
Can the Mythical Heroine *Sita* Still be Taken as Role Model in the Contemporary Society?

Sunu Kalita

Research Scholar, Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, Assam, India

Abstract: *Women are carried with various images of goddesses to face the present day situations. But what about Sita as the role model? In Ramayana the character of Sita was different from new various interpretations, so which image will follow by women in present day. The Hindu religious tradition teaches both women and men that Sita the heroine of Ramayana is the ideal wife and women. Sita is a powerful icon of wifely duty in the Hindu tradition that is all-encompassing. Sita's name is invoked to describe women who exemplify that ideal or to encourage women to take up Sita like virtues. The conception of the ideal reflected in Sita as a combination of beauty and strength, and need to examine whether or not Sita serves as a role model for women in the Hindu tradition. Mahatma Gandhi used the Sita symbol to advocate the idea of women's strength, autonomy and ability to protect themselves rather than depend on men for safety. Some see her as victimized and oppressed, other sees as outspoken, had the freedom to express her. Sita's characters has touched the western countries also, as we can find many work done on the great epic of Hindu tradition. I have tried analyse the character to the context of Nina Paley's animated movie Sita Sings the Blues, in which she tried to reflect feminist perception and in her movie. Sita is still seen as an ideal for every woman to strive for, but she is far from quiet.*

Keywords: *Sita, Hindu, Ramayana, role model, ideal, socio-cultural, modern context.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Women nowadays are versatile and there is a little bit of Laxmi, Saraswati, even a bit of Kali, Draupadi if needed in the situation. But what about the nature of Sita; which was depicted in The Ramayana by Valmiki. And in later it is interpreted by many others in textual forms and also oral presentations. The Ramayana famous Hindu epic, in which main characters are Rama and Sita as couple, which symbolised the ideal conjugal relationship topically possible between two partners. On the other hand they stood as a mass-oriented image for tragic sacrifice that one undertakes or gives for the sake of one's ethics and for the wellbeing of the realm that in the long run serves to build an ethnically normative codex for the fellow masses.

Some scholars think that Sita is a character that does not receive the development that she deserves within the text of the Ramayana. When she is understood in the hearts and minds of the readers, her personality and actions are elaborated in ways that are not always the way that the text intended. She can be used by the most traditional of men to set forth an example of their perfect, subordinate wife, while simultaneously being used as a rallying point for women who have had enough of their husbands. All who read her story carefully witness the strength within her character, but the way her image is employed in the popular arena illustrates the variations to be found within this ancient text.

There are some framework for thinking about normative models of women within Hindu culture in their roles as wives and how Sita might represent that role. Sita represents the normative wifely model; she personifies the dependent, devoted, and unblemished wife yet as we can find that the Sita of the many various Ramayanas which does not always line up with the Sita of traditional practice or even of the admired in thoughts. The Ramayana famously known as is a book of ideals. Where Rama is the ideal man in his every roles as a son, older brother and eventually as king. He exemplifies the perfect warrior, a protector of righteousness and a just ruler to his people. But his duty as a husband is not a theme in the narrative in the same way as we can see that is Sita's duty as an ideal wife. If one wants to look for examples of the perfect husband, one has to look outside the Ramayana description. Similarly, to understand how Sita is imagined to be the perfect wife one must look beyond the shallow image that of only one interpretation [1].

2. OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this paper is to analyse is to explore what is the impact of *Sita* in contemporary society. And to find out that whether women should her as role model or not.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper is followed by secondary data, basically collected from the existing books on The Ramayana. And along that also followed like magazines, articles published online, films and documentaries of associated subject matter has been used for the study.

4. Can Sita be role model?

The question about Sita's impact as a role model was at the heart of this paper. Sita's story, her major life actions, her trials and troubles, her successes and failures vibrate with women of the tradition, and though we feel her strong and resolution is admirable, it is also generally felt that she suffers more emotional and physical suffering than is possible and therefore is an hard to find ideal. We know The Ramayana through scholarly papers, comics, various oral traditions, watching in television different composition of Ramayanas, and most basic to form talking about the Ramayana.

