

Resurgence of Sita in Select Contemporary Narratives

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In recent years, Sita from the Ramayana has been reimagined as a strong, independent character, breaking away from her traditional image as the epitome of passive virtue. This reimagining in contemporary literature reflects a broader cultural shift aimed at empowering mythological women by reclaiming their stories. This research will focus on Sita's portrayal as a warrior and leader in works like *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* by Amish Tripathi and *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. By examining these narratives, the study will highlight how modern retellings emphasize Sita's strength, agency, and resilience, challenging patriarchal norms and offering new models of womanhood.

Keywords: Myth, Narrative, Sita, Ramayana, Women, Empowerment, Warrior.

Introduction

Myths, traditionally centered on heroic male characters, stem from the Greek word "Mythos," meaning "speech or word." As defined by The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms, myths are stories with unclear origins or authorship that explain religious beliefs (Childs 146). For decades, these myths have been analyzed from religious, social, ethical, and moral standpoints. Indian writers, in particular, have creatively reinterpreted and redefined epics and mythologies in new ways. This process, known as demythification, offers fresh perspectives on old myths by blending mythology with fiction an emerging trend in modern literature.

For past many decades, writers have been scrutinizing myths religiously, socially, ethically and morally. Myths have been used by many Indian writers in their creative pieces of literature. They have tried to reinterpret and redefine the epics and mythologies in unconventional style. De-mythification helps to understand myth from a new angle. Demythification or revisioning mythmaking is the confluence of mythology and fiction which is the most emerging trend in present literature.

Devdutt Pattanaik, in one of his interviews, differentiated mythological fiction and mythology. He said, "One must distinguish between mythological fiction and mythology. Mythological fiction is very popular as it is fantasy rooted in familiar traditional tales. Mythology itself is about figuring out worldviews of cultures— how people think in a culture" (Pattanaik). The critical discourse of de-mythifying attempts to reinterpret and reconstruct the old myths from a new perspective and is concerned with rethinking the past in relation to the present.

Epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the bottomless oceans in which one can dive and can come out with a new version of reality. This is the reason that there are so many versions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In the present era, there are a number of prolific writers who de-mythify these mythological texts and present them in a new light. Some of the popular writers include Devdutt Pattanaik, Amish Tripathi, Kavita Kane, Amit Majmudar etc. These writers are also known as revisionist myth-makers continuing with the tradition established by K.R.S. Iyengar who is regarded

as one of the earliest revisionist writer to give voice to the marginalized mythological characters in his works like *Sitayana* and *Satisptakam*.

Review of Literature

Sita's Ascent by Vayu Naidu is a novella published in 2012 by Penguin India. The book tells the story of Sita from the perspective of various characters that were the part of the journey of her life. Major characters like Rama, Lakshman, Soorpanaka, Urmila, Lava, Mandodri and Hanuman are assigned respective chapters as a narrative. The author portrays Sita as damsel in distress and a victim of misunderstanding. The book illuminates the physical and emotional landscape of a woman in exile.

In Search of Sita is an anthology of collection of poems, essays, commentaries and paintings which surround the character of Sita. The book was edited by Namita Gokhale and Malashri Lal, and was published by Penguin India in 2009. The book critically analyses the various forms and interpretations of Sita as a wife and a goddess. The character of Sita is depicted with strength and courage. Sita is compared with various women characters in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

C.V.Vaidya's *Epic India* presents the detailed account of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* from a novel perspective. It was published in 2001 by Asian Educational Services. He has described social, political, intellectual and religious conditions of the country during the period. The book is divided into eighteen chapters, mainly describing the ideas, concepts and institutions of old Vedic

period in relation to caste, race, food, marriage, religion etc. In this text, he has referred the *Upanishads*, *Manusmriti* and some Greek authors also.

Shamik Dasgupta's *Ramayana 3392 AD*: Mahavinaash has three volumes which were published in 2007 by the Virgin Comics publication. It is a graphic novel. The story of *Ramayana* is set in the futuristic time. The book portrays the future where the lives of human beings are in danger because of the Asuras, and Prince Rama and his brother Lakshman rise as saviors of human race. There is a division of world into two parts—Nark and Aryavarta. Nark is the abode of demons and Aryavarta is presented as the abode of humans. Being a graphic novel, the main focus is on action.

Character-Portrayals in the Ramayana of Valmiki

A Systematic Representation is a published PhD thesis of Alois Wurm. It was published in 1976 by Ajanta Publications, New Delhi. The book critically analyses each character of *Ramayana*. The characters are divided into various categories such as Vanavasi characters, the Vanaras, Raksasa's, Courtly characters and the Heroic four. It investigates the characters on the grounds of social, psychological and intuitive exploration.

Fred Ramen's *Indian Mythology* discusses the culture and civilization of Indian subcontinent. The book was published in 2008 by Rosen Publishing Group, New York. The book tries to study the three major Hindu Gods- Brahman, Vishnu and Shiva. He examines the different incarnation of Lord

Vishnu, their forms and motifs. It also maps and explains the vital parts of the great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. He mainly emphasizes on how different civilizations had their impact on Indian Myths.

