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SITA – “THE BORN VISHNU” IN AMISH TRIPATHI’S *SITA: WARRIOR OF MITHILA*

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ABSTRACT

Myths help people to understand their customs and tradition. The western myths are largely the derivatives of the Greek and Roman mythologies. In India, we have our very own *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, tales from *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, etc., which are introduced to us even from our early ages. The problem is we do not understand them completely as we are not told the entire story but only certain parts of it. Indian myths are largely patriarchal, where we find the female characters playing marginal roles even though the entire epic centres on the actions caused by these women. Modern retellings of the mythologies offer a fresh take on the women characters of these epics. One such powerful revisiting of *Ramayana* is Amish Tripathi’s *Ram Chandra Series*. The first novel in the series is titled *Scion of Ikshvaku* which deals about the story of Ram and it is followed by *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* that deals about the story of Sita. The series is planned by Amish to be written in the style of multilinear narration. These two novels are to be followed by other novels which will merge the individual stories of the main characters of the novels into one. The aim of this paper is to analyse the unconventional portrayal of Sita as “The Born Vishnu” in the novel *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*.

Keywords: Sita, Amish Tripathi, Retelling of Myths

Introduction

Every culture is replete with the myth and folklore that define their very existence. M. H. Abrams in his book *A Handbook of Literary Terms* gives the definition of Myth as follows:

In classical Greek, “mythos” signified any story or plot, whether true or invented. In its central modern significance, however, a myth is one story in a mythology – as system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it

is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. (179)

Myths help the people to understand their customs and tradition. The western myths are largely derivatives of the Greek and Roman mythologies. In India, we have our very own *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and stories from *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and so on which are introduced to us even from our early ages. The problem is we do not understand them completely. It is because we are offered only the certain perspectives of these epics that suit our context and we are not even

offered a glimpse of the other side which is negated completely. Only selective telling of the myths prevents us from knowing the full significance of their ultimate purpose.

For example, Indian myths are largely patriarchal, where we find the female characters playing marginal roles even though the entire epic centres on the actions caused by these women. *Mahabharata* would have not been possible without Draupadi because it is she who initiates the major course of action through her vow. And same is the case with *Ramayana* where Sita attracts the attention of Raavan who abducts her thereby plotting his own death. But when we read these epics, we do not attach much importance to the women characters. Modern retellings of the mythologies offer a fresh take on the women characters of these epics. Mythopoeia (retelling of the myths) is garnering huge attention in the current literary scenario.

Amish Tripathi is one of the most popular Indian writers of the present era. A banker turned writer, this MuHis first series the *Shiva Trilogy* has earned him a prominent place in Indian Writing in English. He is considered to be India's First Literary Popstar. *Shiva Trilogy* tells the story of Lord Shiva in the style of mashup which consists of three novels – *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011), *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013). In the introduction of the *Shiva Trilogy*, Amish states the germ of his idea for rewriting Indian mythological characters:

But what if we are wrong? What if Lord Shiva was not a figment of a rich imagination, but a person of flesh and blood? Like you and me. A man who rose to become godlike because of his karma. That is the premise of the *Shiva Trilogy*, which interprets the rich mythological heritage of ancient India, blending fiction with historical fact.

His second series, *Ram Chandra* tells the story of Ram, Sita and Raavan. The unique feature of this series is the usage of hyperlink or multilinear narrative. Amish has planned it to release as a series of five novels, of which two of them are published and are critically as well as commercially acclaimed.

The first novel in the series is titled *Scion of Ikshvaku* (2015) and it is followed by *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (2017). It should be noted that the important aspect of these novels are they are not told from the character's perspectives instead we are introduced to the other side of the very same characters through their actions.

Objective

Sita: Warrior of Mithila is a fresh take on the patriarchal mythological tale of *Ramayana*. The most laudable thing is Lady Sita is portrayed as a warrior fighting along the battles with Lord Ram without wavering from the paradigms of a dutiful wife. The aim of this paper is to analyse the unconventional portrayal of Sita as "The Born Vishnu" in the novel *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*. In this paper, the novel is abbreviated as *SWM* in the in-text citations.

