IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Reclaiming The Marginal: A Feminist Reading Of Ahalya, Tara, And Mandodari In Koral Dasgupta's Retellings

Harshita Tripathi

Independent Researcher

M.A. in English Literature (2024), Independent Scholar, India

ABSTRACT

The Ramayana, while foundational to Indian cultural and spiritual life, has long centered male narratives and selectively highlighted female characters who conform to idealized patriarchal roles. While Sita's story has been revisited across literary traditions, figures like Ahalya, Mandodari, and Tara remain structurally marginalized—either reduced to symbols of transgression or cast into narrative silence. This paper engages with contemporary feminist retellings, particularly Koral Dasgupta's Ahalya, Mandodari, and Tara, and Volga's The Liberation of Sita, to explore how these characters are reclaimed through what Adrienne Rich terms "re-vision"—the act of rereading and rewriting as a form of feminist survival. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's theory of the subaltern and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of universalizing Western feminist models, this study situates these retellings within the complex gendered, cultural, and mythological codes of South Asia.

The paper argues that through narrative restoration, these women are transformed from silenced archetypes into agents of critique, resistance, and interiority—revealing not only the gendered erasures of classical epics but also the power of feminist storytelling to correct them.

Index Terms — Feminist retelling, Ramayana, Ahalya, Mandodari, Tara, Subaltern, Adrienne Rich, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Koral Dasgupta.

Introduction

The Ramayana, one of the most enduring epics of Indian mythology, has long enshrined its male protagonists as embodiments of righteousness, heroism, and dharma. Within this grand narrative, the roles of women have traditionally been confined to the peripheries—as objects of devotion, virtue, betrayal, or sacrifice. Their voices, when heard, are mediated through patriarchal lenses that equate silence with virtue and submission with honor.

However, recent feminist retellings have begun to unravel and challenge these silences, giving depth, complexity, and agency to characters once limited to the margins. As Adrienne Rich writes in her seminal essay When We Dead Awaken, "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes…—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival." This re-visionary impulse is central to the feminist reclaiming of myth, essentially in their survival in a world that does not acknowledge their existence.

Among the most compelling contributions to this tradition is Koral Dasgupta's Sati Series, which reimagines the lives of mythological women not as supporting characters in the stories of men, but as central figures in their own right. Her retellings of Ahalya, Mandodari, and Tara offer intimate interiorities to women who have historically been reduced to singular archetypes: the seduced wife, the loyal queen, the grieving widow. Dasgupta grants them voice, memory, grief, rage, and above all, choice—constructing a counter-narrative that interrogates the normative values of the epic.

This paper reads these reconstructed narratives through a feminist literary lens, engaging the theoretical frameworks of Adrienne Rich, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. While Rich provides the impetus for textual re-vision as survival, Spivak's concept of the subaltern interrogates whether these women are finally able to speak, or whether their speech is still being mediated through structures of masculine authority. As Spivak cautions, "The subaltern cannot speak," not because she is voiceless, but because dominant discourses do not know how to listen.

Through close textual analysis of selected passages from Dasgupta's retellings, this paper argues that Ahalya, Mandodari, and Tara, though shaped by silence, do not remain silent. They resist, reflect, and reclaim their narratives—and in doing so, they challenge the moral absolutism and gendered expectations of the epic.

Ultimately, the feminist rereading of these women is not merely an act of literary recovery, but a radical critique of the ways in which mythology has been used to define and delimit female agency.

Literature Review

Feminist reinterpretations of mythological texts have increasingly sought to recover women's subjectivities from within patriarchal canons. The Ramayana, in particular, has inspired a broad spectrum of responses—from scholarly critique to creative retelling—each attempting to illuminate the silenced or subdued voices of its women. Volga's The Liberation of Sita (2016) is one of the most significant contributions to this tradition, offering reimagined encounters where Sita learns from women like Surpanakha, Renuka, and Ahalya, who embody various forms of resistance, loss, and liberation.

