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Dr. Beena.G

Associate Dean,

School of Arts & Humanities

REVA University

Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

beena@reva.edu.in

Heroism redefined: women's gaze and a celebration of 'othernesses'

in Samhita Arni's *Sita's Ramayana*

Abstract: Sita, the central character of the epic *Ramayana* is an integral part of India's collective psyche and is often one of the most defining role models for womanhood in India. The persona of Sita is so integral to our lives that she as a character is central to several narratives—paintings, statues, plays, films, dances, folk songs, poems and so on. She is an enigma who is a woman and a Goddess, who is connected to the lives of rural women through her timeless predicament while she is deified in canonical texts. Sita narratives across genres explore her multiple hues and layers making every aspect fascinating, lending themselves to newer interpretations. Beyond every interpretation, Sita is a woman, a human, tried and tested by daunting challenges, makes clear choices and moves on. The paper explores the woman's gaze as seen in Samhita Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* and attempts to understand how Sita breaks the stereotype of restricting heroism to male values of anger, bravery and warrior ship, thereby shifting the site of heroism itself.

Keywords: Heroism, Feminism, Sita, Narrative, Ramayana, Deification, Gaze.

Sita, the central character of the epic *Ramayana* is an integral part of India's collective psyche and is often one of the most defining role models for womanhood in India. Sita is defined variously through varied perceptions. The quiet, submissive epitome of selfless sacrifice is a stereotype perpetuated by patriarchal lens while the same Sita seen through feminist lens seems a symbol of fortitude and dignity making her own choices. As an archetype she represents the image of a *Grihalakshmi* (Lal, 1995:13) that juxtaposes women's deification as well as her confinement within a domestic space in the name of being venerated. Patriarchy defines its control through rigid rules and also very subtly through role-models thrust down through deified images such as Sita or Savitri. The deified image of Sita is a stereotype that primarily restricts; and any revisionist retelling is an attempt to subvert this patriarchal representation.

Looking at Sita through feminist vision, Sita crosses the threshold of domesticity twice and moves to a space that is beyond the home. She steps on to untested grounds into risky terrains very consciously where in the gaze of society is on her. The persona of Sita is so integral to our lives that she as a character is central to several narratives—paintings, statues, plays, films, dances, folk songs, poems and so on. She is an enigma who is a woman and a Goddess, who is connected to the lives of rural women through her timeless predicament while she is deified in canonical texts. Sita narratives across genres explore her multiple hues and layers making every aspect fascinating, lending themselves to newer interpretations. Eminent danseuse Sonal Mansingh rightly says, "Sita's own luminous strength determines her identity and self-respect, which does not admit contrary intrusions" (Lal and Gokhale 2009: 92). Beyond every interpretation, Sita is a woman, a human, tried and tested by daunting challenges, makes clear choices and moves on. The focal point of the Sita narratives is her rejection of Rama's request for a second *agniparikasha* or trial by fire and choosing to leave Rama and her two

sons. This choice made by her is interpreted by both traditionalists and feminists from their own perspectives.

Samhita Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* belongs to this world view of presenting Sita's side of the story and is markedly different in being a woman-centric narrative. It focuses on the later part of Sita's life in the ashram of Sage Valmiki after her abandonment by Rama. As a genre too it is different because it is a graphic novel which uses the patua art of painting to make scrolls in order to present the stories from epics. Patua art involves a form of storytelling through painted panels shared with audience along with accompanying music. The format of this art is adapted in the book creating a distinctly specific regional flavour. The book begins almost towards the last phase of the epic with a heavily pregnant Sita, abandoned, walking into the Dandaka forest alone, helpless and bruised. The sleepy forest with its animals, trees, leaves, creepers and flowers wake up on account of the unexpected arrival of a beautiful woman in their midst. In response to their queries Sita narrates her story—a story which represents her voice as a woman through a gaze that is a woman's in entirety. Sita's arrival in Dandaka forest brings the woman and the environment together—"I am Sita, daughter of the earth, sprung from the same womb that nurtures this forest...the world of men banished me." (Arni 2011: 8). The opening of the book brings together Sita's close association with the environment and also a stark comment about the world of men which banishes her. This association supports eco feminist ideals of upholding eco feminist culture. Vandana Shiva, an environmental activist claims that women have a special connection with environment and both are oppressed by men. The women understand environment holistically and interact with the environment regularly. In a way, Arni's Sita also connects with the forest in a similar manner. The ease with which the forest and Sita respond to each other is a manifestation of the special connects that women feel towards the environment. The story of the *Ramayana* is narrated in retrospect by Sita on her arrival into the Dandaka forest.

