

*Revisiting Sita: The Subversive Myths of Womanhood in Contemporary South Asian
Women Writers*

Sutapa Chaudhuri

University of Calcutta, India

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Abstract

Sita, the heroine of the Indian epic Ramayana, is one of the most defining role models for womanhood in the Indian subcontinent and as such exerts a powerful influence on the collective psyche. This paper proposes to focus on the revisionings of the Sita myth by contemporary South Asian women writers writing in English like Anita Desai and Niaz Zaman, or in regional languages like Mallika Sengupta and Nabaneeta Dev Sen both of whom write in Bengali. It would also analyse examples of modern day adaptations of the Sita tale like Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar's graphic novel Sita's Ramayana or Meena Kandasamy's provocative poems. It would try to explore the different ways that these writers, through their creative re-workings of the Sita myth, at once posit their connectedness to the mythical woman as well as their alienation from the stereotypes of the 'eternal woman'—silent, submissive, sacrificial and selfless—perpetuated by the patriarchal culture. These subversive re-tellings interrogate/erase Sita's identity as a Token Woman pervasive in the repressive patriarchal myths while simultaneously imagining a much more egalitarian identity for Sita that endorses alternate points of view, lending different/deviant connotations to traditional modes of understanding. The writings of the South Asian women perform as creative rewrites, fluid, irreverent and deviant (sub)versions which they build into the gaps and absences, the fissures in the traditional male narratives of power thus not only questioning conventionally accepted ideas and norms, but also creating space for the silent voices of the women to be heard.

The voice I have, he has
slaughtered into a thousand;
so I speak many languages, and am
known in many more. Someone sings
for me too; these songs have a kindred tongue.
I, too sing, for I am Sita...
I am your ancestor,
My being reaches back to you.

—Nishi Chawla: *Sita's Divinity*

Sita, the heroine of the Indian epic Ramayana, is one of the most defining role models for womanhood in the Indian subcontinent and as such exerts a powerful influence on the collective psyche of the South Asians, especially among women. “For all of us Indian women carry some of her within us: Sita’s strength and her vulnerability,” writes Namita Gokhale in her perceptive essay *Sita: A Personal Journey*, “Sita has been there, in the mass consciousness of our subcontinent, for very long now. She has been there since the beginnings of our timeless history, in the different versions and renditions of the Ramayana, written or recited and never forgotten. She lives on in ...celluloid, and on television, ...She is there in song, in poetry, in the tears that Indian women have been shedding through generations as they tread the Lakshman rekhas that barricade their lives, as they are consumed by the flames of the penitential agni Pareeksha that their families regularly subject them to.” (Lal, p.xiii) The lack of a single or ‘authentic’ version prompts differing and different accounts of her story to co-exist in myth, literature, folktale and popular culture. Canonical Sanskritic texts deify Sita, non-Brahminic or regional variants humanize her, folk songs and ballads connect her horrendous ordeals and archetypal endurance with the daily lives of hapless rural women, popular culture churns out innumerable films, soap operas or advertisements based on the popular perceptions of Sita’s ideals, while women writers through time interrogate the very concepts that these myriad, often contrasting, narratives portray, trying to create their own deviant (sub)versions that offer fresh interpretations of this enigmatic figure.

Significantly, as this paper would try to explore, the contemporary South Asian women writers show an obsessive involvement with Sita, both mythological and contemporary. Anita Desai and Niaz Zaman try to create ‘different Sitas’ through their novels, Mallika Sengupta, writing in Bangla, creates alternate myths of contemporary Sitas in her poems while interrogating the epics in her fiction and Nabaneeta Dev Sen uses laughter to re-envision the traditional myths of Sita in her comic re-tellings of the epics in Bangla while Samhita Arni, Usha Kishore, Nishi Chawla, Laksmisree Bannerjee or Chandra Ghosh Jain, through their fiction and poetry, contemporize Sita’s predicaments and her choice of life. Sita looms large in the lives of these women, as Madhu Kishwar justly opines, “whether they [are] asserting their moral strength or rebelling against what they [have] come to see as the unreasonable demands of society or family. Either way Sita [is] the point of reference - an ideal [to be] emulated or rejected.”(Kishwar 1997) Responding to elitist patriarchal texts and reading the traditional myths against the grain, women’s retellings of the epic tales tell a different story altogether. These tales speak from and are connected to a strong female folk tradition that holds an alternative perception of the male dominated world and its stereotypical conventions. Within this folk tradition, as Nabanita Dev Sen asserts, “In the women’s retellings, the Brahminical myth is

