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## Unveiling Sisterhood in Volga's *the Liberation of Sita*: Re-interpreting Marginalized Women Characters of *the Ramayana*

Subhadeep Roy

Research Scholar, Department of English, RKDF University Ranchi, Jharkhand, India

Email Id: subha1990.roy@gmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

The classic epic *Ramayana* is primarily a tale of war, love, and brotherhood, centered on Rama's battle to save Sita. The traditional writings have been employed by the privileged to enslave women for the past numerous centuries. Women are presented either as smothered elements or as rivals. However, Volga's retelling, *The Liberation of Sita*, breaks away from this male-dominated perspective to focus on marginalized women characters and their autonomy. Through characters like Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka, Urmila Volga highlights the specific challenges women face. The narrative follows Sita's journey toward self-discovery after being exiled by Rama. By examining these women's lives, this paper demonstrates how Sita's path to liberation offers a blueprint for women today to overcome adversity and achieve social equality. Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* offers a compelling re-interpretation of the *Ramayana*, centering on the suppressed voices of its female characters. Central to this narrative is the concept of sisterhood, which emerges as a subversive force against patriarchal norms. This article unveils how Volga portrays the collective journey toward liberation, framing Sita's quest for independence as a process fueled by female solidarity. By deconstructing traditional gender roles, the discussion explores how these relationships serve as vital sources of strength, resilience, and empowerment for women seeking autonomy.

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## Introduction

Volga is the pen name of Popuri Lalitha Kumari. She is an eminent feminist writer in Telugu. She was born in Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India. Some of her well-known books include *Svechcha* (1987), *Maaku Godalu Levu* (1989), *Rajakeeya Kathalu* (1992), and *Neeli Meghalu* (1993). She has been instrumental in reconfiguring the paradigms of feminist discourse within Indian literature. She has received many honors, such as the Nandi Award, the Best Woman Writer Award, and the Lok Nayak Foundation Award. Her book, *The Liberation of Sita*, is a retelling of the *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective. The original Telugu version is titled *Vimukta Kadha Samputi*. This book won the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 2015. T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijaysree translated the book into English. Their translation is considered a masterpiece of Indian literature.

Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* is a short collection of five stories. They are inspired by the traditional *Ramayana*. In *The Liberation of Sita*, Volga portrays the profound injustice faced by a princess cast out through no fault of her own, even as she carried a child. After enduring fourteen years of forest exile alongside her husband, Sita found herself solitary once more, tasked with raising her sons to embody the noble standards of the Raghukul lineage. In each tale, Sita meets a different minor character from the epic - Surpanakha, Renuka, Urmila, and Ahalya. Through these meetings, Sita learns more about herself. Most importantly, she discovers how to have her own identity instead of being defined by the men in her life. This paper intends to explore the inner lives of the marginalized women characters, focusing on their personal growth, education, and ultimate freedom from patriarchal control. Bell Hooks argues, "Sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a variety of other prejudices divide women. Only after facing these divisions and taking the required actions to eliminate them can sustained female bonding". (Hooks, p. 44) This paper also wishes to delve into the theme of sisterhood through the gradual maturation of the characters.

## Discovering Sisterhood through Marginalized Women Characters of *the Ramayana*

Global folklore and mythology consistently frame men as the primary guardians of humanity-figures who expertly balance power with duty to serve the greater good. Conversely, women are frequently relegated to roles defined by perceived character flaws, often portrayed as impulsive, manipulative, or governed by excessive emotion. Ken Dowden (1992) in his famous work *The Uses of Greek Mythology* states that, "...mythology is by and large a man's mythology, describing a world from a man's point of view. Women are seldom considered in isolation from men.... they seldom have scope for action on their own initiative" (p. 161). Volga breaks the myth in her first story, 'The Reunion'. Sita's



first encounter views her with the demoness Surpanakha, Ravana's sister. During this encounter, Sita realizes that men often use women as tools to settle their own political scores. She understands that Rama and Lakshmana mutilated Surpanakha mainly to provoke Ravana and start a war. The author shows how Hindu mythology often treats women as objects. Traditionally “We are taught that women are ‘natural foes,’ that we cannot, should not, and do not create connections with one another, and that solidarity will never exist between us.” (Hooks, p. 127) Through her research into Sita’s mind, she reveals that Sita feels deep empathy and compassion for Surpanakha's pain. Sita wonders if Surpanakha has lived a lonely life and notes that Nature has been her only companion. Surpanakha also establishes, “I’ve realized that the meaning of success for a woman does not lie in her relationship with a man.” (Volga, p. 13) Sita initially tries to be a ‘good wife’ by following traditional rules, even when her husband causes her suffering. She accepts her fate without protest, even after Rama abandons her. However, seeing Surpanakha’s peace and dignity helps Sita change. Surpanakha acts as a guide, helping Sita realize that her mind has been imprisoned by male tyranny. Surpanakha explains that she became strong by facing life's challenges and finding beauty on her own terms. Sita eventually realizes that her suffering is not her fault, but a way for men to keep women controlled. The author uses this to encourage women to question the reasons behind their own pain. Finally, the story highlights an eco-feminist theme, as Sita finds comfort and healing in the forest after being exiled by Rama.