In the chapter The Music of the Earth, Volga's Ahalya articulates the shared fate of women wrongly condemned under patriarchal norms. When Sita questions her punishment, Ahalya replies: "Aren't many women in this world wrongly accused, Sita?" (Volga 25). This rhetorical question collapses the distance between epic myth and contemporary injustice, aligning Ahalya's silence with the experiences of countless real-world women. Later, she asserts a bolder philosophical stance: "Society gave him [Gautam] that authority, I didn't. Till I give it, no one can have authority over me" (Volga 28). This radical reframing of judgment and agency reflects an internal reconstitution of power—marking a pivotal shift from victimhood to self-authorization.

While Volga centers Sita's evolution through these feminist encounters, figures like Ahalya, Mandodari, and Tara still receive limited narrative space in the broader canon of feminist retellings. Scholars like Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Arshia Sattar, and Paula Richman have explored the gendered moral expectations in the Ramayana, but often still focus on the figure of Sita as the emblem of feminine dharma. Dasgupta's Sati Series intervenes in this critical gap by offering full-length, first-person reimaginings of women whose voices are often treated as narrative footnotes.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminist universalism helps articulate why such culturally grounded retellings matter. In Under Western Eyes, Mohanty warns against flattening women's struggles into a single story: "The assumption of women as an always-already coherent group across social classes and cultures… depends on the privileging of Western discourses" (Mohanty 336). Rather than framing Ahalya or Tara within globalized tropes of resistance, Mohanty urges us to read their agency as shaped by their specific cultural, ethical, and mythological contexts.

This paper builds upon these feminist frameworks by shifting the focus toward Ahalya, Mandodari, and Tara—not as supporting characters, but as complex mythological figures navigating voice, resistance, and subjugation. Through close textual reading of Dasgupta's retellings, the study explores how feminist re-vision functions not just as recovery, but as a political critique of the foundational narratives that have long shaped female identity in South Asian literary culture.

Section I: Ahalya – The Object and the Voice

In most canonical versions of the Ramayana, Ahalya is remembered less as a woman and more as a cautionary tale — a silent emblem of betrayal, desire, and redemption. Created by Brahma and given in marriage to Rishi Gautam, Ahalya's voice has historically been absent from her own narrative. Her story is typically told through the lens of male power: the creator (Brahma), the husband (Gautam), the deceiver (Indra), and the savior (Ram). She is either punished or redeemed, but never truly heard.

In Koral Dasgupta's Ahalya, this narrative is reversed. Ahalya speaks — and in doing so, she exposes the internal contradictions of the myth that silenced her. From the opening moments of the novel, when Brahma tells Gautam, "Gautam, my most precious creation is now your responsibility"(Dasgupta 34), Ahalya is framed as an object of exchange — a gift, a possession. The lack of agency begins not with her so-called fall, but with her creation. She is created to be looked at, to be owned, and to serve as a divine companion for male ambition.

This framing directly echoes Gayatri Spivak's theory in Can the Subaltern Speak?, which challenges how women, especially in colonial and mythic discourse, are often spoken for or through — but rarely allowed to construct their own narratives. In Ahalya's case, her transgression is seen not as an act, but as a contamination — one that can only be purified by Ram's intervention. She is turned to stone, denied voice, denied history, denied identity.

But in Dasgupta's retelling, Ahalya resists this erasure. She questions Gautam's anger and the absurdity of spiritual expectations that deny bodily reality. When Gautam blames her, saying, "The wife of a recluse does not pursue pleasure," and "Our bodies were to unite without attachment," Ahalya asks, "But how? Am I not your wife?"(Dasgupta 165). Her inquiry is not only emotional but epistemological: she is interrogating the logic that makes her desire incompatible with her role as a wife — a logic constructed entirely by men.

In perhaps one of the most powerful reversals, Ahalya reflects after being cursed:

"Taken aback by the undeserving curse, I stared at Gautam with deep shock. But then, what was so shocking? Hasn't power always made its best attempt to uproot voices?"(Dasgupta 172)

This line is a thesis in itself — a concise articulation of how patriarchal power does not merely punish, but silences.

