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AMISH'S 'SITA – WARRIOR OF MITHILA': SHATTERING GENDER STEREOTYPES?

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ABSTRACT

In the second novel of author Amish's Ramachandra series – "Sita – Warrior of Mithila", most of the female characters are empowered. The protagonist Sita is an able administrator and ruler, equally well-versed in academics and the martial arts. She is shrewd, but compassionate towards the Mithilans. She is a warrior par excellence. She is, thus, portrayed in a manner strikingly different from most previous versions and retellings. If she is not docile, dependent and helpless, it is because she has been brought up so. Queen Sunaina, who hardly finds mention in the Valmiki Ramayan adopts Sita and moulds her into the fiercely independent woman and brave fighter that she grows into. Sunaina herself is bold and proactive, moving beyond the confines of the harem and the kitchen. Thus, even as a thirteen-year old, Sita captures Rishi Vishwamitra's attention. He appoints her as the Vishnu, the human initiator of a fresh social order, cleansed of all evil. But, in keeping with the Purusha-Prakriti concept, she proposes joint Vishnuhood with Ram, her husband and co-contestant for the Vishnu's position. Nevertheless, some female characters are typecast. Queen Kaushalya is a doting mother and submissive wife. Queen Kaikeyi conspires and manipulates. Shurpanakha and Sursa are temptresses. Nandini stokes rivalry between two exemplary teachers! Radhika sacrifices her own interests for the greater good. Samichi is a traitor, being the antagonist Raavan's spy. Manthara too is Lanka's undercover agent in India. Yet, Amish does strive to infuse feminist elements into the narration through various devices and episodes. KEYWORDS: female, Sita, Ram, Sunaina, warrior, administrator, Vishnu, Purusha-Prakriti, male-female collaboration

INTRODUCTION

In Amish's retelling of the Ramayan, three novels deal with one of the main characters each – Ram, Sita and Raavan and include events upto Sita's abduction. From then on, the narration will be carried forth in a unified manner. In Amish's Ramachandra series ("The Scion of Ikshvaku" being the first and "Sita – the Warrior of Mithila" being the second" with the rest of the books yet to be launched), all the characters are absolutely human, including Ram, Jatayu and Hanuman. The Vishnu is a human leader who ushers in a new social order when the old is crumbling. He is not an earthly incarnation of Lord Vishnu who descends on earth with the sole mission of slaying demons, especially Raavan in the Ramayan. Guru Vasishtha and

Rishi Vishwamitra prepare their own candidates for Vishnuhood – Ram and Sita respectively. Caught in the crossfire between Guru Vasishtha and *Rishi* Vishwamitra, their respective protégés, Ram and Sita end up marrying each other, but develop mutual love, admiration and respect in the process. So much so that Sita advocates a joint Vishnuhood for the two of them. This is akin to the role of Purusha and Prakriti in creation in Samkhya philosophy. Sita as Prakriti is pragmatic and even ruthless when required, while Ram as the Spiritual Ultimate Reality- Purusha, is all for Truth, Duty and Honour. Amish appears to advocate a joint leadership between the male and the female much as the Spiritual Purusha is required for the creation of the Material that Prakriti undertakes. In short, Queen Sunaina and Princess Sita in their emboldened form in Amish's novel are a far cry from the demure and hapless females that they are in the original and most retellings of the Ramayana.

As for the other female characters, Shurpanakha, Raavan's half-sister, with her unabashed lust for Ram fits into the conventional role of the vamp. Ambition and treason are Samichi's flaws. Kaikeyi is the brain behind Ayodhya's court intrigues. Manthara's actions may be spurred by her daughter's fatal gang-rape and thus vindicated, but the fact remains that she is shrewd and tactical, working for Lanka.

In view of the unethical nature of most of the female characters (except for Sunaina in 'Sita') in the two novels, the question that arises is – by presenting his women in empowered roles, has Amish really portrayed them in a positive light? Have feminists a real reason to rejoice at this unconventional retelling of the traditional Ramayana oriented towards patriarchy? This paper attempts to dissect Amish's female characters to determine the extent to which he has depicted them in a favourable light. Since Amish's focus is on the protagonist, Sita and her mother, Sunaina, who is instrumental in the making of a warrior and a leader, the paper too discusses these two characters in detail. The other female characters occupy secondary roles in the narration and hence the discussion below also follows suit.

DISCUSSION

Amish's novel "Sita – Warrior of Mithila" is the second of the Ramachandra series and has Sita for its protagonist. She is the princess of Mithila ruled over by the erudite King Janaka. Amish's Sita is completely different from the Sita we have witnessed hitherto in either the original or retold Ramayans. How does she evolve into an empowered woman – fearless and independent, extraordinary warrior, astute leader and the future Vishnu? What is her mother's influence on her? What about the other female characters? Do they conform to the established gender stereotypes? The attempt to answer these questions assumes the form of a preliminary analysis of Queen Sunaina's role in the moulding of Sita and then proceeds to discuss Sita's character in detail. A concise reference to other female characters is followed by a brief discussion of the little details in the course of the narration which portray feminist elements.

Sunaina:

King Janak of Mithila is thoroughly immersed in scholarly pursuits with scant regard for the materialistic. However, unable to idly witness the neglect of welfare of the subjects, Queen Sunaina, takes over the reins of the administration of Mithila. This assigning of political power to the female embodies progressive thought regarding gender justice. Sunaina, in particular, finds no mention in the Valmiki Ramayana. Even in later retellings, her role is restricted to that of a doting mother who imparts knowledge only about the kitchen and household to her daughter. But, as a product of Amish's imagination, she shoulders the burden of both administration and foreign policy. Meanwhile, she moulds her daughter into an able warrior, administrator, strategist and ruler besides arranging for formal education in the sciences and philosophy.

She successfully initiates some reforms. Devolving of local tax collection and administration to the village level reduces the strain on the Mithila bureaucracy and improves efficiency. "Using the increased revenue from agriculture, she had retrained the excess bureaucracy and expanded the Mithila police force, thus improving security within the kingdom" (23)

The fatalistic Janak refrains from rebelling against his brother Kushadhwaj's tactics to gain control over Mithila. Sunaina, on the other hand, fights against what is destined to be. Kushadhwaj is the ruler of Sankashya, a "nominally subsidiary kingdom of Mithila" (14). Mithila, originally founded on the banks of the

mighty Gandaki River, had been “a thriving river-port town”, besides deriving its wealth from agriculture. However, consequent upon an earthquake and subsequent flood, the Gandaki has changed its course and now flows by Sankashya. “Mithila’s loss was Sankashya’s gain”. “Janak, a devout and spiritual man” in Amish’s creation, is averse to investment for redirection of the Gandaki back to its old course, adopting “a philosophical approach to his kingdom’s decline in fortune” (15).

