

Mythic Ramayana: Deciphering the Real through Adaptation

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Ramayana is nourished on variants that contextualize different world-views of particular segments of society. The composition of variants was triggered by social norms, social relations and obligations, gender, ethics of conduct, right and wrong aspect of human activity. The multitude of differing versions shows centuries of questioning within the tradition that has two keynotes: multiplicity and accommodating questioning. This is what sustains the tradition over time and space. Valmiki, was perhaps a soft hearted person who sketched Sita's character as a symphonic incarnation of exquisiteness, sensitivity of heart, profusion of empathy, loyalty, insight of the rightest type, bravery of heart, and fortitude, that assisted her well in continuously proclaiming herself for her right. The Ramayana stories in their different versions are also replete with instances of Sita questioning the injustices she witnessed. In this paper it shall be focused how in Shashi Deshpande's "The Day of the Golden Deer," Sita psycho analytically questions Rama's sense of fair play in killing Vali when he was locked in a single combat with his brother Sugriva. She acknowledges her fault for sending her husband after the golden deer, and for sending Lakshmana after him; but, according to her, her banishment was his weakness—his weakness is the belief that his image as the righteous, the perfect ruler should not be tarnished. Daughter of the Earth, touched by the anguish of mortality, she is an obedient yet a rebel and mystic yet real. The paper explores themes of presence and emotional connection and expression.

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India is a mixture of emotions, colours, feelings, music, happiness, sorrow, life and death, gods and people. India is an endless puzzle which each soul that meets its mystery tries to solve. India is infinite, just as untrammelled as the fascination that it produces in the others India is an incredible rich culture, with a history of thousands of years. It saw the rise of various civilizations, religions, dynasties, human groups, cultures and arts. India has been presented and represented in many forms in literary discourses, arts and heritage symbols. But the country is so vast that there always remains an area to be explored. Moreover, there are many new things to be interpreted and established. Any

discussion on anything belonging to India and its culture is incomplete without interdisciplinary dialogue between various cultural aspects and elements.

Through its stories, India has always attracted people of distant places from archaeologists, travellers, merchants, artists to scientists and academic researchers. Its rich diversity and its myths, legends, arts or music fascinated and allured many minds. The languages of India, from Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, Tamil, the regional languages from the ancient times, to Persian and Urdu from the medieval times and English from the modern period, were and still are fascinating for linguists and researchers.

Myths have a leading influence to shape the gender edifice in human civilization which execute male ideology and preserve it as a ritual. Ken Dowden in his book *The Uses of Greek Mythology* rightly observes, “Mythology is by and large a man’s mythology, describing a world from a man’s point of view. Women are seldom considered in isolation from men . . . they seldom have scope for action on their own initiative” (115). The fact is that Myths have been created and interpreted by men to fulfil their various needs. “Women”, says Simone de Beauvoir “have no virile Myths in which their projects are reflected, they still dream through the dreams of men. Gods made by males are the gods they worship.” The Hindu religion through its mythology and epics invokes five women—the Parchakarya (five virgins) and the Parchasati (five chaste wives)—as role models for feminine behaviour, but the story of Sita dominates popular imagination as well as literary representation. This paper attempts a detail analysis of the existing presence of Sita in today’s society through Shashi Despande’s “The Day of the Golden Deer.”

I was that woman, pure and radiant,

Abducted by a demon across the sea ...

I was that woman outraged by a hundred,

My modesty a never-ending sari ...

I was that woman ...

Who longed to be accepted as simply human:

A real person like others, and not a myth.²

Growing up in an epoch with so much dialogue on women empowerment subsequently changed my perception of Sita. She is still a role model, but for a

different reason. I read Adrienne Rich's essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" which talked about "re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." Rich asserts, "We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (18-19). Traditional interpretations of Sita's story focus on her self-sacrifice and obedience to the men that direct her life. This essay posits a re-vision of her story for feminist appropriation and a positive construction of femininity. Indian feminists have often criticized Sita "as an overly-submissive wife who committed suicide for an ultimately untrusting husband" (Hirst and Lynn, 2004). It is also alleged that the ideal qualities of Sita as presented in the Ramayana are of her unquestioning subordination to the demands of her husband (Goldman and Sutherland, 2004).

Nabaneeta Dev Sen in her article "When Women Retell the Ramayana" talks about the retelling of The Ramayana in contemporary rural women's Ramayana songs wherein she analyses the songs and derives and lists ten common sub-themes from those songs which are highly relevant to women's lives in India today, especially rural women. The Ramayana, the Adikavya-the first epic of Indians-as Aurobindo observed, is an epic that has "fashioned much of what is best and sweetest in the national character" of India. "There can be no better textbook of morals [than 's Ramayan.] which can be safely placed in the hands of youth to inspire them to higher and nobler ideals of conduct and character", said Srinivasan Iyengar. In line with this observation, Rama, the hero of the epic is perceived not only as the exemplar for all living and dutiful sons, but also the ideal husband and king, while Sita the heroine as the noblest flower of Indian womanhood, devoted to her lord in thought, word and deed. Driven by this understanding of Ramayan.a and its main characters, Hindus, traditionally, revere Sita as the role model of womanhood. But feminists of today challenge this proposition on two counts: one, they consider her character as an illustration of the subjugation of women in Hindu culture; and two, they feel that upholding Sita as a role model is tantamount to endorsing male supremacy and female subservience. Indeed, some feminists have even argued that "Sita Syndrome" breeds domestic violence in India.