Spivak's notion of the "epistemic violence" done to the subaltern is visible here. Ahalya is not merely cursed into a rock — she is stripped of her right to speak, to be remembered correctly, to narrate her truth. And yet, Dasgupta allows her to speak — not to plead for salvation, but to challenge the structure that demanded it.

Adrienne Rich's concept of re-vision — "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich)— is embodied in Ahalya's story. This is not a retelling that rehabilitates Ahalya into a purer version of herself; it is a re-reading of mythology as political terrain, where Ahalya exposes the spiritual idealism of Gautam as a form of patriarchal withdrawal, and Ram's blessing as a delayed societal approval — not divine justice.

Ahalya's final transformation back into flesh is bittersweet. She recognizes that her redemption is once again mediated by a man — Ram — and that only after his validation will the world believe in her piety:

"With Rama's reconciliation, the world's perception would change almost immediately… The folklore would start singing hymns in praise of Ahilya Mata."

This is not a celebration. This is critique. Ahalya sees clearly: her voice only matters once it is filtered through masculine sanction.

Section II: Mandodari – The Queen Without a Kingdom

Mandodari's story in Koral Dasgupta's Mandodari is not one of a passive queen hidden in the shadow of her king. Instead, she emerges as a woman of extraordinary skill, intellect, and emotional resilience — yet her life arc shows how women's capabilities are often co-opted, silenced, or subsumed under patriarchal rule.

Her first encounter with Ravan is revealing. He recognizes her as the real architect behind her father Mayasur's acclaimed creations:

"Your father denied you the credit though he readily adopted your suggestions. Fathers are kind, artists are competitive." (Dasgupta 51)

Here, Ravan attempts to position himself as the one who "sees" her, contrasting himself with her father. But the promise is hollow. His so-called recognition is not about enabling her independence — it is a strategic appropriation of her talent to beautify his Lanka. Even when she softly sidesteps his offer — "Father would be happy to oblige you, especially if you tell him about your dream for the Golden Kingdom" (Dasgupta 51)— the choice is never truly hers. Ravan's later threat to marry her "whether by force or will"(Dasgupta 54) underscores how quickly admiration turns into possession in patriarchal bargains.

This aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique in Under Western Eyes — that women's skills in traditional or historical narratives are often reframed as exceptional only when they serve male-centered power structures. Mandodari's genius in design is not celebrated for her own sake; it becomes the property of the men around her, first her father, then her husband.

Her sense of self is further shaped — and constrained — by inherited patriarchal ideologies. When Ravan questions why she came with him instead of defending herself magically, she recalls Mahadev's prophecy:

"Being his anchor was the purpose of my life."(Dasgupta 113)

Here, divine sanction enshrines her subordination as destiny. This theological framing transforms personal ambition into marital duty — reducing her "purpose" to being a stabilizing force for a man's life, a trope deeply ingrained in mythic depictions of women.

Mandodari's awareness of power dynamics evolves after marriage. When Surpanakha assaults her, she reflects:

"I was seething with anger, an emotion I hadn't known much about before. Was it something in the air of Lanka, or did being Ravan's wife bestow certain defiance as a wedding gift?"(Dasgupta 141)

This is a turning point — anger here is self-discovery. Yet, she questions whether her defiance is truly hers, or merely borrowed authority from her proximity to a powerful man.

Dasgupta also presents her as burdened with automatic responsibility for others. When Surpanakha disappears, Ravan blames her: "Couldn't you have taken care of her when she needed you?"(Dasgupta 183) The logic is marital, not rational — a wife is responsible for her husband's family by default, regardless of personal animosity or practical involvement. In this, Mandodari's life mirrors the "marital trope" we see across epics, where the wife becomes an unconsenting custodian of all relational duties.

Motherhood imposes its own boundaries. Seeing Sita's optimism, she notes:

"My endeavours would never risk the future of my children."(Dasgupta 189)

This resignation speaks to how women in patriarchal contexts internalize the belief that their autonomy must be limited for the sake of their maternal role — a limitation not equally applied to men.

