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## CHAPTER 11

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# Subverting Patriarchal Interpretation of the Ramayan through a Feminist Lens: A Critical Study of Sita's Ramayana

Shruti Chakraborti<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

“Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival”, writes Adrienne Rich in her seminal essay, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision”. Rich firmly advocates that women authors should create spaces for subversion of patriarchal values and ideals through their literary works. Revisionist mythmaking, from a feminist literary perspective, evolves through challenging a preceding text which predominantly manifests androcentric ideas. The present paper aims to examine a female reinterpretation of Ramayan, *Sita's Ramayana* by Samhita Arni, as a revisionist text. *Sita's Ramayana* is a graphic narrative in which Arni's retelling is complemented by *patachitra* or scroll painting by Moyna Chitrakar, a female *patachitra* artist from West Bengal, India. Sita's character is one of the major literary tools through which women writers often attempt to re-view the Ramayan and subvert the male-centric reading of the epic. This paper seeks to understand the elements of revisionism in *Sita's Ramayana* in the context of a sixteenth century retelling of Ramayan, *Chandrabati's Ramayan*, a verse narrative composed by Chandrabati, the first women poet of Bengal. *Chandrabati's Ramayan*, a fierce Sita tale, has been the primary influence on Arni in subverting the patriarchal, popular representation of Sita's character. This paper attempts to interpret how Arni has altered the patriarchal understanding of the epic by foregrounding the tale through Sita's viewpoint. It also aims to analyse how these female authors, Arni and Chandrabati have assigned Sita's character an agency to challenge the androcentric notions that dominate the interpretation of Ramayan. Further, the paper seeks to interpret how the folk-art form of *patachitra* contributes to the meaning-making of a contemporary subversive retelling of the grand epic.

**Keywords:** revision, representation, subversion, patriarchy, female retelling, Sita's Ramayan.

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### Introduction

“Mythology in India is not just an academic or a historical subject, it is a vital and living topic of contemporary relevance. The complex social, political and religious attitudes of ‘modern’ India cannot be understood without an understanding of our myths and their impact on the collective faith of our people” (Gokhale XIV) writes Indian writer, Namita Gokhale, in the introductory note, entitled “Sita: A Personal Journey”, of her book, *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology*, which is co-edited by Malashri Lal, Retired Professor, University of Delhi. The Indian epic, Ramayan, not only constitutes a substantial part of Indian mythology but also influences the socio-cultural, religious, and political landscape of India to a large extent. Hence, creative minds

through ages and across different cross-sections of Indian society have re-interpreted and re-created this epic narrative, in varied forms and through diverse media.

Female reception, internalisation, and interpretation of the Ramayan essentially differs from male perspectives. Female authors, readers, artists, performers, and audiences often choose to ignore the narrative factors that are prominent in an androcentric representation of the epic. Eminent Indian author and comparatist, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, outlines certain narrative approaches that appear in female retellings of Ramayan, in her essay, “Lady Sings the Blues: When Women Retell the Ramayana”. In this essay, Dev Sen strongly suggests that these female songs or verses or narratives for that matter, are tales of Sita which are far removed from the mainstream narrative on Ram. She specifically refers to four narrative alternatives that get manifested when female authors retell the epic. According to her, primarily, a female author might follow the traditional narrative mode and attempt to write ‘like’ a male author, the second alternative – the epic might be re-told through a feminist lens; as the third alternative, she suggests that the re-presentation might reflect an ideological dimension, or, fourth, it might be the story of any woman narrated in the context of Sita’s tale which is a common cultural practice amongst rural women across India.

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“Just as the Rama myth has been exploited by the patriarchal Brahminical system to construct an ideal Hindu male, Sita too has been built up as an ideal Hindu female to help serve the system. .... But there are always alternative ways of using a myth. If patriarchy has used the Sita myth to silence women, the village women have picked up the Sita myth to give themselves a voice”

(Dev Sen 19).

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The interpretation of the Ramayan by rural women becomes crucial in the context of the present paper. This paper seeks to examine, a contemporary Indian author, Samhita Arni’s graphic retelling of the Ramayan, *Sita’s Ramayana*, as a revisionist re-interpretation of the epic in the context of another female retelling, *Chandrabati’s Ramayan* written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Chandrabati, a rural Bengali female poet who hailed from a village now located in Bangladesh. Chandrabati’s text is an episodic re-presentation of Ramayan approached through the lens of female interpretation. Arni’s narrative is largely modelled on Chandrabati’s verse re-presentation of the epic. Hence, the perspective of reception, interpretation, and retelling of the epic by the rural women emerges with immense significance. Further, the paper also seeks to present an understanding of the graphic illustration that accompanies Arni’s text, locating its socio-cultural connection. It is a particular folk art form called *patachitra* (Scroll Painting) which is widely created in different rural parts of the eastern Indian states, West Bengal and Odisha. Moyna Chitrakar, a female *patua* (Scroll Painting artist) from West Bengal, India, creates the *pata* illustrations for *Sita’s Ramayana*. The *pata* paintings of Moyna Chitrakar, in a terse and precise manner, narrate the story of Ramayan, espe-

cially, the parts of the epic which are closely associated with Sita. She presents to us the wide-eyed, soulful, thoughtful, suffering, enduring yet resilient Sita, the one who is central to Arni's narrative. Thus, this book demonstrates the combination of Arni's and Moyna's exploration of the Ramayan, placing the retelling in a distinctive female narrative tradition.

