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Rebel not Revolutionary: Sita's Agency and Quest for Selfhood

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Abstract:

Traditionally, the socio-culturally imposed selfhood on to Sita is that of a wife, with no independent identity of herself. She is usually seen as the embodiment of an ideal woman — docile, obedient, chaste, devoted, unassertive, self-effacing. But her apparent lack of choice or agency in life negates her societal self-identity and weakens her impact as a role model for women. This paper examines those retellings of *Ramayana* which focus on Sita forging an independent identity for herself beyond that shaped by the needs and desires of those around her. The transformation of the *Ramayana* into *Sitayana* by these writers becomes the means through which the mythic Sita is able to articulate some agency and control over her destiny, thus portraying her maturation into a self-reliant individual. However, I argue that the forces, conditions and structures of Sita's society, her character and the narrative tradition that she belongs to allows her to be a rebel, not revolutionary.

Keywords: Sita, Revision, Agency, Selfhood, Identity, Voice

The Ashoka tree spread its shade
There was your brimming sorrow
And time enough.
What more did you want?
Sita, why didn't you speak?
... To all my questions,
only her silence,
heavy as earth.

(as quoted in *Ramayana Stories in South India*, ed Paula Richman. P 44)

In the poem, Vijay Dabbe wonders why Sita never wrote her view of events in the *Ramayana* even when she had the opportunity and resources to do so. It is as though in response to Dabbe's question, some writers have transformed the *Ramayana* into *Sitayana*, giving an insight into Sita's voice, agency, and personalised experiences and feelings.

Sita is seen, typically, only as a consort of Rama. She has no independent identity of herself. Indeed, it is a rarity to even find any illustrations or images of Sita alone. She is almost always depicted in the presence of males – usually with Rama, Hanuman, her twin sons or

Ravana(Richman, 43). Hence, traditionally the socio-culturally imposed selfhood on to Sita is that of a wife. She is usually seen as an ideal of the tradition, the embodiment of an ideal woman — docile, obedient, chaste, devoted, unassertive, self-effacing. But her apparent lack of choice or agency in life negates her societal self-identity and tempers her impact as a role model for women. This chapter will examine those retellings of *Ramayana* which focus on Sita forging an independent identity for herself beyond that shaped by the needs and desires of those around her. I will study those retellings that explore Sita's capacity for action, how she manages to carve out new spaces for herself, not as a wife but an individual. Hence, these retellings explore the maturation of Sita into a self-reliant individual who is not just someone's wife or mother. These stories become the means through which the mythic Sita is able to articulate some agency and control over her destiny, thus revealing not her passivity but her growing strength and maturity.

The term Agency has often been deployed to describe an unconventional, independent or emancipatory action of an individual who is oppressed. In feminist literature, it has often been used to denote an active subaltern, a female with a capacity to voice and express. According to Laura Ahearn, "Agency refers to the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" (112). Lois McNay, a feminist theorist (2000, 10) describes agency as "the capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities" (10). In other words, agency is exhibited when people act in unanticipated ways, despite the ways in which behaviour is formed by social institutions and/or internalized customs and traditions.

Ambai's *Forest* and Volga's *Liberation of Sita* are retellings of *Ramayana* that assert Sita's voice and agency. A search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self by Sita are prime features of these retellings. These alternative *Ramayanas* articulate the maturation of the selfhood of Sita by giving her a new voice and identity. The revisioning thus becomes a way of creating self-consciousness of who and what Sita really is or could be. A belief in equality and a spirit of rebellion against structures that do not allow women agency, self-determination and freedom becomes the ideology of these new renditions of *Ramayana*.

The topic of the self has long been of central importance in feminist philosophy, for it is critical to issues related to personal identity, the body, social position, and agency that feminism must address. Simone de Beauvoir's provocative declaration, "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other," signals the central importance of the self for feminism. To be the Other is to be the non-subject, the non-person, the non-agent—in short, the mere body. In cultural stereotypes as well as in social practices, women's selfhood has either been subordinated or outright denied. Since women have historically been perceived only as lesser forms of the masculine individual, it has been the endeavour of the feminist writers to create a new paradigm of the self. This includes not only the critique of the dominant "masculine" view of the feminine self but also the reclamation of female identities as well as reconceptualizations of the self.

