

Sita in Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*: A Feminist Archetype!

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In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Vālmīki, perhaps with a feminist heart, chiseled Sita's character as a harmonious embodiment of beauty, tenderness of heart, abundance of compassion, fidelity, wisdom of the truest type, courage of heart, and endurance, that served her well in constantly asserting herself for her rights—rights as defined by her value-system. But Indian feminists have often criticized Sita “as an overly-submissive wife who committed suicide for an ultimately untrusting husband” (Hirst and Lynn, 2004). It is also alleged that the ideal qualities of Sita as presented in the *Rāmāyaṇa* are of her unquestioning subordination to the demands of her husband (Goldman and Sutherland, 2004). Against this backdrop, an attempt is made in this paper to trace evidence from the epic that argues contrary to these beliefs and presents Vālmīki's Sita as the feminist archetype.

The *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *ādikavya*—the first epic of Indians—as Aurobindo observed, is an epic that has “fashioned much of what is best and sweetest in the national character” of India. This celebrated work is revered as “*vedāḥ prāchētasādāsīt sākshād ramāyanātmanā*”—a poetic version of Vedic vision. “There can be no better textbook of morals [than Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*] which can be safely placed in the hands of youth to inspire them to higher and nobler ideals of conduct and character”, said Srinivasan Iyengar.¹ In line with this observation, Rama, the hero of the epic is perceived not only as the exemplar for all living and dutiful sons, but also the ideal husband and king, while Sita the heroine as the noblest flower of Indian womanhood, devoted to her lord in thought, word and deed.

Driven by this understanding of *Rāmāyaṇa* and its main characters, Hindus, traditionally, revere Sita as the role model of womanhood. But feminists of today challenge this proposition on two counts: one, they consider her character as an illustration of the subjugation of women in Hindu culture; and two, they feel that upholding Sita as a role model is tantamount to endorsing male supremacy and female subservience. Indeed, some feminists have even argued that “Sita Syndrome” breeds domestic violence in India.

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¹ P P S Sastri as quoted in *Inaugural Address* by M Hidayatullah in Srinivasan Iyengar (1983).

But a dispassionate examination of Sita's conduct all through the epic does not give the reader an impression that she has ever sacrificed any of her values and rights as an individual. Nor could a reader see Sita anywhere in the epic subjugating herself to male dominance—be it of her husband, Rama, or that of even Ravana, the murderous ruler of demons of Lanka, in whose custody she remained as a captive all alone for a year but challenging his power all through. Such is her consciousness of her rights and the bravery with which she arduously upheld her esteem. The paper shall now trace some such incidents that speak about her assertive conduct all through the epic, besides highlighting the feminist heart—a heart that treated social, political, cultural and moral rights of women as equal to men—of the poet, Vālmiki.

Sita: The Assertor

In *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, when Rama goes to Sita and tells, “I am now going to the forest for 14 years at the behest of my father” (II.26.19), she at once says, “I am going too.” But Rama prevents her and indeed frightens her describing the horrors of the forest, for he could not entertain the idea of such a delicate lady putting up with all the trials and tribulations of jungle life. Hence, he repeats the warning umpteen times—the poet expends almost 17 verses to impress upon Sita how painful the life in forest would be, *tasmaat dukhataram vanam*—besides imparting her a great deal of worldly wisdom about how to behave towards his father, mother and towards his brother Bharata, who is now to be anointed as King, in his absence. But Sita, knowing what matters most to her, has no ear for all this. Instead, she questions him: “Wherefore do you tender me this advice, which makes me look indeed so small, O Rama, ...in the case of women neither father nor son nor their own body nor mother nor their female companions serve as an asylum here or hereafter. The husband alone is their refuge at all times.”

That is the meaning she has about her married life. Hence, she says: “If you depart this very day for the forest..., I shall walk ahead of you crushing blades of grass and thorns that lie in the way (II.27.6). Casting away envy at my courage in voluntarily offering to accompany you to the forest, and wrath at my insolence in flouting your command to stay in Ayodhya, confidently take me along with you to forest... Focusing myself on my dharma of serving my husband, I shall live happily in the forest as I would in my paternal home. Serving you everyday with self-reliance and practicing sacred vows, I shall live with you in woodlands fragrant with honey.”

Her steadfast commitment to the meaning that she ascribes to her life inspires her to confidently say: “The disadvantages that have been enumerated by you as accruing from an abode in the forest will become nothing but blessings for me since I am foremost in your affections. In the event of a separation from you, *tvad viyogena me rāma tyaktavyam iha jīvitam*—I shall cast away my life in this world” (II.29.5).

