Deconstructing Sita: A Study of Female 'Self' under Patriarchy

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Abstract

Modern Indian literature is considered instrumental in providing a fresh perspective on women's position in society. It identifies the existing gaps in contemporary literature with respect to ancient Indian literature, indicating that women have been excluded from mainstream roles. The retellings of Indian mythology also play a vital role in comprehending women's potential to subvert dominant male authority. They underscore the invisible socio-cultural arrangements that ignore women's capabilities. Revisiting and reinterpreting the ancient narratives allows modern Indian literature to reconstruct the system, and establish a new identity of influential female characters from Indian epics, including Sita. Sita, an ideal for Indian women, has been the subject of deep scholarly study. She has been viewed in various shades and colours. Some see her as an ideal wife who obeys her husband, while others think of her as a woman of self-esteem who prefers to reject her husband's proposal of returning to the palace, instead of accepting it. Indian folk traditions also offer a variety of versions of Sita's character. This paper attempts to examine her character from a new perspective, with the aim of finding answers to questions such as: What is Sita's self? Is she a victim of the systematic arrangement of patriarchy? Does she qualify as a respondent to Carol Hanisch's argument "The Personal is Political"? What place does she hold in folk tradition and in the female psyche?

Keywords: Influential; Perspective; Reconstruct; Reject; Subvert.

Introduction

Indian literature is rich with mythology and folk traditions. It records endless accounts of women's journey in the trajectory of patriarchy. These accounts illustrate the conflicts women encounter while navigating the

norms that society has laid out for them. Certain narratives from the Indian mythologies and folk traditions that are relevant to women's conditioning and internalization highlight that socio-cultural factors often construct a web for women with no way out. Ayuta Mohanty in his article titled "Revisiting the New Woman in Indian Mythology" writes that Indian literature portrays Indian women as subjugated, oppressed, silenced, and suppressed under patriarchal weights. He views social, cultural, economic, and traditional factors as the cause of such a discriminative attitude. He attributes Indian mythologies to defining an ideal woman as one who is obedient, faithful, submissive and a passive follower of her husband.

The Ramayana, one of the most symbolic Indian epics, has been subjected to vivid and repeated analyses using modern tools. However, every attempt turns to and points toward the enigmatic and mysterious character of Sita. Her character has consistently been under the scrutiny of scholars and researchers. Sita, the name itself, is representative of the quintessential Indian woman, who has been portrayed as a dutiful and devoted wife to her husband. She also qualifies as a person of infinite tolerance and forgiveness, one who bears adversity, and sorrows without making any complaints. However, there is another body of literature that views her story through a feminist lens and argues that Sita is not just a character, but also the representative of all Indian women. Her experiences are not individual, they are collective. They are not just restricted to her personal encounter with patriarchy but are also political. While Indian folk traditions depict Sita's pain, sorrow, and insult in their private sphere, they are often considered less authentic and insufficient compared to mainstream literature.

On the one hand, there are less recognized texts like Chandrabati's *Ramayana*, and on the other hand, there are strong and well-established male-dominated texts like Valmiki's *Ramayana*- both of which present contrasting perspectives. Chandrabati's *Ramayana* portrays Sita as the protagonist and mitigates the role of her husband, Rama. Her Sita is not merely the wife of Rama, but also an individual who feels and speaks of her sorrows, with a voice to express her innermost feelings and complaints. The study of retellings of Ramayana, such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, raises certain questions about Sita's self and her personal experiences, as well as questions about the role of patriarchy in shaping her. The paper attempts to scan Sita's self by putting it under the scanner of Carol Hanisch's slogan "The personal is Political", Karen Horney's "Feminine Psychology" a theory of personality, and Indian folk traditions. It seeks to identify societal issues associated with wom-

en, patriarchy and power, and to demonstrate how Sita's story reflects the systemic suppression of women's power and potential.

