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## FEMINIST REVISIONIST MYTHOLOGY IN 'THE LIBERATION OF SITA'

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**Abstract:** Indian literature has always been influenced by the Indian myths. Various writers have attempted to present the Hindu mythologies from different perspectives using different theories in innovative ways. These retellings help us to obtain unknown realms of meanings from a contemporary perspective. This paper analyses Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* in accordance to the theory of feminist revisionist mythology, a theory which aims at reconstructing myths from a feminist point of view. Volga in her book *The Liberation of Sita* traces the arduous journey of Sita to attain emancipation after her husband Rama abandons her. The story of Sita is inter-woven with other female characters of the epic Ramayana who were mostly overlooked in the mythology. These female characters have been recreated with strong feminist stances that become catalysts to guide Sita to achieve self-realization and liberation. The insights that we get from these feminist characters not only apply for Sita in the story but also for the women of the contemporary societies as well. This paper analyses how Volga through these female characters has tried to reconstruct new perspectives within the old mythological discourse.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Reconstruct, Sita, Liberation, Mythology.

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**Introduction:** Myth, at times, can act instrumental for a writer to present the contemporary situation in a new way by contrasting it with the mythical past. This trend is becoming popular day by day where writers are recreating mythology in various innovative ways to portray the contemporary reality. These retellings of mythology are helping to extract undiscovered aspects of these ancient stories in the light of contemporary situations. "Contemporary writing of Hindu mythology do not treat it as sacrosanct text; there are creative interpretations and the stories are analyzed, dissected, delve into ambiguous areas and derived meanings are corroborated by discussions and dialogues of readers, thinkers and academicians. The epics are re-interpreted in a way that makes them less godly and more human" (freepressjournal.in). One of the important aspects that have always been neglected in mythology is the role of strong women characters. The mythologies have always been viewed from the perspectives of man and women characters have always been subdued. But the "contemporary retellings attempt a version of feminist revisionist mythology that aims at a strategic revisionist use of gender imagery to transform culture and subvert the heritage that women inherit" (freepressjournal.in). Feminist revisionist theory is a theory that aims at reconstructing mythology from a feminist point of view.

Ramayana is one of the two major mythological epics of ancient India. It is a tale of morality and sacrifices. Ramayana has always presented Sita, the heroine of the epic, as "a paragon of spousal and feminine virtues for all Hindu women. Sita is known for her dedication, self-sacrifice, courage and purity. She has been portrayed as an ideal daughter, ideal wife and ideal mother" (Wikipedia). But Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* aims to attain a different goal. It traces Sita's journey to liberate herself from the shackles of Lord Rama's love, memory, pain and abandonment through her encounters with other minor female characters of Ramayana- Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka and Urmila. Each of these characters gave Sita a new experience and wisdom that helped her in achieving success in her difficult journey to self-realization and liberation.

*The Liberation of Sita* focuses on Sita's meeting with the four extraordinary women who had freed themselves from the shackles of relationships that betrays them when they need them the most. These liberated women guided Sita to achieve liberation after being abandoned by her husband. The first chapter deals with Sita meeting Surpanakha. Sita has been abandoned by her husband and she took refuge in the ashram of sage Valmiki where she was leaving happily with her two sons- Lava and Kush. One day her sons told her that they had visited a beautiful garden and the garden belongs to an ugly lady who has no nose and no ears. Sita immediately understood that the lady is none other than Surpanakha- Ravan's sister. Rama and Lakshmana had chopped her ears and nose to disfigure her and insult her just to provoke Ravan. All Surpanakha wanted was love as she was in love with Rama. But Ravan instead of fighting directly with them abducted Sita. Sita thought, "Do women exist only to be used by men to settle their scores?" (Volga, 4). Next day she went to meet Surpanakha and while talking to her Sita realised that both of them have the same story as both of them loved

Rama and both have suffered a lot because of him. While talking with Surpanakha, Sita realised how Surpanakha has empowered herself even after suffering so much pain, hatred and humiliation. Surpanakha said to Sita, "I have become tough by facing the challenges life threw at me. I have been able to find happiness in trying to understand the very meaning of beauty" (Volga, 10). She further said "I've realized that the meaning of success for a woman does not lie in her relationship with a man" (Volga, 13). She taught Sita to empower herself even without Rama and even without his children as one day they might have to go to live with their father. Empowerment of women and knowing the true beauty of life is necessary for liberation is the lesson that meeting with Surpanakha taught Sita.

