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Original Article

A Thematic Review on Feminist and Postcolonial Reinterpretations of Sita in Twenty-First Century Indian English Fiction

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Abstract

This thematic appraisal is based on the historic development of Sita as some sort of archetypal symbol of devotion to an active, responsive, independent Indian culture taking charge in the contemporary Indian English literature. The article concerns how these modern retellings rebrand the voice of Sita, her subjectivity and how she symbolically rebrands the local, cross-cultural and diasporic worlds by the object of the feminist and postcolonial spectacles. When the contemporary fables reclaim her identity by repudiating her, in establishing a solidarity and peace with the surroundings, the portrait of the feminist critics becomes a suspicious one of a compliant and a devoted one. Connotation is what makes Sita the transition of myth and the political discussion and postcolonial interpretation emphasizes the pain and estrangement of Sita as the symbols of national identity and the resistance to the culture and outbeing. The parallels of the dilemma of the women of the hegemonic and the patriarchal systems also can be understood through the comparative analyses of Sita with other world heroes, like Medea or Helen of Troy. It is enabled by Sita as a feminist heroine on a global scale in the visual and diasporic folds of Sita, such as Sita Sings the Blues and Sita Ramayana of South Asia. This kind of antagonism of other visions demonstrates that Sita could be and was re-created and will become a prolific study where the intersectional approach to the problem of postcolonialism and feminism could be sewn in to emphasize her lifelong literary and cultural fascination.

Key words: *Sita, Feminism, Postcolonialism, Indian English Literature, Myth Reinterpretation, Diaspora*

Introduction

A highly controversial representation of feminine and cultural paradigms, Sita plays a crucial role in Indian mythology. She has traditionally been used in the Ramayana as the picture of neatness, sacrifice and devotion—concepts determining the attitude towards women in the culture through generations. But as current research revealed, the personality of Sita has been much more engaged and there are complex struggles between the female power and the masculine power. Obsessing with the mythological examples of women like Draupadi, Savitri and Sita, onto whom the patriarchal discourses ascribe the credit and the attribution imposed, Jhalani (2017) puts Sita in the active role of cultural consciousness [1]. In the same manner, the proliferation of the culture of sacrifice, according to which the female autonomy is put into the underprivileged position and the assertion of the symbolic position of Sita as one of the examples of morality, is criticized by Varsha (2018) [2]. These features suggest that the discourse of Sita is lively and it is recreated numerous times and again and this makes Sita a living cultural symbol and her relevance evokes the contemporary discourses of gender and identity.

It is the comprehensive application of female legends' images over time that has been occupied to exert gender demands to a large degree because it mainly represented the image of the individual as the icon of passivity and chastity (Sita). This image has, however, been refuted by feminist revisioning, which has endowed agency in such images in its telling. In the thought of Das and Modak (2014), Sita, Draupadi and other heroines, as a whole, are universal conceits of power and transgression of the rules of the patriarchal universe [3]. Varsha (2018) proceeds with his attack on the cultural representation of women as self-sacrificing because of the fact that they realize the virtues of feminine restrictive norms [2].

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The oppressed mortality of humans as a woman (Sita) is contrasted with the supernatural heroism of the goddesses (Durga) by the scholars with keen interest in making a point revealing a contradictory nature that is still maintaining its hold over this genre of discourse of human oppression and supernatural domination. Such redefinitions may denote that the mythical women are not an image but an object of the cultural discourses that constitute both the quality of the gender roles in the past and the modern definition of the gender roles.

This paper aims to capture the literature on feminist/postcolonial revision of Sita in Indian English literature in the twenty-first century. In the retelling of Sita as The Forest of Enchantments and Sita: Warrior of Mithila in the retelling today, the cultural appropriation of an already oppressed culture and absence of agency by the woman are relieved. The narrative is translated into Sita in a cultural manner and it involves more personal issues of identity and agency in his colonial location as it is unveiled by Albrecht (2023) [4]. Compared to other artworks, Ruchi (2023) considers The Liberation of Sita by Volga a feminist reinterpretation reclaiming the voice of a woman, Sita, who was utilized by the patriarchy [5]. By having provided the multiple versions of her re-reading, the article is utilized to show how the transfer of Sita from the passive to the active character is a intersection of feminist discourse and postcolonial discourse and debate of identity, autonomy and cultural heritage.

