

A New Perspective of Female Mythological Characters: Sita and Surpanakha

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Abstract

India has a rich legacy of culture, tradition and myth. These mythologies form the foundation of the mindset of the society. India is a patriarchal country and the patriarchy can be clearly seen in its epics where patriarchy overshadows the female characters. The female characters are generally shown as passive beings that have no voice or choice. They are just the victims who accept the fate as they get it. But with passage of time, the contemporary writers have started to portray these female characters in new 'avtaar'. The women from the epics are starting to speak for themselves through the books of these writers. This article discusses two such characters from the epic the Ramayana-Sita and Surpanakha. The books under discussion are *The Girl Who Chose* by Devdutt Pattanaik and *Ravana's Sister: Meenakshi* by Anand Neelakantan. Both the writer have tried their hand to give us a glimpse of the Ramayana from Meenakshi, or better known as Surpanakha, and Sita. These two female characters have been shown as active characters who had been wronged by the male characters at various instances but they were brave enough to make choices and to face the consequences of these choices.

Key Words: Choices, Women, Mythology, Sita, Surpanakha, Strong

Introduction

India has been famous for its rich and varied cultural background, traditions and mythology. The mythology and literature plays a major part in the moulding of the thinking of a society. They reflect the ideals, customs and attitude of a society. India is a patriarchal country. The Indian mythology reflects the patriarchal attitudes and portrays women as a passive, submissive, frail being that needs to be protected, corrected and guided by the male characters. They have to suffer relentlessly for the decision taken for them and not by them. These characters have no voice or stand against injustice. They just need to accept what fate has in store for

them and abide by the choices and decisions that the male characters take. The question that we need to ponder is: were they such dumb characters that they were incapable of making any choice or decide anything for them? The contemporary writers are on a mission to reconstruct or re-vision the mythology giving it fresh perspectives for the readers to look at. This paper discusses two such characters from the Ramayana- Sita and Surpanakha. As far as we know about these characters are based on their patriarchal portrayal. Sita was an ideal wife who has been raised to a high pedestal for her virtues like chastity, patience, faithfulness, loyalty, obedience

and devotion towards her husband. But the strength and bravery that she showed at various stages and the choices she made that shaped the course of events of her life has always remained overshadowed by these virtues. Similarly Surpanakha or Meenakshi has always been hailed as the evil demoness who fell in love with Ram who sent her to his younger brother Lakshman, who in a rage disfigured her and the consequences followed when to take his sister's revenge Ravan kidnapped Sita. But no one thinks of Surpanakha about her feelings, about the strength with which she continued to live even after being punished because she loved someone. The two writers Devdutt Pattanaik and Anand Neelakantan in their books have portrayed these aspects of these two characters that had remained overlooked since ages.

Devdutt Pattanaik, in *The Girl Who Chose* talks about the five choices that were made by Sita. He also explains how these choices changed the course of her life and affected the lives people connected to her. He begins with the prophecy of Lord Shiva to King Janaka about Sita's arrival. When King Janaka tilled the field in Mithila he found Sita and later she was married to Rama, the Prince of Ayodhya. Rama was selected as the heir to the throne of Ayodhya and this made his step mother Kaikeyi to ask for the two boons, that her husband King Dasarath had promised her when she saved his life in war. Love for her own son Bharata made queen Kaikeyi to ask King Dasarath for making her son Bharat as the king and to send Rama on exile of fourteen years to forest. Rama being the Sun-prince decided to carry out the promises given by his father to his step mother. He gave the crown to Bharata and

decided to go on exile. Lakshman, his younger brother, also decided to go with him. Sita also followed Rama to exile. When Rama tried to forbid her, Sita said, "You are bound by rules, but not I. I am free to choose. I choose to follow you" (Pattanaik, 23). And going with Rama to forest was Sita's first choice. For the sake of her love for her husband, she left all the comforts of the palace went to struggle in the forest with Rama and Lakshman.

After three of them left for forest, King Dasarath died in grief and Bharat declined the crown. He went to persuade Rama to return back but he denied. He was determined on his decision to go on exile to keep the promises. Thirteen years of exile passed. In the fourteenth year of their exile, Surpanakha, sister of Ravana fell in love with Rama and asked him to marry her. After finding this out, Lakshman in a fit of rage chopped off her nose. Her brother Ravana planned to take revenge on Rama. So he decided to abduct Sita. When Rama went to catch a golden deer, Lakshman and Sita heard Rama's cry for help. Sita asked Lakshman to help Rama. Lakshman drew a line, later known as 'Lakshman rekha', for Sita's protection and asked her not to cross the line and he left to find Rama. Ravana came in disguise of a hermit and asked for some food. Sita offered food by staying inside the line but he denied to accept. He asked her to give him food across the line. Sita had to make a choice. "Either she could let the hermit be hungry while remaining safe. Or she could take a risk and step outside the rekha to feed the poor soul. Sita understood that her choice would help someone and so she decided to take the risk" (Pattanaik, 42). She chose to cross the line to give the hungry person some food. So she crossed

the Lakshman rekha. Her crossing the line was the time that Ravana used to abduct her. He took her to Lanka.

