Chapter V

The Reflections of *The Ramayana* in Indian English Fiction and Drama

*People make love over and over

*but only you

*know how it feels. I write about the same Ram

*Everyone else has known, but my

*Feelings of love

*Are mine

—Vishwanath Satyanarayana *Ramayana Kalpvriksshamu*
Chapter V

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Fiction and Drama

5.1 Mythic Structures in the Novels of Raja Rao, Mulkraj Anand and R K Nayaran

The emergence of three writers, Raja Rao, R K Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand brought a new tidal wave. In 1930s, English language had become a part of the life of Indian middle class. The Indians of this class were already expected to be fairly conversant in two or three languages and learning of English posed no particular problem for them, culturally or otherwise. The writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R K Narayan were primarily reformist writers who enjoyed the wealth of western philosophy and literature that came via English language. English language formed a new link for them through which they could represent their cause to the wide number of educated Indians hailing from different vernacular regions. They incorporated the best of western philosophy and scientific thought in their writings and made genuine efforts to improve upon the old customs in the society.

Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R K Narayan despised the old important standards and created something new in their writings, bringing in a distinct Indian flavour. Raja Rao expressed in his novels a
deep preoccupation with Indian cultural heritage and put across his efforts of reconciling old cultural tradition to the modern world. Mulk Raj Anand was intensely aware of the existing social evils such as caste system, the suppression of women and so on. For all these writers the common ground was their cultural heritage and its powerful impact on the lives of the people. Raja Rao and R K Narayan delved deep into the psyche of the individuals and exposed the aspects of Indian mind coloured by myth. Both showed in their works the fact that it is nothing but the mythic frame of mind that dominates the ‘Indian psyche’. Both exploited Indian myths extensively and effectively to put forth their causes. At the same time they derived intellectual substance along with spiritual rejuvenation from the study of Indian myths and mythology. The novels of these writers are rich with meaning which can be attributed to the mythic allusions and the exploiting of myths and archetypes. Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R K Narayan are described as founding fathers of Indian English Novel.

In his *Gods, Demons and Others* R K Narayan writes,

*The legends and myths as contained in our puranas are mere illustrations of the moral and spiritual truths. Each forms a part and parcel of a total life and is indispensable for the attainment of understanding of the whole existence. The characters in the epics are prototypes and moulds in which humanity is cast and remain valid for all time. The mythic allusions in literature help the reader in interpreting the*
characters, as the reader is endowed with a better understanding of particular character. The reader can have deeper insight into the very human nature.


In R K Narayan’s novels reality becomes easily comprehensible with his skilful use of Indian myths that provide us with information about life’s experiences.

Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan recreated Indian myths making an imaginative and fictional use of these myths. These writers embodied the myths with new interpretations, meanings and values. As Keshub Chunder Sen points out, Indians possess the peculiar trait of the mythic mind in which even mundane activities take the hue of religious rituals based on our myths.

Meenaxi Mukherjee observes,

*The Rites and Rituals* do not only form part of myth but provide a frame of reference.

(Mukherjee Meenaxi 1971:139).

In his article *Pigeon – Indian, some notes on Indian English writing*. Mulk Raj Anand writes,

*Literature of any significance, whether local or universal, has to come from the breath of the people. One cannot grow harvests in the air. We*
have to dig furrows in the earth, sense the groves, sow the seed and eat the fruit from our own soil.

(Rajeshwar M 2001:82).

Raja Rao employed *The Ramayana* myth in his first novel *Kanthapura* published in 1938. He takes up the theme of the influence of Gandhiji and his political movement on the people of *Kanthapura*, a south Indian village enclosed in myth, being swaddled by ‘centuries old’ rituals and religious practices. The work is a fictional rendering of a localized myth.

In *The Cow of the Barricades* published in 1947, he dealt with the themes of politics and tradition. His second novel *The Serpent and the Rope* is based on the classical Sanskritic tradition. He used the “Savitri-Satyavan’ myth in *The Serpent and the Rope* and the novel has philosophic dimensions. The next novel of Raja Rao is considered as a sequel to the earlier novel, *The serpent and the Rope*. All his literary works gain philosophical dimensions and have preoccupations with several schools of philosophic and Indian myths.

### 5.2 The Reflection of *The Ramayana* in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

The reflections of *The Ramayana* are a real testimony to the fact that myths impart a new significance to our contemporary existence. Raja Rao has a strong myth- making consciousness. The effect and impact of the values of *The Ramayana* are persistent in *Kanthapura*,
which lends a philosophical profundity to the theme of the Freedom movement. Raja Rao has chosen a small south Indian village *Kanthapura* with rich sthala purana, where the action takes place because as he writes in his foreword to the novel,

*There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich ‘Sthala Purana’. Some God or Godlike hero has passed by the village – Ram might have rested under this pipal tree, Sita might have dried her clothes after her bath, on this yellow stone or the Mahatama himself in one of his pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut... In this way the past mingles with the present and gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grand-mother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals of a village, I have tried to tell.*

(Raja Rao1963:5)

The story thus is located specifically in an Indian village. The impact of Gandhiji is seen as mythological. Myth meanders through fictional fabric. Raja Rao employs Puranic myths and localized myths here. The situations, as well as the characters are mythicised. The Indian *Puranic* myths pertain to the binary opposition of the good and evil. *Ramayana* illustrates this idea of binary opposition through the characters of Ram and Ravan, and the battle between the gods and demons. The battle between gods and demons, the good and evil and
the triumph of the good over the evil, of gods over demons is a recurrent motif in Indian mythology.

In his interview with Shiva Niranjan, Raja Rao stated,

*I like to write like a Purana. I like the Puranic conception in fact that is the only conception of novel for me. I don’t want to write like a foreign novelist. I am very much an Indian and the Indian form is the Puranic form.*

(Commonwealth Quarterly 50).

The tiny episode in the Gandhijian struggle to liberate India, takes an epic dimension as Raja Rao mythicises the whole situation, where the past mingles with the present. The novel possesses the flavour of an epic as it emerges through the eyes of a delightful old woman Achchakka. According to Meenaxi Mukherjee, *Raja Rao’s mythic conception deals with an ideal man or man larger than life.*

(Mukherjee Meenaxi 1971:141).

He exalts and elevates them above the common rung of humanity. Gandhiji’s character is highly idealized like that of Ram in “Ramayana”. Gandhiji is described as an incarnation of the Almighty. The villagers feel his psychological presence. Moorthy, the chief character, who initiates the freedom struggle in the village and who embodies the noble sentiments and principles of Gandhiji is also presented as an exalted and spiritually elevated man.
A mythical aura gets created around these saintly characters. Gandhiji is God and Moorthy, the humanized manifestation of the divineness of Gandhiji. Gandhiji tried to spiritualise Freedom movement. Murthy becomes living presence of invisible Gandhiji, as the villagers do not have easy access to Gandhiji. But Gandhiji dominates the scene with the presence of Murthy, who represents the ideas of Gandhiji. As Srinivas Iyengar says, *Gandhiji is the invisible God, Murthy is the visible Avatar* (Iyengar 1985:391)

Gandhiji’s messages of non-violence, and of freedom of the nation, reach the masses not from a pulpit but when told as a Harikatha, through a popular mythical framework.

Gandhian messages appeal to the villagers through the effective use of folktale, Bhajan and Harikatha. JayaRamachar, the Harikatha man presents a new version of the old epic in which Gandhiji, an epic hero is sent by Brahma to liberate “Bharata” (India) from men who have come from across the sea. In Jaya Ramachar’s Harikatha, the Gandhijian movement is set in the tradition of the Indian epic and thus a link is made between myth and reality.

Gandhiji is Ram and Mother India is Sita, whom Ram (Gandhiji) is fighting to redeem from the hands of the demons who are the redmen-the Britishers. The reign of the Britishers is demonic rule. Gods resist
it. Gods are the Satyagrahis, the followers of Gandhiji who struggle to put an end to \textit{Asuric} rule. Gandhiji is a savior, an incarnation born with a noble cause of liberating Mother India (Sita). Like Ravan, the British have come to kidnap our Political freedom. The tussels between Satyagrahis and the agents of British Government turn out symbolic as the clash between gods and demons.

