
Subversive Retellings: Women's Voices and Inner Liberation in Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*

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Abstract:

The paper examines the unheard voices of women from the *Ramayana*, with reference to Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*. With the exception of Sita, every woman character represented in the *Ramayana* is unimportant. Their voices are unheard from the mainstream of literature. But Volga, a Telugu feminist writer has given voice to the women in her collection of short stories, *Vimukta* translated into English as *The Liberation of Sita*.

Surpanakha in Valmiki's *Ramayana* only has one scene, but it gives us no clue about her personal life. It is crucial to understand the circumstances under which she survived after Laxman amputated her nose. Laxman cut off Surpanakha's nose because she desired Rama. Expressing love for someone does not entail that that person will receive punishment of any type in return. Other women, like Surpanakha, were similarly sidelined in the epic. *The Liberation of Sita* clarifies the concepts of pollution, pativrata, agnipariksha, purity, chastity, honor, and dishonor in relation to women's identities.

Keywords: Liberation, unheard voices, purity, chastity, honor, subversion**Introduction:**

Women in Indian mythology occupy a place of profound significance, embodying strength, wisdom, compassion, and resilience. They are depicted as powerful goddesses and influential mortal heroines, shaping narratives that have inspired generations. The divine feminine is celebrated through deities like Durga, the warrior goddess who vanquishes evil, and Kali, who symbolizes destruction and rebirth. Lakshmi embodies prosperity, while Saraswati represents knowledge and the arts, highlighting the multifaceted nature of womanhood.

In epic tales like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, women play key roles that influence destinies and moral lessons. Sita, revered for her virtue and strength, endures trials with dignity, embodying resilience. Draupadi, known for her courage and assertiveness, challenges patriarchal norms and drives the narrative of justice and honor. Kunti and

Gandharidemonstrate strength in sacrifice, impacting generational legacies through their wisdom and decisions. These mythological women symbolize ideals of duty, devotion, power, and independence. Their stories continue to inspire cultural values and contemporary interpretations of femininity and power. By exploring these narratives, one gains insight into the societal and spiritual roles of women, reflecting both traditional and evolving perspectives.

Volga, a noted 'short story writer, feminist, critic, translator, and poet in Telugu, Volga, has been a forerunner in introducing a feminist perspective into the literary-political discourse in Telugu literature through her very first volume of short stories, *Rajakeeya Kathalu* (Political Stories), her first novel, *Sweccha* (Freedom), and her volume of feminist thought, *Maaku Godalu Levu* (We Have No Walls). Volga has edited an anthology of feminist poems, *Neeli Meghalu* (Dark Clouds), and co-authored 'Mahilavaranam/Womanscape,' a volume on women who created history.' (Volga, *The Liberation of Sita*) She has received the **Sahitya Akademi Award** (2015) for her short story volume, *Vimukta (The Liberation of Sita)*. She has also been the recipient of the Nandi award for the **Best Story Writer (The Government of Andhra Pradesh (1998), the Best Woman Writer award** by Telugu University (1999), the **Lok Nayak Foundation Award** (2014), the **Malathi Chandur Award**, and the **Kandukuri Veerasalingam Literary Award** (2013). She has written screenplays for films and lyrics for dance ballets. She has represented India in women's conferences in China and the United States. She is currently the executive chairperson of Asmitha Resource Centre for Women, Hyderabad.

Excerpts from the text: *The Liberation of Sita*

"Valaminki's Ramayana is the story of Rama's exile and return to Ayodhya- that of a triumphant king who will always do right by his subjects."

"In Volga's retelling, it is Sita who, after being abandoned by Purushottam Rama, embark on an arduous journey to self-realization. Along the way, she meets extraordinary women who have broken free from all that held them back: husbands, sons, and their notions of desire, beauty and chastity. The minor women characters of the epic as we know it – Shurpanakha, Renuka, Urmila and Ahalya – Sita towards an unexpected resolution. Meanwhile, Rama too must reconsider and weigh out his roles as the king of Ayodhya and as a man deeply in love with his wife."