Driven by a strong passion for remaining by the side of her husband, come what may, Sita even taunts Rama: “*kim tvā amanyata vaidehaḥ pitā me mithilā adhipaḥ / rāma jāmātaram prāpya striyam puruṣa vighraham*—What my father, the king of

Mithila belonging to the country of Videha, think of himself having got as son-in-law you, a woman having the form of a man?” (II.30.3). Traditionally, these words can be construed as a transgression in the conduct of a wife, but overtaken by profound grief from the prospect of her separation from husband, and in her anxiety to rightfully accompany him to the forest, she deliberately resorts to such talk. Being a brave and true *kshatriya* woman, in the same vein, she even challenges him: “What are you afraid of? What are the things which you dread that you should reject me who have no other person to rely on earth? I am yours entirely, utterly, and yet you discard me. Where is your moral courage gone?”

She continues to argue: “O Rama, that a wife who stands disunited from her husband would not be able to survive....I certainly know there are sufferings of various kinds in the forest. ...Following my husband to the forest with devotion I shall surely be absolved from all guilt, ...for the husband is the supreme deity for a wife. ...If you do not feel inclined at all to take me, I shall resort to poison, fire or water to hasten my end” (II.30.19).

Sita, thus, entreats him—at times even in a harsh tone—in many ways to let her accompany him. It is her knowledge of what matters to her most that obviously inspires her to boldly articulate her requirements in such an entreating style, which is an amalgamation of threat, persuasion, entreaty, preaching of duty, and exposition of the sanctity of marriage that ultimately compels Rama to gracefully take her with him to the forest saying, “be with me my partner in all that I have to do in the forest.”

Sita happily then strips herself as bare as possible of all pomp and the burden of pomp and makes herself ready to go to forest with Rama cheerfully, and indeed lives happily in the forest. The whole episode reaffirms that Sita, willingly relinquishing royal pleasures and asserting her right to be by the side of her husband, Rama, she realizes the very meaning of her life and undertakes the journey towards the very meaning of her ‘happiness’.

Sita: The Voice of Dharma

Susan Boedo, a modern feminist philosopher, avers that men are historically associated with the intellect and the mind or spirit, while women have been solely associated with the body, the subordinated—the negatively imbued term in the mind/body dichotomy (Boedo, 1993). Contrary to this belief, Poet Vālmiki makes Sita to voice her concern to Rama at his transgressing the path of dharma. Indeed, we encounter an interesting scene in *Aranyakāṇḍa* where Sita wisely expresses her views about dharma with her husband, Rama.

One day in the forest, as Rama and Lakshmana are about to leave early in the morning, it is the turn of Sita to bring the bows and arrows from inside and pass on to the brothers who are to carry them. And as they leave the hermitage after taking leave of the Rishi, Sita, with a strong sense of what she owes her husband—sense of belonging—poses a problem to him. True to her stature, Sita protests against her husband killing *Rakshasas* at the behest of Rishis, which according to her is a transgression of a *muni*—seer—the way in which Rama is required to conduct himself in the forest.

She says: “There are three transgressions to which a man is liable even when he makes a slight departure from propriety: One, false speech; two, copulation with the wife of another; and three, cruelty without enmity (III.9.3). A false statement you have never made nor will you ever make... nor will you desire others’ wives that destroy dharma. Dharma and truth are well-established in you. ...But the third evil, i.e., the taking of others’ lives without enmity, is facing you. ...You have undertaken a vow to kill the ogres on the battlefield for the protection of sages living in the Dandaka forest; and for this purpose you have set out with arrows and a bow towards the forest with your brother.”

She continues to say: “Association with a weapon is said to be of the same consequence as is the association with fire—*kṣatriyāṇām iha dhanur hutāśasya indhanāni ca / samīpataḥ sthitam tejo balam ucchhrayate bhṛśam* (III.9.15). Due to love and great respect I am mentioning this and suggesting to you that while taking the bow you should never take into your head to kill the ogres residing in Dandaka without enmity. ...What connection is there between a weapon and forest-life? What affinity is there between the duty of a *Kshatriya* and asceticism? The two are contradictory. Let us respect the laws of the place. ...After returning to Ayodhya you can again follow the duty of a warrior. ...From dharma follows wealth, from dharma comes happiness, by adhering to dharma one gets everything. This world has dharma as its essence. The wise emaciate themselves with effort by imposing several restrictions on themselves and achieve dharma. With a pious mind, O gentle Rama, always practice righteousness in the forest suited for austerities. In fact, everything comprised in the three worlds is truly known to you. I have said this just in consonance with—‘*strī cāpalāt*’—the frivolity of a woman. Who is really capable of teaching dharma to you? (III.9.27-33) *snehāt ca bahumānāt ca smāraye tvām na śikṣaye*—It is the affinity that I have had with you which emboldened me to remind you; I am not tutoring you (III.9.24). However, thinking over it by recourse to reason together with your younger brother you may do whatever appeals to you. Let there be no delay.”

