

DENIAL OF CHOICES: A STUDY OF THE MYTH OF SITA IN THE ANTHOLOGY IN SEARCH OF SITA: REVISITING MYTHOLOGY

Dr. Alka Rani Purwar

Associate Prof. & Head (English)
Dayanand Vedic College, Orai (U.P.)

Abstract

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, feminism, environmental concern and the dilemma of choices and power-centers 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 and her sacrificing ability which present her as an archetypal figure in Indian society. Present paper intends to focus on the contemporary relevance of Sita as a woman who is substantial enough in making choices of her own so far as the decisions of her life are concerned.

Keywords: denial, mythology, culture, Archetypal figure, tradition.

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IN THE ANTHOLOGY IN SEARCH OF SITA: REVISITING MYTHOLOGY**

- **Dr. Alka Rani Purwar**

As the burden of preserving morality in family or society, more or less, falls on the shoulders of a woman so she is supposed to be always an ideal daughter/ wife/ mother. G.A. Ghanshyam aptly comments in this regard: "...the mantle of preserving and carrying forward the tradition largely falls upon the shoulders of a woman who is groomed and conditioned upon the image of feminine perfection or the ideal Indian woman." (Women Relationships and Rebellion, 76) A woman in Indian society is always expected to be pure as Sita, loyal as Draupadi and devoted as Savitri. Amrita Bhalla writes in the 'Foreword' of Collected Stories Vol. I:

Women have been conditioned to a great extent by Myth: to be as pure as Sita, as loyal as Draupadi, as beautiful as Laxmi, as bountiful a provider as Annapoorna, as dogged in devotion as Savitri, as strong as Durga- there are ultimately the role models we cannot entirely dismiss. (The Indian Women: Myths, Stereotypes and the Reality)

Exploring different aspects of Sita's life, Namita Gokhale along with her co-editor Malashri Lal presents Sita as a woman of immense physical and mental strength; she says in the introduction of the book that Sita "is the primary archetype for all Indian women, a role model pushed and perpetuated by a predominantly patriarchal society, it is no wonder that she is someone the modern emancipated consciousness prefers to banish into yet another exile." (In Search of Sita, XIII) Further, Namita Gokhale 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) It seems pertinent to focus on the contemporary relevance of Sita as a woman who is substantial enough in making choices of her own by denying the available options, fixed specially for the common woman, so far as the decisions of her life are concerned.

Sita possesses a dignified and graceful personality throughout the great epic. Full of so much of physical strength as to lift Lord Shiva's mighty bow, she asserts to choose her husband in a swayamvar from a whole galore of brave kings through which her clear message is that her life partner should be equally powerful, physically as well as mentally.

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Generally, a name represents one specific person, giving a specific identity, for the whole life. What can be the motive behind the social perception of women who feel proud in changing their names, by adding their husbands' names/ surnames after their marriage? We have the example of Sita who prefers to be called more as Vaidehi or Janaki, the daughter of the king of Mithila, Videh or Janaka. It shows how conscious she is of carrying her identity even in the house of her in-laws. Afterwards the noble qualities of her character earn so much honour that her name is added before her husband's name as in 'Jai Siya Ram' or 'Sita-Ram'.

Further when instead of enthronement of Ayodhya kingdom, Rama gets banishment of fourteen years, Sita insists to accompany him in the forest as the sacred marriage thread binds both to be together in good times as well as in adverse time. In fact, the demand of marriage institution is to accept the natural differences of each other and support the social liabilities present before them collectively. As Shubra Verma beautifully defines this bond of marriage in her essay "Conceiving Altered Perspective of Femininity: A Neoliberal Analysis of Spouse:

Marriage is a sacramental bond tied with social liabilities. But its multifarious aspects are equally challenging: two person(s) as life partners denote two different identities on biological and psychological level. The natural differences has (have) to be accepted but demands an extra-sensibility. (Changing Faces of new Woman, 162)

Being 'extra-sensible', Sita is ready to fulfill the requirements of this sacred bond so decides to go to the forest with her husband. Most of her family members advise her not to do so as the hardships of the forest life cannot be faced easily by a princess like her. But her logical and convincing arguments prove to be irrefutable, so she is allowed to follow him, ultimately. This decision of Sita shows clearly that she has 'a powerful voice' which is meant to be heard and accepted. It also shows that as a life partner, the wife can prove to be a trustworthy strong support, during the testing time of the husband. Even in the contemporary scenario, a wife can be a strong dependable partner, during the hour of struggle of the husband. This was her extraordinary physical and mental strength that she completed the long duration of forest stay successfully. Arshia Sattar in her article "Valmiki's Ramayana" presents Sita as a fighter:

...as contemporary women, we see a host of other much more interesting reasons to celebrate the challenges that Sita presents to the male universe by which she is bound. As her beloved husband battles his internal demons and the external rakshasas to find himself, Sita too, has internal conflicts that she must resolve. (In Search, 13)

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At times she is too stubborn in her demands so once insists vehemently Rama to fetch the golden deer which afterwards proves to be a crucial cause of her forceful kidnapping, that is eventually a surprise opening of a course of new action in the story. In her rashness, she even rebukes Laxmana when he is reluctant for not leaving her alone and going to help Rama in hunting the deer.

