

Voices of Liberation: The Journey to the Self through Dialogue Involga's *the Liberation of Sita*

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Abstract : The turn of the 21st century has marked a significant shift in the narrative landscape of Indian epics, ushering in an era where stories are being reimagined from perspectives that challenge long-standing patriarchal interpretations. This wave of revisionist storytelling seeks to amplify the voices of characters who have historically been marginalized on the basis of gender, class, and community. Among the most striking instances of this movement is the recontextualization of Sita, a central figure in the Ramayana, whose traditional portrayal has largely been confined to the parameters of female chastity and virtue. Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* emerges as a seminal work in this domain, transcending the boundaries of feminist revisionist mythology to fundamentally redefine the narrative identity of its protagonist. Rather than perpetuating the image of Sita as a victim of patriarchal constructs, Volga's narrative celebrates her journey towards liberation and self-realization. This paper explores the transformation of Sita from a character bound by societal expectations and moral trials to one who embodies the essence of pure consciousness. Volga's narrative strategy employs a gynocentric approach that not only contests the master narrative of the *Ramayana* but also endeavours to decenter established patriarchal ideologies. By focusing on the dialogic encounters between Sita and other marginalized female figures within the epic, including Shurpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka Devi, and Urmila, the text opens up spaces for these submerged voices to reflect upon their lives and experiences, thereby facilitating a collective journey towards empowerment and self-discovery. The study delves into the mechanisms through which dialogue and relational encounters serve as catalysts for Sita's evolving self-perception and her eventual attainment of liberation. It argues that through her interactions with these women, Sita is able to transcend the victimhood imposed upon her by traditional narratives and redefine her identity on her own terms. This process is emblematic of a broader quest for self-definition and autonomy that resonates with contemporary feminist discourses on agency, voice, and liberation. Furthermore, the paper situates *The Liberation of Sita* within the broader context of feminist revisionist mythologies, examining how Volga's work contributes to the ongoing critique of patriarchal narratives and the construction of alternative female histories. By reimagining Sita's journey as one of self-liberation rather than passive endurance, Volga challenges readers to reconsider the roles and representations of women in myth and society. In conclusion, *The Liberation of Sita* not only serves as a poignant critique of the traditional portrayal of female characters in Indian epics but also as a beacon of inspiration for the reclamation of agency and the pursuit of self-determination. Through its exploration of dialogue as a means of self-discovery and liberation, this paper highlights the transformative power of narrative in challenging and reshaping societal constructs, offering new pathways for understanding and empowerment.

Keywords: Feminist revisionism, mythological retellings, Sita, Volga, Ramayana, mythology, Self, Dialogism, dialogic encounters, Indian epics.

Introduction

The epic *Ramayana* has been subjected to interpretation and reinterpretation since ages in various forms. The 21st century has witnessed an upsurge in the retellings of *Ramayana* in the form of popular fiction which has received a huge response from the Indian reading public. The major objective of such retellings is to bring forth the voices and experiences of the sublimed women characters, in the grand narratives whose voices were lost in the façade of war and men. Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* is such a text which places the readers altogether in a different position to get a better perception of their women characters. Though the text belongs to the tradition of feminist revisionist mythology by subverting the patriarchal ideology embedded in the mythical texts, it also redefines the conventional episteme of a woman from mere victim to the prestige of a liberated woman. This study is an exploration of Sita's journey to self-realization through her dialogic relationship with the other women characters whose voices were submerged in the epic, *Ramayana*. The term 'Self' used in this paper refers to the individual's sense of identity and personal awareness. It encompasses the thoughts, experiences, and perceptions that constitute one's understanding and consciousness of being a distinct entity.

