

SITA IN POPULAR LITERARY IMAGINATION: A STUDY OF SELECT CONTEMPORARY NOVELS

**Thesis Submitted
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the
Degree of
Doctor of PHILOSOPHY**

**in
The Discipline of English**

**by
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(2K21/PHDHUEG/02)

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**To the
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DELHI TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
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August, 2025

CANDIDATE'S DECLARATION

I Ayushi Saini hereby certify that the work which is being presented in the thesis entitled **Sita in Popular Literary Imagination: A Study of Select Contemporary Novels** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, submitted in the Department of Humanities, Delhi Technological University is an authentic record of my own work carried out during the period from January 2022 to September 2025 under the supervision of Prof. Rajiv Ranjan Dwivedi.

The matter presented in the thesis has not been submitted by me for the award of any other degree of this or any other Institute.

Ayushi Saini

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ABSTRACT

Mythological themes in Indian literature first bear their most influential and destiny-defying traces in the two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Today, there is a wide arena of literature dealing with the themes derived from these epics, making the characters and plots conspicuous that were earlier lurking in the background. Indian writers such as Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik, Chitra Banerjee, Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, to name a few, have produced a plethora of stories based on the myths. They have introduced these myths and stories to the contemporary world, affirming the new pattern of life in the fast-paced world. The *Ramayana* presents the ideals of the society, Rama, its masculine part and Sita, the feminine one. She is often portrayed as the epitome of strength and resilience. She is the ideal wife, daughter, sister and mother for Indian Subcontinent. Her conduct is considered to be the closest to dharma.

While Sita is seen as the female protagonist of the *Ramayana*, it is interesting to note that In total, Sita appears in Seventy-six sargs out of 645, accounting for barely 10 percent of the Valmiki *Ramayana*. and even less when one notes the sargs where she has dialogues. This forces one to ponder if she actually is the heroine or just a means to portray what is expected of the women.

“Social roles are highly polarised by gender, with a wider range of acceptable notions available to men than women” (Gardiner 352). The traditional portrayal of Sita in the *Ramayana* reflects deep-rooted cultural and social expectations placed on women, particularly in terms of virtue, obedience, and self-sacrifice. Her attributes to be a pativrata were not just personal virtues but societal mandates, reinforcing a patriarchal framework where a woman’s worth was often measured by her ability to conform to these ideals. Sita’s willingness (as mentioned in certain versions of the

Ramayana) to undergo the Agni Pariksha to prove her chastity after her abduction by Ravana underscores the societal demand for women to maintain their chastity at all costs, even when they are victims of circumstances beyond their control. Mainly because history and myth both, have not given them space to occupy physically or verbally.

Over time, these expectations have evolved, particularly as contemporary perspectives have begun to challenge the rigid confines of traditional gender roles. Feminist interpretations of Sita's story question the fairness of the trials she endures, arguing that they reinforce a narrative of female subordination and the objectification of women's bodies as symbols of family and societal honour.

This research is framed with the urgent need to revisit and reimagine Sita in contemporary times, not merely to honour her mythic legacy but to interrogate the power structures that have historically shaped her portrayal. The study explores how modern Indian women writers reclaim Sita as a site of narrative agency, feminist resistance, and symbolic transformation.

The research is framed by three core questions: How do these retellings give Sita a voice in a literary tradition that has long silenced her? What feminist, mythic, and postcolonial frameworks inform these reimaginings? And how does mythopoesis function as a form of resistance and reclamation in the hands of contemporary women authors? Through these questions, the thesis repositions Sita not as a relic of the past but as a dynamic figure of literary and cultural possibility.

The primary texts selected for this study include Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, Bhanumathi Narasimhan's *Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love*, and Sini Panicker's *Sita: Now You Know Me*. These novels represent a spectrum of genres and voices, from lyrical introspection to mythic fantasy and trauma testimony, yet are united in their shared commitment to reclaiming Sita from patriarchal and canonical fixity. Their inclusion allows for a comparative analysis that underscores both thematic convergence and stylistic divergence.

Methodologically, the study employs an interdisciplinary framework that weaves together feminist narratology, archetypal criticism, and postcolonial feminist theory. The works of Adrienne Rich, Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, Northrop Frye, Robert Segal, and Mircea Eliade serve as the theoretical backbone of the analysis. Rather than using theory as an external lens, the study demonstrates how these novels themselves perform theoretical work by embodying concepts such as re-vision, subaltern speech, gender performativity, and mythic archetype in their narrative forms. This allows the research to move beyond application toward what may be termed “lived literary theory.”

Chapter 1 lays the conceptual groundwork, introducing the mythic legacy of Sita, the history of feminist reinterpretation in Indian literature, and the theoretical frameworks that guide the analysis. Chapter 2 examines Divakaruni’s *The Forest of Enchantments*, where Sita’s first-person voice challenges the moral binaries of the epic and constructs memory as resistance. Chapter 3 explores Tripathi’s *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, where Sita is reframed as a strategist and warrior, engaging with nationalist undertones and mytho-fantasy conventions. Chapter 4 focuses on Narasimhan’s *Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love*, offering a spiritual and ecofeminist portrayal that equates interiority with rebellion. Chapter 5 analyses Panicker’s *Sita: Now You Know Me*, arguably the most direct in its feminist stance, reflecting the affective and cultural echoes of the #MeToo movement. The final chapter synthesizes these readings to position myth as a living discourse, a space of rupture, negotiation, and reinvention.

The thesis contributes to scholarship in four key ways. First, it proposes a new interdisciplinary model for reading mythological retellings by Indian women writers, placing equal emphasis on narrative form, thematic innovation, and socio-political context. Second, it expands the field of feminist narratology within Indian English literature by demonstrating how first-person narration functions as a mode of epistemic reclamation. Third, it reconceptualizes mythopoesis as a contemporary feminist practice—not merely as creative adaptation, but as literary activism. Finally, it highlights the comparative value of engaging diverse genres and tones to illustrate the multiplicity of Sita’s feminist articulations.

While the study is firmly grounded in literary analysis, its limitations are acknowledged. The exclusive focus on English-language texts omits regional retellings in languages such as Tamil, Bengali, and Malayalam, which offer equally rich perspectives. Moreover, the thesis does not address performative or visual representations of Sita in media such as dance, cinema, or television, which remain critical areas for interdisciplinary exploration. The corpus is also limited to post-2000 works, leaving out earlier feminist interventions that shaped the trajectory of mythic reinterpretation.

Future research could undertake comparative studies with regional Sita narratives like *Krittibasi* or Kamban's *Ramayana*, or analyse non-literary art forms to explore how Sita is embodied in visual, performative, and popular culture. Another valuable direction would be to explore masculine counterpoints, Ram, Lakshman, and Ravan, as reimagined within feminist retellings, or to conduct reception studies on how contemporary readers engage with these shifting representations.

Ultimately, this thesis positions Sita not as a resolved or completed figure, but as a narrative site that remains open to reinterpretation. In these retellings, Sita emerges not as a monolith but as a mosaic, assembled from memory, trauma, strength, and survival. Her story endures because it continues to ask the most pressing questions of our time: Who speaks? Who decides? And who listens? In answering them, these writers not only recover a lost voice but also create space for new ones to emerge.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At the outset, I bow down to the Divine, whose unseen hand has guided every step of this journey that has been both intellectually enriching and personally transformative. As I pen these words, I am deeply conscious that the completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the support, guidance, and encouragement of many individuals.

I extend my deepest and most heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, **Prof. Rajiv Ranjan Dwivedi**, whose mentorship has been far more than academic. His belief in this work, even at times when I struggled to believe in it myself, has left a lasting mark not only on this thesis but on the person I have become. A teacher in the truest sense, he offered me both intellectual challenge and patient guidance. I consider myself fortunate to have been mentored by someone who not only leads with knowledge but also listens with empathy.

To my father—this journey is as much yours as it is mine. Your love has been unconditional, your sacrifices quiet but immeasurable. Thank you for always believing. I hope I really made you proud.

To my mother, every word of this thesis carries your strength in it. Thank you for standing behind me, never asking anything in return, only giving—time, hope, and a home. Your silent resilience has been my backbone. I hope this work fulfils the wish you once whispered so gently.

To my brother, Ayush, your constant cheer and loud support have always given me strength and filled me with laughter and joy. Thank you for being my unwavering ally and for always rooting for me, even from a distance.

To Akshay, my dearest friend, fiancée, and unwavering companion, you have been my peace and strength in this journey full of dreams and exhaustion. You have held my hand through the process and filled me with hope and motivation. Thank you

for seeing me not just as I was, but as who I could be. Here's to this journey, and to all the journeys yet to come.

To my future in-laws, your belief in me allowed me to write with clarity, focus and dedication. I feel grateful to have your support during this demanding phase of my life.

To my Sister, Anjali Yadav, your presence reaffirms my belief in sisterhood and solidarity. Thank you for your boundless energy and for being one of my loudest supporters. This is for you—and for all that sisterhood represents.

To my dear friend and scholar, Dr. Vishal Raj, I owe you for all the reading materials, the timely texts, and the consistent check-ins. Your academic insights and friendship have been invaluable.

To Dr. Nishant, thank you for the countless late-night discussions, academic insights, and technological help in this study. I am grateful for your friendship and insights.

To Ms. Srishti, your friendship has been nothing short of a lifeline. From your persistent check-ins to the sleepless nights you spent by my side, your care has been both grounding and uplifting. Thank you for all the meals, the motivation, and the unwavering emotional support. I am deeply indebted to you.

To my friends and peers— your camaraderie during long work sessions and your shared laughter during short breaks made this journey lighter and less lonely. Thank you for reminding me that this path, though difficult, was never walked alone.

This thesis is not just a culmination of academic effort; it is a mosaic of every person, prayer, and quiet act of love that carried me through. For all of it, I remain deeply, humbly, and eternally grateful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title	Page No.
Certificate	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	vi
Dedication (optional)	vii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1-61
CHAPTER 2: Sita as an Assertive Protagonist: Reading <i>The Forest of Enchantments</i> by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni	62- 101
CHAPTER 3: Sita as Warrior: Reading Amish Tripathi's <i>Sita: Warrior of Mithila</i>	102-141
CHAPTER 4: Sita as a Spiritual Character: Reading <i>Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love</i> by Bhanumathi Narasimhan	142-177
CHAPTER 5: Reawakened Sita: Reading <i>Sita: Now you know Me</i> by Sini Panicker	178-220
CHAPTER 6: Conclusion	221-232

Introduction

Abandoned by a mother (presumably), discovered in a furrow, and finally, at the end of a constantly challenged life, returning to Mother Earth by the act of will, is Sita a self-progenated ‘goddess’ who can be seen through modern feminism as the unitary woman? (Lal 55)

Sita’s journey, marked by mysterious beginnings, persistent ordeals, and final, self-directed return to the earth- epitomizes her unique position within Indian cultural memory. The statement above encapsulates the tension at the heart of Sita’s myth- between enforced silence and reclaimed agency, between subjugation and sovereignty. Revered as the ideal daughter, wife, and mother, yet repeatedly confronted by suffering and alienation, Sita occupies a paradox at the heart of the *Ramayana*, she is both divine and deeply human, exalted and vulnerable, celebrated for her sacrifice while often denied agency. As mythological narratives have traversed centuries and geographies, Sita steps out of the margins to assume narrative authority, articulating her own anguish, endurance, and resistance. Sita becomes not merely a symbol, but “the narrator of her own saga” (Kalplata). “In these retellings, Sita’s voice is heard” as a stark contrast to her muted presence in the classical versions (Madina).

This reframing lies at the core of this thesis: What happens when Sita speaks? When a mythic heroine, long defined by others, tells her own story- how does the story shift? What new dimensions of gender, narrative, culture and power emerge?

This study explores this fertile ground: how selected modern writers reclaim, reframe, and reimagine Sita's story; how myth becomes a prism for engaging with the quest of agency; and how Sita herself functions as both a mirror and a map of contemporary dialogues on gender, voice, and cultural belonging.

Myth, Memory and Cultural Identity

Myth as a Narrative System Reflecting Cultural Identity

To explore how contemporary literature reclaims mythological figures like Sita, it is important to dive into the conceptual terrain of myth itself. "What is a myth today? I shall give at the outset a first, a very simple answer, which is perfectly consistent with etymology: myth is a type of Speech" (Barthes 107). Myth in this sense operates as a foundational narrative system that both reflects and constructs cultural identity, serving as what Jan Assmann terms "cultural memory"- a form of collective memory that preserves and transmits meaning across generations (Zhdanov). As Roland Barthes argues in *Mythologies* (1957), myth functions as "a second-order

semiological system” that transforms cultural signs into naturalised truths, incorporating values and worldviews into collective consciousness (Barthes 113). This makes myths far more than just stories; they become living archives of cultural identity and knowledge that actively shape how society understands its origins, values, and place in the world. They are effective tools to present constructed meanings as natural truths, rendering them powerful instruments for reinforcing societal norms and ethical frameworks

Northrop Frye argues, myths form the structural backbone of literature, writing and collective imagination: every human society possesses a mythology which is inherited, transmitted and diversified by literature (Adams et al.). This interpretation transforms our understanding of myth from being a static to being a fluid and ever-evolving narrative form, one that is continuously adapted and revitalised through the act of storytelling. In the Indian cultural context, the significance is exceptional: epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* function not just as ancient literary masterpieces but as vibrant mythological systems. These texts continue to exert immense influence on the ethical conduct of the people, the construction of gender identities, and the maintenance of social norms, even in contemporary times, thereby reinforcing their role as enduring and adaptable sources of cultural meaning.

Myth serves multiple functions in forging cultural identity. They bind communities together by providing a shared set of symbols, origins, and moral frameworks- working both as a compass and a mirror for collective values. Contemporary anthropological scholarship recognizes myths as integral components of what Bronislaw Malinowski called the “social and cultural whole”, where mythological narratives legitimize communal practices and shared values (Strenski xvii). Malinowski’s functionalist approach demonstrates how myths serve as cultural tools that explain and justify social practices, operating as “hard-worked active forces” related to almost every aspect of culture (Strenski xix). This understanding aligns with Claude Levi-Strauss’s structuralist approach, which treats myth as vehicles that reveal “universal patterns in cultural systems” rooted in the invariant structure of human consciousness (*Britannica*). Together, these perspectives frame myth as both a social tool and cognitive structure, simultaneously shaping cultural order and reflecting universal mental schemas.

The relationship between myth and cultural identity operates through what symbolic anthropologists like Clifford Geertz and others term “systems of meanings, culturally ascribed” (*Symbolic and Interpretive Approach*). In this sense, myth is a moral and ethical architecture, offering citizens templates for identity and belonging.

Clifford Geertz's interpretive framework conceptualizes culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life" (Geertz 89). Within this framework, myths function as symbolic resources through which communities construct their narrative identities- what Paul Ricoeur defines as "the sort of identity to which a human being has access thanks to the mediation of the narrative functions" (Emilio 122).

Recent scholarship emphasizes how myths serve as repositories of both individual and collective memory shared by a group of people who share a culture. Jan Assman's distinction between "*communicative memory* everyday memory transmitted through oral traditions and *cultural memory* long-term, institutionalized memory maintained through rituals and myths" illustrates how mythological narratives bridge temporal gaps, connecting past, present, and future within coherent cultural frameworks (Sivasubramanian 10). Agnes Heller identifies the significance of mythological narratives in identity formation by theorizing them as "identity-constituting cultural memory", where the past constantly becomes present (Heller 139). This temporal change allows communities to maintain cultural continuity while adapting to changing social contexts.

In postcolonial contexts, myth take on more dimensions as tools of cultural resistance and reclamation of identity. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues, reclaiming local storytelling traditions shows an act of resistance against cultural imperialism, whereas other postcolonial writers like Amitav Ghosh have also theorised mythological elements as being a means to critique colonial historiography and "reclaim agency over their past" (Sivasubramanian 7). The resistant functions of this thought align with what Easterine Kire describes as "powerful expressions of deeper truth" that subvert dominant narratives while preserving indigenous epistemologies, while mentioning indigenous stories from the North East (Chücha 389).

The structural analysis of mythological narratives reveals their complex coding of cultural logic. This structural sophistication supports Lewis's definition of myth as

"traditional tales with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance where 'traditional' means that it has no identifiable author but appears in several sources and further develops over time" that "dramatically express the ideology under which a society lives" (Wu).

Contemporary feminist scholarship has particularly emphasized how mythological retellings function as sites of cultural negotiation, where marginalized voices can challenge hegemonic narratives. This process

exemplifies what scholars call “revisionist mythmaking”—the strategic reinterpretation of canonical narratives to foreground previously silenced experiences. Such reinterpretations demonstrate myth’s continued vitality as what Malinowski terms “living faith, social organization...morals...and customs” rather than antiquated folklore (Strenski xxi).

In the contemporary context, myths continue to serve as vehicles for cultural identity construction, particularly in societies navigating globalization and cultural change. Research indicates that “shared stories foster a sense of belonging and connection within communities,” Stories provide frameworks for understanding ourselves and our place in the world,” they act as vessels for passing down knowledge, traditions, and historical accounts from one generation to the next,” creating empathy and understanding that strengthen social bonds and ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage (Ahmad 75). This function becomes particularly crucial in diasporic contexts, where mythological narratives serve as cultural anchors that maintain continuity across geographical and temporal distances.

The power of mythological narratives lies in their capacity to integrate what “narrative identity” with “heterarchy of values,” creating multilayered cultural belonging that encompasses individual, social, and cultural dimensions (Emilio 121). This integration allows myths to

function simultaneously as personal meaning-making tools and collective identity markers, bridging the gap between individual psychology and social structure. Thus, far from being static or obsolete, myths are living systems- archives of cultural meaning that evolve with each telling. For a figure like Sita, who resides at the intersection of devotion, duty, silence, and strength, myth becomes the stage upon which cultural values are negotiated, questioned, and transformed.

Myth, Morality, and Muteness: Tracing Sita's Limited Voice in Traditional Retellings

Sita occupies a unique place in South Asia's collective imagination: at once a universal archetype of wifely virtue and a figure whose own volition is repeatedly circumscribed by the needs of her family, her husband's reputation, and the patriarchal order he embodies. Across the subcontinent- in Sanskrit, Prakrit, regional vernaculars and performative traditions- her story is told and retold, yet her agency remains remarkably constrained in classical texts. Across literary and oral tradition, Sita's presence is ubiquitous, yet these four interlocking themes illustrate this paradox, that despite being placed at the heart of the text, Sita is denied voice and agency:

The "Pan-Indian" Sita as Exemplar of Wifely Devotion

In Valmiki's *Ramayana* (c. 4th century BCE–2nd century CE), Sita willingly embraces exile: when Rama—bound by his father's promise—

reluctantly bids her remain in Ayodhya, she insists on accompanying him into the forest (Bala Kanda 44.1–19). Though the assertion reveals resolve, it also underlines her role as Rama’s dutiful consort rather than an independent actor (Goldman). As highlighted by Desai, Sita features in merely ten percent of the sargas in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, further underscoring her marginal narrative presence (Desai 4). Tulsidas’s mid-16th-century *Ramacharitmanasa* amplifies her submission. Her self-immolation and rescue by Agni in the ‘Agni-pariikṣa’ episode is recast as a prearranged pact between the divine pair, rather than a response to Rama’s demand, suggesting that even in devotional re-telling, she cannot set the terms of her own trial (Goldman). The devotional reinterpretation reinscribes obedience and sacrifices as sacred virtues, leaving no room for dissent or refusal (Lal). This echoes Nabaneeta Dev Sen’s observations how female submission is often reinterpreted as passive virtue in devotional literature.

The Test by Fire as Symbol of Female Purity, Not Female Agency

The “trial by fire” (agniparikṣa) enshrines Sita’s chastity as the supreme virtue and shifts all responsibility for confirming it onto her alone. By subjecting herself to a blazing inferno and emerging unscathed, she secures social legitimacy, yet at the cost of her bodily autonomy and personal dignity. In folk traditions—from Bhojpuri jatsar ballads to Pahari ramlila

enactments, women identify with Sita's need to prove themselves innocent, even when they themselves are blameless victims of male suspicion. This shared identification reinforces Sita's symbolic status as the "essential orphan" whose worth is measured by her capacity for incurious self-sacrifice. This dynamic is captured in scholarship on feminist reinterpretations of the epic, which assert that "Sita's agency is often reduced to sacrificial endurance rather than self-determined choice" (Chakraborty).

Public Humiliation and Political Expediency

After her rescue, Rama again exiles a pregnant Sita to placate public gossip (Uttara Kaṇḍa 41). This second banishment transforms political pragmatism—Rama's duty to uphold the royal image—into an unforgivable personal betrayal. Sita's choice to return to Mother Earth rather than live in the same society is a final assertion of agency, but only after she has endured the ultimate public disgrace. Classical Sanskrit variants such as the *Adhyātma Ramayana* and later vernacular retellings—Balaramadasa's *Jagamohana Ramayana*, Krttivas's Bengali *ramanataka*—offer rationalisations (divine conspiracies, shadow-Sita devices) but never grant her the power to refuse the exile itself. These texts offer rationalisations—such as Maya Sita or divine intervention—but never grants her the right to refuse exile (Kalplata). As Navaneeta Dev Sen

writes, “The commonest epithet for Sita in Bengali (also found in Maithili) is ‘*janam dukhini*’ born to suffer, Sita exists in the form of a culturally accepted victim and not a resistant agent (Lal 132).

Possibilities of Re-inscription in Regional and Contemporary Art

The sixteenth-century *aṣṭasakhi* poets like Candravati (Bengali) portray Sita in fatalist terms, as noted by Navaneeta Dev Sen, ““I have no father / I have no mother / I was found at the tip of a plough...”, aware of her oppression yet powerless to resist, suggesting that in some traditions she is the “witness” to women’s systemic subjugation (Lal 131). Modern feminist and artistic interventions—from Mallika Sengupta’s dramatic monologue to Nina Paley’s animated *Sita Sings the Blues*—seek to recover Sita’s interior life, focusing on her grief, rage and final refusal to submit. These creative re-writings argue that within the classical constraints there lie unspoken moments of protest, whose full implications are only now being explored. Moreover, Samhita Arni and Chitrakar’s graphic novel *Sita’s Ramayana* imagines Sita refusing further trials and returning to Mother Earth by her own will—subverting canonical endings and restoring narrative agency (Sinha and Ali).

Sita's trials in life by the exile, Ravana's abduction, Rama's demand and banishment reveal a tragic arc of her life. Yet classical texts seem to focus on her chastity, wifely duties, idealism in endurance and virtue. Obedience and idealism become her sole means of recognition and survival in the texts operating and written in patriarchal society. However, her story serves as a powerful critique of such social and political norms when seen through a feminist lens. The modern reimaginings foreground these latent tensions in the plot and offer Sita a retrospective agency that was withheld from her in the traditional texts.

Myth as Oral, Adaptable, and Performative

Myths are originally rooted in oral transmission. As noted by Devdutt Pattanaik in his text *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, “Shiva narrates the *Ramayana*” to comfort all in turbulent times (D. Pattanaik). Before texts, myths were spoken, sung, chanted, or enacted in rituals and communal gatherings, as in the case of the *Ramayana*, where the transmission started from the crow to Narada and then to Valmiki, who turned it into a song. This oral tradition allows myths to be dynamic, continuously reinterpreted and reshaped by each retelling. Myths in India

exist as “a pool of signifiers”, as noted by A.K.Ramanujan, and with every retelling, they enter into a dialogue with earlier versions, supporting the multiplicity of the epic (Ramanujan 158). The fluidity of transmission, reinterpretation across means and genres ensures that myth is not a fixed relic, but a living narrative, open to refinement, expansion and contestation. It invites participation and improvisation, making each performance uniquely situated in the whole discourse.

Myth operates through symbols and motifs- figures, actions, landscapes and rituals which carry meaning beyond literal narrative and are ever-changing. Northrop Frye’s archetypal theory emphasises how recurring myths and symbols function as building blocks of literature, connecting each work to universal patterns of meaning (Frye). These symbols provide multilayered meanings encoding deep cultural truths, psychological dilemmas, and ethical ideals and making the myth an adaptable vehicle for collective reflections.

Myths are inherently adaptable, responding to new cultural, moral, and psychological needs. Mythopoesis is the creative, continual making and remaking of myth to address changing social values and exemplifies the adaptable nature of the myths. It means that each retelling challenges, subverts, and supplements patriarchal perspectives operating in the narrative discourse in its unique situation (Chakravarty). As Robert Segal

notes, myths are not static but become metaphors for human experience and existential reflection, shifting focus from literal events to symbolic expressions, making myths remain relevant and meaningful in diverse contexts.

The performative nature of myth encompasses its enactment in ritual, drama, storytelling and social practice. Through Dance, theatre, and religious ceremonies, narrators depict different myths, bringing the symbolic narratives to life and shaping the collective meaning for the society. The performative nature also appears in the narrative choice of how mythic characters speak, act or depict any myth. Myths in performance negotiate values, power and social roles, exemplifying how myths can both open spaces for questioning and transformation.

Literature emerging from myth participates in the process of being oral, symbolic, and performative, which not only serves as a repository for societies but also a dynamic engine for narrative authority, identity construction and ethical critique. This shows why myth remains important as a living resource for cultural negotiation and creative renewal.

The Character of Sita: From Epic to Popular Culture

Sita in Valmiki *Ramayana* and other Regional Versions

“The traditional belief is that whatever *Ramayana* we know is incomplete. Of the millions of *Ramayana* narrations available, Shiva narrates the story in a hundred thousand verses, Hanuman narrates 60,000 of these, Valmiki narrates 24,000, and all other poets narrate fewer than that” (D. Pattanaik xvi). Thus making even the Valmiki *Ramayana* a reimagination. Devdutt Pattanaik, a lead mythologist from India, notes few *Ramayana* beacons across History trying to establish the course of the narrative since “before 2nd century BCE: Oral tellings by travelling bards” to 2003: Novel Ashok Banker’s *Ramayana* series” and still writes that “the dating is approximate and highly speculative (D. Pattanaik xviii).”

One cannot fathom the origin of the *Ramayana*, yet Scholars refer to the Valmiki *Ramayana* as the foundational Sanskrit epic narrating the life of Rama, with Sita as one of the central characters. Sita is portrayed as the “archetypal embodiment of wifely virtues and unwavering devotion” in the Valmiki *Ramayana* (Hariyani 454). GRK Murty in *Sita in Valmiki Ramayana: A Feminist Archetype* notes,

“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. Valmiki chiselled 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 hint

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” (78). Valmiki constructs Sita as a symbol of dharma, aligning her personal virtue with broader moral orders.

Sita in the Regional *Ramayanas* exists in over 300 versions across India and South Asia (Richman 1991). Regional *Ramayanas* like Tulsidas’s Avadhi *Ram-charit-manas*, Balram Das’s Odia *Dandi Ramayana*, Kandali’s Assamese *Ramayana*, Krittivasa’s Bengali *Ramayana*, Sanskrit *Adbhuta Ramayana*, Gona Buddha Reddy’s *Ranganatha Ramayanam*, Sanskrit *Adhyatma Ramayana*, Kamban’s Tamil *Ramayana*, Bhoja’s Sanskrit *Champu Ramayana* and many more, reimagine Sita in ways that reflect local customs and societal norms (D. Pattanaik xviii). “Most women’s *Ramayana* are oral. Songs sung in the courtyards across India refer to more domestic rituals and household issues rather than the grand ideas of epic narratives. However, in the sixteenth century, two women did write the *Ramayana*: Molla in Telugu and Chandrabati in Bengali” (D. Pattanaik xxi). The regional variations often negotiated the tensions between classical norms and vernacular values, and Sita’s characterisation became a site of interpretive agency, making each version unique.

Across India, people have witnessed the motifs of the *Ramayana* not just in their day-to-day life, in rituals and traditions, but also embedded in their social tapestry. The motifs of the *Ramayana* may be seen in the temples, houses, art, literature, songs and culture, each forming another layer of already complex characters and narrative of the epic. Sita's multiple portrayal indicates her status as a living cultural archetype, one that does not just reflect the social anxieties towards women but also ethical anxieties, gender politics, and religious sentiments of different communities. "The idea of Sita's strength has its origin in Sita being seen as the Goddess. She is Kali, the sovereign goddess of nature, who chooses to be Gauri, demure and domesticated, for the benefit of humanity. This idea is made explicit in the *Adbhut Ramayana* and in Shakta literature (Pattanaik 48).

Sita in Bhakti Traditions, Folk Songs and Temple Worship

Folk performances such as Ramleela, Ramkatha, kirtans and women's songs often paint Sita as a figure of injustice and resilience. These folk songs, coming from the perspectives of women themselves, result in deep empathy towards them that is visible in their versions. In Maithili oral

songs, Sita is seen weeping over her fate, and often, Rama is criticised outright, a liberty rarely afforded in elite versions. “In folk songs from the Gangetic plains, Sita prays to Shakti, the Goddess, to get a good husband. When a demon approaches her, she gives him a letter to deliver to Shakti. In it, she asks Shakti to kill the presumptuous demon. Shakti kills the demon as Durga, the warrior-goddess, enabling Sita to marry Ram” (Pattanaik 48). A particularly striking example comes from the Bhili *Ramayana*, in which Sita gives verbal retorts to Rama, accusing him of injustice and emotional cowardice. This challenges hegemonic masculinities and creates space for counter-narratives within the epic frame (Blackburn & Ramanujan, 1986).

Sita’s presence in Bhakti traditions and temple practices of India reveals an identity that moves beyond the constraints of the *Ramayana* narrative and mixes with the ritual embodiment and devotion of the people. Bhakti poets, temple rituals elevate Sita to a status of independent reverence, away from Rama, since she has become a goddess associated with fidelity, compassion, and spirituality. She moves away from the classical portrayal and gains an identity for herself. “The Valmiki *Ramayana* does not depict Sita as having the strength to lift the bow, but it is part of folklore. Films like *Sita Swayamwar* (1976) show this episode” (Pattanaik 48).

In Tulsidas's *Ram-charit-manas*, Sita is idealized as the embodiment of grace and bhakti. Her unwavering devotion to Rama, despite abandonment and trial, becomes an example for devotees seeking divine presence amid worldly suffering (Lutgendorf, 1991). Addressed as "Janaki Mata", Sita is a goddess in his text who intercedes for the soul.

In Marathi Bhakti traditions, Sita's character is admired for her surrender and inner strength by women poets like Bahina Bai, and invokes her emotional endurance. In the works of Andal and Vedanta Desika, Sita is paralleled as divine consort Lakshmi, bestowing compassion, and portraying a softening to Rama's strict adherence to law or dharma.

In temples like Srirangam in Tamil Nadu, Bhadrachalan in Telangana, Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, and Ramanathaswamy Temple in Rameshwaram, Sita is identified as the goddess of abundance and treated as co-eternal and co-divine with Rama, following Ramanujan's Vishitadvaita Vedanta doctrine. In some shrines, she is given an independent procession during Rama Navami, Sita Kalyanam, and Vivaha Utsavams, where the marriage of Ram and Sita is enacted symbolising the union of masculine and feminine. It is mainly celebrated in South India. C.J. Fuller notes that such performances function as "ritual appropriations of mythic time," where divine weddings reaffirm the social ideals of

auspicious womanhood while providing emotional solace and spiritual closeness (FULLER).

Across classical texts, regional versions of the *Ramayana*, oral narratives, Bhakti poetry, and temple traditions, Sita emerges as a multilayered character. She begins as an ideal consort to Rama – a dutiful wife, daughter, sister-in-law and even mother, but in other retellings she becomes a lamenting heroine, a divine consort, a bold critic, and even a warrior. Her journey traces the emerging landscape of gendered agency in Indian mythology and changing societal norms. She becomes a cultural mirror reflecting values, anxieties and aspirations, evolving with each retelling.

Sita in other Popular Genres

Sita is not restricted to tradition, culture or literature; she has been continually reimagined in mass entertainment, from didactic textbooks to avant-garde graphic forms to movies and songs. These adaptations make her reveal new dimensions of her character.

From 1997 to 1998, Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* brought the whole country to a standstill while everyone revered the Sita that was brought to their homes. Portrait with devotional fervour by Deepika Chikhaliya, this Sita became the face of the revered goddess for the country.

As Purnima Mankekar argues, televised adaptations of the *Ramayana* have played a pivotal role in “cement[ing] Sita’s image as the archetypal wife,” foregrounding her chastity and self-sacrifice at the expense of a deeper exploration of her inner life (Mankekar).

Early mythological films such as V.Shantaram’s *Sita Swayamvar* (1933), Vijay Bhatt’s *Ram Rajya* (1943), the Silent film *Sati Sulochana* (1921), to recent films like *Adipurush* (2023) portrayed Sita in different lights, underlining the societal norms of that time, majorly focusing on Sita’s devotional postures, upholding her epic virtues. In contrast, Nina Paley’s animated feature *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008) introduces jazz vocals to Valmiki’s narrative, foregrounding Sita’s emotional turmoil and transforming her fire ordeal as a feminist act of self-assertion.

Amar Chitra Katha, the iconic illustrated comic book first published in 1968, condenses the epic into a moral fable to bring home the moral values as didactic lessons for children. Recent graphic representation by Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar’s *Sita’s Ramayana* (2011) blends folk Patachitra art with first-person narration; they have presented Sita as an eco-feminist and also an active narrator, a technique that fused regional visual with the feminist discourse.

Historiography of Sita

The historiographical trajectory of Sita's representation shows how orientalist readings shaped the understanding of Sita's character and how it interprets and influences other contemporary discourses.

Orientalist Readings of Sita

In the history of the Indian subcontinent, colonial history has had a long influence on the people. The orientalist encounter of Sita's character goes back to eighteenth century when Sir William Jones, the founder of Asiatic Society of Bengal (1784), represented "patronizing orientalism" as called by Peter Heehs. It is a scholarly approach of combining genuine appreciation with imperial condescension (Heehs 173). Sir William Jones, in his early oriental writings, writes in his *essay On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India* (1784), "The Hindoos have imagined a multitude of fables and allegories to conceal the mysteries of their religion..." which represented his colonial epistemology rather than a native point of view (Jones). However, his work served as a crucial part of the British understanding of Hindu narratives. This cultural translation put figures like Sita within an interpretive framework that showcased Western aesthetics and moral categories, reducing the complexities associated with them in classical narratives.

The first English translation of the *Ramayana* was completed by William Carey and Joshua Marshman between 1806 and 1810. It was a

prose translation that marked the earliest comprehensive translation of Valmiki's *Ramayana* (Goldman). The translation is followed by many others, not just in English but also in other languages, foregrounding a Western gaze to the epics, their characters and also to the plot.

Another pivotal work of orientalism regarding Sita came when Max Müller wrote his work, where he interpreted Sita as a vestigial earth goddess whose story embedded primitive solar myth cycles, reducing her myth cycle to systematic symbols in order to be relatable to a Western audience. His interpretation was not just widely read but also became a point of understanding Hindu mythology for the Western readership.

Later in 1978, Edward Said's *Orientalism* foregrounded how such scholarship functioned as an ideological tool, making the "Orient" a timeless realm of spiritual and sexual difference (Said). He foregrounded how such interpretations made Sita not a goddess, but a tool to signify and symbolise eastern women's "natural" submissiveness to patriarchy. Following which, critiques from writers like Romesh Dutt reasserted Sita's character, her moral authority and assertiveness, challenging such interpretations from the West.

Postcolonial- Nationalist Appropriations

In the postcolonial era, critiques from Peter Heehs and Lata Mani showcased how the portrayals from the West justify both moral and imperial governance over the East, underscoring the gendered dimensions of orientalist discourse (Heehs).

The postcolonial nationalist movement in India has repeatedly tried to fit Sita's image with their idealistic nationalist image of a woman, nationhood, and cultural identity. Sita has been shaped and reshaped to put into the moulds of the ideal "Hindu woman" symbolising collective memory, as done in school curricula under NCERT (National Council of Education Research and Training). She is modelled as a self-sacrificing and dutiful wife. This curriculum reemphasis was an attempt to bridge the regional and linguistic gap to identify with the ideal of womanhood across India.

In post-colonial India, parallel standards emerged in the literary circles where Rabindranath Tagore celebrated "her unspoken rejection of the existing gender paradigm" in his song, whereas Sri Aurobindo portrayed her descent into the earth as symbolising India's spiritual identity, which is rooted but destined for transcendent realisation (Lal 35). On the other hand, the right-wing Hindutva organisations asserted

majoritarian Hindu identity by showcasing Sita's character as unquestioning and adhering to their moral standards.

Early Feminist Critiques

In contrast, the recent portrayal of Sita brought her out of the shackles of right-wing or Western gaze and gave her active agency. Texts like *The Forest of Enchantments*, *Sita: Now You Know Me* reclaim Sita's voice, reframing her symbolic roles, centring her in regional and feminist retellings, bringing her out of the limited and often docile image in early Western writings.

Uma Chakravarti in her essay, *Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class, and State* writes, "Much attention has been focused in recent years on the ideological control upon women through the idealisation of chastity and wife-ly fidelity as the highest duty of women, reinforced through custom and ritual, and through constructions of notions of womanhood which epitomise wifely fidelity as in the case of Sita, Savitri, Anasuya, Arundhati and a host of other similar figures in Indian mythology (Chakravarti 583)." She examines Brahmanical patriarchy's silence on women, arguing that the passive portrayal of women like Sita serves as an ideological model for women's subordination in classical texts that were written by male writers.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen, who, in her collection of essays, *Sita theke shuru* (Starting from Sita) provides a sharp feminist deconstruction of mythic femininity. Dev Sen brings out “patriarchy demands impossible standards of purity, sacrifice, and obedience from women” (Chakraborty 33). She writes “It's not good enough to just comment upon the extant myths anymore; new stories need to be invented which give power to women, or rather a literature and culture that celebrate woman's autonomy, agency, and strength, and do not let her reduce herself into the suffering passive figures”, claiming the space for reinterpretation by feminist critics and writers and disrupting the classical and colonial shackles around Sita (Chakraborty 34).

Other feminist critics add to the tapestry of such discourses by analysing the androcentric portrayals of Sita and searching for and claiming her authority, thus giving this study its purpose and path.

Review of the *Ramayana* Criticism and Debates

The tapestry of the discourse over the *Ramayana* has evolved over centuries, and in contemporary scholarship, it has become even more complex, addressing the questions of authenticity, orthodoxy, and multiplicity, not just in literature but across different disciplines and genres. These discussions reshape Sita, making her evolve with each essay, criticism or reinterpretation.

Debates on “which *Ramayana*”

The seminal essay in the discourse of multiplicity of the *Ramayana* is A.K. Ramanujan’s *Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation* (1987). Hesuch writes, “For every Rama there is a *Ramayana*.”, which challenges the notion of a single, authoritative text (Ramanujan 133). He examines the differences between the different *Ramayanas* within Southeast Asia.

He views these translations operating in three ways: iconic, indexical and symbolic. One, where the translator mainly keeps the “order and sequence” of the Valmiki *Ramayana*. For example Kampan *Ramayana* in Tamil. Two, when the translator makes the text “embedded in locale, a context, refers to it, even signifies it and would not make sense without it” (Ramanujan 157). For example, Krittivasi *Ramyana* in Bengali. And three, when the translator uses the plot and character from the original text minimally and uses them to say an entirely new thing. For example, the Jain *Ramayana*. He argues that to some extent, all translations have all three kinds of elements. Symbolising the attitudes and anxieties of the society.

“Every author, if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique crystallisation, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context (Ramanujan 158).” His essay foregrounds the vast narrative

variations across the linguistic, regional, and religious boundaries, demonstrating that “there are as many *Ramas* as there are rings on a platter” (Ramanujan 133).

Paula Richman, in her article, *Epic State: Contesting Interpretations of the Ramayana*, explores the long-standing conflict between C.Rajagopalachari and E.V. Ramasami regarding their conception of the *Ramayana* (Richman). Thus, establishing the multiplicity of the *Ramayana* across literature, social and political tapestry.

Within these debates, Sita emerges as one of the most contested characters embodying tensions among orthodoxy, patriarchy, feminism, ecology and womanhood. Her presentation varies in each version and opens spaces for more debates and reinterpretations. In traditional literature, Sita is shown as a dutiful consort, a paragon of virtue, an ideal woman, loyal, demure and devoted. These versions emphasise her sufferings not just by the plot but also by withholding the space for her to grow or speak.

Modern retellings in novelistic, poetic, graphic or visual forms often combine Sita’s myth with modern life complexities, making Sita not just a goddess or revered figure but a symbol of womanhood and their complexities. Contemporary debates reveal Sita as a battleground for competing visions of Indian womanhood, continuing the tradition of

reinterpretation and challenging patriarchal norms. This contested status makes her an ideal figure for examining how mythological characters function as sites of cultural negotiations and ideological transformations in contemporary Indian literature.

