

TO BE OR NOT TO BE SITA: READING THE APPROPRIATION OF MYTH IN LAJJA

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Abstract

Myths are believed to be stories - stories that are more often sacred and whose origins are not known. There are myths of creations; there are myths of gods and goddesses, and there are myths that explain various natural processes. Myths offer explanation for the unknown. Myths could also be taken as beliefs - beliefs that still explain tradition and custom. The Hindus still consider the Ganges to be holy because it descended from Lord Shiva's hair. It is arguable whether myths are true stories or not - members of a society that are closely bound by common beliefs believe myths to be true. Its ability to articulate the existential need for identity endows myth with such pervasive power that makes them still relevant to us today. This paper with special focus on movie Lajja, focusses on reading the appropriation of myth in Lajja.

Keywords: Sita, Lajja, Hindi movie, cinema, Lajja movie, myth

Myth has remained a guiding ideology for many cultures to this day. There are various myths which still find relevance in contemporary times. *Lajja* (2001), a film directed by Rajkumar Santoshi, is a film whose narrative centres on the plight of women in patriarchal societies of India. The exemplary characters in the movie are – Vaidehi (Manisha Koirala), Maithali (played by Mahiman Chaudhury), Janaki (played by Madhuri Dixit), and Ramdulhari (Rekha). The names of all the four characters are variants of Sita, the epitome of virtue. This movie challenges the stereotypes of women constructed by patriarchal societies. Societies establish ideals by propagation and perpetuation of certain social constructs. And myth becomes one of the vehicles to justify such perpetuation of social ideals. Thus tradition continues. In the movie *Lajja*, all four women are depicted to be exercising freedom of will at one point of time or the other. Vaidehi no longer is happy with her abusive and unfaithful husband. She rejects remaining the doll wife anymore. When she rebels against her husband she is sent away by her husband. Maithali refuses to get married to her long time sweetheart when her father was harassed for dowry. She banishes her husband-to-be from the marriage hall. Janaki is another character who is not fettered by traditional norms. Undeterred by the social stigma attached to theatre and dance, Janaki is a popular theatre actress. She is an object of desire, constantly under the lustful gaze of Puroshottam, the theatre director. When she refuses to be his sex object, Puroshottam schemes for ways to ensnare her. Ramdulhari is an educated midwife. She fights against oppressive male characters like Virendra (played by Gulshan Grover) and Gajendra (Danny Denzongpa). These two male characters represent patriarchal forces of feudal society in India. Though this movie was not successful commercially, it remains one of the critically acclaimed movies for its focus on women oppression. The four female characters refuse to conform themselves to the ideal image of Sita. It is the image of the enduring, loyal, and chaste Sita that still haunts the women of India. Every parent grooms their daughter to be like Sita. So, what is it like to be Sita? Sita has an overpowering presence in Literature, relevant across time and space as the herald of the Hindu culture. Aspects of her character has been emphasised to influence Indian womanhood. Among other mythological figures, the overbearing image of Sita and its significance in society still remains persistent in the psyche of Indian society. Indian culture has appropriated the myth of Sita and her ordeals to their advantage: to keep women bound by various norms and ideologies. However, there is a binary view regarding the portrayal of Sita–Sita as the demure, restrained and submissive wife; and the other, Sita as a fierce woman with a sense of pride and duty who rejects life with Ram after her banishment.

Sita is often idealised as the embodiment of virtues – a *pati vrata*. She is portrayed as the ideal wife - enduring, loyal, and obedient, an example to be emulated by all Hindu women. Sita obediently followed her husband into exile, upheld her chastity when abducted by Ravana and unquestioningly underwent the “Agnipariksha” when doubts were raised regarding her chastity. So what it means to be an ideal wife – accommodating, chaste, obedient – is to be powerless. Men, in contrast, prove their mettle by showing their power – especially in their relation with women. Ravana seeks revenge against Rama by abducting his wife. There are subtle hints in the story that tends reader to think that “Sita spelled her own doom.” Sita erred by crossing the Lakshman Rekha, an act that left her tainted. Had she stayed within the bounds set by her male protectors, she would have been safe.

In generic terms, Ramayana's fundamental theme is the glorious win of good over evil, where the righteous, benevolent, kind-hearted Rama braves all odds to destroy Ravana, the demon. However, beneath this idealism, are embedded narratives spurned by power politics and gender relations. Sita was required to prove her chastity while assigning no reciprocal obligations from the male counterparts. Dashratha married multiple times in the mythology; also Rama who stayed separated from his wife was never questioned to prove his purity. In one version of the myth, it is said that Ravana was present at Sita's Swayamvar, where he was cheated of his chance to marry Sita. His abduction of Sita is not revenge against her, but Rama. It is a battle of power-men against men, the woman being the pawn. In this sense, Sita's experiences render her body a battlefield for men.¹ Critics have given their opinions regarding the status of Sita in Ramayana. Uma Chakravati in her article, “The Development of Sita myth: A case study of Women in Myth and Literature,” states that mythology and classified texts have been the preserve of men and that they have projected through these myths and myths, the stereotype of the ideal women as they see her.² But how often have we heard of the empowered Sita, who rejected Rama's demand for a second “Agnipriksha,” and chose her abode inside the realm of her Mother Earth. This act of rejection has been interpreted as the ultimate mark of dignity, which shatters the image of Sita as a compliant, meek wife.³ She is shown as a woman who is liberated and independent. She brings up her two sons-Luv and Kusha-without the Father's name. She remains persevering and did not go back to her husband. Sita reached this level of consciousness because she never saw herself as the victim.³ Although unhappy and heart-broken, Sita certainly was not a

¹Aditi Razdan, Sita's story: the Ramayana's iconographic influence on Hindu womanhood.

