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A critical analysis of Sita in Valmiki's Ramayana and Amish Tripathi's "Sita: The Warrior of Mithila"

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Abstract

Epic tradition and myths in India truly represent the history and several multi-dimensional oppressions have emerged due to these traditions which are still prevalent these days. Those epics and myths are held as the greatest example by this Indian and religious society to guide several roles of them in the Indian family system and their conduct. Hence, it wouldn't be wrong to state that epic and mystical traditions are the basis of the predicament of women in India in a specific family system. The current study explores the mythological journey of Sita and contrasts and compares her depiction in Amish Tripathi's "Sita: The Warrior of Mithila" and Valmiki's Ramayana.

Sita is more than just a female character in the Epic. She represents the journey of every Indian woman in several stages of life. The new breed of Indian English writers like Ashok Banker, Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakantan, and Ashwin Sanghi are great experimenters. They make mythology more logical, palatable, and digestible as per the demand and taste of modern readers by experimenting with mythology.

The way society perceives mythology has changed. Juggling with mythology is creative liberty these days. Mythology is no longer a stone-carved line that cannot be changed. These writers add new flavor and connotations to the existing literature. It wouldn't be exaggerating to say that they have improved the popularity of mythology. They have also opened new doors of research with their analysis. These days, youth has gained special interest in mythology. These novelists have introduced ancient Indian history and culture to young readers who had literally abandoned their rich culture while following western lifestyle. For example, Indian English authors like Amish Tripathi and Ashok Banker have combined fantasy and mythology. They have modernized Indian myths with this fusion. Tripathi has focused on fantasy fiction created with mythical tales. He handled mythology the traditional way and added a new outlook with a new perspective.

Keywords: mythology, Ramayana, Amish Tripathi, Valmiki, Sita, Indian culture, epic tradition, India

1. Introduction

Indian society is very complex by nature. It is very diverse and vivid. There are several other reasons it is known across the world. It is endowed with its hierarchical structure designed on caste, class, and gender. When looking at the start of this hierarchy, searching the origin, or discriminating, one usually end up standing in the middle of mythology. Mythology consists of a huge range of epic narratives, such as Puranas, Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Manusmriti. India has always been patriarchal. Be it Ahalya or Sita, the goddesses could never leave their plight. One should look at the Epics, Myths, and traditions to know the reason behind hardships women have been facing till today in India. There are many traditions which have been nurtured eventually by mythical ideologies, which have been the root cause of pain.

The history of India can be defined by the Epic tradition and myths which have brought a lot of multi-dimensional oppressions these days. Myths and Epics have been held as the classic examples to guide several roles of conduct in the Indian family system by the religious, Indian society. It is not wrong to state that women's predicament depends widely on a set of epic or mythological traditions in a family.

This study explores the mythological journey of Sita and compares and contrasts her portrayal in Amish Tripathi's "Sita: The Warrior of Mithila" and Valmiki's Ramayana. Sita is more than just a Ramayana's character and the epitome of the journey of predicament of women in several stages of time. Every journey starts with Sita's inception which leads readers to the Brahmanical concept of society and Vedic era.

1.1 Background

Patriarchy has always been the inseparable part of Indian society, which has several untold, self-proclaimed, and unwritten rules of marriage, sexuality, values, economic liberation, and family relations. Such rules are not founded after surveys, legal procedures, or observations. Instead they are the by-products of particular metaphors in culture. A lot of ancient texts which not only discuss global wisdom, but also express Indian patriarchy as a strong symbol in mythology. These symbols have been on the nymph or goddesses. The domestic women are always in the middle in the roles of Sativrat or Pativrata.

Women were made to perceive that they are just born to help cosmic tasks which should be fulfilled by men through several legends. A lot of legends and epics have shown self-sacrifice as the only test to emerge as pure women. Women are always represented with ritual practices where they just have to come up as devoted mother and faithful wives. Manusmriti has all these evidences. These rules are self-explanatory in themselves as given by Brahmanical concept of women's status. Gender discrimination can be clearly seen in Manusmriti's third chapter. It has a shloka which preaches how to avoid female offspring and gain male child. It is very unfair as it defines female feticide in this day and age.