In traditional versions of the *Ramayana*, Sita is associated with different traditions, foregrounding the ideals expected of women in any particular society. For example, in the Jain *Ramayana*, she is portrayed as an assertive character, whereas in the Buddhist version, she presents her spiritual intelligence. However, contemporary retellings intermingle this traditional portrayal with folk and modern sensibilities of other societies. She moves away from the ideals and goddess archetypes to a metaphor of womanhood and shared solidarity. Through this disputed status, she becomes an exemplary character who helps to analyse the way mythological figures operate as a focus of cultural negotiations in Indian literature.

Rise of Feminist Retellings and Popular Literary Imaginations

“For the women, writing these feminist revisions, and the millions of readers enthralled by the stories, placing women at the centre of familiar, ancient myths feels like a necessary and overdue corrective”, writes

Alexandra Alter in her article on *The Women of Greek Myths are Finally Talking Back* (Alter).

The transformation of myth visible in feminist retellings in popular literature moves beyond the cultural, geographical and gendered boundaries set by the traditional norms and stands for women's agency and representation across genres and disciplines.

The contemporary reimagination of Greek mythology began with *The Song of Achilles* (2011) by Madeline Miller, followed by her *Circe* (2018); both of these books were widely popularised for their contribution to appeal for voice and agency for mythological women characters. Other popular reimaginings are Pat Barker's *The silence of the Girls* (2019), which retells the story of Trojan war from Briseis's perspective; Natalie Haynes's *A Thousand Ships* (2019), which presents Trojan war through multiple women's perspectives; and Jennifer Saint's series of books *Ariadne* (2021), *Elektra* (2022) and *Atlanta* (2023) with others foreground tales from Greek mythology through women's perspectives.

Norse mythology, African mythology, and others also reimagine their mythological tales in order to give women spaces and agency to tell their stories. These works often present themes of cultural preservation, diaspora identity, and reclamation of indigenous culture. These reinterpretations in literature bring focus to women's world, bringing them

from the shadows to the centre of the tales. The global acceptance of these retellings also opens cross-cultural dialogues, which indicates a global sisterhood and genuine cultural needs for alternative narratives about gender, power and identity.

The Emergence of Feminist Mythological Fiction in India

Chandranbati, the first female to reinterpret the *Ramayana* in Bengali, became a beacon of light for future reinterpretation. Other important reinterpretations of Indian mythology concerning female characters are a short story by Mahashweta Devi, *Draupadi* (1981), which foregrounds women's capacity to reclaim myth and still address social issues like caste and gender discrimination.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusion* (2008), where she explored the plot of the *Mahabharata* through the eyes of Draupadi, marked the first major commercial success of feminist mythological fiction in India. Later, the novel was translated into more than ten languages and is to be adapted into a film. The novel's success opened new doors for feminist reimaginations and was followed by many texts. After almost a decade, *The Forests of Enchantments* (2019) explored Sita's voice and presented the *Ramayana* through her eyes, seeking agency, assertiveness and lessons of love.

Kavita Kane's novels often deal with minor female characters, bringing them from the shadows to light. *Karan's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013), *Sita's Sister*(2014), *Lanka's Princess* (2016), *Menaka's Choice* (2015), *Ahalya's Awakening*(2019), *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* (2017), *Tara's Truce* (2023) and *Saraswati's Gift* (2021) are all reimaginings or reinterpretations of mythological stories in India, her books emerge from folk tradition and stories diving into the characters' lives in all aspects like their agency, desires and sexual explorations. She depicts them as conscious women with explicit qualities, having a place with the period of legendary heroes, and simultaneously fit for human feelings as women overall.

Samhita Arni's and Moyna Chitkara's graphic novel *Sita's Ramayana* (2011) introduces Sita in her own words, "I am Sita, Daughter of the Earth, Sprung from the same womb that nurtures the forest. I am the princess of Mithila and the last queen of Ayodhya" (Arni 8). She merged patachitra art and *Ramayana's* story through Sita's voice and provided agency to tell her own story.

The Liberation of Sita by Volga, translated from the Telugu by T. Vijaykumaar and C. Vijayshree, is a collection of five stories having Sita as the principal character. Moving towards her liberation, "The Last Story, The Shackled' shows Rama imprisoned in the bondage of Arya Dharma

(Volga).” The stories foreground Sita’s spiritual liberation along with the other women characters of the *Ramayana*.

Devdutt Pattanaik’s texts *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010) and *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* (2013) make the complex concepts of the mythology accessible and approachable to modern readers.

Koral Das Gupta’s series of books on Panchkanya from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* – *Ahalya* (2020), *Draupadi* (2022), *Kunti* (2021), *Tara* (2024), *Mandodari* (2023) and others - explores the lives of these women through their own perspectives. Contributing to the larger tapestry of gender studies, art and reinterpretation of Indian mythology.

The four primary readings of this research also operate in the same landscape as these works. *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (2017), *Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love* (2021), *Sita: Now You Know Me* (2021), imagine Sita in different forms. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explore the theme of love, assertion, agency, and womanhood in her tale by giving Sita the first-person narrative, allowing her to find her space and liberation while explicitly questioning the patriarchy.

Amish Tripathi’s Sita becomes an administrator, a warrior and a leader, while also operating with the ideals and morals of her society. She

openly questions the patriarchy and also recasts the traditional portrayal of Sita with modern, empowered fantasy and thriller genres. It synthesises the feminist consciousness, avoiding the either/or between traditional values and female empowerment. It also stands as an example of how feminist reimaginings can co-exist with popular entertainment, reaching audiences beyond traditional readership.

Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love explores the deep reverence towards Sita and situates her as a deeply spiritual and emotionally capable woman. It employs lyrical, meditative prose that focuses on her divine connection with other characters and nature. It explores Sita's strength through meditative techniques and spiritual practices. Existing with deeply devotional traditions, Sita in this text brings readers closer to the power of traditional rituals, meditation and spirituality, which majorly provides Sita strength.

Sita: Now You Know Me explicitly connects Sita to the present-day socio-political tapestry, connecting her to the #METOO movement, making an ancient heroine relevant to current gender discourse. The use of first-person narrative bridges the gap between an enduring queen and modern women's struggles. It acts like a literary activism, transforming mythological retelling into a platform for feminist consciousness.

Reimagining of Sita in these texts brings her into the mainstream popular narratives and demonstrates that reclaiming mythological women's voice serves multiple functions within society: they are artistic, innovative, commercial success, cultural critique, and a tool of social transformation.

Literary and Cultural Gaps

While the *Ramayana* has generated extensive literary and cultural scholarship, as discussed in the above sections, the reimaginings of Sita within contemporary Indian English fiction, especially under multiple theories, remain unexplored. This study attempts to bridge the gap between existing studies focused on oral traditions and Sanskrit texts and relatively less studied contemporary reimaginings in English. Additionally, the relationship between myth and feminist theory has been limitedly studied, albeit through the frames of mythopoesis and demythologization, which have not been systematically applied to contemporary literary imaginations of Sita's story. To this end, authorial intent expressed in prefaces, interviews and essays, which are instrumental in revealing the ideological projects of rewriting myth, has frequently been bypassed by critical

discourses. These gaps call for an interdisciplinary analysis that not only examines how Sita is rewritten in contemporary fiction but also why these changes are significant in larger cultural, feminist, and literary debates. This research addresses that absence.

Hypothesis

The thesis hypothesizes that myths evolve with the evolution of society. The character of Sita from the epic *Ramayana* has been transformed and has become an independent entity that stays relevant with time. Also, the research hypothesises that the demythologised myth concerning the character of Sita has become an expression in itself.

Research Objectives and Questions

Main Objectives

- To study the relationship between Myth and Literature with the help of selected contemporary novels
- To study the character of Sita as presented in the contemporary novels
- To study the evolution of myths concerning the character of Sita
- To study how myth is used and transformed by contemporary writers

- To study and examine the contemporizing of Sita in popular literature

Sub-Objectives

- To study the condition and direction of myth in the contemporary world
- To study the perspectives of different writers regarding the portrayal of Sita
- To discuss the evolution of myth from Indian epics into fiction
- To reveal the transformation of Indian epic characters in contemporary novels

Research Questions

- What is myth and how is it represented in contemporary novels?
- What is the relationship between 'myth and literature' in contemporary novels?
- How is the character of Sita presented in contemporary novels?
- How is the myth related to the character of Sita transformed in the contemporary world?
- How is the character of Sita re-imagined and represented in popular literature?

Methodology

In order to carry out my research, I involved the following methods:

- Analysis of the novels chosen as primary readings for the research
- Analysis of the Interviews with the writers by the researcher
- Analysis of earlier interviews with the writers

- Textual and Inter-textual analysis of the writings concerning the character of Sita

Scope of the Study

With the increasing number of readers of mythological stories, there is a need to analyse the myth and the changes coming with the different techniques of writing and interpreting the same. The texts must bring home the myth and morals given by the ancient texts, although transformed. The scope of transformation is unlimited and the need to study the path is rising. Writers are bound to evolve, and so are the researchers and interpreters.

This research centres on the evolving representation of Sita in contemporary Indian English literature. The study focuses on the select corpus of novelistic retellings published primarily in the twenty-first century. The four novels- *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* by Amish, *Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love* by Bhanumathi Narasimhan, and *Sita: Now You Know Me* by Sini Panicker, primarily focus on the plot of the *Ramayana*, putting Sita at the centre of the story, making her their protagonist. These works are analysed within the broad timeframe spanning approximately 2000 to the present, a period marked by significant socio-political transformations influencing gender discourse in India.

The study employs a multidisciplinary theoretical framework by integrating feminist criticism, theories to study myth like mythopoesis and demythologization, and cultural studies. This study focuses on how the reimagination foregrounds agency, narrative voice, politics of representation and women's spaces through the lenses of ecofeminist and post-colonial criticism. The study also incorporates these novels within the wider discourse of mythic literature in India, acknowledging their role in forming such reimaginings.

In delineating the scope, this study limits itself to the novelistic representations of Sita in Indian English, using other media such as cinema, television adaptations, popular performances, comic representations, graphic novels and texts in regional languages. Although these play an important part in the continuum discourse of Sita's myth, the exclusion ensures a focused and manageable exploration into written novelistic representation and its academic reception. The study remains anchored to these works as they explicitly foreground Sita as a central narrative agent, which allows a detailed exploration of gendered reinterpretation and complexities.

The study responds to burgeoning and hegemonic scholarship of Sita's portrayal of classic myths, playing a role in expanding the discourse about the multiplicity of Sita's character. The study also presents a nuanced

understanding of how traditional narratives are reimagined to foreground modern ethical, social, and political dilemmas. Thus, making the chosen scope academically meaningful.

Finally, the study captures a critical juncture in India's cultural landscape, delving into movements like #METOO, environmental activism, spiritual revivalism, women's safety and recording their impacts in literary productions. Thus, focusing on the interdisciplinary study of mythology's dynamic role in contemporary identity formation, literary expression and social critique.

Focusing on just one character: Sita

The focus of the study on just one character, Sita, is both a scholarly imperative and a deliberate attempt to explore the unique position within the mythic and literary tapestry in India.

Sita is undisputably at the centre of the mythic tradition in South Asia. She is the pivotal female protagonist of one of the epics, the *Ramayana*. She may be presented as just a consort in multiple versions, but she is “the archetypal ideal wife” who serves as a foundational symbol of

womanhood in the Indian subcontinent. Her significance is not restricted to the mythic narratives, but she emerges as an embodiment of complex cultural negotiations around virtue, sacrifice, and feminine power. As religious scholar Nabaneeta Dev Sen observes, “Just as Ram myth has been exploited by the patriarchal Brahminical system to construct an ideal Hindu male, Sita too has been built up as an ideal Hindu female” (Sen 7).

Despite being the female protagonist of the epic, Sita’s voice is historically marginalised in classical texts. “In total, Sita appears in seventy-six sargas out of 645, accounting for barely 10 per cent of the *Valmiki Ramayana*” (Desai 4). Operating at the hands of a male author, she is strangely absent or in the background. However, in *Valmiki Ramayana*, “Sita lifting the Shiva Dhanushya, which takes 5000 servants to fetch for Rama to break (Bala Kanda, Sarg 66), signifies the onset of puberty”, revealing the strength she possesses in the male-dominated narrative, which withheld the space for her to emerge fully (Desai 4). Her historical silencing, enforced passivity during exile, her trial by fire, and her ultimate return to the Earth serve as a telling indicator of the limitations imposed on women in epic literature. Arshia Sattar notes in her analysis that the attempts to critically recover Sita’s voice often provoke “an explosion of anger- predominantly from men” who perceive any assertion as transgressive (Lal 10).

Revered as goddess and constrained by patriarchal expectations, Sita still arises as a complex and intensely gendered symbol. She embodies what feminist critics identify as the fundamental contradictions of Idealised Indian womanhood and devotees see her as an idealised form of woman and goddess symbolising virtue, devotion and abundance. This duality has made her a site of continuous cultural negotiation, where the debates about femininity, womanhood, idealism, duty, and justice intersect. Her story is ever evolving, making important discussions about women's roles, duties and characters within the complex modern landscape.

The *Ramayana* features other rich characters, even women like Urmila, Mandodari, Ahilya, and Kaikeyi, to name a few. This study consciously excludes those characters from the analysis to maintain analytical depth and coherence. These characters have inspired many retellings, for example, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* is just one text in the Ram Chandra Series, focusing on Ram and Ravana in the other text, yet analysing multiple characters would diffuse the study's focus and prevent the nuanced exploration that Sita's complex character and position demand. By concentrating on Sita, the study can undertake 'gynocriticism' which is a sustained examination of women's literary representation that traces patterns of silencing, recovery and empowerment (Showalter).

Key Theoretical Frameworks and Concepts

This study is conceptualised by theories of myth reformation, feminist critique, and narrative voice. The study engages with different theories to interpret the evolution of Sita's myth. Majorly, the study engages with three theories – Mythopoesis as articulated by, Devdutt Pattanaik, which focuses on the reinvention of myth to suit contemporary culture, Demythologization by Robert A. Segal, which transforms sacred narrative to human experience, making them part of modern culture.

Mythopoesis

Mytho-poesis comes “from the Greek poiein, meaning to make, to create” the mythic stories or ancient stories (Slochow 15). Mythopoesis means “myth-making”, a process that transposes the mythic stories to a symbolic meaning (Kazlev 1). According to the Oxford Dictionary, Mythopoesis is the act or process of creating myth . It encompasses both the collective creation of mythology within a culture, particularly pre-literate ones, and the individual creation of mythic narratives by authors. Mythopoesis, as a term, was used by J.R.R. Tolkien in the 1930s to refer to a “genre that integrates traditional mythological themes and archetypes into contemporary fiction (Kazlev).” Tolkien described his storytelling as “the making of myths.” In his poem “Mythopoeia,” Tolkien argues humans, as

‘subcreators,’ have a godlike power to invent mythic worlds (Tolkien, 1988). While all myths are created sometimes for the sake of providing society with morals and values, mythopoesis is a deliberate, conscious and creative attempt to reimagine existing myths, usually to reflect the cultural, ethical, or psychological needs of a new context. According to Jung, Mythopoesis draws upon the collective unconscious, manifesting universal themes (hero, mother, trickster, shadow) (Jung 1964). This stands true to what Campbell writes, “However, the function—the creative making and remaking of myth—predates its modern naming (Campbell et al.). Ancient poets, epic bards, and storytellers across every culture continually reshaped myths according to changing worldviews and values.” Hence, mythopoesis itself becomes a continuous process since the starting of mythic stories.

Devdutt Pattanaik, an Indian mythologist and author, popularised

“Mythopoesis” in contemporary Indian discourse. Mythopoesis, according to him, is “the study of how stories, symbols and rituals transform. How folk gods become guardian angels of Christianity, how tales in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* transform over history and geography. Mythography focuses on interpretations: from psychoanalytical to the structural and the comparative” (*Study of Myths - Devdutt Pattanaik*).

Thus, Mythopoesis becomes a dialogue between the past and present, where older frameworks are not rejected but refined, challenged, or extended. It is a dynamic and inclusive process, whereby authors and communities participate in reshaping myths to remain relevant to modern ethical and existential concerns. Myths created through mythopoesis provide symbols and narratives that mediate between the conscious and unconscious, the individual and collective (Campbell, 1949).

Mythopoesis is a dynamic process that can occur at individual, communal, or cultural levels. It can create a “secondary world” for a self-consistent, immersive mythic reality- such as Middle-earth or Narnia (Tolkien, 1965). Literary mythopoesis often borrows or blends elements across traditions, producing a palimpsest or tapestry of interconnected myths. Campbell argues that “recurrent mythic motifs (call to adventure, trials, apotheosis, return) shape both ancient myth and modern mythopoetic literature (Campbell 1949).”

Thus, mythopoesis as a process is fluid in nature; it operates across time, maintaining core symbolic structures while adapting their meanings. It helps in cultural renewal as a response to changing sociopolitical contexts—whether feminist, ecological, or postcolonial. It is a conscious creative interpretation helping authors or artists re-inscribe meaning into existing mythic symbols—like Sita, Draupadi, or Kaikeyi—granting them

voice, agency, or nuance. It also rejects the Fixity: Mythopoesis resists the idea that a myth has a “true” or “original” version. This aligns with A.K. Ramanujan’s assertion of “Many *Ramayanas*”, each valid within its cultural logic. It enables myth to comment on contemporary questions—such as justice, gender, exile, and belonging—without being doctrinal.

Mythopoesis is a potent tool in literary projects since it challenges the patriarchal structure and opens classical narratives to multiple interpretations. It humanises the characters and explores their interior complexities by putting them into different situations. It often critiques and criticises the reinforced patriarchal narratives.

In this study, mythopoesis is one of the central theoretical tools to study and explain Sita’s contemporization in Indian-English literature since it engages with myth creatively and critically. It shows how Sita is not just retold but remade from a silent ideal into a speaking subject, a spiritual guide, a political thinker, or an ecological symbol.

“Since myth ‘constructs’ it can be deconstructed and reconstructed to satisfy the needs of time. Myths are constantly transforming to meet social and cultural demands. There is no such thing as an ‘original’, perfect of static’ myth. The *Ramayana*, written 2000 years ago, and the *Ramayana* of Ramananda Sagar are not the same; the latter was told to meet modern needs. This is mythopoesis” (*Maya and Myth - Devdutt Pattanaik*).

In this study, mythopoesis is one of the mechanisms through which contemporary Indian- English writers reclaim, revise, and reimagine Sita. The four primary texts treated the story of Sita not as a fixed inheritance but as a negotiable narrative space open to feminist reinterpretation. The authors disrupt Sita's traditional portrayal and construct an identity of a thinking, feeling and autonomous subject. They redefined her journey by actively intervening with the mythic narrative. In each of the novels, mythopoesis is not a mere narrative device, but it is a means by which authors enter mythic tradition and occupy spaces that were withheld from women. These reimaginings do not reject the *Ramayana*, but rather actively engage with it and reshape its ideological architecture. They evoke a Sita who speaks within the patriarchy, across it and against it, transforming its symbolic structure to reflect contemporary concerns around gender justice, autonomy, voice and cultural identity.

Segal's Concept of Demythologized Myth"

Demythologization, the term was first popularized by German theologian Rudolf Bultmann in the mid-twentieth century, particularly in his work *New Testament and Mythology* (1941). Bultmann introduced the concept in the context of Biblical studies, where he found meaningful content related to historical and cultural context. He argues that this meaningful content must be reinterpreted to reveal its present truth in relation to the

modern world (Bultmann and Ogden). He sought to reinterpret rather than discard the myth; he is making them meaningful to the modern age of science and existential philosophy in order to connect with contemporary readership. In other words, demythologization becomes a process of stripping away the mythological framework and revealing the message underlying the symbols, motifs and plot. It combines existential truth within a tradition (Bultmann and Ogden). He points out that “myth does not intend to present an objective image of the world as it is, but to communicate the understanding that man has of himself in the world in which he lives” (Carvalho).

Robert S. Segal has further studied the concept of ‘Demythologization’, the concept of ‘demythologised myth’ represents one of the most significant contributions to myth theory and serves as a crucial bridge between traditional mythological understanding and contemporary scholarly interpretation. His understanding of the demythologization is “when myth is demythologized, then it ceases to be about the world and turns out to be about human experience of the world (Segal 47). It stops being literal and becomes a symbolic representation of human experience and psychological states. It shifts from explanation to expression, “an expression of what it feels like to live in the world” (Robert A Segal) without creating logical conflicts. It focuses on human

experience and makes it relevant to contemporary audiences who live in a scientifically understood universe.

Demythologization not only involves retelling of the stories but also involves retelling and analysing any ideological narrative that has become mythic over time. It dismantles the myth to reveal any underlying meaning with an emphasis on psychological, social, or political realities rather than supernatural explanations.

Demythologization often includes methods like hermeneutic reinterpretation, comparative and critical analysis. It interprets minor motifs, symbols, or analogies in the narratives to fit into modern consciousness. It does not strip away the essence of tradition, yet adds a layer of contemporary understanding to it. It examines the transformation or evolution of myth, addressing how the meaning evolves or transforms over time, with new complexities in society shifting the emphasis of the traditional story to existential, moral, or symbolic truths.

Demythologization has become a standard tool in critical studies of religion, myth, and literature. It is embraced by the writers, scholars and critics who seek to preserve meaningful narratives in an age of scepticism, like in secular reinterpretation of mythic stories in literature, modern myth-busting documentaries and finding meanings in rituals and symbols.

In this study, “Demythologization” is the second major framework to study the evolution of Sita’s myth in society. It is used to explain how Sita in the four retellings sheds the attributes or expected norms associated with her by patriarchy or traditional narratives and emerges as a different personality in the modern context. She is an assertive woman, who sheds the expectation to be demure and obedient and stands tall on her beliefs and learnings to bring home a new perspective of her story, she is a warrior, leader and administrator- the attributes typically assigned to male characters and emerges successfully dynamic in these attributes, how she is an spiritual character who is deeply connected to the traditional Sita yet shows the story with different perspective, She is a strong introspective character who shows or connects to the struggle of “modern men and women of all age” (Carvalho).

Demythologization is a critical process of translation and transformation of the language of myth so that the enduring truths and existential meanings can be accessed by new generations. It is indispensable for critics to study the retellings without delving into the concept of demythologization, as it engages in a dialogue with the myths themselves and reveals the new meanings and complexities of the story.

Frye’s principles of displaced myth and Archetypal theory

“According to Frye, Myth is a certain type of story in which the chief of character are gods or other beings larger in power than humanity. It is usually formed in verbal art, and belongs to the world of art” (Hasyim 46). He acknowledges that the stories in myth originated as verbal art passed on through generation. He further categorises every work of art as fiction. In other words, fiction is an artistic strategy to tell an idea by deceiving a story. he subjected that reading myth is like reading fiction.

Northrop Frye, in his work *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, fundamentally transforms the way one understands the relationship between myth and literature. It is considered that myth is an integral element of literature, a certain type of story with an anonymous author. He said that myth would naturally have the same kind of appeal for the fiction writer that folk tales have. Within myth is a special category of seriousness, the people believed to have really happened or to have some exceptional significance in explaining certain features in life, such as ritual (Hasyim 47).”

The two concepts in his book, “displaced myth’ and ‘archetypal theory, “ are interconnected to one another and become key concepts in this study. These theoretical concepts provide a systematic approach to understanding how mythic structures underlie all literature while adapting to the demands of plausibility and moral acceptability. In Frye’s view, all

literature is rooted in myth, but over time, myths are “displaced” into more human-centered, secular narratives while still retaining their archetypal functions (Frye 136–42).

Displacement is Frye’s central principle for explaining how, although literature moves away from pure ancient myths towards realistic narratives, it is still present underlying some symbols or motifs. It recognises that myth persists in new forms in literature. “The presence of a mythical structure in realistic fiction, however, poses certain technical problems for making it plausible, and the devices used in solving these problems may be given the general name of displacement” (Frye 136). Displacement allows authors to retain archetypal motifs while adapting them to suit the expectations of plausibility, coherence, and psychological realism in modern fiction.

According to Frye, the two primary directions of displacement are: First, towards plausibility and Credibility, in which writers adapt mythic structures to “follow the laws of probability”, moving from the fantastical world of myth toward credibility. These create stories that are “a plausible form of undisplaced myth” (Frye 136). Second is Toward Moral Acceptability, where displacement also moves in the direction of moral acceptability, where “civilisation, or the human form of desire, tries to collapse the stance between the moral and the desirable. In other words,

Frye understood displacement as a kind of technique to make sure the reader of myth and fiction will get the underlying message of the text. “The central principle of displacement is that what can be metaphorically identified in a myth can only be linked in romance by some form of simile: analogy, significant association, incidental accompanying imagery, and the like. In a myth, we can have a sun-god or tree-god; in a romance, we may have a person who is significantly associated with the sun or trees” (Frye 137).

Frye’s archetypal criticism built on how literature emerges from a “core of myth” and functions as a “system” based on “recurrent patterns”. He seeks to establish criticism as “a science” with systematic and objective methodology as he sees that all literary works participate in a unified literary universe where archetypal patterns repeat across cultures and epochs. As he asserts, all literary works “participate in a total order of words,” where the recurrence of symbolic forms and narrative patterns becomes the foundation for critical analysis (Frye 17).

Frye identifies four fundamental mythoi or narrative patterns that structure all literature. These correspond to natural cycles and form what he calls “central unifying myth”: comedy/Spring, Romance/ Summer, Tragedy/ Autumn, Irony/ Winter. These patterns are not genres but rather archetypal narrative shapes, grounded in ritual and myth. Each carries a

unique emotional tone and symbolic resonance, which can help interpret the cultural and psychological function of a work (Frye 192). Comedy/ Spring represent renewal or reconciliation which is a movement from confusion to harmony, Romance/ Summer represent Quest or triumph which is a heroic rise, victory or idealised worlds, Tragedy/Autumn represent Fall or loss which represent fall of the protagonist, or descent of the protagonist into chaos, Irony/ Winter represent disintegration or scepticism which represent cynicism, futility, anti-hero, distorted world.

Frye's concepts of displacement and archetypal criticism represent a monumental achievement in literary theory, providing a systematic framework for understanding how mythic structures adapt and transform across cultures and historical periods.

Feminist Theory

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's article *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) highlights the difficulties marginalised women encounter in achieving self-representation within prevailing discourses. Spivak contends that subaltern groups, especially colonised and economically marginalised women, are effectively muted since the power systems discussing them preclude their self-representation. This generates a dilemma in which attempts to "amplify voices" may inadvertently perpetuate the current suppression. In the context of mythology, Sita

emerges as a subaltern character situated at the convergence of patriarchal and imperial narratives, her voice muted and her agency restricted within the epic's established framework. Feminist retellings provide a voice to this previously silent person, overturning silence and facilitating her narrative subjectivity. These retellings seek to re-establish Sita's presence not as a passive symbol but as an active agent whose narrative warrants attention.

Judith Butler's seminal theory, presented in *Gender Trouble* (1990), posits that gender is not an immutable nature but rather a repeated performance, a succession of behaviours that have been normalized and naturalized throughout time. Sita's conventional depiction as the archetypal 'pativarta' and exemplar of compliance illustrates this "performance" of femininity, culturally inscribed rather than physiologically dictated. Butler's idea elucidates that these positions, although seemingly fixed, are fundamentally manufactured and so susceptible to disruption. Feminist retellings of Sita utilise this understanding to interrogate and deconstruct gendered performances, revealing their artificiality and fostering alternative identities that diverge from patriarchal norms.

Additional feminist scholars such as Ruth Vanita, Nivedita Menon, Romila Thapar, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, and Malashri Lal examine these myths from a feminist perspective. They contest heteronormative, patriarchal frameworks in Indian literature and mythology by "queering"

conventional tales and examining fluidities in gender and desire. Ruth Vanita's analysis of these issues establishes binaries and expands interpretative avenues about heroines such as Sita. Menon views gender as fundamentally political, highlighting power relations and resistance within cultural and literary discourses. Her study emphasises how actions of feminist dissent and reconfiguration confront gendered domination. Dev Sen offers significant historical and literary insights into the multifaceted nature of Sita's character as represented in oral traditions, regional adaptations, and literary works.

Methodology and Analytical Approach

The qualitative and interpretive methodology adopted in this study is strongly rooted in the intersectionality of different literary studies, like cultural criticism, Eco-feminist theory and feminist theory. While other theories helped in understanding the texture of the text, feminist theory is particularly concerned with interrogating how texts reflect, reinforce, or challenge gendered power relations with their narratives, imagery and structure.

This study seeks to examine the representation of women, the construction of gender identity and the dynamics of patriarchy in the context of the character of Sita in reimagined mythological texts. Drawing on feminist literary criticism, the study approaches Sita's character to

analyse the narrative voice and the underlying ideological forces shaping the portrayal of femininity and masculinity.

This study analyses the depiction of female characters, particularly Sita, while focusing on the centre versus margin, agency versus stereotype and subversion versus conformity. It also studies the socio-cultural contexts in which the texts are produced and received, including intersectionality factors. Majorly, this study focuses on how these texts resist or reproduce the patriarchal structures and what spaces they offer for female expression, autonomy or dissent.

The study involves a meticulous and sustained examination of selected texts' formal elements like language, narrative structure, voice, metaphor, symbolism and tone. It involves the process of close reading of the reimaginings since they are a work of transformation in language, symbolism, and narrative voice. The process allows for the identification of how mythic archetypes are reimagined through metaphor, allusion, and language. It examines the nuanced shift in tone, point of view, or diction that evokes broader ideological changes such as resistance, revision, or critique in narrative structure. It appreciates the artistry put in by the author, with which an age-old tale becomes relevant for a new audience. Thus, making a character like Sita, whose representation is densely coded within

the narrative form and charged with historical, social and cultural tapestry, significant.

The four selected novels in this study shift the narrative power, voice and perspective with the portrayal of Sita for contemporary readership. The close readings of these texts involve the investigation of the narrative voice, how an omniscient narrator of first-person narration grants or withholds the power of narration to Sita. It studies the metaphors or descriptive patterns associated with Sita, how each text uses these metaphors differently, and if these elements are consistent with, or subvert, her image in canonical texts. It also investigates the identification of perspective and focalization, how these texts adopt Sita's interiority. It foregrounds the symbolism and tone hidden in natural elements like fire, earth, forest, etc., resonating or changing the meaning in the retellings, how they evoke empathy, irony, critique or reverence. It also detects the narrative structure and agency, how Sita is positioned within the plot's trajectory.

The study draws on diverse feminist frameworks, engaging with theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Judith Butler, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Ruth Vanita, Nivedita Menon, Malashree Lal, to name a few. All thinkers offer tools for interrogating the questions of gender, power, and voice, especially important to contemporary Indian-English literature and

mythological retellings. They foreground the politics of gender, voice, agency, power etc.

The present study applies an intertextual and comparative framework to investigate how the *Ramayana* narrative and Sita's portrayal are reshaped across classical and contemporary texts. By placing the traditional canonical texts like Valmiki *Ramayana*, and other versions alongside contemporary retellings such as *The Forest of Enchantments*, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, etc., the study traces narrative shifts, thematic reinventions and the ideological significance of mythic reinterpretation.

This approach brings into focus not just the content but the context of different interpretations of the *Ramayana*. Valmiki's *Ramayana* portrays Sita as an embodiment of virtue, chastity, endurance and sacrifice, with her voice often subordinated to patriarchal norms and dictates of dharma. Whereas, reinterpretations like *The Forest of Enchantments* foreground Sita's subjectivity, granting her narrative voice, desire, and selfhood that actively interrogate notions of female passivity. *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* recasts Sita as a warrior, leader, replete with intellect and physical prowess, challenging traditional norms of female passivity. Another text, *The Liberation of Sita*, questions the societal control by recasting Sita on a journey of liberation, interacting with other female characters in the text.

This comparative reading enables a nuanced understanding of the evolution of the *Ramayana*, it charts how the core myth evolves in response to, and reflection of, changing cultural, social and political discourses. It is informed by essays like *Three Hundred Ramayanas* by A.K. Ramanujan and Paula Richman's work on the multiplicity of the *Ramayana* Traditions. Ramanujan famously argued that there is no singular or fixed *Ramayana*, but rather a constellation of tellings, each shaped by its historical and cultural moment. Every version or retelling is an interpretation and a transformation in the discourse of Indian myth. This allows the analysis to explore the plurality, contestation and ideological evolution. It also argues that each *Ramayana* must be understood in light of its audience, performance context, and political climate. This is crucial for grasping why Sita's depiction as a loyal wife, rebel, visionary or survivor varies so dramatically in each retelling. This helps in tracing the ideological shift from traditional to modern portrayal of Sita, the narrative shift with each retelling across time and genre, and the cultural relevance, which serves to be both a mirror and a tool for contemporary debates about gender, identity and justice.

The study also analyses the interviews, forewords and critical essays and lectures that play a crucial role in supplementing and contextualising. These materials offer deeper insights into the creative and

interpretive strategies of contemporary writers who engage with mythological retellings. Authors frequently use interviews, forewords and essays to articulate their motivations, themes, intentions, and the specific philosophical or political aims guiding their narratives. For example, Sini Panicker repeatedly aligns her Sita with the #METOO movement, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Amish Tripathi, have commented explicitly on why they chose to retell Sita's perspective, and how their personal background affected their take on it. It also talks about the reception of their works, interaction with the readers, and the intended impact of their feminist or mythopoetic interventions. Lectures and essays provide platforms for authors to elaborate upon the research, inspiration, and narrative choices that shaped their works. Contemporary authors often discuss, in the pretext, how they negotiate between tradition and innovation and what elements of the canonical texts they retain, subvert, amplify, or erase, how they interpret Sita's story personally and in the text. Often, it is a direct address of the author's intentions to recuperate the female voice and agency. For example, Volga's essays and interviews provide explicit rationale for centring women's relationships and traumas, contesting patriarchal metrics such as purity and obedience, thus informing readers how feminist priorities shape every aspect of the retelling.

Significance of the Study

Myth studies have long explored the significance of epics like the *Ramayana*, and feminist theory has interrogated gendered power in literature; there remains a limited focus on the feminist reinterpretation of Sita, one of the most iconic female figures in Indian mythology. This research, therefore, bridges multiple methods and traditions to deepen understanding of mythopoesis, demythologization, and feminist critique within the context of Indian English Fiction.

The study builds on myth studies by engaging with the idea of multiple *Ramayanas*, building on A.K. Ramanujan's and Paula Richman's essays, recognizing that myths are not static but fluid, subject to retelling, revision, and contextualization. It incorporates mythopoesis as a creative and ideological process, examining how contemporary authors reform the mythic narrative of Sita to reflect modern values, especially feminist ideas of agency and autonomy.

The study also draws heavily from a feminist theoretical framework, including the work of Spivak, Butler, Dev Sen, Vanita and Menon, to interrogate how gender dynamics, voice resistance, and trauma are inscribed and reimagined in these texts. This feminist lens offers not only an analytical tool but also a means to highlight the ethical and political stakes of reinterpreting mythology, especially a female character like Sita.

The study also frames the analysis within contemporary Indian English Literature that allows for an exploration of how these age-old myths gain new life, relevance and complexity in a postcolonial, globalized world. The study traces how Indian English authors negotiate tradition and modernity, nationalism and feminism, conservation and subversion in their retellings of Sita's story.

Despite growing scholarly interest in the *Ramayana* and retellings and feminist readings of mythology, several gaps still persist. A lack of focused, comparative scholarly work on how Sita's character is feministically reinterpreted specifically within Indian English fiction as distinct from oral, folk, regional language or texts. There is insufficient integration of myth studies with feminist and literary theory in a systematic way, especially in how feminist notions of agency and trauma intersect with the process of mythopoesis and demythologization. There is a limited attention to the author's pretexts (interviews, essays and forewords) as critical studies in the author's pretexts foreground intentions and the conscious project of myth revision. There is a need for rigorous analysis of narrative power shifts and ideological reconfigurations in contemporary retellings vis-à-vis the classical epic. This study seeks to fill these gaps by offering a multi-method, interdisciplinary approach that brings together

textual close reading, feminist theory, mythological scholarship and authorial intent.

The contemporary understanding of Sita's narration and myth is foregrounded by Mythopoesis, demythologization and other theories. The theoretical engagement provides a deep study of the texts and an understanding of subversive cultural and political statements within them. It also shows the methods in which the ancient myths are decoded, negotiated and reinterpreted to foreground the marginalized and gendered experiences. It addresses the negotiations between the traditional and modern contexts.

Sita has emerged as a cultural and mythological symbol in many ways, she symbolizes feminine logic, and a balance of expectations from society and internal feminine world. She also foregrounds social and gender issues within the society and in the context of the present study, within the mythic discourse.

The continuous gender debates and conversations, the necessity to retell Sita's story, to reconceptualise the narrative of Sita, is urgent not just to move beyond the patriarchal structures but also to confront historicized terror and violence and get even with it by transforming imaginations. Feminist retellings dig up these norms and fight against these internalized oppressions, giving privilege to women's voice, agency and experiences.

These tales reclaim Sita's narrative, offering a response to gendered trauma, engaging with the suffering of marginality, and recovering through language, expression and narration.

Sita's reimagining aligns with global movements like #METOO, which amplify narratives of violated voices and demand accountability. They engage with identity politics, emphasizing intersections of caste, class and sexuality, and contribute to postcolonial nation-building by reclaiming indigenous cultural heritage through inclusive narratives. These retellings contribute to Sita's transformation by redefining gender roles, presenting her as a figure of resistance, autonomy and voice; by encouraging dialogue and critique opening spaces for critical reflection and social norms, power structure, and ethical values embedded in mythology and society, by empowering reader and cultural renewal making Sita a complex character and reflecting living traditions that evolve rather than fossilize, enabling societies to negotiate continuity and change.

This thesis enriches Indian English literary criticism by bringing sustained scholarly attention to the feminist retellings of Sita's myth, a figure foundational to Indian cultural imagination yet underexplored within this specific literary domain. It unpacks how contemporary Indian English authors navigate tradition and modernity, offering nuanced readings that foreground female subjectivity, agency, and resistance.

In the realm of comparative mythology, the study expands the dialogue by applying interdisciplinary theories of mythopoesis and demythologization to Indian epic retellings. Using the lens of multiplicity theorists like A.K. Ramanujan and Paula Richman, it situates Indian English texts within the larger global discourse on myth revision, emphasising narrative transformation as a culturally conditioned process.

The research also deepens feminist literary studies by integrating feminist theory (drawing on Spivak, Butler, Dev Sen, Vanita, and Menon) with close textual analysis and cultural criticism. It highlights Sita's evolving narrative as a site of both trauma and empowerment, complicating simplified readings of female victimhood and illustrating the gendered stakes of myth-making.

Finally, this work positions the chosen texts as part of a growing sub-genre of feminist mythological fiction in Indian English literature. This emergent sub-genre reclaims classical heroines, offering complex, empowered portrayals that resonate with contemporary feminist and cultural concerns. The thesis thus contributes to charting a vibrant, transformative literary movement that reshapes the cultural legacy of Indian mythology for new generations

Chapter Structure and Organization

The thesis is organized into four main chapters following this introductory chapter and concluding at the sixth chapter. Each chapter focuses on a distinct portrayal of Sita as a reimagined in contemporary Indian English literature

Chapter 2: Sita as an Assertive Protagonist: Reading *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

This chapter analyses Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, highlighting Sita's assertiveness and emerging narrative voice. It explores how the novel reconstructs Sita's character as a woman who negotiates power within the epic's constraints, foregrounding her subjectivity and resistance to patriarchal impositions.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-born author, poet, activist, Professor and Speaker. Born in Calcutta, India, she moved to the United States for her higher education and work. Over the course of her literary career, she has authored more than twenty books and published her work in over a hundred magazines and anthologies. Her works have been translated into thirty languages and have been “made into films, plays and dance dramas, and performed at operas” (*Bio — Chitra Divakaruni*).

In addition to her literary contributions, Divakaruni serves on the Advisory Board of Maitri, in the San Francisco Bay Area and of Daya in

Houston, both organizations that help survivors of domestic abuse and trafficking.

Divakaruni's writing consistently deals with women and their struggles, highlighting her interest in feminism and diaspora. "In all her writings, Divakaruni focuses on the nuances of women's relationships with men, but she has also rendered women's relationships with one another with equal subtlety" (Singh xv). She has been noted primarily for giving voice to the experience of South Asians in North America, through her diasporic writings, especially highlighting women's world. "Her works plumbs the nuances of intersectional feminism, demanding holistic understanding of how South Asian/American women assert their agency and autonomy" (Singh xxv).

As a writer, she has explored multiple genres; her novels best demonstrate her formal synthesis of realism, mythology, and magic realism" (Singh xxii). "In *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), a retelling of the *Ramayana*, the Hindu goddess Sita offers her own story in ways that connect with contemporary women worldwide in the light of #METOO movement" (Singh xxii). She foregrounds women not just in diaspora and mythology but also in history and the modern world, inspired by various religious and cultural backgrounds within India and the United States.

“While Divakaruni delves into the traditional subject matter of women’s literature through her explorations of the family, she still has her finger firmly on the social and political pulse of the times” (Singh xxiv).

