

BONDING AND LEARNING IN K.R.SRINIVASA IYENGAR'S *SITAYANA*

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Abstract

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengars's *Sitayana*, (1987) sub-titled *Epic of Earth-Born*, is the re-telling of the *Ramayana*. *Sitayana* means "the journey of Sita", and is the Heroine's Journey of progressive learning process. *Sitayana* is the narrative of Sita, in which the original *Ramayana* story is retold giving import to Sita's life. This *magnum opus* of Iyengar presents the entire life-cycle of Sita, of her birth, girlhood, womanhood, education, spiritual attainment and so on and has also numerous elements unknown in the early version of the *Ramayana*. The most significant improvisation made by Iyengar is to detail the "female-bonding" that Sita cultivates with different female members around her, through which she learns value-lessons and puts into use in the course of her life. *Sitayana* presents different types of "female-bonding" – the sibling bonding, mother-daughter bonding, Guru-sishya relationship, mentorship, friendship and sisterhood. The present paper deals with the bonding of Sita during her adolescence.

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengars's *Sitayana*, (1987) sub-titled as *Epic of Earth-Born*, is the re-telling of the *Ramayana*. The author thus indicates that Sita, the protagonist of this epic not only is not born of a human womb but also has an in-born ecological awareness. *Sitayana* means "the journey of Sita", just as the *Ramayana* means "journey of Rama". *Sitayana* is the Heroine's Journey, a progressive learning process, punctuated with many steps. Sita is the foundling child of King Janaka of *Mithila*, founded in a furrow, when he is engaged in ploughing the ground. Hence, she is the Earth-Born. *Sitayana* is the narrative of Sita, in which the original *Ramayana* story is retold giving import to Sita's life. However, the author sees to it the incidents of original *Ramayana* are kept intact. *Sitayana* is not as voluminous as the *Ramayana*, has seven books like the *Ramayana* but with the different captions of the cantos, namely *Mithila*, *Ayodhya*, *Aranya*, *Asoka*, *Yuddha*, *Rajya* and *Ashrama*. *Sitayana* is K.R.Srinivasa Iyengars's *magnum opus* that presents the entire life-cycle of Sita, of her birth, girlhood, womanhood, education, spiritual attainment and so on. Besides the war account, the epic has numerous elements unknown in the early version of the *Ramayana*. The significant change in *Sitayana* is from Rama to Sita, from the rational-linear masculine to the psychic-integral feminine world-view.

K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar also takes the support of the *Kamba Ramayana*, and Tulasidas' *Ramacharitamana*s. The author presents the pleasant upbringing of Sita as a girl. She is not confined in the palace and remains as a delicate, shy girl; instead her father King Janaka, hailed as "Raja-rishi" meaning "a saint-king", makes her along with her sisters, visit the several ashramas situated in the forest, so that she and her sisters would learn what the commoners' life is in general. Iyengar particularly portrays Sita's involvement with the eco-systems and environment that seem to substantiate the view that she is earth-born. The actions, reactions and instincts manifested by Sita at every juncture of her long and arduous life are treated in an excellent way. The values that she enshrined and adhere to at every point in the course of a demanding life, are the values of womanly virtue held sacred by countless generations of Indians. It is this epic that has shaped the ethos of a large majority of Indians. Therefore, any effort to revive the study of the epic is a positive measure towards strengthening the moral fibre of the society. Though Sita is considered as an *avatar*, she must also be seen as an ordinary girl who, through her experiences progresses mentally and spiritually. The special feature of *Sitayana* is the author's skilful handling of Sita's relationship with the outside world, the lessons she learns through her experiences that mould her character to an empowered person and make her become a prototype of woman-kind. The author's talent lies in blending this unique aspect in the well-known plot of the *Ramayana*. Ahana Lakshmi, the grand-daughter of Dr. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar writes in her article, "The Founding Princess of Mithila: K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar's *Sitayana*":

