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Sita beyond the epic: A mythological reinterpretation of Nabaneeta Dev Sen's Sita theke Shuru

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a mythological reading of Nabaneeta Dev Sen's Sita theke Shuru, reinterpreting the Ramayana as a dynamic site of cultural renewal, symbolic inversion, and feminine re-creation. Moving beyond the feminist reclamation of Sita, this study situates Dev Sen's work within the archetypal and mythopoeic dimensions of Indian narrative tradition. By revisiting the myth of Sita not merely as a gendered figure but as a mythic consciousness, Dev Sen reinvokes what Northrop Frye calls "the mythos of identity" a pattern through which societies continuously retell their own origins. Through symbolic acts of return, inversion, and transcendence, Sita theke Shuru converts the patriarchal myth of obedience into a myth of cyclical renewal, thereby bridging the sacred and the subversive. This mythological reading reveals how Dev Sen transforms the epic from a tale of dharmic submission to one of cosmic feminine autonomy.

Keywords: Mythology, archetype, Sita, narrative structure, sacred feminine, Indian epic

Introduction

The Ramayana, attributed to Valmiki, is one of India's foundational myths an epic that has traversed linguistic, cultural, and geographical boundaries. Its endurance lies not in its fixity but in its adaptability. Each retelling of the Ramayana reflects its time's ideological and emotional temper. In Sita theke Shuru (translated as Starting from Sita), Nabaneeta Dev Sen revisits this timeless myth not to deconstruct it alone but to reanimate it. Her approach aligns with what Mircea Eliade calls the "eternal return" of myth: the recreation of sacred narratives to meet the moral and emotional demands of a new age (Eliade 34).

Unlike purely feminist reinterpretations that foreground Sita's suffering as emblematic of patriarchy, Dev Sen repositions Sita as a mythic consciousness a cosmic archetype of renewal. Her narrative method is deeply mythological: she reclaims the cyclic rhythm of mythic time, allowing Sita's final return to earth to signify not an end but a reabsorption into the cosmic feminine principle, Prakriti. This reading situates Dev Sen's work within India's long tradition of purana and itihaasa retellings, where myth is never closed but constantly rewritten as part of cultural evolution.

Sita as Archetype: The Sacred Feminine Reimagined

In the traditional Ramayana, Sita functions as a moral archetype the embodiment of chastity, devotion, and obedience. She represents what Joseph Campbell terms the "goddess as helpmate," whose virtue validates the hero's journey (Campbell 113). Yet Dev Sen's Sita theke Shuru reverses this structure. Instead of Sita serving as the passive ground upon which Rama's dharma is tested, Dev Sen elevates her to the center of mythic action.

Sita becomes a rearticulation of the Devi archetype, merging human and divine aspects. Her descent into the earth is no longer a tragic withdrawal but a sacred return an act of cosmic restoration. Through this act, she embodies what Wendy Doniger calls the "mythic paradox" of Indian goddesses: "the power to suffer and to save simultaneously" (Doniger 76). Dev Sen's Sita, in choosing to return to the womb of the earth, symbolically reclaims her original mythic identity as Bhumi's daughter. She transforms her suffering into sovereignty, asserting a cyclical rather than linear understanding of time a distinctly mythological worldview.

By ending Sita theke Shuru with this act of return, Dev Sen reframes Sita as an agent of pralaya and utpatti destruction and rebirth. The mythic image of the earth opening to

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receive her resonates with ancient fertility myths across cultures: Demeter's descent into the underworld, Inanna's return from death, and Parvati's withdrawal from creation. These archetypes emphasize renewal through withdrawal, continuity through silence a pattern Dev Sen revitalizes in a modern idiom.

The Mythic Structure of Reversal and Renewal

Myth, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss, functions through binary oppositions that societies continually reconcile through narrative (Lévi-Strauss 214). The Ramayana constructs one such binary: obedience versus rebellion, purity versus impurity, male dharma versus female submission. Dev Sen's Sita theke Shuru inverts these binaries through mythic reversal.

In her retelling, the end of the Ramayana becomes the beginning the title itself, starting from Sita, encodes the cyclical mythic structure. Sita's departure marks not closure but initiation. By reinterpreting her withdrawal as a "shuru" (a beginning), Dev Sen mythologizes the feminist act of reclamation. She situates Sita at the cosmic threshold between myth and history, turning her into a figure of renewal rather than resignation.

