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Resurrecting Sita: A Study in Devdutta Pattnaik’s *Sita*: An Illustrated Retelling of *Ramayana*

**Madhulika Tiwari**

**Abstract**

The writers across the globe are always fascinated with mythology and mythical characters and their representation and representation in literary work have always been focus for many writers since centuries. The characters sometimes in rewritings of the source text, either cling to the representation as it is portrayed in source text but, at times, try to subvert the prevalent ideology by exposing and questioning the stereotyped portrayal and emerge as a new figure. The writers in the rewritings give voice to the silent as well silenced character to resist the dominance as well as prevalent powerful ideology and answer back the subjugation. Writers from centuries have found *Ramayana*, one of the culturally foundational text of Indian mythology, as a masculine text which only considers Rama as a figure eligible to be given credit for his valor and sacrifice deliberately ignoring Sita’s role and importance in the text. The writers, therefore, in the rewritings, have tried to give her voice and thus show her reaction/representation, her perspective and her ideology which was long suppressed in Ramayana. Thus rewritings in a way try to locate the hidden voices in a text. My objective in this paper would be to show how the character of Sita has emerged from the groove in Devdutta Pattnaik’s *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana* proving herself as one of the major setback to the prevalent masculine ideology and no more a tormented woman. The paper shall also focus on how rewritings have given justice to this character by uncovering the unheard voice.

*Sita watched Lakshmana’s nostrils flare. She felt his rage and his embarrassment. She wanted to reach out and reassure him but she restrained herself.*
‘You feel your Ram has abandoned his Sita, don’t you?’ She asked gently.

‘But he has not. He cannot.
He is God... he abandons no one.
And I am Goddess... I can’t be abandoned by anyone’

This is Sita’s reply to Lakshman in Devdutta Pattnaik’s *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana*, a rewriting of *Ramayana*, one of the culturally foundational texts in India, when he discloses to her Ram’s order to leave her in exile, incognito. The book is an attempt to relocate many silent hidden and suppressed voices in Valmiki’s epochal narrative that were long buried or remained unheard for thousands of years. The story of Ramayana is told and retold by talebearers for last 2000 years. Despite of only being a story of a clan, most noble and virtuous to have ever ruled on earth, it has set such high standards of morality, nobility and good conduct that it has become exemplary in Indian psyche. Unquestioned faith made it revered for centuries and its values were beyond question and comparison. But even before emergence of critical enquiries and theoretical intervention in literature and especially religion Ramayana was interpreted and renarrated by many writers like Kambana or ladies singing folksongs. The early renditions of this epic were mostly conformist in tone and a kind of representation of same story by adding more morals, ideals and faith to the story. For eg. Kamban’s *Ramayana* and Tulsidas’s *Ramcharitamana* are renditions of the same tale providing the text a noble, sacred and religious sanctity, while with the emergence of sociological and political theories, contemporary renditions look for the political, cultural and gendered dimensions of the text. For eg. *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana* by Devdutta Pattnaik or *The Missing Queen* by Samhita Arni look at the epics from a perspective that tries to bring out the ‘unspoken’ aspects of the grand narratives.

Thus rewriting is a practice of revisioning the text with an alternate perspective, which may include writer’s own point of
view or biases or his/her effort to trace voices long suppressed in the name of grandeur and holiness of the original renditions. These voices are often representative of a view which may be disruptive and disconcerting for the religious or emotional harmony of the text if made heard. Many times, in these rewritings these voices are resurfaced or made heard to answer back the subjugation or suppression these classes have faced. They (rewritings) not only narrate the story of the silenced characters but also provide these characters with an opportunity to express their feelings in such a manner that these voices subvert the conventional hierarchies. Rewritings, in a way, aim at the democratization of the source text and act as a resistance to the hegemony and subjugation making it a deliberate political attempt on writer’s part. Thus it can be stated that rewritings are radical writings that are used to dismantle the status quo of the source texts.