When Rama found out that Sita was kidnapped, he set out to rescue her. Ravana made several attempts to convince Sita to accept him as her Lord but Sita never gave in. She had her faith that Rama will come to rescue her. One day she found a ring which was dropped by a monkey. She immediately recognised it. The ring was Rama's ring and she came to know that the monkey was Hanuman, a member of Rama's army. Army, that Rama had collected to find Sita and to fight against Ravana. Hanuman asked Sita to come with him. He said, he can take her safely to Rama. But Sita knew that being a sun-prince, if Rama was unable to defeat Ravana and rescue Sita, then it would harm his honour. She said to Hanuman, "I want my husband to cross the sea, come to Lanka, kill Ravana and rescue me himself, thus restoring the reputation of his family. For Rama is a prince, and Royal reputations matter a lot to princes, especially to those who belong to the sun-dynasty" (Pattanaik, 63). So she said, Hanuman to go back and decided to wait for Rama to come to rescue her. It was her third choice.

Ravana's men caught Hanuman and took him to Ravana. Ravana ordered to set Hanuman's tail on fire. Hanuman flew with the fire and burnt the kingdom of Lanka. Rama reached Lanka with his army and defeated Ravana and his army, and rescued Sita. Sita was very happy as her detention came to an end. Her long wait for Rama to rescue her was finally over. But when she met Rama, she received the greatest shock of her life. Rama thought that the society would consider Sita

impure, as she was in another man's house for some time. He said, "I have defeated the man who had kidnapped the queen of Ayodhya, the daughter-in-law of my family. And, therefore, I have saved my family's reputation. Now, Sita, you are free to go wherever you wish" (Pattanaik, 80). But Sita wanted to go with Rama so she took her fourth choice. She decided to walk into fire to prove her purity and came out of fire unharmed. They returned to Ayodhya but peace didn't last longer. Rumours started to spread that Sita lived in another man's land so she is impure. She was an imperfect queen for their perfect king. Rama also came to know about these gossips. For Rama "the rules were clear-anything that stained the royal reputation had to be removed. Sita had to go" (Pattanaik, 87). He asked Lakshman to leave Sita in a forest. Sita took refuge in the forest where she gave birth to Rama's twin sons Luv and Kush. After many years, Rama came across Sita and his sons. Rama asked Sita to come back to him. Sita asked her sons to go with their father and serve the kingdom. But she decided not to go with Rama to the kingdom, where reputation mattered most than all other sacrifice and love. It was her fifth and final choice. She called out her mother Earth and asked her to take her into her lap. "Sita then called out to the earth beneath her, which opened up like a mother spreading her arms to welcome her daughter. Sita slipped into earth's embrace" (Pattanaik, 100). Rama tried to stop her but she was gone to the hold of mother earth. He also decided to end his life and walked into the Sarayu River and never returned back.

The novel *Ravana's Sister: Meenakshi* presents the story of Surpanakha who was given the name "Meenakshi" at her birth.

The novel starts with Meenakshi arriving in front of Rama's palace. Sita has been forsaken by her husband by the order for exile. Meenakshi stood in front of the gate of the palace. She knew no one would let her enter the palace. So she went to a nearby tree where a chandal family was taking rest. When she went and sat under the tree, a dog growled at her but it did not scare her. "She had seen worse-human beings who could bite without even the warning of a bark" (Neelakantan 36). She remembered how she has been punished by the person whom she loved. Lakshman had chopped her nose, ears and breasts and left her disfigured for the rest of her life. When Sita was leaving for her exile, with Lakshman escorting her, she stood before their chariot near the palace gate. Sita came down and they had a small conversation under that tree. During their conversation Sita realised how strong and brave Surpanakha was. Sita asked Meenakshi to forgive her for Lakshman's terrible act. But Meenakshi told her not to hold herself responsible for other's mistakes. She also said that men need to fight wars to protect their ego and safeguard their property and that is what Rama and Ravana did. She explained to Sita how important it is to see beauty in every aspect of life.

When Sita asked her whether she holds bitterness towards Lakshman for all that he did to her. She answered that she did feel bitterness inside her but she fought against it. "Yet I fight it with all my will. It's not a sin to feel bitter. It's a sin to feel like a

victim. I am not a victim, Sita, neither are you. We all made our choices. We chose our men, we chose our destinies and we chose our lives. Some choices went wrong, but life always gives a second chance, in fact many chances" (Neelakantan 139). Sita comes to know that the Chandali has named her elder daughter Sita and pities the child, fearing that she might get an unlucky fate like Sita. Sita promises Meenakshi that she will tell her children the story of Meenakshi to make them realise the beauty of life and to raise them up as a good and compassionate humans. She named the Chandali's younger daughter Meenakshi and said "Child I name thee Meenakshi, the one with beautiful eyes. Let your eyes always see beauty" (Neelakantan 160). She held the child kissed her and whispered happily- "My Meenakshi, Sita's dear sister" (Neelakantan 160) and went back to the chariot where Lakshman was waiting for her.

Sita and Meenakshi both were strong and brave in their own ways. They can be seen as shining examples of strength and courage to women of every age. They were brave enough to make their own choices and strong enough to face any consequences arising from it. They both are portrayed as strong women who broke the stereotypes of the society by choosing what they wanted and not just by following rules that they were expected to follow by the society. They took decisions for themselves, made choices and stood by the consequences of their choices.

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