



Postmodern Lyotardian Reading of Amit Majmudar's *Sitayana*

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Abstract

This paper attempts the re-envisioning of *Ramayana* through a postmodern reading of Amit Majmudar's *Sitayana*. Postmodernism as a theory opposes the traditional singular narratives and prefers mini-narratives. In this paper, the discussion proceeds with the different approaches brought by Jean-Francois Lyotard and Paul De Man. Along with this, the paper also defines what metanarratives are and how mini-narratives are better preferred to metanarratives. The objective of this paper is to narrate the events leading up to the epic battle of Lanka and the events following it.

In contrast to the usual route, writer has focused on the journey of the characters rather than the formation of the plot. Since the entire novel is based on the display of a form of resistance that is mainly portrayed by the character of Sita, it is titled *Sitayana*. The narrative follows her journey from Mithila to Ayodhya, to Lanka, back to Ayodhya, and finally the ultimate journey, into the Earth itself. To break the conventional streak of calling *Ramayana*, the author has chosen the title *Sitayana*, though it does not restrict itself to her narration and progress. *Sitayana* is a novel that tells the events of *Ramayana*, even by eliminating the hero's presence.

The three main characters who narrate the majority portion of the story are Sita, followed by Hanuman and finally the anti-hero, Ravana. The term anti-hero is important here because according to theatre actor Tom Hiddleston, "Every villain is a hero in his own mind." It is only the perspective that shifts and postmodernism focus on exactly this. The kaleidoscopic view of the incidents and the jumbled manner in which it is narrated by different characters provides an order among the chaos and threads the events of the story in a sensible manner.

Keywords: Re-envisioning, lens, characters, Postmodernism, mini-narratives, metanarratives, journey, narration, progress, anti-hero, kaleidoscope, perspective, order, chaos

Introduction: According to The Holy Bible, Adam fell onto the Earth to repent for the sins of Eve and the rest of humanity. He is often viewed by the larger “virtuous” society as the victim of the conspiracy of Eve and Satan. Followers of The Holy Bible believe that Eve tempted Adam to eat the Forbidden Fruit. There is a proverb in English: “Women are the source of all follies and misfortunes.” To a large extent, it is often a common notion to associate the behavior of women with that of snakes. The snake was a form of deception used by Satan to lure Eve into his plan and turn her against God. Falling back on the popular myth, it is believed that after their defeat in the battle with God, Satan and other angels (his supporters) who had “fallen” with him were expected to lead their life in Hell, while the couple, Adam and Eve were sent down to Earth, to toil and repent for their sins.

The Holy Bible also deems that every single individual born on Earth has an inherent capacity to be sinful and to be disobedient to God. When Adam and Eve fell onto Earth, as a result of the temptation towards the Forbidden Fruit, it is believed that Adam gained two lives. The first, who gave in to his desires brought Sin into the world while the second realises the mistakes of the first and sacrifices himself, for the redemption of humanity. As theatre actor Tom Hiddleston has rightly put it, every human being has a chance to live two lives and the second life starts at the realisation of having one in real. All human beings are a combination of the two Adams, the one who “falls” and, the one who sacrifices himself for the welfare of all of humanity. This again is an example of the popular saying that a woman always requires the protection of a man. So is the case with Sita in the story of Ramayana (Rama's Progress) but Amit Majmudar in his work Sitayana (Sita's Progress) pens out the character of Sita as a woman completely independent of her husband and male counterpart, Rama. This in a way also contradicts John Milton's description of Eve as one who was born from Adam's body to serve him. Adam speaks of Eve in the following manner on his first encounter with her.