The narration draws primarily on Valmiki's *Ramayana* but there is also the influence of Tulsidas and Kamban apart from the extensive influence of the times, especially when *Sitayana* was being written (in the early nineteen eighties). Thus, while there is a good deal of direct translation from Valmiki, there is also plenty of improvisation, though there is never a deviation in the personality of the character from the original. The book is not only about Sita, but also on all the other women who appear in the story, elaborating on their thoughts and thought-processes making it obviously women-centric. While providing the 'necessary ballast and scaffolding', Iyengar weaves into his narration, events and actions that one does not commonly hear and viewpoints that are not highlighted in most narratives, and in a manner that is contemporaneous as well. (<http://kiskikahani.openspaceindia.org/articles/the-founding-princess-of-mithila-kr-srinivasa-iyengars-sitayana>)

The most significant improvisation made by Iyengar is to detail the "female-bonding" that Sita cultivates with different female members around her, through which she learns value-lessons and puts into use in the course of her life. By elaborately talking on this aspect, Iyengar forwards an assertive message to the present-day young women, the need to promote healthy relationship with fellow-women that would make them psychologically robust, mentally lively and spiritually energetic. With such an exercise, a community of "naari shakthi", Women Power, can be created to make the society wholesome. *Sitayana* presents different types of "female-bonding" – the sibling bonding, mother-daughter bonding, Guru-sishya relationship, mentorship, friendship and sisterhood.

In two cantos 4 and 5, titled "Sita's Birth and fostering", and "The Girlhood of Sita" respectively in the Book One "Mithila" of *Sitayana*, Iyengar presents a splendid picture of the birth of the "Earth-born" and her siblings and their fostering in the palace of Mithila. After the

advent of Sita, Queen Sunayana gave birth to a daughter Urmila, “and they teamed almost like twins” (*Sitayana*, 32). Likewise, King Janaka’s younger brother Kusadhvaja was blessed with two daughters Mandavi and Srutakirti. These Siblings pass together their childhood and girlhood years. Iyengar records: “In God’s garden of growing consciousness,/ Sita and the videhan sisters/ orchestrated their symphonies/ of progressive Becoming” (33). Of the four sisters, Sita shows excellence and is a “Comrade and leader at once, Sita gave/ her sisters, and all girlhood/ in Mithila, an accession of hope,/ faith, courage and holiness” (33). The commoners of Mithila, adore Sita, the Earth-Born as unique gift of gods, “Responsive to the constant and subtle/ calls of circumambient/ Nature, the wealth of flora and fauna,/ the sisters with communion (34). Their agenda for education consists of various lakes, rivers, underground water, the cosmos, in short all that is made by the Book of Nature. Thus the sibling friendship of Sita with her sisters Urmila, Mandavi, Srutakirti, and other Mithilan friends essay learning and self-growth characterized with the dynamics of female friendship. The modern psychologists encourage sibling-bonding, and confirm that such a binding remains long-lasting and create healthy-minded individuals. Jeffrey Kluger (b. 1954), a senior writer of TIME magazine and author of *The Sibling Effect: What the Bonds Among Brothers and Sisters Reveal About Us* (2012), writes in his article "The New Science of Siblings" in the TIME magazine (July 10, 2006):

From the time they are born, our brothers and sisters are our collaborators and co-conspirators, our role models and cautionary tales. They are our scolds, protectors, goads, tormentors, playmates, counselors, sources of envy, objects of pride. They teach us how to resolve conflicts and how not to; how to conduct friendships and when to walk away from them. Sisters teach brothers about the mysteries of girls; brothers teach sisters about the puzzle of boys. Our spouses arrive comparatively late in our lives; our parents eventually leave us. Our siblings may be the only people we’ll ever know who truly qualify as partners for life.

