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Representation of Sita as an embodiment of nature in selected novel

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Abstract

Ramayana is believed as the earliest epic, composed by Valmiki. Sita is the female protagonist of the epic. In the various versions of Ramayana, Sita is depicted as a personified character of nature. She who took birth from the earth and returned to the earth. Her story of natural birth is not mentioned in the Ramayana and other traditional epics. The name Sita was known before Valmiki Ramayana in *Rigveda*. The word is associated with agriculture and fertility. According to Ramayana, Sita was found by Janaka while plowing. It is believed that she was the daughter of earth and King Janaka. As the plants, she spends her life leading a natural life in the forest. This paper will examine how modern writers like Devdutt Pattnaik and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrayed the character of Sita as a personified character of nature in their novels.

Keywords: Sita as an embodiment, nature, novel

Introduction

The word 'Sita' is older than the Valmiki Ramayana. The word is derived from Rigveda which means "furrow". The vedas describe her as the goddess of earth and the goddess of fertility. She is worshipped as a goddess for good crops. In Indian culture, her blessings are significant for farmers. Farmers take her name as blessings before plowing. Sita means 'furrow'. It indicates agriculture and the rise of human civilization. Since Sita's birth, Ramayana describes her as sprouting from the earth from a furrow of the field. In Hindu mythology, especially in Indian culture, it is believed that Sita was found in 'Bhumi'. That is why she is called 'Bhumija' and worshiped as an earth goddess in Rigveda. In Vedic period, the word 'Sita' is mentioned as the earth goddess associated with fertility. Described as the daughter of Bhumi, she is adopted and brought up by king Janaka. As Sita is depicted as goddess of fertility, Devdutt Pattnaik mentions her as embodies the fruit of nature's domestication and rise of human culture. It is believed that Sita is an epitome of Earth's fertility, abundance, and well-being. The mention of Sita is found in *Rigveda* as she is worshipped.

Auspicious Sita, come thou near. We venerate and worship thee

That thou mayst bless and prosper us and bring us fruits abundantly. (Rg Veda Hymn 4.57.6) (Rigveda by H.H. Wilson)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a diasporic writer. She is Indian born American writer whose work majorly focuses on historic and mythos fiction. She is known for her famous novel *Palace of Illusions* (2008), written from Draupadi's perspective. Later she desired to write a retelling of Ramayana from Sita's perspective. As Sita is her fascinated character, in a prologue of the novel, she uncovers the adventurous journey and crucial choices of her in a more appropriate way. In an interview, she declares that it was the forest that enhanced her life at every step. It gave her life. The story of Ramayana starts with the dramatic birth of Sita who took birth from the earth and ends her life in earth with an unusual disappearance. The king of Mithila, Janaka expresses his emotions while he finds the baby Sita covered in cloth. The author, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni mentions the plot in the first chapter as Ramayana mentions the birth of Sita in a dramatic way.

That day, however, only a few steps into his ploughing, he was forced to a standstill. A baby lay in his path, naked and newborn, glistening in the young sun as though it was a mirage. He was amazed that I didn't cry, regarding him instead with unblinking eyes. I'd kicked off the cloth that swaddled me, a gold fabric finer than anything our Mithila weavers could produce, with strange and intricate designs the likes of which no one had ever seen. Believers said the gods had gifted me to the good king, who was childless in spite of years of effort. (Forest of Enchantment).

As in the epic, the novel opens with Sita's birth. The birth of Sita is not ordinary. It is believed that King Janka desired to have a son or daughter. As he is called 'Rajarishi' (a king who loves the life of simplicity and lives like a sage) once he was plowing with his wife Sunaina. Suddenly he found the baby covered in cloth. He raised her and dedicated his life to her as a father. Sita and Urmila were treated alike by Janaka and Sunaina. According to Ramayana, once there was a severe drought in Mithila, due to which Mithila King Janak was very worried and he asked the sages to perform a yagya. After the completion of the Yagya, King Janak plowed the fields. At the same time, while plowing the land, he found a girl wrapped in mud in a gold bundle. When King Janak took that girl child in his lap, he felt fatherly love and adopted that girl child as she was found in earth he named her Sita.

Sita is Kanakavarnaangi. She is of Golden colour. She is Neelakesi (black hair), Bimbosthi (bright scarlet colour like Tindoor or Bryonia), Sumadhya (beautiful waist), Padmapalaasakshi (having eyes like Lotus petals), Manmadhasya Rathim yathhaa (like Rati, the wife of Manmadha). -28th sloka, 15th Sarga, Sundarakanda, Valmiki.

In *Ramcharitmanas*, Rama and Sita are worshiped as *chetan* and *prakriti* respectively. It is said that when tyranny of Asura increased on the earth, then *Shakti* and *Prakriti* met. Sita was born from the earth itself, because of which she used to recognize the beats of the earth. She used to listen to footsteps coming from far away, understood the language of animals and birds, used to recognize the direction of winds, used to talk to trees and plants, due to which she used to foretell the upcoming crisis, natural disaster. It was already known to her. Valmiki described her beauty and compared it with nature. He compared her plait with the wild black snake as it was Krishna sarpa. Her hair and braids are like a group of forest on the earth. She is also called *Varavarini* because her body is warm in winter and cool in summer. She is an example of nature itself.

