From Agni to Agency: Sita’s Liberation in Arni and Chitrakar’s Graphic Retelling of the Ramayana

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Abstract: The traditional interpretations of the Ramayana have been critiqued for preserving and promoting patriarchal gender structures by emphasising masculine heroism and often portraying female characters as unidimensional symbols of selflessness, purity, and honour. This paper analyses how Samhita Arni and Chitrakar’s graphic novel Sita’s Ramayana offers a retelling that foregrounds Sita’s perspective to question and reinterpret the social constructs. By analysing the text through a feminist literary lens, this paper examines how the novel adapts the traditional narrative to provide centre stage to Sita’s various encounters with instances of oppression. The findings reveal how Arni’s retelling employs unique aesthetics that combine texts and Chitrakar’s patua art illustrations to question the traditional male-centred versions, making this novel a part of a broader structure of feminist reinterpretations that aim to highlight female agency in cultural canons. This paper examines Sita’s stance against societal expectations for women, such as self-sacrifice, while also tracking her personal growth, which is symbolically represented by her reunion with Mother Earth. The novel contributes to the ongoing tradition of literary revisionism by offering a nuanced critique of the patriarchal foundations within classical myths. This is underscored by the novel’s reinterpretation of the epic in a way that points out the plasticity of the Ramayana, which can be reshaped to support more progressive views, encouraging discourse on existing gender norms present in contemporary societies.

Keywords: modern retellings; intersectionality; feminist; Ramayana; gender

1. Introduction

The Ramayana, a significant ancient Sanskrit epic of India and a cornerstone of Hindu mythology, has significantly influenced cultural norms and gender roles in Indian society for more than two thousand years (Johari 2023). This sacred text narrating the life of Prince Rama has been widely interpreted as prescribing idealised virtues of femininity, encapsulated in the characterisation of Sita as the quintessential faithful wife and mother figure (Albrecht 2023). Contemporary feminist scholars argue that traditional retellings of the Ramayana often overshadow the perspectives and agency of female characters like Sita with androcentric viewpoints (Priyadarshini et al. 2023; Pal 2022). Despite these patriarchal overtones, there are several moments in the epic that highlight Sita’s strength, such as Sita’s steadfastness during her abduction, present in versions such as Valmiki’s Ramayana and Tamil Kamban’s Ramavataram. The graphic novel Sita’s Ramayana, published in 2011, adds to the line of reinterpretations that explores Sita’s subjective experiences and consciousness by blending Arni’s narrative with Chitrakar’s patua folk art.

The Ramayana, attributed to the sage Valmiki and believed to have been written between 500 BCE and 100 BCE, is often considered the original and most authoritative version. It has been reinterpreted across the South Asian subcontinent as A.K. Ramanujan’s seminal essay Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation, underscoring the heterogeneity of the Ramayana tradition while stressing how the epic has been retold in diverse ways across different cultures, languages, and historical periods.
For instance, the Tamil Kamban Ramayana *Ramavataram* and the Assamese Ramayana *Saptakanda Ramayana* by Madhava Kandali highlight regional narratives, while the Jain *Paumacharya* and the Buddhist *Dasaratha Jataka* offer alternative spiritual perspectives (Kaushal et al. 2015; Richman 1992). In addition to the Indian retellings, the Ramayana has been adapted into various cultural contexts in Southeast Asia. For instance, the Thai *Ramakien* portrays Hanuman in a less heroic light than Indian versions, while the Indonesian *Kakawin Ramayana* blends Hindu and local Javanese traditions, showcasing the adaptability and cultural integration of the epic (Richman 1992). This multiplicity speaks to the malleability of the Ramayana and its capacity to accommodate various perspectives and narratives (Ramanujan 1991).

While analysing Arni and Chitrakar’s *Sita’s Ramayana*, it becomes essential to acknowledge that traditional versions, like Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, contain moments that highlight Sita’s agency and strength. For example, Sita’s decision to accompany Rama to the forest, her resilience during her abduction, and her ultimate choice to return to the earth are significant episodes that depict her as a character with agency and moral fortitude (Valmiki 1874). Ramanujan’s essay also reveals how different versions focus on different aspects of Sita, offering regional, caste-based, and gendered perspectives. For instance, in the *Ramcharitmanas* by Tulsidas, her return to the Earth is depicted as a devotional and sorrowful moment symbolising the completion of her divine role and reunion with her Mother Earth (Tulsidas 2002). The Jain Ramayana, known as *Paumacharya* by Vimalasuri, presents Sita as a symbol of purity and moral integrity, emphasising non-violence (Vimalasuri 2004). The Buddhist *Dasaratha Jataka* portrays Sita as a wise and compassionate figure driven by a deep sense of dharma and compassion for all beings (Cowell 1907). In *Sita’s Ramayana*, Sita’s final submission to Mother Earth is portrayed as an act of self-assertion and defiance against societal injustices, reinforcing her autonomy and strength (Arni and Chitrakar 2011). Thus, Arni and Chitrakar’s graphic novel can be seen as a continuation and amplification of these themes rather than a radical departure from the traditional version.

