate a literary and feminist aesthetic. The article subverts the traditional binary (of good woman or bad woman) by relocating social reality of mythical archetype Sita, who after getting abandoned by *Purushottam* Rama, embarks on an arduous journey of self-realizations interestingly, and is helped by the stigmatized characters who occupy center-stage. This is how women gain new maturity and create a room of one's own. Therefore, bringing *this* study into a modern-day milieu, Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* serves as an important tool in conveying ideologies of political configurations of gender.

Keywords: Archetype; Mythical; Subjectivity; Subversion; Trauma.

Introduction

Over the centuries, literature is considered a male's property where masculine discourses have been the dominant and the stronger ones. Hence,

women suffered neglect due to male chauvinism and had found no space in literature. Similarly, the work of Indian women writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions. But as the time went on, women writers were able to inculcate the emotions of female in their writings in India. Emerging literature including mythological works such as Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*, Kavita Kane's *Maneka's Choice*, Samhita Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* and many scholars have separated themselves from the traditional literary structures by recasting the mythological characters as real women in literature with their idea of existence and liberating ease. This paper is an attempt to explore the women's strenuous journey with particular reference to *The Liberation of Sita* written by an activist cum writer P. Lalita Kumari, a Telugu feminist, better known by her pen name Volga. She won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 2015 for her slim collection of five stories *Vimukta*, originally written in Telugu which is further translated as *The Liberation of Sita*. by T. Vijaykumar and C. Vijayshree.

Conceptualization of the Research Article

Volga emerges as an eminent writer with this compilation of short stories which narrates *Ramayana* in a different light and its female characters with great wisdom. The article also examines how gender manifests itself within the framework of trauma which remains an extremely queried term and become the prominent theory in literature. This term (trauma) has gained significant attention in Cathy Caruth's work *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma Narrative and History* (1996). It has sought to emphasize the extent of profound sufferings of an individual and many functions of literature. An exceptional emphasis of trauma studies has re-imagined many modern reciting of women too in a way where unspeakable void can be located. It enables us to understand women's trauma and suggests that our understanding of trouble has traditionally been coloured by masculine discourses. Similarly, we witnessed an increasing fascination with trauma and memory in the concerned text. Therefore, this study concerned with speaking cause of the wound in female character's mind. With this, voices of all women characters (in the concerned text *The Liberation of Sita*) who were abandoned by their husbands and dwelled in the forests are also situated. At first, they all felt only disdain and anger for each other but later they had realized that the pain, oppression, anguish in their lives was similar, and felt a companionship with one another.

Sita (consort of Lord Rama) is one of the main characters of *Ramayana*,

known for her dedication, self-sacrifice, courage and purity. In her article of the *Contemporary Influence of Sita*, Anju P. Bhargava calls her the “*pativrata*”, the ideal woman, “for many immigrant women.” Sita’s exile in the deep forest took her to the Ashram of Valmiki, who took her to his shelter where she encounters with four marginalized and most overlooked women characters of the epic: Surpanakha, Renuka, Urmila and Ahalya. These four women who are representative of the suffering of their own kind, are in search of the self-identity. They appear in Sita’s lives at different times and help her assert her individuality. Their conversation with Sita helps her, shapes her, liberates her in difficult situation. The text undertaken study also questions the strong patriarchal system and resonates some women who were strengthened under the given circumstances. Therefore, to study and understand the patriarchal practices is important. It is necessary to have specific studies, in order to build an adequate theoretical basis.

“Valmiki has gone to the extent of saying there would have been no Ramayana without Kaykeyi and Surpnakha”, says Motisagar who is the son of Ramanand Sagar, directed the teleseries in the 1980s. The very opening of the text reflects upon significant aspects of motherhood. In Volga’s narrative, Sita raises her sons by herself in Valmiki’s ashram. Upon their return to Ayodhya, Sita was abandoned by her husband (Rama) when the natives of Ajodhya questioned Sita’s purity. As a dutiful wife, she obeyed him but always tries to get new forms of values. It is the new episode in her life which begins from trauma to self-actualization. Her actions and worries as an ideal mother are not overlooked when she says, “they would normally return by this time every day, bringing some wild flowers with them...What was the reason for the delay?” (2). She heaved a sigh of relief with her children who normally return bringing some wild flowers for their mother.