blasted automatically though, probably, unwittingly. Women sing for themselves, the male bard sings for the public. Their approaches to the epic and to the act of singing are totally different.” (Dev Sen 1998) Conditioned to emulate the ideal of the perfect woman built up to help serve the system —taught to bear all injustice silently, yet resisting the ideal, Sita in the women’s songs will always be “an essential orphan, as a being without an identity, an ever-alienated self in exile...When the women cry for Sita, they cry for themselves. Like Sita ... the women sing themselves into their Ramayana. When women retell the Ramayana, Sita is the name they give themselves: the homeless female, the foundling, unloved, rejected and insecure.” (Dev Sen 1998)

Sita’s persistent presence in the consciousness of the South Asian women writers gets represented in their modern day adaptations of the Sita myth to portray the contemporary culture. The relevance of the ancient Sita myth and its countless retellings come out as these writers grapple with contemporary issues like that of the ‘missing girl’—the rampant female foeticide/infanticide, dowry deaths and honour killings that indelibly scar the South Asian culture. This is exemplified by Chandra Ghosh Jain’s short story *Sita’s Letter to Her Unborn Daughter*. In a culture that traditionally blesses young brides with a normative adage to be the mother of sons ‘Putravati bhava,’ the condition of the girl child and her mother become precarious and thus endangered. The girl child, an eternal orphan, ‘always scared to admit even Hope’, takes on the connotations of Sita, as Dev Sen so succinctly points out in her essay, *The Essential Orphan: The Girl Child*. In Ghosh Jain’s narrative the ‘test’ that Vaidehi or Sita is forced to take, becomes aminocentesis to determine the sex of her unborn child. Calling her unborn daughter Paakhi, or ‘bird’, Vaidehi signs off her letter as “Your Ever-Hopeful Ma” as she determines to ‘fight and survive’ with her girl child; but the mirage of Pakhi vanishes: the ‘unborn daughter’ feels afraid to suffer like her exiled-in-soul mother, and refuses to be “another Sita...Abandoned by father, husband and family.”(Lal, p.229)

Questioning the viability of the myth of Sita in the contemporary social reality, Anita Desai creates an apparently conventional Sita in her novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*(1982) in which the protagonist surrenders her self imposed exile to return home with her husband. Feeling dissociated from nature and pregnant with her fifth child, Desai’s protagonist Sita, a sensitive, middle class housewife in her forties who lives in Bombay, desperately seeks refuge in a utopian existence in Manori, the magic island of her ‘idealistic’ father. Revolting against the “subhuman placidity, calmness, and sluggishness” (Desai, p.43) of her hollow humdrum life in the city, the overpowering mundane realities of her life— the insensitivity of her family and the suffocating four walls she called home—Sita escapes to Manori in order to keep her unborn child protected forever in her womb away from the unfeeling world that is divorced from nature and natural human attributes. Though disillusioned about the healing nature of the island, Sita finally learns to face the reality and reconnect with life during her exile amidst nature. Through her understanding of her relationship with nature, Desai’s Sita re-establishes the mythical Sita’s age old connection with nature as the Daughter of the Earth that the modern day city dwelling Sita had lost and becomes re-integrated in a linked chain of existence with her familial relationships. As the realization that life cannot be neatly categorised into opposing binaries of real/unreal, true/ false, pretence/ sincerity, dawns on her, Sita comprehends the fluid complexities of life: “Neither sea nor sky were separate or contained — they rushed into each other in a rush of light and shade, impossible to disentangle.”(Desai, p.139)