*Sita’s Ramayana* is part of the broader tradition of modern retellings of the Hindu mythological epics that include works like Chandrabati’s *Ramayana*, which focuses on Sita’s story from a perspective highlighting the struggles of women within a patriarchal framework; Nina Paley’s *Sita Sings the Blues*, which juxtaposes Sita’s story with contemporary issues faced by women; and Volga’s *The Liberation of Sita*, which reimagines Sita’s journey towards self-empowerment by meeting other women from the Ramayana, such as Surpanakha and Ahalya (Chandrabati 2020; Paley 2008; Volga 2016). This diversity is crucial to understanding the *Ramayana* not as a singular text but as a tapestry of narratives, each contributing to the larger mythos. As scholars like Rashmi Luthra explain, most mainstream versions of the *Ramayana* “tend to deify Rama and offer all kinds of alibis for his abandonment of Sita” (Luthra 2014, p. 140). While some traditional versions explore Sita’s emotional and moral complexity, Arni’s work provides a concentrated and feminist interpretation. As scholars state, “Arni certainly aims to offer some justice to [overlooked alternate narratives] in her 21st century novel” (Chakraborti 2022, p. 8). The retellings present the character of Sita as highly relevant as Gokhale notes, “Sita was not only an immortal daughter of the Earth or an incarnation of Lakshmi. She was also intensely human, although her vulnerabilities are lost in the accretions of myth and reverence. But Indian myth is never static, it is constantly in the process of reinterpreting and revalidating itself, and the society that it defines” (Gokhale 2018, p. 17).

The main objective of this research is to critically analyse how *Sita’s Ramayana* reinterprets the ancient Sanskrit epic from a feminist perspective to foster discussions on gender roles, power dynamics, and intersecting marginalities. Through textual and narratological examination of Arni and Chitrakar’s revisionist strategies, this study highlights how the retelling brings to the forefront the perspectives overshadowed in traditional masculinist versions. Additionally, placing the novel within the context of feminist revisionist myth-making and acknowledging its contribution to the line of feminist retellings provide a comparative view of its socio-cultural and literary significance.
2. Literature Review

The Ramayana, one of the most influential Sanskrit epics in Indian culture, has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry and feminist reinterpretation (Hongal and Kshirsagar 2023). Traditional narratives of the epic have often portrayed Sita as an ideal of feminine virtues, such as self-sacrifice, forbearance, and devotion to her husband Rama (Richman 2001; Nabar 1995; Sangari and Vaid 1989). However, contemporary feminist scholars have argued that this unidimensional characterisation often suppresses the voices, experiences, and agencies of female characters (Sunder Rajan 1993; Tharu and Lalita 1991). In this progressive spirit, several authors have attempted to reclaim the Ramayana narrative through a feminist lens, recenetrin the epic around Sita’s perspective and amplifying her subjectivities. Samhita Arni and Chitrakar’s *Sita’s Ramayana* is a part of this revisionist drive, which reinterprets the ancient tale from Sita’s viewpoint. This retelling has been lauded for its poignant portrayal of Sita’s resilience, where Chitrakar’s illustrations play a crucial role in conveying the emotional depth and cultural context of the narrative (Chakraborti 2022; Gokhale 2018). This approach aligns with broader feminist strategies of revisionist mythmaking, which Alicia Ostriker (1982) deems “an essential strategy for feminist survival and liberation” (p. 71). The Ramayana has been retold in numerous languages, including Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, Tibetan, Tamil, Old Javanese, Japanese, Telugu, Assamese, Malayalam, Bengali, Kannada, Marathi, Hindi, Odia, and Kashmiri, offering multiple narrative standpoints (Manavalan 2011; Richman 1992). These retellings create opportunities for feminist voices to challenge patriarchal interpretations of Hindu epics and mythological texts (Ostriker 1982; Pratt 1981). By foregrounding Sita’s emotions, dilemmas, and acts of resistance, the retellings lend agency and complexity to her characterisation, which adds a different layer to the popular image of her character as endlessly forgiving and patiently enduring injustice (Sunder Rajan 1993).

Arni and Chitrakar’s revisionist approach resonates with ecofeminist perspectives that draw parallels between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature (Shiva and Mies 2014). The novel’s opening sequence poetically juxtaposes Sita’s arrival in the Dandaka Forest with the awakening of its flora and fauna, symbolically linking her story to ecological renewal (Arni and Chitrakar 2011). Moreover, Arni creatively employs the folk art tradition of patachitra scroll paintings by Moyna Chitrakar, which possesses an “aesthetic of defiance” that threatens hegemonic narratives (Bose 2017, p. 12). The vibrant patachitra visuals lend Sita’s story a potent counter-narrative force, aligning with the revisionist ethos of reclaiming marginalised perspectives historically suppressed by elite Brahminical discourse. Recent works have continued exploring revisionist retellings as ideological praxis for advancing feminist perspectives and social change, as seen in the translations by Arshia Sattar (*Valmiki’s Ramayana*, (Sattar 2021) and *The Ramayana for Children*, (Sattar 2022)), which offer a fresh perspective on the epic by presenting a more balanced portrayal of characters, such as Sita and Surpanakha. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) also reinterprets the narratives from a feminist standpoint. Feminist scholars conclusively establish that revising myths challenges dominant narratives by bringing marginalised characters to the centre (Pratt 1981). The reinterpretations of ancient myths allow for powerful symbolic reclaiming of cultural heritage, promoting more inclusive power structures.