Kluger affirms that the siblings’ relationship and what it promotes during childhood of a person continues to upgrade his/her personality throughout one’s life. **Siblings** play a unique role in one another’s lives that simulates the companionship of **parents** as well as the power and assistance of **friends**. Siblings generally spend more time with each other during childhood than they do with parents or anyone else, and sibling relationships are often the longest-lasting relationship in individuals’ lives. Developmental Psychology has contributed through research the significance of the Sibling Bonding. The US Department of Health and Human services in 2006 publishing a bulletin on "The Importance of Siblings" states, “Sibling relationships are emotionally powerful and critically important not only in childhood but over the course of a lifetime. Siblings form a child’s first peer group, and children learn social skills, particularly in managing conflict, from negotiating with brothers and sisters. Sibling relationships can provide a significant source of continuity throughout a child’s lifetime and are likely to be the longest relationships that most people experience.”

While Sita with her sisters and some other Mithilan friends play, they sometimes tease Janaki’s ‘earth born’ condition. Sita, start rising queries as “we’re all earth-born, aren’t we?(38). Sita has strong filial feeling not only with her single human mother but also with all mothers of Mithila. Sita points out: “Of course I love Mother Sunayana,/ I love Mandavi’s mother/ and every mother in Mithila, and/ all mothers in Videha” (37). More than that Sita has a deep affinity with Earth. At times her whole being seems to be enfolded with dear Earth-Mother. She alone is concerned with the well-being, growth and maturity for all her creations. Sometimes her

anguished heart experiences sympathy for this poor long-suffering Mother when she is unduly exploited. Iyengar makes his protagonist voice out the vibrations she feels towards Mother Earth:

There are times when my whole being -- my soul
and heart and body's nerve-cells
and all the aggregates that comprise me --
chime with this dear Earth-Mother. . . . (37)
Millions her progeny every minute,
and infinite her concerns
for their well-being, growth and maturing,
and infinite too her groans!
Sometimes I needs must wring my anguished heart
in impotent sympathy
for this our poor long-suffering Mother,
the exploited and disowned. . . . (38)

The author presents an exemplary discourse in about 68 lines, "the mystery of Sita's mystic ties with the divine Earth-Mother" (40). The whole speech is like a prayer and is highly philosophical. As she narrates the "dear Mother's saga of trial and error and becoming" (40) to resurrect herself to the present splendour, Sita talks about the strange feeling she experiences:

In times of clairvoyant intensity--
although far between and few --
I have had the oppressive sensation
of playing the Daughter's role!
Almost a shudder would pass through me then,
and I would feel invaded
by an elemental ocean darkness
and cast down spite of myself. . . . (41)

The peculiar, unusual association that Sita has towards Mother Earth, on the one hand substantiates that she is Earth-born, and on the other, relates itself to the modern scientific invention, "Gaia Theory", formulated by the British Scientist, Dr. James Lovelock in the 1960s. The theory asserts that living organisms and their inorganic surroundings have evolved together as a single living system that greatly affects the chemistry and conditions of Earth's surface. Scientists believe that this "Gaian system" self-regulates global temperature, atmospheric content, ocean salinity, and other factors in an "automatic" manner. Earth's living system appears to keep conditions on our planet just right for life to persist. In Greek Mythology, "Gaia" is the personification of Earth and one of the primordial deities. "Gaia" as a metaphor has led to a fresh thinking in Cultural Studies, namely, "Gaia Paradigm", augmented by Martin Ogle, the founder of Entrepreneurial Earth LLC. He has done elaborate study of Gaia Theory and also conducts workshops applying this perspective to education, business, energy conservation, food production and other practical pursuits. He says in his presentation, "*The "Gaia Paradigm" – What it is and Why it matters*" : "I envision the Gaia Paradigm . . . as a context within which the potential wisdom of all traditions can blend with scientific discovery in all disciplines, yielding new cultural narratives and new ways of living. Gaia Paradigm can be the catalyst by which we crack through the shells that limit our thinking and discover ways to thrive as a seamless continuum of our planet!" (<http://entrepreneurialearth.com/the-gaia-paradigm-what-it-is-and-why-it-matters/> Mar 6 2015). Such an elucidation opens way for *Sitayana*, even for the original

