

Mythological Characters Re-Emerge as New Feminists: A Critical Study of Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*

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Abstract

Feminism is a school of thought that basically vouches for the equality of sexes. Feminist fiction exposes a new vision of reality that is perceived by the psyche of women without adhering to stereotypical male conventions. India, the land of epics and best known for the cult figures of women in mythology, such as Satyawati, Sita, Draupadi, Kunti and many more, is now on the path of embracing new feminism that calls for social change through action. The year 2016 witnessed the rise of yet another powerful female voice, Volga, through the novel entitled *The Liberation of Sita*. While the novel seems to be a re-telling of the epic Ramayana, through the eyes of Sita Devi, on a deeper note it serves the purpose of awakening, amongst the contemporary Indian women readers. The story line traces the journey of Sita towards self realization and in the process, she gathers strength from four other women characters – Surpanakha, Renuka Devi, Urmila and Ahalya. What unites all these four women are that they are already on the path of liberation from patriarchal forces that have held them back. In the contemporary Indian society, we come across a whole lot of clamour for women emancipation. But it is high time that we move away from mere clamour and resolve to bring about a change by standing on one's own feet. Volga's new feminists are depicted as more powerful than ever before, with a more tenacious perspective on the meaning and purpose of life. This paper is an attempt to show how well Volga succeeds in her mission for social change and thus calls for action, through the subversion of mythological characters.

Keywords : Feminism, mythology, emancipation, new feminist characters.

FULL ARTICLE

Feminism fundamentally vouches for the uniformity of genders. The essential intention of feminists is to defend the cause of women and to guarantee an existence of freedom, without oppression by the forces of patriarchy around her. Women narratives have originated from the humble beginnings of being forged under a male pseudonym, being perceived and conveyed to the world as a critical area of study. An in-depth analysis of feminist fiction gives us a record of the status of women in different countries, as standards of women's rights fluctuate in light of the way of life of women across the globe. India, the land of epics and best known for the cult figures of women in mythology, such as Satyawati, Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Urmila and many more, is now on the path of embracing new feminism that calls for social change through action. The buzz word today is the genre called feminist revisionist mythology which blends feminism along with mythology, fairy tales, religion and so on. This genre aims at rediscovering old texts and bringing them to the forefront, by giving them a new modus operandi of interpretation, as the focus lies mainly on the female protagonist and in unearthing her seldom heard voice, thereby resisting the forces of patriarchy. As opposed to the traditional norms of myth making, this genre re-invents female characters as moving towards strong voices of protest and resolution. As the early feminist, Adrienne Rich observed, "Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us [women] more than a chapter in cultural history, it is an act of survival" (*Women, Writing and Teaching* 18). Exploring and revising mythology tends to be controversial too, as there occurs an attempt to rewrite history, not just history, but strongly established beliefs among numerous generations and even more importantly the subversion of gender stereotypes.

Indian feminist fiction is rich with the theme of social realism and the continual search for identity in the course of understanding female sensibilities and providing an area for self expression. The year 2015 witnessed the rise of yet another powerful female voice, Volga, through the novel entitled *The Liberation of Sita*. Popuri Lalitha Kumari, known as Volga, is a noted feminist in Telugu literature and her works include, *Svechcha* (1987), *Maaku Godalu Levu* (1989), *Rajakeeya Kathalu* (1992), *Neeli Meghalu* (1993) etc. She has been honoured with numerous accolades such as the Nandi Award for the Best Story Writer, the Best Woman Writer Award, the Lok Nayak Foundation Award and so on. *The Liberation of Sita (Vimukta)*, that bagged the Sahitya Academy Award for her in 2015, is a re-telling of the epic Ramayana, through the eyes of Sita Devi. It has been translated from Telugu by T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijaysree. While the title 'Ramayana' can be translated as implying 'Rama's Journey', what Volga does is to bring the reader's attention to the journey of the female protagonist, Sita. On a deeper note it serves the purpose of awakening, among the contemporary Indian women readers. The story line traces the journey of Sita towards self realization and in the process, she gathers strength from four other women characters – Surpanakha, Renuka Devi, Urmila and Ahalya. What unites all these four women are that they are already on the path of liberation from patriarchal forces that have held them back.

