



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reimagining Sita's Voice in Select Retellings of the *Ramayana*

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Abstract

This paper examines the retelling of Sita in contemporary Indian English Fiction within the framework of revisionist mythmaking. In the narrative structure of the *Ramayana*, Sita has long been understood, within traditional and critical discourse, as an embodiment of virtue, endurance, and self-sacrifice, an ideal that has shaped cultural perceptions of womanhood across generations. As noted in feminist reading of the *Ramayana*, her interior voice remains only partially visible. Adopting a character-centred approach, the study engages with select contemporary retellings such as *The Forest of Enchantments*, *The Liberation of Sita*, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, and *The Missing Queen* to explore how narrative strategies reshape her presence. Across these retellings, Sita is no longer confined to relational roles. She begins to reflect, to question, to interpret her own experience. The shift is gradual, but it alters how she is encountered. Identity, in this context, is no longer simply assigned, it begins to emerge. These rewritings do more than offer alternative versions of a familiar story. They intervene in the ways meaning has been stabilised, opening the narrative to reconsideration. Myth, as a result, does not remain closed; it becomes dialogic, a space where tradition and reinterpretation exist together. Sita's shifting representation signifies a transition in the interpretation of her character, developing from a static ideal to a more intricate and introspective persona. These retellings do not provide a singular, definitive portrayal of Sita; rather, they give several viewpoints that redefine her identity.

Keywords: Reimagining, Gender, Identity, Mythology, Subjectivity.

Introduction

Rewriting involves revisiting or reinterpreting an established canonical text from an alternative perspective, offering new insights into the source material by either challenging the ideological underpinnings of the original version or adhering to the previous viewpoint. It has the capacity to take several forms, such as the modernisation of classic narratives, general experimentation, and challenges to the established canon. Functionally, rewriting as a prominent genre emerges from political fringes, serving as a response

to the claims of authenticity and originality made by canonical literature. Consequently, rewriting serves as a discourse that challenges the authority of hegemonic or oppressive social institutions, allowing the 'other' (who is deliberately marginalised in the original text) a chance to assert their presence in their own rendition and portrayal of the narrative. Consequently, rewriting serves to contest the canon and articulate the experiences of marginalised subjects. It honours the viewpoints of several overlooked figures in the original text. The prevailing voice, representing a certain ideology, resonates within the mainstream discourse of a given age, making its story the central focus of the work. For a Marxist critic, there always exists an ideology embedded in a text.

Contemporary Indian English writing has revisited myths not to dismiss them, but to interact with them in a new manner. Through what is often described as revisionist mythmaking, these retellings bring into focus what once remained less visible. In Sita's case, this results in a gradual rearticulation of her identity. She is no longer encountered only as an archetype; she begins to appear as a reflective and self-aware presence. This shift carries significance beyond literary form. By repositioning Sita within the centre of narrative attention, these retellings begin to unsettle established hierarchies of meaning. The

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Ramayana no longer appears as a closed structure; it opens toward multiple perspectives. Interpretation, in this sense, becomes an act of engagement rather than reception. The present study locates itself within this evolving landscape. It approaches contemporary retellings as sites where voice, agency, and psychological depth are foregrounded. The answer does not resolve into a single direction. The transformation unfolds gradually through reinterpretation, through shifts in perspective, through repeated returns to the narrative. Myth, in this process, does not remain fixed. It continues to evolve. And it is perhaps within this ongoing movement that its enduring relevance resides not as a closed inheritance, but as a living discourse that invites each reading to encounter it anew.

Objectives and Hypotheses

This research is directed by specific aims focusing on the reinterpretation of Sita in select modern retellings of the *Ramayana*, including *The Forest of Enchantments*, *The Liberation of Sita*, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, and *The Missing Queen*. This study aims to analyse the re-centering of Sita as a narrative subject in these texts, transcending her conventional role within the epic framework. The research examines the use of storytelling techniques, including first-person narration, changes in focalisation, and depictions of interiority, in the formation of her voice and presence. This study examines how various retellings redefine Sita's identity concerning agency, autonomy, and self-representation.

Additionally, the research examines how modern socio-cultural issues, especially those pertaining to gender and identity, influence these reinterpretations. It analyses the link between the traditional depiction of Sita in the *Ramayana* and its contemporary adaptations, highlighting areas of consistency and variation. The research evaluates how these tales contest or reshape prevailing ideological interpretations of Sita's character. This paper aims to assess the role of these retellings in the larger context of revisionist mythmaking within contemporary Indian English literature.

The study proceeds with working hypotheses that view the selected novels as interconnected attempts to reinterpret Sita from multiple perspectives. These rewritings are seen as reflective of broader social changes, particularly in relation to women's roles and evolving notions of feminine identity. At the same time, the enduring influence of classical narratives remains evident, shaping both literary imagination and cultural perception. Taken together, these objectives and hypotheses establish a flexible framework for inquiry. The transformation of Sita's character is understood not as a singular shift, but as an ongoing process one that unfolds at the intersection of literature and ideology, continuity and change, remaining open to further interpretation.