*“I now see
Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, myself
Before me; Woman is her name, of man
Extracted...”* (Milton, John. Book 9. *Paradise Lost*)

Ken Dowden in his book *The Uses of Greek Mythology* points out that mythology is, by and large, male-centered and women are “seldom seen in isolation”. In *When Women Retell the Ramayan*, an article written by Nabaneeta Dev Sen, she chooses songs from Bengali, Marathi, Maithili, and Telugu to assist in her analysis of the condition of women in rural India. The woman here is seen as an ordinary one from the village who loses her power over herself and submits herself to her husband. Amit Majmudar's *Sitayana* is a retelling of the Ramayana from the points of view of the characters within the story. The author Majmudar, from the beginning, has tried to portray Sita as a strong and independent woman, who has upheld her values, from the beginning to the end. Sita moulds her character by taking the reins and narrating the story of her life. The first chapter, therefore, naturally begins with

Sita's narration:

I had no brothers, so my father didn't mind my tomboyish streak. I liked horse riding and archery. When I looked around the place for something to play with, I found the perfect toy: Something that could twang in pretend battle, then carry me, a plain steed, when I slipped it between my legs. I happened to be astraddle this. Bow, hopping merrily about and shouting to my imaginary cavalry... 3

This utterance/wording is enough for the readers to understand who Sita is. Sita here is not merely the consort and the Queen of Ayodhya; nor is she a loving mother alone. But before all else, she is a woman, who chooses her destiny. Upon being told to walk through fire to prove her purity, she tells the readers: *I don't fear fire. I'm the same girl who went up to her daddy's outdoor entertainers and gargled what they feigned to swallow. I don't fear fire, but this rickety flaming structure terrifies me anyway. 86*

It is clear that she is not deprived of fear, but has built her confidence and dared to stand up to those who question her. Dr. Anjali Tripathy in her article **Sita: My Story** states that Sita is "an archetypal symbol of woman's accountability to man." Before Hanuman returns with the word of Sita's safety, he lights up the whole of Lanka with his tail.

The living fuse is lit. Hanuman, to whistles and profanities from the Lankans, jumps from the lotus position onto both feet. I see no frenzy in how he moves. He stands perfectly still and stares down his tormentors. His tail rises behind him, undaunted, independently aware, like a pet cobra flaring a hood of fire on command. It is his panache. His weapon. 55

As soon as this incident takes place, the Rakshasis in the kingdom begin wailing while Sita realises that her long-term resistance is finally bearing fruit. Sita once again speaks to the readers: "The Rakshasis clutch each other and wail. It delights me to tell a story about Rama, but it delights me even more, I confess, to scare these fake friends of mine." She is also assured no matter how difficult the circumstances turn out for Rama; he would never deviate himself from the path of righteousness or Dharma.

In a country where widow burning and child marriage were once upon a time prevalent; it is no wonder its people rely on the Puranas to reassert their value system.

The Hindu religion follows a cycle of four yugas. These are the Satya Yuga, the Treta Yuga, the Dvapara Yuga and the Kali Yuga, and they rotate like the calendar months. The present age is the Kali Yuga, which will last for 4,32,000 years. As per the Kali Yuga, it has been predicted that the varna ashrama will be forgotten in time, the whole of humanity would eventually turn into atheists, and marriage will be seen merely as a bond keeping a family together. According to Sadhguru, the relevance of Puranas such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata is to concern oneself with the truth rather than the facts. The same is preached by Homer with his Illiad and Milton with his Paradise Lost. If one were to question the facts of the situation under which it

was written, then the authenticity of the oral tradition is lost. Amit Majmudar has written the plot of Sitayana in such a manner that the characters narrate their own sides of the story and thereby, adopting a more subjective approach. Namita Gokhale, a renowned writer, editor, and publisher has praised the book with the

words: “This vibrant, vigorous reimagining of an ancient epic in many voices had the feel and breath and urgency of lived life.” Bibek Diberoy, an Indian economist and author of *The Valmiki Ramayana* (2017) has said:

“*Sitayana* is a lyrical kaleidoscope with many colours and prisms, unlike Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, which is primarily from Rama’s perspective. Not just the expected protagonists, there are unusual takes on Nala and Nila, the squirrel and Sanjeevani. An imaginative rendering demonstrating that as long as there are mountains and rivers on earth, the story will be popular among people.” Moreover, the Agni Pariksha (Fire Sacrifice) questions not only the integrity of Sita as a woman but also that of Rama as a King. Hanuman speaks his mind: *‘It’s an insult to ask her to show it! In public, in front of a mob of unrepentant Lankans and off-duty bonobos peeling bananas in the crowd, and after all she’s been through! To make a spectacle of her purity!’* 86

