

AMPLIFYING WOMEN'S NARRATIVES: ROLE OF SITA SONGS IN EXPRESSING FEMALE EXPERIENCES

OJASWITA SHARMA

Assistant Professor of Sociology, Chunaram Govinda Memorial Government College, Manbazar-II, West Bengal

Abstract: Anthropologists have explored diverse avenues in their quest to comprehend the complexities of social life. One such avenue involves delving into oral traditions, which offer valuable insights into the cultural practices, beliefs, and narratives of communities passed down through generations. This article looks into the folk songs of women in North India, focusing on their engagement with Sita and themes of the Ramayana, a central narrative in their cultural milieu. While these women absorb the tales of Ram and Sita as part of their cultural upbringing, their songs serve as a platform for multifaceted expression and social reflection. Through these songs, they assert their cultural identity and find a means to voice their experiences within their cultural framework.

Keywords: Folksongs, North India, Ramayana, Sita Mangal, Culture

INTRODUCTION

Research on folk songs sung by women has demonstrated that female voices often challenge patriarchal norms within society (Gold and Raheja 1994; Trawick 1990). Trawick (1990) explores how women from untouchable castes use songs to critique the caste system prevalent in society. Similarly, Gold and Raheja (1994) argue that patriarchal societies often portray women in dichotomous terms, either as nurturing mothers or seductive temptresses (Bennett 1983; Hershman 1977; O'Flaherty 1980), a perception countered by the songs of women in Rajasthan, which celebrate female sexuality alongside their reproductive capabilities (Gold and Raheja 1994). This article aims to analyze the portrayal of the mythological figure Sita in North Indian women's songs, examining how women from diverse social backgrounds utilize her character to offer critical commentary on societal norms. Drawing on Das' (1998) interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophy of "culture as capability," the article argues that women appropriate the figure of Sita through various perspectives, highlighting the dynamic nature of cultural narratives (Das 1998: 171). Methodologically, the study employs content analysis of songs featuring Sita as the central character to investigate how women interpret and express themselves within different social contexts.

VARIED WAYS OF VIEWING SITA

Kishwar (2000) emphasizes the significant role that Sita plays in the lives of Indian women, portraying her as an exemplary wife who fulfills her duties with unwavering love and loyalty to her husband, Ram. According to Kishwar (2000), women interpret Sita's devotion to Ram not as subjugation but as the fulfillment of her wifely duty, viewing her trial by fire, as a test of her integrity rather than an act of defiance. This study underscores the reverence that Indian women hold for Sita and sheds light on why she is often depicted as the central figure in women's songs. Interestingly, Jassal (2012) found during fieldwork that women rarely compare themselves to Sita as a divine figure, recognizing the vast disparity between themselves and a deity. Instead, they identify with Sita's various roles and experiences as a new bride, a troubled wife, and a sacrificial woman, often humanizing her character by portraying her emotions and struggles as relatable to

ordinary women. In North India, Sita is perceived in two distinct ways: as a divine goddess to be revered and respected; and as a relatable figure who faces the same challenges and hardships as mortal women. It is this humanized version of Sita that resonates with women, leading them to claim and identify with her character in their songs and narratives. Das (1998) challenges the conventional anthropological view of drawing on Wittgenstein's concept of "culture as capability," she critiques the notion of culture as merely adhering to a set of normative rules and procedures within anthropology (Das 1998: 174). Instead, Das argues that individuals not only learn about culture but also creatively engage with it to express themselves, thereby becoming active contributors to cultural enrichment. Building on this perspective, this article contends that North Indian women, while learning about the Ramayana and the story of Ram and Sita as part of their cultural heritage, use songs as a medium to mobilize these characters for diverse expressions and reflections on social life. Through this process, they assert their cultural identity by finding their voice within it.

DIFFERENT SONGS ON SITA

(1)

This is one of the many songs sung by North Indian with *Sita* as the protagonist.

Anaganā me ratulī palangiyā
Obariya mein dasaveli ho
E sāsū, nānhen vidhi likhle lilār
Kais eke sejiā dasabi ho
Ram sūtele, Sita jāgeli
Beniyā dolāveli ho
Ai Sita, Kāhe uthelu tu karvatiyā
Nīndariyo nāhi avela ho
Nāhin ham pet bhari khainī
Nīndariya bhari sovelī ho
Ai Ram, ban hi ke din niyarailen
Banhī rauār jāibai ho
Jāhu Sita pet bhari khaibu
Nīnariyā bhari soibu nu ho
Ai Sita, Lachuman lākh manaihen
Bani nāhin jāibū nū ho
Jab Sita bhari pet khaiīn
Ninari bhari sovelī ho
Arai sūtal Ram uthā bane gailen
Kehu na jāgelā ho
Aagi lāgasu ehi nagare
T avarū Ajodhiya mein ho
Sūtal Ram bane gailen

