





A *Ramayana* of Her Own: Reading Chandrabati's *Ramayana* through a Gendered Perspective

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Abstract

Composed in the late 16th century, the Bengali woman poet Chandrabati's *Ramayana* retells the Ramkatha stories with a distinctive female voice that narrates the familiar story of women's suffering rather than of masculine heroism. Belonging to the Bengali genre of folk narratives variously known as *pala gaan*, this version of the *Ramayana* stands in clear affinity with the several narratives about women's tragic lives that comprise a distinct type of *pala* literature. It centralizes Sita's agonizing experiences. Sita's character becomes the primary narrative tool through which Chandrabati's verse narrative subverts the traditional patriarchal representation of her character. She (Chandrabati) challenges the mythology from the point of view of the gendered subaltern and makes Sita occupy the centre stage pushing back Rama to the margin.

Written with a unique narrative technique this verse narrative is told through a "baromasi" – a woman's plaintive refrain about everyday sorrows that venture into mythical intertextualities, Chandrabati questions the woman-centric point of view to understand, analyze, and interpret religion and remains critical of the dominant male ideology. The narrative authority of the female voice becomes even more assertive with the addition of the poet's own life story, which serves to set this revision of the customary Ramkatha within a discourse on women's self-perception. The paper intends to explore how a woman's narrative raises crucial questions regarding wifehood, motherhood, the female psyche, the various forms of oppression that women go through, and the overall position of women in a male-dominated society. It is a woman's text, an atypical refashioning of the *Ramayana* story which starts with a river in Sita's village and her miraculous birth. While maintaining some of the basic plot points, Chandrabati's short, humble *Ramayana* in Bangla takes artistic liberties that few 'Ramayanas' of the time had taken.

Keywords: *Ramayana(s)*, pala literature, intertextuality, religion, gender, narrative



Gender Equality

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The *Ramayana*, even after thirty centuries of its composition, has remained profoundly appreciable and “in the mass consciousness” (Gokhale, 2018, p. XIII) of all and sundry and has become a reflection of Indian ethos, values, and culture. Romila Thapar has pointed out the multiplicity of traditions of the epic by observing that:

The *Ramayana* does not belong to any one moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places. (Richman, 1991, p. 4)

Not only do diverse *Ramayanans* exist; each *Ramayana* text reflects the social location, ideology, and milieu of those who appropriate it:

The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations which changed the conceptualization of characters, events, and meaning. (Richman, 1991, p. 4)

Thapar emphasizes that traditionally local references and topical remarks play crucial roles in many performances of the *Ramayana*. Following this it may be surmised that the epic with its multitude of versions opens new spaces for retelling, re-envisioning, and reinterpreting the accepted and canonized versions of the epic.

Regarding many versions of retelling and revisioning of the Ramkatha stories in diverse languages across India, A. K. Ramanujan’s observation is worth mentioning. He discourses on what he asserts “gender of the genre” (Ramanujan, 1997, p. 227) that redesigns the original concept of the tale. In consonance with the alteration of the gender of the story and the storyteller, there appears a marked shift in the structure of the narrative in its center-periphery binary as motifs and symbols acquire a different meaning. Such retellings thus attest to a certain sense of authority which Ramanujan calls “agency” (Raamanujan, 197, p. 240), particularly in an embellished hierarchical society like India. The *Ramanyana* stories retold by women offer a discernible variety of genres through folk ballads, songs, pictorial art, and written narratives across the sub-continent. To cite a few examples, two sixteenth-century women composed their versions in two different ways though, on personal levels both remained spinsters to surrender to Lord Shiva and produced their *Ramayanas*. Atukuri Molla, “a Telugu woman of the Shudra potter community by translating the *Ramayana* into simple Telugu to make it available for the common masses.” (Chakravarty, 2023, p. 169), Chandrabati, “a Bengali Brahmin poet from Kishoregunj in today’s Bangladesh, by composing her *Ramayana* in the folk ballad form of the pala gaan of Bengal” (Chakravarty, 2023, p. 169). Both these texts counter the existing cultural and literary hegemony of the traditional patriarchal ideologies and reshape the *Ramayana* myth from a woman’s perspective. Chandrabati appears to be the first female author to retell the age-old myth in a woman’s language to question the patriarchal indifference doled out to women, thereby creating opportunities within her counter-narrative for the articulation of female emotions that have been otherwise unheeded in the patriarchal mainstream narratives. Amidst the conservative socio-cultural set-up of medieval Bengal, her refashioning displayed a unique characterisation of Sita making her the

central protagonist of her ballad relegating Rama and his heroics to the periphery. Nabaneeta Dev Sen in her essay, "Lady Sings the Blues: When Women Retell the *Ramayana*" observes:

Just as the Rama myth has been exploited by the patriarchal Brahminical system to construct an ideal Hindu male, Sita too has been built up as an ideal Hindu female to help serve the system. But there are always alternative ways of using a myth. If patriarchy has used the Sita myth to silence women, the village women have picked up the Sita myth to give themselves a voice (p. 19).