SupriyaChaudhary in this context says, "The sole purpose of feminist literature is not to replace the authoritative male subject at the centre of the traditional historiography with a powerful female subject who would rewrite history and repossess the authority of the self. By focussing on the denials and blank spaces that made a certain kind of history possible, feminism sought to re-examine questions of authority and self-making to expose the tensions of a concealed dialectic that runs through the apparently homogenous texture of recorded history.... Most importantly, female

scholarship asked new difficult questions about identity, selfhood, the shaping of the world by culture and the practice and possibility of writing (1-2).”

Chandra Talpade Mohanty in the introduction to her book, *Third World Women and Politics of Feminism*, says: “Feminist analysis has always recognized the centrality of re-writing and remembering history. This process is significant...because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of...consciousness and self-identity...It becomes a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself” (34).

Hence, the notion of subjectivity in an environment that diminished and belittled the assertion of identity by a woman has been a persistent concern of several women writers. A search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self are the prime features of women in literature.

In her book on English women writers known as *A Literature of their Own*, Elaine Showalter, divides feminist criticism into three phases – the feminine, the feminist and the female (26). During the ‘feminine phase’ women writers imitated male writers, they wrote in order to compete with the achievements of the male authors and often used male pseudonyms. The women’s writing in the second or the feminist phase was characterised by protests against male standards and values, advocating women’s rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. The “female” phase of writing neither rejected nor protested since both are signs of dependency. As opposed to merely uncovering misogyny in men’s texts, women displayed a more independent attitude and depended on their own attitude and experiences to participate in the literary process.

In the retellings discussed in this chapter, Sita’s character is perceptibly related to the third phase of self-discovery in terms of classification made by Showalter. Both Ambai and Volga attempt to fight patriarchy through a rewriting of *Ramayana*. Since, stories in religious narratives promote gendered stereo types that uphold patriarchy, rewriting such narratives provide crucial opportunities to redefine many conventional epistemes and subvert several sexist prejudices. Both the texts are clearly feminist in their intent and an obvious effort in feminist revisionist mythmaking. However, their agenda is not merely to subvert and question the patriarchal structures embedded in the myths of these marginalised and wronged women but also to “forge a vision of life in which liberation is total, autonomous and complete” (Kumar and Vijayasree, 107). Such revisionist myth-making opens new spaces within old discourse, making women review their life and experiences from the gynocentric perspective. The re-creation of these myths allows them to visualise a new world in which they themselves are responsible for their own survival, freedom, and joy. They are no longer just the facilitators of men’s quests or prizes in men’s quests. They are, rather, seekers of their own salvation.

As a leading Tamil short story writer and a critic of Tamil literature, C.S. Lakshmi (writing under the pen name, Ambai) wished to advocate a form of expression that more truly articulated the real experience of women. The mission she sets out for modern women writers and hence also for herself is to forge a new language and idiom that is more closely linked to the beliefs, experiences and practices of a woman. In the conclusion to her book, *The Face behind the Mask* Ambaigave out a strong plea to women writers to stop reinforcing popular and conventional images of women and ‘to write the truth’. Ambai further specified that this ‘new language’ must also communicate women’s silences, and share those silences in words and images (Holstrom,1). Hence, instead of

portraying a predictable, passive, unidimensional, epic Sita, Ambai rewrites Sita's story to redefine feminist consciousness. She defies patriarchal norms and conventions by deliberately challenging the stereotypical portrayal of Sita.

Ambai's novella *Forest* is an intriguing retelling of *Ramayana* that shows Sita's journey from self-effacement to selfhood. It juxtaposes the life stories of two women characters in two different time periods: that of Chenthiru who is a contemporary Sita, living in the modern world; the other of the *Ramayana*'s Sita, who however "rewrites" her story.

Ambai interrogates the puranic story of *Ramayana* by questioning the brahminical and patriarchal norms and the human situation in epics, nudging the reader to see them from Sita's point of view. She re-envision the period of Sita's life after her children have grown. Hence, Ambai provides a fresh way of thinking about Sita as we see Sita through the prism of middle age. Sita is an older woman who, after largely completing her responsibility towards her children embarks on a midlife reassessment and attempts to discover her selfhood.