Sunaina, on the other hand, refuses to take this turn in fortune lying down. When she can’t find logical reasons to justify “the costly and difficult engineering project”, she convinces Janak to seek the blessings of the *Kanyakumari*. However, when the Child Goddess instructs her to “respect the judgment of nature”, (15) the disappointed Sunaina embarks on the return journey to Mithila. It is then that she chances upon a solitary vulture guarding an infant from a pack of marauding wolves.

Here, we are witness to Sunaina’s courage and compassion. Ignoring the gentle Janak’s warning to not intrude into the potentially dangerous situation, Sunaina gallops on undeterred, with a few bodyguards racing after her. Their approach drives the wolves away into the woods. With a Mizo parentage (on the maternal side) that has bestowed her with an instinctive understanding of animals and the rhythms of nature, she is able to communicate with the vulture. It calms down when she hums a soft tune and asks the bird in a mellifluous voice to trust her. However, it collapses and dies. Sunaina decides on the spot to make the baby hers, considering it a gift from the *Kanyakumari*. Though Janak is drawn towards the abandoned child, he’s hesitant about total acceptance and the untoward consequences it could bring in its wake. Sunaina’s affection, in contrast, is unconstrained. She realises that the child must be strong “to have survived this ordeal” being only a few months old. Janak remarks that the child is “strong and beautiful. Just like you.” (19) This remark throws light on the sterling qualities of both Sunaina and Sita.

Sunaina makes Sita pay obeisance to the face of the vulture cast in metal on each birthday. It is a clear illustration of Sunaina’s righteous and frank nature. She doesn’t believe in concealing the truth about Sita’s birth from her. Instead, she reminds Sita to feel obliged to the brave bird that had shielded her till she was in safe hands.

Through her determination to put Mithila back on the track of development and her efforts to compensate for King Janak’s indifference towards their needs, she earns her subjects’ respect. Nevertheless, she is an example of how women aren’t considered to be truly a part of the family they marry into. As Kushadhwaj tries to thwart her attempts to retain the reins of Mithila, he sneers – “you are not blood family. You are only an import.” (41) By revealing the domination of patriarchal attitudes, this dialogue enhances the value of Sunaina’s efforts to swim against the tide for its not acceptable even in a novel that puts women on centre stage. Amish’s female characters do not thrive in a welcoming environment; they carve out one that’s conducive to the blossoming of their talents. If Sita evolves as a brave warrior and strategic ruler, she owes it to her mother! Truly, if there’s any female character worthy of unalloyed appreciation, it’s Sunaina!

Sunaina moulds Sita’s thinking right from her childhood, making it amply clear that Sita would in due course be involved in Mithila’s governance.

Sunaina’s canny nature is also evident from her having a lit lamp placed while attempting to extract Kushadhwaj’s contribution towards the rebuilding of the road connecting Sankashya to Mithila. She, in effect, invokes Agni, the God of Fire, as the witness. For, “all promises that were sealed with the God of Fire as witness could never be broken.....” (40)

Not even an iota of her love and affection for her adopted daughter Sita diminishes even after she begets her biological child, Urmila! Moreover, instead of rueing the absence of a son, she trains her daughter to succeed to Mithila’s throne. She doesn’t curb Sita’s eagerness to excel at horse-riding, stick-fighting (Sita practises it since the age of 7!) and chariot-racing. In fact, she is even pleased at her daughter’s avidly engaging in pursuits conventionally intended for the male. She, along with Janak, chooses *Rishi Shvetaketu’s gurukul* for Sita’s education in Philosophy, Mathematics, Science and Sanskrit. “One subject that Sunaina had insisted Sita be taught, overriding Janak’s objections, was warfare and martial arts. Janak believed in non-violence. Sunaina believed in being practical” (43)

She is also practical enough to realise that a greater destiny awaits Sita than kingship over an inconsequential kingdom.

Sita:

The protagonist of this novel, Sita, is the one who is outstanding as an empowered woman. She shines as warrior, administrator, thinker and strategist. How does Amish portray her in a refreshingly different light?

Lessons from her mother:

Sita, the bold warrior, is a product of Sunaina's upbringing. From the beginning, Sunaina imparts her valuable lessons about life. For instance, after little Sita's first foray into the slums turns into a fearful encounter with some unruly boys, she is rescued by a slum-dweller, Samichi and brought back to the palace. One stern look from her mother and silence – just two things are enough to teach the lesson which ordinary parents would need the rod to teach. Such is the devotion towards her mother! The astute Sunaina turns Sita's misadventure into a lesson rather than give vent to an angry outburst. She makes her realise that criminals are found amongst both the rich and the poor - Sita's first lesson in distrust and repudiation of blind faith.

She also enlightens Sita about the differences in the emotional makeup of the rich and the poor and the way to attain balance in appeasing the two extremes. Since the poor get frustrated at their inability to enjoy as much material comfort as the rich, the rulers have the responsibility of their uplift. However, wresting away too much from the elite to enrich the poor will stoke rebellion amongst the rich. She also teaches her that since perfect equality is a utopian aim, a ruler can strive to only reduce inequality. She underlines the importance of maturity and pragmatism for a ruler. "You must use your heart to decide the destination, but use your head to plot the journey" (36)

When the ailing Sunaina visits Sita at her *gurukul*, Sita learns a lot about life from her mother. They witness the death of an elephant, the matriarch of the herd, in the forest. All the animals pay homage to the dead elephant and move on. Only its male calf refuses to leave her side and has to be finally dragged away by its older sister. Sunaina turns this into a lesson for Sita. "Society moves on, my child...Countries move on. Life moves on. As it should." (98) Referring to her continued stay at the *gurukul*, Sunaina points out – "Running away is never the solution. Confront your problems. Manage them. That is the way of the warrior. And, you are a warrior. Don't ever forget that." (99)

Bold even as a bud:

That Sita shows extraordinary pluck at a very young age is brought out through many incidents. One is at Mithila's palace when she flings the golden saddle at her paternal uncle, Kushadhwaj's feet. The saddle and the fine Arabian horse are his gifts to her. Her fury is roused by Kushadhwaj's declaration of insubordination to Mithila and his appropriation of Mithila's royal seal. A mere child realises that acceptance of a gift from one who aims at subjugating her parents implies submissiveness through a sense of obligation. She spreads "her arms out to cover her mother protectively" (42) This gesture speaks volumes about her fierce possessiveness towards her parents and her intolerance of any indignity shown towards them. She regrets this impulsive act long after as it has aggravated the hostility between the two kingdoms and decides to stay on at Guru Svethaketu's hermitage rather than return to Mithila and cause more trouble for her parents.