## Background of the study

As already mentioned, the narrative of *Sita's Ramayana* has been modelled on *Chandrabati's Ramayan*. Hence, it becomes imperative to present a critical analysis of the model text which ensures a better understanding of the primary text. The present paper attempts to analyse the prominent narrative elements present in a 21<sup>st</sup> century graphic narrative, *Sita's Ramayana* that is revisionist in nature, and further seeks to understand how those elements got transmitted from a 16<sup>th</sup> century verse retelling of Ramayan written by a rural Bengali female poet. In this context, *Chandrabati's Ramayan* emerges as the key secondary textual resource which has been translated from Bangla to English by Nabaneeta Dev Sen. Two essays by Dev Sen on female retellings of Ramayana, entitled "Lady Sings the Blues: When Women retell the Ramayana", and "Rewriting the Ramayana: Chandrabati and Molla" are pivotal texts to understand the narrative traits inherent in the re-interpretation of Ramayan when perceived by female authors, and to locate the socio-cultural significance of Chandrabati's narrative respectively. Another text that offers an elaborate perception on Chandrabati's life and her works is *A Woman's Ramayana: Chandrabati's Epic*, a book jointly written by Mandakranta Bose and Sarika Priyadarshini Bose. This text has also been referred to as a secondary resource to understand the social factors that were at play during Chandrabati's time, along with insights into her personal experiences, which together contributed to Chandrabati's retelling of the Ramayan. The other book by Mandakranta Bose which is of key importance in the context of the paper is, *The Ramayana in Bengali Folk Paintings*. In this book, Bose presents extensive research on the *pata* images and their genealogy of West Bengal.

Feminist writer, Adrienne Rich a key figure in the domain of revisionist mythmaking, who has advocated in favour of the requirement of a revisionist literary dimension. In her essay, "When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" she clearly outlines the purpose and significance of a revisionist outlook:

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"Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for woman more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society"

(Rich 18).

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In this seminal essay, Rich challenges patriarchal social constructs and highlights the fact that old texts need to be reinterpreted, re-evaluated, and revised from a new critical perspective, which should essentially be a feminist perspective. She further suggests that this act of revision is not only directed in search for an identity but must be launched as a way to survive male-dominated society. The feminist thinkers and authors who promote the notion of revisionist myth-making, highlight the dire necessity of applying a feminist critical approach to evaluating these myths. In patriarchal societies, myths are constructed according to the androcentric terms, and they perpetuate a phallogocentric cultural system. Reality is often subdued and a perceived reality surfaces and dominates the cultural landscape of a specific society. The mythic images of women are often stereotypical in nature and these stereotypes contribute to imposing a gender identity on women in a given social structure. This imposition subsequently hinders the growth of a feminist outlook and a feminist resistance that would liberate women from the entrapment of a constructed reality. The revisionist writers challenge this tendency of subjugating the female voice in a narrative.

Indian author, Beena G. comments in her book, *Vision and Re-vision: Revisiting Mythology, Rethinking Women*, “Revisionist myth making counters hegemonic narratives and is commonly used as a strategy by writers with an objective of revaluing the experiences of the marginalized people” (G 13).

These core concepts of revisionism are pivotal to the development of the whole study as presented in this paper.

### Chandrabati’s Ramayan: The Text

Dev Sen, in her essay, “Lady Sings the Blues: When Women retell the Ramayana”, refers to the revisionist approach commonly observed in the appropriation of Ramayan done by the rural women in India. She writes,

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“Rural women do not care for the court nor the critic. What they care for is something with which they can identify themselves. Therefore, Sita and her suffering becomes an inseparable part of their existence. They sing songs on Sita, not on Ram. They are not interested in Ram as an ideal man, nor as a valorous warrior or a just king. The interest of rural female folk tradition lies in episodes like, Sita’s birth, her marriage, her love life with Ram, her abduction, her childbirth, and most importantly her abandonment, injustice and suffering, hence the Balakanda and Uttarakanda of Ramayan are favourites

(Dev Sen 18-19). “

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In the context of *Chandrabati's Ramayan*, Bose and Bose state,

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“But Chandravati’s work further distinguishes itself by going beyond the usual domestic or local ambit of folk narratives to venture upon the epic theme of the catastrophe that overtakes an entire people. Even though it side-lines battles, the typical subject of the epics, and turns away from Rama, the conventional hero of the Ramayana, to his wronged wife Sita and centralizes her agony, it no less urgently concerns itself with the public doom that falls upon Lanka, where she is incarcerated, and upon Ayodhya, of which she is the queen. Chandravati’s poem is indeed about Sita, but it is no less about her world”

(Bose and Bose 1).

