

# Voice and Agency: Subversive Feminist Narratives in Select Contemporary Indian Retellings

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine the transformation of Sita's character in the works of Volga and Amish Tripathi, analysing how these authors challenge traditional patriarchal narratives in Indian mythology through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Butler's concept of gender performativity, which postulates that gender is constructed through repetitive acts and can be subverted through alternative performances, provides the theoretical framework for this analysis. Volga's narrative emphasises female solidarity, portraying Sita's empowerment through interactions with other women. This approach substantiates how collective performative acts can challenge established gender norms. Amish Tripathi reconstructs Sita as a warrior and leader, directly subverting traditional gender roles. This

reimagining illustrates how gender identities can be actively reshaped through new forms of performance. Both authors present Sita as an empowered figure, contrasting sharply with her traditional portrayal as passive and submissive. This transformation represents a deliberate disruption of the repetitive acts that have historically defined Sita's character. This study endeavours to reveal how literary reinterpretations of mythological figures can serve as powerful sites for challenging and reshaping gender norms and concludes by suggesting that these narratives not only empower her character but also can promote gender equality by offering counter-narratives that challenge traditional gender roles.

**Keywords:** Mythology, Gender Performativity, Liberation, Empowerment and Patriarchy

Indian mythologies have significantly shaped patriarchal systems within the society. Many ancient texts and legends uphold and reinforce traditional gender roles, often portraying men as the dominant figures while women are depicted in subservient or secondary roles. These narratives often showcase male gods and heroes as powerful and authoritative figures, while female characters are frequently depicted as obedient wives, devoted mothers, or as damsels in distress needing male protection. Moreover, the codes of conduct and societal norms derived from these mythologies often validate and perpetuate patriarchal structures. These narratives have been used to justify and uphold practices such as dowry customs, honour killing and the subordination of women within the household. The influence of these mythologies extends beyond religious contexts; they permeate cultural values and societal norms, often concretizing the idea of male authority and female subservience. However, it is important to note that there are many contemporary retellings that has diverse perspectives which seek to challenge and reinterpret these narratives to foster more equitable societal structures.

This study employs a close textual analysis of Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* and Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, focusing on instances where Sita's character performs acts that deviate from traditional gender expectations. These performances are analysed in the

context of Judith Butler's theory of performativity to understand how they contribute to a reimagining of Sita's identity and challenge traditional gender roles. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity posits that gender is not an innate essence but a series of repetitive acts that create the illusion of a stable gender identity. Butler argues that these performances can be subverted through alternative acts that challenge established norms.

Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* portrays Sita who is banished to the forest in a pregnant state without any fault of hers. She has spent fourteen years in exile raising her sons with the traits and skills that is expected to be required for Raghukul's sovereigns. During her time in the forest, she meets Surpankha, Ahalya, Renuka Devi, and Urmila. These women support her in her journey of self-introspection through their bonding. In contrast to the conventional portrayal of the characters, Volga's portrayal of women encourages sisterhood. It turns out that Sita is surprisingly endearing, despite her confusion and her unease upon meeting a significant number of other women who were abandoned by their husband or children. In Volga's retelling, Sita's journey of self-discovery is marked by a series of encounters with other women who have been marginalized or oppressed by patriarchal structures. These interactions can be viewed as performative acts that gradually reconstruct Sita's identity.

Sita first encounters Surpanakha in the chapter entitled "Reunion", Sita had an urge to meet Surpanakha when her children Lava and Kusa described her about the garden. The portrayal of Surpanakha often represents qualities deemed unsuitable for women without delving into her perspective and circumstances. Surpanakha was not loved by any man after she was deformed by Ram and Lakshman. This led her to explore additional avenues of self-love beyond her physical appearance, embracing her craftsmanship, connection to nature, and a deeper appreciation of her intrinsic values as an individual. Amidst the emptiness of the tangible world, she finds solace in accepting who she is. She cultivates a garden surpassing the mythical Ashokavanam and finds affection from Sudheera, who loves her despite her perceived

flaws. Despite belonging to different kingdoms and races Sita could find a similarity with Surpanakha because both of their life has been affected by men, "Do women exist merely to be used by men to settle their score? Sita asks herself... Rama's purpose was to aggravate Ravana, which Surpanakha contributed him to do. It was all politics" (TLOS 3). Surpanakha confides her suffering to Sita, recounting her arduous journey and the endurance of pain. She reflects on embracing the perspective that beauty exists in everything within the world. Volga establishes a link between Sita and Surpanakha to highlight the universality of women's subjugation under patriarchy. This story additionally addresses the possibility of utilizing the unity of female relationships to fight against this kind of tyranny. Sita's empathy for Surpanakha and her recognition of their shared experiences of male-driven politics represent a performative act that challenges the traditional animosity between these characters. This performance of solidarity subverts the expected narrative and contributes to a new understanding of female relationships.