“युग्मासु पुत्रा जायन्ते स्त्रियोऽयुग्मासु रात्रिषु ।
तस्माद्युग्मासु पुत्रार्थं संविशेदार्तवि स्त्रियम्॥ 3-48”

This shloka means sons are conceived by mating on even nights and daughters are born by mating on uneven nights. In simple words, the couple has to get physical on even nights if they desire a son. In one of the shlokas, women are portrayed as the epitome of beauty and just sex objects. It also shows the deep-rooted mindset of Indians in terms of beauty and skin tone. India was also a victim of racism imposed by the Europeans and Indians also want wives with white skin tone.

“यदद दि रत्री न रोचते पुमांस न प्रमोदयते ।
अप्रमोदात्पुनः पुंसः प्रजनां न प्रवर्तते॥ 3-61”

This shloka means a woman cannot physically attract her husband if she is not beautiful. If she is not attractive to him, there will be no children. Here, husband's choice means a lot, but not her. She has to compromise to give birth to a child. Additionally, not having bright and radiant skin is a body shame to a woman.

“स्त्रत्रयां तुरोचमानायां सर्वं तद् रोचते कुलं ।
तस्यां त्व अरोचमानाया सर्वं एव न रोचते॥ 3-62”

This shloka means a fair and radiant wife can illuminate the entire house. If she has dull skin or ugly, she won't do that. Manusmriti has defined every rule of being an ideal woman. India has developed truly weirdly and differently from other countries. It has formed a strange hegemony and harmony by

pluralistic notions rather than chaos. Over the years, the generations have constantly forgotten and learnt things. What once regularly turned rare and what was rare has been forgotten. Common people usually don't read and know Vedas and Puranas. But the Mahabharata and Ramayana have constantly been the source of solace for people. It may be because of their cinematic presentation and adaptation on big screens and TV in India. In particular, the Ramayana has constantly been revisited, retold and redefined. Each region and generation of this country has its own version of Ramayana. Amish's Ramachandra series and Shiva Trilogy have been very popular due to the following points –

- The fusion of myths and fantasy makes it more digestible and acceptable to novel readers.
- God and Goddesses are treated in human form instead of supernatural ones in mythological fictions.
- Readers can read ancient mythology and epics with new angles and new perceptions.
- Amish Tripathi has used “Hyper Looping technique” which combines known and the unknown. It takes readers to known and unknown places to find connection.
- Tripathi gives more focus or equal treatment to female leads.

1.2 Research Gap

Epics, mythology, fables, folklores, and literary values have been at the forefront of several civilizations and cultures. These things choose the temperament and social setup of the country in several cases. Mythological characters and mythology are perceived as epitome, embodiment and beacon. Mythological characters are the official standard or prototype to serve philosophies and values. They are often used to serve patriarchal and political interests. The Bible has been an undisputed part of Christian philosophies and values in western world. It is not possible to follow any individual ideology or text in India. Plural society has always been a part of India in terms of language, culture, mythology and food. One shouldn't and cannot follow a single text of Hindu way of living in India. Pluralism refers to the basis of Hinduism. There are hundreds and thousands of versions of Ramayanas and Mahabharata, Puranas, Vedas, Samhitas and Smritis, along with local fables and folktales to define the value of customs, social norms, and rituals. In this study, we are going to discuss the portrayal of Sita in Valmiki's Ramayana and Tripathi's Sita: The Warrior of Mithila.

1.3 Research Objectives

- To analyze the journey of Sita in Amish Tripathi's "Sita: The Warrior of Mithila" and Valmiki's Ramayana.

2. Research Methodology

The mythology is persistent and is subject to change over time in context of connotations and perspectives. The myths usually represent rich narratives and themes. From every epoch, the literary authors use such forms and themes in their creations. These days, a lot of famous books and bestsellers pick stories from mythology in India which are lesser known to attract the audience. This act is called “retelling” what masses have forgotten to add new aroma and taste to what has been popular already. As a famous genre, Hindu mythology has evolved. Refurbishing, revisiting, re-reading, and re-analyzing the same gives the audience another dose of antidote to those who are serious about their roots and want

to know their history as a passion, not as a lecture or history. They get the opportunity to arrive at new perspectives and feel important changes which couldn't be done in the past, as mythology and epics were stated in restricted corners of scriptures. These days, mythology has changed its flavors and colors as per new demands.

