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Original Article

A Study on the Reinterpretations of Sita in 21st Century Indian English Fiction: Feminist and Postcolonial Perspectives

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Abstract

This study reviews the ways in which Sita has been unveiled in 21st-century Indian English literature by applying the lenses of feminist and postcolonial views and emphasizes her character as a lot more of an independent and rebellious force than a conventional archetype. In modern novels including The Forest of Enchantments, Bhumika, The Liberation of Sita and Sita: Warrior of Mithila, Sita has been redefined and reversed into a warrior, conquering force and independent lead protagonist in the novels. Traditionally, Sita has been an archetypal symbol of sacrifice, devotion and fidelity. These reinterpretations symbolize more massive societal shifts in gender consciousness because they challenge the ideas of a patriarchal culture and rebrand Sita as one of empowerment. It gives the woman freedom, power and symbolism to the study as she reduces femininity in her redefinition of femininity in the Indian literature, which places her in the position of feminism. The postcolonial interpretations also accentuate her importance as a recovered voice in that it transfigures myth to identity, justice and freedom discourse. The analysis shows how the reinterpretations of tradition and modernity by Sita can be connected with the help of two books that introduce fresh perspectives into female subjectivity in Indian English novels. Finally, the conclusions confirm that the legend of Sita is living, which is rewritten every day to mark postcolonial reclamation, feminist resistance and memory of culture; she is a emblematic figure of feminist discourse.

Keywords: *Sita Reinterpretations, Indian English Fiction, Feminist Literary Criticism, Postcolonial Discourse, Gender Consciousness, Cultural Identity*

Introduction

Contextualizing Mythology in Indian Culture

Mythology is a type of Indian cultural treasure trove that can affect customs, values and national identity. Ramayana and Mahabharata are not just another epic; they are cultural works that still have their impact on morality and societal norms. Sita, one of the main characters in the Ramayana, is a representation of the best qualities of loyalty, altruism and bravery, but the image of Sita has been influenced over centuries. Scholars describe mythology as giving archetypes, which can be used by each generation and as a lens through which cultures can debate the continuity and transformations [1]. The Indian culture is dynamic in this myth since it is an indication of interaction between the past and the present by the oral and literary reinterpretation and the modern reinterpretation of the myth [2]. Therefore, it is important to contextualize mythology and how the ancient tales are repackaged towards a better interpretation of present issues, especially gender and identity [3].

Importance of Ramayana and Sita's Archetype

The moral and cultural authority on the book of Ramayana, which in the Indian culture is amongst the most important books, has been made pivotal by the archetype of Sita. Sita would be considered a sort of idealization of virginity, devotion and stamina glorified by the patriarchal paradigms. New investigations, however, are eager to point out the manner in which even these images reproduce keeping gender normality [4]. Sita, as an active being and a resister, has also been reassessed in the dialogue of the feminists as a victim of a patriarchal tyranny too [5].

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The archetype Sita is a problem-filled cultural site as the re-conceptualizations of her influence reverberate with a huge impact on Indian culture because of the lingering power of the Ramayana. When examining her representation, researchers can leverage how mythological characters can be used to examine gender politics, nationalism and identity in contemporary India [6].

Contemporary Relevance of Mythological Reinterpretations

Sita reimaginings have been widely proliferated in Indian English literature and this change has been even more profound in society in the twenty-first century. Modern authors redefine Sita as a female, empowered and outspoken person rather than a victim. These reinterpretations introduce not only additional complexity to the traditional stories but also provide fresh perspectives, which are appealing to new readers [7]. As mythology is retold, it becomes an issue of debate due to female rights, identity and postcolonial resistance rather than a historical thing [8]. The significance of these reinterpretations is that they present novel interpretations of women and cultural identity in terms of how they locate historical narrations within the contemporary sociopolitical settings. Feminist and postcolonial literature is enhanced through these texts in that they lay emphasis on the agency of Sita, thus making sure that mythology goes further in having further development as a significant area of culture negotiation [9].