The Liberation of Sita emerges as a compelling reinterpretation, focusing selectively on certain events and characters from the *Ramayana*. This 2016 English rendition by T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree brings to a global audience the original Telugu masterpiece penned by Volga, the literary alias of Popuri Lalita Kumari. Renowned for her feminist viewpoint, Volga's body of work, encompassing novels, articles, and poems, presents women through a lens of modernity and progressive thought. Her adaptation of this epic narrative not only retains the authenticity of its characters but also underscores her commitment to quality and depth in storytelling. *The Liberation of Sita* stands as a universally impactful work, its themes resonating deeply with women globally, making it an enriching read in any translation. The translators' exceptional skill in preserving the text's poetic and evocative essence, alongside its profound philosophical insights, deserves high praise. Crafted predominantly through dialogues, each narrative thread is intricately interlaced, offering both standalone significance and a collective exploration of a woman's soulful quest for understanding.

Sita is a character from the epic *Ramayana* who is subjugated in the name of female virtue. She was subjected to a moral trial in terms of chastity and fidelity by her male counterpart. She is always identified with the stereotypical image of an ideal woman, chaste wife and a muted sufferer. Sita is also one among the victimised women of the epic story. Volga in her *The Liberation of Sita*, unravelled the life of a self-assured Sita in the Valmiki's ashram who embraces independence as a single mother of twin sons, after being abandoned by her husband, Ram, the King of Ayodhya. She imparts knowledge of archery and other skills to her children,

embodying strength and self-reliance, unfazed by the need for validation or admiration from others. The novel is a depiction of the arduous journey of Sita towards her 'Self' through her encounters with the other desolated women of the *Ramayana* namely, Shurpanaka, Ahalya, Renuka Devi and Urmila. The story also shines a spotlight on these traditionally minor female characters, enriching the narrative with their perspectives and experiences, making it as much their story as it is Sita's. The book is structured as a collection of five short stories, each standalone yet interconnected. However, the focus of this analysis does not extend to the final story, "The Shackled," which contrasts Rama's constraints with Sita's newfound freedom, thus emphasizing the journey of Sita along with the other marginalised women characters of the epic, towards autonomy and self-realization.

Analysis

The story of "The Reunion" is about Sita's unexpected meeting with Shurpanaka, the immoral and despicable sister of Ravana in Valmiki's *Ramayana* who is deemed to be responsible for the abduction of Sita and the consequent war. In *The Liberation of Sita*, Volga has crafted Shurpanaka into a positive persona. With the efficient employment of dialogue between Sita and Shurpanaka, the author has successfully exposed the character transformation of Shurpanaka and her perception of beauty and life. Shurpanaka who was once been proud of her beauty and adored her own nose has been disfigured by Ram and Lakshman and turned her into an ugly figure. She was turned into "a walking volcano. A stormy sea of grief" (Volga, 11). The story has provided an ample space for Shurpanaka to narrate her course of life after the mutilation and how she has survived the greatest humiliation ever done to her by the brothers. In the course of her interaction with Sita, Shurpanaka has unravelled her struggles in discovering the true nature of beauty by getting over her anger, frustration and depression all by herself. She learned to embrace everything around her with the help of nature and has proudly admitted that her own life experiences were her greatest teacher, "I had no guru in this matter. I pursued it on my own ... the effort I made to achieve all this was extraordinary" (Volga, 12). Volga has also presented Sita as a matured woman by the years of solitude in the forest, "On Sita's face, Shurpanaka could only see peace and dignity; there was no trace of distress. She has matured a lot..." (Volga, 9). However, a sharp contrast is drawn between the two characters when Sita reveals that she found her happiness only in bringing up her sons. She considers it as her duty as a queen as well as being Rama's wife. On the contrary, Shurpanaka's realisation that "the meaning of success for a woman does not lie in her relationship with a man" (Volga, 13) is purely a manifestation of her wisdom and dignity. Sita is entangled in the social responsibilities of a wife and a queen even after being abandoned by the king and the Kingdom. For Sita, her whole purpose of life was to raise her children, the heirs of Ramarajya. Her decision of taking refuge in her mother, Bhudevi, after handing over her children to Ram could be interpreted as her decision

to end her life once the purpose is met. But Shurpanka's "unsolicited affection" (Volga, 15) and her words of wisdom has created a huge impact in Sita for which she has decided to spend the rest of her life with Shurpanaka, determined to discover a new meaning of herSelf.