Ancient gods and goddesses are beyond any humanizing or questioning. Hence, contemporary writers and readers don't see them as they are. Instead, modern authors humanize them. Hindu mythology cannot be altered and touched as it is considered as a holy text. Hence, contemporary writing derives meanings; analyzes and dissects stories; and delves the same into creative interpretations that are verified by dialogues and discussions of thinkers, academicians, and readers. Epics are reinterpreted in contemporary retellings in a way to make them less godly and more human.

The protagonists of the stories and novels have all human emotions that make them strong and weak. Their battles and fights are not always perceived to be based on higher purposes. The myths have changed the narrative as universal journeys and these myths are retold from the perception of individuals. In this article, we are going to analyze the mythological character of Sita in Valmiki's Ramayana and how Amish Tripathi has reinterpreted her with the human side of her, so that human readers can relate to her with a fresh perspective. To fulfill this objective, we have used secondary data collected from the studies on mythology by several authors and academicians.

3. Analysis of Study

Amish Tripathi portrays a harmonious balance between conflicting weaknesses of male characters around Sita in

"Sita: The Warrior of Mithila ". It starts with Janaka, who is her father and also a ruler who failed to perform his duties just to indulge in Scholarly conferences and readings. He was a Kshatriya ruler but he was doing what a Brahmin should do. His wife, Sunaina handles the kingdom and the legacy goes to her daughter, Sita, after her death. The Saptasindhu ruler, Dashrath is affected by his own despair and short-tempered nature when he was defeated in the battle of Karchapa. He also couldn't get away with family politics and polygamy.

Rama has his own ideology which he doesn't want to compromise with and always remains on the right side. Being too diplomatic and pragmatic is wrong for him. He accepts living in the jungle in exile for his adherence to the values and rules. Bharata yearns for creativity, peace of mind and freedom from the chaos. Sita attempts to find a balance between all such weaknesses. She wants Rama to be practical and reason his adherence to the rules. Rama witnesses the family politics and fate of his father in the royal family, so he hates polygamy. In Ayodhya, she makes Bharata realize the difference between feminine and masculine ways in a conversation.

She also counterbalances the scholarly pursuit of her father. She looks at all of the issues around her with a different view and becomes a practical and rebellious ruler. Figure 1 represents this counterbalance between Sita and men around her. Tripathi presents her as a solution to various problems in the leading male protagonists. She is the counterweight and center of gravity around them. She is the solution to excess of everything and acts as a neutralizer.

