

# Volga's 'Sita': a Study

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## Abstract

Indian mythology depicts the life of many women who are richly revered and highly idolized. Sita of *the Ramayana* is one such highly revered person who is eulogized for her wisdom and humble submission to her fate. A mythological character like Valmiki's Sita has been depicted to be under the influence of male domination. It's a fact even Sita couldn't escape. Yet, Volga's Sita is different as she overcomes her initial inclinations of being overtly submissive to emerge as an ever obliging mother, and a perception-changed woman. The whole process of agony that she goes through leads her to seek liberation from patriarchal dominance which is vividly described in the 2015 Sahitya Academy-winning masterpiece Volga's *'The Liberation of Sita'*, a collection of stories of Sita's encounters with the Ramayana's 'minor' women characters: Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka Devi and Urmila. This paper attempts to make a study of how these mythological characters, as depicted in Volga's *'The Liberation of Sita'*, engage in a quest for identity which ultimately leads them to a state of comprehensive understanding of worldly life and its concerns. Thus they become 'truly' wise and 'fully' liberated.

**Keywords:** Indian mythology, patriarchal dominance, Ramayana, Sita, other women characters, understanding of life, liberation.

## Introduction

Myths are widely-accepted traditional stories-some factual, the others fictional. Whether they are factual or fictional, they serve a profound purpose. *The Ramayana* is a myth of epical proportions because it is the story of Sri Rama and his dotting wife Sita. Her qualities of wifely submissiveness and *paativratyam* have been extolled through the ages. In fact, many women characters in

the mythical Ramayana and the Mahabharata are portrayed to be delicate, sensitive and chaste-the 'typical' nature expected of women.

Valmiki's Ramayana is the story of Purushottama Rama and of Sita, a submissive wife and a caring mother. In a retelling titled *'The Liberation of Sita'* by a self-declared feminist Volga, it is Sita, who embarks on an arduous journey to self-realization. All along her way, she meets extraordinary women- Surpanakha, Renuka, Urmila and Ahalya- who have broken free from all that had held them back: husbands, sons and their notions of desire, beauty and chastity. These minor women characters help Sita embrace the power of sisterhood while attaining liberation.

## The Motivation for the Study

Volga aka Popuri Lalitha Kumari wrote *'Vimukta'*, which won her a Sahitya Academy Award in 2015. *'The Liberation of Sita'* is a translation into English by T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijaysree. In this book of short stories, we encounter Sita's and other female characters' quest for identity. The motivation for this study came after reading these mythological portrayals which provide a paradigm shift in our understanding of beauty, self-worth, authority, self-reliance and liberation.

## Journey to Liberation: The Road Less Traveled

In the first story titled *'The Reunion'*, Sita is seen waiting in the ashram for her two sons to arrive. The boys bring some unseen flowers from a garden. When Sita wants to know whose garden it is, Kusa replies that the garden is beautiful but its owner is so ugly. Sita admonishes him saying that one should never loathe people for their looks. Sita says:

"She has grown a very nice garden even though she is ugly, hasn't she?" (*The Liberation of Sita*, 2).

From the description given by her sons about the woman's ears and nose being chopped down, Sita is sure that she is Ravana's sister Surpanakha, who has come seeking Rama's love but is ill-treated by Rama and Lakshmana, eighteen years ago. It is

because Rama insulted Surpanakha that Ravana wanted to take revenge on Rama by abducting Sita (3). Sita muses:

“Do women exist only to be used by men to settle their scores?

It was all politics...

Poor Surpanakha came longing for love...

Has she showered all her love on that garden? Has she created the garden as an expression of her passion for beauty?” (3).

The next day, the boys take her to the garden where she meets Surpanakha. She doesn't understand why Sita is in the forest. Sita says:

“Sri Rama has abandoned me. I'm now living in Valmiki's ashram” (6).

Surpanakha is dumbfounded. Surpanakha is aware of

“the love between Sita and Rama better than anyone else. And the price she had paid for it, too, was not small” (6).

