Reinventing Sati and Sita: A Study of Amish Tripathi’s Central Women Characters from a Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

In the age old mythical narratives, women were seen from the androcentric perspective and were portrayed as creatures that are inferior to men by all means. The customs and traditions created by the patriarchal world suppressed women to an extent where she become a dumb doll, unable to express her talents and capabilities. Revisioning myth interprets the myth from a new angle. Revisioning mythmaking is one of the emerging trends in literature at present. The critical discourse of revisionist mythmaking attempts to revision, reinterpret and reconstruct the age-old myth from a feminist perspective. It gives voice to the voiceless beings and challenges the patriarchal notions of feminine identity. Amish Tripathi, India’s first literary pop star and a contemporary Indian myth maker, rereads and rewrites the ancient Indian epics by utilizing the strategy of revisionist myth-making. This paper examines the way Amish Tripathi has subverted the androcentric mythical narratives by creating a new identity for the mythical woman characters, Sati and Sita. It traces the challenges faced by these central women characters and highlights bravery and efficacy as leaders which help them to undermine the power structures of male-dominated society. It also shows how they transcend the stereotypical image of ideal femininity and evolve as liberated and emancipated women.

Key Words: Revisioning, myth, feminist perspective, patriarchy, gender stereotypes.
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“There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of woman is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing.” - Swami Vivekananda.

Introduction:

Myths have existed as androcentric texts relating to the adventures of heroes from a masculine point of view and reinforcing male supremacy. The great Indian epics delineate the predominance of patriarchal society that existed down the ages by highlighting the various male counterparts such as Lord Ram, Hanuman, Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva through their heroism, intelligence, virtuous, might, determined, diplomacy and generosity respectively. Nevertheless parallel to them, there were strong women characters like Draupadi, Sita, Savithri, Parvathi, Kannaki, Damayanti, Mandodari, who were known for their bold decision, virtuousness, bravery, might, chastity, determination and diplomacy respectively. These women characters also overcame struggles and were able to create an identity for themselves in the society which oppressed them.

The etymology of the word Ramayana can be split into ‘Ram and ayanam’ the word ayanam in Sanskrit means ‘journey’ hence Ramayana means the ‘journey of Lord Ram’. Though Goddess Sita remains an ideal wife who follows her husband unquestionably, she wins because of following the path of dharma. In Mahabharata, Draupadi is staked by her husbands in the dice game. She is seen as a materialistic object. She becomes a slave to Kauravas in the dice game. She undergoes harassment by their cruel deeds. When Dutchadana tried to untie her garments she prays to Lord Krishna and gets his blessing. Through the help of Lord Krishna, she overcomes her agony. At that time she takes a vow that she will not tie her hair until she applies the blood of Dutchadana to her hair. At the end of the Kurukshetra war, she fulfills her vows and proves women’s greatness against patriarchal atrocities. It is said that ancient Indian women were respected in society. Kshatranis and Rishikas are testimonies of women being respected in ancient India. Nevertheless they lived in an androcentric world where every aspect of their life was determined by an androcentric social norm. So they were vulnerable to misogynistic hatred. But still, there were also women like Sita and Draupadi who were submissive and docile but when the need arose, did not remain mute. They voiced out their views and proved themselves.

Revisioning of Myth:

The status of contemporary women has greatly improved over the years because of the various feminist and liberation movements and their insistence on freedom for women from the harsh cruelties like sati, dowry, child marriage and female infanticide. The same women, who obliged to the patriarchal values even when they were harassed by men, have now learned to transcend male domination and voice out their views. These movements also exerted a great influence on the representation of women in the literary texts. Revisioning mythmaking is concerned
with rethinking the past in relation to the present. The same myth which subjugated women is seen to empower women due to the change of perception. As the saying goes, pen is mightier than sword, the pen irrespective of the gender of the writer who wields it, has been able to bring about a mighty transformation in the social position of women. Revisionist myth making especially, serves as a powerful weapon for the feminist writers as they can rethink and revise the image of silent, passive women of the past and envision them from a different perspective. These reconstructions of ancient women’s identity have gone a long way in demolishing their socially constructed inferior status.

In the present time there are a group of creative writers who revision the old mythological text and reinterpret them in a new light and such writers are called as revisionist myth makers. There are various strategies employed by the feminist revisionist myth makers which include deconstructing the role of a woman in patriarchal male dominated society by placing them in the center of the text, decentralizing the male superiority in the myths, portraying the uncelebrated glory of free willed ancient woman, demythifying the portrayal of woman in ancient myth and subverting the power structure which provides the space for them to show case their talents.