Sita is definitely central to the book; however it also explores her responses to the other women such as Trijatha, Kaikeyi and Surpanaka. In fact Trijatha plays a very crucial role in Arni's *Ramayana* because it is through her eyes that Sita gets to see the war. Trijatha gives constant inputs about the war between Rama and Ravana and in doing so she helps preserve the woman's gaze and also Sita's perspective. War and heroism have no place in a woman centric perspective. Narrating her story, Sita recounts the event of her accompanying Rama and Lakshmana into the forest. In exile, amidst the serenity of the forest she recollects that life is pleasant but only to her. She intrinsically understands that Rama and Lakshmana were not very happy with the lack of action –“but Rama and Lakshmana were restless. They were born to a life of action...a life of palaces and wars chariots and weapons. The peace of the forest was not for them.” (Arni 2011: 14).

Sita's connect with the forest and Nature reminds one of Rabindranath Tagore's reverences for Nature which is reflected in his essay *The Religion of the Forest* where he delineates the influence of the forest and the affinities between the forest and people. He further explores the symbolism of the forest and suggests the *Tapaban* or forest hermitage as a learning space. The forest further becomes an extended metaphor in its representation of purification, reconciliation and conflict resolution (Tagore: 1922). Sita too finds in the forest a space that brings the Creator and the creation together. This view is also expressed in Malini Nair's article “Why Sita was happy in exile”(Nair: 2015). The article quotes theatre exponent Veenapani Chawla in the book *Voyages of Body and Soul* “Ayodhya was a place of claustrophobic, dark, domestic politics...while for others leaving Ayodhya was a tragedy, for Sita it was a happy thing...the forest for Sita was a place of alternate knowledge for that is where the seers and sages lived, where nature thrived...” In terms of education, Arni's Sita evolves in the learning spaces outside Ayodhya. As Ravana's captive in Lanka she learns to connect with the women and their suffering establishing one thread of solidarity that binds them together as women. In

fact, this solidarity helps her empathize with Surpanaka too and nowhere does she judge Surpanaka. Her learning space is extended to Valmiki's hermitage too where she connects with the forest and its creatures.

Sita feels injustice not only in the treatment meted out to her but she is also concerned about others. Her sense of righteousness is accompanied by deep sense of compassion and empathy for others around. Narrating the Surpanaka episode, Sita is clear in her opinion that Rama should have stopped Lakshmana from acting impulsively because "violence breeds violence, and an unjust act only begets greater injustice" (Arni 2011: 16). Sita feels the same compassion to the Rakshasa jailors of Lanka whose "cries rent the air as they watched their homes go up in flames" when Hanuman sets Lanka ablaze (Arni 2011: 55).

