

## Asserting Female Autonomy through Aditya Iyengar's *Bhumika*

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### ABSTRACT

It is a known truth that even in digital era, the study of mythology is not considered an escape from reality into the world of fantasy, but a journey in search of greater understanding about human existence. Despite its repetitions, innumerable interpretations and adaptations, the mythical narratives have never lost their fascination among the readers. However, when subjected to scrutiny, the age-old customs, superstitious practices and tainted values that have been accepted so long are questioned. While some contemporary writers focus on the 'lesser known' women characters which were 'overlooked' in the traditional versions, a few others have 'recreated' the well-known characters not in the conventional sense, but in a different light as they assert their identity and own responsibility for their choices in life. Among such retellings, the current study focuses on Aditya Iyengar's fictional work, *Bhumika: A Story of Sita* (2019). It fictionalizes the story of Sita to show how her life could have been if she had not married Rama. The chosen work intends to show how some women of these myths have been misrepresented, ignored and overlooked deliberately in the mainstream literature, by 'subverting' the stereotyped notions about women in the society.

Keywords: Mythological retellings, Patriarchy, Silenced, Subjugated voices, *Unsung*.

From the days of yore to the present, it has been proven innumerable times that a myth is a positive force that unites many cultures. Amidst others, Hindu mythology occupies a lofty position as it is one of the most ancient mythologies in the world. Unlike many countries that practice a single religion, India is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, collectively known as Indian religions. Among these, Hinduism is the major religion of the Indian society where religion and culture are interrelated. The key components of 'culture' such as values, norms, and artefacts are often derived from religious beliefs and practices. Sushree Smita Raj in her article insists this as, "Myths act as an instructor and preach man how to live a noble life and act as a guide... It holds traditional believes, cultural values, customs and fables. They always serve as great example for man and inspire man for a meaningful life. They influence the social, cultural and psychological aspects of man" (265).

The chief storehouse of the Hindu myths has been the two great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, as the earlier is considered the oldest of the Sanskrit epic and the latter is the longest epic in the world. As nothing is sacrosanct to criticism, even today these epics are subjected to scrutiny, as they create a whirlpool that questions the age-old customs, superstitious beliefs and tainted values accepted so far. Despite its innumerable interpretations, the epics have never lost their fascination upon the readers.

Writers like Amish Tripathi and Chitra Banerjee have redefined, retold and rewritten myths from different perspectives. Some of them have focused on women such as Urmila, Tataka and Manthra, who have been 'overlooked' in the traditional versions, but others have 'recreated' known characters like Sita, by portraying them not as meek, mild, obedient and passive in the conventional sense, but as courageous, strong and outspoken. Such retellings help readers to look beyond traditional representation of the 'unsung' by questioning the patriarchal notions and obsolete values in society.

This paper focuses on the way Aditya Iyengar asserts femininity through his fiction, *Bhumika: A Story of Sita* (2019). Inspired by Volga's *Liberation of Sita*, Aditya sets the background for *Bhumika* by

fictionalizing the narrative to show how Sita's life could have been if she had not married Rama. It is divided into four acts, each dealing with different aspects of two enigmatic women, Sita and Bhumika. Unlike Sita, Bhumika the queen of Mithila remains a spinster by defying convention and finally confronts Rama and hastens his realization.

The first act portrays a graying Sita spending her last years at Valmiki's ashram. A group of minstrels with their troupe drop in as they travel to Ayodhya to sing praise of Rama. That evening they narrate the story of Rama, the Ideal Man, to entertain the inmates. Like earlier versions, they sing about Rama's birth, marriage, exile and Sita's rescue from Lanka, not knowing that the heroine is amidst them. The minstrel finishes his narration telling how Rama established *Ram Rajya*, a period of great prosperity; but never mentions the whereabouts of Sita after her return from Lanka. Like other narrations pruned perfectly to suit their demands, they project him an ideal man who remains loyal to his wife and crosses the seas to rescue her.

However, these narrations never highlight the fact that despite her unflinching devotion to Rama, Sita had to prove her loyalty through 'agnipariksha' after the historic war. Despite that Sita is banished from her kingdom, when the Ayodhyans raise doubts about her purity. As a ruler Rama must give in to their decisions, as there could not be a perfect *Ram Rajya*, if the ruler and his wife do not embody perfection beyond reproach. These lead Sita to doubt the mutual love, respect and relationship they shared till then.

In the second act, Sita becomes an audience of her own story, as she watches some snapshots from the life of Bhumika. As a foundling from a furrow of a rice field, Bhumika is adopted by Janaka, the king of Mithila who strongly believes in her divine birth. Although adored, Bhumika understands that her chief role as the princess of Mithila is to marry into a powerful family to defend their land. So, she knows that she can never become an heir to the throne.

