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Reclaiming the Epic from the Margins: Gender, Voice, and Feminist Revision in *Sita's Ramayana*

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Abstract

Mythological narratives have historically functioned as repositories of cultural values, preserving and transmitting social norms across generations. Among these narratives, the *Ramayana* occupies a central position within South Asian cultural consciousness. Yet, the canonical tradition has largely privileged masculine heroism, political duty, and martial glory. It often relegates female experience to the margins of the epic imagination. Samhita Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* (2011), illustrated by Moyna Chitrakar, challenges this patriarchal orientation through a radical retelling of the epic from Sita's perspective. This paper examines how Arni's adaptation reconfigures the ancient myth by foregrounding female subjectivity, interrogating patriarchal constructions of honour and exposing the gendered consequences of war. It redefines agency through resistance rather than obedience. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, bell hooks, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, the study analyses the text's narrative strategies, characterization, thematic concerns, and visual aesthetics. It argues that *Sita's Ramayana* transforms an epic of masculine conquest into a feminist meditation on suffering, survival, solidarity and self-determination. The text thereby creates a distinctly contemporary intervention within the long tradition of *Ramayana* retellings.

Keywords: Feminist Mythology; *Ramayana* Retellings; Gender Studies; *Sita's Ramayana*; Graphic Narrative; Feminist Revisionism.

Introduction

Few literary narratives have exerted an influence on South Asian cultural consciousness comparable to that of the *Ramayana*. For more than two millennia, the epic has been retold, translated, adapted, performed, and reimagined across linguistic, geographical, and ideological boundaries. Its endurance stems not merely from its narrative appeal but from its function as a cultural text through which societies negotiate questions of morality, governance, kinship, gender and identity. Yet the very persistence of the *Ramayana* has also ensured the persistence of certain patriarchal assumptions

embedded within its dominant versions. The heroic exploits of Rama, the martial prowess of Lakshmana and the political ambitions of Ravana have traditionally occupied the centre of narrative attention. On the other hand, female characters have often been evaluated primarily through ideals of chastity, sacrifice and obedience.

Modern feminist engagements with mythology have sought to interrogate such inherited structures. Rather than treating myths as immutable repositories of cultural truth, feminist scholars have approached them as dynamic narratives whose meanings shift according to historical and ideological contexts. Rewriting myth becomes, therefore, an act of cultural intervention. By revisiting foundational stories from alternative perspectives, contemporary authors challenge established hierarchies of power and recover voices historically silenced within dominant traditions.

Samhita Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* constitutes one such intervention. Produced in collaboration with the Patua artist Moyna Chitrakar, the text combines graphic storytelling with feminist revisionism to offer a retelling of the epic through Sita's eyes. While drawing upon traditional Ramayana narratives, particularly female-centred retellings such as the Bengali *Chandrabati Ramayana*, Arni transforms the epic into an exploration of female experience under patriarchal authority. The shift in narrative perspective is far more significant than a mere change of narrator. It fundamentally alters the moral and emotional architecture of the story. Events that appear glorious within heroic narratives are revealed as sources of devastation when viewed from the standpoint of those who endure their consequences.

The afterword to the text explicitly situates the narrative within a female tradition of Ramayana storytelling. V. Geetha notes that Arni builds upon the feminist possibilities present within Chandrabati's retelling by narrating the epic entirely through Sita's voice and by emphasizing the suffering caused by pride, warfare, and masculine honour. Moreover, Sita's perspective encompasses not merely her own experiences but also the suffering of other women, children, animals as well as ordinary people affected by political conflict. This narrative strategy displaces the conventional epic focus on heroic achievement and redirects attention toward vulnerability, empathy and endurance.

