

Gender Dynamics in Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*

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Abstract- The traditional male narratives in The Ramayana and The Mahabharata defines the roles and responsibilities of women. These male-centred narratives treats women as symbols of honour, property, or prizes for male warriors. Existence of women is valued in their relationship to men. Women were idealized as dutiful wives, devoted mothers, and self-sacrificing daughters. Epics reinforced the idea that a woman's virtue lay in obedience, chastity, and service and they are subjected to tests and trials when they deviated expected norms of the society, . A woman's honour is tied to the honor of her husband/family, unlike men, whose worth came from bravery and strength. Women in traditional epics were rarely decision-makers. Their roles revolved around supporting male heroes—waiting, suffering, or sacrificing for them. By glorifying submissive women, epics have set models for generations: women should be loyal like Sita, patient like Draupadi, forgiving like Gandhari, or nurturing like Kunti. This normalized gender inequality by presenting it as “ideal womanhood”. Traditional male narratives in epics confined women to roles of obedience, chastity, and service, defining their responsibilities in relation to men, rather than as independent individuals. Women were expected to embody virtues that upheld patriarchal order, making them instruments for sustaining male honour and authority. This paper analyzes how Volga portrays female characters as individuals who defy the norms and rules of the male-dominated society and make choices, and guide one another. Women find empowerment in sisterhood—challenging patriarchal divisions.

Key words: Gender dynamics; male narratives; patriarchal order; chastity; sisterhood

Mythology is an integral part of a culture and cultural consciousness and often functions as a norm that influences and shapes ideologies and value systems. The stories of mythology travel from generation to generation reiterating the norms and codes of conduct in the society. The two great epics of Indian mythology namely, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have greatly influenced the people of India, and the Hindu religion draws values from these two epics. Epics are composed by men celebrating the glory and power of other men. These epics contain very little about women and their glories. Women in these traditional male narratives are often depicted as weak creatures who can be kidnapped, pledged, suspected and humiliated. The traditional male narratives in epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata define the roles and responsibilities of women. According to these epics, women must care their beauty, do the household duties with devotion, obey their husbands and always live for their children. Women are not treated as individuals, and their existence is valued in their relationship to men. Women were idealized as dutiful wives, devoted mothers, and self-sacrificing daughters. Epics reinforced the idea that a woman's virtue lay in obedience, chastity, and service. When women moved away from the expected norms of the society, they are subjected to tests and trials. A woman's honour is tied to the honor of her husband/family, unlike men, whose worth came from bravery and strength.

Women in traditional epics were not given right to decide. They supported the male heroes and suffered in silence. By glorifying submissive women, these grand narratives have set models for women over the years. They expected women to be loyal, patient, forgiving and nurturing and the epic women are modeled on these virtues. Sita, Draupadi, Gandhari and Kunti are portrayed as ideal woman. Women were expected to embody virtues and support the patriarchal order. They were mere instruments for sustaining male honour and authority.

These grand narratives find an important place in the minds of the people, even in the modern period. Paula Richman recounts how the whole of India watched the television serial based on the Ramayana in the year 1987. This weekly broadcast had nearly 80 million viewers across the country. It is noteworthy that in many parts of the country, people did not own a television, and in some parts, electricity was scarce. People gathered in one place and managed to watch the serial when they did not have

a TV of their own. The train schedules were reworked to enable people to see the serial. People bathed before watching the serial and when Rama's image appeared on the television, people worshiped him as an idol in the temple. In many homes television sets were garlanded during the serial. When the serial ended, people were worried and demanded its continuation. This clearly shows the grip of the epic, The Ramayana, on the people of India. It is same with the Mahabharata too.

In the modern age, women felt that the future must not be based on the past and wanted to give their voices. They reinterpreted the epics from the female perspective when they found injustice meted out to women in the epics. Retelling of epics from a feminist angle not only challenges the prevalent and well-established patriarchal beliefs but also gives voice and visibility to the marginalized women in the narratives. According to Charu Ahluwalia and Purnima Bali, retelling of the grand epic narratives help the religion survive longer and female writers who take up this retelling myths have shifted from "other to self" giving new identity to the unheard voices of the past (37). Many writers came forward to rewrite what has been overlooked by male writers. Some of retellings of the Ramayana in the past include, Chandrabati's *Ramayan* written in Bengali and translated by Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Atukuri Molla's *Ramayanam*, written in accessible Telugu and Ranganayakamma's *Ramayans*. In the modern days, Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*, Bhanumathi Narasimhan's *Sita, Kaikeyi* by Vaishnavi Patel, *Urmila* by Smriti Dewan, and *Sitayana* by Amit Majumdar offer new insights into the epic.