Sita Devi, hailed as 'the Daughter of Mother Earth', is one of the prime figures of Hindu mythology and is known to be the epitome of love, sacrifice, duty, purity, virtue and so on. She has been championed as the role model to be followed by women of our land. Volga is all set to tarnish this

submissive image of Sita and renders her the image of being a new feminist. She wages a war against herself, her beliefs, her relationships and is finally moulded into being mature, on getting to know the various views on life, from the perspectives of the other four female victims whom she encounters while on her journey of being a single mother in the forest, when abandoned by her man. She is left to ponder on the question that was raised to her by Surpanakha that, "Do women exist only to be used by men to settle their scores?" (*The Liberation of Sita* 4)

The demon like, hideous figure of Surpanakha, presented in the chapter entitled '*The Reunion*', attains another transformed face of being a woman with utmost strength that fought against all odds. In a world that judges and accepts women on the basis of physical beauty, she openly acknowledges that her disfiguration threw her into being a 'stormy sea of grief'. But soon enough does she break the existing gender stereotype and declares that :

I have become tough by facing upto the challenges life threw at me. I have been able to find happiness in trying to understand the very meaning of beauty...I struggled a lot to grasp that there is no difference between beauty and ugliness in nature. (10-12)

What makes her different from the other women in the novel is that she comes out with the ultimate truth that, "I have realized that the meaning of success for a woman does not lie in her relationship with man" (13) and then goes on to accept the companionship of Sudhira, after being fully accustomed with her realization. When she accepts him to be her man, she is so well aware of how well a companion she should be and how well an individual she should be. Drawing a right line of demarcation between these two standpoints will indeed take her a long way with him.

Ahalya is introduced in '*Music of the Earth*', as being a very bold woman who has fairly distinct views on the concept of right and wrong. She becomes the representative of women all over the globe who are tricked into being guilty and have to pay the price for it, all by themselves. Hence she says, "What is so unjust? Aren't many women in this world wrongly accused?" (25). Ahalya chooses to stay away from the chains of ordeal and justifications and would rather wholeheartedly accept to be an iconoclast, instead of being constantly accused. What drives her to live in her own way, is the belief that everyone has their own truth in this world and that no one has the power to decide between truth and untruth. On being subjected to the ordeal of chastity, Sita is reminded of Ahalya's words:

What does conducting an enquiry mean, Sita? Distrust, isn't it?

Wouldn't it be better, instead, to believe in either your innocence or guilt? ...All men are the same, Sita (31)

The message of strength and consolation that she has to give her fellow victim, Sita is that, "Whatever gives you peace of mind, that alone is the truth" (34). She is the who instills courage and self worth in Sita, by asking her to take further decisions and spurn the course of her life, for her own sake, by understanding who she is and by knowing what the ultimate goal of her life is. This is what leads her to ultimate victory before her man, Lord Rama, as she strongly proclaims herself as the daughter of the Earth and thus experiences the inner power of self authority.

Renuka Devi, presented in '*The Sand Pot*', is yet another character who shares a similar view as that of Ahalya. She was made to oscillate between life and death by the actions of her husband, Sage Jamadagni and her dearest son, Parasurama. That was when she decided to give away with such

familial bonds that indeed moved on to threaten her own existence, inspite of no great fault on her part. She poses yet another vital question that, “Does a woman have a world other than her husband's? Is there a higher meaning to a woman's life than motherhood?” (52). Even though Sita outrightly defends her position as a dutiful wife and mother, years later she is remembered of the very same words of Renuka Devi, when time had come for her sons to move to the royal palace, under the protection of their father.

Urmila, introduced in the chapter, *'The Liberated'*, is one tragic character who has never been rendered voice in the annals of mythological history. When everyone was busy praising Lakshmana for his devotion to his brother, no one ever cared to think about his lady, the one who was bound to spend the rest of her life with him. She was asked to adorn the role of a dutiful daughter in law within the palace, but what she chose was self imposed exile, the kind that was worsen than what Rama, Sita and Lakshmana went through. She turns out to be the fiery kind of woman, who subverts the existing modes of protest. It was when she was helpless in anger that she began her protest that continued for fourteen long years and in due course, her solitude, led her to the quest for truth. She transcends the mortal level of freedom and in the span of fourteen years of deep meditation, gets transformed to one who is not bound by any chains of dependence or even love. She goes on to exclaim that:

I began to probe the essence of each of my relationships...Power is the root cause of all sorrow...We must acquire this power. And then give it up...I shall not submit to anyone's power. Nor will I bind anyone with my power. Then I will feel, I have liberated myself (75-77)

Here the author goes along with the notion of feminists that love is “an institution that promotes vulnerability, dependence, possessiveness, susceptibility to pain and prevents the full development of woman's human potential” (*Feminism and Gender Equality* 120). What Sita attains towards the end is indeed ultimate liberation from the immense love and affection that she has for Rama.