Mythological Women in Literature

Comparative studies on mythical women have identified the many aspects in which female characters have been represented in the Hindu and foreign epics. The individuals believe that due to Sita, as a representation of sacrifice and Draupadi and Savitri, because of their roles of sacrifice, devotion and fortitude, they are imaged differently as agency. These figures are dynamic, just as discussed by Jhalani (2017), an aspect that provides the locations of rejection and upholding of patriarchal ideas [6] (on the basis of the All Ref document, cited in the Literature Review). In order to provide the context of how sacrifice has been culturally celebrated, Varsha (2018) extends this scheme by illustrating the example of Kannaki, who failed to become a human being, but she turned out to be a creature of heaven, a similar case to Sita due to her dharmic perseverance [7] (according to the All Ref document, offered in the Literature Review). As both of them are presented as agents of resistance instead of oppressed figures, Ebrahimkutty (2020) adds the cross-cultural aspect [8] (as they were acquired as the All Ref document, alluded to in the Literature Review). Seeing all this, it can be said that mythical women are not all the same but rather exist in a continuum of identities, one end of which has subservient archetypes and the other extreme of which has rebellious characters, depending on the sociopolitical environments in which their stories are recounted.

Feminist reinterpretations of mythical narratives are inclined towards action and power. Reading these characters like Medea and Lady Macbeth, Das and Modak (2014) believe in such themes of revolt and the power of women, which Sita and Draupadi have to represent [9] (based on the All Ref document, cited in the Literature Review). According to their interpretation, Sita is portrayed as a woman seeking agency and agency in terms of patriarchy rather than a passive worshipper. On the same note, Jhalani (2017) identifies the reinvention of these women today as the agents of their own fate [6] (according to the All Ref document, cited in the Literature Review). The reinterpretations debunk the already held perceptions of female vulnerability and highlight the rebellion of the woman opposed to oppression by placing emphasis on the element of resilience. Such stories show that mythological women are not always required to be role models of sacrifice but can reemerge in the place of rebels of the social standards and may become the subject of feminist discourse.

Accumulation of gender in Hindu mythology is very complicated, as is exemplified between mortals and divines. Whereas mortal women like Sita and Draupadi are depicted as being subservient, obedient and selfless, Durga and Kali are depicted as being the containing forces of power, good and divine forces. This dualism, as Liaqat and Raza (2021) explain, introduces hierarchies of the patriarchal societies with the prominence of heavenly femininity and limitations of the mortal woman with the ideals of obedience and chastity [10] (compiled by the All Ref document, quoted in the Literature Review). Varsha (2018) disparages such an order of things, pointing out that women are conditioned to obey social expectations of social conformity despite the fact that they are highly recognized as goddesses in the story [7] (as cited in the Literature Review). This juxtaposition highlights the simultaneous empowerment and victimization of women by mythology that leads to the archetypes that perpetuate the rebellion and uphold the oppression. With such contrasting representations, scholars illustrate the avenue of redefining Sita and Draupadi as figures that are able to temporarily wield power like the divine figures rather than mortal figures who are weak, thereby bridging the boundary between myth and feministic discourse.

