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Wronged, Wrong Sita: a Feminist Critique of Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: an Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*

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The paper attempts to look at retellings of the Ramayana through a feminist perspective focusing on Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*. The Ramayana is vastly popular to this day despite having oral traditions beginning somewhere in the 2nd Century BCE which were later written, translated in several languages and much later retold, enacted and televised. Pattanaik's work is a recent retelling of the Ramayana with the title of Sita and was published in the year 2013. There have been several studies on the Ramayana from several perspectives and on all its various genres. I chose Pattanaik's retelling as the title 'Sita' held great promise for I expected a different interpretation. Instead I found a celebration of the conventional and typical Sita. Pattanaik's treatment is dignified and magnanimous with Sita as a Goddess. His tone is formal and reverential and at the end of each chapter there are stories from various retellings with critical references. Despite all this the narrative, I believe is limited and does not the raise the societal arguments necessary.

Key words: Ramayana, Sita, Patriarchy, Retelling, Perspective, Society, Sexuality, Identity

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I will begin the paper with a quote from the text that I found to be a paradox in itself. *I am a Goddess. I cannot be abandoned by anyone. Ram is dependable hence God. I am independent; hence Goddess. He needs to do his duty, follow rules, and safeguard reputation. I am under no such obligation. I am free to do as I please; love him when he brings me home, love him when he goes to the forest, love him when I am separated from him, love him when I am rescued by him, love him when he clings to me, love him even when he lets me go.*

With the use of these dignified and graceful words Sita makes being forsaken and deserted while being pregnant, her 'own choice'. She makes her abandonment an essential aspect of her husband's acceptance into society. We must note that she is 'free', only to 'love', without expecting any reciprocation or actually 'expecting' anything at all. Her words are tranquil and noble and implore women to this day to enjoy or willingly accept and find solace in mistreatment and accept one's 'fate' exactly as Sita did.

Pattanaik begins his Ramayana with Hanuman narrating his dear Rama and Sita's tale. It begins with Sita's birth. She was born from the earth. Her various names Bhumija, Maithili, Vaidehi, Janaki and Sita (she who was found in a furrow and who chose Janak as her father) depict her illustrious and *ayonija* birth, which means one who is not born from a womb. Such

children were considered special as they defied death. Sita was found in the Earth when the land was being ploughed for the first time. Agriculture determined the onset of civilization which is why she embodies productivity and domesticity. She thus became an exemplary example of a perfect submissive wife and daughter in law, an example for all women to follow and emulate.

The story of Shanta, king Dashrath's first daughter is not known by most people. The king's longing for a son made him marry two more times. Neither of his wives was able to reproduce. King Rompada of Anga asked for Shanta so she could seduce a young hermit Rishyashringa and in return he would perform a yagna which would result in Dashrath having sons. She was able to successfully entice him and become his wife. The yagna he thus performed blessed all of Dashrath's wives with sons. The fact one must not miss here despite the glorification of Shanta's bravery and boldness by Pattanaik is a father's open approval of the prostitution of his daughter to beget sons. Women were considered the property of men passed on from father to husband with either or both controlling her sexuality. Her choice in the matter has not been questioned even by Pattanaik who attempts a women's perspective. She does what she is asked of her clearly indicating the heavy patriarchal bent of society.

Women in the Hindu society bear a poor position. The concept that a man's virility has nothing to do with the production of sons; it is always the 'wife's fault' stays. Dashrath therefore remarried twice. Sons were required for salvation and women were not considered anything more than 'wombs' wherein sons must be born for 'continuing the family name'. The words used for Shanta are resplendent but restricted to the same ancient patriarchal structure of man first and women second that is, if she is to be counted at all. Our supposed 'role model' Sita was vastly knowledgeable owing to the fact that she attended various conferences of enlightened men and women with her father. She was an excellent cook and understood both the court and the kitchen

and believed herself to be a seeker of knowledge. Why did this knowledgeable woman then accept her fate quietly? The answer Pattanaik says is because she was a Goddess. So then does a Goddess have to be homely and docile to maintain the 'civility' in civilization? Why does this burden fall on women? It is because Sita and consequently women have been taught and trained by their parents and society to be complacent and meek and be the one on the accepting and not the demanding side. A woman knowledgeable or not must always be an excellent cook and homemaker. This is apparent in Janak's words when he asks Sita to *bring happiness into marriage, rather than seek happiness from it.*