²ibid

³Anju Bhargava, Sitayanam: A woman's Journey of Strength.

docile character. She understood Rama's predicament as a husband and a king, and rove above the situation. When her two sons were accepted as the future heirs, she had won. Without undergoing a second "Agnipariksha," she proved herself publicly.

Various episodes in the lives of the four women in the movie *Lajja* could be aligned with various episodes of Sita's life. Vaidehi's self choice of marriage parallels to Sita who makes a choice of Rama. Ramdulhari who was raped and burnt by the patriarchs of the village for standing up against them parallels the fire ordeal that Sita had to go through to prove her single-mindedness and chastity. Janaki was abandoned by Manish (her beloved) for his mind was poisoned by Purushottam that it is not his child. This incident is similar to the suspicion that was aroused in the mind of Rama by his people. And finally, the abandonment of Vaidehi by her husband Raghuvveer is similar to the banishment of Sita on a second exile by Rama. But all the four women in this movie refused to conform to the virtues like endurance, obedience, and chastity that were highly glorified by Indian culture to align women images to that of Sita.

What is of interesting significance in this movie is the refusal by Janaki to go undergo the fire ordeal-Agni pariksha-while enacting the role of Sita on stage. Janaki's act of defiance could be seen as an articulation of the repressed voices that ask "Why only Sita?" In an inebriated state she challenges the Agni pariksha that chastises Sita. She questions the normative custom of society why woman and her chastity is always the subject of question; and why women should always be the vehicle of chastity, and by extension, culture. In this way the movie, through Janaki, challenges how patriarchy appropriates the myth of Sita's ordeal to their advantage to keep women in suppression. The myth of Sita has continually been used to justify the creation of ideal images of women.

As is uncommon of any society wherein images of deviant (nonconforming) women are reconfigured as devils, evils, or witches, Indian culture is no exception. In Indian context is the myth of Churail, an evil spirit that is transposed from the soul of women who died at child birth. According to this myth, Churail often haunts pregnant women and even infants. Therefore there is a tendency in India to associate deviant and rebellious women with Churail. Such stigmatization is one way of distancing the deviant women from the so-called ideal women. Thus such name-branding serves as one way of alienating and ostracizing women who are deviant so that they could be redeemed. In *Lajja*, Janaki was pregnant with Manish's child, and the fact that she outright refused to take the 'Agni pariksha' on stage was used as a symptom of her malicious nature – thus her association with Churail. Her refusal to be like Sita ensues a public condemnation. She chose not to Be Sita therefore she was condemned by the society and her character was vandalised. Her image was ossified as that of a Churail. A mob literally pounced on her and branded her as mentally deranged. She was assaulted physically as though she were a witch, and outside the theatre was a scene of witch hunting going on. This scene sends out the social message: what deadly consequence awaits those who dare.

The Victorian myths of 'the angel in the house' and 'the devil in the flesh'⁴ were the two extremes of the predicament that governed women's role in Victorian society. A woman was incorporated in the patriarchal set-up, if she identified with authority. If she had tried to deviate from the path laid down for her by patriarchy, she was labeled as 'mad'. Her degradation was sheltered with security and secrecy by

locking her up in the attic. Since Janaki has refused to be the 'angel', 'the ideal Sita', she has become a bad example of womanhood, her presence in the mainstream can corrupt other women. She has to be marginalized and cut off from the society on the ground that her rebellion is an act of madness. This is a strategy that the age old patriarchy uses to maintain the hierarchal system which confines women as the 'other' under the protection of men. If we go a step back in the history of England to the Elizabeth era, the system was such that it made sure the women were dependent on men in every epoch of their lives. Few women, belonging to noble families were allowed the privilege of an education; however they were never allowed to go to the Universities or to go for professional career like law, medicine or politics. Their education was limited to the study of languages-Latin, Greek which were taught by a private tutor. Women of common families never received formal education, but were rather educated to run their own home. All Elizabethans women were expected to be married, with few rights, they were expected to serve and obey men. Family titles were always passed on to sons, as was any woman or land. Poor women could only hope to be protected by men.

Belief in witches and witchcraft were at its height during the Elizabethan period. People blamed unpleasant events such as the BLACK DEATH, crop failures, bad harvests and death of animals to be the handiworks of witches. And these witches were those women who deviated from the paradigm of femininity constructed by men to be precise, "witches" were those poor helpless women who were not under the protection of men, single women or widows who had an independent identity. The deviation was seen as an act of disobedience and since disobedience was thought of by society as a crime against religion, these unfortunate women were hunted and burdened as heretics. The immolation of Ramdulhari in the movie can be read as a metaphorical representation of the ostracized women as witches. In 15th century Europe, the Catholic Church included in its definition of witchcraft, women with knowledge of herbs for medical purpose. However farfetched it may seem, Ramdulhari's profession as mid- wife makes the parallel implicit. The parallel is strengthened by her stand as a feminist and her goal to change women's role in society. Her quest is extraordinary but it is as vulnerable, her society in which female infanticide is still a prominent practice is no less bias than the Elizabethan society, in which the life and death of women is decided by the men. Her efforts to cross the 'lakshman rekha' of patriarchy is finally halted, her punishment comes in the form of her rape and immolation, overtly a consequence of her son's audacity to cross class barriers.

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⁴ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *Madwoman in the attic*.