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This statement, which appears in the “Introduction” of their book, *A Woman’s Ramayana: Chandrabati’s Bengali Epic*, summarizes the narrative component and significance of *Chandrabati’s Ramayan* from the revisionist perspective. The theoretical idea of revisionist mythmaking emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, Chandrabati did not follow the domain of ‘revisionism.’ Her retelling was a spontaneous reflection of her personal experience and realisation and inspired by the cultural and religious environment around her.

Chandrabati belonged to an impoverished Bengali Brahmin family in Maimansingha which is presently located in Bangladesh. Writing religious verses was already a practice in her family. Moreover, Krittivas, one of the key literary figures of medieval Bengal was a forerunner to Chandrabati. The 15<sup>th</sup> century *Krittivas Ramayan* is one of the significant mainstream Ramayan narratives in India. Following Kampan’s *Iramavataram*, composed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, this was the first major work after a span of three hundred years which has remained a dominant Ramayan narrative since then. However, in both, style and content, Chandrabati’s Ramayan largely differs from Krittivas’. Perhaps the most significant difference lies in the reception of these two texts. *Krittivas’ Ramayan* occupies a canonical position in the Ramayan discourse in India. However, Chandrabati’s text was lost in the course of time, both, in India and Bangladesh. Dineshchandra Sen and K.C. Moulik, noted literary historians and Bengali scholars of the Bangla literary domain in 20<sup>th</sup> century, played a key role in reviving Chandrabati’s text. The modern Bengali scholarship became aware of this text in the 20<sup>th</sup> century after it was documented by Dineshchandra Sen in his *Maimansingha Geetika* in 1916, and K.C. Moulik’s *Purvavanga Geetika* in 1976 (Dev Sen 165). <sup>β</sup>this parenthetical phrase is awkward—introduce them before you first quote them not in a parenthetical phrase; also, is Dev Sen the same as D.C. Sen? If so, use one name consistently throughout, and again, only cite the last name in parenthesis. The key resource for Sen was a long poem, *Chandrabati* composed by a balladeer Nayanchand Ghosh. This poem was composed fifty years after Chandrabati’s death. According to this poem, Chandrabati was in love

with a young man from her village named Jayanand. Jayanand too was a Brahmin and both their families had agreed to their marriage. On the day of their wedding, Chandrabati came to know that Jayanand had fallen in love with a Muslim girl, converted to Islam, and married her. This left Chandrabati heartbroken, and she refused forever to marry. She was adamant in her decision and devoted herself to serving Lord Shiva in a temple in her village. After some time, Jayanand realized that he still had a deep-rooted love for Chandrabati. He returned to her and pled for forgiveness. Chandrabati locked herself in the Shiva temple. He wanted to see her for the last time before committing suicide; he knew that because of his religious conversion neither Chandrabati nor the Hindu community would accept him further. However, Chandrabati refused to even meet him. She was determined to decline the person who had betrayed her and her religion. Once his continuous pleading stopped Chandrabati came out of the temple only to discover Jayanand's floating dead body in the river adjacent to the temple.

Upon "seeing his dead body floating in the river, Chandravati stood bereft of sense" (Bose and Bose 7). This betrayal and the subsequent intense grief that Chandrabati suffered was reflected in the inherent melancholy of her writings. Her personal experience, correlated to her creative performance establishes a clear direction towards her empathy for an abandoned, dejected female figure like Sita. This is a potential reason behind her re-creation of the Valmiki Ramayan in which the focus shifts from the glory of Ram to the suffering and resilience of Sita. The suffering yet resolute character that Chandrabati herself was, found its expression through the characterization of Sita in *Chandrabati's Ramayan*.

However personal emotions might be at play, there was also a larger socio-cultural perspective which undeniably had a major role to play in the context of Chandrabati's retelling. The tremendously popular and dominant understanding of Valmiki's Ramayan often ignores the essence of Ram's character that Valmiki had portrayed in his epic creation. Valmiki's Ramayan demonstrates Ram as the ideal man, the best amongst mortals. But the subsequent mainstream readings and interpretations of the Ramayan have established Ram as an avatar of Vishnu, and he gradually transcended to a heavenly entity, perceived as the reincarnation of Vishnu himself. This transformation happened predominantly under the influence of the Bhakti movement which substantially changed the philosophical and theological landscape of India from the 7<sup>th</sup> century till the medieval period. Nevertheless, a different approach towards receiving this interpretation emerged in interpreting the Ramayan in the eastern part of India, after Krittivas. The epic was being scrutinised through a culturally critical lens and alternative narratives appeared.

