

RECONSTRUCTING SITA'S IMAGE: A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO VAYU NAIDU'S *SITA'S ASCENT*

Subah Gautam

Abstract

The paper is an attempt to study Sita's psychological aspect through her interaction with other characters from the epic Ramayana as portrayed in Vayu Naidu's Sita's Ascent, which is a collection of narratives based on the Ramayana. It ascertains that women suffer because of male dominance and it tries to depict the psychological turmoil of female characters during their suffering, which eventually leads them to form varied perspectives. The paper focuses on a number of questions that awake Sita's conscience in Sita Ascent, such as; does she have some identity of her own? Do males in the Ramayana consider her interests? Why is she treated as the source of objectification? Is it necessary to sacrifice her wishes for the sake of Pativratyam dharma or the sake of motherhood? Why is she always being enquired to prove her chastity based on suspicion? Moreover, why is she believed to be inferior and fragile? Answers to these questions would be presented to comprehend Sita's psyche and the gender injustice, which is being realized in the story of the Ramayana.

Keywords: Indian mythology, Ramayana, Sita, Gender Injustice, Psychoanalysis

I. INTRODUCTION:

The paper critically analyses Sita's role in interrogating gender inequality and how the patriarchal social structure constraints gender equality as Vayu Naidu presents in *Sita's Ascent*. Further, it unravels harmful patriarchal practices, which objectify women and often result in psychological violence. In her reflection on gender, Njoroge states that:

Historically, gender roles – the socially constructed roles of women and men – have been ordered hierarchically, with men exercising power and control over women. Male dominance and female subordination have both ideological and material bases. Patriarchy has been entrenched in social, religious and cultural norms, institutionalized in the law and political structures and embedded in local and global economies. It has been ingrained in formal ideologies and in public discourse. Patriarchy restricts women's choices but does not render women powerless, as evidenced by the existence of women's movements and successful claims by women for their rights¹.

¹ Njoroge, N., "Gender justice, ministry and healing: A Christian response to the HIV pandemic", *Progressio*, (London: 2009), 4

Therefore, Vayu Naidu's retelling is an endeavor at "a reconsidering of the possibility of woman as goddess"² by weaving the account through the perspective of different characters in the epic who are close to Sita. Naidu, who has examined Indian oral customs, has been interested and inspired by the character of Sita—"an exiled queen, an expectant mother abandoned and left alone, undaunted by the extraordinary circumstances that are thrust upon her by the husband she continues to love"³. Naidu refers in a note to the novella that "the function of memory is a metaphor for 're-membering' a disremembered story because it is told to us infrequently and in parts, and for experiencing culture through its epic characters"⁴. Coleman's views regarding psychoanalysis are very apt and suggestive to study the character of Sita and other female characters described in *Sita's Ascent*:

Of course, literature cannot provide either the theoretical or practical basis for understanding and treating specific cases of abnormal behaviour, but it does complement psychology in giving a different kind of understanding of such behaviour. Literature yields valuable information, for example, about personality dynamics, about mental disorders prevalent during a particular historical period the inner experiences of those who have undergone such disorders⁵.

II. PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE OF SITA:

Following this approach, Sita may be seen as suffering and bearing the psychological torture in her life because of the *Pativratyam dharma* in which she is always entangled. Sita's position of following the *pativratadharm*a and suffering for that postulates the condition of the majority of Indian women who are caught into the trap of stereotyped notion of the *pativratadharm*a. Endendijk et al. state that gender stereotypes are 'widely held beliefs about the characteristics, behaviours, and roles of men and women'⁶, and Louw postulates that:

... hierarchy is underpinned by four interlocking justifications namely biological (that male physical strength is part of intended natural law); cultural (that families and societies are naturally based on aggression, domination, procreation and spouse and child protection); economic (that property, production and distribution of goods are the natural domain of men); religious (that male superiority, dominance and privilege are part of received religious revelation)⁷.

² Vayu Naidu, *Sita's Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 169

³ Ibid., 170

⁴ Ibid., 170

⁵ James C. Coleman, *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life* (Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., 1976), 8

⁶ Joyce, Endendijk, Marleen G. Groeneveld, van Berkel, S.R. et al. Gender Stereotypes in the Family Context: Mothers, Fathers, and Siblings *Sex Roles* (2013) 68: 577. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-013-0265-4>

⁷ Louw, D., 'From phenomenology to ontology in the gender debate: "Feminine" without "Femininity" beyond "Feminism"?'', in N.P. Miranda, S. Nadar & C. Le Bruyns, eds., *Ragbag theologies: Essays in honour of denise ackermann: A theologian of praxis*, (Stellenbosch: SUN Media, 2009), 99

Sita in Vayu Naidu's novel *Sita Ascent* could comprehend the trap of the *Pativratyam dharma* when her memories of past events start haunting her during her second exile. Sita's second exile was introduced in the very first chapter, which shook her, as she could not see this coming. Lakshmana was handed over the responsibility of leaving Sita in Valmiki's *ashram*⁸ at Rama's command. At Valmiki's ashram, Sita was haunted by all the memories of the past event, for instance, when she was "called to prove that she was worthy of all the lives that had been lost in the war at Lanka. Is she 'pure', they wanted to know"⁹. There were "malicious murmurs"¹⁰ in soldiers who had survived the war.