Tadaka a matriarch of the herd of rakshasas attacked during a yagna ceremony which was being held in her territory. She was brutally murdered on the spot by Rama and Lakshman on Vishwamitra's orders. The humiliation that Surpanakha faces is similar. Her nose was cut off (literally meaning loss of respect in society) simply for desiring the two handsome brothers openly and expressing her desires. She did not control her female libido and was therefore painfully punished. All these are examples of the atrocities committed against women only because they were resolute enough to desire or fight. They were killed or mutilated being termed 'rakshasas' (demons) as they had a 'different' (natural) way of life. Ahilya a princess, married to the sage Gautama was turned to stone by her husband simply because Indra in the guise of her husband had come and spent the afternoon with her taking advantage of her desolateness. Her only fault had been ignorance. She was therefore cursed. It is only after being 'forgiven' by Ram and being touched by him that she became human again and was taken in by her husband.

Tara another character of the Ramayana, who was initially Vali's queen after his death becomes Sugriva's queen as then, women were considered property and married to the throne rather than the person sitting on it. The wife's wishes were not taken into consideration and

they were passed on like inanimate objects or property. Then there is Mandodhari, Ravana's first wife who was harassed by Angada and his *vanaras* (monkey army) to disturb Ravana from his meditation. Using a woman wrongly to gain one's end and open harassment is also a common feature displayed in the Ramayana and its retellings. A woman's fidelity was considered to be of primary importance whether it is Ahilya, Mandodari or Renuka who was beheaded by her own son on her husband's orders simply because she had desired another. It is no wonder then that both Ahilya and Tara regain their virginity which was of primary importance for a woman and the question regarding their husband's other wives or their celibacy or even loyalty is not even lightly questioned. A woman's sexuality was controlled through various concepts like chastity, abstinence, virginity, female honour etc. Desire was an unheard of concept for women. Any woman who dared desire any man and sometimes even her husband when he was not the first one to approach was considered uncontrollable and obscene. Such women were openly punished and humiliated terribly, examples of which I have stated above. These are also brilliant examples of the inequality of the patriarchal society where Sita was abandoned despite being virtuous and Ram celebrated simply for being an *ekam-stri-vratam* (having a single wife only) and the *marydapuroshottam* (one who could do no wrong to his people, his wife is a different issue all together). The measuring scale for men and women's 'fidelity' was very clearly highly biased and unequal.

The requirement of a husband to be stronger than his wife and the concept of applying vermilion on the parting of the forehead to show the marital status of women is seen in the Ramayana. Men however required no external signs to show their marital status and unlike women were also free to marry again several times over. Kaikeyi, Dashrath's third and youngest wife is branded evil by most scholars of the Ramayana simply for being ambitious and having an

excess of motherly affection for her son Bharata. Her valor which had been the reason for her boon (she could ask the king for anything) is disregarded and she is considered a vamp who asked for the fulfillment of her boon for personal use. The terms used for any woman who displayed any other qualities except humility and pliability or did anything unconventional or outside the rules of society were harsh and unforgiving. This misogynistic attitude prevalent in the Ramayana is displayed to this day. The Ramayana was the setting stone for societal construct as it depicted a 'perfect' society where justice and 'duty' apparently existed side by side.

Sita follows her husband into exile as she is a 'devoted' and 'perfect' wife. She is young and beautiful and refrains from maintaining sexual relations with her husband as he stays like an ascetic for fourteen years in the jungle. She is kidnapped by Ravana when she crosses the famous *Lakshman Rekha*, lines drawn around her hermitage by her brother –in-law. This line was meant for her protection as any man who would try to cross it would burst into flames. Ravana dressed as an ascetic asking for alms asks her to cross the line and give him food, refusal of which would have resulted in her family getting 'dishonored'. This societal idea of women's hospitality regarding all members of the household guests included resulted in her abduction as she chose 'honour' over safety. Contrary to this the *Vibhandaka-Rekha* which kept women and all female animals outside to protect Rishyashringa's celibacy was considered unnatural. A man's virility is supposedly only 'natural' while a woman's must be controlled. The blame for her abduction according to society then falls on Sita alone as she was foolish enough to cross the line drawn around her which is a literal display of control. Women unknowingly to this day emulate this very concept of blaming themselves for the misfortunes that occur in their lives.