It was Shrupnakha whom Sita had confronted in the first part of the concerned work entitled “The Reunion” that mainly unfolds her harrowing conditions while living in the forest. This part clearly uncovers the politics of Hindu folklores, traditions, mythologies where women are merely reduced into a frame that has left women with nothing. In Hindu folklore and mythology, two types of women appear, such as Sita who is generally considered pure, light, good, auspicious, and subordinate woman, whereas Surapnakha is dark, inauspicious evil, and defiant. Sita is the chaste good woman; Surapnakha is the ‘loose’ bad woman. Here lies peculiarity in Volga’s portrayal of its women characters, more specifically Surpnakha.

she is not embodied as a demonic princess, but reimagined as a beautiful princess who is not rival to Sita. Otherwise, who have imagined Surpanakha as a friend of Sita. Why Sita and Surpanakha could not be friends? How she had become inauspicious and unchaste for expressing her love for princes of Ayodhya? At this point Volga has provided us with a character of Surpanakha who as a guiding force strikes Sita's consciousness and helps her in achieving liberation. Therefore, Surpanakha articulates:

[D]on't look at how I am today and imagine the all this happened easily, Sita I have become tough by facing upto the challenges the life threw at me. I have been able to find happiness in trying to find the very meaning of beauty. (20)

This makes Sita realize that why the women alone have to face the brunt of unjust society even without any reasons. The reason for which Surpanakha has to face mutilation, can be found common on the part of males of a society too. Hence the perspective of looking onto these mythological validations in relations to women's life in general, could be either inverted or altered. The study is based primarily on the idea that gods were human beings who do follies by making choices of life-style and opinion. They adhere to orthodox beliefs as reflected in an another part of the text entitled "The Music of the Earth." This part explains the retellings of Ahalya and her meeting with Sita in the forest. She enlightens her with the popular notions of female chastity. She narrates her accounts of sufferings as victims of patriarchy. She articulates:

Indra lusted after me. Like everyone else, he too looked at women as if they are meant for men's enjoyment. Knowing that I wouldn't surrender to his desire, he came in the hour of darkness in the guise of my husband. Did I see through his disguise? That is the question that bothers many people in this world. But to my husband, the question was irrelevant. It was the same to him either way . . . there is no scope in them for truth and untruth. (26)

Ahalya genuinely exposes her understanding of *Pativratyam* dharma before Sita and says, "All men are the same, Sita. Especially in the matter of their wives" (27). The discussion between the two reflects the psyche of Sita who, being a devoted wife, initially neglects her by saying that "My husband is not such a person. He will enquire into truth and untruth" (27). Her adoration for Rama can be witnessed when she heard about the slaying of Ravana by her husband. This summary filled her heart with joy. She feels excitement in her and become impatient to meet him. So she thinks: "How would she react on seeing Rama? His affection, love, touch . . . she was going to have it all again" (30). But soon her rejoice turned into futility

and barrenness when she is asked to prove her chastity by going through fire says. Here, Lakshman says:

Sri Ramchandra wants you to undergo a chastity test, Sister-in-law . . . [he] has no misgivings whatsoever, Sister-in-law. It's only for the sake of the people. Justice alone will prevail in the trial. Truth will triumph. Everyone will applaud your character once you withstand with the test. Sri Ramchandra has asked me to convey this to you, Sister-in-Law.(31)

Sita considers her emotional sufferings given by her husband as her fate or destiny. She, therefore, bears her trauma without posing even single questioning to Rama for 'his' treatment for her. But the account of Lakshman made her recall words of Ahalya. Thus, the image of Ahalya began to flash across Sita's mind who once meets Sita in the forest and tells her that a woman's loyalty is not the issue but what is, is that a man's ability to question and put it to test, be it for any reason: "What does conducting an inquiry imply? Distrust, isn't it? Wouldn't it be better, instead; to believe in either your innocence or guilt?" (31). These questions from Ahalya to Sita enlightened her about the complex riddles of female chastity.

The third part of the book entitled "The Sand Pot" illustrates the tragic life of another mythical woman of the Ramayana named, Renuka. She too shares the common sufferings as Sita and Ahalya does. Her experience is particularly appalling on so many levels. This part of the text reveals the meetings of Renuka and Sita in the forest. She tells Sita that it is totally futile for women to make men the centre of their lives because she was brutally killed by her own son Parshurama under the order of his father. Neither husband nor son is able to feel the pathos and cry of Renuka Devi. Thus she explains, "He ordered our son to kill me. Parasurama came forward to do it. He began Chopping my head. When my head was half-cut, my husband's fury abated." After her self-realization only, she tries to project the fragile nature of women and links herself and woman to a pot, which can be broken anytime. Thus she warns to Sita, "if they understand their *paativratyam* and fidelity are like these sand pot, they will be able to live in peace" (50). It is Renuka, who implants seeds of independent thinking in Sita's mind by posing questions to Sita, "Does a woman have a world other than her husband's? Is there a higher meaning to a woman's life than motherhood?" (52). The discussion between Renuka and Sita seems so intense that demonstrates not only her sufferings but of contemporary women too. Renuka has questioned the basic institution of marriage. More particularly, she dared to question about basic institution

of bearing children because she has realized all through in her life that she is no more important for her husband and similar things happens with Sita. Thus Renuka explains to Sita:

A situation where children ask their mother who their father is or where a husband asks his wife who fathered her children comes only in the lives of some women, Sita. Think of the predicament of those women and you'll understand my words. (55)

Initially, Sita felt only contempt for Renuka and opines her, "Your truth and mine are not the same" (54). But she grasps the conveying of Renuka only when Ram asked Sita to return to Ayodhya on the condition she declares her innocence in the royal court. Therefore, she asks him: Do I need to do that? Is there any sense in such an effort?" (64). Instead, she decides to live with her mother – Mother Earth. This act of Sita describes the steps of Indian woman also who are unaware of the restrictions, insults, and violence they are subjected to. They are unaware of the patriarchal unjust. There is no doubt that the institution of motherhood is quieting even the most rebellious woman. A change in woman's consciousness is obvious when we generally ask 'which mothers?' instead of talking about 'mothers.'

"The Liberated" is the fourth narrative of the concerned text that too offers the interesting account of an encounter between Sita, who returned to Ajodhya after fourteen years of vanvaas, and Urmila, who lives all those years in a self-imposed penance. This part reveals more painful psyche of Sita about her sister, Urmila. In Sita's words: "To be separated from one's husband – isn't that the most miserable ordeal to suffer?" (70). There was continuous war like situation in the mind of Sita after knowing the battle inside Urmila's mind. Later in Valmiki's ashram, when Sita comes to know that Rama is performing the Aswamedha Yag, she feels terribly disturbed by the thought that Rama might have taken another wife to become eligible to perform the ritual. Urmila calls it foolishness to get anxious and said to her:

"Don't swallow. Don't even let it enter your mind. You must liberate yourself from Rama... 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". (81)

Sita had learnt a lot from experiences of Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka and Urmila – each one had a story of her own and followed a path of her own. Every story filled with miseries of married life, womanhood and oppression getting worse in each stage. In this way, the present article is

an attempt to raises important questions regarding the issue of women's rights from ancient times till today. It also offers a renewal of the struggle for the equality and freedom of women.

Mythology serves as an aid to male gods, as Armstrong once argues that It is a commonplace in the study of Vedic religion to observe that "the goddesses played only a subordinate role in the pantheon; the principal deities were exclusively male, and it was solely by virtue of their positions as consorts of these male deities that the female deities acquired their influence" (45). But the fifth and last part of the narrative entitled "The Shackled" ultimately brings the uncertainties of Ram who realizes that he has no self-determination, that his identity is wholly conducted by his role as ruler and an advocate of Arya Dharma. For the first time Ram came to know that he has no personal freedom. He articulates, "Mind? My mind? I who execute the Arya Dharma without a second thought, do I have a mind of my own? He wished to embrace the life he had consumed with Sita. He came to apprehend that her wife, Sita, had sustained a wound for his sake. Therefore, we can see a sense of concern and regret in the character of Ram for Sita. As he enunciates:

A wound that would never heal.

A wound that would hurt every day.

A wound caused by the throne to the love of Sita and Rama.

He could forsake Sita; Sita belonged to him. (94)

He realizes that the time spent in the forest with Sita the only time he practiced true freedom. He laments to Lakshman: "My exalted nobleness is my handicap. With this political power, I have lost power over myself. I have lost my Sita" (88). This time Ram feared the matter Sita choose to take into her own hands. She declined every request of her husband and handed over their sons to him. Therefore, Sita articulates, "These children are not just my children, Rama. Thus are symbols of the life force of this universe. I have realized that they belong to the whole universe. Of course, you, and they too, believe that they belong to Ayodhya and are the heirs of Raghu Vamsa. You should act according to your belief" (40). This part of Sita indeed serves the best purpose for the whole womenfolk. It explains how she rejects the ideals of 'womanhood' and choses to go back to where she came from; to her mother Earth. She liberates herself but Rama remains shackled who can never be liberated from his world. He is tied to the throne, to politics and his kingdom. His life is tied to his dharma as a king and a ruler of his people. But Sita has no fascination for authority. She stood up for herself. Her decisive insubordination in the end lets Sita

gains her lost selfhood.