Analysis

The novel *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* continues the story of the first book. Sita, along with her husband Prince Ram of Ayodhya and her brother-in-law Lakshman, has been racing through the Dandakaranya, to escape the wrath of the demon-king Raavan because Lakshman has accidentally wounded Shurpanakha, the half-sister of Raavan. Jatayu and a small army of Malayaputra tribe are riding with them offering protection. Just when they decide they are away from the demon-king's wrath, the attack takes place. Raavan and his soldiers attack their camp while Ram and Lakshman are gone for hunting. Sita and Makrant, a Malayaputra are out to collect the banana leaves for the lunch. At that time the Lanka soldiers attack them by showering arrows. Makrant dies by the arrow of Lankan soldier who says that he only need the Vishnu. Any reader who might be reading this sentence will assume that he is referring to Prince Ram of Ayodhya. But the Vishnu mentioned here is Lady Sita. Sita is raged to the core but she realises that she is at the weak point and chooses to attack stealthily and carefully. Jatayu, the naga with an appearance of a vulture is captured by the Lankan captain Khara. Sita kills Khara but she could not save Jatayu. Sita is captured unconscious by the Lankan soldiers and kidnapped in Raavan's Pushpak Vimaan.

Just then, Ram and Lakshman reach the place only to hear the news from dying Jatayu.

The story shifts back to thirty-eight years earlier. King Janak of Mithila and his wife Sunaina are childless. Janak's greedy brother is Kushadhvaj who rules Sankashya, the neighbouring kingdom of Mithila. Mithila's resources are depleted and the only way to increase the economy of Mithila is through agriculture. The royal couple go to seek Kanyakumari, the virgin goddess blessings to change the course of Gandaki in order to improve agriculture in Mithila. But the goddess says no and while returning they find a vulture fighting a pack of wolves. The vulture protects a girl child and dies in the process; Sunaina takes the child with her and names her Sita. Sita knows about her adoption story very well. When Sita is eight years old, she visits the slums in disguise, without the knowledge of her mother where she gets attacked by a group of slum boys who get her ring and try to hurt her. At that instant, she is saved by a girl who is similar to a boy in her builds. Sita runs to the palace soon after the girl intervenes and saves her. The girl is Samichi and she stays in the palace as her guard.

Kushadhvaj has eyes on Mithila and wants to unite Mithila with his kingdom. There comes the conflict between Kushadhvaj and Sunaina when he tries to make Sankashya as the main kingdom and himself as the direct ancestor of the Mithila's bloodline. Kushadhvaj uses a seal of his own to proclaim his right. Just then, Sita breaks the seal thereby causing the conflict that would extend for years. And because of this she takes the guilt with herself and maintains a distance from her mother and by this time Sunaina also gives birth to a girl child Urmila. Sita is sent to Shvetaketu's gurukul to learn soon after the incident. There she learns different subjects to improve her knowledge and is taught martial arts befitting a princess. Sita feels guilty and she starts to behave distant towards her mother. Bhoomi is her gurukul name. Many of her mates used to make fun of her father and often try to incite Sita against her father by referring to her adoption. Sita's temperament is one of her attractions. She is kind at the same time she is quite spirited. She thrashes almost everyone who speaks ill of her father and his rule.

Two years had passed since Sita had arrived in Shvetaketu's guruku. While the ten-year-old student had impressed her guru with her intelligence and sharpness, it was her enthusiasm for the outdoors that was truly extraordinary. Especially noteworthy was her skill in stick-fighting. But her spirited temperament also created problems on occasion. Like the time when a fellow student had called her father an ineffectual king, more suited to being a teacher than a ruler. Sita's response had been to thrash the living daylights out of him. The boy had been confined to the gurukul Ayuralay for almost a month. He had limped for two months after that. (SWM 44)

The emotional side of Sita is portrayed in her relations with her mother, her sister and her husband prince Ram. Sita remembers the story of her adoption well. Though she wonders about her birth mother, not for an instant she forgets about her mother Sunaina. "Sita sat up straight and closed her eyes for a moment. She had often wondered about her birth mother? Why had she abandoned her? Was she as magnificent as her adoptive mother? But there was no doubt in her mind about one fact: she was Sunaina's daughter" (SWM 45). Sita's another friend besides Samichi is Radhika, the daughter of the tribe guarding the gurukul. Mahrishi Vishwamitra visits Shvetaketu's gurukul when Sita is thirteen years old. He takes quite an interest on Sita.