The existing sentiments of people are that Sita is an ideal of the tradition but her apparent lack of choice in life tempus her impact as a role model for women, although on interpretation of Sita specially and women in the Hindu tradition more generally submissive one. The Hindu religious tradition teaches both women and men that Sita the heroine of Ramayana is the ideal wife and women. Sita is a powerful icon of wifely duty in the Hindu tradition that is all-encompassing. Sita's name is invoked to describe women who exemplify that ideal or to encourage women to take up Sita like virtues. Essentially the popular image of Sita that so powerfully shapes the Indian womanhood is essentially that of a very submissive person and ideal wife archetype.

But feminists both from within and without the tradition find much to critique in this image of Sita, yet there are different perspectives on Sita - as strong-minded, static, and in some cases pretty insubordinate, have been expressed by many Hindu women in the tradition and by some academics who take their cue from such women. These different perspectives are in part dependent on which texts one is familiar with, how one learns the text, where one learns the text and who one learns the text from.

Although Sita is described as possessing all the virtues of the ideal wife, she is much more, or in any case her wifely virtues are elaborated by narrators and storytellers alike who imagine her through a complex of qualities: loyal, devoted, in love, doting, beautiful and strong, yet fragile. Sita is the ideal wife, an ideal rooted in religious righteousness that continues to hold meaning for many women of the Hindu tradition. Yet she and the many other characters of the narrative are not remote archetypes that turn into the Ramayana a hard to find tome. Sita, for many, is beloved specifically because her story reflects the concerns of women within the Indian cultural background. In some situation like an ordinary woman Sita also faces the pressures that of relation to marriage, relationships with one's husband, family and children and finally with the social norms and customs [2].

Sita may be an ideal, or a goddess or at least a semi-divine being, but as like the same Indian women and wives are taught only to think of other's needs and never their own. Though Sita herself is real or not or just a character but the interpretations of her actions have real meaning for some women in the tradition. In The Ramayana Sita's final scene is that she went to her mother earth's womb and may be it can helps women find the courage to stand up to victimizers or even over-demanding husbands or social conventions. But in many interpretations there is a wariness of labelling Sita's final scene as suicide because it implies a literal version that sends an unhealthy message to women in the tradition. The point is that discussion of the trial by fire, interpreting the story literally can have dangerous real life consequences. That is not the solution to stand against injustice.

Sita's fire ordeal is a controversial that many have trouble interpreting optimistically because of the potential violence indicated by fire and strongly associated themes of women's purity. As the women here felt that Sita's fire ordeal is unfavourable to the struggle for equality have indicated, it is a reminder of violence, carried out or threatened, linked to oppression through impossible standards of wifely purity and the expectation of submission

to those standards. An image of Sita as the ideal for the participants in this study emerges and she is often depicted in terms of her strength or strong as well as her beauty and delicacy. This image is drawn from the many sources that contribute not only to imagining aspects of the ideal woman, but also raising concerns and questions as to whether or not this is a healthy ideal. The conception of the ideal reflected in Sita as a combination of beauty and strength, and need to examine whether or not Sita serves as a role model for women in the Hindu tradition.

Though Sita is most definitely thought of as the ideal woman and wife, but many women do not relate to her in the way that archetypes are used as role-model figures in modern age basically, feminist-derived spiritualities. Though some Hindu women may find certain qualities of Sita interesting, but those qualities vary depending on family and personal values, as well as the region and religious sect that one is raised in. The study of archetypes as it is used in feminist spirituality creates massive quality profiles from which one might take cues for individual improvement. Sita may be described as the tradition's "archetypal" ideal wife, but that doesn't make for a complete picture, because it does not take into account how Hindu women, Hindu wives, actually receive her. As the women in this study have cautioned, there are deep problems with the assumption that women's innate characters reflect Sita-like virtues. Though the women have said there are some things about Sita that are worth adopting, taken together these are the character traits of a woman who does not have choices.

The descriptors that were given by the Ramayana's different interpretation pull together an image of Sita's ideal nature as a combination of beauty and strength. Some formulation of the terms beauty combined with strength to describe Sita as an ideal. The terms beauty and delicacy generally derive from the ways that narrators have described Sita's physical attributes and her personality. Sita's beauty is very often described in terms of delicacy in nature. From a textual standpoint strength is not normally a term one sees associated with Sita. She may be described as soft-spoken and demure, but when she does speak up she is quite forceful and steadfast.