Sita's Ramayana (2012) is an unusual graphic novel created by the collaboration of two women from two very different backgrounds and cultural locations —the young, educated and sophisticated urban writer Samhita Arni who gave English words to the visual narrative as illustrated through vivid paintings and narrated through Bengali songs by the rural illiterate Bengal Patua scroll artist Moyna Chitrakar. As part of an oral tradition of women's variant retellings of the Ramayana dating back to the sixteenth century that is passed on through the generations among rural women of Bengal, Chitrakar sings and paints of Sita's oppression as a banished, humiliated queen, and of the quiet strength of a single mother raising her twins alone. Sita, who is shown as the epitome of courage and compassion, not only endures her fate with fortitude but also challenges it to assert her own choice in life. Employing a post-modern feminist design grounded in a compassionate community of women, *Sita's Ramayana* subtly shifts the perspective of the timeless epic Ramayana to bring a woman's point of view to the saga of a heroic war that traditionally has a predominantly male narrative—thus not only providing glimpses into the complex lives of women in the epic but also revealing gender based injustices, women's resistance to oppression and their strengths as well as their hopes for a relational equality. Narrated by Sita, the heroine of the epic, Arni and Chitrakar's narrative is a powerful meditation on the fate of women, as they are used as pawns in the wars between men and kingdoms. A part of a strong tradition of feminist retellings, *Sita's Ramayana* is an alternate story that provides a bold new interpretation of the conventional Ramayana by placing Sita at the centre as the focal point of the story and thus providing a woman's perspective on war and justice. Throughout the story, Sita empathises and commiserates with the other victimised women— Surpanaka, Trijata, Tara, Mandodari: "I heard the women of the palace, shrieking, I saw Ravana's queens running to the battlefield, tears streaming down their faces. Their screams rent the air. Even I, enclosed in this garden, could hear their grief... They would be queens no more, and their people had met death on the battlefield—for what? For one man's unlawful desire...It was such a high price to pay." In this narrative Sita emerges not just as an ideal woman and wife or a queen with a collection of virtues, submissive and demure, but as a complex, strong, wise woman in her own right, one who is able to bear the many trials of life. Sita displays sensitivity, maturity and insight and comes out as one whose sense of righteousness is complemented by an equally strong sense of empathy and compassion — a woman with mind of her own, making her own choices. Arni and Chitrakar re-imagine a heroic Sita who is a far cry from the weak, passive and suffering woman of popular imagination. As the vivid illustrations that form the primary narrative show, Chitrakar's 'dark' Sita, radical in spirit, is earthy, not divine and fair complexioned. She is different as she negates the conventional male values of aggression, anger, bravery or victimization on the battlefield and celebrates other, 'feminine' virtues of empathy, compassion, sisterhood, justice, dignity, patience and solidarity with all beings. (Singh 2011) It is through this compassion and empathy that Sita emerges as a stronger character than Rama, and becomes, ultimately, a testament to the true human spirit with her unswerving faith on human kindness and loyalty.

"War, in some ways, is merciful to men," Arni wrote in *Sita's Ramayana*. "It makes them heroes if they are the victors. If they are the vanquished—they do not live to see their homes taken, their wives widowed. But if you are a woman—you must live through defeat." This insight becomes the starting point of Samhita Arni's latest novel,

The Missing Queen (2013) that embarks upon a search for Sita, ten years after the famed victory of Ayodhya over Lanka. In this political thriller, set in a very contemporary, sophisticated and urban ‘shining’ Ayodhya vis-à-vis a war-devastated, impoverished Lanka and a nondescript, underdeveloped, rural Mithila, Arni’s protagonist, a young female journalist dares to ask Rama, the God-King, a tabooed question on a live television interview being broadcast to the Ayodhyan masses as part of the victory celebrations. *The Missing Queen* disproves the construction of mythical history as a tale told by the victors and attempts to re-write, albeit as a film noir style fantasy, as an amalgamation of counter narratives from the vanquished and the subalterns who have lived through defeat. This contemporary feminist quest for Sita, highlights the pathos of Sita’s experiences as the sinister forces of economic and cultural imperialism come out as the real motives that spurred the war in which Sita has been used and discarded merely as a convenient pawn to conceal the ugly face of Ayodhayan aggression.