What distinguishes *Sita's Ramayana* from many contemporary mythological adaptations is its refusal to construct empowerment solely through physical strength or political authority. Instead, Arni locates agency within acts of ethical resistance. Sita emerges neither as a passive victim nor as a simplified feminist icon. She remains emotionally complex, capable of love, anger, grief, compassion and defiance. Her eventual rejection of Rama's invitation to return to Ayodhya signifies not merely personal disappointment but a profound rejection of a social order that repeatedly subjects women to suspicion and humiliation.

The graphic form further amplifies the text's feminist intervention. Moyna Chitrakar's illustrations draw upon the visual vocabulary of Patua scroll traditions while simultaneously adapting them to the conventions of the modern graphic novel. The result is a visual narrative that resists idealized representations of epic grandeur. The illustrations emphasize emotional intensity, bodily vulnerability and collective suffering rather than heroic spectacle. In doing so, they contribute significantly to the text's redefinition of epic values.

This paper argues that *Sita's Ramayana* functions as a feminist reimagining of myth that destabilizes patriarchal constructions of gender by re-centering female experience. Through its narrative voice, characterization, thematic concerns, and visual aesthetics, the text transforms the epic from a celebration of masculine heroism into a critique of patriarchal power. Drawing upon contemporary feminist theory, the study demonstrates how Arni's adaptation challenges dominant understandings of agency, honour, motherhood, and authority while creating new possibilities for reading mythology in the twenty-first century.

Theoretical Framework: Gender, Voice, and Feminist Revision

The feminist intervention undertaken by *Sita's Ramayana* may be understood through several influential theoretical formulations concerning gender, representation, and subjectivity. Although the text emerges from a specifically South Asian cultural context, its critique of patriarchal power resonates with broader feminist debates regarding the construction of femininity and the politics of representation.

Simone de Beauvoir's foundational assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" remains particularly relevant to Arni's text (Beauvoir 283). Beauvoir argues that femininity is not an innate essence but a social construction produced through cultural institutions and ideological practices. Within traditional Ramayana narratives, Sita often functions as an idealized embodiment of feminine virtue. Her worth becomes inseparable from chastity, loyalty, and self-sacrifice. Arni's retelling challenges this essentialized model by presenting Sita as a thinking subject rather than a symbolic ideal. Her experiences reveal the violence inherent in social systems that reduce women to moral exemplars while denying them autonomy.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further illuminates the text's engagement with patriarchal norms. Butler contends that gender is constituted through repeated social performances rather than expressing a stable inner identity. The categories of masculinity and femininity are maintained through acts that acquire legitimacy through repetition and social recognition. Rama's insistence upon proving his honour, his suspicion of Sita's chastity, and his eventual abandonment of her may be interpreted as performances of normative masculinity. His actions are motivated not solely by personal conviction but by the need to conform to public expectations regarding kingship and male honour. The text reveals how these performances inflict devastating consequences upon women, exposing the fragility and violence underlying patriarchal ideals.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential question—"Can the Subaltern Speak?"—offers another productive lens through which to understand Arni's narrative strategy. Spivak argues that marginalized subjects are frequently spoken for rather than permitted to represent themselves. The dominant discourse appropriates or silences subaltern voices, rendering them intelligible only through structures of power. In conventional Ramayana narratives, Sita is often represented through the perspectives of male narrators, kings, sages, and commentators. By allowing Sita to narrate her own story, Arni symbolically restores narrative agency to a figure historically spoken about rather than heard. The text does not merely tell Sita's story; it allows Sita to become the authoritative interpreter of events.

The text also resonates strongly with bell hooks' understanding of feminism as a movement dedicated to ending sexist oppression rather than simply elevating individual women within existing structures of power. Hooks emphasizes the importance of analysing interconnected systems of domination and understanding how patriarchal ideology shapes social relationships. Sita's critique extends beyond her personal suffering. She repeatedly reflects upon the experiences of widows, mothers, prisoners, and ordinary civilians affected by war. Her perspective transforms individual injustice into a broader critique of patriarchal violence.

Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's work on transnational feminism offers a framework for understanding the text's resistance to universalized representations of women. Mohanty cautions against treating women as a homogeneous category and emphasizes the importance of historical and cultural specificity. Arni's Sita emerges from a distinctly South Asian mythological context, yet her experiences illuminate broader structures of gendered oppression. The narrative avoids simplistic victimhood by presenting female agency as historically situated, culturally mediated, and politically complex.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives reveal *Sita's Ramayana* as more than a modern adaptation of an ancient epic. It is a feminist rearticulation of cultural memory that interrogates the ideological foundations of patriarchal authority. By reclaiming narrative voice, exposing the performative nature of gender roles, and foregrounding marginalized experiences, the text transforms myth into a site of critical resistance and social reflection.

Reclaiming Narrative Authority: Sita as Narrator

The most radical intervention undertaken by *Sita's Ramayana* is its relocation of narrative authority. In the dominant Ramayana tradition, Sita frequently functions as an object around which male action revolves. Her abduction motivates the war, her chastity becomes a matter of public concern, and her suffering is often interpreted in relation to Rama's destiny rather than her own experience. Arni reverses this narrative hierarchy by making Sita both narrator and focalizer. Events are filtered through her consciousness, transforming the epic from a tale of heroic conquest into a story of female endurance and ethical reflection.

This shift in narrative perspective exemplifies what feminist critics have identified as the recovery of women's voices from patriarchal discourse. Elaine Showalter argues that feminist literary criticism must move beyond examining representations of women and instead explore women as producers of meaning. Arni's text performs precisely this function. Sita ceases to be a symbol interpreted by others and becomes the primary interpreter of her world.

The significance of this narrative shift becomes evident in the manner in which the text treats familiar events. The war against Lanka, traditionally celebrated as a triumph of righteousness over evil, appears in Sita's narration not as a glorious victory but as a catastrophe. Rather than celebrating Rama's achievement, she reflects upon the immense human cost of the conflict. When Rama explains that he fought to redeem his honour, Sita immediately questions the value of such honour by observing that widows and orphans now populate both sides of the battlefield. She notes that Valin and Indrajit have been killed, Tara and Mandodari have been widowed, and countless families have been destroyed.

This perspective radically alters the ethical framework of the narrative. Heroic warfare is stripped of its romantic aura and revealed as a mechanism of collective suffering. Such a reinterpretation aligns with feminist critiques of militarism that expose how traditional narratives often celebrate masculine heroism while obscuring the experiences of those who bear the consequences of conflict.

Spivak's concern regarding the silencing of marginalized voices is particularly relevant here. In many patriarchal narratives, women appear as subjects of discussion but rarely as producers of discourse. Arni's Sita breaks this pattern by speaking continuously, interpreting events, questioning assumptions, and offering ethical judgments. Her voice becomes the principal source of narrative authority.

The text's feminist orientation becomes especially evident through Sita's capacity for empathy. Unlike conventional epic heroes who divide the world into allies and enemies, Sita repeatedly recognizes the suffering of individuals on both sides of the conflict. She grieves not only for her own losses but also for the losses experienced by women in Lanka. Trijatha, Mandodari, and unnamed widows become part of her moral universe. In this respect, Arni's Sita embodies what Carol Gilligan describes as an ethics of care, a mode of ethical reasoning grounded in relationships, interdependence, and responsibility rather than domination and conquest.

The narrative voice thus functions as more than a stylistic innovation. It becomes a political strategy that challenges patriarchal control over cultural memory. By granting Sita interpretive authority, Arni exposes the ideological assumptions embedded within traditional epic narratives and creates space for alternative understandings of justice, heroism, and power.

Rewriting Heroism and Masculinity: Rama, Ravana, and the Politics of Honour

One of the most striking aspects of *Sita's Ramayana* is its re-evaluation of masculinity. Traditional Ramayana narratives typically construct masculinity through ideals of courage, duty, honour, kingship, and martial prowess. Rama serves as the embodiment of righteous manhood, while Ravana functions as its demonic opposite. Although Arni does not completely dismantle these distinctions, she complicates them by examining how both forms of masculinity generate violence and suffering.