Concept of Self

The concept of self, on a broader level, reflects the idea we have about us. It refers to the exploration of self: who are we? Self-concept considers multi-dimensional aspects including social, spiritual, and emotional. Carl Rogers (Theories of Personality), an American psychologist, states that 'the self' displays two aspects: real and ideal. The former aspect is related to real life while the ideal one shows a person's expectations of oneself. Self-concept keeps on changing with the change in environmental interaction. He believes that self-concept is the result of the influence of three factors: (Rogers, 338)

• Parents' attitude in childhood toward their child

• The belief for oneself, and

• One's perceptions for others

He concludes that a positive environment in early life instills a positive attitude in the receiver. This positive perception helps in recognizing one's self-worth and also regulates one's behaviour with the external world. Under this theoretical framework, we observe that Sita qualifies as having a positive personality. It is noteworthy that she was raised under Janaka's positive parenting, and thus, received a healthy environment for individual growth. This helped her realize her self-worth, which this paper strives to explore. Her experiences made her a stronger and bolder character.

What is Sita's Self? An Analytical Overview

Sita, the wife of Rama, has traditionally been portrayed as an ideal woman. She has been presented as a woman who follows her husband's commands passively and has been labelled as a caring and doting wife who always prioritizes her husband's words over her own. Her characterization in Valmiki's *Ramayana* reflects the male perspective that anticipates a submissive female character. However, feminists have their own perspectives when it comes to the portrayal of women's individuality in these epics. They argue that women are defined by male perspectives solely to secure their position of power. They perceive society's attitude toward women as an attempt to create an exemplary figure, who must be followed faithfully by the gamut of Indian women. Here, Sita is that role model. It is expected that Indian women must display virtues like Sita. Further, to receive the

title of a good wife, they should behave and accept things silently and unquestioningly. In brief, they should be like those mute spectators who put on display their cheering faces only. In addition, they should not have any such opinion that counters their male partners' opinion and they must reflect faith in the decisions of their companions. A woman who lacks Sita-like qualities is labelled unfaithful as per the perception of patriarchy. Consequently, patriarchy comes to the centre stage and plays a massive role in moulding women's psyche by conditioning them to follow patriarchal norms sincerely. Western feminist, Karen Horney, in her theory of feminine psychology, writes that women have been conditioned to think of themselves as inferior to men because of society. "Although women may view themselves as inadequate compared to men, they do so for societal reasons, not because they were born female." (Chapter 5, 165)

Horney concludes that women's treatment in a male-dominated culture has led them to internalize the feeling of unworthiness. Her study reflects that women have identified themselves with this notion for ages, due to social, economic, and cultural discrimination.

Under this theoretical framework, the question that arises is- "What is Sita's self?". The paper focuses on deconstructing Sita's character by applying some Western theories as well as Indian folk traditions. While Valmiki's *Ramayana* gives due importance to Sita's character as that of a submissive wife, in-depth studies conducted on her character reveal that Sita is not simply a passive recipient of patriarchal dictation, although it is also believed that Sita is not an ordinary woman. She is an incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi, a symbol of strength. Her strength reflects her unique self as she struggles and negotiates with patriarchy to secure a dignified place for herself. She does not allow herself to be influenced by patriarchal orders. Whatever she received in her life was by her own choice.

For instance, in Valmiki's *Ramayana,* Sita has an argument with Rama on the issue of exile, in which Rama wants her to stay in Ayodhya and follow Bharata, a crowned prince of Ayodhya. He instructs her to control her behaviour and emotions under his dominion and dissuades her from following him in exile by trying to convince her of the hardship and potential dangers she may face in the forest. However, Sita listens to his reasoning and still insists on letting her accompany him. She reveals to him a sage's prediction about her prospective future in the forest. Also, she expresses her interest in exploring and enjoying the forest life. She discloses to him her intense desire to live in proximity to nature and nurture her desires. When she presumes Rama's indifference to her proposal, she threatens

him to commit suicide (herself). Soon, Rama realizes that all his efforts to persuade her have gone futile. He finds himself incapable of checking her demand. Consequently, Rama agrees and instructs her to prepare for the journey.

