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Agony of Sita: A Feminist Re-Interpretation of The Ramayana from Sita's Perspective

Dr. Rakhi Radh Krishna

Assistant Professor
New Horizon College
Marathahalli, Bangalore

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Abstract:

The novel, *Agony of Sita*, is a feminist interpretation of the great Indian epic, the Ramayana, from Sita's perspective. Sita is the narrator of the whole story in the novel and the major characters in the Ramayana have been analysed and criticised by her. The author attempts to emphasize two facts in particular in this acclaimed work. Firstly, women around the world are similar in their perceptions and feelings regardless of age or status. Secondly, people may not always be magnanimous even if they are born in royal families, or they may not always be malicious though they happen to have the so-called low origins.

Keywords: Indian Mythology, Rewriting, Feminism, Discrimination, Deconstruction.

Agony of Sita (2010) is the English translation of the Assamese novel *Bideh Nandani* (2009) by Dr. Neelima Saikia, who is known as Dr. Malinee to the literary world. Being a scientist by profession, Dr. Malinee has given important contributions in both scientific and literary fields. Her fictional works exhibit her profound interest in Indian epics and mythology, and stand as a testimony to her deep research on them. The female protagonists of the epics have particularly attracted her which forces her to re-imagine their roles and significance in the twenty first century. Dr. Malinee has been appreciated for her treatment of feminist ideas which appeal to the readers in a subtle but strong manner. Dr. Malinee is the recipient of two National Awards, instituted by DAE, Ministry of HRD and NCERT, New Delhi.

The novel, *Agony of Sita*, is a re-interpretation of the great Indian epic, *The Ramayana*, from a feminist point of view. Written in the form of first person narrative, the novel recounts the story from the entire perspective of Sita, the female protagonist of *The Ramayana*. The chief characters in the epic are being analysed and criticised by Sita in this novel. Most of Sita's major accusations are directed against her husband Rama, the king of *Ayodhya*. The novel gives an insightful account of the life of Sita, starting from her birth till her entry into the bosom of Mother Earth. It also traces the transformation of Sita from a lovable and dutiful wife to a strong and resolute individual. Dr. Malinee lends voice and conscience to the character of Sita which reflect in the modern and revolutionary attitude of Sita in this novel.

The beginning chapter of the novel gives the picture of a disconcerted Sita in Valmiki's ashram, who ponders over the three questions which always jolted her mind, "Why was I exiled? What was my offence? What is to be the future of my children?"(1) These are

very significant questions as they demand a compromise in the otherwise flawless character of Rama. In Sita's view, Rama should have been a little more considerate towards his pregnant wife, as she is not only the wife of Rama but a subject of his kingdom. It is unjust from the part of Rama, the king of *Ayodhya*, to neglect the basic rights of one of his *Praja*. Malinee's Sita does not hesitate to question this injustice even when she is accompanied to the forest by Lakshmana and is informed about the decision of Rama to disown her. Sita asks the most relevant questions to Lakshmana at this point.

O son of Sumitra, ask your brother three questions on my behalf. First, ask him whether women are subjects of his kingdom or not? If yes, is it not a king's duty to protect them? Secondly, it is I who has been exiled. Will he accept the child in my womb? ... And the third question, whether I shall bring up my yet to be born child like the rakshasas that you destroy or shall I teach him to live by begging like the Brahmins? (5-6)

Sita wonders how Rama could renounce her so easily after winning her in a tough context. She considers it a matter of pride for men to win a wife by performing the most difficult feat.

When Lakshmana explains the circumstances which lead to the desertion of the queen of *Ayodhya*, Sita sharply disagrees with the accusations imposed on her, and blames Rama and Lakshmana for initiating problems by mutilating Surpanakha. This act of the sons of Dasaratha is in fact the source of all enmity. But later she understands that it has been a part of divine plan that Rama should kill all the *rakshasas* along with the mighty Ravana, and for that purpose Sita has to be taken hostage. Nevertheless, she complains the integrity of gods who always let the women suffer for the glory of men. In *Reunion*, a short-story written by Volga, this particular episode has been treated with political implications by the author. Here, it is the awareness that Surpanakha is the sister of Ravana which prompts Rama and Lakshmana to ill-treat her. Surpanakha unknowingly provides the cause for Rama to provoke Ravana, for which Rama has been waiting for so long. Volga's Sita identifies herself with Surpanakha and reflects whether women are there only 'for the men to settle their scores.'

