

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY

Reinterpreting Sita: A Feminist Analysis of Gender and Agency in *The Ramayana*

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Submitted by

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Letter of Recommendation

This thesis entitled “Reinterpreting Sita: A Feminist analysis of Gender and Agency in *The Ramayana*” by Bibha Kumari Jha is done under my supervision at the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, from August to 2025 to December, 2025. Her proposed thesis entitled “Reinterpreting Sita: A Feminist analysis of Gender and Agency in *The Ramayana*”, addresses a significant and current research gap. I recommend this study to the expert committee for evaluation.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Bibha Kumary Jha entitled “Reinterpreting Sita: A Feminist analysis of Gender and Agency in *The Ramayana*,” has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research committee.

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## Abstract

This research reinterprets the character of Sita in Valmiki's *The Ramayana* through the critical frameworks of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as well as religious feminism to offer a reinterpretation of her position and identity within a patriarchal social and moral order. Traditionally, Sita is represented as an ideal, obedient and self-sacrificing woman, she has often been read as passive and submissive; however, a close textual analysis of key narrative moments, including the *Swayamvara*, *Exile*, *Captivity in Lanka*, *Agni Pariksha*, and her final *Return to the Earth*, reveals a pattern of deliberate, ethically grounded actions that complicate this perception. The study is therefore justified by the need to reexamine female characters whose identities have been predominantly shaped by patriarchal interpretations and to address the limited critical attention given to forms of resistance expressed through culturally authorised roles. Religious feminism allows for a reinterpretation of Sita as a spiritually autonomous figure whose moral authority challenges male dominated explanation of the epic. While using Butler's idea of performativity, we see how the multiple occasions of Sita performing the ideal feminine roles function as a site of both compliance and subversion. Collectively, these frameworks illustrate that Sita negotiates patriarchal expectations in ways that expose their internal tensions and limitations. This reinterpretation creates a new vision of Sita as a conscious resistance to the limits of patriarchal expectation, whose autonomous ethical choices affirm her dignity, identity, autonomy, and moral sovereignty within her sociocultural constraints. In addition to analysing the character of Sita as she appears in Valmiki's *The Ramayana*, this dissertation provides an analysis of the changing perception of Sita through a comparison of the various adaptations of her story with the original Valmiki's *The Ramayana* and the implications of those changes for contemporary understandings of Sita.

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## Chapter 1

### Rereading Sita from Valmiki's *The Ramayana*

This research examines Sita's actions in Valmiki's *The Ramayana* through a feminist lens, particularly Judith Butler's perspective on gender as performance. It explores and analyses the expression of agency and resistance, so often unnoticed, exhibited by Sita. Instead of accepting the traditional reading of Sita as the acted-upon, suffering wife (not to be confused with the mother, sister, and daughter roles), a reading propagated over centuries by a patriarchal re-telling, it has examined Sita's means of negotiation through acts of resistance situated in her own time's history and context. By analysing key events (e.g., *Swayamvara*, *Exile*, *Agni Pariksha*, *Return to the Earth*), in detail, it demonstrates how Sita consistently displays agency and resistance within and through patriarchal structures.

Valmiki's *The Ramayana*, written approximately between the fifth and first centuries BCE, serves as one of the foundational epics of Hindu mythology and cultural awareness. This vast epic, consisting of 24,000 verses, divided into seven Kandas (books), establishes a mythos around a cosmic conflict between dharma (righteousness) and adharma (unrighteousness) in the tales of Rama, Prince of Ayodhya (Goldman 4-9). The epic transformed the culture of South Asia far beyond its religious origins, developing social values, artistic traditions, and gender roles for millennia (Goldman 3). As Robert P. Goldman notes, *the Ramayana* has been reworked in every major language and significant indigenous religious traditions across South and Southeast Asia, reflecting its enduring presence in the region's cultural life (Goldman).

The story structure, altogether, creates purpose in the movement of *The Ramayana*, from civilised order to chaotic wilderness and back, framing Rama's exile from Ayodhya and his eventual return. At the centre of this narrative is Sita, who serves as the moral and

emotional core of the story. Sita, the daughter of the King Janaka of Mithila and Rama's wife, is also believed by many to be an incarnation of the Goddess Lakshmi. She represents a unique combination of divine qualities and human emotions. The story of her journey from wife and princess to forest-dweller, to captive, to queen, and ultimately to earth provides a moral and emotional anchor for the reader. Through these experiences, Sita becomes an important moral and emotional guide for the reader, reflecting values such as patience, dignity, sacrifice, and inner strength.

Valmiki's *The Ramayana* has been rewritten in multiple versions. Among them, *Ramcharitmanas*, composed by Tulsidas (sixteenth century), is a very popular one in Nepal and India. *The Ramayana* is particularly difficult to translate because "the work is in many ways similar to epic poems like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid*", as Goldman observes in his translation (Goldman 1). The *Ramayana* has been translated into many languages over the years. But it has gone through many changes due to the many versions that exist today. Therefore, even though the grammar in the text can be confusing, the *Ramayana* still stands as a significant work of literature.

There are many retellings of the *Ramayana*, which show how the stories in it are still able to be applied to current situations. For example, there have been numerous adaptations of Sita, one of the characters in the *Ramayana*. Many of these adaptations place Sita and the other characters into new social and political contexts by redefining Sita's role in those contexts and by using the *Ramayana* as a way to analyse contemporary issues related to gender roles, women's empowerment, and the effects of patriarchy on society. These adaptations express the view that Sita has many different meanings and interpretations over time.

*The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents Sita's story from a feminist perspective. In this retelling, the narrative moves beyond Sita's traditional

association with fate and her relationships with others. Instead, it focuses on her inner thoughts, emotions, and her struggles. Sita tells this story, questioning traditional male ideas of self-sacrificial love by showing her emotional depth. Divakaruni creates a Sita who is not simply a victim, but an individual with complexity, able to articulate her experiences across time and circumstances with subjectivity and agency. The novel provides moments that Valmiki can only hint at: for example, Sita's childhood in Mithila, the relationship she had with her sister, and space to articulate emotional anguish around abandonment in exile and captivity. Indeed, in the case of Sita's longing for the golden deer, that is framed not as innocence leading to foolishness, but as a moment of human weakness that very importantly reflects the expectations of women. In this novel, the author indicates the sexist expectations of men that put Sita's honour on women by critiquing Rama's actions. In the *Agni Pariksha*, Sita expresses her resentment and indignation through her inner thoughts when she expresses doubt about her ability to pass the tests and thus demonstrate her purity because of the lack of faith in her word. The author uses Sita's choice to return to the earth as a means of expressing personal dignity and self-respect; thus, the choice is not one of weakness or defeat but is indicative of the power of choice that Sita has over her destiny. Within the new framework developed by Divakaruni, Sita is no longer to be viewed just as a passive victim of circumstance but rather as a confident woman who has the ability to reframe specific circumstances into opportunities, demonstrate her inner strength, and ultimately pursue her own path. In addition to the new framework of interpretation for Sita, the author uses other elements from Sita's life and experiences to provide insight into some of the difficulties that contemporary women face today. These difficulties include emotional hardship, societal expectations of female perfection and social performance, and silencing/control of women's voices. In fact, by leaving Rama, Sita affirms her love for him but chooses to demonstrate the modern idea that self-respect must not be forsaken for the purpose of a relationship that

impairs one's dignity. As such, Sita's departure represents an overall theme of strength and moral fortitude. To summarize, Divakaruni presents a thoroughly creative retelling of the character of Sita.

Feminist retellings commonly face strong criticism and anger from groups who want to keep the old stories unchanged. For instance, when scholars such as Nabaneeta Dev Sen pointed out Sita's critiques of Rama in Valmiki's text, they were subjected to online harassment and threats (Chakraborty 34). Modern versions, such as *Adipurush*, have also been criticized for changing parts of the epic. This shows that there is still a debate between modern retellings and patriarchal classic interpretations. (Wikipedia; *India Today*).

These adaptations illustrate the earlier discussed concept of "duplex femininity" described in this thesis, Sita performing both compliance and resistance simultaneously. Sagar's portrayal emphasises compliance, while Divakaruni's emphasises resistance, providing a sense of balanced perspectives on a complex figure in relation to contemporary debates about power and agency. Divakaruni's novel can also be contrasted with the other representations of Sita in the *Ramayana*, thereby exhibiting the different ways in which adaptation allows for transformed representations of women. This exploration demonstrates how Sita's character has changed over time and how narrative can represent cultural ideologies and advocate for social change.

Key episodes in Sita's life suggest she has made important choices throughout her life, beginning with the *Swayamvara* or self-choice ceremony. The *Swayamvara* is one of the first times Sita is visibly displaying her own agency (decision-making power) in the epic. The much-abridged notion of Sita as a mere trophy in a contest is juxtaposed with the agency that Valmiki gives Sita through her willing inclusion in the tournament's demise. When King Janaka announces that whoever can string the great bow of Shiva will win Sita's hand, it is not just a test of physical strength, but a divine endorsement whereby only one worthy to be

Sita's consort—the incarnate Vishnu—could accomplish. In Debroy's account, Sita is depicted as watching the proceedings with a garland in her hand, completely active in deciding her fate in the ritual.

When Rama finally manages to string the bow, and Sita is then allowed to garland him, the action is described as intentional and voluntary. As Debroy translates, “Sita, beautiful in every limb, glanced at Rama. Her heart given to him. With a smile, she approached and placed the garland around his neck” (87). This action was much more than a mere ceremonial nicety. It was an act of will and love for Rama, establishing Sita not as an object to be exchanged between two men, but as an active agent in her marriage.

Sita's decision to go into exile with Rama might represent her most overt and insistent claim of agency in the entire epic. Rama attempts to dissuade Sita from her choice by describing the difficulties of forest life, saying: “There are trees with thorns and kusha grass and reeds. In every direction, these pervade the forest with their branches. Therefore, the forest has greater misery. Thus, enough about leaving for the forest. You will find the forest unbearable” (Debroy 208). Her words not only ascend common understandings of a wifely duty but also communicate a deep and emotional commitment: “When I am on the path with you, kusha reeds, cane, grass, and thorns of trees will touch me. However, they will be like the touch of cotton or deer skin. Great storms will rise and will envelop me in dust. However, I will take pleasure in this, as it is a supreme gift of sandalwood power” (210). Similarly, she admits: “A woman without a husband is incapable of remaining alive” (208).

Sita exhibits extraordinary bravery and conviction. She is adamant that she accompanies Rama, although this is not what he wants, and she gives up a life of royal comforts to go and live in the forest with him. This represents her ability to act on her own accord within patriarchal constraints. As she states: “The idea of being brave and dwelling in the forest appeals to me, because of my pure soul and love, I will be without any traits” (209).

This is a powerful gender dynamic reversal that makes Sita not a burden to Rama, but a shield on Rama's journey.

After Sita was rescued from Lanka, Sita underwent the Agni Pariksha, or a trial by fire (*Agni Pariksha*), which has perhaps become the most debated episode of *The Ramayana*. It has long been assumed that this represents the ultimate passive acceptance of a patriarchal structure; however, a deeper exploration shows Sita in more subtle acts of resistance and agency. When Rama says, in a public place, for everyone to hear, that he cannot accept her back because she has lived with another man, Sita neither protests nor even pleads. She stands tall and responds with a clarity of moral vision. As Debroy renders her response: "O mighty-armed one! I am not what you take me to be. You should have trust in me. I swear on my own character. Because of the conduct of ordinary women, you are casting doubts on the entire species. If I have been tested by you, you should cast aside all doubt" (Debroy 276). Her reply challenges the nature of Rama's fixation on public judgment, and asserts the primacy of her own moral self-judgement. Rather than go quickly into the trial, she orders Lakshmana to prepare the pyre: "Prepare a funeral pyre for me. That is the medication for a calamity. Having suffered from a false accusation, I am not interested in remaining alive" (277). This act of agency reclaims the Agni Pariksha from a text mandated by patriarchal power to an authorial decision made by Sita herself to demonstrate the truth of her position on her own terms.