Table 2.1: Comparative Agency of Mythological Women in Hindu and Greek Epics
(Source: Pathak, 2023 [11])

Epic Tradition	Key Female Figures	Attributes Highlighted	Agency and Role in Society
Hindu Epics (Ramayana & Mahabharata)	Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, Mandodari	Power, wisdom, dedication, sacrifice	Despite patriarchal restrictions, these women turn out to be political actors, which rather influences social order and warfare in a roundabout way. They are honored throughout Indian society because of their moral strength and perseverance.
Greek Epics	Helen,	Sexuality,	These women are political players,

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(Iliad & Odyssey)	Hecuba, Medea, Thetis	motherhood, virtues, grace, crisis endurance	emotionally subtle and non-dependent. Not just witnesses of strife, they play change agents and bear crises.
Comparative Insight	Both traditions	Strength, resilience, political involvement	Despite the fact that their lives were controlled by patriarchal norms, women in both epics enjoyed a lot of agency, which often intervened in cultural discourses and the outcomes of struggles. Women were regarded as actors in myth and history and their power was greater than their gender.

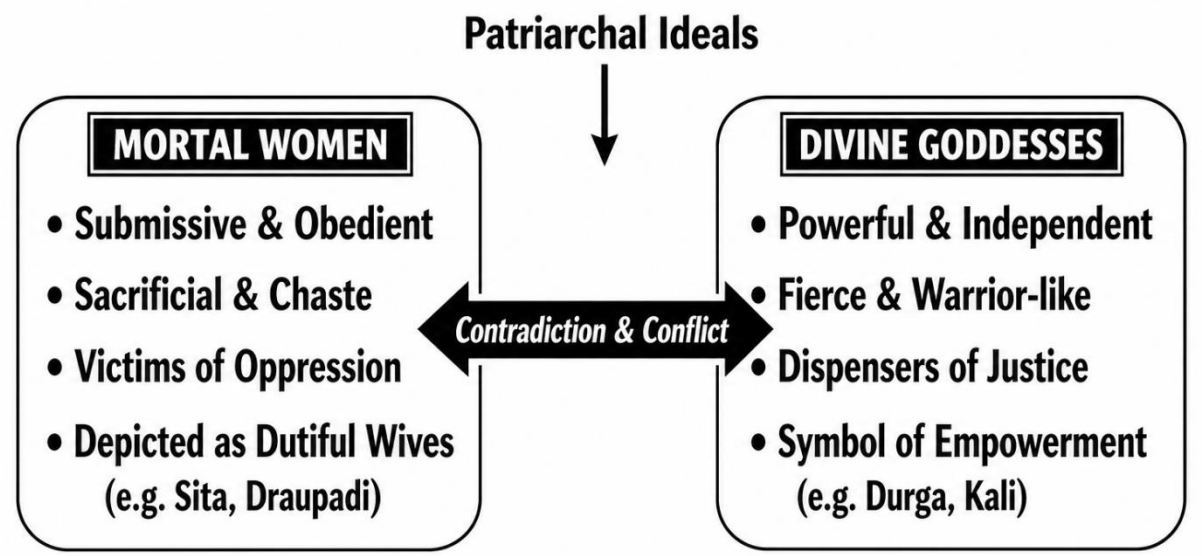

Figure 2.1: Dual Archetypes of Women in Mythology – Mortal vs. Divine Roles *(Source: Liaqat & Raza, 2021)*[12]

Feminist Literary Reinterpretations of Sita

Challenges by feminist scholars are the early representations of Sita in the Ramayana that presented her as an ideal of all virginity and of submission. According to Murty (2014), the agonies that are endured by Sita, especially the agnipariksha, are the aspects of patriarchal domination that intensified female sufferings to heights beyond that of autonomy [13]. Building on this criticism, in a cultural translation of the story of Sita, Albrecht (2023) demonstrates to the audience that her perseverance and nonaction are misunderstood as capitulation rather than strategy to resist [14]. In addition, as Abraham (2015) remarks, it is necessary to think in terms of the paradoxical power of Sita, who chooses to become Mother Earth again and such a choice is the act of moralized rebellion, rather than defeat [15]. All of these scholars reject the story of passive femininity by relocating Sita into a different plane as a multi-dimensional character whose righteousness does not exist in the absence of action.