Bose and Bose comment, "But later still one may see an altered consciousness, strongly responsive to gender concerns, which signals the beginning of a tradition of looking at the epic from below, from the viewpoint of the victim rather than that of the victor. The conventional practice of narrating the epic has thus been radically altered and sometimes altogether subverted" (Bose and Bose 4).

Both Nabaneeta Dev Sen and the duo, Bose and Bose focus on this tradition of alternative writing from the perspective of the rural women community across India. There were numerous retellings that were created during this period, however unfortunately, the large portion of it could not find a place in the canon of the Ramayan discourse. *Chandrabati's Ramayan* too falls into this category. She earned the reputation of being the first Bengali woman poet for two of her ballads, *Sundari Malua* and *Dasyu Kenaram*, however, not for her Ramayan. The 700 hundred-couplet verse that comprises her Ramayan is a fragment, which the Bengali male scholars and critics have conveniently pushed to the margins. Bengali scholar and literary historian, Sukumar Sen is of the opinion that Chandrabati's retelling lacked the potential to even be considered as a retelling in the first place. Another pivotal Bengali literary historian and author, Asitkumar Bandyopadhyay has recognised Chandrabati's authorship but has ascribed some episodes to her narrative which do not even exist in the original Chandrabati text. This exhibits a significant lack of reverence towards Chandrabati's work. Thus, the initial critical reception of *Chandrabati's Ramayan* did not do any justice to the work, rather, it was considered as a dismal failure, from the literary perspective.

Dev Sen, in her essay, "Lady sings the Blues: When Women retell the Ramayana", mentions that *Chandrabati's Ramayan* is the first female retelling of the Ramayana that had triggered her own interest in exploring the domain of female retellings of the Ramayan in 1989.

"For me it all started in 1989 with an accidental re-reading of the Chandrabati Ramayana. That is where I discovered that a women's Ramayana tells a different story. Since then, I have been fascinated by women's retellings of the Rama tale" (Dev Sen 18). In her essay, "Rewriting the Ramayana: Chandrabati and Molla", she explicitly expresses her disappointment in how Chandrabati survived in the memories of the common people in Bangladesh as a historic character, not for her Ramayan but for her personal life:

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"Although her Ramayana is no longer read or even known, Chandrabati herself is all remembered fairly well for her tragic love with Jayananda. Even after 400 years, the love story, as told by Nayanchand Ghose, holds our interest, like the story of Tristan and Isolde, or Laila and Majnu. Chandrabati, a historic character, has thus turned into a legend, and lives on in the ballads herself. But in these ballads, Chandrabati the poet and the writer of the Ramayana is hardly given any importance, it is simply the sad tale of a young woman, and her lost love"

(Dev Sen 168).

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Quintessentially like a revisionist author and critic, Dev Sen seems to be worried about the identity that patriarchal reception of Chandrabati has created. Male critics, and male bards and balladeers, be it in the 20<sup>th</sup> century or back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century have been more concerned with Chandrabati's personal life and less about her creative acumen.



Dev Sen comments that, issues related to gender roles and its manifestation, foregrounding of silenced voices, and the tensions between the established socio-cultural normativity regarding interpreting the Ramayan narrative and Chandrabati's feminist re-presentation of Ramayan led to the extinction of the text's existence in the public memory. Further, Dev Sen elaborately explains the reason why this text had not been accepted in the Ramayan canon. The narrative features and narrative elements of *Chandrabati's Ramayan* which are essentially transgressing and subversive in nature might be 'responsible' for the text being labelled as a dismal failure in the patriarchal cultural domain.

Chandrabati chose to write her Ramayan in Bangla and not in the revered language, Sanskrit. The prologue or *bhanita*, which Dev Sen presents in her translation, has been taken from *Sundari Molua*. It includes mention of her parents, goddess Manasa and also the small river Phuleshwari of their village. However, there is not even a customary mention of Ram. In fact, in the whole composition, Ram has never been glorified at any point. The composition is not about Ram's glory or his valour, it is about Sita's life. *Chandrabati's Ramayan* is one of Bengal's own versions of Ramayan which can be considered more as a narrative on Sita than on Ram. It narrates Sita's sufferings. Her experiences as an abducted woman by Ravan, her plight in Lanka, her rescue by Ram, her return to Ayodhya, Ram's betrayal to her and her subsequent exile, the humiliation she suffered, and her final submission to Mother Earth. It is explicit that Chandrabati aimed at re-creating the Ramayan in which Sita's plight worked as a framework based on which, Chandrabati aimed building a resistance towards the patriarchal domination of women in the sixteenth century, which still stands out with so much relevance. As Dev Sen keeps emphasising it throughout her essay, "Rewriting the Ramayana: Chandrabati and Molla", and also do Bose and Bose in their book, *A Woman's Ramayana: Chandrabati's Bengali Epic*, that Chandrabati's text was a text written by a woman, written about a woman, and the target recipients were the uneducated, ever-suffering rural women of Bangladesh (erstwhile undivided Bengal) who identified their plight with Sita's suffering. The patriarchal presence, neither in the content which would involve Ram, nor as the audience was desired. Chandrabati, had a Brahminical orientation. She was trained in Sanskrit, she was also well versed with the style of ballad writing which is manifested in her other works; yet, she chose to retell her Ramayan in an unconventional form with unconventional contents from the point of view of epic writing.