“But on Sita's face, Surpanakha could only see peace and dignity” (6).

On being inquired by Sita how her life has been, Surpanakha answers that it is as beautiful and joyous as the garden she has nurtured is. Surpanakha accepts that she has hankered after beauty till her face was disfigured. Everyone deserted her. It turned her into a “walking volcano and a stormy sea of grief” (7). Yet, she soon realized the real meaning of beauty in collaboration with nature as she says:

‘To come out of that spitefulness, to love beauty once again, to understand the essence of form and formlessness—I had to wage a huge battle against myself. My only collaborator in that battle was this infinite nature” (8).

Surpanakha in due course of time has found the companionship of Sudhira, a rare man who has deeply understood the concept of inner beauty in Surpanakha. In a moment's interaction, Sita could immediately see that between Sudhira and Surpanakha there was a

“relationship which she had not seen before between any man and woman” (9).

On being asked by Sita whether she has understood the meaning of success in life, Surpanakha replies:

“I've realized that the meaning of success for a woman does not lie in her relationship with a man” (9).

From the story, we understand that both Sita and Surpanakha love being in the woods. Surpanakha says that she got great joy in the forest. Even Sita opines that it is the forest that softened her suffering (11).

Traditionally, women are described as people who are jealous of the other women. Volga breaks this myth. Sita sympathizes with Surpanakha immediately in a spirit of sisterhood. Another myth that is busted is the myth of beauty. Through the characterization of Surpanakha, Volga makes us realize that real beauty is the inner beauty manifested in Surpanakha's belongingness with nature through her creation of a beautiful garden. The third myth that is busted is that the joy of a woman need not depend on a man or any other person at all. This myth is busted and dusted.

The first story is the story of two women who have loved Sri Rama. Both are forced to a life of despair, but both emerged victorious. Sita enjoyed her life in the forest as did Surpanakha. Sita created a life beyond Sri Rama and Surpanakha created a beautiful garden besides receiving the companionship of Sudhira, who saw the inner beauty of Surpanakha. Both approached life proactively and never forgot their duties towards nature and life. It is a great turnaround of fate in the lives of two women who were ill-treated by life itself but emerged victorious.

The second story '*Music of the Earth*' opens with the wedding of Sri Rama and Sita. In the process of a casual conversation on their first night, Sri Rama mentions about the beautiful but characterless Ahalya. Sita wants to know what that lack of character meant. Yet, soon she forgets about it.

A few days later, Sita is visited by the wives of a few feudatories who mention that Sita, in fact, “surpassed Ahalya in beauty” (13). Sita seeks to know from Kausalya who Ahalya is. Kausalya says that Ahalya is the wife of Maharshi Gautama and she is

“an exceptional beauty with a noble character befitting her beauty. Unfortunately she was accursed’ (13).

She narrates the story of how Indra has lusted after her and how he has gone to the ashram in the hour of darkness. Ahalya mistakes him for her husband and satiates his desire. When Gautama learns the truth, he disowns her. Kausalya makes a statement about the nature of men in general thus:

“men consider women objects of enjoyment” (14).

Sita can't fathom the plight of Ahalya. Kausalya says that Ahalya isn't at fault and she is a noble woman (13), yet, Sri Rama calls Ahalya 'characterless' (14).

As years pass by, during vanvas, Sita happens to meet Ahalya. In the conversation that has ensued, Sita tells Ahalya that all that has happened to her was 'unjust' (16). Ahalya asks sharply what is so unjust about it. Sita replies that it is unjust Ahalya is accused of a crime she has not committed. Then Ahalya says with sympathy:

‘Aren't many women in this world wrongly accused, Sita?’(16).

Ahalya adds:

“I don't know why my story was told to you and how it was narrated. Indra lusted after me. Like everyone else, he too looked at women as if they are meant for men's enjoyment... But to my husband... His property, even if temporarily, had fallen into the hands of another. It was polluted” (17).

Ahalya wonders why she is explaining her state of mind with Sita: she wonders if it was a spirit of sisterhood she felt with her.