Since Valmiki's *Ramayana* is neither just nor sufficient, Sita rewrites her own 'lifestory'. Sita says "In the ages to come, there will be many *Ramayanas*. Many Ramas. Many Sitas" (149). When Valmiki asks Sita if the epic that he has written not good enough, she replies "you were a poet of the king's court. You created history. But I experienced it. I absorbed into myself all manner of experiences. My language is different" (149). This paradigm shift leads Ambai to deviate from telling 'his-story' to give 'her-story', and creates 'Sita's ayanam' (149).

Hence, in 'Sita's ayanam', Sita discloses her innermost feelings and does not shy away from censuring Rama. She does not come across as a passive character, but as one critical of her husband's actions. When Rama casts her off into the forest, Sita is escorted by Laxman. When Lakshmana informs Sita about Rama's command that the forest is to be her dwelling place, a distraught Sita remarks to Lakshmana that it has become Rama's main duty to doubt people's purity, "to put them constantly to the test" (148). She recalls various instances wherein she was subject to purity tests and accuses Rama of insensitivity, misjudgement and suspicion. By thus questioning Rama and his actions, Sita contests the dubious nature of patriarchal values inculcated through epics and myths. She reveals the inner pain that she was experiencing and says that she was tired of purity tests. She thinks to herself that she should tell Lakshmana to inform Rama that she is pregnant with Rama's child "otherwise, there will be preparations for yet another ordeal by fire. There are some whose minds cannot travel in a straight line" (149).

Sita voices the torment she felt when she was brought "like an exhibit in front of the crowd" (164). After the war got over, she was told by Rama that the battle had been fought, not to save her but to defend his honour and that she was free to go anywhere with whomever she chose: Lakshmana, Bharata, Vibhishana, Sugriva. She laments, "Had she not herself made it necessary for him to wage a battle because she was so aware of his pride? Otherwise, would she not have sat on the shoulders of Hanuman, who thought of her as a mother, and left Lanka when she could? Hanuman set fire to Lanka. All Rama could do was light a fire in his wife's heart" (64). The critique of Rama's character is an act of challenging the existing oppressive norms often inscribed in the most revered traditions.

Ambai captures the nuances of Sita's emotions as a woman and as a single parent insightfully. Once, looking at her sons eating their food, she wonders how her life would have turned out if they had both been girls. She questions herself if she would have allowed them only to pick flowers and fruits and play at home. And she knows in her heart that she would have brought them up as women warriors so that nobody would be able to kidnap them or carry them away. When Lava and Kusa learn that Rama is their father, they run towards him, without a moment's hesitation and Sita thinks, "Had they been girls, they might have stood close to their mother. They might have looked upon a father who abandoned their mother in the forest with suspicious eyes" (172).

When Rama asks Sita to come back to Ayodhya along with her children, she refuses to go back with Rama and decides to stay in the forest. Sita's refusal to comply to the wishes of King of Ayodhya makes many people wonder what it was that Sita sought. She tells Rama that "her journey lay in a different direction (173)". She wants to take "a journey that would be long, that would go very deep", "somewhere beneath the earth, somewhere so deep that nobody could reach her" (176). She wants to take a lone journey into the forest where she doesn't have to go through any ordeal to prove anything. She doesn't need anyone anymore. She wants her own space now, wants to explore the world and the Mother Nature. She wants to understand the value of her existence in this world. Far deep into the forest she is thrilled by the beauty as well as the reality of the nature. She witnesses the delighted sight of baby elephants running alongside the herd, the horrifying picture of deer-eating tigers, the shimmering green leaves when the sun rays fall upon them.

In the forest, Sita meets a tapasvi who is living a life of austerity and playing the *vinai* in his small hut. Sita discovers that the tapasvi is none other than Ravana, whose life had been spared by Rama on the request of one of Ravana's bodyguard. South Indian folklore depicts Ravana as a learned and refined musician of the *vina*. Ambai builds upon this motif by having the middle aged Sita meet Ravana again. A tired, old Ravana has been waiting to meet Sita for so long. Sita tells him that she is a tired, old woman and is surprised that he is still infatuated by her. Ravana explains: "it is then that a woman needs a friend. To support her when she is distressed by her changing body. To serve her. To encourage her. To stand at a distance and give her hope" (177). When Sita enquires if he will teach her to play *vinai*, Ravana agrees by saying "I did battle for you once, and lost. Would I deny you music?" and then adds "Don't think of it as an ordinary musical instrument. Think of it as your life, and play on it" (177). When Ravana lifts the *Rudravina* and stretches it out towards Sita, she declares, "leave it there on the ground", then adds, "it is my life, isn't it? A life that many hands have tossed about, like a ball. Now let me take hold of it; take it into my hands" (178).