Sita though empathetic does retain her clarity of thinking even in captivity. Trijatha narrates to her the killing of Ravana's son Indrajit through deceit by Lakshmana and Trijatha is anguished at the deceit and treachery that was being let loose in the name of war. Sita though understands Trijatha's anguish yet doesn't grieve at the death and destruction because she firmly believes that injustice breeds injustice and the war itself is a result of her unjust imprisonment. Finally when the long drawn war gets over and Ravana is killed, strangely Sita is not overjoyed. The large scale and meaningless death and destruction that the war results in, leaves her shaken and moved. "I heard the women of the palace, shrieking. I saw Ravana's queens running to the battlefield, tears streaming down their faces. Their screams rent the air...they would be queens no more, and their people had met death on the battlefield...men had been killed, widowed and children orphaned..." (Arni 2011: 113). This sisterhood that binds women in sorrow is an important aspect to consider looking through feminist perspective. In this compassion and empathy she emerges as a strong character, stronger than Rama too who is an unhappy person torn by the conflict between his love for Sita and honour and duty as a king. Sita's family in the hermitage comprises of the entire forest, Valmiki, the other

inmates and her two sons. Since the book deals with the last phase of Sita's life, not much is discussed about her education or her childhood.

Sita is in for a shock at the reception she gets from Rama after the victory in the war. Contrary to her expectations, Rama tells her that the war is over and she is free to go wherever she willed. On being told that he would not take her back because there is a possibility that Ravana must have touched her since she had been his captive, Sita tries to justify her purity and chastity. However she is infuriated when he does not respond to her justifications and explains that he fought the war and freed her only to redeem his honour. This obsession with honour is clearly a very patriarchal attribute in feminist narratives.

In her book *Seeing Like a Feminist* Nivedita Menon discusses this issue of masculine honour as related to women. In patriarchal perspective, any violation of women, be it rape, molestation, and in this case Sita's abduction is unacceptable or evil because it eventually is a crime against the honour of the man and his family. What is at stake is the honour of the family and the act of violation is seen only through this patriarchal perspective. However the same act of violation to the women is an act of crime against the autonomy and bodily integrity of the woman who has been violated (Menon 2012: 113). The same view is expressed through Rama who fought the battle to redeem his honour while for Sita; his honour had exacted a huge and bloody price. The battlefield drenched with blood and corpses, Valin and Indrajit killed by deceit and women such as Tara, Mandodari and other hapless women of Lanka being widowed and children orphaned. Sita's perspective of honour is very different from Rama's idea of the same. Hence there is a righteous anger in her. She voices her contempt for war and questions its futility,

“war, in some ways, is merciful to men. It makes them heroes if they are victors. If they are the vanquished- they do not live to see their homes taken, their wives widowed. But

if you are a woman—you must live through defeat...you become the mother of dead sons, a widow, or an orphan; or worse a prisoner.” (Arni 2011: 121).

Sita breaks the stereotype of restricting heroism to male values of anger, bravery and warrior ship on the battle field. She shifts the site of heroism, she is heroic because it is she who, analyses and interrogates people and their choices. As far as the question of Rama’s honour is concerned, Sita agrees to walk through the flames of the fire Lakshmana had built. The *agnipariksha* of Sita to prove her chastity has varied interpretations. In Arni’s work Sita is untouched by fire and Agni, the fire God escorts her safely out of the flames. This *agnipariksha* too can be seen as an act of defiance by Sita who walks through the flames to challenge Rama’s flawed judgment. The notion of purity associated only with the physical body can also be questioned. The abruptness with which she decides to walk through the flames seems more an act of defiance, a mockery of Rama’s patriarchal mind-set. Once her chastity is proven, Rama takes her back to Ayodhya, regaining his sense of honour on Sita having successfully survived the trial by fire.

The next challenge to this woman arises after her return to Ayodhya. Amidst rumours of her chastity, a heavily pregnant Sita is abandoned in the Dandaka forest. The entire forest with its creatures, leaves, and trees respond to her suffering empathetically. This synergetic coming together of the forest to embrace the suffering woman and comfort her is an extension of the sense of eco-feminist solidarity. She accepts refuge in Valmiki’s hermitage and has two sons growing up under the mentorship of Valmiki. Sita finds the calm of the forest healing and finds happiness in her role as a single mother to her sons living her life as a simple forest woman away from the claustrophobic palace. She is outraged when her peaceful life in the hermitage is disturbed by the arrival of the sacrificial horse and Hanuman –“I have been here in the forest, living a simple, peaceful life. And now my past returns...in the shape of my husband, to defeat and kill my sons! I wish he had never come” (Arni 2011: 142). The arrival

of Hanuman into the premises of the hermitage in fact indicates the disruptive intrusion of the serenity of the place by the voices and people from a civilized city.