The conventional writers of the *Ramayana* represent Rama as an embodiment of rectitude and paramount justness and a prodigious monarch who does not hesitate to desert his caring wife for his people. Sita is portrayed as a dutiful wife and a devoted follower of *stree dharma*, a quintessence of womanly qualities and a nonpareil model for the Indian women to adhere to – "a role model pushed and perpetuated by a predominantly patriarchal society" (Gokhale, 2018, p. XII). While reconstructing, Chandrabati too follows this conventional characterisation of Sita, but she concentrates on Sita's suffering from that of Rama's heroism, thus reorganizing the woman-centric elements from the sideline to the centre and androcentric elements to the margin. Chandrabati's Sita is piteously posited who is a sufferer of patriarchal prejudices, and the raconteur has not only argued against the wrongs meted out to her, but also has offered her a voice of her own. The present study would like to see how the woman narrator has reshaped this male-centric story through a narrativization of the female psyche using a unique storytelling method in vis-à-vis the accepted mainstream templates of the *Ramayanās*.

This structural orientation followed by writers like Valmiki, Tulsidas, Krittibas, Kamban, Kandali, and others who formulate a *Ramayana* matrix through seven *kandas* endorse patriarchal creed by constructing gender-based behavioural patterns, objectification of the female body, and overemphasis on chastity and *stree dharma*. Though Chandrabati has not questioned the customary roles in which women are anticipated to comply to be designated as virtuous women in terms of the patriarchal paradigms, she has certainly endeavored to espouse gender consciousness by re-fabricating the tale from the standpoint of a woman. She has not abided by Valmiki's pattern in so far as the structural pattern and narrative quality are concerned; her story can be considered to be an episodic representation of the epic, divided into three books. Though Valmiki and his followers commence with the story of Rama's birth and his family lineages, Chandrabati begins her narration with a description of Ravana's Lanka. She goes on to map out Ravana's expertise and his dominance over other kingdoms followed by Mandodari's misery caused by her husband's depravity and her eventual suicide attempt that introduces Sita's genesis. The way Chandrabati outlines baby Sita's passage from Lanka to Mithila and how she has been embraced by Janaka's queen clarifies that more than anything else Sita is her main concern; not Rama. In the second book, an account of the major events from the *Ayodha Kanda* to *Yudha Kanda* of Valmiki's epic has been put forward in a few words. Chandrabati has employed a unique style in this framework – *baromasi* – a woman's plaintive and an important part

of Bengali folk culture. In her *baromasi*, Sita, like a rural bride, talks about her maidenhood, her married life, her devotion to Rama, her abduction by Ravana, and how she has been rescued by her beloved husband, along with a spontaneous description of the natural world which becomes a symbolic expression of her intimate self before her women folks (*sakhi-jan*). The woman re-teller does speak neither about warfare nor about Rama's valour and divinity. Mandakranta Bose points out how

She has also excluded many important episodes of the original epic such as Taraka's death, Rama's meeting with Ahalya, Surpanakha's mutilation, and Sita's fire ordeal in Lanka. Also, the concept of Lakshman Rekha which is a metaphor for gender boundary and has been mentioned by a number of post-Valmiki retellers including Bengali poet Kritibas, finds no existence in her narrative. (p.108-109)

In the third book, Chandrabati recounts episodes that include Ram's deportation of Sita brainwashed by Kukuya's malicious scheme, and Sita's *paatal prabesh* which evokes the reader's empathy for her. In her story, Sita is a vulnerable woman whose providence is not in her favor and Rama is a jealous husband who, driven by simulated misgiving and erotic envy, expels the wife who has always been dedicated to him. Dev Sen, explaining Chandrabati's attitude towards Rama, in her essay, "When Women Retell the *Ramayana*," states that.