This thesis studies her *The Forest of Enchantments*, a novel deeply informed by contemporary feminist movements and stands out as a profound narrative intervention in mythic retellings. *The Forest of Enchantments* is a reimagining of the *Ramayana* through Sita’s perspective. In this novel, Divakaruni intricately weaves mythology with contemporary feminist concerns, offering a deeply personal, gender-conscious retelling of an epic that has long been dominated by patriarchal voices.

The novel traces Sita’s journey from her childhood in Mithila, her trials in the forest, her abduction by Ravana, and the eventual emotional estrangement from Rama. Inspired by the different versions of the *Ramayana*, Sita is an amalgamation of traditional and modern womanhood. She is not a symbol of obedience or purity but a woman who questions, endures, and finally refuses to participate in cycles of gendered and patriarchal silences.

The text presents attention to the voices of women through poetic prose and interior monologues by Sita, who speaks not just for herself but also for other women. The novel thus becomes not only a retelling, but a

literary intervention; it interrogates duty, honour, and love, reframing myth as a space for women's reclamation and reinterpretation.

Chapter 3: Sita as Warrior: Reading Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*

This chapter delves into Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, where Sita emerges physically and intellectually strong warrior. This section examines the strategic reimagining of Sita as a leader and fighter, challenging traditional tropes of passive femininity and emphasising mythopoetic creativity.

Amish, an author, broadcaster and former diplomat, is described as the

“Indian Tolkien” by the BBC. Born on October 18, 1974, he has become among the fastest-selling authors in Indian publishing history. Known for his “unique combination of crackling storytelling, religious symbolism and profound philosophies”

he has authored more than ten texts (*Author - Authoramish*). His work has been translated into over nine regional and international languages and adapted into films.

His text *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* is a part of his four books in the Ram Chandra Series. A reimagination of the *Ramayana* with *Ram: Scion*

of *Ikshuvaku*, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*, and *War of Lanka*. It is a compelling mythological fiction saga told in what Amish call a “hyperlink” or “multilinear narrative technique”, a narrative that has many characters and a connection bringing them all together (Tripathi).

Amish Tripathi has presented the grand epic in a richly imagined, modern epic, including four main titles. The first book traces the early years of Ram, his origins, politics, and eventual exile, set against the socio-political backdrop of Ayodhya. The second text, reimagined from Sita’s point of view, portrays her as a devoted consort but also a formidable warrior and stateswoman. This narrative covers her upbringing, marriage, and exile alongside Ram and Lakshman. The third text brings Raavan into focus, exploring his motives, early life and the circumstances that shape his antagonistic role in the epic. The fourth text covers the climactic war centering on Sita’s abduction and the emotional gravity of the ensuing battle between Ram and Raavan.

In this study, the second text *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* is studied to analyse the evolution of the Sita myth. The novel reimagines the life of Sita as a fierce and strategic leader, showing a departure from the traditional portrayals of Sita. The narrative traces her journey from her adoption by King Janak and Queen Sunaina of Mithila to her rigorous training in

martial arts, statecraft and philosophy. She is raised in a kingdom known for its rationalism and progressive values, and Sita develops into a capable and morally grounded leader. Through her intellect, discipline, and progressive values, Sita develops into a capable and morally grounded leader. Her intellect, discipline and political acumen eventually led her to be chosen as the seventh Vishnu, a protector of dharma. The story highlights her as the decision maker in the kingdom of Mithila, occupying the seat of a Prime Minister, as a woman to choose her own husband and then as a leader of the country. The novel positions Sita not merely as a supporting character in Rama's story but as a central dharmic force in her own right, complex, courageous and capable.

Chapter 4: Sita as a Spiritual Character: Reading *Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love* by Bhanumathi Narasimhan

This chapter focuses on the spiritual dimensions of Sita's persona as represented in the text. It investigates how spirituality and mythology intertwine in the narrative to offer an alternative interpretation of Sita's identity that transcends earthly suffering, emphasizing her divinity and inner strength.

Bhanumathi Narasimhan, born on January 11, 1958, is the chairperson of Women's Welfare and Child Care initiatives at the Art of Living

Foundation, a global NGO. She is a spiritual teacher, social worker, author, leader and younger sister of spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

Bhanumathi Narasimhan has authored over five books, including the best-selling biography of her brother, *Gurudev: On the Plateau of the Peak*, providing a personal look at Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's life, and others like *Parashakti*, foregrounding stories of Divine mother blending folklore with interpretation, *Tejasvini*, *Lalita*, exploring hidden meanings in Hindu myth, *Gods and Goddesses*, a children mythology book to introduce them to the religion and myth of Hindu tradition and *Sita: A Tale of Love*, a reimagining of the *Ramayana* through Sita's perspective. Her writing reflects a blend of devotion, spiritual insights and storytelling. Her works often make spirituality accessible and emotionally resonant, whether for adults seeking deeper meaning, like in *Parashakti* or young minds discovering myths and religion, like *Gods and Goddesses*.

Sita: A Tale of Love (2021) is a novel that presents a unique balance of prose and poetry, foregrounding Sita's inner thoughts with the help of lyrical intensity. It is an emotional journey marked by Sita and witnessed by the modern readership, foregrounding her inner strength and dignity, making it an intimate tale for the readers as well. It is a spiritual but deeply human Sita whose emotional intelligence and cosmic connection with nature bring a message of resilience and agency.

Set primarily in Ashoka Vatika, Sita, in the text, reminisces about the story of her life with subtle but formidable strength. She navigates exile, abduction, and societal expectations with composure. Rather than yielding to despair, she chooses acceptance and holds on to her faith in spiritual practices and her love for Rama. The narrative also enriches her horizon by weaving in lesser-known stories, like her bond with Urmila, her domestic wisdom and counsel from sages, all of which humanise her beyond the epic archetype.

The novel offers a lyrically intimate and psychologically enriched portrait of Sita, who is wise, compassionate, steadfast, and emotionally articulate, embodying resilience and self-awareness in the face of suffering.

Chapter 5: Reawakened Sita: Reading *Sita: Now you know Me* by Sini Panicker

This chapter examines a contemporary feminine retelling that presents Sita as a reawakened, self-aware, autonomous, and engaged in reclaiming her narrative. The analysis concentrates on themes of trauma, memory, and empowerment, where Sita challenges both her mythical past and present social discourse.

Sini Panicker, born in Kochi, Kerala, is a researcher, scientist and writer. She leads scientific investigations in the Department of Agriculture, US. Her unique role in heroine profiling keeps her busy and away from literature. However, she has always harboured a passion for storytelling. Her transition to fiction began in 2017, and it was deeply rooted in personal loss and the #METOO movement. In her debut novel *Sita: Now You Know Me*, she envisioned Sita, not as a victim but as a strong, contemporary voice, drawing parallels between her epic trauma and modern narratives of women's resilience and autonomy. Panicker is a unique voice—one that connects rigorous scientific inquiry with mythological empathy, personal loss, and feminist resonance.

Panicker's novel presents an intimate portrayal of Sita in her most human, imperfect, and yet appealing form, set in the Vedic times of India, where Sita narrates her turbulent life in extensive detail, revealing her deepest desires, grief, and horrors, as well as her profound love for Ram. The text presents a significant departure from the conventional *Ramayana* retellings by positioning her as the primary narrator.

This Sita is deeply rooted in two major elements of her time: the agricultural practices that are further cemented by her connection to the Mother Earth, and the philosophical debates on life and the cosmos of the Vedas and Upanishads. Through this retelling, Panicker offers a nuanced

exploration of Sita's character that challenges traditional interpretations while remaining faithful to the epic's essential narrative structure. The analysis presented here addresses the novel's contributions to contemporary feminist discourse by analysing how Panicker reclaims Sita's voice through an immersive first-person narrative, by situating the novel within contemporary socio-cultural movements especially #METOO discourse, and by interrogating the theoretical implications of transforming an archetypal mythological figure into feminist symbol, while examining its limitations and contradictions within the broader field of mythological retellings.

The novel maintains the plot of the epic and presents an emotionally charged narrative that wounds, heals and questions Sita's life and situations. Sita walks away from the expected submissiveness and boldly presents her inner thoughts to the readers.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The final chapter synthesizes the findings from the study, reflecting the transformations and ideological shifts uncovered. It outlines the study's limitations and proposes avenues for future research, emphasizing the ongoing relevance of feminist mythopoesis in Indian English literature and cultural critique.

Concluding Remarks: Reframing the Myth

Myth is not a fixed entity; it is a continuous process, evolving and adapting with society and culture. Myth functions as an inherited cultural memory and an active, ongoing form of storytelling as represented by theorists like Malikowski, Frye, Segal, Spivak and Pattanaik, to name a few. They remain important and are continuously reframed and reinterpreted to mirror the values, struggles and identities of contemporary audiences.

Sita emerges as a cultural and mythological icon in not just cultural tapestry but also in contemporary mythical traditions. Known for her chastity, obedience, virtue and duty, she emerges as a symbol of resistance and agency in the modern contexts. She is reconstructed as a complex character challenging patriarchal norms and still rooted to the traditions. Her transformation is in continuum with the evolution of society and foregrounds a shift in Indian cultural consciousness.

Sita as an Assertive Protagonist: Reading *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

For the sake of my sons, I made myself live when it would have been much easier to give up and die than to go through the pain of having the person you love most in the world abandon you. For the sake of my daughters in the centuries to come, I must now stand up against this unjust action you are asking of me. (Divakaruni 327)

This moment, coming towards the close of *The Forest of Enchantments*, distils the Sita that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reimagines as an assertive character with agency, voice and perspective. This chapter traces the reimagination of Sita in contemporary Indian Literature as an assertive character through the examination of *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019). Within the broader framework of this thesis's investigation into Sita's contemporization in popular literature, this chapter serves as a foundational analysis of one aspect of her character, moving away from patriarchal margins to foreground her agency, voice, and perspective. The text represents a significant departure from the conventional *Ramayana* retellings by positioning Sita as the primary narrator of her own story – “the Sitayan” (Divakaruni 4). By foregrounding first-person narration, the novel enacts what Adrienne Rich calls “re-vision,” the act of “looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes” to reimagine women's place in inherited narratives

(Rich 18). This highlights the reclamation of narrative authority by a character who has been “good and meek and long-suffering, bearing her misfortunes with silent stoicism the way the perfect Indian woman was supposed to” (Divakaruni viii).

While studying myths related to women characters in India, scholars note that the great female characters in Indian mythology have left a “discernible impact, representing strength, perseverance, and deep insight” (Shukla 42). By foregrounding Sita’s own voice, the text challenges the readers to reconsider the power dynamics of gender and storytelling itself. As Divakaruni herself notes in interviews, “we believe the point-of-view narration because that’s how we experience it. I want to show the conflict there” (Shekhar). In reclaiming authorship, Sita not only revises her own image but also redefines the cultural memory of the *Ramayana*. Sita becomes a voice for not just her story but for the stories of all the women in the story, “Write our story, too. For always we’ve been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten—or maligned and used as cautionary tales” (Divakaruni 4). This chapter will argue that self-narration and assertion function as a radical act of mythic reclamation, transforming a figure traditionally defined by silence and endurance into one characterised by articulation, interpretation, and self-authorship.

Contextual Background

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni holds a significant position in contemporary Indian English literature, particularly on diaspora and retellings of myths and epics “Expertly reinterpreting traditional stories, infusing them with fresh perspectives and significance for contemporary audiences, focusing on women’s experience” (Shukla 42). In the modern period, feminist scholarship has critiqued the normative representations of female characters in the epics, arguing that Sita functions as a cultural identity “For all of us Indian women carry some of her within us: Sita’s strength and her vulnerability” (Lal XIII). Gayatri Spivak (1988) subaltern speech empowers us to read Sita’s rejection of fire, not merely as an act of narrative agency, but as a radical assertion of subjecthood. Uma Chakravarti (1995) supports this with her work on gendering Indian mythic pasts, giving us a gender conscious lens to view Sita’s narrative reclamations as part of feminist historiography.

Works like *The Forest of Enchantments* exemplify this “re-visionist” trend with different lenses (Rich). Through first-person narration, Sita not only steps into her own voice but actively disrupts the archetypal silence expected of her. “There was a disconnect between the truth of Sita and the way Indian popular culture thought of her. I sensed that Sita was more than what we look her to be” (Divakaruni viii). The

feminist reclamation is visible across contemporary retellings. Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* reconstructs Sita as a figure of agency and solidarity among women, furthering an ecofeminist turn that links female liberation with claims to the earth. Such stories "represent women and nature or the earth, thinking especially about the relationship between power, justice, and resisting domination" (Tushar 88). Similarly, Samhita Arni and Chitrakar's *Sita's Ramayana* foregrounds Sita's autonomy through visual and textual narrative, transforming myth into feminist meditation: "the novel foregrounds Sita's viewpoint while deconstructing her objectification in hegemonic masculinist versions" (Sinha and Ali 11). *The Forest of Enchantments* shifts the spotlight from supporting role to protagonist for Sita.

Drawing on the Sanskrit Valmiki text alongside regional recensions (Krittibasi *Ramayana*, Kamba *Ramayana*, *Adbhuta Ramayana*), Divakaruni locates Sita at the intersection of divinity and humanity, interrogating centuries of cultural assumptions about her passivity, virtue, and meekness. It is an ideological intervention that establishes the reclamation of spaces by subaltern characters.

Divakaruni imbues the narrative with elements from folk tradition and feminist critique. Sita's connection with the earth and flora provides a strong alliance with the natural world, her hidden training provides her with

self-sufficiency, and the courtly intrigues are not mere backdrops of her story but emblems in which her courage is forged. The character of Sita is layered, flawed and human, whose love lessons throughout her life taught her lessons about not just love but life. “Ah, love is the sharpest, sweetest weapon of all” (Divakaruni 353). Her love for Rama coexists with complex problems, internal battles and public bonds. Divakaruni dives into the question of her belongings by centring her interior battles to the narrative, her quiet courage, endurance and ultimate rage speak the truth of being human even in the face of cosmic decree.

The Forest of Enchantments stands as both homage and corrective, a novel that invites readers to see one of Hinduism’s great epic, the *Ramayana*, anew, through the voice of the “perfect Indian woman,” not as a paragon of silent suffering but as a woman of substance, agency, anger and profound empathy. By animating Sita’s interior world, Divakaruni transforms a familiar tale of banishment into a universal meditation on love, loss, and the uncompromising strength of a woman who refuses to be silenced. From her anger, “So he banished me because a few people are gossiping? People always talk. Should an elephant turn around and run away because dogs are barking?” (Divakaruni 316) to I forgave you a long time ago,’ I say to Ram. ‘Though I didn’t know it until now . Because this is the most important aspect of love, whose other face is compassion: It

isn't doled out, drop by drop. It doesn't measure who is worthy and who isn't. It is like the ocean. Unfathomable. Astonishing. Measureless.' (Divakaruni 358). Chitra Banerjee uncovers a tale that is human more than anything else.

Theoretical Framework

The study synthesises three influential theories: Northrop Frye's archetypal/ myth criticism, Robert Segal's comparative theory of myth, and Devdutt Pattanaik's idea of mythopoesis. Each provides a unique lens for understanding how mythic patterns are transformed into modern expressions of agency, voice and selfhood. This chapter uses Frye to read structure/ archetype, Segal to trace myth's shift from cosmology to lived experience, and Pattanaik to theorize myth as ongoing cultural practice—together illuminating Sita's self-authoring voice.

Mythopoesis, as articulated by Devdutt Pattanaik in the Indian context, refers to the creative, continual making of myths to address evolving cultural, moral and psychological needs (Maya and Myth). Myth, according to him, "is truth which is subjective", "open to correction", "a cultural construct" that binds the society (Pattanaik). Myths in this view are not inert relics of the past but living, adaptive narratives capable of responding to shifts in societal values and norms. This aligns with A.K. Ramanujan's understanding of the Indian epic tradition as a "pool of

signifiers” where each retelling enters into a dialogic relationship with earlier versions, and with Bakhtin’s notion of the dialogic text, where meaning emerges through continual interaction between multiple perspectives (Ramanujan 8). They empower marginalized perspectives, making them reclaim the spaces never offered before. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni recasts the *Ramayana* from a male-centred saga into a women-centred myth, providing Sita the metaphorical quill that was not given to her before and a chance to tell her story, “I set quill to leaf. In red ink I began to write” (Divakaruni 4).

As Divakaruni notes, a male author (Sage Valmiki) cannot understand “a woman’s life, the heartbreak at the core of her joys, her unexpected alliances and desires, her negotiations where, in the hope of keeping one treasure safe, she must give up another” (Divakaruni 2). She foregrounds the problems of reading or knowing the text from one point of view and the need to uncover the other side of it.

Through this re-authoring, the epic is transformed into a narrative that not only reclaims Sita’s agency but also redefines the cultural memory of the *Ramayana*. In Divakaruni’s re-visioning, the forest becomes Sita’s domain of self-discovery, healing, and diplomatic agency, aligning with Pattanaik’s notion that symbolic landscapes are reinvented to convey new ethical insights. Amalgamation of different versions of the *Ramayana* to

weave a polyphonic tapestry in the text exemplifies the dialogic tradition. Mythopoesis democratises mythic authority, making the reimagination negotiate the values, ethics and norms of the society according to each plot, character or interpretation. *The Forest of Enchantments* stands as an exemplary case of mythopoesis, re-visioning Sita's story for twenty-first-century readers.

Robert Segal's concept of demythologized myth draws on Rudolf Bultmann's theological program, which reinterprets myth not as a literal account, but as "interpreted in terms of human self-understanding" (Bultmann and Ogden). Segal's *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (2004) builds on this to argue that a demythologised myth "ceases to be about the external world and becomes instead an expression of what it feels like to live in the world" (Segal 48). The focus of these demythologised myths is human experience and is reinterpreted as a symbolic representation of human psychological and existential states (Segal). Instead of being dismissed as primitive, pre-scientific thinking, myths gain universal relevance by addressing persistent human concerns about meaning, identity and purpose. Myth justifies societal arrangement "by projecting it back to ancient reconciling people with societal structures" (*Evaluating Theories of Mythology*). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's retelling transforms the literal, cosmological elements of the *Ramayana* into a symbolic

expression of human experience by transforming key mythic elements like divine births, supernatural weapons, and rakshasa magic, making them metaphors for the complex human relationships, moral choices and personal growth. The forest exile, traditionally understood as divine punishment or cosmic necessity, becomes in Divakaruni's hands a symbolic journey of self-discovery and empowerment. Segal's concept validates feminist authors' claims that their retellings are not mere revisionism but rather authentic discourse within mythic tradition. For a broader anthropological context, Bronislaw Malinowski offers a functionalist lens: myths act as "social charters," legitimising communal practices and shared values (Strenski xiii). This supports the reading that *The Forest of Enchantments* transforms myth into a living guide for ethical introspection, not detached ritual or cosmic decree.

Northrop Frye's concept of displacement, articulated primarily in his seminal work *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), is particularly useful in understanding how *The Forest of Enchantments* reshapes the *Ramayana* for a modern readership. He defines 'displacement' as the description of the adaptation of mythic structures to conform to the standards of plausibility, moral acceptability, and psychological realism of a given era (Frye). For Frye, myth functions as the "structural organising principle in literary fiction" (Theory of Myths). He argues that literature doesn't derive

its shape from life but from “literary tradition”, and so ultimately from myth (Frye 35). This represents a radical departure from mimetic theories that view literature as a limitation of reality; instead, positions myth as the “matrix of literature.” By employing displacement, Divakaruni makes the epic both psychologically plausible for contemporary audiences and ethically resonant, allowing the archetypal framework to remain intact while granting interpretive primacy to Sita’s perspective.

Central to Frye’s archetypal theory is the cyclical patterns of the Four Mythoi, each corresponding to a season and a dominant narrative structure: comedy (spring), romance (summer), tragedy (autumn), and irony/satire (winter) (Frye 1957, pp. 162–239). Sita’s early marriage and initial happiness in Ayodhya represent the comedic mythos of social harmony, featuring the hero’s movement from a lower to a higher social order.

“If my spinsterhood had not been a rock obstructing Urmila’s happiness, I would have joyfully lived out the rest of my life beside my saintly and affectionate father and my keen-witted, elegant, laughing mother . I loved Mithila, its cool, crisp breezes that came down from the mountains, its fragrant gardens that bloomed year-round with white and purple flowers, its gentle people who loved to sing and dance” (Divakauni 13).

The period of exile as a romanticised adventure of self-discovery and a deepening relationship with Ram represents the mythos of adventure and quest, where the hero confronts challenges and achieves idealised goals.

137“I’d been right about nature testing us. Now it seemed that we’d passed the test, and she showed us her kind and bounteous face. Here in Panchabati, I saw brilliant sunsets spreading like a smile across the sky and molten-silver moonrises. I saw stars glimmering like shy eyes from behind veils of cloud. I saw birds and beasts, multi-hued, multi-pelted, so different from the creatures I’d known that I was struck with awe. The plants here were particularly attuned to me. Bushes would pull in their sharp thorns and burst into flower when I watered them or loosened the earth around their roots. Squirrel-like creatures, their long white hair smooth as silk-thread, would scurry up to take berries from my palm. Brilliant blue songbirds with curved beaks would land on my shoulder and allow me to stroke their plumage. There were others who watched us from afar , only their glistening eyes visible through the thick foliage. I sometimes glimpsed, at a great distance in the sky , bird-like creatures with enormous wings and what appeared to be human heads” (Divakaruni 137).

The fire ordeal and second exile, foregrounding the tragic mythos of isolation and fall from grace, exemplify the mythos of isolation,

depicting the hero's fall from grace. Sita's final years, reflecting the ironic mythos, marked by a realistic assessment of human limitation and institutional failure, exemplify the mythos of experience, characterised by realistic portrayals of human limitation exemplified in the text. Divakaruni both preserves the archetypal scaffolding and subverts its traditional masculine orientation, fulfilling Frye's assertion that mythic patterns are "flexible enough to contain an indefinite variety of particular forms (Frye 136)."

"Yet strangely a part of me didn't want to abandon our adventure so soon. I had the feeling we'd only scratched the surface of what the forest had to offer, that so far it had been testing us. Once it was convinced that we were worthy, that we had truly chosen it over other options, it would open up untold treasures for our enjoyment. What these were, I had no idea. I only sensed that they were deep and intense, enchanting beyond anything I'd ever experienced. Sweet, but with an exciting aftertaste of danger (Divakaruni 122)."

Divakaruni's novel follows what Frye identifies as the quest-romance pattern, though significantly re-gendered. Sita becomes the hero on a quest whose journey involves not the conquest of external enemies but the negotiation of internal and social conflicts. The forest functions as what Frye calls the "other world" of romance—a space where

transformation occurs (Frye). However, Divakaruni subverts the traditional romance pattern by making this space, of female empowerment rather than male adventure. As scholars of feminist narratology note, such reconfigurations “reverse the gendered direction of mythic teleology” (Lanser, 1992; Tatar, 2003), positioning the heroine’s interior evolution as the true site of epic resolution.

Frye’s concept of displacement explains how mythic structures are adapted to meet contemporary standards of plausibility and moral acceptability. As he explains, “the presence of a mythical structure in realistic fiction poses certain technical problems for making it plausible, and the devices used in solving these problems may be given the general name of displacement” (Theory of Myths). This allows ancient mythic patterns to remain relevant in modern literature through symbolic transformation. Divakaruni’s novel transforms the supernatural elements of the *Ramayana* into psychologically credible narrative structures. The divine interventions, miraculous births, and cosmic battles of the epic are displaced into realistic portrayals of political manoeuvring, personal relationships, psychological development and internal emotional journeys. The ‘agni pariksha’ is stripped of its cosmic spectacle and rendered as a public trial of honour, transforming a test of purity into an ethical confrontation about justice and societal precedent.

Frye identifies recurring archetypal patterns that transcend individual works, connecting literature across cultures and historical periods. Central to Frye's mythic theory is the death-rebirth pattern, which he sees as "the framework of all literature... the story of loss and regaining of identity (Frye 186) ." Within this larger framework, the hero's cycle-akin to Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*- involves departures, trials, symbolic death, and return (Campbell 1949). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* provides an exemplary case study for applying Frye's mythic theory, demonstrating how contemporary feminist retellings both preserve and transform archetypal structures. As Sita reflects

Sita's symbolic "deaths"—through fire ordeal, social ostracism, and final return to earth—are followed by "rebirths" into new forms of consciousness and agency. Her final disappearance into the earth represents not defeat but transformation from mythical to social power. This pattern reflects what Frye calls "the continuum of identity in the individual life from birth to death, extended from death to rebirth (Frye 186). Divakaruni crystallises this transformation when Sita reflects:

"By the time gods intervened, I was no longer Sita of old: daughter of earth, strong and silent, patient and deep, forbearing and forgiving. I was something else too" (Divakaruni 246). Sita's mythic identity transcends her

historical circumstances, achieving the immortality that Frye associates with archetypal heroes, a figure whose identity attains a kind of immortality through symbolic renewal. As Joseph Campbell (1949) and subsequent feminist theorists (e.g., Warner, 1994; Tatar, 2003) have argued, the death–rebirth cycle is not limited to male protagonists; it can equally articulate the heroine’s journey toward autonomy and self-definition. In Divakaruni’s hands, Sita’s “rebirths” mark her progression from idealised epic consort to a self-authorising subject, thereby integrating the universal archetype into a distinctly feminist mythopoesis.

The novel employs what Frye calls “archetypal imagery”—symbols that connect the work to the broader literary tradition. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, the forest, fire, earth, and water function not merely as realistic elements but as descriptive or realistic symbols carrying mythic significance. The forest becomes the “other world” of transformation; fire serves as both trial and purification; earth signifies origins and ultimate return; and water, often linked to the unconscious in Jungian symbolism (Jung, 1968), appears in moments of emotional depth and renewal. These images create what Frye terms “centripetal structure of meaning” that can support multiple interpretations while maintaining coherent symbolic resonance (Frye). In the text, these archetypal images come to the foreground in the form of Sita’s ability to connect to nature,

healing powers, dreams and other images that function as narrative foreshadowing and thematic reinforcement.

Within the broader framework of this thesis examining feminist mythic retellings, Frye's theory provides crucial legitimation for contemporary authors' transformative practices. His concept of displacement explains how feminist retellings can simultaneously preserve mythic structures while adapting them to contemporary values and concerns. By filtering the *Ramayana*'s archetypes through Sita's subjective voice, Divakaruni achieves what Frye describes as the adaptation of myth "to the conventions of realism without losing its archetypal core" (Frye 136). Frye's emphasis on literature as an "autonomous verbal structure" supports the argument that feminist retellings are not merely derivative but participate in the ongoing creation of literary meaning. By bringing Sita to the centre of the narrative, Divakaruni demonstrates how archetypal patterns can accommodate diverse viewpoints while maintaining their essential structural integrity.

Chapter Objectives

This chapter explores Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's reimagining of Sita's myth in *The Forest of Enchantments* and aligns its analysis with the thesis's overarching aims and specific sub-objectives. The chapter traces Sita's

psychological, moral and social transformation from a traditionally depicted character to the protagonist of the text.

This chapter demonstrates how *The Forest of Enchantments* operationalises the thesis's core proposition of the evolution of the character of Sita, how writers convert epic heroines into interiorized narrators who revise, rather than merely repeat, myth. It establishes the shifts from iconic passivity to self-authored subjectivity by making Sita the protagonist and foregrounding the inner turmoil of women's world. In doing so, the chapter contributes to feminist mythic retellings scholarship and the broader discourse in South Asian literary studies by showing how a culturally canonical figure can be re-voiced to reflect contemporary ethical, psychological, and political concerns.

This chapter articulates the novel's contribution to feminist mythopoesis by showing how Divakaruni's text fulfils the sub-objective of the thesis to catalogue revisionist technique through a retrospective focalisation, dialogic engagement with multiple *Ramayana* variants and an ethics of dissent that questions king-centrism. It also explains how Sita's strategic interior monologue transforms epic exile into a bildungsroman of female agency, deepening the character's analytic lens on "assertive Sita."

It applies the theoretical frameworks of mythopoesis, demythologization, and Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism to

Divakaruni's narrative strategies, thereby meeting the thesis goal of testing these models in practice. The chapter will:

- Show how mythopoesis reframes the *Ramayana's* archetypal structure into a subjective, character-driven account that preserves mythic resonance while accommodating modern feminist ethics.
- Reveal how demythologization translates supernatural interventions and cosmic conflicts into symbolic expressions of psychological struggle, human choice, and relational politics, aligning with Segal's view of modern myth as metaphor rather than literal history.
- Map Frye's archetypal imagery, like forest, fire, earth, and water, as a symbolic coordinate that structures Sita's inner and outer journey, functioning within a centripetal web of meaning.

It addresses the sub-objective of mapping gender role transformation by analysing key narrative episodes- Sita's moral resistance to unjust commands, her nurturing as a form of political agency, her resilience during exile, and her final act of self-determination. Through these moments, the chapter demonstrates how Divakaruni subverts the passive-idealised Sita of traditional readings, recasting her as a figure of moral courage, self-definition and transformative power.

Textual Genesis

The Forest of Enchantments emerged as a companion novel to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's earlier text *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), forming what the author herself describes as "two books that are pairs to each other" (*Times of India*). This pairing represents Divakaruni's systematic project to "fill in the gaps between the adventures undertaken by the male characters in the epic, their victories and defeats" by addressing the significant half of the text, foregrounding historically marginalised female protagonists (Divakaruni vii). "I wanted to retell those stories putting a woman right at the centre... Sita and Panchali are both very strong women. But they are strong in their own different ways" (*Times of India*). This statement encapsulates the novel's fundamental purpose, driving the novel's creation to counterbalance the male-dominated narrative tradition that has historically relegated women to supporting roles in epic discourse, as Divakaruni puts it, my Sita, "will tell her own tale" (Divakaruni vii). In the context of feminist narratology, such a move aligns with Susan Lanser's argument that women's narrative authority must be reclaimed through formal strategies that reposition them as narrators of their own stories (Lanser, 1992). Divakaruni's assertion that "my Sita will tell her own tale" is not simply a thematic choice, but an intervention within the mythic discourse that disrupts the epic's androcentric voice, patriarchal point of view and rigidity, situating the retelling within a broader tradition of feminist mythopoesis that challenges canonical authority.

Divakaruni spent about a decade composing *The Forest of Enchantments*; her research went from traditional versions of the *Ramayana*, like “Valmiki *Ramayana*, *Adbhuta Ramayana*, *Kamba Ramayanam*, and the Bengali *Krittibasi Ramayan*”, to other folk versions (Divakaruni viii). This method of textual scholarship and folk traditional readings reflects A.K. Ramanujan’s notion of the “many *Ramayanas*” (1991), where each version participates in a living, adaptive tradition, and Paula Richman’s observation that regional retellings often carry subversive possibilities embedded in local idioms (Ramanujan). Divakaruni herself notes, “I read up on many different versions of the *Ramayan* and delved into whatever scholarly material is available about life in those times. But I also listened to popular folk songs about Sita and asked many people for their opinion of Sita’s character” (*Storizen*).

“The novel’s primary cultural intervention lies in the explicit challenge to what Divakaruni terms “male-centric narratives traditionally employed in the original version and several retellings of these epics (Times of India).”

She underscores how “Sita is strangely absent” in the narrative, “accounting for barely ten percent of the Valmiki *Ramayana*”, a spatial and narrative marginalisation that Gayatri Spivak would identify as emblematic of the subaltern woman’s silencing (Desai 4). By repositioning Sita as the

author of her own story—"You must write that story yourself, Ma... for only you know it"—Divakaruni enacts what Susan Lanser (1992) defines as "voice recovery" in feminist narratology: a strategic reclamation of narrative authority from structures that have historically excluded women's self-representation (*Fictions of Authority*) (Lanser). Divakaruni calls out to this difference of space and positions her Sita to write her own story.

"It must have been a god that brought it to you, then, and not a goddess,' I said drily. 'For you haven't understood a woman's life, the heartbreak at the core of her joys, her unexpected alliances and desires, her negotiations where, in the hope of keeping one treasure safe, she must give up another'" (Divakaruni 2).

The device of first-person narration transforms the epic from a third-person male-authored chronicle into a subjective account rooted in lived experience, fulfilling Adrienne Rich's call for "re-vision" as an "act of survival" (Rich). The novel recovers authentic complexity that has been obscured by more recent patriarchal reinterpretations. Divakaruni's approach thus represents not a revolutionary departure but a restorative revision of the discourse.

The novel's first-person narration represents a fundamental redistribution of narrative authority. By positioning Sita as both protagonist and narrator, Divakaruni enacts what can be understood as voice recovery,

“In red ink I began to write-in crooked, effortful lettering because it has been so long since I’d composed anything”, It shows the restoration of agency to a figure who has been spoken about but rarely permitted to speak for herself (Divakaruni 4). This narrative strategy emerges from a recognition that traditional epic discourse has systematically silenced women’s perspectives. This technique answers the gap Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) identifies in the silencing of subaltern women’s voices, foregrounding Sita’s authority to construct her own narrative (Spivak).

The shift from Male autonomy to female internal and psychological journey surfaces the cultural transformation that Divakaruni centres in her text. In her author’s note, she describes the project as “the most challenging of my life”, explaining that she felt “a lot of pressure to do it well, with the right combination of respect and inquiry” (Divakaruni viii). This challenge stems from the novel’s dual obligation to honour the tradition and interrogate its patriarchal assumptions altogether. Divakaruni positions the work within broader contemporary movements for gender justice, noting its relevance to issues such as “the METOO movement, single motherhood, and victim shaming” (Raji). This contemporary resonance demonstrates how the novel’s textual genesis responds to the literary gaps and social needs of society. By explicitly linking her work to contemporary discourses

and invoking movements like #MeToo, as well as themes of single motherhood and victim-shaming, Divakaruni situates her retelling within a continuous gender discourse. This aligns with Devdutt Pattanaik's (2013) concept of mythopoesis in the Indian context, as an ongoing cultural practice, where myth is reconfigured to address present ethical and political needs (D. Pattanaik). Through this interplay of ancient narrative structure and modern socio-political consciousness, *The Forest of Enchantments* emerges as a text that both addresses literary gaps and responds to urgent societal questions

Theoretical underpinnings

In the context of mythic retellings, assertiveness can be defined, drawing on Diana Tietjens Meyers, as “a self-directed stance that involves the capacity and willingness to act on one's own values and commitments in the face of opposition” (Meyers). It emerges as a multidimensional concept that encompasses three core elements: self-expression, moral steadfastness and active resistance to injustice. This definition of assertiveness, transcends conventional definitions to embrace what Susan Stanford Friedman terms the politics of location, when seen through a feminist lens (Roof). It is the recognition that women's voices emerge from specific historical, cultural, and ideological positions that have been systematically marginalised. For Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments*, this location is

layered: she is simultaneously daughter of the earth, wife to a king, queen in exile, and mother navigating political and personal betrayal. Each role situates her within—and against—different axes of power. By framing her assertiveness within these shifting positionalities, Divakaruni engages the symbolic flexibility of myth itself, as theorised by Frye, Segal, and Pattanaik: Frye’s archetypal structures provide the deep narrative scaffolding; Segal’s demythologization translates cosmic trials into lived experience; and Pattanaik’s mythopoesis enables continual reinterpretation so that Sita’s resistance resonates with both ancient archetype and contemporary feminist ethics.

Self-expression within mythic contexts represents the fundamental assertion of narrative authority- the right to tell one’s own story. It is long recognised by feminist critics that the act of narration is inherently political, that “shapes and delimits cultural forms and expression”, particularly for women (Roof 73). *The Forest of Enchantments* provides the space for Sita to write her own tale, exemplifying what Adriana Cavarero calls the “narratable self”, where the subject claims authority over her own story over her own life-story (Feminist Perspectives on the Self).

This form of self-expression operates on multiple levels: “Linguistic Reclamation”, which follows Monique Wittig’s concept of

linguistic revolution (Elizabeth and Judge 19). In re-writing Sita's voice, Divakaruni adapts this principle to the South Asian epic tradition, where female speech is often circumscribed by dharmic codes, reclaiming language for the heroine's ethical and affective self-definition. Likewise, Helen Cixous terms "écriture féminine"- a distinctly feminine mode of expression that challenges masculine literary traditions, here functions as a productive model for epic re-writing: Sita's intimate, sensorial narration resists the *Ramayana*'s authoritative, male-voiced register, replacing it with a textual body marked by emotional nuance, corporeal memory, and dialogic engagement with other women's stories (Women in Myth).

Voice recovery, which represents not just personal empowerment but collective resistance. In South Asian feminist myth criticism, voice recovery often entails re-centring silenced female figures within canonical epics (Nair 2008). "Feminist literature has been crucial in revealing and confronting institutional oppression as well as in providing critical analysis of how patriarchal systems support gender-based inequality" Sita, in *The Forest of Enchantments*, exemplifies this voice recovery by not just taking the quill in her hand for her story but the story of all the other women characters that were in the shadows before.

In feminist mythic contexts, moral steadfastness refers to the unwavering commitment to ethical principles, even when such

commitments conflict with social expectations or patriarchal demands. In mythic retellings, this manifests in heroines who refuse to accept injustices as divine will or cosmic necessity, insisting instead on holding both gods and men to ethical account.

This quality is also shaped by “care ethics”—a term rooted in Nel Noddings’ care ethics framework which emphasises making ethical decisions in light of relationships, consequences, and situational realities rather than rigid adherence to abstract rules (Sumatra 3). Applied to *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita’s moral decisions—whether to confront Ram publicly, protect her children, or reject a second trial by fire—are guided by this situational moral reasoning, which refuses self-erasure as the price of harmony.

Research indicates that “feminist retellings portray mythological heroines as empowered women with agency, challenging traditional roles and subverting patriarchal narratives” (Trivedi and Suresh Kumar). These characters embody what feminist theorist Diana Tietjens Meyers calls “self-confident, self-assertive” womanhood that operates “out of step with prevalent gender norms” (Meyers).

This reclaiming of narrative not only rejects imposed identities but asserts self-determined subjectivity, reconstructing patriarchal story-worlds from within. Similar patterns appear in other mythic heroines like

Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*, who has been reimagined in works such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Mahashweta Devi's *Draupadi*, and other popular texts as an autonomous narrator interrogating the political and personal betrayals of her life. Similarly, in Greek mythology, contemporary retellings like Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (2019) give Helen of Troy her own reflective voice, allowing her to contest centuries of patriarchal subjugation.

Finally, epistemic agency in these feminist retellings becomes a tool of collective empowerment—not only creating space for one character but interacting with the entire mythic discourse, reframing the experiences of a community of women who have been historically marginalised. Recent scholarship shows that assertive female protagonists in contemporary literature serve multiple functions beyond individual characterization. While female characters are more likely to be passive in cross-gender relationships than their male counterparts, feminist authors are increasingly creating characters who challenge this pattern (Lancer).

The significance of assertiveness in mythic contexts extends beyond literary analysis to encompass broader cultural transformation. As feminist scholar Rita Felski argues in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, “feminist literature not only questions injustice but also suggests fresh

approaches to understanding gender roles and power dynamics”, making assertiveness a catalyst for social change rather than merely individual empowerment (Sharama 102). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Forest of Enchantments*, assertiveness operates within feminist mythopoesis as both a literary and cultural act—recasting a traditionally passive Sita into a self-authoring subject whose moral and narrative agency models alternative gender scripts. By embedding this assertiveness within the symbolic framework of the *Ramayana*, Divakaruni demonstrates how reimagined epics can function as catalysts for collective cultural rethinking, not merely as individual acts of resistance. This lays the groundwork for the following section’s focus on how such strategies translate into concrete narrative techniques of voice recovery and ethical dissent.

Textual Analysis

“I wanted to tell him that I would be fine. The bow had explained to me already that Ram wasn’t like ordinary men. Naturally, his behaviour wouldn’t be ordinary. I accepted that. After all, I wasn’t completely ordinary myself” (Divakaruni 34).

The repeated “I” and the phrase ‘I accepted that’ represent a conscious choice rather than a passive submission. Sita’s acceptance emerges from self-knowledge and her own analysis. This mythopoetic displacement meets modern demands for plausibility while preserving the archetype of divine counsel. Sita’s self-ascribed extraordinariness embodies what Cavavero calls the “narratable self”, directly challenging the male-dominated interpretive tradition and positioning her as the authoritative voice of her own story. Such framing also enacts Pattanaik’s (2006) principle of mythopoesis—preserving archetypal resonance while meeting modern plausibility—through a displacement of divine counsel into self-knowledge.