Set in the backdrop of Bangladesh Muktiyuddha, the war of Independence in 1971, Bangladeshi writer Niaz Zaman’s novel in English, *A Different Sita* (2011), turns the Sita tale literally on its head as it explores ideas of right vs. wrong, compassion, loyalty, trust, honour and the terrible price of war from a woman’s perspective. Written from the point of view of Shabina, a middle class woman and a mother of two children, who is involuntarily, unwittingly compelled to get involved in the politics of war, Zaman’s novel subtly interrogates the notion of war as a means to achieve independence and the price ordinary people, especially women and children, have to pay for it. Taking her place among the “few, very very few brave women who held their heads high and narrated what had been done to them”(Zaman, Prologue) Shabina narrates her untold story, charting a new Ramayana as it were. Questioning the status of the women who were forced to undergo physical and emotional brutality in the war of 1971, the ‘biranganas’—the raped and sexually abused women who ‘gave their honour for their motherland’ whom the Mujib Government officially honoured as ‘heroines of war’ acknowledging their sacrifice—but who in reality suffered public derision as ‘baranganas’, prostitutes or public women, with no place in society, Shabina faces the bitter memories head on. She courageously shares her heart rending memories of war with her children, the two boys, now grown up, whom she has raised single handed, in an urge to tell them the truth, to reveal her untold secrets borne silently for four decades. Through Shabina, the unassuming housewife circumscribed within her household cares, a mother of two young children (and pregnant with the third), a very unlikely heroine for a novel on war, Zaman shows how an average woman transforms herself into ‘a different Sita’ in the face of ruthless atrocities and forced victimization. Shabina’s narrative is the story of a modern day Sita, who faces ignominy and torture to rescue her helpless husband from “the clutches of Ravana”, the Pakistani military. Situating herself in an in-between space as neither a certified ‘birangana’ who sacrificed her ‘honour’ for the cause of her nation, nor a ‘barangana’ who catered to her own pleasure and self aggrandisement, Shabina emphatically evades categorization and certification: “No one called me a birangana. I was not discovered cowering naked in a bunker. I cannot call myself a heroine of war. ...My fight was to keep my family whole, to bring my husband back alive. I had no patriotic motives when I did what I did. ...But there is also something I did which had nothing with wanting to bring him back alive.” (Zaman, Prologue) Interrogating the norms of patriarchal morality imposed on women, Zaman’s novel, as a contemporary retake on the age old saga, thus creates a space in between for women like Shabina to exist.

Through her modern day Sita, Zaman tells the story of the love and desperation of a wife who is forced to barter her body to rescue her abducted husband from the clutches of the enemy, as well as her overwhelming attraction for Saeed, her husband's friend, her gallant saviour, the Other Man in her life. Ironically her whole fight proves futile as all her efforts to restore her family end in vain— her husband who she manages to bring back 'alive' dies, with her eldest son, on the day of independence, on the day the war ended, in a senseless shootout. The moving finale of the novel poignantly alludes to Shabina's interpretation of the Ramayana story that she often told her little boys: "[Rama] and Sita and his two sons lived happily ever after in Ayodhya. I had changed the ending. Sita and her two sons did not live happily ever after in Ayodhya with Rama. Sita had to walk through fire to prove her chastity." (Zaman, p.30) At once ordinary and extraordinary, homely and courageous, Shabina, as Sita, takes on the attributes of Rama, the Dark God in the face of utter wreckage of human values. The references to blood and fire—the fire that "Sita had to walk through...to prove her chastity" highlights Shabina's uncertainties in the novel: "And how was I to explain [to Haider] how Sita had killed Ravana? In the Ramayana, Rama had doubted the purity of Sita, but this other Sita was not pure." (Zaman, p.239) Zaman's Shabina, a 'different Sita' had the courage to not only rescue her abducted husband but also to avenge her own debasement by killing the person who debased her as well. The blood that splashed on Shabina as she killed the General is the blood that both stigmatizes and sanctifies the 'impure' Sita who not only pays a 'tremendous price' to rescue Rama but also gathers the courage and determination to kill Ravana.