Chandrabati calls Ram a deranged wimp, and to make the picture clearer described him in a way that makes him appear closer to a dragon than a king. She also holds him responsible for the fall of Ayodha (p. 20).

Critics like Dev Sen, and Bose have alluded to Chandrabati's personal life in their respective treatises. Bose informs:

The narrative authority of the female voice is even more decisively confirmed by the addition of the poet's own life story, which thereby serves to set this revision of the customary Ramakatha within a discourse of women's self-perception. What was traditionally a celebration of manliness is thus turned into a depiction of women's inescapably tragic lives. (p. 110)

In her personal life, she made choices unheard of among upper-class women of her time who were all victims of the 'priestly renaissance' that had swept Bengal at the time as well as of the *kuleen* system introduced by King Vallalasena, the-then ruler of Bengal in the twelfth century. Against such a social environment Chandrabati, daughter of a well-known Sanskrit scholar, was educated by her father Dwija Bangsidas, and introduced to the Sanskrit texts and grammar. She fell in love with a fellow scholar Jayananda, had the courage to declare her love, and her father arranged her marriage to him. However, she was betrayed on her wedding day by Jayananda who married a Muslim woman instead. Overcoming the threat of being socially ostracised for this abandonment by her future husband on the day of her matrimony, Chandrabati with support from her father, made the daring choice of remaining celibate, of becoming a worshipper of Shiva, and of composing her *Ramayana*.

Chandrabati bole, Pita, momo bakya dhoro / Janmena koribo biya roibo ayibor / Shib-puja kori ami Shib-pode moti / Dukkhinir katha rakho dhoro anumoti.

(Chandrabati says, O father, please heed my words. Allow me to remain unmarried and worship Shiva. Please heed the plea of this unfortunate victim.) (Sen, 1923, Vol. I, Part I:12)

And her father says

Shib-puja koro aar lekho Ramayane. (Her father asks her to worship Shiva and compose the Ramayana.) (Sen, 1923, Vol. I, Part I:12)

Perhaps she could identify her affliction with that of Sita; her personal heartbreak and her protagonist's grief seem to have coalesced somewhere and have become synonymous.

Besides subverting the gender roles, Chandrabati's *Ramayana* placates the Brahminical perspectives, too. Velchuru Narayan Rao in "A *Ramayana* of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition" speaks of women's oral narratives enumerating their own version of the *Ramayana* in Andhra Pradesh where both the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin women using their composition as a medium of protest against both gender and caste prejudices. Compositions popular among the non-Brahmin women recount the exploitative nature of the caste hierarchy of the Hindus where the Hindu gods are forced to act like menial labours in Ravana's Lanka, "just as these women narrators themselves have been subjugated by the upper castes through the ages" (Rao, 2001, p. 114). The Brahmin woman Chandrabati's narrative also starts with a description of Ravana's magnificent and luxurious kingdom and with his conquest over the four worlds of gods, kings, the underworld of the serpent kings, and the hermits of the forest hermitages. Here too the gods are compelled into menial labour at Ravana's command, some scrubbing the floor, others nursing the royal gardens of Lanka, or safeguarding the royal treasury. The heavenly maidens or *apsaras* are held captive to serve their sexual pleasure. Her Ravana has even stocked up the blood he has extracted from the hermits in a vial as his weapon against the immortality of the gods. Chandrabati thus punches at the very crux of classical Hindu mythology. Though not quite glorifying Ravana's dynasty, she nevertheless lauds his invincibility and his competence in warfare. His might dismantle the immortal gods of their divinity and their insensitive superciliousness, the kings of their authority, and the hermits of the sheer potency of their spiritual energy which has the power to incinerate kingdoms and dynasties through a curse. All this is reduced to nothing in Chandrabati's opening canto. At the same time in Ravana's hubris lies the seed of his downfall. The container in which he preserves the blood from the hermits' punctured breasts is consumed by his queen Mandodari as a poison to kill herself in grief at her husband's profligacy. In the *Adbhuta Ramayana* too, a similar episode is found:

Peetam vishadhikam raktam garbhastenabhvanmam / Iti sanchintayamasa bharta vipreshitau mama. (Mandodari drank the blood as poison, but to her surprise, she conceived.) (Chhauchharia tr. 2009, 8: 30 – 31)

Instead, in this extra-marital conception she becomes pregnant with the egg which will bring forth Sita the future agent of the downfall of the demon dynasty. Once again it is a woman who is celebrated as the involuntary protagonist in Chandrabati's narrative:

Doyber nirbandha kabhu khandano na jaye / Apni more raja go eye kanyar daye.) (The workings of fate can never be prevented. King Ravana himself will be killed because of this girl child.) (Chandrabati, 2004, p. 200.)