Mandodari's most revealing moment of self-valuation comes late in the war, when Vibhishan asks if she regrets marrying Ravan. She replies:

"No, I don't. I have celebrated myself in his company. If it was not for Ravan, I would perhaps be producing layout after layout, trying to rouse the apathetic to my artistry… My journey would not be as legendary."(Dasgupta 245)

This is a complex admission. She recognizes that her public legacy is tied to Ravan's shadow, yet she claims the visibility he inadvertently gave her. It is both an acknowledgment of patriarchal mediation and a reclamation of agency within those confines.

Adrienne Rich's concept of re-vision is critical here — Mandodari is not simply a tragic queen; she is a figure negotiating space between personal ambition and structural constraint. She knows she has been both exploited and elevated by her marriage, and Dasgupta allows her to narrate this paradox herself.

Her assertion during Ravan's confrontation with Sita — "Raising arms against an unarmed is the sin"(Dasgupta 263) — shows a moment of ideological clarity. Initially falling into the patriarchal reflex of "not against a woman," (Dasgupta 263) she reframes her protest in terms of power, not gender. This subtle correction hints at her growing ability to challenge patriarchal logic on its own terms.

Mandodari's life in this retelling is thus not defined solely by her role as Lanka's queen, but by the constant negotiation between what she could build and what she was allowed to claim. Dasgupta's narrative makes her less the ornamental queen of a golden city and more the architect of her own incomplete freedom.

Section III: Tara – The Queen Who Would Not Be Tamed

In Tara, Koral Dasgupta presents a heroine whose voice is sharper, more sardonic, and less willing to perform the acquiescence expected of women in epics. Tara is self-aware, politically astute, and unapologetically difficult — traits that make her simultaneously indispensable and suspect within the patriarchal order of Kishkindha.

Early in the narrative, Tara identifies herself as "the unspoken bridge between the twins"(Dasgupta 16) Bali and Sugriv. This is more than a domestic observation; it positions her as a stabilizing axis in a volatile male rivalry. Yet her identity is still relational — defined by the space she occupies between men — an illustration of Gayatri Spivak's argument that women in epic narratives are often caught as mediators between male-centered conflicts, rather than protagonists in their own right.

Tara's self-perception disrupts this passive framing. She recalls Bali calling her "a difficult woman" (Dasgupta 26)and adds, "It's fun being one." In this quip, defiance becomes a source of pleasure. She is constantly breaking norms and her defiance brings her titles like "a disaster of a woman" and "problem child"(Dasgupta 56) from her own tribe.Unlike her conformist counterpart Ruma, who obeys out of devotion, Tara embraces the discomfort she causes. In Mohanty's terms, she resists the "universal docile woman" stereotype by taking pride in being hard to contain.

Even so, Tara cannot fully escape the relational labels imposed on her. When Sita greets her as Sugriv's wife — based on Lakshman's description — Tara corrects her: "I am Bali's widow unless Sugriv needs me for political exigencies."(Dasgupta 51)The correction is telling: she refuses the marital tag with Sugriv unless politically convenient, but still anchors her identity to a dead husband, revealing the difficulty of imagining herself outside male affiliations.

Her forced marriage to Bali crystallizes her sense of betrayal. When the forest elders, including her own father and Anjani Ma, agree to the match, she fumes:

"So Bali wants to punish me for life? The tribe… did they see it and still not mind sacrificing one girl for everyone's security? What an enormous betrayal."(Dasgupta 83)

Here, marriage is explicitly framed as a political sacrifice, not a romantic union — a dynamic common to epic women whose personal consent is overridden by collective expediency.

Tara's engagement with Sita becomes a space for feminist interrogation. She asks why Sita did not refuse the fire test: "You had the courage to stay firm before Ravan. Why surrender now?" (Dasgupta 85)Sita's

answer — that she did it "to protect Ram" — shocks Tara: "How on earth did someone protect the powerful?"(Dasgupta 86). The incredulity here exposes the absurdity of women sacrificing themselves for men already in positions of ultimate authority.