The last episode in Sita's journey in the *Uttara Kanda* offers us the most extreme action of her agency. When Rama banishes his pregnant wife a second time (in response to further rumours circulating among his people), Sita does not argue or plead with him to reconsider, but accepts that Ram has made a decision and manifests her decision with solemnity. Years later, when Rama wishes to unite with Sita and undergo yet another public trial of her (Appearances) to prove herself, Sita no longer exercises agency and does not

accept another trial. Sita, instead, chooses another path. She calls upon her mother, Earth Goddess Bhumi, to embrace her into her arms, if indeed her thoughts, words, and deeds had remained solely dedicated to Rama. As Debroy interpolates this powerful moment: “If I have not thought of anyone other than Raghava in my mind, then let the goddess earth open up a chasm for me” (Debroy 476). The earth opens its arms in front of Sita, and she descends into it, thus definitely rejecting the patriarchal system of repeated tests and trials and public verification of her virtue. This extraordinary conclusion to Sita’s earthly life is not defeat, but ultimate victory; a reclaiming of identity and agency that transcends human limitedness.

### Feminist Reclaiming of Sita’s Narratives

This research is primarily concerned with feminist literary criticism and focuses on the reinterpretation of Sita’s character in Valmiki’s *The Ramayana* and selected modern retellings. Traditionally, Sita has been represented as the embodiment of the ideal woman, identified as an obedient, innocent, submissive, and silent woman. The present study revisits the lost or distorted voices of women who have been marginalised as a result of the patriarchal interpretations of these works. More specifically, this research analyses the character of Sita of Valmiki’s *The Ramayana*; as Sita has been presented in such works as either an ideal and suffering wife or a dame who displayed obedience, therefore this research provides an alternative perspective on Sita as a figure demonstrating ethical awareness, agency, and power through a range of different choice models through a feminist lens. The research engages with feminist scholars who are currently questioning the simplistic and uncritical views of the passivity of Sita. Through the development of Sita's use of agency through the roles and expectations as defined by her society, the research shows that while Sita's agency was often overlooked by later writers, it is recoverable by drawing upon Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity and through the application of religious feminist reinterpretations of these texts. This research places Valmiki's text in direct conversation with

various eastern interpretations of Sita as an example of feminist opposition and resistance throughout her lifetime, through the acquisition of moral authority through silence and duty, and through the expressions of faith. This research moves beyond the common binary that views Sita either as a powerless victim or as a fully empowered subject. This research steps outside of the restrictive duality of these two frameworks. It also considers the social and cultural boundaries that contextualise women's options to use the tools of agency within those constraints. This research recognises that Sita uses her silence, her ability to endure all pain, and her commitment to dharma as meaningful strategies for maintaining her ethical authority and self-respect in a world where she is being treated unjustly.

By applying Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which regards gender as created by actions rather than as something that exists already as part of a person's being, this research considers what Sita is doing in the text to be performing various roles in accordance with, as well as related to, the expectations of patriarchal society for women. In addition, religious feminism offers a way to understand Sita's devotion and moral strength not as signs of submission, but rather as sources of morality. This research moves past the agency versus victim dichotomy. This research conceptualises Sita's resistance as relational, contextual, and grounded in morality in addition to being directly confrontational. This study highlights her as a resilient and self-determined figure whose strength lies in ethical consistency rather than overt rebellion.

#### Research Problem

Sita's character is often viewed through a patriarchal framework that portrays her as an obedient, and loyal to her husband, her virtue being defined as her ability to remain chaste, and her role as a sacrificial figure, even though the *Ramayana* has been studied and analysed for centuries. Contemporary scholars are also frequently neglectful of the sophisticated manner in which Sita managed to negotiate her power within social and religious constraints.

The central research problem of this study is the critical gap between Sita's lived narrative choices and the dominant interpretations that deny her ethical agency. The focus of the study remains on the exploration of Sita's actions, particularly in the instances of her life, such as exile, time spent as a captive in Lanka, her trial by fire, and her ultimate return to her previous home, which can be seen as acts of individual agency, performance of gender, and moral resistance. Thus, the study provides an opportunity to consider what feminist theory can offer as a means for creating a more nuanced understanding of Sita's subjectivity within a patriarchal epic tradition.

### Research Questions

This research has addressed the following questions:

1. How does Sita negotiate and perform her gender roles within the patriarchal framework of Valmiki's *The Ramayana*?
2. How does Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity help to reinterpret Sita's behaviour beyond traditional ideals of obedience and sacrifice?
3. How do selected contemporary retellings interpret Sita's character in order to represent feminist consciousness?

The research has the following objectives:

1. To provide a feminist re-interpretation of Sita's character that challenges the existing patriarchal story of *The Ramayana*.
2. To use Butler's theory of gender performativity to understand Sita's behaviour within the limitations imposed by the gender system as a strategic performance.
3. To study Sita's capacity for moral judgment, faith, and reasoning ability from a religious feminist approach.
4. To compare how Valmiki has presented Sita with contemporary retellings to present Sita in order to analyse shifts in feminist presentations.

## Theoretical Framework

This study creates an integrated feminist conceptual framework by drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and perspective of religious feminism in order to provide an overall reading of Sita as a character and to represent her way of acting in relationship to the constraints of the male-dominated society in which she lived.

Butler has written in his book, *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), about the theory of performativity, which helps to provide that Sita's 'being' is not just a natural process, but is constructed through a power structure. According to Butler, gender is not an inherent trait that we possess but one that arises from behaviour that is considered acceptable according to the cultural norms and hierarchical institutions within a given society. When these ideas are connected to Sita's identity as a perfect wife instead of someone who is passive towards men, we see how Sita's silence affirms her ethical behaviour in not contributing to the performance of Sita. The ethical behaviour of Sita is characterised by her perceived superior morals and the way in which she embodies her ethical obligations to her family. The combined use of these approaches creates an overall context for understanding Sita. Butler's views demonstrate that there exists a performance aspect associated with gender, while religious feminists provide women with a spiritual component of authority.

The main theory used to analyse this study is feminist literary criticism. The main events of Sita's life are her *Swayamvara*, *Exile*, *Captivity in Lanka*, *Agni Pariksha*, and *Return to the Earth*. The following paragraphs look at how Sita exercised her agency or resistance to her circumstances. They also discuss the ethical decisions made by Sita. The analysis of these points of Sita's exercise of agency, resistance to her circumstances, and ethical decision-making will be examined in light of various social norms regarding gender performance and a variety of religious norms, values, and expectations as they exist in the *Ramayana*. This study is an interpretive study based on textual analysis that does not use empirical or quantitative

data, but uses theoretical applications and interpretations to produce rich and meaningful interpretations of a classical piece of literature, where multiple levels of meaning exist based on narrative, symbolic, and religious juxtaposition.

This research has reinterpreted Sita through an integrated religious feminist rereading, moving past previous views of Sita as either just a victim or just an ideal of obedience. This study, uniting Judith Butler's concept of gender and the spiritual authority of religious feminist perspectives, supplies a nuanced model for determining how Sita exercises agency within patriarchal society and within a religion. The study puts forward negotiation of agency in order to demonstrate that Sita's silence, endurance, and performance of 'dharma' were not examples of submission, but were ethical and strategic means of exerting resistance. Through this analysis, the study presents Sita as a strong and morally independent figure whose power comes from her ethical consistency and inner strength. Thus, the analysis challenges the role of women as simply passive victims or as mere rebels within the study of literature and mythology. In addition to broadening feminist literary studies, feminist mythological critique, and broader discourse around femininity, Sita's reinterpretation contributes to the idea of female empowerment with regard to the historical and sacred framework of Valmiki's *The Ramayana*, undermining the traditional definitions of the concept of "woman."

#### Delimitation of the Study

The study is limited to a feminist literary reading of Sita's character. Primarily in Valmiki's *The Ramayana* and selected modern retellings, this research enables a reinterpretation of her agency in the context of a patriarchal socio-religious framework. Although Valmiki's *The Ramayana* appears in many regional, oral, and performative traditions, this study does not attempt to examine all of these versions. Instead, it concentrates on a few important narrative moments—such as Sita's *Swayamvara*, her decision to accompany Rama into exile, her captivity in Lanka, the Agni Pariksha, and her final return to

the earth. These episodes are selected because they clearly reveal Sita's moral strength, her quiet forms of resistance, and the ways in which she negotiates and performs gender roles within the epic. The analysis is mainly informed by the theory of gender performativity proposed by Judith Butler, together with ideas from religious feminism. Other theoretical perspectives are mentioned only when they help to clarify the broader context of the discussion.

Likewise, this research concentrates on the character of Sita only, and does not provide a full feminist analysis of all female characters in *The Ramayana*, nor does it examine the more complex religious dimensions of the epic in great detail. Additionally, it does not attempt to establish the historical authenticity of the story, nor does it engage in extensive philological debates. Thus, this research does not involve examining *The Ramayana* as either a religious or mythological text. Visual adaptations, popular media retellings, and broad cross-cultural comparisons are also not included in this research.

#### Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative and interpretative research design, using a close reading as an analytical tool. The primary text of this research is Debroy's translation of *Valmiki's The Ramayana*. Its foundational role in shaping religious and gendered perceptions of Sita is selected through modern adaptations and retellings. They are taken as secondary texts to explore Sita's representation across time.

#### Critical Reviews and Scholarly Context

Scholarly works on *The Ramayana* have changed dramatically over the years, and the translation choices made are reflective of interpretations. An example of this issue can be illustrated using Bibek Debroy's choice of the term 'laghuvikrama', which he translates to 'dexterous in valour'. In the Sanskrit language, 'laghuvikrama' can be used to describe how someone moves, or acts, so Debroy's translation of 'laghuvikrama' as 'dexterous in valour'

would suggest that *laghuvikrama* refers to someone who is brave or skilled at war. Based on the fact that the word '*laghuvikrama*' can also be translated into English as either 'swift-striding' or 'fleet-footed' (i.e., moving quickly or being fast on one's feet), the difference between each of these translations creates a very different interpretation of the character. Debroy's translation seems to emphasise highly developed warrior qualities (i.e., bravery). The Goldmans provided a more accurate translation of 'swift-striding', 'fleet-footed', which conveys the same idea of 'quickly moving' or 'fast on their feet'. The distinction is important, as Debroy's translation focuses on warrior qualities (i.e., bravery). The Goldmans provided a more accurate translation of 'swift-striding', 'fleet-footed', which conveys the same idea of 'quickly moving' or 'fast on their feet'. The distinction is important, as Debroy's translation focuses on warrior qualities (i.e., bravery), while Goldman's translation focuses on the physical attributes (i.e., speed). These subtle differences in language dramatically shape the interpretations of the characters' relationships; in particular, we see how they relate to gender.

In her essay, "Rewriting *The Ramayana: A Feminist Perspective*," Nabaneeta Dev Sen points out numerous moments in the story where Sita demonstrates agency, claiming that Sita's actions are assertions of autonomy and not merely submissions. Madhu Kishwar's essay, "Yes to Sita, No to Ram," continues to disregard Rama's glorification and reflect on Sita's strength and dignity. These feminist scholars contributed to a body of scholarship that has resulted in Sita being not just a passive victim, but she has depth, where she realizes she has a space to act within the social conventions of the time.

In recent years, several examples of feminist reinterpretations of *The Ramayana* have analysed Sita's long history as a silent, obedient character. Through Sita's perspective, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* is an alternative retelling of many previous retellings. Divakaruni utilises Sita's first-person perspective as a means of

presenting Sita's thoughts and feelings. Divakaruni's novel highlights that Sita's emotional intelligence existed in a moral way, and therefore, she was not just a victim, but a conscious actor in her life. The author's statement: "I sensed that Sita was more than what we took her to be" (Divakaruni viii). Thus, Sita's internal fortitude is real, and while it may not have been recognised publicly or existed previously, the words the author uses create an awareness of Sita's internal experience, reconceiving her perseverance as an experience of consciousness instead of silence and obedience.

