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# WHEN SITA SPEAKS PALI AND DRAUPADI TAMIL: THE POLITICS OF REGIONAL REPRESENTATIONS

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*Abstract: Epic retellings are instrumental in liberating a cultural phase from the normalcies of a bygone era by destructing discourses of the past by constructing new discourses. By challenging, subverting or negating the knowledge system of yester years manifested through the myths and legends of the cultural group, modern writers give new cultural colouring to the tales once told, images once created, representations once fashioned and knowledge once established. This paper attempts to trace out the diverse representations of Sita and Draupadi shaped by different socio-cultural and spatio-temporal currents. Regional versions of the Ramayana are Sitayanas in spirit and content for such representations offer a counter narrative to the much acclaimed patriarchal rendering of Valmiki Sita. The regional retellings the Mahabharata are Draupadi Mahabharata ,of the goddess of vengeance, who relentlessly fought for her space negating all the patronymic names, declaring herself as the queen of the palace of illusion.*

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His-story tells that man always had a fascination for stories. Even when our race was nomadic, we eased our tiring days of labour with the soothing balm of stories, stories of Gods, goddesses, the wicked and the virtuous, coloured by the taste and culture of our times. Being a group overawed by the magnificence of nature, our race framed stories where nature expressed its omniscience and omnipotence. Later, as time passed by, nature got replaced by culture and the cultured human being became the omnipotent. This transit paved way for the birth of epics, where his-story got narrated with sound and fury. Whether it is *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*, *The Ramayana* or *The Mahabharata*, the treatment of theme remained same, projecting the flawed but omniscient human being.

Literature in general and epic in particular are the products of the culture to which it belongs, since literary representations are shaped by culture and history. Culture

is often perceived as the systems of knowledge shared by a relatively large group of people. It is the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time and space acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving. Often these shared experiences enter the collective unconscious of the group as myths and reincarnate time to time by way of various narratives, retellings or re-creations and continue dominating the psyche of the generations to come. Down the ages these re-creations get coloured, for narration is always shaped by the socio-cultural, and spatio-temporal framework. To put it in Foucauldian terminology, "at any given period in a given domain, there are substantial constraints on how people are able to think" (Gutting 32). There is a system of utterability or law of what can be said. This utterability frames representation and the do's and don'ts of culture, episteme, re-frame representation thereby triggering retelling.

The origin of the practice of retelling familiar or classical tales can be traced back to the days of ancient Greeks, whose feast of Dionysus occasioned retelling of classical tragedies and comedies. The Dionysia was a great carnival in ancient Athens, a tribute to Dionysus, the God of wine and merry making. The celebrated event of the festival was the theatrical performance of classical tragedies and comedies. Being the god of rebirth and revival, retelling of tragedies and comedies were made mandatory at the festival. Scholars are of the opinion that the Greek audience preferred to see popular or well-known plays re-staged, altered or revived, rather than financially assisting new plays of debatable quality. The revivals also presented a nostalgia for the glory of Athens.

Retelling is a comparatively popular genre. Retelling an epic means to pick that tale out of its frame and putting a different spin on it. Often retellings retain the unembellished frame of the original tale, but drape it with something different, keeping the main plot intact making everything else about it different. What is unique about retellings is that, though it deviates from the original, the reader can still identify the tale being retold.

The genre of Fairy Tale retelling has got a sub-genre called "Fractured Fairy Tales" ("Once upon A Time...We Changed the Entire story"). In fractured fairy tales, the same story is either retold through the perspective of a different character or a continuation of the same tale is offered. This concept of fractured fairy tales can be made applicable to the retelling of epic narratives. Retelling of epics also adopt the same methodology, ie either offers a re-reading by providing

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an altered point of view or offers a continuation of the original tale, revealing what happened thereafter.

