



Echoes of Sisterhood: A Reading of Sreekantan Nair's *Kanchana Sita*

Dr. Shreyasee Datta

Assistant Professor,

Department of English,

Balurghat Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Balurghat,

West Bengal, India.

shreyasee85@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6793-7515>

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Abstract:

Mythological narrations are the bible of a society; the characters in them are societal models. Role models are significant in inculcating societal norms. Thus, the validity of these role models never expires. The advent of feminism has re-casted these models through feminine lens, thereby attempting in bringing about a change in society. Feminist authors incorporated this theme in manifold ways. In some recasting, the marginalised are endowed with voice and identity; while others the process of peripheral existence is questioned. This paper has highlighted the predicament of a legendary feminist character of Sita, through the work of the famous playwright, Sreekantan Nair. The play focuses on the episodes from the Book of War of Ramayana. In this play Sita is the “absentee-heroine” only appears towards the end. It is Urmila and Kaushalya who vehemently question Rama’s behaviour towards his wife, Sita. Thus this play exhibits exquisitely the woman-to-woman bonding, thereby finding a way towards gaining confidence and resilience in a woman’s self-identity.

Keywords: Re-reading epics, feminism, Indian feminism, woman-to-woman bonding, sisterhood sorority.

Introduction:

Mythological narrations are not just stories about the past—they are psychological software for navigating the present. As the great mythologist Joseph Campbell famously puts it in his book *The Mythic Image*, "*Myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths.*" (Campbell 19). Hence a society never loses the power of myths. Salman Rushdie calls mythology "the family album or storehouse of a culture's childhood, containing (it's)... future, codified as tales that are both poems and oracles" (Rushdie 83). Mark Schorer validates this view by calling myth "a controlling image", the "indispensable substructure" (Schorer 355). In Indian context a widely known saying goes, 'Jaha nei Bharate, taha nei Bharate'—translated as, every Indian situation finds its mention or solution in Mahabharata. The Mahabharata is considered the bible of ideals, morals, solutions, conflicts, religion, politics, economics and various other topics. Similarly, the Ramayana is held up as a mirror of the highest ideals of Hindu culture and civilisation. Herein is described the ideal hero Sri Ramachandra, ... the exemplar for all living and dutiful sons,... the ideal husband and King ... Sita is the noblest flower of Indian womanhood, devoted to her lord in thought, word and deed ... (Iyengar 27)

Mythology has always been the storehouse of models. Myths are male constructs so are the characters in them. Men are heroes and women are supporting casts to valorise the heroism. This is "the face that launched a thousand ships" where the beauty of Helen is considered the reason for the Trojan War. The abduction of Sita by Ravana created the colossal war of Ramayana. Women in epics are a complex presentation. Somewhere presented as catalyst for wars, elsewhere becomes the moral anchors but cumulatively they are interpreted everywhere as submissive heroines.

With the rise of modernist feminism, these narrations are reconsidered and texts are re-read, re-interpreted with an intention to read deeper into the women figures because feminists considered them as characters imbued with profound inner strength. Adrienne Rich in her 1971 essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" writes, "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival." Here, in this paper this understanding would call into practice with the central women character from Ramayana. Sita is widely considered as an epitome of purity and devotion; elevated to the level of a Goddess. Throughout her regular interpretation of an ideal wife and daughter, somewhere is lost her inner strength and autonomous agency. These recent retellings read texts from a women perspective – the perception that harbours multiple possibilities. In some reinterpretations, the marginalised characters themselves voice their anguish, or lend their voices for another woman, and in some these characters are given a total alteration. Hence, in multiple ways the writers and critics are pulling out the models from periphery to centre.

Among many, one such attempt is C. N. Sreekantan Nair's drama *Kanchana Sita – A Play*. It is originally written in 1961 in Malayalam and is the first play of a dramatic trilogy. The other two are *Saketham* and *Lankalakshmi*. *Kanchan Sita* has won the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award in 1962. Later it is translated into English.

