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Different Sitas: A Critical Study of the Visual Enunciations of Sita

Geetanjali

This paper will examine how different visual enunciations of Sita across diverse modes of reinterpretation leads to creation of not only newer images but also to newer meanings and newer social relations. I will take up three instances of the re-reading of the legend of Sita, across three diverse media of articulation, where-in the visual depiction of Sita plays a significant part in the formation of new and different Sitas: (i) a graphic novel, *Sita's Ramayana*; (ii) a Malayalam feature film, *Kanchan Sita*; and (iii) an animated movie, *Sita Sings the Blues*. Although it cannot be claimed that the visual representation of Sita in these narratives gives a comprehensive account of position and role of women in the period that they are derived from, these narratives do constitute evidence of how the feminine has been perceived by the author of that particular narrative. I will examine how these creative interpretations lead to transformations in Sita's character and new subjectivities are formed because of these re articulations.

There are certain images of *Ramayana* and its characters that are mechanically and endlessly reproduced across diverse media such as calendar and poster art, Mumbai films, graphic novels, the Internet, etc. It will not be far-fetched to say that through these widely circulated images a semiotic system has been developed that unifies visual representations of the story of Sita and Rama in general. The visual narratives of the creative interpretations that will be examined in this paper are quite dissimilar from the normative mode of visualizing *Ramayana* and its characters and hence are different from the typical "visual literacy" of *Ramayana*.

It is to be noted that Valmiki in his *Ramayana* tells us very little about her physical appearance. Her physical beauty is described rather vaguely, and that too in the final chapter of Balakanda. She is said to possess virtue and beauty and is compared to Sri, goddess of beauty and is called as lovely as a goddess (Sutherland 73). Although there are no specific details about the appearance and beauty of Sita, she is generally perceived in an archetypal mode.

There exists a stereotypical representation of Sita in the visual conventions of both high art and popular culture. Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, in *The Invention of Tradition*, demonstrate that traditions, which appear ancient, are of quite recent origin. They are invented through a "set of practices, of a ritual or symbolic nature which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition which automatically implies continuity with a suitable historic past."

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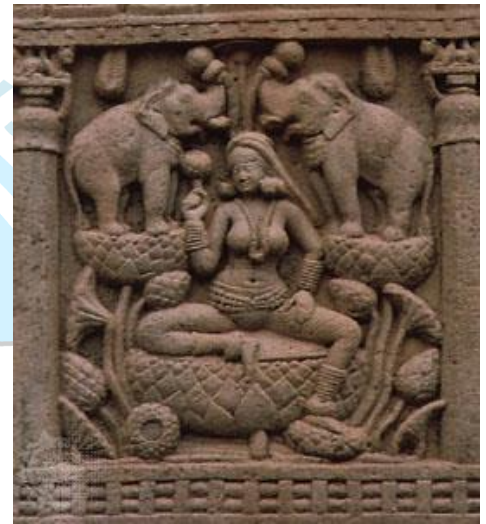
Traditionally in Indian art, sculpture and iconography, Sita is often depicted as an epitome of feminine beauty and grace, resplendent in her queenly attire with pleasing facial features. Typically, in calendars and posters we see her as fair-skinned with long, black hair, with her head sometimes covered by an ornate crown to communicate her queenly position. As could be expected of her social status, she is often bejewelled with bracelets and anklets of gold. She wears a sari, which symbolizes her chaste and virtuous nature.

In religious iconography, she is usually seated or standing at the left side of her husband Rama. Sometimes she may be depicted with additional arms to convey her status as an incarnation of Lakshmi. Lakshmi is often represented in sculpture seated on a lotus, full-breasted, broad-hipped, beneficently smiling, and sometimes being lustrated by a pair of elephants pouring water over her.

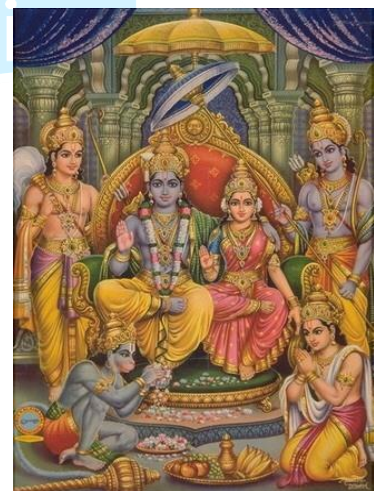


Lakṣmī, from the north gateway of stupa No. 1 at Sānchi, Madhya Pradesh, 1st ...P. Chandra

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lakshmi#ref158465>



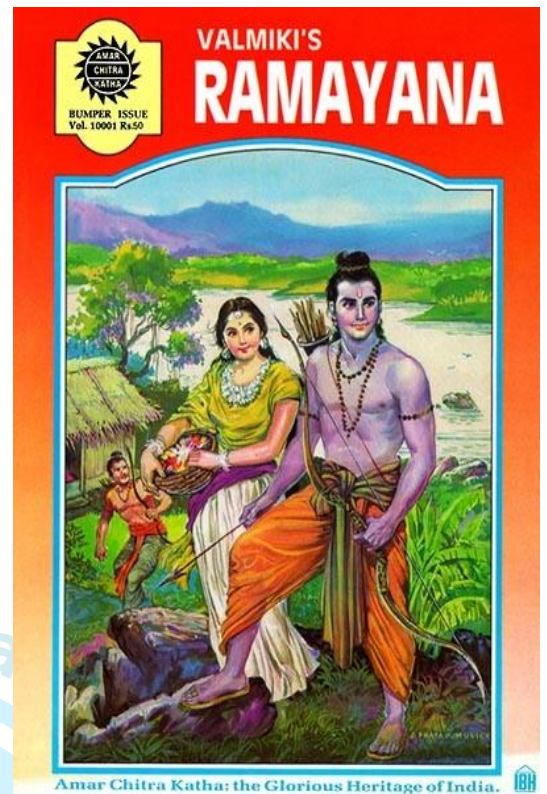
Sometimes, Sita and Rama are accompanied by other important characters from the *Ramayana* including Hanuman, Lakshmana, and sometimes her twin sons. In the picture to the right, although each of the characters is an object of veneration, the composition of this icon immediately establishes their internal hierarchy in terms of gender, kinship, and caste: Sita as the lesser companion of Ram, Lakshman bowed before his revered brother, and Hanuman, lower caste subhuman, prostrate in the most lowly position of all.



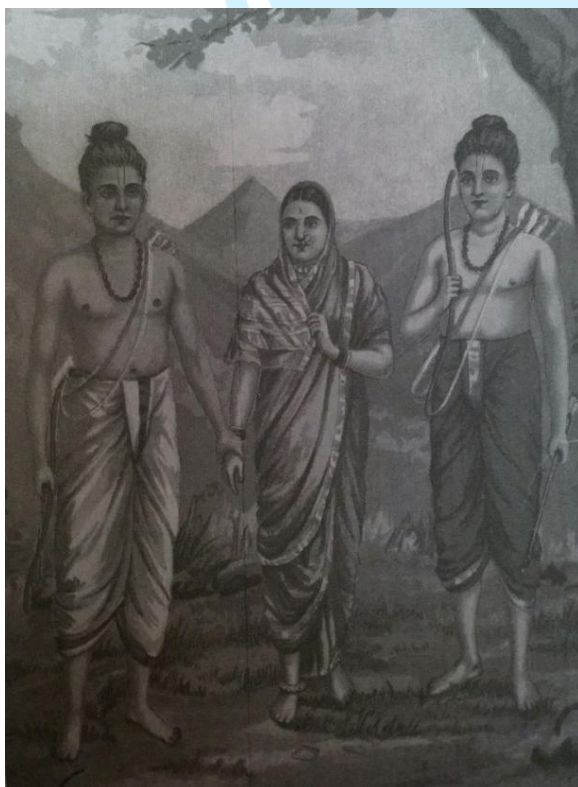
A major influence that defined the artistic tastes of common people for many decades was Raja Ravi Varma. The affordability and easy availability of lithographs of his paintings greatly boosted his reach and impact among the masses as an artist and as a public figure. His depiction of Hindu deities and episodes from the epics gained profound acceptance from the public and are found often as objects of



worship in many Indian households. His representation of mythological characters has been a part of Indian imagination for many years. Ravi Varma's "victorian" sensibility played a big part in creating a composite archetype of Indian womanhood for the Indian masses.