The primary difference between the original tale and a retelling is the difference in plot points. It offers the reader a chance to identify the original tale with minor or major alterations. Sometimes the plot remains same with different characters. There are instances where characters are retained but placed in a different plot structure. Many a times, the retellings which focus on characterization offer refined, complex and fully realized characters with whom the reader of the present can identify more intensely than their counterparts in the traditional tales. The retold tales are as good as the original except some twists, which make them unique and exciting. The twists offered are the results of a question posed by readers of today, what if?

Retelling of epic narratives can be viewed as a sub-genre of the much talked about resistant writing. Retelling, as a genre is devised to read the much read and much told epic stories with an improved perception. And in that attempt these canonical texts, with their often-acknowledged patriarchal bias and marginalization of the subaltern, are interrogated for their silencing of certain voices, that of women, avarnas and the rakshasa. This silencing is justified as a means to design and perpetuate the moral codes of the respective societies.

Retellings on *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have been a part of Indian literary tradition, for they often unfurl newer and newer interpretations, and remain there as a colossal body of literature which hasn't yet revealed what it has to say.

Consequently, reading a cultural historical text like the *Mahabharata* is not a simple mechanical interconnection between readers and the text; instead, it is a dynamic interaction between individual and cultural histories. Individuals select certain aspects of their lives and the world around them to write their life stories and likewise they select certain aspects of the epic to rewrite the story. (Lakshmi 5)

Most of the retellings of *Mahabharata* fall under the category of perspective retelling where the epic tale is retold through the eyes of those who are often silenced or mis-represented. Such retellings have provided Sita, Mandodari, Shurpanaka, Urmila, Karna, Draupadi, Druyodhana, Bhima, Urvi a voice to retell the epic tale from their perspectives.

Such retellings are also important reminders of how malleable old stories are, especially in a country as culturally and socially diverse as India. As you travel from one region to another, plot specifics vary, as do people's perceptions of different characters. Duryodhana might be the villain-in-chief in any conventional version of the *Mahabharata*, but there are temples in Kerala and Uttaranchal where he is worshipped as a just ruler. And not all *Mahabharata* traditions subscribe to a misty-eyed view of the Pandavas as heroes. Tribal communities who revere Ekalavya as a folk-hero — cruelly denied the status of the world's greatest archer — are likely to think of Arjuna and Drona as privileged schemers ( Arjun Singh).

In India, folklore and mythology are not only a thing of academic interest, but also a factor of contemporary relevance, without the understanding of which the complexities of the contemporary Indian way of thinking, can be comprehend. The *Ramayana* has been made into many counter narratives in diverse social locations. Stressing the plurality of *Ramayana* narratives Romila Thapar writes “the *Ramayana* does not belong to any one moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places, even within its own history in the Indian subcontinent”. Each rendering of the *Ramayana* has its own manifestation at every historical situation. “Each of the versions is the cultural expression of a particular historical time. Every single version provides a plethora of information about the historical events of a particular society. The variations and interpretations incorporated into the mainstream meta narratives serve cultural and religious purposes” (Gangatharam et al. 878-79).

The story of Rama, Ramakatha, initially was a chronicle preserved against the pillages of time by the power of memory. In the course of time it yielded to changes, modifications and exaggerations. The *Valmiki Ramayana* of yester years was never a sacred book, neither an Ithihasa nor a discourse on Dharmic principles. It was only a Kavya, Adi Kavya, as it is popularly titled, which endured significant changes with the passage of time to become an Epic or an Ithihasa. With the emergence of the Cult of Rama in the medieval age, the kavya turned Ithihasa got refashioned as a sanctified discourse.

A K Ramanujan in his essay “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation” narrates a story where Hanuman went into the nether world in search of Rama's ring which fell on to the ground and latter disappeared. The quest of Hanuman ended seeing a platter full of signet rings with the name Rama. Hanuman asked the king of the nether world on how happened this

to which he replied "[t]here have been as many Ramas as there are rings on this platter. When you return to earth, you will not find Rama" (24). So it will not be wrong to state that there are as many *Ramayanas* as there are writers attempted to re-present the life of the Vishnu incarnate.