The narrative suggests that Sita is not a mere puppet in the hands of male authority. She has her own individuality and nurtures herself with dignity. Despite Rama's effort to dissuade her from opting for a hard life in the forest, Sita achieves her goal efficiently. She stays in the forest contentedly. She enjoys and explores nature, which serves as a testimonial of her true nature. She seldom complains about the hardship of her forest life rather we see her as a supportive and comfort provider. It is her undaunted spirit that allows her to make such a bold decision. Even though she is untrained when it comes to using weapons and lacks the art of fighting, she bravely ventures into the dangers of the forest. However, ancient literature only portrays her as a weak and vulnerable character, and her devotion is used to tame the Indian female psyche. Carol Hanisch finds that patriarchal arrangement is responsible for female domestication. In her essay "The Personal is Political", Hanisch writes that women are assigned roles related to child-rearing, taking care of their families and other domestic activities. She believes that power dynamics have a stronghold in maintaining this structure. She argues that domination and subjugation are present where there is power, which is evident in Rama and Sita's relationship. Rama dictates how Sita should behave under King Bharata's rule, while he will be in exile. Between the lines, he also tries to make her understand that her position within the family would be relegated due to the shift in power from one hand to another.

With this context, one can see that for ages, women in India have been held subservient to men. They have no individual say in matters of politics and power. In this regard, it can be assumed that patriarchy plays a significant role in conditioning the female psyche. The studies conducted by scholars on women's positions, whether in Indian culture or Western societies, converge at one point which is 'patriarchy'. A.S. Altekar, in his survey book on Indian civilization pertaining to women's position, observes that almost every society observes patriarchal attitudes towards women. He concludes that women have been treated as inferior to men, with the exception being the Vedic period. Women's condition deteriorated over time, due to foreign invasions as well. His study further brings to light the fact that women faced utmost subjugation in the time of the Mughal empire (Altekar, 27). They were made to stay within the four walls of the houses and perform their assigned roles sincerely. They were con-

ditioned to internalize the notion of inferior positions within families. Political influence, power, and power dynamics within families made them vulnerable individuals. Consequently, they began passing down the same notion of worthlessness to the next generations. This reinforces Hanisch and Karen Horney's theories of male domination and internalization.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* is a retelling of *Ramayana,* recast to Sita's voice. She narrates the epic from Sita's point of view. Gheeta Chandran et al. in their article titled "Re-Imagining Sita in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments: A Spiritual Ecofeminist Reading" state that Divakaruni's creation of Sita is a unique and unconventional character, who reflects endurance as a strength, not a weakness. They remark: "Divakurani in *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) maintains the core identity of Sita, which is her ability to endure inexplicable and innumerable pain. However, in this text the notion of endurance is not seen as weakness but it is associated with strength." (p 65)

The article discusses women's empowerment and endurance. It hints at the challenges that women face, while still striving to triumph over them. Divakaurni lets Sita express her thoughts when Rama is reluctant to allow her to accompany him in the forests. She feels that her abilities are being underestimated and wants to challenge Rama's decision, but ultimately restrains herself.

Is Sita a Victim of Patriarchy? A Revisit

Sita demonstrates efficiency in maintaining her self-worth. She neither accuses her husband nor acts according to his choices, but rather chooses her own path with conviction. She strides on the path willingly, never succumbing to the harshness and hardships of life. Her abduction at the hands of Ravana highlights her inner strength as she remains determined to her resolution as a devoted wife to her husband. She turns down Ravana's proposal of marrying him or accepting him, who goes all out to bend her soul through physical and mental torture and trickery. Sita displays a character of supreme virtues and traits and this aspect of her personality has been portrayed differently in the male version of the narrative. Her image has been projected as a weak person who is at the mercy of someone else in order to create a notion that women are weak and need protection and security. Her indomitable spirit of a fighter has been replaced with a sense of vulnerability. Her abduction can be perceived as a dire consequence of crossing an inconspicuous line drawn by patriarchy. However, Valmiki's *Ramayana* does not mention any line known as

"Lakshman Rekha", in other words, a line of restrictions which dictates patriarchal norms set for women. One can find here that Sita is a victim of patriarchy. She is not vulnerable but is rather projected as a vulnerable character by male perception. Sita's self is an individualistic aspect of her personality. She dares against danger and risks, yet walks elegantly. She is a brave soul, not an "Abla Nari" as often portrayed. Hanisch's "The Personal is Political" gives a thought-provoking impression of the female psyche. It permeates the concept of self-awareness and makes women try to apprehend the invisible factors harming them. This self-awareness may assist women to redefine and reconstruct their sphere and their roles. Sita's character has been used as a tool to control the female psyche and make them act in accordance with the male perspective. Sita, no doubt is a role model for Indian women, but by substituting the epithet 'inability' with 'capability and potential'. This male perspective is also highlighted in Rama's cold reception of Sita at the end of the war between him and Ravana. He categorically tells her that he waged war against Ravana, not for her, but to wipe the stigma of insult inflicted on his family. "I was careful to wipe out the affront paid to me completely and to avenge the insult offered to mine illustrious House" (Shastri, 335).

