

REWRITING SITA: RE-CONSTRUCTING ARCHETYPES

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Sita in the popular imagination and in the Indian cultural lore is perceived as the epitome of loyalty, devotion, chastity and sacrifice. The figure of Sita as constructed in the myths and scriptures has been coded in the national narrative as a figure of forbearance and this has served to instill similar ideals in Indian womanhood in various phases of the making of nation. Sita served as a reference point to enforce new forms of male patriarchy by making the Indian women submit to ideals of sexual purity and unquestioning devotion to the male order. Hence the nation returned to the mythical construct of Sita to make the women internalize ideals of suffering and moral virtue.

A counter perspective that emerges among the feminist critics is to challenge these constructions and question Sita's unwavering devotion and silent suffering. They see her as submissive and subservient and prefer to dismiss her as too stereotyped to represent realities. They even prefer to see a more assertive or aggressive Durga or Kali as the representation of the modern Indian women. Such a perspective is largely derived from the western feminist constructions of womanhood and does not take into account the whole picture of Indian womanhood. Such a perspective sees Sita only with a borrowed lens and places her in a borrowed western framework which does not aptly fit in the Indian context, completely ignoring the Indian cultural ideals, the "civilizational specifics" [In Search of Sita,105] that vary drastically from the western context. The effort to typecast women and their representations into prescribed slots is as dangerous and undesirable as the traditional Indian perspective. Women have to be perceived in totality and not cast into slots or compartments where one aspect is different from the other. So, as Madhu Kishwar argues eloquently aggression is just one aspect of a woman's personality as love, affection or devotion is, "Durga is not just a warrior goddess, a slayer of evil demons but also a compassionate mother who is nurturing and forgiving." [105] Sita, to redeem her from the "negative stereotypes" [105] that western feminist perspective readily condemns her, is not a subservient figure. Her assertion, rarely voiced, can be seen in the manner in which she insists on going to exile with her husband despite the latter's strict instructions against it, shedding her regal comforts and opting for a life of hardships and misery. her courage and resilience is noticeable in the way she refuses to give the test of her purity the second time and chooses to return to mother Earth. Her moral fiber seen in her refusal to let Ravana come near her, inspired Gandhi to cast her as the inspirational figure, as an icon of non-violence resistance during the freedom struggle for the Indian woman.

Most of the creative interpretations of Sita also serve to cast her in a similar mould of courage and quiet assertion. Many women writers have sought to re-write her story challenging

the mythical versions which generally are the male versions of reality and thus superimposing a woman's story, and breaking conventions of silence and recreating cannons. In doing so, these writers have rescued Sita from the male prescriptions and perspectives and made her more acceptable as a woman and a real being. In Shashi Deshpande's 'The Day of the Golden Deer' a monologue where Sita voices her true feelings, silencing the patriarchal voices and questioning her husband's ethical responsibility in abandoning her when she needed support. The monologue also punctures the male ideals of perfection that Rama pursues relentlessly casting his pregnant wife into exile. The motif of exile and fire constantly remind us of her trial and tribulations and in her withdrawal into the forest, she chooses to be silent and not plead with the King too absorbed in his own image. The monologue not only rewrites her story but it also rewrites the story of the King, who sadly is a victim of his image and thus seems to be a greater captive than his wife, the Queen. She emerges stronger of the two and makes a more dignified choice than the King who always was a puppet in the hands of others.

In Vijay Lakshmi's story 'Janaki' the protagonist is also a victim of jealousy and possessiveness. This modern story, narrated by a boy who had been working in the family is very similar to the story of Rama and Sita, and broadly creates similar archetypes. As in the mythical story the blissful home shatters because of the wagging tongue of the Dhobi who plants seeds of suspicion in the mind of the husband. Janaki, a successful lawyer, has an identity and a fame that even surpasses that of the husband. She manages a home and a career with ease and has the ability to sail through problems. The narrative voice valorizes her, "she had the knack of setting everything right. She knew how to resolve cases in court. She knew how to make Saab smile." [215] The narrator in his devotion is like Hanuman, but the Hanuman strongly disapproves of the master's conduct. And after the death of his mistress leaves the house and the job and repairs cycles and patches tubes, tighten brakes, fixes broken spokes and straighten wheels, something that he had tried to do when the crisis strikes the master's house but his act of mending and repairing relationships fails. He even orders the drunk and insensitive washerman to be quiet but it is too late and the master overhears the nasty insinuations.