Moments of apparent romantic surrender, in Divakaruni’s hands, are spaces of female self-assertion. When she recalls, “I am yours, I say again silently, and it seems to me that with this thought, my heart leaves my body and enters his” (Divakaruni 34). The suggested submission in the above passage actually demonstrates her inner agency, indicating her control over both the content and declaration. The silent speech represents Helen Cixous’s “écriture féminine” operating through interiority, becoming a distinctly feminine mode of expression, adapted here to an Indian epic context: an intimate, sensorial register that resists the epic’s authoritative male voice. Comparable transformations occur in Draupadi’s

voice in *The Palace of Illusions*, where intimate moments are reframed as acts of self-narration (Nair, 2008). The transformation of an objectifying moment into self-narrated intimacy, “my heart and body entered his”, aligns with feminist research showing how “women’s first-person narratives reclaim romantic discourse by centring female subjectivity within it.” The silent “I am yours” demonstrates mythopoetic reinvention of traditional love scenes, foregrounding interior consciousness over epic spectacle. The intimate metaphor functions as archetype displacement, recasting cosmic union into personal, credible emotion with the romance structure. The moment conveys the felt reality of devotion rather than literal myth, offering a universal portrayal of love’s transformational power, exemplifying demythologization. This reframing of love scenes demonstrates how Divakaruni grounds epic romance in interior consciousness, a feminist reclamation that humanises myth without diminishing its power, exemplifying Segal’s (Segal 48) demythologization by recasting cosmic union into personal, credible emotion, preserving the romance archetype while making it psychologically plausible.

Sita’s self-definition comes to the foreground: “Perhaps I should have been more worried, but I wasn’t. I was in love, and love is wild and optimistic, especially in the beginning”, exemplifies active resistance to externally imposed emotional expectations (Divakaruni 34). Sita refuses to

conform to the prescribed feminine anxiety about her situation. She establishes her own theory by exploring the lessons of love throughout the text. She moves beyond personal testimony to make universal claims, demonstrating Susan Friedman's "gynocentric narrative authority" (Homans 12). Sita builds up the temporal gap between past innocence and present knowledge by creating interpretive space for critical reassessment. "Thus, I did not think of this: what else might he destroy in future?", reframes Ram's bow breaking from heroic demonstration to potentially destructive pattern (Divakaruni 34). This demonstrates what Miranda Fricker calls "hermeneutical agency"- the power to generate new interpretive frameworks for understanding experience, turning Sita from a naïve participant to a critical analyst of masculine power (Nyairo). In South Asian feminist criticism similarly notes that reclaiming narrative space allows epic heroines to interrogate masculine acts, transforming them from unquestioned cultural ideals into subjects of critique (Nair 47).

Sita exemplifies "strategic reframing"- using metaphorical language to reclaim interpretive authority over one's own experience.

"Living in the forest wasn't what I'd planned for myself or my babies. But then, had I planned that Ram should come to my life like a tidal wave and sweep me away?... All these had happened without my choice,

but I'd survived them", exemplifies her survival narrative (Divakaruni 322).

The passage exemplifies ongoing mythopoesis, turning exile, a traditional curse, into a narrative of resilience that speaks to modern motherhood and autonomy. The "tidal wave" metaphor displaces the epic's divine intervention into an elemental force requiring survival skill, aligning with Frye's quest-romance pattern. Sita's survival reframes mythic destiny as human experience, fulfilling demythologised myth's aim to express enduring existential truths. By recasting a curse as a site of growth, Sita aligns with Segal's demythologised myth, shifting from cosmic explanation to universal expressions of survival. This aligns with Malinowski's functionalist reading of myth as a "social charter" (Segal 101), here repurposed for modern feminist ethics.

"The truth was, I didn't know how to write Sita's story... It gave me the courage to write my own version" (Divakaruni viii). The self-authorisation and shift from Sita's story to my own version embody the fundamental feminist move from the subject to discourse, challenging masculine literary tradition in the entire mythic discourse. This reflects broader patterns in feminist literature where women's self-narration is understood as an act of resistance rather than just self-expression. The moment is a form of mythic displacement where divine authority gives way

to personal authorship, yet retains the epic's structural power, demythologising the myth from cosmic explanation to expressive self-definition, showing how myths survive by being re-narrated.

Sita's scholarly approach further legitimises her narrative authority. "As I researched and meditated on my findings, I realised three important things..." establishes her scholar-narrator position, establishing her as an intellectual authority rather than merely an intuitive voice (Divakaruni viii). The academic language validates "situated knowledge" embodying Donna Haraway's (1988, p. 581) concept, where marginalised standpoints produce unique insight. This recognises the marginalised perspectives generating unique insights through their particular positioning.

Divakaruni's Sita demonstrates "ethical self-reflection" by analysing her relationship dynamics,

"How entangled love is with expectation, that poisons the vine! The stronger the expectation, the more our anger towards the beloved if he doesn't fulfil it- and the less our control over ourselves... I shouldn't have used my knowledge, born of intimacy, against him. But I did" (Divakaruni 158).

Foregrounding her psychological complexity, the passage exemplifies "accountable narration", taking responsibility while

maintaining interpretive complexity. Sita neither excuses nor condemns her behaviour but contextualises it within relationship dynamics. It foregrounds the ethical maturity, establishing Sita's reliability as narrator while acknowledging the complexity of human motivation and behaviour under stress. This balance of intellect and vulnerability strengthens Sita's reliability as narrator, offering a feminist counterpoint to one-dimensional portrayals of epic heroines.

Sita's climactic declaration,

“And that is why, O King Ram, I must reject your kind offer to allow me to prove my innocence again, because this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, No more!”, reshapes the epic justice to include female political agency performing a Butlerian resignification (Divakaruni 357).

Sita reclaims her agency over not just her life but cultural discourse, where she is not rejecting the patriarchy because of morality but because of her own accord. Her stance aligns with the comedy mythos of social reintegration through self-assertion, a displaced pattern of heroic declaration. It also exemplifies demythologised myth and becomes a moral expression, emphasising lived demands for justice rather than cosmic decree. By redefining justice in terms of female autonomy, Sita not only

reclaims her own life but also reshapes the cultural memory of the *Ramayana*.

Interwoven with these sensory passages are dream sequences that function as private counsels, revealing Sita's unconscious reckoning with her altered reality. In one dream, she beholds "silvery rain bathing distant trees," an image of cleansing and renewal that foreshadows her eventual stewardship of the forest and her alliance with nature (Divakaruni 8). This symbolic rainfall aligns with ecofeminist readings of nature as an active agent in female self-recovery. Later, as her fears deepen, she dreams of "ocean", an archetypal image of emotional depth and latent power, resonating with Jungian theories of the collective unconscious in which water often symbolises the psyche's vast, uncharted territories. These dreams operate not as ornamental digressions but as what Gaston Bachelard (1942/1994) calls "oneiric images," crystallising unconscious desires and fears into symbolic form (Bachelard 6). Each dream becomes a fragment of an interior map, guiding Sita toward self-knowledge and underscoring the novel's blend of mythic grandeur with psychological immediacy.

Throughout these oneiric interludes, Divakaruni returns again and again to the lotus as a motif of self-actualisation and an emblem of resilience. She finds lotus in Ram's eyes, which were "large and very dark,

and shaped like lotus petals”, the smell of lotus from her mother’s bosom and the presence of lotus in the forest become recurring motifs in the text (Divakaruni 32). In South Asian tradition, the lotus signifies purity emerging from mud; here, Divakaruni reframes it as “reborn through suffering,” a symbol not of untouched perfection but of survival and self-definition. This re-interpretation aligns with Pattanaik’s understanding of mythopoesis as the regeneration of symbol to meet contemporary values (Pattanaik). By claiming the lotus as her emblem rather than a divine gift, Sita shifts it from a marker of divine femininity to a feminist statement of earned resilience.

Similarly, the forest itself transforms from a site of punishment to a sanctuary. Critics of feminist mythology have noted that natural settings often mirror a heroine’s psychological growth (Chatterji 2015). In this reframing, the forest becomes a living symbol of Sita’s evolving autonomy. This is ecofeminist reclamation- the land itself becomes ally and witness, and Sita’s bond with it redefines exile as a political space for autonomy. In Divakaruni’s reframing, the forest becomes a living interlocutor—an ally and witness—within an ecofeminist reclamation of space, where the land itself participates in the process of healing and empowerment. This transformation redefines exile not as isolation but as a politically charged

site of autonomy, collapsing the binary between nature as a passive backdrop and woman as a passive sufferer.

The motif of fire and ash further articulates her transformation from a figure subjected to public scrutiny into one who reclaims symbolic agency. After the ‘agni pariksha’, Sita recalls her “My husband, whom I forgave even after his harsh words on the battlefield in Lanka, gave me no choice but to throw myself into a fire. My husband, to whom the gods themselves proclaimed my innocence” later turning it into “Rage rises up in me until my whole body is scorched, for some kinds of burning don’t require a fire. Not a word of love, not a word of apology for the sorrow he has caused me. Not a word about the unjust and cruel way in which he sent me away. He hasn’t even called me by my name” (Divakaruni 317, 355). reframing public humiliation into proof of an indestructible spirit, converting her helplessness and heartbreak into assertion in Ayodhya. In the language of feminist trauma theory, fire serves as a crucible of controlled destruction, from which survivors forge new strength (Herman 2015). When Sita invokes “Mother Earth and Father Fire” as her ancestral guides, she both honours and rewrites traditional ritual—an act of mythopoesis that Pattanaik identifies as the living myth’s continual regeneration to address contemporary values (Pattanaik 2012), whereby living myths are continually regenerated to reflect evolving cultural values.

The pairing of Earth and Fire collapses conventional gendered symbolism—Earth as feminine, Fire as masculine—into a balanced source of strength, aligning with ecofeminist readings of elemental kinship (Shiva 88). This invocation fuses archetypal ritual with personal authorship, displacing large-scale cosmic ceremony into the intimate domain of self-affirmation (Frye 1976), merging epic-scale symbolism with personal authorship..

Underlying these symbols is Sita's evolving philosophy of love, which Divakaruni frames not as sentimental devotion but as a constant learning through different incidents in her life.. In her dream of Ravan's tears, she confronts the complexity of enemy and victim alike, learning that compassion can coexist with fear. This reframes epic righteousness—compassion tempers justice without negotiating it. As Sita reflects on motherhood in exile—"every darkness is edged with light" because her twins draw her closer—she recognises that love demands both sacrifice and generosity (Divakaruni 333). This lesson aligns with ecofeminist scholarship, which argues that love extends beyond human relationships to encompass all living beings, fostering mutual care and respect (Merchant 1996). By presenting motherhood as a catalyst for Sita's ethical and emotional autonomy, Divakaruni disrupts the patriarchal trope of maternal self-erasure. Instead, motherhood here becomes a mythopoetic resource,

enabling Sita to forge a political and moral selfhood rooted in vulnerability transformed into strength. In doing so, the narrative participates in revisionist mythmaking, reconfiguring archetypal roles to serve contemporary feminist values.

Through sensory richness, dream symbolism, and recurrent motifs, Divakaruni offers a narrative that is at once lyrical and deeply political. Divakaruni's prose ensures that each rustle of leaf or aroma of wet earth carries subtext about Sita's inner fortitude, while her repeated images of lotus, forest, and fire chart a continuous journey from subservience to self-assertion transposed from inherited epic archetypes into credible psychological realities. In doing so, *The Forest of Enchantments* enacts Pattanaik's mythopoesis, displaces Frye's archetypes into credible reality, and fulfils Segal's vision of demythologised myth as expressions of shared human experience, ultimately reaffirming Sita's place as a feminist icon of enduring strength and autonomy (Segal 2015; Frye 1957; Pattanaik 2018)

Vocal Resistance

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita's speech acts function as weapons of defiance, directly challenging the patriarchal authorities who seek to constrain her. Rather than passively seeking the dictates of kings, sages, and societal norms, Sita repeatedly uses her voice to assert moral agency and demand justice. From her small confrontation questioning the customs

of her motherland, “Why can’t customs change? I asked angrily,” Especially ones that don’t make sense?” to her final confrontation, when Rama offers her a second trial by fire to prove her purity, “And that is why, O King Ram, I must reject your kind offer to allow me to prove my innocence again. Because this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, No more!” (Divakaruni 14, 357). By addressing Rama in the vocative

“O King Ram” rather than as husband, she detaches herself from the conjugal bond and repositions the confrontation in a public arena, where her speech is a performative rejection of male-dominated standards. This refusal embodies what feminist theorists identify as speech act resistance, where declaring her stand becomes a locutionary act of autonomy rather than mere complaint. This strategic readdress exemplifies Judith Butler’s notion of “resignification” in which ritualised language is appropriated to subvert the authority it once served (Butler 163). In the context of mythic retellings, this marks a Frye’s displacement of the epic’s formal speech—once a sign of loyalty—into a feminist declaration of autonomy. Here, Sita transforms the ritualised register of epic speech into an instrument of protest, interrupting the patriarchal script with her own narrative authority.

Sita's words do not plead for fairness, they declare the end of participation in a game whose rules are written by men. This act resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reading of the subaltern woman's speech as "doubly radical" — asserting subjectivity while simultaneously destabilising the authority of the listener (Spivak). In mythic retelling, such speech not only liberates the speaker but speaks vicariously for all women silenced within the epic's patriarchal frame. Adrienne Rich's concept of "Re-Vision" — "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (*On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, 35), is equally relevant here: Sita's verbal confrontations reframe canonical epic moments not as acceptance of divine decree but as deliberate acts of dissent.

Early in the narrative, when Rama reveals his vow to avoid fraternal conflict only after winning her hand, she remarks, "Your desire to avoid conflict among brothers is a good one, Prince of Ayodhya, but perhaps you should have informed us of this vow before you strung Shiva's bow? Surely you knew that once her bride-price is paid, a woman can't marry anyone else?" (Divakaruni 36). The irony and public address shift the exchange into a political critique, exemplifying Butler's concept of resignifying discourse to unsettle authority. Her defiance is equally visible when Bharat is installed as heir in Rama's place:

“How can you do this?” I cried, my fury making me forget all the lessons in caution that my mother had taught me. “It’s wrong inß every way. We all know that Ram would be a better king than Bharat. He’s been trained for it his whole life...” (Divakaruni 104)

Here, repetition and moral absolutism shift her voice from advisory to accusatory, asserting a moral standard above dynamic convenience. The repetition of ‘wrong’ turns her protest into a moral indictment.

In her confrontation with Valmiki,

“But,’ I said, and I couldn’t keep the anger from my voice, ‘what occurred when I was alone in the darkness, under the sorrow tree, you don’t know. You don’t know my despair. You don’t even know my exhilaration, how it felt—first in the forest and then in Ayodhya—when I was the most beloved woman in creation” (Divakaruni 2).

Here, she exposes the limitations of a male-authored epic, pointing out that the peaks and valleys of a woman’s life remain unwritten unless she claims them herself. In doing so, Sita asserts her authority to fill those silences, transforming storytelling into an act of resistance. By naming his ignorance, Sita claims what Alicia Ostriker calls “revisionist mythmaking” re-authoring a canonical epic from within to centre the female experience (Ostriker 68–90).

Sita's Relationship with Male Characters

The Forest of Enchantments fundamentally reimagines Sita's relationships with male characters, reframing them not as isolated interpersonal bonds but as part of a broader network of female narratives.

“But as I dipped my quill into the inkpot, they rose inside me. Voices. Some clamouring, some tentative, some whispering, so that I had to still my breath to hear them. Kaikeyi, second queen of Ayodhya, who wrested our throne from us out of blind devotion to her son, only to be hated by him for it; Ahalya, her beauty turned to stone by a husband's jealous fury; Surpanakha, wild enchantress of the forest, whose gravest crime was to desire the wrong man; Mandodari, wife to the legendary demon king, forced to watch her kingdom fall into ruin and her beloved son perish because of her husband's obsession with another woman; Urmila, my sweet sister, the forgotten one, the one I left behind as I set off with blithe ignorance on my forest adventure with my husband” (Divakaruni 4).

Sita's relationship with male characters is not just hers but a collective discourse of all the females in the text. She foregrounds the internal struggle and complexity of women's lives living in a male-dominated society. She voices the questions that other females might have asked if provided the space.

The most significant relationship in the novel, and the most dramatically reconceptualised, is between Sita and Ram. Divakaruni foregrounds the emotional and moral complexity of their relationship, positioning Sita as a critical evaluator rather than an unconditional supporter. Early in their relationship, Sita demonstrates a protective nature towards Ram, subverting the protector/ protected situation in the relationship

“I stepped in front of Ram. It wasn’t an act of courage. Until it happened, I didn’t even know I was going to do it. Wherever the impulse had come from, it certainly wasn’t my conscious mind. I realized, right away, that it was a thoroughly stupid move. I had no power over the enraged sage. He’d probably kill us both with the same blow. A little part of my mind said, That’s all right. It would be better than living on alone if he killed Ram” (Divakaruni 59).

Their relationship oscillates between personal fulfilment and social obligation. The heartbreak Sita endures, banishment while pregnant, drives her resolve to live for her unborn children, and act of maternal agency beyond marital alliance. The relationship crisis emerges during Sita’s banishment, where traditional narratives emphasize Rama’s dharmic duty as king.

Divakaruni’s Sita, relationship with Valmiki marks a profound narrative alienation. She breaks his male-centric storytelling when she calls

out his narrative, underlining his lack of knowledge about women's pain in the narrative. Divakaruni's treatment of Sita's relationship with Ravana transcends traditional victim-villain binaries to explore psychological complexity and moral agency. Rather than being depicted as a helpless captive, the novel reveals her as a strategic negotiator and critical observer.

While not a human male, the forest in Divakaruni's novel functions as a male-adjacent authority- both shelters and a site of trial. Ecofeminist readings stress how Sita's bond with the forest and nature subverts patriarchal values by linking female autonomy with ecological resilience.

Divakaruni also portrays Sita navigating relationships with male authority- fathers, sages, kingly brothers – through speech acts of refusal and critique. These interactions continuously reposition Sita as an ethical, narrative, and political agent, rather than a passive object. Sita's reflections on Ravana demonstrate empathetic analysis without minimising his wrongdoing. This perspective aligns with feminist scholarship emphasising “nuanced portrayals” that reveal the “complexities of human behaviour” rather than simple moral categories. Significantly, Sita maintains moral agency throughout her captivity. She refuses Ravana's advances, warns him of consequences, and strategically drops jewellery to aid her rescue, actions that position her as an active participant rather than a passive victim. Contemporary research validates this portrayal, noting

that “Sita was an intelligent woman” who “had the presence of mind” to assist in her own liberation.

Sita’s interactions with Lakshmana reveal her moral authority within traditional protective structures. During the Golden Deer incident, Sita exercises persuasive power over Lakshmana, compelling him to abandon his protective duty despite his loyalty to Rama’s commands.

This episode demonstrates Sita’s strategic use of emotional leverage—including her threat of self-harm, to achieve her objectives. While traditional interpretations might view this as feminine manipulation, Divakaruni’s narrative reveals it as calculated moral agency. Sita later acknowledges her harsh words and provides a true and glowing picture of Lakshman to Hanuman, demonstrating ethical self-reflection and relational repair.

The novel’s treatment of Sita’s relationship with Luv and Kush transforms traditional maternal sacrifice narratives into stories of empowered single motherhood and educational partnership. Sita reflects:

“Sometimes I thought, it’s true what people say: every darkness is edged with light. In a palace, bound by my royal duties, I’d never have had so much time for my children... Motherhood taught me something new about love” (Divakaruni 332).

This passage demonstrates what feminist scholars identify as “maternal strength and legacy”—the recognition that “Sita’s upbringing of Luv and Kush is not only an act of nurturing” but also “central to her character” development. Research confirms that “her role as a mother” becomes “central” to her identity construction and agency assertion.

Sita’s educational approach with her sons involves teaching them Rama’s story while maintaining critical perspective on their father’s actions. This dual loyalty, honouring their heritage while acknowledging injustice—exemplifies what scholars call “balanced child-rearing” that prepares children for complex moral realities.

Conclusion

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni takes the Sita of epic tradition and gives her what the centuries of retelling had denied her — her own voice. By placing Sita at the centre as both narrator and subject, the novel does more than retell the *Ramayana* from a woman’s perspective; it dismantles the long-held narrative habits that have kept her in the margins. This is not simply a matter of style. It is a conscious act of reclaiming, of rewriting the cultural memory so that Sita speaks for herself, and in speaking, alters the meaning of the story altogether.

The analysis in this chapter has shown how the first-person voice becomes Sita's most powerful tool. Through it, she is able to interpret her own life, assess the actions of others, and lay down moral boundaries that are her own. Whether she is quietly questioning the customs of her motherland or openly rejecting Rama's demand for another trial by fire, Sita's words carry the authority of a woman who has claimed the right to define herself. Her "I" is not passive — it is active, deliberate, and aware. It becomes the site where patriarchal expectations are resisted and re-written.

Divakaruni keeps the familiar frame of the *Ramayana*, the marriage, the exile, the trials, but shifts the meaning of each event. The forest is no longer only the backdrop for Rama's tests; it becomes Sita's place of awakening. Fire is not just the element of trial; it is the crucible in which her dignity is proved to herself. In each of these, the mythic symbol remains, but it has been refitted to speak in a language that answers to Sita's truth.

The novel also reframes Sita's relationships with the men around her. With Rama, there is love, but also a steady negotiation of dignity. With Lakshmana, a quiet solidarity that sits beneath the surface of duty. With Valmiki, there is the sharp reminder that the male-authored version of her life will never be enough. Each interaction becomes an occasion to test the

limits of loyalty, justice, and truth — and each time, Sita pushes those limits further than the tradition allows.

Her resistance is not always loud, but it is always intentional. At times, it is a direct refusal, as in her final rejection of Rama's demand. At others, it is the way she reframes an experience — exile becomes survival; loss becomes self-knowledge. These acts, large and small, are what turn her from the “ideal wife” of popular imagination into the political and moral agent at the heart of her own epic.

By the time the novel closes, the Sita who began as a figure bound by cosmic duty stands as a woman who has defined herself by her own terms. Divakaruni's telling shows that to re-imagine a myth is not to destroy it, but to make it live again — to let it speak, with clarity and urgency, to the world we inhabit now. This is how Sita survives in the cultural memory: not as a silent symbol, but as a voice that refuses to be silenced.

Sita as Warrior: Reading Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*

This chapter traces the reimagination of Sita in contemporary Indian literature through an examination of Amish's *Sita: The Warrior of Mithila* (2017), focusing on how it addresses the evolution of Sita's myth and challenges the patriarchal norms of society. This analysis focuses on Sita's transformation as a warrior princess, exploring how it disrupts the rigid structures and resonates with contemporary readers.

Scholars note that "Mythic fiction with an element of fantasy, which may be urban or contemporary, always attracts the attention of the readers" (Bhargava 128). This analysis situates itself in the broader context of this research, examining how myths evolve with society, merging traditional frameworks with modern sensibilities. As Ramesh observes, "epic and mystical traditions are the basis of the predicament of women in India in a specific family system", yet texts like *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (2017) represent a significant reimaging of mythological figures in contemporary Indian literature, helping readers and, by extension, society to move away from such predicaments (Ramesh 603).

This chapter situates itself within the thesis's broader exploration of Sita's contemporization in popular literature, investigating how traditionally "docile and passive" heroine is transformed to address modern sensibilities and challenge established gender paradigms (Chatur et al.).

“This fresh perspective challenges both historical and modern ideas about gender roles, sparking a necessary conversation” on evolving cultural understanding of feminine agency (Chatur et al.). Texts like *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* emerge not just as a literary innovation but as a cultural phenomenon that reflects changing societal attitudes, contemporary mythological discourses and feminist literary criticism, providing much space for discourse to contemporary readers.

Contextual Background

Tripathi’s approach to mythology represents a paradigm shift in how ancient stories are presented to contemporary audiences. Critics note his ability to “create completely new stories from old ones” and to reconfigure ancient myth into a narrative driven by human emotion and experience, serving “as a vehicle for exploring questions of identity, power, and agency” (Priyadarshini and Fredette). This creative strategy aligns with Mircea Eliade’s understanding of myth as “sacred history” continuously re-enacted to mediate humans’ relationship with the transcendent, while also acknowledging that retellings inevitably reflect the values of their own era. Tripathi’s work exemplifies this statement, repositioning the character of Sita in the spaces traditionally occupied by the male characters, mirroring the contemporary complexities faced by women who often deal with public spaces. His works are characterised by critics as tremendous

research, deep thought, a rooted pride in India, and a liberal progressive outlook. His reimaginings of myths are deeply ingrained with scientific explanation, modern sensibilities, and contemporary relevance, often delving into themes related to “religion, spirituality, destiny and human nature” (Chatur et al.).

“Tripathi’s text does not simply modernise Sita for popular appeal; rather, it participates in a critical cultural project of rescripting canonical narratives to accommodate the evolving aspirations and ideological commitments of contemporary society” (Autar).

His methodology involves humanising divine figures, making them accessible to modern readers while preserving the spiritual and cultural essence of the original narratives. As he recounts, “My wife told me not to approach the book with arrogance of a creator, approach it with humility of a witness” (Writing Changed Me). This “witness consciousness” represents more than a mere writing technique; it embodies spiritual philosophy that penetrates his entire creative process. Tripathi states in his conversation with Somi Das, “beyond the familiar *Ramayana*, lesser-known tales whisper untold stories” that made him paint Sita, “who transcends tradition” (Chatur et al.). His approach serves as “a cultural commentary, emphasising the enduring relevance of these stories (K and Pillai 735).” The amalgamation of different genres makes the epic stories

that they become relevant to contemporary life while staying attached to the original stories. His extensive reading habits reflect his comprehensive approach: “I read a minimum of at least five-six books a month.” This voracious consumption of diverse materials, ranging from ancient texts to modern narrative constructions, ensures that his mythological reimaginings are informed by multiple perspectives and scholarly traditions.

Theoretical Framework:

To frame the analysis of Sita’s transformation in *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, this chapter draws on three theoretical perspectives: Pattanaik’s Mythopoesis, Segal’s demythologised myth, and Frye’s archetype displacement. Together, these frameworks illuminate how Tripathi bridges the gap between tradition and modern sensibilities.

Devdutt Pattanaik, in his book *Myth=Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology*, defines myth as “truth seen through a frame of reference (Pattanaik XV). Pattanaik advocates that myths function as “subjective truth expressed in stories, symbols and rituals” that shape cultural understanding and collective consciousness (Pattanaik). This perspective aligns with the concept of mythopoesis - “the study of how stories, symbols and rituals transform”, it reveals how societies imbibe values, ethics, and identities over time (Study of Mythsβ). By foregrounding plurality and

fluidity, Pattanaik positions myth as an inseparable cultural technology that mediates between the differences of meaning understood by the individual and the community, evolving to meet their social needs. This framework positions myth not as a static historical narrative but as a living, evolving construct that responds to contemporary societal needs and aspirations. *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* stands in accordance with this understanding of myth. Tripathi's reimagination has brought Sita out from the shadows and made her not just a consort to Ram but also an administrator, a warrior and a strong leader, along with other things. Through mythopoesis, Tripathi retains the cultural legitimacy of the *Ramayana* while repositioning Sita to resonate with twenty-first-century social needs, making her a warrior-administrator.

Robert Segal's concept of "demythologized myth", represents one of the most significant contributions to myth theory and serves as a crucial bridge between traditional mythological understanding and contemporary scholarly interpretation. His understanding of the demythologization is "when myth is demythologized, then it ceases to be about the world and turns out to be about human experience of the world (Segal). It focuses on human experience and makes it relevant to contemporary audiences who live in a scientifically understood universe. *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* let the protagonist shed all the expected norms and became an expression of

liberation through leadership, skills and intellectual advancement. Tripathi's deliberate removal of divine intervention and reliance upon human efforts and rational scientific understanding shifts the narrative from dependence on mythic narratives into relatable human character. This humanization of Sita aligns with Segal's notion of myth as an expression of lived experience rather than a literal explanation of the world.

Frye identifies myth as "the fundamental organising principle" in the autonomous literary universe; it deals "not with the world that man contemplates, but with that man creates" (Frye). He believes that archetypal patterns- recurring symbolic structures that represent universal human experiences- are "most clearly discernible in myth". In mythical stories, these archetypes appear in their purest form, representing "a world of pure and abstract literary design." The bridge between myth and literature operates through what Frye calls "displacement"- the process by which pure archetypal patterns are adapted to meet the demands of plausibility and moral acceptability in different cultural contexts (Frye). Frye's understanding of literature and recurring mythical patterns provides a robust framework for analysing how Tripathi transforms the traditional Sita narrative into a contemporary heroic quest. Instead of abandoning the foundational structures of the *Ramayana*, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* preserves its archetypal power while substituting divine and supernatural

elements into plausible forms of political leadership, martial skill, and strategic agency that appeal to modern audiences.

Pattanaik's *Mythopoesis, Demythologized Myth* by Robert Segal and Frye's principle of archetype displacement demonstrate how Tripathi's portrayal challenges traditional gender roles while preserving mythic resonance as it not only reimagines a classical heroine but also reconfigures deep-rooted mythic structures to subvert patriarchal conventions and model new paradigms of feminine power. Tripathi has reinterpreted symbols to actively subvert the patriarchal norms of society, giving Sita courage and agency. Tripathi has humanised Sita, bringing her closer to his readers and away from the rigid, idealistic standards of society. He has given her determination and agency while still making her universal, thus demythologizing the idealistic portrayal of her character. Tripathi has brought Sita from pure myth into literature through "credibility" and "moral" displacement, creating the romance mode.

Chapter Objectives

This chapter explores Amish Tripathi's reimagining of Sita as a warrior in *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* and aligns its analysis with the thesis's overarching aims and specific sub-objectives. By tracing how Tripathi transforms Sita's traditional identity into that of an empowered martial heroine, the chapter

demonstrates the dynamic processes through which myth evolves to address contemporary concerns of gender and agency.

This chapter demonstrates how Tripathi's warrior Sita advances the thesis's primary objective of tracing the evolution of Sita's character across modern retellings. This analysis positions *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* as a distinct moment in Sita's mythopoetic cycle, whereby her earth-born symbolism (Prakriti) is recoded from passive fertility to strategic leadership in response to present-day discourses on female empowerment.

It situates Tripathi's ideological and methodological framework within the broader field of feminist revisionist mythmaking, thereby fulfilling the sub-objective of analysing authorial perspectives. By examining his "witness consciousness," rigorous research architecture, and detachment principle, the chapter illuminates how Tripathi's philosophical orientation and immersive scholarship inform his decision to portray Sita as a warrior rather than a consort.

It applies the theoretical frameworks of mythopoesis, demythologization, and Northrop Frye's archetypal displacement to Tripathi's narrative strategies, thereby meeting the thesis goal of testing these models in practice. The chapter will:

- Show how mythopoesis explains the syncretic fusion of Sita's traditional earth-mother imagery with universal warrior motifs, illustrating myth's capacity for continual adaptation.
- Reveal how demythologization transforms supernatural birth and divine intervention into symbolic expressions of human agency, aligning with Segal's assertion that modern myth functions as expression rather than literal explanation.
- Demonstrate Frye's credibility and moral displacement in structuring Sita's quest as a plausible romance—grounded in military training and ethical decision-making—while preserving archetypal resonance.

It explores how Tripathi's martial reimagining subverts conventional gender roles in epic literature, addressing the sub-objective of mapping gender role transformation. By analyzing key narrative episodes—Sita's rigorous training under Sage Agastya, her active leadership in battle, and her strategic counsel to Mithila's court—the chapter will show how physical prowess and political acumen recast Sita's agency and challenge patriarchal norms.

Textual Genesis

In the context of this study, Textual Genesis refers to the creative, ideological, and cultural origins of *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, situating the novel within Tripathi's broader narrative architecture and examining his intentions for its reimagining. *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* is the second book in Tripathi's Ram Chandra Series, positioned between *Scion of Ikshvaku* (2015) and *Raavan : Enemy of Aryavarta* (2019). His methodology of incorporating innovative narrative structures attracts readers and keeps them hooked throughout the whole plot, sometimes for multiple books. *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* is also part of his Ram Chandra Series that employs what he describes as "a new narrative structure... similar to Rashomon (by Akira Kurosawa) where you have multi-linear narratives and the back of stories of characters('Our Ancient Culture - The Indian Express). This technique intersects the storyline while presenting the larger *Ramayana* arc with different perspectives. In this design, Sita's story is not a side narrative like the traditionally dominant male narratives; here she takes the central strand and shares equal space with other characters.

Amish Tripathi holds a significant position in contemporary Indian literature for creating radically revitalised mythological fiction. His reimaginings have become a way to be connected with the ethics and morals of the epics. His imagination has made characters like Sita, Shiva, Ram and even Ravana popular among modern young readers.. These

characters are dramatic, intellectual, supreme beings and yet human. They are psychologically rich and culturally relevant as their powers are derived from rigorous training, discipline, and inner resolve. His methodology involves identifying elements within traditional narratives that support progressive interpretations, blending “political theory and feminist studies” rather than imposing external modern values (Chatur et al.). This is evident in *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, as Sita is depicted not simply as an ideal figure of virtue, sacrifice and devotion but strategic thinker and courageous leader. Her leadership is not derived from supernatural explanations but comes from difficult martial training, courtly intrigue, and statecraft, which are drawn from a careful study of archaeological, literary and philosophical materials. For example, his portrayal of Sita as a warrior draws upon “the original version of Sita” from the *Adbhut Ramayana*, where “Sita kills Ravan. She’s a warrior”. This process mirrors Robert A. Segal’s demythologization, whereby supernatural attributes are recast as symbolic expressions of human capability. This approach maintains cultural continuity while challenging contemporary assumptions about traditional gender roles. As mentioned by Amish Tripathi repeatedly in his interviews, this portrayal of Sita is not an act of westernisation but a return to the true spirit of ancient India. He argues that pre-colonial Indian society featured women not just as symbols of virtue but as active “philosophers, rulers, and warriors” (Pattanaik).

“Speaking of women’s empowerment is not being Westernised, it is being truly Indian! Ancient India celebrated women as philosophers, rulers, and warriors.”

His inspiration comes from strong women of mythology like “MA Rishika Maitriyi, Lopamudra and Gargi” who exercised their intellectual and political authority in Indian civilisation (Here’s What Makes Amish).

“In vedic Sanskrit the male and female gods are addressed as ‘twam’ ...In ancient India, Rishikas wrote scriptures. This shows men and women were considered equal, which is what feminism is all about. (*Here’s What Makes Amish - Hindustan Times*)”

“The perception of Sita as devoted wife is one which was portrayed in the 1980s or in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. I have portrayed her as a warrior, a strong woman. Strength here doesn’t necessarily mean physical strength- it means being mentally strong as well, to have the ability to stand up and face challenges. Sita, in this book, has feminine power. (*I Have Portrayed - Times of India*)”

Generally, the physical power attributed to men is subverted by Tripathi in his book *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*. The power he attributes to her is a manifestation of broader mental resilience, strategic ability, and moral courage.

Tripathi acknowledges that by centring Sita as a warrior, his intentions are to “bid goodbye to the stereotyped submissive image of women,” instead underscoring a vision of women who are self-sufficient, vocal, and capable of facing and resolving challenges traditionally reserved for male figures (Pandey and Jodha 173). Its textual genesis reflects a deliberate engagement with variant sources, an application of progressive interpretive methodologies, and an intent to subvert gendered expectations in epic literature without severing the work from its mythological roots.

Sita as a Warrior Archetype: Theoretical Underpinnings

Defining the Warrior Myth

In this study, Pattanaik’s concept of mythopoesis is combined with Jungian archetype theory to define ‘warrior myth’ as both a culturally constructed narrative and a universal psychological pattern. According to Devdutt Pattanaik, myth is conceptualised as “belief, not truth” (*Study of Myths - Devdutt Pattanaik*). They may be known as “social constructs, imaginary and ideology, that make them seem less fictional, but they are a collection of stories that continually evolve to reflect the values and anxieties of the societies that tell them. They are dynamic narratives that respond to changing cultural contexts across time and geography, and this dynamic nature that is ever-changing and ever-evolving, which allows archetypes to

gain new relevance and meaning for each generation, is termed Mythopoesis by Devdutt Pattanaik.

Applied to “Warrior myth”, Pattanaik’s framework shows how traditional symbols of warriorhood that typically cast a masculine figure, or male heroes, can be dynamically reassigned, and Tripathi did that in *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*. The adaptation of Sita as a warrior figure is a direct product of the mythopoetic process. It is the first in all reimaginings that subverted the virtuous, sacrificing and enduring archetypes with martial training, combat power and dynamic leadership in public sphere that too drawing from ancient stories (including lesser-known versions such as *Adbhuta Ramayana*, regional and folk narratives) and serves urgent debates about women’s agency in the present (Decoding Women in Hindu Mythology).

In Carl Jung’s theoretical system, the warrior archetype represents one of his fundamental archetypal patterns, embodying what scholars identify as “the archetype of self-disciplined, aggressive action” and “a universal pattern of behaviour associated with courage, strength, and the ability to protect and defend oneself and others” (Moore). Carol S. Pearson interprets the Warrior’s inner code — “one based on control, strategy, and sacrifice — rather than brute violence (Pearson 1991).” Sita in the text stands in accordance with these warrior archetype, which symbolises

“courage, discipline, and the drive to act decisively in the face of danger or injustice(Jung).” In *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, Sita’s journey follows the pattern of the individuating Warrior, as she evolves from an orphaned child into a powerful political and military leader. From an early age, Sita trains in martial arts, warfare, and philosophy, showing not only physical strength but also intellectual and moral discipline, exemplifying Pearson’s warrior archetype.

Her courage is displayed repeatedly: whether confronting the danger of Raavan or defending her kingdom, Sita remains unwavering in her purpose. Her appointment as the Prime Minister of Mithila, based on merit rather than marital status, further establishes her as a leader who embodies strategic foresight, justice, and integrity — all qualities of the archetypal Warrior. Moreover, Sita’s leadership is not driven by ego or personal gain but by her devotion to Dharma (cosmic and moral order), echoing Moore and Gillette’s (1990) idea of the Warrior as a “disciplined servant of a higher cause” (Moore).

Tripathi’s own understanding of the warrior ethos is expressed in his reflection:

“What are the chief qualities of warriors? What drives them? What motivates them? Yes, there are many who fight for honour, for the country, for a code. But equally, there are those who simply want a socially

sanctioned way to kill. If not given an outlet, such people can easily turn to crime. Many great warriors, celebrated by humanity, narrowly escaped being remembered as social degenerates. What saved them from becoming criminals and instead turned them into soldiers? The answer is the warrior code: The right reason to kill” (Tripathi 62).

While Moore and Gillete conceptualise the warrior’s “higher cause” in psychological terms, Tripathi’s culturally specific framing locates it in dharma, integrating ancient Indian moral philosophy with universal archetypal principles. This blend of mythic reinterpretation and archetypal resonance is the product of mythopoesis.

By embodying a warrior archetype historically reserved for male heroes, Sita disrupts entrenched gender binaries in epic literature. Her combat prowess, political acumen, and moral resolve recast her agency as active rather than reactive, offering contemporary readers a model of feminine power that is simultaneously culturally authentic and psychologically universal. In doing so, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* demonstrates how the warrior myth can be redeployed to subvert patriarchal conventions while sustaining the mythic depth that ensures its enduring relevance.

Demythologization and Expression

The concept of demythologization originated in theology with Rudolf Bultmann, who argued that scriptural myths should be stripped of their supernatural elements and interpreted as symbolic expressions of human existence (Bultmann and Ogden). Robert A. Segal expands this idea into myth theory, redefining myth as “no longer an explanation of the world, but an expression of the human experience of the world.” Segal explains myth when demythologised, “it ceases to be an explanation at all and becomes an expression, an expression of what it feels like to live in the world (Moore).” He contrasted it with the earlier view of myth that explained it as “the primitive counterpart to science” and allowed myth to coexist with scientific understanding while maintaining cultural significance (Moore).” In this framework, demythologised myth “is not to be read literally” but functions as “a symbolic, not literal, description of human experience, of one’s experience as a moral agent,” allowing myth to coexist with scientific understanding while retaining cultural meaning.

Tripathi’s Sita exemplifies Segal’s concept as Sita moves from Supernatural origins in the *Ramayana* to Psychological grounding in the text. As described in the novel, “Sita’s connection to the earth represents her groundedness in practical governance”, making her move away from the divine origin to a symbolic explanation of human capability and moral authority. Tripathi’s Sita shifts from passive endurance to active agency;

she demonstrates “not only physical but also moral: she possesses the strength to stand up for justice despite inhuman personal loss (Gupta 138).” She is not just an ideal consort but also a strategic leader and a partner who shares responsibility. Sita in the text becomes “ a skilled warrior and political figure who makes her own choices, defies societal norms, and embodies true strength through intelligence and moral courage (*Sita As A Feminist Icon*).” Her personality doesn’t just stand for divine ideal consort and virtue but also for human capacity for growth, strategic thinking, and moral development. This shows the demythologization within a broader process of mythopoesis: the divine consort archetype is transformed into a politically and militarily empowered leader without severing ties to the cultural memory of the epic.

She is no longer solely an idealised partner; she is also a strategic leader who shares responsibility in governance, exemplified in her declaration:

‘You share my fate and I share yours. That is what a true marriage is.’ She entwined her fingers through his. ‘Ram, I am your wife. We will always be together; in good times and bad; through thick and thin (Tripathi 273).’