A very similar concept occurs within Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*. Tripathi actively portrays Sita within the political and ethical realms. Unlike the classical portrayals of Sita, Tripathi's Sita is proficient in military training, participates in administering the kingdom, and possesses leadership attributes, which would not have been afforded to her in classical portrayals. Tripathi redefines moral responsibility, noting that 'Dharma' is an active ethical responsibility rather than passive obedience, therefore framing Sita as a moral agent and leader. The combination of these modern adaptations demonstrates a growing effort by many groups to restore Sita's power as a female figure in Hindu culture. In both books, Sita's portrayal is as an intelligent and independent character who thinks for herself and makes well-deserved choices about her life. Both of these interpretations allow us to envision that the original story leaves open the possibility for Sita to be born as a non-passive being, with the capacity for moral strength, agency, and interpretive potential.

Scholarly work has also considered how Sita's representation has evolved historically. Paula Richman's edited collection, "Many *Ramayanas*: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia," studies various ways of viewing the regional versions of *The Ramayana*. It follows the changing representation of Sita across a range of historical backgrounds and cultural processes. These accounts of Sita suggest that Valmiki's story opens up more possibilities for feminist interpretation than many contemporary retellings

allow for. These interpretations allow us to imagine that the original narrative leaves space to view Sita not only as a passive figure, but also as a character with moral strength, agency, and interpretive depth.

This dissertation builds on this literature while also adding something novel to the conversation, especially the presentation of ‘duplex femininity’ and a comparative approach to modern retellings. The aim of this study is to re-examine the text of Valmiki's *Ramayana* and its central character, Sita, with particular emphasis placed on feminist perspectives in order to gain a deeper understanding of Sita's actions. The study investigates the text of Valmiki's *Ramayana* with an emphasis placed on seeing Sita as a victim; it shifts away from the traditional interpretation of Sita as merely a victim and instead presents her as a stronger and more empowered figure. This chapter has established the basis for this study by introducing Valmiki's *The Ramayana* as the primary text, expounding on key episodes that reveal Sita's agency, describing my research area and point of departure from other studies, and surveying relevant critical scholarship. The subsequent chapters explain these ideas in detail through textual analysis of *The Ramayana*, the application of a conceptual framework, and comparative discussion of adaptations.

### Summary

This chapter discusses Valmiki's *The Ramayana* as the key text for understanding Sita's character and redefining her role from a feminist perspective. It also opposes the conventional view of Sita as a passive and obedient wife. Rather than exploring Sita's agency in opposition to the patriarchal nature of society, the author examines how she exercises personal power, inner strength, even in crucial scenes such as *Swayamvara*, *Exile*, *Agni Pariksha*, and *Return to the Earth*. Each of these episodes serves to illustrate how Sita exhibits thoughtfulness, tenacity, and an ability to make significant decisions despite her limitations. *The Ramayana* is one of the most significant works of literature and cultural

expressions in South Asia. This chapter explains how it has had a considerable impact on the social values of society and the way women are viewed in that society. Sita is the main central and emotional figure in this story; her life journey acts as the moral basis of the entire work.

Next, it describes the focus of my research: a feminist revisionist mythology that reclaims women by reinterpreting how female characters resist patriarchal standards. Drawing on the work of feminist scholars, this study shows Sita as empowered from within, rather than submissive. A key concept introduced is "duplex femininity." This explains Sita's duality as equally compliant and capable of resisting. She does this by appealing to virtue to support her position while at the same time subtly challenging patriarchal authority. Overall, this chapter serves as a theoretical and scholarly structure for this research and provides the basis for a deeper feminist analysis in later chapters.

## Chapter 2

### Reclaiming Sita's Agency

#### Why Feminist Matters: Rereading Sita beyond Patriarchal Interpretation

Feminist literary criticism provides important perspectives on reading pre-feminist literature through non-patriarchal lenses. *The Ramayana* has traditionally been read with Sita as the quintessential mother, wife, daughter figure (that is, a woman whose worth is predicated on obedience, self-sacrifice and suffering), yet much of Sita's decision-making, ethical structure and resistance have been ignored or diminished in these traditional readings; however, by utilizing feminist literary criticism, it is possible to view Sita's actions with greater insight and recognise that she is not simply the object of the actions of others, but rather a subject who exercises power within limiting circumstances.

This research uses feminism as a primary theoretical framework to explore the meanings embedded in the storyline constructed by Valmiki and also to consider how gendered relationships of power are involved in Sita's experience of her own dharma, the authority to act ethically, and the principled dimensions of her actions, all while living in a male-dominated society.

#### Judith Butler's theory of performativity

Butler's theory of performativity, particularly found in her book *Gender Trouble*, where she proposed that gender is not a natural or stable identity. According to Butler, gender is produced through socially regulated, culturally enforced, repetitive acts. Through these repetitive acts, the idea of a 'fixed' identity is created, but it is possible to disrupt and reinterpret the gendered acts. Butler explains as: "In this sense, gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the submissive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the governing practices of gender

coherence” (Butler 33). Thus, when applying this lens to Sita, we can see the performance of the role of ‘ideal wife’ as grounded in social constructs surrounding femininity, rather than something ‘essential’ to Sita herself. How Sita demonstrated the qualities of a good wife (e.g., obedience, loyalty, and restraint) was carried out with moral understanding and blind obedience.

Butler states that repetition creates potential sites of resistance to the very norms it repeats, as the performance of these acts may reveal the contradictions in the norms they reproduce. She explains, “This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the ordinary and ritualised form of their legitimation” (Butler 178). Sita's performance of her duties as a wife was also, in a sense, subversive. Sita remained silent during *Agni Pariksha*, maintaining her dignity by neither reacting to the emotional spectacle of being accused nor seeking public justification for her actions. Instead, Sita's action (or inaction) caused the injustice that the patriarchal judgment represents to emerge. In this way, Sita's silence can be viewed as both the intentional use of a vocal presence and an ethical position. Since Sita does not argue within a system that has already disposed of her guilt, she keeps herself above the system by showing the weakness of patriarchal power over women. Sita's performance of virtue has thus become a tool of protest toward patriarchal power.

#### Feminism within Sacred Texts

The goal of religious feminism is to provide a critical framework for reexamining how patriarchal interpretations of sacred structure limited women's voice within religion; this has been done by using male-defined meanings about the role of women in various traditions. Feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether assert that the reason women have not held positions of spiritual leadership in religion is not due to the nature of the religion itself but instead due to the way religion has been interpreted by patriarchal society. She

states, “The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive” (Ruether 18). Religious Feminism, therefore, intends to reclaim women's spiritual and ethical power by using the sacred texts of various religions and re-reading them critically.

Using feminist theology as an approach through which to interpret the *Ramayana* allows for Sita to be seen as a person of spiritual integrity rather than simply a symbol of chastity. Sita's innocence is tested many times throughout the *Ramayana*, but her commitment to moral truth (satya) and adherence to ‘dharma’ is unwavering. By using the theory of religious feminism, it is possible to view Sita's innocence not just as being God's protection of her, but also to give Sita's innocence a greater meaning through Sita's continuing commitment to the ethical principles of dharmic behaviour. Therefore, Sita's decision not to return to Ayodhya after her second exile should not be viewed as an act of despair but rather as a decision that she made based upon her own spiritual autonomy; Sita placed her commitment to divine justice above her desire for social acceptance. Rita Gross argues that feminist involvement with religious traditions does not aim for rejection. Instead, it seeks to improve these traditions from within patriarchal systems. This approach restores women's spiritual authority without removing sacred narratives.

Women often develop their spiritual authority through acts of ethical resistance to established institutions rather than an institutionally approved method of development. One of the best examples of this is Sita's final return to the earth; she decided to reject the social system of the time that demands endless proof of purity and instead asserts her dignity through spiritual self-sovereignty. Sita's exile is typically portrayed as a display of her wifely devotion; however, feminist theory views it as an agency within the confines of patriarchy. When Rama is trying to convince Sita not to join him on the grounds of the hazards of living

in the forest—"the forest has ferocious animals in it, and it is made for rakshasas; it is no place for a lady"—Sita responds not as an obedient party but in an unyielding affirmation of her desire. She states: "A woman without a husband is incapable of remaining alive." (Debroy 208). While this declaration reinforces patriarchal norms, simultaneously, it subverts them by articulating her decision in terms of her desire as opposed to being simply obedient. This is an example of what political anthropologist James Scott refers to as the 'weapons of the weak,' forms of banal resistance for individuals and groups in less powerful roles. Sita cannot overtly reject the expectations of the patriarchal institution, but she learned to move within them, turning their own weight to her purpose. The fact that she asserts herself in the way that Rama has explicitly denied her becomes an act of agency disguised as duty. Not only that, however, she also states that "The idea of being brave and dwelling in the forest appeals to me. Because of pure soul and love, I will be without any traits." (209), to be like an unencumbered act of agency—positioning herself, not as dependent, but as a protecting element aiding in them walking together into the woods. The challenge to the passive, dependent portrayal of Sita patterned by patriarchal readings presents a vision of a woman who takes control of her life, even in limited contexts.

Sita's captivity in Lanka is another example of suffering and helplessness. Many traditional readings portray her as a passive, quietly waiting to be rescued. However, a deeper feminist analysis suggests that Sita's silence, suffering, and helplessness express as resistance and self-assertion. Sita consistently refuses his advances and reaffirms her devotion to Rama during her captivity in the Ashok Vatika. Sita applies silence as a means of resisting evil morally and spiritually rather than through submission or obeying those who were violating her rights. Many religious feminist scholars contend that the authority of women comes from their ability to maintain moral purity (refusal to engage in unethical behaviours) as opposed to being voices in the eyes of others through public speaking. According to Rosemary

Radford Ruether, many religious feminist scholars of religion argue that women across different religious traditions have long resisted unjust systems by preserving their moral and spiritual integrity. Even though they were often denied the authority to hold positions of institutional power due to their gender, they were able to assert themselves through their spiritual and ethical practices as a form of resistance to oppression and defiance of systemic violence. Given this understanding of women's resistance to oppression and violence within religious systems, Ruether interprets Sita's response to Ravana's repeated threats and coerced persuasion as indicative of her ethical conviction. Sita's choice not to speak to Ravana's threats and coercively persuading her to submit to his demands for her virtue or love demonstrates that she was making a conscious moral choice in her refusal to justify herself to him and that she was maintaining fidelity to her code of ethics and demonstrating her own personal commitment to acting in accordance with what she believes to be right (i.e., her understanding of dharma) and, therefore, demonstrating her moral independence and ethical accountability for her actions. In this sense, Sita used her silence as a way to sustain the integrity of her soul while resisting the traditional expectation that women need to justify themselves before men to command any degree of respect and authority in the world. She does not allow her captivity to silence her or make her powerless. Instead, she uses silence in a meaningful way to express her inner strength and moral position herself as an ethical being. Her silence becomes a conscious choice. Thus, Sita's silence is explained as her independent commitment to defending her personal dignity and sense of healthy authority by living according to her ethical values.

Sita's innocence is repeatedly tested throughout *The Ramayana*, but her devotion to moral truth (satya) and to the observance of dharma remains unchangeable. By using the theory of religious feminism, it is possible to view Sita's innocence not simply as God's protection of her, but also to give it a greater meaning through Sita's continuing devotion to

the ethical principles of dharmic behaviour. Therefore, when Sita decides not to return to Ayodhya after her second exile, that is not an act of despair, but a decision made from her own spiritual independence. Sita values her faith in divine justice above her desire for social acceptance. She remains loyal to what she believes is morally right and just. Ruether argues that women have often been excluded from official positions of authority in patriarchal religious institutions, but they have still exercised spiritual power by resisting patriarchal structures. A strong example can be seen in Sita's final *Return to the Earth* (Ruether), she rejects the social system of the time, which demands endless proof of purity, and instead asserts her dignity through spiritual self-sovereignty. Through this act, Sita demonstrates a form of spiritual independence and self-respect that challenges the authority of the patriarchal order.

The combination of Judith Butler's performativity theory and feminist religious theory enables the interpretation of Sita's resistance as a complex, humanistic, and ongoing experience. Butler provides insight into how society constructs Sita's female role, which is formed by it, while also showing the instability of patriarchal beliefs compared with Sita's performance of her responsibilities (her 'dharmic' duties) relative to those expectations. Religious feminism offers a new perspective by permitting readers to see Sita's actions as important and by providing additional evidence that Sita did not experience her long-silenced suffering in the same way as someone merely being 'submitted' to her husband. Thus, combining religious feminism and Judith Butler's theories allows the research to view Sita not simply as an opponent to patriarchy, nor merely as a passive victim of patriarchy, but as a woman who contended for social capital based on her right moral understanding of female virtue.

