

**Postfeminist Autonomy and Ecofeminist Ethics: A Re-visioning of Myth in
*The Liberation of Sita***

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Abstract:

The concept of liberation (moksha) is a significant concept of Indian philosophy and is found in almost all the Puranas, Gita and other ethical writings in India. Out of four goals of life described in Indian Philosophy – Dharma, Arth, Kaam, and Moksh, the Moksh (Liberation) is regarded as the ultimate goal of human existence. According to the Gita, moksha is the realization of the individual's true nature relieving one's self from any imposed or unnatural positions or state. In this state of Moksh or liberation, human being is in a state that transcends good and evil, offering eternal and everlasting reconciliation. Moreover, the parameters of women's liberation in Indian culture have differed from those mentioned above. From the early phases of the feminist movement in India, feminist writers have sought to reinterpret cultural narratives and reconcile these gaps within tradition. *The Liberation of Sita* by Volga is one such effort that redefines the female self through a feminist perspective and gives our sacred epic Ramayana a modern and more human-centred reading.

The Liberation of Sita (2009) written by Volga is much more than a retelling of a classic epic; it is a stark reminder of the problems of women in securing an identity as well as respect. Volga's re-contextualization effectively articulates contemporary feminist concerns as it deals with the relation of Nature and female as in Eco Feminism, Patriarchy Critique, Post-Colonial Feminism, Ideology of Self-Liberation, Ethical Rationalism, Mythological Revisionism and yet succumbs not entirely to the ethos of Indian history and culture. The book not only seeks to appropriate Sita's story but also seeks to explore such elements as the search for self, compassion, and overcoming tribulations. The Release of Sita and other discarded female characters ushered in a new era in the Indian feminist literary discourse by providing agency to those who have been voiceless in the epic stories. Although it has been received with both praise and criticism for its feminist interpretation, its primary focus on the issue of conflict between freedom and identity, and the use of women in literature and society, remains relevant to this day.

Key-words: Liberation, Feminist, Redemption, Jnana (Knowledge), Mythological Revisionism.

Introduction:

The Liberation of Sita (2009) was written by Volga (pen name of Popuri Lalita Kumari) and originally published in Telugu as Sita's Ramayana. Later, its accessibility broadened by its translation into English. Volga often focuses on feminist issues, such as gender, patriarchy, and self-liberation from the framework of Indian mythology and culture. As A. K. Ramanujan's influential essay "Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" demonstrates, "the Rama story is a universe so expansive it cannot be encapsulated in one text or even a cohort of texts" (Ramanujan, *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*). For this reason, every interpretation is also a telling and every telling also an interpretation.

The Liberation of Sita received much acclaim for its stark feminist critique of the Ramayana. In the course of applause and criticism, critics praised its ability to honour the original epic and recognized it in new transformative perspective. The book was esteemed for voicing the often-discounted female characters of the Ramayana, it showcased their inner lives and struggles. In India, the book ignited discussions about the representation of women in mythology, literature, and popular culture.

This paper is an attempt to examine and analyze the life and character of mythical female characters as they are socially constructed as marginalized, and how these female characters are deconstructed from myths and history in Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, and reconstruct it with contemporary concerns of Eco Feminism, Patriarchy Critique, Post-Colonial Feminism, Ideology of Self-Liberation, Ethical Rationalism, and Mythological Revisionism. Volga's work suggests that traditional epics like the Ramayana by Valmiki or Ramcharitmanas by Tulsidas and many other versions of Ramayana have historically silenced women's voices, portraying them primarily through patriarchal standpoints. **Volga challenges these conventions**, by re centring these narratives around female experiences. Through her book she has **suggested that true liberation for women does not lie in complete subservience and self-abnegation, it lies in reclaiming their identities and stories**. This paper is an attempt to examine feminist reinterpretation, discourse as a form of empowerment, and the collective female experience, contextualizing the traditional portrayal of Sita in the *Ramayana*. She has explored how each narrative contributes to the overarching theme of liberation.

Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* rewords the *Ramayana* by transferring attention from patriarchal narratives singing the valiant male to the inner life of Sita, presenting her story through a feminist framework. Volga has not portrayed Sita as a silent symbol of virtue, rather the novel reconstructs her as a thinking, questioning individual. The writer has structured her narrative around imagined conversations between Sita and several women from the epic tradition, including Surpanakha, Renuka, Urmila, and Ahalya. These dialogues function as moments of reflection through which Sita re-evaluates her past, confronts social expectations, and gradually arrives at a definite insight of her own identity.

Adrienne Rich in her essay *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*, describes "re vision as the act of re-entering inherited narratives with fresh insight." She argues, that for women this process is essential for survival, as it allows them to question dominant ideologies and reclaim silenced histories. The present paper mainly draws upon the same idea and highlights the significance of collective female voices in Indian women's writing by re-examining marginalized figures from Valmiki's *Ramayana*. In *The Liberation of Sita* Volga reveals, as exemplified by Ania Loomba "reinterpretation of cultural dominance" by rewriting the hegemonic *Ramayana* narrative to expose patriarchal ideology, recover silenced female voices, and redefine Sita from a symbol of submissive virtue into an agent of selfhood and resistance. She has established how myth constructs gendered norms of obedience and purity, and at the same time subverts this dominance by offering an alternative feminist consciousness rooted in experience rather than patriarchal idealization.

The key term used in the text "the Liberation", in Indian Philosophy defined as the **complete cessation of sufferings**. The concept of liberation entails someone's state of bondage and anticipates the possibility of his or her release into a state of freedom. It is perhaps the biggest idea in man's quest of happiness. The idea of liberation also finds philosophical roots in the *Bhagavad Gita*. In *Bhagavad Gita* moksha described as realization of the true self (*atman*). For the great Indian Philosopher and thinker S. Radhakrishnan this self-realization is the spiritual condition and it is the highest form of religious life, achieved through inner awareness and wisdom.

According to the *Gita*, liberation requires mental purification, freedom from ego, and detachment from material desire. Moksha is associated with inner fulfilment and self realization rather than external obligation. A liberated individual acts without attachment and may serve humanity without being bound by moral compulsion. The *Gita* outlines three interrelated paths toward liberation: *karma* (selfless action), *jnana* (knowledge), and *bhakti* (devotion).

Of the many theories of the means to salvation, the jnana-yoga or the way of knowledge may be said to be a very effective and important theory. This is a very widely prevalent theory in ancient India. This is the theory which holds that "by perfect knowledge man can control his destiny." In other words, it means that perfect knowledge enables one to be free. ("The Concept of Liberation (moksha) in the Bhagavad Gita", Mansi Bora)

However, for female, in the same culture liberation means obedience and purity, and the complete subjugation for family. Volga's retelling of the Ramayana reclaims subaltern female subjectivity by foregrounding women traditionally reduced to silence, thereby enacting Loomba's theory that reinterpretation of canonical cultural narratives becomes a political act that destabilizes hegemonic authority and restores suppressed identities. In the course of the narrative, Sita embarks on an inward journey through which she starts thinking on the incidents and characters she had in her life from a new perspective and hence, dives into self-awareness through her encounters with several marginal female figures. After listening to their stories and contemplated upon their experiences from her own perspective. These moments of reflection lead her to recognize how male authority and social expectations shaped her life, gradually allowing her to reclaim a sense of personal identity and self-understanding.

Within Indian philosophical thought, liberation is not viewed as something newly attained but as the realization of an existing truth. The *Bhagavad Gītā* describes the liberated individual as one who perceives unity among all beings and therefore harbours no sense of hatred or division. Bondage, according to this tradition, arises from ignorance—specifically, the inability to distinguish between what is real and what is illusory. Hence, 'Liberation', is the realization of reality, and it is achieved through clarity of understanding rather than external transformation.