The flame within her burst into rage. Somewhere deep inside she knew that all of those who stood there, grieving the loss of their dear ones, wanted in exchange for the cost of flesh something invaluable- moral fibre. If the dead could not return, then those left behind wanted purity as the price of blood¹¹

Sita by then could understand that baggage of war and murders are being put on Sita's character. She is directly being held responsible for the entire bloodshed and she is being asked to pay the price for all that by proving her morality and purity. Such a recurring image of the event of *AgniPariksha*¹² reveals Sita's psyche. There is a clear inclination that Sita bears mental distortions and intolerable sufferings given by her husband, which she has accepted without contesting ever. "Rama said to Sita, 'Ravana is dead. You are free now'"¹³. At Valmiki's ashram, Sita remembers that how easily her husband disowned her, which agonizes Sita. Further, she reveals that she has gone through *AgniPariksha* not to prove her morality and chastity but out of disappointment and disillusion from her husband even after following the *Pativratyam dharma* in such harsh circumstances. She commands Lakshmana to light a fire. "Let the flame burn brighter!" she hissed... Her eyes were ablaze, her voice was fire as he struck the flint and it sparked"¹⁴.

In her second exile, she is not aware of the betrayal as she asks Lakshmana to take her back on *Dasami*¹⁵. He replies painfully, "No, Sita,'... 'Rama...instructed me...I am to leave you here. You are not to return. Those were

⁸ Valmiki's ashram is the hermitage of Valmiki where Sita lived in her second exile, it is also the birth place of Luv and Kush.

⁹ Vayu Naidu, *Sita's Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 8

¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

¹¹ Ibid., 8.

¹² *Agnipariksha* is mentioned in the ancient texts portraying Sita's trial-by-fire to prove her chastity.

¹³ Naidu, *Sita's Ascent*, 9

¹⁴ Vayu Naidu, *Sita's Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 9

¹⁵ In Hinduism, Dasami means the [tenth](#) day (tithi) in the lunar fortnight (paksha) of the Hindu [calendar](#) which has its origin in [Sanskrit दशमी](#) (daśamī, "tenth day in a lunar fortnight") <https://www.yourdictionary.com/dashami>

Rama's words"¹⁶. She bade goodbye to Lakshmana with a heavy heart "Sita let out the first scream...and held her belly tight"¹⁷. Valmiki was also pained to see abandoned Sita who was in this situation for multiple times now. Sita felt betrayed. Rama did not inform her that she is not coming back to Ayodhya. "When... did all this happen? she asked. 'Why didn't he tell me?' ... How long ago was this planned"¹⁸? These words of Rama clearly indicate the authorial psyche of Rama and enable Sita that she is like an object merely to her husband and holds no value in her husband's life. However, Sita's exile enables her to articulate her psychological condition and interrogate the structural inequalities to which she is subjected to. Each event is relooked by Sita and how it subjectivized her. The relook at previous events unravels Sita's consciousness and the pain that she has undergone. Marilyn French in her book, *Beyond Power: On women, men and morals* argue that:

Historically, women's oppression and marginalisation amounted to a form of slavery. She contends that slavery in a patriarchal state occurs when women do not have the rights to their own bodies, sexuality, marriage, reproduction, divorce, education, when they are excluded from practising a trade or profession and when their freedom of movement is restricted. Because the roots of patriarchy run so deep in the fabric of society, it is difficult to change, because patriarchy is so deeply rooted in the principles of control, male dominance, identification and centeredness¹⁹.

III. NAIDU AND TULSIDASA- A COMPARATIVE STUDY:

Naidu keeping in mind the women's oppression and marginalization attributes female characters with agency. Not just Sita, she also uplifts another character Urmila and gave her voice and sense of questioning like a modern woman who speaks boldly for her rights and exploitation. Urmila, Sita's younger sister speaks against her sufferings. Urmila's inclusion in the text serves two purposes: one is that it helps universalize Sita's sufferings and, secondly, interactions with Urmila become instrumental in unveiling Sita's psyche. Like Sita, she also wanted to accompany her husband, Lakshmana to the forest. She was asked to wait for him until he comes back from exile. Urmila was treated as an object that is devoid of feelings and emotions. Urmila chose solitude in her isolation. When Sita meets her after she returns to Ayodhya from the exile, both of them share their learning, experiences, and agony. Urmila gives her a nice hair massage to relieve her tension and stress. "How strangely time heals, Urmila. I had never thought I would be able to laugh so easily about the whole foreigner thing," Sita said thoughtfully. "Some were eager for me to return. But how quick the others

¹⁶ Naidu, *Sita's Ascent*, 10

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁹ Marilyn French, *Beyond power: On women, men and morals* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), 16

were to test me and see if I had indeed given in to Ravana”²⁰. Urmila is cautious as speaking of Ravana after his death is dreadful. She explains Sita that both of them are also foreigners in Ayodhya though it is their home now. “After all, when women marry they get adopted by their husbands’ people”²¹. Sita corrects Urmila that their husbands do not adopt them. “Our husbands came in search for us”²². Sita explained that both of them were not orphans when they left Mithila. This disclosure contradicts Tulsidasa’s depiction of the issue. Tulsidasa in *SriRamacharitmanas* writes about Sita, “Sita went with a glad heart to Girija’s temple. She offered worship with great devotion and begged of the Goddess a handsome match worthy of Her”²³.

