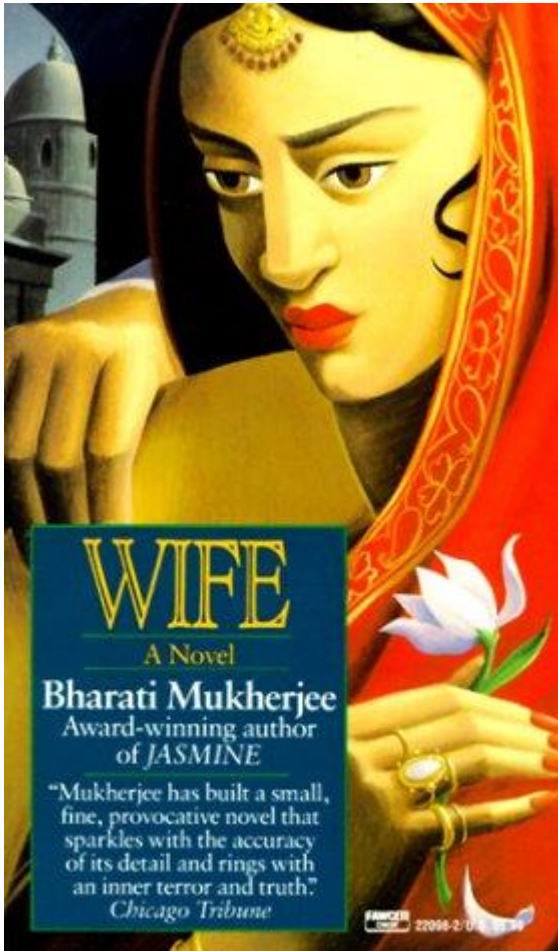


Myth of Sita in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife and The Holder of the World*

T. Latha, M.A., M.Phil.



Abstract

One of the major trends in recent literature is to interpret the ancient myths, humanize them and offer a new interpretation. The use of myths in fiction is another narrative strategy followed by the writers in accordance with the demands of the times. Thus, the writers create a new language through the myths. For the women writers most of the mythological worlds are shattered to build up new worlds from their perspective. In *Sitayana* - (1987) Professor Srinivasa

Iyengar rewrites the story of Sita. His Sita is not a rebel. She fits into the old pattern and remains with the same parameter but with understanding and acceptance. In *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo expounds his philosophy through the account of Savitri's life. In his work, the character of Savitri is imbued with a new meaning and life. Such archetypal images from mythologies are being portrayed in several new ways. Bharathi Mukherjee, Indian born American writer, uses this myth to show the condition of traditional Indian women and the modern American women. Dimple in *Wife* and Hannah in *The Holder of the World* try to follow the path of Sita. As they are modern, their reactions to life is different.

Key Words: mythology, myth, ideal woman, Rama, Sita, chastity, tolerance, submissiveness.

Myths for Women's Submissive Role

Women writers like Shashi Despande, Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee use these myths to show women in the submissive role. Sita myth is used to refer to the chastity and purity of women. Savitri myth is used to stress the devotion of a woman to her husband. In general, these myths stress the idea that to be a good wife is to be a good woman. Shashi Despande has mentioned the myths of Sita, Savitri, Gandhari and Maitreyi. In *The Long Silence*, the heroine identifies herself with these women. Like Sita, who follows Rama to the forests, she follows her husband wherever he goes. Like Gandhari, she blindfolds herself to unpleasant realities in her home. She wonders at Savitri who reclaims her dead husband from the jaws of death. She also wonders at Maitreyi, who begs for knowledge and immortality from her husband.

Bharati Mukherjee and Sita

Bharati Mukherjee uses the myth of Sita in *The Ramayana* in her works. *The Ramayana*, the Hindu epic, is used for spiritual guidance which shows Indian culture. She uses the story of Ramayana and other Indian cultural artifacts in an American context to emphasize a tie between India and America.

Story of Sita

The story of Sita is a popular one in Hindu mythology. Sita, the protagonist of *The Ramayana* has great impact on Indian women in general and the writers in particular. The