Vishwamitra observed Sita with a keen eye. Tall for a thirteen-year old, she was already beginning to build muscle. Her straight, jet-black hair was braided and rolled into a practical bun. She flicked a spear up with her foot, catching it expertly in her hand. Vishwamitra noticed the stylish flick. But he was more impressed by something else. She had caught the spear exactly at the balance point on the shaft. Which had not been marked, unlike in a normal training spear. She judged it, instinctively perhaps. Even from a distance, he could see that her grip was flawless. The spear shaft lay flat on the palm of her hand, between her index and middle finger. Her thumb pointed

backwards while the rest of the fingers faced the other direction. (SWM 51-52)

Sita as befits a real ruler shows no distinction among the people. When Vishwamitra and his Malayaputras visit Shvetaketu's ashram, a Naga named Jatayu accompanies them. Nobody treats him with due respect but Sita treats him kindly. She is not bothered about what others would think or that Jatayu is a Naga. She takes care of him in a proper way. Sita regards the vulture to be her saviour and that's why when she meets Jatayu, she treats him kindly despite him being shunned by the Malayaputras as he is a Naga.

Vishwamitra knew the biases that existed in the times. He also knew that in this ashram, it was unlikely that anybody would have bothered to take care of Jatayu's meals. He looked around, trying to find him. He finally saw Jatayu, sitting alone in the distance, under a tree. Even as he was about to signal a student, he saw Sita heading towards the Naga, a banana-leaf plate in one hand, and a tray full of food in the other. (SWM 54)

Convinced by his close observation of Sita, Vishwamitra chooses her as the next Vishnu. Vishnu is the title given to those who are considered to be the propagators of good and showing a new way of life to people. At the same time, Guru Vashistha, Rajguru of Ayodhya, who is in enmity with Vishwamitra, chooses prince Ram as the next Vishnu. The enmity between the two goes back a long way and they do not see eye to eye since then. Vishwamitra reveals his plan to Sita and makes her to accept her Vishnuhood.

Meanwhile Sunaina's health deteriorates and she comes to meet Sita. Sita is shattered to know that her mother is dying. Sunaina asks Sita to come home with her. "Running away is never the solution. Confront your problems. Manage them. That is the way of the warrior." Sunaina lifted Sita's chin and looked into her eyes. 'And, you are a warrior. Don't ever forget that'" (SWM 99). Sita does not share the news of her being selected as Vishnu to Sunaina immediately. But when she learns that her mother is very ill, she chooses to return to

Mithila and to take care of her younger sister Urmila.

Sita becomes the Prime Minister of Mithila when she is sixteen years old. Urmila is only six years old when her mother dies. Samichi becomes the chief of police. Soon after Sita becomes the Prime Minister of Mithila, she begins many reforms that are profitable to the subjects in particular. Right from the style of house construction to the protection of the city, Sita manages it all. Mithila begins to regain some of its older fame. An assassination attempt is made on Sita, her chariot is tampered with but Sita manages to escape. She comes to know that her uncle's PM Sulochan is the key of this attempt and so she gives orders to Arishtanemi to eliminate him. Sulochan is killed by another assassin Maara. Arishtanemi is the right-hand man of Guru Vishwamitra and he offers his protection to Sita. When Sita decides to kill her enemy, Arishtanemi is quite impressed to know that she is worthy of being a Vishnu. "Now, you are truly worthy of being a Vishnu, thought Arishtanemi, a Vishnu who can't fight for herself would be incapable of fighting for her people" (SWM 137).

When she goes to the capital Agastyakootam of Malayaputras, she is welcomed as a Goddess. Soon she finishes her tour and her lessons of Vishnuhood and returns to Mithila to resume her duties. Sita's gurukul friend Radhika knows of Sita's identity as Vishnu and she gives her information about the princes of Ayodhya from time to time because her uncle is serving Vashistha too. When Vishwamitra approaches the subject of her wedding, Sita realises that she misses her mother too much. "Her mother's voice resonated in her mind. Find partners you can trust; who are loyal to your cause. Personal loyalty is not important. But they must be loyal to your cause" (SWM 105).

Sita comes to know of Vishwamitra's plan of making Ram marry Sita thereby gaining upper hand over his childhood friend turned foe Vashistha. After hearing about Ram and his actions, Sita is convinced that he would be a better Vishnu than her. Not an iota of self-importance or jealousy is found in Sita. She just wants to bring back goodness to her own country which is spoilt by evil.