“ऋतेज्ञानात् मुक्तिः” — A doctrinal assertion rooted in Advaita Vedānta, emphasizing that liberation is impossible without self-knowledge (Śaṅkara's Vedāntic philosophy). “ज्ञानादेव तु कैवल्यम्” (*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, v.56, Ādi Śaṅkarācārya.)

According to the Viṣṇupurāṇa, avidyā or ignorance is the cause of bondage of the individual self. Avidyā consists in the cognition that the not self is the self (anātmani ātmabuddhiḥ) and in the notion of property in what is not one's own (asve svamiti matiḥ). These are the two seeds of the tree of avidyā or ignorance. In the Viṣṇupurāṇa, it is mentioned that the self is distinct from the body, which is composed of five elements, viz., ether, air, fire, water and earth. Even then the embodied being, bewildered by the darkness of fascination, asserts that 'This is I' thinking the body on the self. The self is pure and ever free;

and is composed of happiness and wisdom. Thus, bondage is not natural to the self. Truly, the properties like ignorance, impurity and pain etc. belongs to prakṛti or the matter, not to the self. When the self is associated with prakṛti, it is vitiated by ahaṁkāra etc. and assumes the form of prakṛti. Such association of the self with prakṛti is produced by avidyā. When avidyā is destroyed through right knowledge, then the self realizes its own nature, which is pure and liberated. The realization of the true nature of the self is called mukti or mokṣa or liberation. In the Viṣṇupurāṇa, the avidyā or ignorance is classified into fivefold heads, i.e. tamas (darkness), moha (delusion), mahāmoha (deep delusion), tāmisra (gloom) and andhatāmisra (dark gloom).

तमो मोहो महमोह स्ताममस्तो ह्यन्धसंमितः।

अमिद्या पञ्चपिषा प्रादुर्भूता महात्मनः॥ (I.5.5)

In the first book 'The Reunion' Volga talks about the reunion, it's a sensitive narration of Sita with Surpanakha. The main mystery that Sita sets out to explore in this book is, "Do women exist only to be used by men to settle their scores?" After Rama leaves her at Valmiki's Ashram in the forest, Sita meets Surpankha, a demoness and Ravana's sister, whose nose was cut off by Rama and Lakshman. Surpankha was proud of her beauty and after the mutilation, found it difficult to love herself and 'find' love for a long time. Kathleen M. Erndl in her exploration states,

On the other hand, there is a deep suspicion of women's power and sexuality when unchecked by male control. On the one hand, there is an effort to evade the question of whether Rama's behavior in teasing and goading Surpanakha before having her mutilated was appropriate. On the other, there is in many telling the not-so-subtle suggestion that Surpanakha, as an immodest would be adulteress, deserves whatever treatment she receives. ("The Mutilation of Surpanakha", 66-77)

Surpankha undergoes a period of deep inner struggle, and ultimately, arrives at a renewed understanding of beauty that is imbedded in harmony with nature rather than external approval. Surpanakha rebuilds her life in harmony with nature after patriarchal violence attempts to shame and silence her, and makes her story resonate with ecofeminist thought. Her withdrawal from royal power structures into creative, ecological self-sufficiency challenges the systems that control both women and nature.

Her story becomes a powerful ecofeminist moment that challenges traditional portrayals of femininity, beauty, and civilization. While, staying in isolation she chooses to cultivate a

garden, it is an act that symbolizes care, creativity, and self-restoration. In time, she forms a meaningful relationship with a man; however, she makes it clear to Sita that this

companionship came only after an important realization. As she explains, a woman's sense of achievement should not be measured through her attachment to a man, and it was only after recognizing this truth that she was able to welcome companionship into her life (13). Vandana Shiva, in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* argues, "The patriarchal worldview sees man as separate from and superior to nature, leading to the domination of both women and the environment." Volga's portrayal of Surpankha shows that she is resisting this domination by reclaiming identity through coexistence with the natural world instead of submission to social norms. From her earlier experiences she has learnt that dependence on male validation can result in emotional suffering. Tormented by the repeated rejections - specially from Rama and Lakshman - she internalized this dismissal as a failure of her own worth. These experiences brought her pain because her sense of desirability was shaped by how she was viewed by men. Her transformation begins when she no longer seeks affirmation from external sources. Self-identification, frees her from the burden of rejection. This self-awareness not only enables a healthier relationship with another person but also allows her to heal from the emotional wounds of her past. She got ultimate fulfilment only after self-realization (aatmgyan) "आत्मिनस्य तु के िल्य मनःश्रेयसहेतुत्िमि? रेदप्रत्ययमनितूकत्िेन कैिल्यफलािसानत्िात्"। (*Sri Bhagavad-Gita* Supersite, Indian Institute of Technology)