Incidentally, when she discovers that her determination to keep away from Mithila has caused immense distress to Sunaina and has taken a toll on the latter's health, pushing her towards the brink of death, she repents. She realises with renewed intensity how strongly Sunaina is attached to her.

During one of her visits to the Mithilan palace allowed in the course of her education at Guru Svethaketu's hermitage, "Sita had, in a fit of anger, told Janak..... that he should stop wasting his time on spirituality and help Sunaina govern the kingdom" (95). This illustrates her possessiveness towards her mother, plus the importance she pays to practical thought and action. Not that she lacks this strong feeling towards her father, Janak. When "...a fellow-student had called her father an ineffectual king, more suited to

being a teacher than a ruler", she thrashes him black and blue! (44) Shvetaketu now decides to give her meditation exercises in a bid to prune her spirited temperament!

After this, she develops novel methods to counter insults. Kaaml Raj, a fellow-student, taunts her about her adopted status. She tries to keep her calm, remembering her guru's words. But, he keeps nagging her about the impending neglect by Sunaina, now that she has given birth to her own child, declaring that Sita would be thrown out of the palace. In response, Sita only screams so loud that the astounded boy stumbles and falls back! (45-46)

Education:

At Guru Shvetaketu's hermitage, Sita excels not merely in academics, but in warfare too. This is where *Rishi* Vishwamitra, the chief of the Malayaputras, notices her, when he halts at the hermitage as part of one of his itineraries. He observes her exceptional skill at spear-throwing and also her compassionate nature when she serves food to Jatayu, (one of his assistants) usually isolated for his deformities.

Engaging the students in a discussion, he focuses on Sita, asking her to express her views. He also enlightens her about the reason behind the success of great warriors – the warrior code. What distinguishes them from criminals is that they kill only for the right reason. But, the Bhaarat society demonised the warrior class and consequently disintegrated. It was incapable of defence when the barbaric 'Hiranyaloman Mlechcha' warriors attacked the "pacifist, non-violent" Bhaarat society. (62) He explains that "society must be wary of extremes" and unhesitatingly employ violence in critical times. Sita's identifying of the "resentment and hatred towards the trading class" (63) as the extremism which facilitated Raavan's control over the Sapt Sindhu provides him immense satisfaction.

Her philosophy:

Here, a window opens to let us peek into her guiding philosophy - "The only 'ism' I believe in, is pragmatism". At this, Vishwamitra asks her if she is committed to *Charvak* philosophy that believes in neither the soul nor the Gods, but only the body as the reality. She denies it and elucidates – "If I am pragmatic, then I should be open to every school of philosophy. And accept only those parts that make sense to me, while rejecting other bits that don't. I should learn from any philosophy that can help me fulfil my karma." (64) Essentially, then, the pragmatic Sita pays importance to action over doctrine and experience over fixed principles. Thus, she justifies decisions based on the consequences of an action and the extent of general welfare that it can increase rather than rely on precedents. Vishwamitra is pleased at the maturity the 13-year old displays. Being authorised to select the next Vishnu after Parshu Ram, he decides that Sita is capable of donning the mantle.

Political thought:

Her discussion with Bharat in the gardens of the Ayodhyan palace affords opportunity to learn more about her as a statesman. When she defends Ram's "unbridled commitment to the law", (276), it is out of not blind love, but objective analysis. For, she is able to substantiate her views unambiguously, causing the normally indefatigable Bharat to fumble for words in a vain bid to justify his libertarian views.

In her view, "hatred for money, disdain for wisdom and love of violence" (277) are the current conditions in the Sapt Sindhu. In such a situation, radicalisation of the youth (both male and female) has led to a spike in the crime rate, especially against women. Sita concedes that "Women can be talented and competitive in the fields of knowledge, trading and labour. But, when it comes to violence, the almighty has not blessed them with a natural advantage." Does Amish imply here that his empowered Sita is an exception and not the norm?

She continues to explain how the radicalised, disempowered, violence-loving youth, looking for simplistic solutions are drawn to the authoritarian message of the masculine way of life and attack the weak, creating chaos in society. She contends that the feminine way of life can't ensure stability. (In the 'Scion of Ikshvaku', Amish explains that the hallmarks of a feminine way of life are freedom, passion and beauty. The masculine is marked by truth, duty and honour.) Sita elaborates that by removing fundamentalism from the

masculine way of life, Ram aims to harness it to guide radicalised youngsters vulnerable to misuse by demonic forces for unleashing endless violence and hatred. She firmly believes that Ram “can lead such youth to a life of order, justice and fairness.... ” and “.... build them into a force for the good of India” (279). She, then, presents her ideology - “Freedom is good, but in moderation.... That’s why the path I prefer is that of Balance. Balance between the Masculine and the Feminine. ” (280) Isn’t this quite in harmony with Ram’s formula for social change?

Sita as the Vishnu:

In Amish’s Ramachandra series, Prince Ram of Ayodhya is not the automatic choice for Vishnuhood. Plus, Amish’s concept of a Vishnu isn’t that of an earthly incarnation of Lord Vishnu, but of a human being who is the initiator of a new social order when society is in a state of decline. Guru Vasishtha has chosen Ram for Vishnuhood. But, *Rishi* Vishwamitra being Vasishtha’s arch-rival, doesn’t approve of the latter’s choice. Moreover, being the Malayaputra chief, *Rishi* Vishwamitra chooses the best candidate for the next Vishnu - Sita. He also ritually anoints her as the next Vishnu after Parshu Ram, albeit in the absence of the Vayuputras under Guru Vasishtha. We get a glimpse of Sita’s boldness when she is led, unaccompanied by friends or family, into the unknown territory and strange terrain of the *agastyakootam*, *Rishi* Vishwamitra’s abode, to be anointed as the Vishnu. She doesn’t experience any fear or hesitation.