Her personality represents “self-respecting, self-dependent, and courageous individuals” expressing moral agency that resonates with contemporary readers (Moore). She also challenges gender limitations by

embodying not just being a princess but a warrior, which actively rejects the limitations that gender roles or social positions put on any individual. In Segal's terms, she becomes a demythologized figure who depicts ways that resonate across cultural and temporal boundaries while addressing urgent contemporary concerns about female agency and empowerment.

Mythopoetic Transformation

Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, establishes myth as “the fundamental organising principle” of literature, with archetypal patterns providing the structural basis for narrative forms (Frye). Among these, his theory of romance archetype occupies a central space as the highest mode in Frye's hierarchy, representing the idealised quest for the hero in a morally polarised world, progressing from conflict toward restoration. His archetypal pattern encompasses “a risky journey with inconsequential adventures, leading to the final battle where either the hero or the villain would die and eventually the emergence of a happy ending (*Frye's Theory of Mythoi*).” Sita in the text exemplifies his theory by embarking on her journey from adopted foundling to prime minister of Mithila to chosen Vishnu, following the classic romance quest structure. “She is portrayed as being able to lead armies into war, proficient in combat, and talented with an arrow”, demonstrating the heroic capabilities essential to the romance mode (Kumar and Bharadwaj 219). She becomes an archetypal hero as

with her “excellence in combat training and strategic planning” and ability to “survey the battlefield, her mind racing with strategies (Gupta 138).”

Sita also exemplifies Frye’s “total quest-myth” that involves “conflict, catastrophe, disorder and confusion, and triumph,” with her training at the ashram of Rishi Shvetketu” and later at “Agastyakootam to continue training for becoming the next Vishnu” (*I Have Portrayed Sita -Times of India*). It represents the preparatory phase of the romance quest. The conflicts she faces as prime minister of Mithila, implementing reforms and defending her kingdom, embody the active struggle phase of the romance archetype. Her ultimate selection as Vishnu represents the triumph and apotheosis that Frye identifies as central to the romance mode.

Sita in the text also exemplifies Frye’s Displacement theory that explains how what can be metaphorically identified in a myth can only be linked in romance by some form of simile: analogy, significant association, incidental accompanying imagery, and the like. This process allows mythic patterns to appear in a more credible way in contemporary contexts, while maintaining their archetypal power. In the text, Sita’s archetypal attributes are displaced into human capabilities through rigorous training and strategic intelligence. Her “muscles, honed and strengthened through years of practice, coiled with tension, ready to spring into action” represents the displacement of supernatural power into believable human prowess

developed through training over the years (Gupta 138). Sita exemplifies two primary forms of displacement by Frye: credibility displacement (making stories plausible) and moral displacement (aligning with contemporary values), with her warrior abilities and active resistance against injustice.

Sita's story also incorporates elements from all four of Frye's mythoi.

Her adoption by Janak and transformation from an abandoned child to a beloved princess show 'spring/comedy'. Her role as the prime minister of Mithila and her reforms demonstrate the summer/romance. Her kidnapping and trials represent autumn/ tragedy. Her final recognition as Vishnu shows winter/irony, where her ironic reversal from foundling to cosmic authority ultimately completes the cycle.

Textual Analysis

Narrative Structure and Voice

Tripathi employs what he describes as a "multi-linear narrative technique" that made the whole Ram Chandra Series more interesting to read (Triptahi xix). It is a radical reimagination of the *Ramayana*, subverting the patriarchal underpinnings of the epic. Moreover, it brought Sita from shadows to light "We've heard the *Ramayana* from Rama's point of view,

where Sita was just a character. In my book it's not written from Sita's point of view, it is Sita's story, where Rama is just a character (*This Is Sita's Story -Hindustan Times*)."

The structural transformation is evident from the very beginning of the novel, where Sita is engaged in practical work- "Sita cuts quickly and efficiently, slicing through thick leaf stems with her sharp knife (Tripathi 1)." This establishes her as an active participant rather than a passive observer in Valmiki *Ramayana*. The narrative structure follows her journey of what Frye identifies as a hero archetype, "from birth to abduction," creating what scholars identify as a "female-centric novel which has solutions to problems related to modern society" (Rameshbhai 2168).

The third-person omniscient narrative voice provides an intimate access to Sita's thoughts while maintaining the epic scope necessary for mythological storytelling.

"Sita looked down and closed her eyes. Her shoulders slumped with helpless rage. And then, without giving herself any time for second thoughts, she stepped out. But not before her instincts made her nock an arrow on the bow, ready to fire" (Tripathi 11).

The passage reveals both emotional vulnerability and tactical preparation, showing how the narration balances human psychology and

warrior instincts. It also contrasts Sita's internal strategic thinking with external perceptions: "She was surrounded by at least fifty Lankan soldiers. But they kept their distance," establishes Sita's reputation and demeanour, commanding respect even from enemies, establishing her as a formidable presence beyond mere physical capability. "You believe you did me a service. No, Samichi, you did not. I lost respect among those men by receiving an undeserved compliment" (Tripathi 190).

The action-oriented approach transforms traditional mythological narrative, especially with regard to female characters, and makes it a contemporary adventure while maintaining cultural authenticity.

"As a Lankan closed in, she lassoed her bow, entangling his lathi with the bowstring, snatching it from him. Sita hit back with the bamboo lathi, straight at the Lankan's head, knocking him off his feet. She swirled the lathi over her head, its menacing sound halting the suddenly wary soldiers. She stopped moving, holding her weapon steady. Conserving her energy. Ready and alert. One hand held the stick in the middle, the end of it tucked under her armpit. The other arm was stretched forward. Her feet spread wide, in balance (Tripathi 12)".

This passage combines rapid action verbs with technical details about combat positioning, which shows that the skills honed by Sita are not mere supernatural abilities but come from intense martial training and

provide a “cinematic narration” that enables contemporary readers to visualise complex fights and relate to them (Who Is Amish Tripathi). “There were great archers who could shoot arrows by relying on sound. But very few could throw knives at the source of a sound. Sita was one of those very few (Tripathi 4).”

Sita’s character is developed through the strategic use of both direct discourse and internal monologue. She is not defined by my relationships but by my actions and choices, which represent a fundamental change that stands in strong contrast to the traditional depiction of Sita’s character. Her intellectual sophistication and strategic planning further demonstrate her understanding of political realities and her strong place in the social and political tapestry of the plot.

“You will need to be mature and pragmatic. You must use your heart to decide the destination, but use your head to plot the journey (Tripathi 36)”

The passage shows her emotional depth and strategic calculation to transform her character into not just a warrior but also a strong administrator. She actively transforms the traditional portrayal where Sita is “usually presented as Lor Rama’s ideal bride, renowned for her chastity, devotion, and fidelity” and characterised by “tenderness and strong will power (Kumar and Bharadwaj 224).” Tripathi’s Sita transforms these

traditional attributes not by defying tenderness or fidelity but by showing her devotion through partnership and strategic support in intimate and social life. The text explicitly establishes this transformation:

“I’m your wife, Ram. It’s my duty to take care of you” (Tripathi 233).

Typically, the role of caretaker in public space is associated with males here; Tripathi subverts the myth by putting Sita in charge of choosing the husband and also feeling responsible for taking care of him, not just in private space but in public as well.

“Sita’s portrayal as a warrior to whom her husband Rama bows, and as a pragmatic leader, refreshes the old ideas of her as a demure victim (*Sita Recycled and Retold*).”

This could be seen in the physical description of Sita as well, where traditional texts emphasise beauty and grace. Here, she is described as capable and strong: “Vishwamitra observed Sita with a keen eye. Tall for thirteen-year old, she was already beginning to build muscle.” Representing what critics recognise as “a seemingly simple line, where a woman is described by her height and her muscles, rather than by her doe-like eyes and lissome figure, that speaks volumes about the kind of book this is (Amish’s PM Sita - Telegraph India).”

The frequent engagement in complex problem-solving and strategic planning foregrounds Sita's social dynamics and leadership role. She works with the people around her, caring and strategizing every move that benefits her kingdom, such as building housing for the poor while providing them with temporary housing and in the meantime strategizing to save her kingdom for future warfare. It shows how she integrates traditional virtues like patience and service with modern leadership concepts of constituent responsiveness. The successful outcomes of her strategic thinking and reforms speak for her capabilities, "Sita's reforms brought prosperity to Mithila, reflecting her visionary leadership (Tripathi 103)."

"Mithila was more stable than it had been in years. The rebuilt slums, along with the ancillary opportunities it provided, had dramatically improved the lives of the poor. Cultivation in the land between the two fort walls had led to a spike in agricultural production. Inflation was down. And, the unfortunate death of the dynamic prime minister of Sankashya had neutralised Kushadhwaj substantially. No one grudged the now popular Sita her decision to carry out a spate of diplomatic visits across the country (Tripathi 143)."

“She looked down at the earth and whispered, ‘Help me, mother. Help me.’ She drew her knife from the scabbard tied horizontally to the small of her back. She closed her eyes (Tripathi 4).”

The passage reveals her traditional connection with earth, the invocation to ‘mother’ connects her to earth’s origins while transforming it not to derive endurance but combat excellence. “For there was a knife buried in the throat that had been the source of that voice. She had, without bringing herself into view, turned quickly and flung the knife with unerring and deadly accuracy (Tripathi 4).” This sequence demonstrates how Sita integrates extraordinary skill with believable technique, creating combat scenarios that feel both mythologically impressive and tactically sound.

Sita in the text transforms traditional dharmic concepts by not just accepting duty as external imposition, as in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, but articulating duty as a conscious choice balanced with right consciousness. “Life is not only about what we want, but also about what we must do. We don’t just have rights. We also have duties (Tripathi 295).” These dialogues reveals Sita’s evolution from protected princess to autonomous leader.

Despite radical contemporizing, Sita in the text maintains traditional authenticity. The combat sequences are presented with respectful titles, maintaining the dignity of mythological figures while presenting them in unprecedented situations. Sita’s courage embodies

traditional concepts of dharmic responsibility rather than modern individualism: “Running away is never the solution. Confront your problems. Manage them. That is the way of the warrior (Tripathi 99).”

Language and Symbolism

Sita: Warrior of Mithila employs various symbolic registers: earth imagery, weapon symbolism, elemental motifs, animal archetypes, and ritual objects. From the very beginning, Sita is associated with earth and serves as a sophisticated literary transformation of one of Hinduism’s most fundamental symbolic relationships. As discussed earlier, Sita, as a warrior, is not outrightly defying the traditional attributes but transforming them to fit the contemporary landscapes. Her identity as ‘Bhumija’, meaning ‘furrow’, as in a ploughed field, establishes her connection to earth, agriculture or fertility.

However, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* transforms Sita’s earth-born nature from supernatural into a metaphor for political groundedness and administrative capability. “Sita recalled something she had heard in one of the dharma sabhas of her father. ‘The only “ism” I believe in, is pragmatism (Tripathi 64).’” Rather than emphasising mystical properties, Sita here is grounded in practical governance abilities, transforming the traditional fertility symbol into a representation of stable, nurturing leadership. Sita’s emergence from a ploughed field is dramatized, but eventually does not

connect her to supernatural powers, but with meaningful personality. The metaphor foregrounds Sita's birth as a deliberate act of nature, emphasising both vulnerability and sacred origin. The symbol here is reclaimed as a charge to "cultivate" social order and nurture citizen-subjects. "Help me, mother. Help me (Tripathi 4)." Earth becomes her ally in violence, where Sita appeals to her to provide help in combat, making Earth not just a symbol of endurance but of strength.

"The layout was symmetrical, well-manicured. The thick, green carpet of grass thrown into visual relief by the profusion of flowers and trees of all shapes, sizes and colours. It was a celebration of Nature, expressed in ordered harmony" (Tripathi 212).

Sita applies the agricultural symmetry to urban planning, equating civic order with natural order, symbolising her balance between nature and society.

Weapon Imagery

Sita: Warrior of Mithila uses a lot of weapon imagery – bows, spears, knives, swords and even lathis- to animate Sita's evolution from a foundling to a warrior. This weapon imagery foregrounds Jungian theory of the mature warrior archetype, for whom mastery over implements signifies psychological integration rather than brute force. Her use of

weapons is not just weapons of violence but tools for self-definition, “a work of art (Tripathi 186).” When “she flung the knife with unerring and deadly accuracy,” this act of knife-throwing shows years of disciplined training, making her claim individual power (Tripathi 309). Sita’s dynamic posture, “she twisted her body leftward...shoulder and back into the throw,” echoes Northrop Frye’s displacement theory: martial prowess is grounded in credible, humanised technique (Tripathi 186). Ram’s struggle in handling the same manoeuvre “his boy laboured at the task” casts Sita’s effortless fluidity and sync with her weapons, emphasising her superior strategic agility (Tripathi 215).

Sita’s martial training and ability to wield divine weapons present a fine balance of the traditional portrayal of a warrior and the contemporary requirements of reimaginings of these epics. Her martial training is a part of cosmic order. When characters note “The bow once belonged to the one whom we both worship” and name it “the Pinaka... strongest bow ever made”, Sita’s wielding of Pinaka becomes sacred vocation mirroring cultural sanctity of divine arms in Hindu myth, yet the placement of the bow in Sita’s hands, subverts patriarchal tradition of associating warrior image to only males (Tripathi 214).

Re-Imagination of Gender Roles

In *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, Sita's identity operates at the intersection of multiple categories: foundling, adopted, royalty, Prime minister, warrior, divine avatar. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, Intersectionality recognizes that "identity categories such as 'male,' 'female,' 'Brahmin,' 'Muslim,' 'middle-class,' or 'differently abled,' are not merely labels; they have long, sometimes painful histories of social construction and suppression of desires and rights." Sita's operation at the border of multiple identity positions her to challenge gender norms and subvert the patriarchy (Theory of Intersectionality). Sita doesn't reject feminine virtues but strategically combines them with traditional masculine capabilities, blurring the stark lines between gender in social tapestry.

Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic framework reveals that "girls are faced with the challenge of becoming the object of desire without the same castration anxiety that boys undergo." Sita in the text disrupts the symbolic order by refusing to be positioned as an object of male desire or protection (On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge). Her being a warrior and moving away from the traditional portrayal of a princess represents her breach of the space that is essentially reserved for masculine subjects. She is situated at the centre of Mithila's statecraft redeveloping Slums, economic reforms, military justice; recognized as "constructing an inclusive nationhood" by critics (On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of

Love and Knowledge). She altered the performance of fixed roles, blurring the lines between traditional masculine and feminine traits. “What matters is not the weapon, but the woman who wields that weapon (Tripathi 194).” She reiterates the gender acts through martial performance and strategic excellence. Judith Butler’s performativity theory explains how Sita in the text demonstrates that “gender is a continuous process of citation and alteration, and it is all about doing.” Sita’s performances—training with weapons, governing Mithila, leading diplomatic negotiations—cite masculine authority while maintaining feminine cultural positioning, creating what Butler identifies as subversive “imitative structure” that “denies the idea of stable Self and its forced naturalization” (Sandro 51).

Drawing from Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist feminism provides crucial insight into Tripathi’s portrayal of gender as achievement rather than essence. De Beauvoir’s famous assertion that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” establishes that “woman is not bound by her sex to be the sort of object that man has made her” (*Introduction - Simone de Beauvoir*). Sita in the text may not know her birth parents, yet she is able to establish herself as a ruler, warrior, administrator, partner and a leader as well.

Tripathi’s Sita embodies this existentialist principle through her continuous self-creation via training, strategic thinking, and conscious

choice-making. Her warrior identity is not innate but achieved through “engaging in in-depth training to develop skills” and making “every action count”, previously analysed. De Beauvoir argues that “woman has no specific essence” and that “science considers characteristics as secondary reactions to a situation” (*Introduction - Simone de Beauvoir*).

Sita’s situation as a foundling, adopted princess, and chosen Prime Minister shapes her development rather than any essential feminine nature. Her conscious rejection of “roles foisted on her by society” in favour of self-determined identity is also fuelled by the presence of strong, competent women around her, unlike traditional *Ramayana*, where she is isolated. Here she has seen strong women from the very beginning of her life- Sunaina, as a strong mother, bold administrator, strategic thinker, and loving wife; Samichi, as a strong ally, trusted friend and intelligent leader; Kanyakumari, who inspires marital faith and stays rooted in tradition. Sita derives her attributes as much from these women as she does from Earth and her teachers. Such sororal solidarity enacts what post-colonial feminism terms collective agency and ruptures androcentric hierarchies (Ashakiran).

Sita’s relationship with her mother, Sunaina, forms a cornerstone of female empowerment in the text. She has her first lesson in administration by looking at Sunaina as a passive queen, but “governing

the kingdom practically singlehandedly” while “Janak was spending more and more time lost in the world of philosophy (Tripathi 21). This reversal of traditional gender roles was normalised soon in Sita’s life, establishing her belief in such a partnership. It establishes a matriarchal foundation where women exercise real political power rather than merely ornamental authority.

Sunaina’s positive popularity demonstrates the effectiveness of feminine leadership “The queen had become increasingly popular in the kingdom. Many believed that she had been lucky for Mithila. For the rains had poured down in all their glory every year since she had come to the city as King Janak’s wife (Tripathi 21).” The text grounds Sunaina’s success in practical governance and not in any mystical symbol of luck.

Sunaina’s political philosophy reveals a sophisticated understanding of power dynamics and social justice. “The criminals among the rich are mostly driven by greed. One can negotiate with greed. But the criminals among the poor are driven by desperation and anger... They have nothing to lose (Tripathi 36).” Her analysis of such criminality demonstrates nuanced thinking, providing Sita with a governance model that transcends traditional masculine/ feminine boundaries and is steeped in the realities of society. She also prepares Sita for ethical decisions that require understanding human nature’s contradictions rather than applying

rigid moral formulas: “Don’t assume that the powerful are always bad or that the powerless are always good. There is a good and bad in everyone (Tripathi 36).” The realistic approach to social reform demonstrates her wisdom, which is later mirrored in Sita as well.

Sita’s relationship with her younger sister reveals a different kind of sororal solidarity where they both share the loss of their mother and later become her, “The both of us, together, are now our mother (Tripathi 103).” Sita’s protectiveness towards her sister stems from the care Sunaina showed her. She feels responsible for Urmila. The “tender Urmila” requires different types of support as “her little sister”, and research indicates that “Despite Sita not being her biological sister, Urmila does not harbour resentment. Instead, she becomes a pillar of strength for her loved ones”. This dynamic shows how adopted family relationships can create authentic bonds that transcend biological connection.

The friends that Sita had, Samichi and Radhika, both show her nature, which is cordial and comfortable for other females to be around. “She looked to her friend, Samichi, who stood at a distance. Next to her stood Radhika, her friend from the gurukul. She drew strength from their support” (Tripathi 105). Sita and Samichi represent a complex example of cross-class female friendship. Where Sita embodies royal privilege, Samichi represents street survival. The evolution of their relationship from

a rescue situation to a professional partnership demonstrates how this friendship transcended class boundaries through shared commitment to justice and ambition. As Sita's achievement of being Prime Minister doesn't just come because of her royal lineage but also from her earned respect and talent same is for Samichi; her designation of "Chief of Police and Protocol of Mithila" is not just because she saved Sita's life but also from the competence with which she achieved remarkable social mobility (Tripathi 195). Sita's philosophy of female empowerment directly influences their relationship: "What matters is not the weapon, but the woman who wields that weapon", demonstrating how women's wisdom circulates within female networks, creating shared philosophical foundations for their agency (Tripathi 61). The ultimate betrayal in their relationship becomes poignant since it examines how women's relationships can become casualties of larger political conflicts, and how personal loyalty must sometimes compete with other pressures, whether economic, political, or ideological.

Sita: Warrior of Mithila presents a world where women occupy significant institutional positions. Major political and social news is brought and shared by women characters. This elevation of female characters from the domestic circle to the social and political one creates a female power structure that supports individual women's advancement

while transforming entire social systems. The female bonds in the text are not idealised feminine bonds, but rather dynamic and evolving bonds that require constant negotiation and mutual commitment.

Sita's Relationship with Male Characters

While Sita's relationship with female characters is established as strong and inspiring to each other, her relationship with key male figures – Ram, Lakshaman, Jatayu, Vishwamitra and Janak stands on partnership, mentorship, fraternal bond and protective loyalty. It reconstructs the network of Sita's male relationships in a manner that both preserves the mythic architecture and transforms the gender dynamics. "Tripathi presents her as a solution to various problems in the leading male protagonists. Traditionally, Sita submits to Rama in devotion and reverence, whereas Sita in the text understands partnership in all aspects. Sita's approach to marriage reveals a sophisticated strategic thinking of equal partnership rather than emotional dependency. "Sita plans a marriage alliance with Ram through a Swayamvar. Although she likes Rama but it's not a blind love. She wedded with Rama with a perspective of a companion not only for his personal life but also for the title of Vishnuhood, assigned to the welfare of society" (Earnestly Eccentric). She regains the agency of choosing her husband, and this choice is based on rational evaluation of compatibility for shared goals rather than purely emotional attraction.

“Oh Lord Rudra, give me strength to help him. To help this magnificent man” (Tripathi 252). She is devoted to Ram in ways where she is not just a passive figure but an active partner in combat and emotions both. “Tripathi depicts Sita as Ram’s equal partner, showcasing her as a wise woman rather than just a beautiful one. She advises Ram on various occasions, and remarkably, Ram often accepts her counsel without question” (Vigneshkumar S and Boomiraja). “A part of Sita that had died years ago, when she had lost her mother, slowly sputtered to life once again. I am not alone anymore (Tripathi 230).” She accepts and depends on Ram’s ability, “Wish Ram was here. He would have gotten an arrow through somehow,” and excellence in combat, and proves to be an equal partner, where she leaps to shield the camp as a leader when Ram is not around, and calls out “Ram! Ram!” not in terror but to summon an equal ally and convey the call of danger to him (Tripathi 309). Their partnership depends on equality and belief, where even though she is the Vishnu, she says, “He is more than my husband. He is my anchor (Tripathi 310).” And Ram reciprocates the partnership by not just bowing down to Sita but also by accepting to follow her leadership, “You will make a great Vishnu. I will be proud to follow you (Tripathi 331).”

The relationship that Sita shares with male characters in the novel is one of mutual respect that is not limited to submissive expectation as

shown in traditional versions of the *Ramayana*. Her childhood was spent in a house where her mother ruled the kingdom and her father talked about philosophy. “Janak gave her the freedom to be a warrior, not just a princess (Tripathi 186).” He “raised her to question, not to follow blindly (Tripathi 105).”

“Sita had, in a fit of anger, told Janak the last time she had been in Mithila that he should stop wasting his time on spirituality and help Sunaina govern the kingdom. That it was his duty. Her outburst had angered Sunaina more than her father” (Tripathi 95).

This incident demonstrates several crucial elements of Tripathi’s approach to reimagining traditional relationships. First, Sita’s willingness to directly criticize her father’s priorities represents a fundamental challenge to traditional expectations of daughterly deference. Rather than accepting paternal authority as absolute, she positions herself as someone with legitimate grounds to question his choices and priorities. This reflects what feminist theorists term “filial parity”, a relationship model where intergenerational authority becomes subject to dialogue and negotiation rather than unquestioned submission. While Janak remains a beloved and respected figure in Sita’s life, and their bond provides her with legitimacy and emotional support, this affection no longer requires intellectual submission or passive acceptance of paternal judgment. Instead, their

relationship models how traditional bonds can be preserved while allowing for greater agency and equality.

Guru Vishwamitra also fuelled her strong personality by summoning her at Agastyakootam, he crowns her with the red-and-white trident tilak—“the outer arms white, the central line red” (Tripathi 160)—marking her as the chosen Vishnu. and ultimately preparing her for this role. Their relationship is also based on mutual respect and prophecy, yet presents a complex example of the tension between traditional mentor-disciple relationships and modern expectations of agency and autonomy. His mentorship sharpens her political and martial training, compelling Sita to negotiate the world of male power through her own agency, not shying away from standing up to her own guru if need be. Rather than simply receiving instruction, Sita becomes a strategic partner in a larger political project aimed at India’s spiritual and political renewal. Crucially, Sita does not accept Vishwamitra’s guidance uncritically. The text reveals that she starts suspecting Vishwamitra’s reasoning for choosing her over Ram, the prince of Ayodhya. This skepticism demonstrates her capacity to maintain intellectual independence even within a mentorship relationship. Rather than blind faith, she applies critical thinking to evaluate his motives and strategies.

The relationship becomes most complex when Vishwamitra's strategic interests conflict with Sita's ethical principles. After Ram is "compelled to use the biological weapon Asurastra by Viswamitra" despite it being "forbidden according to Lord Rudra's Law," Sita holds resentment against Vishwamitra for constraining Ram to use the weapon and never addresses him. This response demonstrates Sita's capacity to resist manipulation while maintaining strategic relationships. Rather than simply accepting that political necessity justifies ethical compromise, she holds Vishwamitra accountable for forcing Ram into moral transgression. Her refusal to speak to him represents a form of moral protest that asserts her independent ethical judgment while avoiding complete rupture of their political alliance.

The male characters in the text respected her rather than patronising her under patriarchal rule.

"Behave with honour? Don't be childish, Sita. What I have always liked about you is the fact that you are practical. You are not taken by silly theoretical ideas. You know you can do a lot for India. You must agree to make the announcement of your Vishnuhood ...(Tripathi 257)"

She is shown reverence, solidarity and service to her cause. Jatayu's pledge "It is my duty to protect you ... my sister" —a vow he upholds by shadowing her across the land (Tripathi 162). His respectful address—"my

sister”—and readiness to die for her welfare model a bond of fraternal allegiance rooted in choice rather than social obligation. These relationships foreground Sita’s role as sovereign, marking a radical shift from traditional gender hierarchies in epic literature.

Sita’s relationship with her brothers-in-law also shows her respect that reaches Ayodhya before her,

“I have heard a lot about you, Bhabhi ... I always thought it would be impossible for my brother to find a woman better than him. " ‘Welcome to the family, Bhabhi (Tripathi 266).”

The dialogues between Bharat and Sita bring out major strategic and political clarity to readers.

She is the counterweight and center of gravity around them. She is the solution to the excess of everything and acts as a neutraliser (Ramesh).” Sita stands as a gap between strong female characters who are defying the roles assigned to them and yet are not given much recognition, and the male characters who are given recognition but are still held up in other complexities. Her father, being the king in social space, hardly rules, and her mother hardly comes to the foreground in public but rules exceptionally well. “Dashrath is affected by his own despair and short-tempered nature when he was defeated in the battle of Karachapa, “Bharat yearns for

creativity, peace of mind and freedom from chaos” and even the gurus Vishwamitra and Vashishtha have animosity towards each other, yet Sita brings harmony to this chaotic situation with her dialogues, administration and leadership (Ramesh).

Sita’s relationships with male characters demonstrate how mythological frameworks can be preserved while fundamentally altering their gender dynamics. Sita and her male counterparts continuously perform their relationship through actions that cite and alter traditional gender scripts. They also destabilise binary oppositions like protector/protected and mentor-disciple. The success of this approach, where Tripathi alters the power dynamics while preserving the essential structure, lies in “evolutionary rather than revolutionary” characters.

Contemporary Resonance

Sita in *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* directly addresses contemporary concerns about women’s leadership capabilities by being “Prime Minister of Mithila” where she embarks on two developmental projects: “the construction of a road connecting Mithila to Shankashya”, and “a housing plan for slum dwellers”(Tripathi 39). It provides concrete examples of female governance that resonate with contemporary Indian women entering political and corporate leadership roles. The novel’s emphasis on Sita’s “martial competence” and “physical prowess” directly addresses

contemporary concerns about women's safety in India. Her mastery in archery, weapon handling, and hand-to-hand combat provides symbolic and practical empowerment for readers confronting issues of gender based violence and harassment. Sita's education, training and experience in the field speak directly to contemporary readers and relate to their problems.

Research reveals that "feminist retellings have resonated with readers across India, particularly women who see their own struggles reflected in the stories" and "provide a vision of empowerment that speaks to the experiences of modern Indian women". Rather than importing Western feminist models that may seem alien to Indian context, the novel "proposes that mythic retellings can serve as potent tool for feminist reimagination and cultural renewal" while remaining "rooted in tradition yet urgently relevant to the present." This demonstrates that "rather than adopting imported theoretical models, Indian feminism has often turned to its own symbolic traditions to articulate agency, resilience, and empowerment (Sodha)."

The text successfully reframes traditional feminine virtues as sources of strength rather than limitation. Sita's "unwavering loyalty to Ram, her compassionate nature, and her profound wisdom are timeless qualities that continue to inspire, but now these qualities are enriched with

diverse dimensions of virtue, strength, and resilience rather than passive endurance (Gupta).

This approach allows contemporary readers to maintain a connection with cultural traditions while expanding their understanding of what these traditions can encompass. As research confirms, “Sita’s character has been used as a tool to control the female psyche and make them act in accordance with the male perspective. Sita, no doubt, is a role model for Indian women, but by substituting the epithet ‘inability’ with ‘capability and potential (Devi and Raghav).”

The novel also deals with struggles of balancing traditional expectations as daughters, wives, and mothers with modern aspirations for professional achievement and personal fulfilment. Sita “assumes various roles-daughter, wife, sister, sister-in-law – but her strength and ability to handle any situation with grace and confidence stand out (Vigneshkumar S and Boomiraja).” Research shows that “Sunaina and Sita both leave a powerful message for modern women to take action while balancing their ‘heart’ and ‘head’ (traditionally linked with woman and man respectively) (Tripathy).” The integration of emotional intelligence and rational decision-making provides practical guidance for contemporary women navigating complex personal and professional relationships.

The novel's portrayal directly confronts limiting stereotypes about Indian women. Sita's assertion that "A woman's dignity lay not in her attire but in her actions" challenges contemporary debates about women's clothing, behaviour, and social participation (Gupta). Her declaration that "What matters is not the weapon, but the woman who wields that weapon" reframes discussions about women's capabilities in traditionally masculine domains (Tripathi 61).

Research confirms that "these retellings have garnered both critical and popular acclaim" and have "sparked discussions in literary festivals and reading groups about the importance of reinterpreting mythology to reflect contemporary values (Trivedi and Suresh Kumar)." The novel's success demonstrates hunger among Indian readers for authentic representations of empowered femininity.

The mother-daughter relationship between Sunaina and Sita offers particular resonance for contemporary readers concerned with raising empowered daughters while maintaining cultural connections. Sunaina's "commitment to female education" that "encompasses both practical governance and natural wisdom, preparing daughters for leadership that integrates multiple forms of understanding" provides practical guidance for contemporary parents.

Conclusion

Sita: Warrior of Mithila presents a transformative character portrayal that synthesises martial prowess, strategic leadership, and feminist empowerment into a coherent vision of mythological evolution. Tripathi's Sita embodies physical capabilities and martial prowess that fundamentally challenge traditional feminine archetypes while maintaining cultural authenticity. She reclaims autonomy over her life, which transforms the female image into an active instrument of justice and moral enforcement rather than just a passive listener.

Her combat philosophy explicitly reframes traditional discussions about masculine and feminine domains. Her martial prowess blurs the stark lines of martial competence and serves multiple contemporary functions: It provides practical self-defence models for readers concerned with women's safety and creates credibility for leadership authority. It also fills the gap between traditional characters and modern audiences.

The novel's portrayal of Sita's administrative excellence through her role as "Prime Minister of Mithila" demonstrates feminine intellectual capacity applied to governance and social transformation. Her tactical intelligence on the battlefield and strategising during any hard time positions feminine wisdom as equal to masculine, which occupies a major space in power rhetoric.

The integration of feminist themes throughout the novel creates what scholars recognise as “culturally embedded feminist paradigm (Sodha). Sita’s relationship demonstrates “partnership models” based on mutual respect and strategic alliance rather than traditional hierarchical dynamics. Her marriage stands on equal partnership rather than romantic submission. Her filial parity with Janak that includes the right to critique paternal authority, and her reciprocal mentorship with Vishwamitra, all exemplify transformed gender relations that preserve cultural bonds while expanding possibilities for female agency.

Tripathi’s approach validates the crucial hypothesis that Sita remains relevant through adaptive reinterpretations rather than static preservation. His methodology demonstrates how mythological figures achieve contemporary significance by evolving to address current social needs while maintaining their essential symbolic power and cultural authenticity.

The warrior archetype serves as a particularly effective contemporary lens through which to interpret Sita’s significance. The warrior identity transcends simple role reversal to offer a holistic empowerment model that integrates traditional virtues with contemporary capabilities. Sita’s warrior portrayal demonstrates how women can maintain “compassionate nature” and “unwavering loyalty” while

exercising “physical prowess” and “strategic brilliance”—showing that traditional feminine virtues can be sources of strength rather than limitation when combined with expanded agency and authority.

The culturally grounded empowerment model addresses the particular needs of women navigating “the complex intersection of tradition and modernity” in contemporary India. The novel exemplifies how feminist goals can be achieved through the expansion of the traditional framework in modern contexts, offering a sustainable model for women’s empowerment that maintains community support and cultural authenticity.

Sita’s physical capabilities, administrative excellence, strategic partnerships, and economic independence demonstrate practical pathways to financial autonomy. The character serves as a bridge between theoretical feminist discourse and practical implementation, offering guidance and inspiration for contemporary women. The reception of such a character by readers validates the hypothesis that myths achieve enduring relevance through adaptive reinterpretation rather than reserved preservation.

Sita’s warrior portrayal suggests a model for sustainable cultural change that achieves progressive goals while maintaining community support and cultural authenticity. By demonstrating how traditional wisdom can serve contemporary needs, Tripathi shows that cultural

evolution need not involve abandoning heritage but rather expanding understanding of what traditional values can encompass.

This approach offers particular relevance for societies navigating modernization while maintaining cultural identity. The novel demonstrates that “genuine cultural preservation requires thoughtful adaptation” rather than rigid fixation on historical forms, suggesting that living traditions achieve their highest purpose when they continue evolving to serve each generation’s deepest needs.

Sita as a Spiritual Character: Reading *Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love* by Bhanumathi Narasimhan

Introduction

This chapter undertakes a comprehensive analysis of Sita in Bhanumathi Narasimhan's *Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love* (2021), situating the novel within the broader landscape of contemporary reimagination of the *Ramayana* and evolving literary imagination of Sita as a spiritual character. It explores the spiritual aspect blended with feminist consciousness in the text. This text presents a deep reverence for the mythological essence and contributes to understanding the relevance of such spiritual retellings for modern readership.

Narasimhan's work represents a nuanced approach that challenges the binary between traditional devotion and female assertion, offering a model of empowerment rooted in spirituality and inner strength. The significance of this study lies in its examination of how modern writers adapt mythological narratives to address contemporary spiritual and gender concerns while preserving cultural authenticity. This chapter situates Narasimhan's contribution within the broader trend of Sita retellings, demonstrating the diverse pathways through which contemporary authors reimagine this iconic figure.

Contextual Background

“Bhanumathi Narasimhan is the sister of Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, humanitarian leader and ambassador of peace, and shares his vision for a stress-free, violence-free world” (About Bhanumathi)

“Bhanumathi Narasimhan is the younger sister of Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar...” (bhanumathinarasimhan.org)

On Bhanumathi Narasimhan’s official website, and her introduction in *Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love*, she is introduced with two words- “Bhanumathi, and sister” before quickly shifting focus entirely to her brother, Gurudev Sri Sri Ravishankar, and his global spiritual initiatives. Bhanumathi Narasimhan is the chairperson of the International Women’s Conference, and she is the author of several books, and the initiator of programs like “Gift a Smile-Care-for Children” and the Weaver-to-Weaver project, these achievements in non-profit NGO; The Art of Living but these two things come at the end of her introduction on her official website, way later than introducing her as a sister to Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. In fact, her vision for a “stress-free, violence-free world” is also contextualised in terms of her brother’s vision. This brief self-identification, overshadowed by her familial connection, prompts an immediate question about Narasimhan’s own identity as a writer and activist, especially in her feminist and spiritual retellings of *Sita: A Tale of*

Ancient Love (2021). As a meditation teacher, social activist, and Chairperson of a women's welfare NGO, Narasimhan brings a distinct perspective to her literary work, yet her public identity often remains tied to her brother's spiritual legacy.

The above discussion brings forth the core concern that the present chapter seeks to address: the politics of identity and the sheer marginalization of women under the guise of their social roles. Be it a sister, as in the textual case, a wife or mother, as in the case of the *Ramayana*, the primary focus of the research, the social roles of women have more often than not overpowered their individuality, further diminishing their agency, subjectivity and their own self. *Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love*, written by Bhanumathi Narasimhan, is a contemporary retelling of the *Ramayana* that emphasizes Sita's inner strength and spiritual depth. This chapter explores the spiritual portrayal of Sita in Bhanumathi Narasimhan's work, forming part of a broader thesis investigating the contemporization of Sita's character in popular literature. Narasimhan's Spiritual focus contrasts with Divakaruni's assertive Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments* and Tripathi's warrior archetype in his *Sita: The Warrior of Mithila*, offering a unique lens on Sita's narrative that resonates with readers seeking spiritual and feminist insights. In a review of the text, Kiran Bedi writes, "Bhanu-ji's Sita shows you that strength

doesn't lie in armies and weapons, nor sheer physical prowess. Strength lies in a mind that is unfazed by adversity, unblemished by negativity, ever pure and reflecting the perfection inherent in creation" (Narasimhan).

Theoretical Framework

To analyse the transformation of Sita's myth, this chapter employs several theories: Mythopoesis, as popularized by Devdutt Pattanaik, is the creative, continual making of myths to address evolving cultural, moral and psychological needs (Devdutt Pattanaik). Myth, according to him, "is truth which is subjective", "open to correction", "cultural construct" that binds the society (Pattanaik). Myths in this view are not inert relics of the past but living, adaptive narratives capable of responding to shifts in societal values and norms. This aligns with A.K. Ramanujan's understanding of the Indian epic tradition as a "pool of signifiers" where each retelling enters into a dialogic relationship with earlier versions, and with Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic text, where meaning emerges through continual interaction between multiple perspectives (Ramanujan 157). They empower marginalised perspectives, making them reclaim the spaces never offered before. *Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love* exemplifies it by integrating the divine with the spiritual and human. She presents her Sita spiritually aligned and yet deeply human as she sways between the cosmic and the literal in the text.

‘Demythologization’, as popularized by Robert A. Segal in his *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, is “an expression of what it feels like to live in the world” (Segal 48). According to Segal, demythologized myth ceases to be about the external world and becomes a tool of inner exploration and expression. Demythologization focuses on the symbolic representation of the myth, representing psychological and existential state” (The Modern Study of Myth). Instead of being dismissed as primitive, pre-scientific thinking, myths gain universal relevance by addressing persistent human concerns about meaning, identity and purpose. *Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love* transforms the literal elements of the epic into a symbolic expression of human experience, which is deeply rooted in spirituality and inner strength.

Northrop Frye’s exploration of the relationship between myth and literature provides a lens to understand themes of spirituality and self-discovery (Wikipedia: Northrop Frye). Frye argues that “the relation between myth and literature is established by studying genres and conventions of literature.” Suggesting that mythological patterns form the underlying structure of all literary works. His archetypal approach identifies recurring patterns and symbols that connect individual texts to the broader tradition of human storytelling (*Archetypal and Psychological*). Frye’s theory explains how contemporary authors can

draw upon mythological archetypes to create works that speak to universal human experiences (Frye's *Theory of Mythoi*). Following this, Narasimhan's text functions both as a spiritual text and a literary work that engages with timeless archetypal patterns. The concept of displacement by Frye also helps in understanding Narasimhan adapts mythological material for contemporary audiences. Displacement- "the adjusting of formulaic structures to a roughly credible context" allows authors to make ancient patterns relevant to modern readers while preserving their essential archetypal power (Frye 49).

The integration of feminist spirituality theory provides essential context for understanding how Narasimhan's work challenges traditional patriarchal interpretations while maintaining spiritual authenticity. Feminist spirituality "reclaims the power, value, and dignity of women" by focusing on "women's heritages, women's body as the locus of the divine, and women's work of replacing patriarchal societies with equality for all". This theoretical approach explains how spiritual retellings can serve as vehicles for both personal empowerment and social transformation.

Feminist spirituality highlights the importance of "women's search for meaning rooted in their experiences, which is exemplified in Narasimhan's text. This framework highlights how Narasimhan's work challenges the patriarchal structure through spiritual strength to ground

more inclusive and empowering myths related to Sita. The concept of “embodied spirituality” from feminist theory also helps the author’s emphasis on Sita’s connection to nature and her relationship with other characters in the text. This approach validates women’s spiritual experiences as equally valid to traditional male-dominated religious frameworks.

Chapter Objectives

Aligning with the thesis’s broader goal, this chapter examines the depiction of Sita in Narasimhan’s reimagining. She depicts Sita as a spiritual character and highlights her inner attributes of strength and resilience. She foregrounds the relevance of spirituality in the myth by reflecting and adapting it to a modern readership.

