

NIPPING IT IN THE BUD: EXPOSING THE FOUNDATIONS OF #METOO THROUGH THE LIBERATION OF SITA

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Abstract

The #MeToo movement has largely focussed on exposing sexual abuse, sexual harassment and rape culture, in an attempt to rid it of shame and build solidarity and empathy. However, it is important to actually delve into the roots of the unfair treatment that is meted out to women and their stereotyping, at times as a misplaced understanding or display of love, to expose the mindset that helps in justifying actions of cruelty and violence. Unearthing this palimpsest cannot merely aid in exposing what lies at the root of unjustifiable actions, but can also contribute, over time, in nipping the issue in the bud rather than protesting or tackling its manifestation.

Written by Volga in Telugu as Vimukti, The Liberation of Sita a novella or as the author likes to call it a collection of stories revolves around the lives of 5 women from Ramayana, each finding her identity and realising that to a great extent she too was a victim of patriarchal structures and beliefs that both makes injustice possible and unfortunately often gives it a stamp of acceptability, which is what the #MeToo movement seeks to protest.

By choosing to examine characters from mythology, The Liberation of Sita draws attention to where it all begins both in context of time and space. Reclaiming the mythological space and trying to rid it of its patriarchal stronghold, the book moves the focus from the manifestation to the mindset that generates and justifies it.

This paper would explore and expose this paradox in an attempt to comment on the need to nip the issue in the bud by observing and questioning the mindset that makes #MeToo possible.

Keywords: Gender; #MeToo; mythology; retelling; Ramayana.

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1. Introduction

Through its going viral, in October 2017, the hashtag Me Too (#MeToo), with about twelve million responses, in twenty-four hours, from across the world, indicated the widespread and deep-rooted issue of exploitation of women, whether physically, emotionally or psychologically. Started by Tarana Burke in 2006, when she called out the sexual exploitation she had faced, the hashtag metoo soon caught on with women across the world for the first time voicing out the sexual exploitation/abuse they had faced, exposing the widespread nature of the malaise. By gaining visibility and demanding accountability and justice, the movement built a community

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transferring the shame hitherto placed on the exploited women to the exploiting/abusive male. The magnitude of the responses revealed that while women's success was on the rise, so was the crime against them².

This exposes the fact that while much has changed in the world vis-à-vis women – in their having conquered diverse fields and proven their mettle across numerous areas – there is much that still remains unchanged – the approach to them and the degrading manner in which they are treated, through their exploitation both in the personal and professional space and the varied and rampant crime against them³. Against this backdrop, what the #MeToo movement essentially does is to draw attention to the politics of power in gender relations, that has become so commonplace and yet is rarely noticed or reported. In fact, it has sadly come to be seen as unavoidable and therefore to be accepted, or acceptable, depending upon which side of the gender spectrum one is on. And, what Tarana Burke, the founder of the #MeToo movement, saw in this was the opportunity to consider, “How all of this attention could be harnessed to advance my vision for a world without sexual violence” (Haines, 2022).

This is no doubt a basic expectation; however, what is equally important is to trace back what makes sexual violence possible or even considered acceptable. Doing so will ensure that sexual violence and the improper treatment of women is reined in, if not wiped out. If observed carefully, it is not difficult to see that sexual violence, is birthed by an extreme disrespect for womanhood and personal boundaries. It thus serves as an expression of power and manhood and reflects a mindset that makes men believe in their inherent superiority. In turn, it helps both manifest and justify the violence they perpetrate on women. Affecting both men and women in opposite ways – where the patriarchal order implicitly justifies the objectification of women and women feel that they are born to suffer such treatment (Beauvoir, 2011) – this mindset becomes the root of the exploitation of women and the silence that surrounds it. A product of what one absorbs consciously, or worse still unconsciously, while growing up, this mindset finds unbridled manifestation in the socio-cultural milieu that (re)presents it.

Popular culture, as reflected through art, serves to both mirror reality and influence it; having a mass accessibility and appeal. An important expression of popular art is

² A World Bank report shows that 30% of women have experienced intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. That's 736 million women around the world. This figure is likely to be much higher, if one considers the unreported cases as well as the other kinds of violence against women that is non-sexual in nature. The World Bank, “Violence against women and girls – what the data tell us”, October 01, 2022, <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/data-stories/overview-of-gender-based-violence/#:~:text=30%25%20of%20women%20have%20experienced,million%20women%20around%20the%20world> (accessed March 15, 2023).

³ Ibidem

mythology, which often gets unquestioningly accepted as tradition and a reflection of culture. This paper would thus like to inspire the readers to reflect on the gender stereotyping that mythology often embodies, serving to become, over time, a means of its justification; in the hope that it will generate awareness about the birthing of stereotypes that result in the secondary treatment meted out to women, thereby helping to address the issue, by tackling it at the roots.

