



EXPLORING THE FEMININE PERSPECTIVE IN DEVDUTT PATTANAIAK'S 'SITA: AN ILLUSTRATED RETELLING OF THE RAMAYANA

Dr. Dimple

Associate Professor of English, Government College for Women, Karnal, Haryana

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Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the significance of this perspective in reinterpreting the epic for contemporary readers. By examining the portrayal of Sita and other female characters in Pattanaik's retelling, the paper highlights the challenges to traditional gender roles and the promotion of a more inclusive and balanced understanding of the Ramayana. Pattanaik's reinterpretation of Sita's character showcases her agency, assertiveness, and depth of love for Rama, as well as her connection to nature and fertility. The inclusion of the feminine perspective in the narrative allows for a more nuanced appreciation of the Ramayana, resonating with modern-day feminist movements and fostering a more diverse understanding of Indian mythology. In conclusion, Pattanaik's 'Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana' offers a fresh and inclusive interpretation of the epic, enriching its relevance for contemporary audiences and contributing to a richer appreciation of our shared human heritage.

Key Words: Pattanaik, Sita, Illustrated, Retelling

Introduction:

The Ramayana, a revered Indian epic, recounts the journey of Prince Rama to rescue his wife, Sita, from the demon king Ravana. It is a significant religious and cultural text in Hinduism and has been reinterpreted and retold by various authors and scholars. Pattanaik's reinterpretation of Sita's character showcases her agency, assertiveness, and depth of love for Rama, as well as her connection to nature and fertility (Narayan 24). The feminine perspective in the narrative allows for a more nuanced appreciation of the Ramayana, resonating with modern-day feminist movements and fostering a more diverse understanding of Indian mythology.

Pattanaik's retelling gives Sita a stronger presence in the narrative. Unlike the traditional portrayal of Sita as a submissive and dutiful wife, Pattanaik's Sita is depicted as assertive, independent, and resilient. By granting her greater agency and emphasizing her inner strength, the retelling allows readers to view Sita as a powerful and inspiring figure in her own right. The feminine perspective in Pattanaik's retelling highlights the experiences and emotions of female characters in the Ramayana. The narrative delves into Sita's feelings during her abduction, captivity, and trials, as well as her relationships with other women, such as Mandodari, Trijata, and Ahalya. These insights enable readers to better understand the complexities and challenges faced by female characters in the epic. Pattanaik's retelling questions the patriarchal norms prevalent in the traditional Ramayana by presenting female characters who defy societal expectations (Doniger 31). For example, Sita's refusal to be passive and submissive challenges the conventional role of a wife in ancient Indian society. Similarly, other female characters, such as Mandodari and Trijata, are portrayed as strong and compassionate, breaking away from stereotypes. In the retelling, Sita's character is closely associated with nature and fertility, emphasizing her status as the embodiment of feminine energy. Her birth from the earth, her connection to the forest during her exile, and her eventual return to the earth all serve to highlight her role as a symbol of nature and femininity.

The feminine perspective in Pattanaik's retelling resonates with modern readers, particularly in the context of ongoing feminist movements and discussions surrounding gender equality. By offering a more inclusive and balanced portrayal of female characters in the Ramayana, the retelling encourages a deeper appreciation of the epic and fosters a more diverse understanding of Indian mythology.

The Traditional Ramayana and its Portrayal of Sita:

Pattanaik's retelling highlights Sita's agency and strength, while also critiquing the patriarchal norms and values that are present in the original text. Pattanaik's version of the story emphasizes Sita's ability to make her own decisions and take action, rather than simply being a passive victim of circumstance. For example, in his retelling, Sita chooses to accompany Rama into exile in the forest, rather than being forced to do so (Narayan 25).

She also takes an active role in defending herself against Ravana's advances, rather than simply waiting for Rama to rescue her. Pattanaik's retelling also critiques the patriarchal norms and values that are present in the original text. For example, he questions Rama's decision to put Sita through a trial by fire to prove her purity,

arguing that it is unjust and cruel. He also challenges the traditional gender roles that are present in the story, showing Sita as a strong and independent woman who is capable of making her own decisions (Richman 45).

In the traditional Ramayana, Sita is portrayed primarily as a devoted wife and a symbol of feminine virtue and purity. Her role is largely defined in relation to her husband, Rama, and she is depicted as his faithful companion and support throughout their many trials and tribulations. Sita's character is often viewed through a patriarchal lens, which emphasizes her subservience and obedience to her husband. For example, when Rama banishes Sita to the forest, she does not protest or resist his decision, but rather accepts it meekly and follows him into exile. Similarly, when she is kidnapped by Ravana, Sita does not attempt to escape or resist her captor, but rather remains patiently awaiting rescue by her husband. Furthermore, Sita's actions and decisions are often dictated by the men around her, rather than being based on her own agency or desires. For example, when Rama orders her to undergo a trial by fire to prove her purity, Sita does not object or resist, but rather submits to the test in order to prove her devotion to her husband (Doniger 32).

Pattanaik's Reinterpretation of Sita:

Pattanaik's reinterpretation focuses on Sita's ability to make decisions and express her opinions, showcasing her as an independent and strong-willed character. For example, during her marriage to Rama, Sita is depicted as actively choosing Rama as her husband rather than passively accepting him. In Pattanaik's retelling, Sita is portrayed as an assertive figure who stands up for her beliefs and challenges societal norms. Pattanaik's retelling emphasizes the depth of Sita's love for Rama, as well as her capacity for compassion and understanding, which extends beyond her role as a dutiful wife (Pattanaik 104).