This is a popular print of Sita from Ravi Varma that shows her alone and pensive in Ashoka Vatika, after her abduction by Ravana (From the collection of Aman Nath, as found on the cover page of *In Search of Sita*). According to Aman Nath, "It is evocative of both past and future exiles, of her loneliness and strength. However, it was also Raja Ravi Verma who "cast his mould for the pan Indian, sari clad woman" (Nath, 193).



In the picture to the left, we see Rama holding the dutiful Sita firmly while also affirming his total possession of her (From the collection of Aman Nath, as found in *In Search of Sita*, p 193)

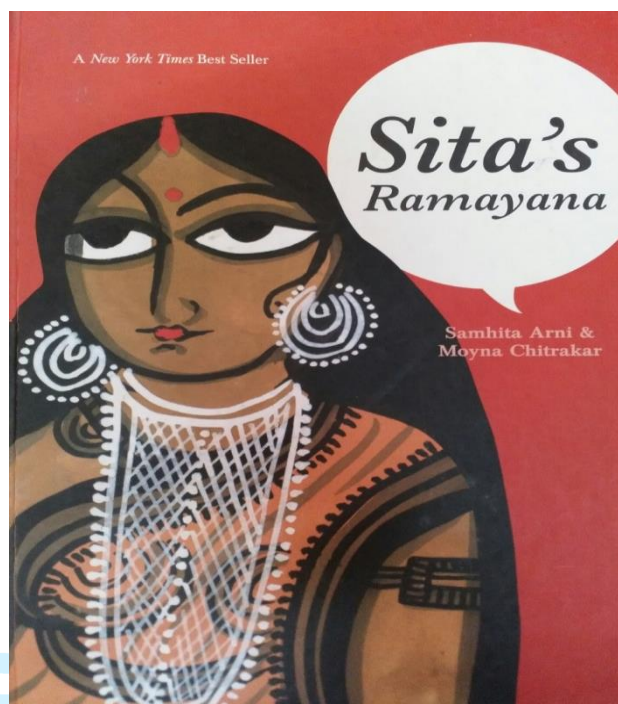
Amar Chitra Katha, one of India's largest selling graphic narrative series, well known for retelling stories from the great Indian epics, mythology, history, folklore and fables. The supposed function of these reasonably-priced volumes was to teach westernized and secularized, middle class Indian children about their cultural heritage in an easily accessible, and graphic rather than literary format. Therefore, from the beginning it was produced in English as well as several regional languages. The cover of the volume titled Valmiki's Ramayana can be seen in the figure.

Amar Chitra Katha was quite successful in perpetuating the image of Sita as a fair skinned, voluptuous woman with flowing hair. And Rama as blue skinned, handsome and well-muscled. The Rakshasas in ACK are dark skinned, stocky and grotesque. Similarly, the visual structuring of Rakshasis is done in an overtly negative manner – they are depicted as being dark complexioned, with huge physical frame, fangs and exaggerated noses and lips. They are also derogatively depicted as being sexually aggressive.



Karline McLain is of the view that the *Ramayana* has historically acted as a hegemonizing influence that has promoted a dominant north Indian Brahminical, Sanskritic culture over south Indian Dravidian culture. (McLain, 34). However, it is also a fact that mythic tales are brought before the audience again and again and are subject to constant re interpretation.

Challenging the dominant ideological representation of Sita, the cover page of *Sita's Ramayana* shows a “dark” and Dravidian, earthy Sita, not a divine, fair complexioned goddess that one is so used to seeing in various media. Sita is also particularized geographically and we see a distinct regional character in her looks, clothing and ornaments. Sita is obviously Bengali with bright red vermillion in her hair and a red bindi, which incidentally also marks her as the ‘wife’. When Sita crosses the lakshman rekha, we see her foot adorned with Alta, Payal and bichuas.



Similarly, the stereotypical image of Surpankaha has been dislodged. Shurpanakha as a pretty woman and as a demon is just demarcated by a difference in hairstyle. Her mutilated nose is indicated with a stroke of red paint at all times. Hence, the art of the graphics contributes to the radical spirit of the tale.

Sita's Ramayan is a novel creative experiment, wherein through the use of pictures, colors and an alternative perspective, not only are we presented with a fresher point of view but also one that is interlinked with contemporary issues and everyday reality. Published by Tara Books, it has text by Samhita Arni and illustrations by Moyna Chitrakar, a Patua scroll painter from Bengal, thereby bringing two women of very different backgrounds together – a, young, urban writer and an uneducated, rural artist – a forceful fusion of modern feminism and strong folk.

Patua is an old oral folk tradition and an indigenous art where handmade paper pasted on cloth is painted with stories from epics in scroll form. It is a combination of art, storytelling and performance. The painted scroll is held up for the audience to see while the story is sung or recited. Significantly, these itinerant artists and narrators who travel from one place to another to showcase their audio-visual art are primarily Muslim (Bhattacharya 604).

The Patua *Ramayana* is influenced by a sixteenth-century version by a Bengali poetess Chandrabati. Chandrabati lived in the 16th century and was one of the few female re tellers of the epic, *Ramayana*. It's one of the more subversive versions and was perhaps in turn inspired by the songs and ballads of ordinary women who wove their own issues and concerns in the narratives of Gods and myths. There were women who sang songs about Sita, wrote about Sita in the kitchen, in her trial, on her wedding day –and in each of those things, the frustrations that Sita experienced, the circumscriptions, the *lakshman rekha* – these were symbolic, women actually spoke about their own imprisonment and issues through their songs. Moyna Chitrakar's art in *Sita's Ramayana* builds on these ideas. An amalgam of verbal and visual narrative, this graphic novel is a retelling of *Ramayana* which comes from folk stories and versions which were sidelined and where we saw a very different Sita. The book is a collage of paintings but it may be viewed as a part of this oral tradition. It is noteworthy that all the

characters in the graphic novel have closed lips, their mouth is never shown open because the story is supposed to be sung and not told through pictures.

The colours and form contribute significantly in transmitting the message and have a language of their own. All pages are black with the colourful drawn in primary colours - red, blue, green, orange indigo, white. Demons wear red clothes, the colour of aggression. Ravan is always shown in blue with his ten heads intact.

Not just Sita, but all the other human figures have a distinct regional character in their looks, clothing and ornaments. They all wear white kundals in their ears and similar necklaces. Even the sea God is very Bengali with white dots over the cheeks and red dots over the eyebrows. Sita offers rice cakes, Bengal's staple diet to Ravana when he comes to abduct her. Ravan comes with a Dhadak, the sound of the dumroo as used by the wandering minstrels, the Baul singers of Bengal.

As is obvious from the title, this unusual graphic novel places Sita at the centre as the focal point of the story, allowing the reader to mull over her trials and emotions. Instead of focusing on King Rama's glory or his courage and kingly prowess, *Sita's Ramayana* dislocates and subverts the gaze offering an alternate story. It breaks the stereotype of perfect Indian wife and has Sita voicing out her turbulent life, her anger on Rama and various such emotions that have been underplayed in most of the 'sanitised' or canonical depictions of the Ramayana.