2. *Setting the Context – Capturing the Essence of Ramayana*

Given that mythology is what most grow up listening to and reading, in their formative years and considering its status as a long standing and extremely powerful expression, mythology proves to be highly surreptitious and subversive in its influence. Consequentially, it has a deep and powerful influence on the definition and understanding of what is acceptable or to be imitated, in order to gain respectability in society. Myths serve thereby as “A part of the fabric of human life, expressing beliefs, moulding behaviour and justifying institutions, customs and values” (Cavendish, 2003: 8). In the Indian context, this can be witnessed in the context of *Ramayana*, which serves as an extremely popular mythological tale. It has not only been translated into multiple regional and international languages, but is recited and enacted in various forums and on diverse occasions, even today. It, thus constitutes, “The solid and enduring foundation of age long and magnificent edifice of Indian culture and civilization..... [and] still influences, to a great extent, the cultural life and behaviour-pattern of crores of Indians” (Ramesh, 2016: 2453). Over and above the original mythological text, authored by Valmiki, the many versions of *Ramayana* have a huge following. The *Ramayana* thus serves as a religious text and is recited not merely annually, but on many auspicious occasions, including wedding ceremonies. Its many versions reflect additions and deletions, as per their place of origin, over and above which *Ramayana* has birthed many re-readings. Among the versions are those showcased as pop art - folk performances, TV serials and comic books, ensuring reach across ages and audiences. On the other hand, the re-readings have taken varied forms – ranging from political, historical and caste based to the feminist. This popularity and enduring appeal of *Ramayana* springs from its defining and symbolising the ‘ideal’, in the numerous family relationships and values – encompassing that of a son, a brother, a husband, a wife, a mother, et al. Additionally, for most its appeal lies in its building and deifying the image of the ideal man/the *maryada purushottam*⁴, in the image of its protagonist – Rama.

A tale that revolves around its protagonist Rama, *Ramayana* unfolds through intrigue, deception, vengeance and the many obstacles that Rama faces, being banished to the forest by Kaikeyi, one of the many wives of his father. Kaikeyi’s

⁴ Rama has been defined as the *maryada purushottam* or the ideal man, as he is believed to both represent the highest values through his thoughts, actions and character and embody idealism in his approach to and handling of the varied relationships in his life.

actions are driven by her love for her son Bharata, whom she wants to see as the successor to his father – the king of Ayodhya. Rama thus spends 14 years in the forest, accompanied only by his wife and his brother Lakshmana, who chooses his brotherly duty over his marital one. Among the many twists and turns, in Rama's life, in the forest, is his encounter with Surpanakha, who is from the *rakshasa*⁵ clan, and who comes seeking his love. Spurning it, he eggs her on to seek out Lakshmana, who, in turn, cuts off her nose and ears to teach her a lesson. She, in turn, appeals to her brother – Ravana, to avenge her humiliation. Tricking Rama and Lakshmana into leaving Sita alone, Ravana abducts her and keeps her captive in Ashoka Vanam, a forest, which is a part of his kingdom. This results in a war to get Sita back, which Rama wins. However, before accepting her back, Rama expects Sita to prove her chastity, by taking an *agnipareeksha*/a test by fire, pushing the shame of his behaviour, reflected through his suspicion of her chastity, onto her. This is much like slut shaming, against which women were protesting through the #MeToo movement.

Not surprisingly, being pure in thoughts and actions Sita emerges from the fire unscathed. This event also marks the end of their exile and they return to Ayodhya, where Rama becomes the king. He however soon banishes Sita to the forest, when a *dhobi*/washer-man casts aspersions on her purity. A pregnant Sita seeks refuge in the *ashram*/hermitage of Sage Valmiki, where she and the sage bring up her twin sons Lava and Kusa. While Sita teaches them different skills, Valmiki teaches them the story of their father's life. Later, when the brave and skilled twins stop the horse, that is a part of the *Aswamedha Yaga*⁶, that is meant to proclaim Rama's power over the territory it covers, they are invited to the palace, where Rama eventually learns that the twins are his sons. He then sends for their mother Sita and says that he would love welcoming her back in his life, if she proclaims her innocence before the entire court, so that no one ever suspects her again. Having undergone a chastity test once already, Sita chooses instead to go back to her roots, to mother earth, whose offspring she is, thus asserting herself.

What gets eclipsed in the story of *Ramayana* and elided in its narration are the demands and expectations that Rama's allegiance to his *Dharma*⁷, as a king and son, inadvertently places on the women, who directly and indirectly are a part of his life or those who cross his path. This, in turn, results in the unfair and unacceptable treatment that is meted out to them, in the process of the fulfilment of his duty that helps in his casting as the *maryada purushottam*. In doing so, it no doubt casts Sita as the ideal woman; but, unlike in the case of Rama, Sita is defined by the role she plays in the unfurling of his destiny – as an ideal wife and an ideal mother.

⁵ The *rakshasa* clan is seen as demonic and temperamental, ready to go to any lengths to fulfil their desire.

⁶ A *yaga*, commonly spelt as *yagna*, is a ritual to invoke gods, through religious sacrifices and prayers, for the fulfilment of diverse purposes.

⁷ *Dharma* is seen as the righteous behaviour expected, as per one's role in the society.