Ramayana, to get interpreted in terms of ecological analysis, showing that these texts of great tradition are no aliens to science. Iyengar does not fail to point out the siblings' dedication to Mother Earth. Through their friend Jayanti, who perhaps is overwhelmed by the girls' bonding with this Earth, the author in about 36 lines describes their special affinity. While Sita finds in Bhooma, "the Mother of manifestation and sustainer of all life," (39) Urmila sees the earth as an artist and her variegated hues present her alphabet for the painting. Srutakirti's love for Bhooma is like that of a grandmother at home, "for whom nothing is too burdensome, whose caress is heavenly, who carries the load of all mothers" (39), and Mandavi's devotion to Earth is one of divine partnership, "the Supreme Giver, the Goddess Sakambari" (39). Though the three girls do not have the intensity of Sita, they do understand the value of Mother Earth, and readily get bound to her. The psychologists view that the siblings may influence one another in much the same way that peers do, especially during adolescence. These relationships may even compensate for the negative psychological impact of not having friends and may provide individuals with a sense of self-worth.

Sita and her sisters, being the Videhan princesses, perhaps, had only a small group of selected friends. Iyengar, however, indicates this fact as he mentions about "their time of fostering" when "they would sometimes, consorting with friends, / engage in banter, or tease / one another, or Janaki's 'earth-born' aura would raise strange queries" (37). In Canto 6 titled, "What Dreams May Come", he makes a passing remark while he talks about Sita's dreams and that "she used to compare notes with her sisters/and other close companions" (46). Friendship is a relationship of mutual affection between people. Friendship is a stronger form of interpersonal bond than an association and possesses characteristics such as affection, sympathy, empathy, honesty, altruism, mutual understanding, and compassion, enjoyment of each other's company, trust, and the ability to be oneself, express one's feelings, and make mistakes without fear of judgment from the friend. In the sequence of an individual's emotional development, friendships come after parental bonding and before pair bonding. In the intervening period between the end of early childhood and the onset of full adulthood, friendships are often the most important relationships in the emotional life of the adolescent, and are often more intense than relationships later in life. The absence of friends can be emotionally damaging. In childhood, friendships are often based on the sharing of toys, and the enjoyment received from performing activities together. These friendships are maintained through affection, sharing, and creative playtime. Friends or companions - male or female - enjoy a special status in literature. Though the author of *Sitayana* has not elaborated the friendship-bond between Sita, her sisters and their friends, he forwards a pithy statement that they consort with friends, engage in banter, or tease one another, and the friends too without any reservation raise questions regarding Sita's 'Earth-born' status. Jayanti, their friend seems to be quite observant as she clearly distinguishes the affinity of the sisters towards Mother-Earth. She clearly speaks out her feelings without any fear and has an ability to be herself. Perhaps, Sita thus learns human behaviour through them. Iyengar also talks about the art of learning of the siblings through the simple games they play. "The princesses had their educative games and diversions as well" (43), says the author. Sita often plays chess with her sisters and while they enjoy the battling of the rival armies, they also understand that "ingenuity, Rules of the Game and Chance strove for victory". Iyengar also points to Sita's liking for the game of Snakes and Ladders, since "the entire suspense-charged exercise / seemed a vast education" (43). In about 50 lines, the author describes the nuances of the game, converting it as a great metaphor in terms of "half-frightened and half-edified" (43) Sita.

It was a marvellous education

without tears, for the lessons
seeped within, and seasoned the very cells
and blood-streams of the body.
Sometimes, for a variation, Sita
opted for another kind
of chart, symbolising the soul's journey
through the tunnels to the Light. . . . (44)

The innocent bonding of the siblings develops into close friendship in their adolescence, with a different kind of matured learning. Female friendships are emotionally deeper and involve a higher level of self-disclosure.