Sita as an important cultural and religious icon, but according to some Sita was slightly more empathetic and nuanced as the ways in which Sita was restricted by her circumstance and the ways in which she challenged those limitations. Some other views that Sita's characteristics ranged from the temporary, to the real-life exemplar in family dynamics, to a leftover of the patriarchy; although that ever-present equation, ideal equal to strength and beauty, was expressed by all. Where Sita, and indeed the *Ramayana*, has more religious and cultural currency, they were more familiar with the story and rhetoric about Sita and other may only have gone through the various interpretations only.

5. Gandhi's Sita in the image of Swadesi

Mahatma Gandhi was among the most creative reformers who impulsively understood the creative possible of many of our traditions and values. For example, he used the Sita symbol to advocate the idea of women's strength, autonomy and ability to protect themselves rather than depend on men for safety. His Sita was like a "lioness in spirit" before which Ravana became "as helpless as a goat." For the protection of her virtues even in Ravana's custody, she did not "need the assistance of Rama." Her own purity was her sole shield. Gandhi's Sita became a symbol of swadeshi or the decolonization of the Indian economy. He asked the women of India to follow her example by wearing Indian homespun and boycotting foreign fineries because Gandhi's Sita would have never worn imported fabric. Gandhi wanted to create a whole army of new Sitas who were not brought up to think that a woman "was well only with her husband or on the funeral pyre." He wanted them to stop aspiring to be mere wives and instead become leaders of men, teaching them the message of peace and social harmony [3].

Even those who are put off by Gandhi's use of Hindu religious symbols for political mobilization and who have problems with many of his views on women and sexuality do not deny that, more than any other modern leader, he helped create a favourable atmosphere for women's large scale and respectful entry into public life. Gandhi's moral backing legitimized women's right to hold political office without having to wage long-drawn battles, like the Suffragists in the West had to do to. His Sita's were encouraged to break the shackles of domesticity, to come out of purdah, to lead political movements and teach the art of peace to this warring world.

Sita, conjures up an image of a chaste pativrata woman, the ideal woman. Some see her as victimized and oppressed who obeyed her husband's commands, followed him, remained faithful to him, served her in-laws or yielded to parental authority, generally did her duty whether she wanted to or not. Yet, there are others who see a more

liberated Sita, a cherished wife of Ram. She was outspoken, had the freedom to express herself, said what she wanted to in order to get her way, fell for the temptation of the golden deer, spoke harsh words, repented for it, loved her husband, was faithful to him, served her family, did not get seduced by the glamour and material objects in Ravana's palace, faced an angry and suspicious husband, tried to appease him, reconciled her marriage, later accepted her separation, raised well balanced children as a single mother and then moved on.

5.1 Nina Paley's Sita in Sita sings the blues

In the film woman who sings songs of Sita are not just telling one individual's stories, but many women's stories, which create a story-matrix with Sita as the core. The enquiry as to whether Sita is a role model emerges from this dialogue of women's oral traditions. Clearly women relate to Sita's life as the oral tradition shows and she remains an ideal of the Hindu religion, but what specifically is it about how she handles various situations that women find undeniable? What of her individuality and qualities? What are Sita's limits and how might she fail in providing women today with an example? Sita is an ideal of the tradition, but whether or not she is a role model is a question is followed up in the paper.

But along with that here, I have tried to analyse the character to the context of Nina Paley's animated movie *Sita Sings the Blues*, in which she tried to reflect feminist perception and in her movie she gives it a comprehensive significance outside its fixed social, spatial, temporal, religious, political, geographical and enlightening influence of Indic interpretations of Ramayana. In Nina Paley's 2008-09 animated version, *Sita Sings the Blues* (Annette Hanshaw), Paley by her comic subversion shows us how an Indian epic text can be taken out of its immediate cultural context and become adapted for a global audience. She delicately shows how the dilemma of an Indian mythical wife has very close parallels with the problems of a modern divorcee American woman in our recent postmodern period. The postmodern progressive society is worn to shreds open by Sita's comic revolt in the film [4].

Actually, every version of interpretation of The Ramayana and the character of Sita is both ambiguous and uniquely creative in its own way by different writers from their own projections. But Paley's film is added some interesting features as because it attempts a drastically critical and comically revolutionary postmodern secular reading of the Indian religious epic, The Ramayana in a modern context. Paley's film in fact challenges an Indian viewer's notion of Sita and in Sita's songs not only give her a voice, but rather show her as a modern woman with a rebellious persona who is able to decide for her own self and is able to face life as it comes with new problems in everyday. Paley does not mock Sita's character in her film but rather gives her wifely sincerity a new dimension.