At the heart of mythic storytelling lies the recognition of recurring patterns- archetypes- that reflect fundamental aspects of the human psyche. Archetype is a concept that bridges individual characterization with universal human experience. The term “archetype,” derived from the Greek *arkhetypos* meaning “original pattern or model,” refers to universal symbols that resonate across cultures and time periods, representing instinctive patterns of thought and behaviour that can be found in myths,

dreams, literature, and spiritual practices (The Importance of Feminine Archetypes in Spirituality).

“This is particularly true of religious ideas, but the central concepts of science, philosophy, and ethics are no exception to this rule. In their present form, they are variants of archetypal ideas created by consciously applying and adapting these ideas to reality. For it is the function of consciousness, not only to recognize and assimilate the external world through the gateway of the senses but to translate into visible reality the world within us” (12 Archetypes: Definition, Theory, and Types).

According to him, Archetypes come from the collective unconscious. He rejected the concept of *tabula rasa* and believed in the collective unconscious that retains the experiences and knowledge that humans share as a species (Cherry). In the context of literary analysis, archetypes function as what Jung described as “primordial images” that carry profound psychological and spiritual significance beyond their surface narrative roles (Jung). These archetypal patterns, according to Jung, are “autonomous and hidden forms which are transformed once they enter consciousness and are given particular expression by individuals and their cultures” (Samuels). This understanding proves crucial for analyzing Narasimhan’s Sita, who operates simultaneously as a specific character within the *Ramayana* narrative and as a universal symbol of spiritual

feminine power that transcends cultural boundaries. Devdutt Pattanaik understands it as myth, “truth which is subjective, intuitive, cultural and grounded in faith” (Pattanaik).

The concept becomes particularly relevant when examining spiritual archetypes, which serve as “powerful symbols and representations of the divine feminine, embodying traits such as intuition, compassion, nurturing, and creativity” (The Importance of Feminine Archetypes in Spirituality). Jung believed that archetypes form “a dynamic substratum common” to all human experience, manifesting not directly but through the symbols, images, and patterns they produce in consciousness (Samuels). This indirect manifestation explains how Narasimhan’s Sita can function as both a traditionally recognizable character and a contemporary spiritual guide, accessing what Jung termed the “collective unconscious—a set of shared memories and ideas that transcend individual experiences” (The Importance of Feminine Archetypes in Spirituality).

Archetypal criticism, as developed by literary theorists like Northrop Frye, interprets texts by focusing on “recurring myths and archetypes in the narrative, symbols, images, and character types in literary works”(Archetypal Literary Criticism - Wikipedia). Frye’s approach, outlined in his seminal *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), proposed that “literature drew upon transcendental genres” and that “basic symbolic

myths recur” throughout literary history (Myth Criticism of Northrop Frye – Literary Theory and Criticism). This theoretical framework proves essential for understanding how Narasimhan transforms traditional mythological elements while preserving their archetypal power to speak to universal human experiences.

The spiritual dimension of archetypes becomes particularly significant in feminist retellings of mythological narratives. Feminist archetypal theory recognizes that “recognition of the archetypal and universal dimensions of one’s experiences can help free one from a purely personal relation to them”, allowing for what Christine Downing describes as connection to “a religious non-patriarchal consciousness” (Pickard). This theoretical foundation explains how Narasimhan’s Sita can challenge patriarchal structures through spiritual embodiment rather than political rebellion, representing what feminist spirituality identifies as the “divine feminine” that encompasses “creativity, intuition, nurturing, and compassion” (*The Importance of Feminine Archetypes in Spirituality*).

Structural Overview

Narasimhan’s narrative structure demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how spiritual experiences require different modes of expression from conventional storytelling. As Rainer Maria Rilke suggests in *Letters to a Young Poet*, “Be patient towards all that is unsolved in your

heart and try to love the questions themselves”, emphasising the shift from rational construction to heartfelt reflections where rational narrative gives way to intuitive, mystical expression (Letters to a Young Poet 52). *In Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love* (2021), Bhanumathi Narasimhan reimagines the mythic figure of Sita not merely as a legendary consort or virtuous queen, but as a spiritually awakened being deeply rooted in nature, silence, and divine consciousness.

Narasimhan’s narrative does not follow a strict first-person structure but frequently shifts into an intimate, poetic third-person voice that immerses the reader in Sita’s inner world. The narration foregrounds her perceptions, intuitions, and spiritual resonances, thus emphasizing the introspective nature of her journey.

Textual Genesis

Her voice may not be explicitly first-person, but the lyrical rendering allows a deeply embodied portrayal. The opening passage exemplifies this technique: “Time stood still, The soul danced, As they locked eyes with each other”(Narasimhan xiii).

The poetic format here serves multiple purposes - it disrupts linear time, emphasizes the mystical nature of divine connection, and allows readers to experience Sita’s spiritual state through rhythm and imagery

rather than logical explanation. Unlike Valmiki's externally focused narrative that describes events and actions, Narasimhan's poetic interludes create what can be understood as meditative spaces within the text where consciousness itself becomes the subject of exploration. The writer understands those human expressions that cannot be expressed simply in words but need a touch of art to be expressed.

"She had ceased to exist. There was only him and he was everywhere. There was no temple, no steps, no earth, no sky, no people, no voices, no other, no 'I' – Sita stood rooted to the ground and so did the young boy" (Narasimhan 76).

This mystical encounter encapsulates the bhakti-infused mode of narration, wherein love becomes a dissolution of the ego. Such instances situate Sita within a tradition of feminine mysticism, aligning her with figures like Mirabai or Andal, who perceive their beloved as a divine presence.

When Sita reflects, "And in that inner silence, the soundless vibration of the sacred word 'Ram' rose in soft ripples of bliss", the reader gains direct access to her meditative consciousness (Narasimhan 2). This meditative consciousness makes her choose poetry to explain Rama or to express herself in front of him

“Smaller than the smallest

Larger than the largest

Finer than the finest

The self-luminous of all.” (Narasimhan 25)

This narrative choice transforms the traditional epic’s external focus on heroic deeds into an exploration of what contemporary spirituality recognises as “inner action” - the dynamic processes of consciousness during spiritual practice.

The frequent shifts between prose description and poetic revelation mirror the alternation between ordinary consciousness and heightened spiritual awareness that characterizes mystical experience. This structural innovation allows Narasimhan to present Sita’s story as both biographical narrative and spiritual instruction, fulfilling what Robert Segal describes as myth’s function to offer “timeless insights into human nature” through accessible storytelling (Chanda).

From the outset, Sita is positioned as one with the Earth. Sita’s emergence from the earth in Narasimhan’s retelling transcends the traditional fertility symbolism to become a profound meditation on the relationship between individual consciousness and universal consciousness. It is an event interpreted symbolically as rebirth from

earth's womb- immediately roots her identity in Prakriti (nature). The description of her discovery reveals this deeper spiritual dimension, the image is vivid and maternal:

“The box was lined with soft red silk, and within it, wrapped in fine white muslin cloth, was a tiny baby girl with pink cheeks and curly black hair” (Narasimhan 9).

The imagery suggests not crude emergence from soil, but a careful presentation by the earth itself, as if nature were offering its most precious creation. The Earth is not merely her origin but her constant companion. She prefers walking on the soil rather than the gem-embedded palace paths, and animals and trees respond to her presence with affection (Narasimhan 3). The trees and animals become symbols of harmony, attesting to her *sakshi bhava*—the quality of being a witness to and part of all creation.

Narasimhan's Sita reflects what Devdutt Pattanaik describes as “mythopoesis”—the transformation of myth through new lenses, where archetypes such as the ‘*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*’ (the world as one family) are reworked to reflect ecological harmony and feminist subjectivity (Pattanaik, *Myth = Mithya*).

King Janaka's immediate recognition of her spiritual significance –
 “I don't think she was ever born, Sunayana. This child is a special being

who has chosen us as parents to fulfil a divine purpose” - establishes the theological framework for understanding Sita as what feminist spirituality recognizes as an embodiment of “the divine feminine” connected to earth consciousness (Narasimhan 11). The earth’s role as mother here aligns with ancient goddess traditions.

Narasimhan’s description of Janak’s mystical experience during Sita’s discovery provides crucial insight into the spiritual implications of her earth-birth.

“He saw millions of seeds sprouting, flowers blooming, little birds hatching out of eggs. He felt a part of all the innumerable droplets of water that rose from the oceans into the sky to become puffy rain clouds” (Narasimhan 9).

The passage exemplifies how Sita’s presence brings a cosmic consciousness that transcends individual boundaries. It reflects the spiritual concept of oneness. While Janak is revered as a realised soul in the Vedas and Upanishads, in the text, Sita becomes a tool of his spiritual awakening.

This experience of Sita’s divinity from infancy establishes the tone of their relationship. The realisation of her divinity and his control-free parenting presents a picture of holistic nurturing in the text. He organises discourse and readily accepts Sita’s wish to be taught by Gargi in order to

fuel the feminine intellect in the fundamentally patriarchal world, representing spiritual maturity.

Janaka's influence also prepares Sita to choose Rama not merely as a husband but as a spiritual counterpart. He tells her to "look for the honey hidden in each event in life" (Narasimhan 21), a metaphor for seeing sweetness even in suffering. This advice becomes a touchstone for Sita during her years of exile and captivity, enabling her to sustain her joy and sense of purpose. Moreover, his teachings often emphasize detachment:

"Though he was holding her, he felt like he was holding empty space in his hands. In fact, it was not empty space—it was pure energy" (Narasimhan 32). This reflection captures not only Sita's ethereal nature but also Janaka's yogic vision of her as part of Brahman. This detachment is echoed later in the narrative when Janaka sighs at the thought of "acting on the predictable opinions of people" (Narasimhan 117), subtly critiquing social orthodoxy. In her moments of doubt, Sita recalls her father's spiritual compass. Before confronting Kaushalya to seek permission for exile, she remembers his words: "If she took the side of dharma, then Rama would surely agree with her" (Narasimhan 148). Thus, Janaka's guidance continues to shape her actions, even in his physical absence. The connection between Sita and Janaka is not sentimental but sattvic—based on clarity, trust, and spiritual alignment. He entrusts her fully to Rama at

the wedding, declaring that she will be the one “to support him and help him uphold dharma throughout his life” (Narasimhan 126). This blessing is not transactional but a spiritual transference, affirming that Sita’s dharma is intertwined with the cosmic order.

The author’s treatment of Sita’s relationship with nature throughout the narrative reinforces this spiritual interpretation. Narasimhan weaves Sita’s identity into an intimate, almost mystical, relationship with the natural world. Far from being a passive backdrop, nature is a conscious, nurturing, and responsive force in the text, offering both companionship and affirmation of Sita’s divine self. The description “The earth has formed a smooth mound below the tree for Sita to be comfortably seated upon” suggests not mere physical accommodation, but conscious response by the earth to her spiritual presence (Narasimhan 3). In this spiritual ecology, Sita is not separate from the world around her; she is an emanation of it—a living embodiment of Prakriti, the universal feminine principle in Indian philosophy (D. Pattanaik). From the earliest chapters, nature is Sita’s sanctuary and mirror. The novel opens with a lush garden scene:

“Sita stood watching as two butterflies danced in the air... Her eyes followed them... over to a little squirrel... chasing a buzzing bee... A shower of a hundred soft lilac-coloured petals floated down... a few rested on her outstretched, soft palms. Sita’s eyes closed and she dived deep

within as the gentle touch of the petals enveloped her being in waves of beauty” (Narasimhan 1).

This moment of sensory immersion evokes the *rasa* of *shanta* (tranquillity), highlighting how nature does not merely surround Sita—it participates in her awareness. Such episodes reflect an eco-spiritual poetics, where communion with the natural world becomes a gateway to inner stillness and divine resonance. As environmental theorist David Abram suggests, the “more-than-human” world in many indigenous and ancient traditions is not inert but animate, filled with spirit and intention (Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 1996). Narasimhan’s rendering aligns with this sensibility. Similarly, when “The tree responded with its kind but firm touch, radiating the love and warmth of a protective mother for her newborn”, Narasimhan presents nature as actively participating in Sita’s spiritual journey rather than serving as mere backdrop.

This portrayal aligns with contemporary understanding of nature as resistance for women in fostering spiritual health and well-being, where connection to natural environments serves as a pathway to spiritual empowerment that transcends conventional gender limitations. Sita’s refusal to walk on jewelled palace floors in favour of the earth beneath her feet further symbolizes her groundedness and humility:

“She avoided stepping on the gleaming white, solid pathways etched with gold and precious gems. She preferred the comforting feel of the soft earth under her feet. Nature was her respite and constant companion in her time away from her beloved,” reflecting her deep identification with the Bhumi Devi archetype (Narasimhan 3).

Her affinity with the soil is not decorative; it is ontological. Earth is not an object but a mother, a companion, and eventually, a destination. Sita’s earth-birth thus becomes not only a mythological detail but a spiritual metaphor for the grounding that comes from recognising one’s fundamental connection to the source of all life.

Even during her captivity in Ashoka Vatika, nature remains her ally. Birds, squirrels, and sunbirds defy the harshness of the rakshasis to bring her food offerings:

“When the rakshasis were asleep, little squirrels would run down the trunk of the Simsupa tree and drop nuts into her lap... Sita could not refuse their offerings. She would wash those berries and nuts in the water from the nearby stream and eat them” (Narasimhan 14).

This act of nature feeding the divine underscores the sacred reciprocity between Sita and her environment, where love and care flow not just from human to non-human, but vice versa. This image powerfully

subverts her isolation, turning the forest into a temple and its creatures into devotees. Moreover, her meditative connection with the Earth reaches a transcendental pitch when she begins to merge with the ground:

“As she continued looking at the ground, it began to part, and she felt as if she were going deeper and deeper into it... There was no durbar, no dialogue, no earth, no sky—just her and the golden light” (Narasimhan 45).

This moment prefigures her eventual return to the earth—not as a retreat, but as a spiritual liberation. It aligns with bhakti and tantric traditions where Prakriti (nature) is not illusion (maya), but the sacred field through which union with the divine occurs (devdutt Pattanaik). The “golden light” is both a symbol of transcendence and the interior of nature itself—suggesting that Sita does not flee the world but returns to her source. Furthermore, metaphors of flowering, blooming, and growth often echo her presence. As Mandodari observes:

“The flowers are in full bloom, the trees are yielding more fruits, the varieties of songbirds have increased... The lotuses seem to bloom on seeing you instead of the sun” (Narasimhan 59).

Here, Sita’s presence activates abundance. She is no longer just a dweller in nature—she is its awakener. These images reinforce her shakti

aspect, where feminine energy is seen as the creative power animating the world.

In literary terms, this relationship positions Sita within the archetype of the “Green Woman” or “Earth Goddess,” a figure whose power flows from alignment with natural rhythms. The Romantic tradition in English literature often evoked women as symbols of nature, but Narasimhan transcends metaphor—her Sita is nature. She is not passive like Wordsworth’s Lucy; she is an active force of harmony, much like the Vedic Devi or the Puranic Bhumi.

The forest exile episode reveals Narasimhan’s most significant departure from traditional interpretations; exile is not merely a socio-political disruption or a punishment imposed on the royal family, but rather it is a transformation into spiritual liberation. Sita’s response to the announcement of exile demonstrates this radical reinterpretation:

“Sita, on the other hand, felt almost liberated! A great fount of joy welled up in her and she was as eager to go as if they were embarking on an exciting adventure. All she wanted was to be by Rama’s side. Nothing else mattered” (Narasimhan 150).

This reaction reflects what spiritual traditions recognize as the shift from attachment to worldly conditions to appreciation for opportunities for

inner growth. The forest, rather than being a site of discomfort and degradation, is transformed into a spiritual sanctuary—a place where Sita’s divine essence, intuitive wisdom, and deep inner joy come fully into view.

The author’s description of Sita’s experience in the forest emphasizes spiritual rather than material concerns. Sita’s decision is instinctive and spiritually motivated. Her joy in choosing to accompany Rama does not stem from wifely duty alone, but from the realization that the forest will offer a deeper, truer expression of her being. The renunciation of palace comforts is not a sacrifice but a liberation.

The forest environment serves as what can be understood as a natural temple where Sita’s spiritual practice deepens rather than deteriorates. Her meditation experiences in nature - “As she continued looking at the ground, it began to part, and she felt as if she were going deeper and deeper into it. She held her gaze and began seeing a golden light,” - present the exile as an intensive spiritual retreat rather than punishment (Narasimhan 45). The “golden light” imagery connects to established mystical traditions where divine light represents direct spiritual experience beyond conceptual understanding.

Sita’s understanding of dharma is neither passive nor dependent on Rama’s approval. She asserts her agency when Rama hesitates to take her along:

“You forget that you are my greatest comfort! I have promised to be by your side through everything that you do... To care for you, to be your comfort, to share your life, to walk with you, is my dharma” (Narasimhan 148).

This firm declaration is especially significant because it challenges traditional gender expectations not by defiance, but by invoking the spiritual unity of purpose. Her dharma is not confined to social roles; it is a conscious, soul-level commitment that transcends ritual definitions of wifehood. Here, Narasimhan’s Sita embodies what Gayatri Spivak would call “the speaking subaltern”—a woman who reclaims voice not through aggression, but through ethical and metaphysical clarity.

Narasimhan further enhances the spiritual dimension of Sita by highlighting forest animals’ response to her,

“But the small animals and birds noticed Sita’s refusal. When the rakshasis were asleep, little squirrels would run down the trunk of the simsupa tree and drop nuts into her lap. They would wait to see if Sita accepted their offering or not. The sparrows and sunbirds would carry tiny berries in their beaks and place them on the ground near Sita, just as if they were bringing food for their young ones. Sita could not refuse their offerings. She would wash those berries and nuts in the water from the nearby stream and eat them” (Narasimhan 14).

The passage suggests Sita's unity with the natural world. The animals frequently present near her become Sita's solace, foregrounding her compassion towards them. Narasimhan presents a Sita who does not dominate or domesticate but become part of the larger cosmos.

These episodes also evoke the classical Indian trope of *sakhya bhava*—the mood of friendship with the divine. The animals, like devotees, offer sustenance not out of necessity but reverence. Their gestures are quiet acts of *seva*, reinforcing Sita's status as *Devi incarnate*. As one of the yogis earlier tells King Janaka: "The earth she walks on is equal to gold" (Narasimhan 12). This reverence naturally extends to all sentient life, which recognizes her spiritual aura even when the world of men has forgotten it.

Moreover, this relational ecology is especially profound because it takes place in *Ashoka Vatika*—a space designed to isolate and degrade her. In this context, the presence of nurturing animals becomes a symbolic reclamation of agency and spiritual community. While the *rakshasis* represent *adharma*, cruelty, and ignorance, the animals restore *satya*, *dharma*, and *prem* (truth, virtue, and love) in Sita's life. Her captivity, therefore, becomes not a descent into loneliness, but a retreat into a new kind of kinship.

Theologically, Sita's communion with forest creatures can also be interpreted through the lens of *advaita vedanta*. The non-dual nature of existence—where all forms of life are seen as expressions of the same divine consciousness—is mirrored in these moments of non-verbal, instinctive communion. There is no hierarchy here, only harmony. In receiving food from the animals with gratitude, Sita affirms that divinity is not monopolized by humans or gods, but distributed among all beings, each playing its role in the larger cosmic rhythm.

Sita's comment that "Being with nature is liberation, isn't it?" followed by Rama's response "Being in your nature is liberation" provides the theological key to understanding this episode (Narasimhan 136). The wordplay on "nature" (external environment) and "nature" (essential spiritual identity) reveals how the forest exile serves as both outer journey and inner pilgrimage, allowing Sita to discover her true spiritual nature through communion with the natural world.

Narasimhan's portrayal of Sita's relationship with Rama transcends conventional marital dynamics to explore what spiritual traditions recognize as divine union or mystical marriage. Their union is grounded not merely in marital roles or *dharma*-bound duties but in *bhakti*, silence, and cosmic recognition. The bond between them transcends physical companionship and reflects the *advaitic* understanding of unity—where the

individual self dissolves into the supreme self, and where love becomes a medium of self-realization. The author's description of their first meeting exemplifies this approach: "She dissolved into him, like a river merging into the ocean. She could not feel herself, she had stopped breathing; the flow of her thoughts had come to a halt and her eyes had stilled. She had ceased to exist. There was only him and he was everywhere. There was no temple, no steps, no earth, no sky, no people, no voices, no other, no 'I'—Sita stood rooted to the ground and so did the young boy" (Narasimhan 76).

This passage employs classical mystical language to describe what spiritual traditions identify as ego dissolution in the presence of the divine. The imagery of the river merging with the ocean particularly resonates with Vedantic descriptions of individual consciousness (*jiva*) recognising its unity with universal consciousness (*Brahman*). Narasimhan's use of such language positions Sita's love as spiritual realisation rather than merely emotional attachment.

This moment of divine recognition echoes the Upanishadic idea of *Tat Tvam Asi*—"Thou art that"—in which the perceived other is realized as one's own self (Chandogya Upanishad 6.8.7). Narasimhan's poetic language intentionally avoids corporeal imagery and emphasizes instead the spiritual quality of their union. In her vision, Sita sees herself at Rama's

feet and beholds the universe: the coiled serpent (Shesha), the cosmic ocean, and her own reflection. This metaphor situates Rama not only as a beloved, but as the Lord of the Universe, and Sita as the soul longing for the Absolute.

The theological depth of their relationship becomes explicit in Rama's declaration: "But where are 'you' to feel everything is in me, Sita? We are but one!". This statement reflects the non-dualistic understanding that characterizes the highest levels of spiritual development, where the separation between lover and beloved dissolves into recognition of fundamental unity. Such language is characteristic of what mystical traditions describe as the goal of spiritual practice - the direct experience of unity consciousness.

Their love continues to be described not through emotional or erotic intimacy, but through shared silences, inward devotion, and intuitive presence. Sita reflects:

"Infinity is tangible, but Rama was here. Sita's personal relationship with infinity. Her relationship was one of unconditional love and absolute surrender. The memory of bowing down to his lotus feet filled her heart, the tears of devotion flowed profusely from her closed eyes. It was almost as if she were washing his feet with her tears" (Narasimhan 89).

Such expressions evoke the bhakti tradition, particularly madhurya bhava, where the soul relates to the divine as a lover—but with humility, longing, and ecstatic surrender. Her tears, which in patriarchal narratives often denote weakness, are transformed here into sacred offerings of love.

Sita's experience of Rama's presence demonstrates how this mystical dimension operates in practical life: "From the moment Sita has met Rama, she constantly felt the vastness of his presence. And those who met her felt his energy and presence strongly through her (Narasimhan 147). This description suggests that their relationship functions as a spiritual transmission system where divine consciousness flows through their connection to benefit others - a phenomenon that spiritual traditions recognize as the hallmark of authentic spiritual partnership.

The mystical connection between them transcends physical proximity, as demonstrated when "Deep in the forest, Rama felt a sudden coolness at his feet, as if they were wet, and he felt the intensity of Sita's longing" (Narasimhan 89). The continuity of feeling across physical distance affirms that their love exists in the realm of consciousness, beyond body or geography.

Narasimhan's portrayal of Sita's relationship with her captors reveals her spiritual approach to adversity. Her interaction with the rakshasis demonstrates how spiritual consciousness can maintain its

integrity even in hostile environments: “And here, surrounded by ugly, coarse, insensitive rakshasis, Sita was held captive. They were not ugly because they had deformed faces or protruding teeth, unclean hair, or twisted nails. They were ugly because they refused to acknowledge the beauty that surrounded them” (Narasimhan 4).

This passage shows Sita’s spiritual maturity in recognising that true ugliness comes from spiritual blindness rather than physical appearance. Her ability to maintain compassionate understanding even toward those who guard her demonstrates what spiritual traditions recognise as the hallmark of advanced spiritual development, the capacity to see beyond surface appearances to the spiritual reality that underlies all existence.

Sita’s encounter with Mandodari during her captivity reveals another dimension of her spiritual approach - the capacity to recognise and honour the divine feminine in all its manifestations. Her respectful attention to Mandodari’s words and her recognition of the loyalty that Mandodari shows toward Ravana demonstrate how spiritual consciousness naturally honours the authentic expressions of love and devotion wherever they appear, even in seemingly compromised circumstances.

The author’s description of Sita’s state following this recognition shows how spiritual awakening transforms one’s relationship to experience: “Most of the creation left her answerless. And she enjoyed

being in that state of wonder” (Narasimhan 47). This passage reflects what mystical traditions recognise as the hallmark of authentic spiritual realisation, the capacity to abide in mystery and uncertainty without the compulsive need to resolve everything through mental analysis.

Narasimhan’s portrayal of Sita fundamentally reimagines traditional gender roles by presenting spiritual strength as a legitimate form of feminist agency, aligning with the author’s belief that empowerment challenges patriarchy in a subtle but assertive way. This approach reflects a broader trend in Indian feminist spirituality that recognizes “the divine feminine energy” as inherently empowering without requiring external validation or masculine approval (Bhatt). Narasimhan’s emphasis on Sita’s spiritual authority manifests through her statement,

“Only divinity can recognize divinity”, which represents a form of self-recognition that transcends patriarchal validation systems. This spiritual self-awareness becomes a source of power that operates independently of social structures, demonstrating what feminist spirituality theorists identify as “empowerment through recognizing and nurturing the inherent Shakti—the energy and resilience within every woman” (Women Empowerment- International Women’s Conference).

This reimagining challenges the binary between traditional devotion and feminist assertion by presenting a third pathway where

spiritual empowerment serves as both personal liberation and subtle social critique (Rajnandini). Narasimhan's approach resonates with the understanding that in Indian spiritual traditions, "spirituality transcends gender" and that true transformation occurs when individuals "rise above gender" through meditation and spiritual practice. This perspective allows Sita to challenge patriarchal structures through spiritual authority rather than political confrontation, offering a model of empowerment that honours traditional spiritual values while asserting feminine agency.

Narasimhan's portrayal of Sita's relationships with other women, particularly Urmila and Mandodari, demonstrates what feminist scholar Volga describes as "sisterhood" - a network of spiritual solidarity that challenges traditional narratives of women as competitors (Aardra; Bajpai). This approach echoes Volga's influential feminist retelling *The Liberation of Sita*, which emphasizes how "Sita meets some of these women – Surpanakha for instance, and immediately empathises with them, equating her own hardships like trial by fire with tribulations of others" (Bajpai).

While Narasimhan's text may not extensively detail these relationships, her spiritual approach to Sita's character suggests a fundamental recognition of what contemporary feminist scholars identify as "the significance of sisterhood and female camaraderie amid the

backdrop of patriarchal norms”. The *Ramayana* tradition includes powerful examples of female solidarity, particularly through “Sita’s sisters—Urmila, and her two cousins Mandavi and Shrutakirti—all brought up together in the lap of love and luxury, but more importantly, under the tutelage of a sagacious man called King Janak” (Pethe).

Urmila’s relationship with Sita represents a particularly significant model of feminine support that transcends conventional marital obligations (Gornik). In traditional interpretations, Urmila’s sacrifice—sleeping for fourteen years while Lakshmana remains awake to protect Rama and Sita—is often overlooked, but contemporary feminist readings highlight how “there is so little known about their sacrifices, they are relegated to history and in their story lies the story of every woman, who does so much for her family, but her efforts remain unseen and unappreciated” (Vaid).

Narasimhan’s spiritual approach to these relationships suggests that feminine solidarity operates through shared spiritual understanding rather than merely shared suffering. Her portrayal of Sita’s compassionate response to other women, including the rakshasis who guard her in Lanka, demonstrates what feminist spirituality recognizes as “creating safe and welcoming spaces for women to explore their spirituality” (Arora). Rather than viewing other women as threats or competitors, Narasimhan’s Sita

extends understanding and empathy, reflecting the spiritual principle that recognizes divine consciousness in all beings.

The relationship with Mandodari, Ravana's wife, provides another crucial example of how spiritual consciousness transcends conventional boundaries of loyalty and enmity. Narasimhan's Sita maintains respect for Mandodari's devotion to her husband while neither condoning nor condemning her choices, embodying what feminist spirituality describes as "building community and solidarity through shared spiritual experiences" (Arora). This approach challenges traditional narratives that typically pit virtuous women against each other based on their male associations.

These relationships collectively demonstrate what Volga identifies as a "break from this absurd myth" that women are "usually described as jealous and resenting other women" (Bajpai). Instead, Narasimhan's spiritual framework presents feminine relationships as sources of mutual recognition and spiritual growth, contributing to what contemporary scholars recognize as essential feminist work of "promoting the idea of 'sisterhood', much less known than the oft-celebrated idea of brotherhood" (Bajpai).

Narasimhan's spiritual interpretation of Sita represents a fundamental departure from traditional depictions that present her as the

“passive, sacrificial archetype” characterized by “unquestioning subordination to the demands of her husband” (Murty). While conventional portrayals emphasize Sita as “the epitome of the standards for women” who was “chaste, pure, unadulterated, and steadfast, almost always defined by her status as a wife and a daughter”, Narasimhan’s version presents a figure whose spiritual agency operates as a source of inner empowerment (Sachde).

Traditional interpretations have long portrayed Sita through what feminist critics identify as an “androcentric” lens that reduces her to “a plot device to further the story, instead of a complete character of her own” (Sachde). The conventional narrative emphasizes her as “the ideal wife of the Hindu tradition” described through “terms like demure, loyal, modest, pure, chaste, and devoted” (Delaye). These portrayals, while acknowledging her suffering, often present her trials as validation of her virtue rather than demonstrations of her strength.

In contrast, Narasimhan’s spiritual approach presents Sita’s experiences as opportunities for inner growth and self-realization rather than external validation. Her response to exile—“Sita, on the other hand, felt almost liberated! A great fount of joy welled up in her”—directly contradicts traditional portrayals of her as suffering victim.

Narasimhan's approach also addresses the concern raised by contemporary women who find that "Sita's apparent lack of choice in life tempers her impact as role model for women" (Delaye). By presenting spiritual practice itself as a form of choice and agency, the author transforms apparent passivity into active spiritual engagement. This interpretation resonates with the understanding that "true empowerment lies in recognizing and embracing this inherent power rather than seeking external validation or parity with men" (Bhatt).

Narasimhan's spiritual portrayal of Sita addresses a crucial cultural need among contemporary Indian readers seeking "spiritual meaning amid modern challenges," reflecting what scholars identify as a broader trend where "many Indian women have turned to spirituality as a means of freeing themselves from patriarchal oppression" (Girdhar). This approach resonates particularly with educated Indian women who find themselves caught between traditional expectations and modern aspirations, offering a model of empowerment that honours cultural heritage while asserting personal agency.

The contemporary relevance of this approach is evidenced by the growing recognition that "spirituality can either serve to empower women and genuinely liberate them from patriarchal oppression or enable them to cope with patriarchal oppression" (Girdhar). Narasimhan's Sita represents

the former category, demonstrating how spiritual practice can serve as a foundation for authentic empowerment that transcends external circumstances. This interpretation speaks to contemporary Indian women who seek models of strength that integrate rather than reject their cultural spiritual heritage.

The cultural significance of this portrayal extends beyond individual empowerment to address broader social concerns about women's roles in modern India. Contemporary studies reveal that "women living in modern India still face many issues of discrimination" including challenges related to "India's patriarchal culture" that makes "the process of gaining land-ownership rights and access to education challenging for women" (*Feminism in India - Wikipedia*). Narasimhan's spiritual approach offers a response to these challenges by presenting inner strength and spiritual authority as resources that cannot be externally controlled or diminished.

The timing of this interpretation proves particularly significant given contemporary movements toward "spiritual empowerment that can free women from all her inabilities. Organizations like The Art of Living Foundation, under which Narasimhan works, have demonstrated that "when women lead with values, they bring stability, creativity, and progress to society" (*Women Empowerment -International Women's*

Conference). This philosophy directly informs her literary portrayal of Sita as someone whose spiritual values become sources of social transformation.

The approach also addresses the contemporary need for indigenous models of feminism that are rooted in Indian spiritual traditions rather than imported from Western contexts. As feminist scholars note, there is a growing recognition that “actions undertaken with awareness, compassion, and a commitment to equity can counteract the negative consequences of past deeds” (Hashia). Narasimhan’s Sita embodies this principle by demonstrating how spiritual consciousness naturally leads to compassionate action and social awareness.

Furthermore, this portrayal resonates with contemporary spiritual movements that emphasize women’s leadership in religious and social transformation. The Brahma Kumaris organization, mentioned in several sources, demonstrates how “this is the largest spiritual organization run by women which proves that, given the opportunity, women can do work at par with men, or perhaps even better”. Narasimhan’s Sita provides a mythological foundation for such contemporary spiritual leadership.

The cultural implications extend to the broader question of how ancient wisdom can inform modern living. Contemporary readers increasingly seek “a holistic concept, rooted in inner strength, values, and

the ability to lead with grace and purpose” rather than empowerment defined purely in terms of external achievement or opposition to tradition. Narasimhan’s spiritual interpretation of Sita provides exactly this model, demonstrating how ancient spiritual principles can inform contemporary approaches to personal and social transformation.

This approach also fulfils what contemporary scholars identify as the need for “redefining spiritual practices and symbols to be more inclusive and empowering for women” (Arora). By presenting Sita’s traditional spiritual practices as sources of empowerment rather than limitation, Narasimhan contributes to the broader project of reclaiming women’s spiritual authority within traditional frameworks rather than rejecting those frameworks entirely.

The contemporary resonance of this interpretation is further evidenced by the growing recognition that “the pursuit of spirituality can either serve to empower women and genuinely liberate them from patriarchal oppression” (Girdhar). Narasimhan’s work demonstrates the empowering potential of this approach, offering contemporary Indian women a model of agency that integrates spiritual practice with social consciousness, providing both personal fulfillment and cultural authenticity in their quest for empowerment and meaning.

Narasimhan's *Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love* demonstrates how contemporary authors can preserve the essential timeline and structural elements of the *Ramayana* while infusing it with modern spiritual sensibilities, supporting the hypothesis that myths evolve with society rather than remaining static. Unlike retellings that dramatically alter plot points or introduce anachronistic elements, Narasimhan maintains what scholars describe as “mythic continuity” - the preservation of core narrative structure while allowing for interpretive evolution (Kulkarni).

This approach aligns with Devdutt Pattanaik's understanding that “myths are usually embedded in sacred stories” and serve as “windows to the soul,” providing “an understanding of the world around us” (*Relating Myth to the Present -IndiaWest Journal News*). Narasimhan's careful preservation of the *Ramayana*'s timeline demonstrates what contemporary scholarship recognizes as successful mythopoesis - the transformation of ancient narratives “to fit the contours of modern society” while maintaining their spiritual essence (Kagaba). The author's description of Sita's birth from earth, her marriage to Rama, the forest exile, and subsequent trials follows Valmiki's chronological structure, yet each episode receives spiritual reinterpretation that speaks to contemporary seekers.

The novel exemplifies what mythological scholars identify as the evolution of “mythological narratives in contemporary India” where “creators are reinterpreting mythology for modern audiences” through digital and literary platforms (Lalchhanhima). Narasimhan’s spiritual approach represents what researchers describe as the movement from “rigid” mythological frameworks toward interpretations that “address the concerns in mythical narratives and give them a modern spin” while maintaining story continuity (Dulal Halder). This preservation of timeline combined with spiritual innovation demonstrates how myths can “serve as frameworks for individual and collective identity” while adapting to contemporary spiritual needs (Lalchhanhima).

The author’s treatment of key episodes like the agni pariksha illustrates this balance between continuity and change. While maintaining the event within the traditional narrative sequence, Narasimhan transforms its meaning from a test of chastity to a demonstration of spiritual purity that requires no external validation. This approach reflects what scholars recognize as the contemporary need to make “ancient tales accessible and relevant” while preserving their transformative power (Jenkins).

The reception of Narasimhan’s novel reflects broader patterns in contemporary Indian readership that increasingly seek spiritual meaning through mythological literature. Recent studies indicate that “the year saw

a significant surge in the popularity of spiritual reading among the youth” with this trend expected to “continue its upward trajectory” (Garg). Publishing industry analyses reveal that “a sizeable percentage of the top sellers in the bestsellers list on Amazon.in comprise of books in mythology, epics and historical fiction,” with these categories contributing “almost one fourth of the titles in the bestsellers lists” (*Of Myth, History and Sales Reality!* - *The Sunday Guardian Live*).

This shift in readership patterns reflects what cultural analysts identify as a response to contemporary challenges. As noted by industry experts, “youngsters feel it can help unlock new doors and lead them to a happier life” and seek “guidance from a spiritual master” through literature (Garg). The appeal of Narasimhan’s spiritual interpretation of Sita aligns with observations that “many feel shifting reading habits thus can ‘solve their existential dilemmas’” (Garg). This trend particularly resonates with “those in the 18-27 age group” who have been “constantly seen as needing help in understanding their lives” (Garg).

The growing market for spiritual mythology reflects what scholars describe as readers’ “desire to reconnect with their cultural roots” while seeking contemporary relevance. Publishers note that “with the convenience and accessibility of audio streaming services, previously unexplored characters and familiar tales retold in novel ways have found

great favour among contemporary listeners”. Narasimhan’s emphasis on Sita’s inner spiritual journey appeals to this demographic seeking what industry analysts call “spiritual explanation or solution for the many conundrums that life often poses”.

The novel’s reception also reflects the broader phenomenon where “mythology is deeply interwoven into the cultural fabric, revered by many readers” and “iconic epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* resonate widely due to their exploration of universal themes and timeless human emotions” (Sarfare). Contemporary readers increasingly appreciate retellings that offer “new life into ancient tales, along with elements of fantasy and adventure” while maintaining spiritual authenticity (Sarfare). Narasimhan’s approach satisfies what cultural observers identify as the contemporary need for narratives that provide both “personal reflection and community cohesion” while addressing “fundamental questions of identity, morality, and existence” (Lalchhanhima).

Narasimhan’s spiritual interpretation of Sita creates a distinctive position within the landscape of contemporary *Ramayana* retellings when compared to the more politically assertive approaches of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Amish Tripathi, and the #MeToo-inspired voice of Sini Panicker. While Divakaruni’s *The Forest of Enchantments* presents Sita as “a woman who endures countless predicaments for her husband and his

kingdom” and emphasizes her struggle to “retain autonomy in a world that privileges men”, Narasimhan’s Sita finds empowerment through spiritual transcendence rather than political resistance (*Chitra Divakaruni*).

Conclusion

This chapter’s examination of Bhanumathi Narasimhan’s *Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love* reveals how contemporary authors can successfully blend spiritual empowerment with feminist consciousness to create transformative mythological retellings. Narasimhan’s unique contribution lies in her presentation of what can be termed “spiritual feminism” - an approach that challenges patriarchal structures through inner authority rather than external rebellion, offering contemporary readers a model of empowerment that honours traditional wisdom while asserting feminine agency.

The analysis has demonstrated how Narasimhan employs sophisticated narrative techniques to convey Sita’s spiritual journey through poetic interludes, symbolic natural imagery, and mystical language that transforms traditional episodes into metaphors for spiritual awakening. Her declaration “Only divinity can recognize divinity” represents not merely self-awareness but a fundamental assertion of spiritual autonomy that requires no masculine validation. This portrayal exemplifies how spiritual consciousness can serve as both personal liberation and subtle

social critique, resonating with contemporary Indian readers seeking authentic empowerment models that integrate rather than reject cultural heritage.

The theoretical framework combining Pattanaik's mythopoesis, Segal's demythologization, and feminist spirituality theory has illuminated how Narasimhan transforms Sita from mythological figure to universal spiritual archetype whose experiences offer guidance for contemporary spiritual seekers. Her work demonstrates how myths can evolve through reinterpretation rather than replacement, supporting the thesis hypothesis that ancient narratives remain culturally relevant when adapted to address contemporary needs while preserving essential wisdom.

Significantly, this spiritual interpretation addresses what scholars identify as the growing recognition among contemporary readers that "spiritual texts are an integral part of Indian literature" and that ancient wisdom can inform modern spiritual seeking. Narasimhan's approach responds to the contemporary need identified by cultural analysts for narratives that provide both "personal reflection and community cohesion" while addressing "fundamental questions of identity, morality, and existence".

The chapter's comparative analysis with other contemporary retellings - Divakaruni's political assertiveness, Tripathi's warrior

archetype, and Panicker's #MeToo-inspired voice - demonstrates the diverse pathways through which authors reimagine Sita's agency. Narasimhan's spiritual approach offers what feminist spirituality scholars describe as "empowerment through recognizing and nurturing the inherent Shakti—the energy and resilience within every woman".

This analysis strongly reinforces the thesis argument that Sita's enduring relevance stems from adaptive reinterpretations that respond to contemporary spiritual and gender concerns while maintaining a connection to traditional frameworks. Narasimhan's work exemplifies how spirituality serves as a crucial contemporary lens for mythological reinterpretation, particularly in addressing what contemporary scholars recognize as the spiritual vacuum characterizing much modern discourse.

Reawakened Sita: Reading *Sita: Now You Know Me* by Sini Panicker

This chapter undertakes a comprehensive analysis of Sini Panicker's *Sita: Now You Know Me* (2021), situating the novel within the broader landscape of contemporary reimagination of the *Ramayana* and evolving literary imagination of Sita as a reawakened character.