The first two pages are totally blank, setting the tone of the narrative. The second page has only one sentence – “For a thousand years the Dandaka forest slept until one day the daughter of the earth came”. Hence, the story begins with a heavily pregnant Sita walking into the forest with bruises on her feet and tears in her eyes. The inhabitants of the forest, the leaves, flowers, creepers, and animals wake up from their long sleep at the intrusion. They wonder what this beautiful maiden, dressed in silks and ornaments, is doing in their world and start questioning her: Who was she? Why is she in the forest? Why is she crying? And she replies, "I am Sita, daughter of the earth, sprung from the same womb that nurtures this forest. I am the princess of Mithila and the last queen of Ayodhya...Let me live here...The world of men has banished me" (8). She informs that she roams the forest alone because she has been banished by a world of men. The forest curiously wonders how she came there, and Sita begins to tell her story in flashback.

We are soon told that Ram and Lakshman, “born to a life of action” were used to “palaces, wars, chariots and weapons” and that “the peace of the forest was not for them” (Arni 14). Referring to the violence against Surpanaka, Sita says, “Violence breeds violence and an unjust act only begets greater injustice. Rama should have stopped him. Instead he spurred him on” (Arni 16), indicating that Rama and Laxman are to be blamed for the calamity which is to strike later. Shurpankha's scream when her nose is chopped off is significant in this context. As in the case of Surpanakha, the violence and physicality of Sita's abduction is also not glossed over – “He seized my hands and grabbed my hair” (Arni 25). The Violence that is perpetrated against women in the name of honour is not glossed over. In the “lakshman-rekha” episode, Sita crosses the line in a mesmerized state, thereby eliminating Sita's responsibility of it.

Sita's Ramayana is not just a reimagining of Sita's character, but a rethinking of the entire story in many ways. Many lesser known characters gain primacy, eg, Indrajeet, Vali and Tara are sympathized with. Hanuman is given a more significant role than Ram. He is the one doing everything. Besides discovering Sita, burning Lanka down, carrying herbs, he also kills Mahiravan, flings the Sun God across the sky, rescues Ram and Laxman and even tricks



Mandodari to locate the arrow required to kill Ravana. The narrative also suggests that it was a war that lacked honour and was based on deception and trickery, an example of which is Laxman killing Indrajit on the sly.

The narrative suggests that it was Sita who made Ram look great because she always thought of establishing Ram's glory. When Vibhishana leaves Lanka to seek shelter with Rama, Sita wishes she could have gone with him. But then she says, "I would have never been able to escape. And Rama's honour would be stained, if he couldn't come to rescue his own wife" (Arni, 69). Another new idea presented is that it was actually Sita, who at first thinks of Vibhishana as the successor of Ravana. The narrative also includes myths such as that of Mahiravana, the sorcerer and Goddess Chandi. These, like the 'Lakshman rekha' episode are absent in Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

While Sita is central to the book, it explores how she responds to other women in the epic. Throughout the story, Sita empathises and commiserates with the other victimized women—Surpanaka, Trijatha, Tara, Mandodari. The justness of Tara's dilemma who has to be Vali's widow and Sugreeva's wife on the same day is questioned. Trijatha, Vibhishana's daughter is Sita's friend and confidante despite being a demoness — she describes the war to Sita and consoles her in her moments of despair.

The text highlights the futility of war. "I heard the women of the palace, shrieking, I saw Ravana's queens running to the battlefield, tears streaming down their faces. Their screams rent the air. Even I, enclosed in this garden, could hear their grief... They would be queens no more, and their people had met death on the battlefield—for what? For one man's unlawful desire... It was such a high price to pay" (Arni, 113). Even though the war will deliver her from Lanka, it revolts her in its cruelty. Even as she herself suffers in captivity, Sita can empathize with the suffering of others, including the Rakshasis who must lose their men in the war. Later, she says "War, in some ways, is merciful to men... It makes them heroes if they are the victors. If they are the vanquished—they do not live to see their homes taken, their wives widowed. But if you are a woman—you must live through defeat" (Arni, 120).

The narrative is, therefore, a powerful meditation on how women become pawns between men, their wars, their kingdoms. After the war is over, Rama tells Sita that he hadn't fought the war for her, he had fought it to redeem his honour. Sita laments, "Tara and Mandodari are widows, and so are the women of Lanka. Their children and the children of Lanka are orphans" for no fault of theirs (Arni, 117). Sita of this story feels injustice not only in the treatment meted out to her but her "sense of righteousness is accompanied by an equally strong sense of compassion" (Singh). Ram has no answers to any questions but silence. Sita wonders if Rama had ever known her. And this is the core of the story for it breaks the stereotype of Sita as a submissive wife and we see her as someone who can see, feel, evaluate and question people and their choices, their actions and their consequences.

Sita's character and personality has been infused with human aspirations, emotions, weaknesses, expectations and disillusionments. She is humanized through various narrative strategies. Episodes which are pivotal to her character are highlighted. Sita in her second exile thinks not as a princess but as an ordinary woman. The questions that plague her are very fundamental. How will she avoid snakes in the forest as she cannot see under her huge belly? Who will assist her in labour? We are given a peep into Sita's feelings and thoughts at different points in story. Her feelings and doubts take primacy. The story doesn't change much. Only, here, Sita speaks up. She describes exactly how she feels, what she thinks and in the end, she makes her final choice.

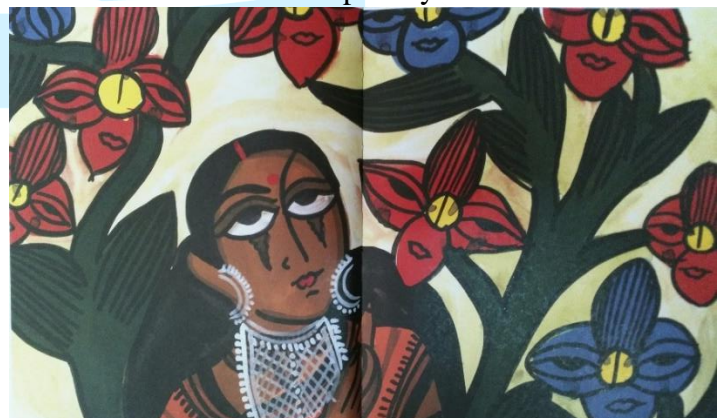
The pictorial journey of *Sita's Ramayana* brings to us a woman's perspective on war and justice through anger and angst, story-telling and image, myth and bitter realism. Sita comes forth not as a goddess to be deified and admired from a distance but as a complex, strong, wise woman in her own right. She is a banished and humiliated queen but discovers great courage and strength. Destiny is brutal to Sita, yet it does not make her helpless.

First – person narration and personal tone makes a reader empathize, and identify with her circumstances – her captivity, her hopes, her fears, the tragedies that consistently happen to her (exile, capture, war, distrust, the agni pariksha, her abandonment when pregnant.) She displays sensitivity, maturity and insight and is one whose sense of righteousness is complemented by an equally strong sense of empathy and compassion. She negates the conventional male values of anger or bravery on the battlefield and “celebrates other, ‘feminine’ virtues of empathy, compassion, sisterhood, justice, dignity, patience and solidarity with all beings” (Singh 2011). It is through this compassion and empathy that Sita emerges as a heroic figure and a much stronger character than Rama.