Tulsidasa introduces Sita as a woman who is desperate to get married. She meets two men in the garden, named Rama and Lakshmana, who are also the eligible suitors to marry her. Sita is pleased with Rama’s personality and cannot think about any other man as her husband. She prays to Goddess Girija and wants Rama as her consort. Tulsidasa shows Sita’s desperation to get married to Rama as she is continuously praying to God to grant her wish. On the contrary, Naidu in her text depicts Sita as an affirmer and not a desperate woman to get married. Sita explains to Urmila that “we women have to change things around – our husbands’ homes do not adopt us; we adopt them and create homes and families around them”²⁴. Urmila being a calm woman helped inquisitive Sita in releasing her stress and incoherent thoughts. She played “the role of a friend and oracle-bearer to that of masseuse”²⁵. Their beautiful relationship enables them to exchange dialogues; discuss their doubts; their struggles and concerns; joys and sorrows. Their relationship embodies Elizabeth Abel’s instance, “Through the intimacy which is knowledge, friendship becomes a vehicle of self-definition for women, clarifying identity through relation to another who embodies and reflects an essential aspect of the self”²⁶.

Sita’s feeling of estrangement in Ayodhya has also unveiled through her interaction with Urmila that “foreigner is not just someone from another place... someone who is threatening because he thinks and acts differently... when they feel threatened by difference, they call it “evil”. They now associate Ravana with what is foreign, therefore different;

²⁰ Vayu Naidu, *Sita’s Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 15

²¹ Vayu Naidu, *Sita’s Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 15

²² *Ibid.*, 15.

²³ Tulsidasa, *SriRamacharitmanas* (India: Geeta Press), 223

²⁴ Naidu, *Sita’s Ascent*, 16

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁶ Elizabeth Abel, “(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women”. *Signs* 6, no. 3 (Spring, 1981): 413-435 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3173754.pdf>

and different equals evil. But the difference is not evil. That's what has become the curse of us women, coming from a different place with different ways of doing things²⁷.

Women are essentially considered outsider, which has become a curse for women – “coming from a different place with different ways of doing things”²⁸. Urmila seems to share and understand Sita's mental state and how the fire trail made “Sita burn with anger, not shame”²⁹. Sita had been asked to prove her purity in public. She “called out to Agni and the essence of fire as ammunition in her defence”³⁰. Urmila realized that “Only a woman possessed such an infinite capacity to love could go through that – not for her man, or to justify herself to the world, but because she raged against the inquisition all women had to face”³¹. Sita kept asking herself, “How dare anyone question me?”³² Seeing this Urmila first thought this was the “Sita of their youth in Mithila”³³. Soon she realized that “Sita was reworking in her mind the ordeal she had been through when she was held hostage in Ravana's exquisite Ashoka garden”³⁴. It was a mental trap where Sita had mental and physical resilience. When she was asked to “demonstrate how ‘pure’ she was, everything within Sita rankled”³⁵. Sita had reached a point past caring for social opinion. Sita not only knew what the truth was but wanted to stand in for every other person who was challenged about her innocence, whether it was within relationships or for the sake of social opinion³⁶.

Urmila valued her sister's thoughts and perceptions. She knew the purity test to prove fidelity was bothering Sita's mind. For the sake of *Dharma* or social law, Rama asked Sita to prove her purity to satiate the doubtful nature of the public. Sita has always accepted Rama as *Maryada Purshottam* but despite being innocent, she is challenged to prove her chastity and innocence. Sita condemns this social law and stands for every innocent person who is challenged to prove oneself. When she remembers, she questions the decisions of *Agnipariksha*. She enrages that why she is asked to prove her chastity. Naidu further shows Rama's psychological state when he sends Sita away to Valmiki's hermitage. Rama heard the argument between son-in-law and father-in-law. In the argument, they mention Sita. The son-in-law aggressively says, “Well, I believe in honour in the old way, not like our king... He just took his wife back after she had been kept by Ravana for more than a year! Who knows what happened there?”³⁷ Rama is astonished to

²⁷ Vayu Naidu, *Sita's Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 17

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

³² *Ibid.*, 17.

