



Reimagining Saraswati Nagpal's Sita : A Critical Study

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In a contemporary context, feminist dignity and nature have evolved into a positive discourse, often laden with the complexities of negative and nihilistic connotations. Gender roles, shaped by culturally influenced stereotypes, construct the structural framework for women and men. Gender-role education, in turn, shapes a child's self-concept. The efforts of graphic novels in challenging the ancient stereotypes of traditional female roles are evident in various retellings of classical epics such as *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. Saraswati Nagpal's *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* shifts the narrative perspective from Rama's *Ramayana* to Sita's *Ramayana*. Narrated by the destined princess Sita, the story presents a powerful depiction of women navigating a patriarchal culture. Sita's portrayal as an ideal woman blurs the boundaries between religion and mythology, offering a nuanced exploration of her struggles. Introducing Sita's plight to young readers does not dilute the broader struggles of women; instead, it underscores women's roles and serves as a moral instruction. This paper adopts a feminist lens to examine women's struggles for survival and identity, as reflected in *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*. It also highlights the importance of fostering children's understanding of gender stereotypes, paving the way for a more equitable and inclusive perspective..

Keywords: *Graphic Narratives, Mythology, Postmodern Feminist Narratives.*



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1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary discourse, feminist dignity and nature have become positive terms, often laden with negative and nihilistic connotations. Gender roles, shaped by culturally influenced stereotypes, create structural frameworks that define expectations for women and men. Gender-role education, in turn, shapes a child's self-concept. Graphic novels have emerged as a potent medium to challenge ancient stereotypes about traditional female roles. This is particularly evident in the retelling of classical epics such as

The Ramayana and *The Mahabharata*. Saraswati Nagpal's *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* shifts the perspective from Rama's *Ramayana* to Sita's narrative. Told through the eyes of the destined princess Sita, it is a powerful narration that centers on women navigating a patriarchal culture. Sita's portrayal as an ideal woman blurs the boundaries between religion and mythology. By bringing Sita's struggles to younger readers, the novel underscores women's roles and struggles without diluting their significance, offering moral

instruction and fostering a deeper understanding of gender stereotypes.

2. THE POWER OF READING AND REPRESENTATION

Mem Fox (1993) states, *“Everything we read constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men.”*

This is particularly relevant to graphic adaptations of epics like *The Ramayana*, which are popular among young readers. Graphic narratives, as a combination of visual art and textual storytelling, allow readers to engage effortlessly. The visuals provide a deeper understanding of settings and emotions, enabling readers to connect with the narrative through creative imagination. Saraswati Nagpal’s *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* uses this medium effectively to depict women’s emotions, their subjugation in society, and the need for feminism in children’s literature.

3. THE SYMBOLISM IN SITA’S STORY

The title of Nagpal’s novel represents the identity of an Indian married woman, symbolized by the red tilak on the forehead and the imagery of closed eyes. Sita embodies autonomy and the quiet power of resilience. The narration begins:

“It was a time when wonderful miracles or terrible misfortune could change a man’s life in the blink of an eye. In that age, the land of Bharat was a cluster of many kingdoms, each ruled by a strong warrior king. One such kingdom was Videha to which I belonged... I was destined to be a princess, and this is my story...” (Nagpal, 1)

This sets the tone for a narrative that reclaims Sita’s voice, presenting her as a complex individual rather than a one-dimensional ideal.

4. GENDER STEREOTYPES AND REPRESENTATION

Indian graphic narratives often reinforce entrenched notions of femininity, oscillating between the “ideal” and the “vamp” archetypes. Gail Simone aptly termed this phenomenon “women in refrigerators”—a trope where female characters exist primarily to suffer or die, motivating the male protagonist’s journey.

Nandini Chandra (2008), in her book *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha*, highlights the dichotomy of the *pativrata* (devoted wife) and *virangana* (heroic woman) models, which are embedded in patriarchal frameworks. These narratives often use women’s bodies as metaphors for purity, chastity, and cultural sanctity (**Natrajan 3**).