The narrative is for the most part manifested in the *Baromaasi* form, the songs that women of many parts of rural India and Bangladesh sing to describe their everyday life, their plight and suffering. The word *Baro* in Bangla means twelve and *maas* means month. The word, "baromaasi" (also known as baromashya) refer to the songs that rural women sing, essentially to a female audience, recounting the experience of their female existence. This is a part of the folk cultural tradition in India and Bangladesh. Moreover, *Chandrabati's Ramayan* was composed to circulate as an oral narrative. It was to be sung as a ballad, predominantly by female singers to female listeners. Ac-

According to the traditional Bardic tradition of singing ballads in Bangla, the crowd is addressed as “Sunno sabhajana”, which means “listen, members of the court” (Dev Sen 171); however, the refrain that Chandrabati uses in her verse is “Sunno sakhijana”, which means, “listen my girlfriends” (Dev Sen 171). This is a massive subversion, from all angles, socially, culturally, and a deviation from the established literary tradition. Therefore, the great epic narrative tradition is absent in the composition.

Further, the epic war has been ignored in this text, as has Ram’s heroic valour. The narrative technique is quite unique; the war is described through Sita’s dreams. Chandrabati had an intriguingly fascinating narrative logic. According to her, since Sita was not present with Ram during the war, how would she know what exactly had happened. Hence, she had dreams of the war, and she narrated them. Chandrabati’s primary concern was to depict Sita’s sorrow. Her composition is a tale of love, longing, pain, and separation. Her deliberate rejection of the apparent glorious war from being included in her narrative was a reason potential enough to label her retelling as inferior and substandard according to the androcentric understanding of an epic poem like Ramayan. Dev Sen firmly believes that *Chandrabati’s Ramayan* was deprived of an inclusion to the canon not because of its fragmented composition, but because of its subversive, non-traditional approach. Two voices operate in the text, one is Chandrabati’s rebellious voice, and the other is Sita’s soft and subdued yet irrepressible voice, and both together have displaced Valmiki’s, or for that matter, any male narrator’s voice. Dev Sen further comments,

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“In fact, Chandrabati’s Ramayana was never even properly read for what it actually was: the story of Sita’s journey from birth to death. Instead of praising Ram, Chandrabati often intrudes into the narrative to comment on Rama’s foolishness, to advise and guide him and to accuse him of the devastation that awaits Ayodhya. It is clearly not a devotional text, but a secular one; the story is presented as a plain human drama and not as a divine mystery”

(Dev Sen 171).

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Chandrabati had the rebellious, analytical mind to de-mystify the divine elements and heroic epic grandeur from the Ram-tale and transformed it into a Sita-tale. Dev Sen suggests that this subversion of epic convention has led to the text being denied an inclusion in the domain of the mainstream, authoritative Ramayan narratives.

The scope of this paper does not remain limited to a comparative study of two texts, *Chandrabati’s Ramayan* and *Sita’s Ramayana*. Rather it aims at locating *Chandrabati’s Ramayan* as a point of departure for many other female retellings of Ramayan in the subsequent time. The contemporaneity of Chandrabati’s text is reflected in its immense potential to influence authors five centuries apart. Dev Sen reminisces her experience of visiting Chandrabati’s village in Bangladesh.

To her utter disappointment she found that Chandrabati is remembered for her ballads and also for her and Jayanand's love story. But she is hardly associated with her Ramayan. The Ramayan songs are still popular among the rural women community, but they are not ascribed to her. The songs have survived; but the poet has been forgotten since she refused to follow the authoritative patriarchal understanding of Ramayan. That she chose to write solely on Sita, did not fit into the male dominated Ramayan discourse. However, it is undeniably true, that the rural female community indeed identifies themselves with Sita. They have internalised this epic heroine as one suffering human who is one of them. Towards the end of her essay, "Rewriting the Ramayana – Chandrabati and Molla", Dev Sen writes,

"Even to this day Sita provides a voice to our silent, suffering women. We are sisters in sorrow, be it in India or in Bangladesh" (Dev Sen 177). Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* is one such text in which the author has internalised the spirit of *Chandrabati's Ramayan*.