Rama’s action of putting her through the fire test answers the question that was raised in the minds of the people of Ayodhya. To the people of Ayodhya, the role of Sita is not just Rama’s wife but also that of a Queen and in essence, a mother of the whole nation. Rama tells Lakshmana: “I have to put Ayodhya above my personal love---I mean, my personal life. I am king of Ayodhya, and I tolerate not a flyspeck of suspicion.” 89 If her values and chastity are tainted by the touch of Ravana, then it also taints the fame and glory of the entire kingdom. He (Rama) is considered the ideal man because of his ability to overcome the different disasters that were thrown at him and yet he refused to give up or become a recluse. This is why, Sadhguru says, Rama’s role in Indian mythology and history is acknowledged to date.

Amit Majmudar is a diagnostic nuclear radiologist and the author of three volumes of poetry, two novels, and a verse translation of the Bhagavad Gita, titled *Godsong*. The son of two immigrant parents, young Majmudar is a poet and novelist, who grew up in Cleveland. He earned a BS at Northeast Ohio Medical University Hospitals of Cleveland. He is currently living in Dublin, Ohio where he served as Ohio’s first Poet Laureate.

Each character in *Sitayana*

has his/her own stories to tell and perspectives to give. On the side of Lanka, Mandodari, Indrajit, Shurpanakha, and Kumbhakarna defend Ravana while Vibhishana alone does not. The titular character, Sita does not yield to Ravana’s requests and desires but puts up stern resistance. This is the difference between this retelling from the abridged version of C. Rajagopalachari’s or the original *Ramayana*. However, the title *Sitayana* does not fully substantiate itself but tells the story from the characters’, other than Sita’s, perspectives. The only major point of difference is that the characters speak for their selves, rather than being voiced by an author, who focuses on the acts of one hero and places the others in the background.

Another point of difference is that Sita extends her role beyond being the dutiful consort of Rama. It is the perfect example of a mini-narrative of Ramayana, with each of Ravana's heads having its own opinions and purposes. Ravana in the end, tells the readers: "Ravana did not really desire Sita, I will write. Ravana was used to prettier, more pliable women than Sita." This shows that his real intention is to arouse empathy in the Supreme Personality of Godhead- "Ravana made His Most Serene Highness tumultuous, bloody, human in full..." 90 The story moves back and forth and even the inanimate objects have their own stories to which the readers are moved to lend an ear. The use of poetic language in the book by the author along with the brisk wording captures the immediate attention of the readers and keeps it through to the end of the novel. The unique narrative technique adopted by the author focuses on the character rather than the plot. It focuses on the effect of the events on the lives of the characters, rather than the events themselves. Though the events in the story are influenced by the different versions of Ramayana before it, the novel has its uniqueness, which is evident in its short and crisp narrative style. The story provides multiple perspectives with future scope for research. In conclusion, the story is conveyed in simple language with simple diction.

'Postmodernist science' as Frederic Jameson suggests in his introduction to Lyotard's book, was an experimental disruption of the given system; and Lyotard's desire to see modernism and postmodernism as continuous with one another is in part a refusal to confront the disturbing fact that modernism proved prey to institutionalization. Robert Frost speaks of the manner of the Modern Poetry: *No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader*. Lyotard is deeply opposed to any such historical consciousness, with his reactionary celebrations of narrative as an eternal present rather than a revolutionary recollection of the unjustly quelled. Again as Frost puts it: "It [the poem] can never lose its sense of meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it."

In his most recent novel *Sitayana*, the author Amit Majmudar takes multiple perspectives, bringing to life, the different characters within the mythological tale of *Ramayana* originally written by Valmiki. Instead of focusing on the single character of Rama and his actions, the narrative of Majmudar is compelling as the events of the *Ramayana* are retold from the perspectives of Sita, Hanuman, Ravana, Indra, and various other characters. This is an interesting mode of narration, requiring the readers to broaden their understanding of the story and evaluate the actions of Rama. Interestingly, the readers are provided with a lot of information about Rama but are denied his presence. This is what Postmodernism as a theory lays down its arguments in favour of. In her study, Jane Caplan refers to the term "post" as not simply resistance but the outcome of critical engagement, in a dialectical sense. Therefore, postmodernism is a loose body of thought, which provides a historical description. She says: "Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodernist age."