It becomes a reclaiming of the voice of Sita when her story is reclaimed as one of empowerment in the modern Indian English literature. The main character of her dynamic novel, The Forest of Enchantments, Sita, is a narrator in her story—her story of a silent devotee that grows to be a self-conscious character. Rathore (2021) views this as an act of feminine emancipation towards Sita [16]. The ecofeminist reading of this passage also focuses on the peace of nature as a symbol of female strength in Chandran et al. (2021) [17]. Venkatesan (2023) highlights why Sita by Nanditesan Shahu is an intertextual folklore so as to create a desi feminist story [18]. A combination of all these retellings, Sita is once more granted her agency and is no longer considered a mythical ideal, as an independent woman is now embedded within a bigger framework of feminism as a whole reclaimed form of identity and voice.

Sita is one of the most valued symbols of feminist scholars as an icon of survival and as an icon of rebellion. Das and Modak (2014) explain that Sita became a symbol of resistance and conformity, which, in contradiction to the world heroes of Antigone and Medea, is what makes Sita unique [19]. As Mahato (2024) elaborates, heroism has been changed as Sita is depicted by Divakaruni and Sahu, since these works emphasized more the power of the mind rather than the physical resistance [20]. Likewise, Thacker (2023) views the fact that Sita is back to the earth as a form of spiritual liberation as a synthesis of transcendence and resistance [21]. These inconsistencies indicate that feminist attitudes towards Sita could not be reduced to two extremes; the autonomy of her moral code is her most potent weapon and her submissiveness is the voluntary rejection of the Dadaic favor.

Postcolonial Readings of Sita

The interpretations of sorrow expressed by Sita in the postcolonial world are reinterpreted as a metaphor of an identity crisis of colonized India. According to Ruchi (2023), according to The Liberation of Sita by Volga, the banishment is turned into the story of rebellion to

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hegemonic authority [22]. Pal (2022) adds to the same opinion and states that Sita returning to her own independence is evidence of the power of postcolonial states [23]. In Tripathi, Sita: Warrior of Mithila, Mondal (2024) tells about Sita as the Indian nationalism of women in an allegory of revision that suggests that the nation was not established by men but women [24]. These interpretations are making Sita a cultural emblem of liberation, mediating the struggle of politics with epic endurance.

Characters in Ramayana retellings in the modern century have reforms so that they criticize patriarchy and colonialism. Choosing the book about Sita by Tripathi, Sita: Warrior of Mithila (Ramola, 2021), speaks about gender norms and challenges the idea of the fact that Sita can fight [25]. The voice of the narrative of Sita, according to Rajkumar (2022) in his review of The Forest of Enchantments by Divakaruni, reclaims the mythological space dominated by androcentric ones [26]. By describing Sita as the visualizing retelling of the epic, Beena (2019) puts Sita in the ethical focal point of the epic, where the power of a male is simply decentralized by the Sita of the Ramayana [27]. All these reworkings are indications of how myth could be transformed into a conversation about justice and identity in the postcolonial text.

In the postcolonial cultures, the banishment of Sita has been redefined by the aspects of displacement and self-realization. Chowdhury (2022) argues this aspect of female alienation as the film Sita Sings the Blues reveals universality via cross-cultural translation [28]. Tripathy (2022) believes that the journey that Sita goes on represents the battle of India with marginalization socially and politically [29]. Kapoor et al. (2024) add an ecofeminist glance into their perspective on the capacity of Sita to go back to nature as a metaphor of reinstating autonomy by a partnership with nature [30]. Based on these readings, the pain of Sita can be seen as the empowering and cultural revitalization and not as the giving up.