³³ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁶ Vayu Naidu, *Sita's Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 18

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

hear this. Thus, it made him take the decision to send Sita away. He focused more on *Rastra Dharam*³⁸ than *Patni Dharama*³⁹. Rama was aware of the fact that “Sita never uttered the name Ravana”⁴⁰. He knew that she was recovering from the “traumatic captivity”⁴¹ by remaining silent. Both of them were true and transparent to each other. “They were two bodies entwined around one soul”⁴². Sita questions did he not “see how her eyes blaze”⁴³ when she stood at the trial of fire – that there is nothing more precious than his belief in her. She mentioned, “Ra and Ma were the only two syllables I knew in all my time in captivity”⁴⁴. She only enchanted Rama’s name to stay alive. “Then why was this shadow still looming over them?”⁴⁵ Rama orders Lakshmana to leave Sita safely at Valmiki’s ashram. Lakshmana was astonished by this decision of Rama. He questions Rama, “Why are you falling prey to rumour? You are above this!” To this Rama replies,

This is not rumour. It is about challenging power with principle. If I don’t push myself through this test, how will everyone know that we are all subject to the principle. Can’t you see, we are all bound by the rules? ...Whoever we are, sacrifice is inevitable⁴⁶

This conversation between Lord Ram and his brother, Laxamana entails that despite the fact Rama could not have been in favor of Sita’s second exile, he succumbs to the pressures of gendered social structure which subjectivizes women to all kinds of moral apparatuses. However, the deliberation also demonstrates the authority that society exercises over women and how Sita is relegated to the status of an object who holds no value in the social and political system. This entire setting is missing in *SriRamacharitmanas* where Tulsidasa’s focus remained on Rama’s greatness. He deliberately did not mention about Sita’s adversaries as it overshadows Rama’s image. Aartee Kaul questions:

Did Tulsi not know enough about Sita as he learnt the tale of multiple sources that he mentioned in his text or did he not feel the need to write in detail about her because Sita was perceived by him as

³⁸ *Rastra Dharam* is Duty towards Nation

³⁹ *Pami Dharma* is Duty towards wife

⁴⁰ Naidu, *Sita’s Ascent*, 37

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁶ Vayu Naidu, *Sita’s Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012) , 39

playing second fiddle to Ram and every character around him is only employed to serve Ram's purpose?⁴⁷

Naidu's rewriting of Sita's narrative to rebuild her position from the position of gender injustice exemplifies what Wood states:

History teaches us what people before us did, what their intentions were and where they failed or went wrong. If historical viewpoints about women reflect women's subordination and oppression, they force women to discover their roots and their past⁴⁸.

Similarly, Kaul in her text also mentions that Tulsidasa's *SriRamacharitmanas* speaks about how women bring misery in men's lives.

Ram and his ideas seem biased that a woman is illusion personified and is the cause of great distress. Woman bashing is a characteristic trait of Tulsi's and it is ironic that while Ram is hunting for Sita lamenting as a human husband about a near perfect, loving and beautiful wife with admirable qualities, how much she is missed and what difference it has made in his life, Tulsi decides to warn his readers not to get taken in, be alert of women if possible and distance themselves as they bring misery⁴⁹.

IV. OTHER CHARACTERS UNDERSTANDS SITA'S MENTAL STATE:

Vayu Naidu explores how other characters respond to Sita's second exile: Lakshmana, for instance, shows an affinity towards Sita. He was unhappy with Rama's decision to abandon Sita in the forest to satisfy his people. He says, "I don't know what he wanted to prove; I could not punish her like that"⁵⁰. He was astonished with Rama's

⁴⁷ Aartee Kaul Dhar, *Sita in the Ramayana Traditions* (New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers and Distributors, 2018), 49

⁴⁸ J.M. Wood, 'Patriarchy, feminism and Mary Daly: A systematic-theological enquiry into Daly's engagement with gender issues in Christian theology', Unpublished doctoral thesis (University of South Africa, 2012), 1

⁴⁹ Aartee Kaul Dhar, *Sita in the Ramayana Traditions* (New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers and Distributors, 2018), 63

⁵⁰ Vayu Naidu, *Sita's Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 133

decision. He questions, “Even if he thought people would come around and want their queen back, how could Rama ignore Sita’s feelings? Or had he taken her for granted”⁵¹? Lakshman wonders that once Rama told him “Sita was different. She was not a woman who expected to be tossed around in the maelstrom of misfortune. He had always insisted she would be one to light the dawn of a new age for women. Then what made Rama take this decision to leave his wife for his people. To him, Valmiki’s ashram was the safest option to leave Sita in the second exile. It was disheartening for Lakshmana to leave Sita there. She was stunned into stone. He had nowhere else to go. He does not want to go back to the kingdom and see Rama living “dual lives of state and self”⁵². “I found nothing in myself to redeem after what had happened to Sita, and I am left with nothing”⁵³.

Lakshmana wonders if a king only has to serve his people and not family. Is family of the king not important? Should family not be given enough priority and should be punished if the kingdom doubted them? Is social law above love? All these questions arise in Lakshmana’s mind and he completely understands Sita’s psyche and values her emotions. However, Lakshmana also surrenders to gendered social structure and could not challenge the decisions made by the king, Lord Rama.