Another important aspect of this decidedly feminist narrative is the humanization of the forest. Rebecca Buchanan in her article "Sita's Ramayana" for the journal *Sequential Tart* (Nov.21, 2011) observes: "By choosing to base *Sita's Ramayana* on Chandrabati's version, translator / adapter Samhita Arni and artist Moyna Chitrakar have created an adaptation which is markedly different from any other in print: it is a female-inspired, female-centric and a (eco)feminist tale".

Nature is a living driving force – flowers and creepers have a face and they can talk, think and converse with Sita, calling her sister. Nature and animals are depicted as friends of man and can help man a great deal if man decides to live peacefully with them. After her second exile, Nature proves kinder than man to the pregnant, lonely and suffering Sita. The birds promise to spread her tale of woes to the skies, the snakes vow to steer clear of her feet and wild animals pledge to leave her alone. The affection with which flora and fauna are portrayed is obvious.

“I have been happy here in the forest, living a simple, peaceful life and now my past returns – in the shape of my husband, to defeat and kill my sons! I wish he had never come” (142). Hence, the graphic novel is successful in at once linking the woman, the environment and art.



The link of Sita with Nature is however not a new concept. Indeed, in Hindu culture the woman is perfectly homologized with Nature and its creative potency. The woman/ symbolic feminine is perceived to be one of the most appropriate agents of fertility, both in the social as well as in the natural domain. This fertile power of woman is co terminus with the potential and inherent power of Shakti. The Sanskrit word *Sita* literally means "the line made by the plow" or "furrow," a term indicative of fertility and all the benedictions that ensue from settled agriculture. In early Vedic literature, there is a goddess known as Sita who is linked to the earth and is thought to bless the land with good crops. In various texts, Sita appears as the wife of gods who hold control over the fertile rains, such as Parjanya and even Indra. In the *Vajasaneyi-samhita*, Sita is invoked when furrows are drawn during a sacrificial ritual. This Vedic goddess of the fertile earth, though she remains relatively insignificant in these early texts, may indeed be considered as a model of the character, Sita who appears in the *Ramayana*. The role of kings in ancient India was often described in terms of promoting fertility of the land over which they ruled. Thus, the significance of pairing Rama (the archetypal ruler) with a wife connected to the earth's bounty is apparent.¹

Kanchan Sita, a 1977 Malayalam film, directed G. Aravindam, takes this humanization of natural elements a step further, where we see Sita as Nature itself. In the film, Sita is presented not in the human form, as a woman or an individual, but rather as a symbol of the philosophical concept of *Prakriti*, the feminine aspect of all life forms. Sita's physical absence liberates her presence from the limitations of a specific spatio-temporal location or physical form such as a body, a scene, a place, or a voice. Instead she now pervades the narrative of the film through her immediate and all-pervasive presence as *Prakriti*, the cosmic life-force.

Although the film is about Rama's inner conflict between the desire for enlightenment (moksha) and the desire for sovereign power (artha), Sita as *Prakriti* is central to the narrative of the film. If Sita is *Prakriti*, Ram represents *Purusha* whose journey inevitably leads him into becoming a part of her. The film does not focus on plot, rather it reveals the inner life of characters such as Rama and Lava, even as it interweaves the concept of Purusha and Prakriti. Sita is portrayed not as a human being, but as an eternal concept in the film. The movie is based on the play of the same name by C.N. Sreekanthan. The play in turn is the re-interpretation of the *Uttara-Kanda*, the seventh and last book of *The Ramayana*. It is interesting that certain retellings of Ramayana further generate their own subsequent retellings. *Uttara Kand* is regarded as a later addition to Valmiki's original version of the epic. As the last book of *Ramayana*, it records the declining half of Rama's sovereign power and godly aura. It is sometimes seen as a critique of sovereign power through the actions and choices made by Rama in his life. The earlier sections of Ramayana both declare and confirm the sovereign power of Rama and exalt him as warrior-king, but the *Uttara-Kanda* provides a powerful contradistinction to Rama's supremacy by focusing upon characters that are "other" (represented by Shambuka, Sita, and Valmiki) to his regime. Following the advice of Brahmin sages, Rama conducts the horse sacrifice to consolidate the absolute sovereignty of his power. C. N. Sreekanthan Nair had rewritten this final section of Valmiki's Ramayana as a critique of political domination, brahminical privilege and the evil aspect of caste system. The play questions Rama's 'dharma'. It expounds the complexities of dharma and the sacrifices it demands by adhering to it. It also interrogates the discrimination of gender and uses the feministic perspective to recount various incidents of *Uttara-kand*, thereby deconstructing the myth of Rama. In contrast to Rama, who is a tragic victim of totalitarian power, Sita is "nature itself in its many seasons of flowering and fall, she is purity and motherhood and as such refuses to be a cog in the machine of governance" (Satchidananda 15).

The title of this original play *Kanchana Sita* is also very significant. *Kanchana Sita* literally means the golden image of Sita, which Rama uses as a substitute for her presence by his side in rituals that required a queen, such as in the Aswamedhayaga. But the title is an ironic comment on the status of women in the Hindu society of the time. Hence, though ostensibly, women were revered and possessed by men like the golden images, but in fact they were deprived of basic human rights. The condition of Sita, the queen of Ayodhya was no different from ordinary women of the epic age. Sita had not only been accused of an offence she had not committed, she was also abandoned in a wild forest, unmindful of the basic consideration that should be a right of every human being, in her last stages of pregnancy. Kausalya's reply, when Urmila questions why Sita had to undergo such misery being the queen of a country, is very significant in this context. She says, "but the queen is just a queen. She is not the king. The queen is a woman" (Sreekantan 24). In Aravindan's film, *Prakriti* takes Sita's place.

Before the film starts, a written commentary appears that throws light on Aravindan's interpretation of the play. This opening scroll reads, "This film is an interpretation of the Uttara-Kanda of the *Ramayana*. Our mythologies and the epics are constantly re-created in retellings. The epic is the basis for this visual interpretation as well. This film deviates from established norms in how it visualizes the protagonists and portrays the course of events in the epic." The scroll explains that the film will try to reflect what it calls the epic's adi-sankalpam, "original conception," of the theme and protagonists. It states that "the inner essence of this film" is that woman is Prakriti. Audiences/ readers belonging to Kerala are not unfamiliar to the concept of Rama as Purusha and Sita as Prakriti as Eluttacchan's *Adhyatma Ramayana*, the classic Malayalam telling of Rama's story espouses this notion.

The prakriti-purusha notion had been made quite clear in Sreekantan Nair's play but using Nair's play only as a starting point, Aravindan transformed the script as per his own interpretation of Indian philosophy and his minimalist artistic sensibility. In contrast to almost all other tellings of the *Uttara-kanda*, and in what probably establishes Aravindan's creative genius in the film, Sita herself is physically absent. As director, Aravindan did not think that Sita should be represented in the physical form of a woman. Hence, Sita is never actually seen in the movie. Instead, her presentation is done in a most unusual and astonishing cinematic way. Her presence is fascinatingly conjured in the moods of the forest and the elements, thus carrying the concept of Sita to its visual limit. Her simulated being is suggested through the different facets of nature. Sita's emotions— pain, sadness, joy, and equanimity— are visually conveyed through the moods of *Prakriti* which seems to bear no resemblance to woman in her temporal, sensual, and worldly form.

Interestingly, Aravindan has retold the epic as if it occurred in the Adivasi (tribal people) world. Hence Ayodhya has been visualized in the forest: instead of ornate, royal palaces, the interiors of the caves serve as the palaces of Ayodhya, its streets are trails in the rough country, and its Sarayu River is the Godavari River winding through rural Andhra Pradesh. While the different roles in the film were played not by conventional actors but by members of a tribal community in Andhra Pradesh; the whole narrative unfolded in forests, caves, open spaces and riversides, thereby creating the visual look of starkness and of purity. By relocating the epic into such an unusual spatial context and by stripping the narrative of any historical details, Arvindam made it possible for the viewers to imagine that the events could be taking place in any age or period. Such a setting also proved helpful in directing focus on the inner dharmic predicaments of Rama as well as for highlighting Sita as Prakriti.