Panicker's novel presents an intimate portrayal of Sita in her most human, imperfect, and yet appealing form, set in the Vedic times of India, where Sita narrates her turbulent life in extensive detail, revealing her deepest desires, grief, and horrors, as well as her profound love for Ram. The text presents a significant departure from the conventional *Ramayana* retellings by positioning her as the primary narrator. By foregrounding first-person narration, the novel enacts what Adrienne Rich calls "re-vision," the act of "looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes" to reimagine women's place in inherited narratives (Rich 18).

This Sita is deeply rooted in two major elements of her time: the agricultural practices that are further cemented by her connection to the Mother Earth, and the philosophical debates on life and the cosmos of the Vedas and Upanishads. Through this retelling, Panicker offers a nuanced exploration of Sita's character that challenges traditional interpretations

while remaining faithful to the epic's essential narrative structure. The analysis presented here addresses the novel's contributions to contemporary feminist discourse by analysing how Panicker reclaims Sita's voice through an immersive first-person narrative, by situating the novel with contemporary socio-cultural movements especially #METOO discourse, and by interrogating the theoretical implications of transforming an archetypal mythological figure into feminist symbol, while examining its limitations and contradictions within the broader field of mythological retellings.

“Reawakening” in this context signifies an active revival of Sita's agency—an interpellation of her voice from the margins of conventional mythic portraiture into the centre of narrative consciousness. Drawing on Eliade's notion of the ‘eternal return’, this revival is not merely retrospective but a renewed presence: Panicker's Sita re-enters the mythic field from which she was historically sidelined (“Eternal Return (Eliade)”). Concurrently, this act aligns with feminist re-vision, repositioning Sita as a speaking subject rather than a passive figure through the process of mythopoesis. Using Frye's archetypal criticism, one can see her reawakening not as an obliteration of myth, but as a rebirth of the archetype suffused with human interiority and existential urgency. Sita's reawakening is a ritualistic returning to a space from which she was narratively and

culturally exiled. In retelling her own story, she resumes participation in sacred time, not as an object of myth, but as a conscious agent who is alive in her grief, introspection and defiance (Denham).

The chapter begins by examining Panicker's literary context and motivations, followed by the theoretical framing of the 'reawakened' Sita. It then undertakes a detailed textual analysis of key episodes, exploring how Sita asserts agency and resists patriarchal norms. The chapter concludes by evaluating the novel's reception and its contribution to modern feminist retellings of myth.

Contextual Background

Sini Panicker, born and raised in Kerala, always aspired to write. The loss of her parents and the #METOO movement moved her towards the question of pain and equality, which led to the birth of the text we know as *Sita: Now You Know Me*. Writing this novel somehow became both a personal catharsis and a political gesture. The debut novelist has embedded her Sita with the questions she feels are relevant to her and to women today.

In an interview, Panicker reflects, "She is still here, isn't she? Because the women are still being mistreated on this vast earth. Every single day. They suffer from inequality and harsh judgment, from punishment and torture," despite all this advancement (Panicker). And Sita

still epitomizes us, all of us, all women, irrespective of our time or place.”

This invocation of Sita as a universal, transhistorical figure underpins the narrative’s central aim: to retrieve Sita’s voice from the margins of epic tradition and allow her to speak, think, and resist. Her Sita is introspective, analysing everything in her life, searching for equality and a voice for women across centuries. Her text is a result of searching for the equality that she feels Sita and all the other women deserve.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing on primary textual analysis, author interviews, and relevant theoretical frameworks, this chapter aims to foreground Sita’s introspection, autonomy and resistance to patriarchal norms, facilitating her “reawakening” as a contemporary feminist subject. While integrating critical perspectives and alternative readings that enhance the academic rigour of this study. This analysis is done through the study of ‘Mythopoesis’, Segal’s Demythologization and Frye’s theory of ‘Archetypal Theory’ along with feminist narratology, ecofeminist symbolism, and postcolonial reinterpretations. Ultimately, this analysis reinforces the thesis’s broader argument that these reimaginings are dynamic cultural art, keeping Sita relevant by giving voice to her in the spaces that were withheld from her.

Mythopoesis refers to “the creation of myths, either collectively within a given culture or individually by a writer or a group of creators” (Chakravarty). Contemporary scholarship defines it as a “cyclical process” where “fragments of myth may result in the making of another mythopoeia”. Research demonstrates that mythopoesis involves both “reworking and inventing new symbols and stories” to create “alternative narratives when necessary” (Sodha). “During the process of creation of its mythos, works of mythopoeia often draw upon older myths from various cultures across the globe, and are subsequently characterized by dense self-referentiality” (Chakravarty). Modern mythopoesis serves as “relief from existential dread that comes with a rational world” while linking “different cultures and societies” (Bastian). Panicker engages in active mythopoesis by creating new mythic meanings for post-#MeToo audiences. Her retelling doesn’t merely repeat Valmiki’s narrative but forges innovative symbolic frameworks where Sita’s earth-connection becomes feminist resistance and her trials become contemporary women’s struggles—enabling mythic reawakening for modern readers.

Robert A. Segal, in his comprehensive work on myth theory, defines mythologization as the process by which “myth ceases to be about the external world and becomes instead an expression of what it feels like to live in the world (Segal 48). This approach makes the epics and legends

psychologically credible human experiences, making ancient myths relevant to contemporary readers. Panicker's first-person narrative exemplifies this theory by humanising Sita, making her relatable to a common woman. Through psychological depth, grief processing, and contemporary emotional language, Panicker transforms the archetypal earth-goddess into a relatable woman experiencing trauma, resilience, and self-discovery, enabling her to speak for not just herself but other women too.

Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) establishes that literature draws upon universal archetypes, "recurring myths and archetypes in narratives, symbols, images, and character types in literary works" that shape collective imagination and literary meanings(*Archetypal Literary Criticism - Wikipedia*). Frye argues that these archetypal patterns provide the centripetal structure, meaning that connects individual works to broader cultural traditions(*Northrop Frye - Wikipedia*). Recent scholarship confirms that "Frye's analysis of archetypal symbolism created a new direction in literary criticism" by establishing "a credible cohesion between the cultural, religious and civilisational body of myths and symbols and the whole order of literary works" (Ryan). Panicker's narrative engages multiple Frye archetypes: Earth Mother, Exile, and Hero's Journey. The novel's power lies in its archetypal displacement while

preserving mythic resonance. Panicker transforms Sita from passive earth-goddess to an active heroine, demonstrating what Frye calls the “flexible” capacity of mythic patterns to contain “indefinite variety of particular forms” (Landa).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) foregrounds the challenges faced by women in accessing self-representation within dominant discourses (Spivak). Spivak argues that subaltern groups, particularly colonised, economically disenfranchised women, are effectively silenced because the structures of power speaking about them do not allow them to speak for themselves. Susan Lancer’s work establishes feminist narratology as combining “the investigation of narrative form with gender politics. Lancer’s *Section of Authority* (1992) demonstrates how “narrative structures and women’s writing are determined by complex power structures” and how “narrative authority” emerges through “social and rhetorical properties”. Judith Butler’s theory in *Gender Trouble* reveals gender as not a fixed essence but a repeated performance, a series of acts normalised and naturalised over time. Other feminist and eco-feminist critics and writers also foreground the politics of space and representation in these epics with regard to women. Panicker’s text engages in the symbols and archetypes reclaiming the spaces withheld from women in the traditional texts. Her first-person narration gives Sita

the agency to tell her own story, trauma, and to subvert the patriarchal structures from within.

These frameworks together operate to foreground Sita's reawakening in *Sita: Now You Know Me*, transforming mythological inheritance into contemporary feminist consciousness while maintaining cultural authenticity and narrative power.

Chapter Objective

The chapter examines Sita's awakening in *Sita: Now You Know Me* by tracing the narrative and symbolic strategies through which Sini Panicker maps shifts in Sita's voice and autonomy. Specifically, the chapter aims to demonstrate how first-person narration transforms Sita from a passive epic figure to an active subject, aligning with the thesis goal of mapping shifts in narrative authority and voice reclamation. It also analyses the symbolic connection between Sita and nature as an enabler of autonomy and resistance to patriarchal constraints, advancing the thesis's argument that mythopoesis and eco-feminist symbolism serve as sites of cultural renewal. The study applies Segal's demythologization, Frye's archetypal theory, Mythopoesis, as popularised by Pattanaik in *Indian Myths*, feminist and eco-feminist theories to illustrate how Panicker humanises Sita's internal struggles while reconfiguring her archetypal journey from exile, ecological imperatives.

Textual Genesis

The genesis of Sini Panicker's *Sita: Now You Know me* is deeply rooted in personal grief and broader socio-political movements. In an interview Panicker recalls,

“I have always wanted to write fiction. But I never made a dedicated attempt at it until *Sita*. And *Sita*, she happened sort of unexpectedly, to be honest. The year 2017 was very devastating for me. I lost both my parents in Kerala. My mom died in January of that year, and dad in December. The pain and loss I suffered in 2017 were in the backdrop when I began to work on this novel in 2018.” Then there was something else; #MeToo. Year 2017 was a difficult, and, yet, a strong and great year for women in the US. The movement gained strength, and it became very effective as well. It was all over the media, all the time. I had several serious discussions with friends and family members in our gatherings about it. And without any direct or related thought processes, *Sita* began to surface in my mind during some of those discussions.”(Front List).

The emotional turbulence she experienced coincided with the rise of the #METOO movement, which, though originating from the West, sparked global discussions about gender inequality, harassment, and the systematic silencing of women. The discussions around the movement and struggles of women even in the 21st century remind Sini Panicker of *Sita*,

the ideal woman of the Indian subcontinent, despite being the female protagonist of the *Ramayana*, who suffers at the hands of the society that she so ideally adheres to. On the contrary, Sini Panicker in another interview to Indian Express, says,

“The movement does not correlate with Sita’s story, but it was a space that discussed inequality and oppression, alongside discrimination and mistreatment of women.”

In another interview, Panicker explicitly states:

"I was inspired by these #MeToo voices to give her protagonist a spirited and resilient voice befitting the present-day affairs that occupy the news cycles and social media" (Veena)

This feminist orientation shapes her narrative approach, enabling a more intimate exploration of Sita's psychological complexity and distinguishing it from the epic's traditional third-person narration, showing that While Sita may be seen by many as a victim of patriarchal structures, she is reimagined not as a passive sufferer, but as a figure who emerges from those very constraints with renewed voice and presence, reclaiming her space in the broader feminist discourse (*Goodreads*).

Sita: Now You Know Me is a novel that reimagines the *Ramayana* through the voice of Sita. As Panicker writes in the beginning of the novel:

“Sita: Now You Know Me is the new voice of Sita, a woman evolved far beyond her time, a woman who speaks to us today out of the narrative of one of the oldest epics. The Ram-ayana, meaning the Journey of Ram in Sanskrit, discusses Sita only nominally. ‘Let Sita walk with you as your own shadow, Rama, in the righteous path of your life’, Maharishi Valmiki wrote a blessing verse describing their celebrated wedding scene (Panicker). Here is Sita, moving into the light, away from the shadows. She is Valmiki’s but she is also mine, yours and everyone’s. No one’s” (Panicker).

What distinguishes Panicker's narrative strategy is her use of first-person narration, which gives Sita agency over her own story. Sita is a symbol of womanhood for most of the women in Indian subcontinent “Was it myself that I saw there, sitting on that rock? For all us Indian women carry some of her within us: Sita’s strength is her vulnerability”, writes Namita Gokhale in her essay, *Sita: A Personal Journey*, Sita has not only provided ideals and morals but also a place of vulnerability to question the norms of society for women in general (Lal). The narrative choice by Panicker “aligns with feminist literary theory's emphasis on reclaiming women's voices and perspectives in traditionally male-dominated narratives” (Nadamala and Priyanka Tripathi).

In her review of *Sita: Now You Know Me*, Vidhu Philip writes,

“The author never attempted to put Sita on a pedestal. Sita reflects the everyday life of common women, which makes this novel appealing to its readers, especially women. Oftentimes, a reader like me would stop to imbibe that Sita’s thoughts and feelings were not different from what I have experienced in life!” (Philip)

As Panicker notes in her interview,

"The world in the novel is surreal. It is an ancient world, it is an imaginary world, dating back to two millennia or more, where we, the good-natured humans fight the ghastly demons. But no. The world outside – the living, breathing world of ours – is the surreal one" (Veena)

This perspective demonstrates how Panicker uses the ancient mythological framework to comment on contemporary issues, making Sita's struggles relevant to modern readers (UR).

The re-imagination of the text is entirely Sini Panicker’s; her Sita comes from various texts such as Valmiki *Ramayana*, *The Ramayana* by Linda Egenes and Kumuda Reddy, *Ramayana* by C. Rajgopalachari, *Sampoorna Ramayanam* by C. Damodara Menon and the *Ramayana* by R.K. Narayan, along with other poets and texts. Sini Panicker establishes herself as a researcher as she pens down her acknowledgement and sheds light on the retellings of the *Ramayana* for her inspiration.

Archetype: Theoretical Underpinnings

The concept of “reawakening” in mythological retelling transcends mere symbolic resurrection to encompass a profound narrative and existential transformation. In Panickers’ *Sita: Now You Know Me*, reawakening functions as both a psychological process of consciousness expansion and a literary strategy for reimagining archetypal identity. This reawakening operates through multiple theoretical dimensions that illuminate how ancient mythic figures can achieve contemporary relevance and agency.

Micrea Eliade’s concept of the “eternal return” provides crucial insight into mythic reawakening. In the *Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954), Eliade argues that through ritual practices, one is able to “merge with or return to ‘mythical age’, the actual time of one’s myth. For Eliade, traditional cultures distinguished between sacred time and profane historical time. Sacred time was “eternal” because it could be “repeated indefinitely” and returned participants to “an eternal, mythical time that is always present” (*Eliade -- Chapter 1*).

Sita’s reawakening in Panicker’s text operates through a similar mechanism but with feminist reversal. Rather than returning to a patriarchal mythical time, her narrative creates what might be termed as ‘feminist eternal truth’, accessing the sacred power of mythic origins while transforming their gendered implications. Sita’s reawakening involves

deep introspection and connecting with herself and claiming contemporary feminist consciousness. This process enables her to transcend both historical limitations and profane time by accessing a renewed sacred identity (*Eliade -- Chapter 1*).

Northrop Frye's archetypal theory illuminates how reawakening functions through character transformation. Frye describes conventional myths and metaphors—as archetypes—as forming the “order of words,” a structure enabling readers to respond imaginatively by situating literature within broader literary and social contexts (Roy). In mythological contexts, archetypes serve as “universal symbols that shape human experiences, providing insights into both individual and collective identity” (*Northrop Frye - Wikipedia*).

Panicker's Sita undergoes archetypal reawakening by shifting from passive Earth Mother to active Heroine archetype. Traditional interpretations positioned her within what Frye would identify as the “innocent” or “victim” archetype, a figure who endures suffering to validate virtue. Panicker transforms her into what Joseph Campbell terms “hero with a thousand faces”, an archetypal shift enables Sita's psychological depth by granting her agency within universal narrative patterns (Wolfreys). Through first-person narration, Panicker enables readers to experience Sita's archetypal journey from within her

consciousness, creating identification between mythic transformation and contemporary women's psychological experiences.

Adrienne Rich's call to "re-vision" to look back with fresh eyes, forms the bedrock of Panicker's project. Her Sita is not just re-told but re-authored, given agency over the act of narration itself (Rich). By employing a first-person voice, Panicker interrupts the male gaze embedded in traditional epic narration. Sita no longer exists in the periphery of Rama glory; she becomes the centre of moral and emotional inquiry. Rich's work *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision* (1972) talks about the re-vision, a process that transcends mere literary criticism to become "an act of survival" for women seeking to understand "how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves" within male-dominated cultural frameworks (Rich).

Rich's methodology proves essential for understanding Panicker's transformation of Sita because it positions feminist retelling as primary cultural intervention rather than secondary interpretations. Rich argues that women's "drive to self-knowledge" constitutes "part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society"; she establishes the political stakes of feminist re-vision (Rich). Panicker's Sita embodies precisely this refusal, transforming from passive recipient of male judgement to active interpreter of her own experience.

Panicker's Sita also functions as a postcolonial reclamation of voice. As Gayatri Spivak famously posed, *Can the subaltern speak?* Panicker answers by reconstructing a textual space where Sita does. Within the colonial and Brahmanical frameworks that shaped the dominant *Ramayana* versions, Sita is largely voiceless—spoken about, judged, and abandoned. In contrast, Panicker offers her the power of introspection and public narrative, turning myth into a platform for speaking back to systems of caste, patriarchy, and colonial moralities. Sita's reawakening thus becomes an act of postcolonial subversion as much as feminist recovery.

Panicker's retelling creates what might be termed 'counter-discursive space' where Sita can articulate experiences that dominant traditions have rendered unspeakable. Through first-person narration, she grants Sita what Spivak identifies as the capacity to "represent herself" rather than being represented by others, "The small peasant proprietors cannot represent themselves; they must be represented."

This speaking position enables Sita to critique the very systems that have silenced her. When Panicker's Sita reflects on her parents' progressive attitudes—"King Janak's 'wish' for her to be the ruler of Videha paints a very progressive picture of the parents living in a society in which women were far away from any role of leadership"—she articulates alternative social possibilities that challenge patriarchal assumptions.

The novel's integration of #MeToo discourse demonstrates how Panicker positions mythological retelling as a platform for contemporary postcolonial feminist consciousness. As Panicker notes in interviews, the convergence of personal grief and the #MeToo movement shaped her reimagining of Sita as a figure who emerges from those very constraints with renewed voice and presence, reclaiming her space in the broader feminist discourse.

Textual Analysis

“Let me be a wild flower... a white jasmine, on the top branch of a tall, twisting vine. At the end of its life, it will slowly succumb to the earth's pull in the caress of an evening breeze, without making a single sound in this world. I need to be that flower; Ayodhya and its king Ram shall not notice its departure, its demise” (Panicker 3).

In the thought of her death, Sita wanted to be a wild flower, yearning for anonymity and peace. It shows her desire to withdraw from the tumult of her life. Her wish to be a flower on a tall twisting vine shows how she wants to be free from the burdens of expectations placed upon her as queen of Ayodhya and the wife of Rama, where her worth is measured by her adherence to the roles of wife, mother, and queen, rather than her individual self. This suggests a profound moment of self-reflection and resignation. The idea that neither Ayodhya nor Ram will notice her

departure underscores her feelings of isolation and the sense that her existence has been reduced to fulfilling roles and expectations that do not truly reflect her inner self. In this passage, she confronts the dissonance between her public role and her private desires. Through the passage, Sini Panicker reinterprets Sita not just as a figure bound by duty but as a woman seeking agency and autonomy, even if it means embracing an existence that is intentionally unremarkable and quietly liberating.

“But fairness evades human life like a master illusionist in the most singularly fragmented moments of one’s existence. Afterwards, a broken life is reflected back from the hundreds of shattered shards, in anguish that is so pure and holy, any judgement or chastisement will be just another ritual to sanctify it.” (Panicker 3)

In this passage, Sita reflects on the inherent unfairness of her life. It suggests that justice and equity are often elusive in life. Sita resonates with life’s inherent unfairness with her own experiences, where she has been subjected to trials and unjust tribulations, despite her unwavering devotion and righteousness. Panicker powerfully conveys the emotional and psychological fragmentation that Sita endures through this passage; each shard represents a piece of her shattered existence, reflecting back not just the pain of her past but also the purity of her suffering. The description of her anguish as “so pure and holy” elevates her suffering to a spiritual

level, suggesting that it transcends ordinary human experience and enters the realms of the sacred. This moment in her life is one of re-awakening, where she confronts the brutal reality of life and futility of seeking fairness in a world that is inherently unjust. It also represents the hollowness of society, where ritual often substitutes for genuine empathy or understanding.

“And yet, I have found myself on innumerable occasions in this ashram as suspended dirt in a raging muddy river, unable to locate my existence in the realms of time or place. I have simply drifted along with the current. When you are stuck in the thick emulsion of a storming stream, all you can do is to look up to the light above and wonder. About a beautiful life that could have been. About the fortunate life my boys could have had in Ayodhya.” (Panicker 9)

This passage comes after Sita narrates how Luv and Kush are her two eyes, her “Surya and Soma”, sustaining and invigorating her “meek, mendicant existence” Although she sees beauty in her life, she still is not able to look away from the pains life has put her through. The passage captures Sita’s profound sense of dislocation and helplessness as she reflects on her life in the ashram after being exiled by Ram. It symbolizes the turbulent, uncontrollable current, the chaotic and unanchored state of her existence. It talks about her powerlessness as she drifts through life

without a clear sense of direction or belonging, unable to ground herself in any place repeatedly in her life. The act of looking up underscores her deep sense of loss and regret. Her reflections on what could have been reveal the pain of missed opportunities and the harsh contrast between her hopes and reality. The passage reveals the emotional and psychological toll of her exile underscoring broader themes of dislocation and longing that permeate Sita's character.

Sini Panicker's Sita is an abandoned child whom she considers her "first rejection" (Panicker 11). Following that, her life is a series of abandonment and rescue. This journey stands in stark contrast to the traditional portrayals of Sita in the *Ramayana* and other classical texts, where she is often depicted as the epitome of passive virtue and unquestioning obedience. Her thoughtful nature is visible in multiple instances in the novel. While walking with Lakshmana in one of the early episodes, Sita's discourse about Ram's sister Shanta shed light on her introspective nature.

"I had thought about Shanta from time to time, even before Ram came into my life, and imagined all the overwhelming neglect she had experienced in her life in Ayodhya. I could not blame her now for keeping a distance. If I were her, I would too live a secluded life with my husband, far away from Ayodhya and its residents who would notice you only at the

time of their need. Some part of me quietly wondered, as I strolled with Lakshman, about what kind of family I was marrying into.” (Panicker 57)

Sita’s introspection shows her deepening awareness of the complexities of the life she is walking into. Sita’s contemplation about Shanta, even before meeting Ram, shows her understanding of the complexities of a woman’s life. Later, she ponders the complexities and emotional cost of marrying into a family like Ram’s, where a person’s presence is often only acknowledged during times of need. Her understanding of Shanta’s choice of living away sheds light on her awareness of the potential for loneliness and invisibility within Ayodhya. She critically assesses the reality of her future life while questioning the kind of family she is marrying into. Sita stands at a crossroad, where she is contemplating her future but already senses the burdens and complexities of it. One might wonder if this leads to her accepting all the roles brought to her in the future.

“I found my in-law’s home like an intricate design on the floor, outlined and filled with powders of varying colours, all intersecting with each other for an outward display of beauty and elegance, without any meaning or purpose. With even a mild gust, the designs could easily jumble beyond repair. I did not like the thought that I had left the sturdy, perfect

ground of my parents in Mithila for a place that could be blown away so easily.” (Panicker 81)

Sita’s first impressions of her in-law’s home create an image of fragility and superficiality in her perspective. Her growing disillusionment foreshadows the coming challenges in her life within the family. Her comparison of Ram’s family to a design of rangoli reveals her awareness of appearances and reality. It might look beautiful to others, but she realises its fragile nature and lack of solidity. She longs for the stability, security and strong foundation of her parents’ home. The sense of instability is not just physical but also emotional and relational, as Sita begins to sense that the relationships and dynamics within the royal household may be equally fragile and susceptible to collapse. It is a moment of clarity for her towards her marriage, new family and place.

“I had nothing to do and I was confined to my room, mostly. I had not seen Ram since the contest. Everyone protected me as a bride, as someone who had to be continuously cared for and beautified, and I began to hate it. It was lonely and boring. As a princess, I had walked along with my father, greeted the visiting kings and great rishis, sat with him in the great hall, and sometimes held conversations with his honoured guests. I was not reduced to being just a bride, reminded that I was first and foremost a woman; and I was massaged, poked, and prodded from head to toe by

relatives and maids. They were transforming me into a proper bride, primed and packaged suitably for the wealthy and advanced kingdom of Kosala.” (Panicker 51)

While traditionally Sita is seen enjoying the pre-marital rituals in her home, Panicker’s Sita shows discomfort and alienation in her transition from a princess to a bride. Although she is in love with Ram and enjoyed the Swayamwar wholeheartedly, she feels a loss of agency and dissatisfaction with the rigid and superficial expectations imposed upon her. Her fondness to be with her father, engaging with the guests, shows that her social and critical faculties were satisfied in the presence of intellectual discourse. Her identity seems to be reshaped by the ‘massage, poking and prodding’ to fit the mould of an ideal bride. She longs for the intellectual beauty, whereas society seems to enjoy the physical beauty, which she seems to be confined to.

“Despite my trepidation, I had thought of Kaikeyi as a role model in the past; she had overcome the insurmountable walls of the suffocated life of a woman. What I had to accomplish now was to follow in her footsteps, to break the norm, to go into exile with Ram like no other woman ever had.” (Panicker 105)

Although Sita seems wary of Kaikeyi’s intentions since she came to Ayodhya, she is inspired by Kaikeyi’s strength and boldness in

accompanying Dashrath to the battlefield. She draws inspiration from the person who has inflicted the pain on her and reflects on the decision to be made. Traditionally, Kaikeyi is presented as the villain of the plot, yet Panicker's Sita takes a refreshing take and sees Kaikeyi as a woman who managed to "overcome the insurmountable walls of the suffocated life of a woman" (Panicker 105). Sita's evolving understanding of empowerment comes from different women in the text, starting from Sunaina to Lopamudra, Urmila and even Kaikeyi. She asserts her individuality by seeing beyond the conventional judgment of society about Kaikeyi, although she sees the understated villainy of Kaikeyi, yet she recognises her strength.

The literary tradition in India is grounded in androcentrism, where the male voice is "the central determining and unifying point of the plot" (Bhat, 2). In the *Ramayana* and different versions of the *Ramayana* Sita is given little space, she is found to be an 'absent heroine' (Desai 3). In Valmiki *Ramayana* "She is barely present in Bala Kanda, even when Ram wins her in the *swayamwar*, since Valmiki is more enamoured of the men in the story - Vishwamitra, Janaka, Rama - than Sita (Desai 4). In the *Ramayana*, Sita is said to be one of the most important characters and yet she is present mainly as a listener, adding up to "only seventy-six sagas out of six hundred and forty-five, accounting barely ten per cent of the Valmiki

Ramayana” (Desai 4). Panicker’s novel challenges this patriarchal portrayal of Sita as a passive figure. She complements Sita’s progressive character with the portrayal of male characters’ adherence to dharma. In this retelling, the character of Rama is not uncritically celebrated but is instead contrasted with more nuanced character of Sita.

“My parents, especially my father, were caught between a wish and a worry. As a king, he wished for me to remain in Mithila. To rule Videha.” (Panicker 25)

Traditionally, princesses were brought up with an understanding that procreation is their utmost duty. However, Panicker’s portrayal of Sita questions this thought by making not just the character of Sita progressive but her parents, too. At sixteen, she is “beyond the marrying age” She should have “had a few children” by then, but Sita’s parents did not force her into marriage; rather, they brought her up to be a ruler someday (Panicker 25). They were torn between their beliefs and societal expectations for a girl. King Janak’s “wish” for her to be the ruler of Videha paints a very progressive picture of the parents living in a society in which women were far away from any role of leadership or rulership. This suggests that Janak sees Sita not just as a daughter but also as a capable human being.

However, this wish is juxtaposed with a “worry”, which stems from the societal pressures and norms that dictate a woman’s primary role as a wife and daughter-in-law. Janak’s worry illustrates a powerful grip of society’s shackles around a king as well, because of which he, even though he recognises Sita’s potential, pushed her towards a more conventional path of marriage.

“I convinced Ram, in an hour of argument, putting every tactic into play. I began with my celebrated title as the earth’s daughter; that I would be comfortable everywhere on earth, regardless of whether it was a farming field or a forest, that my mother would protect me. Then I moved onto my farming experiences in Mithila. I would take some seeds with us and we could have some vegetable and grains field, just enough for us, if we cleared some forest land, built a grass hut and stayed there. I braced about my archery skills and excellent cooking abilities. I reminded him about my understanding of weather and nature. I even spoke the language of demons who roamed in the forest.” (Panicker 106)

Sita traditionally seems and is revered as a meek and understanding nature. She is celebrated as a pati-vrata, but along with that, Sita portrays a lot of strength and character, which is very well woven into the tapestry of this novel. Sita is determined and resourceful, along with being extremely intelligent, as she sails through the discourse and presents a valid

argument to convince Ram to take him to the forest. She challenges the patriarchy by emphasising her agency, intelligence and multifaceted capabilities, thus subverting her traditional image of a passive and submissive wife. Rather than portraying the decision of accompanying Ram to the forest as an act of loyalty, Panicker presents Sita as an intelligent woman who presents a valid argument and asserts her agency as resourceful and competent.

She demonstrates her practical knowledge of farming and self-sufficiency that defies the patriarchal image of a princess. Her deliberate putting forward the idea of clearing some forest land, building a grass hut, and staying there, reveals her willingness to engage in traditional male activities, such as farming and building, further challenging gender norms. She is versatile in her knowledge such as farming, archery and languages of “demons” which shows her physical, intellectual and cultural faculties. She is persuasive in her argument that Ram agrees to take with her within an hour.

In *Sita: Now You Know Me*, one of the most striking aspects is Sita’s defiance of being confined to the roles that society imposes on her. Panicker offers a radical reinterpretation of Sita’s character, emphasising her strong character and pursuit of autonomy and self-determination. From the very beginning of her life, she focuses on acquiring different kinds of

knowledge that becomes useful to her in different stages of life, confirming that no knowledge goes in vain. Sita's character not only redefines Sita's identity but also serves as a broader critique of the patriarchal structures that have historically limited the roles and potential of women in both literature and society.

“I had not stretched my hands out to receive Kaikeyi's sari. I did not mind wearing maroon clothing since my Ram was going to, but I was not going to wear what she was offering. Even if I had to beg for a garment from a stranger, I would not accept anything from Kaikeyi.” (Panicker 117)

Sita, while accompanying Ram to the forest, does not stretch her hands out to receive the maroon colour garment from Kaikeyi, which serves as a powerful assertion of her autonomy and self-determination. By rejecting the garment, she symbolically rejects the authority and control that Kaikeyi shows in this part of the story. While all the other characters seem helpless in front of Kaikeyi's wish and demands, Sita stands tall on her autonomy and does not give Kaikeyi the satisfaction or happiness. This highlights Sita's agency and her determination to make choices that align with her own values and principles. While Kaikeyi's garments are accepted by Ram and Lakshman, giving her the satisfaction and confirming her power within the household, Sita does not give her control over her choice and serves as an act of resistance. She agrees to wear a maroon garment,

“the colour of detachment,” but she does that on her own terms and not because of another’s authority (Panicker 4).

Her decision to beg for the garment rather than “accept anything from Kaikeyi” speaks of her fierce independence and self-respect in the face of extreme challenge (Panicker 117). Sita’s rejection of Kaikeyi’s saree is a broader rejection of the power structure that seeks to control and define her. She chose to decide her own navigation through any challenge; she derives her strength from Kaikeyi in a previous instance, where she is preparing herself to convince Ram to take her to the forest, and yet she declines Kaikeyi’s assertion of power in this one.

The arc of Sita’s character in *Sita: Now You Know Me* moves from an abandoned infant child to a liberated woman who let go of everything around her and chose peace. In this evolving arc, Sita’s experience with different characters shapes her personality. She is as inspired by the women around her as they are by Sita; she questions the male dominance, along with accepting the nature of dharma. Her discourse with male characters in the text stands out as opposed to Valmiki, who did not give this authority to Sita.

Sita becomes the “luckiest orphan in the world” by getting parents like Janak and Sunetra who prayed to the goddess “for a daughter. Not for a son, but a daughter.” (Panicker 13). The text emphasising this line shows

how it is an unusual matter in a world where people conduct yajana to acquire a son as the heir. Sita's quest for liberation and philosophical meanings starts in her very childhood with sharing "a special bond at the scholarly level" with her father. Janak who "was a scholar of the sciences of the land (Panicker 15). He conducted debates with famous ascetics on the Vedas and the Upanishads." He taught her "hymns and their meanings" and she "occasionally participated in the debates" at his court (Panicker 18). He inspired her "to search the realms above for answers to both spiritual and existential questions" (Panicker 18). She acquired skills like riding, sword fighting, archery, farming, cooking, and ruling a kingdom. Janak raised Sita to be a ruler, scholar, and warrior. Sita saw a couple of similarities in her parents, so she looked for the same in Ram. Janak pushed Sita to be a scholar and question everything that she learns. "Don't ever simply memorize what I am teaching you, Sita", hence building up her agency, thoughts and critical faculties (Panicker 86). At the time, Sita is seen to make a decision as the future ruler of Videha and not just a princess; during her first meeting with Ram, she questions her unescorted stroll and considers remaining quiet, but decides to greet her guests properly as the future ruler should. Janak does not give her hand in marriage easily and challenges the suitor to lift Shiva's bow. He gives away Sita happily after knowing she is in love with Ram. Janak and Sita's bond is progressive,

where both are given equal opportunity to question and respect each other's decisions, which shapes Sita's autonomy and character in the text.

Sita's discourse with Janak shapes her vision to see characters in a father's mood; Sita experiences Valmiki as her second father figure, not Dashrath, for she finds Dashrath's attitude towards Shanta very demeaning and patriarchal. Where Janak gives Sita's hand to Ram, saying, "Ram, here is my daughter Sita; take her as your wife. She will walk with you, every step, in accordance with dharma, in the righteous path of your life" (Panicker 8). Dashrath pawned off Shanta to the neighbouring country Anga, assigning her a "demeaning job" to seduce a chaste young ascetic (Panicker 56). Janak, on the one hand, bid farewell to his daughters, saying,

"Don't think of Mithila and us a world that you lost. You will never lose us, and we are here for you. Always. You both can come and visit whenever you feel like. I suggest that you come every other month. You don't even have to ask for a chariot from Ayodhya. I will send one. And... we will visit you as often as possible" (Panicker 70).

Dashrath does not look towards Shanta, which surprised Sita since he loves his sons, especially Ram, so much that "he would literally die" for them (Panicker 57). Which he eventually suffers. Sita's discourse with Valmiki is laden with heavy intellectual and philosophical undertones. The relationship offers a compelling dynamic that gives Sita's character the

final touches; unlike any other character, Valmiki does not place Sita within any patriarchal structure but helps her walk towards her spiritual journey. Valmiki understands Sita's agony and "absorb" her pain by looking into her eyes (Panicker 9). He becomes her refuge from the struggles of life and provides an end to her constant 'lost and found' game of life.

"I will never abandon you. Never!" While Valmiki discussed the prospect of writing the Ramayan, he gave Sita the agency to put forward her thoughts, although Sita felt he did not need it. Valmiki, as a feminist character, wanted to write the poem for Sita. He was so moved by the birds that he saw that gave him the idea to write this poem, but society bound him to write it, focusing on Ram. "I would rather write this poem from your life, from your side, because I know you and your life in detail, Sita. You know that I love you as my own daughter. But this is a world of men, my child. I have to write it in world's way and therefore, it will be Ram's story. You will be there, my child, along with him all the way, but it will be *Ram-Ayana*. And, I am hoping that it will eventually fulfil... my purpose of this poem" (Panicker 9).

In traditional *Ramayana*, Valmiki is known as the sage who shelters Sita during her exile; Panicker builds on this and provides Sita a sanctuary to think through Valmiki. Valmiki does not impose a societal role on Sita and helps her move from a place of suffering and abandonment to one of

inner strength and autonomy. Valmiki becomes a bridge to Sita's legacy in the Ramayan; in Panicker's retelling, Valmiki recognises Sita's agency in shaping her story and becomes the conduit through which her truth is preserved, not as a passive or victimised figure but someone with a deep sense of self and justice.

Sita's discourse with Ram and Lakshman shows her most candid self in the text; she finds family after Mithila, mostly in Ram and Lakshman. "I was going to be alright because Ram and Lakshman were going to be with me. My new family" (Panicker 60). She finds a brother in Lakshman from the very beginning, away from the hustle and bustle of the court and later in the forest. They seem to enjoy candid conversations about family, Ayodhya, and life with each other. Lakshman and Sita become companions in the forest, while Ram seems to stay quiet for a long time. Unlike Ram, Lakshman fought alongside Ram to rescue Sita and was elated to see her. Lakshman's emotion while banishing Sita to the forest shows his disagreement with Ram; in contrast to the traditional *Ramayana*, he shows remorse and strong disagreement with Ram and Ayodhya.

Sita's relationship with Ram is multi-layered- emotional, intellectual, evolving and symbolic. Their relationship diverges from the traditional version and allows for a critical examination of how Panicker challenges patriarchal norms. Sita first sees Ram during his visit to Mithila

with Sage Vishwamitra and Lakshman, and she is seen to be love-struck at first glance. Although she has heard the story of Ram's chivalry via travellers yet she felt "shy and insecure" in his presence (Panicker 31). Sita's relationship with Ram is characterised by love but also by the underlying tension that arises multiple times in her mind. Ram somehow symbolises the end of Sita's relationship with the Janak clan "Despite his victory, I was momentarily upset with Ram for breaking the bow. I had seen and worshipped it every day since I was a child. The bow had made me a true Janaka and it pained me to see it in pieces" (Panicker 47). She became a part of the Janaka clan when she first took the bow in her hand, and Ram's breaking that bond. Although Sita's relationship with Ram has just started, it somehow breaks the bond with her father's clan. "I, on the other hand, had lost Mithila on that ride to Ayodhya. Forever" (Panicker 72). This tension highlights the conflict between Sita's personal desires and the patriarchal duties imposed on her by society. The transition from a princess to a bride and later to a wife seems intellectually challenging to Sita since she has to adhere to society's expectations of her and give up a lot of freedom. This discontent shows her awareness that her individuality is subsumed by tying the knot with Ram.

Ram is also in love with Sita and wants her to be happy in her married life, “Are you happy, Sita? Are you happy that...you are my wife?” (Panicker 69)

Ram asks this question multiple times throughout the text, yet it seems that he does it at his own expense. Ram does not ask this question after Sita’s abduction and later banishes her to the forest as well. He symbolises the part of society that is concerned about a woman’s happiness till she adheres to their expectations. He seems to represent a complex character that evokes a lot of questions in Sita’s mind. Ram stands in contrast with Sita’s character on multiple occasions when he did not question the norms and followed them blindly. After marriage, when Sita asks Ram, “Why does everyone have to be this separated?” (Panicker 80). Ram does not answer the question, and “He would simply hug her with a smile, kiss me and say, ‘Patience, my Sita, patience! The places will be in your head soon! Just give it time. Then all will be well’” (Panicker 80).

“It was the most puzzling thing I discovered about Ram. He never questioned his father. He only listened to him and accommodated.” On the one hand, Janaka raised Sita to not simply follow his lessons, while Ram seemed to follow everything Dashrath said without question. The lesson that made Sita “bold and critical” it made Ram a follower. “Despite

oneness, Ram was hesitant to reveal his inner thoughts about anything his father said to me” (Panicker 86)

Sita faces several problems in her marriage, and most of them stem from her being in the dark about Ram’s thoughts. She found herself “competing for Ram’s time” with ministers, Dashrath and the people of Ayodhya who do not have any reason to see Ram, and yet they want him for themselves (Panicker 87). When she questions the blind practices of Ayodhya and Ram, he seems to be comfortable following the norms. He defends Ayodhya's way and leaves Sita with her apprehensions unresolved. He banishes Sita without facing her and seems unbothered about his unborn children. He adheres to the patriarchal norms of society and banishes her based on rumours. He prioritises male duty as king and societal perception over the duties of a husband and father. He does not seem to represent the traditional heroic figure attributed to him. In their forest years, Ram also seems distant and meditative in multiple instances where Lakshman and Sita try to build a bond and extend warmth towards each other. Sita and Ram’s relationship in *Sita: Now You Know Me* is multifaceted, marked by love but also deep tensions created by societal expectations and patriarchy. Panicker portrays Sita’s character as multi-dimensional instead of the idealised character in traditional Raman. She highlights Sita’s frustrations, emotional turmoil, and eventual assertion of

autonomy. While Ram is portrayed as a figure trapped by his duty, Sita becomes a fully realised individual who rejects the confines of her traditional role as just a wife.

Sita's relationship with Ravana portrays a complex challenge to Sita's conventional figure. In *Sita: Now You Know Me*, Sita's discourse with Ravan serves as a platform for deeper reflections on power, autonomy and the oppressive structures of patriarchy. Traditionally, Ravana and Sita are portrayed as Villain and Victim, with Ravana's desire and Sita's resistance building the plot. In *Sita: Now You Know Me*, we see Sita's presence of mind once she wakes up in her confinement, thinking about Ram and Lakshman, she tries to seek information from her captor. "What if Ravan had entered Panchvati with a hidden large army? I needed that piece of crucial information from him" (Panicker 190). Although she is panic stricken and afraid she paid attention to her surroundings once she enters Lanka to gather as much as she could about her captor. "I gained my first insight into my captor. He was a collector. I thought of all the wall decorations. A panic surged in me as I considered that the collectors rarely parted with their items" (Panicker 192). She tries to understand the captor and the kingdom by talking to people and still resisting their will.

