

Rewriting Mythology

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Rewriting Mythology: Some Lessons from Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*

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In his lecture titled “Myth and Hinduism” Greg Salyer (2017) attempts to create a certain archaeology of myth by defining it at three levels in any cultural understanding. In the first instance, he understands “myth” (in the lowercase) as a false story. In popular culture and in the ever-growing social media space, we perhaps use it the most. The oft-used phrase “myth-busting” covers some aspects of this definition. Second, Myth (in upper case)—as a particular set of stories, say, for instance: Greek Myth, Roman Myth, Mesopotamian Myth, and so on. At the third and final level, Salyer defines MYTH (in all uppercase) to be a story that a culture tells itself, which by definition is true. He equates it with a song that one listens continuously but can’t sing and can’t help listening. In other words, MYTH (in all upper case), asserts Salyer, is the deeper level, where it is true. In theoretical terms, the individual level is often understood in the sense of Freud’s *unconscious* and at the cultural in Jung’s *collective unconscious*. And beneath all that we have something called “truth and meaning”—a sort of end, closure or finality—the lowest level. Nevertheless, Joseph Campbell gives a novel turn to this conceptualization when he argues that “stories aren’t the end of the story.” In other words, stories are always pointing to something that can’t be said but experienced—like that ever-reverberating song just mentioned.

In *The Liberation*, Volga takes a step further and attempts to catch those missing links from Sita’s life and re (presents) them as lived experiences rather than mere speculations, as happens in the “original” Ramayana narrative. The context here demands that we provide a list of those missing links before moving further. In *The Liberation*, we have a set of five small stories having Sita as the connecting link. Apart from Sita, the other characters are Surpanakha,

Ahalya, Renuka, Urmila, and Rama. Apart from Rama, the original epic narrative doesn't provide much individualizing detail about the other four (female) characters. Our focus in this paper is to analyse these four women characters in sync with Volga's reworking. While understanding the original Ramayana narrative, any discerning reader would wonder about the fate of these four women, once they are subjected to the "moments of crises" in their lives. To simplify further, the original story doesn't tell what happens to Surpanakha once Lakshmana disfigures her face; how does Ahalya make sense of her life after she is brought back to life by Rama's touch; what lessons of life Renuka—sage Jamdagni's wife, receives after being beheaded by her own son on the orders of her husband; how Urmila feels after being abandoned and left alone by her own husband and so on. To be fair, rather than providing a resolution to the predicament of these characters, the storyline of the original epic attempts to deliberately forget them. Aniket Jaaware (2019) terms this forgetting as instances of ethical and political destitution and argues, "Because storytelling has the ability to terminate the telling at crucial points of ethical and political 'destitution,' it provides a special opportunity to abandon the narrative at an ethical conundrum or even an aporia." (7)

However, central to all these destitutions in the epic is the eventual predicament of Sita herself, which paves the way for her to be a *Vimukta* (The Liberated One) after she renounces everything and becomes one with the mother earth. The grand narrative in the epic indeed informs that Sita hands over the children to Rama before becoming one with the mother earth and accomplishes her liberation. Yet, it remains silent about the background that prepares her to display the strength of character, especially, in the wake of having a conditional offer of a return to the palace. After all, the decision to abandon her children would not have been that easy for Sita. It is at this juncture that Volga pitches in and formulates that Sita's strength of character is derived from the experiences of other destitute characters: Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka, and Urmila.

The intelligence of Sita's character learns from the experiences of others. Volga's central thesis in this intervention is that liberation is more of a collective exercise than the individual. The co-operative pursuits of sisterhood (an important feminist concept) among these women translate destitution into liberation. In a way, Volga's revisionist MYTH-making attempts to fill the voids available in the original storyline of the epic. While undertaking this exercise with individual characters, the writer seems to be making her moves quite cautiously, as we shall see in a short while. Volga, in spite of being a self-

confessed feminist, doesn't go overboard by reducing everything in terms of binaries. On the contrary, her approach is more humane, gentle, practical, and to a great length organic. Her argument here is simpler: Sita's eventual liberation is dependent on the individual liberation of Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka, and Urmila.