As Ravana devises the destruction of the egg under advice from his soothsayers, Mandodari's motherly heart cries out and begs for it to be floated in the sea. In some versions of the Ramayana such as those of Malaya, Java, Kashmir, and Tibet, Sita is either Mandodari's child or that of Ravana himself. In an oral narrative of Karnataka, Ravana himself conceives Sita after covetously consuming the charmed mango given to him by a sage for Mandodari to help her conceive. He ultimately ejects Sita through a sneeze after the full ten-month pregnancy, the name 'Sita' coming from a Kannada word meaning 'sneeze'. Chandrabati devotes much space of almost three cantos to Mandodari's involuntary pregnancy, the floating of the golden egg, its discovery and nourishment by Sata, and the birth of Sita in Janaka's palace described as the descent of Lakshmi to earth:

Swargo-morte joy joy go shur narigan / Hoilo Lakkhir janmo go Mithila bhabane / Satar namete go kanyar naam rakhe Sita / Chandrabati kohe go kanya bhubanbondita. (Sita's birth was celebrated in heaven and on earth with great rejoicing among the gods and the women folk, for Sita was the incarnation of the goddess Lakshmi now born into the royal palace of Mithila. The girl was named Sita after Sata. Chandrabati says the child was worshipped across the earth.) (Chandrabati, 2004, p. 205)

Not only the birth of Sita, Chandrabati also asserts equal importance to the three women who remain involved in this extraordinary event, the demon queen Mandodari, the impoverished fisherwoman Sata, and the queen of Mithila, Janaka's wife. All of them are projected as virtuous and chaste as opposed to the evil and scheming Kukulya in the later part of the narrative. On the contrary, the story of Rama's birth, his divine origin, and the human incarnations of Vishnu in the four parts of Rama and his brothers are summarily dismissed in a single verse with no individual mention of the other three. The genre picked up by Chandrabati to re-tell the epic story of the *Ramayana* is that of the *pala-gaan* or folk ballad, popular in rural Bengal and used by both Hindu and Muslim minstrels in their narration of folk and fairy tales or historical legends. These ballads were also popular among the rural women and were sung by them within their homes during festivities like marriages and rituals associated with pregnancy or childbirth in which case the focus remained centred on the lives of the womenfolk in an epic like Sita, or her sisters-in-law or Kausalya. Dinesh Chandra Sen observes that the singers mostly belonged to the lower castes like the Namasudras, the Doms, the Jelas (fisherfolk), or the Patnis (boatmen) and by Muslim minstrels, most of whom were illiterate. The chief singer was called a *gayen* who sang the ballad adding his interpretations while a chorus of eight or ten men provided vocal support to the accompaniment of cymbals, tabors, and harmonium. In some cases, the *gayen* himself was the composer of the ballad. The language of these *pala-gaans* is the local dialect of Bengali and includes Arabic and Persian words⁹ showing the seamless synthesis of Hindu and Muslim cultures and language at the grassroots level. It is very different

from the highly Sanskritized Bengali used in the mainstream Bengali literature of the time. Chandraboti, however, fuses highly Sanskritized words like 'suborno', 'pakshi', 'palanka' with dialectical variants like 'rajotti' (rajatwa), 'pushkuni' (pushkarini), 'matuk' (mukut). There is also a profusion of Arabic and Persian words here though perhaps less so than in the other folk ballads of the time. The stock metaphors and similes found in mainstream Bengali literature are absent in these rural songs and are substituted instead with refreshing images drawn from a close observation of local life in these villages. Chandrabati's version is thus part of a rich repertoire of local legends and folktales presented through the genre of the pala-gaan, like other compositions of the genre like *Malua*, *Mahua*, *Surat Jamal O Adhua Sundari*, etc.