Central to this critique is the concept of honour. In patriarchal societies, honour frequently operates as a gendered construct. Male identity becomes tied to reputation, authority, and control, while women often function as symbolic bearers of male prestige. Feminist theorists have long argued that such systems transform women into objects through which masculine status is negotiated.

Arni foregrounds this dynamic during Sita's reunion with Rama after the war. Instead of celebrating their reunion, Rama reveals that he fought not for Sita herself but to restore his honour. His declaration devastates her because it transforms her from a beloved partner into a symbolic possession whose recovery validates masculine prestige.

Through this moment, the text exposes a contradiction at the heart of patriarchal heroism. Rama's honour appears noble only when viewed from the perspective of masculine ideology. From Sita's perspective, however, that same honour becomes responsible for death, destruction, and grief. The heroic narrative begins to collapse under the weight of its own consequences.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity offers a useful framework for interpreting Rama's actions. Rama repeatedly performs the role expected of an ideal king and patriarch. His suspicion of Sita after her rescue emerges not from direct evidence but from social expectations regarding feminine purity and masculine authority. Public perception becomes more important than personal trust.

The fire ordeal constitutes perhaps the clearest manifestation of this logic. After enduring captivity, emotional trauma, and prolonged separation, Sita must prove her purity before being accepted. She reflects upon her suffering with profound anguish, recalling the starvation, humiliation, and isolation she endured while remaining faithful to Rama.

Yet even this extraordinary endurance fails to secure trust.

From a feminist perspective, the episode reveals how patriarchal systems subject women to impossible standards. Women must continuously demonstrate virtue, while the authority to evaluate that virtue remains concentrated in male institutions. Sita's trial by fire symbolizes the broader social demand that women repeatedly justify their worthiness.

Arni's critique extends beyond Rama to encompass broader structures of masculine power. Although Ravana is undoubtedly responsible for Sita's abduction, the narrative does not permit readers to reduce the conflict to a simplistic opposition between good and evil. Instead, both Rama and Ravana become implicated within systems of patriarchal authority that prioritize pride, conquest, and possession.

Significantly, Sita's suffering does not end with Ravana's defeat. In many respects, her greatest pain occurs after her rescue. She discovers that liberation from one patriarchal structure merely returns her to another. The suspicion she encounters in Ayodhya reveals that the ideology governing Rama's kingdom differs less from Ravana's world than traditional narratives might suggest.

The washerman's gossip becomes emblematic of this social order. Public discourse reduces Sita's experience to questions of sexual purity and masculine reputation. Her personal suffering disappears beneath collective anxieties concerning honour and legitimacy.

Arni thereby demonstrates that patriarchy operates not only through individual actions but through collective social practices. The washerman, the citizens of Ayodhya, and even Rama himself become participants in a system that continually scrutinizes and disciplines female bodies.

Gendered Experiences of War and Violence

Perhaps the most powerful feminist intervention in *Sita's Ramayana* lies in its portrayal of war. Traditional epics often celebrate warfare as a site of heroism, sacrifice, and moral triumph. Arni dismantles this framework by focusing on the experiences of those excluded from heroic narratives.

Sita's reflections after the war provide one of the most compelling critiques of militarism in contemporary mythological fiction. Observing the destruction surrounding her, she recognizes that victory has produced immense suffering for countless women. The battlefield may have established Rama's glory, but it has simultaneously created widows, mothers bereaved of sons, and children deprived of families.

Her observation that "war, in some ways, is merciful to men" constitutes the moral centre of the text. Men who die in battle achieve heroic status, while surviving women must endure the long-term consequences of violence. They become widows, prisoners, mothers of dead children, or caretakers of devastated communities.

