

# **INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT SOCIOLOGY & HUMANITIES**



**ISSN 2277 – 9809 (online)**

**ISSN 2348 - 9359 (Print)**

*An Internationally Indexed Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal*

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## Revisiting Sita of the *Ramayana*: The act of Subversion in Kumaran Asan's *Chinthavishtayaya Sita*

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### **Abstract**

The *Ramayana*, the ancient epic depicting the story of Rama and Sita, has been widely recognized as a cultural text that shapes itself in different forms as a response to the time period of revision. Revisionary literature often carries the purpose of disseminating certain ideologies. Many of them promote the mission of subverting the legitimized notion of patriarchy which silences women. By giving voice to the women who are denied of expressing their perspective, revisionary writings provide a fresh dimension of the story that the reading public is familiar with. Kumaran Asan's *Chinthavishtayaya Sita*, the poem, written in Malayalam in 1919 set a new era in Malayalam literature with the novelty of the theme and approach to the *Ramayana* that the text adopted. The current study examines the methods adopted by the writer to problematize patriarchal concepts used in the epic. Also the modes of subversion employed by the writer and the context that initiated such a revisionary writing will also come under the purview of this analysis.

Keywords: The Ramayana, Sita, subversion, patriarchy

Thunchath Ezhuthachan, considered as the father of Malayalam literature, wrote *Adhyathma Ramayanam* in the sixteenth century. The work is recognized as an epoch making creation as it raised the quality of writing of Malayalam literature from the state of degradation and made the epic and its messages accessible to the ordinary people. Since Ezhuthachan's work brought tremendous transformations into the minds of the people of Kerala by means of his *Ramayana* rooted in Bhakti tradition, it was marked as didactic literary piece too. M. Leelavathi in her seminal work titled, *Malayala Kavitha Sahithya Charithram* observed that Kumaran Asan, the Malayalam poet, by introducing a new literary sensibility in to Malayalam literature, was transforming the mind-set of the people of Kerala in the twentieth century through his works and hence can be compared to Thunchath Ezhuthachan (171). Both these writers employed the method of subversion and contribute alternative thinking possibilities to nourish the creativity of the readers to lead them towards progress.

N. Kumaran Asan (1873-1924), the Malayalam poet was the follower of Sree Narayana Guru, the social reformer from Kerala. Obviously this association directed him to provoke the society by questioning its standards that ignore the marginalised human beings. He was one among the literary triumvirate that includes Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer and Vallathol Narayana Menon. Using poetry as a medium to articulate his revolutionary perspectives, he set a new path for the contemporary writers to follow. In fact, Kumaranasan was following the progressive principles

offered by V.C. Balakrishna Panicker and A.R. Raja Raja Varma in literature. Though he began his literary career writing erotic verse, Kumaran Asan shifted his writings to philosophical mode under the influence of Sree Narayana Guru. His life in Bengal and the exposure of Bengali literature also served pivotal roles in bringing a transformation in him. He addressed the various aspects of life such as empathy, compassion, passion, kindness, love, equality etc. through his thought provoking verse including *Veena Poovu* (Fallen Flower), *Nalini*, *Leela*, *Duravastha* ( Pathetic state), *Chinthavishtayaya Sita* ( Sita immersed in thought) etc.

The poem, *Chinthavishtayaya Sita*, published in 1919 depicts the thoughts of Sita who critically evaluates the context of her exile and abandonment. Being the central character of the myth that influenced the people across centuries, Sita is venerated as a cult figure of patience and sacrifice. This is done by silencing her in the epic. By carefully avoiding the voice and thoughts of Sita, the creator of epic projected her as an embodiment of patience. The danger of this depiction lies in the societal veneration of Sita as a model for the women to follow. By setting her as a model, the society demands the women to be passive to the injustice committed against them. Kumaran Asan was contesting with this projection of Sita as a silent sufferer. Though he acknowledges the suffering of Sita, he was not ready to portray Sita as a person who legitimises the violence done against her. Portraying her as a thinking individual and depicting her thoughts through the poem, the writer reveals a contrasting perspective of the mythical narrative. By writing this poem, he was challenging the ethos of the period. His intention was to question the truth circulated in the society by Brahmanical patriarchy.

The poem containing the spirit of Kerala renaissance, *Chithavishtayaya Sita*, problematizes the decision of Rama to abandon Sita based on public opinion. Sita, in the poem, views this as an act of lack of vision and selfishness. Kumaran Asan's portrayal of reflects the traits of modernity that Kerala literary sphere embraced. In addition to the wisdom of the poet and his vision, the poem contains historical sense too. The poem was addressing the question why and how women are degraded in history. In *Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill shared an observation about the mechanism of patriarchy: "But, it will be said, the rule of men over women differs from all these others in not being a rule of force: it is accepted voluntarily; women make no complaint, and are consenting parties to it" (16). Patriarchy blames women for the prevalence of their marginalisation, according to this critic. So, the passivity of women is considered as the reason for their subjection by patriarchy. Here, what Kumaran Asan argues through Sita is that women can no longer accept this blame.