K.R.S.Iyengar is one of the earliest revisionist writers who has given voice to the marginalized mythical women characters. His remarkable feminist revisionist works are Satisaptakam and Sitayana. In Satisaptakam, he envisages the strong women characters of myth like Devayani, Damyanti, Renuka, Draupadi, Kannaki and Devahuti. Sitayana narrates Sita’s quest for identity. The contemporary revisionist myth makers include Devdutt Patnaik whose work gives insight into the mythical women characters, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who has revisioned the character of Draupadi and empowers her, through imagination, in the novel Palace of Illusions and Kavita Kane who chronicles the untold story of Urmila in her work Sita’s Sister.

Amish Tripathi who comes in the line of revisionist myth makers is a renowned Indian novelist. His novels are a fusion of myth, fantasy and science. Having grown up in a religious background, Amish was able to acquire a profound knowledge of Hindu mythology. Almost all his novels have Hindu myths and legends as their source. Though many versions of our myths and epics exist, Amish Tripathi deliberately chooses the ancient interpretations as his source, in order to bring about a shift in the perspective of women characters. In his work Immortal India he says:

Yes, most medieval interpretations of our epics tend to be patriarchal……. But if you study the versions of the epics, of our myths, from an earlier era, it would not be so out of the ordinary to find very strong women, and interpretations that are not patriarchal. (43)

Amish Tripathi has demythified the Goddesses and has portrayed them as normal human beings who are bestowed with indomitable spirit to overcome their trials and tribulations. Though Sita’s birth is shrouded in mystery, she grows up as a daughter of Sunaina and king Janak. Sita is called by Amish himself as ‘Warrior of Mithila’. Lord Ram, her husband tells her that “I will be proud to follow you” (SWM 331). Amish Tripathi has reimagined the character of Goddess Shakthi who is the consort of Lord Shiva, as a forceful woman. Amish Tripathi
has also reframed, reconstructed and revisioned the myth of Lord Shiva, and Lord Ram by placing the women characters in the center stage.

Though Vedavati is portrayed as a Goddess in the novel Raavan, she does not possess any supernatural power. She is the only character whom Raavan worships. She is a Kanyakumari. Kanyakumaris are worshipped as Goddess before they attain puberty. Vedavati encourages Raavan when he feels low and instills hope within him and educates him on the path of dharma, swatatva and philosophies. She asks him to serve the country. The transformed Raavan plans on using his immense wealth for the upliftment of the poor. He also wants to build a big hospital for the people of Sapt Sindhu and provide medical facilities at free of cost. Thus Vedavati is portrayed as a powerful woman who turns antisocial thug into a kind of Robin Hood.

**Breaking the shackles of Gender Stereotypes:**

Gender stereotyping is prevalent in every society, irrespective of its social, political and economic foundations. In fact it is one of the oldest and most established divisions between human beings. It expects a man to possess the qualities of assertiveness, logical reasoning, and courage and to be strong both physically and mentally. Men should not cry and must not do any household chores whereas the conventions for women are to be a caretaker, docile, feeble, nurturing, and emotional. These rules and restrictions for masculine and feminine gender are laid down by the traditional patriarchal society. These stereotypes create barriers for women and eventually hinder them from pursuing their wish or goal in their life, by caging them within the four walls of the house. The Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson, in the poem *Princess* says:

- Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
- Man for the sword and for the needle she:
- Man with the head and woman for the heart:
- Man to command and woman to obey:
- All else confusion (In 427-431).

Both men and women support this system of gender stereotyping. This Gender stereotyping of the male and the female starts right from the childhood when they mould themselves or are molded by their parents according to the expectations of the society. However Amish Tripathi’s heroines are exceptions to this gender stereotyping. In an era when women were not allowed to come out of their household, Amish Tripathi’s central women characters break the shackles of the gender stereotypes and empower themselves by being valiant and courageous. Sati and Sita gain an autonomous identity right from their childhood. At the age of eight, Sita visits the slum in Mithila, in spite of her mother’s objection. Unfortunately, when she encounters a gang of boys who ask her for the ring that she is wearing and out of her generosity she gives it to them, they disturb her further. However she goes to the extent of smashing them and overcomes her trouble.
Sita and Sati are intellectual warriors and they also excel in sword fighting and horse riding, especially Sita excels in stick fighting, spear throwing, archery and knife throwing. Guru Vishwamitra who comes to visit Gurukul one day is stunned on watching the stick fighting skills of Sita.