The article is an attempt to comprehend that even in the olden times, an opinionated woman was treated differently by the patriarchal society which mostly looks down upon a woman who stands up for herself. It elucidates how the female characters were denounced politically and bears stigma in the Hindu Mythology. It enabled us to grasp the idea of “demythification” of the original myth. Hence, Volga has proved that Indian mythology is a new and an essential medium of choice for feminist narratives because this retelling is an endeavor to question and subvert the stereotyped in ages of women in mythology by bringing women together. Women is speaking of how war of patriarchy has affected them. In binding them together within a single sentence – “Do women exist only for men to settle their scores with each other’s? (4). A bond has created between the two characters, as women oppressed and manipulated by male egos, and as women together battling patriarchy. In this way the study has promoted the idea of ‘sisterhood.’ Usually described as envious and feeling aggrieved for other women, Volga’s depiction of women folk is a break from this absurd myth and promotes sisterhood. The strong binding factor between the women is their ability to speak their husbands as an individual in the end, and negotiate their terms and conditions. The study has deeply explored a key point that to have a power on ourselves and not operating it on others, will bring fraternity, liberty into this world.

Findings

In *The Liberation of Sita*, the writer has focused on the injustice done to womenfolk throughout ages. Different tales of different mythological characters are depicted on the themes of unknown psyche of females, and we can witness many such stories where sufferings of mothers and wives are portrayed. The complexities in a man-woman relationship has portrayed. The writers have tried successfully to explore the psychological aspects of the lead protagonists. In this way, this study is an important endeavor to spread modernism and feminist statements.

Political and social life in the country (India) in the last decades has given rise to a variety of questions. It interrogates the nature and resilience of patriarchal systems in a postcolonial society. With this, the image of women in fiction has also undergone a change from the last few decades. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women toward conflicted female characters searching for the identity. The women are no longer characterized and defined in terms of their victim status. Unlike earlier novels, female characters are

defying marriage and motherhood in contemporary literary fiction. The women writers in India also re-interpret mythology by using new symbols. In conclusion, the present text undertaken research is significant in providing a medium for self-expression and, thus, rewriting and recasting the History of Indian women. Hence, it is noteworthy to see how women and womanhood are inserted into, and affected by mythology, patriarchy, ideology, and social change. With this, we are able to relook not only the history of feminism but also how both 'tradition' and 'modernity' will continue to fuel the biased ideologies in India.

She must be redefined, reorganized, recast, regenerated . . .

Koylaschander Bose,

"On the Education of Hindu Females," 1846

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it has become essential to ponder over the orthodoxy of the Hindu tradition. The study is an attempt to revisit mythology to fathom how and why women are articulated as *Shakti* in Indian mythology. It also questioned the customary binaries that labels women as the vessels of either creative or destructive powers. The notion behind labelling women with divine becomes clear through emerging women literature. It provides a little room for woman. The identification of women with creative and destructive label them either with saint or sinners, as Arshia Sattar, a Ramayana scholar, who has an acclaimed prose translation of the Ramayana to her credit, says in an essay, "*Sita and Surpanakha exemplify two types of women . . . Sita is good, pure, light, auspicious and subordinate, whereas Surpanakha is evil, impure, dark, inauspicious and insubordinate.*" This has created a dichotomy of black and white in the perception of women, without leaving any room for the grey in between. There is no space left in between for them. Thus It would be more appropriate to deal with the present study without any binary. Through these exploration, we attempt to analyze Ram's behavior, and the behavior of the society towards Sita in many contexts. At last, by presenting Sita as a strong woman can really inspire women readers to create a room of one's own. There is a need to relook the Ramayana from a woman's eyes. It is a perfect take on the inner strength and resilience of women and how they don't always need a man to feel themselves complete. Similarly, sita declared: "I am the daughter of Earth, Rama. I have realized who I am the whole universe belongs to me. I don't lack anything. I am the daughter of Earth". (41) Volga's Sita has acceptance of self, others and nature. She has feelings of *gemeinschaftsgefühl*, which is a sense of oneness with humanity. Therefore, in *The Liberation*

of *Sita*, woman passed through all levels of revealing her 'self' like, her character is tested through exile, abduction, ordeal by fire and banishment but at the end, she listens to her own feelings in evaluating experiences instead of the voice of the tradition, authority or the majority.

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