T kehu na jāgelā ho

The cot is ready in the courtyard.
Yet how to decorate my bedchamber?
Mother-in-law what is to be my fate?
How to decorate the bedchamber?
Ram sleeps, Sita stays awake.
Gently moving the fan.
“O Sita, why do you toss and turn so?
Are you unable to fall asleep?
“I never had a hearty meal
Nor ever a full night’s sleep
Because Rama’s days of exile approach
And to the forest he will go.”
“Go Sita, have a hearty repast
Have a restful night”.
“O Sita, despite Lakshman’s thousand entreaties
To the forest, you should refuse to go.”
But after Sita had a hearty meal,
Had plunged into the deepest slumber
Oh! That’s when sleeping Ram awoke and went off to the forest,
Then, not a soul was awake.
A curse on the city,
And on the city of Ayodhya.
That Ram awoke and went on his path of exile
While not a soul was awake!

(Krishnadev Upadhyaya 1990 quoted in Jassal 2012: 180-81)

This song, as discussed by Jassal (2012), depicts Ram leaving for the forest at night, while Sita is unable to stop him, resulting in a separation between the couple. This narrative aligns with the story of the Ramayana, wherein Ram is obligated to go into exile for fourteen years. What sets this song apart is the focus solely on Ram's departure for exile, unlike in Tulasi's Ramacharitmanasa (Das: 1998), where Ram, Sita, and Lakshman witness the exile together. This deviation from the common narrative is a recurring pattern in North Indian women's songs, suggesting a deliberate effort to convey or express their own situations. In this particular song, the singers aim to raise awareness about the challenges of conjugal separation faced by peasant women. Jassal (2012), drawing on Sen's (1999) research on jute mill laborers in Bengal, highlights the history of male migration within the peasant class of North India. With men frequently migrating to nearby cities for work, women are left to manage agricultural responsibilities alone, leading to loneliness and emotional struggles. Through songs, women articulate their pain and isolation, drawing parallels to Sita's emotional turmoil in the song. The use of Sita as a symbol allows peasant women to express their

emotions and experiences effectively, as seen in the portrayal of Sita's inability to sleep or eat properly due to her concern for Ram's impending exile.

(2)

The second song discussed below is one among the many songs that are sung during the wedding in Uttar Pradesh. Songs are usually sung by female cousins of the bride but Nilsson (2000) explains that women from Barber castes are also called to sing risqué or insulting songs.

The queen sits on her exalted chair
She is looking at the door.
[Queen] “I see you come, Rama.
I see your brother Lachhman.
But I don’t see your wife Sita anywhere.
Where is she?
Is she lacking in beauty?
Or is she of lower birth?
Has she done something wrong?
Why don’t I see her with you, Rama?”
[Rama] “Mother! Sita doesn’t lack beauty
Nor is she of low birth?
I have left her behind and have come alone
Her father didn’t give enough dowry in her marriage.”
[Queen] “Gold lasts for ten days, Son!
Silver even less.
Silk rips.
O Son, a good wife
fills your life with happiness”.

(Marāṭī quoted in Nilsson 2000: 147)

It is challenging to ascertain the social class of women singing these songs at wedding ceremonies, but their critical stance on the prevalent dowry practices in North India is evident. Nilsson (2000) provides a nuanced interpretation of these songs, suggesting that women utilize them to critique the customs of high-caste communities, particularly the dowry system. The songs portray men as primarily responsible for perpetuating this system, while women are depicted as passive participants. This song holds significance as it demonstrates how women leverage the figure of Sita and her wedding episode from the Ramayana to critique societal norms. Interestingly, the song also highlights men's greater involvement in the dowry practice compared to women. Sharma's (1993) research sheds light on the differing roles of North Indian women in the dowry system: the bride's mother gathers valuable items long before her daughter's marriage, while the mother-in-law manages the dowry received during her son's wedding. This disjunction between the song's portrayal and actual practices suggests various interpretations. Women may morally oppose the dowry system but feel constrained by patriarchal norms, using songs as a safe outlet for expression. Alternatively, they may actively support the practice but shift blame onto men in song narratives to

distance themselves from its negative aspects. Regardless, the appropriation of mythic characters in songs allows women to reflect on social issues and express themselves within societal constraints.

(3)

Some songs on *Sita* are appropriated by women to explain their subaltern position. These songs not just explain about the oppression of women by men but also show that in patriarchal society there are multiple oppressions.

[Kaushalya] “Barber’s Pretty Wife!
Don’t delay.
Do the welcome ceremony”.
[Barber Women] “I want a pair of braclets
For doing this ritual”.
Queen Kaushilya gently coaxes her
[Kaushalya] “Barber’s wife! First welcome Rama and Siya.
I promise, I’ll give you a pair of bracelets.”