Although education is common to everyone in Mithila, as in other patriarchal society it is deemed more important for boys than for girls, as it applies different 'degrees of tightness to their harnesses' on women. While sports and martial arts are taught to boys, cooking and sewing are meant for girls; they are segregated even from childhood to practice pursuits suitable to their respective gender. And the worst thing is the role of a princess like Bhumika who is restricted from learning archery. It implies how the patriarchal notions were ingrained even in women to restrict others.

Nevertheless, Bhumika proves that she can do something which no man can do by lifting *Pinaka*, the divine bow of Lord Shiva during her *swayamvar*. It is believed that no human can lift the bow except a celestial or demigod, but through such heroic feat she proves to be one. It is a known fact that men neither wanted women to be their equal, nor better than them, and so Bhumika remains unmarried as the queen of Mithila, since she proves to be more than equal to any man.

Many kingdoms of Bharatavarsha have been ruled by queens earlier, but only as a temporary arrangement. Nevertheless, by refusing marriage proposals with a firm hand, Bhumika boldly announces that the queendom of Mithila does not need a king. As soon as she becomes the ruler, Bhumika brings a silent 'social revolution' into the kingdom. It is evident from the washerman's wife, Devaki's experience when she comes to the palace to start a new life. While asked about her preference for a new job in the royal household, Devaki's bold response startles the queen when she asks, "Is that all a woman can do here?" (Iyengar 114).

Although she agrees that all the household chores were equally admirable, only after Devaki's demand does Bhumika realize that women could aspire for more than just minding their familial needs. So, she wants Mithila to be a land ruled by a woman. To get women adapted to new conditions, Bhumika involves them in occupations traditionally dominated by male, especially in administrative sectors and military services. She questions this as, "Why should it only be a man's duty to take up arms for his

country? A woman, if she chooses, must also be allowed to wield a sword and lift a bow. If a goddess can take up arms to destroy evil, then a woman must too" (Iyengar 121-122). Thus, Devaki becomes the first woman to join the armed forces, and Mithila becomes the first kingdom to have a regiment of female warriors. As Devaki mentions earlier, women are expected to follow social conventions in Mithila and never allowed to move beyond those boundaries. Usually, a woman relates to conventional roles such as a daughter, wife or mother. Unlike Sita who plays her traditional roles precisely even under extraordinary circumstances, Bhumika never plays them as they never appeal to her. However, she proves that they can bring about lasting changes in society if only they are involved in the process of a nation's progress.

Similarly, in the name of 'protection' men exercise either their physical strength or moral obligation to control women within their territory. Even when women want to establish themselves independently as leaders, the patriarchy never allows them to take over as in the case of Bhumika. Starting from basic education and learning skill-based art forms like archery to enroll in elite professions like armed forces, women are given least priority to exhibit their skills in any chosen field. It is due to the demands of the patriarchy that is unfair towards women in general.

Like other kingdoms without a male heir, even Bhumika's parents consider her marriage an attempt to build an abled ally with the powerful. When they fail to find a better bridegroom at her *swayamvar*, they are greatly dismayed by the turn of events. The continuous rejection of Bhumika as a 'strong bride' leads her to realize that every woman's life is decided either by her parents or by a strong man in marriage. In the name of marriage men always want women to play only 'supporting roles', if not they would never acknowledge women who are either stronger or smarter than themselves.

Aditya's *Bhumika* explores similar exercise of power which enforces Rama's ideology on others, under the guise of creating an ideal society, *Ram Rajya*. As soon as Rama assumes power, he is bent on creating an ideal society in Ayodhya and extends it to other parts of Bharathavarsha. His kingdom is

considered 'perfect society' envied even by kings. The people of Ayodhya are always happy, as there are low taxes, no violence or crime, and abundance of food for everyone. It feels as though Rama removes even the unpredictable natural calamities being exaggerated by minstrels in their litany.

Although prosperous like Ayodhya, Mithila cannot enjoy complete peace and prosperity as its people yearn for simpler social structures than the silent revolution Bhumika has brought in. Nonetheless, she strongly believes in her ideals claiming, "If Ayodhya stood for obedience and uniformity, Mithila stood for diversity and, therefore, dissent" (Iyengar 137). She even doubts the possibility of building such an ideal society without any opposition.

Joining Vali, the vanara ruler of Kishkindha and Ravana, the king of Lanka, Bhumika agrees upon mutual military assistance so as to 'resist' *Ram Rajya* from their respective kingdoms. She decides to fight against such 'power' for the common cause of not losing their individual identity. While Rama believes in *Ram Rajya* which stands for 'uniformity' and intends to abolish all indifferences, Bhumika wishes to 'retain' their respective identities, to cherish their 'uniqueness' amidst others. Bhumika propagates this fact as, "...they can have their own lands and their own identity and still be allies, ... there is no need for a single identity of Bharatavarsha. That age old system, fragmented as it was, was not wrong since it gave every kingdom a chance to create its own identity" (Iyengar 147).