Bali's death does not free her from patriarchal impositions. He bequeaths her to Sugriv on his deathbed, prompting her to rage:

"What makes everyone nurture such dastardly expectations from women? Was I entitled to nothing, not even grieving?"(Dasgupta 298)

This moment recalls Adrienne Rich's call for re-vision, as Tara openly challenges the assumption that a widow's grief must be subordinated to the needs of political stability.

Throughout the narrative, the gaze of the tribe shapes Tara's self-positioning. She refuses to leave the banana orchard after Bali's presumed death because she does not want to be seen as "a pitiful widow" (Dasgupta 226)— or worse, as Sugriv's wife. Later, gossip about her supposed affair with Sugriv becomes folklore: "Friendships blossomed, folklore flourished."(Dasgupta 231) Her dignity becomes raw material for collective entertainment, illustrating how, in patriarchal settings, women's reputations are public property.

The control extends into her role as mother. When she teaches Angad script-writing, Bali dismisses it: "Scribbling symbols on leaves won't prepare him for life battles."(Dasgupta 207) Writing — a form of legacy, record, and intellectual labor — is feminized and devalued in contrast to the masculine art of warfare. Yet Tara continues to preserve knowledge, refusing to let male contempt dictate her sense of what matters.

Her political insight is consistently sharper than that of the men around her. When Bali justifies Sita's exile as a necessary act to preserve social justice, Tara fumes: "In pursuit of social justice, one woman's disrespect was no more than a minor sacrifice."(Dasgupta 177) She rejects the logic that normalizes women's suffering as the acceptable cost of male governance.

Even in death, Bali concedes her indispensability: "The forest has always been yours… Without you, no king can sustain."(Dasgupta 300) This admission is both validation and indictment — validation of her power, and indictment of a system in which her authority must always be filtered through a man's throne.

Tara's portrayal in Dasgupta's retelling is thus one of paradox: a queen who will not be tamed in thought or speech, but whose political and personal agency remains bound by the structures she rails against. She is a strategist, a mediator, a mother, and a ruler — but above all, she is a woman who refuses to pretend that her compromises are choices.

Thematic Synthesis – Silenced Archetypes, Speaking Women

Though Ahalya, Mandodari, and Tara occupy different narrative spaces in the Ramayana, Koral Dasgupta's retellings reveal a shared condition: each woman is historically remembered not for the totality of her life but for the role she plays in relation to male-centered events. In the classical epic, Ahalya is the "fallen" wife redeemed by Ram, Mandodari the loyal queen defined by her husband's downfall, and Tara the widow whose remarriage secures political stability. In all three cases, their symbolic utility to the male narrative eclipses their subjectivity.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak 78) echoes across their stories. In the original epic, these women are allowed to speak only within frames controlled by male authority — Gautam's curse, Ravan's court, Bali's deathbed. Dasgupta's project is not simply to let them speak, but to reframe the circumstances of speech: to give them space to question, contradict, and redefine the terms of their own participation in history.

Adrienne Rich's concept of "re-vision" is equally vital here. Each woman's retelling is an act of looking back at the epic with "fresh eyes" — not to romanticize their suffering, but to expose the structures that produced it. Ahalya confronts the logic of asceticism that criminalizes her desire; Mandodari interrogates the

way her talents are appropriated under the guise of recognition; Tara refuses to disguise political coercion as personal choice. In Rich's terms, they are not reclaiming their purity but reclaiming their capacity to define what their stories mean.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of the "universal woman" — a passive, docile victim — also helps illuminate their differences. These protagonists are not interchangeable emblems of female suffering. Their strategies for negotiating patriarchy are shaped by context:

Ahalya resists primarily through epistemic challenge, forcing the narrative to account for her body and voice.

Mandodari navigates through strategic accommodation, working within male power structures while subtly reframing their terms.

Tara chooses open dissent, voicing her defiance even when it cannot fully dismantle the constraints around her.