During the banishment, once she asks Laxmana authoritatively to help Rama who has gone to hunt after the golden deer. Being courageous enough she does not care for her own security but for Rama's safety. When in the disguise of a saint, Ravana begs for food, she does not hesitate to step over the line drawn by Laxmana though is forcefully kidnapped by him. This transgression of Laxmana Rekha is her own decision because being a queen, she cannot allow anyone going hungry from her door and this was the conspiracy of Ravana to ask her to give the food coming out of the Laxmana Rekha's magical power.

Afterwards, Sita is abducted and imprisoned by Ravana for no fault of her own. In her moments of captivity and sadness, Sita maintains her dignity on her own, without the support from her husband or anyone else. This Sita is surely relevant today for the women of our time, in the most practical way. This is the strength of her character that even though having so much power at his disposal, Ravana could not touch her. In the Ashok Vatika of Lanka, we come across a bold, aggressive and defiant form of Sita. Sonal Mansingh talks about her exceptional strength: "Sita's own luminous strength determines her identity and self-respect. She has an aura about her, which does not admit contrary intrusions." (In Search, 92) But after defeating Ravana, Rama asks her to walk through fire to prove her purity and chastity. Sita passes this fire ordeal or Agnipareeksha easily due to her strong will power and mental strength.

Later after many years, Rama abandons her into the forest as the people of kingdom gossip about her chastity. Rama, being a Maryada Purshottam king, cannot allow anyone to deplore his royal values. After the birth of Lav and Kush, Rama again brings back Sita who decides to prove her loyalty to Rama by asking Mother Earth to swallow her if she was loyal to Rama. Mother Earth to testify her loyalty, opens and swallows her. And, the so-called daughter of Earth finally disappears into Earth. This is her own way of dispensing a life partner who could not treat her sufficiently well and provide her due dignity. Due to this bold decision, Indira Goswami in an interview, "Ramayana: The Human Story" calls her a 'candid' and 'fearless' woman: "When Sita decides to retreat into Mother Earth, it is a decision based on her outright refusal to be a part of an order where she never received her share of respect. She is quite vocal about the reason behind her decision." (In Search, 98) According to Namita Gokhale: "It is now that the silent, nourishing, enduring strength of Sita finds voice. She finally exercises her choice. Calling

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upon the Earth as witness, Sita rejects the patriarchal power system that has so devalued her.” (In Search, 87)

All these actions imply that Sita is not a meek sufferer, a natural victim or a passive character who follows her husband silently rather she emerges as a strong woman with the choices of her own throughout the epic. Madhu Kishwar in an interview, “Trial by Fire” aptly calls her a non-conformist:

Sita is wrongly seen by some feminists as a harmful role model which culturally enslaves women, conditions them into accepting subordination and maltreatment at the hands of men and leaves them without the courage to protest or retaliate. To see her suffering as a ‘victim’, or imagine her as lacking in selfhood, or to condemn her for her passivity and subservience is to negate the power of satyagraha. (In Search, 110)

One of her hidden strengths lies in the full control over her reproductive cycle along with her nerves. For a smooth and healthy upbringing of her children, she intentionally delays the child-bearing issue till Rama secures his throne. Unfortunately, she is again left by him before the birth of their children. But like a modern single mother, she brings up her sons with immense courage and daring skills but without disclosing them their father’s identity. Following lines from the essay, “Sita and Some Other Women from the Epics” of Meghna Desai will beautifully sum up her character denying the statement of Penelop Brown that “in order to survive a woman must, by kinship and later by marriage, be attached to a man.” (Women in Society, 242)

Yet Sita is a silent heroine as she refuses to bear Rama any child till he secures his throne. She brings up her sons on her own as a single abandoned mother and finally returns to her mother’s womb, thus establishing the autonomy of the female. (In Search, 9)

Thus, the need of the hour is to redefine the traditional meaning of Sita in a new perspective. Even in the predicament of denial of choices, she successfully asserts her strength and individuality. Since age she has been a symbol of silence, obedience and vulnerability but a minute study of her actions and decisions prove the supreme power of candidness, boldness and defiance in her character which made her take her own choices.

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