Naidu gives Hanuman the major role of storyteller, who seems to be Naidu’s mouthpiece. She gave a reference in a note to the novella that, “the real storyteller is Hanuman who remains silent, watches the drama and takes action. He can enter Sita’s world and witness her ability to engage with the urgent and immediate, while she simultaneously understands and expresses the call of what is constant in life”⁵⁴. Hanuman, in the novel, is associated with the major characters – Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana. “Hanuman had been the real insider to Sita’s story, and Lakshmana’s place within it”⁵⁵. After the *sanjeevani*⁵⁶ herb incident, Lakshmana did not contact Hanuman. Lakshmana did not inform Hanuman about the “mission to banish Sita”⁵⁷. Hanuman knew Rama closely and “would have reasoned with Rama against his fears”⁵⁸. He loved Rama in spite of knowing Rama’s fears. Hanuman knew Rama to be “a wise and compassionate leader”⁵⁹. He could sense “discomfort” in Rama’s eyes after being separated from Sita. He could also understand Lakshmana’s state of mind who “mistakenly burdened himself with the guilt of being the cause of

⁵¹ Ibid., 133.

⁵² Ibid., 133.

⁵³ Ibid., 133.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 183.

⁵⁵ Vayu Naidu, *Sita’s Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 136

⁵⁶ Sanjeevani, a traditional mythical herb

⁵⁷ Naidu, *Sita’s Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 136

⁵⁸ Ibid., 136.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 136.

Sita's abduction and now leaving her in the forest at Valmiki's hermitage⁶⁰. Further, Naidu depicts how Hanuman comforted Sita in Lanka during the captivity. He was "ready to turn Lanka upside down for the suffering that Ravana had caused her"⁶¹. No one else had seen Sita as Hanuman had.

In captivity too she was brave, never giving in to Ravana's manipulative logic, shape-shifting and delusions. She had shared her anguish about the state of corruption that was embedded in everyone who visited her⁶²

Hanuman associates Sita with three symbols – "the first was the iron bow granted by Shiva"⁶³. He realized that it would be impossible for any contestant, may it be human, animal or divine. He was amazed to see the real trick she knows - "it wasn't about physical strength. It was about sheer mental and spiritual grit"⁶⁴. The second symbol was the wedding ring that Sita gave to Rama at their wedding. The gem in the ring was a "deep forest – green emerald and the gold filigree around the band held an inscription which read: My earth, my moon, my sun. Rama, my full circle"⁶⁵.

Another symbol was the "scrap of Sita's sari that he had preserved as a relic"⁶⁶. Hanuman never had an opportunity to ask Sita if that scrap was a clue for Rama to come in search of her; or Ravana tore it and it fell; or in Jatayu – Ravana tiff it ripped off by the branch of a tree and fell down. "Did it matter that it would never be known?"⁶⁷ All these symbols show Sita's resilience, strength, power, and a strong mind. After so many unpleasant events happened in her life, she did not give up. She was on her journey where she was turned down many times but she got up every time and fought the circumstances.

Hanuman visited Sita in *Ashokavan*⁶⁸ in Lanka. He wanted to take her back and end the trial. Sita insisted him to go back alone to Rama. "It's not about me...Rama and Ravana have to face each other", she said⁶⁹. At that

⁶⁰ Ibid., 137.

⁶¹ Ibid., 141.

⁶² Ibid., 141.

⁶³ Ibid., 141.

⁶⁴ Vayu Naidu, *Sita's Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 141

⁶⁵ Ibid., 142.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 142.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 142.

⁶⁸ *Ashokavan* is a garden in Lanka where Sita was kept captive by Ravana included in various versions of the *Ramayana*

⁶⁹ Naidu, *Sita's Ascent*, 143

time, she knew it would be safe for her to leave with Hanuman but more than her, she was worried about Rama's reputation. She told Hanuman, "My returning with you would be "safe". But what would Rama have signalled to the rest of the world? I sometimes wish we were down to earth in our aspirations. But no, it's not enough. Things have to be stirred at the very root"⁷⁰. Sita's concern for Rama's motive is seen here. She was unaware that what is in store for her in the future; unaware of the fact that she would go under fire ordeal to prove her purity and ultimately, the husband for whom she was sacrificing will abandon her and send her to exile afterward.

In *Ashokavana*, Ravana holds Sita captive. Hanuman is the only visitor in Lanka to meet Sita. Hanuman is the witness to all the psychological traumas and emotions she experiences. Hanuman comforted Sita as a friend, brother, protector in those circumstances. He makes sure Sita does not get into any trouble as Rama⁷¹ has given him the responsibility to look after her safety. Seeing situations of both sides, Hanuman became the medium of communication between Rama and Sita. He explained both of them what they feel for each other. He asked Sita to come with him, as he could understand the hardships she is going through but Sita decided not to leave Lanka until her husband Rama comes to rescue her. She knew how much *Rashtra Dharam* is important for Rama and he has to prove it to the world. It also reflects Sita's *Pativratyam Dharma*.

To me, this is about my abduction, yes, but it is also about being avenged. Why should anyone, human or animal, be used as a pawn? Why am I a pawn in this game of creating alliances and oppositions between forces? Why the focus is a woman's vulnerability? Why not her strength as a bargaining power for peace – even if by means of war? 'I'm not weak, Hanuman, I know what I have endured"⁷².