Sita is an iconic wife unlike Rama who was anything but an ideal husband. She is a single mother. And above all, she is, at the end of the epic, self-esteem and honour personified. But interestingly, ‘she is strangely absent or silent/silenced in major part of the epic and her silence is celebrated’ (add reference). Valmiki in his narrative has written the story of Ramayana in about 24,000 verses. Out of them majority of the verses are dedicated to Rama and his family and a few verses, comparatively, are about Sita’s ordeal and her representation independently. He seems to be more enamoured with the men in the story—either of Raghu clan or even Ravana family. Does it mean that Sita’s role was not of equal caliber compared to Ram in the epic or he intentionally overlooked the character of Sita? Was the character herself silent or silenced by the author? Or had Sita’s character the potential to create a stir in the patriarchal social order which would have created a disharmony and thus not been given proper space? Not only Valmiki but even Tulsidas and Khamban, who composed their version much later, have also not given voice or deserving space to her character. Both of them have glorified the
character of Rama and thrown Sita to the margins. Even if Sita is barely presented, she is only limited to a woman displaying her feminine virtue and discusses her either as Ram’s wife or a undimensional character not much to offer. Famous theatrical performances, bed time stories or folktales present Ram in a domineering presence and his lineage is well adorned and presented. There are instances which present Sita’s version too (for eg- folksongs in Mithila or Andhra Pradesh) but they fail to affect mass or do not find a place in popular imagination. Is it an ideological suppression that is a part of women marginalisation, making it an intentional political motive? Why is her story not revered equally (in terms of valour and ideals like Ram) and does not encompass major part of the epic? Where is Sita in all the grand display of valour? When was she born? Who was her mother? Why is she strangely absent or silent in popular imagination? These were the recurrent questions that the successive tellers chose to ignore. But in the 16th century, Chandrabati a poet from Bengal, presented the story of Sita in Sitayana telling her version and establishing her as the master centre of his narrative. Later in many rewritings, Sita has emerged as a character with manifold meanings, brave enough to renounce her relations and answer back the injustice and is not merely a victim of patriarchal/social/cultural subjugation. Sita in such rewritings questions, answers, protests, laughs, understands but never compromises. She chooses to be the epitome of wisdom and dignity rather than being a symbol of love, purity, wifely duty, sacrifice and emotion. In short, this new Sita questions her stereotyped projection in the epics.

Devdutta Pattnaik in his book has provided a fresh perspective to the epic by narrating it in the light of Sita’s character. The book has been divided into 7 chapters and has a prologue and an epilogue narrating the life of Sita like Ram’s in Ramayan. The first chapter talks about the myth of her birth. Janaka found her when he was ploughing the land. Popular belief (as presented in the Ramayana or earlier writings) says that she
was called Janaki as Janaka chose to become father of an abandoned child by adopting her. But here the book subverts this myth by giving Sita the choice of carving her own destiny. Janaka calls her Janaki because she was the one to “choose Janaka to be her father (10)”. The book further makes a comparison between Dasaratha, who barter his daughter Shantah (in popular belief Dasharatha had only 4 sons and not any daughter, indicating the ignorance of women in society) in exchange of sons and Janaka, who was contended with daughters. The motive behind this comparison is to show how Mithila and Ayodhya differed in attitude which forms the background of Sita’s life, her attitude as well as her misfortunes in future. Dasaratha’s lust for a son blinds him so much that he not only barter (or in simple terms, uses) his daughter for this lust’s satisfaction but also marries thrice to make his wish fulfilled and provide Ayodhya the heir to the throne. Loyalty towards the throne and subject always superseded the personal relations and love in Raghu clan.

The Court of Mithila had a custom of organising annual debates and discussions on Vedas which later culminated in Upanishads. Sita, therefore, gains the first hand knowledge of this intellectual debate and had seen intellects like Gargi, Yagnavalkya etc. She realises that mere acceptance of ideals, customs and beliefs is of no good and inquisitiveness is the root of wisdom. Rituals or theories should not be followed blindly but examined and re-examined. The state of Mithila was not in the habit of suppressing ideas in the name of ideals, customs and gender unlike Ayodhya. Pattnaik in the book has taken liberty with the story showing Sita and Urmila present with Rama and Lakshmana after Tadaka’s assassination when Vishwamitra tells them the story of Ganga’s descent on earth and how Shiva captured her in his locks till she submitted to his wishes of shedding her force and replace it with gentleness. Sita and Urmila do not seem happy with this argument unlike Ram and Lakshman and asked- ‘To be a wife must a woman be tamed as Ganga (52)’. They question the sage that he wants to assert that femininity if not domesticated
would lead to imbalance in family as well as societal order. Such attitude of Janaka’s daughters surprised Vishwamitra. He remarked “It did not escape Vishwamitra’s notice that Janaka’s daughters asked questions like Gargi of the Upanishads; Dasharatha’s son preferred obeying commands. Different seeds nurtured in different fields by different farmers produce very different crops indeed. (41)”. This portrayal of Sita here is unlike the popular image of a docile and submissive woman who never protests or disagrees with her husband, duty or society. She presents a standard of femininity not considered proper and against her stereotyped projection. Jasbir Jain in her book Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency says:

Gender is constructed by an interplay of both femininity and masculinity. Further the manner in which retellings have altered them is equally relevant, for the change marks either the resistance or a shift in the social perception of the role, or it may also signify a shift of focus because of social location of the narrator/narrators.