The paper “Myths and Puranas: Decolonization of Indian English Drama” by Nagraj Hokeyannavar starts with the definition of myth as “Myth is fictitious belief of the people in a popular manner”. There is further brief description of Purana, Ramayana and Mahabharata. These epics and Puranas provide great inspiration for the modern writers. Later in the paper, the author has cited many examples from the modern writers who have used the mythological themes in their works like Rabindra Nath Tagore, T.P. Kailasam, Girish Karnad, Uma Parameshwaran, etc.

Amish Tripathi’s *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, Tripathi masterfully reinvents the myth of Sita, presenting her as a post-feminist icon. As the prime minister of Mithila, Sita introduces numerous welfare schemes, demonstrating practicality and moral integrity in her actions and decisions, which fuel her confidence.

Historically, the Valmiki’s Ramayana has been regarded as the most authentic version and is also frequently presented as the foundation of all versions of the Ramayana. Maharishi Valmiki narrated the story of the sublime legacy of Rama, and presented Sita as passive, dutiful and tame. Sita is respected as the epitome of self-sacrifice, chastity and virtue.

Contemporary writers, however, have reimagined Sita from a new perspective,

depicting her as a warrior and a comparatively stronger character. These modern interpretations include Amish Tripathi’s *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, Devdutt Pattanaik’s *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana*, and Aditya Iyengar’s *Bhumika: A Story of Sita*. This shift portrays Sita as a dynamic figure with solidarity and frailties, reflecting her development in modern narratives.

Devdutt Pattnaik’s ‘*Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*’ offers a fresh take on the epic, highlighting themes like love, desire, greed, and malevolence through Sita’s eyes. Rather than offering new interpretations, Pattnaik retells the story with a slight Western touch, portraying Sita’s abduction by Ravana with gravity. The narrative is enriched by illustrations that bring the characters and events to life. Sita is portrayed as a devoted wife who faces numerous trials, including abandonment by Rama and tests of her chastity. This portrayal reflects societal tendencies to blame women for actions they didn’t commit, indicating a need for change.

In Amish Tripathi’s ‘*Sita: Warrior of Mithila*’, part of the Ram Chandra Series, Sita is depicted as a strong warrior, excelling in her roles as daughter, wife, and mother. She is outspoken, unafraid to question her husband Rama, and confident in her identity as the daughter of the Earth. Tripathi’s narrative, written in a multi-linear format, diverges from the traditional Ramayana by depicting a different site of exile. Sita takes charge in critical moments, showcasing her strength and agency.

Through these retellings, Sita is transformed from the myth of the devoted wife

into a powerful role model for modern women. Tripathi's depiction of her journey from an adopted girl to prime minister and eventually a goddess highlights the sacred power of the feminine. "The root of every tree that enters the earth whispers a name: Sita. Who is she? Do you know?"

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni masterfully transports readers into a new world with her novel 'The Forest of Enchantments'. This retelling, which she calls 'The Sitayan,' presents Sita's untold story from her perspective. Divakaruni not only highlights Sita's struggles and bravery but also brings to life the unheard voices of Mandodari, Sunaina, Urmila, and Kaikeyi. By creatively depicting these characters, she stays true to the original plot while emphasizing the powerful narrative of the 'feminine world of Sita'. Written in an autobiographical style, the novel aims to show the women of our epics as strong, and complex beings. Divakaruni herself expressed this goal in a December 1st, 2019 tweet.

Ajil de Silva, in the UNESCO Digital Library article "The Collective Dream of a Continent," notes that although the Mahabharata and Ramayana originated in India, they have been continually revived in history. Valmiki's Ramayana portrays Sita as wise and courageous, and examining her through various lenses offers new insights into women's history. In 'The Forest of Enchantments', Sita plays central role contemporizes her voice, blending it with the experiences of modern women.

Conclusion

Sita has often been misunderstood and misjudged as one of the most marginalized characters in the epic. The traditional image of Sita is now being reimagined to allow the modern woman to live freely, sending a strong message that no one should dictate how a woman lives her life. Women in epics were often viewed one-dimensionally, but Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni challenges this by portraying Sita as an equal and empowered character, not just a devoted daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. Her story encourages women to think critically and question patriarchal norms.

Over time, many versions of the Ramayana have emerged, each offering unique perspectives on Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, and Shurpanakha. The epic is rarely told from Sita's viewpoint, typically presenting her as Rama's companion or through other female characters. The Uttara Kanda section is dedicated to Sita and her struggles, highlighting her as a fierce and strong-willed woman who defies the challenges life throws her way. Events in her life illustrate her detachment from the existing social structure and her battle against patriarchy, asserting her own identity.

Sita is often depicted as either modest and apprehensive or fierce and free-spirited. Some texts view her as a symbol of sacrifice, while others portray her as a powerful character. Readers connect with her in different ways, either glorifying or marginalizing her in various retellings of the epic. Traces of Sita can be found in every modern woman today.

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