Harleen Singh, in her book *Rani of Jhansi: Gender, History, and Fable in India* (2014), examines how women are metaphorically elevated to goddesses to contain their agency within nationalist discourse. Similarly, graphic novels such as Virgin Comics’ *Ramayana 3392 AD* and *Ramayana 3392 AD Reloaded*, Sanjay Patel’s *Ramayana: Divine Loophole*, and Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar’s *Sita’s Ramayana* use hyperreal portrayals of gendered bodies, reinforcing stereotypes even as they attempt to modernize the narrative.

Sara Austin (2014), in her article *Sita, Surpanakha, and Kaikeyi as Political Bodies: Representations of Female Sexuality in Idealized Culture*, discusses how Indian women are often reduced to archetypes that embody prescribed codes of feminine behavior and enforce consequences for transgressions. These portrayals serve as symbolic representations of Indian culture and as tools to construct postcolonial national identity.

5. FEMINIST RETELLING IN SITA: DAUGHTER OF THE EARTH

Nagpal’s novel takes a feminist stance by presenting *The Ramayana* from Sita’s perspective. This retelling is not just an epic story but also a reflection of Indian women’s real struggles—their emotions, sacrifices, and resistance to societal constraints. The novel shifts the focus from Rama’s heroic narrative to Sita’s experiences, offering a critique of gender stereotypes.

Sita’s journey in the novel illustrates the tension between responsibility and self-satisfaction. As a queen, she sacrifices her happiness for her kingdom and family. She reflects:

“For hours, I sobbed in solitude, bemoaning my fate. A queen’s first duty is to her citizens; my relationship with Rama comes second. Therefore, I must do what is

necessary to uphold the law and keep the citizens' faith in their king." (Nagpal, 79)

When Sita is abandoned by Rama, her emotional rejection is portrayed poignantly:

"Once again, I was alone." (Nagpal, 81)

Despite her struggles, Sita's resilience shines through, particularly in her role as a mother. Her decision to live for her unborn child reflects her maternal strength:

"But if I die, then my child within me will die too. I cannot commit that sin. The child has done nothing wrong and deserves to live." (Nagpal, 81)

The novel also highlights the emotional sacrifices of other women, such as Sunaina's longing for a child, Kaikeyi's manipulative love for Bharata, and Sita's enduring love for her children. These portrayals underscore the centrality of motherhood in defining women's roles and emotions.

6. CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES

Traditional narratives often depict women as dependent on external forces for their identity. In contrast, contemporary retellings, such as Nagpal's, portray women's independence and agency. Sita's choices—selecting her husband in the *swayamvara*, following Rama into exile, and ultimately rejecting societal norms to follow her heart—demonstrate her strength and autonomy. She declares:

"Deep inside my soul, I know that my life as a mortal queen was over. I was glad to have accomplished all I could for Rama. I finally followed my heart and made the choice I did." (Nagpal, 90)

These decisions inspire young readers, particularly girls, to embrace resilience and make strong, independent choices.

7. THE ROLE OF MOTHERHOOD AND GENDER EQUALITY

The novel challenges the traditional preference for male heirs by celebrating the birth of Sita as a moment of joy for the kingdom. This

subverts the patriarchal notion that sons have higher economic and cultural value. Sita's narrative emphasizes equality for all human beings rather than endorsing specific gender roles. Her experiences highlight the societal constraints placed on women while celebrating their resilience and agency.

Nagpal's *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* concludes by portraying Sita as a principled heroine who transcends traditional archetypes. Her journey—from a dutiful wife to an independent woman who makes her own choices—reflects the essence of feminist humanity and literature.

8. CONCLUSION

Saraswati Nagpal's *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* is a groundbreaking graphic novel that reimagines *The Ramayana* from a feminist perspective. By focusing on Sita's struggles and choices, the novel challenges traditional gender roles and offers young readers a nuanced portrayal of resilience and independence. Through its feminist lens, the novel not only reclaims Sita's voice but also inspires readers to question societal norms and embrace individuality. In doing so, it underscores the importance of gender equality, emotional resilience, and the transformative power of storytelling.

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