Again, Ahalya's story in *The Liberation of Sita* is explored from an eco-feminist and mythological revisionist lens, which reveals how patriarchy controls both women and nature. Deriving her views on eco-feminist thinkers such as Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant, Volga exposes a system in which women's bodies, like natural resources, are treated as property to be regulated and punished. In the traditional scripts, Indra's violation goes unpunished, while Ahalya is silenced and transformed into stone. It symbolizes "the reduction of living entities into inert objects under patriarchal authority" (Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*). This punishment reflects Val Plumwood's critique of hierarchical dualisms that justify domination (Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*).

Volga revises her script in her text *The Liberation of Sita* and allows Ahalya to speak for herself, Volga challenges the traditional moral framework that equates female embodiment with impurity. Ahalya remains socially excluded even after her restoration in original version of the script, it reveals that patriarchal redemption restores form but denies dignity. Ahalya's emotional isolation within marriage equals to Sita's experience of isolation and questions the assumption that social institutions ensure belonging. In line with Vandana Shiva's eco-feminist ideas of resilience and regeneration, Ahalya's turn toward self-reliance becomes a form of resistance. Hence, Volga successfully transforms mythology

into a site of critique, and shows that liberation arises through self-sustenance and harmony rather than submission to patriarchal structures.

There are certainly more ways to look at Ahalya's narrative. Using a postfeminist lens shows how much she wants to be free and define herself, but also criticising the strict social restrictions and patriarchal standards that hold women back. She is against the old story of oppression by not feeling guilty or like a victim. She shows how these feelings keep power disparities going. She won't admit culpability or act like a victim, which changes the script on what Rosalind Gill calls the "postfeminist demand for intelligible femininity"—that pushes women to stay "readable" by owning up, taking responsibility, and morally rehabilitating themselves (Gill 2007). Ahalya reveals how much patriarchal control depends on women believing in these prepared acts by throwing them away.

Postfeminist society tries to market empowerment as your own decision, but Angela McRobbie says that this only shifts the blame to people and covers the broader structural disparities (McRobbie 2009). Volga's view of Ahalya adds a sharp twist: she says that authority only works when women go along with it. "Society gave him that authority, I didn't" (Volga 28). This shows that real empowerment isn't only about claiming your independence within the system; it's about refusing to recognise those repressive systems completely.

Angela McRobbie writes in her 2009 book *The Aftermath of Feminism* that women's empowerment and equality can exist alongside new forms of control that weaken them. She called it "double entanglement," which means that society agrees with feminist ideas (such as women being independent and making their own choices), but then wraps them up in neo-conservative restrictions about gender, sexuality, and family. Ahalya's advice to Sita shows this fake respect that goes along with demands for sacrifice and moral honesty. It makes you think about how to hurt women. By saying, "You mean you, nothing else... "You are not just the wife of Rama" (The Liberation of Sita, Volga 39). Ahalya rejects limited ideas of empowerment that are based on relational fulfilment and instead promotes a reflective, self-determined subjectivity. This shows how gendered norms still exist even though postfeminist ideas of choice and freedom are popular.

