Subverting the 'Pativrata': A Select Reading of Contemporary Retellings

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Abstract: This article examines the contemporary feminist retellings of Sita—Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* (2016) and Amit Majmudar's *Sitayana* (2019)—The study looks at how character-based revision challenges the traditional portrayal of the 'ideal pativrata' within the Ramayana canon. The study centres on Alicia Ostriker's concept of feminist revisionist mythmaking as primary theoretical framework and investigates how these texts reclaim mythological narratives to disrupt patriarchal representations and create alternative feminist epistemologies. It also employs close reading and discourse analysis to examine how these authors deconstruct the 'pativrata' ideology. By centering Sita's subjectivity, these narratives disrupt repetitive cultural performances that have historically constructed female subordination. The research establishes that feminist mythological retellings function as cultural interventions, offering alternative frameworks for understanding female agency in postcolonial context. This study contributes original comparative analysis bridging revisionist mythmaking with postcolonial feminist discourse and provides insights into how contemporary writers strategically appropriate and amend inherited narratives.

Keywords: feminist retellings, Sita, Ramayana, revisionist mythmaking, gender performativity.

The *Ramayana* remains one of the most influential epics in Indian cultural consciousness and has shaped moral frameworks across centuries. Within this narrative tradition, Sita occupies a paradoxical position. She has been revered as an ideal woman yet silenced within her own story. Traditional interpretations have consistently presented her as an archetypal pativrata— a devoted wife, whose identity derives entirely from her relationship with Rama. This characterization emphasizes qualities such as unquestioning obedience, self-sacrifice, and the passive endurance of suffering. Such representations extend far beyond the literature, informing the social expectations and lived experiences of women across Indian cultures.

In recent decades, there has been a significant shift in the literary engagement with mythological narratives. Writers, particularly feminist authors, have begun to interrogate these foundational stories by challenging their patriarchal assumptions and reclaiming marginalized voices within epic traditions. This movement toward revisionist mythmaking raises critical questions about how contemporary retellings might dismantle the gender ideologies embedded in classical texts. Specifically, how do feminist authors subvert the traditional portrayal of Sita as a silent, suffering ideal? Through which narrative mechanisms do these retelling reclaim agency, voice, and subjectivity? These questions become especially urgent when considering cultural authority, and the *Ramayana* continues to wield itself as shaping gender relations and women's roles.

This paper examines two significant contemporary retellings that centre Sita's perspective and challenge her conventional representation: Volga's *The Liberation of Sita (2016)* and Amit Majmudar's *Sitayana* (2019). The selection of these particular works allows for a comparative analysis that spans different geographical contexts, while focusing on character-based reconstruction as the primary mode of feminist intervention.

The analytical framework for this study draws primarily from feminist revisionist mythmaking. The framework identifies how women writers reclaim silenced female experiences, and amend traditional meanings to create alternative mythographies. Ostriker's concept of "stealing the language"(Ostriker 211) provides lens for understanding how these authors engage with the Ramayana's authority while subverting its ideological foundations. Ostriker tells in "Stealing the Language", "…the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends,

the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual but ultimately making cultural change possible" (212-213). This framework is supplemented by gender performativity, which illuminates how these retellings expose and disrupt the repetitive acts through which the idealized feminine subject has been constructed. Additionally, postcolonial feminist perspectives inform the analysis, acknowledging the intersections of gender, culture, and power.

The theoretical basis for this research is grounded in Alicia Ostriker's groundbreaking analysis of how female authors interact with traditional mythological narratives. Ostriker suggests that feminist writers act as what she vividly describes as "thieves of language," by intentionally taking over stories that have traditionally supported patriarchal agendas and reshaping them for liberating aims (72). Her study identifies that this process of revision occurs through three distinct but related methods. Firstly, appropriation involves taking control of mythic content that has been dominated by male-centric traditions. Secondly, reclamation focuses on retrieving and highlighting female viewpoints that have been overlooked in standard retellings. Lastly, amendment involves purposefully modifying established interpretations. This questions those that uphold gender inequalities, and replacing them with new perspectives that affirm women's independence.