This radically altered reading of *Ramayana* that envisions a totally different trajectory for Sita posits a positive reconstruction of Sita's selfhood, achieved through the assertion of her voice, agency and personal dignity. Ambai provides Sita with an opportunity to walk away and start afresh. She gives Sita space to think about herself, where she develops self-realization at the end and learns to control her body, mind and her life. Ambai presents Sita as continuing to live a rich and meaningful life even after her sons leave for Ayodhya. Such a deconstruction of the epic *Ramayana* and its representation through Sita's voice leads to the empowering of mythic Sita and a celebration of her emotional and mental strength. When *Ramayana* is looked through Sita's lens, she emerges as a critical heroine who questions the norms of wifehood, making apparent the gender bias and discrimination. Sita's emotional strength is mirrored through her "total renunciation" (176)

from all those people who “spoke lovingly, who dispensed advice...” (176). She boldly undertakes her “lone journey” (176) into the forest. While Valmiki presents Sita as returning to Mother Earth, Ambai depicts Sita embarking on a new phase of life. Looking back on many years of self-sacrifice, Sita sees how she let others control her life and realizes that it is time to cultivate artistic fulfillment of her own. By taking the reins of life in her hands, she articulates agency and control over her destiny.

In a parallel narrative, Ambai imagines how the incidents would have occurred if they took place today rather than in ancient times through the story of Chenthiru, a modern day Sita who destabilizes patriarchal structuring of female roles.

Chenthiru, a middle-aged woman with grown up children, decides to leave everything behind—her home, her husband, the city and wants to spend some time in the forest. She strives for a space of her own by seeking renunciation and refuge in “a forest far away, leaving behind the noise of traffic, the sounds of conversation, of people walking about, of electrical gadgets in the house” (145). She has decided to take this radical step because of her husband's neglect of her abilities. She is being denied a partnership in the family business despite all the hard work and effort that she had put in for its expansion. Her husband tries to reason with her that he certainly wanted her as a partner in his “many-branched” business, that if he was the king, he considered her the queen of the business. But, since his other business partners did not agree to this, he couldn't do anything about it. And hence, although she has her family worried, she travels alone to stay in a forest for a few days in order to relieve herself of the physical, mental and emotional burden that characterised her life. She retaliates against, her husband, Tirumalai's notion of forest as a place where a woman cannot find her way or going to forest as “a means of punishment” (147). Her husband thought that the rightful place of a wife was only next to that of a husband and thought that it inappropriate for a woman to leave her husband and go somewhere alone. He couldn't understand why she wanted to go to the forest as if she had been banished:

“In epic times, a woman only went to the forest meekly accompanying her husband. It was the epic men who went on their own, to hunt or to destroy demons. As for women, they could only be in the position of Sita, accompanying Rama who assented immediately when his father ordered him into exile in the forest...it was most appropriate for a woman to be a *rishi-pattini*, spouse of a sage, journeying along with her husband. If she did go there on her own, it could only be as the seductive Menaka, putting an end to a sage's meditation...For a woman, the forest is a means of punishment. To send her there is to cast her aside and make her destitute....” (147). But Chenthiru disagrees: “It is time to rewrite the epics” replies Chenthiru.

In her suitcase, along with her clothes she packs a dozen dark-leaded pencils, a pencil sharpener, and an eraser (to erase history and rewrite a new one?!) Chenthiru's journey to “self-discovery” leads her to writing, imagining Sita rewriting the Ramayana from her own perspective. Hence, Chenthiru's journey to the forest is narrated alongside the mythological tale of Sita's exile. The interspersed narratives of Sita and Chenthiru suggest parallels between their experiences. There are many clever parallels between mythic Sita and Chenthiru which suggests that there is not much difference in their lives – both marry men of their choice and both are rejected after years of faithful companionship. Most importantly, Chenthiru and Sita's unique search for self-identity is underscored. As Paula Richman says Lakshmi (Ambai) is “passionately interested in women's lives

and experiences, the space and manages their lives, their support system, and their sustaining dreams. But most of her stories also concern the quest for self-realization and liberation”.