In conclusion, this chapter expresses that feminist theory, particularly with a focus on gender performativity and religious feminism, serves as a vital tool for reclaiming Sita's

agency in the *Ramayana*. By examining her actions in key moments in terms of exile and captivity, we see that the guise of surrender or compliance in discursively compliant places often conceals coded forms of resistance as we unravel Sita's story to a more layered and multidimensional figure, devising her own methods to navigate patriarchy with strength and strategy. This reclamation is not an exercise in deepening our analysis of the epic, but also supplies empowering alternatives to the restrictive models of gender through which Sita has largely been justified.

## Chapter 3

### Unravelling Sita's Resistance in Valmiki's *The Ramayana*

This chapter employs feminist literary theory to examine Sita's character in Valmiki's *The Ramayana*. Instead of following traditional patriarchal readings that portray her as simply passive and submissive. A reading of key episodes in her character, drawing on Judith Butler's gender performativity and a religious feminist theory of embodied resistance, found that Sita negotiates patriarchal constraints and performance while asserting her subjectivity. The concept of *duplex femininity*, introduced in this study, helps to understand Sita's character in a new way. It suggests that Sita performs obedience and resistance at the same time in her actions. Her actions reveal that she is not merely passive; instead, she actively manages to make her decisions deliberately. This provides a basis for reading how she maintains her moral authority while navigating expectations of gender difference.

The analysis consists of four major episodes: (1) Sita's insistence on going into exile with Rama (*Aranya Kanda*); (2) Sita's abduction and captivity in Lanka (*Sundar Kanda*); (3) the Agni Pariksha (*Yuddha Kanda*); and (4) Sita's return to Earth (*Uttara Kanda*). Each of these episodes is closely analysed within the framework developed by political anthropologist James Scott in *Weapons of the Weak*—the subtle forms or patterns of resistance open to people in subordinate relationships in hierarchically organised systems. This chapter does not aim to set limits on either agency or victimisation paradigms and reject the dichotomy that social science, and in particular *Ramayana* scholarship, has primarily constructed as the canon of ideal positions to analyse women's actions. Instead of accepting notions of agency and victimisation as necessarily separate, we understand Sita's sophisticated approach to coded resistance as working in and against patriarchal notions of agency, investigating the patriarchal dominance within traditional accounts and recapturing the silenced voice and

agency of female characters. Critical reflexivity allows us to interrogate how the narrative of Sita has been construed, in oppressive ways, historically, to uphold regressive gender norms while also digging into the potential for resistance that exists within the epic itself. These theoretical approaches are informed by an interdisciplinary range of methods that include religious feminism and performance studies. Butler's notion of gender performativity helps to conceptualise how Sita's realisation of her wifely duty (*pativrata dharma*) might also signify a performance that upholds (and simultaneously rejects) patriarchal simplifications.

The Swayamvara: Choice, Consent, and Gender performance.

Sita's Swayamvara episode is characterised by her agency within the patriarchal system, as noted previously. The Swayamvara is frequently interpreted as a competition between men. However, a close reading of Valmiki's text shows that Sita is an active participant in this event and that the consent of Sita is essential for the Swayamvara ritual to be properly conducted. Sita's act of placing the garland on Rama was not only a ceremonial act but also symbolic, representing her choice of Rama as her husband, designing her as an agent rather than a mere object of exchange, and ultimately completing the marriage. Butler's theory of gender performativity offers insight into how Sita's agency functions under culturally prescribed norms. Butler asserts that gender is created and defined by "the repeated stylisation of the body" as governed by the social realm (Butler 191). Sita embodies the ideal daughter and bride through her involvement in the Swayamvara; at the same time, she performs this role while asserting her entitlement to give her consent. Thus, Sita's decision to comply with the ritual rather than refuse it illustrates the potential for agency to be enacted through compliance, which can be intentional and have meaning. From a religious feminist perspective, the Swayamvara ceremony demonstrates Sita's moral and spiritual authority. By looking at Sita through an ethical lens, we believe that her decision is not imposed on her. From a religious feminist perspective, the Swayamvara becomes more than a

ritual; it becomes a space where Sita's agency is visible. In this moment, Sita's actions do not reflect a rebellious or passive manner of existence. Instead, Sita lived authentically how she wanted to through the ritual of the Swayamvara. Through the Swayamvara, Sita asserts her identity within the cultural and social structures around her. Even while existing within a patriarchal society, she finds a way to act authentically. Through this choice, Sita also separated herself from the patriarchal structure of the society in which she was raised and in which she lived her life.

### Exile as Self- Choice: Rejecting Passive Victimhood

In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, the exchange of dialogue between Rama and Sita is a complex debate. Rama uses a style of protective patriarchy, describing the dangers of the forest in vivid detail: "There are many difficulties in the forest. Listen to what I say. O Sita! Abandon this intention of residing in the forest. It has been said that there are many hardships associated with dwelling in the desolate forest. Indeed, it is with your welfare in mind that I spoke words of advice...Therefore, the forest has great misery" (Debroy 208). He presents her suggested confinement to Ayodhya not as a form of oppression but as a necessary step for her safety and comfort. He instructs her to stay behind. "You are always devoted to dharma. Perform your own dharma here" (207). Sita's reaction shows her skill in convincing and emotional insight. She doesn't openly challenge his authority. Instead, she cleverly uses the language of dharma and wifely devotion to express her own wishes. She says, "...for a woman, the husband is only a refuge—not a father, not a son, not her own self, not a mother and not a friend" (206). This statement functions on two levels: first, on the surface, it seems like she supports a patriarchal belief that the happiness of a woman lies within her husband and defines her identity and fulfilment from him; hence, reinforcing the traditional view that a wife is supposed to be with her husband. However, on a deeper level, the model behind the statement is one of redefinition. She redefines what happiness looks like

to her. Ayodhya is not simply a physical kingdom or place to her, but rather a symbol of emotional connection and having someone to share her life with. She gets to establish the definition of what Ayodhya means to her; for her, it is not the four walls of a palace that provide a sense of security but rather a strong bond based upon companionship and mutual commitment. Thus, she shifts the definition of home from a physical/unoccupied building to being a place where there is an ethical/moral bond based upon feelings for each other. Her speech grows more intense emotionally, leading to a powerful threat: if she is separated from him, she would “end her life by poison, fire, or water” (Debroy 208). This contrasts with the earlier view of being forced to accept this separation quietly shows the strength of her personal power; she makes a strong and bold statement that reflects both the intensity of her emotional connection to him along with her unwillingness to accept someone else's choice as the right choice for her.

Her speech grows more intense emotionally, leading to a powerful threat: if she is forced to stay behind, she would “end her life by poison, fire, or water” (Debroy 208). This is not a passive plea but a strategic ultimatum. It forces Rama to choose between his safety plan for her and her very life. Valmiki thus sets a blueprint for Sita as eloquent. This episode of Sita’s exile can be considered a significant site for feminist retellings. In Valmiki’s text, Sita explains her insistence on following Rama into the forest, “A woman without a husband is incapable of remaining alive” (208).

This moment has primarily been interpreted as an act of wifely devotion, but feminist interpretations present this moment as a choice and an active decision, not a passive one. This decision is made even clearer in *The Forest of Enchantments* by Divakaruni, where she recounts Sita’s first-person narration. She states that on realising her identity is separate from being Rama’s wife. “I didn’t know that, for me, a greater sorrow was about to begin” (Divakaruni 237). This act of reclamation of the original moment turns Sita from a sacrificial

body to an individual with the agency to articulate her own narrative.

Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* further expands on this reimagining and makes Sita's decision in the scenario a political decision reflecting her own strategic agency. In this retelling, Tripathi portrays Sita as she analyses their forest exile, not just as an act of wifely devotion, but as providing Rama an opportunity to strengthen his political station and eventual kinship through their simultaneous hardships. This instance coincides with what Tripathi calls "feminist nationalism" in Sita's acts, both personally and politically. The definition of "feminist nationalism," as described by Amish Tripathi, is a new way of constructing a nation that is centred on women's political agency and disputes traditional expectations for women. Sita embodies this feminist nationalism in Tripathi's novel through her advocacy of the altruistic warrior ideal instead of living within traditional confines. In Tripathi's narrative, the character of Sita expresses feminist nationalism. She establishes "altruistic warrior ideals" and does not adhere exclusively to the conventional images of women in nationalism. Sita poses as the warrior princess whose development in the story transforms and revolutionizes "gender-based political norms" in a larger context. Sita's character development and her connection to forming national identity in a more expansive context differentiate her from the typically minor or limited portrayals of women in constructing mythology and nationhood. While considering Sita's journey to become a crusader for a "new" feminist nationalism, we see that she can embody both the roles of combatant and creator of national identity.

The second example through which this argument can be made is provided by Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, where exile serves as a site for raising awareness among women about their place in the world. Sita's encounters with Shurpanakha and Ahilya provide her with a greater understanding of systems of subordination and a way in which she may exist outside

of the norm for a wife. These women are both marginalized due to their gender and, in many cases, also their races. Sita learns through Ahilya that she could live beyond a traditional wife by standing up for herself and not being solely identified as “not just the wife of Rama” but belonging “part of wider world,” Ahilya encourages all women to leave behind their male-dominated constructs and take ownership of who and what they are: ‘This is who I am; I do not need a man to tell me who I am.’ This helps Sita to expand her view of female agency and critically evaluate what women can do beyond the gender role assigned to them by society. Sita’s captivity in Lanka is another significant moment that feminist retellings interpret through the lens of covert resistance and psychological strength. Traditional retellings present Sita as defenceless and powerless during captivity, while the more contemporary retellings highlight silence and endurance as a form of resistance and the use of Patua Art by Chitrakar, because Sita takes her steadfast position and direct gaze with her back turned, while surrounded. While her literal freedom is absent when under captivity, Sita represents the freedom of the spirit. The graphic novel structure takes on its own theoretical dimensions and functions for feminist revisionism.

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni strengthens Sita's sense of agency by focusing on her inner growth and by using first-person narration, which provides readers insight into her thoughts. Through Sita's reflections, readers gain insight and a clearer understanding of her emotions. Divakaruni's Sita recognises the patriarchal structures that seek to control her. Divakaruni uses Sita’s observance of Rama’s suggestion that she should stay behind, as evident in the many times she discusses the lack of choice in the lives of women throughout the text, as a means of exposing the assumption by men that they know best for women, creating a disconnect between men's and women’s choices and futures. Therefore, her decision to accompany Rama is viewed as a form of rebellion against this form of condescension, exercising her right to make her own decisions, even if such a choice

means risking her own life. She also emphasises that her choice to accompany Rama was not an obligation but rather an exercise of her free will and self-respect. Therefore, Sita's decision to go with Rama was an act of self-respect and free will. This change in viewpoint is essential, Divakaruni makes a distinction between subservience and love. Although Sita does not have to obey Rama, her love for him is genuine. In actuality, Sita standing her ground and wanting to share his fate are characteristics of true love, according to Divakaruni. In fact, true love, according to Divakaruni, involves Sita standing her ground and wanting to share his fate. This defines their relationships; the forest becomes not a place of punishment but a space full of possibility, a 'forest of enchantments' where her identity can grow outside the strict limits of the place and its patriarchal demands. In internal monologue, Divakaruni's Sita states, "They thought they had caught me, but my mind was freer than theirs. They could capture my body, but they could not capture my thought, nor my love, nor my resolve" (Divakaruni 156). In Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, Sita's dialogues with Shurpanakha bring new dimensions to this topic when, post-captivity, both women reflect on how their experiences represent a continuation of a spectrum of patriarchal violence. In *The Forest of Enchantment* by Divakaruni, she maps out Sita's mental landscape during captivity and shows how resigned compliance conceals strategic agency through strategic resistance.