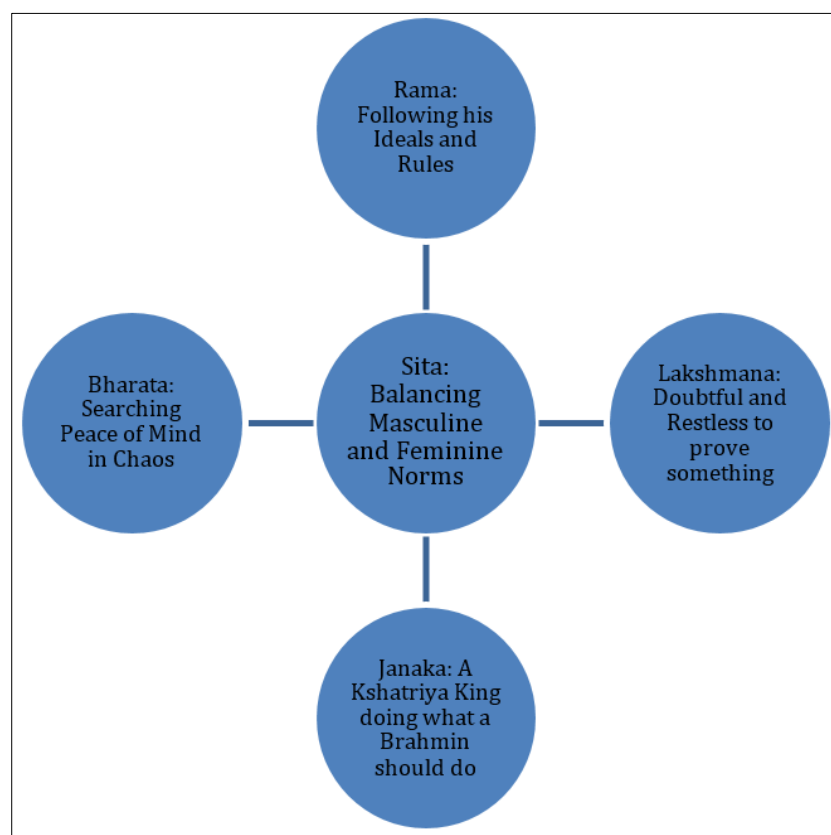


Fig 1: Sita counterbalancing male characters around her

Sita has realized a new responsibility and played a new role over time. She was once an icon of Sativrata and Pativrata

women who could sacrifice herself for family and her husband. She is still being used as an epitome of controlling

inner power in every woman. Every woman is conditioned to accept and sacrifice like her. Sita was left several centuries behind feeling that she will adjust to circumstances. Contemporary writers have made humble attempts with mythological fictions or mythological retellings to bring her back to present time. They have questioned the frame which is set in these characters molded for centuries.

Sita is being judged for a lot of things in Valmiki's Ramayana. Ravana abducted her by tricking her as a golden deer and sage. She is blamed for being tricked by a deer. She sent her husband to bring that deer and Lakshmana to help Rama. Lakshmana was not going away and leaving Sita behind because he found that something was fishy. But Sita scolded him and sent him away. Lakshmana still drew the line of safety "Lakshman Rekha" but she is still blamed for crossing that line and faced the aftermath. But Sita was a loyal wife. Sita had to prove her chastity by going under "Agnē Pariksha" or the fire trial for society, not for her husband.

She turned out to be a stain on the image of the king of Ayodhya and she has to go to the forest again. This time, she has to go alone and she is pregnant too. She accepts the decision finally and gives birth to twin sons, Lav and Kusha. They reunite accidentally when they abduct Ashwamegh's horse. Rama calls Sita to reunite after a trial in public. Instead, Sita summons Mother Earth to get her away.

In "Sita: The Warrior of Mithila", Sita is never being judged for centuries. Instead, she turns judgmental. Amish's Sita is raised by an absolute matriarch, Sunaina, who is always willing to respond to her questions. Sunaina never keeps her reality hidden, whether it is her responsibilities for Mithila and her arrival in their lives. Sita is an explorer by nature, who explores the grim reality of slums. She knows how to struggle and learns from her personal experiences. She breaks the ribs of people who mock her and her father, and also her

uncle's royal seal. She is a rebel who chooses sides and makes choices. She partners with both Vayuputras and Malayputras. She refrains from being a tool of politics.

She chooses Rama as her spouse and makes a masterstroke by uniting two different ideologies indirectly and camps led by Vishwamitra and Vashishtha, the archrivals. She uses her rational thinking to deal with the problems. According to her, class and caste conflicts are the real culprits and bigger than Ravana. She is an asset to Rama rather than being just a liability. She is a true partner as "Lady Vishnu" to support Rama. She contrasts the fanatic idealism of Rama. She is the alternative to Rama's weaknesses. She protects Rama and herself in the jungle. She befriends the Nagas. She brilliantly performs her duties as Mithila's ruler. She always puts ahead development and economic reforms of her empire. She is no longer the woman who doesn't know her strengths. She knows her powers and skills completely. She is the ultimate warrior who can challenge the entire battalion of Ravana on her own.