Sita is reluctant to even communicate to Rama and others; on being requested by Rama to accompany him back to the palace as his queen she quickly rebuts him saying “I do not wish to be queen. I have been doubted once, twice, and I do not care to be doubted again” (Arni 2011: 145). She then disappears into the yawning earth asking Rama to take care of their children. This refusal by Sita to go back to Ayodhya is her firmest stand taken and is equivalent to a public rejection of Rama as her husband. She chooses to denounce the civilized world that Rama belongs to and instead opts to go into the earth’s bosom, to go back into the world of nature that is an extension of her basic identity- she after all is the daughter of the earth.

Samhita Arni’s *Sita’s Ramayana* does not restrict heroism to the traditional values of bravery or anger on the battlefield. It in fact through Sita celebrates the ‘otherness’, the feminine values of sisterhood, compassion, dignity, patience and solidarity with all beings – human and non-human (Dhar: 3). Sita evolves and grows as a character from being a helpless abandoned woman in tears to the strong woman who speaks to Rama and chooses to leave him and her children to become one with nature. Arni’s Sita is a re- imagination of a Sita who is heroic and lives with her choices. She brings in a sense of quiet dignity and refinement through her genuine empathy with the plight of other women in Lanka and her comment on the futility of war with its meaningless dance of death and destruction. In contrast to the conventional images of a demure, shy Sita, Arni’s Sita has a clear thinking mind and voices her concerns with a perspective. In her critique of Rama, the war, men’s notions of Dharma and her solidarity with the other women, she clearly manifests feminist behaviour that is Indo-centric. The narrative space given to the other female characters such as Trijatha, Surpanaka and Tara is significant in establishing a solidarity and sisterhood that Sita feels for the other women which reinforces the feminist argument. Another significant shift is the episode of the *Lakshmanrekha*

where in the Sita crosses the line drawn by Lakshmana in a daze. Arni's Sita makes her choice of her identity very clear in her refusal to return to Ayodhya as queen.

In her making the final choice, there is no confrontation; there is no breaking down of system but a quiet yet assertive statement she makes through her choice. Her final choice indicates her individual identity over all relationships or roles. She is only Sita, and in her choice moves beyond the roles of being a queen, a wife, a mother or a daughter-in-law. She negates the rules and system of a civilized world and liberates herself by returning to the earth. Arni's Sita takes the focus away from the male characters and shifts the attention to her and other women, both named and unnamed (Dhar: 4). It is her voice and her gaze that takes us through the narrative in which the male characters including Rama are moved away from the centre.

Sita's thinking mind, the opinions she forms, the clear stand she takes against deceit, betrayal, the futility of war and the final act of liberating herself – these definitely indicate awareness of her position as a woman and feminist behaviour that makes her stand out when looked through the lens of feminism. Sita's gaze removes the conventional good versus evil layer and brings in a currency to the context and the narrative--the gaze of a woman that values life and condemns war and destruction. This gaze, the narrative space given to characters such as Trijatha, Sita's voice, her opinions, all of these are overlooked in canonical Ramayana narratives. Sita's clear thinking raises questions on who actually set the wheel of injustice and violence rolling. She clearly states the responsibility of Rama and Lakshmana in triggering the series of destructive events with the violent assault on Surpanakha. Sita sees things from the perspective of a woman who is wronged against and hence sees the futility of war, violence and superficial pride and honour. In addition to this, her plight helps her understand the predicament of all others who suffer due to the actions of men –she is able to empathize with not just fellow women but also children, common people, and also other creatures such as birds

and animals (Moreillon 2013: 2). This solidarity with women and others who are oppressed is significantly feminist awareness and behaviour.

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