Ahalya is very clear that women should learn to live even without husbands by their side. She states that “All men are the same, Sita. Especially in the matter of their wives” (17). Society may have given the husband the authority to judge a wife, but Ahalya thinks that “Till I give it, no one can have that authority over me” (18). She is very clear that nobody can overpower her unless she herself is willing to be overpowered. This is a great feministic thought.

As a parting message, Ahalya advises Sita not to agree to a trial and not to bow down to authority. Years later, after Ravana is defeated by Sri Rama, Sri

Rama tells Sita, through Lakshmana, to undergo a chastity test. Lakshmana says:

“Sri Ramachandra has no misgivings whatsoever, Sister-in-law. It's only for the sake of the people... Truth will triumph. Everyone will applaud your character once you withstand the test” (20).

Sita remembers Ahalya's words that it is better to believe in either your innocence or guilt? “All men are the same, Sita” (17 and 20).

But Lakshmana describes Sri Rama's despondency and the burning in her heart has subsided as she thinks:

“Rama has no misgivings. He knows the truth. He is doing this for my sake, to save me from any accusation.” (21).

Sita prepares to console Sri Rama and save his prestige in the kingdom. Ahalya has advised her not to agree to a trial(18) but Sita agrees to it.

Years later, the pregnant Sita is sent to the ashram of Valmiki. One day, she tells Valmiki that she wants to meet Ahalya. Ahalya is invited to the ashram. When Sita wants to know whether her decision will haunt her, Ahalya says:

‘Till you take decisions for Rama's sake and not yours, it will continue to pursue you, Sita...(25).

Sita wants to know who she is. Ahalya says:

‘You means you, nothing else. You are not just the wife of Rama... Most often, women don't realize that they are part of the wider world... You belong to this whole world, not just to Rama’ (25-26).

Later on, Sita receives a message from Ayodhya to return to the palace. She refuses to go.

“Then what about you, Sita ... without a husband, children?”

“I am the daughter of Earth, Rama. I have realized who I am. The whole universe belongs to me. I don't lack anything. I am the daughter of Earth” (27).

Rama is left speechless by those solemn words. By refusing to bow down to external authority, Sita has

fully experienced, for the first time, “the inner power of self-authority” (27).

In the third story titled *'The Sand Pot'*, we find Sita going to Shanta's ashram. There she is told about the skill of Renuka Devi as a sculptor. She is told that once Renuka Devi starts to work, it's like she's meditating. The mention of her name evokes some memories in Sita.

Renuka Devi is the mother of Parasurama, a Brahmin who has avowed to kill any kshatriya who hasn't followed arya dharma. Parasurama chops his own mother's head on the instruction of his father because for an aryan, there isn't a higher dharma than obeying the orders of his father.

When Sita meets Renuka Devi accidentally, she passes a comment on arya dharma which makes people blindly follow the commands of a father without thinking of justice and injustice. Sri Rama blindly followed his father's orders to go into exile, while Parasuram followed his father's orders to kill his mother, deeming it to be his dharma.

Renuka Devi invites Sita to come to her ashram. Sita promises to come after taking permission from Sri Rama. By and by, Renuka Devi says:

“No one knows as much as I do about husbands and sons” (32). But Sita says:

“Your husband and son may have done you an injustice. But it is not fair to conclude that everyone is like that” (32).

Later on, Renuka Devi gifts her a sand pot which only she could make with utmost concentration. She says that every woman must have this sand pot. On being enquired by Sita why she thinks so, Renuka Devi says:

“If they understand that their paativratyam and fidelity are like these sand pots, they will be able to live in peace” (34).

She sarcastically continues:

“To make this pot, you need a lot of concentration... Concentration can be broken at any time. The cause may be anything. In my case, a man became the cause of distraction. My husband was enraged. He believed that my paativratyam was violated by the mere act of looking at that man” (34).