In the "Music of the Earth", Volga introduced the character Ahalya who was disowned and cursed in the name of infidelity by her own husband, Sage Gautam in the *Ramayana*. Besides being a divine beauty, Volga portrayed her as an enlightened woman which she attained through her years of solitude. Sita's initial meeting with Ahalya haunted her for a lifetime. She was not matured enough to comprehend Ahalya's words of wisdom back then. But years later those words kept coming back to her making more sense. She has learned from Ahalya the complexities of truth and untruth and also about the popular notion of female fidelity. Sita realises the concept of Self and recognised that her life has more meanings to be discovered. From Ahalya, she grasped that she is a part of the whole universe as all other beings. Ahalya's words, "Most often, women don't realise that they are part of the wider world. They limit themselves to an individual, to a household, to a family's honour" (Volga, 39). Sita understands that she is neither just a property of her husband nor motherhood is the ultimate objective of her life. Ahalya's whole point of her argument is that why society is so behind the truth and untruth. In short, her advice to Sita is to learn to accept people as they are and stop being judgemental. The harsh realities of life have turned Sita wise enough to understand Ahalya's shared wisdom and hence was able to appreciate her inner power of self-authority, "I have realised who I am. The whole universe belongs to me. I don't lack anything. I am the daughter of Earth" (41).

In the epic story, Renuka Devi was a voiceless character who was accused of infidelity by the mere act of looking at a man, was beheaded by her own son, Sage Parashuram, who was blindly following the command of his father, Sage Jamadhagni. "The Sand Pot" explores the voice of Renuka Devi who was a victim of "mistrust and humiliation" (61). Volga here paves a firm ground for Sita to have an interaction with Renuka Devi. Renuka Devi is portrayed in this story as a liberated woman who has freed herself from the clutches of the socially imposed duties and responsibilities of a woman. She was shattered by listening to the orders of her own husband whom she has served all these years with all her "thoughts, words and deeds" (51) and by the brutal act of her beloved son whom she fed and cared for all her life who did not flinch even for a second to carry out the orders of his father, the so-called Arya Dhrama from the words of Ram, "Is there a higher dharma than carrying out the wishes of one's father?" (Volga, 46). Hence, she has separated herself from their life and started leading a peaceful life embracing her skill of sculpturing with other women. Though Sita finds Renuka Devi's perception of life as uncivilised earlier, she could realise the true essence of her preachings later, when her own sons started enquiring about their father. She advised Sita to embrace nature and worship them. Sita learned that

wifehood and motherhood are temporary roles like a sand pot as wisely illustrated by Renuka Devi, “They are shattered by the slightest cause and life hangs on a sword’s edge” (Volga, 52).

“The Liberated” portrays the unsung heroine of the Ramayana, which is Urmila, the wife of Lakshmana. Urmila is the younger sister of Sita who was left behind in the palace when the trio left to the forest for fourteen long years. Her existence was not counted by anyone in the palace as they had surrendered all their worries and concerns for the three who left the palace. Urmila who was dejected by her own husband, sister and the other inmates of the palace was caught between the whirlwind of emotions like anger, sorrow, jealousy, hatred and love. She waged a war with herself against all these feelings and set within herself the quest for truth. She finally was able to find peace and happiness within herself. She shared her wisdom with Sita who could only grasp the in-depth meaning of her shared wisdom much later, during her solitude in the ashram when Valmiki had taken her kids to Rama for Aswamedha Yaga. Sita started to reflect on Urmila’s words, “Assume authority. Give up power. Then you’ll belong to yourself. Then you’ll be yourself. We should remain ourselves” (79). She learned that only by liberating herself from Rama, she could find her true Self. In the end when Rama had accepted Lava and Kusa, Sita was liberated from her children too. Hence, she found her way to discover her real Self.