At many instances, Sita's skill in martial arts is portrayed in detail. When she is attacked by the Lankan soldiers in the beginning, she is not able to see them properly but kills them effectively just by the source of their sounds. "There were great archers who could shoot arrows by relying on sound. But very few could throw knives at the source of a sound. Sita was one of those very few" (SWM 4). Sita is very practical and morally right in her actions. She takes credit for her actions which are due and does not encourage sycophancy or accepts something which is not her due. Sita once goes to a hunting expedition where she kills a tiger with only an average skill at display. Samichi congratulates her openly even though everyone present there knows that it is only an average kill. Sita calls Samichi and tells her mind. "You believe you did me a service. No, Samichi, you did not. I lost respect among those men by receiving an undeserved compliment.'... 'Don't let your royalty to me blind you. That is the worst thing you can do to me'" (SWM 190).

Perhaps the most important or special thing in the entire novel is nowhere Sita's beauty is exaggerated or to be more correct Sita's physical beauty is not mentioned at all save a very few paragraphs. Whenever an author pens a description about the protagonist, be it a male or a female, and that too mythological and godly characters, their beauty is so much concentrated and eulogised such that there could be no imperfections found in them. But Amish portrays Sita in a realistic way possible. We know that she is a warrior and ruler in a real sense fighting along with her soldiers. When Ram sees Sita for the first time, he notices the prominent scars which adorn her.

Ram's eyes had glazed over once again. He was staring at Sita's hands in almost loving detail. Only the Almighty or Ram himself knew the thoughts that were running through his head. For probably the first time in her life, Sita felt self-conscious. She looked at her battle-scarred hands. The scar on her left hand was particularly prominent. Her hands weren't, in her own opinion, particularly pretty. (SWM 208)

After their wedding, when the couple go to Ayodhya, everyone wonders what Ram could have

seen in Sita because such is her external beauty which is neither exaggerated nor underrated. But when they once converse with her, they come to know what must have attracted Ram towards her. She is equally dogmatic and unrelenting as Ram is and that is why they make a perfect pair. She is also perfect for him physically too.

She was almost as tall as Ram. Lean. Muscular. Wheat-complexioned. Her round face a shade lighter than the rest of her body. She had high cheekbones and a sharp, small nose. Her lips were neither thin nor full. Her wide-set eyes were neither small nor large; strong brows were arched in a perfect curve above creaseless eyelids. Her straight, jet-black hair was braided and tied in a neat bun. As always. (SWM 211)

As Ram himself says that he needs a wife whom he can respect the most, he finds Sita at the right time and falls for her. Ram first meets Sita when she was defending a poor boy from a shop owner who is intent on punishing the boy for theft of a fruit. But Sita is firm that the boy should be punished according to the law, the most important code of Ram's life and that itself is enough for him to respect her. Added to this is her fighting skill. Sita is also equally impressed by Ram when he decides not to take advantage of the Pinaka bow when Sita herself asks him to. When she gives him a thread to tie in his hand, "Placing the thread on the table, Sita began to climb the stairs. As she reached the door, she turned around for a last look. Ram was holding the thread in the palm of his right hand. Gazing at it reverentially. As if it was the most sacred thing in the world" (SWM 209). However one has to note that the romance between Sita-Ram is not overtly explored and it lies only as an under-current of the main plot.

The wedding takes place despite the brief disturbance created by Raavan. But Raavan attacks Mithila the very next day to take revenge but he and his army is immobilised with the help of the Asurastra launched by Ram under the manipulation of Guru Vishwamitra. Sita is enraged as she already understood that Vishwamitra does not favour Ram for being a Vishnu. Sita feels guilty as she knows

Ram well enough not to disobey the rules of Lord Rudra. Sita knows that Ram has been compelled by Guru Vishwamitra to use the daivi astra. "The idea wasn't to get rid of Ram. It was to destroy his reputation with his most powerful supporters.' Sita's eyes widened as she finally unravelled the conspiracy. 'The Malayputras do not want him dead. They want him out of the reckoning as a potential Vishnu; and, under their control'" (SWM 217-18). Breaking the law means fourteen year exile and the second time use means death and that is what the actual trump card of Vishwamitra to eliminate Ram as the Vishnu.