A noted Bengali writer, Nabanita Dev Sen uses laughter as a strategy to undermine the traditional stereotypes of women as weak, inefficient, servile and garrulous or silent, submissive, suffering and sacrificial perpetuated throughout the Ramayana tradition. Speaking from the subversive position of the female 'jester' in her series of stories on the reinterpretations of the Ramayana, Dev Sen presents utterly realistic portrayals of Sita, Urmila, Surpanakha and other women of the epics as having strong, positive and powerful personalities. In Dev Sen's fiction, women centred 'homely' images of nurturance are repeatedly posited to counter the destructive violence of war that is so persistently portrayed in the traditional epic narratives. *Basumatir Keramati* (Basumati's Magic Feat) presents a nurturing matriarchal, highly domestic and as such disciplined, yet subaltern social structure, the netherworld or Patalrajya as against the warring patriarchal, highly political and as such undisciplined, ego-centric world of Ayodhya or Ramarajya. In this matriarchal world Sita, presented as an independent woman with a career—she is worshipped as the Goddess Brateswari in Patalrajya, gets re-united with sons whom she was forced to leave behind in Ayodhya. Dev Sen stresses the happiness of mothers when reunited with their children after long estrangements: Basumati with her daughter Sita; Sita with her twins—Luv and Kush. *Mul Ramayan* (The Basic Ramayana) narrates how Sita came back to Rama from her imprisonment in Ashokevan with the help of Hanuman, and how she had to go back to Lanka because of the admonitions of Valmiki, the would-be-epic-poet then. This story focuses on the intellect, commonsense as well as practicality of Sita. Sita is depicted as more wise, conscientious and moral than Rama, contrary to the stereotype of Rama as a man who can do no wrong. The spirited and scholarly way in which Sita retorts at Valmiki's remonstrance against her about her sense of virtue and sin—the way she uses logic in her arguments, actively resolves the situation and goes back to Lanka in order to save the situation—so that an 'epic' can be written on the victory of good over evil by the 'great' poet Valmiki are ample illustrations to the point. Instead

of weak and passive, the stereotype of *Dukhini* Sita, the eternally sad, helpless and poor creature that Sita is, the silent, suffering and submissive, ideal obedient wife to be emulated, Dev Sen posits an alternate, strong woman who speaks her mind, and is able to take decisions for her own self as well as for others. Instead of Rama rescuing her, Sita rescues Rama as it were. Questioning the agency of Rama in Sita's mysterious 'death,' *Sitar Patal Pravesh* (Sita's Journey to the Netherworld) imagines a scenario where Rama deliberately kills Sita when Sita prepares to walk out of her own free will. In this tale we see Sita in exile—a mother of adolescent twins; as she tries to unravel the mystery surrounding her own birth and the birth of her sons when in exile, Sita understands the real nature of patriarchal authoritarianism. She searches for a refuge, a place to call her own away from the tyrannies of harsh life. Vehemently revolting against Rama's dictate of a second Agnipariksha, a fire test to prove Sita's chastity, as Sita curses Rama's family, Rama pressed a button that opened the earth and Sita fell into the whirling tides of the Sarayu river. From a silent, suffering woman, Sita is here transformed into a mature, strong and powerful woman—powerful enough to exert control over her life choices, to reject social definitions of duty, obligation and decency. Sita's strength of character, her decisive nature, her willpower as well as her understanding of human character are highlighted in this tale.

A significant voice in contemporary Bengali literature Mallika Sengupta, is known for her political poetry and fiery essays. In her novel *Sitayana* (1996), a modern pro-feminist re-telling of the classic tale, Sengupta has her Sita question the patriarchal notions of chastity and 'purity' of a woman asserting that "the loss of chastity is a mere accident, a physical assault just like [Ram's] and Lakshmana's entrapment in the coils of the Nagpash in the battle of Lanka. The body of the woman does not alter after an assault, nor does her mind." (Lal, p.222) In the unfinished poem *Ulto Ramayan* (The Reversed Ramayana), with a comic under tone Sengupta puts forward a situation that not only recreates but revises the famous *Agnipariksha* of Sita in the twenty-first century. When Rama gets abducted by a wily witch and is 'molested,' Sengupta has her Sita boldly demand that her husband confesses and asks forgiveness for his indiscretion in front of the nation. Viewing the *Agnipariksha* as an act of domestic-violence perpetrated by Ram on his wife Sita, Sengupta charts how this single act of violence has given false authenticity and cause, as it were, for hundreds of cases of wife-burning and violence on women in the so called 'happy households' of India:

"Fire burnt the sheaves of grain throughout the land,
Fates of hundreds of girls burnt together in a sudden blaze
Like burnt tyres, the smell of love nights pervades the air
Net like, violence at home hangs heavy in happy households."