Ostriker contends that modern female poets who reinterpret classical stories often have goals that are "consciously or unconsciously feminist," utilizing their literary skills to critique ideologies (73). This perspective is particularly useful for examining retellings of the Ramayana, as it recognizes both the cultural significance of these stories and their potential for profound change. This framework reveals how writers both respect the epic's importance in South Asian culture and challenge its gender dynamics. By giving Sita, the power to narrate her own story, rather than being a silent figure in male-dominated narratives, authors exemplify the feminist reinterpretation Ostriker describes.

In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Sita is depicted as the epitome of wifely devotion. She personifies the concept of pativrata dharma, which mandates a woman's complete submission to her husband. Paula Richman's extensive study of Ramayana traditions demonstrates that, despite various regional and historical interpretations, Sita is consistently characterized by three primary traits: unquestioning obedience in all circumstances, patient endurance of suffering without complaint, and unwavering chastity even during extended separation from her husband (3). This portrayal becomes particularly problematic when considering two narrative events that have come to symbolize idealized femininity. The agnipariksha episode requires her to prove her purity by walking through fire. This trial reflects patriarchal anxieties about female sexuality and male honour. Although Sita was abducted, she must publicly prove her virtue to dispel doubts about her fidelity during her time in another man's realm. Madhu Kishwar observes that this episode establishes a precedent where Sita's "life is one long demonstration of the pativrata dharma—absolute loyalty and subservience to the husband under all circumstances" (Kishwar 2). The second pivotal moment—Sita's abandonment during pregnancy due to public rumours questioning her chastity, further exacerbates this injustice. Traditional interpretations commend Sita's acceptance of exile without protest as a testament to her noble character. This effectively transforms victimization into a virtue. These narrative elements have significantly influenced gender socialization in South Asian contexts. Nabaneeta Dev Sen succinctly articulates the feminist critique, noting that Sita "has been used for centuries as a role model to browbeat women into submissiveness and husband-worship" (Sen 165). The elevation of silent suffering as the ultimate feminine ideal creates ideological frameworks that normalize patriarchal control. Contemporary feminist scholars argue that challenging Sita's traditional representation constitutes necessary cultural work for dismantling oppressive gender norms.

In the past few decades, feminist mythological fiction has seen a notable rise in South Asian literature. This development reflects broader societal shifts as female authors claim the right to reinterpret cultural stories that have historically influenced and restricted their lives. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explains the core idea behind these efforts, stating that "myth is a living, breathing entity" that "evolves over time, reflecting the era and society
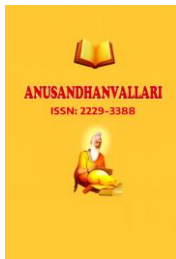
that retells it" (Divakaruni xii). Her view implies that revising mythology is not a violation of tradition but an engagement with its inherent fluidity. Academic studies of Ramayana retellings emphasize their role as arenas for cultural negotiation. Feminist retellings stand out for their direct challenge to gender ideologies. While earlier versions might have altered plot details while upholding patriarchal values, modern feminist writers fundamentally question the assumptions underlying Sita's portrayal. These works aim to achieve what Nabaneeta Dev Sen describes as freeing "Sita from her sanctified prison," allowing her to become "a thinking, feeling, and most importantly, a speaking woman" (Sen 170). This shift from a silent icon to a vocal subject is the primary intervention that feminist retellings strive to achieve. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers crucial theoretical insight into the workings of feminist mythological revision. Butler argues that gender identity is not derived from an inherent essence but from "a repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 45).

Hence, Sita's characterization reveals how traditional narratives construct idealized femininity through repetitive performances. Each of the retellings that depicts Sita as silent, patient, and self-sacrificing reinforces specific gender norms as seemingly natural rather than culturally produced. Feminist retellings that disrupt these patterns try to give Sita a voice and desire. This reveals the constructed nature of the pativrata ideal and demonstrate the possibility of alternative performances of feminine identity. Adrienne Rich offers another important concept through her theorization of revision as a feminist practice. Rich defines "re-vision" as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction," arguing that for women writers, this is not merely an aesthetic choice but "an act of survival" (Rich 18). Her formulation emphasizes that feminist engagement with patriarchal narratives serves an existential necessity: women need alternative stories that validate their experiences and model possibilities beyond subordination. Rich's conception of revision thus frames feminist mythological retellings as acts of cultural self-preservation and imaginative resistance.