According to Jean-François Lyotard, Postmodernism, as a theory provides readers with knowledge from questioning existing patterns rather than coming to an agreement with something similar to a consensus, or blindly agreeing on a matter. Readers in the past have viewed Rama as the divine seventh avatara of Vishnu, whereas Postmodernists view Rama as the most human form of the Creator. Like in almost all writings of the *Ramayana*, C. Rajagopalachari writes of the conversation between Rama and Lord Brahma after the Fire Test as it is one of the most trying episodes of the epic and questions Rama's position and power. Lord Brahma tells Rama: "*Narayana! Mighty God that took human form to slay Ravana! Is this not your own Lakshmi?*" Soon after, Agni, the God of Fire lifted Sita out of the flames and presented her to Rama, as she is. Rama at this point, asks Lord Brahma: "*Who am I? All that I know and can tell is that I am Rama, son of Dasaratha. You know who I am and whence I came and more. It is you who must inform me.*"

After the departure of Hanuman and his promise to deliver his word of Sita's plight in Lanka, Sita hears the story of Tataka's death from her warden, Trijata. Sita is told of how the two young princes of Kosala, Rama and Lakshmana defeated the female-demon and cannibal queen, Tataka. According to Trijata, Rama is in the wrong because he killed a woman when he has been told from the beginning that to kill a woman meant breaking a warrior's "Dharma". On the other hand, Sita justifies Rama's actions when she says: "He had been taught from an early age that killing women betrayed a warrior's dharma. All he wanted to do was make sure she couldn't take up weapons against him, couldn't grab any more bodies to eat, couldn't throw bones into any more mandalas." Postmodernism also provides a form of consolation and tolerance for the incommensurable. In the story of *Ramayana*, Rama is seen as an ordinary form and the representative of the Ideal Man, who despite every adversity, must never deviate from his one true purpose. Sita towards the end of the novel analyses her relationship with her husband Rama and tells the readers, "Some Ayodhyans make Rama out to be a man too uncommonly holy for common feelings."

Liotard also in his essay, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) has tried to put forth the diversity and heterogeneity associated with language and discourse. Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernism summing it up as 'incredulity towards metanarratives', where metanarratives are understood as totalising stories about history and goals of the human race that ground and legitimise knowledge and cultural practises is by far the most quoted one on the subject. Before the battle begins, Lord Indra had given Rama a garland saying: "There's no air for you to breathe out there. These lotuses exhale a rare fragrance called "oxygen" that will let you to survive." In the final battle when Lakshman and Indrajit face each other, Indrajit warns Lakshman with the words: "You and your brother. You're only human beings. You can't compete. Not against mixlings like me and my dad. You make war. We *are* war. On the inside." Indra watches the proceedings of the battle from the skies and thinks to himself of the events of Ravana's joy at seeing Rama bleed: *Once he had proven that Rama could bleed, Ravana, gloating, unzipped and peed.* (pg 70) This proves Rama is an ordinary mortal human being.

'Metanarratives' or 'grand narrative' or 'mater narrative' is a term developed by Jean-Francois Lyotard which refers to a theory that tries to give a totalising, comprehensive account of various historical events, experiences, social and cultural phenomena based upon the appeal to universal truth or universal values. A story that functions to legitimise power, authority, and social customs is the narrative in this context. Marxism, religious doctrines, belief in progress, and universal reason etc.... can be termed as grand narrative among others. The concept of metanarratives was criticised by Lyotard in his work *The Postmodern Condition:*

A Report on Knowledge. The postmodern condition is one in which metanarratives are criticised with a wave of increasing skepticism towards the totalising nature of "metanarratives" or "grand narratives". According to John Stephens, it "is a global or totalising cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience". The prefix meta means "beyond" and in this context, it also equals "about", and a narrative is a story. Therefore, a metanarrative is a story about a story, encompassing and explaining other 'little stories' within totalising a schema. According to Lyotard, individuality is to be given due importance. Lastly, as said by Lyotard, a postmodern writer is a philosopher, because he relies on the present and not on the rules of the past. They work on a situation with a perspective from the future with the question, "What will have been done?". At the end of the novel, Sita takes her children to the court for Rama to see them.