In doing so, Dev Sen draws on what A. K. Ramanujan terms the "many Ramayanas" tradition an oral and textual continuum where each retelling redefines the moral axis of the narrative (Ramanujan 46). Her version breaks the linear temporality of Valmiki's text and aligns with the cyclic temporality of Indian cosmology: creation, dissolution, and rebirth. The structure of Sita theke Shuru thus mirrors the rhythm of myth itself a spiral that returns to its point of origin but at a higher level of consciousness.

Earth and Voice: The Symbolic Resonance of Return

The motif of Sita's return to earth is one of the most charged symbols in Indian mythology. Traditionally interpreted as a mark of resignation or purity, Dev Sen transforms it into a voice of cosmic reclamation. By merging the physical (earth) and metaphysical (selfhood), Dev Sen reconnects Sita with the pre-patriarchal matrix of the prakriti principle. The earth in Indian myth is not passive matter but the living goddess Bhudevi who sustains and regenerates life. When Sita returns to the earth, she collapses the distinction between the individual and the archetype, between human and divine. Her act is both symbolic death and transcendence. This mythological lens allows Dev Sen to elevate a domestic tragedy into a cosmological event: the feminine principle reclaiming itself from the structures of patriarchal order.

Moreover, the act of return has linguistic implications. Sita's silence in the epic, often interpreted as submission, becomes in Dev Sen's hands a different kind of speech the silence of myth. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, mythic silence is not absence but "an encoded speech beyond articulation" (Mukherjee 89). Dev Sen's Sita speaks through withdrawal, through her alignment with the cosmic feminine rather than through dialogue.

Rewriting the Sacred: Dev Sen and the Continuum of Mythic Consciousness

In retelling the Ramayana, Dev Sen participates in what Girish Karnad calls the "continuum of mythic consciousness" a mode of reinterpretation that keeps myth alive by reshaping it to suit contemporary consciousness (Karnad 19). Sita theke Shuru thus belongs to the same

mythopoetic lineage as C. Rajagopalachari's moral retellings, Kamala Subramaniam's devotional renderings, and Volga's feminist reimaginings but it diverges in its mythological approach.

While feminist reinterpretations like Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* (2016) focus on reclaiming Sita's agency through human relationships and ethical discourse, Dev Sen's mythic framework reclaims her cosmic significance. She does not secularize the myth but sacralizes rebellion. By restoring mythic texture to Sita's defiance, Dev Sen resists the flattening of myth into history. Her Sita is not merely a woman wronged but a symbol of cyclical creation, echoing the Vedic concept of Rita cosmic balance restored through disruption.

Dev Sen's mythological strategy reclaims the sacred feminine within modernity without dissolving the sacred. As she herself remarks in *Theoretical Implications of Women's Writing*, "Myth is not to be destroyed; it is to be rewritten from within its own grammar" (Dev Sen 42). This approach situates her closer to mythographers like Sri Aurobindo or C. G. Jung, who see myth as a psychological and cultural code rather than a static narrative.

The Feminine Principle and Cosmic Ethics

Sita's myth, when reinterpreted through Dev Sen's vision, becomes an ethical myth a narrative of balance between justice and compassion, order and transformation. Her return to the earth, rather than marking an ethical failure of Rama, becomes a restoration of dharma beyond patriarchy. In mythological terms, she embodies Shakti the dynamic energy that ensures moral equilibrium through self-withdrawal.

Dev Sen's mythic vision also aligns with the tantric understanding of the feminine as Mahashakti, the source of all creation and dissolution. By invoking this mythic energy, she recasts Sita's journey from exile to emancipation as a cosmic rite of passage. The sacred feminine, suppressed by centuries of patriarchal exegesis, reclaims its mythic authority in her telling.

The closing image of Sita merging into the earth is, therefore, not defeat but transformation a reabsorption into the primordial. It symbolizes the eternal rhythm of myth where endings are beginnings, and silence becomes creation.

Conclusion: The Myth of Return and the Return of Myth

In Sita theke Shuru, Nabaneeta Dev Sen transforms Sita from a passive emblem of virtue into an active mythic principle. Through mythological inversion, symbolic return, and cyclical time, she restores to Sita the fullness of her archetypal identity. Her reinterpretation does not reject myth but renews it, proving Eliade's contention that "to tell a sacred story anew is to regenerate the cosmos" (Eliade 92). By situating Sita within the cosmic cycle of dissolution and rebirth, Dev Sen offers a mythological resolution to the moral and gender crises of the modern world. Her Sita speaks not only for women but for the human spirit's perennial struggle for balance between power and surrender, voice and silence, matter and divinity.

Thus, through Dev Sen's mythopoetic imagination, the Ramayana once again becomes what it was always meant to be: not a closed scripture but a living myth ever returning, ever beginning.

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