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## POSSIBILITIES OF OVERSEEN HEROISM: A STUDY OF GENDER STEREOTYPES AND THEIR BREAKING IN SITA – WARRIOR OF MITHILA

KRISHNAPRIYA.K

M.A English Literature

krishnapriyakamal@gmail.com

### Abstract

Destiny may have plans but sometimes, it is the society that decides whether destiny is to be fulfilled or not. That decision is based on various factors and gender is one important factor. When there is a discussion on the great epics, for ages the gender roles have been set firmly. Almost always it has been the hero who rescues the damsel in distress. Rarely do we come across a warrior princess, with a strong heart meeting the hero and being his equal partner.

What if women of the yore were actually heroic, strong and talented enough to be at par with men? What if the obsolete and narrow views on gender have kept the world from seeing the possibility of a woman being a leader, a warrior, an equal partner to her husband; in all terms, way back in the past?

The paper seeks to point out the possibilities of the underrated and ignored heroism in Ramayan through Amish Tripathi's novel – *Sita -Warrior of Mithila*.

**Key words:** Heroism, gender stereotypes, epics and women

Human as a social being has a society to live in. This society, though formed by its members, control the way they behave. In a deeper level, the society slowly begins to control the way the members think. Stereotypes get formed and whatever fails to fit into those narrow frames are seen as rule-breakings that are to be shunned. Gender has always been an important criterion for these stereotyping. Society has been framing rules and images for men and women. Roles have been assigned for men and women separately and any overlapping or exchanges of these roles are frowned upon. Stereotypes have been existing in all cultures, be it Eastern or Western. Exceptions are seen as iconoclasts when they are loud and when they prefer silence to arguments, they are comfortably removed out of the picture and the future would hardly know they even existed.

One such stereotype, that has been reluctant to acknowledge exceptions, is the image of the hero. A hero of the ancient lore is, in most cases, a man, endowed with good qualities like selflessness, fortitude, righteousness, bravery and great strength. Rarely do we read or listen about a woman who has all these qualities. Rarely have women been portrayed as warriors fighting alongside men. Most of the time they are damsels in distress waiting for a knight in a shining armour to come and rescue them. Stories that portrayed women as heroines were told in ancient times too. But they were very few. In Indian mythology, only the sect that worships the Mother Goddess has such tales. In the two great epics- Ramayana and Mahabharata, women have been portrayed with exemplary fortitude and strength of character but not as warriors fighting alongside men. These epics are primarily projected as stories of men. The reason may have been that it was a man who wrote these epics and he just applied what he approved of and what he thought to be approved of by the then society. The reason may be that these epics were modified as male centred narratives in the passage of time.

But whatever be the actual reason, it is to be acknowledged that the versions that have been considered as the oldest are male-centred and portray women as fragile beings.

When retellings are abounding, it is time to think of the possible alternative and parallel narratives. It is not to break down the existing beliefs relating to religion or culture, it is just to broaden the existing perceptions regarding men and women. Irreverence is not the aim here but becoming more relevant to the world where women are proving themselves equal to men in almost all spheres of life. The writer of the best selling Shiva Trilogy, Amish Tripathi, has presented the same idea of the female characters as equal to their male counterparts. In the Shiva Trilogy, however, it was Sati, who was portrayed as a warrior princess. It is not an unusual thing for the story had its base in the legend of Lord Shiva and Sati, his consort, is depicted as a female warrior in the original legend too. But the second series of Tripathi has surprised or in some cases shocked readers by portraying Sita as a warrior princess. Sita, in Amish Tripathi's novel, is not the soft-spoken, delicate princess. She is a warrior and leader in all senses of the word. The version of Ramayana that the Ram Chandra series puts forward the possibilities of heroism that the narrow perceptions filled with gender stereotypes would never have allowed in the narratives. It portrays that kind of heroism that could have easily overseen in a stereotypical way of narration.

The first glance of Sita, presented in the first book of the series, *Scion of Ikshvaku*. Ram; when revealing about the kind of woman her wishes to marry; says, "...I want a woman who is better than I am; a woman who compel me to bow my head in admiration." (Tripathi, *Scion* 79) He finds such a woman in Sita. When he travels to Mithila for the first time, he witnesses the administrative prowess of Sita, who is the prime minister there. He notices that she has made the most of what was available in her small kingdom that depended chiefly on agriculture. She had tackled the problems of slums by constructing an innovative beehive like housing units. With slums cleared, she has effectively made her city look more organised. The hive-like structure serves both as living quarters for the workers and also as a fort wall, with its unique design. The fort has further been strategized in such a way that on an occasion of an attack by an enemy, there would be the minimum damage as possible. Ram is impressed with how well she manages her government.