Postcolonial feminist theory emphasizes the importance of analyzing cultural specificity and power dynamics that extend beyond gender alone. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal inquiry, "Can the subaltern speak?" resonates profoundly with Sita's textual silence, prompting an examination of which voices traditional narratives authorize and which they suppress (Spivak 78). Spivak's scholarship cautions against the assumption that merely providing a voice to marginalized characters resolves issues of representation. Instead, she proposes a careful examination of the conditions that enable or constrain speech. Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques scholarship that constructs the "'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject," advocating for the recognition of diverse positionalities shaped by intersecting factors such as caste, class, religion, and location (Talpade 333). These postcolonial feminist interventions anchor the analysis of Sita's retellings in an awareness of cultural complexity. These studies prevent reductive or universalizing interpretations and acknowledge the specific contexts from which these texts emerge and the audiences they address.

Volga's "The Liberation of Sita" is a radical feminist reinterpretation of the epic *Ramayana*. In the work, the character of Sita is endowed with a powerful voice to narrate her own story. This narrative intervention challenges established patriarchal mythologies and reconstructs the character of Sita. Sita is represented not as a submissive ideal wife but as an autonomous, self-aware woman who questions and defies the oppressive social roles assigned to her. Volga's narrative technique uniquely positions Sita as the first-person narrator who speaks candidly about her experiences. This direct narration disrupts the traditional mediated stories of Sita, allowing for a re-visioned subjectivity. Sita asserts, "I can protect myself. I can match you in archery," as a direct challenge to the expected dependency on Rama, marking the text's radical stance (Volga 57). The narrative also includes encounters with other silenced women—Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka, and Urmila—who collectively form a sisterhood that supports Sita's awakening and empowerment. For instance, Urmila advises: "You must liberate yourself from Rama… Fight, meditate, look within until you find the truth that is you" (Volga 94).
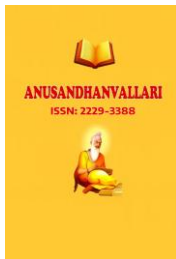
Volga establishes a platform for female subjectivity by allowing Sita to narrate her own story. Sita herself interrogates these obligations: "Till you take decisions for Rama's sake and not yours, it will continue to pursue you, Sita. Look at yourself. You are enduring great pain… What have you saved for yourself?" (Volga 84). Volga reimagines Sita's character from the archetype of the obedient, ideal wife to a complex woman who exercises autonomy. This transformation is evident in Sita's interactions with Surpanakha, who imparts her experiences of violence and survival: "Surpanakha unravelled before Sita the beauty and truth of her life's journey" (Volga 112). Sita's sojourns in the wilderness, her role as a single mother, and her instruction in archery signify a departure from her epic origins, highlighting her evolution into a self-reliant figure: "She walked in with a fierce determination, her eyes reflecting the pain of her past" (Volga 130). Ultimately, Sita rejects being solely defined by her roles ascribed upon her; as Volga articulates, "Sita, who would walk in the footsteps of Rama -she rejected the same man, even deserted her children and followed her own path" (Volga 144).

Volga employs feminist revisionist strategies by reclaiming and re-narrating Sita's subjugated story to underscore women's agency and solidarity. The text foregrounds sisterhood as a potent site of healing and resistance: "Volga engages in a profound deconstruction of the traditional narrative surrounding Sita, challenging the age-old portrayal of her as a passive and submissive figure" (Devi 272). The collective experiences of women become emblematic of feminist empowerment: "Sita's journey towards self-discovery and independence becomes a collective endeavor, echoing the broader feminist call for women's autonomy" (Devi 274). Symbols such as the forest and river in the narrative deepen the themes of liberation and self-realization, while intersectionality ensures that different social dimensions like caste and class uniquely affect the characters. The narrative culminates in Sita's realization that without surrendering herself, "Rama tasted defeat for the first time in his life… Sita had fully experienced, for the first time, the inner power of self-authority" (Volga 151).