"A suspicion has arisen, however, with regard to thy conduct, and thy presence is as painful to me as a lamp to one whose eye is diseased! Henceforth go where it best pleaseth thee, I give thee leave, O! Daughter of Janaka. . . . I can have nothing more to do with thee." (Shastri 335)

He rejects the idea of accepting her and gives her the choice to choose anyone she would like to go with. He says:

"I no longer have any attachment for thee; go where thou desirest! This is the outcome of my reflections, O! Lovely One I Turn to Lakshmana or Bharata, Shatrughna, Sugriva or the Titan Bibishana, make thy choice, O Sits, as pleases thee best. Assuredly Ravana, beholding thy ravishing and celestial beauty, will not have respected thy person during the time that thou didst dwell in his abode." (Shastri, 336)

Sita does not accept this humiliation passively but rather advocates her point of view by emphasizing her innocence in all the chaos that occurred in her life. She reacts to establish herself as a circumstantial victim, who suffered at the hands of Ravana. She further expresses that it was beyond her control to avoid the unintentional contact she had with another man, thereby asserting her lack of culpability for the punishment that she was receiving. "If my limbs came in contact with another's, it was against my

will, O! Lord, and not through any inclination on my part; it was brought about by fate. That which is under my control, my heart, has ever remained faithful to thee; my body was at the mercy of another." (Shastri, 336)

She claims her respect and dignity; which she believes she is on the verge of losing. She categorically states that the humiliation would bring her irrevocable loss and jeopardize her worth. "If despite the proof of love that I gave thee whilst I lived with thee, I am still a stranger to thee, O Proud Prince, my loss is irrevocable !" (Shastri, 337)

The narratives indicate that Sita has great argumentative skills as she voices her thoughts whenever she feels it's necessary. She knows her self-worth, thereby upholding her morals and self-esteem.

As seen earlier, Sita's character has predominantly been interpreted from a male perspective. This systematic projection of an ideal woman is done so that women can be influenced to identify themselves with Sita and thus instill a sense of fear in their psyche. Repeated exposure to the portrayal of Sita as a vulnerable woman has conditioned other women to accept this idea as fact. Sita's banishment during her pregnancy can also be attributed to a game of power and politics. Rama abandons her to prove himself a just king, thereby prioritizing his kingly duty over his duties as Sita's husband. He, without warning Sita about her forthcoming misfortune, commands Lakshmana to drop her in the forest. However, Lakshamana carries out Rama's command with a bereaved heart. Sita laments after learning about her banishment, yet remains brave. She lives in sage Valmiki's hermitage and rears her children as a single parent proficiently. Her exile is the product of a politically motivated move to establish dominance. The concept of 'personal, power and politics', as described by Hanisch, is evident here in dynamically influencing relationships.

Indian oral traditions have their own contribution to deconstructing the patriarchal codes, by filling the gap in mainstream textual versions. Charndrabati's Ramayana, which is considered a mixture of oral traditions from different versions, throws light on Sita as an individual. It talks of her perception and reflects upon her psyche. Chandrabati gives voice to Sita and an audience who can relate to her pain and suffering. They try to explore Sita's self through their songs and criticize patriarchy for silencing her.

Thus, Indian folk tradition investigates the patriarchal system through its own lenses. It tries to bring to the surface women's inner turmoil and make

them visible to society. Chandrabati's *Ramayana* plays a crucial role in deconstructing Sita's sufferings from her point of view. Additionally, she tries to bring a female protagonist to the centre stage, from an epic where she was relegated to a subordinate role. She gives Sita space to express her feelings as a woman and lets her speak of her suffering in her own words. On the other hand, Valmiki's *Ramayana* only depicts her as the wife of Rama and connects her to the world of power and politics. In the opening paragraph of Chandrabati's *Ramayana*, the translator gives an overview of the book and writes: "It laments the suffering of women caught in the play of male ego." The words 'lament', 'caught' and 'male ego' represent the gist of Hanisch's entire essay "The Personal is Political". Male ego and male perspective, as seen, interpret women's personalities through their own rendition of womanhood.