This paper is an exploration of Bakhtin’s conception of dialogue and its relevance in Sita’s identification of her Self. The study thus employs the Bakhtinian concepts of the Dialogical Self, Outsideness, Surplus and Chronotope to examine the journey of Sita to her liberation.

Dialogism is a concept in literary theory and linguistics that emphasizes the dynamic and interactive nature of language. It was introduced by the twentieth century Russian philosopher and literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin. The term ‘Dialogism’ is never used by Bakhtin himself but later coined by Michael Holquist for “categorizing the different ways he meditated on dialogue” (Holquist, 15). Dialogism highlights the idea that communication involves a continuous exchange of perspectives and voices, shaping meaning through the interplay of various viewpoints in a dialogue. In other words, meaning is not fixed or predetermined but emerges through the ongoing exchange of voices and perspectives in dialogue. Central to his concept of dialogism is the idea of utterance. In Bakhtin’s own words from his “The Problem of Speech Genres”, “Every utterance must be regarded as primarily a *response* to preceding utterances of the given sphere ... Each utterance refutes affirms, supplements and relies upon the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account ... Therefore, each kind of utterance is filled with various kinds of responsive reactions to other utterances of the given sphere of speech communication” (91). Every utterance is in relationship with other utterances and the cultural and historical contexts. It is shaped by the ongoing dialogue and interactions

with in a community. The meaning of an utterance is influenced by the multitude of voices and perspectives that surround it. Dialogism also challenges the notion of a single, authoritative voice and encourages an understanding of language as a social, open-ended, and polyphonic phenomenon. He believed that genuine communication involves a continual interplay of diverse voices, creating a rich tapestry of meanings within a cultural and historical context.

For Bakhtin “self” can never be a self-sufficient construct ... for him “self” is dialogic, a relation” (Holquist, 19). In the Bakhtinian framework, the self is formed and defined through ongoing dialogues with others and with the cultural contexts. It’s not a fixed, isolated entity, but rather a dynamic and evolving construction shaped by social interactions and linguistic exchanges. This dialogic self, engages in a continual process of negotiation, adaptation and transformation through its encounters with various voices and viewpoints.

Bakhtin’s concept of “chronotope” refers to the inseparable connection between time and space in language and literature. Bakhtin first developed the term in his essay, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” (1937). The term can be literally translated as “time-space” to describe the ways in which time and space are interwoven and mutually influence each other within a narrative. The chronotope is not merely a backdrop for the narrative but actively participates in shaping the meanings of events and characters. Different chronotope can evoke distinct cultural, historical, or social contexts, enriching the narrative with layers of significance.

For the perceivers, their own time is forever open and unfinished, their own place is always the center of perception ... By contrast, the time in which we model others is perceived as closed and finished ... From the perspective of a self, the other is simply in the world, along with everyone and everything else (Holquist, 22).

The concept of “outsideness” is integral to Bakhtin’s dialogical theory. It refers to the ability to view one’s own culture or situation from an external perspective. It involves stepping outside of one’s own world view to understand different perspectives and cultural contexts. In the words of Michael Holquist,

The term, as always in Dialogism, is not only spatial, but temporal: it is only from a position outside something that it can be perceived in categories that complete it in time and fix it in space ... An event cannot be wholly known, cannot be seen, from inside its own unfolding as an event (31).

Michael Bakhtin’s notion of “surplus of seeing” is the excess of seeing in relation to the other. The basic idea it conveys is that the subject’s ability to perceive the other from outside involves his/her potential to see the other in its whole including the external space from the subject’s unique position in existence which the other cannot see himself/herself. “The aspect of the situation that you see, but I do not, is what Bakhtin

calls your “surplus of seeing”; those things I see but you cannot constitute my “surplus of seeing” (Holquist, 36).