Figure 1.1: Timeline of Major Retellings of Sita in 21st Century Indian English Fiction [10]

Literature Review

In the twenty-first century, scholarly interest in the persona of Sita is drastically increasing, which indicates that the persona interpretation as religiously determined has been lost and rather a shift towards feminist/cultural interpretation has started to emerge. This moral strength and spiritual perseverance of Sita are highlighted in early Indian literature, including the Sita in Valmiki Ramayana: A Feminist Archetype! [11]. Philosophers subsequent to her keep her imprisoned in the body of contemporary feminist ideas such as Volga and Divakaruni, who view her as the resistant subject within patriarchal structures [12]. Contemporary research examines the tale of Sita, too, with comparative mythology since she became a powerless figure and changed into a symbol of autonomy and self-determination [13]. Collectively, these pieces of work demonstrate how the Sita story has been transformed over the years to become a moral icon to a multi-layered icon of empowerment, from archaic archetypes to current-day gender sensibility.

Sita has been reinterpreted using the feminist and postcolonial perspectives as they are reflected in the Indian English literature. The feminist criticism of the silence of Sita in traditional epics argues that it is estimated resistance imprisoned in silence, which is emancipated in the modern retelling with the reclamation as the narrative [14]. Instead, the mourning and exile of Sita are interpreted through the prism of the postcolonial readings as the manifestations of colonized subjectivity and erasure of the cultural identity [15]. Such works as Sita: Warrior of Mithila and The Forest of Enchantments are emphasized as the subversion of gender and power hierarchies and feature an independent woman [16]. These reinterpretations coincide with the postcolonial theory of Leela Gandhi, which views myth as the junction between tradition and modernity. As a result of the feminist and postcolonial studies, Indian literary imagination is therefore aimed at reclaiming Sita as a rebellious woman as a symbol of resistance and rebirth in the Indian tradition.

Gaps Identified

The level of our information on reinterpretations of Sita is quite inadequate, in spite of a large body of literature. Most reviews, instead of adapting to comparative structures, follow her development across the many retellings, thus evaluating individual books. This intersection of gender, culture and myth is not a well-investigated field, as little literature is found to bridge the views of feminism and postcolonialism on one problem [17]. Besides, even though the independence of Sita is revisited in modern literature, the sociopolitical influence of her image in the context of other international set-ups was scarcely addressed [18]. It is difficult to understand whether or not the story of Sita can be appealing outside India due to the absence of cross-cultural analysis. To address such gaps, to demonstrate that Sita did not lose meaning in the new feminist and postcolonial discourse, a certain approach, such as integrating the textual, cultural and theoretical layers, needs to be invented.

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Table 2.1: Comparative Overview of Scholarly Perspectives on Sita's Representation

Scholar / Year	Work / Source	Perspective	Key Interpretation	Citation
Murty (2014)	*Sita in Valmiki Ramayana: A Feminist Archetype!*	Classical Feminist	Sita as moral archetype and spiritual ideal	[11]
Volga (2018)	*The Liberation of Sita*	Neo-Feminist	Sita's self-realization and rejection of patriarchal norms	[12]
Rajkumar (2022)	*Retelling of The Ramayana in The Voice of Sita*	Postcolonial Feminist	Sita's voice as resistance to androcentric narrative	[13]
Tripathy (2022)	*Indian Feminism: An Analysis of Amish Tripathi's Sita: Warrior of Mithila*	Feminist Revisionist	Sita as warrior and autonomous leader	[14]
Chandran et al. (2021)	*Re-Imagining Sita in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments*	Eco-Feminist / Postcolonial	Sita's spiritual ecology and cultural reclamation	[15]
Mahato (2024)	*Voices of Women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions and The Forest of Enchantments*	Comparative Feminist	Sita's evolution from mythic silence to narrative agency	[16]
Singh G. (2024)	*Analysing Femicide and Antinationalism in The Nirbhaya Case: A Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking Reading of Clea Chakraverty's La Voix de Sita*	Political Feminist	Sita as symbol of resistance against gender violence	[17]
Kapoor et al. (2024)	*Sita in Forest: A Critical Analysis of Ecofeminism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forests of Enchantment*	Eco-Feminist	Sita's connection to nature and female spirituality	[18]

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Literary Theory: Agency, Resistance, Subaltern Identity

The basis of the analysis of how Sita can become the active agent of resistance and not a passive archetype takes place due to the existence of the feminist literary theory. Her independence and character are brought to the fore in less dated readings, asking cynical and patriarchal mythologies, which had obscured her in the previous past, to change. Arni and Chitrakar, introduced in the Ramayana of Sita as alternative characters, use distinct visual narrations in the procedures of restoring Sita her voice that uses art as a medium of expressing her torment and power [19]. On the same note, Sita is re-imagined as an empowered heroine with self-awareness that crosses the social conventions and presents herself in Retelling Ramayana: Sita: The Hero of Nandini Sahu [20]. By these feminist understandings, we draw Sita into larger women/empowerment discourses via highlighting her liberty as moral and emotional beings. Sita becomes the image of a subaltern woman not only reclaiming his account in an antique tradition of the male but also resisting and making an identity of her own.