Renuka Devi narrates her tale of how her husband ordered his son to chop her head; how her own son half-chopped her head; how her husband ordered him to stop and how her half-chopped head was healed by the tribal women. She says:

“Lot of questions came up during that struggle between life and death. Are such bonds, with a husband and sons, necessary for women? I thought they were not, so I moved away from them” (34-35).

There goes a discussion between Renuka Devi and Sita regarding the importance of husband and kids in the lives of a woman. Both have their own valid points based on their experience. Yet, the following words come back to haunt Sita later on in life:

“A situation where children ask their mother who their father is...comes only in the lives of some women, Sita. Think of the predicament of those women, and you'll understand my words” (36-37).

Based on her experience, Sita thinks this is a futile discussion. Later on in life, when one day Lava and Kusa come back to the ashram asking the same question, she understands the impact of Renuka Devi's words. The boys ask:

“Amma, who is our father?” (37).

Sita's face turns pale. The statement of Renuka Devi who speaks of a situation where children ask their mother who their father is comes to haunt her. Sita's composure is disturbed (37).

Sita has many unanswered questions. She is full of thoughts of how she is forsaken by the man she has loved, bowing to public opinion. She has no power over Sri Rama, the man she loved. Sita realizes that even as a mother, she has no power over Lava and Kusa.

“Power never fascinated her. She only had love—she loved her father; she loved Rama; she loved her children. There was no desire for power in any of those relationships.

These children were nature's gift to her. She had raised them like fawns. When fawns grow up, they go off into the forest, never to return” (40).

The day Rama demands a trial by fire and the day he sends her away into the forest, Sita remembers the

sand pot Renuka has made. There is no doubt that Ahalya, Renuka, Sita and Surpanakha are victims of mistrust and humiliation. But there is one thing neither Sita nor Ahalya, Surpanakha or Urmila experienced. It is what only Renuka has faced- “the brutality of her own son” (41-42).

The fourth story titled ‘*The Liberated*’ is the story of Urmila, the wife of Lakshmana. Urmila doesn’t welcome her husband after the vanvas. When Sita enquires about her whereabouts, she is told that she has never come out of her palace in these fourteen years of their vanvas.

Volga writes that Sita has felt happier in the forest than in Ayodhya(47) and Sita is under the impression that Urmila is happy to be in the palace, not in the woods (46). Sita wants to know why Urmila has gone into self-exile for fourteen years. Urmila says:

“My husband left me without uttering a word to me, without any concern for my opinion, without even giving me a thought, devoting himself entirely to his brother. That day I burned in fury”(50).

Urmila is angry initially but after embracing solitude, she has come to grips with reality. She is able to “converse within and with myself”(50). She says:

“I heard that our husbands fought many battles... But the war I waged with these questions has brought me peace and joy” (50-51).

Peace is evident on Urmila’s face. Sita is worried about Lakshmana. She says that no matter what happens in her life after Lakshmana’s entry, her peace will not be affected.

Urmila promises not to overpower someone nor be overpowered by someone. She says:

“Power is the root cause of all sorrow, Akka...We must acquire this power. And then 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”(51).

Volga makes a clear-cut difference between sleep and wakefulness through the character of Urmila. To be able to sleep peacefully and be truly awake and

conscious is an important achievement fully realized in the awakened life of Urmila.

When Sita is sent to Valmiki’s ashram, Sita remembers the words of Urmila. Lakshmana blindly follows his brother to vanvas, without informing his wife Urmila and now Rama asks Lakshmana to leave Sita in the forest, without giving an iota of information to Sita. In both the contexts, women are taken for a ride. In the first instance, Urmila protested initially but through penance, she liberated herself. Now it is the turn of Sita to liberate herself from the man she has loved most. Volga writes:

“Immense love and affection for Rama—how could she attain liberation from him? Now she had to wage a war against herself. The battle had begun. How long was it going to continue?”(53).

When Sri Rama is conducting Aswamedha Yaga, Sita is curious to know who would sit in her place. She finds Urmila who advises her:

“I’ve come to tell you not to torture yourself with unnecessary questions... Don’t even let it enter your mind. You must liberate yourself from Rama”(54).