As applicable to every other piece of writing, every retelling of *Ramayana* is coloured, depending on the cultural context, attitudes and comprehensive capability of to whom it is narrated. The story of Rama, often of Sita and the entourage of a good number of marginalized and minor characters, got newer and improved representations. Socio- economic, gendered, generic, and tonal multiplicities from tragic to commonplace, lofty to farce, elevated to colloquial are found in the writings of people belonging to the high, middle and low castes, in the works of male, female writers and the songs of the tribals.

The cultural uses of the *Ramayana* are manifold and ever changing. Particular groups at particular times in history develop an elective affinity for specific characters. Valmiki currently attracts the affection of certain *jatis* of sanitation workers, Sita has traditionally elicited the empathy of long-suffering wives, and the proponents of a separate Tamil state have identified with Ravana. Clearly, the significance of the *Ramayana* goes beyond specific texts to encompass twin processes that lie at the heart of culture. Thus some tellings of the *Ramayana* affirm the hierarchy found in social, political, and religious relations, while other tellings contest that hierarchy. (Richman 14-15)

Retelling an epic means to bring it out from its frame and offering a different perception. Often retellings maintain the unadorned structure of the original tale, but decorate it with something unique, keeping the main plot intact making everything else about it different. The retold tales are as good as the original except some twists which make them unique and exciting. The twists offered are the results of a question posed by readers of today, what if ?. Retelling of epics can fall under two categories; "one where the old texts are reproduced with modifications but the ideology or the value system upheld by the source texts is adhered to....In the second category, the old source is adopted in order to ridicule or defy the value system suggested by it. In other words, it parodies the old text". (Mulla 1)

Most of the mainstream *Ramayana* stories including Valmiki *Ramayana* are patriarchal rendering of Ramakatha, marginalizing women, the classless and the commoner. Out of the raw material supplied by the meta narrative every society breeds its own version of literary representations. Using the same raw materials of the given period in history socio cultural interactions, by projecting certain events

and ignoring the rest, create counter narratives. Most of the counter narratives or regional narratives of *Ramayana* are against the dominant patriarchal Sanskrit *Ramayana*.

The Ramakatha versions framed by the unorthodox sects of Buddhist and Jains are devised to challenge the mainstream Brahmanical traditions of Valmiki. According to Buddhist version, Rama is Rama-Pandita meaning the wise one, Lakshmana is Prince Lakkhaṇa, the lucky one and Sita, the sister of Rāma, Lakshmana and daughter of Dasaratha. Unlike the canonical Sanskrit rendering, Rama and Lakshmana are sent to the forest for twelve years by Dasaratha to protect them from the evil plots of their step mother. Lady Sita insisted on following her brothers to the forest. The trio lived in a hermitage for 12 years. Upon the death of Dasaratha, the king of Benares, the trio returned and Rama-Pandita was crowned as the king and Lady Sita, his queen consort. The abduction of war and the sub plot of Ravana is ignored in the Buddhist version. The narrative is in Pali as against the scholarly Sanskrit. Some argue that the Buddhist rendering pre-dates *Valmiki Ramayana*.

The Jain tradition of Ramakatha places Ravana as the hero, to offer a more aggressive counter narrative. It is no wonder that the Jain rendering of the *Ramayana* story is called Pratipuranas, meaning counter/anti purana. The Jain version of *Ramayana* hardly extols the Hindu values and moves on a strong conviction that it is the Brahmanical patriarchal politics which maligned Ravana. Vimalasuri's Paumacharyam written in Prakrit challenges the Brahmanical rendering of the Ramakatha, and dismisses the vilifying statements of Valmiki version as misinterpretation. In the story, Ravana is epitomized as a Jain monk who acquired power through his penance and austerities and is one among the Sixty-Three salakapurusas of the Jain tradition who has promised not to touch any unwilling women. But a prophesy falls on him saying that he will be killed through a woman, Sita. Sita's fire ordeal is omitted in Vimalasuri's narrative instead she renounces the world and embraces Jainism. The story declares that Hanuman is not a monkey but the leader of a clan with the monkey emblem on its standard. The story concludes by making a remark that all characters in the tale embraced Jainism. In Sanghadasa Gani's Vasudevahindi version of *Ramayana*, Sita is born to Ramana and Mandodari. "It was predicted that the first child of Mandodari would be the cause of annihilation of her family. Ramana decided to abandon the first child...Mandodari gave birth to a daughter who was put in a jewel box...he placed it in front of a plough in a park-ground and informed Janaka that the girl had sprung from a furrow"( Shash 63-64)