Next to Ahalya's bold defiance that shuffles patriarchal judgment and uncovers that postfeminist "double entanglement" Volga's reworking on Renuka's story, exposes the brutal logic behind moral policing, that compels women to prove their fidelity at any the cost. Renuka's beheading for imagined adultery symbolizes patriarchal violence on women's fidelity, fragile as a "sand pot" that shatters under scrutiny—a metaphor Volga uses to

expose the hypocrisy of purity tests. In her story McRobbie's concept fits seamlessly – feminist "gains" like women's voices are entangled with regulation via endless fidelity trials, making autonomy conditional on confession or atonement. Ahalya refuses victimhood or guilt, declaring authority relies on women's consent ("Society gave him that authority, I didn't" [Volga 28]); Renuka echoes this by revealing beheading erases "sexual vision" memory, not sin—exposing how postfeminist empowerment obscures structural control, urging withdrawal from oppressive scripts.

Renuka's narrative is a challenge to postfeminist discourse as it foregrounds the danger of complete self-denial in intimate relationships. Her near-execution at the command of her husband and her subsequent healing by forest women reveals the collapse of marital security as a source of identity. Renuka's realization – "Someday that very husband will tell her that there is no place for her in his world". McRobbie warns that postfeminist culture often romanticizes intimacy while withdrawing collective support structures, leaving women vulnerable when personal relationships fail. Renuka's script reveals the insecurity of women in patriarchal social structures and denial of self-identity in conjugal relation and underscores the necessity of preserving a personal world beyond romantic attachment (Volga 52).

Ahalya and Renuka offer a postfeminist critique that transcends superficial empowerment, advocating for a more radical emphasis on self-authorship, refusal, and ethical autonomy. Volga's mythical reinterpretation critically interacts with postfeminist sensibilities by exposing how narratives of choice and agency can either reinforce or contest patriarchal authority. The Liberation of Sita does not extol individual autonomy in solitude. Instead, it emphasises the importance of intentionally disengaging from systems that compel women to obliterate their identities in the name of love, duty, or moral righteousness.

In the penultimate story, Sita recalls her reunion with her sister, Urmila, who was married to Lakshman. He had left to accompany Rama on his exile without having a word with his wife or bidding her farewell. Urmila, in those fourteen years, came to realise that power is the cause of unhappiness. The only way to liberation is autonomy, to have no one command you and to exert power over no one. To be self-reliant and self-sufficient. She doesn't shun her relationship with Lakshman but wonders if he will accept her as she is.

Sita learns from these women, finds companionship at different times, as well as the assurance that she isn't alone in her suffering. These women, including Sita, our protagonist, were in committed relationships, yet none could rely on their partners for support of any kind. Then, how do we define singlehood? Having a partner doesn't solve most of our issues and so to have one should not be considered a success either. The goal has to be about

ourselves and we need to take care of ourselves before we care for others in life. To depend on someone for our self-worth, identity and for validation is not the only way to happiness and sometimes not a happy path either. Once we depend on ourselves for that we might be able to see ourselves, our actions and others in a different light and maybe then we will be in a better position to love someone for who they are, accept them, and still remain autonomous.

The foregoing analysis suggests that Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* reimagines mythological narratives to interrogate the deeply embedded structures of patriarchy that continue to shape women's identities through expectations of obedience, purity, and sacrifice. The female characters presented by Volga narrates their own story. Volga allows Sita, Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka, and Urmila to narrate their own experiences, by doing so she transforms myth into a space of defiance where silenced female subjects reclaim voice and agency. She is able to voice the inner agitation through the encounters among these women. Their encounter and self-exposure reveal that liberation is neither merely social nor relational but an inward realization rooted in self-awareness and autonomy, echoing philosophical notions of moksha as knowledge of the self rather than compliance with external moral codes.

Through ecofeminist, postfeminist, and revisionist lenses, Volga exposes how systems of control persist even within narratives of empowerment, demanding that women continually justify their worth through conformity. Her reinterpretation ultimately dismantles the illusion that fulfillment lies solely within domestic or marital structures and instead foregrounds solidarity, self-recognition, and ethical independence as paths to freedom. Thus, the work not only revisits mythology but also speaks urgently to contemporary gender discourse, asserting that true liberation emerges when women disengage from scripts of subordination and reconstruct their identities beyond patriarchal expectations.

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