The text brings forth two kinds of expression, "a woman looking at the Ramayana from a woman's point of view and a man looking at the Ramayana from a woman's point of view. In both these expression, the woman's point of view (as distinguished from a patriarchal point of view) attains a fuller dimension" (Nair XX). The play is divided into four acts beginning with the return of Rama to Ayodhya until Sita's disappearance into Mother

Earth. In this play, Sita is the “absentee-heroine”, (14) only appearing towards the end. Further unlike other women casts, Sita retains her mythical identities sought in every woman. Other women in this play are Urmila and Kaushalya who vehemently question Rama’s behaviour towards his wife, Sita.

Nair takes a pro-woman stance in this play. Being a liberal, he laid a great emphasis on woman’s point of view. He aims to deconstruct the myth of Rama and his hallowed image. The drama intended to provide a new, more humane and acceptable platform to the whole epic. In the play Urmila, Kaushalya, Bharata, Hanuman and Valmiki question Rama on his sense of justice. They even assert that justice which discards personal emotions is not justice at all. Hence comprehensively the play is challenging the patriarchal stance in the depiction of characters of the epic.

Sita is the absent heroine around whom the play revolves. Her sister Urmila and her mother-in-law, Kaushalya strive to seek justice for Sita. The play begins with Urmila and Kaushalya conversing. Urmila is hoping that Rama’s visit to the *Panchavati* may transform “A soulless Ayodhya” King (Nair 25) to a human with pulsating heart. Kaushalya being more experienced in the norms of *Raghuvamsam* rectified Urmila saying, “single-minded concentration is the glory of *Aryavamsam*.... A human being’s words were deemed greater than the human being himself...” (23), thus Dasaratha’s son would never change his mind. Their conversation now took a turn where the negligible position of a woman in worldly state affairs is discussed. Kaushalya puts it as, “the queen is just a queen. She is not the King. The queen is a woman” (24). Emphatically, Urmila continues, “Perhaps, for the glory of *Raghuvamsam* the woman has to be sacrificed” (24). Kaushalya expressed her support with a deep sigh, saying, “Ayodhya likes sacrifices” (24). This brief introductory conversation

between the two royal ladies sets a background note to the whole drama. It acts as an introduction to the rules of *Aryavamsam* and the position of women in it.

The scene now shifts to accommodate Rama and Lakshmana returning from the forest. Urmila reverently greeted them. She started enquiring about the Godavari river, the mountains, the trees, the birds, the animals. Explaining the intricacies of the forest of *Panchvati*, she halted at Valmiki's hermitage and asked Rama whether he visited the hermitage on his way back. Rama replied that they were not welcomed by Valmiki who might be absorbed in the rituals. The reason seemed unacceptable for Urmila, she questioned: "Is it surprising if the poet who composed the world's first verse upon seeing the death throes of the *krauncha* bird did not welcome the great King Ramachandra?" (31) Urmila now puts direct questions. She questioned Raman, "Do you believe that Sita is chaste?" (31), to which Raman gave an impersonal answer, "[I]n the test of fire she was victorious" (31). She puts her next question, "... why did you display an unimaginable heroism to liberate Sita?" (32) It begets another cold reply from Raman saying, "That was not for her sake. It was important for the security of the Aryans to vanquish the clan of *Malyavan*.... For this, Sita was only an excuse" (32). The concluding sentence triggered Urmila's dissatisfaction that breaks into a loud exclamation: "Your legally wedded wife was just an excuse!" (32) She further doubts that Rama's suspicion on Sita's chastity has not been yet clarified. Another impersonal answer followed, "Sita's husband is primarily the servant of the people" (32), says Rama. With growing impatience Urmila asks, "Is King Ramachandra the servant of ignorant people?" (32) Branded with the title of an arrogant lady Urmila exits the first act. The remaining portion concentrates on the discussion regarding Rama's second marriage. The second act presents a more assertive image of Urmila whose desperation to seek Sita's justice is highly evident. She praised *Ramarajya* as paradise on earth and with certain irony she honoured Rama with the credit. Acknowledging the concept of royal *dharma*, Urmila