When her abilities and business acumen are negated by her husband, instead of surrendering herself, Chenthiru exercises her agency by renouncing all her relational attachments. Her pride in her entrepreneurial capabilities as well as her strong desire for independence and space- both personal and professional leads her to assert her equal rights and she decides to take leave from everything and surrenders herself to the mother-forest so that she can find peace in her life and understand her inner ‘self’.

Chenthiru challenges and transgresses conservative social norms in other ways. When Chenthiru has a spontaneous feast with Rukminibai and others, the high point of the feast is that they treat themselves to palm toddy. Chenthiru gets high and her intemperate condition leads her to a visionary moment. In that state of near intoxication, Chenthiru hears the music of rudravina coming from the ashram. The music leads her to meet an old man who lives in the forest and plays vinai. He helps her to understand herself and to make crucial decisions of her life. When Chenthiru describes her situation that she cannot breathe in Mumbai, the old man replies that if she understands herself and if she is in full harmony with her mind then ‘Mumbai can follow you here. And the forest too can go with you to Mumbai’. He explains the importance of ‘being in tune’ with oneself through a musical metaphor. According to him, it is the *sur*, the right pitch that holds one in tune. However, he says, the pitch cannot be controlled. Since it can be easily lost, it must be constantly sought after and observed with careful attention. Through the metaphor, Ambai tries to suggest that the sense of the self is fluid and changing. Indeed, the quest to have a grounded self which at the same time allows for fluidity and change is at the core of Ambai’s ideology as a feminist and critic.

This modern day Sita fights against patriarchy, stands her ground and questions roles, rules and identities that are “given”. She questions the canon: “All visions and all quests are allowed only to those who are old enough. And only to men. As for her, she had to give a thousand explanations. Make excuses or become a devotee of Kannan or Shiva” (160).

Ambai’s belief in equality is visible even in the small characters. When Minabai’s granddaughter was deserted by her husband, she was four months pregnant. And when the baby boy was born the husband claimed the child. Rukminibai did not support this, rather she questioned the husband, “the vessel is ours and the milk is ours. Just because the man gave a drop of buttermilk to turn the milk into curd, can we be expected to hand over the whole pot of curd to him” (171).

Another important concept in Ambai’s feminism is sisterhood. This is manifested through Chenthiru’s sharing of food and drinks with Minabai, Savitabai and Rukminibai, with the “ease of long-familiar friends” (153). In the feast, Chenthiru and Rukminibai meet each other not through roles and identities but as individuals and as equals. The feast takes place in the house of one of the labour women who live in the forests, Savitabai. Savitabai, Rukminibai and Minabai live in the forests. They invite Chenthiru who is a professional businesswoman staying in the government guest house, for a meal. There is no occasion for a celebration except that all of these women’s husbands are away. They cook together and eat together, no one ‘serves’ another. The feast is planned, yet spontaneous; the food and drink is familiar yet strange. The feast is an assertion of sisterhood and of the possibility of dissolving boundaries of caste and class. What they share with

each other is not only food, but also dreams, aspirations, personal histories and everyday pain. The cheerful spirit manifested through the sharing of food, palm toddy and songs provides Chenthiru with emotional fulfillment, as she remarks, "both her stomach and her heart felt full" (171).

Indeed, sisterhood is a concept on which Volga's (pen name of Popuri Lalitha Kumari) *Vimukta*, translated as *Liberation of Sita* is also based upon. This Sahitya Akademi Award-winning book is built on Sita's relationship with four minor characters of *Ramayana* and the sisterhood that Sita shares with them. It comprises five interconnected yet independent stories that draw from the *Ramayana* and have Sita as the chief character. Instead of the grand and lofty persona of Rama, it is from the perspective of minor female characters that events in the *Ramayana* are interpreted. It is Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka and Urmila who take centre stage and are instrumental in enlightening Sita.