Apart from learning while playing, the princesses receive high level of wisdom-education from different sources. Mithila's high priest, Sage Satananda is always ready to impart instruction and often engages them in useful dialectics. Iyengar writes: "Once the chase for Truth was in full swing / it was sometimes uncertain / whether the pupil or the teacher felt / more rewarded in the end" (41). He enchants them with the Vedic lore "redolent of seminal myths and Truths / and profound symbol figures" (42), perhaps more in a playful mode provoking the girls to question him. Their wise questions obviously surprise the teacher and make him a learner. He retells with meticulous detail the saga of Savitri's rescue of Satyavan, the Soul of Truth. Iyengar seems to suggest that serious studies can be taught to young children through story-telling method that will inspire them and make them wiser. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, being a great teacher, quietly shares his experience through the knowledge-imparting discussions between the Sage and the sisters. This is verily the "Guru-Sishya" (Master-Disciple) bond hailed from time immemorial. From early childhood itself, young minds are driven towards seeking knowledge and blessed are those who get the guidance to move away from the darkness of ignorance towards illuminating wisdom. In Indian scriptures, since Vedic age, the significance of 'Guru', the teacher, and 'Sishya', the student or follower, is highlighted. The syllable 'gu' means shadow, the syllable 'ru', he who disperses them. Because of the power to disperse darkness, the guru is thus named. In the modern times, the guru is more of a friend, philosopher, facilitator and guide for their sishyas. The rigidity of the roles of the teacher and his pupil has ended and a role reversal is a possibility. The changing times have entailed the pupil to be a teacher in some domains and the teacher could be a pupil himself as age is not a barrier to learning. The "Guru-Sishya" relationship is as strong as ever, only perspectives have changed. Arti Chopra, Principal, Amity International School, Gurgaon has said in a message to the *Indian Express* dated 26th August, 2013 thus:

Teaching in today's classrooms is certainly more challenging. It means identifying the needs and requirements of individual learners, adapting teaching-learning strategies to specific situations and making a constant effort to perfect the art of the ever-evolving character of teaching. Classrooms have become places where both teachers and students learn. Unquestioning acceptance of what the teacher says as gospel does not exist any longer. Teachers today are facilitators who open the door for their students. But changes notwithstanding, the special relationship between the teacher and the taught will continue to thrive in this dynamic environment. (<http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/the-gurushishya-bond-is-as-strong-as-ever/1159992>)

It is interesting to note that K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar indicates in his *Sitayana*, the trend-setting in a different sort of teaching to the girls especially in the Epic age. In the present day, this kind of

"Guru-Sishya" bond is identified as "Mentorship", a relationship in which a more experienced, knowledgeable person (Mentor) guiding a less experienced person (Mentee). It is a learning and development partnership between someone with vast experience and someone who wants to learn.

In Cantos 6, 7 and 8, Iyengar talks about another kind of "Guru-Sishya" bonding or "Mentorship" which is more akin to "Mother-Daughter" bonding. "The Mithilan quartet" (54), says the author, receives the rare privilege of receiving "Mentorship" training from great scholarly-women like Gargi and Maitreyi. Gargi Vachaknavi was an ancient Indian philosopher. In *Vedic Literature*, she is honored as a great natural philosopher, renowned expounder of the *Vedas*. She is known as *Brahmavadini*, a person with knowledge of *Brahma Vidya*. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, her name is prominent as she participates in the *brahmayajna*, a philosophic debate organized by King Janaka and challenges the sage Yajnavalkya with perplexing questions on the issue of *atman* (soul). She is also said to have written many hymns in the *Rigveda*. She remained a celibate all her life and was held in veneration by the conventional Hindus. Iyengar, in Canto 5, briefly mentions about King Janaka's "sessions of exhilarating thoughts" (42) and of Gargi-Yajnavalkya's sinuous argument, and Sita following with close attention the lead of Gargi Vachaknavi. The open minded Sita used to accompany Janaka whenever he visits the Hermitages in and around Mithila and be a silent learner. She, as a young adolescent, eagerly learns the art of wise worshipful living from Gargi and Maitreyi, later after her marriage with Rama, from other rishipatnis like Anasuya, Lopamudra, Ahalya and Arundati. The author remarks in Canto 7 entitled "Initiation": "For Sita, as for her sisters, the years / of their girlhood were indeed / a seed-time of unceasing unfoldment / and growth within and without" (54). The author seems to be quite careful to point out that for Sita and her siblings, it is not all work and no play. Sita, particularly inspired by Gargi's image and her rich flavour of debates, remains absorbed and gets lost. Likewise, Gargi is drawn towards Sita and notices her "sitting aloof and absorbed / with a look of wondrous comprehension / ranging from earth to heaven" (54). Whenever the pensive girl approaches her for enlightenment, "Gargi gave her time freely, and between them grew / a mature understanding" (54). The understanding is like that between a mother and daughter, with the mother personality acting as a mentor.