3. Methodology

The present study employs a feminist literary analysis to critically examine Samhita Arni and Chitrakar’s graphic novel *Sita’s Ramayana*. The analysis brings forth how Arni presents an alternate view, Sita’s point of view, of the ancient epic of Ramayana. This contradicts the male-centeredness of traditional narratives and critiques gender roles in orthodox storytelling. Therefore, the paper focuses on Arni and Chitrakar’s portrayal of identity, autonomy and oppression, as experienced by Sita, based on her gender, marital status, and societal position. The study also integrates ecofeminist perspectives, particularly drawing on the works of Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, to explore the similarities between
the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature depicted in the novel. This paper explores Sita’s plight through theoretical paradigms such as the male gaze, revisionist mythmaking, and the presentation of alternate gender narratives. These frameworks provide insights into how Arni and Chitrakar’s work creates spaces for women to express their experiences of injustice and resilience. The distinctive visual appeal resulting from the fusion of text and traditional folk art patachitra is also explored for its potential to challenge conventions. Finally, the study places Arni and Chitrakar’s novel in the wider context of feminist retellings that challenge gender dynamics in Hindu mythology, allowing modern audiences to connect with ancient stories from a feminist perspective.

4. Reversal of the Male Gaze: Sita as the Protagonist

In *Sita’s Ramayana*, Sita emerges as the central figure, assuming the roles of both protagonist and narrator. The novel opens with a pregnant Sita entering the forest with wounded feet and tears flowing down her face. The visual depiction of Sita, with her expressive eyes and the detailed flora surrounding her, immediately connects her to the natural world, symbolising her intrinsic bond with nature. This imagery is consistent with the ecofeminist themes prevalent in various regional Ramayana versions. For example, the *Adhyatma Ramayana* portrays Sita as an incarnation of Prakriti (nature), further emphasising her connection to the natural world (*Richman* 1992). The opening page of the novel states “For a thousand years Dandaka Forest slept” (*Arni and Chitrakar* 2011, p. 15), but when Sita emerges within the forest, her presence seemingly stirs life into the previously dormant flora of the Dandaka. The forest inquired of Sita’s purpose and the tears she shed. She replied, “I am Sita, daughter of the Earth, sprung from the same womb that nurtures this forest. I am the princess of Mithila and the last queen of Ayodhya. Let me live here,” Sita requested, “The world of men has banished me. And then, the forest spoke: tell us, sister, how you came here” (*Arni and Chitrakar* 2011, p. 15). Therefore, the narrative commences in *medias res*, unfolding the story from its midpoint. This episode embodies ecofeminist themes, drawing parallels between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature.

Vandana Shiva, in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*, argues that women and nature have been historically exploited through the conceptual framework of patriarchal societies (*Shiva* 1989). This perspective is mirrored in *Sita’s Ramayana* through several key elements. Sita’s birth from the Earth symbolises her intrinsic connection to nature, emphasising the purity and sanctity of both Sita and the natural world. The depiction of Sita in the forest highlights her solitude and the sanctuary she finds in nature. The detailed portrayal of the forest underscores its role as a space of refuge and empowerment, allowing Sita to reflect and grow away from patriarchal constraints. This visual aligns with the ecofeminist motif of the forest as a nurturing and empowering space for women, reinforcing the interconnectedness of gender and environmental issues.

The novel depicts the classic tale of the struggle between Rama, the prince of Ayodhya, and Ravana, the king of Lanka, in a graphical and narrated format. Rama’s mission is to rescue his abducted wife, Sita, from Ravana’s clutches. Throughout the narrative, Sita emerges as a strong and self-assured woman, undeterred by her captivity under the formidable demon king. Contemporary retellings like Bhavabhuti’s *Uttararamacharita* also emphasise Sita’s dignity and moral strength during her exile, highlighting her unwavering virtue and emotional depth (*Bhavabhuti* [1921] 2002); Kamban’s Tamil *Ramavataram* portrays Sita with a blend of grace and assertiveness, reflecting a deep sense of duty and righteousness (*Richman* 1992); the Telugu *Ranganatha Ramayana* explores Sita’s trials and emotional complexities, delving into her inner world with sensitivity (*Kaushal et al.* 2015).

Following her abduction, Ravana confines Sita to the enchanting Ashok vatika (garden) after her refusal to marry him. Upon her arrival in Lanka, Sita keenly observes “…with palaces built of gold and adorned with priceless gems and lovely gardens… It was one such garden that Ravana imprisoned me, when I refused to marry him” (*Arni and Chitrakar* 2011, p. 29). Sita’s confinement in the lush garden symbolises the entrapment of both feminine and natural worlds by patriarchal forces. However, Sita’s resilience and
refusal to succumb to Ravana’s demands highlight her agency and strength, aligning with ecofeminist ideals that advocate for the empowerment of women and the protection of nature. By transforming domestic and natural spaces into sites of empowerment, the narrative underscores Sita’s authoritative role, resonating with feminist revisionism aimed at redefining and reclaiming female characters. (Ostriker 1982; Pratt 1981). By forming an alliance with Trijatha, Ravana’s niece, Sita gains valuable insight into Rama’s efforts to rescue her, as also seen in Devdutt Pattanaik’s *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, which depicts Sita as an empowered figure, navigating her challenges with wisdom and strength (Pattanaik 2013). Rama embarks on a challenging journey across the ocean to confront Ravana and secure Sita’s freedom. Despite facing significant losses in the ensuing battle, Rama ultimately succeeds in rescuing Sita. However, their reunion is overshadowed by questions about Sita’s purity after Ravana had captivated her. Sita strives to assert her innocence amidst the complexities depicted in this vivid retelling of the heroic saga.

