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Sita's Ramayana as a Revisionist Narrative: A Critical Analysis of Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar's Graphic Novel

Roopa Rani G.S

Research Scholar,

Ph.D. English,

Jain Deemed-to-be-University,

Bangalore.

&

Dr. K Charles Godwin

Associate Professor,

Department of English,

Centre for Management Studies,

Jain Deemed-to-be-University,

Lalbagh Road, Bangalore.

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Abstract:

The graphic novel stems from comics, but eventually it progressed with acceptance as a revolutionary genre. The contents of graphic novels become more serious, subtle, and wide as they encompass socio-political concerns, gender issues, historical narratives, mythology, ecological issues and all the vital concerns which any other kind of narrative depicts. Amar Chitra Katha has an extensive compilation of comics based on Indian mythology and within it are stories from Ramayana and Mahabharat. Samhita Arni's Sita's Ramayana offers one of the greatest Indian epics, *The Ramayana*, in the form of a visually impressive and engrossing graphic novel. Though it is adapted from the Indian epic, the story is told from the perspective of the queen, Sita. The paper entitled, Sita's Ramayana as a Revisionist Narrative: A Critical analysis of Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar's Graphic Novel, aims to analyse the graphic novel as a revisionist narrative. It attempts to explore the narrative style and plot as depicted in the graphic novel which offers different perspective of Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

Keywords: The Ramayana, Epic, Revisionist, Narration, Graphic novel.

Introduction

The Indian Hindu epic poem, The Ramayana has more than hundred versions. Sanskrit version ascribed to the sage Narada, the Mula Ramayana who passed on the knowledge to

Valmiki. The oldest available version of Ramayana is believed to be authored by Valmiki. In the Valmiki Ramayana, Sita is one of the major characters in the Ramayana, and Sita is believed to be an avatar of goddess Lakshmi and the consort of Sri Vishnu during the Treta yuga. She is also considered to be one of the most chaste women and revered as the embodiment of all virtues of the Hindu women. Sita is known for her adherence to righteousness (Dharma) and had to suffer lots of trials and tribulations in her marital life. Sita is shown as a strong woman who lived with her principles as an ideal daughter to her parents (Janaka and Sunayana), ideal wife to her husband (Rama) and the perfect mother to her sons (Luv and Kush). Sita's portrayal as epitome of beauty, compassion, courage, and endurance and Sita's portrayal is often criticized by many Indian feminists.

There are enormous retellings of the epics which have been produced in the Indian literature. The epics are often retold according to the diverse cultures. They allow the flexibility for various interpretations such as historical, gender and feminist perspectives. For example, Chitra Banerjee Divakurni and Devdutt Pattanaik's works can be classified as mythological fiction.

There are several adaptations of the Ramayana appeared over the period in many languages and in many forms such as television series and animated movies. With the rise of graphic novel as a genre comics offered different dimensions for readers. There are number of graphic novels which appeared based on the epic tale of Ramayana such as '*Sita: Daughter of the Earth*', elucidates on the plight suffered by Sita during her imprisonment by Ravana and the strengths, sacrifices she exhibited without letting to her principles and stay true to her. *Ramayana: Divine Loophole*, narrates the tale in a highly engaging and refreshing manner with highly artistic illustrations. And '*Ramayan 3392 A.D*' tells the story of a post-apocalyptic future destroyed by Ravana and graphic novel *Ravanayan* gives an in-depth vision into the world of Lanka and Ravana and his brothers. It also dictates the story from the perspective of Ravana and tries to bring a fresh new interpretation of the mythological tale.