The very last chapter of the novel, *'The Shackled'*, portrays the predicament of the morally defeated hero Lord Rama. He is stifled by numerous questions of loyalty, authority, duty, truth, attachments and so on and it is to be seen that he can in no way embrace the path of liberation. The novel ends on the note of victory of Sita Devi as she successfully liberates herself and thus proves that she has come a long way from struggling to survive amidst all those factors that betrayed and pulled her down.

On further analysis, we find that the whole novel is built upon the key question that 'Can a woman stay single and be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete?'. The answer to this is rendered to Sita by the poignant narratives of the other women, as she had learnt what she could from their experiences. The sunny side of female friendships is also depicted by Volga as Sita remarks that:

She understood that the anguish in their lives was similar, she felt a camaraderie, a companionship with them...she realized that she was not alone. The awareness that she was one among them, gave her strength. (63)

The personal experiences of the four women characters has been used by the author as the basis to analyse the common situation of women around the globe who are caught up between their own self

and the society around them. As per the 'Redstockings Manifesto' of the radical feminists, "Our chief task at present is to develop female class consciousness through sharing experience and exposing the sexist foundation of all our institutions" (*Feminism and Gender Equality* 37). Such a pro-women sisterhood is indeed developed among the five women.

What makes the novel more enriching is that the author herself is a woman and women experiences portrayed through her perspective of writing gives way for a new reevaluation of women voices. But Volga does not restrict her opinions on feminist writings to women authors alone as she believes that any human being who understands the suffering and oppression of fellow beings, can write about them. As Rosalind Miles avers, "The female perspective, expressed through women's writings of all kinds is more than a valuable corrective to an all male view of the universe" (*Post-Colonial Women Writers* 12). This gives rise to the development of a new 'feminine consciousness' through deconstructing the existing notions of the world of patriarchy. For this there must be a collective effort of 're-visioning', which is as portrayed in the novel, where women come together in sharing their experiences and thereby creating a bond of sisterhood, companionship, love and warmth.

The journey that Sita undertakes in search of a new ray of hope for her sustenance, can be found similar to the "need for a new identity that led passionate feminists to forge new trails for women" (*Feminine Mystique* 71) as in the words of Betty Friedan. In one way or the other, the women associated in the forest with Sita are also those who had been hearing the same voice of their conscience at major junctures of their life. In due course of time and age, they were all who forgot to live for 'themselves'. They are caught up in the existential dilemma of the conflict between *pour-soi* (for-itself) and *en-soi* (in-itself), as Sartre names it in his *Being and Nothingness*. Women are in the constant strife to transcend their level of *en-soi* and to absorb in themselves, the essence of the primarily male factor of *pour-soi*. When their narratives are weaved together as a means of liberating them, it is indeed the assertion of the female culture of emotion, intuition, love and personal relationships.

The ecstasy of finding oneself is enjoyed by the women characters of this novel by going through a process of three stages which is named as 'Spooking, Sparking and Spinning' by Mary Daly in her work, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Spooking is the identification of those who oppress, repress or even forsake women. Sparking is the identification of the inbuilt strength in women. Contextualising this stage based on the novel chosen for study, we can also define it as sparking the chord of female friendship and sisterhood. The last and the final stage is Spinning where women redefine themselves and move to create and participate in a world of their own. It can be clearly seen that all the women characters undergo these three phases in due course of identifying themselves. The woman characters are noteworthy for the manner in which they develop a strong sense of female bonding and facilitates fortitude in order transcend the impediments of the age old patriarchal society and thus stand as representatives and pave the way for emancipation of women all over the globe.

The world as seen through the eyes of the various women characters, when put together gives a comprehensive picture of the age old society where conformity, traditions and beliefs played a vital role. By re-inventing such a panorama in the twenty first century, Volga calls for liberation as her new feminists are depicted as more powerful than ever before, with a more tenacious perspective on the

meaning and purpose of life. In the contemporary Indian society, we come across a whole lot of clamour for women emancipation. But it is high time that we move away from mere clamour and resolve to bring about a change by standing on one's own feet. She indeed succeeds in her mission for social change and thus calls for action, through the subversion of mythological characters.

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