The second story, ‘Music of the Earth,’ highlights how male chauvinism is used to control women. The author explains that Rama’s desire for total devotion - where Sita cannot have a single thought apart from him - is an attempt to destroy her independence. When Sita meets Ahalya, she sees a woman filled with anger and fear. This encounter terrifies Sita and makes her question her husband’s role in her life. Rama actually fears this meeting because he worries Ahalya will make Sita more self-aware and questioning. Sita’s mother-in-law later explains the reality of male chauvinism to her. She tells Sita that men view women as objects for their enjoyment and suggests that women must simply accept this as their fate. Ahalya, however, rejects this idea. She tells Sita about how her own husband sage Gautama abandoned her after she was tricked by the god Indra. Ahalya’s modern feminist voice serves as a wake-up call for Sita. Ahalya does not authorize Gautama to control her - “Nobody can have that authority until I give it” (Volga, p.28). She warns Sita never to submit to authority or agree to a ‘trial of purity.’ These conversations cause Sita’s belief in traditional wifely *Paativratyam* (devotion) to crumble. She begins to see her husband’s actions as a way to deprive her of her own choices. By the end of the story, Sita is completely transformed. She no longer lets the roles of motherhood or ‘the devoted wife’ define her entire identity. She speaks honestly to Rama, telling him that their children are his responsibility too. Sita



replies sternly, “I am the daughter of the Earth, Rama. I have realized who I am. The whole universe belongs to me. I don’t lack anything. I am the daughter of the Earth.” (Volga, p. 41) She also finds a deeper connection to the universe, which helps free her from societal constraints. She also realizes the words of Ahalya: “Don’t grieve over what has already occurred. Everything you do is for your own interest and is necessary for self-realization. Be Delighted. Observe the advancement of life in nature. Note how they are evolving with time. You are not simply Rama’s asset; this entire globe is yours” (Volga, p. 39)

Volga introduces Renuka Devi as a guide for Sita in the third story, ‘The Sand Pot,’ Like the other women, Renuka is a victim of the patriarchy. In the original myth, she was killed by her own son, Parashurama, on the orders of his father Jamadagni. Neither the husband nor the son cared for her feelings or her life. After her death and spiritual awakening, Renuka uses her art to explain the delicate nature of women’s lives. She compares herself and all women to fragile sand pots that can break at any moment. She warns Sita that women will only find peace once they realize that traditional ideas of a wife’s deep, unwavering loyalty, dedication, and affection toward her husband and family are as unstable and fragile as these pots. Renuka uses creative expression to reject the burdens of motherhood and the role of the ‘perfect wife.’ The author presents her as a moral inspiration, similar to the strong women in Sudha Menon’s modern book, *Devi, Diva, or She-Devil*. Renuka tells Sita that some women face deep humiliation when their husbands or children question their purity or parentage. These words deeply affect Sita. She realizes that despite her efforts to be a devoted wife, she has been treated with nothing but mistrust and suspicion. She finally understands that she, Ahalya, and Renuka have all suffered because of the same male jealousy. Ultimately, the story highlights the importance of nature. Whenever, these women are in pain, the natural world acts as a loving mother to them. When Sita feels alone in the dark and calls out, Mother Earth speaks to her affectionately, giving her the strength of a thousand elephants.

The fourth story, ‘The Liberated,’ explores Rama’s mindset as both an individual and a controlling husband. When Sita asks Rama what he values most about their marriage, he replies that he takes pride in protecting her. He compares his protection to an eyelid guarding an eye. This response makes Sita realize that Rama views her as a piece of property rather than an equal. His desire to be her ‘defender’ is actually a way to exert power over her. Volga then introduces Sita’s sister, Urmila, who speaks with the voice of a modern woman. Urmila was ignored and left behind when her husband, Lakshmana, went into exile. Instead of just being lonely, Urmila chose to seek solitude to understand her. She tells Sita that she spent her time observing her own body and emotions to find inner peace. Urmila explains that men use power to keep women from discovering their true identities. She argues that men



force women to see themselves only through a male perspective. Urmila tells Sita that women must reclaim this power to find liberation, joy, and compassion: “I’ve acquired the wisdom to ask questions not out of hatred but for the sake of justice. My relationship with Lakshmana depends on whether he understands my wisdom and how much he respects it.” (Volga, p. 76) These ideas deeply affect Sita. Although she still wants to believe in Rama’s morals, she begins to see how the traditional roles of a ‘devoted wife’ and ‘mother’ have restricted her. By the end of the story, Sita is no longer the helpless person Rama imagined. Instead, she becomes the powerful one. She realizes that by raising her sons and standing by Rama, she was actually the one protecting and liberating him.