The graphic novel '*Sita's Ramayana*' by Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar's version of Ramyana is distinctive with its newer version. It is a quick retelling of the *Ramayana* which differs from the classic version. Samhita Arni gets on the side of Sita and her perspective on the stands of women. *Sita's Ramayana* offers the epic the *Ramayana* from the viewpoint of Sita who is deprived, suffered due to assumed stereotypical roles of women of society. It is reiterating of Sita's perspective and her pivotal role in the shaping of war. It primarily emphasises on the Sita's benevolent being, the book explores Sita's thoughts as when she is



antagonized by reality while being held incarcerated by Ravana. Samhita Arni's Sita is not glorifying Rama, but she is telling her version of story. She speaks about her worries and fears, and about the miseries she witnessed on both the sides when Rama's army made war on Lanka.

Patua Graphic Art

According to Kent Puckett's '*Narrative Theory*', the narratives need to be understood in terms of formal relation between story and discourse, between what they narrate and how they narrate it. The graphic novel stands out with its stunning illustrations by illustrator. Moyna Chitrakar who is an artist from the Patua scroll painting tradition has magnificently used Patua art which is one of the Indian Folk arts and a popular style of folk painting from West Bengal. This kind of painting is conventionally done on a piece of cloth known as Patti or Patta. The artists or the painters are called Patua, who wander from village to village and sing traditional songs in front of their audiences, unrolling the scrolls, also called Patua. These traditional paintings are special narrative scrolls based on the sacred themes. Today, the scrolls also depict current affairs, history, and other issues apart the traditional themes. The features of this Patua art can be seen more evidently as the figures are not as they appear in real life. Patua scrolls are usually large and complex and the Patua artist tells the story through song while unrolling the scroll and gesturing to images. But the paintings in *Sita's Ramayana* have been designed to fit the page. The story begins with a pregnant Sita walking around the woods with tears in her eyes. The title page provides picture of Sita with her parted hair wearing vermillion, bindi on her forehead and surrounded by creepers and flowers which are personified. The faces of the characters are drawn and there are some features overly emphasised and some features are left out. They are almost always shown front facing and the arms and legs, angled. Even though only a few features are picked up to depict the different figures, the different characters such as the humans, the rakshasas and the Vanaras are easily distinguishable. They have some features in common, but they are clearly different. The colours are evenly spread-out providing clarity of scenes depicted. Chitrakar's adroit work at creating a graphic novel within the confined length with Patua artists adhering to the graphic devices like Splash, Emanata, speech bubbles, panels, gutter with broad images and colours have made the narration more vibrant.

Sita: A woman of Endurance

Sita is portrayed as a woman who patiently understands everything. She accompanies her husband in his journey to the forest. The author of '*The Author of Forest Enchantments*' Chitra Divakaruni, aptly writes:

“I’m going to write the story of Sita, I said, because I’ve always been fascinated by the Ramayan. Just Sita is the central female character who was found while ploughing field as a part of yajna by King Janak of Mithila. Sita is brought up as a princess and later wedded to Rama the valiant prince of Ayodhya in the swayamvara. Sita’s life becomes miserable like Panchaali, my Sita (yes, with the presumptuous intimacy of authors, I thought of her as mine) will tell her own tale. She’ll fill the gaps between the adventures undertaken by the male characters in the epic, their victories, and defeats. She’ll tell us what inspired the crucial choices that directed the course of her life. What she believed in. What interested and moved her. How she felt when faced with the deepest of tragedies. And what gave her the ability to overcome them. (Divakaruni, Pg.4).

Sita is intensely human, less of goddess, more than ‘perfect woman’ or ‘ideal wife’. There is an exposition to her Sita who lives in the ashram of the sage Valmiki. The writer has tried to break norms without tampering the original storyline. The strong attack on the stereotypes such as dutiful wife, infidelity and female subjugation exemplifies feminist ideology. The glorified and elevated position of Sita as a symbol of beauty and endurance as depicted in Valmiki’s Ramayana is contrasted. Samhita Arni’s Sita is depicted as the hapless princess wandering in Dandaka forest. The opening page of the text evidently confirm the script as female-centric and the story is told through the female point of view. In the prologue of the graphic novel ‘*Sita’s Ramayana*’ Arni writes:

“The forest watched her, with great interest. She was no hermit’s wife – beautifully dressed in priceless silks and ornaments, worth a king’s ransom. She walked with pain, her belly huge with child, her ankles swollen, her delicate feet bruised by thorns and brambles. (Pg.8)

Sita’s Ramayana gives us Arni’s description of Sita and her plight when she was left alone in the forest. The forest wondered, the whispered questions about her in the forest were heard by Sita. Nature becomes living active agent questioning, contemplating, and communicating with Sita. and she says:

I am Sita, Daughter of the Earth, sprung from the same womb that nurtures this forest. I am the princess of Mithila and the last queen of Ayodhya”. (Arni Pg.8)

Sita narrates her story of marriage with Rama, prince of Ayodhya who was exiled from kingdom and her life in the chitrakuta forest with her husband and her brother-in-law



Lakshmana. Arni's Sita does not give an account of her early life as presented in other versions of Ramayana. Sita's narration begins with the mixed feelings of rage and sorrow for being expelled. She says:

“The world of men has banished me” (Arni Pg.9)

As an ideal king, Rama banished Sita owing to men who doubted her chastity. Sita becomes a victim of social criticism. Despite taking the harsher road of accompanying her husband in the fourteen years of exile sharing all the hardships and troubles, Sita was crudely sent to forest when she was pregnant. The treatment of women in the society is subtly portrayed through Sita's character.

According to the Ramayana by Valmiki, Rama fears the criticism of people and orders Lakshmana to leave Sita in the forest near the hermitage of sage Valmiki. Sita is portrayed as a dutiful wife decides to obey him and doesn't show her resentment. The ideal wife must obey her husband without showing any disapproval. But in Arni's *Sita's Ramayana*, Sita narrates her story of her marriage with Rama, her life in Chitrakuta forest and her abduction by Ravana in brief without glorifying Rama and Sita's early life. The novel emphasises on Sita's version of her life in Lanka, waiting for Rama being captivated by Ravana and watched over by demons. After the death of Ravana battle field, Rama gets busy crowning Vibhishana, King of Lanka. It was Hanuman who appeared before Sita not Rama to bring Sita to her husband. Sita says:

“It wasn't like anything I imagined”.

Rama didn't look at me. He was aloof and distant. When he finally spoke, he spoke in anger.

“Sita, you are free. I have freed you. You can do whatever you want. Go whenever you want”. (Arni Pg.115)

Sita yearned for her beloved husband Rama and suffered so much. The captivity, the constant taunts of her jailors, the tricks Ravana played on her to lure her. She had despaired for so long, starved, cried, and kept herself alive only for Rama. Woman's devotion is always subjugated in the society. The writer artfully tries to convey how women have always been the victims of male chauvinism through the voice of Sita. A woman's predicaments are overlooked before male's self-esteem. Sita was shattered when Rama says:

“Ravana must have touched you. I can't take you back”. (Arni Pg.116)

It was Rama's presumption that Sita would have been touched by Ravana. This reflects the treatment of women in the patriarchal society. The choice of selecting or abandoning lies ultimately with men but never with women. Women are always expected to be submissive and vulnerable like Sita in the society. This is indicated when Sita says:

"I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I told Rama that I was pure. That Ravana had never touched me. I was forced to say this- he was honourable. But Rama didn't speak to me". (Arni Pg.117)

"Sita's character doesn't only show women as the symbol of endurance, but it also portrays the women of defiance. There is a fusion of woman with conventional ideology as well as modernity. Arni's Sita expresses her anger and questions Rama why he fought that war if he didn't want to accept her. Arni's Rama indeed represents the attitude of typical man of society and tells Sita that he hadn't fought the war Sita, but he had fought it to redeem his honour. Sita decides to free herself by stepping into the flames of the tall pyre due to Rama's suspicion on Sita's chastity. But the fire god appears and tells Rama not to test Sita's purity and not to doubt her. After Rama was crowned king of Ayodhya, the gossips and suspicious eyes in the regarding Sita's sojourn in Lanka led to Sita's abandonment. Sita's desolation is nicely depicted when she says:

"The same accusation. The same doubts.