3. *Approaching Indian mythology through the #MeToo lens*

The treatment meted out to Sita, in her roles as a mother and wife, makes a feminist re-reading a much-required eye-opener, which Volga, the author of *The Liberation of Sita*, the text under consideration, manages effectively, by drawing upon a simple and engaging style. As a consequence, *The Liberation of Sita* serves as, “A powerful subversion of India’s most popular tale of morality, choice and sacrifice [and thus] opens up new spaces within the old discourse, enabling women to review their lives and experiences afresh” (Thakkar, 2020). Over and above making it more relevant to the times, this feminist re-reading also helps draw attention to how a woman’s chastity and fidelity get associated with family honour, in the Indian context, thus taking away “[Women’s] agency over their destinies or any instruments to deal with the injustices they incur” (Srivastava, 2018). And, in the light of the varied crimes against women – whether in the form of the constantly unfolding honour killings, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, rapes and the abandonment of women on mere suspicion of their fidelity and chastity⁸ – being brought into focus by the #MeToo movement, this reading can serve both as an epiphany and inspiration.

In herself a strong and independent character, Sita is found by the childless King Janaka, while he is furrowing the earth, as a part of some ritual. Consequently, she is perceived as the daughter of Mother Earth. Being both knowledgeable and skilled, in diverse fields, Sita demonstrates her power, from a very early age, by stringing a sacred bow. As a result, her marriage is announced to the person, who can string the same mighty bow, which Sita would play with in her childhood. Rama wins her hand by completing the task and takes her to Ayodhya, his father’s kingdom. Later when Rama is banished to the forest, as a result of the scheming nature of another of his father’s queen, Sita chooses to accompany Rama. During their stay in the forest, Sita requests Rama to catch a fancy golden deer, she has set her heart on. When Rama and then Lakshmana leave her in search of the deer, which is actually Ravana in disguise, Lakshmana draws a *lakshmanrekha*/a safe line around their hut, to protect her. She however steps across it, when tricked by Ravana, who now appears as a sage seeking alms. Sita is then abducted by Ravana and confined to the Ashoka Vanam, in his kingdom, which in turn raises the entire issue of chastity, in her context and the subsequent requests, by Rama, to prove it, not once but twice.

In the narrative, Sita thereby repeatedly finds herself at the receiving end of unfair treatment, as the circumstances of her unfortunate abduction, cast a shadow on her

⁸ Even today the figures of crime against women, in India, remain shocking. One comes across regular reports in Indian news that gain momentum and die out from public attention. This includes cases right from the Delhi rape case (2012), to women wrestlers representing India in international competitions complaining about sexual abuse and harassment and a lack of action against it (2023).

chastity and image. Her abduction and the time she has spent away from her husband leaves her unfit for an ideal king, who unsurprisingly chooses his role as a king and the expectations from it, over his role as a husband. This serves to echo the treatment meted out to women, who experience fear and seclusion, even today, while the perpetrators go free. Like the women, who chose to claim their identity under the #MeToo movement, Sita claims hers, by choosing to return to her mother, rather than having to undergo repeated trials to prove her chastity and innocence. This bold action is however just glossed over as an incident in the life of the protagonist Rama, who continues his life as the ideal king, in *Ramayana*.

The re-reading – *The Liberation of Sita*, while written earlier than the #MeToo movement, aligns itself to it, through their common focus on dealing with the manifestation of misogyny, patriarchy and sexism in the form of sexual violence. It does so, by exposing the temperament that makes all these possible and the values that enshrine it, bestowing men with power and women with shame. Against the backdrop of patriarchy and the resultant secondary position of women that it unwittingly justifies and therefore indirectly promotes, *The Liberation of Sita* serves as an important re-reading of the myth, from the context of gender equality and the point of view of women. Such a re-reading or what Adrienne Rich terms “re-visionist reading” (1972: 18) of *Ramayana* helps offer an alternative perspective, by giving voice to the concerns and experiences of women, thereby aiding in exposing the patriarchy that it expounds. By doing so, it spotlights the temperament that, if unchecked, is bound to result in the unbridled use of sexual power against women, that the #MeToo movement is trying to expose and address. Being a re-visionist reading, it also serves to ease the work of the writer, for, as Volga points out, “Since the characters are already known to the reader, the author is spared of the effort to introduce them, and can then concentrate on the subject.” (2016: 102) Given the popularity of *Ramayana*, and the haloed status of its protagonist, the re-reading can, in fact, serve to compel the readers to ponder deeper into the thematic of the improper treatment of women by generating shock and thereby shaking them out of their complacency.

Furthermore, such an endeavour is also important because, as Yoshita Srivastava points out,

The portrayals and the consequences incurred by these mythical female characters transcend into the treatment of women in reality. Even now, the most degrading and hurtful verbal attacks on women are related to slut-shaming or rape threats. The patriarchal model, therefore, propagates that women can be controlled by robbing them of their sexual agency. (Srivastava, 2018)

This holds true in the context of the five female characters around whom *The Liberation of Sita* revolves and can thus help to expose it.

Ironically, patriarchy is a practice that is so pervasive and deep rooted that many, whether women or men, are blinded to it or do not vociferously oppose it, since it can be seen percolating through the ages. ‘Re-visioning’ mythology thus forms a crucial way to draw attention to this unacceptable, yet widely prevalent, approach to women and the manner in which they are treated. And, *The Liberation of Sita* (2016), originally written in Telugu and published under the title *Vimukta*, does just that. Written by Popuri Lalitha Kumari, under the pseudonym Volga, it has been translated by T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree.. The revisionist reading shows how, as Volga herself succinctly puts it, “Times change, and along with it change customs and traditions. Dharmas of the past become meaningless and unjust now. To convey this truth, many writers continue to rethink and rewrite stories from mythology” (2016: 102).