In the political poetic play *Ashokeboner Sita Sarkhel* (Sita Sarkhel of the Ashoke Forest). Sengupta recreates the story of the abduction of Sita as a contemporary political story. Sengupta's Sita, when her integrity and chastity are doubted, decides to go back to the Ashoke Forest as a peace worker choosing the freedom of her soul over the so-called 'securities' of a husband/ home and a well-paid job.

Like their regional counterparts, the South Asian women poets writing in English also offer strategic revisionings of the Sita myth in their poems for a meaningful and rightful re-construction and re-configuration of the restrictive stereotypes that have

repressed women for ages. Their poems call into question the efficacy of the patriarchal structures of thought and the constricting symbols of fidelity of women that they propagate through the image of the Pativrata Sati, the ideal wife eternally devoted to her husband. Laksmisree Banerjee's poem *Sita or Sati*, conflates these two predominant images of the ideal wife prevalent in the Hindu culture—that of Sati, immolation of the 'pure' wife on her husband's pyre that supposedly guarantees eternal bliss in Heaven for both man and wife, and Sita, the ideal emblem of the devout wife—both connoting the readiness of the ideal wife to annihilate herself for the husband's well being that is 'schooled' in young girls from childhood through the various religious rituals. The subterranean linking of the Agnipariksha of Sita with the wife immolation of Sati suggests that in a culture that denies life to its women and girl children, Sita is forced to commit Sati in the Agnipariksha that is also a funeral pyre—the testament of her forced chastity thus connotes the death of her individual freedom as a human being. The 'dark' insinuations of the age old practices apparently preserving the 'purity' of the women is spotlighted succinctly:

“myself, lying in state,
a dubious spectacle,
a violent, red pieta
in dark colours of
a make-believe whiteness.”

Equating Sita with the women of Western mythologies—Eve, Medusa, Helen or a She-Prometheus, Usha Kishore in *Agnipariksha* (The Test of Fire) calls upon the women as 'daughters of Sita' to gather their strength to rise up and resist the atrocities perpetrated on them by the patriarchal world. The very test of fire that Sita was forced to undergo to prove her chastity, becomes curative for the empowered daughters of Sita as it purges the 'eons' of humiliation, degradation suffered by women in patriarchy and gives the woman freedom to 'find' herself in 'the fire of awakening'. In *Do Not Burn Me Fire*, Kishore prays for the freedom to “seek chequered immortality/ in silver goblets of bird song”—the freedom to be born again, happy, free and fulfilled:

“let me ride your
chariot again, O Dawn, into the
soft lap of pregnant Earth –
Earth, bear me yet again as
another golden grain of life –
Do not burn me, Fire,
I am made of ancient promises,
flowing out of cosmic rivers –”

Nishi Chawla's poem *Sita's Divinity* has Sita herself voicing her anguish at fixity. Burdened for ages with the stereotype of the ideal wife—the fixed image of the obedient, submissive, passive and dependent woman to be emulated as a norm, Sita feels the futility of her 'divine essence'; the irony of Sita's existence lies in her being an incarnation of Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth, sustenance and prosperity in the Hindu pantheon as well as the daughter of Vasundhara, the Earth Mother, yet she has no power over her own self or destiny. Existing as a Token woman, a mere construct of patriarchal normative processes, denied agency, liberty or choice, Sita remains forever fixed in meaningless routine rituals:

“The image that he creates of me,
is firm now, centuries have eroded.
I remain fixed,
undressing me is only a ritual.”