Rishi Vishwamitra prepares Sita for her role by firstly imparting knowledge through month-long discussions. “Some of these were purely educational; on science, astronomy and medicine. Others were subtle lessons designed to help her clearly define, question, confront or affirm her views on various topics like masculinity, femininity, equality and hierarchy, justice and freedom, liberalism and order, besides others.” (164) He, then, makes her traverse the extensive territory of the SaptSindhu and India, of which she is slated to be the sole ruler. In a year, she covers the western coast. The motive behind this venture is to lend insight into the territory of which and its inhabitants of whom she will be the future ruler.

To defuse Guru Vasishtha’s plans of setting Ram up for Vishnuhood, he creates a situation whereby Ram has to fire the *asurastra* upon the Lankans attacking Mithila as a last resort to safeguard his just-wedded wife’s kingdom. Well-acquainted with Ram’s righteous nature, *Rishi* Vishwamitra weaves this clever ruse to pave the way for Ram’s anticipated self-exile as atonement for firing the forbidden *asurastra*, thus effectively knocking him out of the race for Vishnuhood.

Incidentally, Vishwamitra has another plan to discredit Ram in the eyes of his most powerful supporters, from which too Ram emerges unscathed. Little does Vishwamitra know what’s in store for him! Sita, Vishwamitra’s choice for the next Vishnu and now, Ram’s wife, follows Ram into exile along with Ram’s shadow, his younger half-brother, Lakshman.

Sita’s superiority over males:

Doubtless, Amish’s Sita displays skills that are superior to those of the males involved in the situation. For instance, at the opening of the novel, she has cut down many more plantain leaves than the Malayaputra soldier, Makrant, even in the face of inclement weather. Her strategies, as she faces almost a hundred Lankan soldiers, Raavan and his brother Kumbhakarna included, are awesome. Her knife-throwing sans sighting of the enemy and reliance on merely the source of sound is unerring in meeting its mark. And then, her tricks to mislead the Lankans into believing the existence of multiple enemies in the vicinity are extraordinarily clever. Also astonishing is her resolve to counter the Lankans despite being heavily outnumbered.

Commitment:

Yet, Amish steers us towards a little imperfection of hers at this point. Failing to aim at Raavan and Kumbhakarna through the dense ring of soldiers around them, she misses Ram, for she knows he “would have gotten an arrow through somehow” (9) While this reveals her high esteem for Ram’s abilities with the bow and arrow, we also realise she’s not equally adept at it. Anyway, she is finally felled not owing to her incapability but because of her reluctance to let the faithful Naga, Jatayu, who she considers as her brother, perish in an effort to defend her from the Lankans. This encounter with

the Lankans shows Sita, the warrior, in resplendent light – not only is she a true leader sacrificing her safety for her soldier's survival but is also a committed sister. While it is usually the brother who makes a commitment to safeguard his sister for life as a return gesture for her tying of the *rakhi* on his hand, here, Sita unhesitatingly chucks her personal well-being away for rescuing the person who calls her 'sister'!

True, Sita "...had often wondered about her birth-mother. Why had she abandoned her? Was she as magnificent as her adoptive mother? But, there was no doubt in her mind about one fact: She was Sunaina's daughter" (45). Again, when Sunaina passes away, Sita sets personal grief aside to lend support to the tender Urmila, her little sister.

Sharpness:

Amish's Sita is sharp. She spots spies with ease. When Ram first catches sight of her in Mithila, she is at the market-place, engaged in mob control. The wealthy merchant, Vijay, tries to incite the crowd to attack her, "...when she had intervened to save a boy-thief from mob justice" (195) so that law may take its course. She not only rescues the boy and defends herself, but disperses the mob with aplomb. It is then that Ram bows his head to her in deference to her superiority, having witnessed her remarkable courage, unparalleled fighting skills and presence of mind. Anyway, her suspicions that Vijay's loyalties lay with Sankashya rather than Mithila are confirmed.

At the market-place in Ayodhya, she meets Manthara, who she had sympathised with the previous day owing to the latter's deformities and her daughter's brutal and fatal gang-rape. But, she is instantly on alert when Manthara is aware of inside information regarding the succession process in Ayodhya. When she notices Manthara's bodyguards keeping people at bay, she realises that the meeting had been pre-planned. She also detects veiled threats to Ram's life in exile in Manthara's enigmatic words to her. (284-285) That is when she decides to learn more about Manthara and take precautionary steps to safeguard Ram.

However, emotion blinds her to Samichi's links with the Lankans, though the latter's absence on many crucial occasions baffles her.

During her first voyage to the *agastyakootam*, "the fabled capital of the Malayaputras" along with Jatayu and some Malayaputras, (143), she sights two Lankan ships smoothly speeding away in the distance. She realises that "Raavan must have some technology that the others do not possess". More significantly, as she looked at the Lankan flags on the ships, "Not for the first time, Sita wondered about the relationship between the Malayaputras and the Lankans." (145)

She is also quick to observe Lakshman's enchantment with Urmila at first sight, when she descends into the Bees' Quarter to meet Ram before the *swayamvar*. She also makes a mental note of the possibility of another matrimonial alliance (204)

Sita, the friend:

Sita places immense faith in Samichi. Sita's mother, Sunaina had granted Samichi a place in the palace after the latter had rescued the eight-year old Sita from a nasty encounter with a group of unruly boys during a foolhardy venture of exploring Mithila's slums despite Sunaina's prohibition of the same. This, of course, also serves as an instance of Sita's curiosity, tenacity, and dauntlessness. Sita is shocked at the uninhabitable conditions in the slums which actually constitute an improvement resulting from her mother's efforts. Anyway, her realisation of the wisdom of Sunaina's forbiddance from entering the slums arrives a tad too late.

Sitalater promotes Samichi to the rank of Chief of Police and Protocol of Mithila. She evenpersuadesSamichi to addressher by name rather than as 'Princess' at least in private. This extreme trust proves costly later on, for Samichi leaks inside information about Mithila and Sita to Raavan. Should we conclude from this erroneous judgment that, here, Amish makesSita compliant with the gender stereotype of sentiment superseding objectivity amongst females?