### Sita's Ramayana: Textual Analysis

In *Sita's Ramayana*, Arni approaches the age-old epic from the same perspective that Chandrabati had done almost five hundred years ago. It is unfortunate that *Chandrabati's Ramayan* is considered a fragment, and thus it never received recognition amongst the mainstream narratives of Ramayan, but Arni certainly aims to offer some justice to it in her 21<sup>st</sup> century novel. However, it is a graphic narrative, thus, much colourful and appealing in nature. The text is written in the autobiographical mode that captures a part of Sita's account of the Ram-tale in flashback. The tale emerges with a revisionist dimension. The narrative opens with Sita in Dandakaranya after being abandoned by Ram. She is expecting her first child and the nature around her thoroughly sympathizes with her plight, as she recounts the whole series of events of her life post-marriage. This recollection essentially centres around Sita – the initial days of her happy married life, her decision to accompany Ram to the forest and the subsequent crisis that befell her after she was abducted by Ravan, her agony as a captive in Lanka, and the painful days she spent over there resisting Ravan's repeated insistence to marry him with the sole hope that Ram would definitely appear and rescue her. Ram indeed rescues her only to abandon her again. Sita's first-person narration ends with her being abandoned in Dandakaranya by Lakshman on being instructed by Ram. After that, the third person narration starts, which captures the events of her children's birth, her stay at the hermitage of Valmiki, Ram's encounter with Lav and Kush, and finally her voluntary acceptance of death. The primary revisionist feature that is demonstrated in the text is that the narrative initiates from the events that followed after Ram was exiled for fourteen years; after his arrival to the Chitrakut forest with Sita and Lakshman, Sita's recollection of the happenings of her life begins hereafter. The narrative emerges to be significantly revisionist in nature when, like Chandrabati, Arni too chooses to be episodic in selecting episodes from Ramayan that are significantly related to Sita. Like Chandrabati, she too overlooks the entire episode of Kaikeyi and Manthara's plotting against Ram to deceive

him and deprive him of the throne of Ayodhya which he was rightfully supposed to ascend. Ram's apparent generosity and the act of being the ideal son in accepting to go to exile bearing the burden of his father's commitment is altogether removed from Arni's narrative, which otherwise occupies a key narrative space in the dominant Ramayan narratives. Arni, displays no preference in representing Ram either as an ideal man or as a gallant warrior. Rather, she interprets him as a lover-husband of Sita, who again wretchedly fails in emerging as the hero in his wife's life. Apparently, *Sita's Ramayana* might seem to be another comparatively shorter retelling of the Valmiki Ramayan. However, a close reading of the text is bound to reflect that it is quite different from the *adi kavya* (Valmiki is often referred to as the *adi kavi* which means the earliest poet and thus the Ramayan becomes the *adi kavya* or the earliest verse) and from other popular discourses of the Ramayan that have dominated the readers' mind across ages.

The revisionist approach manifests itself in not only assigning Sita the centrality but also ascribing her an agency to critique the acts of men in Ramayan which for ages have been celebrated as valorous and virtuous acts. Sita's interpretation of Lakshman's act of mutilating Surpanakha is subversive: "Violence breeds violence, and unjust act only begets greater injustice" (Arni and Chitrakar 16). Sita explicitly states that Lakshman's deed was unfair, and she had to suffer the consequence of it later in her life. Here, one cannot miss feeling the presence of the subtle empathy that Sita feels towards Surpanakha. As a distinctive revisionist text, Arni creates space for other female characters of the epic who have remained unheard and unnoticed, or misperceived. She highlights the character of Trijatha, Vibhishan's daughter. Trijatha has been ascribed with magical powers and a soft heart. She became Sita's friend during her days of captivity in Lanka. Trijatha empathised with Sita, but not for one moment did she want to leave Lanka and take refuge under Ram. Whereas her father Vibhishan betrayed his brother, Ravan, and with the favour of Rama became the King of Lanka after Ravan's death. Trijatha's approach had an ideological perspective. She and Sita shared a bond of female companionship which did not percolate beyond their personal relation. She refuted the idea of accepting Ram as the superior and the victor. Trijatha stands out as the second important female character in the text. She has been placed almost like a parallel to the character of Sanjay in Mahabharat who was blessed with divine power to witness the War of Kurukshetra sitting at Dhritarashtra's court and narrate it to him. Trijatha does the same thing. She narrates to Sita the war that had taken place between Rama and Ravan which she witnessed in a dream. Arni incorporates a similar narrative logic as Chandrabati. In *Chandrabati's Ramayan*, Sita experienced the war in her dream, in Arni's narrative, she does it through Trijatha's dream. Both Chandrabati and Arni establish the narrative formula in which Sita is essentially dissociated from Ram's 'valour' as a warrior and the 'glory' of the war. She stands alone with her plight, resilient towards her suffering, critiquing Ram.