V. SITA'S STANDPOINT:

Sita kept her standpoint buried in her mind for her entire life obeying the patriarchal social structure, as she understood it well that putting up her perspective would be synonymous with challenging the entire social structure, based upon gender inequalities. However, Sita is forced to unravel her mind as she is not left with any choice. Hanuman knows that Sita is extraordinary. She possessed great strength in her. She is a seeker of truth, love, and life. She believes that she is "no martyr". She tells Hanuman that, "A world without trust will never have the strength to seek the truth. Without the quest for truth there is no love...without love this life is meaningless"⁷³. Now Hanuman

⁷⁰ Ibid., 143.

⁷¹ The spelling of Ram or Rama varies in chapters as different writers are taken for research

⁷² Vayu Naidu, *Sita's Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 144.

⁷³ Vayu Naidu, *Sita's Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 144

knew the word Ra-ma was her life-breath. In *SriRamacharitmanas*, Hanuman asks Sita to stay for few more days in Lanka as his Lord Rama will come to rescue her. For so many days and weeks, she has been there in *Ashokavan* living her life in captivity. Her honor was not taken into consideration rather Rama's honor is talked about, also, which is at stake if he does not defeat Ravana in war. Sita's psychology and emotions are neglected completely. Hanuman in *SriRamacharitmanas* tells Sita:

The moment Sri Rama's arrows make their appearance like the sun, the demon host would be scattered like the shadows of night. Mother, I would take You to Him this very moment; but, I swear by Rama, I have no such orders from the Lord. Therefore, wait patiently for some days more, mother, till the Hero of Raghus line arrives with the troops of monkeys. Slaughtering the demons, He will take You away; while Narada and the other sages will glorify Him in all the three spheres of creation⁷⁴

In *Sita's Ascent*, Hanuman asks Sita to come with him whereas, in *SriRamacharitmanas*, Hanuman asks Sita to stay in Lanka for few days, as Rama will come to rescue her. The contemporary writers take care of her emotions and her psychology, her paranoia and her character are not given much importance in the traditional texts rather she is taken as a secondary character.

Hanuman seems to be aware of his power that "he could kill Ravana on his own, uproot mount Trikoot and get Sita back easily"⁷⁵. However, the readers are left in a dilemma that why did it not happen.

VI. TULSIDASA MISSED SITA'S DETAILS

Aarttee Kaul writes, "If the entire drama was set up by the Gods to glorify Ram, then the princess of Mithila was caught in the trap of destiny to suffer the uncountable tests and trials, humiliate on and rejection as the prince that she paid for being the wife of a supposedly perfect man on his way to becoming God"⁷⁶. Kaul in *Sita in the Ramayana Traditions* referred that how Tulsidasa has portrayed Sita as a suffering but virtuous wife. She writes,

⁷⁴ Tulsidasa, *SriRamacharitmanas* (India: Geeta Press), 762

⁷⁵ Aarttee Kaul Dhar, *Sita in the Ramayana Traditions* (New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers and Distributors, 2018), 64

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

Tulsi's description has established Sita as a dedicated, committed wife suffering in separation, rebuffing, rebuking Ravana for all his advances and attempts to tempt or scare her. Her personal power is obvious by the fact that she is loved, protected, looked after and consoled by the two female demons Trijata and Sarama and others touch her feet. Tulsi puts her on a pedestal. She is beyond herself with joy at the sight of Ram's ring and bombards Hanuman with questions that depict a suffering but virtuous wife⁷⁷.

This also implies that women were expected to be conscious of their bodies all the time. In *SriRamacharitmanas*, Rama is repeatedly referred to as Sita's Lord. It suggests that poet has made her almost a devotee. The psychology of the character of Sita is missing in Tulsidas's text. "No elaboration exists about Sita's psychology here but it is safe to conclude that though discarded her silks, jewellery and finery; she was a princess who grew up amidst splendor, wealth and grandeur. Her regal temperament got the better of her when she asked Rama to get the golden deer. Sita blames herself for everything in the latter part of the dialogue" in the text⁷⁸. Moreover, Naidu's primary or central character is Sita in the *Ramayana*. Her choices, emotions and the voice she lacked in the traditional text are given more importance.

VII. SITA HONOURS RAMA:

This is evident when after the war ended; Hanuman again visited *Ashokavan* to meet Sita; to tell her the result of the war. She gazed at Hanuman to give her the good news. "Triumph, victory, nothing mattered. To know that Rama was alive poured the very essence of life back to her"⁷⁹. Her love for Rama was pure. All the time she had spent in Lanka, she only longed for Rama to come for her, to take her to their world where they may live happily ever after. "I'll keep this sari for as long as I live; wherever I am. Its every wrinkle is inscribed with all my longing for Rama to return. Return to the Light!"⁸⁰. This shows the purity of her love for Rama. The time she has spent in Lanka without Rama was terrible. All this time, she only has a perception of a happy life in the future together, which was shattered later when Sita was not accepted without the trial, and further, she is sent to exile to Valmiki's ashram.