The Harikatha man makes the freedom struggle culminate into a sort of mythological war between Ram- Ravan, gods – demons. Gandhiji becomes a legendary figure in \textit{Kanthapura} and therefore he is a subject of Bhajans and Harikathas.

Jaya Ramachar, the Harikatha man sings,

\begin{quote}
\textit{And lo, when the sage was partaking of the pleasures Brahma offered him in hospitality, there was born in a family in Gujarat a son such as the world has never beheld and hardly was he in the cradle than he began, to lisp the language of wisdom.}
\end{quote}

(Raja Rao 1974:16)

The mixing of myth, religion, politics, fantasy and poetry makes Gandhijian movement a reality for the people of Kanthapura. The contemporary political struggle undergoes a transformation. Mythic allusions to the political crisis appeal to the villagers with mythic frame of mind and becomes a vital factor in integrating them. The ever-present
Indian myths at length absorbs the characters and history it has all along been bathing and overwhelming.

(Guzman 1980:39)

The political events get coloured with mythic tradition. Gandhiji’s visit to England to attend the Round Table Conference is perceived as Ram’s visit to Lanka to save Sita from the hands of Ravan in his “Hari Katha style, Raja Rao mingles myth, history and also religion and politics. Only through such fusion he makes the Gandhijian movement a reality to villagers. The oral traditions have kept alive Indian myths through centuries and even the illiterate villagers live and enact myths thinking themselves as the archetypal extensions. So they take an ideal and noble man as Ram, dutiful and loyal woman as Sita, obedient brother as Laxmana and so on. They have an understanding of good and evil through the myths and archetypes.

The concept of Freedom movement turns out to be uplifting and the villagers dream of the day when ‘Ravan will be slain and Sita freed’! They imagine Sita, sitting at the right of Ram in a chariot going towards Ayodhya and Bharata will go and meet them with all the devotion. The naiveté of the narrator of the story seems obvious in looking at Nehru as Bharatha, Gandhiji as Ram, ‘Swarajya’ which is personified as Sita, the British rulers as Ravan. It is typical of true Indian storytellers that a certain mythological framework is embedded in the recesses of their
consciousness. The stories appeal to the listeners irrespective of their being educated or not, as they too have consciousness that has a mythic framework. The mythic parallels and allusions in Jaya Ramacharya’s ‘Harikatha’ are very well drawn and they enhance the intensity of freedom movement which is realized by the villagers.

The freedom movement thus acquires mythic dimensions, and the significance of the National Movement is expressed through a religious metaphor.

C.D. Narasimhaiah says, *religion seems to sustain the spirits of the people of Kanthapura*. A viable portrait of Indian reality is presented in *Kanthapura* by relating the myth of Ramayana to the modern context. Raja Rao proves that it is possible to mythologise the contemporary reality in literary tradition. In the words of Raizada, myths and symbols in Kanthapur occur as artistic and creative mode of conveying a meaningful world – view of human reality in terms of shared human experience.

While laying emphasis on the religious faith of the freedom fighters who are inspired by the teachings of Ramayana or Gita, Raja Rao shows his great zeal for Indian philosophy and his abiding belief in the immortal values preached through our epics, and the timelessness of these eternal human values.
Raja Rao’s mythic design seems more effective than that of the other Indian writers in English. In R.K. Narayan’s *Waiting for Mahatma* Gandhiji’s character does not emerge as symbolic figure as in Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*. B. Rajan’s *Dark Dancer* also has a mythic framework, where he mythicises the post-partition Hindu muslim clashes. He presents the predicament of Hindu – muslims as a re-enactment of Kurukshetra. But Raja Rao’s inspiration from Ramayana that results in mythicising the freedom movement appear more effective and stands as proof of Raja Rao’s strong myth making consciousness.

5.3 Mulk Raj Anand’s Recreation of The Ramayana in *Gauri*

Mulk Raj Anand recreates the myth of *The Ramayana* in his novel *Gauri*. The reflection of The Ramayana story is seen in the novel where Mulkraj Anand uses the myth of Sita fitting it into the frame of contemporaneity. He fuses myth and realism, the fusion of the realistic and the folktale narrative form.

The character of *Gauri*, the protagonist, chooses to be like Sita in the beginning but towards the end she gets transformed into “Sita” of twentieth century, very different from the Sita of *The Ramayana*.

Social concerns is the forte of Mulk Raja Anand. He employed his literary skills in writing about the plights of under privileged section of Indian society with these concerns. His *The Untouchable* and *Coolie* deal with the plight of marginalized section of our society – untouchability.
and social injustices. He was saddened by the fact that the average Indian woman has the status of a slave. He saw women in India bound and fecund for the service of the hearth. Such themes are dealt with in his novels like *The Road* and *The Big Heart*. The protagonist Rukmini in *The Road* questions the male superiority and male chauvinism. Rukmini’s marriage is delayed due to want of money as she cannot afford to give dowry and satisfy the demands of groom.

Though voices were being raised against the oppression of women, Anand knew very well that only by legislation, emancipation of women was not possible. It was difficult to change the social taboos against women. There was always an urge in him to contribute his lot towards the movement of the “Emancipation of women”. His novels like *The Road*, *The Village*, *The Big Heart*, *Two leaves and a Bud* are the steps towards his goal of contributing to the movement.

He took up such themes to project the evils of male chauvinism and the ambivalent attitude of Indian society with regards to women.

In *Gauri* Anand employs the myth of Ramayana as his technique. In many of his letters to Saros Cowasjee he has expressed his strong feeling of rejection of the old myths and their irrelevance to the modern rational era. He writes in one of the letters to Cowasjee Saros,

*The old myths of Ramayana Mahabharata and Puranas can be safely left to those who want to bring back the civilization of the pre-
Christian eras to the “Machine age”. I have myself deliberately tried to create and live up to a new contemporary myth – man in his dignity of weakness, struggling to be an individual, a god of course failing in the attempt”.

(Cowasjee Saros 1973:32).

Spontaneously I feel that the revivalists want to take us back to the filth of Hinduism, to the worship of sabala, the cow, the Hanuman the monkey, to the Godking Ram, who was a casteist and allowed his wife to be consigned to the fire because the dhobis said she had been abducted by Ravan and had stayed in his Ashram. The revivalists want to bring back the philosophy which smothered the rationalism of Buddha and divided India into hierarchies, weakening it so that it fell before every conqueror who could bring five hundred horsemen through the Khyber pass and descend upon the fertile plains.

(Cowasjee Saros 1973:34).

In the words of M. K. Naik,

Anand’s modification of the myth suggests that the original has become outdated and irrelevant in the modern context.

(Naik M K 1985:8).
Anand also disproves the doctrine of ‘woman’s interior position as the weaker sex, as the prospect of economic independence in the present context has enabled her to be an autonomous being who is no more an encumbrance on man. Anand strongly felt that woman should never be the victim of rigid social order.

The frame work of the novel comes from *The Ramayana*. In the first chapter of the novel there comes the reference to The Ramayana and the character of Sita. When Gauri is departing to her husband’s house, her mother Lakshmi advises her,

*Be like Sita.*


Gauri falls a victim to the vicious plots of Panchi’s (Gauri’s husband) jealous aunt Kesaro, who incessantly struggles to have a firm grip over Panchi Gauri struggles to be like Sita,. Gauri’s character symbolizes the purity and strength of Sita.

Panchi, an orphan is brought up by his aunt Kesaro. Like all other average Indian males, Panchi, too, has an unquestioning faith in the orthodoxy and tradition bound Hindu views, that have been governing the relationship between husband and wife for ages. He expects his wife to be always gentle, obedient even under his ill treatment. It is a common scene in Indian houses that even under the kicks and blows of
husband, a woman is expected to be “infinitely good Hindu wife”. Panchi simply does not protest his aunt Kesaro when she levels against Gauri insulting innuendos. Kesaro wants to retain her hold on Panchi and in that effort she tortures Gauri. Using the rustic idiom of her rustic culture and superstition she shouts,

Control her if you can! This bride of yours. She has begun to answer me now, when she was meek and silent before! From the day that this witch from big piplan set foot in our house, we have had bad luck. You know the crops have withered and burnt up. The bullocks have fever. And there is no sign of rain (Anand Mulk Raj 1976:40).