This paper also contains the character sketches of the three most important individuals in the story. They are Sita, Hanuman, and Ravana, namely. Since the focus is primarily on the heroine of the epic, we begin there.

1. Sita: Sita is the protagonist of the novel, and the story is told from her perspective. She is the daughter of the king of Mithila and she is otherwise called Mythili. At the beginning of the novel, she is married to the eldest prince of Ayodhya, Prince Rama. As a child, she was taught what each person eats. For example, she is told of the composition of food of a scholar and a warrior. "They explained how everything you eat can change how you think and behave. So turmeric in a curry made a scholar more scholarly, while ghost pepper made a warrior more warlike. ... I understood only much later that they were not feeding a six-year old all this philosophy in order to make a better cook someday." 6 The story progresses on to her wedding ceremony and her instant attraction toward Rama. "I kept my attention on the present and on Rama. Nothing in three worlds interested me more than his kneeling body, his softly moving lips, the tender hand with which he stroked the Bow. He was calming an unbroken horse the moment before he meant to mount. With a swift movement, entirely unexpected, of his left hand, he grabbed the curved crest of the Bow, as though surprising a flared cobra, and stood up. The Bow rushed upright and stood at attention beside him, shrinking in his shadow, unless he had grown in height."

2. Ravana: Ravana is the King of Lanka and the antagonist of the novel. He is married to Mandodari, who speaks highly of him. They also share quite an intimate relationship with each other. *This was love: Me luxuriating on my back, arms straight overhead, feet flexed; turning so his leftmost head kissed my hands and his rightmost head kissed my feet, and the heads in between kissed every part of me. The arms came out a few minutes later. Several of his hands had sixth, seventh, sometimes eighth digits---at the ends of his spider legs, smaller spiders. His twenty hands stroked all my skin at once, no part of me neglected. Loving Ravana in that form, I touched pleasure's ceiling.* 7 Mandodari also informs the readers of her husband's real identity and personality. "He was Brahma's great-grandson." Sita in her conversation with Mandodari anticipates the assured defeat of Ravana in the upcoming battle of Lanka. "A bad king with a strong jawline will end up getting punched in the face by a good king with a strong arm. Karma is coming for him." In the final moments of his life at the hands of Rama, he tells Rama of the real reason why he abducted Sita in the first place. Ravana tells Rama of his relationship with Sita. *Years ago, I went on a pilgrimage to the source of the Ganga. I wanted to climb it myself. So I hired a guide. This guide had a daughter. I made her my wife for a while. We visited all the temples together. We even had a child. ...A daughter. ...I dropped the baby miles back, and though I went back over my flight path, I couldn't find her. One of the places I flew over, Rama, was a little kingdom called Mithila. Ruled by a childless king named Janaka.' Ravana's aged head shakes and titters malevolently. 'I knew the moment I saw her. She looks exactly like her mother did. I "knew". You have no idea how tainted she is now. Neither does she. Take her back, Rama, if you can. See how you like her new smell. You know what's worse than adultery, Rama? Incest.'* 81 Equally important is the episode where Kumbhakarna questions his real intentions

3. Hanuman: In terms of the title and the progression of the story, Sita takes the reins most of the time. But the monkey God and son of Wind God, Hanuman is no less important, as he serves as the messenger between the separated husband and wife. He makes his first appearance at the Griefless Grove when he is sent to Lanka in search of Sita. The two of them first interact when Hanuman first appears at the gates of Lanka. The narrator describes their first meeting in this manner: "A rustle, on the grass, in front of me. I lower my hands from my face. What's this? 'At last, Mother Sita. At last!' On one knee, his palms joined and his head bowed, his tail lying meekly between his legs: It's a... a monkey?" 82 Hanuman is the minister to Sugriva, \King of Kishkinda, sent on the mission to find Sita in turn for his support in defeating Vali. \Sugriva tells his readers, "The core zealots, Hanuman among them, celebrated harder that day than they did the day of my coronation. I celebrated with them. at first uneasily, then wholeheartedly." 56 When Hanuman loses confidence in himself, Jambavan reminds him of his lineage and ancestry. Upon remembering his father, he regains his lost confidence and grows in size; big enough to destroy Lanka.