The first story in *The Liberation* is titled "Reunion." It accounts for the first meeting of Sita and Surpanakha after the latter's humiliation and mutilation at the hands of Lakshmana. Meanwhile, before the actual meeting, readers are reminded of Surpanakha's "crime" through one of Sita's monologues: "Poor Surpanakha came longing for love." (4) In Sita's understanding, seeking love was Surpanakha's only crime, and "the wicked prank played by Rama and Lakshmana left her horribly disfigured. Poor thing!" (4) The narrative further defamiliarizes Surpanakha to be a daughter of the forest, which seems quite believable due to the bygone sequence of events. By this time, Volga manages to convince her reader regarding the injustice meted out to Surpanakha through Sita's eyes. Surpanakha proposes an alternative vision of life in the concluding part of the story that impresses Sita no end.

Bereft of hatred, anger, and vengeance against her tormenters, Surpanakha develops a vision of beauty that transcends the individual physical attributes. She now believes in becoming one with nature (an early intimation of Sita becoming one with the mother earth eventually) by developing a beautiful garden of her own. Depicting a harmonious relationship between Surpanakha and Mother Nature, Volga, perhaps, also seeks to hint at the ecological crises. Such a depiction has the potential to strike a chord with the contemporary reader. It needs to be mentioned here that the reunion becomes possible due to Sita's children who during one of their ventures, discover Surpanakha's beautiful garden. One point of their conversation revolves around children and that throws up interesting insights for the readers:

"...Were those your boys? How charming they were! Surpanakha said.

A fleeting expression of pride crossed Sita's face. It did not miss Surpanakha's attention.

"All the creepers, plants and trees in this garden are my children," Surpanakha said. (9)

The conversation leaves little doubt in Sita's mind that Surpanakha has risen above the material human existence by becoming inseparable from the beauty

and harmony of nature. Sita realizes that true liberation is not clinging to the human relations and attributes but in a subtle withdrawal from them and also in becoming one with the creative energies of nature.

“The Music of Earth” retells Ahalya’s story from her perspective, a right denied to her in the original storyline. In Volga’s narrative, Sita meets her twice and also hears about her from Rama and Kausalya. The initial seed of conflict is sown in Sita’s mind when Rama and Kausalya have a contrasting assessment of Ahalya’s character. While narrating her story Rama uses the phrase “lack of character” (19) whereas Kausalya calls her to be a woman of “noble character.” (22) Through Kausalya, Sita realizes that the way women understand fellow women could be drastically different from the way men understand them. It is all about perspective and the one who can “afford” it—is the lesson Sita learns from Ahalya’s story. She learns the monopoly men have achieved over matters of pollution, cleanliness, purity, honour, dishonour, and selective usage of these concepts against women. In Ahalya’s case, when Indra disguises himself as sage Gautama (Ahalya’s husband) for his lust for Ahalya, the sage cursed Ahalya and never bothered to ask if she could see through Indra’s disguise. In Ahalya’s words, “did I see through his disguise? That is a question that bothers many people in this world. But to my husband, the question was irrelevant. It was the same to him either way. His property, even if temporarily, had fallen into the hands of another. It was polluted.” (26)

During their conversation, Ahalya doesn’t focus on the question of women’s fidelity or the violation of it but the power in the man’s hand to control or supervise it. Sita could not understand Ahalya fully until she is forced to prove her chastity by undergoing a trial by fire. Quite cleverly, Volga is able to create obvious parallels between Sita and Ahalya’s lives here. Both are subjected to humiliation and insult without being given a chance to explain their side. Later, when Rama abandons pregnant Sita in the forest, she realizes the value of Ahalya’s prophecy, “...All men are the same, Sita.” (31) In other words, the encounters with Ahalya teach Sita to seek her salvation not through Rama but beyond him. As a daughter of the Earth, she belongs to the whole cosmos and not just to Rama, she is made to believe by Ahalya.