Postcolonial Theory: Cultural Translation, Myth as Discourse

As an embodiment of the postcolonial theory, the myth is a location of a cultural negotiation where ancient discourses are rearticulated in describing new identities in a contemporary environment. Re-telling the Sita story in modern Indian English literature transforms it into an argument about reclaiming culture and colonial memory. Albrecht (2023) in Sita in Cultural Translation explains how Sita focuses on transcending language and agents of culture since the story is the postcolonial search of India attempting to spiritualize femininity outside of the colonial and patriarchal processes [21]. It is as well mirrored in Sita, The Story of Intertextuality and Folkloric References in Nandini Sahu's Sita, in that it addresses the adoption of mythology as live textual practice since it combines the feminist with the folklore to voice out the postcolonial identity [22]. Going by these readings, the Sita tale is a cultural discourse, which is laden with gendered, political and historical connotations. Postcolonial literature myth is a tool for assisting to recover the voices of the indigenous peoples and reposition the female subjectivity into a focal point.

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Archetypal Criticism: Sita as Mother, Wife, Warrior, and Goddess

Sita falls within a mode of women in legends: mother, wife, warrior, goddess—each illustrating different aspects of her personality as archetypal criticism would suggest. In Greek and Indian Epic Women: In Some Reflections, Pathak (2023) compares her model with the women warriors of that time to emphasize the exploitation of her two personas as a moral fighter and a nurturer [23]. To this end, The Patriarchal Values of Indian Womanhood and Its Legacy by Ghorai (2020) highlights the role of the force of Sita and her generosity in bringing her to new heights but how idealism with a patriarchal mindset constrains [24]. These generalized interpretations divulge the change of Sita from the idealized wife to goddess and, hence, transcendence, power and sacrifice. Thus, her archetype assists in straddling the boundary between legend and modernity and asserts her right to remain an archetypal representation of moral and spiritual power and a personage of the timeless feminine who cannot be put in a box.

Sita as a Traditional Woman

Representation in Early 21st Century Novels (e.g., The Untold Story of Seeta, Sita: The Furrow Princess)

The values of Sita that are considered in the books with the traditional interpretations are the values of patience, love and purity of morality enumerated in the early 21st-century books. To reinforce the information that Sita is a moral core of Ramayana, Phatak (2014) introduces her as the woman embodying devotion and devotion as the major features in her life in The Untold Story of Sita [25]. Similarly, Sita: The Furrow Princess by Sharma (2014) depicts her as a selfless and dignified woman and as the example of a perfect Indian woman [26]. In this, the stories recognize the inner strength and the depth of emotion in Sita without belittling her conventionality. These initial images of Sita allow these early 21st-century writers to maintain the cultural halo of this woman as a moral aid in a male-dominated society as well as indicate the potential strength of her attachment and her resistance to subjugation.

Themes of Sacrifice, Devotion, and Loyalty

The image of Sita has always been associated with devotion and sacrifice; these are the basic traits of her emotional and spiritual nature. In The Forest of Enchantments, Desai (2022) regards Sita as a conscious attempt at devotion, abandoning her grief as spiritual strength despite the painful experience [27]. Similarly, Sita: A Symbol of Feminist Revisionist Nationhood by Tripathi via Mondal (2024) delineates the meaning of sacrifice in another way through the lenses of agency and her adherence as moral heroism in essence, rather than submission [28]. As these interpretations point out, Sita does not passively love but tenaciously opposes and this element of opposition is what makes her a moral role model and her sufferings, therefore, holy. Her obedience, therefore, goes against ideas of patriarchy and becomes a political and even spiritual statement.

Critique of Patriarchal Expectations

Modern scholars are critical of the patriarchal system whose straining of Sita has a long and winding lineage. In Rewriting of Hindu Mythology in Popular Indian English Novels, Bharali and Visvanathan (2022) suggest that the representation of Sita highlights the conflation of patriarchal moral codes that is patriarchal in nature, in which "right" is considered right [29]. Likewise, From Myth to Mythya: A Study on the Metamorphosis of Ramayana in Modern India by Munna (2024) is one of those where the feminist protagonist confronts the beliefs and expectations of the society and heaven by portraying her as a female character that does not embody manly ideals [30]. All these criticisms point at the fact that the story of Sita, which used to be narrowed within the moral value of home, is nowadays reflective critique, which helps to realize the evolution of gender awareness in Indian literature. Her rejection of women, as anticipated, is turned into an image of moral and intellectual independence.