Deshpande's journey through mythology becomes incomplete without a word on the strange and cruel injustice imposed on Sita, for whom any Indian's heart pains:

“What stirred in me was the contrast between the young girl, whose innocence made this going away with her husband a joyous adventure and the woman, older, mature, soon to be a mother, once again getting ready for exile”.⁴

Between these two exiles, Sita's faults, her strengths, her sufferings, her sacrifices and the course of her development to maturity in this male-dominated society are analysed with a kaleidoscopic view in “The Day of the Golden Deer”.

Long back, the day Sita came to Ayodhya with her husband as a bride, she had seen the people lining their path only to look upon her husband, hear him, and cheer him. He had turned to her then with glowing eyes and a radiant smile on his face. She was too young and foolish, perhaps, to realize what his eyes were saying to her - “Do you see how they love me? Do you hear them?” (67) Now she realizes that “a man can get drunk with the wine of too much love and admiration.” (67) The day when he killed Vali, she did not believe that her husband would kill an unsuspecting man that way, for her sake. But now, when it is too late for the knowledge to help her, she understands that “it can become a passion too, this desire to be loved and admired” (67) and led to abandoning “his wife to please his people” (66).

Her life is ruined not by one but by two persons, who are alike, with their passion. Twice she experienced the moments of fearful agony when she felt she would disintegrate. The first experience was on the day of the golden deer, when she had felt the iron hands of the seemingly gentle hermit grip her - but his passion was simple. Now she feels them again, alien hands on her, cruel, hard and hurting - the decision of her own husband to abandon her for the sake of the people. But “this passion, to be always in the right, never to do any wrong, is worse.”(67) The same passion had asked her to prove her purity. She tries to discover herself, who she is and what identity she has:

“I am no Queen if the King casts me off. I am nothing . . . I go back to being what I was. The daughter of King Janaka. No, not even that. I am just Sita.(65) .

. . Only a woman who wants to live in peace with the man she loves. With the children of their love.” (67)

The man who is “too busy to spend some time with his wife” (65) is certainly dutiful and righteous too. But “what happens to those who are crushed under the chariot of his righteousness?” His duty has been her only rival. She scorns at the word “duty”, she has hated it since the day after the battle, her husband asked her to go through the fire and said: “I would have failed in my duty if I had let my love for you stop me from doing it.” And it had hurt her then that he had shown her, not his grief at having to be cruel to her, but “his pride in having done his duty.”(68)

Even now, Sita wishes, if he himself had come to her, if he had told her why he was abandoning, if he had revealed his grief for doing this thing. What difference would it have made? But one thing she knows is: “when one human suffers for another, there is a strange link between them.”(69) She realized this the day when the end of the war was near, the man who had ruined her life had come to her and wept, showing her, his grief, his anger, his weakness. He conquered his tears, advanced his hands to squeeze life out of her but finally became helpless. It was then that she realized his tragedy. She was never afraid of him. As people speak of “there never was any blade of grass” (70) between them. “There was just my will. And this feeling of his for me that would not let him force his will on me.”(70) After he had gone, she too had wept for him.

She neither blames fate nor believes in it: “It is not fate that shapes our lives, but our wills, our actions.” (70) It was not fate that left her unprotected on the day of her abduction. It was her fault, the result of her weakness, of her love for her husband. Her first exile along with her husband was the result of the weakness of her father-in-law, “the weakness of a doting old husband for a young and beautiful wife “(71).

But this time, she has done no wrong: “The wrong is his and his alone. It is because of his weakness, his belief that he can never do wrong, his desire that he should never be seen to do wrong” (71). To maintain his image as the righteous and perfect ruler he has sacrificed her. She has to suffer his wrong. Tears, reproaches, entreaties - all these, waiting inside her, clamouring for release, wanting her to cry out to the man who sacrificed her: “I am innocent, I

am blameless. How can you do this to me? I have your child in my womb ”(65) But she endures everything and remains silent; she wants to retain her anger: “If I grieve, if I cry or complain I am indeed lost. Nothing can uphold me now but anger, I have to hold on to that.”(66) It doesn’t mean that she has submitted, but she has forgiven him as he is a victim of his own idea of himself:

“Perhaps I will forgive him, after all, not because I am virtuous or a devoted wife, not because I am good and merciful, not even for the sake of our shared life, our memories, tears and laughter, but because I pity him.”(72)