The representation of Sita in the folk songs of Telugu women is of a definite feminine colouring and Velcheru Narayana Rao labels the folk renderings of *Ramayana* as Sitayanas. Though the Upper caste men in Andhra Pradesh view

*Valmiki Ramayana* as authoritative the Telugu Brahmin women favour their own versions. These songs do not mention many of the familiar *Ramayana* events. Instead, the women's songs are woven around Sita, her birth, marriage, her journey to her in laws, the games she played with Rama, Lava and Kusa. Even the *Ritambhara* in the women's songs pertain to more domestic matters, in which women are prominent.

Jatsam songs sung by the Bhojpuri speaking peasant women often represent their complete identification with Sita. Sita's trial by fire is a constant and recurring motif in these songs. Like Sita, the heroines of these songs are often ordered to produce proof for their chastity. Return to mother earth or to surrender to the elements like fire are the choices these heroines are often left with. Though the motif ignites a fierce feminine image, empathy with Sita is the temperament they share.

There are more than fifty version of *Ramayana* in Oriya literature which present two distinguished representations of Sita; as a long-suffering queen and as a vivacious and innovative woman. By virtue of its very strong local colouring, the *Jagmohan Ramayana* departs from the Sanskrit rendering. Oriya women have identified Sita as the epitome of womanhood, *Grihalakshmi*, the embodiment of femininity, beauty, purity and the unfailing companion of her husband. "...Balarama Dasa's Sita may appear as a glorious victim because of her blind love for her husband even when she knows that Rama was brutally unfair to her in asking her to undergo the chastity test twice in public interest" (Das 181). Sarala Das's *Vilanka Ramayana* presents Sita as a warrior queen who kills the tyrant Vilanka.

In many of Marathi, Bengali folk renderings of the *Ramayana*, Sita is an essential orphan. She represents and bears the sense of rootlessness and loneliness women, especially rural women face. They are left to suffer with no one to listen to. The commonest epithet for Sita in Bengali versions is *janam-dukhini*, the one born to suffer. In a Marathi folk song, she, Sitabai, as addressed, asks "[w]hat kind of a woman am I? I was given away to Rama when I was five years old. What sort of a mother's love have I got? Dear Plum tree, dear Babul tree, Sita is telling you the story of her life. Please listen" (Sen 131). The girl child as an essential orphan is not a farfetched concept as far as Marathi Bengali culture is concerned and her ever alienated self is projected through these songs to voice the insecurity these women experience.

In the Ramains of Himachal Pradesh, Sita is a popular figure. Sita, Janaki are common names among the Pahari people. The mountain lass Sita is represented in different costumes, habits and names in these versions, as different districts in Himachal Pradesh have different versions of *Ramayana*. Dressed in chola or ghaghra, she argues with Lakshmana, rebukes Rama for playing dice while the

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golden deer destroys her kitchen garden, refuses to go and fetch water unless a new cloth is offered. In these tales Sita is the agency who lets herself to be abducted and is not overshadowed by Rama. In Mahasuvi Ramain, Sita is born to Ravana and Damodari. Some tales in the hills mark her culinary skills as the reason for her abduction. Ravana perceives her as an ideal wife and homemaker and abducts her for she cooks well. This tale is sprung from the culture of the hills for these skills are highly valued there.