Popuri Lalita Kumari, who writes under the pen name of Volga, is one of the most significant writers in contemporary Telugu literature and a social activist. She has authored many short stories and novels. Some of her prominent novels are *Swecccha*, *Sahaja*, *Manavi*, *Kanniti keratala vennela*, *Gulabilu*, *Rajakiya Kathalu*, *Prayogam*. She received the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for her short story collection, *Vimuktha*. *The Liberation of Sita* is a collection of short stories written in 2016. These stories trace the life of Sita both in Ayodhya and in the forest. The transformation that

happens within her forms the basis of all these stories. Sita transforms from an innocent, obedient wife to an empowered, assertive woman. This transformation happens in three stages; the first stage is innocence, the second stage is self realization, and the third stage is defiance. This transformation happens when she encounters women who have faced injustice like her. Charu Ahluwalia and Purnima Bali posit that:

The text revisits Sita and other female characters, reopening a debate on their lives, and offering fresh interpretations of these enigmatic figures because they still impact our everyday life. Hence, Sita and her sisters, with all their idiosyncrasies, get a space where they can be discussed as a woman and as a human. (46)

Sita, in the first stage, is a young innocent wife, obedient to her overbearing husband, Rama. She accepts Rama's ideologies as her own. When Rama chides, "When I'm with you, your thoughts can't be elsewhere. If your mind veers away from me even for a fleeting moment, I can't bear it" (*The Liberation of Sita* 19; hereafter cited as LS). Though his authority unsettles her, she obeys him. When Ahalya accuses men of exercising authority over their wives, Sita retorts saying, "My husband is not such a person" (LS 27). She agrees to the trial put forth by Rama to prove her chastity. She even gets angry with Renuka, who scorns Rama for spreading Arya Dharma even in the forest. She asks, "Does a woman have a world other than her husband's? is there a higher meaning to a woman's life than motherhood?" (LS 52). Sita in this stage is like the "other" mentioned by Simone de Beauvoir in her work *Second Sex*:

And she is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called "the sex," meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him, she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (p. 26)

She merely exists without any independent ideas or opinions. Sita is adept in archery and other royal martial arts, yet she waits for Rama to come and rescue her, knowing that Rama would be happy to protect her. She is aware of her valour yet remains docile in Ravana's garden.

In the second stage, Sita begins to understand her condition and recognize how she is suppressed by men and societal norms. When she was told about the chastity test, Ahalya's words echo in her mind. And when her mother-in-law rejoices at her chastity, she reflects, "Why is mother-in-law so relieved at the confirmation of my chastity?" (LS 36). She considers Ahalya, a *gnani*. The sufferings of Ahalya and Renuka awaken a sense of self realization in her, making her realize that she is not alone in this male-dominated culture. When sage Valmiki asks her affirm to truth in the royal court to prove her chastity once again to reunite with Rama along with her sons, Sita asks, "Do I need to do that? Is there any sense in such an effort?" (LS 64). She realizes that her love and devotion for Rama will not suffice him, when it comes chastity. This realization marks the shift from dependency to self-assertion.

Sita breaks away from the established norms when she embraces the power of sisterhood. Urmila's words, "Assume authority. Give up power. Then you'll belong to yourself. Then you'll belong to yourself. We should remain ourselves" (LS 79) resonates deeply in her. She wages a war against herself and decides to reject Rama's offer for a reunion. Refusing to undergo another chastity test, Sita asserts her autonomy and chooses to return to the earth from which she had come. Like Ahalya, Sita finds her own identity. Sita discovers her identity beyond the role of a wife and mother after the advice of Ahalya, who says "You are not just a wife of Rama. There is something more in you" (LS 38). Renuka's questioning, "Are such bonds, with a husband and sons, necessary for a woman?" (LS 52) further shapes Sita's awakening. Through her encounters with Surpanaka, Ahalya, Renuka and Urmila, Sita realizes that they are like her, victims of male-dominated *dharma*s. By drawing strength from their voices, she transforms her defiance into liberation.

Conclusion

The Liberation of Sita offers a new view of the epic, the Ramayana, shifting the focus from hegemonic male-centred to female self-realization and liberation. In these stories Sita, Ahalya, Renuka, Urmila, and Surpanakha are not portrayed as passive symbols of chastity and sacrifice, but as women of self-worth, active and assertive. The interaction among these characters foregrounds how the silenced women liberate

themselves. Sita's transformation from obedience to self-realization and eventually to assertiveness is a metaphor for the larger struggle of women to move from being the "Other" to becoming autonomous individuals. Sita asserts her right to self-hood by rejecting another test of chastity. Volga not only reclaims silenced voices of mythological women but also offers a vision where empowerment comes from sisterhood, self-realization, and defiance of unjust norms. In doing so, the text defies patriarchal ideals of "ideal womanhood" and foregrounds that liberation lies not in obedience to dharma but in a woman's ability to define her own identity.

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Abbreviation- *The Liberation of Sita*- LS

Author's bio-note

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