Mightily pleased with what Sita said, Rama says: “You have said this to me because you have a right to do so. It was done in good faith, out of an honest desire to put me on the right path. I am not offended... Nobody will chide one whom he does not care for. You chide me, because you are interested in me, because you love me, because you think I should do no wrong, commit no sin” (III.10.20,21).

That is the power of Sita’s mind: articulating the complex intricacies of dharma, that too, structuring it in a quite freely flowing adult-to-adult communication adorned with gracious expressions such as “*smāraye tvām na śikṣaye*”—reminding you; not tutoring you—she reaches out to her husband with ease. And what a fine articulation by the poet, Vālmiki: a wife reminding husband about dharma and husband appreciating it with no reservations whatsoever, an admirable understanding between a wife and husband, all to strengthen human bonding!

Sita: The Commander at Ease

Contrary to the common belief of feminists about the existence of “spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) among the women in the so-called patriarchal culture that pushes women to prefer silence rather than venturing into the domains of male spheres, Sita is displayed by the poet as a lady accustomed to speak freely. Indeed, her tongue is seldom under a curb (Srinivasa Sastri, 1949).

We can experience this phenomenon in an incident involving Sita in *Aranyakāṇḍa*. When Marica, assuming the form of a golden deer, jumps around their cottage, Sita sees it and longs to possess it. She then calls Rama and Lakshmana and entreats them to fetch it. But Lakshmana warns that this golden deer must be an ogre in disguise. Yet, Rama, whose mind too is filled with curiosity, decides to fetch it. While going out in search of the deer, Rama tells Lakshmana: “O Lakshmana! ... Stay you protected with armor and, remaining confined to this place, guard Sita. ... I proceed apace to bring the deer. Mark, O Lakshmana, ... You must remain wide awake in the hermitage with Sita till I dispose of this spotted deer ... Keeping Sita by your side, O Lakshmana, remain vigilant every moment and full of apprehension from all quarters ...”

So warning his brother, Rama goes out in search of the deer. Vexed by its flight, Rama, at last, hits it with his arrow. Struck by the arrow, Marica piteously cries, “Oh! Lakshmana, Oh! Sita” before dying. Hearing the cry, poor Sita gets worried and orders Lakshmana to go and see for Rama. He is not willing to go. On the other hand, he tells her all about her husband. “Can there be any danger to him? What is likely to happen to him? And if anything is to happen to him, am I going to save him? Don’t fear. I am here to protect you, I am under strict orders.”

But Sita is so full of fear for Rama that she does not listen. Instead, she even hurls harsh imputation at him: “*anārya karuṇāraṁbha nṛśaṁsa kula pāṁsana / aham tava priyam manye rāmasya vyaśanam mahat* (III.45.22)—You are a debased one devoid of mercy, thus a dreadful one, and a degrader of your dynasty, and I deem that you derive pleasure from fatal hardship to Rama; *suduṣṭaḥ tvam vane rāmam ekam eko anugacchasi / mama hetoḥ praticchannaḥ prayukto bharatena vā*—With your motive clearly concealed, you have followed Rama to the forest, who was without a male companion, either for my sake or because you were engaged by Bharata” (III.45.24).

Finally, she says, “I shall undoubtedly give up the ghost in your presence, O son of Sumitra!” (III.45.26) Then Lakshmana, saying, “You have driven me to choose between one horrible alternative, that of disobeying my brother, and the other alternative which I consider still more horrible, to see you kill yourself before me. Well, I will go.”

That is Sita’s fury! True enough, perplexed by the sensing of a ‘help-cry’ in her husband’s voice, she might have spoken like that, but command she did with ease. And this kind of tongue-lashing is not for once; we see her doing it whenever the situation demanded, but unlike in the present rude form, it was always decent and affable.