Theoretical Framework

In her essay "Reading and Writing the Other: Criticism as Felicity", Martine Motard-Noar quotes H el ene Cixous'

theory as "if you examine literary history, it's the same story. It all refers back to man, to his torment, his desire to be (at) the origin," (93). And in their stories the women are always treated as subservient to men, whose stories are not worthy of a place in the canonical literature. She believes that "the logocentric project had always been, undeniably, to found phallogentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself?" (93). Women are tasked with deconstructing male-centered literature to reveal the phallogentric power system that subjugates them. This biased portrayal was contested by several authors of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The present study explores the convergence of myth critique and feminist theory to analyse the reinterpretation of Sita in modern Indian English literature. Myth is seen not as a static narrative framework, but as a fluid cultural system that gains new significances through reinterpretation. A. K. Ramanujan posits in his concept of the "many Ramayanas" that the epic manifests in several iterations across history and geography, each influenced by its socio-cultural milieu. Paula Richman similarly illustrates that retellings of the *Ramayana* are not only derivative but integral to the tradition, allowing the text to remain amenable to reconsideration. From this viewpoint, rewriting is seen as a method of interacting with myth that maintains continuity while facilitating alteration. From the perspective of myth critique, Sita may be seen as an archetypal character whose significance is not fixed but historically contingent. Traditional legends often depict her as a symbol of virtue and resilience, although newer retellings emphasise her viewpoint and inner thoughts. This process does not eliminate the legendary framework; instead, it reformulates it inside, illustrating that reinterpretation works through alteration rather than substitution.

Feminist theory offers essential analytical tools to scrutinise the construction and rearticulation of Sita's voice in these narratives. Simone de Beauvoir notes that women have always been seen as the "Other" in prevailing narratives, often stripped of subjectivity and agency. Expanding on this issue, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak examines the circumstances that enable marginalised voices to articulate themselves, highlighting the systemic silencing inherent in canonical literature. Within the framework of the *Ramayana*, these viewpoints facilitate an interpretation of Sita's seemingly muted demeanour not just as a moral virtue but as a narrative limitation influenced by patriarchal discourse. Modern reinterpretations address this constraint by repositioning her as a vocal and introspective being, using narrative techniques that make her inner thoughts perceptible.

Postcolonial feminist viewpoints enhance this examination by contextualising myth within larger frameworks of cultural authority and ideological dominance.

They emphasise how canonical tales contribute to the formation of normative identities while sidelining alternative subjectivities. The reimagining of Sita may therefore be seen as an element of a broader discursive process that challenges prevailing images and facilitates the emergence of alternative perspectives. This process does not always manifest as outright antagonism; instead, it often occurs via negotiation, whereby parts of continuity coexist with criticism.

Collectively, these frameworks provide a methodological foundation for understanding how modern retellings recreate Sita's voice. In this setting, rewriting serves not just as a literary technique but also as a critical activity that interrogates myth, challenges its ideological foundations, and reinterprets its meanings within evolving socio-cultural contexts.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and interpretative research methodology, centred on a close, character-focused reading of Sita. The objective extends beyond tracing shifts in narrative content to examining the deeper structures through which these shifts occur: voice, perspective, and ideological positioning. Close reading, in this context, functions not merely as a technique but as a sustained mode of engagement, where meaning is approached gradually rather than extracted immediately. The methodological lens itself participates in shaping what becomes visible within the text, guiding attention toward nuance, silence, and structural complexity. The study engages with a purposively selected set of contemporary Indian English texts, *The Forest of Enchantments*, *The Liberation of Sita*, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, and *The Missing Queen*. Each text offers a distinct narrative orientation, and it is precisely within this variation that the analytical direction of the study is formed. Rather than converging toward a unified interpretation, these works generate multiple interpretative pathways, expanding the field of understanding rather than narrowing it.

The study employs a character-centered method, focusing specifically on the development of Sita's narrative voice. Following principles from narratology, the research analyses certain storytelling tactics, like first-person narration, focalisation, and the depiction of interiority, to comprehend how Sita is redefined as a vocal and introspective subject. Close reading is used to discern patterns in language, viewpoint, and narrative structure that facilitate this reconfiguration. The research includes a comparative aspect by analysing the link between current retellings and the traditional depiction of Sita in the *Ramayana*. This comparison aims to find elements of consistency and variance in the portrayal of her character, rather than to construct a hierarchy.