Aravindan clearly indicates through visuals that *Prakriti* is not nature in the passive sense. A woman is a symbol of *Prakriti* for she is conceived as the enlivening force of the natural world. She is the animating principle of nature that energizes all visible life-forms. Thus, she is the wind that rustles the leaves, she is the ripples in the water of the river, she is the sunlight that marks an ever-changing path through the thick forest trees and every other audible and visible movement in nature. She is also the inspiration and the creativity of the poet Valmiki who begins to compose the *Uttara-kanda* in her presence. And to Rama, Sita in the form of *Prakriti* appears as a guide to dharma, indicating the path of action that he must adopt. As Rama proceeds, under the counsel of Brahmin sages, to confirm absolute power through the horse sacrifice, he goes through a series of dharmic dilemmas. Aravindan, focuses on selective events that unfold around the horse sacrifice, creating critical changes in how Sreekantan Nair's play depicts Sita. The horse



sacrifice was meant to be a king's assertion of absolute power and authority over an external territory. However, it turned into a battle with the self that is caught up in the fetters of existence. In the end, the horse sacrifice turns out to be a precursor for Rama's final deliverance from the self: Whether it is questioning of and execution of Shambuka; the disagreement between Rama, Bharata, and Urmila over whether the horse sacrifice should be performed or the surprising challenge from Sita's twins, Lava and Kusha, who capture the sacrificial horse that has been let loose at the beginning of the horse sacrifice; whether it is Valmiki bringing the twins to chant Rama's story at the sacrifice; the necessity for Rama to recognize and accept his sons there, Rama feels the unseen presence of Sita at every such critical juncture. Signs from *Prakriti* (Sita), presented through the music and images of nature's movement, stop Rama from killing Shambuka at first sight and from fighting with Bharata. Likewise, the turbulence in nature appears to warn Rama against the performance of the horse sacrifice. Rama's external world, controlled by Brahminical ritualism comes into conflict with his own inner self which, removed from kingly power, appears to hear and feel Sita's presence everywhere. Hence, for Aravindan *Prakriti* appears to be primarily a maternal force that heightens Rama's awareness of his own destructive actions.

This is best brought out in the Shambuka incident in the film. The incident in which Rama kills Shambuka plays a significant role in Aravindan's film because the Brahminical prescriptions that sustain sovereign power come into direct conflict with the desire for spiritual knowledge. In Sreekantan Nair's play, Rama finds Shambuka, the Shudra tapasvi performing penances hanging upside down, and kills him. Aravindan broke Rama's single, critical encounter with

Shambuka into two scenes. In the first scene, set at the very beginning of the film, Rama finds Shambuka practicing penances forbidden to Shudras, but Shambuka's wife pleads with Rama not to kill her husband. At this moment, soft music begins to play, Rama looks up as if he senses another presence, and a gentle wind blows through the tall trees. As if overwhelmed by emotion, Rama spares Shambuka. He has obviously been effected by Sita's presence, who appears as the force of compassion. Although, later, Rama tells Lakshmana "A king ought not to dream", yet it is clear that he couldn't help but be swayed by Sita. The second brief scene shows a Shambuka who has already been killed by Rama's arrow, his body having fallen into the lap of his grief-stricken wife. The scene precedes an image of the white horse's head, now severed for the horse sacrifice. Both killings reassert the primacy of the quest for absolute power, and the pitilessness of such power to assert itself through arrogant and thoughtless destruction. The Brahmin sages who advocate the killing of Shambuka are directly countered by the absent presence of Sita as *Prakriti*. Hence, the Shambuka incident in Aravindan's film emerges not as a societal critique but rather as the confrontation between a primal drive for power and compassion, in the form of *Prakriti* (Sita). The Brahmin sages who advocate the killing of Shambuka are directly countered by the absent presence of Sita as *Prakriti*. Aravindan stated that he used the Shambuka episode "to highlight Rama's troubled conscience and evoke within him and the film the memory and presence of Sita" (qtd in Zacharias 103-104).

Since, Sita speaks only through movement in nature, dialogue was "redundant," and has been used minimally in the film. In the film (as in the play), Urmila, Lakshmana's wife and Sita's sister, asks why Rama abandoned Sita and why he submits to the dictates of Brahmins. However, the emotionally charged, dramatic and sharp dialogue in Sreekantan Nair's play has been subdued in the film. In the Sreekantan Nair's play Urmila has been given a radical role. With her eloquent and fiery speeches to Rama, she unveils Rama's own misgivings about betraying Sita. However, the crisply articulated exchange of dialogues has been stripped down to the bare minimum and shorn of their resonance with the modern expression of women's rights. The argumentative voice of Urmila, the "real" and physically present woman of the film, although weighty, remains on the margins. Explaining this, Usha Zacharias says, "In the refined sensibility of the film that foregrounds the masculine tapasvi's journey to *Prakriti*, the Sita of the Uttara-kanda, cast out of the kingdom, the "woman crying aloud in despair" outside Valmiki's hermitage, is not heard. To Aravindan, *Prakriti*'s silence is more eloquent than the speeches of her womanly manifestations"(106).

While Sreekantan Nair has focussed on developing character conflict in his play through Rama's passionate encounters with Urmila, Bharata and even Kaushalya, Arvindan has, it seems deliberately done away with emotional expressions and outbursts in the film. He has rather emphasised "feelings" by employing a nondramatic, non-dialogic style of expression and a unique cinematic technique of "absent presence" of Sita. Hence, there are long, silent takes of Rama and Lakshmana wandering through the dense forests and the ochre river banks, as if on a spiritual quest. The human drama so prominent in the play has been reduced to the minimum through quiet acting styles and minimal dialogue. Poet and scholar Ayyappa Panicker views Sita's absence as typical of Aravindan's style, in which there is a conscious, meticulous effort 'not to communicate in order to communicate.' (qtd in Zacharias,106). The film excels in using minimal devices for dramatizing what it wants to say and relies on music to signal Sita's presence and for a simple unveiling of events to convey the powerful story. The mood of the music that accompanies the presence of *Prakriti*, which Aravindan repeats throughout the film whenever Rama experiences the presence of Sita, is nostalgic, compassionate, and tender. Only

in the final scenes does *Prakriti* begin to consume Rama's universe, as the fire that burns down the sacrificial hall and as the waters of the Sarayu that await Rama's final journey.

The physical absence of Sita also made Aravindan alter the final scenes of Sreekantan Nair's play, leading Rama's journey and the film to a remarkable end. Rama demands a second trial by fire from Sita, who refuses to prove her purity again. And instead where Sita appears at the sacrificial site and descends into the opening Mother earth rather than undergo a second ordeal of sexual purity at Rama's behest. In both, Valmiki's *Ramayana*, and in Sreekantan Nair's *Kanchana Sita*, a golden image of Sita is used at the horse sacrifice. The golden image used in the film for the horse sacrifice is traditional South Indian bronze sculpture of Sita seated in a benedictory posture. Rama, who is sitting directly in front of the sacred fire, can see the image of the golden statue being reflected in the fire. Hence, to Rama, Sita enveloped in flames, yet untouched by it, appears as she must have appeared when she entered the fire after the great battle of Lanka to prove her chastity. Enshrined by fire, yet transcending it, she is at once Rama's conscience as well as the animating life-force within him which fire signifies. As we draw close to the last scenes of the film, it becomes clear to the audience that the *agni-pariksha* (fire ordeal) is eventually for Rama to gain enlightenment, not for Sita. And the significance of the horse sacrifice changes from attaining absolute power over the kingdom to attaining *moksha* or enlightenment from the kingdom. As *Kanchana Sita*, the golden image of Sita enveloped in fire, she is the medium of his enlightenment, as well as enlightenment itself, for there is nothing that exceeds her presence (Zacharias, 107).