That said, we must also appreciate another fact here: that Sita is not thinking of the meaning of the words she had spoken, rather she is more concerned about their effect in making Lakshmana obey her order to go to the rescue of her husband, Rama. This is what one will be compelled to conclude from how she describes Lakshmana to Ravana a little later when he is carrying her to Lanka thus: “A powerful half-brother of his [Rama], Lakshmana by name, a tiger among men and the slayer of his foes on the battlefield, is the companion of Rama” (III.47.17). He is a *bhramachari*, and a *dridhavrata*—the resolute (III.47.18). Unless she had a good opinion about Lakshmana, she would have not been able to refer him to Ravana in such high esteem. Reading these two incidents together it becomes abundantly clear that Sita did not mean what she said to Lakshmana and she merely used those words as perhaps, a ploy to get him move immediately to the aid of Rama. And, she also exhibited the wisdom of limiting the impact of her words/ thoughts to temporary and specific effect, and also keep them impersonal, else she would not have been able to refer to him with such ease paying glowing tributes, while dissuading Ravana from his evil mission.

Sita: The Optimistic Debater

Research indicates that optimists see the world more realistically than pessimists do. Optimists are driven by two fundamental notions: one, positive framing—accepting the facts of adversity and acting to counter them; and two, positive thinking—replacing the adversity with positive beliefs. All this is again an activity associated with one’s mind-power, which, according to western feminists, women are deprived of by the patriarchic society. But that is exactly what Vālmiki’s Sita demonstrates in *Aranyakāṇḍa*, when Ravana, who comes in disguise as a *sannyasin*, declares himself and announces his evil intention of abducting her.

Sita bursts out in a fit of uncontrollable indignation at it. But even in that anger, she does not lose her optimism and courage. Indeed, accepting the reality, she makes an attempt to defend herself and in the process, she eloquently speaks about her husband’s greatness to Ravana, perhaps with an intent to dissuade him from the crime: “Do you know what kind of person my husband is? He is unshakable like the great mountain Sumeru, he is invincible like the great Indra, he is imperturbable like the great ocean. To him do I belong utterly, body and soul... Strong-armed, strong-chested, he has the tread of a lion, he has the majestic mien of a lion, he is a lion in man’s shape... Do you realize what you are doing? In desiring me, the devoted and worthy spouse of Rama, you are a low jackal desiring a lioness far beyond your reach... You desire to lick a sword’s blade with your tongue. You desire to swim across the sea with a stone round the neck... You desire to carry a blazing fire in your clothes. You desire to walk on a row of pikes with steel points (III.47.33-44). ... You may carry me away now; but while Rama, like Indra in prowess, lives and wields the *Kodanda* (Rama’s bow), you cannot bend me to your purpose, any more than a fly can eat ghee and digest it” (III.47.48).

In her rhetoric, she exhibits the presence of mind to mention even about Lakshmana: “A powerful half-brother of his, Lakshmana by name, a tiger among men and the slayer

of his foes on the battlefield, is the companion of Rama” with a fond hope that Ravana would yield to her reasoning.

Provoked by what Sita said, Ravana thus boasts of himself in harsh words: “...Alarmed to see my very face when I am provoked to anger, gods headed by Indra take to flight...Rama is not equal to my finger on the field of battle” (III.48.1-19). Enraged by it, Sita equally responds with blood-red eyes, that too, in harsh words to that Ravana in that lonely place: “How after calling god Kubera, your half-brother, do you seek to perpetrate a foul deed?... on treating with indignity a woman like me there is no escape for you even though you have quaffed the drink immortality, O ogre! (III. 48.20-24).

All this only indicates her courage—the courage that emanated from her optimistic frame of mind—that enables her to threaten even the mighty monster, Ravana, about the wrath that he has to face at the hands of her strong husband, Rama and brother-in-law, Lakshmana, if he abducts her. It is the same optimism that keeps her mind agile enough to know what to do and at what time: when Ravana is carrying her over Pampa and seeing five monkeys there, she ties her jewels in her upper cloth and drops it hoping that if by chance Rama passes that way, they would tell him. That indeed happens. That is Sita’s strength of optimism that encouraged her to counter adversity without losing heart and surrendering to it.

Unlike the routine female characters that we encounter in literature, whom the feminists often consider as marginal and subordinate and represent either as complementary and subservient to, or in opposition to masculine desires and enterprises (Abrams, 2005), Sita proves herself to be a match to stand against even the murderous Ravana in debating her cause.

Sita: The Lady of Endurance

Psychologist Daniel Gilbert says that people, who are capable of working with risk rather than avoiding it, are entitled to enjoy more happiness than others do (Gilbert, 2006). We see this trait being employed by Sita in *Sundarakāṇḍa* not only to withstand the pressure built up by Ravana to yield to his luring but also to dissuade Ravana through a meaningful exposition from committing further sin. In one of his frequent visits to *Ashokavana* (garden) where he kept Sita, Ravana tells Sita: “You smile so sweetly; your teeth are so attractive; your eyes are so winsome; you captivate me utterly, as Garuda does when he meets serpents. Come, let us drink together, let us sport together, let us enjoy each other’s company...”