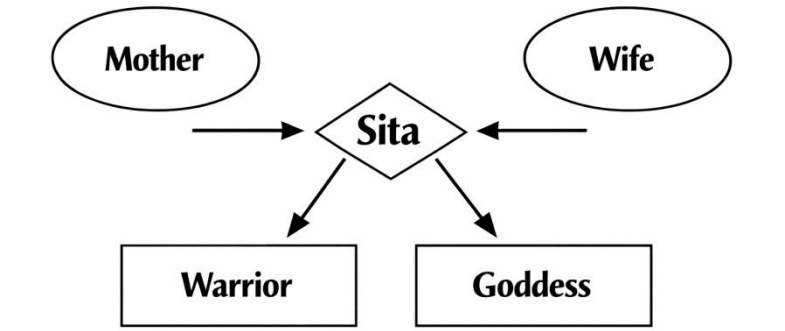


Figure 4.1: Archetypal Roles of Sita in Traditional Retellings[23]

Sita as a Revolutionary Figure

Sita in The Forest of Enchantments is a character of Divakaruni, a woman who is facing her spiritual and social limitations and transforms her sufferings into morality. In a similar vein, Iyengar employs Sita in his book Bhumika as a ruler and warrior, a ruler who is not only just but also independent enough to rule Mithila, but the emancipation of Sita due to self-realization and a union with other women reinvents her. In Sita: Warrior of Mithila by Tripathi, she is once again heroized in the role of a political leader and defender of the dharma. All these reimaginings have rendered Sita an icon of privilege and agency in Indian literature and have subverted its traditional ideas of feminine servitude [31].

Sita is a central figure in contemporary literature whose agency is the foundation of feminist objects towards the patriarchal frameworks. Sita in the novel According to Chandran et al. (2021) in The Forest of Enchantments

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experiences her independence with the help of spiritual and ecological unity with nature [32]. Such a self-recovery is seen when she refuses the strength of Rama, as well as a rejection of herself—rather than a sign of failure. These reflections allow Sita to transcend the field of mythology and become the symbol of a feminist spirit of this world: a woman who forms her own moral and emotional world in the society dominated by men.

The postcolonial readings of Sita's speech are reconstituted as an identity reassertion and a cultural rebuke. In The Voice of Sita, Rajkumar (2022) is reinterpreting the Ramayana; her voice is a symbol of the reconstruction of the feminine subjectivity in postcolonial India [33]. Sita becomes a political and cultural figure by voicing herself and becomes a mythical figure. Therefore, her narrative can be a literary space of gender decolonization and displacement of the role of Indian women in national and spiritual storytelling.

Table 5.1: Contrasting Traditional vs. Revolutionary Portrayals of Sita in Selected Novels

(Source: Chandran et al., 2021 [32])

Aspect	Traditional Portrayal	Revolutionary Portrayal
Role	Devoted wife and mother bound by dharma	Autonomous woman and leader asserting moral a gency
Voice	Silent and obedient within patriarc hal order	Articulate, questioning, and self-defining
Symbolism	Embodiment of virtue and sacrifice	Icon of resistance and empowerment
Outcome	Acceptance of fate and social duty	Rejection of subjugation and embrace of freedom

Cross-Cultural and Contemporary Adaptations

The versions of Sita in the world were renegotiated in the manner of an international icon of female force to bring her past India. Her story is reclaimed in Sita Sings the Blues with animation and western music as a way of bringing to the fore universal concerns about love and sorrow by contrasting human suffering with the deceit of the epic [34]. Likewise, Sita Returns (2018) by Walikhanna locates Sita in contemporary India and juxtaposes the role of women in the globalized world. These rewritings indicate how the tale of Sita has been brought nearer to the cultural border to make it a globalized narrative of female empowerment.

Intertextual retellings of the story of Sita include intercultural discourse to mend myth and contemporary times. Daly (2012), in the book That's What She Said: Sita in the Lives and Imaginations of Hindu Women, delves into how the story of Sita translates into oral traditions and folk tales of various countries, filling her with the symbolism of all female experiences [35]. This intertextual approach must be underscored by the fact that Sita's narrative is a cultural work that holds on to its principal concepts of love, justice and identity that adapt to a great number of circumstances.

