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SITA AS EVERY-WOMAN: THEMES OF THE WORK-SONGS SUNG BY THE RURAL WOMEN OF THE INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT

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ABSTRACT

Ramayana in keeping with the global epic tradition started as oral literature that mapped the evolution of the society it is rooted in. While the mainstream epics deal with war and stories glorifying patriarchy there is always a treasure trove of women-centric stories that have often been ignored as trivial 'kitchen stories' and so on. There has always been many alternate ways of interpreting or re-telling stories from the epics especially within the oral tradition. If patriarchy has created Sita as the role model of their notion of the ideal silent wife, the village women across the Indian sub-continent have picked up the Sita myth to give themselves a voice, to break their silence. In the mainstream canon, Sita is a *devi*, a reincarnation of Goddess Lakshmi herself. In the women's retellings Sita is a far cry from the idolized *devi*. She is a flesh-and-blood woman facing real-life situations which continue to be as relevant today as it was in her age. This paper explores some of the Sita-centric themes from *Ramayana* and its continuing relevance in contemporary society. Her story becomes the master story containing within it the blueprints of the stories of generations of women waiting to be heard, as also of our unborn daughters.

Keywords: Retelling, oral literature, Sita, work songs, women's literature

Ramayana in keeping with the global epic tradition started as oral literature that mapped the evolution of the society it is rooted in. Valmiki's *Ramayana* (dated roughly between 500 B.C. and 1000 B.C.) is just one of the many available versions of the *Ramayana*. Some of the them include the great Tamil scholar Kamban's *Ramayana* written in the 12th Century, Molla's *Ramayanam* in Telugu written in the 14th Century, Tulasidas's *Ramacaritamanas* in 16th Century written in Avadhi, and two Bengali versions written by Chandrabati and Krittibas. Apart from these there exist a plethora of women's songs sung by rural women across the Indian sub-continent. Not only in India

but throughout the Asian sub-continent, *Ramayana* continues to be adapted and re-interpreted. While the mainstream epics deal with war and stories glorifying patriarchy, a treasure trove of women-centric stories have often been ignored as trivial 'kitchen stories' and so on. Patriarchy has created in Sita their notion of the ideal calm, uncomplaining, virtuous and most importantly a silent wife. However, there are numerous alternate ways of interpreting or re-telling stories from the epics especially within the oral tradition. Rural women across the Indian sub-continent have picked up the Sita myth to give themselves a voice, to break their silence. In the mainstream canon, Sita is a *devi*, a

reincarnation of Goddess Lakshmi herself. In these women's retellings Sita is a far cry from the idolized *devi*, she is a flesh-and-blood woman facing real-life situations which continue to be as relevant today as it was in her age.

There are alternate ways of reading a myth. In 'Sita's Garden of Epic Longing' Nabaneeta Dev Sen writes that women's work songs create a space to express their desires. Though it is not quite a public voice and it is heard by women alone, it still fulfils the basic wish to be heard. Dev Sen points out:

'It's best done by using a persona, by speaking through a borrowed voice. And the voice easiest to borrow is Sita's. Draupadi's surely, would not do. With her five adoring husbands and a divine boyfriend, she is hardly an acceptable role model for the rural Indian women;'

A Marathi work song illustrates the timelessness of Sita's story:

Sita's exile,
Let us share it among ourselves.
Sita's exile,
Is happening every moment, everywhere
When leaving for the forest
Sita distributed it amongst us all
Bit by bit.

In this paper we propose to explore some of the themes from *Ramayana* and its continuing relevance in contemporary society. Devdutt Pattanaik, a noted scholar and author in his book *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* has many interesting anecdotes on the themes of *Ramayana* which provide for informative reading.

An orphan girl is found and raised as a princess:

There are many variations in the stories of Sita's birth. Some Jain versions even claim that Sita was Ravan and Mandodari's daughter and abandoned because her horoscope proclaimed that she would be the cause of her father's death. However, all versions are unanimous that King Janaka found her at the edge of a furrow and raised her with great love and affection. There is a double motif hidden here. How many girl children are still abandoned and killed before birth because they are believed to bring misfortune and poverty to the fathers in the form of the dowries they will need for marriage? The second motif is one of wish fulfilment. An

abandoned girl child of uncertain birth is raised as a beautiful princess by doting parents. In a country still infested with caste barriers and pure bloodlines we don't see such happy endings too often.