(Quoted from Anusuya Devi’s 1923 personal song book by Nilsson 2000: 154-55).

This song is just one example of many sung by women in Uttar Pradesh. It illustrates the complex power dynamics within patriarchal society. Nilsson (2000) interprets the song as depicting the tension between a mistress and her domestic helper, with the helper refusing to perform a ceremony until her demands for material items are met. This narrative communicates two key ideas. Firstly, it highlights the varying social positions of women within patriarchy. In the song above, queen *Kaushalya* occupies a higher status due to her caste and class, contrasting with the barber's wife. This suggests that while women may be oppressed by men, they also wield power based on the positions held by the men in their lives, using it to exert influence over others. Secondly, the song emphasizes the interdependence between individuals of different social strata. Despite her elevated status, the queen relies on the barber's wife to conduct the welcome ceremony. Similarly, other songs depict high-caste women depending on low-caste women for tasks associated with ritual pollution, such as childbirth assistance. These songs illustrate how marginalized groups leverage their positions in a society structured by power differentials. Often, the tasks considered polluting afford them significant influence, enabling them to make demands of higher-caste individuals. Ultimately, these narratives convey the idea that lower-caste women can use their perceived pollution as a source of agency and empowerment.

The three songs examined above demonstrate how mythological figures and narratives from the Ramayana are repurposed to reflect the realities of society. Ram and Sita are portrayed as relatable figures, with snippets of the Ramayana adapted creatively to mirror the everyday experiences of women. However, it is essential to acknowledge that women's agency in expressing themselves through songs is deeply intertwined with the context in which they sing, including the space, time, and audience present. Each song addresses different themes depending on the context in which it is sung. For example, the third song, which depicts the dependence of high-caste women on low-caste women for various polluting tasks, is typically sung by women of lower castes among themselves.

When women from different economic backgrounds come together to sing, they tend to adhere to the traditional Ramayana storyline. However, when singing among their own group, they incorporate events closer to their own life experiences, giving rise to new narratives involving Ram and Sita. This highlights the influence of context on the expression of women's personal experiences and the sense of collective representation fostered through group singing. All the songs discussed, whether performed in ritual settings or as part of everyday life, are sung collectively. This collective singing serves as a strategic tool for women, providing them with a sense of anonymity and protection from individual targeting.

UNVEILING POWER DYNAMICS THROUGH FOLK SONGS

The diverse range of songs featuring Sita also sheds light on the intricate power dynamics at play in North Indian society. McNay (1992) contends that the relationship between power and gender is multifaceted, cautioning against oversimplifying women's experiences as mere victims of male oppression. He emphasizes that factors such as history, race, caste, and class shape individuals' experiences of subordination in society. Similarly, folk songs not only explore relationships between men and women but also among women occupying different social positions. Through these songs, women appropriate the figure of Sita to elucidate the layers of oppression prevalent in society, as demonstrated in the third song discussed earlier. This multiplicity of interpretations is perhaps why there are numerous versions of songs featuring Sita, each resonating differently with different women. The capacity of these songs to unite women is acknowledged, yet it is also recognized that a single song can harbor multiple voices, each interpreted uniquely depending on individual perspectives. Just as oral narratives are reinvented with each telling, they are also reinterpreted with each new understanding. Roland Barthes (1974) posits that texts are inherently plural, as they are recomposed with each reading. Similarly, Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) highlights the dialogic nature of novels, where multiple voices and truths coexist without one dominating the narrative. Barthes' and Bakhtin's works underscore the idea that texts, including women's songs, are open to multiple interpretations, with each interpretation contributing to the creation of a new understanding of the text.

CONCLUSION

This article explores how women from diverse social backgrounds claim and reinterpret mythological figures, particularly Sita, to reflect their own realities. Jassal (2012) notes the annual enactment of Tulasi's *Ramacharitramanasa* in Uttar Pradesh, where both men and women participate and witness. Concurrently, *Sita Mangal* and other Sita songs use the Ram-Sita narrative to convey women's experiences in society. It's crucial to recognize that there exist multiple retellings of the Ramayana, as elucidated by Ramanujan (1994) and other scholars (Chakravarti 1983; Lamb 1994; Rao 1994; Richman 1994; Thapar 2000). The folk songs of women offer a profound insight into Wittgenstein's idea of "culture as capability". As discussed in the article, the narratives of the characters such as Ram and Sita's marriage, exile, and return are preserved while details are creatively manipulated to convey new ideas. The creative utilization of these elements in women's songs about Sita demonstrates the capacity of cultural stories and mythical figures to serve as vehicles for self-expression and societal reflection.

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