The social framework and power dynamics within Sita’s royal household are characterised by significant disparities and hierarchical structures. Rama is portrayed as exercising strong influence over Sita, both as her husband and as a king. Additionally, Sita’s actions and decisions are evaluated by society based on patriarchal gender norms, which expect women to exhibit traits of submissiveness, chastity, and domesticity. Her purity is constantly questioned, exemplified by the *agnipariksha*, a fire trial she is asked to go through, in society’s attempt to regulate female sexuality. Since her return to Ayodhya, Sita faces public condemnation and eventual exile, contrasting sharply with Rama’s immunity from repercussions despite engaging in warfare. This event ultimately results in Sita’s banishment to Dandaka, while she is pregnant, which marks the beginning of the novel. When Rama learns about Sita’s survival and the sons she has borne him, she is called back to Ayodhya. She is then, asked to undergo another *agnipariksha*, which she refuses, questioning the impartiality of such trials. These sexual policing and moral codes reflect broader patriarchal control over women’s bodies and identities (Ostriker 1982). Her resistance against societal expectations, as examined by Luthra (2014), showcases Sita’s bravery and her refusal to conform to societal standards. Her unwavering determination amid challenges illuminates her power as a female lead. Through her defiance of societal norms, Sita presents a powerful challenge to the traditional patriarchal interpretations that often dominate discussions surrounding the Ramayana (Thacker 2023).

5. Intersectional Analysis of Sita’s Identity

In *Sita’s Ramayana*, the portrayal of Sita’s identity and agency is influenced by the dynamics of gender, social structures, and power relations that limit her in various roles—as a woman, wife, queen, and exile. This intersectional approach is consistent with feminist policies that explore the ways in which marginalisation is reinforced under different oppressions (Crenshaw 1991). This complexity is mirrored in various regional versions of the Ramayana. For instance, the Telugu Ramayana by Atukuri Molla presents Sita as a strong, independent figure, challenging the traditional submissive portrayal (Kaushal et al. 2015); Samhita Arni’s *The Missing Queen* offers a modern, feminist retelling of the Ramayana, where Sita’s narrative is interwoven with contemporary issues, such as media control and political propaganda. These works collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of the Ramayana from a feminist lens, showcasing the diverse ways in which female voices have been reimagined and amplified.

While Sita contributed significantly to Rama’s triumph over Ravana and the subsequent return to Ayodhya, her involvement in political governance and decision-making processes within the state remains notably constrained. Despite her pivotal role, she finds herself subjected to societal norms that limit her agency and often regard her as a subordinate rather than a co-regent. This is evident in her abandonment by Rama amidst public scrutiny and her subsequent expulsion while pregnant shortly after she had successfully passed the fire trial, all of which highlights the extreme vulnerability and complete erasure
of her agency. However, her hardships in exile ultimately empower her to reject oppression and seek liberation through a symbolic return to Mother Earth. By prioritising her selfhood over marital fidelity, she resists and ruptures the patriarchal notions of ideal womanhood.

Sita, immersed in the natural environment surrounding her, expresses a desire to retreat to the forest during her pregnancy, a departure from the customary practice of seeking refuge with her parents. Valmiki, encountering Sita in the forest, extends his hospitality, and safeguards her. It is within this setting that Sita gives birth to her twin sons, Lava and Kusha, within the confines of Valmiki’s hermitage. Valmiki takes on the role of a mentor to Sita’s sons, imparting knowledge and education to them as they grow up in the forest. Valmiki narrates “the story of the kingdom of Ayodhaya” to Lava and Kusha in a way that “their mother was the heroine of that tale” (Arni and Chitrakar 2011, p. 128). From multiple narrative standpoints, the novel establishes Sita as the heroine of the epic, a strong counterpart to Rama. Despite enduring hardships, she remains composed and steadfast, refusing to succumb to adversities in life. Embracing her past, she finds contentment and fulfilment in her exiled life in the forest: “She was no longer Sita, the Queen. She was Sita, the simple forest woman” (Arni and Chitrakar 2011, p. 131). This portrayal challenges conventional notions of feminine virtue, which often prioritise self-denial and submission, as noted by Pollock (1993).