A powerful subversion of India's most popular tale of morality, choice and sacrifice, Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* opens up new spaces within the old discourse, enabling women to review their lives and experiences afresh. This is Volga at her feminist best." (*The Liberation of Sita*)

The Liberation of Sita is a remarkable reimagining of the *Ramayana*, offering an alternative feminist perspective to the epic's traditionally patriarchal narrative. It presents Sita not as a passive sufferer of fate but as a woman who embarks on a journey of self-discovery and liberation. Through a series of her journey, Sita encounters with women who have also been wronged or sidelined by the epic's dominant narrative, after meeting these

women, Sita gains wisdom, strength, and a renewed sense of selfhood. *The Liberation of Sita* thus becomes a profound commentary on the struggles of women in patriarchal societies, offering a voice to those silenced by history and mythology alike.

The paper examines how Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* reclaims Sita's agency, challenges conventional interpretations of the *Ramayana*, and serves as a feminist manifesto by highlighting the resilience and wisdom of its women characters. The story primarily focuses on five aspects: *The Reunion*, *Music of the Earth*, *The Sand Pot*, *The Liberated*, and *The Shackled*.

By rewriting a well-known epic, the *Ramayana* through a subversive lens, Volga not only questions the deeply ingrained gender roles in Indian society but also empowers contemporary readers to rethink traditional narratives of womanhood and liberation. "What Volga attempts through these stories is a compelling exercise in 'revisionist myth making'. It was nearly four decades ago that Adrienne Rich made that famous statement about women's writing as re-visioning'. In the words of Rich, 'Revision- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – in cultural history, it is an act of survival.'" (Volga, 107)

Reimagining Sita: From Submissiveness to Self-Realization

Sita, in the traditional *Ramayana*, is often portrayed as the epitome of devotion, purity, and obedience. Her trials—abduction by Ravana, the agni pariksha (trial by fire), and eventual banishment by Rama—underscore her role as a suffering yet unwaveringly loyal wife. In contrast, Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* reconstructs her story as one of personal growth and defiance. Instead of resigning to her fate, Sita embarks on a journey that leads her to a deeper understanding of freedom and self-worth.

Volga's Sita is not confined by the expectations imposed on her as a wife and queen. After her abandonment in the forest, she meets four other women—Surpanakha, Renuka, Urmila, and Ahalya—each of whom imparts a crucial lesson in autonomy and strength. These interactions are transformative, allowing Sita to reject her imposed identity and forge a new path that is defined by her own desires rather than societal expectations.

The Women Who Shape Sita's Liberation

One of the most compelling aspects is the way in which Sita's journey is interwoven with the stories of other marginalized women from the *Ramayana*. Through these encounters, the novel not only deepens Sita's evolution but also reclaims the narratives of these women, giving them a space to voice their own struggles and wisdom.

Sita: Sita's agnipareeksha was important part of the story. When Lakshman informs to Sita, "Sri Ramchandra wants you to undergo a chastity test, Sister-in-law". When the words sank into her heart, Sita could barely stand. She collapsed to the ground.

"Sri Ramchandra has no misgivings whatsoever, Sister-in-law. It's only for the sake of the people. Justice alone will prevail in the trail. Truth will triumph. Everyone will applaud your

character once you withstand the rest. Sri Ramchandra has asked me to convey this to you, Sister-in-law’.

“The image of Ahalya flashed across Sita’s mind. ‘What does conducting an enquiry mean, Sita? Distrust, isn’t it? Wouldn’t it be better, instead, to believe in either your innocence or guilt?...All men are the same, Sita. Especially in the matter of their wives. She remembered Ahalya’s words.” (Volga, 31)

“Did Ahalya Know it would turn out like this. Rama has asked for my chastity test. Isn’t death better than this? Isn’t leaving me to my fate better? Why humiliate me like this? Why wage such a war if this is how I was going to be treated?” (Volga, 31)

“Sita prepared herself to console Rama. He is helpless. A weakling. But against whom? Not against Ravana but against society. Against its moral principles, its code of justice.” (Volga, 31)

“Sita recalled Ahalya’s words once again: Pollution, cleanness, purity, impurity, honour, dishonour – Brahmin men have invested these words with such power that...(Volga, 33)

Surpanakha: The Right to Desire and Rejection of Beauty Norms

Surpanakha, often depicted as the lustful and grotesque demoness in the *Ramayana*, is reimagined in *The Liberation of Sita* as a woman who has been punished for expressing desire. Her disfigurement at the hands of Rama and Lakshmana symbolizes the violence inflicted upon woman who does not conform to societal expectations of beauty and passivity. Surpanakha’s encounter with Sita is a powerful moment of sisterhood, as she teaches Sita that beauty should not be the defining trait of a woman’s worth and that desire is not a sin but a natural part of existence.