4. Results

Being strong or weak has never been the matter of debate for Sita as she was always powerful. She is portrayed strong or weak. Amish knew her realities which are different from what is defined in Valmiki's Ramayana. She knows her origin and who she is. She is aware of not just her own weaknesses and strengths, but also of other's weaknesses around her, whether he is her husband, her father, brothers of her husband, or her gurus. Sita balances between Humans and Nagas, extreme enemies like Malayaputras and Vayuputras, Vaishyas and Kshatriyas, between various beliefs, and also between feminine and masculine ways of controlling situations.

Table 1: Sita in Valmiki's Ramayana and Amish's "Sita: The Warrior of Mithila"

Decisive Moments	Sita in Valmiki's Ramayana	Sita as "Sita: The Warrior of Mithila"
Plot	Sita in "Valmiki's Ramayana" is the wife of Lord Rama, the 7 th avatar of Lord Vishnu. He rescues Sita and kills Ravana to save the world.	Here, Sita is a daughter who later turns Lady Vishnu and is found by Sunaina, the true matriarch. She takes charge to save the nation.
Her portrayal	Also known as Janaki or Vaidehi, Sita remains pious and proves her loyalty and chastity by going through a fire trial "Agni Pareeksha"	The Lady Vishnu herself, Sita ties the knot with Rama for a greater cause. She defeats Mithila's Lankan troops with the help of Rama. She emerges as a great administrator, savior and ruler.
Conflict	The ideology of Deva and Asura is the major cause of conflict here. Rama was born to kill the demon Ravana.	The contrast of class between traders and rulers is the main cause of conflict. The Kacharpa battle has deteriorated the "Sapt Sindhu" kingdom. The politics between Malayaputras and Vayuputras is another cause.
The way she is treated	Sita is King Janak's divine child. She is unaware of her superpowers or maybe she doesn't want to use her powers and let others and her own people victimize her. Other female characters like Manthara, Anusuya, and Ahalya were also weak in patriarchal society.	Sunaina is a true matriarch queen and mother who raised Sita and makes her a great warrior and rebel. Parasurama himself chose her as "Lady Vishnu". She marries Rama and they both defeat Ravana. The story also has other strong female leads like Sunaina, Manthara, Samichi, and Radhika who know their own strengths and they get what they want from society.
Lakshman Rekha	Lakshman Rekha represents boundaries or bondages imposed to women to be kept or be within. Sita crosses that line and suffers consequences.	Amish Tripathi has totally excluded any such symbol or myth behind Lakshman Rekha. It shows women's conditioning in that period. Instead, he portrays Sita and Sunaina as the living epitomes of matriarchy.
Casteism	There are many incidents in Valmiki's Ramayana like Shabri, Shambhuk Vadha, and Nishad to advocate caste system. Shambhuk was murdered because he was practicing self-punishment to attain heaven and he was shudra.	The Amish's Sita believes that the root cause of all problems is the caste system. She promotes caste on the basis of skill and work, instead of birth. She accepts the outcast tribe of Nagas for her service. She becomes a companion and friend of Samichi.

Amish's Sita is a reformer, a ruler and an administrator who reforms, rules, and creates her own kingdom. She questions

conventional ideologies and doesn't follow any ideology. She has own rational and secular views on class and caste

discrimination that is prevalent in society. She has rational views to run her own kingdom and she knows how to seek the loyalty of people. She openly reasons and argues with people and dares to find solutions to the questions. She is not the victim of Lakshman Rekha as she eradicates all boundaries. She fights for truth and treats everyone with equality. She accepts Nagas, Jataayu, and other outcast people. She treats them with care and love as humans. She also saves Jataayu by risking her own safety.

5. Conclusion

All in all, “Sita: The Warrior of Mithila” is a journey of women’s consciousness. Amish Tripathi presents Sita as the symbol of progress and spiritual enlightenment of Indian women. Sita travels through several narrow pathways to reach where she wants to be. She has progressed eventually in each critical book based on Ramayana and its progressive version. Currently, these books stand at destination and inception. Amish Tripathi’s Sita attempts to give solutions to the questions framed by Valmiki’s Ramayana. This study is a humble attempt to cover these extremes to describe Sita’s journey by uncovering the layers of customs, history, anecdotes and myths about her.

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