In his blind belief, Panchi, too, recognizes his wife as the incarnation of Kali, the destructor.

She has ruined me, ohe sone! Ohe chandi! She has destroyed our home, this Gauri, to be sure, Gauri is the incarnation of Kali, my aunt Kesari is right when she says that this bride is the incarnation of the black Goddess who destroys all before her, who brings famine in her breath.


Panchi thinks Gauri is inauspicious to their house. Unable to rid himself of the quoted customs, tradition and the social taboos laid
against women in society, Panchi falls a victim to the tyrannical influence of Kesaro.

Gauri, who had entered the life of Panchi with a “Sita-like” commitment, reaches a mental and emotional stage, where she cannot withstand the cruelty of her husband and aunt Kesaro. She goes back to her mother Lakshmi, thinking that would be a place of comfort for her. But the modern Sita is disillusioned here too. She is sold to an old money – lender by her own mother, out of economic necessity. Kesaro who arouses suspicion in the mind of Panchi, acts in her own way as Manthara, though in a different way. Gauri is sold to the old money – lender seth Jairamdas who acts like Ravan, abducting Sita.

There is a re-enactment of The Ramayana myth when Gauri is forced to stay with the old – banker as Sita had to forcibly stay with Ravan. Gauri is reunited with Panchi as Sita was reunited with Ram. Gauri is crushed under the village gossip after her “come back” Anand highlights the parallelism when Panchi follows the path taken by Ram in similar situation, when Gauri’s chastity is suspected in the similar way as was Sitas. The women folk too gossip,

“They are all wondering sister, if the child is Panchi’s or some one else’s!”

(Anand Mulk Raj 1976:227-28)
Panchi’s friend Damodar says to Panchi,

*Ohe ja, and look after her, she has come back, after the exile, like Sita who stayed with Ravan.*


Rakhi (another character) compares the case of Gauri to that of Sita – “When Sita was abducted by Ravan and her husband went and fetched her back, what did people say?” Gauri’s enemies and the village gossipmongers, who do not have any other work than gossiping and wiling away their time, keep comparing her stay with seth Jai Ram das to Ravan’s abduction of Sita in *The Ramayana*. Now it is Panchi’s turn to enact the role of Ram in such situation. He challenges Gauri to give proof of her chastity.

Gauri is basically an orthodox self-sacrificing wife. Even when Panchi treats her inhumanly, she defends him before her friends and relatives. She parts with her golden ear-rings, the only possession of jewellery to buy the seeds for cultivation. Like a devoted true Hindu wife she dedicates herself to Panchi and prays for his prosperity.

*“In the softly illuminated heaven of the cavernous dark, she breathed an involuntary wordless prayer to God to grant the blessings of a good harvest to Panchi.*

As Sita’s strength was in her unwavering love for Ram, Gauri cherishes a silent resolution and loves her husband Panchi.

Panchi turns out Gauri in her state of pregnancy just as Ram rejected pregnant Sita under social pressures. Gauri goes into exile like Sita. Gauri lives with a sage figure doctor Mahindra and gives birth to her child. Even when she is with Dr. Mahindra, who harbours her like Sage Valmiki in *The Ramayana,*

“She keeps uttering, *I want my husband I am with child by my husband and I want to go back to him – I want to go back home.*


But Gauri has a fate like Sita who repeatedly becomes the object of suspicion. Here Anand recreates a new myth. He gives a new turn to the myth of Ramayana.

Gauri ponders over her situation,

They are telling him that Ram turned out Sita because everyone doubted her chastity during her stay with Ravan! I am not Sita that the earth will open up and swallow. I shall just go out and be forgotten of him*. “She looked up to the sun, then dazzled, withdraws into herself and relapsed into silence. She dared to look in the face from energies inside her which had been almost blinded.
Anand points out a growth in her evolvement as a new woman.

_Gauri had stopped crying for a moment with the resurgence of her courage and was wiping her tears with her Dupatta. But the bitterness kept surging up, suffusing her face with a red rage and exacerbating her feelings how into a rigid defence like that of Kali in anger._

(Gauri slams the door against her husband and explodes the old myth of the suffering and enduring Sita devoured by the earth. Gauri’s life is a pilgrimage of hope and faith. She organizes her emotions to bring substance and significance. She does not allow her cultural conditioning to deform her into an image of self surrender and despair._


Gauri does not disappar into the recesses of mother earth, but feels the hardness of the path that leads her to a new life. She rejects Panchi, her cowardly husband and makes her own decision to build a new life for herself.

_Though Gauri suffers all injustices imposed on her, silently, she transforms herself as an individual gaining a consciousness of her intrinsic worth as an independent woman. Parallel resemblances are_
there in the suffering of Sita and Gauri. The frame work of the novel comes from The Ramayana and the reflections of the mythic characters are seen in the characters of the novel. Kesaro acts like “Manthara”, Seth Jai Ramdas is like Ravan abducting Sita, Seth and Dr. Batra are like demons, and Dr. Mahindra acts like Sage Valmiki, harbouring Gauri and reshaping her personality instilling in her a new confidence and enabling her growth as a potential, independent individual.

Sita’s character is not mythicised in an ideal manner as “Gandhiji’s character” is mythicised in a very ideal manner in, Kanthapura with a mythical aura around Gandhiji’s saintly figure. Gauri, in the end turns down Sita’s lot and finds her own way, making up her mind to struggle against all odds in securing her own identity. Here Gauri’s suffering climaxes into liberation of her spirits.

At the climax of the story, the parallel resemblance between Gauri and Sita crumbles with the awareness in Gauri That she cannot become the Sita of The Ramayana to disappear in the oblivion but shows her assertion that she is “Sita” of twentieth century and she should be different from her. The realisation that the solutions in her life lay in forgetting ‘Sita’ of The Ramayana and in choosing a path that leads her to a town where she can start her life afresh.

According to C. J. George,
“Anand seems to be saying – In this modern era of existential struggle, man, instead of blindly depending on the strength of old myth, must find strength in his own physical and mental powers through hard work and devotion to duty. As Gauri takes the road to town, the novel says that she “waves her head to forget Sita”. She seems to have made proper assessment of her era in which the Gods are no longer helpful to the helpless. The road she takes is a road to progress, free from the stumbling blocks of old myth.

(C. J. George 1994:172)

Gauri becomes a nurse and begins her new life. She blossoms into the new woman.

Gauri starts as Tulsidas’s submissive and loving Sita, evolves into Valmiki’s more assertive one and finally takes on the dimensions of a Nora if not an Isabel Archer.

Alastair Niven says,

The strength of 20th century writers who render afresh the ancient myths can partly be gauged by their ability to free themselves from the limitations of the myth when it proves too unwieldy.

(Alastair Niven 1977:99)

The old myth is transformed into a “living myth” in Anand’s literary creation.
The use of myth as a structural parallel and the mythical parallel serve the purpose of the writer in manipulating a parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity the distant heroic past of the mythical Sita and the sordid, stale anarchic present of the contemporary Sita.

As M. K. Naik says, Gauri is a modern versions of Sita but Panchi has very little of Ram in him. According to M. K. Naik, the modern Sita,

“like Gauri sheds her narrow domestic coils before they can strangle her to death and escapes into the refreshing world of modernity. Gauri emerges as an awakened woman with a fresh lease of life. Her decisive walk out and her choice of a non – domestic profession in the context of woman’s predicament in India is a tremendous act of protest- this is effectively illustrated by the skilful modified use of the “Ramayana myth”.

(M. K. Naik 1985:38)

It enhances the thematic pattern of the novel. Anand’s modification of the myth suggests that the original has become outdated and irrelevant in the modern context.

The character of Dr. Mahindra who provides shelter to “Gauri” in the novel represents the author himself. Anand’s messages of the new concept of woman are explicit in Dr. Mahindra’s speeches. It is Anand himself who speaks under the mask of Dr. Mahindra in the novel. He
speaks about the “new awareness” that has to come in women in the modern era – a proper assessment of the era where a woman needs to free herself from the stumbling blocks of old myth.