In the Ramayana, the principal characters embody divine incarnations, blending metaphysical power dynamics with human socio-political contexts. Sita, portrayed as the human form of goddess Lakshmi, occupies a revered cosmic position (Sreekala 2022). Despite her divine essence, Sita endures mortal injustices without invoking any divine intervention. Additionally, Rama’s ‘Vishnu’ avatar status contextualises his actions, including his mistreatment of Sita, within human legal and moral frameworks of the time (Sugirtharajah 2004). Despite being part of the ruling elite as Rama’s wife, societal norms ensure Sita remains tightly constrained by heteropatriarchal domesticity. Her symbolic feminised role as an idealised queen/mother takes precedence over actual political influence. Intersectional theorists like Nira Yuval-Davis highlight how women are often “bearers” of ethnic/national collectivities rather than autonomous agents (Yuval-Davis 1997). Sita’s intersecting identities as royalty and divine avatar therefore do not insulate her from gender-based oppression; rather, they accentuate her objectification as a vessel for hegemonic patriarchal/nationalist norms. Following her trials, Sita chooses to return to Mother Earth rather than assert her rights as Rama’s wife. Lavanya Vemsani’s analysis of Sita within Hindu mythology highlights her role as an embodiment of the Earth (Bhudevi). Sita’s narrative is steeped in ecofeminist symbolism, presenting her as both a nurturer and protector of nature. Vemsani discusses how Sita is often identified with Bhudevi, the Earth goddess, symbolising fertility, purity, and resilience. This identification is vividly depicted in Sita’s Ramayana, where her actions and experiences are closely tied to the natural world, reinforcing her role as a guardian of the Earth (Vemsani 2016). Sita’s return to the Earth at the end of her journey signifies a cyclical relationship with nature, where the Earth reclaims her daughter, underscoring themes of renewal and continuity. This act symbolises the ultimate resistance to patriarchal oppression, as Sita chooses to return to her elemental form rather than remain in a world that has wronged her (Vemsani 2016).

6. Feminist Critique of Patriarchal Culture

Feminist interpretations of the Ramayana epic critique the patriarchal values and culture that lead to the injustices suffered by Sita, such as exile, abandonment, and suspected infidelity, without reasonable cause. The epic war between Lord Rama and the demon king Ravana leads to many casualties, as Trijata notes: “War, in some ways, is merciful to men. It makes them heroes if they are the victors. If they are the vanquished—they do not live to see their homes taken, their wives widowed. But if you are a woman—you must live through defeat” (Arni and Chitrakar 2011, p. 120). The devastation caused by the war in the novel parallels Sita’s personal suffering and environmental damage, reflecting Shiva’s
idea that the exploitation of the environment is intrinsically linked to the subjugation of women (Shiva 1989).

After the war, Sita is taken to Ayodhya. Upon her return, it is presumed that Sita has lost her chastity and virtue after being abducted. Rama tells her, “I can’t take you back” (Arni and Chitrakar 2011, p. 115). She is asked to go through agnipariksha to prove her purity. This scrutinisation of Sita’s sexuality while Rama faces no questions reflects the patriarchal policing of female bodies and agency (Sunder Rajan 1993). Sita willingly undergoes the first agnipariksha. As seen in Figure 1, Sita enters a blazing fire and remains unscathed, as a testament to her purity and devotion to Rama. She states: “I stepped into the flames of the tall pyre that Lakshmana had built... but I felt nothing. The fire refused to touch me” (Arni and Chitrakar 2011, p. 120). In the visual where Sita stands unharmed in the flames, the vibrant reds and oranges contrast with her composed expression, symbolising her inner strength and purity. This visual aligns with Lavanya Vemsani’s interpretation of Sita as Bhudevi, the Earth goddess, who transcends human suffering through her divine connection to nature. The flames failing to touch Sita signify the inherent power of nature that remains untainted by external forces (Vemsani 2016).

Figure 1. Source: Dr Shilpa Daithota Bhat (2022) Sita-centric Revisionism in Sita’s Ramayana, Androcentric Encoding and Conceptualising the Diasporic abla nari (Art by Moyna Chitrakar, for Sita’s Ramayana).

Following the successful completion of the trial, Rama’s confidence in Sita remains significantly compromised, prompting her into exile. While the possibility of rescue had some hope for Sita’s happiness, it ultimately leaves her disillusioned. She is forced to contemplate the idea that her life in Ashok vatika could have been better. After Rama’s victory over Ravana, Sita notes, “Rama didn’t look at me, he was aloof and distant. When he finally spoke, he spoke in anger: Sita, you are free, I have freed you, you can do whatever you want. Go wherever you want” (Arni and Chitrakar 2011, p. 123). His terse declaration of her freedom, coupled with the accompanying illustrations portraying Sita against a backdrop of flames, symbolises the internal turmoil and trauma she continues to endure despite the apparent resolution of the conflict. This portrayal challenges traditional
narratives of masculine heroism by highlighting the persistent influence of gendered power dynamics and societal expectations on characters like Sita.

In the later stages of the narrative, when Lava and Kusha reach adulthood and reunite with Rama, the possibility arises for Sita to return to Ayodhya as its Queen. However, she encounters yet another trial, this time triggered by doubts among the people of Ayodhya regarding her purity. Refusing to subject herself to this trial by fire, Sita beseeches Mother Earth to validate her innocence. In response, Mother Earth cleaves open and envelops Sita, shielding her from harm and reaffirming her purity. This event is accompanied by visuals of Sita being enveloped by the Earth, symbolising her return to her elemental form. The use of earthy tones and the intertwining lines representing the Earth emphasise Sita’s deep connection with nature. This image aligns with Vandana Shiva’s ecofeminist framework, where Sita, as an embodiment of nature, reclaims her agency by returning to the Earth, highlighting themes of renewal and resistance against patriarchal oppression (Shiva 1989). It signifies Sita’s transition from the mortal world back to her divine essence. Sita’s refusal to reconcile with Rama and her acceptance of a sense of self beyond her role as a wife can be seen as a powerful assertion of her individuality and empowerment.