Why Sita is silent in the epic? This question is answered by Devadutt Pattanaik in *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*:

Until the fifth century CE Ram was hailed as a great human hero, even though the Valmiki Ramayana alludes to Ram sensing his divinity, though never revealing it. From the fifth century onwards Ram was increasingly seen as a form of Vishnu on earth, a model king who valued his word over all things. By the tenth century, there was no doubt about Ram's divinity. In Kamban's Tamil retelling, *Iramavattaram*...Ram struggles with his divinity and gradually slips into silence,

as his actions often seem contrary to what is conventionally accepted of the divine. By the twelfth century, following the works of Vedanta scholar Ramanuja, Rama became equated with God himself and this marked the beginning of Ram-Bhakti, where Ram is assumed to be God and does not have to prove he is God. Everyone in the epic knows he is God and approaches him accordingly (81).

So, in order to promote this unquestionable image of Rama, Sita is portrayed as a woman of patience. Her silence legitimizes the deeds of Rama. Despite the prevalence of the norms of patriarchy, the twentieth century literary scenario of Kerala provided ample space for the expression of the subjectivity of Sita. Kumaran Asan's character is a mature Sita, who reflects on the past incidents when Valmiki took her sons to meet Rama. Sita in Asan is not guilty of thinking against Rama. Instead she makes many logical arguments to substantiate that Rama's actions were wrong. But she neither overtly critical nor loveless towards Rama. Sita places her trauma in the wider context of human existence so as to provide a convincing argument through ruminations. Under the pretext that she is trying to give a vent to her sad thoughts, she articulates her perspectives:

“Nothing guarantees certainty in life  
Each stage of life would visit the man and depart  
No one knows the secrets of the world  
Though men wish for the best always (45-48)

Sita seems to be sceptical about the attainment of justice which she expresses through the above lines. Since Kumaran Asan was involved in the activities against caste atrocities done by Brahmanism, the lines can be viewed as poet's reflections on human actions too. The poem indirectly addresses the problems of Brahmanical patriarchal principles that highlighted purity of women. Also, it must be noted that Sita has the critical views when she lives with Valmiki, a non-brahmin. Connecting these two, one can view that the work is an anti-caste narrative too meant to subvert caste based discrimination which it has not stated overtly as *Chandala Bhikshuki*, a poem by Kumaran Asan. She used the word “Mannavan” to describe Rama. This remark contains sarcasm about the priorities of Rama. Sita has not even the remote dream of reuniting with Rama. But she was shattered by the public humiliation that Rama's act brought on her character. She is wise enough to understand how Rama destroyed her dignity to preserve his dignity. While Sita makes ironical comments about Rama and his clan, she sets Lakshmana free by stating that she is guilty of the wrong words used against him. This incident shows that Sita is not blind by rage and her criticism is not the by-product of her anger.

In the 83<sup>rd</sup> stanza in the poem, Sita raises an allegation against the clan of Dasaratha that not only Rama, but also many kings in the clan abandoned their wives and children. She was hinting at Dasaratha's abandonment of his daughter Shantha. In Asan, Sita questions Rama for separating his dignity from his wife's dignity and thereby forfeiting the fundamental concept of union in the institution of marriage. She found Rama's false pride as the major reason for their tragic life. She was sympathetic towards the people who died in the war that Rama fought for his pride. The idea of fire ordeal is not palatable to the modern Sita, who like Ibsen's heroine asks

whether she is a doll ( Asan 36). Kumaran Asan’s understanding of Western literature and his awareness of Ibsen’s *The Doll’s House* might have made him form a Sita in his poem who asks *Pavayoyival* [Am I a doll?] (36). This is definitely a feminist question that criticizes the objectification of women in the society.

The subversive strategy of Sita is a part of the use of the techniques and ideals of Romanticism in Malayalam literature. In *Chinthavishtayaya Sita*, the writer prioritizes the sentiments of a female individual whose suffering is unreasonable. The thoughts of Sita in Kumaranasan were guiding the literary imagination to think on behalf of the marginalised. As a consequence of this new awareness spread by Asan , many of the writers started acknowledging the perspective of Sita. This transformation is reflected in the works such as *Kurukshethram* (1958) by Ayyappa Paniker, “Sarayuvilekku” by O.N.V. Kurup and “Ramante Vilapam” by Thonnakkal Narayanan.

The poem begins with the philosophical reflections on suffering and proceed to make a critique of the patriarchy and pride. The narrative is complex and one could notice the ambivalence of Sita towards Rama: on the one hand she expresses her pain, regret and anger emerge out of the incident of abandonment, on the other she is understanding about the interference of the society in the decisions of the individuals making him helpless. Sita shares the huge gap between her expectations and her experience connected with Ayodhya. Understanding the futility of rituals and meaninglessness of life of a woman whose existence depends on the choices of men, Sita discards her life. The poem talks about Rama’s failures in addition to evaluating his perspectives. While she reflects on her relationship with Rama, she was responding to the fantasies about love that man cherishes until the reality is revealed.

*Chinthavishtayaya Sita* speaks the rhetoric of Sita. What Sita demands is justice. She found that the recognition of love will solve many of the follies of man. Sita’s voice is subversive as it rejects the piety of the grand narrative. Abandoning the conservative vision, Sita speaks on behalf of many women, violence against whom might be justified. Twentieth century Kerala literary landscape provides the fertile soil for the flourishing of radical perspectives of the writers. The literary sphere, which gathered momentum from the Indian independence movement and the intellectual growth by the exposure to many literatures from different parts of the world along with the motivation offered by many social reformers functioned as the catalysts of the production of *Chinthavishtayaya Sita*. The voice of dissent it offered is the result of the spirit of Kerala Renaissance.

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