Vishwamitra observed Sita with a keen eye. Tall for a thirteen year old, she was already beginning to build muscle. She flicked a spear up with her foot, catching it expertly in her hand. Vishwamitra noticed the stylish flick. But he was more impressed by something else. She had caught the spear exactly at the balance point on the shaft. Which had not been marked, unlike in a normal training spear (SWM 51).

Sita is one of the few who could throw knives and shoot arrows at the source of the sound. The way Sita is described from a masculine point of view, in terms of her height and muscular built shows that Amish do not subscribe to the archetypal gender stereotyping. This fact is also substantiated by Amish’s confession in an article entitled, Amish’s PM Sita:

We shouldn’t deride the archetype of beauty, though. There are women and men who pursue that and there are women and men who have a warrior approach to life. Their mindset is different, their bodies are also different. They will be tougher, because of the kind of games they play, the kind of sports they practice, the kind of food they eat…Lady Sita just emerged like that in my mind. She is going to grow up to be a warrior, so she is going to show those attributes from a young age (n.p)

Commenting on Sati, Amish Tripathi in his work Immortal India says: “Lady Sati decided to enter my imagination through a novel interpretation in my book, The Immortals of Meluha. I visualized Her as a strong woman with a mind of her own” (22). Sati exhibits bravery, at the young age of six, she helps an injured immigrant woman by violently attacking a pack of wild dogs which tried to attack her. She is reprimanded for overstepping the borders of gender stratification when Daksha exclaims: “who asked you to be a hero?”(IOM 269). Daksha being the patriarch of the family believes that it is the duty of the man to be a protector and savior, when Sati is adventurous, he cannot digest the fact that woman can also be a savior. Sati retorts by saying that “Wasn’t it one of Lord Ram’s primary teaching that it is the duty of the strong to protect the weak (IOM 270)”. Sati subverts the traditional time-honored stereotype of women as weaker sex and the belief that their intellectual and moral frailty needed men’s guidance to protect them.

Subverting Patriarchy:

Patriarchy is a system in which men are the rulers not only in the private spheres but also in the political and social sphere. Amish Tripathi in his work Immortal India says that one of the important reasons why women suffer is because of “the patriarchal prism to interpret our past and myths” (22).

In the novel Sita: Warrior of Mithila, and Shiva Triology, one sees a subversion of this patriarchy. Sita’s adopted parents are King Janak and Queen Sunaina. Though the real king is Janak, it is Sunaina who is endowed with “pragmatism” and “fighting spirit” (SWM51) to rule Mithila. King Janak spends more time in philosophy and
does not prove to be a powerful ruler. Sunaina takes care of the kingdom and is also successful. Amish Tripathi says:

But the new queen Sunaina who had married Janak two years earlier was not of the ideal sort. She planned to restore Mithila to its old glory. Janak was spending more and more time lost in the world of philosophy (SWM 21).

This subversion of patriarchal world is also emphasized through the imagery of the elephant herd. Elephants follow the system of matriarchy. The matriarchic set up of elephant is juxtaposed with Sunaina and her family. There is a herd of elephants which dwell in Mithila. Sita as a small child gets to know the way of life of these matriarchal elephants from her mother and years later when she is in Gurukul she happens to see the death of the head elephant. The missing female head in a sense forebodes the death of Sunaina, who is now very ill. The next powerful female elephant will lead the elephant herd by carrying on the role of the previous matriarch. In a parallel scene, Sunaina instils hope in Sita and asks her to be responsible and take care of the family and kingdom after her. Eventually Sita is made the Prime minister of Mithila.

Amish Tripathi has deconstructed the socio economic image of the traditional powerful man with the new wonder woman who contributes to the society through her inherent leadership traits. Sita being the Prime Minister of Mithila works hard for the progress of the society. She deviously invests on the donation of Malayaputras. She undertakes two noteworthy projects for the enhancement of the slum dwellers. As a remarkable leader she commences a project of laying roads from Mithila to Sankashya. Her second project is building permanent houses for slum dwellers. Sita endeavours to construct a deep lake and a central market for the Mithilans. She feels that this will eventually empower the Mithilans by providing them with job opportunities.