Amish Tripathi's Political Strategist: *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (2017)

In his *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, Amish Tripathi takes a different but equally feminist approach. In this retelling, Sita is portrayed not only as a devoted wife but also as a capable leader and a thoughtful strategist who is believed to be the prophesied saviour of India. Her character is presented with greater agency and strength. Rather than seeing her decision to accompany Rama as purely emotional or based on marital devotion, the narrative suggests that it is also guided by political awareness and strategic thinking. In this version, her decision to accompany Rama is viewed less as an emotional choice but more as a political

and strategic necessity. Tripathi's Sita comes from a background where she has military and governmental training in the novel. She believes that exile is not only a personal loss, but it is also a significant political event that has great meaning beyond herself. When she decided to join Rama in his exile, Sita was showing her awareness of how strategically that decision benefited their interests and their shared responsibility. Sita stood with Rama to lend credibility to his claim and to promote their common goal. Sita is not portrayed as a person who needs protection, but rather as an equal participant who is able to assist with housing, warfare, negotiating, and motivating others. She states her thoughts on leadership by saying, "Well, Lord Rudra had said: 'A leader is not just one who gives his people what they desire; he must also be one who teaches them to be greater than what they thought they could be'" (Tripathi). This presents Sita as a leader committed to guiding her people. This portrayal challenges the traditional belief that men are protectors and women are dependent. Tripathi shows this idea by presenting a Sita whose physical and intellectual strengths are often stronger than those of the men around her. Her choice to live in exile reflects her sense of leadership responsibilities and presents wifedom as a form of political partnership. This reflects a modern feminist notion that agency means having the power to act and take leadership in every area, even those that have historically been traditionally controlled by men.

Volga's Liberation Perspective: *The Liberation of Sita* (2016)

Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* offers a post-exile, reflective viewpoint that radically changes the interpretation of Sita's choices as she deliberates. Sita reflects that her life was fulfilled through Rama's love; she later realises she had confined her identity within the boundaries of that relationship (Volga 85). This moment presents Sita moving from her traditionally defined portrayal by others to exploring her own identity. Through her conversations with other women in the epic (Shurpanakha, Renuka, Ahilya, and Urmila), Sita

undergoes a feminist awakening. She reevaluates her past actions, including her choice to follow Rama into *Exile*. She expresses her view to Ahilya that she is not a stone. She is a woman who transformed a curse into empowerment, reminding her that a woman's self-worth should arise from within rather than validation from anyone (Volga). Sita's dialogues with marginalised women provide her with new models of strength and independence, moving her toward "true feminist liberation."

Volga's Sita begins to see that her original choice, while assertive, was still shaped by a patriarchal view of love and duty. She followed Rama into exile because she could not imagine her life separate from him. Her decision reflects her deep emotional attachment and sense of wifely duty. In this new understanding, exile does not represent Sita's complete freedom. Instead, it makes the beginning of a longer journey toward self-awareness. Through this experience, she starts to understand herself deeply and begins to search for her own identity. Her conversations with Shurpanakha, who lived her own desires outside of male approval, and Ahilya, who found strength through independence, provide a new concept of Sita. On Sita's realisation that her decision to leave is not motivated by anger toward Rama but by her realisation that she has an independent identity and a world that belongs to her (102). This perspective doesn't erase her agency during the exile. Instead of limiting Sita, this experience gives depth to her growth. Volga illustrates that agency evolves over an extended period. Sita's exile is her first step towards independence, and the pain and suffering she endures after her exile will allow her to finally develop the power to choose to prioritise herself instead of listening to patriarchal demands. This will ultimately allow Sita to make her final independent choice of going back to Earth.

#### Theoretical Synthesis: From Duty to Self-Determination

Together, these reinterpretations produce a strong feminist revision of the episode of exile for Sita. These reinterpretations, in transforming a narrative of passivity into one of

agency and autonomy, also redirect the emphasis of the interpretation from being one of women who were sacrificed to being women who assert themselves through choosing their own destinies. Valmiki gives a textual depiction of Sita's voice and will. Divakaruni uses the psychological implications of Sita's will to frame her choice of love on her own terms.

Tripathi uses a political lens to view Sita's choice as both an act of leadership and an equal partnership. Volga contextualises Sita within her own lifelong journey toward true feminist liberation. These works present a new perspective of agency that does not purely rely on bold rebellion but rather demonstrates what this thesis will describe as "duplex femininity. This term indicates an intelligent ability to operate within a specific present-day framework while understanding and working to change it through one's actions. Rather than submit to her husband or to the patriarchal society around her, Sita uses the language and ideas of wifely duty as tools to convince others of her belief in her choices, which asserts an agency for herself. Her acceptance of exile is also an outright rejection of a life of security and instead a choice for the pursuit of something greater than herself. This courageously asserts that Sita is an author of her own story, a theme that the feminist reinterpretations of her life celebrate and emphasise as they transform Sita from an embodiment of love and devotion into a model of a multifaceted, strategic agent of change.

**Agni Pariksha: Rejecting the Patriarchal Woman's Value.**

Some people believe that *Agni Pariksha's* trial by fire from the *Yuddha Kanda* of the *Ramayana* represents Sita's submission to the patriarchal power of men. However, another interpretation suggests that this event is merely one of submission rather than domination. In this sense, when Sita stands before Agni and accepts the trial, her decision can be taken as a deliberate choice. Thus, this moment can be interpreted as one in which Sita does not plead with Rama or argue with him when he says he cannot take her back due to her living with another man; she maintains dignity and exhibits moral clarity. Debroy translates her response

as: "O mighty-armed one! I am not what you take me to be. You should have trust in me. I swear on my own character. Because of the conduct of ordinary women, you are casting doubts on the entire species. If I have been tested by you, you should cast aside all doubt" (276). Her words question Rama's concern for public opinion and highlight her strong sense of personal dignity and moral integrity. Sita's response expresses her self-respect and moral strength. This act suggests that individual dignity should not be sacrificed simply to satisfy social expectations. Instead of silently accepting the situation or waiting for others to judge her, she takes control of her own decision. Sita asks Lakshmana to prepare a pyre for her rather than passively submit to whatever the trial may be: "Prepare a funeral pyre for me. That is the medication for a calamity. Having suffered from a false accusation, I am not interested in remaining alive" (277). In terms of the Agni Pariksha, this changes the Agni Pariksha from a test forced through patriarchal dominance into a choice that Sita took to display her veracity in her own conditions. When stepping into the flames, Sita says, "If my heart has always been with Raghava and never wavered, let the fire, which is the witness to the world, save me in every possible way" (278). This phrase transforms Agni from an example of patriarchal judgment to the testimony of Sita's character, supplanting the objectives for which the trial was initially constructed. The outcome of the Agni Pariksha, in which Agni himself affirms Sita's purity, was not solely a restoration of dignity but a statement that Sita attempted to resist the assertion of masculine authority through a male figure. The God of Agni has identified Sita: "O Rama! This is Vaidehi, and there is no sin in her. She possesses good conduct, and her conduct is firm. In words, thoughts, intelligence, and sight, she has always followed you. At that time, the rakshasa Ravana, full of valour, abducted her. Though she was protected and confined in the inner quarters, her mind was always devoted to you" (281). The outcome of the *Agni Pariksha*, with Agni himself declaring Sita's purity, is more than just vindication; it confirms her resistance to patriarchal

doubt. Sita's *Agni Pariksha* (Trial by Fire) is one of the most heavily covered feminist retellings and critiques because it is a major site for reclaiming Sita's power and agency. While previous retellings emphasised Sita's Agni Pariksha as a divine test, contemporary feminist retellings critique the patriarchal rationale behind requiring proof of a woman's purity. As such, Divakaruni's work does show Sita's Agni Pariksha as a successful test that proves her purity. Instead, it highlights Rama's sincerity toward Sita and shows how she loses control over her own life and identity. Therefore, Divakaruni's retelling relates to modern movements that fight against blaming women and controlling their bodies.

Volga's spelling out of *The Liberation of Sita* offers perhaps the most radical alternative reading of this episode by positing Sita's final refusal of repeated tests as a completion of her feminist awakening. Through conversations with other female characters, like Ahilya and Renuka, Sita grasps that "the meaning of success for a woman is not in her relationship with a man. This transformation repurposes Sita's final return to the earth from an act of ethical failure into an act of liberation, a rejection of the type of patriarchal economy that continually puts women's virtue on public display. Similarly, Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* uses the graphic novel format to juxtapose the public spectacle of the fire test with Sita's private suffering to highlight the brutality of insisting on patriarchal affirmation of women's identities.

Sita also bolsters her position with emotional appeals that underscore how deep her commitment is while asserting her moral authority. She states to Rama: "O beloved! If I am neglected by you, death is superior. Alone, I am incapable of tolerating this misery and grief for an instant, not to speak of fourteen years" (Debroy 211). This comment operates on multiple layers: it expresses an emotional response but also allocates to Ram the liability of doing something for which he might be held culpable.

### Captivity and Resistance: *Sundara Kanda* Close Reading

In *Sundara Kanda*, of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, talks about Hanuman, who goes on a heroic journey to rescue Sita from Ravana's captivity in Lanka. While previously this has been viewed solely as a representation of Sita's suffering and loyalty to Rama, a close feminist analysis of this book reveals a much more complex interpretation of this story. For Sita, her imprisonment was not merely physical, but she exhibited tremendous 'psychological and moral resistance'. This analysis sees her captivity not as an example of her being a passive victim, but as an example of her strong defiance against her captor(s), using whatever means were available to her as a woman in her position, namely, her words, her body, and her spirit.

#### Ashoka Vatika as Prison

Sita's prison is not constructed like a normal prison, but a strange, twisted version of paradise called the Ashoka Vatika, or the Grove of Ashoka Trees. Valmiki's descriptions highlight this contrast. The grove is filled with "trees bent down with the weight of flowers" and "ponds with water as clear as crystal" (Debroy, *Sundara Kanda*). But this beauty is spoiled by its inhabitants: "fierce-eyed ogresses with frightful faces" (Debroy, *Sundara Kanda*). Where Sita can find beauty in her surroundings, she has no other means of transforming what could otherwise be the most beautiful experience into her own pleasure, except to bear her mind's suffering in silence; she is like a diamond in Ravana's golden cage, an object to be possessed, not a person to be respected.

Ravana has made her exist in a physically impoverished state in contrast to the luxurious environment around her. He describes her as "emaciated," "soiled with dirt," "dressed in a single soiled garment," and "having a single braid" (ekaveni) (Debroy, *Sundara Kanda*). Sita's physical neglect represents the initial act of resistance against Ravana's control of her life. By selecting not to adorn herself with elaborate garments or other adornments,

Sita was making a statement; she did not want to be a part of Ravana's world. The ekaveni is also a style of hair worn by women who are mourning the death of a loved one and women who are experiencing hardship and suffering; therefore, it expresses Sita's sense of deep sadness for Rama, her husband, whom she has been separated from, as well as her defiance of Ravana's advances. Sita demonstrated her courage in rejecting Ravana's advances through the act of cutting off her hair and living as an ascetic. Sita's condition is also indicative of her conscious decision to simplify her living environment as compared to Ravana's wealthy environment, where she is being held captive. Sita has been referred to as "emaciated", "dirtied", "dressed in one dirty garment" and "with a single braid (ekaveni)"; (Debroy, *Sundara Kanda*) a way to show that Sita has rejected all that is from the world of Ravana and to demonstrate that she has wholly refused to accept any comfort or adornment from him. The ekaveni is a hairstyle commonly worn by women in mourning or in times of adversity, which reflects both her deep sadness for her husband's absence from her and her defiance of Ravana's advances toward her.

#### Earth's Return: *Uttara Kand* as Ultimate Assertion

In the *Uttara Kanda*, Sita's final return to Earth illustrates her strong sense of autonomy. Sita acknowledges and rejects the demands of patriarchy, which constantly require her to provide proof of her purity. When Rama once again exiles a pregnant Sita to quell the continuing gossip of his citizens about Sita's fidelity, she accepts Rama's decision without argument or request, as a sign of great dignity. Years later, despite Rama's desire to bring Sita back, he proposes to her another public trial to prove her fidelity, to which Sita seeks a different response. In Sita's own words to her mother, the Earth Goddess, or Bhumi, she states: "If I have not thought of anyone other than Raghava in my mind, then let the Goddess Earth open up a chasm for (Debroy 476).