I wish I had died in Lanka.

Now I am pregnant, and alone.

My belly is huge, and I cannot see the ground under my feet. How will I avoid the poisonous snakes that slither across this earth? How will I, with my heavy belly and swollen ankles, outrun beasts or prey?

And when my hour draws close, when my child is to be born, who will calm my fears and assist me in my labour?

How ill I, alone, raise a child, born to be kind, in this forest? (Arni Pg.127)

Sita's fear of life in forest alone is the representation of fear of all the women in society who are abandoned. As Kate Millet points out:

"Under patriarchy the female did not herself develop the symbols by which she is described. As" (Kate Millet, Sexual politics)



According to Kate Millet, the roles and qualities associated to any female character are socially formed for her. She is the first woman who was abandoned in history of religious tellings, and she was the first single mother. She lived a cursed life and silently endured all the trials and tribulations. Sita's characters as an average woman who is expected to live within the male-imposed barriers reflects society. Sita's vision encompasses all those who suffer, endure, and bear the consequences. It is written with emphasis Sita's character attempting to delve in to the thoughts and perspectives. The retelling around her abduction, later her exile showing the female characters as the victims. The characters such as Sita, Tara, Mandodari suffered due to male conflicts. Tara wife of Valin, (elder brother of Sugriva) was forced to marry Sugriva on the day she was made widow. Women are ordained to play the roles which are already predestined for them by men. The idea of female subjugation prevailing in the society is subtly conveyed through the female characters.

Birth of Kusha from Kusha Grass

The several versions and adaptations of the Ramayana points out that Sita gives birth to twins in the forest, and they were named as Lava and Kusha but in Arni's *Sita's Ramayana*, Sita gives birth to Lava whom she loved fiercely. One day, she went to take bath in a nearby tree leaving Lava in the hermitage. Valmiki, on not finding Lava in the hermitage, thought that the boy must have fallen prey to a wild beast. He feared that Sita would lose her sanity and he took a blade of kuhsa grass and with his yogic powers he turned that into a boy, identical to Lava. Sita returned to the hermitage with the mischievous Lava and found the boy who was identical to Lava, and they named him Kusha.

Conclusion

The graphic novel *Sita's Ramayana* offers a completely new take on the epic tale. Sita's story is retold but it marks a departure in the way it was told. It focusses on Sita's compassionate being and her quality of endurance yet woman of self-assertion. Valmiki's Sita was enclosed by piety and upheld as the woman of endurance and goddess of sacrifice, but Arni's Sita is seen as a falling prey to the doubts and bouts of hopelessness at the same time she is also described as woman of self – assertion. Arni's Sita is more relevant in this new world of fourth wave feminism. There is presentation of issue of patriarchy and women's liberation. Rama's appeal to come back to Ayodhya after being subjected to the humiliation of the agnipariksha and banishment from the kingdom reaches the point of feminist independence. Sita refuse to come back and says:

“I do not wish to be queen. I have been doubted once, twice, and I do not care to be doubted again”. (Arni,Pg.145)

Sita's act of self-respect is admirable when she tells her husband that her integrity was doubted, and she doesn't want to succumb. There is a rejection to appease the male ego and the godliness of Rama and the utopia of Ram-rajya is questioned. The blend to image of ideal woman and woman of self-assertion is cleverly brought out in the graphic novel.

The graphic novel stands unique and significant with its edgy art work, eye catching illustrations and explanations. It offers different dimensions of the original tale which includes birth of Kusha, Sita's conversation with leaves and trees of the forest and Sita's voice that guides the reader through many events of violence and miseries of war which was due to wrongful pride. Hence, Sita's Ramayana can be viewed as the synthesis of traditional mythology and modernity.

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