

Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita* : More Fiction Less Facts

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The epic *Ramayan* has a distinguished and magnificent importance in Indian Society, culture, traditions, customs and teachings. As one of the greatest and most revered epics of all time *Ramayan* is not just a story or an anecdote but is a part and parcel that is ingrained in the Indian minds and also has international approach. No need to mention that it is the most famous epic of 'Sanaatan Dharm.'

The dynamic waves of time have always been unable to let down this story from Indian minds and thus, it becomes the beacon of India. It is the iconic story of Lord Ram and Goddess Sita woven into beautiful lines of poetry initially by Aadikavi Valmiki. These 24,000 verses of Valmiki were retold and re-written by innumerable poets and authors through the course of time with certain changes in the storyline in accordance to the time, place and societal situations where they were written. But such is the expertise of Valmiki that no one has been able to surpass his flamboyant creative skills. However, one cannot ignore the noticeable retellings of this greatest epic. *Shriramcharitmanas* by Bhakti poet saint Goswami Tulsidas is a benchmark work narrating the story of *Ramayan*. Other than we find different retellings of *Ramayan* in different parts of India. Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi had mentioned the same in an oration at Ram Mandir Bhoomi Pujan:

Thousands of years ago, the Rama who was an inspiration to the ancient India as depicted in Valmiki's Ramayana, the Rama who was inspiring India through Tulsi, Kabir and Nanak in the Medieval era, the same Rama was present in the Bapu's bhajans during the fight for freedom in the form of non-violence and satyagraha--- There are many more countries and parts of the world, where Lord Rama venerated owing to their faith or past

Amidst all this, the genre of mythology gained major sales in Indian books' market and thus became a burning topic of literature and Devdutt Pattanaik emerged as an effective persuader of thoughts by relating epic tales with day-to-day lives and deriving several interpretations from them. So far, he has authored 53 books. All of the flamboyant illustrations present in his books are drawn by himself (except Devlok series). He is also a story consultant to Star TV, India where he has consulted on mythological tele-serials. In 2015, Devdutt presented the Hindi television series 'Devlok With Devdutt Pattanaik' on Epic channel.

His book *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of The Ramayan* published in 2013, he tries to see the traditional story of *Ramayan* through goddess Sita's viewpoint. While exploring this, he presents various versions, both written and oral, traditional and folk, of the epic tale. The book

opens up with a Prologue and then there is a detailed story divided into seven chapters (as Valmiki's Ramayana), concluding with an Epilogue. He also provides with acknowledgements and bibliography at the end of his subject matter. The language of Devdutt Pattanaik is lucid, musical and easy to comprehend. The illustrations breathe life into the book by making it more lively, catchy and entertaining for the reader. He has also employed literary techniques of storytelling in the book and succeeds in making it a complete package. His viewpoints are liberal, sympathetic and persuasive. The famous television series 'Siya Ke Ram'(2015) was highly based on this book. This book not only presents Indian and Hindu retellings of the epic but foreign and non- Hindu retellings also share a part of it.

Though Devdutt has the gift of pen and fame, his works are always more fictional and less reliable. Scholars call it 'distortion'. His work *Sita* is a bit misleading and misguides the youth when he narrates the great epic. He had incorporated correct details as well but the perception and explanation is just a verbose argument. In *Sita*, Devdutt says, "..... Janaka's daughters asked questions like Gargi of the Upanishad; Dashratha's sons preferred obeying commands." (41)

This statement is highly controversial as we have *Yog Vaasishth* by sage Valmiki which is a full commentary on Lord Ram's noticeable philosophical questions and his teacher Vasishth's knowledgeable answers. Guru Vasishth makes it very clear that, the problem is confusion of the real with the unreal, or change, due to the seeming reality of its appearance.