What unites them is not a singular mode of resistance but a shared refusal to remain only what the epic made them. Each insists on the validity of her own perception, even when her society is unwilling to honor it.

These narratives also expose the limits of "redemption" in patriarchal contexts. Ahalya's return to flesh is mediated by Ram's blessing; Mandodari's public legacy is inseparable from her marriage to Ravan; Tara's authority as queen must pass through the legitimacy of a male ruler. None of them escapes the structural reality that women's power in myth is almost always derivative. And yet, by telling their own stories — questioning, reframing, and sometimes mocking the logics that bind them — they transform the terms of their visibility.

In this sense, Dasgupta's retellings are not simply acts of literary recovery; they are political interventions. They demonstrate that to "give voice" to silenced women is not to insert them neatly into existing myths, but to allow them to interrogate those myths from within — to become, in Rich's words, "subjects of their own stories" rather than "objects of someone else's."

Taken together, the trajectories of Ahalya, Mandodari, and Tara reveal that feminist re-vision does not simply "empower" mythological women in a straightforward way. Instead, it exposes the layered negotiations between agency and constraint, voice and erasure, resistance and complicity. Each woman's story unfolds in a space where personal choice is both enabled and limited by the patriarchal structures of her world. These tensions do not resolve neatly — and that is precisely their critical value. By holding onto this complexity, the retellings refuse the temptation of turning these women into uncomplicated heroines, instead offering them as agents of disruption within the very systems that sought to contain them.

Conclusion

The retellings of Ahalya, Mandodari, and Tara in Koral Dasgupta's Sati series do more than fill narrative gaps in the Ramayana — they reconfigure the very terms on which these women can be remembered. By placing their voices at the center, Dasgupta performs what Adrienne Rich calls "re-vision": an act not of sentimental restoration, but of deliberate political intervention. In these narratives, silence is not a void but a site of contestation, where characters interrogate the logics that confined them, even when they cannot fully escape them.

Through Ahalya's defiance of spiritualized patriarchy, Mandodari's negotiation between artistic agency and political subordination, and Tara's refusal to disguise compromise as choice, these women emerge as complex figures — neither wholly liberated nor wholly subjugated. Their power lies not in a miraculous overturning of mythic structures, but in their capacity to speak within them, unsettling their stability from the inside.

Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" resonates sharply here. In Dasgupta's hands, the answer is conditional: the subaltern can speak when given a narrative frame that refuses to ventriloquize her voice through male authority. Yet, as these retellings make clear, recognition still often depends on patriarchal

sanction — whether through Ram's redemption of Ahalya, Ravan's public acknowledgment of Mandodari's artistry, or Bali's admission of Tara's indispensability. The tension between voice and validation remains unresolved, and perhaps necessarily so; it is in this unresolved space that the feminist critique sharpens.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's insistence on culturally specific feminist readings also proves vital. These women's struggles are not abstractions of universal female oppression; they are rooted in the codes of dharma, kinship, honor, and divine prophecy that shape South Asian mythic life. Reading them through Westernized models alone would risk flattening their cultural complexity; Dasgupta's retellings instead invite us to see their resistance as deeply embedded in, and responsive to, their own worlds.

Ultimately, these stories insist that mythology is not a fixed inheritance but a living archive — one that can be reinterpreted, contested, and rewritten to reveal what has been strategically forgotten. In reimagining Ahalya, Mandodari, and Tara, Dasgupta not only restores their voices but challenges the authority of the epic itself, opening space for future tellings where women are neither ornaments nor warnings, but full narrators of their own histories.

Works Cited

Dasgupta, Koral. Ahalya. Pan Macmillan, 2020.

---. Mandodari. Pan Macmillan, 2021.

---. Tara. Pan Macmillan, 2022.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." Boundary 2, vol. 12, no. 3, 1984, pp. 333-358.

Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, W. W. Norton, 1979, pp. 33-49.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271-313.

Volga. The Liberation of Sita. Translated by T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree, Harper Perennial, 2016.