The film ends with *Mahaprasthanas*, Rama's last journey, which is his walk into the waters of the river, *Sarayu*. He carries with him, fire in his one hand and becomes one with Sita, *Prakriti*, the all-pervading nature. The benevolent *Prakriti* absorbs all the elements of life back into herself. Hence, Rama's desire for final liberation from the material world results in the dissolution of the *Purusha* (masculine self) into *Prakriti*, the female animating power of the universe.

Although, *Kanchana Sita* touches upon several episodes from the *Uttara Kanda*, Aravindan's focus on the physical absence, but pervasive presence of Sita rouses his film. Hence from a feminist perspective, the film celebrates primal female power in contradistinction to male law and order. It portrays Sita as a form of power whose spirit guides Rama to be compassionate even after her physical presence from earth is gone. Stripped as the film is of all the embellishments and paraphernalia that typically characterizes mythological stories and mythic figures like Sita and Rama, it is one of the most innovative and experimental retellings of *Ramayana*.

While Arni and Chitrakar have "humanized" Sita, G. Aravindan has presented Sita as an eternal concept rather than a human being. In sharp contrast, American artist, Nina Paley in her animated film, *Sita Sings the Blues* presents Sita in a striking postmodern, exoticised and eroticised visual avatar that immediately grabs attention of the audience.



While, Arni and Chitrakar's Sita gives us a woman's perspective on war and justice and G. Aravindam's Sita stresses the female attributes of love and compassion vis'a vis violence and desire for power of the male world, Paley's Sita is presented simply as a scorned lover. In this westernized, modern twist to an Indian, ancient myth, Paley combines colourful visuals and a rather derisive, chatty narrative style to reflect Sita's experience for contemporary men and women. Hence, what we see on screen is not an ancient Hindu goddess but a person in deep pain, one whom mortal women will be able to identify with. This retelling is a "personal interpretation" of Ramayana by Paley's own admission. Paley has said that she did not set out to make an animated film of the Ramayana so much as *her* Ramayana. She adapts this story of ancient Hindu God and Goddess, considered ideal, to tell her own break up story. In deed the tag line of the story is "the greatest break up story ever told". Hence, what we have is not the greatest story ever told, rather it is the greatest break up story.

The film opens with a screen full of blue waves and sitar-like music in the background. After a while, the tip of a crown emerges from the waves. It is Sita in the form of goddess Lakshmi. Clad in pink and iridescent with charm, her curvaceous body rises from the water. At the flick of her hand, a peacock gramophone record player rises from the waves. It has snake shaped legs. Suddenly the gramophone begins to play

'Moaning low,

My sweet man I love him so,

Though he's mean as can be

He's the kinda man needs



A kinda woman like me,

A woman like me, a woman like me,
me, a woman like me'.

Sita sways to the music actively in enjoyment until the record stops, looping over the line "woman like me, woman like me". The words, "a woman like me" "repeat until the goddess stops her dance in exasperation, perhaps implying that the history of womankind is a broken record as it keeps repeating itself over and over again.



The image of a woman rising from the waves is perhaps the most iconoclastic image of essentialized femininity. This faithful adherence to the image of elemental woman is immediately disrupted by Sita's appearance in exaggeratedly exoticised and eroticised physical

form. She is made excessively feminine, almost to the point of being comical. Many critics

have pointed out the resemblance of Sita's physical form to sexy American cartoon figure, Betty Boop. Annett points to the reflection of Betty Boop's signature circular, short lashed eyes, oval facial structure and bow lips, huge bosoms, a tiny waist, and flirty eyelashes in the representation of Sita in the film. (Annette,9)

Betty Boop was unique because she was one of the first animated female cartoon characters to be represented as a sexual woman. She was modelled as a caricature of a Flapper from Jazz Age (flappers were a generation of young Western women in the 1920s intent on enjoying themselves and flouting conventional standards of behaviour). With big eyes in a large round baby face and an hourglass figure, Betty Boop combined the childish with the sophisticated in appearance.



In the film, Sita's cartoonish and curvaceous body is shown singing the blues in the piping voice of a real-life Jazz Age flapper-era singer named Annette Hanshaw. The title itself is suggestive of film's motive – Ramayana's "Sita", a mythical figure from ancient India, "sings the blues" –in the voice of 21st century American jazz singer Annette Hanshaw - juxtaposition in both space and time.

This overt discrepancy of the aural with the visual complicates our understanding of the "natural" performance. It also problematizes our understanding of who "she" is and whose subjectivity are we being introduced to– Sita? An American jazz singer? Paley herself? Sandra Annett wonders who are these women exactly like. Annette compares this repetition with Judith Butler's analysis of the song, "You make me feel like a natural woman" and argues that the fact that "woman" as defined by the simile "like" reveals the "constructed, performative aspects of gender" (quoted in Annett 12).

If Sita is Betty Boop, Rama can be likened to Johnny Bravo, who, while physically muscled and macho, is all soft and putty in the hands of women (Chanda, 5). Like Sita's, Rama's physicality has also been exaggerated – puffed up musculature, huge biceps and ridiculously broad chest. The exaggerated physical attributes have clearly been used for parodic and/ or comic purposes while at the same time it categorizes the two characters unmistakably as masculine and feminine. Both the colours as well as the shapes used to represent Rama and Sita emphasize gender.

Hence, rather than simply americanizing the Ramayana, Paley plays through exotic and erotic imagery. The graphic design gives the impression of classic Indian mythic typology, yet one is curiously aware that some sort of subversion is taking place. Graeme Huggan, improvising on Spivak's 'Strategic Essentialism' calls 'strategic exoticism' in which postcolonial writers/thinkers, working from within exoticist codes of representation, either manage to

subvert those codes or succeed in redeploying them for the purposes of uncovering differential relations of power.” (Qtd in Annett 12)

Sita's portrayal by Paley is in sharp contrast to the nationalist trope of Indian womanhood, which historically constructs the woman's body and sexuality as chaste. Sita's identity is altered by visually eroticising and exoticising her, thereby transforming a revered, feminine goddess into a seductive woman. Such a depiction appeared profane and troubling to many people who thought of it as an appropriation and imposition of western vocabularies onto an Indian female body.²



In the film, Shurpanakha describes Sita's beauty to Ravana calling her “the most beautiful woman in the world”. She then goes on to compare her body parts with lotus flowers: “Her skin is fair like the lotus blossom. Her eyes are like lotus pools. Her hands are like ... from ... lotuses. Her breasts like ... big ... round. .. firm ... juicy ... lotuses.” And on screen, we see lotuses popping up at appropriate body parts even as Surpankha verbally aestheticizes Sita's physical beauty.



Similarly, when Ravan appears in the guise of a hermit asking for alms, setting his eyes upon Sita, he says, “Who are you, radiant like the glow of gold, dressed in golden clothes like a lotus tendril, auspiciously garlanded with lotuses.” This establishment of connection between Sita and the lotus could be seen in light of the fact that in the *Rāmāyana*, Sita is identified with Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu, who arises from the depths of the seas created by the gods and demons for the elixir of immortality. Both Vishnu and Sri are pictured as standing on lotuses and in some representations Sri or Lakshmi is shown as seated on a lotus emerging from the navel of the reclining Vishnu. Lakshmi is commonly portrayed as a beautiful woman standing on a lotus flower.³

Legends associated to Lakshmi personify her as the model of marital commitment and righteous behaviour. She is portrayed performing the domestic roles with great perfection, and ever devoted to her husband. At the Jagannath temple in Orissa, Lakshmi is said to cook food for Vishnu and wait patiently for him at the door when he returns home. Such Iconography reiterates her unstinted devotion to Vishnu by portraying her massaging the lotus feet of Vishnu. She further asserts that in typical icons, she is shown considerably smaller than Vishnu, reflecting her submissive and subservient character (Khanna, 11).