Gauri’s decision to take a road to progress, her assertion for social amelioration, her new role in society as a nurse indicate that ideals values, and traditions set in by gone ages are not valid and always worth emulating in the modern context. Anand has seen the continuing hold of the mythical character “Sita” on the popular imagination that has become a part of larger “belief system” of India. Therefore “Gauri” slams the door against the meaningless belief – system, not succumbing to despair. Her suffering climaxes into a delightful moment of her liberation from all the bonds. It is her inner transformation that guides her conscience to organize her emotion and reshape her life. As Binod Mishra says,

Gauri organizes her emotions to bring substance and significance. She does not allow her cultural conditioning to deform her into an image of self surrender and despair.

(Binod Mishra 2003:161)
5.4 Savitri as Sita in R K Narayan’s The Dark Room

K R Shrinivas Iyengar observes that he myths have been the ground plank of Indian culture. The writers use mythic allusions for better understanding of particular characters. Mythicising characters in literature, enables readers to have a deeper insight into the human nature conditioned by socio-cultural norms. R. K. Narayan was aware of the truth that reality can only be grasped through myths. He makes a skillful use of myths to make reality comprehensible. As M. K. Naik comments about the novel Man eater of Mulgadi,

*R. K. Narayan grafts a realistic narrative of modern south Indian life on ancient Hindu myth, thus ensuring that his questionings and solutions are firmly rooted in his own cultural ethos. The man eater of Malgudi” is a recreation of the old Hindu myth of Bhasmasura in modern form.*


In The Dark Room, R K Narayan presents a modern version of Sita myth. The heroine of the novel is an extension of Sita archetype. He has brought the ancient myth to our reality. The events, situations and characters have similarities with the events and characters of The Ramayana but are interpreted and presented in a different way according to the demands of the modern age.
R K Narayan puts forth a feminist viewpoint of the contemporary south Indian society. *The Dark Room* symbolizes the meaningless existence and uselessness of the life of the protagonist Savitri, who realizes the meaninglessness of her life but has no other option than returning to her “dark room”. Narayan deals with the theme of social consciousness, portraying the dilemma of a married woman encircled by male domination and social taboos.

The protagonist Savitri is aware of all the injustices laid on her by her husband and tries to fight back in vain. The use of Sita myth is pinched with irony. Savitri, the protagonist is submissive and dedicated like Sita. She goes on an exile like Sita but not out of obedience to her husband as Sita does. She revolts against male domination. Her walking out of the house is because of the difficulty of her situation.

Ramani, Savitri’s husband is self-indulgent, self-centred and egoistic. He makes his wife always feel how dependent she is upon him. Ramani has conservative views regarding a wife’s role. He says,

*And what woman retained the right of being called a wife who disobeyed her husband. Didn’t all the ancient epics whose one dominant quality was a blind stubborn following of their husbands like the shadows.*

(Narayn R K 2009:92).
He likes his wife and daughter to be very submissive. Savitri is meek and submissive, dedicated completely to her family – her husband and children. She serves her husband quietly, obeys him and thinks only about his comfort. She possesses nothing in the house other than a dark room where she locks herself up under her mental pressures. She is blind prisoner of the age old orthodoxy and can lend herself in the darkroom.

Ramani’s infatuation with Shantabai contributes to the complication of the situation in the family.

The novel basically is about the family of Ramani, his wife Savitri and three children Babu, Kamala and Sumati and is structural on the interactions between these characters Savitri represents a subdued typical Indian housewife who endures her husband’s rage and sudden outbursts with conventional submissiveness traditional Indian housewife. As M. K. Naik says, *Ramani’s outburst makes the dominance clear and Savitri’s sub-ordination to masculine authority sets the nodes and antinodes of the tension that shapes the fiction* (Raghavacharyulu 1985:38)

Savitri is aware of her helplessness. Even after fifteen years of married life, Savitri does not have the slightest power to do anything in her house.
Savitri walks towards the river in the darkness of the night. According to M K Naik,

*Savitri in this part of the narrative owes its meaning and experience to the leading female character of The Ramayana – “Sita”. Savitri’s exile resembles many mythological heroines who suffered exile – Sita, Shakuntala and other. Savitri is closer to Sita, Irony operates the use of myth. Savitri, like Sita is submissive and dedicated, but unlike Sita her exile is not an act of obedience to her husband but it is a revolt against male domination. It is chiefly the reason why Narayan himself takes Savitri to be “an early testament of woman’s liberation movement.*

*(Raghavacharyulu 1985: 23)*

The river Sarayu of Malgudi reminds us of mythological Sarayu and the plight of Savitri reminds us of Sita’s troubled mind and her inner turmoil and tumult.

She walked all the way to the north end of the town and reached the river an hour later. Sarayu was flowing in the dark with a subdued rumble.

She stood in the water and prayed to her God on the hill to protect her children. *In Yama’s world cauldron must be ready for me for the sin of talking back to a husband and disobeying him, but what could I do… what I could I do… no, no, I can’t die. I must go back home I won’t,*
I won’t… The last sensation that she felt was a sharp sting as the water shot up her nostrils, and something took hold of her feet and toppled her over.


Savitri is saved by the burglar Mari and his wife Ponni look after Savitri. This is another Paralance to the story of Ramayana. Sita is given shelter in sage Valmiki’s ashram. Here Mari and Ponni reconstitute the identity of the sage Valmiki, Valmiki too was an unsophisticated thief and then becomes a transformed man and is blessed with poetic creativity. Mari as a thief is Valmiki’s past. Savitri hates to be back again to the life of charity and dependence. She refuses to accept charity from Mari and Ponni and agrees to work in the temple only for a half measure of rice and a quarter of an anna.

Savitri is left desolate in the temple in the darkness with the dim oil – lamp and stars and the massive tree looming over the wall.

Was there no escape from fear and charity?

(Narayan R K 2009:140).

Savitri ponders over her situation. The old man, the priest of the temple had offered her, If you are afraid to remain here, you may come to my house. You can spend the night with the womenfolk in my house.
Of what should I be afraid? asked Savitri, I am living in God’s house and He will protect me. (Naryan R K 2009:145).

These brave words did not sustain her long. Everything terrified her. In the quiet solitary hour, the surrounding objects took monstrous shapes. Savitri was furious with herself at this.

What despicable creations of God are we that we can’t exist without a support? I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support it (Narayan R K 2009:145). Savitri’s plight reminds us of Sita’s exile and her helplessness.

And she grew homesick. Nostalgia for children, home and accustomed comforts seized her. Lying here on the rough floor, beside the hot flickering life, her soul racked with fears, she couldn’t help contrasting the comfort, security and un-loneliness of her home. The futility, the frustration and her own inescapable weakness made her cry and sob (Narayn R K 2009:146).

The temple under the old man is the last station of Savitri’s exile. The stay in her exile accounts for the realization which is ratified through the recreation of the image of the darkroom. The image of dark room in the beginning of the novel, in which she retires always in her frustration, is applied with simpler meaning, but in the last phase of the narrative the image of the Dark Room is used with deeper layers of irony. Savitri refuses charity by Mari and ponni. She denies fear when
she decides to stay in the dark lonely shade in the temple. But now in
the *Dark Room* of the temple, at the end of the novel, Savitri grows
nostalgic and homesick. The rebel in Savitri dies. The ‘woman’ is reborn
in her—a woman who always suffers nostalgia homesickness and a
strong yearning to be with her children.

Savitri represents here the Indian housewife who rejects male
mediation, whose ‘inner fury’ arouses in protest against the male
dominance. According to M K Naik Savitri revolts against the “doll’s
house” of conventional Indian woman hood by retreating into the
privileged isolation of the “Dark room” her attempt is foiled by the
logistics of her tradition bound society. Nevertheless she succeeds in
partly neutralizing the menace of victimization and subservience by
recovering her role as a mother which she asserts with dignity and
firmness. *There is more of Isabel Archer in her reconciliation to her
situation than of Nora Helmer* (Raghavacharyulu 1985:38).

K. V. Suryanarayana Murthy opines *Savitri’s realization of her
helplessness and dependency confirms the cyclic reversal of the situation
that Savitri in the beginning of the novel is same as Savitri in the last
page* (Murthy K V S 1987:133).