For her, the day of the golden deer is over, “it is nothing but a mirage, a delusion.” But “he is still chasing it, the golden deer of perfection.”(72)

Finally nothing is left; “a fearful spill of silence” (63) pervades everywhere. She gets ready to enter the forest once again with a will to fight: “The demons of fear, hate, self-pity and bitterness, yes, and anger too. Only when I have vanquished these will I emerge out of the forest of exile once more”(72)

She wants to send the message to the king: “I was wrong in thinking that I had surrendered the golden deer. I have not, not entirely. Now, it is time for me to do so, to give up the idea of perfection in any man, in any human.” (73) Instead she simply says to Lakshmana: “Tell my husband that he could have done something worse. He could have forgiven me.”(73) And she walks into the forest, to face the terrible years that are waiting for her.

While Lakshmana blames the fate for all the unhappiness, Sita analyzes the causes for her wretched state - her love towards her husband.

It is not fate that shapes our lives, but our wills, our actions. It was not fate that left me unprotected that day, the day of the golden deer. It was my fault, the result of my weakness, the weakness of my great, of my too great a love for my husband. It was this that made a coward of me, making me afraid he had been hurt, it was this made me say those cruel words to [you]. (CS II 140).

Sita openly criticizes Ram’s traits and forgives him. His wish to be perfect in all areas is his weakness. She pities him for his ignorance - perfection is also another golden deer, an illusion, and an unattainable one.

Perhaps I will forgive him, after all, not because I am a virtuous or a devoted wife, not because I am good and merciful, not even for the sake of our shared life, our memories, tears and laughter, but because I pity him. For what is he but a victim of his own idea of himself? He is still chasing it, the golden deer of perfection, while I . . . No, for me, the day of the golden deer is over, I know it is nothing but a mirage, delusion. (CS II 141)

The reason for this open rebuke is that her man does not consider her as his wife or as a human being. When she realizes that she is not given the due consideration, she starts objecting Ram's determination. Jacqueliën Van Stekelenburg and Bert Klandermans in their article "The Social Psychology of Protest" analyse the grievance theory by quoting the views of Folger and Martin. Comparison results in grievance and grievance causes protest.

Prominent among grievance theory was relative deprivation theory. Feelings of relative deprivation result from comparison of one's situation with a standard—be it one's past, someone else's situation, or a cognitive standard such as equity or justice (Folger, 1986). If comparison results in the conclusion that one is not receiving what one deserves, a person experiences relative deprivation. Runciman (1966) referred to relative deprivation based on personal comparison as egoistic deprivation and to relative deprivation based on group comparison as fraternalistic deprivation. Research suggests that fraternalistic deprivation is particularly important for engagement in protest. (Major, 1994; Martin, 1986). (2)

So in turn the intelligent Sita leaves to the forest without revealing her pregnancy to them. Her frustrations provide her courage to face the crisis in her life.

She knows he is chasing a mirage, a delusion, a chimera of perfection. He is in fact a victim of his own idea of himself, still chasing the deer of perfection where he can never be seen to do wrong. He has sacrificed Sita to his God. His belief that his image as the righteous, the perfect ruler should not be tarnished. Thus by peeping inside the mind of Sita, Deshpande bestows her with flesh and blood and she suddenly becomes real and plausible any woman would be able to identify with. Her Sita also remains silent like the Sita of mythology but the probe into her psyche has revealed that there is a reason behind her silence.

Shashi Deshpande asserts in an interview that it is not her duty to replace one model with another. She says:

“It is not my idea of replacing one model with another. I am just deconstructing these myths... I’m not saying don't take these women role models. See them for what they are otherwise the pressure on you is going to be very difficult, if you are expected to be a Sita, a ‘Pathivrata’ in the sense of Sita, who never wrongs her husband, never does anything wrong gentle, loving motherly. You can never be like that and you will always feel guilty, I am not like Sita, I can't be. I am just telling you that let us see Sita as a human being.” (Prasanna 157-158)

Shashi Deshpande feels that myths are not, cannot and should not be gender circumscribed and believes myths need to be liberated too. By rewriting these mythical stories and by referring to them in her other stories she does exactly that. Shashi Deshpande is of the view that it is not needed to reject the ideals the important thing is that woman should be seen as an individual rather than from the perspective of ideal woman-hood. Bose views that the transformation of an independent, articulate, and decisive Sita that Valmiki created into an exemplar of uncomplaining acceptance is a fascinating act of literary manipulation serving religious, social and, above all, patriarchal ideologies (Lal and Gokhale, eds. 143). Undoubtedly, in *The Ramayana* Sita was not passive; rather she was making choices all along. The two instances which stand out are that she opted for a life of forest privation leaving a life of royal privilege and when asked for a fire test for the second time, she chose to enter Mother Earth according to her own free will.

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