This passage resonates strongly with feminist critiques of militarism advanced by scholars such as Cynthia Enloe, who argues that war cannot be understood solely through military strategy or political outcomes. Its effects are deeply gendered, shaping everyday lives in profoundly unequal ways.

Arni's narrative repeatedly emphasizes this asymmetry. Men appear as warriors and rulers; women appear as those who survive war's aftermath. Yet the text refuses to portray women merely as passive victims. Their endurance becomes a form of historical testimony. Through memory, mourning, and survival, they preserve truths that heroic narratives often erase.

The character of Trijatha is particularly significant in this regard. Although she belongs to the enemy camp, Sita develops a bond with her based upon shared vulnerability. This relationship disrupts conventional epic binaries that divide characters according to political allegiance. Female solidarity emerges as a counterforce to masculine conflict.

Similarly, Mandodari's grief receives attention rarely afforded to her in conventional versions of the epic. Through Sita's perspective, the suffering of Ravana's family becomes visible. The narrative thereby humanizes those traditionally classified as enemies and broadens the ethical scope of the story.

The illustrations reinforce this thematic concern. Rather than emphasizing spectacular combat, Moyna Chitrakar repeatedly depicts the emotional consequences of violence. Bodies, tears, ruined landscapes, and grieving women occupy visual spaces traditionally reserved for heroic triumph. The artwork thus participates actively in the text's feminist critique of militarized masculinity.

Ultimately, *Sita's Ramayana* redefines the meaning of victory itself. If triumph results in widows, orphans, suspicion, exile, and emotional devastation, then the concept of victory becomes morally unstable. Through Sita's narration, war ceases to be an instrument of justice and becomes a manifestation of patriarchal pride whose consequences are borne disproportionately by women.

Female Solidarity and Feminist Ethics: Sita, Trijatha, Tara, and Mandodari

One of the most significant departures from conventional Ramayana narratives in *Sita's Ramayana* is its insistence upon a shared female experience that transcends political, ethnic, and moral divisions. Traditional versions of the epic generally organize characters according to binary oppositions: divine and demonic, righteous and wicked, Aryan and Rakshasa, victor and vanquished.

Arni systematically destabilizes these oppositions by foregrounding relationships among women whose lives are shaped by common experiences of loss, exclusion, and patriarchal control.

This emphasis on female solidarity aligns closely with bell hooks' conception of feminism as a collective struggle against systems of domination. Hooks repeatedly warns against models of empowerment based solely upon individual success because such frameworks often leave oppressive structures intact. In *Sita's Ramayana*, meaningful resistance emerges not through isolated acts of heroism but through recognition of shared vulnerability.

Sita's relationship with Trijatha provides the clearest example of this ethical framework. Within many traditional Ramayana versions, Trijatha occupies a relatively minor role as a sympathetic Rakshasi who offers comfort to Sita during her captivity. Arni expands the emotional significance of this relationship by presenting it as a form of female companionship forged within conditions of violence and imprisonment.

Importantly, Sita does not define Trijatha through her political affiliation. Although Trijatha belongs to Ravana's kingdom, she becomes a source of emotional support and understanding. Their relationship demonstrates that patriarchal conflict often obscures deeper solidarities among women. While men engage in warfare, women confront the consequences of those struggles together.

This perspective becomes especially apparent after the war. Instead of celebrating Ravana's defeat, Sita's attention turns toward the women left behind. She sees Mandodari mourning her husband and countless women grieving sons, brothers, and fathers. Her empathy extends even to those conventionally identified as enemies.

Such moments reveal a fundamentally different moral vision from that which governs epic heroism. Rama's world is structured by duty, conquest, and political legitimacy. Sita's world is structured by relationships, suffering, and care. Rather than asking who has won, she asks who has been harmed.