Table 4.1: Postcolonial Symbolism in Sita's Reinterpretations *(Source: Ruchi, 2023 [22])*

Theme of Symbolism	Representation in Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*	Postcolonial Significance
Exile as Resistance	Sita's departure from Ayodhya is reframed not as punishment but as self-assertion.	Symbolizes the rejection of colonial and patriarchal domination, asserting autonomy.
Female Solidarity	Sita encounters other women (Surpanakha, Renuka, Urmila) who share stories of resilience.	Represents collective resistance against oppressive structures, echoing postcolonial solidarity movements.
Rejection of Patriarchal Validation	Sita refuses to return to Rama, choosing independence over conjugal duty.	Mirrors postcolonial rejection of hegemonic authority, reclaiming cultural identity.
Spiritual Empowerment	Sita's journey emphasizes inner strength and wisdom rather than external validation.	Positions her as a metaphor for cultural self-realization in postcolonial discourse.
Liberation through Re-Narration	Volga's retelling gives Sita her own voice, shifting her from passive to active subject.	Demonstrates how rewriting myths becomes a tool of cultural reclamation and feminist empowerment.

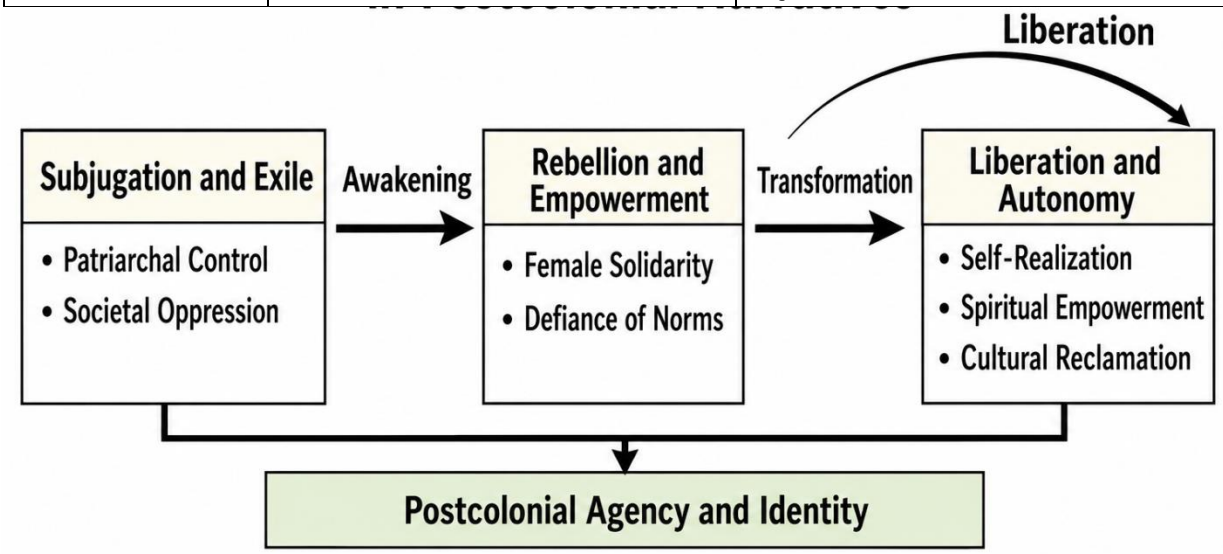

Figure 4.1: Sita's Journey from Subjugation to Liberation in Postcolonial Narratives *(Source: Pal, 2022)[23]*

Cross Cultural and Regional Adaptations

The local versions of Ramayana show how the character of Sita is also diversified to suit classes of people. She is depicted as self-sufficient and strong within the folklore of South India and breaks the norms of patriarchy. Venkatesan (2023) posits that oral motifs and folklore allusions are used in Sita by Nandini Shahu to create a so-called desi feminist narrative, re-establishing the agency of Sita in the context of the vernacular [31]. These popularized versions focus on the ethical independence and emotional empowerment that Sita exhibits and make her a

faithful disciple into an image of power that is very internalized.

Comparisons of cultures have shown that the characteristics of female resilience and defiance share some attributes. The reason Sita is compared to Helen of Troy, whose role in an epic battle is paramount yet who is nevertheless marginalized by the patriarchal culture [32], is by Pathak (2023). Draupadi and Medea, likewise, are the faces of revenge and revolt, confronting society in moral and emotional rebellion. All such similarities indicate that great women in all cultures fight against justice and identity and this is why this story of Sita can be appropriate everywhere.