These counter *Ramayanas* questioned the dominant narrative of *Valmiki Ramayana*. Jain and Thai version of the tale focus on Ravana, his genealogy and exploit. *Adbhuta Ramayana*, Kannada and Telugu Folk tales focus on Sita, her birth, marriage and the ordeals she faces as the ideal wife. These counter retellings are attempts to destabilise the notion of the binary, the psychological divide spawned between man and woman, hero and villain, higher and the lower.

In the first book of the *Ramayana*, Valmiki states that it is the story of Sita. "A man who always fulfilled his vows, he [Valmiki] taught them the whole of this great poem, the *Ramayana*, which is the tale of Sita and the slaying of Paulastya [Ravana]" (Sheth). That means, *Ramayana* has to be *Sitayana*, for she being one of the delineating figures of Indian womanhood. So much and so long has been written about Janaki but there is no single version of her story. If "[t]here have been as many Ramas as there are rings on this platter" there has to be as many Sitas as there are Ramas and as many *Sitayanas* as there are *Ramayanas*.

Sita has been there, in the mass consciousness of our subcontinent, for very long time. She has been there since the beginning of or timeless history, in the different versions and recensions of the *Ramayana*, written or recited, and never forgotten. ... she is there in song, in poetry, in the tears Indian women have been shedding through generations as they tread the Lakshmana Rekhas that barricade their lives.... (Gokhale, XIII-XIV)

In the many versions of *Ramayana*, which is the celebration of monogamous love as opposed to the polygamous practice of the *Mahabharata*, Sita is hardly presented as deviating from her undaunted love and loyalty to her husband and is often presented as doing everything possible to uphold the patriarchal virtues. "Sita was not only an immortal daughter of the earth.... She was also intensely human, although her vulnerabilities are lost in the accretions of myth and reverence. But Indian myth is never static, it is constantly in the process of reinterpreting and revalidating itself, and the society that it defines"(Gokhale XVII). It would not be wrong under the contemporary set of universal values, to perceive a Sita who is reluctant to return to mother earth.

"The *Mahabharata* has been read, critiqued, interpreted, sung, narrated, danced to, speculated on and theorized about for epochs now...Studies focusing on individual characters are more popular in recent scholarships, and these retell the epic from the point of view of one of its heroines, thus reclaiming female agency" (Anitha Singh ). Draupadi, the daughter of King Drupada, Panchali, Krisna, Yajnaseni the fire born, is admired as the most beautiful of all women in Indian mythology and one of the most re visited character too. The attempts at revisiting Draupadi in Indian literature has always been productive and controversial, for she has been etched in the Indian cultural psyche as an assertive, emphatic, ambiguous character and thereby complex. Whatever be the cultural context, Draupadi has often been presented as independent, learned, vengeful, proud and ravishing, though she, the Ayonija, bore a patronymic name.

In the Tamil tradition, Draupadi is worshipped as a goddess. The representation of this heroine of Vyasa in the Tamil regional retellings like Panchali *Shapatam* by Subramanya Bharatiyar and stage/ street performances which include theru *koothu* and Bharata *koothu*, contributed to her deification in the Tamil culture. "Professor R. Srinivasan, in his introduction to *Nallapillai Bharatam*, has opined that it is the Draupadi cult which is responsible for the rapid spread of *Mahabharata*, especially in the narrative and the performative mode"(Different Strokes: Women in the Tamil *Mahabharatas*).

The story of Draupadi is retold across Tamil Nadu during the festival of Draupadi Amman celebrating her transformation from a Sati who is left to fend for herself to an avenging goddess who cannot be pacified by nothing other than the blood of her abusers. The Draupadi cult folk renderings focus on her representation as Vira Panchali, who defeats *Malaiyukacuran*. She is even identified with the cannibalistic demon. "To put it simply, Draupadi is a cannibal herself.../ The Telugu account...widely known and derived from Telugu *Mahabharata*, locates the revelation of Draupadi's cannibalism prior to the forest exile.( Hildebeitel 290) "She is also Veera Panchali, who roamed the jungles at night as a demon feasting on animals, until spotted one day by Bheema, who promises to keep her reality a secret if she in turn swore to protect the Pandavas"(Shoba).