"I gained my second insight about my captor; he was totally self-absorbed. Ravan's image in the narratives I had heard was of a ruthless

king with enormous wealth, an uncontrollable rage and a narcissist. It was true I treaded lightly, trying to feed into his vanity” (Panicker 195).

She posed a “calm, confident self” despite her escalating fear. She tries to gather information about Ravan’s bond with different people in order to use them to her advantage later on. (Panicker 194). “Thus came my third insight into my captor; that the queen and her eldest son had some power over the mighty Ravan” (Panicker 199). Sita even compares Ravan to Dashrath when he described his love for Indrajit. “Ravan had no shame in bragging that he and his son were far greater than the god” (Panicker 208). She compares Ravan with her father when they “shared intelligent, insightful conversation on the Vedas” (Panicker 208). She identifies Ravan's different qualities in her state of fear. She tries to make allies in the enemy’s territory and succeed to make some. “Mandodari’s visits, problematic in the beginning, began to change unexpectedly and strangely. We started to develop a bond” (Panicker 209). Along with Mandodari she finds her allies in Vibhishan, Sarama, Kala and her maids. She received her strength from the people she met in life. She remembered her father, Lopamudra and Valmiki and their lessons during the hard times.

“My father’s presence in my head had saved me several times already, by prompting me to be wise and to say the right things in Lanka, and now my mother too came to my rescue, and turned Mandodari into an

ally. I could not believe that my vicious foe becoming my friend” (Panicker 210).

Although Sita shows a calm and composed front in her captivity, she also faces mental and physical torture to the point of thinking of ending her life. She feels lonesome, tired and hopeless on multiple occasions, but gathers her strength again to stand against Ravan.

In *Sita: Now You Know Me*, Panicker presents a powerful reimagination of Sita’s relationship with the male figures in her life, using her interactions to assert Sita’s autonomy and self-empowerment. Panicker’s Sita redefines the role attributed to her traditionally and challenges the structure she is limited to.

In *Sita: Now You Know Me*, Sini Panicker employs symbolism and imagery to convey Sita’s journey of self-awareness and inner transformation. The novel is rich with metaphors and symbols that reflect Sita’s evolving sense of self, her connection with nature and her rejection of patriarchy. Sita is traditionally known as the “daughter of Bhumi (the earth)” (Sita- Wikipedia), referring to her as “Bhumija. ‘Sita’ itself is derived from the Sanskrit word Sita, furrow. (Sita- Wikipedia). In the Rig Veda, she is mentioned as an earth goddess who blesses the land with good crops. In the Vedic period, she was one of the goddesses associated with fertility.” “Sita, you will remain famous forever as Janaki and the earth’s

daughter...as long as people live in this land of Jambudweep!” Sita’s birth is not known in any traditional Ramayan; we know her to be found in a furrow by King Janak (Panicker 15). Her connection to Earth is established at the very beginning of her life as the daughter of the Earth. The earth becomes the most significant symbol in the novel, representing Sita’s birth and death. She finds her solace in the lap of her mother, Earth. “I began to descend down freely and weightlessly... like a feather...there were no more screams in me” (Panicker ix). She finds her birth and final liberation as a blissful daughter of the earth. Throughout the novel, Sita draws strength from nature, which becomes a source of comfort and power during moments of self-reflection and empowerment.

“While Janaki made perfect sense, the title of earth’s daughter was confusing to me as a child. Yes, I was found in a field; but the deeper association with mother earth was initially lost on me. However, anything about nature, including crops, their cycles and whether patterns was fascinating to me. I sensed and measured them precisely and became a proficient interpreter of the mother earth. The farmers, around the place began to abandon their almanac and generational beliefs; instead, they started to rely on me for crop select and times for planting. They found their harvests exceeded expectations if they followed my advice every year.

I began to grow even more famous, and the title of earth's daughter became, more and more, a part of me" (Panicker 16)

Sita's connection with the earth is omnipresent in the text, even though she does not realise it in the beginning. This connection becomes deeply integrated into her identity, symbolising her profound connection to nature. She develops her love and bond with Mother Earth as she grows up, and it becomes even deeper in her exile. "But you have remained in the heavens lately. Descend down to earth, Sita. Find your mother again, her creation, her splendour, her love. Think of the exile as a journey to discover her" (Panicker 125). She embarks on a spiritual journey towards liberation and towards Mother Earth in her exile, making her let go of the pain that she endured in her life and be peaceful.

"You don't have to do anything Sita, just sit and breathe. Let the ground...the mother earth...absorb your pain" (Panicker 125). Valmiki's words become a lifeline for Sita to survive in the forest and help her deepen their bond with Mother Earth. She became more interested in nature, farming and building and is seen to be using her skills better in the forest. She builds cottages with Ram and Lakshman, and she grows plants around for food and comfort. Nature becomes Sita's companion in the forest and helps relieve the pain that she has. She embarks on a spiritual journey in exile and discovers her connection with the earth deeply. While Sita seems

confused about her real parents, she seems sure about her bond with Mother Earth.

“You don’t know this about me...but my life in the palaces often let me...feeling guilty. I used to feel I have not earned or deserved that luxurious life. The abandoned infant in an old blanket is always in me, Ram. She is always in me. And this exile has finally eliminated that guilt. I am guilt free... because we are now poor and homeless. I feel like I am where I am supposed to be. A poor daughter from a poor family... and finally, I am living like them” (Panicker 144).

Sita always stayed an abandoned child, even after being a princess; she took her forest years as an opportunity to be a nobody. She happily accepted the fate and joined forces with nature to survive in an abandoned situation. This evolution reflects how Sita gradually embraces her unique power, not just as a woman but as someone intrinsically linked to the rhythm and cycles of the earth itself.

“My mother earth and I were connected again and we began to communicate wordlessly. She told me everything that there was to know. By examining rocks, I could easily say which hills would house caves. We stopped building huts, because finding a cave became easier. I knew when the storms were arriving, which helped us to find shelter. Most of the plants, shrubs and trees in the south and the fruits they offered were foreign

to us; and intuition always guided me as to which were poisonous or edible. The same instinct led me to find medicinal plants and shrubs to heal our ailments and injuries. The jungle spoke to me so much so that it became a second being within me. With each experience, I became ever more grateful; I surrendered to my mother earth's holy power wholeheartedly" (Panicker 161)

She could predict weather patterns and interpret cycles of crops, actively engaging with nature and studying the patterns that become helpful in the forest and to the people of Mithila. She takes her role as a leader in helping and advising people around her, establishing herself as not just a princess related to Earth but also knowledgeable and practical.

"Let me be a wild flower...a white jasmine, on the top branch of a tall, twisting vine. At the end of its life, it will slowly succumb to the earth's pull in the caress of an evening breeze, without making a single sound in the world. I need to be that flower" (Panicker 3).

Sita contemplates her end to be towards earth's pull and not upwards, which she finally gets. Her liberation is associated with the earth, which is the most comforting place she has in her life. Nature becomes her solace to remember Mithila everywhere in her life; the garden that she created in Ayodhya becomes her 'little Mithila', and she often finds herself spending time and introspecting in the garden.

Sita is deeply connected to the natural world in the text, as she traditionally is. Her strength and empowerment come from her ability to engage with and influence her environment. She shows how her identity is independent of the others and intrinsically connected to nature. She is self-aware and deeply connected to the natural world, and hence presents a very complex character who initially could be confused about her place in the world, but eventually makes it. Her journey with nature is far away from any societal bond and hence keeps her empowered.

In *Sita: Now You Know Me*, Sini Panicker employs a range of literary Devices to subvert traditional narratives of the *Ramayana* and present Sita as a more empowered and autonomous protagonist. Through techniques such as narrative voice, symbolism, imagery, and intertextuality, Panicker's Sita redefines the passive image and challenges the historical representation. One of the most significant ways Panicker subverts the traditional narrative is through the use of a first-person perspective for Sita.

"Diana Purkiss has established three modes of re-writing poetry applicable to feminist re-visioning of mythology. Firstly, one can do it by shifting the focus from male to female, thereby marking the shift of agency from the other (male-centric) to the self (female-centric) narratives; secondly, by transposing the dominant-negative connotations and terms

into positive versions. Furthermore, placing the role of narrator in the hands of a minor character gives autonomy to the voiceless, marginalised, and side-lined women in the grand narratives.” (Nadamala 10487)

In contrast to the traditional *Ramayana*, where Sita’s voice is often mediated through male narrators, Panicker’s allows Sita to narrate her own story. This shift in perspective is crucial, as it gives Sita control over her narrative, allowing readers to access her thoughts, emotions and internal struggles directly. The direct engagement with Sita’s inner world is a radical departure from the traditional portrayal of her passive and silent figure, reinforcing her agency and independence.

Panicker’s use of symbolism and imagery further enhances the plot and Sita’s character. Nature, Mother Earth, and Life from different perspectives serve as recurring symbols of Sita’s strength and resilience. Her metaphors towards life and nature provide a fresh perspective towards the internal journey of her character. It enhances the creative arena of the text and also provides critical dilemmas to readers.

Panicker’s use of imagery of confinement and liberation, of abandonment and rescue, provides strong metaphors for Sita’s journey. Sita being found at the boundary where the forest ends and the field begins serves as a powerful metaphor in her life. Sita seems to be at the boundary on the number of occasions. The palace becomes a symbol of confinement,

and the forest a symbol of freedom. Sita's time in the forest becomes a place of self-discovery and freedom, and forces her towards liberation.

Panicker's reimagining of key characters and relationships also serves to challenge traditional narratives and empower Sita. The novel reimagines different characters and their relationship with Sita. Her relationship with Ram is not idealised or uncritically celebrated, as it often is in traditional tellings of the *Ramayana*. Instead, Panicker created a tapestry of human emotions for the character to present more complex dynamics of Sita with other characters. She questions her loyalty; she seems to feel angry, happy, love, and a myriad of emotions that make her more relatable. Sita's agency is highlighted through her questions, presenting strong beliefs and ethics. Her interaction with Ravana, presence of mind and negotiation with him for a year show her strong character and intelligence in the face of any challenge. While in traditional narratives, Ravana is unequivocally the villain, Panicker explores Sita's capacity to engage with him as a thinking, autonomous individual. Panicker's dialogue with the *Ramayana* and other tellings provides her with a framework to challenge the passive portrayals of Sita from older texts. She is the centre of her own story and subverts traditional narratives.

In *Sita: Now You Know Me*, Sini Panicker offers deep insight into the psychological and emotional dimensions of Sita's character. Sita is a

multi-faceted individual who grapples with intense inner conflicts and self-reflection. Sita is portrayed as a woman who experiences profound emotional turmoil as she navigates her role as a wife, mother and daughter. Her internal journey becomes a testament to her strength, self-awareness, and quest for personal autonomy. In one of her interviews titled “Book Discussion of Sita Now You Me”, she says her Sita is “Vanishing but emerging”; her struggles push her through to unlearn and learn time and again.

In the plethora of literature that is inspired by the *Ramayana*, Sini Panicker’s *Sita: Now You Know Me* is another addition.

“There is this saying that our mother earth is struggling from the weight of books originated from the *Ramayana*! There are far too many books. No doubt. So, why would I add one more to the pile, right? As I said earlier, I felt I had no choice. I had to write Sita’s story. We have heard of Sita all our lives. We feel confident that we know her. But do we know her? If you read this book, you will know her intimately. This is a Sita you have not met before. And that’s why I ask the readers to give this book a chance.” Sini Panicker appeals to the readers to see her Sita uniquely; she is simple, human and relatable (From Heroin to India’s First Heroine). As much as she is of *Ramayana*, she is of the readers as well. “This is a book for the

universal reader.”, writes Vidhu Philip in her review of the book (From Heroin to India’s First Heroine).

Sini Panicker’s *Sita: Now You Know Me* has sparked much interest among literary critics and scholars. The novel has been noted for its departure from traditional portrayals of Sita, positioning her as an autonomous and introspective character.

“She purposefully chose this complex character as her debut project. It shows her dedication and love for mythology. The character is complex but relevant at the same time. What Sita went through mentally, her thought process, her qualities as a human being... everything is shown from a discrete lens.”

Panicker is praised by some scholars as an essential feminist intervention that challenges the conventional patriarchal framework of the *Ramayana* (Modha). One should also argue that although the novel introduces a more reflective Sita, it does not entirely break away from established gender norms and instead offers a modernized but not necessarily subversive retelling.

The novel has received much attention from readers, particularly in reading circles and on platforms like Amazon, where it sparked lively discussions about Sita’s character. Many readers appreciate Panicker’s

effort to present a version of Sita who actively questions her circumstances rather than silently enduring them and making characters more human. “They are more human than I have ever come across in any retelling of the *Ramayana*.” Says one of the critics of the book. Reviews highlight the novel’s introspective nature, where Sita’s internal monologue allows readers to engage deeply with her psychological and emotional struggles. However, a subset of readers has critiqued the book for straying too far from traditional religious narratives, arguing that it diminishes the spiritual and devotional aspects of Sita’s character.

“I feel that the author has become very critical of Ram. Anyone who would be reading Ramayan for the 1st time through this book will find Ram to be a bigger villain than Ravan, unfortunately. Secondly, I must say that a few events of the Ramayan are completely twisted in order to make Sita’s life look more miserable than it actually was. The author has purposely picked up the specific tales from several versions, wherever Sita’s plight is immense. I believe there should have been some balance.” Says one of the reviewers on Amazon (*SITA: NOW YOU KNOW ME: Kindle Store*).

This polarization in reception underscores the broader cultural and ideological divides in how modern reinterpretations of mythological figures are received.

One of the most striking aspects of *Sita: Now You Know Me* is how deeply it resonates with women who have experienced societal constraints similar to those imposed on Sita. Readers from diverse backgrounds—particularly Indian women—have shared how Sita’s struggles mirror their own battles with societal expectations, marriage, motherhood, and personal identity. Many have noted that Panicker’s Sita speaks to the challenges of navigating autonomy within deeply entrenched patriarchal systems.

The novel has particularly struck a chord with women who see Sita’s story as a reflection of their own struggles against familial and societal expectations. Online reviews frequently highlight moments in the text where Sita’s introspection mirrors contemporary female experiences. For instance, her feelings of isolation and frustration in Ayodhya resonate with women who feel trapped in roles assigned to them by family and tradition. Similarly, her sense of liberation in the forest parallels the freedom many women seek outside societal constraints.

The *Ramayana* has long been subjected to colonial-era interpretations, with British Orientalists often framing it as a text reinforcing patriarchal and hierarchical norms. These colonial readings emphasized the *Ramayana* as a rigidly moralistic epic that dictated strict gender roles, often erasing the diversity of interpretations that existed within Indian oral and regional traditions. By giving Sita a powerful voice

and an introspective narrative, Panicker reclaims agency for her, positioning the novel as a cultural reclamation. It challenges not only the traditional Hindu patriarchal framework but also the colonial gaze that sought to define Indian womanhood in narrow, subservient terms. Through this lens, Panicker's work can be seen as a postcolonial intervention that asserts the relevance of Indian feminist narratives in contemporary discourse.

The novel dismantles the Pativrata ideal, the expectation that a wife's primary duty is unwavering devotion to her husband, by allowing Sita to critique and reflect on her own journey. Sita's rejection of patriarchal norms is a feminist act of resistance. Unlike the traditional *Ramayana*, where her suffering is glorified as a testament to her virtue, Panicker's narrative exposes the injustices of her trials, portraying her instead as a "human" figure, stripping away the "divinity", says Panicker in "Book Discussion of Sita Now You Me". The feminist critics sees her refusal to accept oppression unquestioningly marks a significant departure from conventional portrayals. Panicker's Sita serves as both a postcolonial reclamation and a feminist icon. By challenging traditional and colonial interpretations of the *Ramayana*, the novel contributes to the evolving discourse on gender and power in mythology.

In India, Sita is revered as a religious and cultural icon, making any reinterpretation of her character a subject of debate. Many Indian readers approach *Sita: Now You Know Me* through the lens of devotion and tradition, leading to a mixed reception. Many reviewers write “Sita Mata” in their reviews (*SITA: NOW YOU KNOW ME: Kindle Store*). While progressive readers embrace Panicker’s feminist portrayal, conservative audiences may find it a departure from the sacred image of Sita. The tension between traditional reverence and modern feminist retellings is particularly evident in literary circles, where the novel has been both celebrated and critiqued. In contrast, Western audiences often engage with Sita as a universal feminist figure rather than a Hindu deity. Panicker’s novel has been well received in global literary markets where readers are more familiar with feminist retellings of classical myths. She says that she has written it to Western interpretations, often comparing Sita’s exile and resilience to figures like Eve, Helen of Troy, and Persephone, recognising themes of gender oppression, autonomy, and self-discovery.

Religious readers, particularly Hindus, may find Panicker’s Sita too radical, as it diverges from the traditional portrayal of duty and virtue. Some may even find it diverges from the traditional character of Ram, and put him in question time and again. On the other hand, secular and feminist

readers appreciate how Panicker gives Sita agency, positioning her as an intellectual and self-aware character.

Conclusion

In *Sita: Now You Know Me*, Sini Panicker presents a forceful reimagination of Sita, moving her from a traditional passive and virtuous role to a protagonist with deep introspection and empowerment. In this chapter, we have seen how Panicker challenges conventional representations of Sita, giving voice to her thoughts on suffering, identity, and her agency. Panicker organizes her narration through the lenses of different retellings of the *Ramayana*, intertwined through contemporary feminist and post-colonial lenses, and speaks of the struggles of women, both historical and contemporary.

An equally strong aspect of Panicker's reimagination is Sita's self-consciousness and cerebral depth, which enable her to engage in mutual interaction with structures that have stroked her throughout her entire existence. In her hot relationships with characters, Sita navigates an emotional and psychological landscape where the strictures of the patriarchal code of conduct become evident. Unlike previous portrayals that position her as the ideal mother and wife, Panicker's Sita begins actively questioning the propriety of her trials and whether the ideals based

on her would be fair; hence, she is a more sympathetic character, more human-like.

The inclusion of Sita's tale is potent with allusions to the #MeToo movement—positioning themselves with the essence of resistance, the journey of Sita against the mechanisms of societal oppression. The symbolism adopted by Panicker, mostly her relation to Mother Earth, emphasizes Sita's connection with nature and final freedom from the clutches of society. The structure of the novel, which weaves between the past and the present, adds a timelessness to Sita's voice in a manner that makes her struggles and triumphs relevant to a modern reader.

Furthermore, *Sita: Now You Know Me* is fraught with the sharply divided responses of feminist and progressive readers for embracing this bold reimagining, while more traditional audiences critique it for straying away from the fixed ideological narratives in an orthodox setting. This dichotomy exposes the fervent culture-based contention about mythological figures within up-to-date societal settings—should they remain?

Conclusion

At the onset of this thesis, the investigation started with how Sita is seen as a site of feminist voice, resistance and agency by the contemporary Indian English writers. The study dives deep into different versions of the *Ramayana* to study how Sita came to be revered. To study how she became an emblem of purity, virtue, sacrifice and devotion. The study analyse the contemporary reimaginings in the novelistic forms that play an important part in transforming the myth. These reimaginings reveal different versions of Sita, moving away from the dharmic or patriarchal obedience into the light of self-narration. The study analyses the following primary texts: *The Forest of Enchantments*, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, *Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love*, and *Sita: Now You Know Me*.

The focus of research incorporates new feminist approaches, postcolonial analysis, and myth criticism in order to re-read the Sita myth and her significance in the contemporary world. The research sheds light on the fact that myth is not static, but rather the consciousness of the socio-cultural system in constant confrontation and dialogue with the past and present. The thesis balance itself on the argument that the question of Sita's myth is not Who is Sita? but rather 'Who gets to narrate her tale and what changes when she narrates her own story?'

The research delves into the analyses of the four aforementioned novels that present Sita as their protagonists. She is highlighted with different authorial intentions and with different sets of strengths and weaknesses. The tapestry of her reimagining is added with four more lenses to understand Sita's myth. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Forest of Enchantments* make her sail through her life with the lessons of love, and yet in these lessons we see her growing into an assertive woman. Sini Panciker, in her *Sita: Now You Know Me*, like Divakaruni, provides a first-person narration to her Sita, but the protagonist here is more vocal. Both texts transform Sita from a listener or observer into a narrator, subverting not just patriarchy but also paving new routes for Sita's tale.

This shift where Sita asks her own questions and learn her own lessons, albeit Ram's journey, foregrounds the stance of feminist narratologists like Gayatri Spivak, Uma Chakravarty, Judith Butler. They see the framework of the narrative as politically charged and often gendered. The feminist reimaginings operate in the same light, foregrounding the politics of space for women and answering the questions that Spivak asked, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

In the select novels of the research, Sita not only enacts Spivak's question but also expands her presence in the mythic discourse. The use of archetypes in these novels by the author presents different meanings to the

symbols associated with her. Her silence somewhere is her sorrow, somewhere rage, and somewhere a quiet resistance.

In the selected novels, Sita goes beyond telling her story; she reclaims symbolic structures and expands on mythic discourse. Each novel differently narrates her designed and constantly evolving relationship with the archetype. In *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, she is portrayed as a tactical and strategic warrior and leader. In *Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love*, she is firmly rooted in the spiritual realm, where the text recasts her as an introspective, emotionally intelligent, and, in her own way, resilient figure.

The narrative variations are examined through several theories, one being Frye's Archetypal Theory, which states that the archetypes of myths, such as exile, the divine feminine, and the journeys, create the deep structures of literature. These structures are not fixed, but rather fluid and change across cultures. To illustrate, in Narasimhan's retelling, while the earth mother archetype is included, she is given active, rather than passive, philosophical agency. Thus, illustrating Frye's argument of archetypal myths in unending variation. The idea of unending change is also framed as eternal change in Eliade's readings, which deepens the present inquiry.

By reinterpreting the characters, the author places them in what Eliade would call timeless, sacred, or mythical time, but in the present text, the cycle is not solely to affirm culture but to critique the boundaries from

within. The sacred space is not a space of subjugation, but instead becomes a space of reclamation.

By reimagining the character of Sita, these texts also exemplify the theory of Demythologization, where the myth moves away from cosmological events and becomes a humanised, more acceptable or relatable version of itself. They transform themselves into a mirror of society. Sita's character, going through emotional and psychological hardships, brings her from a pedestal of reverence to relatability.

The reading of *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni showcases a Sita deeply connected to nature. She is assertive, empathetic and perceptive. Sita in the text is layered with emotions; she is flawed and human, and she learns from the lessons and hardships her life puts her through. Divakaruni's Sita is comfortable in the domestic as well as the political world of the texts. Her subtle resistance portrays her choices and rewrites her alleged submissiveness with intelligence and choice.

Sita: Warrior of Mithila by Amish Tripathi actively transforms the spaces assigned to men and women. Sita in the text occupies almost all the spaces traditionally attributed to men. She is a leader, administrator, warrior, along with her domestic role of being a daughter, wife, sister and sister in law. She is a student who challenges the teacher if required, and she demands respect and equality. Her hard work and training make it

believable that the mythic heroine is not just divine but human. It challenges the traditional portrayals and highlights the modern challenges of its readership.

Sita: A Tale of Ancient Love offers a model of empowerment based on spirituality and inner strength, challenging the dichotomy between traditional devotion and female assertion. shows how modern writers can successfully combine feminist awareness with spiritual empowerment to produce mythological retellings that are transformative.

The text *Sita: Now You Know Me* by Sini Panicker foregrounds the questions after deep introspection. She relates the story of Sita to the #METOO movement, which operates in the continuum of the space that is unsafe or unjustified for women. Sita in the text is human, imperfect and yet set in Vedic times, which makes it relatable to its readership. She is coming out of the corners and occupying the centre of her story.

These texts operate in the continuum with the mythic discourse emerging from and responding to specific socio-political situations. Across these novels, myth becomes a tool to highlight literary activism for interrogating injustices within society and presenting them. They evoke cultural consciousness to question the rigidity forced on women through the process of mythopoesis, crafting new myths that not merely echo the sacred but interrogate it.

This thesis emerges from a nexus of multiple frameworks pertaining to feminist literary criticism, postcolonialism, and the study of myths. Much of the research is concerned with how the novels themselves espouse, embody, and, at times, reinterpret these frameworks in a manner that is more than superficial. These novels don't simply represent ideas espoused in the academy; they engage with them and extend them in practice.

The approach of this study, together with many of the novels considered, has been informed by Adrienne Rich's notion of re-vision; that is, 'the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text with new perspective and critical direction.' Each of the authors' revisions of the *Ramayana*, positioning Sita not in her traditional role as the moral exemplar, but as a speaking subject who reclaims agency through rage, love, introspection and even silence. Rich considered the act of 're-visioning' as vital not only for literary engagement, but also for a much-needed feminist ethos of survival, a relationship to tradition. These are the very texts under consideration in this study; they penetrate a visceral, patriarchal story and construct its emotional architecture anew from within. Sita, in these texts, does not simply revise her choices; she revises the terms of narration herself.

The novels are acts of fictional subversion where the subaltern does not speak with borrowed authority, but with her own vocabulary of anguish, critique, and contemplation. These are the resources that, it can be argued, Spivak would designate as new 'focalizations' for Sita, in whose case she is not the subject of others' interpretation but rather, she is the one doing the interpreting of her own existence. Most importantly, the speech here is not simply oppositional; it is richly textured. Sita speaks of love, of confusion, of betrayal, and of transcendence, but rejects the binaries of victim and victor.

These reimaginings bear witness to Judith Butler's claim that Gender performative is ritualised, repeated and socially cited, more relevant than ever. In the traditional *Ramayana*, Sita's identity is not unlike that of the shaped identity ascribed to her, which in this case is the ideal daughter, the wife, the mother, and in addition, the queen, all of which are the result of a severe, intertwined order of patriarchal society. These acts of primary socialisation, like most others, are not self-evident, but rather, of a cultural nature. Thus, Butler's insights into gender as constituted by social scripts are powerfully enacted across the select novels as Sita understands, resists, and redefines her own script.

This thesis offers a substantial contribution to the growing body of scholarship on mythological retellings in Indian English literature by

advancing a nuanced, interdisciplinary framework for reading Sita as a reimagined figure of voice, agency, and symbolic resistance. Situated at the intersection of literary theory, feminist narratology, and postcolonial myth criticism, the study charts new territory by foregrounding how contemporary Indian authors reclaim myth not only as cultural inheritance but as a narrative space for subversion, introspection and radical reinterpretation.

The research proposes a new interpretive framework for engaging with mythological retellings by contemporary writers, one that is not limited to thematic analysis, but integrates formal narrative choices, theoretical structures, and socio-political consciousness. By closely examining how narrative voice, gentle hybridity, and archetypal transformations intersect across the selected texts, the study reframes the figure of Sita as a literary construct continually reshaped by shifting cultural currents.

The research contributes significantly to feminist narratology within Indian English fiction. It defines and analyses the deliberate use of first-person narration as a feminist act of reclamation. In doing so, it extends existing feminist theories of narrative authority by demonstrating how epic silence is reconfigured into testimonial speech, thereby shifting Sita from a narrative object to a narrating subject.

The research offers an expanded understanding of mythopoesis, particularly in the context of the #METOO movement. It argues that mythopoesis, traditionally viewed as a creative reworking of ancient motifs, is now evolving into a political practice, where writers strategically use mythic memory to challenge structural injustices, re-inscribe emotional truth, and generate new symbolic economy of power, gender and grief. This moves the conversation beyond aesthetic reinvention to one of cultural and affective reclamation.

Finally, the research demonstrates the comparative literary value of examining multiple retellings across distinct narrative tones, lyrical, philosophical, commercial, and testimonial. The thesis shows that each genre offers a different mode of resistance, while the poetic narrative may rely on emotional texture, the myth-fantasy may foreground action and policy, and the spiritual retelling may privilege inner life and cosmic meaning. Taken together, they present a kaleidoscopic vision of Sita that resists singular interpretations and embraces multiplicity as a critical feminist mode.

Limitations of the Study

While this thesis offers a focused and in-depth analysis of contemporary literary reimaginings of Sita, certain limitations inevitably shape its scope and methodology. These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but serve to clarify the boundaries within which the research has been conducted.

One of the primary limitations is the linguistic scope of the study. The analysis is confined to English language retellings of the *Ramayana*, thereby excluding a vast and rich corpus of regional literature in languages such as Tamil, Bengali, Malayalam, Hindi, and Kannada. Texts like Kamban's *Ramavataram*, Chandrabati's *Ramayana*, or even contemporary regional novels and poems offer diverse and deeply rooted perspectives on Sita that merit attention. While including these would have undoubtedly enriched the comparative framework, the decision to focus on Indian English literature was taken in order to maintain a coherent linguistic and theoretical register.

Secondly, the temporal framework of the study centres on post-2000s narratives. While this allows for an exploration of Sita's retellings shaped by contemporary feminist and postcolonial consciousness, including movements like #METOO, it also means that earlier feminist interventions, such as Nabaneeta Dev Sen's critical essays or Malashri Lal's work on women from mythology, are not directly discussed. These

earlier voices laid crucial groundwork for later literary developments and could provide valuable intertextual bridges, which this thesis only gestures towards rather than fully develops.

Finally, the research is textually literary in orientation, and therefore does not extend to the vast body of dramatic, performative, and visual representations of Sita. television adaptations like Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan*, cinematic portrayals in Indian films, classical dance narratives like *Sita Swayamwar*, and even visual representations in comic books, or digital art remain outside the purview of this analysis. These forms carry significant cultural influences and are often where myth meets mass reception, and would form a rich area for further interdisciplinary study.

These limitations highlight not omission, but future avenues, underscoring the fact that the story of Sita, as a mythic figure and cultural symbol, continues to evolve across languages, media and generations. This thesis captures a specific moment in that discourse, while acknowledging that many more voices and visions of Sita remain to be explored.

Future Directions

The retellings of Sita examined in this thesis represent only one part of a much larger cultural, literary, and mythic conversation. The scope of this

study was necessarily selective, but its findings open up multiple fertile directions for future research, each offering the potential to deepen our understanding of how Sita continues to evolve across time, space and form.

A particularly promising area lies in comparative studies with regional Sita narratives. Texts like *Krittibasi Ramayana* in Bengali, Kamban's *Ramavataram* in Tamil, and oral folk retellings in tribal and rural traditions offer rich alternatives to the dominant Valmiki narratives. These versions often present variations in tone, emphasis, and characterisation that reflect specific cultural, linguistic and historical contexts. A study that places these regional Sitas in dialogue with their English-language counterparts could reveal how localised mythologies contest or complement pan-Indian ideals of femininity, dharma, and resistance.

Another underexplored domain is Sita in non-literary art forms. Classical dance performances such as Sita Swayamwar, cinematic portrayals in films ranging from *Sampoorna Ramayana* to *Raavan*, and television epics like Ramanad Sagar's *Ramayan* have profoundly shaped public perceptions of Sita across generations. An interdisciplinary approach that considers choreography, mise-en-scène, or costume design could uncover how the visual and performative aspects of myth re-inscribe

or resist textual authority, offering Sita not just as a character, but as a culturally mobile image.

Further exploration is also needed into masculine counterpoints within feminist retellings. Characters like Lakshman, Ram, Raavan often serve as foils to Sita's agency, yet their own representations remain relatively underexamined within feminist frameworks. A focused study on how male figures are reimagined in literature that centres Sita could provide a more complex view of masculinity, complicity, redemption, and vulnerability in mythic retellings.

Finally, reception studies could offer insights into how modern readers, especially women, respond to these new Sitas. How do different generations, castes, or regions interpret these texts? Do they see in Sita a mirror, a myth or a metaphor? An ethnographic or reader-response approach could help capture the emotional and political resonances of these retellings in real-world contexts, revealing how myth travels not just across pages, but into lives. These directions do not merely extend the current study, they affirm that myth, like Sita herself, remains unfinished, open to infinite return, revision and reimagining.

Closing Reflections

Sita endures because she is not just a character; she is a question. A question that every woman in a deeply coded patriarchal society has asked in some form: What does it mean to be virtuous when the rules were never written with you in mind? Her presence in the Indian cultural imagination is not stained by divine perfection but by the unresolved tension between idealism and injustice, silence and speech, endurance and assertion. She survives precisely because she does not settle into one meaning. She fractures, fragments, and reappears, again and again, in the consciousness of society.

As a researcher and a reader, I approached this thesis with curiosity, but emerged from it with transformation. The act of tracing Sita across divergent retellings became not only an academic pursuit but a personal reckoning. Each Sita offered something new, own spoke softly but firmly, another raged yet stayed calm; one walked away, another stood still; some forgave, some remembered. These stories refuse closure. They insisted on nuances. They demanded that I read myth not as a moral prescription but as a mirror, one that reflects both collective memory and private consciousness. Through them, I learned that interpretation is not about certainty, but care.

Returning to the myth of Sita is not a return to origin but to a continuum. These contemporary narratives do not offer a single, definitive

Sita. Instead, they offer a living palimpsest, inviting each generation to inscribe its own anxieties, hopes, truths and consciousness onto her story. That is the power and the burden of myth. It persists not by staying fixed, but by remaining porous, interpretive, and emotionally alive.

This thesis, then, does not conclude Sita's story. It adds to her archive. It listens where tradition was silent. It speaks where scriptures whispered. And it leaves the final word, not to this document but to the reader, who must decide which Sita they carry, and which one they are still becoming.

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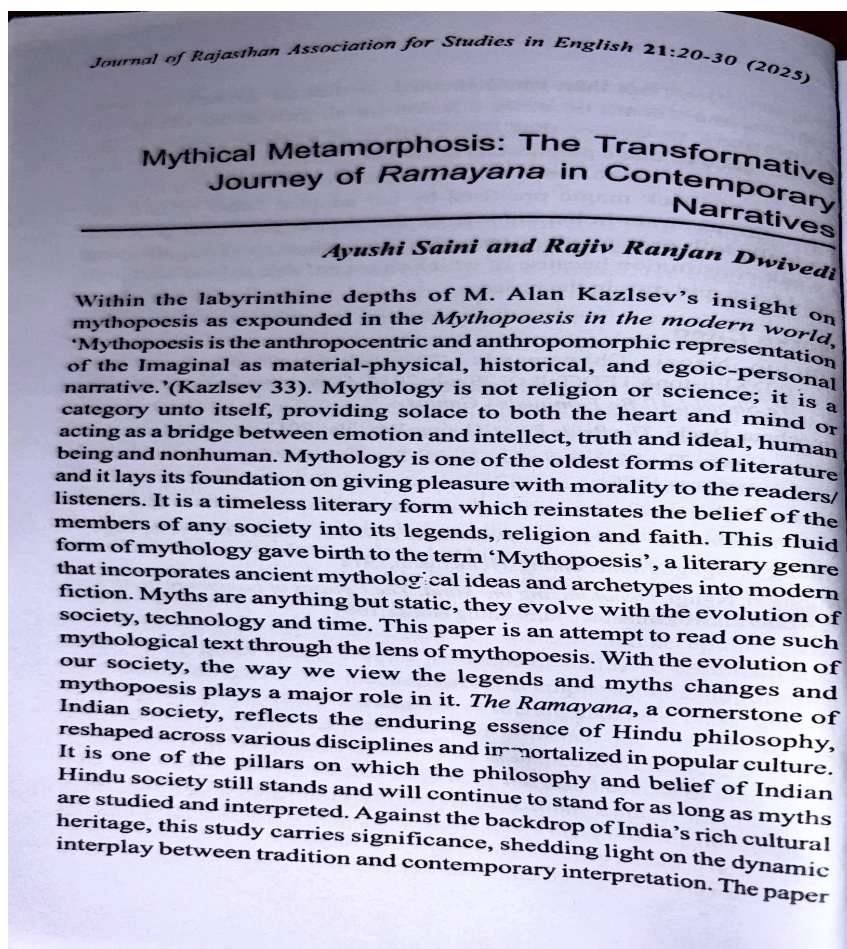
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1. "Saini, Ayushi, and Dwivedi, Rajiv Ranjan. "Mythical Metamorphosis: The Transformative Journey of Ramayana in Contemporary Narratives." Journal of Rajasthan Association for Studies in English. Vol. 21, 2025, pp. 21-30."



2. “Saini, Ayushi, and Dwivedi, Rajiv Ranjan. “Mythopoesis and Feminism: Examining Janak- Sita Relationship in Contemporary Retellings of the Ramayana.” *Anhad Lok*. Vol. 10, 2024, pp. 253-256.”

**Mythopoesis and Feminism: Examining
Janak-Sita Relationship in Contemporary
Retellings of the Ramayana**

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**Pita Dharma Pita Swarga Pitahi Paramantapa
Pitori Preetimapanne Priyontay Sarvadevata**

**Father is dharma, Father is heaven, Father is the supreme subject of meditation
If father is contented, all other gods and goddesses will be satisfied.**

Chanakya- Sloka

The father (Pita) is someone who gives birth; who initiates children (boys) into spirituality/lord through the sacred thread ceremony; who imparts knowledge; provides sustenance; and offers protection from fear. To cultivate the character of a son, a father nurtures him for five years, disciplines him for ten years and thereafter treats him as a friend. This encapsulation of Chanakya's slokas provides the scriptural foundation for the role of a father. The father-son dynamic, prominently featured in ancient Indian texts such as the Upanishads and the Puranas, particularly the epics, underscores societal norms prioritizing male lineage and inheritance. Although the father-daughter relationship is present, it often lacks the same depth of exploration, leading to a notable scarcity of literature and research on this dynamic. However, contemporary novels that reimagine traditional stories such as the

Ramayana and Mahabharata are gradually bridging this gap.

This paper seeks to explore a father-daughter relationship (Janak-Sita) that not only challenges traditional gender roles but also supports feminist interpretations, thereby setting the stage for a broader discussion on the role of feminist perspectives in mythological literature. By examining how mythopoesis defies patriarchal norms, this study aims to highlight an exemplary father figure from our epics, illuminating the progressive aspects of his character by analysing the novel *Sita: Now You Know Me* by Sini Panicker. Through this analysis, the paper will emphasize the importance of reinterpreting classical narratives to reflect contemporary values and contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender equality in literature.

3. “Saini, Ayushi, and Dwivedi, Rajiv Ranjan. “Sita as a Progressive Character: A Study of Select Contemporary Novels.” Atishay Kalit. Vol. 10, Pt. B, Sr. 18, 2023, pp. 303-308.”

ATISHAY KALIT
Vol. 10, Pt. B, Sr. 18, 2023
ISSN : 2277-419X

**SITA AS A PROGRESSIVE CHARACTER:
A STUDY OF TWO CONTEMPORARY NOVELS**

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Abstract

Stories like Ramayana and Mahabharata define the ideals of our society. They are subjective, intuitive, cultural, and grounded in faith. These stories provide us with the ideal characters to look up to. Most of these stories were written in the Vedic period. As the World progresses, these stories have been revised and edited so often that we cannot see them as unique texts. Indian society is so deeply rooted in its faith that, even today, people are expected to adhere to the ideals of the characters from these epics and stories, especially women. This paper attempts to study a part of broad literature which brings out the character of Sita from Ramayana and challenges the patriarchal norms of society. With the help of two novels, *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Sita, the Warrior of Mithila* by Amish Tripathi, this is an attempt to bring out the progressive attributes of the character of Sita.

Keywords: Myth, Ramayana, Sita, Feminist study.

Myth, as defined by Devdutt Pattanaik in his book ‘Myth=Mythya, Decoding Hindu Mythology’ is a subjective truth expressed in stories, symbols, and rituals, that shapes all cultures, Indian and Western, ancient or modern, religious or secular. Hence, myths form the basis of our society. India is a land of such mythical stories. These stories are of gods and men that laid the very foundation of our lives and belief systems. These stories not just entertain us but teach us how to live. Stories like Ramayana and Mahabharata define the ideals of our society. They are subjective, intuitive, cultural, and grounded in faith. These stories provide us with the ideal characters to look up to. Most of these stories were written in the Vedic period. As the World progresses, these stories have been revised and edited so often that we cannot see them as unique texts. Indian society is so deeply rooted in its faith that, even today, people are expected to adhere to the ideals of the characters from these epics and stories, especially women. This paper attempts to study a part of broad literature which brings out the character of Sita from Ramayana and challenges the patriarchal norms of society. With the help of two novels, *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Sita, the Warrior*

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- “Saini, Ayushi, and Dwivedi, Rajiv Ranjan. “Mythopoesis and Feminism: Examining Janak- Sita Relationship in Contemporary Retellings of the Ramayana.” *Anhad Lok*. Vol. 10, 2024, pp. 253-256.”
- “Saini, Ayushi, and Dwivedi, Rajiv Ranjan. “Sita as a Progressive Character: A Study of Select Contemporary Novels.” *Atishay Kalit*. Vol. 10, Pt. B, Sr. 18, 2023, pp. 303-308.”
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