Another device taken up by Chandrabati in her text is that of the *baromasya*, a versified account of the events of a woman's life, her joys and sorrows matched with the seasonal variations of the twelve months of the year. It is a genre common to the folk narratives of Bengal. Chandrabati herself uses it in her other folk ballad *Malua* both in the narratives of Malua's mother-in-law and of Malua herself. In the *Ramayana*, she uses the *baromasya* in the second section of the narrative where Sita is the narrator addressing her handmaidens using the address of 'shuno sakhigan'. Her narration is in answer to their request for an account of her abduction by Ravana during their forest exile, her ten month captivity, and eventual rescue by Rama, referring to herself repeatedly as 'janam dukkhini' or 'mui abhagini' ill-fated from birth. Most major events of the epic are presented in the form of her dreams. These include one about the young Rama's arrival in Mithila to snap Shiva's bow and win her hand in marriage, another anticipating the pomp and glitter of Rama's coronation, a scene which in reality turns to the dreadlocks and ochre robes of his exile brought about by the machinations of his stepmother Kaikeyi and her evil mentor Manthara. In addition, as part of the *baromasya* form of narration, significant events from the original epic are here linked to the vagaries of nature during each month of the Bengali year. It is important to note that the principal events of their fourteen-year period of exile are here condensed into a single year and associated with its seasonal variations:

Sitar baromasi katha go dukkher bharoti / Baromaser dukkher katha go bhane Chandraboti. (Sita's baromasi is a chronicle of her sorrow; Chandraboti has here narrated the twelve-month saga of her sorrows.) (Chandrabati, 2004, p. 215)

Since the *Ramayana* of Chandrabati is a rural woman's narrative traces of the utopian life of the forest occupy Sita's dreams in her narration much more than the pomposity and showiness of the royal palace. In these sylvan surroundings amidst the beauty of nature and the closeness of flora and fauna, she enjoys the undivided love and attention of her husband, the dedicated service of her brother-in-law Lakshmana, the companionship of the pious and chaste wives of the hermits of the forest hermitages and soon forgets the luxury of palace life in Ayodhya. She finds a closer empathy with her joys and sorrows among the simple forest folk or the forest life than she does in the palace. The occasional glimpses of the opulence and splendour of courts and palaces offered by Chandrabati's text whether in Ravana's Lanka, Janaka's Mithila, or Rama's Ayodhya offer instead the counter-narrative of dystopia - the debauchery, the

scheming politics, the rivalry for the throne. Here the chastity, piety, and trustfulness of women like Mandodari, Sita, or even Kausalya's simple generosity are irrevocably denied, defeated, and wiped out without a trace. To a rural woman the wheels of governance, of the king's rule and sovereignty, of his duty to his subjects and his court are of far less significance than the consort's role within the sphere of domesticity. The text, therefore, projects Rama as a husband and lover rather than the ideal man and king, the 'maryada purushottama'. He is attentive to every wish of Sita both within the palace and during their exile in the forest. He laughingly engages in games of dice with Sita and her handmaidens within the inner chambers of the palace readily responding to their good-natured teasing. His love and sexuality are equally counterpoised against her completely selfless devotion, purity, and chastity as a loving and loyal wife who knows nothing beyond her complete immersion in her husband's presence:

Ki koribe rajshukhe go rajshinghashane / Shoto rajyapat amar go prabhur charane. (What more happiness can the luxury of the palace and the throne give me? asks Sita. I have found happiness a hundred times at the feet of my lord.) (Chandrabati, 2004, p. 211)

Chandrabati's inclusion of Sita's *baromasya* is undoubtedly a bold step taken by her. First of all, it adds to the novelty of her story and sets it apart from the mainstream narratives. Secondly, it has attributed to the story a greater mobility and dynamism. Thirdly, it has created a fusion of two genres – epic and folk literature. In the words of Bose:

Here again, her *baromasi* varies from others, for it begins with a long reconstruction of pleasures past. This is the only period of unalloyed joy in her life and it is commemorated as an idyll, freed from the cares of court life, living in an Edenic state that is going soon to be lost and never regained. (p. 25)

There is no mention of either the test of her chastity through the *agni-pariksha* (the ordeal by the fire) nor is there any mention of her eventual descent into earth in utter humiliation at his repeated public tests of her chastity in response to the demands of his subjects. At the end of the third section of the text towards the end of Chandrabati's narrative, it is Sita's innocent desire to re-visit the sylvan surroundings of the forest and its simple pleasures which courtly luxury cannot compensate in her mind that facilitates Rama's banishment of his pregnant wife to the forest. It is instigated by his sister Kukuya. However, Chandrabati's *Ramayana* is a text almost entirely devoted to women and therefore here too it is by the evil machinations of another woman that the royal decree is issued, not of Rama's own accord and not due to the skepticism of his subjects regarding Sita's chastity as in the traditional versions of the epic. It is Kukuya who plants the seed of suspicion within Rama's mind and nurtures it till he explodes in murderous rage against his wife just as her mother Kaikeyi had manipulated Rama's banishment in an earlier section of the text:

Bishlatar bishphal go bish gacher gota / Antare bisher hashi go badhailo letho. (Kukuya was the poisoned fruit of a poison tree, the venom churning within her caused the disaster.) ((Chandrabati, 2004, p. 218)

By projecting Rama's own sister as the force of evil, Chandrabati's text is shifting the primary action of the epic from the public domain into the internal politics of the women's domain. It speaks of the suffering of women within the marital home and the ill-treatment of the bride by mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law typically projected in much of Bengali literature. D.C. Sen notes that episodes similar to the story of Rama's causeless jealousy triggered by the machinations of the treacherous sister-in-law Kukuya in Chandrabati's ballad are found in the Ramayanas of Kashmir, Malay, Java, Cambodia, and Tibet (xv). Kukuya's is sheer jealousy of Sita's happiness and of her beauty. But the fire of evil she unleashes will not only claim its one innocent victim Sita but the kingdom of Ayodhya itself along with its ruler Rama, reducing its prosperity to utter ruin:

Je agun jalailo aaj go Kukuya nanadini / She agune pudibe Sita go shohit
Raghumani. / Pudibe Ayodhyapuri go kichudin pore / Lakshmi shunya hoiya
rajya go jabe charkhare. (The fire that Kukuya, Sita's sister-in-law has ignited will
destroy not only Sita but Raghumani (Rama) as well, and along with him his
kingdom of Ayodhya will eventually burn too. For the kingdom has now become
bereft of the goddess Lakshmi and will be ruined.) ((Chandrabati, 2004, p. 220)

Chandrabati concludes her ballad with a warning that those who listen to the ill advice of others and allow their power of independent judgment to be clouded by them like Rama under Kukuya's spell are sure to come to grief thus once again subverting the heroism of the epic hero:

Porer katha kane loile go nijer shorbonash / Chandrabati kohe Ramer go buddhi
hoilo nash. (If you heed the evil counsel of others, you will surely come to a
downfall. Chandrabati says Rama's power of judgment had been clouded.)
((Chandrabati, 2004, p. 220)

. Mandakranta Bose, in "A Woman's *Ramayana*", has aptly stated that:

Chandrabati's Sita has no such queenly temper. Rather, she fits the image of her
cultivated in popular belief as an infinitely submissive wife. By foregrounding
her virtuous resignation, Chandrabati so glaringly spotlights Sita's victimhood
that is seen against Rama's tyranny and shows in the darkest belief. (p. 32)

Sita's unjust abandonment proves to be fatal for Ayodha – disease consumes people, scholars and sages leave the court; and people begin to get involved in sinful activities. The narrator openly blames Rama for ruining his state and his people in this way:

Instead of praising Rama, Chandrabati often intrudes into the narrative to
comment on Rama's foolishness, to advise and guide him, and to accuse him of
the devastation that awaits Ayodha" (Sen, 1998, p. 171).

In sum, it may be said that in its re-telling Chandrabati's *Ramayana* has carved out its own space across the literary cultures in the great *Ramayana* tradition. Her retelling therefore asserts a sense of empowerment for both the composer and the audience or readers by bringing the silenced voices in the epic to the forefront of its narration and by identifying with these voices, her sense of victimization. Hers is a life spent under the shadow of a patriarchal society and an androcentric and upper-caste religious order. Further, in transposing the canonical literary genre of a Sanskrit epic

into their personal space by using a folk form familiar to her and adding details of her own life and images fresh from her surroundings, she has carried the text into realms of unexplored vernacular versions in which the epic has been recast. And, in doing so she and her 'Sita' claim a sense of entitlement and participation which has been denied through the ages both in life and its reflection in literature. The readers can see

... the internal growth and individuation of a woman who has been rejected by the state, monarch, husband, and family, and yet has not abandoned the constituents of her dharma and individual duties. There is a deep resonance ... of inner resolve in the face of societal marginalization. In Indian psyche, the enduring appeal and relevance of the Sita myth resides in its embodiment as a journey into examining ... collective and individual woundings, betrayals, losses, yearnings and initiations. (Lal, 2018, p. 87).

Both the writer and her heroine are conformist as well as rebel, real as well as mystical.

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