The world has invited Sita as a global icon of feminism, which means that she remains relevant in the literary and cultural world's discourse. Reimagining Marginalized Voices: The Liberation of Sita and Yashodhara (2023), by VolgaMarginalised Voices, allows us to take a look at the procedure going on in the life of the character Sita, subjection to self-realization, which can be understood as a global feminist ethic, one that never transcends geographical and religious boundaries [36]. Her tale is a global allegory of the journey of woman to discover self-sufficiency and herself as a classic icon of ethical competency and empowerment.

Findings and Discussion

One of the most tremendous changes Sita underwent is the change to a proactive agent of opposition and self-definition as opposed to passivity and a stereotypical image, which is characteristic of the Indian English literature of the 21st century. Iyengar (2019) describes Sita as a warrior queen that rules Mithila in Bhumika, who rejects her former role of housewifery and embodies political power [31]. Equally, Chandran et al. (2021) emphasize the way The Forest of Enchantments repossesses the voice of Sita as an ecological and spiritual force within which she denies the patriarchal demands on her [32]. The use of these pictures shows that the characterization of Sita is not just literature alone but other societal changes as well. Where women have lost their voice, they have been provided with a elevated role of empowerment in the retellings of empowerment and justice and identification. The results emphasize the fact that Sita is a timeless figure of resistance because her metamorphosis shares some similarities with the circumstances in which women of the contemporary world have to exist between tradition and modernity.

The feminist implications of the reinterpretations of Sita are important as they provide women with an alternative to gender and challenge the systems of patriarchy that are formed during a long period. One such case, as described by Rajkumar (2022), is Indian literature, where modern retellings of legends of Sita rob them of their female subjectivity, a background phenomenon that shifts to counter-narratives by androcentric traditions [33]. This reclaiming follows feminist speech stressing agency, autonomy and refusal of being silenced. In a bid to reveal once again how feminist reinterpretations cross cultural borders, Sita Sings the Blues by Paley understood the sadness and the strength of Sita by putting it into the context of international feminism [34]. These are some of the results that imply that the most extraordinary

characters like Sita are being rewritten in Indian English literature such that it becomes a relevant site where the feminist argument is to be argued. Besides literature, the cultural discourse of politics of gender, identity and representation is influenced by the implications.

The fact that the reinterpretations of Sita can claim the myths of the legends as cultural sites of resistance is what makes them postcolonial. Delaye (2012) says the myth of Sita may adapt to different contexts but preserves the key themes of justice and identity because the oral traditions and the recreations of the stories into her myth are viewed as the cultural translations [35]. Likewise, Ruchi (2023) highlights that The Liberation of Sita by Volga uses her journey as a symbol of female fight across the globe that goes beyond geographical and religious boundaries [36]. These reinterpretations paint the picture of how the marginalized voices are recentered by postcolonial works on the utilization of myth as a metaphor to play with the colonial and patriarchal legacies. The results suggest that the latter suppressed voice of Sita has become a literature and culture weapon of restoring an indigenous identity and decolonizing gender discourses. Here, her narrative has become a prototype of postcolonial reclaim; that myth is preserved and mobilized in furthering already pertinent demands of justice and independence.

Conclusion

The dynamism of the ways in which tradition and modernity, feminism and patriarchy and the colonial past and postcolonial recovery are interacting are reflected in the reinterpretations of the Indian English literature of the twenty-first century that Sita was the first to have developed. The character of Sita is altered when she is a warrior, ruler and actant of her action speaking out against a system that is attempting to silence her speech. She was formerly trapped inside the paradigm of the archetypal wife and mother. These literary reinterpretations reveal the transformation in her character from a docile object of sacrifice into an icon of power and defiance, which is a kind of reflection of struggles and aspirations of the contemporary woman. Finding Sita in the discourse of feminism, the authors allow highlighting her self-sufficiency and her power and open up new perspectives on perceiving women that are out of time and intercultural space. In the readings that are postcolonial, the myth is read as a discourse of identity, justice and freedom as well, which substantiates the importance of her recovered voice. Finally, Sita's reinterpretations prove that literature can be an effective form of renegotiating gender and recovering repressed voices and, moreover, testify to the timelessness of the mythology in terms of cultural discourses' formation. This paper will conclude that, through numerous rewritings, the story of Sita is still a evolving cultural text and this fills the gap between the local and the global feminist ideal, the tradition and the opposition and the past and the present.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of thesis paper.

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