In the next chapter "Music of the Earth" Sita meets the beautiful lady, Ahalya. She remembers, that Ram had described Ahalya as a woman of distrust where as her mother-in-law describes her as a woman of honourable character. Ahalya recounts her tale to Sita, detailing how Indra schemed to fulfil his desires by disguising himself as her husband, Gautama, in order to gratify his passion for her body. Many people had a doubt that whether she was able to see Indra's self despite his disguise. But, Ahalya has no driving incentive to show her fidelity to the people who question her, including her husband. She tells Sita further, "In all these years, I have learned about my identity, how the world runs – on what morals and laws, and what their roots are. I have gained a lot of wisdom" (TLOS 18). Ahalya advises Sita that truth keeps on changing in accordance with time other than being a wife or daughter or mother, a woman should have her identity, to understand who she is and what her goal is. When Rama challenges her, arguing that without a spouse and kids, a woman does not possess an identity of her own. Sita replies sturdily, "I am the daughter of the Earth, Rama. I have realized who I am. The

whole universe belongs to me. I don't lack anything. I am the daughter of the Earth" (TLOS 27). For the first time, Rama tasted defeat in life and Sita fully experienced the inner power of self-authority. The conversation between Sita and Ahalya, where they discuss the nature of truth and female identity, serves as a performative act of intellectual engagement. This performance challenges the notion of women as passive recipients of knowledge and instead portrays them as active philosophers.

Another character Sita meets is Renukha Devi. Rishi Jamadagni ordered his wife's execution, fulfilled by their son Parasurama, who obeyed his father's command. Accused of longing for a Gandharva, she was labelled an adulteress, scared by the betrayal of the two men she devoted her life to. Renuka, revealing to Sita the futility of women centring their lives around men, shares how her husband and son had betrayed her. She advocates women should discover their own identities and purpose. Later, Sita faces a similar realization when her children choose to leave her for their father, Rama. Both women undergo betrayal by their husbands and children, learning the importance of forging their own paths. "When a child belongs to its mother, there is no harm in that. A situation where children ask their mother who their father is or where a husband asks his wife who fathered her children comes only in the lives of some women, Sita. Think of the predicament of those women, you'll understand my words" (TLOS 35). Initially dismissing Renuka's words, Sita later comprehends its depth. As her sons inquire about their family lineage, she imparts kshatriya skills, playing the dual role of mother and Guru. Despite their longing for their father, when Rama arrives to take them, Sita recognizes their belonging to the Raghu Vamsha and the necessity to continue the dynasty. Sita's eventual understanding and acceptance of Renuka's wisdom about the futility of centring one's life around men is a performative act of independence. This performance directly challenges the traditional expectation of a wife's unwavering devotion.

The last character Sita meets is Urmila, who had locked herself in another castle for fourteen years when Ram, Lakshman and Sita had been to the forest, “Everyone was grieving for you all. No one even looked at me. In helpless anger, I too decided not to look at anyone. I began my protest” (TLOS 50). Initially it was to show her hatred and agony but later it became her quest for truth. She began to examine her interpersonal connections on a psychological level, realizing that emotions like love, hate, greed and envy stem from dependence on others. After fourteen years of silence, Urmila breaks her silence to share with Sita how she achieved internal harmony. Sita's attentive listening to Urmila's story of self-discovery through isolation is a performative act of sisterhood and mutual growth. This performance challenges the competitive relationships often portrayed between women in traditional narratives.

Sita had very mature thoughts when Valmiki conveyed to Sita an important message from Ram that “he has accepted Lava and Kusa. He has accepted Sita, too. But Sita must declare herself innocent in the open court” (TLOS 55). Sita listens attentively, maintaining a serene composure, fully aware of what is right for her. Sita replies, “Is there a need for me to do that? (TLOS 55). Furthermore, she peacefully frees herself from her children and returns to the embrace of Mother Earth, her origin. Sita's refusal to prove her innocence and her choice to return to Mother Earth represent a culminating performative act of self-liberation. This performance radically subverts the traditional narrative of Sita as a long-suffering, obedient wife. Sita sails beyond liberation, reigning in the endless tides of empowerment in Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*.