Overall, Sita's final return to the Earth represents an important site of feminist reclamation within contemporary adaptations of *the Ramayana*. The tragic ending of Sita's Return to Earth, according to most traditional interpretations, has been predominantly understood as a conclusion to her suffering; however, in feminist retellings, this moment in time has been reframed through an entirely different lens and viewed as an affirmation of Sita's independence and rejection of Patriarchal Authority. *The Forest of Enchantments* recounts this moment from Sita's perspective as an example of her empowerment. Sita states that she is not disappearing but returning to her true self, the person she was before being defined as Rama's wife or Janaka's daughter (Divakaruni 289). Instead of showing this event as Sita quietly accepting abandonment by Rama, Divakaruni presents this as an act of self-recovery and personal choice.

*The Liberation of Sita* broadens the interpretation of this scene as it expands upon Sita's conversations with other women, and their similar efforts to repel the structures imposed upon them by a patriarchal society. The return to the Earth is therefore not to be viewed solely as the personal choice of one woman but as a public act of support and solidarity with other feminist women who have echoed similar concerns of Sita, creating a community, ready to act with her in the name of their feminine identities and rejecting the mandated beliefs and philosophies of men, which deny them their rightful identities. The connection to ecofeminism is noteworthy in its recognition of the similarities in the oppression of women and Nature. Sita's return to the Earth also symbolically reestablished the true relationship between women and nature. Likewise, Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* examines this event politically as Sita publicly rejected any kingship that demanded women to continually sacrifice their dignity.

### *Yuddha Kanda* Reinterpretation, From Patriarchal Validation to Feminist Defiance

The *Agni Pariksha* (trial by fire) is the most discussed scene in the entire *Ramayana* (*Yuddha Kanda*). Traditionally viewed as Sita's last confirmation of her purity and ultimately proving her existence, feminist readings reveal a much more complicated and disturbing reality of Sita's evident humiliation as a result of patriarchal anxiety regarding the energy(vulgarised) of female sexuality and its unnatural implications. As part of the study of Valmiki's original text and modern reinterpretations by authors including Chitra Banerjee, Divakaruni, Volga, and Samhita Arni, we find that Valmiki does not depict the *Agni Pariksha* as Sita's moment of glory; instead, it depicts an instance of Sita's alienation in a patriarchal society. In Valmiki's opinion, the patriarchs value public opinion above personal truth. They place a higher value on a king's honour than on the dignity of his wife.

The *Agni Pariksha* is located within the *Yuddha Kanda* (the book of War) of Valmiki's Sanskrit epic, specifically, Sarga 115-118. Valmiki reveals Sita's childbirth episode as not a joyous reunion, but as a cold public rejection. Following the defeat of Ravana and the coronation of Vibhishana, Rama would meet Sita at last. However, rather than expressing joy upon reuniting, Rama delivered a painful speech. In this speech, he expresses that Sita was not the reason for the action of defeating Ravana. Rama expresses that, because of suspicion of Sita's character, she is unacceptable to him. Rama permits Sita to leave wherever she wants. He questions what nobleman, born of a noble race, would accept back a woman who has been in another's house.

### Valmiki's Account: Public Suspicion and the Performance of Purity

The *Agni Pariksha* is a story in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. The *Agni Pariksha* scene takes place in the *Yuddha Kanda*. The *Agni Pariksha* begins with a negative public embrace, where Rama's joy in seeing Sita is overshadowed by his negative feelings about her. As soon as Rama defeats Ravana and sends Vibhishana to be crowned, he meets Sita for the first time.

Rama asserts that the war was fought to defend royal honour: "I won you back for a reason, and I have got that fame back. I have no attachment for you. You can go wherever you desire. O fortunate one" (Debroy 276). What Rama says indicates that he cares more about upholding his family's honour than about love. Rama has indicated that the reason he holds this belief about Sita is that she has "been with another," or has spent time with another man, and therefore, should be considered to be "dirty," or an object of dishonour, and not fit for a nobleman. Rama articulates a public, lineage-based logic of honour when he asks: "If a woman has resided in the house of another, which energetic man, who has been born in a noble lineage, will take her back again, in a happy frame of mind" ( 275- 76).

When Sita hears Rama's words, she is filled with extreme sorrow and disbelief. She sways, as if she were a vine torn away from its support, but then she straightens herself and answers him with dignity and strength. Sita confronts Rama about the cruel and disrespectful way he speaks to her: "O brave one! Like an ordinary man speaking to an ordinary woman, why are you making me hear such harsh words" (276). This is the talk of a common man to a woman of the streets. She also reminds Rama of her moral high ground, saying, "O tiger among men! However, you only followed your rage. You were like a feeble man, placing importance on a feminine sentiment. I was not really born to Janaka. I was born on the earth. One who knows about conduct! You did not set a great score for my conduct" (277).

Moreover, Sita also commands her brother-in-law, Lakshmana, to prepare a pyre for her: "O Soumitri! Prepare a funeral pyre for me. That is the medication for a calamity" (Debroy 277). This command is especially important because it demonstrates Sita's strength of character and determination; she doesn't just accept the trials imposed upon her by the people of the world. She chooses her trial as the only way to show her truth in the face of so much public humiliation. Finally, Sita's request to the god Agni is a public declaration of her

innocence: "If my heart has always been with Raghava and never wavered, let the fire, which is a witness to the world, save me in every possible way" (277-78).

The scene after *Agni Pariksha* returns Sita to Rama shows Agni confirming that Sita is pure. Rama then says that he never doubted Sita, but he highlights the need to silence public rumours. However, it cannot fully remove the harshness of the episode. Although this provides only partial relief from Sita's painful experience, it highlights a specific mythological event, the real-life consequences of the myth. The manner in which Valmiki presents the issue illustrates the overall systemic oppression women had to suffer at the hands of a patriarchal system, as women were required to prove themselves worthy of a patriarchal system that routinely questioned their word, but was much slower to credit them for their actions.

#### Divakaruni's Interiority: Betrayal and the Shattering of Illusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni effectively utilises Valmiki's *Ramayana* and creates a deeper, more personal perspective of Sita's emotional world through the first-person account of Sita's trauma during this ordeal. Through this viewpoint, Divakaruni captures the emotional devastation Sita experienced, which Valmiki only briefly mentioned. The trial in Divakaruni's Sita represents betrayal instead of purity. The man for whom she endured so much pain (the king of Lanka) does the ultimate humiliation to her. In the way that Divakaruni uses Sita's internal monologue, she puts forth the idea that the spoken word does not prove enough to show someone was truthful and that to prove Sita's integrity, she needed to endure a life-threatening ordeal, exhibiting the deep patriarchal framework that places a priority on the display of a woman's existence rather than that of her testimony. The author captures the pain of Sita at the time of the Agni Pariksha, showing her the moment of realisation that not only must Rama love her, but that he has to meet the expectations set forth by the king and subjects of the kingdom. In this manner, the value of the relationship is set

aside to maintain the reputation of Rama. The Agni Pariksha is the moment Sita's perceptions of Rama were broken. The *Agni Pariksha* is seen not as a test of virtue, but rather as a performance created to assist in rectifying masculine honour and royal honour, showing the extent to which women have become the primary sites where patriarchal anxieties find their resolution. The fire serves as a physical challenge for Sita as well, but also as a representation of the destruction of Sita's earlier understanding of Rama as a man.

#### Volga's Liberation: The Catalyst for Feminist Awakening

Emotional reaction of Divakaruni's Sita of betrayal is typically the primary focus of the books examining her expulsion from Ayodhya, while Volga's book, *The Liberation of Sita*, addresses the intellectual basis for a woman to understand and contextualise her betrayal at the hands of Ram. Specifically, Volga envisages Sita's existence post her second expulsion from Ayodhya; as she meets with other oppressed female characters, Sita comes to understand her Agni Pariksha in a new way as a reflection of the damages caused by a broken system of which she cannot remain a part. Through her conversations with Shurpanakha, Ahalya, and Urmila, Sita comes to recognise that her value as a female is not contingent upon a man or upon the endorsement of the God of fire in the form of a certificate that attests to her purity. Ahalya, who faced deep humiliation and was turned into stone before being restored to human form, helps Sita understand her own identity and self-worth. She teaches Sita that a woman's truth belongs to her alone and does not require validation from others. In the same way, Shurpanakha, who was harshly punished for asserting her sexuality, is an example of how women are oppressed and controlled by the male-dominated culture. Lastly, Urmila, Sita's sister, remained in a deep sleep for fourteen years to carry out her husband's duties. Through her conversations with these three women, Shurpanakha, Ahalya, and Urmila, Sita comes to the radical conclusion that for a woman, success means something entirely different from what it means for a man. When viewed from this perspective, the Agni Pariksha

becomes a meaningless ritual that reinforces the patriarchal economic system of honour.

Volga presents Sita's return to the earth as a direct result of her self-realisation, a firm decision to reject a system that repeatedly doubted her honour. At the end of the narrative, Sita chooses to return to Mother Earth, asserting her autonomy and rejecting a world that continually subjects her purity and worth to patriarchal scrutiny. She chooses to validate herself by going back to her mother, the Earth, instead of seeking validation from her husband and his kingdom.

Reinterpreting the *Agni Pariksha* as a Feminist Ritual:

A feminist theoretical analysis of the *Agni Pariksha* allows us to look at it not simply as proof of purity for women but rather as a reflection of how the culture interprets anxiety within patriarchy towards feminine sexuality, lineage, and honour through the body of a woman. By acting out the ritualistic nature of the Agni Pariksha as a public performance, Sita is showing how patriarchy views female sexuality and reproductive rights regarding their regulation and control by men.

Butler's theory of 'gender performance' can also provide insight into this episode. While Sita is coercively forced to act as the 'chaste and pure wife' as defined by patriarchy, she also remains an active participant in this performance; without the act of self-sacrifice, her status as a good woman would not be recognised. Even though Sita is perceived to have demonstrated female purity through her survival of the fire, we must also consider the level of violence and abuse of power in requiring this type of proof from women. By agreeing to perform the ritual as she had chosen and asking Lakshman to create the pyre on her behalf, Sita reclaims her own narrative.

Religious feminism theorises that the trial of Sita was not about her physical purity but rather about her spiritual commitment to truth. According to many religious feminists, women's authority in sacred texts emerges from maintaining a moral position rather than

being sanctioned by the church, temple, or other social authority. Sita does not seek social permission to claim her authenticity; instead, she relies on God's ultimate justice as her truth. Sita's actions are representative of her adherence to her dharma rather than to submission to a patriarchal social order, thereby confirming that she has the right to be a spiritually self-possessing individual.

The concept of *duplex femininity* can be seen in the *Agni Pariksha* incident. Although Sita is outwardly willing to submit to the expectations of male supremacy, her independence of action through participating in this rite, coupled with her survival of the rite whilst retaining her honour, undermines the very logic of patriarchal society. As Volga suggests, true victory over patriarchal oppression is impossible while we continue to engage within the confines of oppressive structures, but Sita's example demonstrates how much of our power is the result of negotiating power dynamics that challenge the moral legitimacy of patriarchal authority.

The *Agni Pariksha* is reinterpreted in feminist writings as a critical site for understanding gender politics. In Valmiki's vision, we have a king willing to place public honour over trusting the docility of a wife; Divakaruni embodies the painful betrayal; Arni frames it within the violent mesh of war for masculine honour; and Volga sees in Sita's rejection the true fortitude of women who are stripped repeatedly of agency. Together, these accounts indicate that it is not Sita but the patriarchal society that tests the very threshold of morality in the *Agni Pariksha* by refusing to allow, respect, and honour a woman.

Synthesis of Theory: *Duplex Femininity* as Analytical Frame

We can characterise this as the backwards construction of *duplex femininity* as a synthesis enabling a better understanding of Sita's simultaneous expression of compliance and resistance across these key episodes. This allows for a theoretical frame of Butler's performativity and religious feminism. In each episode—*Exile*, *Captivity*, *Agni Pariksha*, and

*Return to Earth*—Sita outwardly performs the prescribed gender expressions of patriarchal culture, while simultaneously reconstituting those normative definitions from within. This dual position allows her to assert her moral authority whilst chasing and fulfilling her desires, as a sophisticated type of coded resistance that has gone unnoticed in traditional readings.