Though a skilled warrior and unbiased ruler, Sita is also the perfect wife for Ram. Soon after launching the Asurastra, Ram is shattered. It is Sita whom holds Ram together in that instant. She knows about the plan of Vishwamitra. She solaces Ram. "Sita continued to hold Ram in a tight embrace. 'I am with you, Ram. We will handle this together'" (SWM 252). Ram decides that he has to stay in exile for fourteen years as a self-penance. Sita and Lakshman decide to go with him. Sita decides that her Vishnuhood can wait and she asks Jatayu's help regarding Somras so that they can remain young for their years in exile in order to me more powerful when they return to Ayodhya. Her only worry is about Urmila, now the wife of Lakshman. They both come to Ayodhya and everyone wonders what has attracted Ram towards Sita since she belongs to a very small kingdom Mithila. Kaushalya welcomes both Sita and Urmila with warmth and affection but she is more attached to Urmila even from their first meeting and this pleases Sita as she realises that she need not worry about Urmila anymore when she accompanies her husband to the exile.

Sita learns a lot about her husband's family and his kingdom. She comes to know about Manthara. When Manthara questions Sita, she realises that Manthara is not just curious about them but also has a deep grudge against Ram and so she decides to be diplomatic with her. "Oh, I am a nobody from a small city. I just happened to marry above myself and arrive in this big, bad metropolis where I don't understand much of what you people say. Why should my husband trust my advice?"

(SWM 285). Urmila decides to accompany them to the forest, but Lakshman convinces her to stay in the palace. Sita too talks to Urmila and convinces her to stay in the palace to take care of Kaushalya.

Though they are married, Sita takes time to reveal about her Vishnuhood and about her Guru to Ram. It is because she does not want him to feel that she is hiding something but she makes sure that she reveals the truth only in the right time which would enable them to mutually understand and trust each other for the task that lies before them. Ram accepts her explanation and is happy to hear about her Vishnuhood. "Yes, but only as a wife. Some secrets are too big even for a marriage. I know who the Malayputras are. I know what your being Guru Vishwamitra's favourite disciple means'" (SWM 330). Finally, Sita is captured by Raavan but she is treated kindly by him. He almost treats her with respect and she is completely unharmed. This surprises her. When Raavan is not on alert, Sita tries to attack him but an unknown attacker surprises her. When she turns to look at her attacker, she is completely astonished to see that she is Samichi. The book ends there to be continued in the third and final part of the series.

Findings

In this novel, Sita is portrayed not as a paradigm of women's virtue but as a warrior. Amish portrays Sita as an equal partner of Ram. We find Sita advising Ram at various instances. And more surprising is that Ram is even able to accept that she is right at most of the times without contending her opinion at all. Sita is portrayed as a woman of wisdom rather than a woman of beauty.

When we look into our mythologies we could see that Sita is presented as a paragon of virtue and her chastity is the first thing that is concentrated by any writer. But Sita remains only as a passive participant of the actions and this is what is found in the epic *Ramayana*. She is not an active participant and she needs Rama to get her out of her trouble. But Amish's Sita is just the opposite of the traditional and conventional Sita. It is true that she needs Ram in order to rescue her being captured unawares by Raavan. But in the very first few pages of the novel, we come to know of her

fighting skills as a warrior which becomes her distinctive nature.

In the epic *Ramayana* and other interpretations of the same, the entire focus is on Rama. But Amish portrays Sita as an irresistible character. Even in the first book which narrates the story of Ram, we find Sita intriguing whenever she comes. And that is why she is selected for her Vishnuhood. She is brave and skilled; she is diplomatic; she is self-reliant; she takes her due credit without favouring sycophancy; she does not discriminate anyone; she is a follower of the laws and she is fair in all sense. These qualities befit a ruler and Sita is a born ruler in the real sense.

Conclusion

The status of women in our Indian society is still questionable. Though there are some improvements, it cannot be denied that our society is a male dominated one. Writers of fiction often rely on mythologies and histories to find solutions for the contemporary problems that plague our society. Even our mythology is highly patriarchal. Women characters are given marginal roles and it could be found in each of the stories. Modern retelling of these patriarchal stories tend to offer a different perspective where we are able to understand the voice of the voiceless. The novel *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* is one of a kind. It is completely unconventional in its portrayal of Lady Sita. Amish portrayal of Sita as a skilled warrior, unbiased ruler and a perfect wife and above all as a person who could inspire others makes us consider as a Vishnu for sure. This unconventional portrayal of Sita as a self-sufficient, strong and pragmatic woman makes her an exemplary of modern women.

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