Sita follows the advice of Urmila and gradually peace pervades Sita. Soon she realizes that her sons are accepted by Sri Rama. Sri Rama is willing to accept Sita provided she declares herself “innocent in the open court”(55). Liberated as she is from her own petty thoughts and anxieties, Sita smiles and sets out to return to where she has come from, the Mother Earth.

In the fifth story ‘*The Shackled*’, Volga depicts the predicament of Sri Rama. Rama’s life is in pitch darkness. For Rama, Sita is a “companion who dispelled his loneliness”(57).

Volga mentions that both Lakshmana and Rama “shed tears in silence” for the plight of Sita. Lakshmana tells his brother not to grieve because he is an emperor. Rama asks:

“Don’t I have the freedom even to grieve, Lakshmana?” (58).

“Sita and I are inseparable, Lakshmana...I am grieving for both of us. Nothing untoward will happen to her. She is the daughter of Earth. She is a strong and able woman” (58).

When we look at ‘*The Ramayana*’, we realize that Dasaratha asks his son Rama to go into exile for 14 years. He readily obliges because Parasurama has said:

“Honouring one’s father’s word is the noblest deed in Arya Dharma” (60).

After defeating Ravana, there are “whispers in the air. Whether it was in keeping with Arya Dharma to bring Sita back to Ayodhya” (61). Though Rama loves Sita beyond any doubt, he has to answer the “whispers in the air” as part of his dharma and so he orders a chastity test: a trial by fire for Sita. Sita obliges for the sake of Rama. As the eldest son, Rama has to preserve the political power. It is his prerogative to protect arya dharma which robbed him “of all the happiness in his life.

There was no liberation for him”(62).

Later on, Rama meets Lava and Kusa and accepts them as his sons. Volga writes:

“What about Sita?

The debate about dharma started all over again.

‘If Sita declares her innocence in the court, Ramachandra may accept her’” (64).

Rama knows that Sita wouldn’t come back. Volga ends the story with Rama knowing for certain that Sita

“would entrust the children to him and liberate herself...She had always stood by him. She had always protected him. In Ayodhya, everyone swore by Rama’s protection.

Who knew that Sita was Sri Rama’s protective charm?”

### Conclusion

Sita, Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka, Urmila- each one has a story of her own. Her path, her way, is hers alone. What Volga attempts through these stories is a compelling exercise in ‘re-visionist myth-making’(73).

Traditionally, women don’t belong to themselves- they belong to their men as daughters, sisters, wives and as mothers. In this work by Volga, even though the women characters are victims of

various problems wrought on to them by men (Lakshmana plucking out the nose and ears of Surpanakha), by husbands (of Sita, Ahalya, Urmila and Renuka Devi) and by sons (of Renuka Devi), they come out victorious in the company of nature (Sita, Ahalya, Renuka Devi and Surpanakha) or by being in solitude (Urmila). In this retelling by Volga, all the women characters complement and supplement each other in their journey of self-identity and liberation from patriarchal fetters, in a spirit of true sisterhood.

When Volga is questioned about the positive and/or negative response to *Vimukta/The Liberation of Sita*, she has mentioned that it has not received any negative responses at all. She says:

“I did not portray anyone as a villain. I described circumstances—historical and cultural contexts...I did not blame Rama or Ravana for Sita’s plight. I took a balanced view which was well liked” (94).

Volga states her intention of writing these stories in the following words:

“I wanted to show the kind of strength Sita got through others... Their experiences help us... Sisterhood is an important concept in feminism” (94).

This is the story of the liberation of Sita, Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka Devi and Urmila visualized through the eyes of a feminist writer Volga. This can also be a story of every modern woman. This gives the modern world a hope that every woman, who is put through a line of fire, can emerge victorious and be fully liberated. This is the hope of the writer. This retelling ‘*The Liberation of Sita*’ is an excellent example of feminist writing in Translation Studies.

### Works Cited

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