The second chapter discusses Sita's meeting with Ahalya, wife of Rishi Gautam. Sita had heard Ahalya's name just some days after her marriage and when she asked her mother-in-law about her, Kaushalya said: "As you know, men consider women objects of enjoyment. Someone named Indra lusted after her. One day, when Gautama was not in the ashram, Indra arrived disguised as Gautama. Ahalya mistook him for her husband and satiated his desire. When Gautama returned, the truth came out. The Maharishi disowned her. When she realized what had happened, Ahalya was stupefied. Turned almost into a lifeless rock. Now she lives in a forest, outside our world, without a shelter, and indifferent to the sun, rain or cold. Refuses to see anyone" (Volga, 21).

When Sita met Ahalya during her fourteen years exile with Rama, Ahalya told her: "Indra lusted after me. Like everyone else, he too looked at women as if they are meant for men's enjoyment. Knowing that I wouldn't surrender to his desire, he came in the hours of darkness in the guise of my husband. Did I see through his disguise? That is the question that bothers many people in this world. But to my husband, the question was irrelevant. It was the same to him either way. His property, even if temporarily, had fallen into the hands of another. It was polluted. Pollution, cleanliness, purity, impurity, honour, dishonour- Brahmin men have invested these words with such power that there is no scope in them for truth and untruth. No distinction" (Volga, 26).

Ahalya had advised Sita never to bow down before a man's authority and never to let a man have the power to put her to test. When Sita was asked for the trial on fire she remembered Ahalya words but for Rama's sake she agreed for the trial. Ahalya had also said to Sita that "I have spend all these years thinking about my identity in this universe. I have learned how the world runs-on what morals and laws, and what their roots are. I have gained a lot of wisdom" (Volga, 28). When Sita was abandoned by Rama, she again met Ahalya at Valmiki's ashram where Ahalya asked her to stop taking decisions thinking about Rama and to think about herself. She said,

"If men's pride is in wealth, or valour, or education, or caste-sect, for women it lies in fidelity, motherhood. No one advises women to transcend that pride. Most often, women don't realize that they are a part of the wider world. They limit themselves to an individual, to a household, to a family's honour. Conquering the ego becomes the goal of spirituality for men. For women, to nourish that ego and to burn themselves to ashes in it becomes the goal. Sita try to understand who you are, what the goal of your life is. It is not easy at all. But don't give up" (Volga, 39).

She taught Sita that instead of finding her identity in her relationships, she should try to establish her own identity and follow the path of self-realization. Creating their own identity can help women to find liberation to a great extent. This path to create their self-identity and self-authority won't be easy but at the end they will be at peace with their own self as well as with the world around them.

The third story is about Renuka, wife of Rishi Jamadagni and mother of Parasurama. Renuka's son Parshuram almost killed her on his father's order. When she met Sita during her exile, she handed Sita a pot made up of sand and told her that every woman should have a sand pot because only if women start to realize that their fidelity and devotion to husbands are like those pots, they will be able to find peace in their life. She further explains,

"To make this pot, you need a lot of concentration. Those who did not know this thought I was making a miracle happen by virtue of my chastity, my paativratyam. Since there was no flaw in my character anyway, I let them think what they liked. Concentration can be broken at any time. The cause may be anything. In my case, a man became the cause of distraction. My husband was enraged. He believed that my paativratyam was violated by the mere act of looking at that man. A good pot is a product of many things- practice,

concentration, sand, the right amount of water and so on. Sage Jamadagni was a man of great wisdom, yet he did not understand such a simple truth. But such is the wisdom of these spiritual seekers. No matter how much wisdom they earn through penance, they continue to have a dogmatic view on the paativratyam of their wives" (Volga, 51).