The dialogue with Shurpanaka, Ahalya, Renuka Devi and Urmila hastaken Sita to the path of enlightenment. As these enlightened women characters of the novel have claimed their own life experiences to be their greatest mentor in their journey to the Self, Sita’s years of sufferings and solitude had widened her consciousness to befit the wisdom and ideology of these women. “... in dialogism consciousnesses is otherness. More accurately, it is the differential relation between a center and all that is not that center” (Holquist, 18). Therefore, as per Bakhtin, one’s consciousness is based on their relationship with the other. So, in order to understand her Self, Sita has to position herself outside the time/space category of her own. In *Response to a Question from the New World*, Bakhtin says, “Our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people because they are located outside us in space and because they are others” (55). Dialogism emphasizes that since our mind is structured, we perceive everything in opposition to the perception of something else. This must be the reason why Sita could not accept or grasp the knowledge of these women characters earlier, where her consciousness has employed her own time/space category to model the limits of the female characters she was in dialogue with. “Sita did not feel like dragging on the conversation. She felt agitated, anguished” (28-29), “I don’t understand your words...Is that good conduct? asked Sita resentfully ... It seemed like a futile discussion to Sita” (53-54), “She knew that she would not be able to comprehend Urmila’s experience of all these years in a single day” (78). For Sita she was the center of perception whose time is forever open and unfinished for whom the other women just belong to the outside world whose time is closed and finished as far as she is concerned. Her realisation of the Self emerged when she enters the outsideness. She achieved this outsideness through her dialogic relationship with the other. It is only the other who is able to see the surplus of Sita and hence Sita could see her existence as a whole only from the outside. Combining the surplus of the spatio-temporal objectivity of the other with her own surplus of seeing, Sita was able to construct the whole existence of her.

Thus, from the life experiences of the enlightened characters and from the knowledge that she is not alone in her journey has given Sita the strength to move forward. The dialogue with these women had taught her to embrace nature and learn from it. For Shurpanaka, “... there is no difference between beauty and ugliness in nature” (12). Ahalya wanted Sita to “Observe nature and evolution of life. Notice the continual changes in them”(39). Renuka Devi advised her to “... love animals and nature and worship them. We should befriend them. That’s the duty of humans” (53). They also shared their wisdom on truth with Sita, “Truth does not remain the same forever. It keeps changing continuously” (28) as per Ahalya, which is the same for Renuka Devi who says, “Your truth and mine are not the same” (54). For Urmila, truth

resides within one's self, "Fight, meditate, look within until you find the truth that is you" (81). According to Ahalya the goal for women is to "nourish the ego and to burn themselves to ashes in it ... Sita, try to understand who you are, what the goal of your life is" (39) which is conveyed by Urmila in another way, "Power is the root cause of all sorrow... We must acquire this power. And then give it up. I shall not submit to anyone's power. Nor will I bind anyone with my power. Then I will feel I have liberated myself. I feel only joy within myself" (77). Each woman has imparted their own vision of life which has helped Sita to break and free herself from the shackles of the roles and expectations imposed by the society on women. Renuka Devi's vision of wifehood and motherhood as unnecessary bonds which are nothing but temporary roles and Shurpanaka's lesson of "... meaning of success for a woman does not lie in her relationship with a man (13) has shed a new understanding of life to Sita. Sita asserts, "I am the daughter of Earth, Rama. I have realized who I am. The whole universe belongs to me. I don't lack anything. I am the daughter of Earth" (41).

Conclusion

Consequently, this dialogic relationship of Sita with Shurpanaka, Ahalya, Renuka Devi and Urmila has served as a transformative journey for Sita, offering her a profound reimagining of her own identity by looking "into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another" (1984, 287). She learned that the meaning of the Self is always in the process of creation which determined her to create a new meaning for her life, "I shall create a new meaning for my life" (15). Sita's perception of herself from within lacked the potential to see her surplus which has projected her as a victim in the earlier narrations. Whereas, the dialogic relationship with these women has given Sita the potential to actively engage the other's surplus of her or in other words, to perceive herself from the position of the other from their cognitive time/space has given her a new dimension of herself leading her to liberation. Hence, by accomplishing the outsideness of Bakhtin she not only challenges her previous self-perceptions but it also empowers her to embrace her strengths and potential for growth.

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