Fearless and adroit:

Later on in the narration, when the chariot she is riding in, to race with Samichi gets toppled, she is hurled out of it, but doesn't lose her presence of mind. She takes care to protect her head, but hits a

tree, hurting her back and blacking out (132-133) When she regains consciousness, she's more worried about her father being subjected to stress, having just recovered from a serious illness. Her transformation into a hardened warrior and the Vishnu haven't eroded her ability to love and care.

She next wishes to examine her chariot to determine if the mishap was an accident or a conspiracy (134). Surmising that Kushadhwajis behind the plot to kill her, she first wishes to consult *Rishi* Vishwamitra about the next course of action. But, when she learns that he is unavailable, she reflects – "So, we have to do this ourselves." A wonderful example of her fearlessness and initiative! She recalls Vishwamitra's advice – "Never wait. Get your retaliation in first. " (136-137) However, she doesn't kill Kushadhwaj in response or declare war, but paralyzes him by eliminating his right-hand man, Prime Minister Sulochan. Arishtanemi, Vishwamitra's right-hand man, cannot help admiring her strategy. He reflects – "Now, you are truly worthy of being a Vishnu.... A Vishnu who can't fight for herself would be incapable of fighting for her people. " (137)

During one of her meetings with Hanuman, her friend Radhika's cousin, in the forest, he is hurt in the process of killing an attacking tiger. "Sita quickly pulled out the medical aid kit from the saddlebag and dressed Hanuman's injuries. " As he observes her treating him with herbs she searches around for, Hanuman ponders – "She is not nervous.... . She didn't get scared..... This girl is special..." (77)

That she is fearless is evident when she rushes to attack Raavan at her *swayamvar*, for the latter damages the statue of King Mithi, the founder of Mithila. She has to be restrained by her maids and rests assured only when Raavan leaves the venue.

She is adroit when it comes to defence. During Raavan's attack on Mithila, she is optimistic, brave and pragmatic even in the face of certain defeat and destruction. Her selection of a unique vantage point – the windows of the Bees' Quarter to attack the Lankans, stands testimony to her innovativeness as a warrior. When no one else can think of a strategy (including Ram), only she can!

During their exile, Ram, Sita and Lakshman encounter Raavan's half-siblings, Vibhishan and Shurpanakha. The latter makes her infatuation with Ram explicit and grabs every opportunity to discredit Sita. Sita's extraordinary presence of mind, courage and fighting prowess is again on view here. Not only does she stave off Shurpanakha's bid to stuff her mouth with stupefying herbs, but also drags her back to the camp and relates the events to Ram and Lakshman. When Shurpanakha attacks Sita, Lakshman tries to shield his *bhabhi*, but inadvertently chops off Shurpanakha's nose, inviting retribution from Raavan.

Humanitarian:

Sita's killing of a tiger with the objective of saving the villagers from its attacks, without coveting its skin for a trophy, reveals her humanitarian side, reminiscent of Jim Corbett, the British-Indian hunter and tracker-turned-conservationist. She may be portrayed as ambitious at many points in the narration. But, doubtlessly, she places her subjects' well-being above hers. Doesn't the scene of devastation unleashed by Raavan's corps after her *swayamvar* leave her in tears? (245)

Balanced:

Besides, she is balanced in estimating her skills. For, on the above occasion, she reprimands Samichi for her flattery, observing that there is no reason to brag, as her shot was a poor one. She observes that despite propaganda and myth-making being efficient assistants of a ruler, they lose their potency if used to publicise a mediocre act in an exaggerated light. Demonstrative evidence indeed of her expertise in public relations! Plus, it requires fortitude to steer away from the temptation to fall for sycophancy. (189)

Fortitude:

During the ritual to anoint her as the next Vishnu, *Rishi* Vishwamitra asks her to shed a drop of blood into the holy fire as a mark of her commitment to the cause that he is espousing. She immediately slashes her finger, allowing many drops of blood to drip into the fire. Her face betrays no trace of pain.

Again, during her mother's funeral, she refrains from crying in public, considering it a sign of weakness. This is a definite deviation from the established belief of weeping being a typical femininetrail.

The Mithilans hold her guilty for further weakening Sunaina during the latter's illness by making her travel to Shvetaketu's hermitage, thus quickening Sunaina's death and for aggravating the hostility with Kushadhwaj. Despite sensing this animosity, she performs the funeral rites with forbearance.

Sunaina's death leaves her desolate. She wonders if she would ever be able to cope. It is only Urmila's helplessness that infuses a sense of responsibility into her and gets her back on her feet to provide the care, love and protection that has been snatched away from them. Here, we are witness to Sita's stubborn refusal to be cowed down by adversity and her prioritising of duty over inaction stemming from personal grief and loss. Indeed, no one can deny that Amish's Sita is made of stern stuff!

A brilliant administrator:

Though Sunaina has improved the living conditions of the poor to some extent, it is Sita who substantially contributes to their uplift. She also ushers in a number of reforms and policies that bolsters Mithila's economy. Since the slum-dwellers want their new homes in exactly the same places where their current ones are located, she proposes a brilliant situation – honey-comb-like structures that open from the top ('The Bees' Quarter') lined with streets. For their temporary accommodation, she hands over the uninhabited area between the outer and the inner fort wall, converting "the moat outside the fort wall into a lake, to store rain water and aid agriculture". The boost to agricultural productivity translates into higher income for the slum-dwellers. "Moving agriculture within the city wall would also provide food security during times of siege..." (113) Sita also organises the chaotic central market of the city, reducing pilferage and wastage. Prices decrease enhancing business. "All these moves also dramatically increased Sita's popularity. At least among the poor" (114)

Elimination of enemies:

She is, however, ruthless and proactive, when it comes to eliminating her enemies. One instance is the assassination of Kushadhwaj's minister, Sulochan, by hiring the expert, Mara. Not only does she identify the real troublemaker from their subordinate kingdom and silences him for perpetuity, but, in the process also keeps up her word to her dying mother to never harm Kushadhwaj personally. Trouble from Sankashya abates after this move. At Ayodhya, despite being a newcomer, she realises that Manthara plans to get Ram killed once he is out of Ayodhya. She, then, garners information about Manthara and learns that her assistant, Druhyu plans and executes malicious plots. So, she gets him killed to ensure the safety of Ram, Lakshman and herself in exile.