Things fall apart and Janaki's world comes crashing for no fault of her own. While she is away in Delhi pleading for a case in the Supreme Court, she little realizes that an unfair verdict has been passed against her and that the patriarchal voices have labeled her as a woman of loose virtue. The Ravana here who supposedly robs her of her happiness and bliss is a close friend and associate of her husband, a filmmaker, who had stayed with them for a brief while before he went to shoot in Kerala. This other is no outsider because he is a friend of the husband. At another level the Ravana here is not Raghav but curiously the husband who inflicts greater tortures than the agent who brings in the crisis hence he is weaker than the washer man. The husband's role keeps shifting. Janaki's observation about her husband, "If he had time, your Saab would start counting the minutes between when I finish a case and come home." [210] prepares us for the final scene of confrontation between the two and also shows amply the weak and ineffectual nature of the husband. Even the picture that Raghav had clicked before the couple could settle to a comfortable pose, speaks of their incomplete bliss and unattainable happiness. As their posture, their happiness too is suspended.

Janaki's refusal to prove her innocence parallels Sita's refusal to prove her purity the second time. Thus like the mythical Sita, she is asked by the patriarchal voices to prove her devotion and testify herself. In both the cases the burden of proving the purity of her motives and intentions lies with the women because the notion of honour or chastity is a contested idea and

the woman's body or person or character becomes the contested space that the patriarchal voices can control and dominate. Janaki in the story refuses to explain or justify her relationship with the other and leaves the house like Sita in the scriptures who refused to the fire test the second time. Janaki leaves the house refusing to be cowed down or accept the accusations. When she agitatedly drives away, she makes a choice and prefers to go away almost like the exile that the mythical Sita was forced into and abandoned but in refusing to plead for mercy, both are united. In another story 'Sita's Letter to Her Unborn Daughter' by Chandra Ghosh Jain is a letter that the mother writes to her unborn daughter, Pakhi, free-spirited like a bird, who is beyond male bounds and prescriptions. Weaved into the letter is the story of Vaidehi, the mother writing the letter and who was alienated like the mythical Sita, so the letter is an introspection and a journey into her own self. Vaidehi cannot relate or connect to her mother, who is an ambitious and pushing politician compromising her principles and honor for small gains and favours or to her brother, who is detached and unconnected to anyone. Vaidehi admits unknown fears that seized her while she was growing up, her eyes show "silent grief" and her seething anger for her mother, who wanted to use her growing daughter as a pawn to ensnare wily and lustful politicians and then blackmail them. Vaidehi is rebellious and uncompromising and unforgiving and dislikes her name and wishes she were like Surpanakha who, "gave in to her wanton desires" [225] and be more assertive of her choices.

Her association with Varun leads to a chaotic lifestyle and she experiments with alcohol, cigarettes and drugs as a protest and also to assert her presence in the world. Suppressed and caught between a domineering mother and a preferred brother, she suffered while growing up and after marriage with a demanding parasitical husband, Varun, the unborn daughter is her only solace.

Vaidehi is more capable than her husband, who is basically dependent on her and his failures in business add to his frustrations and he becomes overtly jealous and possessive. She feels emotionally drained trying to boost a husband and also allaying his suspicions. The letter also talks about her guilt in succumbing to the pressures of a patriarchal set-up that insists on letting the unborn girl-child go. There are subtle hints that she will have to drop the child and agree to see it. Her letter is an assertion of the only bond that she has as she is disconnected and alienated from the others- namely her mother, brother and husband. There are strong indications that she is not bonded to any of these and can only connect to the child growing within her. She is living in a metaphysical, emotional exile because she cannot relate to a estranged mother, an indifferent brother or a suspicious and domineering husband, "like Sita I am all alone. My soul is in exile." [229] And with the daughter she will be hopeful of sunshine and happiness, "With you holding my hands I also hope to touch the shimmering colours of the rainbow." [229] Even after she promises to be strong and protective about her daughter, she has to let her go and watch helplessly her daughter go.

