

IYENGAR'S SITAYANA: A RETELLING OF THE SAGA OF SITA

Dr. Charulata Verma*

ABSTRACT

Different versions of Sita's story exist in myth, literature, folk tales and performing arts, prompting fresh interpretation and retellings of this enigmatic figure of hoary antiquity who has made an indelible imprint on the psyche and mind of the Indian people. Some tellings deify her while others humanize her relating her trials and tribulations to the daily life of Indian womanhood. That a character of remote antiquity could exert such a sterling influence on the lives of the people of the Indian sub-continent after thousands of years, makes people tell her saga again and again with a new and varied interpretation de novo of silent strength and sufferance sublime. The rendering of Rama-Sita-Ravana saga as Sitayana: Epic of the Earth-born (1987), a new and free re-recital of a familiar old tale, carries a fresh approach and organizing principle in viewing of the saga in a new perspective as essentially the story of Sita: sitayah charitam mahat. The thoughts projected through Sita's mind, since she is the brooding spirit of the whole saga, ranging from purely personal reminiscence to metaphysical queries, echoing at the same time the doubts and queries of contemporary Indian mind, lie at the heart of the reinterpretation of the epic.

Keywords: Retelling, Saga, Epic, Feminine, Rishipatnis.

Introduction

Sitayana: Epic of the Earth-born

A widely admired literary critic, poet, an erudite scholar and the chief authority of Indian English literature Iyengar recasts the Ramayana as quintessentially Sita's story Sitayana: Epic of the Earth-born, 'Sita's saga sublime'. What is unique about Sitayana is the significant shift from Rama to Sita, from the "rational – linear masculine" to the "psychic integral feminine" (xiv Iyengar, Sitayana) world-view. Iyengar, as he admits, felt a divine inspiration to recite de novo the Ramayana story but focused on Sita to the extent that it became Sitayana, Sita's saga sublime. He writes, "Any tree I passed by seemed to be the Simsupa in Asoka Grove, and I seemed in my waking coma to look for Sita, often find her too; and taking a leap in time forward, see also the other Sita in Valmiki's Ashram, for a second time rejected by Ram...(15)."

That was how he stumbled on the idea of retelling the Ramayana as Sitayana: Epic of the Earth-born (1987), intended to be no mere translation or abridgement, but a new and free re-recital of a familiar old tale, a saga of "the fair and sprightly, the insulted and injured Sita, the symbol of sweetness and light, of silent strength and sufferance sublime" (Meet 89). As he states in the Introduction:

In the Ramayana as we have it and as Valmiki himself clearly visualized it, the web is of a mingled yarn, the sky-blue heroic story of Rama, Prince of Ayodhya, and the gold-sheened Sita story, the epic of the Earth-born, merging with the dark hued blood-smeared tale of Ravana, the Titan ending with his death. And Sita's tragic history fatefully links the Ramayana and Ravana stories. (viii)

Valmiki himself calls his epic "Sitayah charitam mahat", "a reverberant and talismanic phrase" (Sitayana viii), meaning the noble story of Sita, and Srinivasa Iyengar in the 'Introduction' of his book, further explains why he has chosen this title by presenting a very brief plot structure:

* Associate Professor, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar Government College, Sriganganagar, Rajasthan, India.

Sitayana is 'Sita's saga sublime', the story of her birth, childhood and girlhood, her marriage to Rama, their life as exiles in Dandaka for thirteen years, their year-long separation and reunion, their Coronation at Ayodhya, her second sundering from Rama, her crown of motherhood, and the last scene of her self-transcendence and return to her Earth-Mother This is the quintessential story: the rest is the needed ballast and scaffolding. (xiii) Even in her captivity, in her suffering, Iyengar notices that Sita is immaculately and transcendently beautiful, rich in her purity, royal in her poise, noble in her transparent humanity, and worshipful in her veiled divinity (Iyengar *The Epic* 24).

The significant change in Sitayana is from Rama to Sita, "from the rational-linear masculine to the psychic-integral feminine world-view". To accomplish a similar duty in a foreign tongue is a more perilous endeavour. Iyengar retains only one fourth of Valmiki's narrative and invents the rest. He alters scenes and adds new ones dealing with birth, childhood and education of Sita. He also inducts entirely new characters like Yajnyavalkya, Maitreyi, Katyayani and Gargi drawing these personages from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. He makes no deliberate attempt to modernize or rationalize the story, but highlights in relief the present from the ancient narrative. The thoughts projected through Sita's mind, since she is the brooding spirit of the whole saga, ranging from purely personal reminiscence to metaphysical queries, echoing at the same time the doubts and queries of contemporary Indian mind, lie at the heart of the reinterpretation of the epic. The poet literally walks on a razor's edge when limning the character of Rama. It is astonishing, however, that Rama's character does not suffer in anyway and yet Sita's sufferings are portrayed with a rare attention to detail.