7. Commentary on Feminine Virtues and Roles

In scholarly discourse, Sita’s portrayal as a symbol of self-sacrifice, willingly giving up her own comforts and unwaveringly supporting her husband during his exile, has frequently been examined from a feminist perspective. There is a debate about whether Sita had full control over her decisions or if she felt pressured to conform to societal expectations of being a submissive wife (Albrecht 2023). In the novel under examination, Sita’s narrative takes a different approach compared to the traditional narrative. Notably, events such as the war are recounted to Sita indirectly through Trijata’s dreams, rather than being depicted as central heroic episodes. Sita notes the destruction of Lanka, “their people had met death on the battlefield—for what? For one man’s [Ravana’s] unlawful desire… It was such a high price to pay” (Arni and Chitrakar 2011, p. 118). This scene is accompanied by men on either side of the boxes, laid dead on the ground, with the women still and wide-eyed in horror. The narrative attention shifts to the suffering and experiences of other female characters, such as Trijata. After the war, “Lanka was destroyed, Ravan was dead. Kumbhakarna, Indrajit and thousands of other Rakshasas had perished on the battlefield. But I could see their women crying… Trijata lamenting” (Arni and Chitrakar 2011, p. 119). This episode serves as a poignant reminder of the collateral damage experienced by women in the wake of men’s warfare.

In her retelling, Arni portrays Sita as rejecting Rama’s authority by refusing to go through another trial, thereby challenging the traditional image of a woman as a passive figure compelled by self-sacrifice. The conventional interpretation of Sita’s *agnipariksha* as a validation of her purity and an affirmation of her fidelity to Rama is problematised by Arni, who sheds light on the inherent injustice of subjecting Sita to such a test and casting doubt on her integrity. While Sita has often been upheld as the epitome of wifely devotion, forgiveness, and unwavering loyalty to Rama, Arni and Chitrakar’s narrative suggests that these qualities may serve to reinforce patriarchal ideals rather than reflect an equitable relationship dynamic. In addition, Rama’s choice to leave Sita is questioned by Arni, who highlights the complexity of their connection and the power structures at play. Sita has been shown as having unending and unwavering love and devotion to Rama. Sita exclaims, “In Ayodhya, whispers and rumours surrounded me. The people of Ayodhya didn’t know the entire story- of my sojourn in Lanka…” (Arni and Chitrakar 2011, p. 125). Sita had hoped for love and reconciliation, but she was met with injustice and suspicions, she notes: “I thought the end of the war had meant freedom for me I had hoped for love, I had hoped for justice, that was not to be. Instead of love. I found suspicion. Instead of justice, I met with false accusation and distrust” (Arni and Chitrakar 2011, p. 124).

Society’s reactions to Sita’s presumed infidelity during captivity criminalise her identity while ignoring issues like consent, the trauma of captivity, or Rama’s own breach of
trust in doubting her virtue so readily. This reflects the expectations of women to be ‘pure’ while a patriarchal society exerts control by enforcing strict codes of feminine conduct through means like the agnipariksha. The injustice is compounded shortly after the agnipariksha when Sita is exiled despite proving her purity. Feminists argue this scrutinisation and punishment for perceived transgression of patriarchal expectations would not be faced by men (Luthra 2014).

Arni and Chitrakar’s alternative Ramayana questions the ‘ideal feminine’ virtues Sita was expected to embody and the unfair trials she was subjected to ‘test’ those virtues, pointing to the control patriarchal society exerts on women’s lives and choices. Through Sita, the alternate versions critique the expectation for women to be self-denying, subordinate and forgiving of injustice—all values serving a patriarchal system (Dhar 2021). By portraying Sita as articulating, her opinions on various incidents, showing emotions like pain, anger, and resistance, and ultimately refusing reconciliation with Rama, revisionist authors lend agency and complexity to her characterisation, as they add another layer to the popular image that shows her as forgiving, and submissive.

8. Revisionist Use of Traditional Art Forms

Moyna Chitrakar’s visualisations of Sita in Sita’s Ramayana are deeply rooted in the rich tradition of Medinipur’s patachitra, a folk art form that has been a significant cultural expression in West Bengal, India. However, the term ‘folk art’ itself is fraught with complexities and power dynamics. The depiction of Sita is not only an artistic endeavour but also a cultural dialogue with the region’s numerous goddesses and the historical narratives preserved in the patachitra tradition. Patachitra, or patua art, is a community-based performative art that combines visual storytelling with songs (Chakraborty 2023). This traditional art form has been used to tell stories of deities, saints, and epics, including the Ramayana. Patachitra’s roots in the rural, oral folk traditions of Bengal stand in stark contrast to the textual authority of the Sanskrit language and Hindu “great tradition” within which the Ramayana was codified and interpreted by upper-caste Sanskrit scholars (Pollock 1986). The term ‘folk art’ is often used to categorise artistic practices that originate from rural or non-elite communities, contrasting them with ‘high art’ or ‘classical art’ forms that are typically associated with urban, elite, and literate societies (Dissanayake 1992). This dichotomy reinforces cultural hierarchies and can marginalise the artistic expressions of non-elite groups by implying that their art is less sophisticated or valuable. Such categorisations obscure the rich, dynamic, and innovative qualities inherent in these art forms.