"Mentoring" is a process that always involves communication and is relationship-based, a process for the informal transmission of knowledge. In the present day, "Mentoring" is done professionally by employing techniques for the improvement of organizations. The focus of mentoring is to develop the whole person and so the techniques are broad and require wisdom in order to be used appropriately. Different techniques may be used by mentors according to the situation and the mindset of the mentee, and the techniques used in modern organizations can be found in ancient education systems, such as seen in the Indian "Gurukulam" and in the Academy of Socrates. "Mentoring has been an effective practice for transferring knowledge and skills since the beginning of time and formalized mentoring has become more fashionable over the past decade. Life, professional and spiritual mentoring are just a couple of examples of mentoring. "Mentoring is a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction", [says] John C. Crosby" (<http://iamsignificant.ca/christian-life-coaching/what-is-a-spiritual-mentor>). A mentor is a model or an example for a person to imitate in an effort to see certain desirable aspects of the mentor's life reproduced in his/her own life. Iyengar writes that "Maitreyi's counselling, the image / of Gargi, the rich flavour / of the debates, all inspired Maithili / to hanker after that life" (54). A Spiritual Mentor can help develop a deep sense of the presence of God in everyday life and help a person cultivate practices for a rich, vibrant life. Gargi and Maitreyi are spiritual

mentors. Gargi takes the princesses to "an exclusive Mandala / ensconced amidst the luxuriant growth / of the Videhan uplands" (55), where the girls stay for a while exposing themselves to the Mandala's integrated way of life. The inmates of the community belong to different parts of the country engaged in various kinds of work labouring towards perfection. The Mithilan sisters mixed freely with the whole community. The congregation is presided over by the sainted Mother of the Mandala , "a glory of golden apocalypse / a column of effulgence . . . / that marvellous catalyst / of change and transformation, / whose smile had the power to redeem all / from their crass mortality" (55). Iyengar explains this unique encounter:

What struck Maithili with peculiar force
was the nature of the bond
that held such a diversity of men,
women, children together.
'Twas a microcosm, in fact, of the world
entire, and composed loners,
householders, with their families, hermits,
ecstatics, hermitresses.
But, everyone -- child, adult, the elect --
relied on his psychic link
with the one beloved Mother of all,
like the wheel's spokes and the hub. . . . (56)
All ties and labels -- father, mother, son,
daughter, husband, wife, comrade --
were feeble ancillaries, deriving
only from the link Divine. . . . (56)

This is a different type of bonding and learning that the Videhan princesses have, as they surprisingly watch the inmates do not seem to mind the kind of work they do, "minuscule, menial or monotonous" (57), as they all happily live as one community, one family. Such an excellent environment reminds the Indian mind of the *Upanishadic* statement, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the Sanskrit phrase found in the *Maha Upanishad* meaning, "the world is one family". This phrase is engraved in the entrance hall of the Parliament of India. *Enlightened Leadership* is a programme for leadership training that informs in its website thus:

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam is a philosophy that inculcates an understanding that the whole world is one family. It is a philosophy that tries to foster an understanding that the whole of humanity is one family. It is a social philosophy emanating from a spiritual understanding that the whole of humanity is made of one life energy. . . . *Vasudha* means the earth, *Eva* means emphasizing and *Kutumbakam* means a family, the entire phrase meaning that the whole earth is just one family.
(<http://www.enlightenedleadershipnow.com/home/power-of-unity-or-oneness/what-is-spiritual-leadership/vasudhaiva-kutumbakam>)

The concept originates from *Hitopadesha*, a collection of *Sanskrit* fables in prose and verse, created by the author to instruct young minds the philosophy of life in an easy way so that they are able to grow into responsible adults. The whole philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is an integral part of the *Hindu* Philosophy. The concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is replicated in the Tamil poem, "*Yaadum oore yaavarum kelir*" (To us all towns are one, all men our kin) found in the early text *Puranaanooru*, composed by the well-known poet Kaniyan Poongunranar.

The article also mentions Werner Karl Heisenberg (1901-1976), a German theoretical physicist and one of the key pioneers of quantum mechanics, who was awarded Nobel Prize for Physics in 1932. He called the Universe a participating Universe. That is, the Universe has a meaning only when we are interacting with the Universe. The greatest discovery of the quantum physics is that the Universe is neither discrete nor continuous. It is a participative Universe, an inter-dependent, inter-twined, inter-woven, inter-related, and inter-connected Universe. We cannot live as separate islands. This is the discovery of the outer world and the outer science. Iyengar seems to suggest that Sita and her sisters must have learnt this great truth found in the present days through their participation in the Mandala life. He correctly says: "The invisible atom, equally / with the distant galaxies, / made the grand orchestrated symphony / of the Hymn of Existence" (57). To the girls, this is a kind of active training emphasized in the modern educational system. The Mother, in one of the meditative evening sessions, blesses Sita specially, tells her that she has come "missioned to this earth" (59), hugs her with the ritual motion of benediction. This initiation brings in the new light of knowledge in Sita. The author affirms: "Sita with the light of her new knowledge / fraternised without speaking. / A new certitude marked Sita's movements/ / and formulations of speech, / and this was reflected in Urmila, /Mandavi, Srutakirti. . . (59)

This is a good example of Peer bonding and mentoring. Peer mentoring is a form of mentorship that usually takes place between a person who has lived through a specific experience (peer mentor) and a person who is new to that experience (the peer mentee). An example is, an experienced student being a peer mentor to a new student, the peer mentee, in a particular subject, or in a new school. Peer mentors are chosen for their sensibility, confidence, social skills and reliability. Obviously, Sita is the right peer mentor to her sisters and perhaps, to her other Mithilan friends too.

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar talks about two different occasions, when Sita without her siblings undergoes singular bonding that expose her to remarkable learning. One is her meeting with Maitreyi, Sage Yajnavalkya's spouse, and another with Devi Manasi whom she sees along with Gargi after her return from the Mother's Mandala with her sisters. The first experience is narrated in the Canto 6, "What Dreams may Come", which is about adolescent Sita's disturbance at her weird dreams, "more alive than life, more charged /with precipitancy, more wide-ranging/ in its ramifications" (47). One day, after taking her father's permission, Sita takes a voyage to the forest-dwelling of Rishi Yajnavalkya to meet his spouse, Maitreyi, meaning "friendly one", and is one of the two wives of the Rishi; the other one is Katyayani. She is mentioned in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. Maitreyi is cited as an example of the educational opportunities available to women in Vedic India, and their philosophical achievements. She is considered a symbol of Indian intellectual women. She is extolled as *Brahmavadin*, a female expounder of the *Vedas*. Maitreyi kindly welcomes Maithili and enquires about her uneasiness, and Sita tells her about the diverse dream-sequences she has had. The saint lady "could see what was hid from others, / she was shocked by what she saw, / but presently, beyonding the beyond, / she felt amply reassured" (49). She forges full, assuring rapport by taking Sita's hands in hers, calmly starts answering the young girl's profound questions. Maitreyi understands that she cannot evade Sita's portentous questions and tells her that she need not be afraid of anything, since she does not know what person she is, since "a veiled divinity shapes infallibly [her] terrestrial " (52). She continues like a modern psychoanalyst who examines his patient in his consulting-room:

All you witnessed in your dream-sequences/are doubtless down to the
earth . . .yes, even the dreams you see must project/the substance of Truth

alone, and you're being prepared unconsciously
 for the still unborn future.
 This is the central paradox, Sita,
 the world is one *and* many,
 and all fragmentation, contradiction
 and self-division are false. . . .
 These visitations and intimations,
 O Maithili, that infest
 the dim corridors of the unconscious
 play their own messenger-roles. . . . (52)

Maitreyi with her patient, tranquil teaching allays young Sita's fear and implants in her mind, the positive shield that the Mother's Grace is with her. Katyayani now enters, embraces Sita with the benevolence of motherly love that at once dispels "the lingering clouds of anxious speculation" (53). Iyengar writes:

Thus did the coming of Katyayani
 galvanise of a sudden
 the atmosphere of Maitreyi's chamber
 with an infectious sunshine.
 There were smiles all around, and queries followed
 queries, and Sita was charmed,
 the dull load on her mind slipped like a cloak,
 and she was seraph-like free. . . . (53)

Both these rishipatnis extend a "mother" bonding to this disturbed daughter and effect a composure to her troubled mind. Another "motherly" bonding and benediction is described in the Canto 8, "The Dome of Holiness", when sage Gargi takes Sita alone to yet another Ashrama set in the lower Himalayan range, made resplendent with the great Dome of Holiness, which is "far more / than an architectural feat: call it, / rather, a *mantra* in stone" (61). Gargi takes Sita to the presence of Devi Manasi, the throned Priestess of the place. In the interior space of the Dome, Sita sees "a Power, a Radiance, / something ageless, sexless, a beyonding / of human suppositions" (61). Mother Manasi gives Sita a spiritual initiation -- "Sita's vision seemed suddenly gifted / with an occult dimension" (63). Iyengar describes this gorgeous vision of Sita:

She saw with a plenary perception
 the merging of the big and small,
 the dissolution of categories
 and the crystalline oneness.
 The within and without universes
 became unseveable,
 and she saw the Tree in the seed, the Sun
 in the nethermost darkness.
 And the more she gazed, her consciousness
 new wings of discovery,
 and Manasi, Gargi, and herself too --
 all in one and one in all. . . . (64)

This is the Supreme Wisdom that a *Guru* imparts to his *sisya*, the wisdom that Arjuna receives from Lord Krishna in the *Kurukshetra* battlefield. In this tremendous experience, young Sita must have been trembling. The Mother, of course, has to bring her back to the empirical

awareness, wipes her tears and speaks to her "as a mother would" (64). She tells her that she thought it proper, she "should be exposed / to this kaleidoscopic / theatre of forms where all the roles change / and all identities fuse" (64). Mother Manasi apparently knows what is in store for Sita in future. She counsels her, saying:

It may be, with a destiny like yours,
you may have to face trails
far beyond the range of the average:
that's why this education.
In this unrelenting movement of Time --
in this cosmic living space --
remember, the centre is everywhere,
the circumference nowhere.
In times of terrific perplexity,
fear not but dive deep within,
look for the hub, the prime source of it all,
and you'll be sovereignly free. . . . (65)

Sita's bonding with Sages Gargi, Maitreyi, the Mother of Mandala and Mother Manasi is more than empirical Mother-daughter relationship, and more than the Guru-Sishya bonding. It is bonding and learning par excellence. A note must be added: K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar is a great devotee of the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, and has written her Biography, as dedication to this great soul. While the Mandala described in *Sitayana* correlates the *Auroville* founded by the Mother, the Dome of Holiness replicates the *Matri Mandir* in Auroville, which has been extolled as an architectural marvel. Finally, Sita is yet to receive bonding and learning as an adult also, from different rishipatnis later in her journey.

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