Amish Tripathi's reimagining of Sita as a warrior presents a series of performative acts that directly challenge traditional gender roles. Sita was abandoned in the forest being safeguarded by a vulture from a band of wolves. Later, she was adopted by King Janak and Queen Sunaina as a blessing from the virgin goddess Kanyakumari. King Janak is presented as a scholarly and philosophical person and is very much involved in the state governance. Queen

Sunaina takes all the necessary steps to bring back the wealth and prosperity of Mithila, whereas Valmiki's Ramayana has no place for Sunaina in the state affairs. Sita is kept very protective by Sunaina restricting her not to go out to the slums but her curiosity to visit the slums has brought many changes in her life. Disguising herself as maid's child she went to slum and was so shocked to see the poor people's surroundings and remembers her mother's saying "often the poor have more nobility in them than the actual nobility" (SWOM 40). When she was surrounded by five boys, she kills one of them to protect her and this shows her courage to save herself which would later act as a valid reason for Guru Vishwamitra to choose her as seventh Vishnu. Through this Amish Tripathi implicitly conveys a message to the readers that how a women should also have courage and valour to protect herself from the society. Sita's act of self-defense against the boys in the slum is a performative act of courage and physical prowess, traits traditionally associated with masculinity.

Sita, chosen by the wise Vishwamitra, embraces her duty to safeguard India. Despite challenges, she readies herself to prove her capabilities as Vishnu. Sunaina, devoted to Mithila, acknowledges Sita's extraordinary talents. Despite her mother's passing, Sita assumes Mithila's leadership, enhancing its culture and as its prime minister, she transforms societal and political realms, supported by her friend Samichi, the police chief. Balancing duties between her sister Urmila and philosophical pursuits of her father, Sita recalls her destiny as Vishnu. Her mother's voice frequently resonated in her mind, "Find your partners you can trust; who are loyal to your cause. Personal loyalty is not important. But they must be loyal to your cause" (SWOM 105). Determined, she remains focused on her life's purpose, disregarding the Malayaputras or vayuputras' beliefs. Sita came to know that Guru Vashishtha, the chief of Vayuputra has chosen Ram as Vishnu. Sita decided to make a partnership with Ram not because of the aspirations to her title of Vishnuhood but in order to avoid the chaotic dispute between Vishwamitra and Vashishtha. She was very determined to fulfil her life's purpose. Sita's performance as Prime

Minister of Mithila, making political decisions and implementing social reforms, subverts the traditional portrayal of women as confined to domestic spheres.

Upon Ram and Sita's marriage, Raavan declared war against Mithila. Despite efforts to defend Mithila, Raavan's army grows stronger. Advised by Guru Vishwamitra to use Asuraastra, Ram hesitates, as it conflicts with Lord Rudra's rule, foreseeing a fourteen-year exile. Eventually, convinced by Vishwamitra, they use the Asuraastra, triumphing over Raavan's forces. Returning to Ayodhya, Ram chooses a fourteen-year forest exile, and Sita, honouring their marriage's bond, joins him, embracing their shared destiny. She was also open in her philosophy regarding marriage when she says to Ram "You share my fate and I share yours. That is what a true marriage is" (SWOM 261).

Sita was enjoying the forest life and she recounted exile as a learning experience. Raavan found their residing place in the forest, when Ram and Lakshman went hunting, Sita was cooking so meticulously so that the smoke did rise above the trees. Raavan captured all the malayaputra soldiers and killed them except Jatayu. He was tortured by them to provoke Sita's surrender. Sita was watching all this by hiding and she attempted to kill the Lankan soldiers not fearing for her life. Finally, she was captured by Raavan and took in the Pushpak vimaan to Lanka. After gaining her consciousness, in an attempt to kill Raavan, went near him. She was not scared did not wait for anyone to rescue her instead she decided to save herself from them. Sita's attempts to fight off Ravana's forces and her plan to kill Ravana herself represent performative acts of heroism and self-reliance, subverting the damsel-in-distress narrative.

Both Volga and Tripathi's retellings present Sita performing acts that significantly deviate from her traditional characterization. These performances can be understood as subversive acts that challenge and reshape cultural understandings of femininity. Volga's Sita performs acts of intellectual engagement, emotional independence, and ultimately self-

liberation. These performances construct a new identity for Sita that emphasizes self-realization and female solidarity over traditional notions of wifely devotion and suffering. Tripathi's Sita, through her performances of leadership, strategy, and physical courage, constructs an identity that blurs the lines between traditionally masculine and feminine traits. This performative blurring challenges the rigid gender roles often reinforced by mythological narratives.

These retellings, through their performative reconstructions of Sita's character, offer alternative scripts for femininity that emphasize agency, intellect, and self-realization. As such, they not only empower Sita as a character but also provide readers with new models for performing gender that challenge patriarchal norms.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of all authors, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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