This ethical orientation recalls Carol Gilligan's influential distinction between an ethics of justice and an ethics of care. Whereas the former emphasizes abstract principles, laws, and rights, the latter prioritizes relationships, responsibility, and attentiveness to human needs. Arni's Sita consistently operates according to the latter framework.

The representation of Mandodari further develops this critique. In many canonical tellings, Ravana's queen appears only briefly and primarily in relation to her husband's downfall. Arni's narrative restores emotional depth to her experience by emphasizing her widowhood and grief. Sita recognizes Mandodari not as the wife of an enemy but as another woman devastated by male ambition.

This shared condition of suffering produces what feminist theorists have described as an alternative community of experience. Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that feminist solidarity must emerge not from assumptions of universal sameness but from recognition of historically specific forms of oppression. Sita's connections with Trijatha and Mandodari illustrate precisely this dynamic. The women differ in culture, social position, and political allegiance, yet they are united by the consequences of patriarchal violence.

The narrative therefore dismantles one of the most enduring assumptions of epic literature: that loyalty to political communities supersedes all other forms of identification. For Arni, female experience creates bonds that challenge and sometimes exceed the significance of kingdoms, dynasties, and wars.

This reconfiguration has profound implications for understanding gender within mythological narratives. Rather than portraying women as passive observers of male action, the text presents them as participants in an alternative moral community whose values challenge dominant structures of

power. Their capacity for empathy, care, and mutual recognition becomes a source of ethical authority that rivals and ultimately surpasses the authority of kings and warriors.

Visual Feminism and the Politics of Illustration: Moyna Chitrakar's Patua Aesthetic

Any critical engagement with *Sita's Ramayana* must account for its status as a graphic narrative. The text's feminist intervention is not confined to language alone; it is equally embedded within the visual strategies employed by Moyna Chitrakar. Indeed, the illustrations often communicate meanings that extend beyond the written narrative, creating a rich dialogue between word and image.

The significance of Chitrakar's contribution becomes evident when considered within the context of Patua artistic traditions. As the afterword explains, Patua storytelling combines visual art, oral narration, and performance. Historically, Patua artists adapted myths and legends for diverse audiences, reshaping stories according to contemporary concerns and cultural contexts.

The adaptation of this tradition into graphic narrative form is itself politically meaningful. Rather than employing the polished visual style associated with many contemporary mythological retellings, Chitrakar draws upon a folk aesthetic rooted in collective memory and popular storytelling. This choice resists the commercialization and sanitization of mythological imagery.

The illustrations repeatedly undermine heroic idealization. Bodies appear earthy rather than divine, emotions are expressed with remarkable directness, and scenes of suffering occupy substantial visual space. Instead of presenting an epic past characterized by grandeur and perfection, Chitrakar depicts a world marked by vulnerability, uncertainty, and emotional intensity.

From a feminist perspective, this visual strategy is crucial. Traditional visual representations of Sita frequently emphasize beauty, modesty, and passive virtue. Such representations often transform her into an object of admiration rather than a subject of experience. Chitrakar's Sita, by contrast, appears active, expressive, and psychologically complex.

Her face frequently becomes the emotional centre of the page. Large eyes, shifting expressions, and dynamic gestures invite readers to engage with her inner life rather than merely observe her external appearance. The visual emphasis on subjectivity complements Arni's narrative decision to grant Sita a first-person voice.

Particularly striking are the illustrations depicting war and its aftermath. Conventional epic art tends to celebrate battle through images of martial prowess and heroic action. Chitrakar repeatedly redirects attention toward grief, displacement, and devastation. The battlefield is not presented as a site of glory but as a landscape populated by corpses, mourning families, and broken communities.

The visual representation of female suffering occupies a similarly important role. Widows, mothers, and grieving companions appear throughout the narrative, creating a collective portrait of gendered vulnerability. Yet these images never reduce women to passive victims. Their expressions convey resilience, endurance, and emotional strength.