Sita, in this graphic retelling, appears to be highly verbal about making her position clear on the issues of deception and lack of personal integrity. As already mentioned, she had not approved

of Lakshman's act towards Surpanakha. She maintains an ethically and ideologically stoic position, irrespective of the person, whether it is about Ram or Lakshman. She disapproves of Ram's killing of the Vanara king Valin. Further, Sita condemns the way Indrajit, Ravan's son was killed craftily. The invincible Ravan too was killed by deceit which Hanuman had designed and executed under Ram's instruction. Sita does not hesitate to sympathize with the denizens of Lanka after Ravan's defeat. Even after being freed by Ram, she chooses to take sides with the vanquished; she critiques the destruction that befell Lanka: "Lanka was destroyed, Ravan was dead. Kumbhakarna, Indrajit and thousands of other Rakhshasas had perished on the battlefield. But I could see their women crying. My friend Trijatha lamenting" (Arni and Chitrakar 119). On the same note, she articulates her thoughts about the destruction that a war causes. Since the text is a distinguishing female narrative, Sita comments on women's situation in a war: "War, in some ways, is merciful to men. It makes them heroes if they are the victors. If they are the vanquished – they do not live to see their homes taken, their wives widowed. But if you are a woman – you must live through defeat" (Arni and Chitrakar 120). According to her, victory or defeat is for me; women are the ever-vanquished lot.

The misery of women has been underlined through the characters of Tara and Mandodri as well. Sita laments the fact that her husband Ram was responsible for these women's woe that they suffered at the bereavement of losing their husbands. Another striking narrative element in the novel is that both Ram and Ravan appear as lovers. It seems as if the war took place between the two lovers of Sita. Ravan has been portrayed as Sita's lover, but also a demon who knew his ethical limits. There is no mention of him making physical advances to Sita.

Hanuman's contribution to the whole scheme of affairs has been more prominently highlighted in this Sita-tale, compared to the other popular narrations. Hanuman is dominantly portrayed as one who had submitted himself to Ram and Sita, and his presence in the epic is highly overshadowed by Ram. This is obvious, as the structure of Ramayan has been to project Ram as an ideal hero in every way. But in this narrative Hanuman stands out as an ally to Ram, who equally if not more, contributed to rescuing Sita. And Hanuman is seen to be sympathising with Sita more than Ram has done. Not only Hanuman, but the other non-human beings like, Jatayu, Gadur, and the trees, flowers, and birds of Dandakaranya all have been shown to have been thoroughly better ones than the human beings. Arni gives a prominent voice to the ecological elements in her text.

However, the most prominent revisionist perspective, in this text, is manifested through Sita's criticism of Ram and the overall re-interpretation of Ram's character. In this context, Arni again follows the narrative elements and arguments of *Chandrabati's Ramayan* which are essentially subversive in nature. Arni, like Chandrabati, deliberately chooses to overlook Ram's glory as an ideal man, an ideal son, an ideal husband. His commitment as a son, his uprightness as a hero, his valour as a warrior remains overlooked in *Sita's Ramayana*. Neither Chandrabati back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, nor Arni in the 21<sup>st</sup> century felt it necessary to highlight Ram and his acts.

For them Sita and her perspective have been of more importance. Until Sita was freed from Lanka, she was unaware of Ram's mindset and intentions. After the war was over, Ram was busy crowning Vibhishan, the king of Lanka instead of hastening to meet Sita. When he was asked about this, he said that he fought the war because it was a matter of his honour, and he was no more interested in Sita, since she might have lost her chastity. Sita was left totally flabbergasted at this. Her reverence for Ram seemed to be a mere illusion that diluted immediately. Subsequently, Sita held Ram responsible for the loss of innocent lives in the war and the destruction that Lanka succumbed to. She decided to end her life in fire. But the fire god, Agni, refused to devour her, and Ram took her back to Ayodhya. Still, her happy life in Ayodhya was transient. She was again abandoned by Ram when she was an expecting mother. She gave birth to her children in Valmiki's hermitage in the forest and refused to let Ram have any knowledge about her sons. Finally, during the 'Ashwamedha yajna' (a Vedic ritual that involved horse sacrifice performed by a king to celebrate his supreme authority) when Ram discovers the identity of his sons and brings them back to Ayodhya along with Sita, she declined to live with Ram in Ayodhya. To avoid being subjected to further humiliation in life, Sita chose to accept death. A return to the lap of Mother Nature was more honourable to her than living her life with a man who had least concern, sympathy, love for his wife. She says, "I do not wish to be a queen. I have been doubted once, twice, and I do not care to be doubted again" (Arni and Chitrakar 145). This statement is full of resistance and dislike not only towards Ram but also towards the entire patriarchal system. In her final statement to Ram, after which she disappears, she says: "Let me go. Take care of our children. Having gained a father, they now lose a mother. You must be both to them" (Arni and Chitrakar 147).