A key subversive element in Volga's text is its exposure of ideal wifehood as a social construct. This echoes Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity, which argues that gender is not an inherent identity but a set of performed acts that can be disrupted (Butler 519). Sita's declaration, "If you take care of yourself, what am I for?" unmasks the dependency embedded in the mythic discourse (Volga 65). Her choice to abandon Rama and forge bonds with other women illustrates a performance of femininity that rejects traditional roles and scripts. This performance becomes an act of resistance and liberation as Sita moves beyond the performative roles imposed on her to find her own voice and power: "Fight, meditate, look within until you find the truth that is you" (Volga 96). The narrative thus endorses a feminist message that women can deconstruct prevailing gender norms and remake identities based on selfhood and choice.

Volga's narrative exemplifies Butler's assertion that "gender is constructed through repetitive acts and can be subverted through alternative performances" (Butler 522). Sita's journey challenges the conventional image of the dutiful wife mandated by patriarchal society. By asserting control over her narrative and life, Sita demonstrates that the ideal wife is an imposed identity rather than an inherent essence: "Your truth and mine are not the same… Perhaps not. As you see more of the world, you may understand the truth of my words, too" (Volga 79). Sita's refusal to conform serves as a performative disruption, offering a feminist reimagining of womanhood as fluid, powerful, and self-determined.

Amit Majmudar's Sitayana (2019) presents a bold reinterpretation of the *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective, emphasizing her agency, voice, and interiority while subverting the patriarchal and epic conventions of the original. Majmudar's *Sitayana* challenges Valmiki's overarching narrative by emphasizing diverse perspectives, particularly Sita's, but also including voices like Mandodari and Hanuman. Sita's direct speech shapes both the structure and moral direction of the story. The prose combines poetic elements with a contemporary sensibility, ensuring Sita's speech is authentically her own, as demonstrated in her introspection: "I am not made of earth alone, I am earth, fire, air, ether, water... But I choose what I become" (Majmudar 112). The text shifts away from a Rama-focused perspective. Sita reflects on her own suffering and spiritual journey, reminding readers that "pain

is not the same as weakness; endurance is not the same as silence" (99). Majmudar's reinterpretation of Sita is both literary and political in nature. Sita is portrayed as a character with her own desires. The psychological realism in Majmudar's prose adds nuance to Sita's loyalty and autonomy. For instance, Sita's ethical crisis following her abduction by Ravana is complex: "My fidelity is my freedom, not my prison. I choose Rama, but I am not his shadow" (Majmudar 103). Such statements performatively reformulate the concept of pativrata. This interrogates the duties and limits of spousal devotion. Majmudar rehumanizes figures such as Rama, whose presence in this narrative is spectral, defined by Sita's agency. Mandodari's perspective challenges the villainization of Ravana, posing the question: "Who has not sinned for love? What makes a woman's desire different from a man's?" (147). The inclusivity of voices reveals competing moralities, situating Sita amidst a world of ethical choices rather than cosmic absolutes.

Sitayana's feminist reinterpretation fundamentally reimagines Sita's character by positioning her as an independent agent rather than a passive figure influenced by external forces. This transformation is apparent in how the narrative highlights Sita's internal voice and emotional autonomy. This enables her to regain control over her story and identity. By focusing on her spiritual resilience and self-belief, the text transcends traditional depictions that validate women solely through physical endurance. Instead, Sita's ordeal is redefined as a profound test of will and self-discovery, which marks a significant departure from conventional epic narratives that often marginalize female perspectives. This reorientation encourages readers to view Sita's journey as one of empowerment and self-definition, challenging entrenched patriarchal frameworks that have historically limited her role. Additionally, Majmudar's subversion of key epic conventions extends to the ethical complexity of Sita's relationships, particularly with figures like Rama, Hanuman, and Mandodari. The narrative destabilizes the "epic closure" and creates space for ongoing negotiation and reinterpretation by introducing ambiguity and questioning established norms. The depiction of Sita's spirituality as matriarchal and generative, further disrupts traditional devotional paradigms. This in turn presents her faith as an independent source of strength rather than mere subservience to patriarchal authority. Collectively, these elements contribute to a nuanced feminist discourse that not only reclaims Sita's agency but also critiques and reimagines the gendered power dynamics embedded within the epic tradition.