Most of the stories are set post Sita's banishment from Ayodhya, some just after her marriage and some set during the 14-year exile. As Sita searches for closure from her life experiences in these stories, she meets other women who too were punished unjustly and relegated to the margins or rejected socially. They, too were victims of insults, rejections, curses and neglect by the world, families and husbands. Each of them has fought her own battle of desire, chastity, fidelity and paid a heavy price to emerge victorious as a complete woman with independent identity, not defined by marriage and motherhood. The ordeals of these women make them self-reliant, giving them the objectivity to question convention. Sita notes the struggle that each of them went through, discovered their strength and ultimately gained empowerment and deep insight.

Sita draws strength from this sisterhood at different stages of her life and this is what puts her on the path of self-realisation and liberation. The liberation in the title does not refer to Sita's freedom from Ravana's captivity, but rather from her attachment to Rama and the grief it causes her. Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka and Urmila are a part of her journey towards maturation. Sita learns from the experiences, knowledge and wisdom that these women share with her and that adds to her internal strength. In each story, Sita learns a lesson that facilitates her liberation. Hence, the bonds of sisterhood that these women forge amongst themselves are not merely as victims of patriarchy but as mature women in pursuit of self-realization.

The Reunion, according to Volga was the first story that she had written and the one which made her explore other 'marginalised' women characters. Although authoritative tellings of *Ramayana* depict Sita and Surpanakha as rivals and opposites, when they meet again, late in life, they realize how much they have in common and develop a bond of friendship and understanding. In the story, both Sita and Surpanakha are portrayed as three-dimensional characters rather than total opposites, thus moving beyond the stock images of pativrata and demoness.

Typically, scorned as a demoness in conventional narratives, Surpanakha is portrayed as a lover of beauty in the story. Her anguish at being disfigured and humiliated is revealed. She speaks of how proud she was of her beauty and how much she adored her nose and how she, who was such a worshipper of beauty was turned into an ugly figure. However, she overcomes her feelings of anger and of taking revenge and explored every particle in nature in search of the true meaning of beauty. It took her ten years of hard work, struggle and practice to understand the essence of form and formlessness. Rejecting the binary opposition between beauty and ugliness, she reinterprets her life

through an understanding that both form and deformity contribute to the richness of nature. She finally evolves to surround herself with beauty all around. When Sita meets Surpanakha, she finds that Surpanakha has created for herself a state of unbounding joy and fulfillment by growing a garden that reflects the beauty of nature. She has also found a partner and a soulmate in Sudhir who respects her wisdom. When Sita talks of her duty as a queen to give 'Ramrajya' its heirs, Surpanakhasays, "You never lived in that kingdom Sita, yet see how your life is entangled in it, Sita!"(14). While Surpanakha has attained a state of inner peace and joy that does not depend on anyone, Sita learns from Surpanakha that her serenity must also lie in self-discovery rather than in bringing up her children. She tells Surpanakha, "After my children leave me and go to the city, I will become the daughter of Mother Earth. Resting under these cool trees, I shall create a new meaning for my life".

The Music of Earth is a retelling of Ahalya's story. According to the popular version, Ahalya is a woman who was cursed to turn into a boulder by her own husband, Sage Gautama. Lord Indra desired her and had ravished her in the guise of her husband. Gautama was infuriated when he came to know about this and cursed her to become a rock until she could be cleansed and rescued from this accursed state by the holy touch of Rama's feet, which is when she would turn into a woman again. Victim of such patriarchal norms of chastity, Ahalya is aware that many people wonder whether she was able see through the disguise of Indra. But to her husband that question was irrelevant because, according to him, Ahalya was his "property" and if she had fallen into the hands of another, even if temporarily and without her knowledge, she was polluted. While Rama calls her a woman without character, Kausalya says she was a woman of noble character. But Ahalya finds no need to explain her fidelity to the ones who doubt her, even if it is her husband. When Ahalya meets Sita in the forest, she tells her about the hypocrisy and problems in popular notions of female chastity. According to her, the fundamental issue is not that of a woman's chastity, but rather a man's authority to put that chastity to test. Ahalya wonders if anyone had the power to decide between truth and untruth and tells Sita, "Whatever gives you peace of mind, consider that the truth". When Sita tells Ahalya that she took the fire trial not to prove her own innocence, but rather to protect Rama from society and to give him strength, Ahalya tells Sita that unless she starts taking decisions for herself and not for Rama's sake, her decisions will continue to haunt her. The full import of Ahalya's words, "Truth does not remain the same forever, but keeps changing continuously" (28) are well-understood by Sita when she herself is asked to prove her chastity. Ahalya advises her: "Don't grieve over what has already happened. It is all for your own good, and is part of the process of self-realization. Be Happy. Observe nature and evolution of life. Notice the continual changes in them... You belong to this whole world, not just to Rama...".