The master stroke of irony is that all the emotions Savitri forcefully
denies are fused into one at last and Savitri after her exile and her stay
in the dark shade of the temple, finds herself in the same old “dark
room”, the only room she possess for herself. Discarding the dark room in temple, Savitri realizes that there are no options in her life but to choose the ‘dark room’ at home with her three children.

R K Narayan has revealed the ambivalence of Indian womanhood in the modern context. A few of the characters and the events in the novel bear partial but remarkable similarities to the characters and events of The Ramayana. But they are presented in a different way and interpretations also differ. In accordance with the demands of the modern age, and the atmosphere, the characters and the events are modified and presented.

Savitri, in the beginning is submissive and obedient wife like Sita, but her Sita-like qualities are not appreciated by her self – indulgent husband Ramani. The mythic names – Savitri and Ramani create the mood for mythicising the story. Savitri’s stay with the thief Mari and then at the temple, may be juxtaposed with Sita’s stay in Lanka or with Sita’s later exile in the Ashrama of Valmiki, who (like Mari in the novel) himself said to have been a dacoit in his early life.

Though Ramani is conservative in his views about women, he accepts Savitri easily. Here, the acceptance of Savitri of Ramani is contrasted with Ram’s suspicions about Sita and making her pass through the ordeal of fire. The ancient myth is brought to our reality with modification according to the demands of new age.
Both Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan have created contemporary myths. Mulkraj Anand has gone a step ahead and has westernized traditional Indian values. He has made the heroine of his novel Gauri a symbol. Both the writers have rewritten the myth of The Ramayana showing their ‘Sitas’ as oppressed under the rigid social taboos against women (Mathur O P 1993:69-75).

Narayana only hints at the situation in his Dark Room, but Mulk Raj Anand provides a solution in woman’s assertion of her freedom.

Both the writers agree that past has to be re-interpreted. Time does not stand still, it moves like a spiral. The old archetypes are still with us but they create new patterns and designs every day. The two novels, Gauri and The Dark Room are two different answers to the question what will happen to woman like Sita in the modern context and how will she weave out her own destiny. The answers are characteristics of their geniuses and attitudes.

5.5 Sita Myth in Anita Desai’s Where Shall We Go This Summer

Anita Desai belongs to the third generation of urban writers. For her, myth is a psycho-emotional reality. She is aware of the fact that reality can be grasped only through myths. Therefore, in her fiction, Anita Desai mirrors the mythic reality of Indian life. This mythic reality is expressed through the interactions of the self and society which is complex. Desai mixes myth with realism. It is the psychological reality
that matters much for her because as a woman, she is aware of the plight of womanhood in the mythic framework of society.

The names of her female protagonists like Maya and Sita, seem to be suggestive of their mythic parallels. In her novel *Cry the Peacock*, Maya, the female protagonist rebels against the mythic mode of Indian life that never provides women with strategies from liberation of male hegemonies. The society upholds the Indian mythic image which is most prevalent – the images of women like Sita and Savitri. These images of women express the values of Indian society – where husband is ‘God’ for a woman through their stories – the way Sita submitted to Ram, followed him into wilderness and when once again she accepted her banishment in silence. Maya develops an urge to escape from the clutches of male dominance. She wants to go back to her father. It occurs to her mind that she can only see another facet of her husband. A realization comes in her that the ‘male logic’ goes hand in hand with most of our sacred yet horrifying myths and traditional values based on them.

Maya no longer wishes to carry the burden of ‘double yoke’. She finds herself in a great dilemma in which she is simply helpless and desperate.

The views of life preached by both the males-her husband on one side and her father on the other are not acceptable for her. At the same
time it is very difficult for her to cut off from the constraints. She is lonely and cannot seek any salvation from her male helpers, nor can she remain forever prisoner in the society ruled by male myths of Hindu tradition. She cries: ‘Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one’

Through Maya’s character, Anita Desai puts forth her rebellious views against myths. The characters of Goutama, Maya’s husband in *Cry the Peacock* and Maya’s father are symbolic. They symbolize the perpetuity of the patriarchal traditions in Indian Society.

Anita Desai explores the themes of mythic escapism versus social responsibility using the stream of consciousness technique. She describes the experiences of the private inner world of women who struggle to cope with the outer world of rigid value systems without losing their self-identity.

Maya of *Cry the Peacock* is driven insane after getting tired of her struggle to discover some meaning in her life to justify herself. The same theme is explored in *Fire on the Mountain* and *Where Shall We Go this Summer*.

In *Where Shall We Go this Summer*, Anita Desai uses ‘Sita Myth’ to make us understand the inner conflicts of the heroine and her painful efforts to re-adjust her inner realities to the meaningless world outside, as Anita Desai’s forte is to explore the inner climate, the climate of
sensibility particularly of Indian women, who experience the intolerable grapple with thoughts, feelings and emotion.

‘Sita’ is the role model for Indian traditional women till now. The name ‘Sita’ is deliberately chosen. The choice of the names ‘Sita’ and ‘Raman’ are highly purposeful. The character of ‘Raman’ in the novel appears like “caricatured’. The mythic “Ram” and “Raman” of Where Shall We Go This Summer have similarities in the sense that they fail to understand the emotions of their wives and justify their inclination towards realities of life, their duties and social responsibilities. This is the reason why both the Sitas suffer.

Sita in Where shall we go this summer is disillusioned,

who feels torn between her intense desire to get herself free from the boredom and hypocrisy of her life and her final realization that she cannot easily break the bonds that bind her to her meaningless existence.

(Desai Anita 1982:132)

Sita is mother of four children and when she discovers that she is pregnant for the fifth time, she experiences a kind of breakdown. A wave of insanity fills her mind with fear of the birth of her fifth child in the world of masculine values. She does not want to give birth to her
fifth child and wants to keep it safe from the cruel world of competitiveness and aggression.

Born as a woman in a society of mythic frame, Sita knows she has to continue in the same way of life. "It was the day she had admitted out of a passion of boredom she could no longer contain and that burst, swamping her that she was bored, bored.

Escape from such boredom becomes inevitable for Sita as now she is jolted out of a feeling of conformity. A sudden awareness forces her to reassess her life the entire meaning of her life. Without her self-identity she cannot live her life which is but a life of slow suicide.

The two exiles are juxtaposed; the exile of ‘Sita’ of *The Ramayana* and ‘Sita’ of *Where shall we go this summer*. She nourishes a strong urge to go back to her childhood past, her parental house – Manori. The island is cut off from the mainland, away from the crowd, noise, hustle and bustle of Bombay- life. Sita is reminded of her past- when she was with her father as a child- Safe and secure happy too. Her father was a Gandhijian in his thoughts and was a respected figure in the island. He had left an unmistakable stamp on the island, through his heroic and also redeeming qualities.

Sita wishes to exile from her disillusionment with Raman. She wishes to exile from the false social values and human relationships. An insane thought flashes in her mind that she can save her baby from
taking birth into the meaningless world. She comes to the island “Manori” in order not to give birth – in order to achieve the miracle of not giving birth to her child. For her insane mind, “Manori” is an island of magic, island of miracles as her father had made it an island of magic once, and had worked miracles there. Sita thinks that she would be safe in her father’s house along with her unborn child. Though her father is dead, she feels she can beg him for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn. The big house of her father, the island, the legends about her father and the proximity of the mysterious sea gain a mythical aura.

The place becomes a romantic metaphor for her who values the qualities of her father heroic, Gandhijian and redeeming. Sita feels the need to take refuge in the magical island of her father to protect her child.

For her, the outer world seems unfit to live where oppression, cruelty and violence have an upper hand. The line between the creative and the destructive appears to grow thin and lazy for her that gazing at it she seems to see it vanish altogether. She grows firm in her decision not to give birth to her child.