In a creative piece 'Sita in my Dreams' written by Anamika in Hindi and translated into English, Sita turns out to be the daughter that Mandodari had abandoned after she was born. Hence the two women are bound by more than the Lanka episode and Ravana's interest and forceful abduction of Sita. It is also about Sita in her private space and her assertion of her choices.

Contrary to popular perception and interpretation, Sita is seen asserting and indicating her choices. When Rama is ordered to leave for the forest, he comes to Sita and tells her to be respectful to the new king and fulfill all the duties expected of her, Sita strongly retorts saying

that she cannot obey one “who has taken away your right to be anointed King”. She even tells him that he can do so, mocking his unquestioned obedience, “You are welcome to this obedience and ignominy, not me!”

The narrative voice compares her to the pitcher that she is washing. The motif of the pitcher surfaces throughout because women are like the water the pitcher contains, “fluid, lambent, taking whatever form of the pitcher she is poured into”[234] and the male ego is like the pitcher, fragile containers that demarcates bounds for women and the women must stay contented within those male prescriptions of demarcations. The metaphor of the pitcher becomes significant because Sita was cast away by her mother, Mandodari in a pitcher and left to be taken to far shores to be “incarnated”[234] so that she could come back to punish and destroy the “unjust and uncaring” Ravana. The pitcher motif binds all the women together in the story – Sita who had transgressed the boundaries set by Laxmana, Mandodari who had entered forbidden zones of disobedience by drinking the blood from a “forbidden receptacle”[234] and Surpanakha who crossed the bounds of propriety by expressing her sexual desires. The patriarchal society punishes all these women for crossing bounds and expressing their inherent selves, for asserting their choices, for choosing to cross thresholds.

Among the many stories that have been consigned to oblivion and the mainstream culture has obliterated is the one that is prevalent in a version of Ramayana in the north-east where both Sita and Ravana are seen post their deaths. They are in a forest and chance to see each other. They have aged and are alone, going through a phase of introspection and rediscovering their selves. The forest becomes the retreat into the inner space where they can introspect and ruminate. Sita’s sons are taken away from her and she is seen playing the rudra veena which is now her identity and her expression of herself. The patriarchal presences again come in the form of Ravana, who though is subdued and lonely, defeated and wandering, is demanding.

He confesses that he had always been in love with her since the time he first set his eyes on her- during the swamvayar and had decided to follow her fate closely and had been watching her. All that happened later was fated to happen and was guided by his lust. He demands that she must come to him as she is deserted by Rama, who is more loyal to the whims of his subjects than to the needs of his wife. Her demands that she teach him to play the rudra veena because he wants to find fulfillment in music and rediscover himself. Sita turns him away thus making herself and denying entry or intrusion into her private space.

In Amit Chaudhari’s story, ‘An Infatuation’ Sita’s presence is minimal though it becomes a significant point of reference. The story is about Surpanakha, Ravana’s sister whose bold gaze and explicit sexual desire contrasts with the demure and shy Sita. While the former is assertive about her choices and sexual preferences, Sita is seen as the epitome of decency and propriety, who stays within the confines of the house limiting herself to the thresholds and Surpanakha is the deviant and thus she is punished by the patriarchal order.

The two women bear a lot of comparison. Sita also becomes Surpanakha when she transgresses boundaries and flouts patriarchal rules and impositions. So while Surpanakha’s nose is cut, Sita is forcefully abducted and kept a prisoner. The woman’s body becomes a space to be contested and violated and abused. Surpanakha’s cruel punishment by Lakshmana on the orders of Rama is equal to the punishment that Sita receives when she is abandoned. Their reactions of horror and shock are also similar and become an ironical comment on the King and a God who was known to be so kind and righteous. He seems so callous when he pronounces the judgement on the two women, In his self-absorption he is at first flattered by Surpanakha’s attention and

concedes proudly that he has been chosen over his brother but soon becomes tired when she asserts her claim over him and hence punishes. When he tires of the plaything he throws it away so casually. Her shock parallels that of Sita's when the latter is abandoned in the forest to humour the whim of a self-obsessed King.

Sita thus has been reinvented and rewritten. Her story is the story of the Indian womanhood and needs to be retold and revisited to define womanhood and to prevent more stereotypical interpretations of both Sita and Indian womanhood and further to rescue it from patriarchal conspiracies that willingly would prefer to set new modes of prescriptions of behavior for Indian women.

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