Yet, she can't be labelled completely 'unethical'. For, when she discovers that Ram has been led to Mithila without being informed of the real purpose – to participate in Sita's *swayamwar* – she is shocked at the Malayaputras' deceit. This is perhaps a redeeming trait that Amish has thrown in.

Ram is mostly incapacitated by his allegiance to 'Truth. Duty. Honour.' But, Sita has no such scruples. Since she doesn't hesitate to use any means – fair or foul – to achieve her ends, she is most suitable for defence matters.

Foresight:

We discover that Sita is far-sighted when she keeps track of the progress of the other candidates for Vishnuhood. When she learns from her friend, Radhika, that Ram is stoic, serious, purposeful, patriotic and law-abiding but bereft of a "romantic bone in his body" which will erode his eligibility for husband-material, Sita realises that "he will probably make a good Vishnu"(180). Even later on in the narration, when Vishwamitra's general, Arishtanemi, expresses pleasure at the impending exile of Ram which will remove him from Sita's path towards Vishnuhood, Sita doesn't glibly gloat at the thought. (257) Instead, she enlightens Arishtanemi about Ram having been catapulted ahead of her in the race to Vishnuhood. She wryly responds – "...you have made him into a hero for the common man. The entire SaptSindhu has suffered Raavan's economic squeeze. And they now see Ram as their saviour" (258)

In Amish's version, it is Sita who enlists the help of Hanuman and Jatayu to safeguard Ram, Lakshman and herself during their exile. She does not remain complacent after Bharat conveys his decision to refrain from assuming power in Ram's absence. His decision to place Ram's royal footwear on the throne and rule only on his behalf would effectively thwart any assassination attempts. Yet, Sita takes extra precautions. She asks Jatayu to follow them in their journey through the forests with a band of Malayaputras. Sita also informs Hanuman about this, ensuring he keeps track of the party in exile.

She also collects *somras* from not merely the Malayaputras but also Guru Vashishth to energise them through their forthcoming travails. More importantly, she obtains his consent for her proposal of joint Vishnuhood with Ram in the future. Moreover, she consumes a dose of the *somras* first as its initial powerful effects will have worn off by the time she administers it to Ram and Lakshman. She aims at being fit enough to tend to them.

Flexibility:

In contrast to Ram's strict insistence on adherence to law, she is willing to flex them to suit her purpose. For her, the end justifies the means. This facet is clearly brought out when she wants Ram to practise on Lord Rudra's bow, the *Pinaka*, before the *swayamvar* ceremony to ensure that he will win. But, Ram declines – for two reasons. One, that it is unethical. Two, that he is confident of his prowess with the bow and arrow. In the process, he leaves Sita impressed.

She also tries to convince Ram that he is needlessly imposing the banishment on himself consequent upon firing the *asurastra*. Firstly, he is "the first in a generation to defeat Raavan". Secondly, "it wasn't really a *daivastra*." According to her, "sometimes, to create a perfect world, a leader has to do what is necessary at the time....". In the long run, a leader who has the capacity to uplift the masses must not deny himself that opportunity. He has a duty to not make himself unavailable...." (260) But, Ram doesn't budge from his stance. Sita, the Woman:

Pragmatic though she may be, Sita, the Warrior, fails to remain unaffected by Ram's radiance. "Sita quickly controlled her wandering mind and beating heart." (212). In fact, before she has seen him in flesh and blood, "all her thoughts about him had been based on reason and logic. She saw him as a worthy partner in the destiny of the Vishnu; someone she could work with for the good of her motherland, the country that she loved, this beautiful, matchless India." But, when she actually sets her eyes on him for the first time, "Emotion arose unasked"! (205)

When he firmly declares that he will play by the rules and touch the *Pinaka* bow only on the day of the *swayamvar*, intending to win her hand the legitimate way, she ponders – "This man is truly special. Either he will go down in history as someone who was exploited by all. Or, he will be remembered as one of the greatest ever" (215).

Her resolve to follow Ram into self-exile, her precautions to safeguard the lives of the three while they are in exile and her suggestion of joint Vishnuhood with Ram as a way out of the deadlock that their respective gurus' hostility has led them towards, are the means Amish has adopted to project her as an ideal wife. She also rebels against *Rishi* Vishwamitra for the first time when he commands Ram to fire the *asurastra* against the Lankans at Mithila, well-cognisant of its adverse implications for Ram's future. (237) She threatens to end her life to safeguard Ram when she discovers the mala fide plans of the Malayaputras to remove him from the race for Vishnuhood. "I may not have Ram's life in my hands. But, I do have my own life in my hands." (220)

Yet, are mundane gestures like sudden consciousness about her appearance and giggling like a silly teenager the only semblance of love that a pragmatic woman is capable of? What does Amish wish to convey? That even a strong woman, when confronted by Love, is a woman at heart? She hopes that Ram's admiration for her will not recede when he notices the battle scars all over her body. "A man like Ram will respect my scars. It's a warrior's body". For the first time, she gives priority to appearance over capability. Amish elaborates how she had always thought of herself as a warrior, princess, ruler and the Vishnu. But, "She now felt like an *apsara*, a *celestial nymph* of unimaginable beauty. One who could halt her man in his tracks by just fluttering her eyelashes. It was a heady feeling. She had always held these 'pretty women' in disdain and thought of them as non-serious. Not anymore." (211). Somehow, it appears as if Amish has lost the key to discover the awakening of love in a thinking woman, a warrior and ruler at that.

Thankfully, Amish compensates for this slip-up when Ram wins the contest at Sita's *swayamvar*. She is relieved.

"A part of Sita that had died years ago, when she had lost her mother, slowly spluttered to life once again. *I am not alone anymore.*"

Sita regrets the fact that her mother wasn't around to see her find her man.

"Grief overwhelms you when you are alone. But, when you find your soulmate, you can handle anything.

What was a painful, unbearable memory had now been transformed into bittersweet nostalgia. A source of sadness, yes. But also, a source of strength and happiness.....

Sita was whole once again. After a long time, she felt like whispering words that lay buried deep in her consciousness. Words that she thought she would have no use for once her mother had died.

She looked at Ram in the distance and whispered, 'I love you'". (230)

She feels that the void in her life created by her mother's demise will now be filled up by a worthy life-partner. Her mother has been the only person to whom Sita had accorded enormous love, affection and respect. If she feels that she can place Ram in that yawning gap of her life, it shows the depth of her feeling for Ram. Here, Amish delineates how, irrespective of the extent of a woman's empowerment, she derives a sense of fulfilment only when she finds a soulmate.