But Paley transforms the icon of Sita positing her as a victim of patriarchal injustice and re-contextualizes the myth in the modern context. Her new twist is that she sees Sita as a conscious woman who can voice her betrayal by both her husband and the society at large which is highly unconcerned to her. The film starts presenting Sita's story in the film through the eyes of Laxmi so, ensuring us that the story is narrated from a serving woman's perspective. This film makes us aware of how a socio-cultural and religious epic as The Ramayana is both timeless and secular enough as to challenge an authoritative reading of the text [5].

Paley, on the other hand, relocates the story by representing Sita as a woman who retells her own story in her own voice in an altogether different context. Sita's steadfastness as a betrayed wife in the epic actually makes her a model for Paley who finds a close parallel between the mythical Sita and herself, after her own break-up with her husband, Dave. Paley very consciously divests the Sita myth of its immediate socio-religious connotations by using potent recent and modern symbols. Here Paley took Sita as her role model but the core point is that she was from the western country but still she took Indian Hindu image as role model. And beside that she has selected the strong and bold side of Sita's image as role model not the oppressed side.

6. CONCLUSION

What makes an ideal figure and what constitutes a role model is the main question, so Sita is the ideal wife within a larger context of a religious tradition, but she's no role model for women within that tradition. The ideal is an unachievable paradigm that is best left that way. Sita is still seen as an ideal for every woman to strive for, but she is far from quiet. She is fierce as she endures a trial by fire to prove her faithfulness, and is strong as she defies her

husband when he asks her a second time to walk through the flames. In many ways, this moment within the text can be used as a focal point from which to see the various ways in which her image is manipulated popularly in both feminist and traditional reads of the text. Unexpected situations can make women as warriors out of ordinary women. And every time of life it is not obligatory that one should follow the path of Sita only. In fact, despite whether she is compared to Sita or Draupadi, each woman should make oneself to have her possession of individuality, judgement and choices. Whether it could be like fiercely loyal or strong-minded as true to herself according to her dreams and her expectations from life. After all, women build up part of the humanity.

REFERENCES

- [1] Linda Hess, "Rejecting Sita," *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, March 1999, 67, 1-32.
- [2] Diana L. Eck, 'Darsan: *Seeing the Divine Image in India*', 3rd edn New York: Columbia University Press 1998.
- [3] Kishwar, Madhu, Gandhi on Women, *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 20, No. 40 (Oct. 5, 1985), pp. 1691-1702.
- [4] Paley, Nina. *QestionCopyright.org*. Vers. Electronic. 2008. Visual. December-January 2012-13.
- [5] Paley, Nina. *Sita Sings the Blues*. Directed by Nina Paley. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike licence, 2008.
- [6] Gandhi, Ramchandra, *Sita's Kitchen: A Testimony of Faith and Inquiry*, New Delhi: Wiley Eastern, 1994.
- [7] Chandrabati, "Sitayana." In *The Ballads of Bengal*. Edited by Dineschandra Sen. Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988.
- [8] Flood, Gavin. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- [9] Gross, Rita M. "Hindu Female Deities as a Resource for the Contemporary Rediscovery of the Goddess." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46 (1978): 269-291.
- [10] Pauwels, Heidi. *The Goddess as Role Model: Sita and Radha in Scripture and on Screen*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- [11] Rajan, Rajeswari, Sunder. "Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 31 1998, WS 34-38.
- [12] <http://www.sitasingingtheblues.com>.
- [13] <https://blog.uvm.edu/religion/2014/12/19/student-research-complications-within-a-feminist-sita/>
- [14] <https://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=1303>
- [15] <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/forum/sitayanam-a-woman-s-journey-of-strength>
- [16] https://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/s_es/s_es_bharg_sita_frameset.htm
- [17] <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/perspectives/sita-ramayana-many-voices-outrage>
- [18] <http://new-savanna.blogspot.com/p/sita-chronicles.html>
- [19] https://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/s_es/s_es_kishw_sitaram_frameset.htm

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



About the Author: **Sunu Kalita**
Research Scholar of Philosophy,
Humanities and Social Science department,
Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati.