

Deconstructing the “Ideal Woman”: Sita, Kaikeyi, and Tara through a Contemporary Feminist Lens

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Abstract—This paper undertakes a deconstructive feminist reading of three women from the Valmiki Ramayana — Sita, Kaikeyi, and Tara — whose portrayals have long anchored a normative, patriarchal template of Indian womanhood organised around chastity, obedience, and self-effacement. Reading the source epic against contemporary literary retellings, including Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), Samhita Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* (2011), and Vaishnavi Patel's *Kaikeyi* (2022), the study argues that these retellings do not merely humanise mythic women but actively contest the ideological function of the “ideal woman” archetype itself. Drawing on Adrienne Rich's (1972) concept of revisionist mythmaking, Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, and postcolonial feminist critique (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988), the paper pursues three objectives: first, to examine how Sita, Kaikeyi, and Tara are constructed within the patriarchal ideal-woman framework; second, to analyse how contemporary feminist retellings deconstruct and reclaim these figures through narrative voice and agency; and third, to evaluate the ideological implications of this deconstruction for contemporary feminist literary discourse. The paper concludes that these retellings collectively dismantle the singular, sacrificial ideal in favour of a plural, contested, and historically situated model of womanhood.

Index Terms—Ramayana, feminist mythmaking, Sita, Kaikeyi, Tara, revisionist retelling, Indian feminist literary criticism

I. INTRODUCTION

The Ramayana occupies a foundational place in the moral and cultural imagination of the Indian subcontinent, and its women characters have historically functioned less as autonomous literary subjects than as instructive templates of virtue and

vice. Among these, Sita, Kaikeyi, and Tara occupy strikingly different positions within the epic's gendered moral economy: Sita as the sanctified ideal, Kaikeyi as the vilified transgressor, and Tara as the largely marginalised counsellor-queen. Despite these apparent differences, all three are ultimately defined in relation to male protagonists and measured against a single, unspoken standard of appropriate femininity. Bhattacharya's (2005) study of the Pancha Kanya tradition demonstrates that even the epic's most “honoured” women are, on closer inspection, uneasy fits for the chastity narrative built around them, suggesting that the ideal-woman archetype was always an interpretive imposition rather than a stable textual fact.

Contemporary

Indian feminist writers have increasingly turned to these mythic women as sites of critical intervention. As Rich (1972) argues in her seminal formulation of revisionist mythmaking, the act of re-entering an old text “from a new critical direction” is not simply an academic exercise but a strategy of cultural survival for women writers. Contemporary retellings such as Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* (2011), and Patel's *Kaikeyi* (2022) exemplify this strategy, using first-person narration, interiority, and reframed motive to unsettle the epic's inherited moral hierarchy. This paper situates these retellings within the broader project of feminist myth-criticism and asks what happens to the category of the “ideal woman” once it is subjected to sustained deconstructive scrutiny.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond literary analysis. Because the Ramayana continues to circulate as a living cultural text — recited, performed, televised, and invoked in political and domestic life —

the archetypes it authorises carry ongoing social weight. Understanding how contemporary writers dismantle and rebuild these archetypes therefore illuminates not only literary history but the contested terrain of gender ideology in present-day India.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study is organised around three central objectives, summarised in Table 1 and discussed in detail in the sections that follow.

No.	Objective	Analytical Focus
1	To examine how Sita, Kaikeyi, and Tara are constructed within the patriarchal “ideal woman” framework of the Valmiki Ramayana and its dominant retellings.	Textual analysis of virtue, silence, villainy, and marginality as gendered narrative devices.
2	To analyse how contemporary feminist retellings deconstruct and reclaim these figures through narrative voice, interiority, and agency.	Comparative reading of Divakaruni (2019), Arni (2011), and Patel (2022) against the source epic.
3	To evaluate the ideological implications of these deconstructions for contemporary feminist literary discourse and the plural model of womanhood they propose.	Engagement with revisionist mythmaking (Rich, 1972), performativity (Butler, 1990), and postcolonial feminist theory (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988).

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis draws on three interlocking strands of feminist theory. First, Rich's (1972) concept of revisionist mythmaking provides the methodological premise that re-reading canonical narratives is itself a feminist act, since inherited stories encode the very assumptions that structure women's subordination. Second, Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity informs the reading of “ideal” femininity not as an essential trait possessed by Sita, Kaikeyi, or Tara, but as a repeated performance demanded of them by narrative and social convention — a performance that contemporary retellings expose and interrupt. Third, postcolonial feminist critique (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988) cautions against a universalising feminism that would flatten these figures into generic “empowered women”; instead, the paper reads their reclamation as historically and culturally situated within Indian feminist discourse, attentive to caste, dharma, and the specific political economy of the vanara and Ayodhyian courts.

IV. OBJECTIVE ONE: THE PATRIARCHAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE “IDEAL WOMAN”

The first objective examines how the Valmiki Ramayana and its dominant retellings construct Sita, Kaikeyi, and Tara within a single, if internally contradictory, ideal-woman framework.

4.1 Sita: Virtue as Sacrifice

Sita is conventionally read as the epitome of self-sacrifice, chastity, and devotion, glorified precisely because she follows her husband into exile without protest and endures the Agni Pariksha to prove her purity. This construction renders her virtue inseparable from her suffering: she is exemplary not despite her hardship but because of her silent endurance of it. Scholarship on feminist subversions of the epic notes that Sita has long stood as “the most popular role model all women seek to emulate,” her chastity functioning as the measure against which all other women in the epic are judged (Chakraborti, 2022). The traditional Sita is thus less a person than a moral instrument — her interiority suppressed so that her obedience can be legible as virtue.

4.2 Kaikeyi: Villainy as Containment

Where Sita is elevated, Kaikeyi is contained through vilification. In the received narrative, she is the jealous second queen who exploits two boons owed to her to secure the throne for her son Bharata and force Rama into forest exile, an act typically read as one of spousal manipulation and maternal ambition rather than political reasoning. This construction performs important ideological work: it displaces the epic's dynastic and patriarchal succession conflicts onto an individual woman's supposed moral failure, allowing the institutional structures of polygamous kingship and male inheritance to remain unexamined. Kaikeyi's villainy, in other words, is less a character trait than a narrative strategy for absorbing structural tension.

4.3 Tara: Marginalisation as Erasure

Tara receives even less narrative space than Sita or Kaikeyi, yet the little the epic grants her is revealing. As queen of Kishkindha and wife first to Vali and then, after his death, to his brother Sugriva, Tara is defined almost entirely through her marital transitions. Bhattacharya's (2000, 2005) analysis of the Pancha Kanya tradition observes that Tara is remembered less for her political counsel than for the fact of her remarriage, which later moralists strained to reconcile with an ideal of singular wifely devotion. Yet within the Kishkindha Kanda itself, Tara advises Vali against a second confrontation with Sugriva, warning him of the danger with considerable political acuity — counsel that Vali disregards, with fatal consequences. Her marginalisation, then, is not an absence of substance but an active narrative erasure of a woman's political judgement in favour of male martial impulsiveness.

Taken together, these three constructions reveal that the “ideal woman” of the Ramayana is not a single coherent figure but a composite ideological effect: Sita supplies the template of sanctioned suffering, Kaikeyi the cautionary emblem of sanctioned ambition, and Tara the erased possibility of sanctioned political voice. Each woman is legible only in relation to the male protagonists whose journeys she enables or obstructs.

V. OBJECTIVE TWO: FEMINIST DECONSTRUCTION AND RECLAMATION

The second objective analyses how contemporary retellings deconstruct these constructions by restoring interiority, agency, and narrative voice to Sita, Kaikeyi, and Tara.

5.1 Reclaiming Sita's Voice

Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) reworks the Ramayana through Sita's first-person narration, transforming her from a passive object of narrative action into its speaking subject. Scholars reading this retelling note that Divakaruni “challenges the patriarchal norms that have long defined Sita's role,” reshaping her from a symbol of passive obedience into an exemplar of courage, wisdom, and individuality (Agrawal, 2025). Rather than erasing Sita's hardships, the novel reframes her banishment, the fire ordeal, and her final return to the earth as sites of deliberate ethical choice: her renunciation of Rama at the narrative's close becomes an assertion of dignity rather than a final act of submission (Dua & Pillai, 2025).

Arni's graphic narrative *Sita's Ramayana* (2011) pursues a parallel but formally distinct strategy, pairing Sita's narration with the patachitra scroll-painting tradition of a woman artist to visually as well as textually decentre the epic's masculine gaze. Chakraborti (2022) situates this retelling within a longer genealogy of women's revisionist tellings — including Chandrabati's sixteenth-century Bengali *Ramayan* — arguing that Arni's Sita “speaks, moves, and actively resists patriarchal constraints, rather than remaining a passive symbol of virtue.” Both retellings thus perform the same essential manoeuvre: they do not deny Sita's suffering but relocate its meaning from proof of obedience to evidence of agency.

5.2 Reframing Kaikeyi's Ambition

Patel's novel *Kaikeyi* (2022) undertakes the more radical task of narrating the epic from its principal female antagonist's point of view. The novel reconstructs Kaikeyi's childhood, her mother's banishment, and her subsequent political education to recast her demand for Rama's exile not as jealous spite but as a calculated intervention against a patriarchal court that structurally disempowers women. In this retelling, Kaikeyi becomes what reviewers have

termed “a feminist icon who wants her ideas to matter,” whose privilege and intelligence are directed toward improving the position of the women around her rather than toward personal aggrandisement. The reframing does not so much exonerate Kaikeyi's actions as recontextualise them within the systemic constraints of polygamous succession politics, shifting the reader's moral attention from an individual woman's supposed failing to the institutional structure that produced her dilemma in the first place.

It is worth noting, however, that this reclamation is not without critical friction: several reviewers have observed that Patel's Kaikeyi is rendered almost too virtuous, her destructive choices consistently narrated as noble intent, which risks replacing one flattening archetype (villain) with another (righteous martyr). This tension is itself analytically productive, since it exposes a recurring difficulty in feminist revisionist mythmaking — the challenge of restoring complexity to a vilified figure without simply inverting the original moral binary.

5.3 Recovering Tara's Political Judgement

Feminist readings of Tara focus less on a single canonical retelling than on recovering textual details already latent within the Kishkindha Kanda but historically underemphasised. Bhattacharya's (2005) study foregrounds Tara's strategic counsel to Vali and her subsequent role in brokering the succession to Sugriva as evidence of “practical wisdom, strategic intelligence, and progressive thinking” that exceeds the political acumen of the epic's male vanara rulers. Read through this lens, Tara's remarriage to Sugriva is reinterpreted not as a sign of dependency but as a pragmatic exercise of political agency in a kingdom that required stable leadership. Feminist criticism thus reclaims Tara by re-centring the very passages the tradition marginalised, rather than by inventing new material — a strategy that underscores how much feminist potential already existed within the source text, obscured rather than absent.

5.4 Comparative Overview

Table 2 summarises the traditional and feminist constructions of the three figures alongside their key contemporary reference texts.

Figure	Traditional / Patriarchal Construction	Feminist Deconstruction	Key Contemporary Text(s)
Sita	Idealised chastity, silent suffering, unwavering obedience; virtue proven through the Agni Pariksha (fire ordeal) and final banishment.	Reclaimed as a subject with interiority, voice, and moral agency; suffering reframed as endurance and ethical choice rather than passivity.	Divakaruni (2019); Arni (2011); Chakraborti (2022)
Kaikeyi	Vilified as the jealous, scheming stepmother whose two boons cause Rama's exile; reduced to a cautionary emblem of female ambition.	Reframed as a politically astute woman resisting patriarchal succession structures; her boons read as strategic, not spiteful.	Patel (2022)
Tara	Marginal figure defined through marriage to Vali and then Sugriva; grief and remarriage read through a lens of dependency.	Recovered as a counsellor-queen whose diplomatic and political counsel is overridden by male impulsivity, exposing the gendered cost of dharma.	Bhattacharya (2000, 2005)

VI. OBJECTIVE THREE: IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR FEMINIST DISCOURSE

The third objective evaluates what these deconstructions accomplish ideologically, beyond their value as literary reinterpretation.