In Chitra Banerjee's *Forest of Enchantment* and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana*, Sita is portrayed as a healer of vegetation who merely with her touch heals people and vegetation. These novels approach her connection with nature and post married life in the forest. The story of her is found differently in accordance with versions. In Jaina text, she is believed as the biological daughter of Ravana and Mandodari while Valmiki, Kamban and Tulsidas didn't mention her biological parents. She has always been associated with vegetation. She had always been accompanied by natural beauty where she lived. Her life went through in Mithila, the forest of Dandaka and in Ashok Vatika. Her life with nature had been a significant

one. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrayed her life with association with the life of forest. In the fiction, Sita discloses her mysterious gift with plants. Sita loved nature very much, since childhood she used to cling to the soil, play with it, make beautiful figures out of it, and make idols of gods and goddesses. She used to go and plant them in the soil again to give new life, so that they become plants again, watered them, and took care of them. She asserts that

"My strange gift with plants was a mystery to me. Perhaps it was because like them I was earth-born, maybe for the same reason when I touched a plant, I knew its healing properties." (7).

As per traditional epics, the author observed that her birth was not ordinary in comparison to a normal woman. Traditional ideology and Literature believes that Sita is an expression and a symbol of Nature. Her birth from earth and her touch with plants becomes an extraordinary association with earth and nature. Writers and Researchers defined her role in the context of Culture and Nature. According to Devdutt Pattanaik, Culture juxtaposes Nature. He points out the symbol and metaphors to explain the concept. He observes that Culture comprises the role of men and women in the society where society is bound by rules while nature depicts the natural forest environment where there are no restrictions. The author, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, portrays the character of Sita symbolizing the nature that enhanced her life in childhood and married life. Sita desired to travel in the forest when she lived in Mithila. Maybe it was the forest who desired back to live with her. She asserts that

"I wanted to visit a forest someday, though I didn't think I'd ever be granted the opportunity. It wasn't something that women did. Even my mother, the most intelligent person I knew, would have been baffled if I confessed this desire to her. So I satisfied myself by standing on the terrace on monsoon afternoons, watching the silvery rain bathing the tops of distant trees. Lightning cracked open the sky, spilling its longing into me. Sometimes I dreamed that I was walking the wilderness with its swaying grasses, its leaping, golden beasts, the earth-mother the way she'd been before people bent her to their desires. The forest dream wasn't the only one I had. At other times, a wide expanse of water came to me in sleep, stretching to the horizon, filled with tumultuous waves. Wind roared over it, and beneath its surface, huge, amphibious monsters waited, ready to pull anyone who ventured close into its dark depths. The scene terrified and excited me at the same time. Once when I told my mother about it, she said I must have dreamed of an ocean. (Forest of Enchantment, 8).

Sita never talked about her desire to travel in the forest as Culture of society limited her opportunity. Culture has always bound her to the rules of society while Nature called for her freedom. She knew that her mother would have been perplexed if she confessed her desires to her. She used to satisfy herself by standing on the terrace on monsoon afternoons, watching the tops of distant trees. She dreamt that she was walking the wilderness with its swaying grasses. The plants, the trees, the grass and the ocean was always dearer to her. She learnt self-defense if some day she

had to go into the forest. It is a matter of attention that she went through many difficulties of life accompanying Rama in the forest of Panchavati and Dandaka. She raised her kids independently alone in the forest after her abandonment. It is obvious that Sita had always been surrounded by nature. Despite knowing the danger of the forest, she insisted on accompanying her husband in exile. Her desires signify a part of nature. Her dream of living in the beauty of the forest was to come as Rama was ordered to exile. The beauty of the forest attracted her passionately. But Sita was inexperienced in forest's life. She had cherished many dreams of forest in her childhood, a life in a forest full of fruit-bearing trees, bodies of water, and waterfalls, where she can play with Rama while splashing in the water and admiring the flowers and birds. Perhaps it was destiny to fulfill her desire. She didn't think twice when it was time for banishment. As Valmiki and Kamban mention it was nature itself who was inviting Sita to itself with outstretched arms. Devdutt Pattnaik defines the reality of nature.

Nature is the ultimate reality, existing within and around us. We cannot escape nature. We are helpless. Before nature's awesome capacity to sustain and destroy us, we are reduced to a state of humbling and humiliating passivity. There are three ways to cope with the truism that is nature: fight, flee, and freeze. Each way is valid. At least one is necessary to survive.

(Devdutt Pattnaik's Delusion of Culture).

Sita was prepared to face the hardship of nature but was not familiar with the lifestyle of the forest. She loved the forest but did not live. Devdutt Pattnaik defines three truths of nature; Fight, Flee and Freeze. Sita chose the first one to survive in nature. He, in his article Men and Women in Hindu mythology, defines the role of women as nature. He says nature is a metaphor for feminine. The existence of God and Goddess has an equal importance. One cannot exist without another. Nature is likely to be Mother Nature which provides us life and food.

Conclusion

Besides Jaina Retellings of Ramayana, Traditional stories of the epic Ramayana portrays Sita's birth as a child who was founded and adopted by Janaka. Maintaining the basic narratives of the epic, modern writers Devdutt Pattnaik and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrayed her connection with nature. Chitra Banerjee's Sita is not just a character to retell her life, breaking the stereotypical images but a character which symbolizes the importance of the environment in her life. She was found on earth, lived in the forest during her husband's exile, lived under Ashok Vatika during her time of abduction, lived in forest after her banishment, and went into fire to prove her purity. The title of the fiction also symbolizes the life of Sita and her unconditional love and attachment with the forest and earth. It was Sita who loved the forest and desired to go in but not to be forced. She unquestionably put herself in the wilderness of the forest and fire ordeal to prove herself pure and chaste as nature.

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