“The Sand Pot,” the third story in *The Liberation* is an insightful discussion regarding a woman’s relationship with her husband, sons, and her *paativratyam* (fidelity). With a running metaphor of the sand pot, which she sculpts, Renuka argues about the fluid nature of just mentioned three associations in a woman’s life. They can go for a toss anytime. A slight lapse in concentration is enough, if Renuka’s own life example is something to go by.

Renuka tells Sita how her own son Parsurama beheads her under the commands of his father. Her crime was a momentary desire (in thoughts, not in actions) for another man. It was reason enough for her husband to order her killing. In a fraction of a second, the bond of a husband-wife, mother-son bites the dust, like a sand pot popping out suddenly from someone's hands. Renuka cautions Sita against the patriarchal affinity of sons, "...those sons become heirs to their father, and even before we realize it, they leave her hands and go under the wings of their father. They submit to his authority. Or they begin to legislate our lives. Why bear such sons?" (52) It needs to be pointed here that Sita is not overtly convinced by Renuka's arguments during their interaction but she unconsciously seems to carry Renuka's experience and advice in her mind. One witnesses Renuka's advice at work when Sita wins over her maternal instincts and hands over her sons to Rama before departing with Mother Earth.

"The Liberated" constitutes the title story of the text under discussion. The life experiences of Urmila, attained under stern observance of solitude for a period of fourteen years prove to be the catalyst for Sita's own liberation too. After being abandoned by her husband Lakshmana, so that he could devote entirely to his brother Rama, Urmila undertakes a journey of self-discovery through her solitude, which others wrongly interpret as her loneliness. Sita is the first person that Urmila speaks to after a gap of fourteen years. Sita notices a glowing peace on Urmila's face. Sharing the fruits of her penance, Urmila counsels Sita about the overarching influence of power in human life. As she says, "we must acquire this power. And 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)

The sisters' conversation reveals the high moral fibre of Urmila's character for modern readers. Later, she visits Valmiki's ashram imagining the amount of despair Sita would be in after getting to know Rama organizing Aswamedha Yaga without her. In the ensuing conversation that follows between the two, Urmila advises Sita to be herself. Her departing message for Sita is, "You must liberate yourself from Rama...each of those 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." (81) Understanding thus, it would be fair to say that Sita's cooperative learning, which begins from her reunion with Surpankha, reaches a fitting culmination with her meeting with Urmila. As readers we know one thing for sure: the Sita we find in the early pages of *The Liberation* has undergone a massive makeover of character by the time we

reach the final chapter of the book.

Volga's alternative reading of Sita's story thus unpacks new vistas of interpretation. She is able to repackage an old story with new life and blood, that too without making it sensational. One of the lingering faultlines of a revisionist MYTH-making is that sometimes the writer attempts to turn the story upside down which might put off the readers. One of the possible reasons for the anguish of readers on such occasions is that they already know the characters too well. As a result, any reworking on them should look emotionally convincing in the first place. Tracing the retelling discourse in Telugu Ramayana, Volga recounts the experiment of G.V. Chalam who in his rendering depicts Sita changing sides: "He presented Sita who saw Ravana as someone who ruined himself for her sake to be a true lover than Rama. She in fact enters the funeral pyre of Ravana." (102) Now, such a depiction may look radical but it might not get readers thinking or impact their collective conscience. However, Volga does not enter into such novelties. On the contrary, she focuses exclusively on the cracks in the storyline and attempts to fill the voids organically. Her treatment of Sita's story is subversive yet acceptable; bold yet empathetic. Volga does not treat any of her characters as heroes or villains. She merely describes the events and circumstances—which resulted in the suffering of the women characters and also turned into routes through which they could visualize their liberation. It would then be in the fitness of things to end our discussion here by bringing in the responses of Volga's readers about *The Liberation* one more time, "Many readers told me that they felt that things must've happened exactly as I had narrated them. In fact, many people asked whether these stories are in the Ramayana itself." (126) The statement is a fitting tribute to Volga's efforts.

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