The illustrations accompanying Sita's exile are especially noteworthy. Her abandonment in the forest is rendered not as a moment of helplessness but as a transformative passage. Nature itself appears responsive to her suffering. Trees, animals, birds, and landscapes become witnesses to her experience. The forest functions almost as an alternative social order, one capable of recognizing and responding to injustice when human institutions fail.

This visual motif culminates in the remarkable sequence where the forest hears Sita's story and transmits it through trees, birds, snakes, and animals. The imagery suggests that nature itself becomes a repository of suppressed histories. What patriarchal society seeks to erase is preserved within a broader ecological community.

The fusion of feminist storytelling and folk visual culture thus creates a uniquely powerful form of resistance. Chitrakar's illustrations do not merely accompany the text; they actively participate in its critique of patriarchal power. Through colour, composition, symbolism, and emotional expressiveness, the artwork transforms the epic into a visual archive of female experience.

Motherhood, Exile, and the Reconfiguration of Female Agency

Perhaps the most profound transformation undergone by Sita occurs after her abandonment. In traditional patriarchal narratives, exile often signifies loss, marginalization, and social death. Arni initially acknowledges these dimensions of Sita's experience. When Lakshmana reveals Rama's command, Sita confronts the terrifying prospect of survival as a pregnant woman alone in the wilderness. She worries about wild animals, childbirth, and the future of her unborn child.

Yet the narrative gradually converts exile into a space of self-discovery and autonomy.

This transformation may be understood through Beauvoir's distinction between immanence and transcendence. Patriarchal societies often confine women to immanence – that is, to repetitive roles defined by domesticity, dependence, and service to others. Transcendence, by contrast, involves active participation in shaping one's own existence.

Throughout much of the epic, Sita's identity is determined through relationships with men. She is Janaka's daughter, Rama's wife, Ravana's captive, and Ayodhya's queen. After exile, however, these identities begin to lose their defining power.

The forest becomes a space where alternative forms of subjectivity become possible. Valmiki offers her refuge, but he does not seek to control or define her. Within this environment, Sita develops an existence independent of royal institutions.

The birth and upbringing of Lava and Kusha are particularly significant in this regard. Motherhood in the text does not function as a mechanism of confinement. Instead, it becomes a source of strength and self-definition. Sita raises her children outside the structures of patriarchal authority, demonstrating that maternal power need not depend upon royal legitimacy or male supervision.

The narrative explicitly emphasizes the peace she discovers in this new life. Eventually she ceases to think of herself primarily as a queen and begins to inhabit a different identity altogether: "She was no longer Sita, the Queen. She was Sita, the simple forest woman."

This transformation represents one of the text's most radical gestures. Within conventional social hierarchies, queenship would appear superior to life in the forest. Arni reverses this assumption. The forest provides dignity, freedom, and emotional fulfilment unavailable within the palace.

The culmination of Sita's journey occurs when Rama asks her to return to Ayodhya. His request appears reasonable from the perspective of traditional epic values. The kingdom requires its queen, and their sons require a royal family. Yet Sita refuses. She declares that she has already been doubted twice and refuses to submit herself to further suspicion.

This refusal constitutes the ultimate expression of agency within the text.

Unlike earlier versions in which Sita's return to the earth may be interpreted primarily as an act of despair, Arni presents it as a conscious decision grounded in self-respect. She chooses departure rather than reconciliation on unequal terms. Her final act is neither submission nor escape; it is a rejection of the conditions through which patriarchal society seeks to define her value.

In this sense, *Sita's Ramayana* culminates not with restoration but with refusal. Sita's dignity derives not from acceptance by patriarchal institutions but from her willingness to exist beyond them. Her departure into the earth transforms her from an epic heroine into a feminist symbol of autonomy, resistance, and self-determination.