Sand Pot is the story of Renuka, the wife of Rishi Jamadagni, who was beheaded by her own son Parasurama on the injunction of his father. The Rishi incriminated her for "lusting" and declared her an adulteress for a fleeting feeling of desire for a gandharva. Renuka Devi compares marital fidelity with the fragility of a sand pot and highlights the pretence of 'enlightenment' that men create for women. She tells Sita, 'No matter how much wisdom they earn through penance, they continue to have a dogmatic view on the paativratyam of their wives (51). She asserts the futility of a woman to seek her identity in her wifehood or in motherhood. Sita is shown to be adept at all sorts of kshatriya skills and fulfilling the roles of both a mother and a guru, she teaches her sons archery. When it is time to give up her sons as royal heirs back to the family, Sita is able to do so with some

detachment and calmness. She also gives up her own claim as a wife to return to the royal kingdom and decides to join her Mother Earth up her in defiance of the Arya Dharma which requires her to declare her innocence in the royal court. Her question to Valmiki is: "Do I need to do that? Is there any sense to such an effort? (64)."

The Liberated, relates the story of Urmila, Lakshmana's wife, who unfettered herself from the obligations and expectations of a marriage by contemplation and meditation of 14 years. After Urmila was 'abandoned' by her husband to follow his brother Rama to the forest, she locked herself in her chambers out of rage and annoyance. However, her self-imposed exile slowly turned her dejection into a quest for truth. She began to probe her relationships in her mind. She realised how love, hate, jealousy all the various human conditions resulted from one's dependence on others. Urmila breaks her 14-year silence to share with Sita how she arrived at a state of inner peace: "Power is the root cause of all sorrow.... We must acquire this power. And then give it up. I shall not submit to anyone's power. Nor will I bind anyone with my power. Then I will feel I have liberated myself (77)". Later, when Sita gets terribly disturbed with the news that Rama is performing the Ashwamedha yagya, Urmila comes to Valmiki's Asharam to meet Sita and to pull her out of her anguish. She makes Sita realize that it is irrelevant whether Rama has taken another wife or not (Rama must have his wife by his side for the Ashwamedha Yagya to be successful and complete). She tells Sita: "You must liberate yourself from Rama...Each of these trials is meant to liberate you from Rama. To secure you for yourself. Fight, meditate, look within until you find the truth that is you'. Liberation from Rama marks the real emancipation for Sita (81)".

Rama is shown to have taken a promise from Sita that she would let him protect her and not protect herself even though she was an accomplished warrior herself. Rama thus remains a prisoner of patriarchy. Though Volga is compassionate while looking at events from his point of view, there is "no liberation for him".

The final story explores the inner life of Rama as he looks back at his choices. Rama must remain "shackled", imprisoned in the chains of Arya Dharma. There is no liberation for him as he must function within the constraints of royal structures.

For most of human history, the woman's body has been treated as man's property. Traditionally, in Indian culture, the female body has been equated with "land" that is a resource and whose ownership is not one's own but someone else's "property". Hence, adultery (where the woman participates) and rape (where the woman does not participate) are both seen as an insult to a man's honour. Jasbir Jain in this regard has asserted that for the Indian woman, the body is controlled by patriarchal morality, and by the roles of wifeness and motherhood. She adds, "Selfhood is not imagined as an abstract concept but the struggle for space begins with the physical existence and the right to ownership (of one's body)...Thus any attempt to seek selfhood or project a subjectivity or to work towards self-expression and freedom has to work through the body (2002, 119)".