The story in the film is acted out by cartoonish Sita and Rama. The style of opening sequence is in the same cartoonish style as Annette Hanshaw song sequences that recur throughout the film. Each time Sita appears, she sings an American jazz number by Annette Hanshaw, reminiscent of Betty Boop. But, the blossoming of romance between Ram and Sita has been depicted Bollywood style. The outcome is a hybrid mix of different cultures.

The complex and cross cultural web of exchange that takes place in this stylistically innovative film is undeniable. Sita's emotional journey from delight to dejection is chronicled through Annete Hanshaw's songs which are uncannily appropriate to each situation. This unique narrative strategy does not allow the narrative to stay complacently within the confines of a single national or cultural thought. Sita is neither eastern nor western, neither traditional nor contemporary. According to Nina Paley, *Ramayana* or Sita do not belong to one single culture: "It belongs to the Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia, to Buddhists in Thailand, to Hindus and to Christians in America".

The melancholic songs of Annette Hanshaw not only remind us of the universality of the story but the songs also assist us in getting the image to float in the right direction. It is worth noting that while on the one hand, the songs tell us Sita's "story", often they are tongue-in-cheek, sound satirical and function subversively.

"If you want the Rainbow, you must have the rain"; "I hate to think what might have been if we had never met"; "here we are all alone" serve to illustrate the development of love between Ram and Sita.

When she sends Rama away after the golden deer, she croons "what wouldn't I do for that man" even as the cartoon Rama literally walks on Sita or sits on her back to drink tea, so devoted she is to him.

While held captive in Ashok Vatika by Ravan, Sita longs to be reunited with Rama and sings "Daddy won't you come home" bringing to mind the image of oppressive male figure. When threatened by Ravana she says "I could have burnt you with my own gaze but I cannot do so as I have not been ordered so by lord Ram", hence revealing the extent to which male superiority has been internalized as part of her psychological and cultural make up. When a bloody and gory battle is being fought outside, Sita sings, "O mere Swaminath Rama, O mere Rama, My love for you is pure". The word Swaminath reveals ownership of objectified Sita by Rama.

And when Rama rejects Sita after the rescue, sad and heartbroken on her unceremonious ouster from Ayodhya, she sings, "You love to see me cryin'. I'm left alone singing the blues and sighin'. Am I blue, where did I go wrong?" And all the elements in the forest – animals, fish, fruits, trees - turn blue, reflecting Sita's state of mind as well as her ostracism. The colour returns to her life and to the screen only when her two children are born. A roto scoped cosmic nature dance in the fire, reminiscent of Shiva's tandav brings out the angst she feels because of the harsh treatment meted out to her. The popular conception of Rama as a perfect ideal man, Maryada Purshottam is played upon: "Rama's great Rama's good/ Rama does what Rama should/ Rama's just, Rama's right/ Rama is a guiding light perspective /Perfect man perfect son/ Rama is loved by everyone/Always right Never wrong/ we praise Rama in this song". This idealization is done only to disrupt the myth: "Sing his love, Sing his praise? Rama set his wife ablaze/ Gets her back, kicks her out, to allay his people's doubt". The whole idea of Rama being the symbol of perfect manhood is dislodged: "Rama's great Rama's just/ Rama does what Rama must/ Duty first Sita last, Rama's reign is unsurpassed".

Annette Hanshaw, through her vocal performances is another character in the story, one who shares with Sita certain qualities that are typically idealized in a woman. They are both women who define themselves through their romantic relationships with men. Despite all the hardships that Sita is put through by Rama, her devotion to him remains unwavering just as the woman portrayed by Hanshaw's lyrics continues to love her man no matter how unfairly he might treat her. Paley clearly identifies with both characters. Even as Dave treats her unjustly; she can't bear to let him go. Despite their cultural and temporal differences, the two women relate to

each other emotionally. Unquestioning devotion – Is it a virtue? Is it a character weakness? Paley certainly thinks the latter. As Hanshaw sings, “Love had its day. That day has passed. You’ve gone away”. Sita, the cartoon character literally cries a river. “I never knew how good it was to be a slave to one who means the world to me”, she sings.

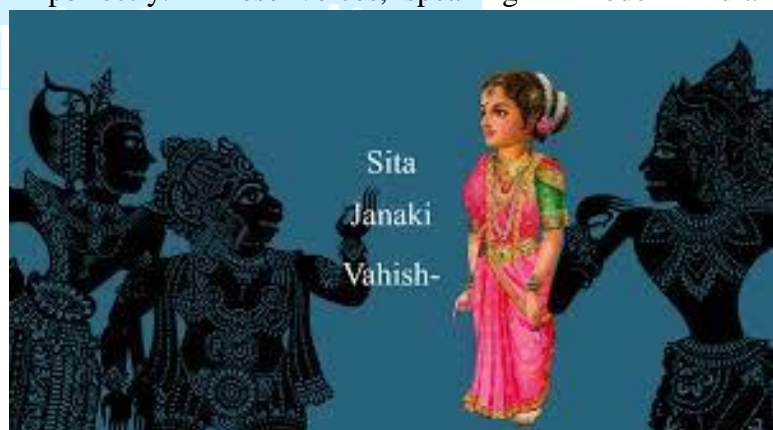
In the film, Sita appears not just in the cartoonish avatar, although it is the style which evoked maximum controversy and is most striking visually, owing to the subversive representation. She is presented in multiple visual avatars drawn from a range of visual depictions of Sita in Indian Art. From Mughal type miniature paintings to collages of brightly coloured calendar art images and Bollywood -style close-ups, it is a visually loaded film. Amardeep Singh in his article, “Animating a postmodern Ramayana...” shows how each different visual layers



highlight the opposing quality of the text and the variable and postmodern quality of the broader retelling tradition.

One style is the traditionally iconic, multi coloured, calendar art type images representing the main characters in the story itself. Yet another visual style is used to represent characters generally as they speak for themselves as Rama and Sita. This style has a hand painted look and is reminiscent of the 18th century North Indian hand paintings of the *Ramayana*. Both these adhere to the traditional, respectful and established iconographic traditions for illustrating the Ramayana from South and South east Asia. These two styles are used for straightforward narration where characters speak in their own voices.

The most interesting thread of the narrative are the three Indian voices represented by black Indonesian Shadow puppets who narrate the story of Ramayana from memory, often questioningly. The conversation between the three reveal that their knowledge of the *Ramayana* is fragmentary and imperfect as it is of most Hindus/ Indians who continue to listen, remember and narrate *Ramayana* imperfectly. These voices, speaking in modern Indian English, talk about and narrate *Ramayana* not with authority but from memory, also often questioning the motives and values of the characters in the epic. They disagree on how or when Dasarath dies. They talk about the strangeness of Sita dropping all her jewellery when she is captured to ensure that someone finds her. The puppets



note that it is strange that she had all that jewellery on considering that she left all of it behind when they were banished. Many other interesting issues such as the characterization of Ravana and the geographical location of “Lanka” are raised. The “purity thing” which is at the heart of the gender issue even today and the issue of “Ram Sethu” which was a live controversy in the Indian politics in the recent past, all find a mention in their conversation. As the puppets argue over plot details and interpretations, they bring into focus the discrepancies and unreliability of oral tellings on the one hand, and on the other, they add comical transitions in the narrative.