The feminist retellings examined in this paper exemplify how duplex femininity operates as a form of what political anthropologist James Scott has referred to as ‘infra-politics,’ a concept that refers to subtle, everyday acts of resistance by marginalised groups within hierarchical systems of social dominations and oppression, often without open confrontation. The term was popularised by political anthropologist James C. Scott, who argues that individuals or communities can subvert, challenge, or resist a dominating power through encoded actions, rituals, and practices that exist within the sphere of social norms--the subtle ways subordinate groups express resistance. Arni's Sita is calm and serene on the outside but speaks out against patriarchy; Volga's Sita symbolically rejects the very patriarchal structuring she seems to adhere to; Divakaruni's Sita embodies the ideal of wifely devotion while subtly expressing dissatisfaction with patriarchy; and Tripathi's Sita is obedient and upholds familial traditions while also being a political leader. By showing how Sita's agency is simultaneously enacted within the parameters of her historical moment and offering women role models for empowerment in the face of ambiguity, this way of thinking also explains the language that might otherwise seem contradictory in describing Sita as both the ideal wife and reclaiming her as a potential agent of resistance. This way of thinking also explains the language that might otherwise seem contradictory in describing Sita as both the ideal wife and also reclaiming her as a potential agent of resistance, by demonstrating how Sita's agency is simultaneously enacted within the confines of her historical moment while providing women with models of empowerment when faced with ambiguity.

This theoretical synthesis not only serves to show how Sita's story is more than fodder for literary analysis but also provides, as Volga describes, a 'pedagogy of resistance' (Volga, *The Liberation of Sita*, 2016) that illustrates the many ways oppressed groups can continue to express agency and live with dignity even when their options are diminished. There is also an ongoing and enduring cultural relevance with these retellings that challenges the search results. Reclaiming Sita's duplex nature as a means of feminist resistance is a potent act of recovery. These accounts contribute to the ongoing feminist project of revisionism, which Ostriker identifies as essential for individual and collective liberation, by restoring the duplex quality of Sita's femininity. Feminist interpretations further reframe this moment as the final declaration of autonomy and rejection of patriarchal authority, while traditional interpretations treat it as a tragic conclusion to Sita's suffering. While conventional readings treat this moment as a tragic end to Sita's suffering, feminist revisions reframe it still further as the definitive assertion of autonomy and disavowal of patriarchal authority. Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments* makes her own decision with full awareness of the implications. At an important time, she expresses her refusal to do what is being requested. She argues that by agreeing to do so, she would cause society to condemn other women based on her actions in the future, leading even pure women to prove they are pure time and again (Divakaruni 356-357). This new interpretation alters our understanding of the event; where we would have previously viewed Sita as silently accepting abandonment, we now see her asserting her morals through this refusal to provide proof of herself in an unending manner based upon her actions. Thus, the incident is no longer an illustration of silent compliance but rather an empowering instance of individual agency and self-respect. This redrawing of the event entirely changes the concept by which we perceive it, as moving from passive compliance with abandonment to active reclamation of self.

### Embodied Resistance: The Body as a Site of Protest

Sita's resistance is more than a verbal one; she is also resisting physically. The expression of her being in the grove, as quoted from Valmiki's *Ramayana*, also speaks to the physical aspect of Resistance. It is through the physical manifestation of resistance that Sita is displaying and embodying her resistance in direct opposition to the physical violence of the demonesses. The poetic imagery that describes Sita's plight and sorrows is profound. The poetic imagery that describes Sita's suffering is powerful. Hanuman compares her to "a smoke-covered fire," her brightness is overshadowed by sorrow (Valmiki, *Sundara Kanda*15).

Sita's body is a metaphor for extreme suffering and strength. Ravana's imprisonment has hidden Sita's inner radiance, but Valmiki (*Sundara Kanda* 15) points out that it remains unchanged by the overlay of smoke. The way in which Sita's long hair is "neatly upplaited into a single braid," a form of serpentine shape, displays both sacred power and the kind of strength that protects. Furthermore, the phrase, "the only decoration of love for her husband," indicates that Sita's personal identity is grounded in moral rectitude and emotional strength rather than physical decoration. In addition, Ravana considers Sita's weakened and bound-up body to be touched with untouchability, which supports her fidelity and devotion to Rama.

Feminist reinterpretation of this work has been able to detect agency present throughout Valmiki's text and highlight the inner voice of Sita. The modern retelling of the *Ramayana* in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's book, *The Forest of Enchantment*, is narrated from a first-person point of view and explores Sita's psychological condition. Her thoughts show that she not only longs for Rama but also deliberately plans her escape from her captivity and views her captivity as a clever game. Divakaruni presents Sita's meeting with Hanuman as both a moment of rescue and a test of his sincerity and wisdom. This highlights Sita's intelligence and caution while facing a dangerous situation.

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The metaphors in this description show that Sita's body reflects both deep suffering and resilience. The image of being compared to fire subdued by smoke implies that while her directional light (inner strength) has been obscured by Ravana, it remains intact after having been diminished. As an example of this, e.g., the imagery of the only visible "long hair carefully woven into a single braid" visualising a serpent indicates that not only is Sita a danger to those who may touch her, but also holds sacred power and integrity. The expression "the sole embellishment of affection for her partner" implies that Sita's self-identity and value derive from her emotional resilience and firm ethical principles. Despite being imprisoned and physically diminished, Ravana continues to regard her as sacred and untouchable. As a result, her fidelity and commitment to Rama stay untainted and cannot be harmed.

### Feminist Reinterpretations: Reinterpreting Sita's Inner Voice

Feminist reinterpretation of this work has been able to detect agency present throughout Valmiki's text and highlight the inner voice of Sita. Modern-day retelling of the *Ramayana* through Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's book, *The Forest of Enchantments*, is told through a first-person perspective and explores Sita's psychological condition. Sita's constant thinking about Rama indicates that she misses him but also that she is attempting to figure out how to deal with the difficult situation in which she finds herself. She sees her captivity as a

challenge that needs thought rather than a place of hopeless despair. Divakaruni uses Sita's meeting with Hanuman to illustrate that, while it is a rescue, it is also a test of Hanuman's honest nature, therefore revealing Sita's intelligence and awareness in a precarious situation. Sita's *Ramayana* (2011), a graphic novel by Samhita Arni, is an excellent example of how effective illustrations can help to convey the emotions felt by the characters in the story. The illustrations show Sita alone, which expresses her feelings of loneliness and sadness, but at the same time, her body language is upright and strong, and her eyes are focused ahead. The rakshasis portrayed in the novel are dark, evil-looking figures that contrast with the lighter, more sorrowful images of Sita, highlighting her identity as morally pure in the face of such evil.

Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* (2016) takes on a post-structuralist approach to Sita's story. By having Sita's conversations with other women who have been marginalised, such as Shurpanakha, Volga creates the idea of captivity as a crucible of self-discovery and the creation of feminist consciousness. Sita discovers that she has been overly dependent on her identity as Rama's wife. The experience of her captivity in the Ashoka Vatika catalyses her discovery of a new, independent identity, thereby creating a path for her liberation from Rama and the system that he embodies.

The *Uttara Kanda*, also referred to as "The Later Chapter," is also the site of great debate among commentators who speculate that it was appended to the end of what was originally an epic poem consisting of six books. However, it contains Sita's strongest assertion of agency, as she chooses to return to earth, to her mother. Some interpreters of this epic tract argue that it disturbed the realisation of what constitutes an ideal ending to *Yuddha Kanda*, but it represents, through feminist critique, something that constitutes not an afterthought, but rather what Sita actually embodies.

### The Final Summons: A Conscious Choice for Self- Sovereignty

Years later, after raising her twin sons Lava and Kusha in Valmiki's ashram, Rama organises a grand Ashvamedha Yagna. He asks Sita to come before the public again to prove her purity and offers her the opportunity to return to the palace. This becomes her third public test of virtue (after the abduction and the *Agni Pariksha*). Sita arrives, and Valmiki himself vouches for her purity. Yet the assembly, along with Rama, remains silent, their gaze demanding a performance. In this crucial moment, Sita does not look at Rama. Instead, she makes her final, sovereign choice. She calls upon her true mother, the Earth Goddess (Bhumi), to take her back if she has remained pure in thought, word, and deed. In Debroy's translation, Sita calls upon her true mother: "If I have never thought of any man other than Rāma, let the goddess earth show me her affection and give me space..." (478).

The earth miraculously opens, a divine throne appears, and the goddess Earth embraces her daughter and pulls her into the ground. This is not a suicide; it is an 'assumption'. Sita is not erased; she is received. She does not die; she transitions to a realm beyond patriarchal judgment. By choosing to return to her origin, she firmly rejects the patriarchal cycle of repeated tests, public validation, and conditional acceptance. Her action declares that her truth belongs to her and needs no further witness than her own mother and her own conscience.

### Feminist Reclamation: Modern Retellings

The feminist retellings above are of immense value to society in that they allow for a re-examination of the character Sita and her life as an individual from her own perspective. In adapting the story of Sita, the authors use a very different narrative form than Valmiki used to tell his story. Valmiki's account of Sita was written by a third party with no access to Sita's thoughts or feelings. The feminist retellings allow readers direct access to Sita's thoughts, emotions, and ultimately resolve. The shift in perspective of the event, from a dramatisation

to Sita's perspective, allows for a deeper understanding of what Sita went through during her time as a wife to Rama.

Another critical ideological shift of the feminist retellings of Sita is in the way they frame the event and the meaning given to the event. Traditional versions of the *Ramayana* present the event as the tragic conclusion of a love story, whereas the feminist retellings reframe the event as the "Beginning of Sita's Own Story"—a story of agency and autonomy that begins where the marital narrative concludes. The love story is shown to be a subplot in Sita's larger journey towards self-realisation. One of the most significant ideological changes that resulted from the feminist retellings of *Ramayana* is that they reject the notion of the ideal sacrifice. The feminist retellings of *Ramayana* challenge the notion that glorifying Sita's suffering for the greater good aids in the perpetuation of an oppressive patriarchal system. In the feminist retellings, Sita's rejection of her sacrifices to a male-dominated society is celebrated. The authors of the feminist retellings reject the ancient "ideal sacrifice" narrative. These authors believe that the romanticisation of the suffering Sita endured perpetuates a continued patriarchal control over Sita. Instead, these authors view Sita's refusal to continue sacrificing her happiness, well-being, and identity for a man and a culture that will never validate her as a fulfilment of her agency. The feminist retellings above are of immense value to society in that they allow for a re-examination of the character Sita and her life as an individual from her own perspective. In adapting the story of Sita, the authors use a very different narrative form than Valmiki used to tell his story. Valmiki's account of Sita was written by a third party with no access to Sita's thoughts or feelings. The feminist retellings allow readers direct access to Sita's thoughts, emotions, and ultimately resolve. The shift in perspective of the event as a dramatization of Sita's perspective allows for a deeper understanding of what Sita went through during her time as a wife to Rama.

### Conclusion: The Ultimate Assertion

Sita's return to Earth represents the highest manifestation of her ability to independently and consciously express herself. In the big myth of Sita, her final choice of exit demonstrates the same "duplex feminine" principles; she'll use whatever resources are available to her to free herself from that which binds her (the patriarchal society). In Sita's case, by connecting her exit to her mythical origins (being born of the Earth), Sita has provided a simultaneous closing of the gap (and the predicament) between female and female (she is both queen and woman).

This is a metaphor for millions of women (all of whom have been subjected to and affected by the patriarchal systems) throughout history. This same choice (to withdraw from oppressive and unjust structures) has echoed throughout the ages (by Sita) and represents the basis of all other females who have claimed their right to self-definition, validation within their inner self and their community, and determining their own versions of liberty, security, and freedom to act on their own behalf and as they see fit. Sita's declaration of self-sovereignty at the conclusion of her story is the final chapter of Sita as a queen. It ensures that the legacy of Sita is preserved and remembered as an empowered woman who claimed her own sovereignty by her own means.

