



Narrative, Norms, and Nation: A Counter Narrative Tradition in Select Retellings of *The Ramayana*

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Abstract— Retellings have emerged as an accepted genre in the recent years. The retellings of the Indian epics, particularly of *The Ramayana* have gained significant scholarly attention and focus. The recent studies posit the retellings provide alternative or counter narratives to challenge and reshape the original tale. The important questions here emerge: 1. Will the tradition of retellings lead us to completely forgetting the Valmiki's *Ramayana*? 2. Are we in the process of creating a new *Ramayana*? 3. Do these retellings align to the epic tradition of India? All these questions are sought to be explored in this paper through an analysis of three modern retellings of *The Ramayan*: Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantment* and Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*. All these retellings provide fresh viewpoints, voices, and versions to understand Sita as a character, and to reinvent identities, contest meanings, and proclaim political influence. The paper finds the counter-narratives portray Sita as a symbol of empowerment and wisdom and contest the notion of patriarchy reinforced in the mythical narrative. It argues the retellings attain a fresh spin with their narrative techniques and intent, yet confirm to the core story and the scheme of characterization. The alterations in the narrative of the retellings do not necessitate a novel tradition, but a continuation of the historical and mythical chronicle, in accommodation of the India's cultural diversity and socio-political dynamics.



Keywords— *The Ramayana*, retellings, narrative, counter narrative

Introduction

The great Indian epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* serve to be the treasure house of Indian narratology as they embody numerous stories and sub stories. "They cover all areas of human psychology and resolve many intellectual and moral questions. These features of the epics provide profuse scope for retellings" (P.S. Kumar 793). In recent years, the retellings of mythical stories, especially stories from the great Indian epics have received overwhelming academic and scholarly responses. The retellings of *The Ramayana*, to this effect, have been widely discussed and debated. Authors like Devdutt Pattanaik, Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, Amit Majmudar, Ashwin Sanghi, Ashok Banker, and others have dedicated themselves to untying the endless puzzles and enigmas surrounding mythical stories of *The Ramayana*. The recent studies [Roy (2025), Halder and Mishra (2024), Shukla (2024), Sharma (2023),

Bavchandbhai (2022), Shejale (2021), Singh (2017), Kumar (2016)] have explored how these authors have reinterpreted and altered the epics in their writings and provided fresh perspectives. In this sense that the retellings provide alternative or counter narratives to challenge and reshape the original tale. The important questions here emerge: 1. Will the tradition of retellings lead us to completely forgetting the Valmiki's *Ramayana*? 2. Are we in the process of creating new *Ramayan*s? 3. Do these retellings align to the epic tradition of India? All these questions are sought to be explored in this paper through an analysis of three modern retellings of *The Ramayan*: Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantment* and Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*. All these retellings provide fresh viewpoints, voices, and versions to understand Sita as a character, and to reinvent identities, contest meanings, and proclaim political influence.

The Narratology of *The Ramayana*

Composed in the 200s B.C., *The Ramayana* continues to be one of the celebrated Indian epics. It is a narrative of great religious and spiritual importance. It chronicles the adventures of Prince Rama, the incarnation of lord Vishnu. It also touches upon themes of duty, loyalty, and the battle between good and evil. The notion of patriarchy forms both the base and superstructure of the narrative. The heroism and valour of Rama is celebrated and granted enough textual space. In contrast to that, Sita is often seen as a typical ideal Indian bride. She is exposed as “passive, subservient, docile, self-sacrificing and intensely loyal to her husband” (Halder and Mishra 2084). She readily accompanies her husband into exile and constantly supports him despite the challenges she faces. Such portrayal of Sita in Valmiki’s *Ramayana* has been brought to scrutiny. The writers of modern retellings, through the model of counter narratives, project Sita as an empowered character who challenges the patriarchal notion of morality.

Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*

Pattanaik's retelling is not a mere reaffirmation of Valmiki's narrative, rather a re-examination of “Sita's depiction and its influence on Indian narrative traditions, norms, and culture” (Halder and Mishra 2091). Sita is portrayed not as a deity but as an individual with full of humanity and compassion. Such portrayal contrasts that of the conventional portrayal of her. She was considered as a gift from the soil goddess for the childless ruler rather than an abandoned child. The assertion of Janaka that “fatherhood is derived from the heart rather than biological reproduction,” (Halder and Mishra 2091) emphasises the social dimensions of fatherhood. Janaka embraced her stating, “I will call her Sita, the one found in a furrow, who chose me as her father...The harvest was outstanding” (Pattanaik 9 - 10). Here, two things are suggested: “adopting a female child and choosing her as a political successor” (Halder and Mishra 2092). “The need to alter the cultural representation of female children in India is evident due to their low adoption rate, lack of enthusiasm upon arrival, and poor involvement in politics. Devdutt's depiction of Sita questions conventional norms and challenges us to contemplate historical truths” (Halder and Mishra 2092).

Sita was imparted Veda by the learned scholars from Aryavrata and made conversant with *The Upanishads*. Pattanaik’s *Sita* underlines the necessity of women's education in Indian culture, thus questioning conventional gender norms. In India, where women were not included in religious writings and deprived of education, Sita emerged as one who loved both seeking and imparting wisdom. Sita acquired proficiency in many culinary activities too. It is

important to note that women's participation in sports also formed a substantial part of Pattanaik’s retelling. Sita’s participation in a competition in lifting a large object resembling Shiva's bow Pinaki was a testimony to that effect. She learned about world politics, culinary skills, and martial arts. “Valmiki's *Ramayana* depicts women as delicate, portraying Sita as docile and Urmila as sleeping for fourteen years while awaiting her husband. Mandavi and Shrutkriti are not referred to as post-marriage. They play a crucial role in Devdutt's *Sita* as bright ladies who relish engaging in talks,” (Halder and Mishra 2093) clearly indicating the germ of counter or alternative narrative.

Pattanaik's narrative counters the conventional view of women as dependents who perform fulfilling roles like daughters, wives, and mothers. In his depiction, Sita is independent. During the banishment, she seemed managing herself independently, and imparting her knowledge and wisdom to her less privileged siblings. Her insights into dharma, nature, charity, exploitation, selflessness, and other societal issues truly make her an admirable company. The incident of Sita metamorphosed into Kaali to defeat a thousand-headed monster shows how much advanced military expertise and resource management skills she had. This deviates from the mythical portrayal of Sita. The deviation here seems judiciously accurate when put to the validation of the retelling in the modern times. The notion this retelling strives to place is to sustain an “equilibrium in political engagement, create a contemporary socio-cultural atmosphere for all genders, and offer fresh viewpoints on social comprehension” (Halder and Mishra 2094).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

The Forest of Enchantments is yet another remarkable modern-day retelling of the Indian epic *The Ramayana*. The book is narrated precisely from Sita's perspective. Here, Divakaruni tries to reinvest in introducing Sita and a bunch of other lesser-known female characters those who are sidelined in mainstream narratives. The characters like Sunayna, Urmila, Kaikeyi, Shanta, Mandodari, Surpankha, and Sarama have been granted a textual space to raise their voices. Divakaruni’s intention is, by no means, to portray male characters as tormented. The characters of Ram and Laxman were presented with full grandeur and respect. Sita is portrayed as courageous and self-confident. She is a “nature lover and healer, skilled in martial arts, shedding the image of a passive and submissive woman” (Halder and Mishra 2095). This retelling lends focus on Sita's hardships while residing in Ashoka Vatika which is usually often overlooked.