apparently supports Rama that whoever disavows the dharma or violate justice should be punished. Beaming with pride Rama confirmed that, be it his mother, wife or even the youngest brother, nobody is beyond this law. Instantly Urmila asks Rama, “Then, why are you not punishing yourself? You who have flung your chaste and pure wife to the mercy of wild animals in the forest, and plans to consort with another woman” (40)? Rama though angry, answered in a controlled way, “The King of Ayodhya has no individuality, other than the welfare of the people. He has no mother, father, wife, or sister.... For a King all these worldly bonds amount to one thing....The will of the people” (41). If Rama is concerned about his subjects then, how can he be blind to Sita’s sorrow? claims Urmila. She understands the royal *dharma* which runs on the will of the people. Nevertheless with uprightness she deliberately sets arrows of question accusing Rama – the King. She puts it thus: “Oh king, is there no value for truth in Ayodhya? Aren’t you the king? A follower of truth? An observer of dharma? What protection does a chaste and pure woman have in this Ayodhya? If in future a woman’s life is unsafe in this Aryavartham, don’t forget that you are responsible. Also, don’t forget that tomorrow you may be labelled as the one who showed the way for heartless men to drive their wives out” (42). Urmila did not stop here. Accusing Rama was not all for Urmila, she even advised him on his act. She compared Rama to his younger brother Bharatan. He went to the forest and begged his elder brother, Rama to return and also did not occupy the throne when he was in exile rather, ruled over with Rama’s sleepers on the throne. Like Bharata, Rama should seek forgiveness of that “jewel among chaste women” (43).

In the last act when Lava and Kusa entered the palace of Ayodhya singing Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, the urgency in Urmila’s tone is noted. Her persuasive appeal can melt any stone where she is requesting Rama to bless these children as his and Sitadevi’s sons. She says, “this blessed face ... True divine images ... call them and put them on your lap, Tirumeni

You will attain that release from curses, which no Aswamedham can give you” (79). Anxious she turned to the great grammarian, Hanuman then present at the court and seek for reason of the expression “Jaya Sitaram” (80). Hanuman replies, “Sita and Rama are not two different beings. Like pakriti and purusha ...” (80). Urmila left no stone unturned to carve out of Rama, the King, a human with a throbbing heart with emotion for his wife. Bound with his moral duty towards the throne, Rama ordered for a second fire-ordeal for the people of *Saketam* because they did not witness the earlier one. Urmila flares up denying every decorum of the court saying, “You are insulting the whole of womanhood” (92).

The drama ended with Sita profusely weeping, beseeching her mother to protect this woman’s pride and give her refuge, thereby disappearing into the bosom of the Earth. In the play, Urmila upheld Sita’s cause of being emotionally deprived and her denial of justice. She provides her the support which her husband deprived her of. Thus, Urmila’s identification with Sita’s sorrow brings into the play the *nascent* potential which lies unacknowledged in a woman-bonding. Urmila all through questioned Rama on his actions, also on the royal *dharma* of Ayodhya, with the aim to return Sita her lost glory and to make people see through the wrong justice meted out to a woman, who is held up as an icon of morality.

To comprehend the play better it can be read in the light of recent modern critical backgrounds. The *avant garde* concept of Adrienne Rich - “lesbian existence” and “lesbian continuum” are potentially liberating for the whole women folk.

Adrienne Rich in her revolutionary essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” emphasizes on the woman-to-woman relationship. She believes this bonding bears potency for free thinking, exploration of new paths, shattering of the silence and clarity in a woman’s position. She uses two powerful expressions of *lesbian existence* and *lesbian continuum*. The ordinary interpretation for the nomenclature stands as a woman to woman

relationship on a corporeal level. The patriarchal heterogeneous society booked this relation primarily under physical level denying every right to intellectual access. The limiting meaning of the term *lesbianism* made her select such a revolutionary nomenclature. By *lesbian existence*, Rich suggests both the historical and the present continuing custom of adding relevance to the concept of lesbianism. And the second term includes a range of woman-identified experiences. Rich categorically made an effort to make the terms transcend beyond their “sexually stigmatised existences” (Rich 650). It embraces many “forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (648 – 649); also felt its effects on associations as *marriage resistance* and in “haggard” behaviour identified by Mary Daly where “a woman [is] reluctant to yield to wooing” (Daly *Gyn/Ecology* 15). Audre Lorde has defined this unique pure relationship as an energy which is omnipresent in “the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic”; as the empowering joy which “makes us less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” (“Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” Out and Out Books Pamphlet No. 3).