## Chapter 4

### Sita as a symbol of Resistance

#### Embodied Resistance: The Body as a Site of Sacred Defiance

In the *Ramayana's* religious context, Sita's body as a reflection of her moral agency and spiritual commitment is an ongoing act of defiance. From a religious feminist point of view, the body is a sacred site of resistance (moral) as well as a means of expressing spiritual freedom rather than merely being a passive container of pain. This idea can be clearly seen in a significant example from Valmiki's *Sundara Kanda* (the third book of the Ramayana). In this instance, Sita is depicted in an Ashoka Vatika (in Ravana's garden), extremely thin, wearing only one soiled piece of clothing, dishevelled hair, and lying on the ground. This representation of Sita signifies her suffering, but it also illustrates her conscious act of defiance against the physical expectations that patriarchal systems place on women. In Sita's case, rejecting any adornment or any notion of a physical presentation that would please Ravana is transposing ascetic restraint into a spiritually defiant religious act by exercising control over her body, as an extension of her dharmic will.

Under the auspices of religious feminism, bodily discipline is seen as both a moral and spiritual statement of freedom instead of subordination. The act of Sita not beautifying her person serves to demonstrate that her vow of chastity is a sacred act rather than a means of male approval. In this manner, Sita's body becomes a place of sacred opposition where pain can become the basis of both moral power and spiritual sovereignty. The peak of this spirituality is illustrated in the event of Sita's last act, as described in the *Uttara Kanda*. In this act, she calls upon the Earth as a divine witness and her sanctuary: "If I have not thought of anyone than Raghava in my mind, then let the goddess earth open up a chasm for me" (Debroy 476). This action is not an escape but rather an act of religiously asserted autonomy.

By returning her body to the Earth, Sita establishes her sanctity (virtue, chastity, and purity) from the constant scrutiny of and judgment by patriarchy. From a religious feminist point of view, the moment is viewed as the culminating expression of spiritual self-determination, marking Sita's transition from a being who has been subjected to moral testing to a sovereign ethical being whose body and integrity are only answerable to the divine.

#### Psychological Resistance: Interiority and Moral Fortitude

Additionally, the psychological resilience and moral strength exhibit Sita's resistance. Modern adaptations of *the Ramayana* that focus on Sita's rich inner life include Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*. With Divakaruni using first-person narration, Sita expresses her thoughts while captive by Ravana, that although her captors may confine her physical body, they have no power over her inner world—her thoughts, emotions, and unwavering resolve remain beyond their reach. This demonstrates that Sita has an inner life that is not under the control of men; Sita uses her thoughts and love to create a sense of refuge from men.

In addition to using her thoughts and love as a refuge, Sita uses her rhetorical skills to demonstrate her psychological resilience. When Sita meets Ravana, her speech towards him objects to his actions, declaring that he lacks morals and that he is an immoral being. For instance, Sita declares, "If Ram is a lion, you're a dog. If Ram is fragrant sandalwood paste, you're gutter mud. If Ram..." (Divakaruni 202). Sita uses language as a way to diminish the authority of Ravana, and this form of speech has been described by feminist theorists as discursive resistance, or changing the distribution of power through speech. In contrast to the adaptations mentioned above, Ramanand Sagar's television adaptation is often depicted in a way in which the audience cannot hear Sita express her own thoughts as she does in the traditional *Ramayana*, but instead focuses solely on her experiences to express her suffering while reducing any form of psychological autonomy.

### Cultural and Symbolic Resistance: Reclaiming Sita's narrative

Sita's struggle for freedom goes beyond just reading the text; feminist writers and artists have tried to reclaim and reframe her identity in a cultural framework. For example, *Sita's Ramayana*, a graphic novel by Samhita Arni, uses visual imagery to juxtapose Sita's helplessness against the power contained within her gaze. Both of these forms of artistic expression represent Sita as someone who retains her sense of moral strength despite being held captive. In the same vein as Lajja, Volga's *Liberation of Sita* offers readers a glimpse into a redefined life for Sita (and others) once she is free from her past relationships with men like Rama. By portraying conversations between Sita and other women, such as Shurpanakha, Ahalya, and others, Volga successfully promotes feminist perspectives of support and community, as well as solidarity among those women who had been marginalised because of their gender.

Both Arni and Volga retell Sita's story in a way that challenges the *Sita Syndrome*, which refers to the use of Sita's story to reinforce female obedience. Feminist interpretations show Sita as a strong and independent figure, giving women examples of courage instead of always demanding self-sacrifice.

### Theoretical Frameworks for Sita's Resistance

Judith Butler's gender performativity argues that gender is a social construct acquired and perpetuated via repeated behaviours, repeated social interactions, and cultural expectations (Butler, 1990). Sita uses the new ideal of fidelity (she is the ultimate loyal and pure wife) as a means to demonstrate the conflict between the expectations placed upon her to be a devoted wife and the conflict between being a devoted wife versus her actions as a means of resisting those expectations, thus exposing the fact that gender is not a natural or biological condition.

Religious feminism is an approach that seeks to reinterpret religious texts, religious traditions, and religious practices in order to critique and expose patriarchy within a religious context. Rosemary Radford Ruether, one of the most notable proponents of religious feminism, asserts that feminist theology should affirm and support the full humanity of women. Through an analysis of Debroy's *Ramayana*, the reader will see that Sita is not an idealised example of feminine devotion; rather, she is an individual who uses her agency in order to make moral decisions based on her beliefs and values (Debroy, *Sundar Kanda*). Likewise, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls for a careful rethinking of traditional interpretations so that women's voices have often been left out of religious history and recognized as active contributors rather than passive followers (xxiii), because of male-focused interpretations. She urges a critical reconstruction that highlights women as active participants instead of silent followers (Fiorenza xxiii). These scholars together advocate for a new reading of religious narratives that sees women as moral and spiritual agents. When applied to *the Ramayana*, this perspective allows us to view Sita not just as a symbol of obedience and sacrifice but as a person of ethical strength, spiritual authority, and resistance within a patriarchal structure.

The religious feminist perspective understands Sita's struggle for liberation through the notion of reverence and ethics (moral philosophy) as expressed in the scriptures of her faith and the power that faith afforded her. On the one hand, her faith also presents itself in a context where Sita has been granted power by her faith and, therefore, is a site of limitation. On the other hand, by being deeply connected to the earth and reasoning morally, Sita shows how organised religion has historically given women no control over their own bodies, while at the same time sanctifying their suffering. Instead of completely rejecting organised religion, Sita works within organised religion and changes the restrictive nature of purity, devotion, and sacrifice into positive forces that give her strength from within. In this way,

these two perspectives explain how Sita demonstrates the dual aspects of femininity discussed in this thesis; that is, how Sita can exist within and outside of the expectations of a patriarchal society, and how she has been able to use the very concepts of organised religion to resist and establish her own sense of self.

These frameworks together illuminate the duplex femininity central to this thesis—Sita's ability to both comply with and challenge patriarchal expectations, using the very tools of her oppression as means of liberation.

Conclusion:

The resistance of Sita has many forms, including physical, psychological, and cultural aspects. By examining these different layers, it becomes clear how Sita has shown herself to fight against the power of her king and for women throughout her life. We can develop a more complex understanding of Sita, not just as a victim, but also as a figure of strength and courage. Because her story is still meaningful, it can be interpreted in different historical and cultural contexts. This research shows that Sita remains a symbol of courage, resilience, and strength, and continues to inspire young generations across Asia today.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

This research reinterprets the character of Sita in the *Ramayana*; she represents a complex form of resistance against patriarchal restrictions. Sita's agency has been made possible by the examination of Valmiki's *Ramayana* and its feminist retellings, as evidenced by her decisions to follow Rama into exile and return to Earth. These deeds cast Sita as someone who fights oppression with strength and intelligence, challenging conventional interpretations of her depictions as a submissive character.

In recognising 'duplex femininity' as an idea introduced in this thesis, one can ascertain Sita's dual role of compliance and resistance. In Sita's situation, this duality does not form a paradox, as it allows Sita to preserve her moral strength as well as fulfil her personal needs, all because of a clever recognition of her social situation. In recognising this duality, through major events such as *Exile*, *Captivity*, *Agni Pariksha*, and *Return to the Earth*, one can identify Sita as a role model for women struggling with an oppressive environment. Comparisons between Valmiki's *Ramayana* and modern retellings reveal that certain traditional interpretations reduce Sita's resistance, while feminist reinterpretations highlight it more strongly. This emphasises that storytelling is shaped by political influences, as well as by the perspectives of the male narrators. This thesis encourages readers to view Sita not as a passive symbol but as an active figure of resistance whose narrative already reflects the struggles addressed by contemporary feminist struggles. Her journey, from being defined by others to eventually returning to the Earth, has been a powerful metaphor in the pursuit of women's autonomy and self-definition in this established thesis. The notion of the "Sita Syndrome," which exalts female selflessness as a virtue, is also called into question by a reinterpretation of Sita. The feminist movement to liberate women from constrictive

narratives is broader than this text. In summary, Sita's story demonstrates that resistance can be subtle or anything in between. Instead of defeating opponents, her real power is in sustaining herself in the face of strong social pressure. Each epic retelling respects not only the myth of Sita but also all the women who have defied and thrived despite patriarchal systems throughout our history and in the present. Sita has changed from a mythological character to a representation of the tenacity of resistance with each new narrative.

This research reinterprets the character of Sita in the *Ramayana*; she represents a complex form of resistance against patriarchal restrictions. The analysis of Valmiki's *Ramayana* and its feminist retellings have enabled Sita's agency manifested through her actions, such as following Rama into *Exile* and *returning to the Earth*. These actions challenge traditional interpretations of Sita's portrayals as a submissive figure, instead presenting her as someone who opposes oppression with intelligence and strength.

In recognising *duplex femininity* as an idea introduced in this thesis, one can ascertain Sita's dual role of compliance and resistance. In Sita's situation, this duality does not form a paradox, as it allows Sita to preserve her moral strength as well as fulfil her personal needs, all because of a clever recognition of her social situation. In recognising this duality, through major events such as *Exile*, *Captivity*, *Agni Pariksha*, and *Return to the Earth*, one can identify Sita as a role model for women struggling with an oppressive environment. Comparisons between Valmiki's *Ramayana* and modern retellings reveal that certain traditional interpretations reduce Sita's resistance, while feminist reinterpretations highlight it more strongly. This emphasises that storytelling is shaped by political influences, as well as by the perspectives of the male narrators.

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*Earth*, has been a powerful metaphor in the pursuit of women's autonomy and self-definition in this established thesis. Reinterpreting Sita also challenges the idea of the *Sita Syndrome*, which glorifies female self-sacrifice as a virtue. This study is involved in a much larger feminist movement to free women from restrictive narratives.

In conclusion, Sita's story illustrates that resistance can take many forms, from subtle resistance to everything in between. Her real power lies not in defeating enemies but in preserving herself despite massive social pressure. With each retelling of the epic, we not only pay tribute to the legend Sita but also to all the women in our past and present who find a way to resist and thrive despite patriarchal structures. With each retelling, Sita has come to represent the enduring power of resistance rather than a mythological epitome.

This dissertation suggests several new areas for future research that need to be explored. One of the possibilities for future research is to conduct comparative studies on regional adaptations, such as Tamil, Bengali, and Thai versions, and on the other local and regional adaptations of the *Ramayana*, and all of these may contain enough detail related to the resistance that Sita exhibited, that this information could shed additional light on Sita's agency and role within the diverse cultural contexts. For future research, when examining how the *Ramayana* relates to issues of caste, class, and colonial histories, I would recommend the use of an intersectional framework in order to understand the evolving nature of Sita as a symbol of women's oppression due to caste, class, and colonial discourse. In addition, another possible area of future research involves the application of religious feminism to contemporary interpretations of the character of Sita for possible analysis of how religious narratives have been recast in terms of developing new philosophical, ethical, earth-centred, spiritual frameworks. Developing these future areas of research may allow scholars to develop a deeper understanding of Sita as a dynamic character whose relevance

extends beyond myth into ongoing cultural and ideological discussions, which continue to influence our world today.

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