

Beyond the Golden Threshold: Reimagining Sita's Inner World in Kumudini's *Letters from the Palace*

Dr. Alka Rani Purwar



Professor & Head, Department of English, Dayanand Vedic College, Orai, U.P., India.

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In the contemporary transnational impulse, Ramayana has taken a new relevance all over the world. Embellished with the core issues of culture and tradition, it has been set as an example of morality amidst the society since ages. Contemporary socio-cultural issues like loyalty, family roles, feminine sensibility, environmental concern and the dilemma of choices and power-centres are well depicted in the form of mythical lore through this ancient epic. In *Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology* (2009), an anthology edited by Malashri Lal and Namita Gokhale comprises of essays, commentaries, interviews and creative writings by eminent writers, presenting various crisscross dimensions of Sita, the leading female protagonist of Ramayana. The general perception about Sita's character is her submissiveness, devoted conjugal sincerity, sacrificing ability and her unquestioning loyalty which present her as an archetypal figure in Indian society. Present paper intends to focus on the feminine sensibility of this ancient mythological figure, depicted by Kumudini in her short essay "Letters from the Palace" very effectively and artistically. The eminent Tamil author Kumudini has humanized the Sita myth by writing about Sita's imagined letters to her mother equipped with true feelings, emotions, longings and the psychology of a newly-wedded woman.

Keywords: Feminine Sensibility, mythology, culture, tradition, Letters.

Myths are an important part of human culture, be it Greek, Roman or any other ancient one. Indian culture also has a long tradition of mythologies, spreading over more than three thousand five hundred years. The famous Indian mythologist and author, Devdutt Pattanaik, rightly remarks about the utility of myths: "Myths may not satisfy the demands of rationality or science, but they contain profound wisdom- provided one believes they do and is willing to find out what they communicate." (Indian Mythology, 2) Mythology and process of myth-making in themselves are the fertile ground for creating new tales. They are often a great source of creativity as both are the aesthetic expression of human imagination having a strong hold on human psychology. In the present context, mythology has become no more just a subject for research or history but has a vital contemporary relevance for understanding human psychology.

Traditionally, Sita, the protagonist of the great epic Ramayana, is presented having a dignified, graceful and fascinating personality. Namita Gokhale along with her co-editor Malashri Lal, presents Sita as a woman of immense physical and mental strength in her edited book *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology*. The articles included in her edited book explore a variety of the dimensions of Sita's life. In the introduction of the book, Namita Gokhale says:

Sacrifice, self-denial and unquestioning loyalty are some of the ideals associated with popular perception of Sita. But the Janki who symbolized strength, who could lift Shiva's mighty bow, who courageously chose to accompany Rama into exile and who refused to follow him back after a second trial, is often forgotten.

Further, she emphasizes on the need to reinterpret the relevance of Sita myth saying, "Perhaps it is time to seek a new image of Sita- one who does not have to return to the Earth, but can resolutely reclaim it." (XVII)

Smt. Renganayaki Thatham (1905-1986), under the pseudonym of “Kumudini,” is one of the earliest women writers of twentieth-century Tamil literature. She has been a novelist and a translator, following Gandhian ideology sincerely. Most of her short stories, essays and musings, along with a short play are translated in English by her grand-daughter Ahana Lakshmi. She was born in a highly educated yet conservative South Indian joint Brahmin family at a time when education and career in writing were not meant for girls. It was quite possible that her family would have remained unknown and ignorant about the creative abilities of “Kumudini” and the presence of the fantastic spirit of a writer, in their own family. She picked this penname from the female protagonist of Rabindranath Tagore’s ‘Yogayog,’ after translating it from Hindi to Tamil language and acquired a huge recognition for it.

Kumudini’s *Letters from the Palace*, in the anthology *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology* (edited by Malashri Lal & Namita Gokhale) under the “Creative Interpretations” section, partakes in the stories from the Ramayana, elaborating its narrative world. Written in the epistolary style, the article comprises of four letters, written by Sita to her mother from her in-laws’ house. Although these letters are short yet an intimate view of the thoughts and feelings of the character of Sita is conveyed in communication. These narratives are monologic in form, depicting the inner aspirations and turbulences of her agitating mind. It is a monologue as the story is being told exclusively through the letters of the main character. These brief and precisely

written letters are like diaries having every minute day-to-day details of the variations and swings in Sita’s mood and attitude, with the incidents that happen in her married life. They are not only the narration of her feelings, emotions and reactions about her post-marital life but also rendition of the inner caverns of the female psyche.

The beginning of every letter is not quite the same though addressed always to her mother. The different ways through which Sita salutes her mother in every letter, clearly communicates her innate feelings. The first letter, the longest one, depicts her submissive mood when she says: “Sita, prostrate prayerfully before Amma with a submission.” (In Search, 239) Written soon after her marriage, this letter shows the happiness and contentment of a newly-wedded girl. As a matter of fact, the greetings of the letter express the feeling of gratitude towards parents when she bows down politely before them for choosing such a prosperous family as the Royal Dynasty of Ayodhya as her ‘sasural’. Surprisingly, this devotional attitude transforms into something formal in the second and third letter’s salutation when she says: “PRAYERFUL submission to mother.” (In Search, 240) And then suddenly the earlier modest way of salutation changes into something very rude and ill-mannered in the last letter when she addresses: “MOTHER,” hinting of some unusual news to be shared (their banishment for fourteen years).

Similarly, the final salutation of every letter also changes according to her actual state of mind. First letter expresses a deep respect to father which is not present in other letters.