Thus, Rich’s concept is a very potent form of nay-saying to patriarchy and an act of resistance. For social endorsement of her concept, Rich forged a network of sisterhood sorority from diverse sources. Rich has drawn examples from the Beguines, African women, Chinese marriage resistance sisterhoods, women who welcomed the birth of daughters. For further illustration, the critic sited an oft-quoted literary passage from Colette Renee’s *The Vagabond*. It describes “the melancholy and touching image of two weak creatures who have perhaps found shelter in each other’s arms, there to sleep and weep, safe from man who is

often cruel, and there to taste “*better than any pleasure, the bitter happiness of feeling themselves akin, frail and forgotten*” (Rich 658).

It is highly acceptable for Urmila to seek justice for Sita being her own sister, but the play also presented a subtle woman-bonding between the mother-in-law, Kaushalya and her daughter-in-law, Sita. The author consciously selected this relationship which is generally considered not a smooth link forged between the two women in the society. At the beginning, Kaushalya in the conversation with her youngest daughter-in-law, Urmila reveals her experienced heart about the miserable plight of the royal woman. She was the queen of King Dasaratha, Rama’s father and was also made to suffer silently at the hands of the royal norms. Moreover now seeing Sita’s unreasonable banishment to the forest she confesses to Urmila, “Even this old woman’s patience is wearing thin. Recently even sleep has forsaken me.... Is the end near, daughter?” (25) Unlocking her heart she said that if she would have been present at the court during Sita’s unjust banishment, “I would have objected – whether I succeeded or not” (25). With a deep sigh, Kaushalya goes on, “The walls of my heart have the strength to face all sorrows” (26). In the second act when the royal priests were deciding on Rama’s second marriage with the princess of Kashi, Kaushalya using her position of the queen-mother requested her son, “You should not marry again. This is the wish of King Dasarathan’s queen” (45). She is not unaware of her limitation as a woman, but only expressed her heart’s desire to her son in great anticipation. She continued, “My husband too was the ruler of Ayodhya. At least in future, let the rulers of Ayodhya be freed of women’s curses” (45). She exits abruptly. Kaushalya again enters in the last scene where she is found talking to Rama, regarding the two bright sons, Lava and Kusa going round the palace and singing in their sweet voice the eternal story of *Ramayana*. The end of the play registers a sound protest from Kaushalya on Rama ordering Sita for a second ordeal. Embracing Sita in her grief smitten heart she pleads with her son, ‘... can you repeat what you said, once again,

before your mother.... My blessed Rama has insulted a mother. Haven't you? On hearing that I must die ...” (92).

Thus, Kaushalya all through her presence defended Sita against the vices meted out to a wife, a mother, essentially to a woman. The play becomes a perfect example of woman-bonding, a relationship that bears the potential to be an act of resistance to the patriarchal mind-set. In addition, the drama also provides voice to two suppressed women figures of the epic, who were made to borne all sorrows without a single word of protest. They transcend their subjugated position to fight for another woman. Urmila and Kaushalya used their influential status of being the King's sister-in-law and the queen-mother respectively to question the injustices meted out and sought to return Sita her desired honour. This even makes the play more significant because plays on women contesting to free her particular situation are not that rare now, but here the struggle was elevated to attempt to seek justice for another woman, forming a close connection among women of society.

The writer is silently addressing multiple issues in one play. The playwright, Sreekantan Nair, has judiciously selected peripheral characters to address Sita's predicament. Many plays are written where Sita herself is lashing out at Rama regarding the patriarchal mind-set that is tainting her image of a self-identified woman. The uniqueness of the play lies in bringing forth the woman-to-woman bonding - in seeking justice for one another.

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