In the *Agony of Sita*, the second exile forces Sita to think of her husband in a different light. She doubts that the whole episode of Rama's coronation had been the result of well laid political plans. Dasaratha's insistence to keep the news of impending coronation as a secret and to conduct it in the absence of Bharata, and Rama's deliberate avoidance of Kaikeyi and his failure to inform the news to her while he reports the same to Kausalya and Sumitra, increase the suspicion of Sita. Sita strongly feels that even if Dasaratha stuck to his strategies, it was the duty of Rama to make him see things in the right perspective. Sita goes to the extreme of asking "was it my husband's desire that his father should leave the throne for him by any means?" (49)

Dr. Malinee has taken considerable amount of freedom in her rendering to provide the text a new sensibility and meaning. This would have allowed her to interpret Rama's request to Sita 'to live according to the wishes of Bharata' in his absence in exile in a reproving manner. In the novel, these words of Rama are taken disdainfully by Sita, and she criticises

Rama for asking her to accept Bharata as her husband and enjoy the kingdom with him. The author further draws light to the troubled psyche of Rama and Lakshmana just after their exile into the forest. She withdraws the divine aura around these two brothers and treats them as human beings who happen to undergo the same fate. Rama doubts whether Bharata and Kaikeyi will plot against Dasaratha to end up his life when Bharata ascends the throne. He also fears that Kaikeyi will ill-treat his mother Kausalya and Sumitra, and will commence violence against them in his absence. He requests Lakshmana to go back to *Ayodhya* which may help to relieve him of these horrible thoughts. Even when Bharata comes to the forest along with his army to entrust the kingdom back to his brother, Lakshmana suspects the motive of him, and tells Rama that Bharata is coming to eradicate both of them to secure the throne from future threats.

The author makes Sita question various actions of Rama in the novel, including the unlawful killing of Bali on the ground of absurd causes. Rama cites three reasons for killing Bali. Firstly, Bali lived together with the wife of his brother Sugriva. Secondly, Rama is bound by his promise that he will help Sugriva to regain his wife and the kingdom. Finally, Bali is like a deer that move along the branches of trees and being a Kshatriya, Rama has the right to hunt and kill him. The reasons that are stated by Rama justifying his deed seem quite shallow for Sita. She asks,

If Bali was a deer of the branches, then Sugriva is also the same. How was friendship possible with such a deer of the branches? Why did my husband expect right conduct from a wild deer or animal? It was a very normal and ordinary occurrence for a wild animal to live together with the wife of its younger brother. (175)

By touching upon various incidents in the story, Sita emphasises the fact that people may not always be magnanimous even if they are born in royal families, or they need not be malicious though they happen to have low origins. Sita finds many good people amid *rakshasas* who make her life bearable in Lanka. Among them are Bibhisan's wife Sarama, his eldest daughter Kala, an old and wise *rakshasi* Trijata, and Ravana's wives Mandodari and Dhanyamalini. Sarama meets Sita in *Asokavana* once in a while, and advises her to take care of her health. Kala brings the food prepared by her mother, and gives it to Sita without anyone's knowledge. It is through her that Sita comes to know the discussions take place in the court of Ravana and the remarks made by the courtiers about her. Mandodari and Dhanyamalini meet Sita occasionally to offer her some reassuring words.

Trijata is a very significant character in *The Agony of Sita*. She is one of the *rakshasis* who is appointed by Ravana to safeguard Sita in the *Asokavana*. She is a woman with prophetic vision who dreams of the downfall of Ravana, and warrants good behaviour from other *rakshasis* towards Sita by warning them about it. Torn between the sense of patriotism and the sense of justice, Trijata determines to stand for justice. She fearlessly speaks the unpalatable truths before everyone including the king and the queen. She is a testimony for the fact that there is no dearth of people with honesty and high wisdom in the non-Aryan society which is considered to have low origin.

The woman in Sita weeps when she sees the army of Rama takes over Lanka by depriving men from every household. Rather than the death of men in battle, it is the lamentation of women who lost their sons, husbands, fathers or brothers in it which makes Sita feel miserable. Sita feels as if she is responsible for the sorrow of these women. The disheartened Sita wishes to meet her husband more than ever before. She dreams the moment Rama comes running to her immediately after the death of Ravana. But Rama accepts to meet Sita only on the third day of his victory over Lanka. The meeting of Rama leaves Sita even more dejected. The words of Rama shock and enrage Sita at the same time.