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:12 December 2015

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passive, obedient Sita of the epic takes different manifestations in the hands of the creative writers. Sita is a foundling. She is raised by childless King Janaka. She is married to Prince Rama of Ayodhya. Rama's inheritance of the kingdom is disputed by his step mother, Kaikeyi, who wants the kingdom for her own son, Bharata. To avoid complications for his father, Rama goes into exile. Sita and his brother Lakshman accompany him to the forest. In the forest, she is abducted by the demon King, Ravana. She becomes a prisoner in Ravana's island. With the help of Hanuman and others, Rama fights a battle and gets back his Sita. Before returning home with Sita, Rama compels her to walk through fire to prove her chastity. And she passes the test- 'Agnipariksha'. They return to Ayodhya and rule as King and Queen. Sita becomes pregnant with twins when a citizen of Ayodhya comments on the inappropriateness of the King's acceptance of a woman whose chastity is under suspicion because of her captivity. To avoid controversy, Rama sends Sita to the forest. In the forest, Valmiki, the saint takes care of Sita. She raises her twins with the help of Valmiki. Many years later, Rama, the King of Ayodhya comes to the forest and encounters his sons. On seeing his sons, Rama wishes to take them back to Ayodhya. At this point, Sita tells Rama that her duties on earth are over. It shows Sita's boldness. She does not want to go with Rama who suspects her chastity. She prays to her mother – the earth. Mother earth opens up a chasm beneath her daughter and takes her back to herself. This story is known by all in India. Rama is celebrated as God in Hindu mythology. His Sita is a model for an ideal wife. The Sita myth generally represents an ideal woman who is the role model for many women.

Sudhir Kakar in *Feminine Identity in India* says,

The ideal of womanhood incorporated by Sita is one of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and a singular faithfulness which cannot be destroyed or even disturbed by her husband's rejections, slights or thoughtlessness... In Savithri myth, the ideal of devoted fidelity to one man takes on an added dimension and categorical refinement. Exclusive devotion to one's husband becomes the prerequisite for the all important motherhood of sons . . . To be a good wife, is by definition, to be a good woman . . . (55)

From this it is clear that Sita is famous for her faithfulness and Savithri is famous for her devotion to her husband.

Satirical Approach – Dimple in *Wife*

In order to show the new image of the modern woman, Mukherjee uses the myth of Sita. Mukherjee uses Sita myth in her novels in a satirical manner. Her protagonist Dimple in *Wife* breaks the traditional role of women. Jasbir Jain explained this as , ''Bharati Mukherjee, like Desai, uses the Sita, Savithri image to enclose Dimple's identity in *Wife* which however slowly breaks through the traditional role model of an Indian wife.'' (34). Dimple knows the character of Sita and she wants to follow Sita but at the sametime, she hates the traditional role of wife.

Meera Manvi in her article ''Rereading of Indian womanhood: A note on the narrative structure of wife'' also views Mukherjee's use of the myth of Sita. There are two modes of existence of Sita, namely, Sita's heroic path of self-sacrifice and Sita the liberated woman who rises against the injustice meted out to her by entering the bowels of earth. Regarding the myth of Sita, Meera Manvi says,

The narrative structure of *Wife* is conceptualized through Bharati Mukherjee's evocation of the Sita myth at strategic moments in the narrative; the examination of this myth is further strengthened by the opposition that is successfully manipulated between passive resistance/ violence, female desire / male authority, enclosure/ freedom, marriage as bond/ female eroticism, reality/ 'after dream,' love / marriage(141).

Dimple's romantic notion about life and the freedom she expects in America do not match with her husband Amit's view of life.

Sita in Different Novels of Bharati Mukherjee

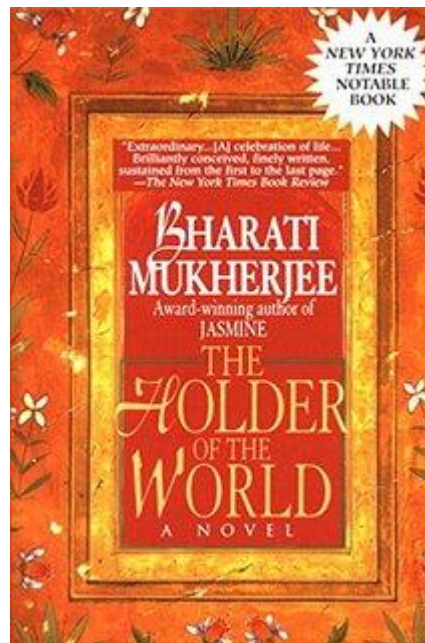
In Mukherjee's novels, Sita comes and occupies the mind of her characters at different levels. In *Wife*, the reference to Sita is superficial. In *The Holder of the World*, Sita myth is functional. To Indian women, Sita is an embodiment of virtue and chastity. But, the irony in *Wife* is the protagonist Dimple would like to lead a life of Sita. In Dimple's dreams, she becomes Sita, the ideal wife of Hindu legends, who had walked through fire at her husband's request. Such pain, such loyalty impressed Dimple.

Sita's myth somewhat plays a negative role in Dimple. Earlier in the novel Dimple was in the hospital for four days. At that time one nurse exclaims that a woman patient set fire to herself. This triggers off wild dreams in Dimple. The idea of being like Sita herself revolves around in her mind, so that she can show herself to be courageous. She thinks, "oh, to have walked through fire! Oh!, to have had the courage and the passion to be dramatic!"(30) But these thoughts make her an incurable schizophrenic. Because of this thought, Dimple is transformed but negatively. In reality, she is no more than the Sita she wants to be. Dimple's character reveals the negative persona motivated by shadow archetypes.