Majmudar's reinterpretation directly engages with Judith Butler's theory that "gender is not an essence but a series of acts and performances" (Butler 1988, 522). Sita's dialogue and introspection deconstruct the concept of the ideal wife, as she reflects, "I became a wife when I spoke the vow, not when others watched me live it" (Majmudar 115). Her narrative exemplifies performative resistance, as she determines how to love, endure, and heal: "Truth does not bind me, I choose it and I make it" (99). The novel concludes with Sita reclaiming her dignity beyond societal approval, embodying Butler's insight: "Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an abiding gendered self, but that self is always an illusion produced by regulatory practices" (Butler 520).

Thus, Sita's journey is both literary and ontological—a rebellious rewriting of the codes and scripts of womanhood. Amit Majmudar's *Sitayana* and Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* are both revisionist retellings that focus on Sita's voice, yet they differ significantly in their narrative techniques, feminist critique, and subversion of epic conventions. Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* utilizes a series of interconnected stories where Sita narrates in the first person, forming emotional and philosophical connections with other marginalized women from the *Ramayana,* such as Ahalya and Surpanakha. The narrative is introspective, with Sita reflecting on suffering, agency, and solidarity. In contrast, Majmudar's *Sitayana* employs rapid, shifting perspectives—Sita's, Mandodari's, Hanuman's, and even minor characters—to retell the epic as a polyphonic tapestry, though Sita's experience anchors the novel's emotional arc. While Volga's style is meditative and dialogic, Majmudar weaves lyricism and psychological realism into a modern epic form. Both texts locate Sita's autonomy at their centres, yet Volga's work is more explicitly interventionist. Sita's journey in *The Liberation of Sita* is defined by her conscious rejection of patriarchal sacrifice—she states, "I can match you in archery," and ultimately claims her

right to selfhood beyond wifehood. Volga's Sita collaborates with other women, promoting an ethic of feminist sisterhood and interrogating gendered roles at a societal level.

Majmudar's Sita resists passivity and is invested with emotional and philosophical agency: "I am not made of earth alone... I choose what I become" (Majmudar 112). *Sitayana* offers a reinterpretation of Sita's perspective, suggesting that her loyalty and suffering are choices rather than obligations: "My fidelity is my freedom, not my prison. I choose Rama, but I am not his shadow" (Majmudar 103). Majmudar's depiction provides a more intricate portrayal, acknowledging Sita's doubts, convictions, and self-awareness, though it is less overtly political in its critique compared to Volga's narrative. Volga's Sita is revolutionary: she questions her designated roles and independently seeks meaning, forming alliances and rejecting patriarchal notions of purity. In Majmudar's narrative, Sita's heroism is rooted in her inner resilience, ambiguity, and spiritual independence. Sitayana also adds depth to other epic characters, such as Rama, Lakshmana, and Mandodari, by delving into their complex inner lives and motivations, which are often missing in earlier versions. Both authors expose the construction of the ideal wife as a performative and societal expectation. Majmudar's Sita conveys this through introspection and choice, while Volga's Sita enacts performative defiance by outright rejecting the roles assigned to her. In conclusion, Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* is more direct in its feminist critique and subversive goals, using Sita's story to promote sisterhood and anti-patriarchal unity, whereas *Sitayana* offers a multi-voiced, emotionally rich reimagining, granting Sita agency through complexity, doubt, and philosophical insight. Both works, however, illustrate the power and potential of revisionist mythmaking in feminist literature.

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