
Contemporary Influence of Ramayana's Sita: a Liberal Feminist Archetype

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ABSTRACT

The Ramayana has been the store house of myths, archetypes and epic characters that are still alive in Indian literature. Literature allows the writers to provide wisdom to the society and interpret one's own life. Many versions of Ramayana exist under the influence of age of beliefs and traditions. The study proposes that Valmiki's Sita in the Ramayana has always been viewed as a perfect woman and mother embodied with the values of sacrifice, submissive nature to husband, kindness and purity of heart, patience, and motherhood. The new theory of Liberal Feminism attempts to view Sita as a feminist woman who had the opportunity and power of decision-making for her family, husband, children and lastly the kingdom. The character of Sita is relevant because after reading her story, a reader can very well relate to her in their own perspective of life. The study states that Sita held her ideal values and also reared her children as a single parent which makes her fit to symbolize the modern feminist world.

KEYWORDS: *Sita, idealism, feminism, sacrifice, purity, modernism*

1. INTRODUCTION

There are three versions of Ramayana most popularly known till date -- the Valmiki Ramayana, Hanuman Ramayana, and the Asura. In the Valmiki Ramayana Sita is portrayed as a loyal wife, daughter, sister and mother. Sita is symbolized as an ideal woman filled with complete loyalty towards Rama with an unconditional bond of love with her husband, Rama. Contemporary studies understand Sita as a strong, powerful woman continually taking up the responsibility of performing risked tasks into her hands. Recent studies remark that Sita was too obedient and over-submissive and that she was solely responsible for her life. Some other studies point out the flaws of Sita for not being aggressive towards Rama's actions. It is believed and interpreted that Sita's kindness and generosity are positive character traits, but she is too obedient, and because of this she is like an abused wife. In this study Sita is shown as a strong woman who is liable to take her own decisions for her life, thereby employing a liberal feminist view of freedom as personal autonomy, i.e., choosing a life of one's own and substantiate that Sita is the true representative of the modern female. This study will focus on the feminine aspects of Sita, with respect to tradition and modernity. It glorifies the trustworthiness, loyalty, courage, courtesy, kind, helpful, obedient and bravery in Sita. Though the modern woman enjoys many privileges and facilities in

comparison to traditional past, the true meaning of freedom is still in search. Thus, this study through Sita portrays the undying spirit of a woman to lead her life peacefully.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concepts of Dharma and core human values in Sita

For centuries, the character of Sita is represented as the epitome of devotion and loyalty, astounded to be pure, patient, and an epitome of all sufferings without even uttering a word. She is represented as the ideal of womanhood and motherhood with loving kindness, patience, total submissiveness and deep love for her husband, patience and purity of thought (Lodhia, 2015). The concept of Dharma in the Indian thought is of various meanings, such as, justice, what is right in a given circumstance, moral values of life, pious obligations of individuals, righteous conduct in every sphere of activity being helpful to other living beings, giving clarity to individuals in need of it or to a public cause or alms to the needy, natural qualities or characteristics or properties of living beings, duty and so on. Studies point out the patriarchal representation of the female character, who although has a significant value of her own, is bound to the shadow of the men around her. In the name of Dharma, Sita is naturally assumed to spend her life in selfless service, yet be blamed for actions that are not of her desire. She is made the scapegoat for the miscalculations and faults of the men around her (Kaur, 2016). On exploring various papers, it can be pointed out that, the character of Sita has been studied in a plethora of ways, with her being the face of feminine power and her being the silent sufferer of the age-old school of patriarchy and male dominance. While some critics point out her indirect abutment of the age-old customs and traditions, assertions such as the fact that the character of Sita is nothing but a human being, who is caught in the war between self and the society.

2.2 Sita as a Liberal Feminist

Researchers point out the strong morals and character determination of Sita; however, it is often contradicted by her qualities of a docile wife. Consequently, the character of Sita in the new age perception and under the feminist light can be asserted as being the symbol of power and motherhood (Jacob, 2018). When her husband, whom she had been ardently loyal to doubts her dignity, Sita chooses to undergo the test of fire, but, leaves the toxic environment; without abandoning her children in the hands of her husband. In the feminist perspective, the agni-pariskha and renunciation of Sita are the acts of a dangerously noxious patriarchal setting (Madan, 2019). And her being under the forceful protection and within the safety of a man shines light on the typical patriarchal representation of women. Irrespective of the act by Ravana, it is indeed Rama who failed to protect his wife from the accusations of the narrow-minded society. The break of early 20th century in Indian English literature witnessed the varied representations and re-representations of the character of Sita, different from that of the historical representations. While some writers represented her as the epitome of feminist power and equality in the time of patriarchal subjugation, the others took it up to rewrite the way the historical character was represented. In the traditional setting, the character of Sita can be attributed as being a rebel but it is indefinite to use the same of her sensibilities and actions in today's world. Thus suggesting the point that the re-reading Sita in the historic sensibilities with the modern ideology will not sit well in the feminist perspective due to the blatant contradicting factors between the modern Sita and the traditional Sita.

2.3 Sita as a chariot of Freedom

In the selected works of literature for the current study, Sita portrayed as a woman who upheld her purity and ideal values while being a liberal feminist, conveying the message of a new modern Sita for the contemporary women of the society. Here, through Sita it is shown that a woman can be ideal and hold her stand as a liberal feminist simultaneously. Thus, Sita is represented as a torch-bearer for the contemporary women of the society. That is, in spite of being shadowed under the arms of a man, the readers are given a glimpse of the character Sita trying to emerge from the grasps of the forcefully submissive patriarchal society. Recent studies remark that Sita was solely responsible for her life. Sita had the deciding power for her life and thus kept drawing her life in her ways (Chakravarthi, 2017). Though her character can be deemed as being difficult and irrational to be adopted in the 21st century, maybe, the certain variations in her character can be adopted – such as her strong individual values and nature of being true to herself are significant to the contemporary society (Devi, 2018). However, while looking into the character of Sita from the 21st century point of view, it can be ascertained that there exists a chance of contradictory views, considering the means of adaption. That is, there is a group of critics that point out Sita to be the epitome of sacrifice and silent acceptance of everything negative while the others point out that to be a reflection of weakness, suggesting that this description does not allow her character to be branded or even regarded as a reflection of a strong and determined woman.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

On exploring various papers exploring the character of Sita in the historical sense and in the contemporary sense, it can be gathered that there are contradicting views on the character representation and execution of the historical Sita. While some papers represented her as the epitome of female courage and sacrifice, the feminist representations were quick to point out that the character of Sita was constantly over-shadowed and always protected by the men in her life - who in the end abandoned her for a fault that is not of herself, but a product of the toxic patriarchal mentality of the society.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The current paper explored the representation of the historical character of Sita, as represented in the Valmiki Ramayana, Hanuman Ramayana, and the Asura. The analysis brought forth the understanding that there are varied and contradicting representation, where some literature has portrayed her as being the epitome of kindness, purity of heart, patience, sacrifice, motherhood, and a docile wife to her husband (Patel, 2016). Whereas another section strongly represents her to be embracing modern feminism, symbol of independence and freedom. There is a scope for studies that can point out the modern liberal feminist in Sita (Roy, 2016). Earlier studies conducted discuss the feminine qualities of Sita that makes the whole world worship her.

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