Life should be the field where this should take place and where it should be corrected. Devdutt portrays Goddess Sita milking the tigresses of the forest after there had fed their cubs. "She discovered how to collect honey without upsetting the bees and milk from tigresses who had finished feeding their cubs." (114)

He describes the golden deer (*Maarich*) who has taken the form of *Mayamrig* for helping Raavan in the abduction of Sita with two heads which is undoubtedly false. He mentions the name of Gautam and Ahalyaa but spells Ahalyaaas Ahilya, this is a shallow understanding of grammar because the word Ahilya, though popular, has no sense. *Ramayan* mentions the name as Ahalyaa which literally means 'pure and untouched.' No scope for Ahilya! Although he mentions various versions of the story now and then but unfortunately fails to establish consistency and credibility for his superfluous text. With reference to the first meeting of Lord Ram and Hanuman, Devdutt declares that "In ancient India, the masses and all women spoke Prakrit. Sanskrit was restricted to priests and kings." (167)

This statement can be taken into thought with the well-known fact that Praakrit had no existence in the age of *Ramayan* (Tretaa yug), "The Prakrits were Middle Indo-Aryan languages spoken between about 500 B.C. and 500 A.D.The oldest stage of Middle Indo-Aryan language is attested in the inscriptions of Ashoka (ca. 260 BCE), as well as in the earliest forms of Pāli, the language of the Theravāda Buddhist canon." (Oxford)

He mentions that “But according to folklore, Sampati gets his wings back for helping the monkeys and takes them back to Kishkindha on his wings”(189). Actually, it is not a folklore but a story from *Shri Valmiki Ramayanam (Aranya Kaandam, 63th sarga)*. He says that, “Ram is thus unaware of his own divinity in the Valmiki Ramayana.” (219) On the other hand, Valmiki repeatedly allows his hero to recognize himself as a super power. The first evidence of Ram’s divinity is found in the *Baal Kaandam* when Ram makes Parshuram surrender. There are several evidences where Ram has been considered divine in the text. Devdutt remarks that “The Valmiki Ramayana is clear in pointing out the consumption of non- vegetarian food, especially game, in Lanka, but is shy of the same when it comes to Kishkindha and Ayodhya” (225). In actual sense, Valmiki clearly points out the consumption of non-vegetarian food in Ayodhya. Some of the mentions are as follows:

Ayodhyaakaandam 52nd Sarga verse 89

Ayodhyaakaandam 52nd Sarga verse 102

Ayodhyakaandam 56th Sarga verse 22-23

Ayodhyakaandam 91st Sarga verse 21 and 70

Ayodhyakaandam 96th Sarga verse 1-2

Aranyakaandam 47th Sarga verse 21-24, and many more.

While reading this book, the reader notices vast differences between the story what scriptures tell and what Devdutt has to say. The difference in viewpoint cannot be the saving log. His presentation of the story is highly modern and based on shallow understanding of the epic. Among innumerable examples of his false reconstruction of the story, is evident on the cover page of *Sita, Book Seven: Freedom* “you feel your Ram has abandoned his Sita, don’t you?” she asked gently. ‘But he has not. He cannot He is God-he abandons no one. And I am Goddess- I cannot be abandoned by anyone.’ Such dialogues are feminist and neither Valmiki nor other poets have quoted such a dialogue between Laxman and Goddess Sita. In opposition to this, Goddess Sita cries in grief when she hears about the abandoning. More of the time, Devdutt is involved in recalling the different versions of the tale and leaves the reader confused between what he wants to say and what he wants to make them understand. Moreover, in the Bibliography provided by the author at the end of the book states everything except the main text of *Ramayanam* by Valmiki and other poets. All the books referred to are either translations or are from authors of various nationalities and thus the work of Devdutt becomes ‘Shadow of Shadows.’ Despite the creative content of *Sita* with attractive illustrations and the lively relatable examples, the essence of the epic goes missing and the reader swings between versions of the story.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of The Ramayana* is a creative but contagious representation of the story as well as the characters. Devdutt's musical language and illustrations serve as the USP of the book. The book may satisfy aesthetic requirements of the reader but fails to obtain a concrete belief for an intellectual. One can consider the book as a part of literature but then too the question of its credibility remains a big issue.

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