In fact, Bhumika sympathizes with Rama for not getting the message, as he is engrossed in his ideals blindly. She expresses her doubt as, "Was his idealism heroic or foolish? .... As long as there are people, there will be differing points of view. All need to be respected. Is it just the voice of the majority that is being heard? Are the other voices in his kingdom stifled?" (Iyengar 150). Despite the differences in the choice of their means, both Rama and Bhumika agree upon the end, as to provide 'peace and happiness' to their subjects. If Rama believes in upholding dharma by establishing *Ram Rajya*, Bhumika tries to create a society based on fairness and equality for women.

Unlike earlier versions, Bhumika demands Rama to take agnipariksha to justify the genuineness of his actions. Bhumika suggests this test of purity to establish his credibility of intention whether *Ram Rajya* is for selfish reasons or for a common cause. Nevertheless, despite the cry of protest, Rama agreed to take agnipariksha, believing that he would emerge from the fire unscathed. Finally, he realizes that he can never bring *Ram Rajya* by enforcing his ideals, which might be achieved through other 'means.'

Such clarity and realization help him to reason with Bhumika's anger and atone for waging war with Mithila. He even apologizes to Bhumika for his grave mistake of imposing his ideals on others as, "Rama Rajya can only be won by love. There is no need of war... If one person opposes it, he or she will have to be won over with the power of love and reason, not aggression. Rama Rajya has to be the happiness of everyone, not of a majority or a minority (Iyengar 166).

Hence, through the character of Bhumika, Aditya asserts female autonomy by fighting against the authority of patriarchy, even when practiced under the guise of equality and prosperity. She strongly believes that letting everyone pursue their dreams and retain their actual identity is considered an 'ideal society' rather than imposing one's ideals on others. She believes that *Ram Rajya* can be established anywhere, but only with love and trust, and not through compulsion and enforcement.

In every society, women are expected to follow the conventions and never allowed to move beyond its boundaries. If any woman makes a choice outside acceptable norms, she is deemed vulnerable. However, it is not only Sita who is doubted regarding upholding the norms expected of her, but also Bhumika who refuses to conform to society's expectation who is made to feel inadequate and imperfect. Bhumika puts forth this harsh truth as,

Many women are comfortable playing the traditional roles that women have always played. Being gentle, caring, nurturing, and not at odds with the men in their family, or the other women... On the

other hand, there are many women who can only find peace if they don't play the roles society expects from them (Iyengar 181-182).

Although it is not degrading to play traditional roles, Bhumika questions why women are always connected to conventional roles under all circumstances. Even if a woman has an ambition and wants to prove her skills in a particular field, she would be made to feel a 'misfit' in the society. If a man like Rama decides to focus single-mindedly on a specific purpose without much regard for his personal responsibility, he would be lauded or even celebrated for this quality. In contrast, when a woman like Bhumika tries to be the same, she must explain her behaviour.

Bhumika interrogates such dual stance of the patriarchy as, "... all I really did was live a life like Rama. I believed in certain ideals, the dharma of my choosing, and I lived my life according to it. And yet, I was judged on entirely different parameters from Rama" (Iyengar 182). Although Bhumika never plays conventional roles like Sita, she adopts those by moulding them suitable to her convenience and purpose. For instance, she becomes a 'mother' to her troops of soldiers and an 'obedient daughter' to the elderly courtiers of Mithila while learning the strategies of administration.

Bhumika also proclaims that the worst enemy of any woman is 'self-pity' which stems from their deep feeling of inadequacy. She is subjected to suffer from this inadequacy in one way or the other, as too dark or inquisitive. Bhumika suggests that the only way to overcome this 'self-pity' and escape social criticism is to respect one another mutually rather than judging others for their choices. Like Sita who chooses to follow Rama into exile, Bhumika's choice to remain alone needs to be respected, as every choice has its own consequence completely different from the other. Having witnessed the manifestation of Bhumika and her successful life without Rama, Sita frees herself from dejection realizing her significance in Rama's life. Hence, she sets herself free from the shackles of anger and doubt to lead a contented and meaningful life.

Since nothing is unknown about this mythical plot, Aditya deftly breathes life into *Bhumika* to highlight what was lost in the earlier renditions. Similar to feminist readings, the present study provides fresh interpretations to the mythical narrative under the framework of Subaltern Studies, as women are 'marginalised' within their territory, raising pertinent questions against the patriarchal practices in the society.

Although the plot is different from that of the fiction under study in terms of social and political setting, it exploits social issues such as the subjugation of women by imposing traditional roles that are basically patriarchy driven. Hence, these retellings help readers to check in their racial, political and gender ideologies they grew up with, but never questioned earlier.

Therefore, the paper intends to prove that *Bhumika* is an effort to assert the 'subdued' feminine voices, which were deliberately undermined so long. However, through such representation of the 'unsung' Aditya strives to celebrate similar merits of modern women, who are equally heroic in spirit. Even today, women of such noble qualities are subjected to trials, forced to prove their chastity, questioned of their fidelity and at times blamed unreasonably. Hence, these myths serve as a powerful medium to express the suppressed voices, silent tears, dead hopes and repressed emotions of the 'unsung' women of both the mythical times and the present.

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