Amit Majmudar in his book, *Sitayana* gives the readers a variety of perspectives with which to analyse the situation from the different characters within the story, from the part of major characters namely Sita, Mandodari, Hanuman, Lakshman, Ravana, Indrajit, and minor characters: Kumbhakarna, Jambhavan, Sugriva, a squirrel and even the plant, Sanjeevani. Majmudar, from the beginning, has tried to portray Sita as a strong and independent woman, who has upheld her values. Here, as opposed to Valmiki's Sita, she moulds her character. The first chapter, therefore, naturally begins with Sita beginning the narration:

I had no brothers, so my father didn't mind my tomboyish streak. I liked horse riding and archery. When I looked around the place for something to play with, I found the perfect toy: Something that could twang in pretend battle, then carry me, a plain steed, when I slipped it between my legs. I happened to be astraddle this. Bow, hopping merrily about and shouting to my imaginary cavalry... 3

Hence, it is clear from the beginning of the book that it is Sita who makes the choices, and naturally, she is the one to tell her own story. However, Sita here is not merely the consort and a duty-bound Queen of Ayodhya; nor is she defined by her role as a loving mother alone.

But by her gender as a woman, and more importantly, as a woman who chooses her destiny. Upon being told to walk through fire to prove her purity, she tells the readers: *I don't fear fire. I'm the same girl who went up to her daddy's outdoor entertainers and gargled what they feigned to swallow. I don't fear fire, but this rickety flaming structure terrifies me anyway.* 3 It is clear that she is not deprived of fear, but she is one person who has built her confidence through the years and, dared to stand up to those who question her. In the second chapter of the book, Mandodari tells Sita: "You came here of your own free will." However, in comparison to the version written by C. Rajagopalachari, the narration in *Sitayana* focuses more on the recounting of events by the individual characters. For instance, the same instance in Rajaji's version leads to the narrator focusing on giving a painful tone to the act of putting Sita through the fire test.

Then turning to Lakshmana, "Fetch the faggots, Lakshmana, and kindle a fire," she said. Lakshmana, who had been watching Rama's behavior in dismay and indignation turned to look at Rama's face seeking his orders, but Rama did not say 'No' to Sita's request nor show any sign of softening. Obeying Sita, Lakshmana kindled a big fire and the princess, with eyes fixed on the ground, circumambulated her lord and exclaimed:

"Ye Gods, I bow before you. Oh rishis, I bow to you. Oh Agni, you at least know my purity and will take me as your own!" With these words she jumped into the flames. 91

Moreover in Majmudar's *Sitayana*, the character of Rama as a husband and as the King is being defined by the other characters in the story. Therefore, duty becomes of prime importance here. According to Rajaji's version, the duty of Rama (dharma) begins even before his birth. To prevent Ravana from disrupting Heaven, the gods approached Hari (Vishnu). Vishnu tells them that he would be born as the four sons of King Dasharatha, who was waiting for a progeny. As soon he turns into a young boy, he along with his brother, Lakshmana is taken into care by Vishwamitra, which puts him through various challenges such as slaying the monster Tataka. Upon his return to Ayodhya, he is prepared to be the king of the land. However, in his preparation, he is also happy to serve his father and ready to give up his position. Rajaji in his version informs the readers of the dutiful nature of Rama. The writer describes Rama's character as: "Rama was not eager to assume authority but looked on it only as a duty to be done. If the King wanted him to give it up, he was equally willing."

Conclusion: Firstly, given the background which follows the progress that Sita took on in her life, Rama does not directly speak to the readers but his presence is felt throughout the novel. His character is introduced through the recollections of Sita in the Griefless Grove. Secondly, every character who plays a part in the story is given the voice to speak for themselves, thereby eliminating the objective perspective of an omniscient narrator. Thirdly, it plays a significant role in making the voice of the women and several minor characters heard. Therefore, it can be analyzed through the lens of marginalised reading as well as feminist reading. Lastly, a comparison of Sita and Eve indicates that while women "fall" as a result of their disobedience, Eve is considered to be feminine and the reason for the birth of Shame in the world, whereas Sita takes a strong stand and fights for her right till the end.

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