Sita returns to Ayodhya with Rama. She was settling down in the kingdom with the domestic affairs. One day she went out in the forest for a stroll. Hanuman, who stayed back to help them settling down also accompanied her. He saw a woman with Sita who was reading her palm. She predicted that she would soon become a mother. Hanuman

⁷⁷ Ibid., 64.

⁷⁸ Aartee Kaul Dhar, *Sita in the Ramayana Traditions* (New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers and Distributors, 2018), 62.

⁷⁹ Vayu Naidu, *Sita's Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 145

⁸⁰ Ibid., 145.

immediately identifies her it was Soorpanakka⁸¹. Soorpanakka compels Sita to tell about her experience in Lanka. Did she see Ravana or felt or smell him? Sita only had praises for her husband, Rama. Soorpanakka insisted Sita to give Ravana's description. However, Sita could only describe his toenail as she only saw that. Soorpanakka created a portrait of Ravana on the cloth and gave it to Sita. Hanuman asked Sita to destroy the portrait. Sita restricted herself for not destroying someone's creation, especially of a woman. It may bring bad omen. Hanuman and Sita had been thinking of hiding the scroll from Rama. Sita puts it under the bed. Same night, she dreamt the painting came to life. Ravana emerged from the scroll and caught hold of Sita's sari *palla*⁸² and started unravelling it. He drew her close that she could smell his perfume and feel his breath. Sita was terrified seeing him in the dream and woke up next to Rama. The next day, she wanted to get rid of the scroll. She waited for people not to enter her room. She held the painting in her hand. Unexpectedly, Rama enters the room to spend some alone time with Sita. As he reaches close to Sita, he saw her holding the painting. Sita could not explain the situation to Rama and there was endless silence. Hanuman visited Sita on the next day and sees, "Her eyes had lost their lustre"⁸³. He sensed the brewing storm between Rama and Sita. Hanuman turned into a normal monkey and ate the scroll. That tale of the monkey was the talk in Ayodhya for quite some time. Then the news broke that Sita has conceived.

VIII. SITA'S TORMENTED EXPERIENCE:

Sita was tormented with the experience and now people did not see her as a pure woman as she was held captive in Lanka at Ravana's palace. In *Sita's Ascent*, Soorpanakha tried to trap Sita by giving her a scroll of Ravana's painting to seek revenge of her mutilation. Hanuman helped Sita to hide the scroll successfully. Thus, it is evident that Sita could not disclose her internal thoughts to Rama and Rama also failed to understand Sita's turbulent mind. Only, Hanuman knew everything.

At the final phase of the text understudy, Rama announced the *Ashwamedha yagya*⁸⁴. There was a huge gathering for the *yagya*. As per the practice in *Ashwamedha yagya*, one horse is released and whichever state the horse travels, the king of that state either accepts the sovereignty of the king who organizes *Ashwamedha yagya*. One of the soldiers informs Rama that one of the *Ashwamedha* horses is missing. They begin a quest to find the missing horse. In Valmiki's ashram, Lava and Kusa captured the horse and kept it with them. Rama reached the hermitage as directed

⁸¹ The spelling of Soorpanakka also spelled as 'Shrupnakha' or 'Surpanakha' may vary from chapter to chapter as different writers and texts have been taken for the present research.

⁸² Palla is a loose outer garment or wrap worn out of doors, usually by a woman; an outer robe, a mantle.
<https://www.lexico.com/definition/palla>

⁸³ Vayu Naidu, *Sita's Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 151

⁸⁴ *Ashwamedha Yagya* is a spiritual experiment. It is conducted to spread the divine knowledge of Indian culture, a culture destined to become the culture of the world in the future. https://www.awgp.org/spiritual_wisdom/yagya/the_king_of_yagyas_ashwamedh/what_is_ashwamedha_yagya

by the soldiers to find the horse. Rama asked the boys to leave the horse, as it is required for the *yagya*. The boys, therefore, challenged Rama to fight for the horse. Rama told them, “You both are engaging in fantastical and unachievable claims and I do not wish to cause you harm. Besides, I can only fight an equal. Neither of you is close to me in age, and indeed, in the middle of the night, I cannot fight two wilful boys who have spent their lives in the forest”⁸⁵. When asked by Rama who are you? Lava narrated him his journey from his birth to his childhood and the role of teachers (Sita and Valmiki) in his life. He mentions about his journey to Rama and tells him how they reached in the forest. Rama listens to his story keenly. Lava kept telling Rama rendering of his mother. Lava continued telling, “that life is a chain of energy. Letting herself live and give birth to me were not merely endurance. She had ascended beyond the chains of name, birth, caste, clan – she is the one who gave me light”⁸⁶. Sita, Valmiki, and Urmila were awed with Lava’s rendering of his mother’s life with Kusa’s accompaniment. They were convinced that they do not have to intervene as boys have attained the age where they can fight their struggles. Both the boys stretched out their arms to support Sita. Rama indicated that he wants reconciliation. However, Sita turned around and rejected Rama.

The leaves shivered and there was a stream of light where she stood. There was no pain or need for reconciliation. Sita had ascended time cycles. She turned to face the footfall that was behind her. All would be well for a while⁸⁷.