‘Manori’, the island of her father provides an alternative in her life. The memory of the island had been buried beneath Sita’s consciousness deliberately for years.
Its black magic, its subtle glamour had grown too huge, had engulfed her at a time when she was still very young and quite alone she had grown afraid of it, been relieved to leave it and come to the mainland with Raman. The mainland—the very word implied solidarity, security the solidity of streets, the security of houses she had not realized then that living there would teach her only that life was a crust of dull tedium, of hopeless disappointment but a thin crust, a flimsy crust that at every second or third step broke apart so that she tumbled in with the most awful sensation into a crashed pile of debris. She had no longer the nerve or the optimism to continue. No, she refused to walk another step. She would turn, go back and find the island once more.

(Desai Anita 1982:52).

It can’t go on like this, it’s impossible she cried everyday, several times a day, in a choked voice that fought speechlessness at the grotesquerie of their situation. She wanted to explain to them it had not been madness to come, had not been a theatrical gesture, a romantic mistake...

(Desai Anita 1982:96).

Like ‘Sita’ of The Ramayana, Sita in Where shall we go this summer, wishes to withdraw herself silently from the harshness of the world dominated by male ego. The mythical Sita absorbed the harshly imposed desolation and mortification of the male ego, where as
‘Draupadi’ of ‘The Mahabharata’ resented and rejected male ego by challenging it. Sita accepted her lot, accommodated herself with it but when got burdened too much with the male dominance, withdrew herself in silence.

Sita can not bear the burden of ‘love’ in the form of male possessiveness. She silently rebels against the false materialism. Sita of ‘Ramayana’ too had not liked ‘love’ to be an aspect of male dominance.

Sita realizes the hopelessness of her situation where in she cannot have an intimate rapport with her husband Raman unless she tries to re-adjust her inner realities with the outer world of meaningless false values.

She has to take a decision like the mythic Sita who resented and rejected the false social and moral values of the world and disappeared in the earth. The modern Sita of the novel finds an answer to her dilemma in Constantin Cavafy’s poem.

To certain people there comes a day

When they must say the great ‘Yes’ or the great ‘No’.

He who has the ‘Yes’ ready within him

reveals himself at once, and saying it crosses over
to the path of honour and his own conviction.

He who refuses does not repent. Should he be asked again, he would say No again. And yet that No.

the right ‘No’ - crushes him for the rest of his life.

Sita finds out the essence of the poem that if an individual has the courage to the ‘Right No’ frees him from the false burdens of life. Sita senses her innermost urge to say the ‘Right No’ to the order and dull - routine life with Raman.

Ironically it was Raman who first suggests escape to Sita by asking Where shall we go this summer? In The Ramayana Ram had asked his pregnant wife Sita about her wish and Sita had expressed her wish to go into forest again to visit the hermitages. Unaware of the cruel and harsh decision of Ram to desolate her, Sita had entered the wilderness and suffered the loneliness and the hardships of living. But the mythical Sita empowers herself as a single parent of her sons. Sita of Where Shall We Go This Summer? is afraid to give birth to her fifth child and develops an urge to escape to the magical island “Manori”, believing that her dead father can still play a miracle and she would contain her child in her womb, protected.

The narrative appears to be precariously placed between the myth and social reality. Sita of The Ramayana could not reconcile with the
world that never allows a woman to be an individual and treats her as a lifeless, senseless object. Sita of the novel realizes her helplessness ultimately and meekly submits herself to Raman’s wish she is taken back to the mainland (Bombay).

Like mythical Sita, she is disillusioned and lonely. The truth of her father that he was not a true Gandhijian at heart, adds to her disillusionment. Being a daughter of a king (Janaka) and wife of a king (Ram), Sita was too lonely to fight back. Sita of the novel too finds herself lonely and desperately submits to her husband’s wish to take her back to Bombay to lead the same old routine life.

5.6 Rose as Sita in Nayantara Sahgal’s Rich Like Us

Published in 1985, Nayantara Sahgal’s novel, Rich like us, the winner of the Sinclair Prize and Sahitya Academy Award, contains ‘reflections of the ‘Ram-Sita’ legend which is a motif that has added irony to the plots of the novel. She emerged as a political commentator and also a novelist. Nayantara Sehgal is ranked with the first Indian writers in English who made a mark on an international readership.

The setting of the novel Rich like us is the aftermath of Independence, aftermath of the “declaration of Emergency” by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The critical moments in Indian history – the freedom struggle, subsequently the partition, Indian independence and the socio-political fabric of India which grew unstable in the later
years. Sahgal was a witness to the shattering of Gandhiji’s vision of ‘Ramarajya’ in India. The novel deals with the implications of the emergency on the Indian democracy. She brings out numerous tales of oppression and sufferings endured by Indian masses during the period of emergency where in idealists got frustrated to see their dreams and aspirations broken and corrupt politicians and businessmen flourished with prosperity.

Within the fabric of this theme, Sahgal uses the myth of *The Ramayana* to illustrate the potency of Indian myths. She wonders at the continuity of the re-instatement of our myths in Indian consciousness. She examines how effective are our myths which are still forcefully enacted in the day today life.

The main female characters in *Rich like us* are, Rose, Mona, Sonali and Nishi. The novel focuses on the intertwining fates of Rose and Sonali. Sonali is an idealist, an unmarried young girl who gets a senior ranking in the civil service and works sincerely to achieve her goals as a civil servant. She is unwittingly embroiled in a political controversy, as she objects to the establishment an imported ‘Drinks factory’. Sonali is humiliated and demoted to a lower post through a corrupt deal at the government level. Rose, a British woman, the ‘Cockney Memsahib’ is brought to India by ‘Ram’ as his second wife, who is never loved by his family. Mona is Ram’s first wife, the silent sufferer, but a typical traditional Hindu wife, performing ‘worship’ and prayers for the success
and happiness of her husband ‘Ram’. Dev is Ram and Mona’s son, the step-son of Rose, a very shrewd entrepreneur. Sonali, the ideal civil servant is demoted and humiliated because of Dev’s participation in the secret deal supported by the minister of industry. Dev forges his father’s signature and secretly withdraws large sums of money for his venture of establishing an imported ‘Drinks factory’. When Dev becomes aware that Rose is suspecting his duplicity, he arranges for her murder. Nishi, Dev’s wife has concerns for ‘feminist Liberation.’ She is used by Dev as a valuable appendage to his political ambitions.

Rose, Sonali and Nishi experience the diverse tensions of patriarchal nationalist and class politics.

Though Rose is a foreigner, after coming into the family of Ram in India, she subconsciously begins to model herself on Sita as she has self-sacrificial and passive qualities. Rose’s character is likened to the mythical character of Sita. Sahgal proves that feminine ideals in India are informed by the myth and there is a continuing influence of the myths in India.

Rose, Ram’s second wife does not know about The Ramayana. She hears about Sita in Sonali’s father Keshav’s rendition of the episodes of Ramayana. Keshav is shown as a feminist who rebels against the injustices laid on women in the name of myth and tradition.

“What’s The Ramayana?” asked Rose.

“Compared with the Mahabharata which is about 100,000 couplets” (Sahgal Nayantara 2010:71).

Further Keshav expresses his anguish at the indifference of Indian attitude towards Ram’s cruelty to Sita.

We are doomed for reasons like Ram’s cruelty. We revere The Ramayana and worship a man who turned his wife out alone and pregnant into the forest. Not even the ordeal by fire proving her purity, saved her. How am I supposed to know what’s right for me to do – whose side I’m on, as Rose says – if even what we worship needs second thought?

(Sahgal Nayantara 2010:71).

Ram uses myth for his convenience. When Rose expresses her inner tumult and her disgust of living as a second wife in Ram,’s house, she bursts out,

I don’t think I can take much more of this Ram.

“Of what?” he had the temerity to ask.

“You living with two wives”.

“Lord Krishna had three hundred”.
“I can’t go on like this”

But there’s no divorce. Hindu marriage is not contract, it’s a sacrament said Ram.

“King Dasrath, Ram’s father had four wives

(Sahgal Nayantara 2010:63).

When Rose learns about the “Ramayana” the story of Sita, she is absorbed by the thought if that’s what happens to the princess what about ordinary people?

(Sahgal Nayantara 2010:80).

Rose recognizes her position as a “wife” in Hindu family. She resembles herself to the marginalized Hindu wife as a submissive and uncomplaining wife. The injustices within the “Sita myth” haunt her sub-conscious mind. She remembers Sonali’s father Keshav’s comment on the myths that no revolution can destroy myths. “Myth were the most indestructible of all things. They re what were made of”

(Sahgal Nayanatara 2010:232).