Even the extreme modesty of first letter “Ever your humble” is replaced with affection and love in the second and the third. The end notes of last letter “Yours in haste” clearly depicts the fractured mentality of Sita after getting the royal order of banishment for fourteen years in place of enthronement of Ayodhya.

One province of India may differ from other in the language, attire, modes of apparel, mannerism and religious faith but they are intact due to one basic factor which is its rich culture and heritage. A sari in Indian context is not just a cloth but an age-old tradition to depict its rich, diverse and vibrant culture. Wrapped in the history of tradition, pride and innovation, the sari represents varied moods, meanings and emotions in the form of different colours, designs and materials not only of its wearer but also of the giver as it is one of the powerful and popular modes of offering gifts or fulfilling traditions. Moreover, a natural infatuation for sari is something which is inevitable in any Indian woman - be a poor one or a queen. Immediately after her marriage, we notice Sita demanding in her letter, for a narrow-bordered sari which looks “so elegant” and like a young darling daughter complaining innocently to her mother: “All the saris that you bought for my wedding have broad borders.” (First letter) As they are out of fashion now so she expresses her annoyance for her ‘not so up to date’ sari-collection as a bride: “I feel so embarrassed to wear them now. Everyone makes fun of me.” (First letter) The reason behind such a kind of funny behaviour might be because the fashion of a particular province may not be popular or prevalent in another region. It may be also just

for the sake of showing their dominance over the newcomer daughter in law; the senior women of the family might be teasing her for the choice of sarees, though everyone has a different taste of one’s own. Through this letter, the author actually wishes to share the fractured mentality of a bride when she receives an unfamiliar behaviour in the family for the poor choice or cost of saris which is quite a common issue in the combined Indian families, even today.

Further, the colour of a sari plays equally an important role along with its cost, material (fabric) and pattern so far as the ceremonial and festive gifting of saris in India is concerned. Usually, every mother is supposed to plan and keep in mind, the change in the colour scheme and designs to meet her daughter’s demands before her marriage or even after marriage too. Sita asks her mother not to send that bright “sindoor-coloured sari” which is specially being woven for her as “in Ayodhya, people are very fastidious about the way they dress” (First letter). Rather indirectly she demands for a blue one like her sister-in-law Shantha has. But in the next letter, same wish changes shortly when she finds the blue colour of the sari not to be fast and therefore “fades soon” so with the right and affection of a daughter demands: “Send the sindoor-coloured silk as planned earlier.” (Second letter) Then a new demand is added to this: “Or else, if you can find a copper-coloured one which is guaranteed to be fast, send that” and asks not to “buy the blue shade.” (Second letter) Further she urges for their blessings in the form of “the navamallika colour sari with spots like a deer’s worked all over it” (Third

letter) to be worn on the occasion of coronation. In her excitement, she finds herself quite in an indecisive mood so leaves it to her mother to buy two different saris for the forthcoming two consecutive occasions: Deepavali and the Coronation Function or just to “buy a very grand sari for both” (Third letter) but to avoid cuckoo- or peacock-colour” as her mother-in-law does not like them. Through this letter, the author depicts the vastness of a female heart how she longs for the respect and cares for the blessings of her mother and mother-in-law as well on a grand function of coronation. Finally, in the last letter in a mood of frustration, she asks not to send any sari instead “a bark-skin” coloured cloth to make a dress to be worn in the forest. This last letter is chockful with a surrendering tone of a matured girl who all of a sudden, puts aside all her fanciful demands, childish enthusiasm and immature behaviour and chooses the life of renunciation while preparing herself to go to the forest. She asks her mother not to worry anymore about the colour of saris for her as she will be now searching for peace of mind, not craving any longer for the possession of materialistic things. She also wishes for all the women of the world to live their life in the forest so that “half the worries would disappear.” (Fourth letter)

The general perception about Sita’s character is her submissiveness, devoted conjugal sincerity and her sacrificing ability which present her as an archetypal figure in the Indian society. But these letters present Sita as a woman who is substantial enough in making choices of her own so far as the decisions of her life are concerned.

These four letters are the finest example of crisp, concise and laconic narrative style of the author. The sentences are conversational, mostly short but meaningful like “All well here”, “Do as you think best”, “All is over”. They depict the true soul of Indian woman who, in general, seems to be quite chirpy, demanding and feminine sometimes non-serious too, in their personal, familial and social approach to life but turns to be very assertive, bold, indifferent and saintlike if the circumstances of their life demand so. Like a common girl, she is fragile enough to be easily susceptible to the comments of the in-law’s family members and so obstinate in her demands even after her marriage being an endearing child but shows the inner strength of her character as the crucial moment of banishment arrives. Thus, the sari can be taken as a powerful symbol to narrate her journey of life. This sudden and quick transformation from immaturity to maturity, from fragility to solidity and from being demanding to being saint-like in the personality is the true essence and power for which since ages, women have such a high place in Indian history.

Thus, in a broader perspective, Kumudini can be put in the category of the writers who are basically humanists like Shashi Deshpande and Chitra Banerji Divakaruni who believe in the process through which human potential especially that of a woman, gets actualized. These imaginary letters written in the form of monologues by Kumudini have, in fact, humanized the great epic and the myth of Sita and thus pave a way to create an affinity with this mythological

character. To conclude, it would be appropriate to quote the words of Namita Gokhale in the article “Sita: A Personal Journey”:

Devotion and respect had distanced Sita from us, while academic interpretations had sterilized the subject. This imaginary daily life reminded me that, at some level, Sita was a human incarnation, tried and tested by extraordinary circumstances. (XVI)

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