When Ram is compelled to fire the *asurastra* against the Lankans, he decides to impose exile on himself for having broken Lord Rudra's law that forbids the use of a *daivastra*. Then, Sita places her palm on his hand and says – "You share my fate and I share yours. That is what a true marriage is.....Ram, I am your wife. We will always be together; in good times and in bad; through thick and thin" (261) Here, we learn about her deep fidelity.

However, Sita isn't fully frank with Ram from the beginning of their relationship (330). She reveals that she has already been selected as the Vishnu only after their relationship has been well-cemented. Ram, however, has already acknowledged her superiority. He is also aware of her being chosen as the Vishnu. He is prepared to cede the position of the Vishnu to her. He tops it with the promise of following her when she becomes the true and sole leader of a new India. In answer, Sita's solution of joint leadership (Vishnuhood) is a practical one, manifesting her belief in the concept of equality and cooperation between the male and the female to achieve a goal.

Joint Vishnuhood as symbolic of collaboration between the male and the female:

Perhaps, it is a deliberate ploy to mirror the *Purusha-Prakriti* dichotomy? The concepts of *Purusha* and *Prakriti* stem from the *Samkhya* philosophy which propounds a dual realism, i.e., two Ultimate Realities – *Purusha* and *Prakriti*.

In essence, Prakriti is matter while Purusha is the self (spirit). Prakriti is the primordial and ultimate cause of all physical existence. Some commentators on the Bhagavadgita consider Prakriti and Purusha to be two properties of the Supreme Being – The spatial extension being Prakriti and Omniscience acting is the Purusha. The process of creation and dissolution in the Universe is cyclical. Prakriti is the material cause of the world and thus, it's Creator. Prakriti is made of three gunas (usually qualities, but refers to constituents in Samkhya) – sattva (purity, finesse and subtlety), rajas (activity and motion) and tamas (inertia and inaction). The interaction of the gunas disturbs the state of equilibrium of Prakriti which then causes creation. In evolution, Prakriti is transformed and differentiated into a multiplicity of objects. Evolution is followed by dissolution, wherein all the worldly objects merge back into Prakriti, which now remains as the undifferentiated primordial substance. Thereafter, evolution commences afresh.

Devdutt Pattanaik, in "Myth=Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology", points out to various stanzas in the Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad which speak of the Self, the *Purusha*, being alone and afraid. Realising that he needs company and pleasure to get rid of his loneliness and fear, he, in his restlessness, splits himself. His splinter is 'Prakriti'. The two complement each other. Though, to the layman, 'Purusha' represents 'Man' and 'Prakriti' Nature, *Prakriti* can also indicate 'woman'. While *Purusha* is the soul, *Prakriti* is mind and matter. *Purusha* is thus unchanging and denotes the inner reality that makes the body alive. But, *Prakriti* is restless and ever-changing, representing everything in this world – gender, names and forms. By its very nature, *Prakriti* is, thus, never perfect. And, most significantly, neither is autonomous. Neither can exist independent of the other. It is clear that Ram, as *Purusha* and Sita, as *Prakriti* are dependent on each other.

Max Muller, the German philologist and Orientalist, in his study of *Samkhya* philosophy, observes that Purusha is devoid of the *gunas* and is super-sensuous and endless. It perceives, however, temporarily, pleasure, pain and trouble through Prakriti's actions. It does not create and is thus not an agent, but only perceives Prakriti's modifications. Purusha, being bereft of seed, can produce nothing. Mueller mentions the analogy of a dancer to describe the nature of Prakriti and Purusha. He explains that the whole development of Prakriti occurs only when Purusha perceives the dancer, i.e., Prakriti, in all her disguises. If he doesn't see, she doesn't dance for him. The moment he takes his eyes away from her, she altogether ceases to try to please him.

If the above is the nature of Purusha and Prakriti, it becomes clear why Ram is idealistic and Sita is pragmatic. She, being Prakriti, is representative of the material. That Amish intends to cast Sita in the role of Prakriti is clear from his quoting of the verse from the '*Adbhuta Ramayana*' credited to *Maharishi* Valmiki at the beginning of the novel. The verse assures that whenever *dharma* is in decline or there is an upsurge of *adharma*, "The Sacred Feminine" will incarnate. "She will defend dharma. She will protect us." The preceding verse in the *Adbhut Ramayan* specifies that Sita is Prakriti and will destroy Evil assuming the form of Kali.

Examining the roles of Ram and Sita in the light of the above discussion, Sita's advocacy for joint leadership between herself and Ram when the time is ripe for a positive social upheaval, is perfectly understandable. For a fresh social order to come into existence shorn of all its evils and imperfections, a resolute and balanced leadership is called for. If creation can occur only through Prakriti and the Purusha is merely the perceiver, it explains why Ram is ready to follow Sita as the Vishnu. If Purusha isn't complete without Prakriti, only joint Vishnuhood can succeed.

Sita also has an emotional-cum-practical reason behind the proposal. In the course of Sita's last coherent conversation with her mother, "Sunaina had warned Sita to not trust either the Malayaputras or the Vayuputras completely if she were to fulfil her destiny as the Vishnu. Both tribes would have their own agenda. She needed partners."

Sunaina had instructed her thus – "*Find partners you can trust; who are loyal to your cause. Personal loyalty is not important. But they must be loyal to your cause*". (105) There's another practical angle as well. Sita learns from her friend Radhika that the Vayuputras' presence is mandatory when the Malayaputras under *Rishi* Vishwamitra appoint a Vishnu. But, her appointment is, in this sense, incomplete, for the rituals had been completed without the Vayuputras. She, then, works out the solution of joint Vishnuhood between herself and Guru Vasishtha's candidate, Ram (Vasishtha representing the Vayuputras).

Thus, it is that Prakriti sets out in search of her Purusha. Determined that Ram fits the bill admirably well, she convinces her father, Janak, to arrange for her *swayamvar*, planning for only Ram to succeed with the *Pinaka* bow.

Lack of originality:

Nevertheless, it is disappointing that some of Sita's views aren't original. For instance, the scheme to eliminate the caste system that proposes adoption of children trained by the State in their respective talents by adults with like talents, after they are relinquished by their birth-parents to the State. This is, originally, *Rishi* Vishwamitra's plan and not hers.