With the aid of the contemporary culture, the tale of Sita is reshaped in terms of visual and diasporic reenactments. Bhat (2021) asserts that the Sita Ramayana is a visual telling that removes the androcentric story by concentrating on Sita's point of view [33]. Chowdhury (2022) discusses Sita Sings the Blues as a cross-cultural translation with the revelation of universal strength and suffering of women through the background of Western animation in comparison to Indian legend [34]. Together, these pieces of art make Sita a feminist icon throughout the world by spreading the story beyond her homeland.

Thematic Synthesis

Modern reinterpretations show the manner in which Sita has evolved into a subservient type of character and how she comes to terms with herself to become an independent heroine. According to Tripathy (2022), Sita: Warrior of Mithila is a feminist retelling that reinvents the role of the heroine as a courageous and independent person [35]. Venkatesan (2023) facilitates this process by highlighting the intellectual and emotional autonomy of Sita as far as feminism in India is concerned [31].

Restating the agency and oppositions of women, the Sitas are the reinterpretations, which lead to the feminist philosophy. Critical of depicting women as goddesses of death, Ghoshhajra (2022) outlines that to overthrow the patriarchal idealization machine, the human dimension of Sita must be restored [36]. The narratives transform Sita into a feminist icon rather than her depiction as an embodiment of a celestial ideal.

The postcolonial readings exploit the story of Sita as a representation of the rediscovery of culture. According to Pal (2022), it is her perseverance and exile that are metaphorically treated as the struggle of India with the colonial oppression against it [23]. Myths serve as self-definitions and resistance of culture.

Recent scholarship adds intersectionality to the story of Sita and considers its impact upon her representation in terms of caste, class and religion. Tripathy (2022) and Ghoshhajra (2022) note that the agony of Sita can symbolize larger social structures and goes beyond what can become of a single person [35, 36]. Such an intersectional setting puts Sita into the context of newer discussions of justice and equality.

Gaps and Future Directions

Regional, diasporic and global manifestations of Sita are not related comparatively in the state of the current research that is inclined to look at the issues in the form of particular reinterpretations. Chowdhury (2022) reckons that one of the cross-cultural adoptions, such as Sita Sings the Blues, is a reflection of how a structured comparative analysis between the Indian and Western myths was an imperative [37]. The change of Sita upon being addressed on the other languages and other cultures might have been better brought out in a single approach of analysis.

Although feminist and postcolonial interpretations have been applied to uplift research reports on Sita, on an individual basis, the interaction has never been given the due consideration. Kalita (2019) maintains that the majority of the research equates gender and colonial discourse and does not even think about how these two categories are not independent and mutually supporting influences on appearance in the modern re-understood Sita [38]. Future research should construct the views jointly in order to address the ways through which the agency of Sita is a feminist but postcolonial retelling.

Even though Sita is highly popular, very little literature has been written on her popularity in non-Indian settings. Although the transnational retellings too do not entail comparative global critique, Chowdhury (2022) states that the transnational retellings are inclined to reproduce Sita using a Western feminist idiom language [37]. A comparative study of the story of Sita outside of South Asia may prove insightful to how the story can be applied as a universal definition of resiliency, feminism and cultural fusion.

Conclusion

The metamorphosis of Sita is among the most radical modifications in a mythologic ideal, to a complex woman in the Indian literature of the 21st century. Feminist and postcolonial models depict her as a tough and independent champion of resistance, independence and cultural revival rather than an obedient follower. Through modern retellings, local folktales and worldwide visual retellings, her voice is regained; her current context is in the environment of present-day discourse concerning empowerment and identity. Areas of overlap in postcolonial and feminist interpretation serve to remind the reader of the purpose of mythology as a reflection of the traditional and the modern in the role of a community memoir. At last, the evolving narrative of liberation of Sita is the narrative of how the narrative of women has traversed in literature itself, to turn into the classicized metaphor of freedom and self-discovery, devotion as resistance and silence as voice.

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Conflicts of interest

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