Sage Jamadagni immediately ordered his sons to kill their mother. Parshuram came forward to obey his father's order and began to behead his mother. When her head was half cut, Sage Jamadagni cooled down and ordered his son to stop. Renuka was cured by some women of ashrama and some tribal women. While she was oscillating between life and death she could visualise three images- of her husband, whom she had served all her life with great devotion and faithfulness; of her son, whom she had nurtured to life with her love, care and motherhood; and of a pot, the result of her concentration and art. She found that all these three things are the same as they all gets shattered by a slight disturbance. She said:

"Lot of questions came up during that struggle between life and death. Are such bonds, with a husband and sons, necessary for women? I thought they were not, so I moved away from them. I am living with my art. A woman thinks she doesn't have a world other than that of her husband's. True. But some day that very husband will tell her that there is no place for her in his world. Then what's left for her? She thinks giving birth to sons is the ultimate goal of her life. But those sons become heirs to their father, and even before we realize it, they leave her hands and go under the wing of their father. They submit to his authority. Or they begin to legislate our lives. Why bear such sons?"(Volga, 52).

Renuka taught Sita that it is foolish to consider your relationship with your husband and son your whole world as anytime you may be told to get out of their lives. Women should know how to live for your own self, how to find purpose for living- a purpose that gives them content, happiness, peace and a sense of self identity.

In the fourth story, Sita's younger sister Urmila teaches her a new lesson about importance of liberation in the life of women. When Sita, Rama and Lakshmana returned from the fourteen years exile, Sita searched for Urmila in the palace but she was unable to find her. She asked her youngest sister Srutakirthi about Urmila and from Srutakirthi, she came to know that Urmila has locked herself in her room for these fourteen years. She neither allowed anyone to enter her room nor did she come out to meet anyone in these fourteen years. The only person who entered her room was the maid Charumati. Sita went straight to Urmila's room and when she saw Urmila for the first time after fourteen years, she noticed that earlier Urmila's eyes were full of innocence but now there was glow and radiance in her eyes. Sita apologised to Urmila for the fourteen years of loneliness that Urmila had spent and asked her why did she shut the doors to everyone. Urmila said her, "Initially I did close these doors in anger. My husband left me without uttering a word to me, without any concern to my opinion, without even giving me a thought, devoting himself entirely to his brother. That day I burned in fury. I wanted to turn this royal household upside down with my revolt. Everyone was grieving for you all. No one even looked at me. In helpless anger, I too decided not to look at anyone. I began my protest" (Volga, 74-75).

Then she said that soon the wrath turned into search for truth. When Sita told her that Lakshmana loves her a lot, she replied: "We are going to see each other after fourteen years. I have changed a lot. Change is the sign of life. The course of our future depends on the value he attaches to that change. I've acquired the wisdom to ask questions not out of hatred but for the sake of justice. My relationship with Lakshmana will depend on whether he understands my wisdom and how much he respects it" (Volga, 76).

Urmila had understood the real essence to liberation is neither one should submit before other's power nor should try to bind others with their power. The real peace comes when one finds joy within themselves. When Sita was abandoned by Rama, it was Urmila's words that helped her in breaking free from the shackles of memories of Rama and achieve real liberation and emancipation.

The book *The Liberation of Sita* is not for any particular age or generation. It is for each and every woman. Every woman is a Sita who faces love, hatred, betrayal, distrust, trials, loneliness, pain and abandonment by the people whom she loves in this patriarchal society. The sufferings of women characters given in the book can also be related to the sufferings of women in contemporary society. Sita, Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka and Urmila might provide women of every generation strength, courage, and wisdom to realize the power of

liberating themselves from all these worldly ties and empower and discover their own selves and find internal peace.

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