The novella, or what the author likes to describe as five stories, revolves around four minor women characters from the *Ramayana* – Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka, Urmila and Sita, the wife of the protagonist (Rama) of the narrative. These tales unfold, as Paromita Sengupta points out, “Mainly as dialogic exchanges, [where] all the narratives are beautifully woven together so that while they are individually meaningful, taken together they chart the wonderful evocative journey of a woman’s soul as it searches for meaning” (2018). Sita serves as the common thread that binds these female characters together. Each of these women have in their way been victims of deeply entrenched patriarchal values. Surpanakha has suffered denial and defacement for having the courage to express her sexuality, majorly impacting her confidence. So too, like Sita, Ahalya and Renuka have had to pay a huge price for what is perceived as their lack of chastity and fidelity. Ahalya, the wife of Sage Gautama, is cursed into becoming a stone because she satiates the desire of the King of Gods – Indra, unknowingly. Lusting after her, Indra comes to her in the disguise of her husband – Sage Gautama. Being unaware of his true identity, Ahalya satiates the desire of the disguised Indra, for which her husband curses her, turning her into a stone, till she is redeemed by Rama’s touch. A similar but more violent plight is faced by Renuka Devi, whose husband – Sage Jamadagni – orders his sons to behead her, only because she dared to look at another man. Her son – Parasurama – otherwise known for his bravery – chooses to blindly obey his father. As his anger abates, Sage Jamadagni orders Parasurama to stop and they abandon her in a half dead state, from which she is nursed back to health by the local tribes. Urmila’s story is however different; the violence she faces is more at the emotional level. Her husband Lakshmana chooses Rama – his brother – over her and decides to follow Rama into the forest for the 14 years of his exile and serve his brother (Rama) and sister-in-law (Sita). He deters Urmila from accompanying them, as he does not want any distractions, in serving his brother. Sita, too abandons her sister – Urmila - and decides to follow her husband, instead of waiting back with her. This, in turn, creates a feeling of betrayal in Urmila, who locks herself in her room for the 14 years, until Rama, Sita and Lakshmana return from the exile. The stories revolve around the interaction of Sita, with Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka Devi and Urmila, and the

lessons she draws from it. These interactions, as Chandra Sundeep reveals, help Sita to, “Reflect upon her life, and ask questions which she had never thought of before. The characters she meets offer a unique perspective to dharma, society and behaviour” (2021), leading ultimately to Sita’s liberation.

Unlike in the original mythology, in *The Liberation of Sita*, these women, when treated unfairly, free themselves from all that has held them back – “Husbands, sons and their notions of desire, beauty and chastity” (2016: dust jacket), embarking on, “an arduous journey to self-realisation” (2016: dust jacket), much like what the women in the #MeToo movement aim to do. The re-reading, thus, shatters the archetypes⁹ that have become an ingrained part of the cultural construct, laying down and gradually, but definitely, entrenching the roles of and expectations from men and women in the society. By re-visioning mythology, *The Liberation of Sita* questions the patriarchal mindset that makes sexism possible and, to an extent, legitimises it. Sexism, which is, in fact, faced in different forms by all the five characters, around whom *The Liberation of Sita* revolves. It exposes the physical, emotional and psychological violence that women often suffer and demonstrates the manner of emerging stronger from it, rather than succumbing to it. In the manner of the #MeToo movement, it thereby shows the importance of both standing up for oneself and with each other. By doing so, it can help women, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, “Write their own histories” (n.d.). It does so, by focusing on women who were, in the words of Volga, “Victims of insults, rejections, curses and neglect by the world, families and husbands” (2016: 104). It brings them to life and highlights their ill-treatment, by using, according to Vijay Kumar and Vijayasree,

Different narrative strategies: giving voice to women characters marginalized in the ‘master narrative’, extending the story of a character beyond its conventional closure; forging female bonds and creating a female collective; and redefining many conventional epistemes including liberation. (2016:108-109)

By shifting the focus on women, without changing the larger narrative, it shows how the ideal/*maryada purushottam* – Rama – may not be so and how men, despite their education and position can easily act upon their conditioning by society. As Nandini Majumdar indicates, “Volga’s story tells of a very different Sita from Rama’s Sita – or does it? This was probably Sita all along. *The Liberation of Sita* is not a simple ‘retelling’ of the Ramayana, but a reliving of it, a new bringing to life (2016). Additionally, it also throws light on how women need to work towards their own growth and liberation and stand together, in a show of solidarity and sisterhood, learning from each other’s experiences. It thereby serves as a work that is both

⁹ First used by Carl Jung, archetypes serve as evocative symbols that find reflection in what the society then tries to emulate and reward, being considered the ideal. Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980). And Rama as the *maryada purushottam* straddles multiple of these archetypal patterns, making him that much more revered and sought after.

thought-provoking and liberating, questioning the varied premises and social constructs, through which the reader approaches it, based on his/her exposure to the original myth of *Ramayana*, on which it is based. It makes the reader realise the hollowness of the social constructs and their futility in the face of human development, in general, and the changing times, in particular. Exposed to a very different perspective, through the book, the reader is compelled to notice how the myth – *Ramayana* – enshrines a lop-sided approach to women, making them pay heavily for what are perceived as unacceptable actions, by a patriarchal society. The re-visioning of *Ramayana*, through *The Liberation of Sita* points to the unfairness of the patriarchal actions and the treatment meted out to women by those near and dear to them, often under the guise of righteousness - while Rama and Lakshmana's unfair actions against Sita, Surpanakha and Urmila are defined by their desire to uphold *Dharma*; the unfair actions of *Maharshi/Seer Gautama* and Sage *Jamadagni* are a product of their sense of entitlement and power.

4. Decoding the nuances of patriarchy and its resistance by the women characters

The first story in the book – ‘The Reunion’ – revolves around Surpanakha, whose choice of exploring and openly expressing her own sexuality and desires leads her to suffer the humiliation of being disfigured, by having her nose and ears chopped off. This is done to teach her a lesson for being so brash about her sexual desire and for being Ravana's sister. The disfiguring also results in Surpanakha losing her confidence, in a world which has always defined and judged a woman by her looks and external beauty. Consequently, she gets dejected and experiences hopelessness, coupled with the fear that she may never be loved. Nursing her hurt, she retreats deep into the woods. However, with time and self-reflection, Surpanakha discovers that not only can she create beauty around her, through gardening, but her ability to do so and the peace it brings her, helps her bond with a man – Sudhira, who respects her for what she is and can do, making that relationship one based on mutual regard and love. Empathising with her plight, it also leads Sita to wonder whether Rama's action, of humiliating her, is born from the desire to provoke Ravana into confrontation and whether, “Women exist only to be used by men to settle their scores” (2016: 4). In addition to exploring sisterhood, what the story also subtly touches upon is the stereotypes and values that strike roots in society, from a very young age. These, if not controlled, can result in the prejudices that define a person. Realising this, Sita chastises Lava and Kusa, her children, for the comments they make about Surpanakha. Lava and Kusa, in their wanderings through the forest and in a desire to both explore it and find flowers for their mother Sita's ‘puja’ [worship] enter Surpanakha's garden. While they are enamoured by its beauty, they return to tell their mother about the ugly woman, who has reared it and has shaken them up, by her looks. In response, Sita gently points out to them, “Never loathe people for their looks” (2016: 3).

These events reveal the undermining of the strength of women, by the varied men, who matter in their lives – fathers, husbands, sons, et al. They also aid in establishing a link with the next story – ‘The Liberated’, where Sita reflects on the fact that when she had asked Rama, “In our relationship, what is it that you like the most?” (2016: 71), to which he had replied, it is ‘protecting her’. Furthermore, Sita experiences how Rama gets dejected, when Sita points out that she is capable of protecting herself. He then goes on to tell her, “As long as I am alive, you will never have to protect yourself. Such a situation must never arise” (2016: 71). The story then hints at how, consequently, Sita became a spectator in her own life, depriving her of agency – whether it was as regards the abduction or the long wait in the Ashoka Vanam – leaving her with no choice or control, in the series of humiliations, that she had to face later.

After exploring the sisterhood of Surpanakha and Sita, in their mutual feeling of being let down by Rama, and raising questions of beauty, as a yardstick by which women are both defined and chained, and the need to liberate oneself from them, the scene shifts to Ahalya, in ‘Music of the Earth’. A highly lyrical and powerful story, it delves deeper into the various ways in which men can be judgmental – from being influenced by beauty, to getting disgusted by what they believe to be the absence of character in a woman, based on societal norms, without really caring to find out the actual truth. Having been cursed by her husband Gautama to turn into a stone, for allowing herself to be misled by Indra, into satiating his desire, by appearing in the disguise of her husband, Ahalya understands the fragility of the trust men have in women. This unfair treatment meted out by her husband helps Ahalya realise that actually it should not matter, whether she was deceived by Indra or whether she understood it was him and still satiated his desire. For Ahalya, her treatment becomes more a question of the fragility of her relationship, the lack of trust her husband shows in her and, at a deeper level, the question of choice and freedom. Ahalya points this out to Sita, and shares how this has hardened her and taught her an important lesson. This lesson is not merely about being held up to scrutiny and doubted, but also about the premium society places on the ‘purity’ and ‘chastity’ of women and the unfair actions it can result in. By putting the onus of maintaining their chastity on women and making it a shameful act, if they fail to do so, the experiences of the characters in *The Liberation of Sita* echo those of the women in the #MeToo movement.

The text thus touches upon major concerns like trust and the duplicitous approach of the society towards men and women. This realisation hardens her into becoming like a stone – unfeeling and tough, unlike in *Ramayana*, where she actually gets converted into a stone. It also prompts Ahalya to point out to Sita that often the truth does not matter and women are unjustly made to pay the price for the values that society imposes only on them and never on men. Whereas men’s expression of their sexuality is often encouraged, as manliness, reflected through the acceptance of their multiple marriages, women are constantly expected to be chaste and are heavily

penalised even for perceived transgressions. What is also noteworthy, in this story, is Rama's approach to Ahalya. In his approach to Ahalya, Rama's gaze is informed by his gender and he perceives her as sinning as against Kausalya, Rama's mother, who sees Ahalya as one, who is more sinned against. In subtle ways, the book thus explores the essential difference between a male gaze and the yardstick that men apply to women. It also shows how a female gaze is capable of exploring beyond the obvious, offering strength through sisterhood. It thus reflects the concerns that the #MeToo movement raises both about the power of women over their own sexuality and the surreptitious way in which men exercise their sexual prowess over women. Like the #MeToo movement, it also drives home the power of sharing and sisterhood.

While 'Music of the Earth' mainly revolves around Ahalya, it also explores Sita's denial of her relationship with Rama being as hollow as Ahalya's. Not knowing what is to befall her, as regards the chastity tests she would be expected to undergo, Sita asserts the depth and value of Rama's and her love for each other. However, Sita's conversation with Ahalya and her realisation of the truth of Ahalya's words, strikes Sita, when she is asked to undergo the chastity test. Understanding their true value also serves to pave the way for Sita's liberation. She is liberated from all the illusions that bind her to Rama and prevent her from exploring her own power and worth. Ahalya points out to Sita how 'the truth', about what is perceived as women's guilt/purity, should not matter, as the desire to probe into the chastity of women is emblematic of distrust; and, the foundations of any relationship that wishes to endure need to be laid in trust. Another important aspect that the story explores is how the freedom of women is curtailed, without them even realising it, and how women internalise these restrictions, believing them to be expressions of love. When Sita goes out alone and later tells Rama that she met Ahalya, Rama gets alarmed and forbids her from ever doing so again. Born of worry, his actions, nevertheless, imply the control that often costs women their desire and freedom to be and become who they want to. Yet, it is only after her own experience, that drives home the value of the restrictions imposed on women, often as a result of concern/love, Sita realises the truth of Ahalya's words, "Pollution, cleanliness, purity, impurity, honour, dishonour – Brahmin men have invested these words with such power that there is no scope in them for truth and untruth. No distinction" (2016: 26). Nevertheless, when Sita understands that it is these values that majorly affect the lives of women and become a cause of their subjugation and the unfair treatment that is meted out to them, she is able to take another step towards her own liberation.

In fact, the question of a woman's chastity, and the premium placed on it, becomes a central concern in the book and is examined in the context of multiple characters. Furthermore, the ridiculousness of the suspicion and the lengths to which the denouncing and humiliation of women can go increases, in each case. While Sita is expected to take the chastity test twice, Ahalya is cursed for her unwitting transgression. What however is the worst is the perceived transgression of Renuka

Devi, the protagonist of 'The Sand Pot', who merely looks at a man beyond the bonds of marriage, incurring her husband's wrath. After ordering their sons to kill their mother for it, Renuka Devi is left with her head almost severed, when her husband – Sage Jamadagni's fury abates. Abandoned in that state, she is nursed back to health by women, from an ashram. In the forest, where she retreats, she too realises the fragility of chastity and the imposing and restrictive nature of this value, in the lives of women. Teaching women around her how to sculpt, she occupies herself in making and gifting pots that help her bond with the women around her. Renuka Devi also nurtures her love for sculpting, by learning to make a pot with sand that requires immense patience and technique, with the right balance, to keep together grains of sand, that can very easily scatter. The pot that is sculpted from this and defines a technique, which she alone has mastered, is emblematic, according to her, of the highly fragile nature of women's chastity, as it is perceived by men and the power and command that they feel authorised to exert over it. Interestingly, this fragility is depicted not as one that can be easily destroyed, but rather as one which can be protected, if the pot remains sheltered. In this light, even a glance at or thought of another man, by a woman, is considered unacceptable and it is believed that the only way to prevent it is to too closely guard the woman and keep her away from public eye.

What Renuka Devi hints at is that it is this approach of men that results in the confinement of women, under the garb of protecting them. Renuka Devi helps Sita realise how she is unconsciously shackled and unwittingly bases her actions on the desires and approval of her husband. Renuka Devi also shows Sita the approach and attitude of the various men wielding power in a woman's life, whether as a husband or son, impeding the fostering of sisterhood, as men decide, whom women can intermingle with. Rama has, in fact, been dissuading Sita from meeting Renuka Devi, which she convinces him to reconsider, with much effort. What this also reveals is that while women are seen placing a premium on their relationship, with the men in their life, the bond between a father and his son(s) outweighs the bonds that the men have with the woman/women in their life, whether in the role of a wife or mother. Sita fails to understand and accept this at the outset, when Renuka Devi points it out to her. However, Sita experiences it herself, later in the book, when her sons Lava and Kusa hanker after their father – Rama and the desire to carry on his *Dharma*. They thus choose to go and live with him, leaving behind their mother, despite all that she has sacrificed and done for them.

Post this, when Sita is offered the choice of joining her husband and sons, and taking up her rightful place, as the queen of Ayodhya, if she avows to her chastity before the entire court, Sita chooses not to even respond to the offer. The incident only fills her mind with a lot of questions that are deep and insightful and can determine the course of a woman's life – “Do I need to do that? Is there any sense in such an effort?” (2016: 64). Her revolt, against blindly giving in to others' expectations from her, connects her to the choices made by the women in the #MeToo movement. By reflecting on these questions, Sita manages to break free of another shackle, taking

a further step towards her liberation. The only question, that ultimately remains with her, and one to which she knows the answer is – ““Would she ever be understood?”” (2016: 65).

To some extent, this question is reflected upon and answered in ‘The Liberated’, the next story in the collection, which, as the title suggests, defines the final step in Sita’s liberation. The story interestingly takes us to an incident further back in time, when Sita has returned from the forest, to which she had been abducted and confined by Ravana, when she sent Rama to the forest to get her a golden deer whom she had taken a fancy to. She had then sent Lakshmana who Rama had kept back to protect her because she was led to believe that Rama was in trouble. When she returned from the forest in the kingdom of Ravana, where Ravana has confined her after abducting her, she was asked to take a test by fire to prove her chastity. Sita agreed to take this test, primarily, so as not to make things difficult for her husband, as the king, whom everyone looks up to, as the *maryada purushottam* (as explained in footnote 4). At this point, she was not aware that later she would be abandoned on the same grounds, of suspected lack of purity, and be expected to declare her innocence, in the court – an incident which is covered in the story ‘The Sand Pot’. The story ‘The Liberated’ revolves around the character of Urmila, the wife of Lakshmana, whom Sita is eager to meet, on her return to Ayodhya. Sita remarks that she had presumed that Urmila would be with them, in their sojourn to the forest and the fourteen years, they would spend there. Yet, she also accepts that the unfolding action and emotion packed sequence of events had not even given her the space to notice Urmila’s absence, till they had left their home and boarded the ship, that was to carry them to their destination. This had been followed by questions about Urmila that Sita had posed to Lakshmana, who avoided them and then Rama, who had chosen to give her answers that helped tide over the moment and yet were not the truth.

Given the closeness Sita shared with Urmila, being her sister, and on noticing that Urmila was conspicuously absent, among those who had assembled to welcome them back, Sita enquires after Urmila. Sita is then told that Urmila had locked herself in her room, for the entire fourteen years of their absence. Learning about this, Sita seeks Urmila out, despite resistance from Charumati – Urmila’s help and the only person, who has been allowed to enter Urmila’s room and keep others informed about her wellbeing. On enquiring about her absence and silence, Urmila tells Sita that she will open up to her. She confesses that she believes that Sita will understand what she has to say and not being sure of that vis a vis the others, she had chosen to keep silent, all these years.

As Urmila’s story unfolds, Sita learns both about Urmila’s external and internal journeys – how Urmila had been left behind without any discussion or being given any choice, by her husband – Lakshmana, who had chosen his duty to his brother – Rama, over her. In addition, she had been even more hurt that Sita had chosen her husband over sisterhood. Urmila admits that her action of shutting herself away was

an attempt to deal with the anger, emerging from this experience of rejection. And yet, with time, she had slowly turned inward, in an attempt to liberate herself, by taking away the right of others, however close, to affect her. Urmila shares this great learning that she has acquired, through reflection and meditation with Sita, “Assume authority. Give up power. Then you’ll belong to yourself. Then you’ll be yourself. We should remain ourselves” (2016: 79). Interestingly, it is this knowledge that lies at the base of the #MeToo movement, giving women the courage to come out into the open, rather than feeling ashamed about the injustices heaped upon them.

While Sita no doubt understands Urmila’s words, she truly appreciates them, only many years later. Sita realises their true meaning, after being left in the forest, on her own this time, despite being pregnant. Her abandonment by Rama is in response to a washer-man, who questions Sita’s chastity. In this difficult moment, Sita uses the understanding, she has acquired from Urmila, to calm herself and makes the resolve to birth and bring up her sons alone. And yet, when she hears the news of the *Aswamedha Yaga*, after quite a while has passed and her sons are grown up, not surprisingly, Sita gets distraught. She knows that, for the *Aswamedha Yaga*, Rama would need a wife beside him. She thus wonders whether Rama had taken another wife for the purpose. At this moment of extreme turmoil, Urmila’s discussion with her reminds Sita, ““Why should that question trouble you?”” (2016: 80). This helps her realise that she should mentally and emotionally liberate herself from the bonds that tie her to Rama, giving him power over her life. The wisdom she has gained from Urmila helps Sita find peace, in the midst of the storms that engulf her life, over which she has little or no control. In thus finding peace and strength within herself, Sita liberates herself from the power that others have over her, choosing and forging her own path.

Interestingly, the book at no point shows male characters in a purely negative light. It rather shows them, like the women, making their own choices, conditioned to a great extent by the same social values that restrict womanhood and define acceptability. Volga thus shows how both men and women need to consciously make different choices than ones that are legitimised by society or which they believe to be their right. Else, as a microcosmic reflection of the society, people would be condemned to make choices and take decisions that are really not in anyone’s best interest. And these would, in turn, reflect and entrench outdated traditions, hampering progress. As Volga herself states, in an interview with T. Vijay Kumar, “I did not portray anyone as a villain, I described circumstances – historical and cultural contexts – in which women suffered and how they came out of them” (2016: 126).

It is in this light that the final story – ‘The Shackled’ – turns attention to how the choices Rama has made – to protect his *Dharma* – keep him shackled to it and the only way that he can find liberation is by passing on the baton of this *Dharma* to his sons; for which Sita has paved the way, in a paradoxical reversal of power. The book

ends with the unearthing of the truth, embedded deep below the obvious – “In Ayodhya, everyone swore by Rama’s protection. Who knew that Sita was Sri Rama’s protective charm?” (2016: 97). In a reversal of power, turning the original *Ramayana* on its head, *The Liberation of Sita* shows how Sita’s contribution proved more valuable in Rama’s life than his in hers. The deified protagonist of the myth – Rama – is shown finding liberation through Sita. By sending him his sons, Sita has ensured that he is liberated of the *Dharma*, which had shackled him, until then. For, once Lava and Kusa ascend the throne, Rama can become free of his role/*Dharma* as the ideal king, thereby paving the path for his own liberation.

At a primary level, *The Liberation of Sita* drives home the value of sisterhood, as a means to offer courage and to expose and tackle the issue of the unacceptable treatment of women. It also illustrates how sisterhood affords the strength to deal with its consequences. The power of this is revealed by Volga, in an interview with T. Vijay Kumar:

I wanted to show the kind of strength Sita got through others. It is not possible to achieve liberation all by ourselves, we need fellow groups – women or other exploited groups. Their experiences help us. Likewise, the experiences of these women help Sita. Sisterhood is an important concept in feminism. (2016: 126)

5. Conclusion

Additionally, both the #MeToo movement and *The Liberation of Sita* point out the need to admit the challenges faced, as a result of the system, and expose men for what they are. They show the need to make men accountable for their action, rather than pushing women to live in shame of the actions or succumbing to the unfair expectations of the patriarchal system. Finally, both directly or indirectly explore and expose the notion of *paativratyam*/fidelity and chastity, as a social construct that offers men power over a woman’s body, mind and life.

In this, both the #MeToo movement and *The Liberation of Sita* lay bare the deeply entrenched misogyny that has made it possible not only to treat women in an unacceptable manner, by affording them a secondary place in the social order; but also, its pervasiveness and the indolence that go along with it. Exposing this should no doubt serve to give a voice, closure and if possible, justice to these women. It is, however, equally important that such books and movements should serve to obliterate the impunity and entitlement that accompanies the behaviour. By doing so, they would motivate both men and women to nip the issue in the bud, by preventing such a mindset from taking roots, rather than tackling the actions and their consequences that result from it, as that is both traumatic and too little, too late.

For the longest time, *Ramayana* has occupied varied spaces in the Indian ethos as mythology, a religious doctrine and a literary epic and has thereby defined and

deified the implementation of patriarchy in India. It is now time to ensure that *The Liberation of Sita* displaces through its reach and impact, the halo built around *Ramayana*. It would then help to reveal *Ramayana* for what it is – a story of a man, great, yet fallible, who is the protagonist of a text and by-product of a context, with an approach that has far outlived its value. Only then will the book – *The Liberation of Sita* – serve its actual purpose, to truly enlighten the readers and guide them to nip ‘the feminine mystique’¹⁰ in the bud. This would aid in liberating Sita and many other women, who for centuries have been bound, mentally, psychologically and physically, by the shackles that define the ‘ideal’, whether for men or women. It would do so by driving home the fact that, as Betty Freidan points out, “In the end, a woman, as a man, has the power to choose, and to make her own heaven or hell” (n.d.). As a re-reading of *Ramayana*, *The Liberation of Sita* helps women see how a woman’s life can be, as Mehak Bajpai points out, “Stable and filled with contentment no matter what her experiences were, in the very society that secludes her for being ‘unchaste’” (2018). It can thus give women courage to take up the battle, as Surpanakha points out, against themselves – their fears, their inhibitions and their mindset – and emerge victorious, liberating themselves by finding solidarity, through sisterhood and empathy. And, in turn, this may, a step at a time, gradually contribute to a society, where the #MeToo movement, rather than serving to expose the harassment that women face, emblemize a revolution, under which those vying to support women can come together and help women in finding their potential, purpose and fulfilment. and many other women, who for centuries have been bound, mentally, psychologically and physically, by the shackles that define the ‘ideal’, whether for men or women. It would do so by driving home the fact that, as Betty Freidan points out, “In the end, a woman, as a man, has the power to choose, and to make her own heaven or hell” (n.d.). As a re-reading of *Ramayana*, *The Liberation of Sita* helps women see how a woman’s life can be, as Mehak Bajpai points out, “Stable and filled with contentment no matter what her experiences were, in the very society that secludes her for being ‘unchaste’” (2018). It can thus give women courage to take up the battle, as Surpanakha points out, against themselves – their fears, their inhibitions and their mindset – and emerge victorious, liberating themselves by finding solidarity, through sisterhood and empathy. And, in turn, this may, a step at a time, gradually contribute to a society, where the #MeToo movement, rather than serving to expose the harassment that women face, emblemize a revolution, under which those vying to support women can come together and help women in finding their potential, purpose and fulfilment.

¹⁰ The feminine mystique as a concept conceived by Betty Friedan points out how women are expected, by society, to find fulfilment merely in housework, marriage, child rearing and sexual passivity.

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