The analytical framework is shaped by feminist theory and myth critique, which together facilitate an examination

of the negotiation of gendered subjectivity and narrative authority in the act of rewriting. Feminist viewpoints direct the analysis of voice, agency, and representation, while myth critique contextualises these retellings within the larger tradition of story diversity and reinterpretation. This integrative method aims to elucidate how modern literature reconstitute Sita's identity amid changing socio-cultural conditions.

Analysis: Rewriting The Character Of Sita

The analysis of the selected texts demonstrates that the rewriting of Sita in contemporary Indian English fiction is neither incidental nor merely aesthetic; it represents a sustained effort to reposition her as a centre of consciousness within the narrative. In his work on Sita, Amish Tripathi mentions,

Sita was not just an obedient and humble wife; she was a warrior. I was surprised to know that many people do not even know that she was the adopted daughter of King Janak. The feeling that I have got after interacting with so many people is that although people seem aware of the *Ramayana*, there is very little knowledge about the story of Sita. (Suman, 54) This transformation does not occur abruptly. It unfolds through layered shifts in voice, narrative structure, and ideological orientation, gradually altering how Sita is encountered within the text.

At a foundational level, the movement from archetype to individual becomes clearly visible. Within the classical structure of the *Ramayana*, Sita is shaped through idealised attributes such as devotion, obedience, and endurance, which stabilise her into a symbolic figure. Contemporary retellings do not reject this framework but redirect attention toward her interiority. She is no longer defined solely through relational roles; instead, she begins to emerge as a reflective and self-aware presence. This shift develops incrementally, allowing identity to move from being assigned toward being experienced.

Narrative technique becomes central to this reconfiguration. The use of first-person narration, introspective passages, and dialogic structures brings Sita's voice to the forefront. These techniques reduce narrative distance and foreground subjectivity as an organising principle. The story no longer revolves around her as an ideal; it unfolds through her perspective, reshaping the structure of meaning itself.

A corresponding ideological shift accompanies these formal changes. The texts engage with inherited frameworks through reinterpretation rather than direct opposition. Familiar episodes are revisited in ways that allow Sita's actions to be understood as ethically informed responses rather than passive acceptance. Meaning is not overturned but reoriented, producing a more layered understanding of her character. The treatment of agency becomes particularly significant. It is no longer confined to visible assertion but

extends to reflection, choice, and self-definition within constraint. Sita's interactions, especially with other women, introduce a relational dimension that expands the scope of her experience. Agency, in this context, appears as something that develops through narrative positioning rather than existing as a fixed attribute.

At the same time, the rewriting situates Sita within broader structures of power, linking her experience to questions of hierarchy, cultural expectation, and authority. This expansion allows the narrative to engage with systemic dimensions of identity. The *Ramayana* remains present throughout this process, not as a rigid structure but as a flexible framework capable of accommodating reinterpretation while retaining continuity. What emerges is a pattern in which continuity and transformation operate simultaneously. The core elements of the myth remain recognisable, yet their meanings are reshaped through shifts in perspective.

Sita's character does not settle into a definitive form; it remains in transition. This ongoing process sustains the openness of the narrative, allowing it to be revisited and reinterpreted across contexts without closure.

Discussion: Tradition, Transformation and Continuity

The examination of modern reinterpretations of Sita reveals that rewriting does not constitute a total departure from the *Ramayana* tradition. Although these writings preserve essential story components and the familiar image of Sita, they concurrently recontextualise her character by emphasising her viewpoint and inner thoughts. Rewriting functions by integrating continuity maintaining the narrative structure with transformation altering meanings and narrative emphasis. It unfolds within a space where continuity and transformation operate together, often in ways that remain subtle yet cumulative. The selected texts show that mythological narratives are not static inheritances but evolving structures, capable of accommodating new meanings while retaining their cultural resonance. Continuity, in this sense, is sustained not through preservation alone but through adaptation. A key insight emerging from the study lies in the nature of transformation itself. It does not manifest as rupture; it develops through reorientation. When the narrative centre shifts toward Sita, the structure of experience changes. What once appeared marginal assumes centrality, not by dismantling the framework of the *Ramayana*, but by adjusting its internal balance. Meaning expands rather than replaces itself, allowing previously unarticulated dimensions to surface within the existing structure.

This process is accompanied by a critical awareness of narrative limitation. The reinterpretation of Sita brings into focus the conditions under which narrative authority has

been historically shaped. By foregrounding her perspective, these texts reveal how certain voices have been privileged while others remained less audible.