Rose realizes the continuing influence of the “Ramayana” myth which becomes a compelling reminder for her that in Indian feminine ideals are informed by the myth. Indian myths haunt her subconscious mind. It is all about power, she thinks, It all depends on whether you are on the right side of power and omnipotence. Sita wasn’t and it was banishment to the wilderness for her.
She recalls the myth she had heard about. The god hurls a thunderbolt and it rains. He frowns his displeasure and his adversary is reduced to ashes. He comes to Draupadi’s aid and her sari stays on her, though several strong men are trying to pull it off. Prahlad in the legend embraces a fiery filler and remains unscathed”. She feels sad for Sita who was not on the right side of power. She imagines Sita’s feelings, when she went into exile and when back, was not accepted easily by Ram.

Rose is frustrated to see ‘the exercise of sheer male prerogative’, as Sonali had called. Her separation from Ram for some time had not had any influence on Ram. He started living with her once again with no reconciliation or new start as they had been in friendly touch all along. Rose was taken for granted. Rose ponders over her situation after her reunion with Ram after the separation. She holds contempt for the ‘male prerogative’.

She feels, something important gets lost and one is too tired to go hunting for it again. If Sita for example, had been taken back by Ram after her ordeal by the fire, if Ram had conceded, “all right, my dear, you’ve been faithful, you’ll do, you may stay with me in the palace, wouldn’t she sometime later have flung out at him, during one of their
quarrels why the hell did you have to put me through that grisly experience”?

When Rose’s Ram decided they should get together again, with no reconciliation or new start, she wanted to give him a furious shaking, asking him what he meant by his bland assumption that their relation would go on exactly as before as if there was no break in their married life. Ram does not speak a word about why everything should swing back to normal only because he said so. Sita was banished into wilderness because Ram wanted to do so as he had his own duties dharma and priorities. Sita was never asked about it. Sita had to undergo her ordeal by fire because Ram said so. It was too humiliating and disgusting for Sita to undergo one more ordeal in her life.

Meena Alexander recalls the episode in uttarakanda, describing the act of Sita’s going into the “Mother earth, as an act of great transformative power, an alternative feminist act. Mona, the first wife of Ram in ‘Rich like us,’ expresses her silent protest against wife. Mona’s codes of practice, her ‘self isolation’ are forms of female insurgency which grant them agency. Sita’s self immolation in ‘Ramayana’ is also a form, of female insurgency according to Meena Alexander.

Though Rose hates Mona, Ram’s first wife in the beginning, she gradually identifies her miseries with Mona’s. But before Rose starts
acting upon the ‘inner voices’, she is killed by the youths hired by her step son Dev.

Sonali, like Rose has a growing suspicion of the legend of Ram, Sita and “Ramarajya” from which a true Gandhijian can not get away. Both Sonali and Rose strive to make their lives meaningful but end up in frustration. Nayanatara Sahgal, while critiquing Hindutwa ideologies in her Point of View, writes. No Hindu had ever been hurt, or even puzzled that a man believed to be God, turned his innocent and pregnant wife out of palace to give birth alone in jungle. If Hindus can live with Sita’s banishment, suffering and suicide and still worship the husband responsible for it, then we can live with any outrage on earth.

(Sahgal Nayantara 2010:192).

Sonali reads the diaries of her father and her grandfather. While digging into the diary of her great grandfather, she ends up reading about the murder of her great grandmother in the name of ‘Sati’. She reads the views of her father and grandfather on Sati as they had heard and also witnessed the horrid scenes of “Sati”. Fire has been associated with women in all forms of injustices laid upon her. Sita was obviously asked by Ram to go through the fire; Sati threw herself in the fire unable to bear her father’s contempt for her husband. Both Sita’s chastity and Sati’s goodness are proven. In Rich like us, the two narratives of Sati and Sita are crucially linked within “Gandhian
ideology” as Gandhiji believed that Ramarajya requires a strong familial foundation, where in Sita is supposed to be chaste and ever - subordinate to her husband. Ram obviously is the embodiment of patriarchy. Be it family or nation, Sita or Sita like wife becomes the weakest link, whose endurance alone determines the strength of the family or nation, which looks so paradoxical.

Sahgal’s narrative is suggestive of her resent and resistance towards the social deification of female suffering and annihilation. She exposes the injustices to women within the patriarchal and nationalistic values. As Gandhiji dreamt about Ramarajya, Rose dreams about her voyage to ‘Cythera’. Rose’s dream represents a woman’s dream of attaining “Cythera”, a land of love and only love. In an old book shop, Rose accidentally finds a post card on which was a painting and a caption, “L Embarquement Pour l’ ile de Cythere” by Jean Antonie Watteau. The pamphlet below it explains about its composition.

_The voyage was a quest, it said, and Cythera a Paradise, an impossible dream towards which pilgrims journey, but never arrive_ (Sahgal Nayanatara 2010:231).

Rose’s Cythera” and Gandhiji’s “Ramarajya” are juxtaposed. Sahgal’s narrative proceeds to tell the tragic tale of Rose, an alien to the culture of India, who dreams of ‘Cythera’, with her rosy picture of her married life in India with Ram. As Ramarajya, a dream of an ideal
man keeps one hoping, Rose keeps hope of her ‘Cythera’, a ‘Paradise’, an impossible dream. The voyage to ‘Cythera’ is a quest and Rose’s life is also a quest. Cythera is a place towards which pilgrims journey, but never arrive. ‘Cythera’ like Ramarajya, is an impossible dream.

“What is Divali”? Rose had asked servant Kumar, ‘It is the beginning of winter” he replied.

Rose thinks why hadn’t he said it was the return and enthronement of Ram a festival of rejoicing, of lights and feasting and gambling? The beginning of winter and another exile was what it had been for Sita. (Sahgal Nayantara 2010:276).

Sita’s tragedy is submerged and Ram’s enthronement is celebrated. Sita will continue to be banished and killed even in the ‘Utopia’ of Ramarajya.

Rose meets her tragic end after Divali. She is killed by Dev, her step son. The murder of Rose in an ancient tomb is also suggestive. It looks like a ‘Sati death’ by burial which can be described as a traditional alternative for “Sati”. The character of Rose, a character of late twentieth century, is linked with ‘Sita’s story” in which Sita was also buried alive, the Mother earth having swallowed her. Rose and Sita both fall victims to tradition and meet their tragic ends.
Like Nayantara Sahgal’s ‘Rich like us’, Bharati Mulkrjee’s novel ‘Holder of the world’ unfolds the story of a displaced immigrant woman, her troubled marriage and her search of identity in an alien culture. Published in 1993, the novel has a complex structure as it spans two historical periods – seventeenth century and twentieth century.

Beigh Masters, from Massachusetts, is the primary narrator in the novel. With the help of her companion, a computer scientist Venn Iyer, an Indo-American, Beigh Masters tries to recover the narrative of Hannah Easton, who lived in 17th century. Beigh Masters is an “asset hunter” and starts her endeavour of piecing together the episodes of Hannah Easton’s life with an initiative of finding the precious diamond ‘Emperor’s Tear’ a jewel, Hannah had stolen from Aurangzeb’s war tent. Eventually Beigh comes to know that Hannah was her distant relative, and involves herself more in the details of Hannah’s life.

Beigh traces the story of Hannah in Hannah’s own narrative that Hannah was born in America and became an orphan very early in her life. She was raised by the ‘Fitches’ in very orthodox surroundings where she was trained as an orthodox household woman. After marrying a sailor, she moves to England. Her husband Gabriel Legge, a colourful raconteur is a swaggering sea – farer. He had neither time nor sensitivity to be with his wife and understand her mind. Gabriel Legge later is employed in ‘East India Company’ and finally turns into a
pirate. In one of his misadventures with Haj pilgrims, he is separated from Hannah. Hannah escapes with her Indian Ayah Bhagmati to Panpur under the protection of Raja Jadhav Singh. Hannah’s fate brings her to India thus.