(29)

Sita was the first one to pick Hara, Shiva’s bow, even before Rama, with just one arm while swabbing the floor with the other. She was equal to Ram in terms of capability and physical strength as she also faced the hardships and dangers of the forest and more than that, she confronted Ravana in his territory without any weapon. Then why does in our psyche, she holds the persona of weakness rather than strength? Pattnaik here in his book has presented an entirely fresh image of Sita who knows her strength, and does not succumb to repressing social norms. During her first exile with Rama, he refuses to take her to the forest as he is worried about her security while she vehemently rejects Rama’s argument saying she does not need his permission to accompany him as she can take care of herself. But the text also hints that wifely duty was not the only reason for Sita to accompany Rama but she actually maintains equilibrium between rules, vows, and practical world and emotions by providing the brothers an emotional balance. After spending a long period of exile, the first
biggest danger that came to Rama, Sita and Lakshmana was in the form of Surpanakha. This encounter for the first time makes Sita scared of the coming dangers. ‘That was no animal, my husband. (126)’ warned Sita. Sita expresses her disagreement on Lakshmana’s act of disfiguring Suparnakha as she could foresee fatal consequences of the brutality done by dishonouring a woman. The men did not feel the need to pay heed to a woman's advice and thus suffered in near future.

After the period of war was over, Sita’s journey of struggle, independent identity and proving her innocence begins. When she appears before Ram after the rescue from Ravana’s capture she does not find her husband but a king for whom she is just a trophy to be displayed as a sign of her victory. For him she was a blot on the name of his clan. This particular incident in fact, changed the course of the epic as well as Sita’s relationship with Ram. A new feel of distrust develops which lasts till the end of the story. Ram, the king superseded Ram, the husband and Sita is the worst sufferer of this change. Sita’s absence in Ram’s life disturbed the equilibrium between masculinity and femininity in his life and thus the tenderness was no more to be seen in Ram. This lack of tenderness and emotion in Ram not only makes Sita a victim of his harsh decisions but incidents like Vali’s killing and ordering Tara to go to Sugriva ignoring her choice shows that Ram without Sita could be a heroic man in deeds but not at all tender in terms of emotion and respecting other’s choice. Ram’s toughness results in breaking of the bow unlike Sita who used to handle it so easily like a feather without harming it.

Pattnaik has divided the work into 7 chapters added with a prologue and an epilogue like Valmiki’s Ramayana. He has deliberately called the last chapter- Freedom. In this chapter Sita emerges from the groove and secures an identity of her own. Her long suppressed inquisitiveness, sense of self sufficiency and pride all are presented in this chapter. Sita in this work emerges as controller of her destiny after Ram abandons her after counting
widespread gossips and rumours among his subject about her worth as the queen of Ayodhya. Ram as a king wants the queen to be above any suspicion and doubt and pure in reputation. But he never expresses what he, as a husband and as a lover felt about her character. Even he trickily along with Lakshmana sends her away from the palace. This also speaks about another predicament of her life that she suffered more because she belonged to the royal family. Her reputation was in question because a queen has to be exemplary in character and deeds. Does this signify that had she not been a queen, she would not have suffered so much humiliation and agony? Are social or say masculine notions of purity, reputation and sacrifice contingent on class? Pattrnax has highlighted these questions in the text and alongside presented Sita calm and relaxed in the lap of nature free of all customs and culture shackles where neither is she queen, a representative of the royal class who should be exemplary, nor a woman bound to any man but a human being who can live life on her terms. Especially the gesture she shows while moving to the forest by unbinding her hair, indicates that she is free from all relations and she was done with all the worldly customs. She celebrates her status as a common woman rather than being a queen. Unlike earlier narratives, she did not allow herself to lament at such insult, grief and loss but instead moved to the forest with a serene smile at her face without showing any rage against Rama or Ayodhya. Instead she says to Lakshsman, ‘Rama is dependable, hence God. I am independent, hence Goddess. (278)’ Again when she asks - “even if she had been impure according to moral code of society, was it right for a husband to throw away her wife?”, Pattrnax has purposely provided Sita a voice to show the age old rage and discontent created by her silent portrayal and unquestioned faith on Ram. She readily accepts the forest and finds it preferable to such ‘intolerant society’. (278) After speaking her heart out to Lakshmana in the forest) she moves to the inner forest after unbinding her hair. This is a gesture to indicate her freedom as she is, henceforth, not bound to any culture, rules or man/master.
She is not a field which can be organised for cultivation but free to become a forest, a woman for the taking. Her name is no more associated to any man she knows and she moves to the inner core of forest as an independent woman and creator of her own destiny unlike Ram who even after staying in culture was bound to rules and his people and did injustice to his wife. Ram redeems Ahalya but punishes Sita. Injustice is done on his part. That's why Sita's smile was serene while Rama could never again smile.