Functional Use of Sita Story

Myth is primarily a story. Myth signifies a primitive response to basic human values and it sustains its relevance even to the present times. The use of myth in a realistic fiction causes displacement to maintain realism in the text. Northrop Frye defines displacement as, "The technique a writer uses to make his story credible, logically motivated or normally acceptable" (156).

In *The Holder of the World*



The Sita myth used by Mukherjee is functional. The use of Sita myth automatically gives strength to its characters. In *The Holder of the World*, Bhagmati tells the story of Sita. By

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:12 December 2015

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retelling the story of Sita, she weaves the life stories of Rebecca, Hannah, Bhagmati and herself. In the epic, God Vishnu comes down to earth for the seventh time to save mortals from demons, assuming the bodily form of Rama. Rama is the hero of *The Ramayana* and the prince of the country Ayodhya. He is the husband of an orphan named Sita. Prince Rama is banished to forest and the demon – King Ravana abducts the beautiful Sita. Hannah finds the story of Sita resonating with her own experience of being an orphan and in captivity. The narrator in *The Holder of the World* says,

Like Hannah, Sita was a foundling. The Fitches recovered her from their doorstep; a childless King, Janaka, had unearthed the girl infant with his plow and named her Sita, or ‘‘furrow’’. Sita adjusted to life as a King’s adopted daughter and a prince’s wife as willingly as Hannah had to her girlhood in Salem. And then, because of machinations against her husband, her life changes abruptly.(174)

Sita and Hannah

Sita was a foundling. King Janaka adopted her. Like Sita, Hannah was an orphan and she was adopted by a couple in Salem. After marriage, Sita and Hannah suffer a lot. King Ravana imprisoned Sita and King Aurangzeb imprisoned Hannah. To Bhagmati, Sita is the self – sacrificing ideal Hindu wife. However, in Hannah’s fantasies, Sita is a woman impatient to test herself, to survive in an alien land. To Bhagmati, Sita’s story is part of an oral tradition. It represents ideal womanhood. She uses Sita’s story to assimilate Hannah into Indian culture. But Hannah is surprised by Sita’s nature. It is something different for her when she hears about the dislocation of Sita in Lanka and her fear of rape by King Ravana.

Mukherjee presents Hannah’s story just opposite the story of Sita. An alien King Ravana abducts Sita. Whereas Hannah is rescued by an alien King Jadav Singh. In Ilangai, Sita is faithful to her husband Rama and she prays to God for Rama. She also waits for Rama to rescue her, whereas Hannah seduces King Jadav Singh. By becoming his favourite bibi, she gets a place in an alien land. Like Sita, her husband Rama is faithful to her. Like Hannah, her husband is also unfaithful to her. At the same time, the patriarchal rationalization of women’s treatment as second-class citizens in *The Ramayana* lends itself to become a feminist message when the

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author translates Sita's voice through Hannah's experience. Jadav Singh doubts Hannah's loyalties as his bibi in ways similar to Rama after she begs him to stop fighting. In one context, Hannah compares herself to Sita in that they were both foundlings. Sita was discovered in a fallow field and Hannah was an orphan. Her mother leaves her. And both Hannah and Sita faced the choice between staying in a hostile environment and trying out new surroundings. Bhagmati's story also stands in contrast to Sita's story. She was raped and immediately disowned by her family, whereas Rama rejected Sita later for the public perception of her assumed lack of chastity. Like Hannah, Bhagmati managed to survive by becoming an English factor's mistress. Both Hannah and Bhagmati know well about the mythical story of Sita who is noted for her chastity. They like her very much. At the same time, they are not able to follow her chastity, which is the cultural trope for ideal womanhood in Hindu culture. Both Hannah and Bhagmati appreciate and adapt Sita's story to reconcile their individual experiences as women. But their experience is different from Sita because native culture is different from an alien one. Mukherjee in her biographical work, *Days and Nights in Calcutta* says,

Again and again, among middle class Bengali women, I would hear, "She is a Lovely, docile girl, she's never given us any trouble", or She is not at all independent, she'll do whatever her husband tells her", and these remarks would be offered as compliments. (231)

Societal Expectations

This mythical image of women is satirized by Mukherjee in her works. Traditional Indian society expects women to be silent and lovely. It expects women to be always dependent. She must simply obey her husband's order. It all shows that women do not have/should have any feelings or opinions. They must obey the orders of her husband and in-laws. The groom and his family expect only this type of girl. Brides' parents also appreciate these qualities of submissiveness and do not care they would be repressed by the males of their future families. Through her writings, Mukherjee tries to present women as having modified their attitudes and ideas. In short, she expects her women to be independent.

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