All this, of course, is gall and wormwood to Sita. It annoys and provokes her extremely. She scorns him, yet she engages him with an argument that is a mixture of threat, flattery and advice to make him see what the ‘dharma’ commands. In her attempt to conquer his wickedness, she gives him an advice, pitched in the highest possible key: “You do not understand the sanctity of marriage. When you have got another man’s wife in your keeping, you must protect her as you would have your own wife protected from others. Think of yourself; think of everybody like you, and then enjoy the company of your own wedded wives” (V.21.7-8).

In a surprised voice she then says: “Are there no good people in Lanka, are there no honest men who care for righteous conduct, and would you not be guided by them? It cannot be. Lanka is a big place, the Vedas are chanted here, and our religion is followed faithfully. There must be many good people. I suspect that you do not follow them. You do not care for the good people that are here. Seeing that your mind is bent upon evil courses, I gather that although there are good people to give you proper guidance, you do not listen to them” (V.21.9-10).

It is because of her positive frame of mind and the strong belief in her character from which constant flow of energy is ensured that she could engage Ravana in an intelligent discourse—even in that hour of crisis to make him understand what good men should do in any community. Indeed, during these long months of imprisonment in *Ashokavana*, she, all alone, surrounded by a bunch of deadly looking ogres who are constantly engaged in breaking her down morally, engages herself by delving deep within to gain strength to face Ravana’s blandishments and threats, while her mind is steadfastly fixed on Rama, her husband. What a spirit—an admixture of ability and courage—she exhibits heroic-spirit in enduring the threats of Ravana to uphold her values!

Sita: The Lady of Self-Respect

Sita has utmost concern for keeping up her esteem. In *Sundarakāṇḍa*, we witness a scene exhibiting her interactions with Hanuman, the emissary of Rama, which makes this fact evident. After Hanuman introduces himself to Sita as the emissary of Rama, Sita, in her pathetic tone narrates all that she was to go through and wonders if she has to live further at all causing anxiety to the great brothers. As Sita is talking with grief about Rama wondering, “How are my husband and his brother to cross the sea?” Not being able to bear her grief Hanuman ventures to say, “*pr̥ṣṭham āroha me devi mā vikāṅkṣasva śobhane/yogam anviccha rāmeṇa śaśa ankena iva rohiṇī* (V.37.24)—O Sita! Mount on my back. Do not have any hesitation. You shall be joined with your husband. Surely, all the dwellers in Lanka will not be able to follow my speed... (V. 37. 28). Bearing you, as I came over, so I can go over. Dismiss all this anxiety” (V.37.29).

Listening his proposition and gently laughing, she says, “*hanūman dūram adhvanam katham mām voḍhum icchasi /tat eva khalu te manye kapitvam hari yūthapa* (V.37.29)—O Hanuma! How are you wishing to carry me for such a long distance? O chief of monkeys! I consider this indeed as your apishness!” Of course, this is not the remark what matters most here but it is what follows that remark: “*ayuktam tu kapi śreṣṭha mayā gantum tvayā saha*—it is not proper for me to go with you ... I cannot touch any person other than Rama knowingly and willfully... It is worthy of my husband after all, having lost me to come and destroy Ravana and his family and fetch me back in triumph so that he can let the world know that no one can dare insult Rama” (V. 37.60-62). That is her concern for upholding the glory of her husband and in turn her own esteem.

Incidentally, feminists such as Annes Jung, harbor a belief that a woman in India could speak her poignant feelings only to a woman (Jung, 1987). Contrary to this assumption, Sita, when asked by Hanuman for a token by means of which he can prove to Rama that he met Sita for certain, recalling an incident connected with a crow that took place in the presence of Rama at Citrakuta mountain, narrates thus: A crow, greedy of flesh, began to peck me. Picking up a clod of earth I kept the crow back. In order to pierce me, the said crow, however, remained in hiding on that very spot and would not leave its prey. As my skirt slipped while I was pulling its string to tighten, angry as I was at the bird, I was actually seen by you in that state and laughed at. I felt nettled and abashed at that moment. The same crow, however, appeared on the scene again. ... suddenly clawed me in the breasts ... later Rama waking up at the touch of blood discharged from the wound, taking a blade of the kusa grass from his mat, he charging it with the potency of the mystic missile ... hurled it at the crow. Narrating an incident—that once made her feel abashed—with ease to an altogether stranger, Sita proves her ability to shed off inhibitions of what ever nature to stay focused on the objective of affording an evidence to Rama which shall enable him to believe that the lady whom Hanuman met is indeed his wife. And, interestingly this narration ends with an appeal to Rama, as though present before her, “How O ruler of earth, having sent a missile presided over a Brahma at a mere crow on my behalf, you bear with him who wrested me from you?” (V.38.11-46), subtly reiterating her concern to be fetched back by him alone.

