

RECLAIMING THE RAMAYANA: THE SITA THAT NOBODY READS

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A history of around 5000 years of human civilization has seen the written word emerge as a primarily male voice. Women in literature, especially in mythology, have been represented with what one would call an intentional (mis)representation. This representation is also often motivated by certain social and political exigencies. As Mark Schorer (1960) points out, "Myths are the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experiences intelligible to ourselves. A myth is a large controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is which has organizing value for experience" (p 355). Ausband (1983) further elaborates on it when he says, Myths are nothing but "tales which demonstrate the order that a man or a society perceives in natural phenomenon. The role of mythology lies in making the world coherent and meaningful by demonstrating or imposing order on it" (p. 2). Postmodernism further problematizes and interrogates the discourse of myth by refusing to give to it a structure, rather deconstructing it and looking at it as a language that "speaks its speakers rather than the other way around" (p.72). Myth in the postmodernist sense has come to represent the 'other'. As Coupe (1997) observes their ethics of 'otherness' operates at three levels-

Firstly, the myth recalls and projects the 'other' world. Secondly, the myth reminds us that there is always something else, something 'other' to be said or imagined. Thirdly, the myth, as a play of past paradigm

and future possibility, gives expression to the 'other', to those persons and causes excluded from the present hierarchy (pp. 196-197).

Pattanaik's 'Sita' is a scholarly take on the 'other' in one of the most important cultural artefacts of India. It is also relevant to mention here that this 'other' of the Ramayana is not often perceived so, and has indeed been deified and glorified as one of the centres of this epic tale of human sacrifice and valour. The present paper is a de-centring of this apparent centre, and an attempt to understand what Ursula Guin has called the "father tongue" of "language" which has proclaimed itself as the voice of reason, speaking with the treacherous forked tongue of dichotomy speaking the subject/object; self/other; mind/body. The Ramayana especially lends itself to this concept as it is the written record of a long oral tradition.

This paper projects the Indian epic Ramayana as a cultural artefact and not merely an epic because it is the record of an ancient civilization, of an old and wise people who have lived and reflected on life. The Ramayana, along with the Mahabharata, stands as the record of a people. But the Ramayana stands unique as it records life in its perceived normalcy. It is the account of extraordinary lives lived in ordinary times, ordinary as in the daily humdrum of routine human existence. Moreover, the Ramayana is in the Indian context, a sentiment, an emotion, a marker of culture, a way of living, a parameter of measuring rightful conduct, a lofty ideal held high to the people of an ancient and wise civilization. The Ramayana, apart from its immense religious and social value in the Indian context, also stands independently as the arbiter of the moral compass that is used to decide the value and meaning of all human action.

The Ramayana has been read and reread, told and retold, a million times and every time it has been told as the story of Rama. It is only recently that attempts have been made to read Sita in the Ramayana. Pattanaik's scholarly reading in "Sita" goes back to the origins of the social practices specific to the Indian context and this in turn

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creates an alternative discourse that questions the social institutions which seek legitimacy and validity in the epic. “Sita- an illustrated retelling of the Ramayana” by Devdutt Pattanaik is a profound scholarly reading and presentation of one of the greatest epics of all times. Pattanaik in this retelling scours the length and breadth of India, trying to understand the very many interpretations of the Ramayana and instead of giving a definitive reading, he presents to us his own re-telling and makes the protagonist of this humongous effort, Sita, the supposed martyr of this grand epic of human greatness and frailty. What makes this work truly unique is its recognition and conscious embrace of the female voice in it.

Pattanaik looks at Sita, not as the corollary to Ram, neither as the glorified victim of society’s grand scheme, but as an individual complete in her own self. Pattanaik’s ‘Sita’ while working on the base premise of binaries seeks to navigate the grey space in which life is lived. Pattanaik (2013) speaks of his work saying,

This book approaches Ram by speculating on Sita: her childhood with her father Janaka, who hosted sages mentioned in the Upanishads; her stay in the forest with her husband, who had to be a celibate ascetic while she was in the prime of her youth; her interactions with the women in Lanka; recipes she exchanged, emotions they shared; her connection with the earth, her mother, and with the trees, her sisters; her role as the Goddess, the untamed Kali as well as the demure Gauri, in transforming the stoic prince of Ayodhya into God.

It is interesting to see Pattanaik say how the ‘stoic prince’ was transformed into a ‘God’ by Sita. What Pattanaik seems to say here is that it is Sita who with her own resourcefulness and courage eases the difficult decisions that Ram has to take as the scion of Raghukula. It is as Pattanaik says Sita’s independence that makes Ram dependable.

Pattanaik consciously begins the narrative of ‘Sita’ with the second test that Ram subjects Sita to, after her discovery and return from the lonely exile in the forest, which Ram had decreed for her following his subjects gossiping about Sita’s chastity. This test sees Sita accept the King’s dict, but with a renunciation of Ram’s world. A

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bereft Ram is left stroking the blades of grass, Sita's hair, sticking out of the ground, as she embraces the earth which had begotten her. The beginning is Pattanaik's recognition of Sita's cultural appropriation and what follows is a scholarly treatise which sees Pattanaik delve into the roots of Indian culture. Pattanaik chooses to begin at the end of this epic narrative and works his way through to where this story began—with Dasharatha's yearning for a scion and Janaka's unexpected and beloved gift of a daughter from the bosom of the earth that he had furrowed. While Dasharatha yearns, and goes out of his way to appease the Gods to get a son, sentencing his daughter to the life of a hermit, using her indeed as the means to achieve his ends, Janaka gladly accepts the daughter that the earth bestows on him. While Dashrath attempts to attain posterity through his hard begotten sons and is forever unwilling to let go of them, Janaka lets go of his daughters with a final blessing that is also the lesson that will hold Sita in great stead as she leaves her maternal home for the home of her husband. We are told that "Janaka told her to bring happiness into marriage, rather than seek happiness from it" (p. 23), and it is this that holds Sita steady through the rigours of married life. While Dasharatha's sons are raised to obey, Janaka's daughters have been taught to question.

Ram, revered all over India as the incarnation of Vishnu, also called Ekam Patni Vrata, loyal to only one wife, is also very problematically associated with making his wife go through a test through fire in order to test her chastity, and moreover forgoing her because of a rumour that maligns her as tainted from her stay in Ravana's bondage. 'Sita' to an extent clarifies this. Ram, who is non-judgemental even towards the cursed Ahilya, can surely not be accused of doubting his wife. Ram is as sure of Sita's chastity, as he is of his own fidelity towards her, and yet he makes her go through the test in order to maintain a sense of social decorum and uphold the established social rules which holds society together. In subjecting Sita to the test of chastity he is acting the king, and Sita in accepting his decree is playing the role of the queen. Ram and Sita are here setting an example of the ideal social structure where rules are upheld and are equal for all.

Pattanaik in writing 'Sita' counters that cultural appropriation of Sita that had reduced her to a helpless victim of a social order that looked at her primarily as Ram's wife, the object of an unnecessary injustice, a martyr figure basking in the reflected glory of Ram. Popular culture has firmly entrenched Sita in our minds as the wronged, helpless woman who had to continually prove her innocence and purity. Pattanaik's Sita stands in stark contrast to the Sita that had been passed to us through ages. Pattanaik looks at Sita in her individuality, tracing her growth from

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the discovery that happened in the fields that Janaka had set out to plough, her education in her father Janaka's court and her mother Sunaina's kitchen, her marriage with Ram and her blooming into youth in the jungle. Pattanaik's Sita stands independent of all the identities that popular culture has bestowed on her. She is uniquely individualistic in her characterisation and bound to people of her own free will. She is true to what Janaka proclaims while naming her,

This is Bhumija, daughter of the earth. You may call her Maithili, princess of Mithila, or Vaidehi, lady from Videha, or Janaki, she who chose Janaka. I will call her Sita, she who was found in a furrow, she who chose Janaka. I will call her Sita, she who was found in a furrow, she who chose me to be her father (p.10).

Pattanaik works his narrative around this independent individual Sita, complete in her own respect, the Sita who had chosen Janaka, the Sita who chose Ram, the Sita who chose exile with Ram over a comfortable life in the palace, the Sita who also chooses to renounce Ram and his kingdom. Pattanaik's Sita is not a plaything in the hands of fate or others but she is an individual who decides the course of her actions and the direction that her life takes. It is in the choices that she makes where we see her character and the Ramayana itself written as if anew.

Pattanaik's 'Sita' is based on a series of binaries as has been often observed. In locating the Ramayana through Sita's eyes, he takes the readers to the very fundamental binary of the patriarchal and matriarchal divide, looking into the gendered norms which define who we are as a people and the effect of the choices that we make on how our life turns out to be. The obvious presentation of this binary is in the figure of the two kings Dasharatha and Janaka who are to father the protagonists of the Ramayana. For Dasharatha fatherhood is in the seed, but for Janaka it springs in the heart. Ram, born of that burning desire to uphold the lineage of his forefathers carries with him the burden of generation-- stoic in the face of every adversity, stands true to the desire that begot him -- to uphold the glory of the Raghukula; while Sita, daughter of the earth, ayonija, born of no woman but of the heart of a generous father who accepts with great humility and gratefulness the golden gift that the earth bestows on him, is free, spirited, wise and generous, just like the father who raised her. Where Ram is dependable, Sita is independent.

'Sita' answers to an extent the most fundamentally disturbing question that the 'Ramayana' raises in the mind of a discerning reader -- that of Sita's continuous tests

of fidelity and purity. Who and What decides these parameters of moral righteousness and can social norms take authority of who and what we are? How does the individual counter this invisible judgemental social force that breathes upon the very existence of every social being? Where Sita, the queen, must bow in compliance to Ram, the King, Sita, the individual, chooses to reject this unfair social norm and structure by embracing her mother, the earth. Although the queen accepts the king's decree, the fiercely independent and questioning individual that Sita is, makes this public test of her purity the means of a self-reflecting mirror to that society which wrongs the individual with its implied and often baseless notions of purity. With this act Sita in a way also chastises Ram who exiles her to the forest in a way that she mildly puts as a "devious route like an errant child" (p. 278).

Sita grudges more the way in which she was exiled without even the opportunity of an audience, more than the exile itself. She would have willingly accepted exile had Ram asked her to do so, but instead Ram, in fear of the questions that he was sure Sita would ask, questions to which he knows there will be no answers, banishes her to the forest surreptitiously. We are told that when Sita finally cries on her second exile, she cries not for herself but for "...Ayodhya, the imagined powerlessness that makes people snatch power through gossip" (p. 280). What is left unsaid however is Sita's ever so slight disappointment in her beloved Ram, who gives in to that baseless gossip, who knows no better to uphold the dignity of his kula rather than in discarding his wife, who walks blindly on the path etched by his ancestors and dares not etch a new one by giving the subjects of his kingdom, the wisdom of a true consciousness. Sita expresses this when she says, "And he sees me, knows that I will support him no matter what, even when he resorts to such a devious route like an errant child" (p.278). Sita further builds on her position when in reply to Lakshman's contention that she had already proved her chastity in the test through fire saying, "and if I were not? Would it then be socially appropriate and legally justified for a husband to throw his woman out of his house? A jungle is preferable to such an intolerant society" (p. 278). Here Sita speaks not only for herself but for all of humanity. She is indeed Janaka's daughter—raised to reflect, to observe and to question and not to blindly accept. Later in life too, as Sita raises her two sons' she teaches them to be careful of their actions, to check before they hunt, lest they hunt a man mistaking it for a deer, reflecting on and correcting the history of the kula they are born in, teaching them to discard what is not worthy and treasure all that needs to be treasured.

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Pattanaik in 'Sita' draws attention to an exile that finds barely any mention – an exile more terrible, and cruel, than that of Ram's; the injustice of this exile, and also to Sita's gracious acceptance of this exile and her generosity in the face of this injustice. In spite of Ram's unwavering love for Sita, in spite of Ram's trust in Sita, he is reduced just to a mortal king who in placing the rules of kingship above that of natural human sympathy; in condemning her on the basis of a baseless rumour without even giving her a chance to speak for herself; becomes base as Gautama who cursed his unwitting wife Ahilya to be stone for the sin of an adultery that she was unaware of. Indeed, here one is reminded of the Ahilya episode where once reclaimed to her human form with Ram's non-judgemental touch Ahilya has a moment of hesitation before she takes her husband's outstretched hand. In Ahilya's momentary hesitation in taking the hand of the husband who had cursed her speak the million voices of protest stifled by societal conventions. Sita in embracing the earth on her second test of purity gives a voice to these voiceless and powerless millions. It is here that Vishwamitra's observation of the royal scions of the two kings Dashratha and Janaka strikes one with its true implication. We are told how, "It did not escape Vishwamitra's notice that Janaka's daughters asked questions like Gargi of the Upanishad; Dashratha's sons preferred obeying commands. Different seeds nurtured in different fields by different farmers produce very different crops indeed" (p. 41).

Sita in rejecting Ram, and in rejecting Ayodhya and its people, turns the focus on the systemic wrongs in society – inherent to its very structure. She makes Ayodhya reflect on what it has lost, for in losing Sita, Ayodhya loses not only its queen but also the fertility and abundance that could have been its lot. What meaning does Ram's emotional tirade have, once Sita has left him, not in a covert way but with the conviction of what she is doing. For Sita knows that if she had indeed gone through fire again to emerge unscathed and take her rightful place by Ram's side, she would be setting a dangerous precedent for the future of humanity. Her sacrifice, the pain that she had borne within her heart in Ram's bereavement, would all go waste since in the ages to come Ram would keep forsaking his Sita, secure in the knowledge that Sita always returns to him.

Pattanaik's 'Sita' is a reclamation of the epic from its oft misguided and motivated cultural appropriation. It is the feminist flagbearer of the epic without in any way distorting the original intent and messages inherent in the epic. It is the empowering of a culture with an epic which remains relevant even today in the greatness and frailties of existence that it captures.

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