6.1 From Singular Ideal to Plural Womanhood

The cumulative effect of these retellings is to replace a singular, sacrificial ideal of Indian womanhood with a plural and internally contested model. Where the traditional epic offers one legitimate mode of female virtue — embodied by Sita and used to measure Kaikeyi's failure and Tara's marginality — the contemporary corpus insists that courage, political judgement, ambition, and endurance are all legitimate, if differently costly, expressions of female agency. This plurality resonates with the broader feminist mythic-reclamation project identified in recent scholarship, which reads such retellings as restructuring “the cultural premises that underpin notions of gender, authority, and national progress” rather than merely offering alternative plot summaries.

6.2 Myth as Contested, Not Closed, Cultural Ground

These retellings also demonstrate that myth functions as what recent criticism terms “dialogic” cultural material — a space where tradition and reinterpretation coexist rather than one simply replacing the other (Bavarava & Pandey, 2026). Because the Ramayana continues to be recited, performed, and taught, feminist retellings do not operate in a separate literary sphere but intervene directly in the same cultural field that reproduces the ideal-woman archetype in everyday religious and social life. This gives the deconstructive project a stake beyond the academy: each retelling is simultaneously a literary artefact and a form of cultural argument about what womanhood is permitted to mean.

6.3 The Limits of Recuperation

At the same time, the study's findings caution against an uncritical celebration of these retellings as straightforwardly liberatory. As Mohanty (1988) warns in her critique of universalising feminist narratives, there is a risk of reading “empowerment” into these figures in ways that import Western liberal feminist assumptions onto a distinct cultural and

religious context. Spivak's (1988) concern with whether the subaltern can meaningfully “speak” through texts authored on her behalf is also pertinent here: Divakaruni, Arni, and Patel write from positions of contemporary authorial privilege, and their reconstructions of Sita, Kaikeyi, and Tara's interiority remain interpretive projections rather than recovered testimony. The value of these retellings, therefore, lies not in claiming access to what these mythic women “really” felt, but in making visible the ideological labour that the original constructions performed — and in modelling alternative ways the same narrative material could signify.

VII. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three principal findings emerge from this study. First, the traditional “ideal woman” archetype in the Ramayana is not a stable essence but an ideological composite, assembled differently for each woman depending on her narrative function — sanctioned suffering for Sita, sanctioned blame for Kaikeyi, and sanctioned silence for Tara. Second, contemporary feminist retellings deconstruct this composite primarily through the restoration of narrative voice and political rationale, converting each woman from an object measured against the ideal into a subject who negotiates, resists, or reinterprets it. Third, this deconstruction carries ideological weight beyond literary form: it reopens the Ramayana as contested cultural ground and offers a plural model of Indian womanhood, while also exposing the interpretive limits of any single retelling to fully recover a silenced subject's voice.

These findings collectively suggest that the feminist reworking of Sita, Kaikeyi, and Tara is best understood not as a rejection of the epic but as an act of critical fidelity to its unresolved tensions — tensions the source text itself, as Bhattacharya's (2005) analysis of the Pancha Kanya tradition shows, already contained in latent form.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the contemporary feminist deconstruction of Sita, Kaikeyi, and Tara does more than rehabilitate three individual mythic women: it dismantles the ideological architecture of the “ideal woman” itself, exposing how virtue, villainy, and

marginality were narratively assigned to sustain a single patriarchal standard. Through close attention to Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* (2011), and Patel's *Kaikeyi* (2022), read alongside Bhattacharya's (2000, 2005) recovery of Tara's political voice, the study has shown that revisionist mythmaking (Rich, 1972) operates as both literary technique and cultural intervention. Future research might extend this analysis to Mandodari and Ahalya within the Pancha Kanya tradition, or examine regional-language retellings that predate the contemporary English-language corpus discussed here, to further map the long feminist genealogy of resistance already embedded within the epic tradition.

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