Other feministic elements in the narration:

Amish's attempt to infuse feminism into the narration is evident at many places. For instance, it is Sita who performs the last rites of her mother, Sunaina. (105). Amish's Sita is also five years older than Ram. Truly unconventional in a country which allows men to take brides decades younger! Another break from tradition is manifest in the women addressing their respective husbands by name, whereas the norm in the epics and myths is to address them as '*arya*' (wise or noble man).

Females can also rise to be 'Vishnus' here. Sita is the prospective Vishnu. Besides, she and most others consider Lady Mohini as a Vishnu.

Through Sunaina's providing of warfare training for Sita at the *gurukul*, Amish indicates the significance of the mother's role in steering clear of gender discrimination right from childhood and empowering the girl-child.

When Amish mentions at the opening of the novel that it was Sita's turn to cook (when she accompanies Ram to the forest for the exile along with Lakshman and the Malayaputras), he is rejecting sexual division of labour. In other words, cooking, for the most part considered to be a woman's job, is shared by all at the camp, men and woman alike.

In most Indian cultural groups, the bride-to-be is expected to be coy and inert. It is her family who finds a suitable boy for her to wed and arranges the wedding. But, Amish's Sita shatters another traditional gender expectation to smithereens when it is she who chooses Ram for a suitable mate and convinces Janak to arrange a *swayamvar* for her. She also personally supervises the arrangements for the *swayamvar*.

Nevertheless, Amish encourages a balanced attitude in women through Jatayu's views when the latter refers to Samichi's hatred for men affecting her work. He points out that Samichi targets men unfairly which may trigger a rebellion. In this context, he elaborates that "... hating all men because of one man's actions, whatever they may have been, is a sign of an unstable personality. Reverse-bias is also bias. Reverse-racism is also racism. Reverse-sexism is also sexism". (115) Sita accepts the veracity of this statement without taking offence.

Characters cast in established gender stereotypes:

Amish complies with some conventional images of women. One is through Shurpanakha – a temptress. As if her markedly distinct appearance owing to her Hiranyaloman Mlechcha origins isn't enough to attract men's attention, she dresses provocatively and uses make-up! Her manicured nails and dyed lips accentuating her blue eyes, blonde hair and fair skin ally with her coquettish demeanour to draw every man's eyes towards her save Ram's. She unabashedly makes manifest her intention to seduce Ram, who has sworn himself to perpetual fidelity towards his wife Sita. The femme fatale goes all out to wrest Ram away from Sita, even to the extent of trying to stupefy her with some herbs! She may also be Raavan's decoy to disempower the Vishnu.

Another seductress is Sursa, who openly flirts with Hanuman to his great embarrassment, he being sworn to celibacy. In response, she assures him – "You can keep up the appearance of your vow. You don't have to marry me. I only want you..." (117)

Radhika, in contrast, forsakes Bharat, not merely in deference to her community's endogamous rules. It is, rather, to emancipate him from the limiting factor of love that he may experience no bondage while working his way towards a greater destiny – service to his motherland. She is the sacrificing woman that Indian society has always adduced as a role-model.

When Jatayu mentions that it was a woman, Nandini, who was probably the cause of the rift between *Rishi* Vishwamitra and Guru Vasishtha, it is an illustration of the primal hostility between men competing for a mate.

Samichi, as the disloyal confidante of Sita, proves that power corrupts. She aims at becoming the de facto ruler of Mithila once Sita leaves the kingdom to merge with her husband's family after marriage. As Raavan's spy, she illustrates that treason knows no gender. By her example, does Amish imply that once a woman ventures out of her traditional terrain, she turns as ambitious and unscrupulous any male?

Though Manthara garners the reader's sympathy (and initially Sita's) in Amish's "Scion of Ikshvaku" owing to the fatal gang-rape of her daughter, Roshni, the fact remains that loyalty to Raavan is another reason for her hatred towards Ram. She represents how a woman can misuse wealth, high social status and power. Yet, if she represents Raavan's interests in North India, how could a mere puppet be an empowered woman?!

Urmila, Sita's sister, is the archetypal female – extremely gentle, dependent (both emotionally and physically), of limited intellectual capacity and incapable of facing adversity by herself. She always needs a shoulder to lean on – be it her mother Sunaina, her sister Sita, her husband Lakshman or Ram's mother, Kaushalya. Amish endows Kaushalya herself with a character traditionally befitting a woman – a devoted wife, loving mother and mother-in-law and never hostile towards her co-wives. Immediately recognising that Urmila, unlike Sita, isn't hardy and self-reliant, she takes her under her wings and showers her with so much love and affection that Urmila equates her with her mother, Sunaina!

Kaikeyi fits into the hackneyed role of a domineering wife. Becoming Dasharath's favourite queen, she is at the heart of court intrigues. To use Sita's words, "...Queen Kaikeyi still has her grip on Ayodhya". The ambitious woman goes all out to ensure that her son, Bharat, is crowned King of Ayodhya. Sita recognises that the chief of diplomatic relations, a post to which Bharat has been appointed, "... is better placed to catapult into the role of Crown Prince. The chief of police is a tough and thankless job" (183). It's the latter that has landed in Ram's lap.

CONCLUSION

Amish, in his 'Sita, the Warrior of Mithila' has presented Sita in a completely different image – that of a brave warrior, clever administrator, ruthless foreign policy-maker, possessive daughter and ideal wife. She is not the hapless princess, captured by Raavan owing to her gentleness and her being swerved by a moment's desire to acquire the golden deer, who we find in most other Ramayan versions, including the original.

Here, she is akin to the Primordial Creative Energy, Prakriti, who assumes all attributes – good and not-so-good because of the interplay of the *gunas*, and is the source of both Creation and Destruction. She finds her Purusha in Ram and true to her image of Prakriti is willing to accept the Vishnuhood in collaboration with him. For, whatever Prakriti does is only for Purusha to perceive.

In the course of this unique characterisation of Sita, Amish has emboldened her to a great extent, but for a few slip-ups. Sita derives this empowerment from her mother, Sunaina, herself a bold woman and efficient queen.

So, if one were to question whether the female characters in Amish's novel have shattered the established gender stereotypes that women are usually cast in, the answer is – "to a large extent, yes" despite some avoidable contradictions in Sita's character besides a negative portrayal of some female characters.

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