The autobiographical sequences are in squiggly vision with a hand drawn effect. This features Nina’s own voice and a drably drawn narrative tells Paley’s own traumatic break-up story. In Rama’s rejection of Sita, Paley finds a parallel to her own story of love and rejection. Paley had travelled to Southern India to be with her husband who had been assigned temporary employment there. But she found herself being rejected once she reached India. Ultimately, their relationship ended over email.

Even though she had not identified with the story of *Ramayana* at first and it seemed nothing more than a “misogynist propaganda” to her; on being betrayed by her husband, the *Ramayana* took on a new meaning for her: “The *Ramayana* took on a new depth and meaning for me. It no longer resembled a sexist parable; rather, it seemed to capture the essence of painful relationships, and describes a blue print of human suffering”.⁴ She began to perceive her own grief as similar to that of Sita’s and her husband’s conduct as reminiscent of Rama’s which served as an impetus for her creative endeavour.

In her conversation with Malashri Lal, Paley says, “The agni pareeksha I see as a metaphor for grief. I wanted to kill myself when my husband dumped me, and the unbearable pain was like fire... Sita is a model for expressing what we often repress. She loves Rama actively, without censure or shame or any limits. And when he breaks her heart, she expresses her pain with her whole being.” She further states: “What blew my mind while reading various *Ramayanas* in the midst of my own break-up was how primal and universal the problems of love are, and have always been... Sita Sings the Blues is just my honest telling”.⁵

The film ends with Sita’s death. As it occurs in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, here too Sita is accepted back in the womb of a personified mother earth. Nina is shown alone, content and independent, in an apartment in New York reading *Ramayana*. Outside her window, in a starry nocturnal sky, Sita suddenly appears. She is seated on the Sesh Naga. But this time, in a complete inversion of deeply entrenched patriarchal image of a wife pressing the feet of the husband,



to her face: she looks directly at us, and winks.

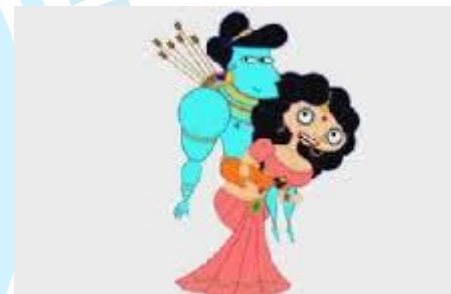
it is *Sita* who reclines and balances the cosmos on her index finger, while the male god, Vishnu, is seen massaging her feet. There is a close up



In Hindu social relations of authority, men are granted a commanding position over women as is established with the image of Sita pressing the feet of Rama at the beginning of the movie. By reversing the moral order, and projecting a reversed situation, Paley introduces an element of satire against the society which sees women as servile. Paley has attempted to structure an alternative Sita image hinting that the existing power relations are subverted. Hence, the attempt is to portray the “new” Sita as a feminist role model.

However, in her endeavor to show the ill treatment meted out to Sita, Paley ends up portraying Sita most consistently as a crying victim, rather than the strong wife of Valmiki. In Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, Sita showed reasonable anger, anguish and resistance when faced with injustices. Of course, in many later renderings, she had been recast into a weeping martyr. Paley tows the same line and portrays her as a symbol of tragic femininity. If Sita is the protagonist of the film, Rama ends up being the antagonist. Paley’s Rama kicks Sita into the fire, punches her as one would a boxing opponent and walks all over her like a doormat.

Here, Paley may be accused of reinforcing the western outlook that perceives Indian women as servile, degraded and in need of being rescued, for Paley’s Sita emerges as nothing more than a scorned, subjugated and victimized wife. Chandra Mohanty argues that the Third World Women are made to never rise above the debilitating generality of their “object” status and are often robbed of their historical and political agency. She challenges the dominance assumed by the western feminists which renders non-western women as passive recipients of western ideas on women’s rights and often ignores strategies evolved by the third world women to contend against their oppression. Mohanty is therefore opposed to the notion of woman as a homogeneous category paying little attention to the variety and specificity of their experiences. The question here is not the patriarchal abuses against women in India, which there are for sure, but rather how Indian women are represented.



Paley confessed that when she reached the part when Sita kills herself to prove her fidelity, she said, she thought, “That’s just messed up and wrong” (qtd in Rochlin, 2009). She then thought of creating a postfeminist comic strip that would still have Rama rejecting Sita, but instead of committing suicide she would become empowered. However, it is interesting that Sally Sutherland, in an article written much before Paley’s film came out, views Sita’s action of taking refuge in Mother Earth differently. Sutherland argues that Sita “expresses her anger at her love object inwardly and this manner of handling aggression i.e through masochistic actions appears to be more societally normative in ancient and modern India for both men and women”. Hence, what seems messed up to Paley may be viewed as a “culturally accepted means through which anger and aggressive impulses can be expressed” (Sutherland 79).

While Paley may have over simplified notions about women in India, her non-proximity to the culture allows her to innovate in a manner that perhaps may not be possible for the natives of the culture because of their religious/ political closeness to it. By contemporizing and humanizing Sita, Paley has made Sita accessible not only to global audience but also to modern Indian audience. Paley has taken the epic to global mass market, in a scholarly, yet fun way.

Although the notion of a seamlessly unified global feminism may be doubtful as expressed by scholars like Chandra Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, it cannot be denied that projects like *Sita Sings the Blues* seek to establish universality of emotions and common areas of purpose for women which span cultural boundaries. Paley's portraiture of women across culture and across centuries makes one hope that Mohanty's "community of women" may yet be a reality!

Different visual representations of Sita discussed in this paper provide frameworks for imageries which allow for a reversal of the way in which Sita is perceived popularly/traditionally. It is interesting how Sita takes on a different and special meaning in relation to different set of geographically and culturally defined situations. The focus in all the three retellings is on Sita, not Rama. Sita is not just a plot detail in the bigger narrative of Rama. She is rather at the centre of the narrative and the story is from her point of view. All three retellings draw from several existing but relatively lesser known counter readings of the epic to construct tales about feminism. Each time Sita is described in new ways, dressed in new clothing, and placed in new situations, she takes on a new meaning, yet she always remains a symbol of devotion and compassion: she is a resplendent north Indian goddess and she is also a Bengali banished queen. She is Prakriti, female power of the universe and she is also the exoticised scorned lover. These counter narratives in different forms of media not only posit alternative representations of Sita by pulling her out of her mythic portrayal but also point to what *Ramayana* has served beyond its literary and religious identity, as a meeting ground of many arts and social practices.

End Notes:

1. The fact that the chaste wife are glorified and provide role models for women comes from the fact that women are primarily valued for fertile power. The wife is looked upon as benevolent bestower of progeny. Her fertile powers are celebrated by her procreative, childbearing capacity and ability.
2. See "Revolting Scenes from the Film", website of Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, <http://www.hindujagruti.org/denigrations/sitasingstheblues>
3. In Hindu mythology, the gods churned the milky ocean to regain Lakshmi and her blessings. After a thousand years of hard work, treasures began to rise to the surface. Among them, a beautiful woman standing on a lotus flower. This was Lakshmi, who returned to the world and helped the Gods in their battle against demons to regain their right to immortality.
4. See Nina Paley, "Big Long Nina Paley Biography," on her website <http://www.ninapaley.com/biohtml>.
5. See Nina Paley in Conversation with Malashri Lal, *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology* eds Malashri Lal, Namita Gokhale (124-127). Print.

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