Sita had learnt her leadership skills from her mother, Sunaina. The queen had been looking after the governing duties since her marriage because her husband, Janak, prefers scholarly debates to the political duties of a king. Sunaina is a heroine herself to balance the duties of a mother and a queen expertly. She was an able diplomat, wise and practical administrator and a caring mother. Sita has knowledge in various *sutras* and *smritis*, like her father. Her teacher proudly says to Sage Vishwamitra, "She has the wisdom of King Janak... But she also has the pragmatism and the fighting spirit of Queen Sunaina." (Tripathi, *Sita* 51)

Vishwamitra, in his quest for the ideal candidate to become the next Vishnu- "The title given to the greatest of leaders, who are Propagators of Good", finds Sita. (Tripathi, *Sita* 79), He selects her to be the successor of Lord Parshu Ram, the previous Vishnu. He finds her smart, brave and quite remarkable. He is impressed with her arguments during their debate on ideologies and about her views of what being the major problem of the present society. She does not see Raavan, the Asura king, as the problem as many others do. For her, "Raavan is only a symptom. He is not the disease" and the actual disease is the imbalance in the society that has been caused due to the arbitrary fixing of occupation and trades by birth. She explains that a man cannot escape his *guna*, or his *attribute*. He decides that she is "Smart, very smart for a thirteen year old." (Tipathi, *Sita* 64) and finalises on his choice and prepares for the ceremony that makes her Vishnu. As an obedient student, she never questions before completing a task given by her master. It is only after the ceremony was sealed by blood, Sita comes to know her changed position. Initially she thinks she is sworn into the tribe of Malayaputras, of which Vishwamitra is the chief, but when she sees the special marking on the knife that has been given to her, she is shocked that she has, in fact, become the next Vishnu.

Sita understands the gravity of her situation, the immense responsibility that accompanies with the title of Vishnu. As a part of her training, she travels to Agastyakootam, the fabled capital of the Malayaputras. She was a living Goddess there. Her name joined the line of the previous Vishnus as the chanted the hymns in praise.

Om Namo Bhagavate Vishnudevaya

Tasyai Sitadevya namo namah

Salutations to the great God Vishnu

Salutations, Salutations to Lady Sita. ( Tripathi, *Sita* 160)

She was the third woman to get the Vishnu status, after Lady Varahi and Lady Mohini. But there were some purists, who refused to acknowledge Lady Mohini as a Vishnu. Most people who knew about her declared status as Vishnu have doubts about it, even though they belong to the Malayaputra tribe, the tribe headed by Vishwamitra. They don't oppose it because of the respect and maybe a little fear of their leader.

The widespread attitude of underestimating women can be seen even in Mithila where Sita is the prime minister. A trader dares to go against the laws to punish a boy thief, despite Sita's intervention. She has to fight her way, literally, to prove that her word is not only right but also mighty. Being a trained and skilled warrior, it is a cake walk for Sita. She cool comments after the brief fight, "Anyone else wants a cracked rib, free of charge?" (Tripathi, *Scion* 232) Ram who witnesses this scene is impressed by her adherence to laws and her skill to handle issues. He bows down to her involuntarily.

Both Ram and Sita are great followers of laws. But the difference is that Sita is more pragmatic, while Ram is a dreamer who keeps on dreaming of a utopian society where everyone would be like him. Sita, unlike him, knows the real state of the society. What she sought was not a drastic change but a change that was applicable and possible for balance in the society. Sita did not see her marriage to Ram as submission, but a kind of partnership. She had kept herself updated about him since the moment she got informed that he was the one being trained by Vashishta to become the next Vishnu. As a keen observer, she easily spotted the unfriendliness between Vishwamitra and Vashishta. She knew that both Ram and herself are in a way turned into pawns in the struggle for supremacy between the two masters. Sita did not see Ram as a competitor but as a partner. Just like a true leader, she acknowledges a fellow leader. She sees that Ram as a partner with whom she can share her responsibility as a Vishnu.

The novel in its unique narrative style ends where it begins, at the point of Sita's abduction by Raavan- the same place where the first instalment of the series began and ended. But it has opened up to the possibilities of overseen heroism, where there is a possibility of a woman to be a heroine, a possibility of a heroic character made docile because of unfair gender stereotypes and a possibility of an alternative perspective. When women are breaking the glass ceilings everyday, why not in epic narratives too? Why stick on to narrow stereotypes when a broader perspective can open up a whole new world, brighter and better?

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