Sita: The Defier of Male Chauvinism

There is yet another scene in *Yuddhakāṇḍa* where we witness Sita skillfully weathering the greatest crisis of hers with grace. To have a full feel of the state of mind of Sita during her tragic distress, and appreciate her gumption, let us follow the scene from the beginning. After killing Ravana in the battlefield, Rama sends Vibhishana to fetch Sita saying: “Ask her to bathe and perfume herself. Let her put on scents and come to me bedecked with all the jewels she has.” Accordingly, Vibhishana goes to *Ashokavana* and conveys Rama’s message to Sita. Perplexed at it, Sita says, “I would rather see him at first as I am, soiled, grief-stricken, tear-bedewed, miserable. Don’t ask me to bathe and put on my jewels and appear as though I have been leading a pleasant life. Let me see him as I am, that is, as I have been here.” But Vibhishana, perhaps, having already seen signs of trouble on Rama’s face, tells her, “I think you had better follow your husband’s order.”

Perhaps, feeling admonished, Sita does as she was bidden and when she presents herself before Rama, he says that he has destroyed the man who ventured to insult him by carrying away his wife and thus wiped out the disgrace. He also says: “Remember I did not do all this for your sake. No” (VI. 115.15). As he utters these words, Sita at once grasps that a tragic fate awaits her. That’s why Vālmiki says that as Sita listening to these utterances of Rama looked up, her eyes seemed to indicate the kind of mortal dread, which a stag shows when the huntsman has sent his fatal arrow. Rama, then intensifying his hostile attitude, knitting his brows with the severity of a magistrate, utters the words: “There is a stain on your character. What man of spirit and born in a noble

family for his part would take back with an eager mind a woman who has dwelt in another's house? (VI.115. 19) While boasting of my lineage, how can I accept you, who were squeezed into the arms of Ravana who cast a lustful eye on you? (VI.115.20) ...There is no more attachment for you in my heart. You may go wherever you like (VI.115.21). Hence this utterance has been made by me today, ...Set your mind on Lakshmana or even on Bharata ... , O Sita or do as it pleases your pleasure" (VI.115.22). Hearing the harsh utterance of Rama, *mānini*—the proud lady (VI.115.25) feels greatly afflicted. Notice the adjective that the poet has chosen here to refer to Sita: *mānini*—proud lady.

Sita stands her head bent low with shame. Sita, pierced by those arrow-like words, yet, pulling up her energy, wiping clean her face that is bathed in tears, slowly addresses her spouse in faltering accents: "*kiṃ māmasadṛśaṃ vākyamīdṛśaṃ śrotradāruṇam / rūkṣaṃ śrāvayase vīra prākṛtaḥ prākṛtām iva* (VI.116.5)—Why do you, like a common man speaking to a common woman, speak to me, such unkind and unbecoming words, which are so jarring to the ear, ...I was helpless when I came into contact with the person of Ravana; I did not act of my own free will on that occasion. My fate is to be blamed for that. That which is under my control, my heart, abides in you. What could I do, helpless as I was, with regard to my limbs, which had fallen under the sway of another? If I could not be fully known to you, in spite of our love for each other having simultaneously grown and despite our having lived together, I am undone for good, thanks to such ignorance" (VI.116. 6 -10). What a subtle style of questioning her husband's wisdom!

She then questions Rama: "When the eminent hero, Hanuman, was dispatched by you in order to find me out, why was I not repudiated by you even while I was in Lanka? Life would have been yielded up by me, ...This useless exertion which you have put forth exposing your life to danger would not have been undertaken nor would your friends have been put to such fruitless hardship. By you, however, who, like a small man, womanliness alone has been mainly taken into consideration. The divine origin of mine is not taken into account by you. My exalted character is not prized by you either... Nay, my devotion to you as well as my chastity have all been ignored by you" (VI.116.11-16).

Speaking so in a voice choked with tears and weeping, Sita then appeals to Lakshmana, who is absorbed in thought and feeling distressed: "Raise for me a pyre, the only antidote against this calamity. I no longer desire to survive, hurt as I am by false reproaches. I will enter a fire, which is the course appropriate for me, renounced as I am in a public gathering by my husband, who is no longer pleased with my virtues" (VI.116.18-19).