Chitrakar’s stylised depictions of Sita’s resilience, pain, and self-discovery draw from an altogether different visual repertoire—one shaped by the experiences, cosmologies, and performative practices of ostensibly “low” rural folk communities existing outside elite Sanskritic spheres of legitimation (Bose 2017, p. 20). Hence, the art form represents subaltern concerns. By incorporating the same folk medium that has been subservient in society to voice her dissenting Ramayana narrative, Arni politicises Sita’s tale as coming from these marginalised sections. As a female patua artist from a marginalised community historically excluded from elite Brahminical discourse around the Ramayana, Chitrakar’s vivid illustrations lend Sita’s story a powerful counter-narrative voice. This tradition of visual and oral storytelling is integral to how Sita’s narrative is presented in the scroll paintings (Arni and Chitrakar 2011).

Anthropological studies reveal that the patuas were highly adaptable artists who responded creatively to the diverse needs and tastes of their patrons in Bengali society, including aristocrats and regional ‘kings’ (Zanatta and Roy 2021). This adaptability reflects a dynamic and innovative artistic community, rather than a static or homogeneous tradition. In line with this practise, Arni and Chitrakar shed light on the dual marginalisation experienced by women, stemming from both their gender and caste/class identities. Arni creatively uses the folk art form of patachitra or scroll paintings by Chitrakar to reinterpret the Ramayana from a feminist perspective. As feminist media scholar Liesbet van Zoonen argues, mainstream media has historically been complicit in reproducing patriarchal
power structures by circulating stereotypical images of women as passive, domesticated objects of the male gaze (Van Zoonen 1994). In contrast, Chitrakar’s folk art style presents Sita with agency, portraying her resilience, emotional complexity, and journey towards self-actualisation through emotive, wide-eyed representations. This visual “oppositional gaze” (Hooks 1992, p. 110) defies the objectifying male gaze pervasive in dominant media forms. Her wide-eyed Sita, full of pathos and resilience, becomes the visual manifestation of the revisionist rhetoric of Arni’s female-centric questioning of patriarchal narratives. Chitrakar’s wide-eyed, emotive depictions of Sita’s resilience, pain, and journey toward self-emancipation manifest the “aesthetic of defiance” that Bose highlights, subverting idealised portrayals of feminine passivity in orthodox Ramayana representations. Using this subversive folk tradition aptly complements Arni’s challenge of the dominant patriarchal Ramayana text through Sita’s viewpoint.

The interplay between text and graphics is seamless in Samhita Arni and Chitrakar’s book as she weaves in references to the paintings at critical junctures—“In my mind, I could still see Trijata’s dream” (Arni and Chitrakar 2011, p. 116). The colours and imagery enrich the descriptions—“Lanka was a splendid city” (Arni and Chitrakar 2011, p. 28). Chitrakar’s sequential paintings themselves tell the story. The complementary text explains the artwork. The combination of the artistic talents of Arni’s words and Chitrakar’s paintbrush make this an impactful revisionist recreation of India’s most popular epic. Understanding patua art highlights its potential to reinterpret mainstream narratives and offer alternative perspectives. Patua art has been used to retell various aspects of both the Ramayana. For instance, patua artist Swarna Chitrakar’s Sita Haran depicts the abduction of Sita, emphasising her resilience and strength. Additionally, Manoranjan Chitrakar’s Ramayan offers a comprehensive depiction of the epic’s major events, while his The Majestic Saga of Ramayana presents epic encounters in the Kalighat style. Another notable work, Imagery of Ram, Sita, and Lakshman, also by Manoranjan Chitrakar, focuses on key characters in the Bengal Patachitra tradition. Laila Chitrakar’s Hanuman Tears Open His Chest showcases Hanuman’s devotion by revealing Ram and Sita in his heart. Purusottam Swain’s The Story of Ramayan provides a detailed Patachitra narrative covering the entire story arc. These examples underscore the versatility of patua art in bringing to life the multifaceted narratives of the epics.

9. Stimulating Gender Discourse through Mythology

As myths play a significant role in shaping ideas about gender roles and relations in society, feminist writers have used the technique of revisiting and reinterpreting myths to challenge patriarchal assumptions and stimulate discourse on gender issues (Priyadarshini et al. 2023). There has been a noticeable shift in modern literary discourse towards reinterpreting ancient epics, like the Ramayana, in a more relatable and comprehensive manner for modern readers through the utilisation of modern prose, regional languages, and the incorporation of folk forms. This approach helps to infuse these narratives with a sense of familiarity and significance that resonates with contemporary values. Sita’s Ramayana can be positioned among various feminist and revisionist retellings of the Ramayana that emphasise female voices and agency. It joins a rich tradition of reinterpretations, such as Phyllis Herman’s exploration of Sita’s kitchens in Relocating Rāmāraṇya: Perspectives on Sītā’s Kitchen in Ayodhya, which transforms domestic spaces into sites of empowerment, reflecting the nuanced portrayal of Sita (Herman 1998); Velcheru Narayan Rao’s A Ramayana of Their Own: Women’s Oral Tradition in Telugu, which reveals a tradition of oral literature that portrays Sita as an active agent, resonating with the themes of agency and resilience (Rao 1991); Nina Paley’s Sita Sings the Blues, which portrays a modern Sita in an animated adaptation of the epic; Bose & Bose’s translation of Chandrabati’s Ramayana, A Woman’s Ramayana, which offers historical feminist perspectives that challenge patriarchal narratives and foreground Sita’s strength and autonomy (Paley 2008; Bose and Bose 2013). Sita’s character undergoes a significant transformation throughout these revisions, transitioning from a helpless captive to a resilient and driven individual who bravely faces grief and injustice, aligning with
feminist revisionist literature that critiques the patriarchal structures inherent in classical myths. Ostriker’s concept of revisionist mythmaking as a feminist strategy is evident in Arni and Chitrakar’s retelling, which reclaims Sita’s narrative from male-centric interpretations and highlights her agency (Ostriker 1982). The ongoing retellings ensure that ancient tales remain culturally relevant, as they are constantly updated through performances to reflect contemporary social realities.