Arranged love-the grand Indian marriage:

Tulasidas's *Ramcaritamanas* and many of the women's songs report that while cleaning out the courtyard one day, Sita had effortlessly lifted Shiva's bow and put it aside to complete her cleaning. King Janaka had watched Sita's great might and decided that she could only be married to someone mightier than her, someone who could not only lift the bow but string it too. It was natural then that the father of a *kshatriya* princess would want his desired son-in-law to be a more skilled warrior than his daughter. The practice still continues more than 2500 years later. Only the criteria have changed depending on the class of the bride and groom. If the girl holds a master's degree the groom should preferably hold a doctorate degree. If the girl brings home a decent salary, the groom should preferably bring home double that amount, or if not that, at least more than the bride.

All women dream of finding love and happiness with the stranger they are being married to. It is perhaps this hope that gives them the courage to trade the security and love of their parents' home and plunge into an unknown life with a stranger. Song after song sing of the mutual love of Ram and Sita – a wish fulfilment for many of the singers who find very little love in real their lives. The marriage rituals, decorations and *stree achars* are also described in great details – for marriage and romance are stuff women's dreams are made of, and thus primarily women's domain.

In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Ram's elder sister Santa hardly plays a part. But she becomes a central character in many of the women's songs. She is a supportive elder sister-in-law, who advises Sita on the correct behaviour of a married woman and daughter-in-law. Kausalya too is represented in these songs as the ideal mother-in-law every daughter-in-law dreams of in a joint family, a mother-in-law who shows warmth and support for her daughter-in-law and who helps to bring her closer to her husband.

True to life, not all songs are of bliss. Some Marathi songs hint at trouble in the paradise from early on.

Ram gave Sita his love
On a tiny tamarind leaf
Kaikeyi poured poison in Ram's ears
So he chews his paan all alone
All by himself
While Kaikeyi waits behind the door
Like a scorpion.

Sita and Surpanakha: The two sides of female sexuality: The idyllic bliss of the forest dwellers is shattered by the arrival of the demoness Surpanakha, who takes one look at Ram and falls deeply in love. When she openly admits the same to Ram and asks him to take her for his wife, Ram banter with her for a while, before admitting that he is already married to Sita and advises her to shift her attention to the more eligible Lakshman — though Lakshman is already married to Urmila, but perhaps the wife's absence makes him eligible, or perhaps Ram just wanted to have some fun at the expense of a 'loose' woman. Lakshman too refuses to marry her and reads Surpanakha a long lecture on the correct code of moral and sexual behaviour for women. When things start getting out of hand, Lakshman disfigures her by cutting her ears and nose. The justification given by Lakshman being that Surpanakha had not only overstepped the boundary of expected female behaviour, she was bent on attacking Sita and Lakshman had to protect Sita, the good wife. Many critics have found it difficult to place this scene in perspective with Ram's nature. Many writers have imaginatively given alternate endings where Surpanakha is depicted as a brave heroine, the pioneer of sexual rights for women.

Sita and Surpanakha are the two types of women who appear almost universally in folklore and mythology: Sita is good, pure, auspicious, and subordinate, whereas Surpanakha is evil, impure, inauspicious, and insubordinate. The good woman is one who remains controlled, both mentally and physically, by her husband (or, in his absence, her father, brother, or son) and whose sexuality is channelled into childbearing and service to her husband. In contrast to Sita, Surpanakha is unattached, independent and wanders about freely. It is not surprising that some versions state her to be

a widow, since widows are considered dangerous and inauspicious, circumstances having rendered them unable to bear children. Their chastity is suspect since they are no longer under the control of a husband and such women are believed to have insatiable sexual appetites. Surpanakha's unattached status is thus the major source of her evil nature; being a demoness is at best a contributing factor. After all, Mandodari, also a demoness, is praised for her virtue, chastity, and devotion to her husband, Ravan. Accordingly, it is Surpanakha's status as an independent woman which is denounced. But an unattached woman, while perceived to be dangerous for the society, also holds a certain fascination for the male imagination, which is perhaps why Ram and Laksman linger a bit, egging her on rather than banishing her immediately.

It is revealing that Ram uses Sita as the excuse for Surpanakha's mutilation: the 'bad woman' or Alaksmi is punished in order to protect the 'good woman,' or Laksmi. It is also perhaps a warning of what would happen to the 'good woman' if she steps out of the male protection. Interestingly in rural Bengal Laksmi festivals, an image of Alaksmi is made and ritually disfigured by cutting off its nose and ears, after which an image of Laksmi is installed in order to ensure good luck and prosperity in the coming year. Discussion of female sexuality remains a taboo even today in most parts of the Indian sub-continent. Surpanakha's story merges with Sita's as she steps out of the Lakshman Rekha and continues to fascinate generations of re-tellers.