Sita being a single parent teaches her sons everything a royal king should possess without mentioning that Lord Rama is their father. Rama and sons, unaware of the fact that they are related, fight over *Ashwamedha* horse for *yagya*. Lava narrated their life journey with his mother, Sita to Rama. Through his narration, Rama judged that he is his son and his mother is Sita. Rama asked them to reconcile and return to Ayodhya but Sita, who was once rejected and abandoned by Rama did not reconcile with him again. In her pregnant state, when she needed her husband the most she was left alone in the hermitage to live on her own. In that state, she went through many emotions and dealt with it all alone. If she can live her life alone in a situation where she needed her husband the most, she can stay alone all her life. Aartee in her text writes,

Sita oscillates between two geographies as a victim of circumstance and marriage. She is married to a prince who is exiled by a jealous step mother, abducted because her husband and brother-in-law dismember Ravana’s sister, interrogated, doubted and examined in an *AgniPariksha* as her husband

⁸⁵ Vayu Naidu, *Sita’s Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 163

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁸⁷ Vayu Naidu, *Sita’s Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 168

wants to allay his people's doubt and could not rescue her the same day that she was abducted. Male exiles are physical or political, female exiles can be social, psychological or socio-cultural. She is exiled a second time as her husband wants public approval and support and does not want a queen whose name is tarnished⁸⁸.

A contrast can be seen here. If a marriage can be a source of joy and stability, it can also be a source of oppression, homelessness, and unhappiness for women. The narrator's obsession with purity, physical and moral is too pronounced, articulated, and problematized and the arbitrariness of the whole idea boils up and overflows at the second fire test which none has been able to justify so far. Perhaps that is also one of the reasons TulSIDasa omitted all these events.

Epic Sita is placed as a skeleton that is fleshed out and in the fleshing out of the modern Sita new and different dimensions are added to her. She exists, lives and breathes in different genres, at different levels enjoying that experimental expressions give to her character⁸⁹

IX. CONCLUSION:

Naidu's Sita is an "everywoman, epic hero and goddess"⁹⁰. Sita embodied the narrative of the canonized version, but her interpolations added a human dimension to Sita's character. In the note to the novella, Naidu referred that, "Sita is a character who is conscious of her choices in spite of what happens to her, and the circumstances under she is placed (by author and storytellers), that is a trigger. This makes her empathetic, inventive and resourceful – she is able to ride out the terror that strikes her"⁹¹. *Sita's Ascent* is an exploration of the psychological dimension that reveals Sita's human condition. It allows identification and empathy with Sita, instead of viewing her as a victim. Had Sita been a victim she would have not survived⁹². Sita's courage is indomitable and takes on epic dimensions in the emotional and geographical landscapes she transverses⁹³. Gender subordination, since ages, has resulted in the marginalization of women. Naidu in writing Sita's character breaks the shackles of patriarchy and portrays her as a central figure of the *Ramayana* and brings in light her consciousness and psychology which was neglected by the

⁸⁸ Aartee Kaul Dhar, *Sita in the Ramayana Traditions* (New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers and Distributors, 2018), 81

⁸⁹ Aartee Kaul Dhar, *Sita in the Ramayana Traditions* (New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers and Distributors, 2018), 201

⁹⁰ Vayu Naidu, *Sita's Ascent* (India: Penguin Books, 2012), 173

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 179.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 174.

conventional and traditional writers. Sita has a journey and story of her own, which needed re-presentation to inspire modern day women of our society.

REFERENCES:

1. Abel, Elizabeth. "(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women". *Signs* 6, no. 3 (Spring, 1981): 413-435 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3173754.pdf>
2. Coleman, James C. *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life*. Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., 1976.
3. Dhar, Aartee Kaul. *Sita Transposed: Multiplicity in Retellings*, New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers and Distributors, 2017.
4. D., Louw. 'From phenomenology to ontology in the gender debate: "Feminine" without "Femininity" beyond "Feminism"?'', in N.P. Miranda, S. Nadar & C. Le Bruyns, eds. *Ragbag theologies: Essays in honour of Denise Ackermann: A Theologian of Praxis*, Stellenbosch: SUN Media, 2009.
5. Endendijk, J.J., Groeneveld, M.G., van Berkel, S.R. et al. Gender Stereotypes in the Family Context: Mothers, Fathers, and Siblings. *Sex Role*, 68 (2013): 577-590. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-013-0265-4>
6. French, Marilyn. *Beyond power: On women, men and morals*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1985
7. Naidu, Vayu. *Sita's Ascent*. India: Penguin Publications, 2012.
8. N, Njoroge. "Gender justice, ministry and healing: A Christian response to the HIV pandemic", *Progressio*, London: 2009.
9. Tulsidasa, *SriRamacharitmanas*. India: Geeta Press.
10. Wood, J.M. 'Patriarchy, feminism and Mary Daly: A systematic-theological enquiry into Daly's engagement with gender issues in Christian theology', Unpublished doctoral thesis. University of South Africa, 2012.