Arni adopts a focused narrative lens that traces Sita’s life journey from birth to death and centres her experiences of agony and resilience. Through this approach, Arni effectively recasts the epic as a woman’s tale, emphasising Sita’s exile and her journey as a single parent as a testament to the inner strength of women in challenging times. Dev Sen argues that women’s retellings of the Ramayana resonate deeply with female audiences, offering them a narrative through which they can identify with the experiences of characters like Sita. They often see their own challenges and aspirations reflected in her story. Undoubtedly, rural women have embraced the Sita myth to express their own struggles and assert their voices in the face of hardship (Dev Sen 2007). She notes, “[these female-centric narratives are] something with which they [women] can identify themselves. Therefore, Sita and her suffering become an inseparable part of their existence. They sing songs on Sita, not on Ram” (Dev Sen 2007, p. 18).

In this regard, Arni and Chitrakar’s interpretation highlights Sita’s agency and offers a critical perspective on the actions of male characters, portraying her as a dynamic and empowered figure rather than a passive one. By focusing on Sita’s perspective, Arni challenges the gender stereotypes present in the original epic and provides more prominence to Sita’s voice. This revisionist approach effectively highlights Sita’s long-overlooked viewpoint, transforming the narrative landscape of the Ramayana. For example, when Sita is prompted to go through the agnipariksha (trial by fire) to establish her purity shortly after returning from Ravana’s confinement, she openly questions the demand, addressing Rama: “then why did you fight this war? For the sake of your honour, people paid a bloody price” (Arni and Chitrakar 2011, p. 116). Here, Sita directly challenges Rama’s prioritisation of societal honour over her dignity and agency, threatening patriarchal notions of feminine virtue tied to male honour. Years later, when she is called back, she is again asked to prove her purity through the second agnipariksha, Sita rejects it, stating: “I do not wish to be a queen. I have been doubted once, twice, and I do not care to be doubted again” (Arni and Chitrakar 2011, p. 145). This episode is accompanied by the visuals that situate Sita amidst a vibrant and earthy colour palette. Her firm stance and the surrounding nature symbolise her rejection of societal norms and her alignment with natural justice and integrity. By refusing to compromise her selfhood to satiate patriarchal demands of feminine purity, Sita weakens society’s attempts to control her identity. These powerful moments of defiance amplify Sita’s marginalised voice against androcentric mainstream narratives underlining masculine honour. The graphic novel may be viewed as a significant feminist effort to recover women’s agency in mythological texts. Revisionist mythmaking involves appropriating androcentric forms to express the experiences of women who have been excluded from mainstream narratives. These retellings shift the focus from the hero Rama onto the obliterated Sita, creating a space in the literary tradition for a feminist Ramayana that challenges patriarchal narratives.

10. Conclusions

Arni and Chitrakar’s Sita’s Ramayana offers a feminist reinterpretation that contributes significantly to the tradition of revisionist literature, bringing marginalised voices to the forefront. The novel offers a fresh and nuanced critique of patriarchal norms within classical myths while shifting the focus to Sita’s perspectives and agency. Arni frees the iconic figure of Sita by dismantling her pedestalisation as a symbol of devotion and sacrifice to emerge as a rallying symbol for feminist empowerment across intersectional lines. The novel foregrounds Sita’s viewpoint while deconstructing her objectification in hegemonic masculinist versions. The findings of the paper reveal how the revisionist mythology genre
enables the reclamation of cultural heritage from subjugated standpoints. Arni’s integration of written history and patua artwork is a powerful multimedia counter-narrative, which draws on the aesthetics of the marginalised. It enables Sita to speak against self-sacrificing womanhood and shifts her from a character typified by perfect femininity into a crusader for gender equity. Ultimately, *Sita’s Ramayana* contributes to the ongoing dialogue that revisits and reinterprets the cultural canons. This graphic novel adds to the multiplicity of voices that have reshaped the Ramayana, offering an alternate perspective that aligns with the efforts of past and contemporary authors who have sought to highlight the perspectives of women and other marginalised groups. Through its nuanced portrayal of Sita’s intersectional marginalisation as a woman, wife, queen, and exile, the text calls for a revisiting of classical narratives to imagine more egalitarian social realities. *Sita’s Ramayana* shows how ancient myths remain relevant by being reworked through revisionist literature that mirrors the evolution of society.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, D.S.; writing—original draft preparation, D.S.; writing—review and editing, Z.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data is contained within the article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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