Conclusion

Sita's Ramayana demonstrates the continuing vitality of myth as a site of ideological contestation and cultural renewal. Rather than merely retelling a familiar story, Samhita Arni reimagines one of South Asia's foundational narratives through a distinctly feminist lens, exposing the patriarchal assumptions that have historically shaped its reception and interpretation. By shifting the narrative centre from Rama to Sita, the text fundamentally transforms the ethical and political significance of the epic. The story ceases to be primarily about heroic conquest and becomes instead a meditation on suffering, resilience, memory, and female selfhood.

The narrative's most significant achievement lies in its recovery of female subjectivity. Sita is no longer a symbolic embodiment of virtue whose value depends upon her relationship to male authority. She emerges as a reflective, articulate, and morally discerning individual capable of interpreting her own experiences and judging the actions of others. Through her narration, readers encounter a version of the *Ramayana* that privileges emotional truth over political triumph and human suffering over heroic glory.

Arni's reconfiguration of gender is especially evident in her treatment of masculinity. The text does not simply invert traditional power structures by portraying women as morally superior and men as inherently oppressive. Instead, it reveals how patriarchal systems constrain both genders through rigid expectations concerning honour, duty, kingship, and social legitimacy. Rama's tragedy lies not merely in his treatment of Sita but in his inability to imagine an identity outside the demands of patriarchal authority. His commitment to public reputation repeatedly overrides personal trust, ultimately destroying the very relationships he seeks to protect.

The narrative's critique of militarism further contributes to its feminist intervention. By emphasizing the experiences of widows, mothers, prisoners, and ordinary civilians, *Sita's Ramayana* challenges the epic tradition's tendency to celebrate warfare as a source of masculine glory. Sita's observations regarding the disproportionate burdens borne by women after conflict expose the hidden costs of heroic narratives and redirect attention toward those traditionally excluded from historical memory. In doing so, the text anticipates contemporary feminist critiques of nationalism, militarism, and state violence.

Equally important is the work's commitment to female solidarity. Relationships among Sita, Trijatha, Mandodari, and other women create an alternative ethical community founded upon empathy and shared vulnerability. These relationships challenge political and cultural divisions, suggesting that experiences of gendered oppression can generate forms of understanding that transcend conventional loyalties. Such solidarity does not erase differences but transforms them into the basis for mutual recognition and care.

The graphic form significantly enhances these thematic concerns. Moyna Chitrakar's illustrations reject idealized representations of the epic past and instead foreground emotional intensity, bodily vulnerability, and collective suffering. Drawing upon Patua artistic traditions, the visual narrative creates a powerful counterpoint to dominant mythological imagery. The illustrations function not merely as decorative accompaniments but as active participants in the text's feminist project, expanding and reinforcing its critique of patriarchal power.

Perhaps the most radical aspect of Arni's adaptation is its treatment of agency. Throughout much of literary history, female empowerment has frequently been measured according to women's ability to gain access to traditionally masculine forms of power. *Sita's Ramayana* proposes a different model. Sita's agency emerges not through conquest, authority, or domination but through refusal. Her rejection of queenship, her refusal to submit to repeated suspicion, and her final decision to return to

the earth represent acts of self-definition that challenge the legitimacy of patriarchal institutions themselves.

In this respect, the text participates in a broader tradition of feminist mythmaking that seeks not merely to reinterpret inherited stories but to transform the cultural values they transmit. Arni's Sita does not seek inclusion within existing structures of power; she exposes their limitations and ultimately chooses a path beyond them. The result is a powerful reimagining of one of literature's most enduring heroines.

By reclaiming narrative authority, reconfiguring gendered identities, foregrounding female solidarity, and challenging patriarchal constructions of honour and heroism, *Sita's Ramayana* establishes itself as one of the most significant feminist adaptations of the epic tradition in contemporary Indian literature. It demonstrates that myths remain meaningful not because they preserve fixed truths but because they can be continually reinterpreted to address changing social realities. In giving Sita her own voice, Arni not only revises the *Ramayana* but also invites readers to reconsider the relationship between gender, power, and storytelling itself.

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