Sitayana, following the epic tradition, is written in seven books that correspond to the seven Kandas or Books in Valmiki's epic (Bala, Ayodhya, Aranya, Kishkindha, Sundara, Yuddha and Uttara). Here the major events of Sita's life are retold in Mithila, Ayodhya, Aranya, Asoka, Yuddha, Rajya and Ashrama. It is neither mere a translation of the Valmiki Ramayana, nor a re-telling of it, though the poet is indebted to it on several counts. He reduces the epic to almost one fourth of the original narrative. Iyengar lends a fresh approach and organizing structure viewing the story in a new perspective as quintessentially the story of Sita, *sitayah charitam mahat*. He introduces certain structural changes adjusting the original seven kandas of Valmiki as seven books of Sitayana namely: Mithila, Ayodhya, Aranya, Ashoka, Yuddha, rajya and Ashram. The seven books are further divided into seventy-seven cantos, each Book comprising of eleven cantos. Of these seventy-seven cantos, more than half are the author's new creation.

Because of the intended shift in the story towards Sita, it was necessary to introduce certain changes in the whole narrative. 'Bala' is substituted by 'Mithila' to delineate beautifully imagined Sita's birth and upbringing, her childhood, girlhood, education and learning in the Mithila. As Sita is the brooding spirit of the whole saga, when she is carried away by Ravana to Lanka, in the Aranya, so it is 'Asoka' substituting 'Kishkindha', and the thoughts and the musings of Sita at this point lie at the heart of the reinterpreting this whole narrative. The happenings in Valmiki's Kishkindha are summed up retrospectively by Hanuman to Sita, when he meets her under the Simsupa tree in Asoka grove.

In Sitayana, the Yuddha kanda concludes with Ravana's death, Rajya presents Sita's fire-ordeal, return to Ayodhya and the efflorescence of Rama Rajya. The last book 'Ashrama' unfolds the supreme irony and supreme tragedy in Sita's life, the climactic second vindication and definitive withdrawal to her earth-mother Madhvi. Further, Iyengar introduces some new characters and gives them distinctive roles in the epic. As for the great rishipatnis of antiquity, Valmiki memorably limns only Anasuya, sage Atri's wife and dramatizes her dowering Sita with presents. But in Iyengar, Sita has her meetings with the legendary Gargi, Maitreyi, Katyayani, Arundhati, Lopamudra and Ahalya herself, as also the Rakshasa and Vanara queens, Mandodari and Tara. He also assigns a definitive role- may be minor- to her three sisters Urmila, Mandavi and Shrutikirti, all the more so because they married Rama's brothers, Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna.

Iyengar Records

We saw in the iconised Sita the Grace Divine, in Rama the living image of Eternal Dharma, in Lakshmana the flawless unfailing Serviteur of the Divine, and in Hanumana the archetypal Brazier of Bhakti or Devotion. Sita had never been separated from Rama at all;....do I, then, diet on contradictions?....my Sitayana aesthesis essays co-existence with my deeper religious and spiritual needs. And this is more than—much more than—just 'negative capability'; it is verily poetry straining after prayer and playing the paraclete-role, and at least with the Adi-kavi's Ramayana, poetic experience or kavyanubhava gently and imperceptibly points the way to Brahmanubhava. (Sitayana xviii)

Iyengar begins his epic with a Miltonic echo by formally declaring the subject of the epic in the twelve stanzas that open:

Of womanhood I write, of the travail
and glory of motherhood;
of Prakriti and her infinite modes
and unceasing variety;
of the primordial Shakti's myriad
manifestations on earth;
of the lure and leap of transcendences
of the ruby feminine.

The prologue highlights the multiplicity of strands that Iyengar weaves intricately within the theme of Ramayana. He has rewritten the hoary saga with a conscious attempt to rewrite its meaning, in addition to the changes he introduces in context and perspective. Sita, more than a heroine of the epic, was an avatar too, the Supreme Shakti's divine descent, to play the role of sufferance sublime. And who can know it better than Indians, where 'godhead' has always been identified with the Eternal Feminine. Although this has been obscured of late, Sitayana is a conscious return to the ancient verities scripting a new narrative for feminism working with value structures and moves towards integrating larger structures of morality at the same time articulating the self. There is a voice of protest and questioning echoing throughout the text, but much more than that there is self- reflection, a deconstruction of the notions of chastity, power and motherhood, a realisation of self-worth with leaps of consciousness, a hypertext that does not abandon values or relationships, but goes on creating self and agency within cultural contexts.