As Sita asked her, “I am happy to hear that, Surpanakha. I was worried about you after the humiliation you suffered. I knew how you hankered after beauty; I was worried that, unable to accept your own mutilation, you might have resorted to something extreme. I was troubled by such thoughts whenever I remembered you”. (Volga, 9)

“It was hard. It was hard finding the real meaning of beauty. I was so proud of my beauty. You don’t know how much adored my nose. The sharp nose of you, Aryans looked strange to me. There’s beauty in strangeness, too of course. My nose was neither sharp nor flat. It was, I thought, exactly how Eshwar must have conceived the perfect nose in the beginning of Creation. I was so proud of my nose! I used to adorn it with yellow and white wild flowers which shone like stars on either side. When My lovers tenderly kissed the tip of my nose, it used to arouse me”. (Volga, 11)

Renuka: Rejection of Patriarchal Control

Renuka, the mother of Parashurama, is another pivotal figure in Sita’s journey. Renuka was punished and condemned for her supposed infidelity, an accusation based on patriarchal paranoia rather than truth. The concept of *Paativratyam* and fidelity are questioned in Renuka’s case. As Renuka says to Sita,

“To make a pot, you need to a lot of concentration. Those did not know this thought I was making a miracle happens by virtue of my chastity, my *paativratyam*. Since there was no flaw in my character anyway, I let them think what they liked. Concentration can be broken at any time. The cause may be anything. In my case of distraction. My husband was enraged.

He believed that my paativratyam was violated by the mere act of looking at that man. A good pot is a product of many things- practice, concentration, sand the right amount of water and so on". (Volga, 52)

In the words of Renuka, "A woman thinks she doesn't have a world other than that of her husband's. True. But some day that very husband will tell her that there is no place for her in his world. Then what's left for her? She thinks giving birth to sons is the ultimate goal of her life. But those sons become heirs to their father, and even before we realize it, they have their father and even before we realize it, they leave her hands and go under the wing of their father. They submit to his authority." (Volga, 52)

Through her, Sita learns about the arbitrary nature of moral codes that are enforced selectively on women while men remain free from scrutiny. Renuka's defiance and eventual self-sufficiency become an example for Sita to question the moralistic expectations imposed upon her own life.

Urmila: The Forgotten Woman's Strength

Urmila, Lakshmana's wife, is often an overlooked figure in the *Ramayana*. Unlike Sita, she does not follow her husband into exile but instead spends fourteen years waiting in silence. Volga reimagines Urmila not as a woman passively enduring her fate but as one who discovers her own identity in solitude. She uses this time to educate herself, find inner peace, and ultimately refuse to be defined by her husband's choices. This teaches Sita that waiting and suffering are not virtues in themselves; instead, self-actualization is the true path to fulfillment. Urmila says,

"You must liberate yourself from Rama.... Each of these trails is meant to liberate yourself from Rama. To secure you for yourself. Fight, meditate, look within until you find the truth that is you. Liberation from Rama marks the real emancipation for Sita". (Volga, 111)

Ahalya: Redemption and Self-Worth Beyond Male Validation

Ahalya, cursed to turn into stone for supposed adultery, is a character who has long been associated with themes of guilt and redemption in Indian mythology. However, Volga's novel portrays Ahalya as a woman who does not seek validation from the men who condemned her. She reclaims her own dignity and refuses to be shackled by the labels imposed on her by male-centered morality. This resonates deeply with Sita, who begins to see that her worth is not determined by her fidelity or the approval of her husband but by her own self-perception.

Ahalya explains Sita about her story, "I know it is difficult to understand, Sita. I don't know why my story was told to you and how it was narrated. Indra lusted after me. Like everyone else, he too looked at women as if they are meat for men's enjoyment. Knowing that I wouldn't surrender to his desire, he came in the hours of darkness in the guise of my husband, Did I see through his disguise? That is the question bothers many people in this world. But to my husband the question was irrelevant. It was the same to him either way. His property, even if temporarily, had fallen into the hands of another. It was polluted. Pollution, cleanliness, purity, impurity, honour, dishonour- Brahmin men have invested these

words with such power that there is no scope in them for truth and untruth. No distinction". (Volga, 26)