### Patua Graphics or Patachitra

In Bengali, "pat" means "picture" and "patua" or "chitrakar" means "painter". *Patachitra* or scroll painting is a popular folk-art form which is practised in the eastern part of India, mainly in the states of West Bengal and Odisha. This art form has an ancient tradition, whose roots stretch far back in time, yet it is very contemporary in nature, since the discourse of this art ranges from traditional myths to current news and socio-cultural issues. To briefly comment on the form and content of this kind of painting, it can be said that colourful, painted scrolls are unfolded to tell stories of different kinds. Each 'pata' narrates each episode of a long narrative. This art form combines the elements of art, storytelling, and performance. The painters are like troubadours, who go around from one place to another with their scrolls of paintings, primarily narrate the stories in the mode of singing. Another quintessential trait of this art form is that it is thoroughly connected to the indigenous folk tradition of its respective geographical locale, be it Bengal, or Odisha, or any other place. It is essentially an oral tradition that incorporates local culture, customs, religious beliefs, along with legends, myths and epics, in its broader perspective. In this book, *Sita's Ramayana*,

Moyna Chitrakar, a female *patua* graphic artist from West Bengal paints the narrative of Ramayana. She has ascribed to the characters bright colours and the traditional features of *patachitra*. Her artistry has made the book far more appealing, and quite close to our modern-day graphic novels. She does complete justice to Arni's text, as well as Chandrabati's take on the Ramayan. Sita becomes so living throughout the book, both in her moments of glee and her phases of plight.

The *patachitra* illustration in *Sita's Ramayana* has multiple significant factors associated with it. It is not merely a graphic art form that has been employed to render a visual effect on the written text. The socio-cultural background of the *pata* artists, their approach towards painting Ramayan in the rural areas of West Bengal, and the contents of the Ramayan paintings, all together have a distinct connection to the narrative content of Arni's retelling. Rather, a close look at *Chandrabati's Ramayan* also exhibits a deep connection. The *patua* graphics might be considered as metatextual in relation to both the retellings, although it has no physical presence in Chandrabati's narrative. Mandakranta Bose, in her seminal book, *The Ramayana in Bengali Folk Painting*, writes that the *pata* artists have an inherent "empathy with the disempowered of the world" (Bose 12). Hence, it can be assumed that *patachitra* representation of the Ramayan narrative would also be concerned with portraying the characters and episodes which involve silenced voices and subaltern epic characters. Like the two retellings that have been examined in this paper, and many other alternative re-interpretations, the *patua* Ramayan painting too is episodic in nature. The artists choose to foreground certain episodes while they ignore others. For instance, episodes involving Kaikeyi and Manthara are often ignored in *pata* paintings which immediately refers to the similar omission of these episodes in Chandrabati and Arni's texts. The *patuas* or the *patachitra* artists exercise an autonomy to select the subjects of their paintings, which in itself, is an act of subversion.

*Pata* paintings, as noted, is a folk-art form in India. Socially, they belong to the marginalised section, both in terms of their caste and economic status. They are illiterate and mostly belong to the significant segment of rural subalterns. Bose writes that these artists and their art have never been approved by the dominant Brahminical society in ancient times, and unfortunately that segregation still latently continues. However, the *pata* artists chose to voice their protest through their art and interestingly that tradition too continues.

According to Bose, "They decided the best way to broadcast their victory would be to paint it and then travel from village to village telling and showing others what happened" (Bose 11). The essential point to be noticed is that any departure from the authoritative versions of a dominant narrative agitates the governing sections of the society. Chandrabati's text was rejected for the same reason that it digressed from the dominant reading of Ramayan, similarly it has happened with the indigenous scroll painters of West Bengal. This is perhaps the primary factor that connects the three narratives, *Chandrabati's Ramayan*, *Sita's Ramayana*, and the *patachitra*, the indigenous form of folk art that constitutes the graphic elements in *Sita's Ramayana*. The overall socio-cultural picture of oppression and subsequent subversion pertaining to the Ramayan narrative connects

deeply to the apt application of Moyna Chitrakar's *patua* paintings to demonstrate *Sita's Ramayana*. Chandrabati's subversive narrative is revived and manifested in Arni's retelling, complemented by Moyna's feminine consciousness as an indigenous subaltern artist. All this together, renders *Sita's Ramayana* the quality of a distinct female alternative narrative that re-interprets the Ramayan as a Sitayan (a tale that revolves around Sita).

## Conclusion

According to Gokhale, "Sita was not only an immortal daughter of the Earth or an incarnation of Lakshmi. 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).

The female revisionist interpretations of the Ramayan are essentially directed towards a search for this human Sita whose image has assimilated with the social, cultural, and emotional life of the common Indian women. They own Sita's tale and identify with it. Further, it is manifested in their stories and through other creative discourses. This paper has sought to examine three such Sita tales composed by three different female creators across a span of five hundred years. Chandrabati's retelling was way ahead of its time. Its contemporaneity emerges suitable as the foundation for Sita's Ramayana which again finds expression through an indigenous folk-art form. Chandrabati composed her verses of the Ramayan for oral circulation. This folk tradition percolates in the inclusion of the folk-art form of *patachitra* in Arni's narrative. The present paper traces this travel of Sita's tale, its female reception and interpretation across media which is a dynamic literary and creative process and affirmatively subversive in its own right.

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## ENDNOTES

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