In patriarchal societies, gender roles are seen as intrinsic and despotic. Women are depicted as less courageous and

dutiful than men. Valmiki's portrayal of Rama, as brave and courageous, and as one who readily obeys his fathers and steps down as crown prince to follow a life in exile for fourteen years, clearly highlights the notion of patriarchy to which Sita as a wife scrupulously follows. "*The Forest of Enchantments* retells and reimagines the old epic.... Divakaruni's Sita defies the conventional wisdom that has always portrayed her as submissive" (Halder and Mishra 2098). The counter narrative digs deeper into the miraculous emergence of Sita from the ground as narrated in the epic. Divakaruni's narrative contests such notion for the fact that the miraculous emergence obscures the details of her birth and deters her ability to understand and interpret it. In the retelling, as a part of their family history, King Janaka is made to recount the incident, particularly how he discovers the deserted infant Sita while cultivating a patch of land for religious reasons, to his wife and daughters. Later in life, Sita recounts this:

"A baby lay in his path, naked and newborn, glistening in the young sun like a mirage. He was amazed that I didn't cry, regarding him instead with unblinking eyes. I had kicked off the cloth that swaddled me, a gold fabric finer than anything our Mithila weavers could produce ... Sceptics wondered which cunning person had placed me there at just the right moment to be discovered by Janaka. It must have been someone who knew my unworldly father well ... Other kings would have had the child removed without considering her fate. At best, they would have ordered her to be brought up in a servant's home. But my saintly father picked me up and held me to his chest" (Divakaruni 6).

It is important to mention that the scene and circumstances of the finding remain unchanged in Divakaruni's narrative. Queen Sunaina, Janaka's wife, raises Sita and educates her in feminine activities and combat skills. "Sita learned to move stealthily like a panther, run, leap, climb quietly, fall without harm, and endure pain" (Halder and Mishra 2100). Divakaruni's narrative challenges the notion of Sita as obedient, submissive, and domestic, as depicted in *The Ramayana*. "While granting Sita autonomy and involving her in her connection with Rama, Divakaruni has maintained Sita's seclusion inside the realm of women, making the narrative more reasonable and slightly romantic" (Halder and Mishra 2100). This retelling invokes in creating an alternative narrative about women in India that would challenge the traditional cultural texts by unpacking multitude secluded dimensions.

Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*

In this retelling, Indian patriarchal society is put to challenge. Instead of being suppressed and oppressed, Sita emerges as a skilled and courageous warrior with exceptional intelligence to rule her kingdom. She acquired her martial arts skills and others while living in the ashram of Rishi Shevthaketu. All her skills and intelligence made her Mithila's prime minister. "She defeats the Lankan army in Mithila with Ram. She is the saviour, the leader, and an excellent administrator. Since childhood, Sita has displayed aggression towards things she disliked. She expresses her disagreement without any hesitation" (Halder and Mishra 2086).

Amish's narrative brings out her unique connection with the slum dweller, Samichi which she has formed while pretending to be a maid's child. She does not discriminate based on social status when forming friendships. The narrative also presents Sita having a keen interest in adventures. She fulfils her curiosity of riding a horse after she receives an Arabian horse as a present from her uncle Kushadhwaj. She is an optimist who even considers the exile as an opportunity for personal growth. She adapted to the jungle conditions in no time. Sita defends her camp against Ravan's attack in the absence of Ram and Lakshman by retaliating against the accosters. However, she failed at one point and was abducted by Ravan.

"Amish Tripathi's *Sita* practices counter storytelling to disrupt and question the patriarchal mindset cherished by Hindu society. He highlights the marginalised characters by empowering them and emphasising their ability to perform. Amish has reinterpreted the passive portrayal of Sita as a kind of rebellion against patriarchal ideology" (Halder and Mishra 2088).

In his portrayal of Sita, Amish Tripathi integrates present-day female experiences in pursuit of martial arts and self-defence training. This alters the notion of patriarchal power of the original tale and presents it in a more realistic and humanistic way. "Amish deconstructs the submissive Sita character from traditional stories and presents a modern, educated, powerful woman who confidently expresses her abilities and strength in the new story" (Halder and Mishra 2089).

Conclusion

All the three modern retellings reinterpret the mythological text to form narratives and to give them a modern twist. They provide fresh viewpoints, voices, and versions to understand Sita as a character, and to reinvent identities, contest meanings, and proclaim political influence. The paper finds the counter-narratives portray Sita as a symbol of empowerment and wisdom and contest the notion of patriarchy reinforced in the mythical narrative. It argues the retellings attain a fresh spin with their narrative techniques

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