In *the Valmiki Ramayana*, Sita is portrayed as the ideal woman. However, in *The Liberation of Sita*, characters like Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka, and Urmila share a close bond of sisterhood with her. All the short stories in this book focus on these relationships. The book concludes by showing Sita’s journey toward self-realization. She gains strength from the stories of Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka, and Urmila. Through these women, Volga encourages contemporary Indian women to awaken, claim their authority, and seek social change. In *Volga: An interview* with T. Vijay Kumar, Volga unravels why she wrote *The Liberation of Sita*: “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. I have been able to grasp that concept through these stories. The other women are all Sita’s sisters.” (Volga, p. 126) The concept of Sisterhood grew out of second-wave feminism. ‘Sisterhood’ has emerged in the West as a dominant model for feminist intercommunity relations. A term of political solidarity, ‘sisterhood’ pronounces women’s activism. Its originators see it carrying the meaning of shared oppression, common victimization, community, of interests, solidarity and collective activism. It has been employed to unite and assemble women of every class of society to fight against patriarchy and other related institutions. (Karekatti, p. 1) In 1970, Robin Morgan published an influential book called *Sisterhood is Powerful*. Later, she released a collection of essays titled *Sisterhood is Forever*. This follow-up work highlights the lasting bond and ongoing connection between women. In an interview with Malini Nair, Volga explains her goal. She wants to use the idea of sisterhood to bring the women of *the Ramayana* together: “All the women characters in the *Ramayana* except Sita are unimportant. Surpanakha gets her one scene but we don’t get any glimpses into her life. How did she live? To me, the cutting off of her nose by Laxman for daring to make an overture to Rama is like the acid attacks on women today. Like Surpanakha they go through life faces and bodies deformed. We always talk of brotherhood between men; it is a recurring, strong theme all around us. But



women are supposedly the enemy of their own sex. In Telugu there is a popular saying: “Moodu koppulu voka chota immadavu.” (Even three women can never co-exist peacefully.) Sisterhood is always discouraged, treated with suspicion. I refuse to toe this line.” In her article, ‘Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women,’ Bell Hooks argues that sexist oppression is a primary source of harm for women. She explains that sexism, like other forms of group oppression, is sustained through several channels. Such as - Those who hold power and choose to dominate or exploit others, Institutions that uphold inequality and Women themselves are often socialized to accept the status quo, which effectively makes them participants in their own oppression. Hooks notes that women are often taught to believe they have little value. Furthermore, male supremacist ideology encourages women to feel that their worth is defined solely by their relationships with men. To combat this, hooks introduces the concept of sisterhood in the following way: “We are taught that our relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience. We are taught that women are “natural enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. We have learned these lessons well. We must unlearn them if we are to build a sustained feminist movement. We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of sisterhood” (Hooks, p. 43)

## Conclusion

The female characters in the epic are victims of patriarchy, but Volga does not show them as helpless. Instead, she gives them dignity and a powerful voice. These women share wisdom gained from their personal pain and struggles. Volga’s work demonstrates a deep understanding of feminism. To her, it is not just a simple fight between men and women. Instead, she views it as a complex issue that goes beyond basic categories. Indian women’s literature has the power to reshape how we understand community, class, and gender. Writers across the country challenge patriarchy to reclaim their authority and highlight voices that have been silenced. In her book, *The Liberation of Sita*, Volga uses a gynocentric approach to retell the *Ramayana*. She deconstructs the traditional epic by focusing on female characters who were previously ignored. By sharing the stories of these neglected women, Volga actively reinvents tradition and revises the past. Ultimately, she creates a powerful female collective by connecting women across different generations through an alternative point of view. Volga works to create a female collective that goes beyond being victims. Her female characters are strong, independent, and mature. Even though they face injustice from patriarchy, they still create their own paths in life. She also challenges the idea that women cannot get along peacefully. In doing so, she redefines sisterhood, a concept that is often unfairly viewed with suspicion. “When woman actively struggles in a truly



supportive way, to understand our differences, and to change misguided, distorted perspective, we lay the foundation for the experience of political solidarity. Solidarity is not the same as support. To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build sisterhood.” (Hooks, p. 67) These stories help the women understand their true identities. Instead of focusing on Rama’s exile or the death of Ravana, the book centers on Sita’s journey toward self-discovery. Through a feminist lens, she and the other female characters learn how men truly perceive their value. Volga uses a psychological approach to examine the perspectives of mythical figures like Sita, Urmila, Surpanakha, Renuka, and Ahalya. Because of this unique focus, the book serves as an excellent example of feminist literature in translation studies.

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