Any other woman when exposed to such humiliation in the presence of the world, an insult that is beyond endurance, and left to entirely defend herself, would have simply wilted. But Sita, the knower of her 'unimpeachable character' and driven by its strength, pulls up herself to reprimand Rama about the language used by him. Even in such tiring situation, she could muster energy to protest that she was not mistress of herself when Ravana touched her, and upbraid Rama: "It was not because I wanted to touch him and see how he felt, that I came into contact with him. It was forced upon me. Don't you see? And yet you say these things to me..."

What we must appreciate here is: Sita's ability to challenge Rama's wisdom with logic and defend herself with grace and élan. And, finally, she makes not only her husband but also the whole world know that she would not meekly submit to the insult heaped on her by Rama; instead, she challenges it by simply defying him and his values by proclaiming to annihilate herself. A metaphorical denial of his accusation! And a metaphorical challenge to male chauvinism!

Here it is logical to argue that Sita by asking Lakshmana to arrange fire for her self-immolation, tantamount to telling Rama: "Look! It is your prerogative to interpret the event as you deem fit, but it doesn't mean you are right. Therefore, to deny your allegation—the unjust insult inflicted on me—the only weapon I have is to fire my personal canon, i.e., myself and hence the self-immolation." Through it, she has also made the world know that what Rama is saying is not acceptable to her. That is her answer to Rama's accusation. What a bravery! Or, independence!

Intriguingly, nowhere else in the entire epic, a reader comes across Rama saying such unjust and harsh words, particularly to Sita. We do not know if the poet has created this scene of Rama repudiating Sita immediately after his glorified victory over Ravana, right over the wrong, dharma over adharma deliberately to elevate the character of Sita, or to universalize the phenomenon of life itself—all its glory and hopelessness; human vulnerability and greatness, for such a repudiation to come from the same Rama who once bemoaned Sita's missing from the hermitage, "*tvayā virahitaḥ ca aham tyakṣye jīvitam ātmanaḥ*—...Don't leave me, O lovely Sita! Bereft of you I shall yield up my life" (III.61.6-10); and who indeed affirmed earlier his respect for her counseling saying to very Sita thus, "You are my *sadharmacharini* and have the liberty to admonish me, to put me right" (III.10.22), is incomprehensible. Such harsh words are indeed difficult to digest when they come from Rama, the "*buddhimān madhurābhāṣī pūrvabhāṣī priyaṁvadaḥ*" (II.1.13)—darling idol.

It is of course a different matter here that Poet Vālmīki, having thus far moved the journey of the epic quite rationally on the lines of cause and effect now, for the first time, giving it a tweak of mythology, seeks divine intervention, perhaps, to keep Sita alive and importantly, to end the epic on a happy note. Accordingly, as Sita enters the fire, the God of fire springs up with Sita in his arms, and commands Rama to take her saying, "Here is your Sita; *na vidyate paapam*—No sin exists in her" (VI.118.5). Intriguingly, Rama accepting Sita from Agni God, says: "...I too know Sita ...to be undivided in her affection to me and agreeable to my mind...In order, however, to convince the three worlds I, ... ignored Sita even while she was entering the fire" (VI.118.15-17).

There is yet another incident in the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, where Sita once again displays her incredible sense of independence in deciding her life course, beyond doubt. Rama, as king, being annoyed with the ill-report about Sita, orders Lakshmana to take Sita away into forest and leave her in the vicinity of Vālmīki *Asrama*. In the hermitage, she gives birth to two sons. Later, as the epic is nearing end, Vālmīki presents Sita to Rama saying,

“...this pious Sita of righteous conduct was left by you near my hermitage out of fear of censure by folks...I have known through divine vision [Sita] to be of pure conduct and devoted to you...” (VII.96.16-24). At this, Rama replies with folded hands, “...The censure of people is great due to which Sita was forsaken... So please forgive me...” (VII.97.4). Amidst this scene, Sita—perhaps, driven by her ineradicable hurt-feelings—instead of joining her husband, Rama, prays to the Goddess Madhavi, “...to provide space to enter nether land” (VII.97.14,15), of course, not as a supplication but more as a rightful demand of hers, for she appeals: “As I have not contemplated about anyone other than scion of Raghu even in mind, so the goddess Madhavi may provide space to me...”, and as her claim is granted she goes back to natal home, as the gathering cries: “O Sita, who are of such conduct.” It is in order here to appreciate that the poet, despite giving a mythological tinge to the epic, ensured that Sita’s concern for her independence is maintained unimpaired.

