

Sita Speaks: The Feminist Voice and Reimagined Power in Devdutt Pattanaik's Retelling of the Ramayana

Dhananjaya Sodha

Research Scholar, Department of English, Jai Narain Vyas University, Jodhpur, India

Abstract- Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* stands as a ground-breaking narrative that interrogates the patriarchal foundations of the traditional *Ramayana*. This paper synthesizes scholarly perspectives to demonstrate how Pattanaik's retelling deconstructs entrenched gender norms, foregrounds Sita as an autonomous subject, and reclaims marginalized voices that have long remained on the periphery of epic mythology. This endeavour explores how Sita is repositioned not as a passive consort or divine accessory to Rama, but as the philosophical, emotional, and political fulcrum of the narrative. She is no longer merely a reflection of Rama's righteousness but a distinct entity with her own moral compass and sense of justice.

Through this feminist lens, the text reconfigures mythological space to elevate feminine agency and critique the cultural glorification of male-centric dharma, which often demands silent suffering from women in the name of duty. Sita emerges as a conscious actor who navigates the intersection of personal duty, spiritual identity, and societal expectations with grace and conviction. Her choices, whether to accompany Rama into exile, confront Ravana, or reject societal judgment, are portrayed as deliberate acts of agency rather than obligatory submission. By placing her voice at the heart of the epic, Pattanaik challenges the long-standing hierarchies of power, morality, and gender, and in doing so, restores narrative balance by acknowledging the feminine as a site of strength, wisdom, and ethical clarity.

Index Terms- Ramayana, Sita, Retellings, Feminism, Gender

I. INTRODUCTION

The *Ramayana*, revered as a founding epic of India, has historically served as a cultural guide and moral framework, influencing social conduct, gender roles, and spiritual values over the years. At its core is Rama, frequently lauded as the epitome of virtue, ethical strength, and exemplary leadership. In this

overarching story, Sita, his consort, has conventionally been depicted through an idealised perspective of femininity, characterised primarily by her steadfast loyalty, patience, and submissiveness. Classical renditions by Valmiki, Tulsidas, and Kamban predominantly limit her agency, portraying her as a passive entity whose virtue is rooted in endurance and sacrifice rather than expression or autonomy. These representations have substantially influenced the establishment of patriarchal gender norms in Indian society, where women are frequently anticipated to replicate Sita's silence, subservience, and endurance.

In sharp contrast, Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* (2013) challenges these entrenched conventions by placing Sita at the narrative's core, not merely as a goddess, consort, or victim, but as a fully developed human being possessing intellect, emotion, strength, and autonomy. In his review on Pattanaik's book, Abhinav Agarwal observes, "Devdutt draws upon a vast store of retellings and regional narrations of the Ramayana over the last two thousand years, blends them into the story, and adds notes at the end of each chapter, identifying these regional narrations and interspersing these with his commentary." (Agarwal)

Pattanaik's tale challenges the dichotomy of glorification and victimhood, presenting a nuanced and complex depiction of Sita as a woman who listens, learns, questions, and finally asserts her autonomy, despite the limitations imposed by dharma and societal expectations. This narrative transforms into a profound reinterpretation of both myth and ethics, portraying Sita not as a symbol of passive endurance but as one of critical examination and subtle defiance.

This paper analyses how Sita reinterprets gendered frameworks, interrogates the moral foundations of

heroism, and introduces novel perspectives on mythology, agency, and national identity. It also highlights Sita's voice and intellect to explore how a modern mythopoetic tale might restore the overlooked dimensions of female subjectivity and present an alternative conception of sovereignty that is grounded in compassion, intelligence, and choice rather than conquest.

Rewriting as Resistance: Deconstructing Patriarchal Norms

In the traditional versions of the *Ramayana*, primary emphasis is placed on Rama's heroism and unwavering adherence to dharma, often relegating Sita to a passive, secondary role with minimal insight into her internal life. Devdutt Pattanaik, however, disrupts this conventional portrayal by bringing Sita's intellectual, emotional, and psychological complexity to the forefront. He presents her not as a submissive consort, but as a self-aware figure who understands her own dharma and refuses to be sacrificed at the altar of public morality. This is powerfully illustrated in her exchange with Lakshmana after Rama's abandonment, where she asserts, "'You feel Ram has abandoned his Sita, don't you?' she asked gently. 'But he has not', she stated confidently. 'He cannot. He is God; he abandons no one. And I am Goddess; I cannot be abandoned by anyone.'... Rama is dependable, hence God. I am independent, hence Goddess" (Pattanaik 278). This moment marks a transformative shift, from dependence to autonomy, where Sita reclaims her identity not through victimhood, but through spiritual self-possession and moral clarity. From a feminist literary perspective, this repositioning serves as a deliberate narrative strategy to restore feminine subjectivity within mythological discourse.

Pattanaik reinforces this portrayal by reimagining key moments that reflect Sita's latent strength and self-determination. One such episode involves her effortless lifting of Shiva's bow, *Pinaka*, with a single hand while performing domestic chores, a feat accomplished even before Rama. This symbolic act, often omitted or minimized in traditional narratives, challenges the perception of Sita as weak or dependent. Her endurance of forest exile, unflinching confrontation with Ravana, and refusal to be side-lined by Rama's concerns for her safety all point toward a figure of formidable resolve. When Rama initially hesitates to take her into exile,

Sita not only asserts that she can protect herself but insists on accompanying him, not solely out of wifely duty, but because her presence brings emotional balance and spiritual anchoring to both Rama and Lakshmana. Through these reinterpretations, Pattanaik crafts a new image of Sita, one who is powerful, perceptive, and unwilling to conform to oppressive societal norms.

In extending this reimagination beyond Sita, Pattanaik also foregrounds other female characters often marginalized in epic retellings such as Kaikeyi, Urmila, Shanta, and Surpanakha, granting each of them a voice, agency, and nuanced perspective. Their inclusion further dismantles the patriarchal narrative architecture of the epic, transforming *Sita* into a literary vehicle for feminist resistance and for critiquing the hegemonic constructs of traditional storytelling. Devdutt discusses the influence of epics on contemporary society in his book *Jaya: An illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, "In the 20th century, the epic cast its spell on the modern mind. Long essays as were written to make rational sense of its moral ambiguity, while its plots were used by novelists, playwrights and filmmakers as potent vehicles to comment on numerous political and social issues—from feminism to caste to war. Its wisdom has often been overshadowed by its entertainment value, its complexities oversimplified by well-meaning narrators, leading to ruptures in the traditional discourse" (xiv).

Gender and Education: Sita as Philosopher and Intellectual

Pattanaik depicts Sita's upbringing in Janaka's palace as an intellectual awakening that challenges traditional gender stereotypes. In contrary to Ayodhya, characterised by paternalistic norms, Mithila is portrayed as an egalitarian realm that fosters female intellect. The opening chapter of *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* revisits the myth surrounding Sita's birth. Traditionally, it is believed that King Janaka discovered her while ploughing the earth, and chose to adopt the abandoned child, thus earning her the name Janaki. However, Pattanaik subverts this conventional narrative by attributing agency to Sita herself, suggesting that she "chose Janaka to be her father" (Pattanaik 10), thereby reframing the act of adoption as an exercise of will on Sita's part rather than Janaka's benevolence.

The narrative further draws a deliberate contrast between Janaka and Dasharatha to highlight differing patriarchal values in Mithila and Ayodhya. Dasharatha, driven by an obsessive desire for a male heir, goes so far as to barter his daughter Shanta (a rarely acknowledged figure in popular retellings of the Ramayana) to fulfill his quest for sons. In doing so, he reduces his daughter to a transactional tool, reflecting the marginalization of women in epic traditions. His three marriages further exemplify the prioritization of dynastic continuity over emotional and relational bonds in the Raghu lineage. In contrast, Janaka is portrayed as content with his daughters, valuing their presence and potential. This ideological divergence sets the stage for Sita's values, disposition, and the challenges she later faces, making clear how deeply rooted gender attitudes shaped the destinies of women within the epic's cultural framework.

Pattanaik presents Sita raised in an environment that embraced philosophical discourse, assimilating the insights of sages such as Gargi and Yagnavalkya. Her education is not merely ornamental; it constitutes the foundation of her perseverance and wisdom throughout the epic. Janaka reveres Sita as a terrestrial gift, a celestial blessing. Sita's assimilation of her dual education, philosophical and domestic, renders her a well-rounded and formidable individual. Her capacity to manoeuvre through academic discussions and practical existence is epitomised in her culinary proficiency. Pattanaik observes her integration of spiritual understanding with quotidian events, underscoring the significance of holistic education. She is not only a literary figure but also a person of experiential wisdom.

Sita and the Ecology of Resistance: Feminine and Nature

Sita's deep connection with nature is not incidental, it is symbolic of a larger ecofeminist framework. Her birth from the furrow signifies not only her organic origin but her elemental strength. Throughout the narrative, Sita remains closer to nature than culture. She feels at home in the forest, questions the cruelty towards Surpanakha, and eventually returns to the earth on her own terms.

Following the *Agni-pariksha* and her subsequent exile, Sita makes a profound statement to Lakshmana: "A jungle is preferable to such an

intolerant society. ... I know the forest well. I remember more years here than in the palace. Do not worry about me. I am not happy with the situation, but I accept it and will make the most of it. Thus I submit to Karma without letting go of Dharma" (Pattanaik 278–79). With these words, Sita not only accepts her fate with dignity but embraces the forest, a space long associated with her sense of belonging and inner peace. She smiles as she unbinds her hair, a symbolic gesture of liberation, suggesting that "when the farmer abandons the field, the field is finally free to return to being a forest" (279). This metaphor poignantly captures Sita's transformation from a domesticated queen to an embodiment of wild, ungoverned nature, fully reclaiming her autonomy.

This imagery aligns Sita with the Prakriti Principle, representing the feminine essence of nature, wisdom, and self-realization, far removed from societal expectations. Traditionally, women have been closely identified with nature, or *Prakriti*, both symbolically and culturally. Their innate capacity for nurturing, intuition, and connection with the environment positions them as caretakers of the natural world. As famous Ecofeminist Vandana Shiva observes, "Nature herself is the experiment and women, as sylviculturalists, agriculturists and water resource managers, the traditional natural scientists. Their knowledge is ecological and plural, reflecting both the diversity of natural ecosystems and the diversity in cultures that nature-based living gives rise to" (Shiva 40). Sita exemplifies this ecofeminist understanding—she is not just a victim of cultural norms, but a figure who consciously chooses when to cultivate herself into a structured garden or when to embrace the wildness of a forest. Her decision to retreat into the forest is not passive resignation but an assertion of self-knowledge and ecological agency.

Thus, in Pattanaik's retelling, Sita is more than a character shaped by circumstance; she emerges as a feminine force deeply connected to nature, resilience, and moral strength. Her story becomes a metaphor for reclaiming female autonomy, and this interpretation subtly sows the seeds of a feminist consciousness within the mythological tradition.

Sita's story exemplifies this entanglement and offers a paradigm of resistance. Her wisdom is not codified in laws but rooted in cycles, emotions, and relational

ethics. As such, she represents an alternative epistemology that privileges interconnectedness over domination.

Sita's Interpersonal Agency: Sisterhood, Solidarity, and Subversion

Unlike older versions of the Ramayana that isolate Sita, Pattanaik builds a network of female voices and solidarities. Urmila, Mandavi, and even Surpanakha are presented as complex beings with unique narratives. Through these relationships, Sita reclaims her emotional and philosophical agency.

One of the most compelling illustrations of Sita's interpersonal agency and sisterhood occurs when she, alongside Urmila, engages in a moment of critical reflection during Vishwamitra's retelling of Ganga's descent. Unlike Rama and Lakshmana, who receive the tale without resistance, Sita and Urmila express discomfort at the implication that Ganga must be subdued. Urmila pointedly asks, "To be wife, must a woman be tamed as Shiva tamed Ganga?" (Pattanaik 52), questioning the suggestion that unrestrained femininity must be softened to maintain familial and societal balance.

This moment reveals the critical consciousness of Janaka's daughters, whose probing reflections contrast with the passive acceptance displayed by Dasharatha's sons. Vishwamitra himself is taken aback, remarking: "It did not escape Vishwamitra's notice that Janaka's daughters asked questions like Gargi of the Upanishads; Dasharatha's son preferred obeying commands. Different seeds nurtured in different fields by different farmers produce very different crops indeed" (41). This portrayal marks a significant departure from the conventional image of Sita as a submissive and compliant figure who uncritically aligns with patriarchal norms. Instead, she emerges here as intellectually engaged and morally inquisitive, challenging not only mythic structures but societal expectations of womanhood. As Jasbir Jain notes in *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency*, "Gender is constructed by an interplay of both femininity and masculinity. Further the manner in which retellings have altered them is equally relevant, for the change marks either the resistance or a shift in the social perception of the role, or it may also signify a shift of focus because of social location of the narrator/narrators." (29) Pattanaik's narrative thus exemplifies this transformative shift,

giving space to Sita's dissenting voice and reshaping her identity beyond the domesticated ideal.

Her interaction with Surpanakha is particularly telling. Rather than responding with scorn, she advises her to find Shakti within herself. This empathetic counseling reframes Surpanakha from a vengeful caricature into a fellow sufferer of patriarchal violence. The scene serves as a metaphor for feminist awakening and mutual healing.

Similarly, Mandavi questions marital fidelity and highlights natural models of relationship diversity. These moments suggest that Sita's court could have been a space of feminist dialogue had it been allowed to flourish. Pattanaik's Sita celebrates relational ethics and community over hierarchy and dominance, positioning her as a pioneer of sisterhood and resistance.

The Ethical Cost of Dharma: Interrogating Rama

Following the war in Lanka, Sita's true journey begins—a path marked by pain, dignity, and self-determination. Rather than receiving comfort and affection upon her return, she is greeted not by a husband, but by a king, a ruler who views her as a recovered possession, a symbol of triumph rather than a beloved partner. Her time in captivity becomes a mark of shame in Rama's eyes, altering not only their relationship but also the direction of the epic itself. The shift from intimacy to institutional detachment redefines their bond: Rama the sovereign supersedes Rama the lover, and Sita becomes the tragic casualty of this transformation. Her suffering, however, is not merely emotional, it is deeply philosophical, as it exposes the rift between personal relationships and public morality in the epic's value system.

This emotional rupture results in a distortion of Rama's character. Without Sita's presence, the balance between masculine authority and feminine compassion is lost. He becomes increasingly rigid and emotionally desensitized, as reflected in episodes like Vali's unjust killing or his dismissal of Tara's agency. The symbolism is rich, while Sita once lifted Shiva's bow with effortless grace, Rama's forceful approach results in its destruction. Through such metaphors, Pattanaik subtly contrasts the ethics of strength with the ethics of care.

In the final chapter titled *Freedom*, Sita emerges not as a victim, but as a sovereign self. Exiled due to

public slander, she does not grieve openly or protest; instead, she unbinds her hair and walks into the forest, severing all ties to societal roles. No longer a queen, wife, or symbol, she reclaims her identity simply as a human being free from ritual, reputation, and relational subjugation. Her act is not resignation, but resistance, a conscious rejection of a culture that commodifies purity and silences dissent. She questions, “Even if she had been impure according to the moral code of society, was it right for a husband to cast away his wife?” (Pattanaik 278). Her calm departure, with a serene smile rather than bitterness, starkly contrasts Rama’s lifelong emotional unrest, suggesting that while she achieves liberation, he remains ensnared by duty and remorse.

Pattanaik’s retelling interrogates the glorification of dharma through Rama’s actions. His decisions, to exile Sita, to privilege political reputation over emotional truth, and to remain complicit in silencing women, are not framed as heroic, but as ethical failures. Sita’s pain is never romanticized or sanctified; instead, it exposes the hollowness of moral codes that dehumanize in the name of righteousness. Her choice to return to the earth is not a retreat, but a rebuke a final assertion of ethical superiority.

This critique is extended to other male figures as well: Vishwamitra’s discomfort with female intellect, Dasharatha’s obsession with lineage, and Lakshmana’s blind obedience are all subject to scrutiny. Against this backdrop, Sita emerges as the sole character who consistently harmonizes emotion with ethics. She is not merely a moral foil to Rama but stands as a counter-narrative to patriarchal dharma, offering an alternative vision grounded in compassion, integrity, and individual agency.

Breaking the Silence: Sita’s Self-Sufficiency and Feminine Reclamation

Throughout *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, Devdutt Pattanaik selects key incidents to demonstrate that the feminine essence transcends societal rules, cultural expectations, and idealized moral codes, it embodies a deeper, more transformative power than any battle fought by men. One such moment occurs when Sita encounters Surpanakha after being abandoned by Rama. Rather than retaliate or react with bitterness, Sita advises Surpanakha to stop seeking validation through a

man and instead awaken the Shakti within herself. This moment is pivotal, it captures Sita, long viewed as a silent sufferer of patriarchal systems, now offering a profound lesson in self-sufficiency and emotional resilience. Where once blood was shed for wounded pride, Sita now addresses similar pain with dignified strength and spiritual maturity.

Her maternal compassion is equally profound. When her sons Luv and Kush are born, she embraces motherhood in solitude, without the privileges or attention due to a queen. As one of the rare single mothers in Indian mythology, she neither demands rights for her children nor relies on her status. Her quiet defiance is evident in her refusal to disclose the identity of the father to her children, reclaiming control over her narrative and dignity. Moreover, the text credits Sita with transforming Ratnakara, a feared dacoit, into Valmiki—the first poet and chronicler of Rama’s life. In this sense, it is not Rama’s heroism, but Sita’s wisdom, forgiveness, and spiritual grace that gives the *Ramayana* its voice and immortality.

Even after facing abandonment and dishonour, Sita remains composed and self-reliant. While Rama, bound by royal expectations, metaphorically transforms a living Sita into a lifeless golden statue for political optics, she never lets herself be reduced to an object. She lives with dignity, never exploiting her identity for sympathy or advantage. Her final renunciation, leaving behind her sons and all worldly relationships, is a conscious act to prevent further erosion of womanhood under the weight of societal ideals of purity, sacrifice, and patriarchal honour. This act, more than any other, validates the title of the final chapter, *Freedom*, as Sita transcends every form of bondage, be it familial, cultural, or ideological.

In popular consciousness, Sita is often regarded as the archetype of Indian womanhood: an embodiment of sacrifice, submission, and loyalty. Traditional portrayals in religious epics typically render her as the ideal wife: silent, self-effacing, and eternally devoted. Consequently, she has often been dismissed by modern readers as a regressive symbol. However, Pattanaik’s reimagining offers a radical shift. This Sita is not only inquisitive and assertive but also capable of protest, revenge, rejection, and most importantly, serenity. She questions societal expectations and public morality,

and when she chooses to return to the earth, it is not an act of passive exit but a symbolic and powerful statement of self-sovereignty.

Moreover, the narrative revives and reclaims several silenced female voices from the epic. Characters like Shanta (Dasharatha and Kaushalya's forgotten daughter), Tara (forced to accept Sugriva after Bali's unjust death), Surpanakha (objectified by Ravana), Kaikeyi (vilified by history), and Urmila (sacrificed by Lakshmana for his loyalty to Rama) are all revisited with nuance and depth. Each is given a voice, a history, and a layered identity. Through this courageous rewriting, Pattanaik not only reclaims Sita from the margins but also extends that redemption to many women who were erased, silenced, or misrepresented in traditional narratives.

II. CONCLUSION

Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita* offers more than a retelling of a myth. The book proposes a rethinking of cultural foundations and by elevating Sita from the margins to the center, it not only disrupts patriarchal myth-making but also offers an inclusive vision of womanhood. By highlighting Sita's wisdom, courage, and leadership, Pattanaik constructs an alternative model of governance. It centers the feminine not as submissive or decorative, but as intellectually and morally authoritative. Sita's governance would prioritize dialogue over decree, care over conquest. Through education, ecological awareness, and emotional intelligence, Sita emerges as a prototype for feminist ethics. Her story is not one of victimhood, but of transformation. Her silence is not submission but strategy. Her withdrawal is not loss, but liberation. In an age that seeks justice, equality, and empathy, Sita's retelling provides a blueprint. This is not just a literary intervention, it is a cultural revolution in the making.

REFERENCES

- [1] Agarwal, Abhinav. "Review - Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana." *Swarajya*, 03 Dec. 2013, <https://swarajyamag.com/reviews/review-sita-an-illustrated-retelling-of-the-ramayana>. Accessed 5 June 2025.

- [2] Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*. Penguin Random House, 2013.
- [3] ---. *Jaya: An illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*. Gurgaon: Penguin Random House India, 2010. Print.
- [4] Jain, Jasbir. *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency*. SAGE Publications, 2019.
- [5] Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. Zed Books, 1988.