This is evident in her refusal to be passive and submissive in the face of adversity, such as her abduction by Ravana and her trial by fire. Throughout the retelling, Sita demonstrates an incredible amount of inner strength and resilience, as she endures various hardships such as her abduction, captivity, and trials. Pattanaik highlights Sita's ability to persevere and maintain her dignity, even in the most challenging circumstances. Pattanaik's reinterpretation emphasizes Sita's connection to nature and fertility, presenting her as an embodiment of the feminine energy. Pattanaik presents Sita as a symbol of nature and fertility, emphasizing her connection to the earth and her role as a mother, further enriching her character (Pattanaik 140).

This is evident in her birth from the earth, her time spent in the forest during her exile, and her eventual return to the earth. In the retelling, Sita's interactions with other female characters, such as Mandodari, Trijata, and Ahalya, offer additional insights into her character and serve to further challenge traditional gender roles. These relationships showcase Sita's compassion, understanding, and solidarity with other women, highlighting the importance of the feminine perspective in the narrative. Pattanaik's retelling challenges traditional representations of Sita by imbuing her character with greater agency and assertiveness, which allows her to make decisions and express her opinions (Pattanaik 64).

The Feminine Perspective in the Retelling:

In retellings of the Ramayana that prioritize a feminine perspective, Sita's role is often reinterpreted and expanded beyond the traditional portrayal of a devoted wife and symbol of feminine virtue. These retellings often emphasize Sita's agency and assertiveness, showing her as a woman who makes her own decisions and takes control of her own destiny. Pattanaik's retelling highlights the significance of female characters in the narrative, showcasing their strengths and contributions to the story (Pattanaik 152). For example, some retellings depict Sita as actively resisting Ravana's advances, using her intelligence and wit to outsmart him and protect herself. In addition, these retellings often explore the emotional and psychological complexities of Sita's character, portraying her as a woman with her own desires, fears, and aspirations, rather than simply a passive object of male desire. By foregrounding the feminine perspective, Pattanaik's retelling presents a more balanced and nuanced understanding of the epic, challenging the traditional patriarchal lens (Pattanaik 210).

Some retellings delve into Sita's inner turmoil and conflicting emotions when she is banished to the forest, or explore her relationship with her sister, the goddess Lakshmi. Retellings of the Ramayana that prioritize a feminine perspective offer a more complex and nuanced portrayal of Sita, emphasizing her agency, assertiveness, and emotional depth. They challenge the patriarchal lens through which the traditional epic is often viewed, and offer a more inclusive and empowering vision of the story. Incorporating the feminine perspective allows readers to gain a deeper appreciation for the complexity and richness of the Ramayana, as well as its relevance to contemporary society (Tharoor 27).

Contemporary Relevance:

With modern readers and ongoing discussions surrounding gender equality, feminism, and the importance of diverse representation in literature. By offering a fresh and inclusive interpretation of the epic, Pattanaik's retelling fosters a more diverse understanding of Indian mythology and encourages readers to challenge traditional gender roles (Pattanaik 210). The reinterpretation of Sita and other female characters in Pattanaik's retelling aligns with modern feminist movements that advocate for the empowerment of women and the questioning of patriarchal norms. The portrayal of female characters as strong, resilient, and assertive provides contemporary readers with inspiring role models who defy societal expectations. Reinterpreting myths

from a feminine perspective contributes to a more inclusive understanding of culture and tradition, as well as fostering greater gender equality (Rajagopal 15).

Pattanaik's retelling promotes the importance of diverse representation in literature by giving voice to female characters who have often been marginalized or overshadowed in traditional versions of the Ramayana. This inclusive approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the epic and helps to challenge the notion that stories from ancient cultures are inherently patriarchal. Pattanaik's feminist retelling of the Ramayana resonates with modern-day feminist movements, promoting the empowerment of women and challenging traditional gender roles (Gupta 38).

The feminine perspective in Pattanaik's retelling contributes to contemporary discussions on gender equality by highlighting the strengths, agency, and contributions of female characters. By presenting a more balanced portrayal of women in the Ramayana, the retelling encourages readers to reevaluate their assumptions about gender roles in ancient Indian society and consider the ways in which these roles continue to influence contemporary culture. Pattanaik's retelling demonstrates the potential for reinterpreting traditional narratives from alternative perspectives, such as the feminine perspective. This approach can inspire further examination and reinterpretation of other cultural texts, ultimately contributing to a richer and more diverse understanding of our shared human heritage. Pattanaik's reinterpretation has influenced other adaptations and reinterpretations of the Ramayana, encouraging a more diverse and inclusive understanding of the epic (Menon 73).

Conclusion:

This paper has explored the feminine perspective in Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* and its significance in reinterpreting the epic for contemporary readers. Final thoughts on the importance of reinterpreting traditional narratives: Reinterpreting traditional narratives from different perspectives, such as the feminine perspective in Pattanaik's retelling, allows for a more nuanced, inclusive, and relevant understanding of cultural texts, ultimately contributing to a richer appreciation of our shared human heritage. Overall, by examining the character of Sita and other female characters in the epic, Pattanaik challenges traditional gender roles and promotes a more inclusive and balanced understanding of the Ramayana. This reinterpretation not only resonates with modern-day feminist movements but also encourages further examination and reinterpretation of other cultural texts. Ultimately, such efforts contribute to fostering a richer appreciation of our shared human heritage, as well as promoting a more inclusive and diverse understanding of the stories that shape our world.

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