Epilog

That is the tale of Sita, the *mānini*—a proud lady, who fought all through her life to assert her rights with an eye on her *swābhimān*—‘self-respect’. Sita, *abhimāna téjeswini*, the lady of self-respect at its brilliance, has indeed never taken to the suggestions given by others, as seen previously while forcing Lakshmana to go in aid of Rama, in declining Hanuman’s suggestion to mount over his back so that he would immediately take her from Lanka to Rama, and even her husband’s suggestion to “...Set your mind on Lakshmana or even on Bharata ...”, instead preferred to act using her own intellect in arriving at a logical decision that stands to the test of dharma as understood by her. This incredulous assertive behavior of Sita that runs quite contrary to the belief of modern day feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, who theorized that “a woman has no identity of her own”, compels one to infer that Sita is an archetype feminist.

She is innocent but wise; gentle but strong, and full of love and compassion both for herself and others. And all this reflects in her motivations, conversations, and actions. Vālmiki chiseled her character as a tremblingly human and a gracious *manasvini*—‘great-minded’ woman, who overcomes the ordeals in her life by asserting herself with sheer dint of optimism, her clear sense of what matters most to her as ‘dharma’ and her art of engaging people with her clever articulation of dharma. She is full of compassion as is reflected in her response to Hanuman when he seeks her permission to kill the ogres who have spoken harsh words to her all through her stay in *Ashokavana*: “...Who will be angry, O prince of monkeys, with obedient maidservants, who are dependent on a king because of their being in his service and so act according to other’s command?... The vow of not returning evil for evil must be redeemed at all costs...compassion should be shown by a noble soul for those deserving even death, for *na kaścinnāparādhyati*—there is none who never commits a wrong” (VI.113.38-46). No wonder, if Mandodari, wife of Ravana, lamenting at the dead body of her husband, praised Sita thus: “*vasudhāyā hi vasudhāṃ śriyaḥ śrīṃ* ... a role model for forbearance even to goddess Earth and a model of grace even to Sri, the goddess of Fortune...”

(VI.111.24-25). Indeed, “the elements / So mixed in” her that a reader tempts to “stand up / And say ... This is a man!”

It is not for nothing that the wise considered Vālmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* to contain the essence of *Vedānta*—“*vedāḥ prāchētasādāsīt sākshād ramāyanātmanā*”. The poet indeed makes Rama to say in *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*: “The universe is established in Truth. The highest Dharma is Truth. Truth is the lord of the Universe. All have their roots in Truth. There is no position or abode higher than Truth. The *Vedas* have their foundation in Truth. *vedāḥ satya pratiṣṭhānāḥ*. Therefore, one should be devoted to Truth” (I.109.12-14). It is not that the poet has merely made his characters speak about truth, but had indeed ensured that all his important characters, right from Dasaratha to his son Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, and Vibhishina, even Khumbakarna did not only speak about dharma, but also ardently practiced it. And that is what indeed Sita did: she not only expounded dharma (III.9.30) but also practiced it with devotion as is examined in the preceding paras. It is to be remembered here that Sita asserted her will, as defined by her dharma and she has nowhere transgressed the ultimate truth, Dharma.

Incidentally, the amazing independence that Sita exhibits in responding to Rama’s allegation at the end of *Yuddhakāṇḍa* and again at the end of *Uttarakāṇḍa*, may appear to some who believe in *Manusmṛiti*—the bête noire for some Hindu social reformers and revolutionaries, particularly, feminists who often refer to some of its dictums such as, “a woman must never seek independence and must never do anything according to her mere pleasure, even in her own house” (V.147), quite revoltingly, but justifiedly—as though she transgressed dharma. It is, however, worth remembering here that *Manusmṛiti* is of later origin to *Rāmāyaṇa* and even otherwise, there is a strong belief that some dictums appear to have been incorporated in it by the unscrupulous later at different periods (Satchidananda Murty, 1993).

That being the beauty behind the orchestration of the concept of equity and equality between genders by Vālmiki in his epic, a sensitive reader remains wonder-struck: How this shift in society’s orientation towards women had crept in. One can’t but feel sad about the disappearance of such a value-system over the years leading to the current plight of womanhood in our society. This unfortunate development, however, now commands that researchers from the fields of anthropology, sociology, history and other related fields must explore to trace how the slide happened and also to strategize a way forward to reverse the trend and better the gender dynamics. ■

Acknowledgment: The verses quoted are from *Śrīmad Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa Part I and II* (2001), Gita Press, Gorakhpur, India. Some of the quoted Sanskrit verses are sourced from <http://www.valmikiramayana.net>. I am highly grateful to the sources.

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