It is natural that, in the Sitayana where the emphasis shifts to the heroine, the woman question should receive a paramount treatment. Ahalya, for instance, prophesizes, detailing the abominations she visualizes in the future:

There's nothing the wretched male animal
will refrain from exploiting –
cunning, fraud, masks, coward self-abasement –
for encompassing his end. (2:63)
I see Man stooping low enough to shame
the Asura and Beast;
I see Woman unfeminised, flaunting
her crass unwomanliness. (2:105)
Not the worst yet: I see the devil-dance
of the seven deadly sins;
I see women staled, enslaved; and female
children cast out unwanted. (2:106)
I see widows on the funeral pyres
of their late partners in life,
and I see child widows of cherubim
innocence branded with sin! (2:107)
.....and I see
bride-burnings and dowry-deaths! (2:108)
... a consumerist piece of merchandise
to be bought, got, bartered, sold,
used, misused, abused, or left long unused
and callously cast away. (2:113)

In contrast to this, Sita though equally outraged by male behavior is inclined to regard it as part of the larger evil, considering war and lechery as "the twin debasing hobbies that deaden and degrade men". Her protest is somewhat muted in the ambience of her deeper perception of woman's ministry as the incarnation of Shakti. She, thus, personates both the embodiment of the Feminine surrounded by an oceanic calm as well as a dignified protest against male delusions and depravities. However, her latter

role is not allowed to over shadow or swamp out her more essential function as manifest Prakriti of the ancient Hindu conception. In this way, anguish at the unending martyrdom of woman is expressed at two levels at once— the socio-historical and the ethical-metaphysical, the latter being the way of viewing men's unethical and perverted behaviour in the larger perspective of Evil in the world. Moreover, the thoughts projected through her mind at this time pertaining to women, chastity, war, lechery, nature, or a whole world view of a woman form the crux of the epic.

Even the mothers of Rama criticize vehemently the unjust behavior of Rama towards Sita. Sumitra, disheartened, portrays the general attitude of patriarchal society towards women:

...Alas,

sufferance is woman's name! (6:383)
You've suffered, Sita, as few women have,
but you'll sustain womanhood—
fair and frail and injured and insulted—
for all the ages to come. (6:386)

These contradictions within the narrative of the epic lends richness to this immortal saga where the normative values are questioned, and unjust impositions of some of them are highly objected to. These complex and carefully structured encounters among its major characters, besides its role as an exemplary narrative, the poem defines and reinforces its vision of the hierarchies of gender, class and authority. Kaushalya, the mother of Rama, is astonished with the misdemeanor of Rama:

I don't know what stark madness drove Rama
to defame you as he did
we're women, and our badge is misery,--
mother or wife, we suffer. (6:388)

Arsia Sattar comments that, "Because Valmiki's connection with telling Rama's story is located in the moment of the bird's grief at losing her beloved, the Rama story that Valmiki tells will mirror the same emotion and end with separation and loss rather than union and joy (Ramayana 88)."

Ten thousand cycles of hibernation,
birth, growth, flowering, fruition,
and fall, and once more winter! But the Earth
renews itself, and endures.
The Earth never tires or stales or despairs,
for the pulses of Sita's
heart of compassion, sustain and foster
our evolving Life Divine. (7:939, 940)

Thus, the saga ends on the hope of redemption of the earth by the Earth-born. It would be illuminating to quote Arsia Sattar here on the challenge that the concluding scene puts before us:

We are used to thinking of Sita as someone who deserves our pity and sympathy, a woman buffeted by the storms of circumstance—first, the innocent object of Ravana's desire, then, the equally innocent victim of her royal husband's honour and, ultimately, the abandoned wife. What we fail to see is Sita's courage and defiance in her final act on earth when she refuses to live with a continuing falsehood...While Rama chooses to place his love in the penumbra of his luminous public life, Sita chooses to place her love squarely in the glare of Rama's shining glory...Sita's heartbroken departure can be seen as a rejection of a life made less by the absence of love, as an act of personal truth and public courage. Rama is left with a public truth and little else. (Lost 98-99)

And, Iyengar beautifully sums up the ennobling tragic tale of Sita:

It is finished, Sita's saga sublime,
the fitful recordations
of the aches, exultations, soul-searchings
of the blemishless Earth-born. (Epilogue 1)

Iyengar, too, like any other reinterpretation of the hoary saga, attempts a projection of his own times into the living past, that is the imperishable world of Rama and Sita. Thus, though Sita is not recast in a contemporary mould her modern relevance is poignantly expressed, as she is presented as a modern mutation of the original ethos.

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