The narrative does not collapse under this scrutiny; instead, it becomes more transparent in its construction, allowing its assumptions to be examined. The rewriting process is defined by the interplay between preservation and critique. The narratives retain their connection to the *Ramayana*, ensuring recognisability, while simultaneously introducing variations that expand interpretative scope. Tradition does not appear as a closed entity; it functions as a field of negotiation where meaning is continuously reshaped through engagement. As French feminist Helene Cixous, in her essay *Laugh of Medusa*, asserts

I "shall speak about women's writing Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Women must put themselves into the text as into the world and history by her movement. (Cixous, 347)

The implications of this process extend beyond literary analysis. The reconfiguration of Sita engages with broader concerns of identity, gender, and cultural memory, positioning literature as a site where inherited narratives are both sustained and critically examined. Storytelling operates here as a medium through which past and present remain in active relation. What emerges is not a definitive transformation but an ongoing movement. Sita's character does not settle into a final form; it remains in transition, shaped by successive acts of interpretation. This sustained openness ensures that myth continues to evolve, remaining responsive to new contexts while retaining its connection to tradition.

Major Findings

The findings of the present study demonstrate that the rewriting of Sita in contemporary Indian English fiction does not proceed along a singular or uniform trajectory. It unfolds across multiple dimensions literary, ideological, and cultural each contributing to a gradual reconfiguration of her character.

This process reflects a sustained engagement with myth, where transformation operates through layered shifts rather than abrupt departures. A central finding lies in the repositioning of Sita from an archetypal figure toward a more self-aware and interpretative subject. Within the classical framework of the *Ramayana*, her identity is stabilised through idealised attributes such as obedience, endurance, and fidelity. Contemporary retellings retain these associations but extend them by foregrounding her interiority. Sita emerges not only as a bearer of values but as a reflective presence whose identity develops through awareness and experience.

Narrative voice becomes a decisive factor in enabling this transformation. The use of first-person narration, interior monologue, and dialogic structures brings her perspective into the centre of the narrative. This shift reduces narrative distance and reorganises storytelling around her consciousness. Subjectivity assumes structural importance, altering the hierarchy through which meaning is conveyed.

A corresponding ideological shift accompanies these formal changes. The selected texts engage with inherited frameworks through reinterpretation rather than confrontation. Familiar events are revisited in ways that allow Sita's actions to be understood as ethically informed responses shaped by context and awareness. Meaning is not replaced; it is reoriented, producing a more layered and nuanced reading of her character. The dimension of agency acquires expanded significance within this framework. It is no longer confined to overt assertion but includes reflection, relational awareness, and the capacity for self-definition within constraint. Sita's interactions, particularly with other women, create a shared experiential space that broadens the scope of agency beyond individual action. This redefinition situates agency within both personal and collective contexts.

At the same time, the rewriting situates Sita within broader structures of power, linking her experience to questions of hierarchy, cultural expectation, and authority. This expansion allows the narrative to engage with systemic dimensions of identity.

The *Ramayana* remains integral to this process, functioning as a flexible framework that accommodates reinterpretation while preserving continuity. The findings also highlight the role of literary form in shaping ideological meaning. Fragmented structures, multiple perspectives, and non-linear timelines create a dialogic mode of storytelling that encourages interpretative engagement. Meaning is not imposed but explored, allowing multiple readings to coexist within the same narrative space. The transformation of Sita does not culminate in a definitive redefinition. It remains an ongoing process, shaped by successive acts of reading and rewriting. Continuity and change operate together, ensuring that her narrative remains open, evolving, and responsive to new contexts while retaining its connection to tradition.

Conclusion

The present study examines the reinterpretation of Sita within contemporary Indian English fiction, situating her transformation within the broader cultural and narrative framework of the *Ramayana*. The analysis demonstrates that rewriting extends beyond literary adaptation and operates as a process of ideological reconfiguration, where shifts in narrative correspond with evolving understandings of gender, identity, and authority.

The analysis of the chosen texts *The Forest of Enchantments*, *The Liberation of Sita*, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*,

and *The Missing Queen* reveals that the portrayal of Sita is not homogeneous nor monolithic, but rather influenced by unique narrative decisions in each work. The *Forest of Enchantments* employs first-person narrative, allowing Sita to articulate her existence from an introspective perspective, emphasising her emotional and contemplative inner experience. Conversely, *The Liberation of Sita* transcends the primary narrative of the *Ramayana* by placing Sita in dialogic interactions with other female characters, thereby broadening the dimensions of her identity through collective experiences of resistance and self-actualization. *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* redefines her character within a more action-centric paradigm, portraying her as tactically astute and politically involved, but simultaneously navigating the limitations of her narrative framework. *The Missing Queen* uses a fragmented and investigative narrative structure that indirectly reconstructs Sita's presence, indicating how absence may serve as a manner of narrative importance.

Collectively, these writings illustrate that Sita's voice is expressed using several narrative techniques, such as first-person narration, dialogic organization, focalisation, and narrative reconstruction. These methods not only re-establish her as a prominent narrative figure but also redefine the perception of her identity across various literary settings. The chosen works generate many interpretations of Sita, illustrating the dynamic and developing essence of myth in modern Indian English literature, rather than presenting a singular revised version. The reimagining of Sita is a continuous process of reinterpretation, whereby narrative structure is important in reshaping both voice and significance.

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