Folk traditions like Chandrabati's *Ramayana* aim to sing along to the inner and personal suffering of women. Nabaneeta Dev Sen in her article titled "Alternative Interpretations of the Ramayana: Views from Below" states, "Just as the Rama myth has been exploited by the patriarchal system to construct an ideal Hindu male. Sita too has been built up as an ideal Hindu female to help serve the system. She remains the ideal woman through whom women may be taught to bear all injustice silently." (Dev Sen, 583)

In her study, Sen finds that folk tradition carries an antidote to the patriarchal representation of Sita in the epic. She concludes that on the one hand, patriarchy uses Sita's myth to silence women, while on the other hand, women give a voice to themselves using the same myth. Thus, they try to keep themselves intact with the common sufferings of the entire women population. Chandrabati's *Ramayana* is also an endeavour of a sixteenth-century poet to understand women's expression in Indian culture, by establishing itself as a representation of the feminist perspective. However, it remains unacknowledged as an epic because of its non-traditional narrative structure. Moreover, it is focused on a female protagonist rather than on a male hero. It marginalizes Rama and criticizes him for banishing Sita during her pregnancy, leading oral traditions to sympathize with Sita and depicting her as a protagonist.

Avadhesh Kumar Singh, in his article titled "In Their Own Words and Worlds", writes that in Valmiki's *Ramayana,* Sita is a dutiful wife who follows her husband unquestioningly. He notes that Tulsidasa's *Ramacaritamanasa*, Valmiki's *Ramayana,* and many other versions in different languages are in a way Rama's *ayanas.* They are part of learned tradition and androcentric. He also states that these learned traditions are a bit unjust

towards Sita as they depict Rama's heroism but Sita's sufferings. However, folk tradition has depicted her as superior and just, in comparison to Rama. To prove his point of view he illustrates a Gujarati folk song as follows:

"Milk of human-kindness and beauty incarnate

May you be called a Lord!

But O! Rama, You don't equal Sitaji

No Rama, you do not equal Sitaji…

A husband so You are,

But failed in knowing your other half"

(Singh, 42)

Further, he writes: "The learned tradition hinges around Rama but the folk voice questions and subverts it" (42). It is clear that the expressions in folk tradition criticize Rama directly for his odd and harsh treatment of Sita, his wife. It also accuses him of misunderstanding his other half. The folk tradition is just, and objective in depicting Sita's self. It keeps oral records of Sita's individuality and highlights the deliberate attempts of the documented tradition to silence her. The close reading of folk traditions hints at its support for Carol Hanisch's claim that the personal sphere is invaded by the male authority to establish its dominance, and hence, it is political.

Conclusion

The study of Sita's character through various angles concludes that she is an integral part of Indian culture. She is a complex and multifaceted woman, something which is unfathomable to scholars and researchers. She continues to stimulate the readers' minds and inspires new interpretations, depending on the attitudes of the readers and scholars alike. However, the study of Sita's self under Western as well as Indian folk traditions indicates that patriarchy has a definite role in shaping her. Despite facing injustice and suffering several times in her life, she maintains her individuality. Carol Hanisch's concept of "The Personal is Political" implies that she is a victim of patriarchy, as she was forced into exile during her pregnancy. She faces this atrocity out of political influence, as Rama did not want to be proven an inefficient king who kept his people unsatisfied. Her story is not just about her individual life but also reflects the larger societal issues of gender inequality and patriarchy. Her life's narratives, experi-

ences and sufferings have been disseminated in order to teach moral values to Indian women. Indian folk tradition only portrays her sorrows and injustice, while feminists express their concern for the internalization of subordinate positions by women. In recent times, writers like Divakaruni have been striving to break this monopoly of male perspectives by revisiting and reconstructing unconventional female characters from learned tradition. Researchers like Nabaneeta Dev Sen and Avadesh Kumar Singh have also been contributing to decoding the established hierarchical tradition. Their endeavour to comprehend the comparative aspects of the Indian folk traditions and learned traditions has promoted parity among men and women. Hence, the examination of literature whether written or oral profoundly establishes that Sita qualifies as a respondent to Carol Hanisch's argument "Personal is Political".

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