The allure of the Golden Deer: The Superior Value of a Male Life: Sita's desire for the golden deer sounds out of place when we remember that she had happily shunned all luxury and riches to be

together with Ram in the forest, especially her insisting on it even though Ram tells her that the animal is a demon in magical disguise. In the Ramayana of the lower caste Telugu women, who are used to fending for themselves, Sita does not insist on Ram getting the deer; she says instead:

You give me your bows and arrows

I will go right now and get the animal.

His ego hurt, Ram rushes forth to capture the golden deer. Many other versions have equated the golden

deer with sons. In a Telugu women's work song Sita questions Lakshman what would happen if she crossed the *Lakshman Rekha*. Lakshman clearly warns her that she would be abducted. When Ravan comes in the disguise of a beggar he tempts her that with each circle she crosses she would be gifted with a son. Even though she knew she would be exposing herself to grave danger, in her desire to have sons she steps out of the circle greedily. A Bengali work song describes that Ravan blackmailed her that if she did not come out to give him food and water he would kill himself at her door and thus she would commit the great sin of taking a male life, which has a much higher value than her life.

The golden deer syndrome of preferring sons to daughters still continues. *Lakshman Rekha* is the symbol of 'appropriate' female behaviour and victim shaming and blaming continues unabated in most instances of violence on women which are even today brushed off as 'she must have invited it with her lewd looks/dress/behaviour'.

Agnipariksha/Trial by Fire: Kamban's *Ramayana* paints a poignant picture of Sita standing before Ram, her eyes raised expectantly to his face, overwhelmed at the prospect of a joyful reunion with her husband after he manfully fought and won his victory over Ravan. Ram, however, remains formal and aloof and sets out to articulate his heartfelt thoughts. In Kamban's *Ramayana* he rejects Sita on the grounds:

You took pleasure in food,
you didn't die
for all your disgrace
in the great palace of the devious demon.
You stayed there, submissive,
wholly without fear.
What thought has brought you here?
Did you imagine that I
could want you?

Another version of *Ramayana* further clarifies: 'Today I have avenged the insult to my honour and fulfilled my promise. You stand unabashed before me, even though suspicion has arisen with regard to your character. Today you seem extremely disagreeable to me even as a light to one who is suffering from sore eyes. Therefore go wherever you like, O Janaka's daughter, the ten directions are

open to you today. What man born in a noble family would take back with an eager mind a woman who has dwelt in another's house, simply because she has been kindly disposed towards him in the past? How can I accept you, who were squeezed into the arms of Ravan while being borne away by him and who regarded you with a lustful eye? There is no more attachment for you in my heart. You may therefore go wherever you like.'

Addressing Lakshman, Sita says: 'Raise for me a pyre, which is the only antidote against this calamity. I no longer desire to survive, smitten as I am with false reproaches.' Looking at his elder sibling's expression, Lakshman realized, to his horror, that this was exactly what Ram expected.

Not one of the assembled warriors, who just moments before had proved their mettle in the battlefield, had the courage to dare open his mouth opposing the grave injustice being perpetrated. The obedient Lakshman set out to prepare the pyre. However, Sita's purity is such that the fire god Agni himself gets burned and cries out in pain. He asks Ram:

Didn't you hear
when the gods and sages
and all that moves and is still
in the three worlds
screamed, as they struck their eyes?
Have you abandoned Dharma
and resorted to misery instead?
Will rain fall,
will the earth bear its burden
without splitting in two,
will Dharma go the right way,
or can this universe survive
if she becomes enraged?
if she utters a curse,
even Brahma on his lotus will die.
Eminent Indian poetess Bina Agarwal narrates Sita's, and any woman's, dual victimization:
With your husband you chose exile:
suffered privation, abduction,
then the rejection -
the chastity test on scorching flames,
the victim twice victimized.
Could those flames turn to flowers

without searing the soul?
they say you, devoted wife,
questioned him not
and let him have his way.

In her delightfully non-confrontational and humourous rendering of the story Dev Sen raises some key issues. She says in her paper 'Lady Sings the Blues: When Women Retell the Ramayana':

'Epic poets the world over are men singing the glory of other men, armed men, to be precise... The ideals of the epic world obviously do not have much to share with women, nor do the women enjoy the heroic values. There is little they can do there – other than get abducted or rescued, or pawned, or molested, or humiliated in some way or other.'

She questions the truth behind the common assumption that behind every epic battle is a woman, be it Helen in the *Iliad*, Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* or Sita in the *Ramayana*. Are women really the cause for war between men or merely the excuse given by power-hungry men? She also questions the deification of Sita to become the perfect role model that the patriarchal society expects from a woman. Interestingly, Dr. Sirajul Islam Chowdhury in his book *Dhruvadi Nayikader Koyekjon (A Few of the Illustrious Heroines)* devotes a chapter to Sita called 'Sitar Dhikkar' ('Sita's Reproach'). He argues that the poet Valmiki who had been so moved by the lament of the female bird to write an epic could not have been so indifferent to Sita's pain, but history and the society of that time forbade him to make Sita the heroine. After all, the epic poet too is bound by the society in which he lives.

We come across Sita's story every day, across classes, castes, and education levels. Suspicion the green-eyed monster in Ram's head is no less deadly than Ravan, the external victim he vanquished. The defining issue however remains chastity and its definition. Sita asserts: 'I was helpless when I came into the contact of Ravan and did not act of my own free will on that occasion. My adverse fate alone is to blame on that score. That which is under my control, my heart, eternally does it abide in you.' Physical chastity continues to be

given importance when most victims have no control on the violence committed on them. A victim has to take the fire trial even now.

The Abandoned Wife — Childbirth in Exile: The green-eyed monster is a lingering one. No sooner had the couple settled down romours and suspicions came back to haunt Ram, some external but some perhaps internal. After all Sita had spent a year in another man's captivity. Not-so-surprisingly Ram, the protector of *Rajya* and *dharma* asks his younger brother Lakshman to kill/banish Sita well aware that she was expecting their first child. Lakshman, on the pretext of taking Sita to visit the hermitage of a sage abandons her in the forests. No one bothered to explain to her that she was being deserted. Lakshman who had mutilated Surpanakha when she had threatened to harm Sita, meekly does his brother's bidding. The helplessness of Sita catches the imagination of many rural women across India, who can understand her plight of giving birth without medical treatment and care too well. A Marathi song laments:

Where is the smoke coming from, in the dense forest?

In the dense forest, Sitabai has given birth.
Water is being boiled
Sitabai has given birth.
Where will Sitabai find a bed?
Dark beauty Sitabai,
You better make a bed of rocks
And sleep on it.
Sitabai has given birth
Where will Sita find nourishment?
There is no one to cook her a meal.
Sita is in exile, there is no cradle for her babies.
Sita made a bed of flowers
And placed her twins in it.
Sitabai has given birth.
The hills and the forests are rejoicing.
She has no one else to call her own.
Sita says, 'I have lived a life of rejection.'
All her life she has been neglected by Ram,
Yes, all her life.

Single Motherhood and Sita's Rejection of Ram as Husband: Sita who gave birth to twin sons in the wilderness and brought them up all alone is not a

weak woman. She has a quiet dignity about her and she seems to have made her peace with life. She no longer thinks of Ram as 'aryaputra' or 'husband' but as king and thus, distanced from her. She has learnt to rely on herself alone and raises two brave sons. She does not need male protection, ornaments and fine clothes to make her feel safe and beautiful. She has gone beyond the patriarchal definitions of good and bad and continues to live like an ascetic in Sage Valmiki's hermitage. When her sons enter their teens, after a long drawn out drama, the sons prove their might and royal breeding and are thus acknowledged by Ram as his own. Ram promptly summons Sita and the two boys to his court and though unwilling Sita goes at Valmiki's bidding. In front of the assembled subjects and kings from all parts of his empire, he asks Sita to undertake the fire trial again for the benefit of these venerable gentlemen, who had missed the earlier spectacle in Lanka. Sita's reaction, however, is completely different from that earlier occasion. With complete outward composure, this time around she rejects her life as Ram's wife. With folded hands, she merely prays to Mother Earth to end her suffering. Mother Earth embraces Sita and carries her home. Thus Sita ends her life preferring a dignified death than a second chance at marriage to a man who had betrayed and deserted her before. The end of Sati, Siva's consort is somewhat similar. But where she ends her life unable to bear her husband's defamation by her father, Sita gives up her life to protect her self-respect and dignity — a rather strong message from an outwardly gentle and meek Sita. Even though she rejects her husband in the end, she remains the ideal woman, even within the patriarchal cannon. Her story becomes the master story containing within it the blueprints of the stories of generations of women waiting to be heard, as also of our unborn daughters. Generations of women across the sub-continent continue to retell and refill the missing pages of history with their stories, they sing about Sita for she lives in every woman, she is Every-woman.

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