Compelled to be the bearer of patriarchal ideologies for eternity, Sita is transfixed in a pose: “I must/ be the ideal one...I must /embellish the truth about me.” Humiliated, degraded and forcibly silenced the male world has coerced Sita to live multiple fragmented, compartmentalized lives, slit up and scattered without coherence amidst all women so that a part of her ‘being reaches back to’ all women.

In *Should you take offence*, the preface to her second volume of poetry *Ms Militancy* (2010), Meena Kandasamy writes, “You are the repressed Ram from whom I run away repeatedly...my Ramayana is retold in three different ways...I work to not only get back at you, I actually fight to get back to myself.” Fighting against enslaving stereotypes that condition women to accept male hegemony and patriarchy, Kandasamy ‘slaughters’ the standard, patriarchal ‘set story’ of the mythological women to create empowering feminist, revisionist retellings that are militant in nature. Her women are autonomous, combative, aggressive, brave and ready to challenge all kinds of oppression. Kandasamy envisions a radical Sita—a Sita who “climbs on to a stranger’s lap...armed with lethal riddles.” Offering alternate possible readings of the epics so as to break the shackles of convention and lay claim to a shared narrative space that has been denied for so long in the socio-religious mores, Kandasamy presents her Sita as one of the first women who stepped across the patriarchal line of control, conversed with a stranger and “picked herself a random man.” In her poems, *Princess-in-exile* and *Random access man*, that tell the story of Sita from a feminist perspective, Kandasamy tries to imagine a scenario where Sita, dissatisfied with her husband’s sexual prowess, might have walked out of her own free will. Learning the language of love from her ‘random man’ Sita becomes “adept at walkouts, / she had perfected the vanishing act.” Demolishing the well-entrenched cultural construct of the passive, dependent, silent, selfless and asexual ideal woman, Kandasamy stresses Sita’s right to agency, liberty and freedom of speech through her extremist readings.

The contemporary South Asian women writers thus, as the above discussion amply shows, choose to transgress the dominant cultural paradigm in creative ways resisting the status quo in favour of a more egalitarian culture where patriarchal oppression ceases to exist and sexist oppression of women is no longer viable. These writers, through their creative re-workings of the Sita myth, at once posit their connectedness to the mythical woman as well as their alienation from the stereotypes of the ‘eternal woman’—silent, submissive, sacrificial and selfless—perpetuated by the patriarchal culture. The Sita who emerges from these feminist re-tellings is “far more assertive and passionate than the stereotype of the perfect wife who emerges from other Ramayanas that play down or omit those qualities”(Doniger 2011). The complexity of her character in these re-tellings not only counters the simplistic traditional portrayal of the ‘submissive, suffering Sita’ that has been a key element in shaping the lives of South Asian women for many centuries, but also affects Rama’s morally questionable actions like the killing of Vali, Sugariva’s brother and the monkey king of Kishkindha in an unfair battle and banishing of a pregnant Sita, that have troubled the South Asians throughout the long Ramayana tradition. In most of these contemporary

narratives Sita comes out as a real woman—a woman who is compassionate, sensitive, with a will of her own and the ability and determination to choose and shape her own life. These subversive re-tellings interrogate/erase Sita's identity as a Token Woman pervasive in the repressive patriarchal myths while simultaneously imagining a much more egalitarian and empowered identity for Sita that endorses alternate points of view, lending different/deviant connotations to traditional modes of understanding. The writings of the South Asian women thus perform as creative rewrites, fluid, irreverent and deviant (sub)versions which they build into the gaps and absences, the fissures in the traditional male narratives of power thus not only questioning conventionally accepted ideas and norms, but also creating space for the silent voices of the women to be heard.

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* Translations of Bengali writings are by the author of this paper except the quote from Mallika Sengupta's Sitayana that has been translated by Sanjukta Dasgupta and published in Malashree Lal & Namita Gokhale (eds.) In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology, Penguin Books, New Delhi, India, 2009.

The logo for the International Association of Agricultural Librarians and Documentalists (iafor) is centered on the page. It consists of the lowercase letters 'iafor' in a light blue, sans-serif font. The text is enclosed within a large, faint, light blue circular arc that is partially obscured by a larger, semi-transparent red arc that also surrounds the text.