There are number of incidents the author has chosen to show that feminine essence is above cultures, rules and ideals and has more power than war fought by men. When Surpanakha meets Sita again and laughs at her poor condition after being abandoned by Rama, Sita advises her to identify the source of Shakti within herself and not to look for a man to fulfil her life. This is the lesson of self-sufficiency learnt and preached by the woman portrayed as a victim of patriarchy and culture, too helpless and modest to protest the tyranny faced. She deals with the same problem with much more patience and dignity which was earlier turned into a blood-shed in which Sita was the ultimate sufferer without any fault of her own. Again, the acceptance of Kusa without any fuss shows her compassionate nature and motherly love. She is the epitome of motherhood as she is one of the few single mothers in our mythology. Despite being a queen, she doesn't demand any right for her child and gave him birth on land in solitude and unattended. Not only that, she avenges her humiliation by not telling her children the name of their father. The book presents Sita as the one who transforms a dacoit, Ratnakara, into one of the most acclaimed poet of all times, Valmiki, an Aadikavi. She becomes his guru by inspiring him to write Rama's story. So, in a way it was Sita, who made the story of Ram audible to the world, not his own deeds. This is an act of forgiveness on Sita's part. Ram definitely turned a living Sita into statue of gold for the kingly pursuit but Sita was not a silent material. She is a woman of dignity who after suffering so much pain and suffering lived with her head held high: Rama.
needed Sita even after abandoning her but Sita was self sufficient and never used her identity to gain any favour. This belief on herself and her pride, in the very end of the epic, makes Sita leave her every worldly relation including her sons as she was not ready to let the womanhood suffer more in the name of custom, ideals, matriarchy purity and above all, culture. The end aptly justifies the title of the chapter as Sita was in fact liberated from the worldly shackles and didn’t fall prey to it.

Sita in popular imagination is one of the defining figures of womanhood. Her timeless predicament is usually connected with women in general and she becomes primary archetype of all Indian women. Sacrifice, self- denial and unquestioning loyalty are some of the ideals related with the image of her. Religious epics in India are a chok-a-block for patiently self sacrificing woman who is slavishly dutiful towards her husband. Thus she is actually ignored by modern headed woman for her stereotyped projection. This is due to the reason the way she has been presented in epics- a silent, suppressed, sacrificing, yet a husband praising woman. All her identity and image is linked with her relations. But the book establishes new unseen aspects of her character. She is inquisitive, protesting, avenging, rejecting and above all smiling. She is a new Sita- one who questions the standards and assumption of public morality. She is not a passive character but knows to reply. She definitely exits from the world and Ram in the epic by going back to earth, but she does not exit so easily. She is always present in the Indian psyche and has been resurrected through such rewritings. This work infact makes her character more pulsating and alive providing the feminists a new role model by averting the ever accepted projection of Sita’s character. The book not just breaks the silence of Sita but also gives voice to many other silent or vanished characters who were put under carpet or remained unheard like Shantah- Dasaratha’s and Kaushalya’s daughter, Tara- Bali’s wife who was forced to accept Sugriva after Bali’s killing by Rama, Shurpanakha- who like Sita was only a symbol of honour for Ravana and Kaikeyi- who
was believed to be the most vicious woman but presented as a victim of fate, Urmila- who was left by Lakshman to honor his words towards Ram and many others. Thus, the book is a continuation of the courageous rewritings which transform the victimised, sidelined and subjugated characters of the epic by providing them a voice to make them audible to the world. It takes the courage to break the many forced silences and break many shackles. The paper thus engages with the thought that it is not the difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.

**Works Cited**