Both Ambai and Volga challenge these patriarchal norms of the society in their own way. In *Forest*, Ambai emphasises on the sacredness of the body and how inhabiting one's body is an important way of finding oneself and of being at "home". When Sita confides to the tapasvi Ravana that she feels fettered by her body, Ravana smiles and says, "The body is a prison. The body is a means of freedom," he said, "Look," he said, showing her his rudra-vina. "A musical instrument that was

created by imagining what wonderful music would come forth, if Parvati's breasts, as she lay on her back, were turned into gourds, and their nipples attached by strings. It is an extension of Devi's body... Will you try?"

While Ambai asserts the significance of women's acceptance of their bodies, Volga's Ahalya, Renuka and Sita question prejudices of morality, fidelity and chastity that are centuries old. Ahalya (who may be seen a rape survivor, slut shamed) questions the hypocrisy of norms of chastity and man's right to judge a woman's morality. Similarly, Renuka unmask the fake enlightenment of men who, under all circumstances remain insular about their notions of a "good woman".

This questioning may be seen as perhaps a necessary step towards greater chances of equality between Indian men and women.

In both Ambai and Volga's work, forest is a trope for quest and discovery. In both the retellings studied in this chapter, forest is a place where Sita comes to terms with the past through self-reflection, away from worldly obligations and distractions. Sita learns to calm the waves of her mind here for Nature offers solace and refuge to her when human contact and trust fails her.

However, GeetuVaid in her review of *Liberation of Sita*, maintains that the heroines in Volga's book are granted victory only when they conveniently leave the world and bury their difficult female selfhood in a forest. According to her, they become victorious only when they abandon victory itself. She further reasons that their harmony with the self is achieved only via an austere withdrawal from life. Such a life lived in solitude and away from men might seem irrelevant and remote to a modern-day woman.

I argue that the forces, conditions and structures of Sita's society, her character and the narrative tradition that she belongs to allows her to be a rebel, not revolutionary. Drawing from Velcheru Narayan Rao's essay, "When Does Sita Cease to be Sita: Notes toward a Cultural Grammar of Indian Narratives", it may be suggested that anything too radical will cause Sita to lose her identity as Sita. In his attempt to discover the boundaries that hold together the idea of Sita, Narayan argues that the "crucial boundary that makes her Sita is her loyalty to Rama and the power that comes from it" (235). If one attempts to deliberately change the well-understood traits of a character that have been deeply embedded in the popular mind and take too many liberties with the underlying cultural grammar of the character and its narrative traditions, then she ceases to be that character. Hence, to maintain her status and identity as Sita, she must remain a pativrata even as she asserts her selfhood. In the retellings explored in this chapter, Sita questions, doubts, feels hurt and searches for independence and dignity as a human being. And to conquer her individual freedom, she walks out of an unjust system. We see Sita as an actor, rather than simply acted upon by male-dominated social institutions. Her act of renouncing the world, must be seen as an evidence of her agency. Renunciation of the world affirms her identity and dignity rather than deny it.

Lyn Parker contends, "We cannot assume the nature and meaning of women's agency. It is important to ask how people themselves conceive of their actions and express their experiences, how communities construe individual practice and how cultures construct meaning and interpret agency in sometimes unintended ways" (224). Hence, Agency must be seen as an aspect of culture, of subjective experiences and of belief systems. Indian society is sociocentric rather than egocentric where "emphasis is on doing one's duty (dharma) as against the egoistic play of individual tastes

and wishes" (3). Also, Indian philosophy extols the freeing of the base self from the *maya* of worldly attachments. Looking at Sita's renunciation from such a context, it is clear that Sita exercises her agency and tries to achieve harmony in life in her own new way. She breaks tradition, yet remains within it. She does not compromise on her identity and individuality. Her actions are formed within the possibilities of her context. The peace that Sita finally achieves cannot be disregarded. As Volga herself says, Sita's final war was against herself. Sita rejects the man she loved so deeply and who loved her back equally, even gives up her sons. The strength to leave Rama could not have come from her anger towards Rama alone. She leaves Rama with a much matured mind and an understanding of her own selfhood.

I am Sita
made up with words
bound in words
imprisoned in words...
I shall cross the river
to see the new world
to assume a new form
to create a new rajya.

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