Sita, you should know something clearly. I did not kill Ravana solely to get you back. I also killed him to pay him back the kind of insult that he heaped upon my head... He (Ravana) looked at you with lustful eyes. Your character is no longer above suspicion... if I could not have rescued you, it would have reflected badly on my name, but if I again accept you now as my wife, it would be a blot to our great dynasty. (219)

Though the fire ordeal returns Sita her lost reputation for the time-being, she is ultimately exiled to the wild forest by Rama for the same reason. But it surprises Sita “how everyone in the royal family could consign the eldest daughter-in-law into oblivion the moment Raghava renounced her (235).” She also cogitates how Shatrughna could not come to meet his nephews Lava and Kusa even though he was present at Valmiki's ashram at the time of their birth. Although he is restricted to come to Sita as her husband's brother, he could always come as the husband of her sister. But it is the neglect of her own father, king Janaka that hurts Sita more than anything else. After her exile, king Janaka pays a visit to Rama to console and sympathise with him. But it never occurs to Janaka that his daughter is in a more pitiful state than Rama, and being a father, it is expected of him to support her in her days of sorrow. Sita also doubts that the intension behind the visit of Janaka is more political than personal. Janaka would not have done that if Rama is just a common person instead of the ruler of a vast country.

The stand of mother Kausalya in the matter of her exile looks mysterious for Sita. She expects her mother-in-law to come to Valmiki's ashram at least once in the entire time of twelve years, but it does not happen. She also wonders why Kausalya did not raise any serious objection against the decision of her son to disown her daughter-in-law. All the time when she was in the palace, Kausalya used to treat her with tender affection. But once Rama renounces her, Kausalya also leaves her to the mercy of fate.

In the last chapter, Dr. Malinee portrays Sita as a strong and determinant person who does not tolerate any more unfairness from anyone. The repeated insults from the part of her husband turn Sita into a completely different woman. She bitterly reflects why the codes of dharma for men are always against women. When Sita is asked to take the oath once again by Rama to prove her chastity before the assembled crowd of *Ayodhya*, it enrages her and she speaks aggressively.

Before whom shall I take my oath? Before that husband who... did not stop doubting his wife even after he had literally tested her by fire...? Before that coward who kept away from me fearing I might ask for the reason for exiling me? ... Shall I take an oath before that father who had left his child ... in the jungle to lead a life by begging? The whole world might consider the person as godhead, but I find it difficult to place such a person even on the level of a human being. (237)

She criticises Rama for showing the willingness to accept her after the long period of twelve years. She considers this willingness something which came out of fear than affection. The thought that his sons Lava and Kusa, who have already excelled in the scriptures and the art of war, will raise the demand for their rightful kingdom in the nearby future, might have compelled him to take this ingenious decision at this point of time. Sita expresses her reluctance to come back to the unfortunate position of being the wife of a person, who gives more importance to the songs of his praise rather than the value of relations. Exhausted by facing various trials in her life, Sita goes back to the all-enduring earth saying, "If I am virtuous, pure and chaste, then ... Let the mother earth embrace me to her bosom." (240)

Dr. Malinee brings many social relevant themes in her novel, *The Agony of Sita*. She deals with various issues women face in a society which is dominant by patriarchal ideals. If Rama, the king of *Ayodhya* himself thinks that a woman is not supposed to have an opinion of her own once she gets married, the attitude of his subject is presumable. Even being the queen of a country, Sita's status is not much different from any other ordinary woman in *Ayodhya*. This is because a woman is primarily looked upon as a woman, irrespective of several other considerations which give her a better standing in society. While Valmiki's Sita understands this fact and chooses to be silent each time her basic rights are denied, Dr. Malinee portrays Sita as the representative of the women of twenty first century and interprets her retuning to the Mother Earth as the clear protest against the conventions of male-dominated world. Sita in *Valmiki Ramayana* worships her husband considering him equal to god; on the contrary Malinee's Sita hesitates to place Rama even on the level of a human being based on his deeds. The author does not want her protagonist to endure the insults of man to save his pride, and assign them to the working of destiny. She would like men to act as human beings rather than someone with divine status, and to consider women one among them and treat them with equal dignity. The re-telling of *The Ramayana* gives the author an opportunity to deal with the theme of gender equality and women's rights which reflect through the voice of Sita in the novel.

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