As Ahalya points out "The core issue is not that of female fidelity or the lack of it but man's power to put it to test. Sita does not understand the implication of this argument until she is asked to prove her chastity by going through the fire test, yet she brushes it off convincing herself that it is not out of suspicion that Rama has put her chastity to test." (Volga, 110)

Challenging the Idealized Image of Rama

A crucial element of *The Liberation of Sita* is its critique of Rama, who, in traditional tellings of the *Ramayana*, is upheld as a *Maryada Purushottama*—the perfect man and ideal king of Ayodhya. However, in Volga's feminist retelling, Rama is exposed as a man who, despite his virtues, upholds a deeply patriarchal order. His insistence on testing Sita's purity, his prioritization of his public image over his wife's well-being, and his ultimate abandonment of her all serve to highlight the ways in which patriarchy, even when cloaked in duty, inflicts profound harm upon women.

"Rama gives the opportunity to return to the royal households on the condition that she declares her innocence in the royal court. But her question is: Do I need to do that? Is there any sense to such an effort? Instead she chooses to join her mother- Mother Earth. Volga raises some questions; how could Rama take Sita to Ayodhya and humiliate her in front of everybody?"

"Must Sita listen to all that they would say?"

"If Sita were to be asked to prove her chastity before the people of Ayodhya, would she be able to bear it? But unless Sita's chastity is was proved, the royal court of Ayodhya would not welcome her with respect and cordiality."

"He knew that very well. So, he thought it should be resolved in Lanka itself."

"Trial by fire- for his Sita."

"For his sake, for his sake alone, did Sita, a woman of dignity, agree to it."

"He had thought that he would have no option but to fall at Sita's feet and beg forgiveness for subjecting her to the ignominy."

"But Sita understood his situation. She decided to protect him and his worldly and kingly duties. She wanted to assure him that she was there for him."

"She hid the seas of humiliation and grief behind her eyelids and came forth unperturbed like a pot of water and doused the fire." (Volga, 93)

By choosing to walk away from Rama's legacy, Sita asserts her agency in a manner that is radically different from traditional interpretations. She does not return to Ayodhya, nor does she succumb to grief. Instead, she chooses to raise her children on her own terms, severing her dependence on a system that has continuously devalued her autonomy. In the end, Rama accepts his children Lava and Kusha, but what about Sita? In the court of Arya dharma, the debate has started about Sita's innocence. "If Sita declares her innocence in the court, Ramchandra may accept her." (Volga, 97) Sita knew about this trial, she gave him his sons and decide to leave Rama. "She was not coming back into his life. She would entrust

the children to him and liberate herself. But he could not find liberation until he turned them into heirs to Rahgu Vamsa. But by giving him his sons, Sita had cleared the way for his liberation. She had always stood by him. She had always protected him. In Ayodhya, everyone swore by Rama's protection."(Volga, 97)

The Feminist Vision of *The Liberation of Sita*

Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* is a work of resistance that reclaims one of Hindu mythology's most revered female figures and transforms her into an icon of empowerment. In doing so, *The Liberation of Sita* challenges not only the conventions of the *Ramayana* but also the real-world gender norms that continue to marginalize women. The themes of the story resonate deeply with contemporary feminist struggles, making it both a literary and political statement.

The Liberation of Sita is necessary for rewriting of the *Ramayana* that shifts the focus from a male-centered narrative of righteousness and duty to a female-centered story of autonomy and liberation. By breaking the silence imposed on Sita and other women of the epic, Volga offers a powerful critique of the gendered injustices entrenched in mythology and society alike.

Sita's journey in *The Liberation of Sita* is a call to all women to reclaim their voices, challenge oppressive traditions, and redefine their own identities beyond the roles that have been historically assigned to them. In this way, text does not merely retell an ancient story—it reshapes it for a new generation, inspiring a vision of a future where women are no longer bound by silence but are free to shape their own destinies. Moreover, the text underscores the importance of solidarity among women. Sita's transformation is not an isolated journey; it is shaped by the voices and experiences of other women who have similarly suffered under patriarchal oppression. This reflects the broader feminist movement's emphasis on collective resistance and shared empowerment. In this way, *The Liberation of Sita* does not merely retell an ancient story—it reshapes it for a new generation, inspiring a vision of a future where women are no longer bound by silence but are free to shape their own destinies.

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