In the Gingee region, Draupadi is celebrated as the mother goddess. In the "invocatory songs to Draupadi the lady who resides in Gingee", Pucari sings of "...Draupadi's 'untouchability'- as already referred to in relation to her virginity, and suggesting not only purity but potentially destructive violence- in connection with her identity as the goddess (or mother) of fire.... (Hildebeitel 11). She is hailed as the protector of the five Pandavas and the Upapandavas, negating the canonical representation of Draupadi as a hapless woman. "For the

Pandavas who went to the forest, you were the helpmate... for the twelve years you protected them at your side" (7).

The Matriarchal, polyandrous and martial communities of the hill regions of Kannada deify Veer Panchali. Yakshagana performance of the Kannada folk theatre captures the valorous spirit of Draupadi, carrying bow and arrow entering the space stereotypically reserved for men. In this theatrical art form, she is the incarnation of the fierce goddess Chandi. She partakes in Kurukshethra saves the Pandavas and in no measure inferior to Arjun and Bheem "...Draupadi Pratapa, renders centrality to Draupadi, celebrating her valour and courage as a woman. The play depicts Draupadi as an incarnation of the goddess Chandi; as such, it lauds the power of "Shakti" and of the warrior goddess" (Misra 24-25).

In some of the folk renditions of the *Mahabharata* Draupadi is presented as a character with strong sexuality, having sexual relationship outside a polyandrous marriage. Bheel *Mahabharata* is one such rendering by the Bhil people of the Western Deccan region, where the snake King Visaka, who is entranced by the beauty of Draupadi, is presented as defeating Arjuna for Draupadi. As per this folk rendition Draupadi accepted the snake king as her sexual partner for some time. This rendering can be treated as coloured because Bhils love and worship Visaka the snake god and this tale was added by the Bhils to show the power of the snake god. In the Buddhist version *Kuāla Jataka*, Draupadi, who is addressed by the name *Ka ha* is presented as having sexual relationship with the hunch back.

Then the Great Being, with the knowledge of one who remembers his former births, making Puāamukha a personal witness, related a circumstance seen in a former existence, connected with the faults of women.... "Friend Puāamukha, I have seen Ka hā, her that had a double parentage and five husbands, and whose affection was set upon a sixth man, a headless, crippled dwarf." (*Kuāla-Jataka* No. 536)

"Draupadi has been subject to varied kinds of storytelling and interpretations. She has been defined as 'an arrogant opinionated, selfish, untrustworthy young woman, and an inveterate troublemaker throughout her life' and held responsible for the devastations of the Kurukshethra war" (Singh "Feminism and Folk Epic"). In The canonical patriarchal rendering of the *Mahabharata*, the story of Draupadi is confined just to Draupadi Swayamvaram and Draupadi *vasthrakshepa*. However fierce was she, Draupadi of the epic is often remembered as the damsel in distress who was won by five brothers and saved by Krishna during her public humiliation. but the regional retellings of the story of Draupadi showcases the trajectory of Draupadi's journey from a damsel in distress to the goddess of vengeance, who relentlessly fought for her space and negating all the patronymic names associated with her, declaring herself as the queen of the Palace of illusion.

The analysis of various regional versions of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* shows how cultural specifications of a period in history initiates changes in literary representations. The regional retellings of the epic tales are often shaped by the value system of the particular culture and in turn influence the system since they are registered in the memory of the people and are constantly evoked. Also, these narratives naturally tend to exalt women, especially if the society or the community has matrilineal or polyandrous ties. "The heroine in the folk versions of the epic is mostly more controlling and commanding than in the classical variants of the same epic" (Singh, "Feminism and Folk Epic"). The centrality of women in the narratives suggests the centrality of women within the social matrix of the region or the community by which the story is shaped and to whom the tale is told.

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