Sulochana is celebrated despite being an asura's wife (Indrajit's) because she was the only one brave enough to go and ask for her husband's decapitated body lying on Ram's

battlefield. She later burnt herself on his pyre committing Sati. She is considered noble and brave simply because like Sita she displays the qualities of devotedness and extreme loyalty to her husband in absolute accordance to society's constructed idea of femininity and correct wifely behavior. Urmilla slept continuously for fourteen years for both herself and her husband and awoke only after his arrival. She is another example of a 'proper wife'. Coming back to Sita, Trijata asks her in Ravana's Garden what she would do, *if Ravana were to take her by force?* To this she replies *you give too much value to this body, much more than I do. I am not my body. I will never ever be violated.* Despite these awe inspiring, spiritual words this very Sita took the *Agni-Pariksha* to prove that she was not polluted again giving in to her own words to 'culture'. Through Pattanaik's words she says to Hanuman *Ram is a king, not a sage. He does not care for nature as much as he cares for culture. In culture, the polluted are cast out.*

Upon finally meeting her after the war Ram says that Sita does not *bring me any joy; you are like grit in my eye, a blot on my family name* for she chose to *live under the roof of another man....instead of killing herself and you to go freely wherever you wish, to Vibhishana, to Sugriva, to Lakshman. Let it be known I stake no claim on you.* This made Sita undertake the fire trial to prove her innocence to her husband. The very requirement of such a trial, her being dead rather than 'shaming him' represents the absurd rules of society which control's every aspect of women's identity and sexuality both mental and physical. Sita's innocence was well known despite this she had to prove herself while Ram who had also lived alone in a jungle for a long time was not doubted at all. A woman's identity is completely borrowed, while a man's is still his own. When they were about to leave Ravana's thousand headed twin who was feared even by him attacked, Sita immediately took the form of Kali and in a fierce battle ripped him apart and drank his blood. Despite being strong enough to thus fight she chose due to societal

restrictions based on family, honor and marriage to remain captive. She therefore did what was expected of her and nothing more.

Sita is abandoned by Ram because his subjects consider her 'impure'. When asked by Lakshman why he had to abandon Sita despite her having proved her purity he says *Pure in body and pure in mind, for sure. But pure in reputation? That stain can never be removed.* Ram chooses to abandon his perfect wife simply because she is considered imperfect by society. Thus obeying society's gender prejudices. She knows she is going to be abandoned when pregnant yet before leaving like the 'impeccable' wife she is, she gives all the servants' instructions to take good care of her husband and leaves with no outward signs of disappointment. Her glorified mistreatment draws pathos and encourages women to live by societal designs of femininity and be the ones to shoulder the burden of being the apparently self-sacrificing inferior sex. This leads to not only blind acceptance but also to internalizing these preconceived notions of misinterpreted womanhood which requires them to always be second to their husbands. This brings balance in society by placing men on pedestals of superiority and women on the obviously remaining lower and inferior position.

The fact of her having to give birth alone because she was abandoned without any post partum care is also not unknown. She has been described as a glorified mother figure who despite several limitations takes excellent care of her children never once crying or telling her children of her father's abandonment. She has again been described as glorious, sacrificing and a hardworking mother who did not leave her children as her husband left her and consequently becomes the 'perfect embodiment of a cultured woman'. Her only and final disregard for society comes when asked to give a public chastity test again she asks the earth to prove her love and

purity by opening up and accepting her in. This is her only and final rejection of society and its irrational rules. She does however prove her purity before leaving.

Sita manages to teach everyone a lesson but it comes in too late and after too long a time of complying with societal pressures and its fake and biased rules. It is only then she asserts having an identity of her own and declines any association with her husband and his identity as her own. She thus goes on to become a glorified example of female misery, exile and dignified womanly behavior who never spoke a word against her persecutors who were her own people. She therefore creates an extended identity for all women to prescribe to which implores them to be tolerant and patient like her reacting only and if in the 'worst' of circumstances. A devoted wife, dutiful daughter in law and a sacrificing mother providing a 'perfect representative' of patriarchal domination and set as a 'suitable' example for all women. Even Pattanaik despite the footnotes criticizing the Ramayana and his being a recent retelling provides us with a 'retold' Sita who is a celebration of the conventional and typical Sita. It does not raise the arguments necessary regarding women's sexuality, identity and position in society among other issues.

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