In another instance, Amish supplants the image of patriarchic system with the matriarchic system, through a venerated sage none less than Rajarishi Vishwamitra. Malayaputras are a tribe left behind by the previous legend Lord Parashuram. It is their duty to guide the next Mahadev when he or she arose. By observing the warfare activities and intellectual superiority of Sita, Vishwamitra chooses her as the next Vishnu and the title of Vishnuhood is conferred upon her. Generally this title is conferred upon the legends and Mahadevs. Through this Amish Tripathi demythifies the status of Mahadevs and places the legendary woman in the center.

Sage Vishwamitra makes Sita travel across India in order for her to gain an insight into the place for which she’ll be the future ruler. Sita spends five months in Agastyakootam, which is the capital of the Malayaputra. She goes through rigorous training to equip herself with the skills of a powerful ruler. She learns philosophies and the tactics of warfare. Further she converses with Vishwamitra and educates herself by delving deep into various subjects:

Some of them were purely educational on science, astronomy and medicine, others were subtle lessons designed to help her clearly define, question, confront or affirm her views on various topics like masculinity, feminity, equality, hierarchy, justice and freedom, liberalism and order, besides others. (SWM 164 )
Sati in *Shiva Triology* is depicted as an intrepid woman, constantly challenging the patriarchal norms of the society. Even after giving birth to Kartik, she goes on an expedition to uncover the mystery in Icchawar and bravely fights the liger even when the men of that place could not confront the wild beast. In general it is considered that physical feats are the domain of masculine gender but Sati fights for demolishing the Somras, for the welfare of the people, when she comes to know that Somras is evil. She assumes the role of a combative potential leader and bravely fights in the war along with her soldiers in Devagiri. Though she is defeated she does not lose her spirit and when Ayurvati asks her to do a cosmetic surgery for the scar on her face she tells that “I will not rest till I have set it right and recovered the ground that I lost for my army” (OOV 346). Amish Tripathi envisions Sati as an idealised prototype of a strong woman warrior. He also brings a shift in the prevailing perspective that war is exclusively an arena for men. Sati is called for a peace conference in Devagiri. She fights a battle with Swuth, an Egyptian assassin and though she is fatally wounded she refuses to give up. On seeing this, the enemy himself is astonished and takes an oath to forego his profession.

Sati also rebels against man made laws and established social conventions of the day. She is considered to be a Vikarma woman because of giving birth to an unborn child and losing her husband on the same day. Consequently she lives the life of an outcast repenting for the sins of her past life. Even a slight accidental physical contact with Vikarma people would require a person to perform a purification ritual called ‘Shudikaran’. However Sati gets an opportunity to resist the atrocities inflicted on Vikarma people during a yagna organized at Devagiri. Tarak an immigrant accuses Sati of trespassing when she is found standing within five feet of the place of yagna. Sati accepts her mistake humbly but when Tarak provokes her by questioning the leadership traits of Lord Shiva, She invokes Agnipariksha. Agnipariksha is a ritual in which the abused victim calls the victimizer for a duel, in a ring of fire out of which only one person will emerge victorious. Parvateshwar thinks that Sati cannot contest with Tarak in the duel and considers taking the place of Sati himself but Sati resolutely declines the offer and fights the duel. Brahaspati and Parvateshwar are afraid that something wrong might happen to Sati. However she wins the duel and does not kill Tarak rather she forgives him. By confronting Tarak and emerging victorious in the combat, Sati smashes the patriarchic Vikarma system and its discrimination against women.

**Conclusion:**

The main argument of this paper has been not ‘woman only’ but ‘woman also’. The role of women in the society has gone through a drastic change and since literature is the reflection of society, the literary texts also mirror this emancipation of women. Even the ancient mythical women have been transformed in the hands of revisionist myth makers. In his retelling of myths of Lord Shiva, Lord Ram and Raavan. Amish Tripathi has given ample space for the women characters as well. Through them, he has captured the quintessence of Indian women who are amazingly beautiful and morally righteous. His characters Sita and Sati are valiant and resilient, and they serve as torch bearers to women’s rights. They were so dauntlessly self-reliant that no catastrophe could shrink their spiritual aura. They shine through the pain, after breaking the shackles of the society. They are shown as spirited women with moral consciousness and nationalistic fervor. They take the feminist initiative to transform their ideals into reality. They also take it upon themselves to get a square deal in the face of gendered oppression. Every Indian
woman has a little bit of Sati and Sita within them. It does not matter what kind of hardship she has to go through in her life, a woman possess innate strength to endure and emerge.

WORKS CITED