Eventually Hannah becomes very close to her Indian Ayah Bhagmati. Bhagmati and Hannah become the guests of Raja Jadhav Singh in Devgad. Hannah woos Jadhav Singh. She becomes ‘Salembibi’ in the palace of Raja Jadhav sing.

Hannah steps into a new world of Hinduism. Bhagmati brings her to the glimmerings of understanding of an age – old civilization. She narrates fragments from, *The Ramayana* to Hannah. The episodes of Ramayana capture her imagination. Sita’s story intrigues her. The episode of Sita’s trial by fire to prove her purity to her husband and to her society touches Hannah. For Bhagmati Sita’s story is part of an oral tradition that she keeps alive and it represents an ideal womanhood and marital relationships.

Bhagmati uses Sita’s story to assimilate Hannah into Indian culture. However Bharati Mulkrajee deflates the possibility of global sisterhood by using the story of Sita as the narrative that both women use to fashion their identities.

Hannah grows aware of her fluid identity in Raja Jadhav Singh’s palace. From Hannah Easten, she had become Hannah Fitches and later becomes Hannah Legge and in the palace of Devgad she is salembibi and then becomes Mukta.
Bhagmati was Bindu Bhashini earlier and later becomes Bhagmati and She became ‘Hester’ after she was taken by an English factor as his mistress.

Hannah’s earlier identities get blurred when she consciously begins re-enacting the life of Sita. Both the women try to find out similarities and differences with Sita’s story. An important distinction between Sita and Hannah and Bhagmati is that neither Hannah nor Bhagmati abstained from forbidden sexual relationships where as Sita’s purity is a dominant cultural trope for ideal womanhood in the patriarchal Hindu culture. The crucial distraction between the two women, Hannah and Bhagmati is that of choice. Bhagmati was raped and was disowned by her family. Bhagmati’s rape disempowers her in a culture that values virginity and chastity. Sita in *The Ramayana* was rejected later for the public’s perception of her lack of chastity. Bhagmati did not end her life after her rape but managed to survive by becoming an English factor’s mistress.

The Nawab Hyder Beg sends his commander Morad Farah to cage Raja, bring Hannah with the diamond ‘Emperor’s Tear’. Hannah kills Morad and saves Raja Jadhav Singh. She decides to end the war and goes to transact with the Emperor Aurangzeb.

She is taken hostage by Aurangzeb. Hannah is imprisoned and kept in captivity.
The Ramayana myth haunts her in her captivity. **The theme of captivity links up with the story of Sita in The Ramayana.**

Iyer Nalini and Zare Bonnie 2007:12).

Whenever Aurangzeb comes to see her, she is reminded of Ravan, the demon king of Lanka in Muslim disguise.

Hannah saves the diamond, gives it to Bhagmati who trusts the diamond in her dying womb. It is in the grave of Bhagmati, Beigh masters and Venn Iyer find the holder of the world, the world’s most famous diamond. The diamond is ultimately found in a cyberspatial finale.

Sita myth provides both the women, Hannah and Bhagmati to find their identities as women in different contexts. Both are intrigued in their own ways by Sita’s story and try to analyse their experience as women. Both realize that they cannot approximate their lives with the life of mythic Sita. Hannah can never imagine of trial by fire like Sita for the sake of a person like Gabrial Legge and the society. Bhagmati knows the significance of culturally significant narrative like Ramayana but cannot emulate Sita’s life as she wants to be alive.

Bharati Mukherajee presents Hannah’s story as the opposite of Sita’s. Sita was abducted by a man from another culture and Hannah was rescued by an alienman Jadhav contrary to Sita, who remains
faithful to her husband Ram. Hannah seduces Jadhav Singh, thereby gaining sanctuary in an alien land. Unlike Ram, Sita’s faithful husband, Gabriel is neither faithful nor concerned about his welfare. Both Hannah and Bagmati approximate and adopt Sita’s story to reconcile and understand their individual experiences as women. Both of them find answers in rejecting the cultural stereotypes and develop the life of their own outside the home.

5.8 The Ramayana Reflected in Short Stories

The Indian diasporic writer Bharati Mukherjee’s story “Management of Grief” (from The Middleman and other stories), focuses on the reactions of the female characters Shaila Bhave and her friend, Kusum after the deaths of their husbands and children in a terrorist attack on an Air – India flight bound for India from Canada, Shaila Bhave, the main character is a Punjabi Hindu living in Canada. Shaila loses her husband in air crash. Mukherjee’s story charts Shaila Bhave’s journey through bereavement, from initial stages of her reaction – stunned calm when the news first breaks. The next stage is rejection of facts and the despair and later comes final acceptance.

In her utter grief, Shaila for the first time feels the pangs of pain of being lonely in the big world. Shaila feels suddenly alone, adrift, and face to face with herself. The sudden realization comes through as what is to be Indian, woman wife and widow.
Many realizations come through in her life; the meaning of marriage in Indian sense of the term and how only a woman is affected by the tradition in certain circumstances. Shaila is now aware of the truth that Indian marriage is not a romantic bond but a religious obligation for husband and wife. Indian woman is not so much an individual in the accepted western sense of the term, but it is ‘dividuel’. The ‘self’ in Indian sense is irrevocably linked to an external authority to an ‘other’ or ‘others’. An Indian, particularly Indian woman has a fluid self that changes and interchanges with others. From the day of the birth, Indian woman is identified in relation to her father, brother, husband or children.

Shaila is the only child for her parents who are well educated, progressive and rationalists. But inspite of her new – found identity in a foreign country (Canada) Shaila unconsciously fells back on the traditional patterns of behavior. She needs some “supra personal other” to guide her in her tough situation. She finds this in the archetype of Sita, who keeping her ‘Dharma’ as Hindu wife followed her husband Ram into exile and while keeping with ‘Swadharma’, crossed the white protective circle drawn around her by Ram’s brother Lakshman (Lakshman Rekha) and thus precipitated the story of Ramayana.

Shaila and Kusum identify themselves with Sita in following their husbands to Canada (Sita’s exile with Ram). They feel, they have followed the footsteps of of Sita.
We were dutiful wives who kept our heads veiled, our voices shy and sweet

(Mukherjee Bharati 1988:189).

Both Shaila and her friend Kusum are aware of the fluid nature of a woman’s identity as written in the puranas. Sita is Lakshmi also, the divine consort of Vishnu. When Lord Vishnu was Janardhana, she was Shri, when Vishnu was Hari, she was Sita, when he was Krishna, she was Rukmini.

Shaila’s reactions and demeanour are that of a traditional Hindu widow. As a widow she shuns the luxury in life and undertakes a pilgrimage. Both Shaila and Kusum return to India. The traditional bringing up of Shaila helps her compose herself in her grief. Compared to the other grief-stricken women, Shaila is calm while other women end up being hysterical.

Later Shaila decides to go to Canada. She overcomes her depression and prepares herself to face life outside. This she approximates to crossing the Lakshmanrekha of grief and entering into a new life of freedom. She meets Judith Templeton, a grief management counselor sent by the Canadian government to help the bereaved Indian families. Judith Templeton knows about the four stages of bereavement – rejection, depression, acceptance and reconstruction.
Judith Templeton is shocked to see how quickly Indian men take on new families for barely four months later. She comes to know that widowers got married and returned to Canada with their new brides. It is surprising to her that in Indian context, only women follow their myths and traditions and men go free. Women emulate Sita but men only know the story but never emulate Ram in his practice of monogamy.

Shaila cannot completely shake off the burden of the myth of Sita, but unlike Sita, she takes her own decision to live her remaining life accordingly to her wish. She gives up her job, sells her house, takes a small apartment in Toronto and reconstructs her life.

**Focus on the Marginalised Characters**

The modern south Indian writers in Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam writers have chosen the genres of short story and drama for their creative writings on mythical themes. The genre of short story proves suitable, as the writers can focus on a particular incident from a fresh angle, without worrying about recounting the entire story of Ramayana.

A short story must have a clear focus. Most readers are familiar with the basic plot of *The Ramayana*. The genre of short story thus helps authors to focus on a particular incident. For example, Ahalya’s story appeals to the modern writers, who look at it with a fresh angle, considering the situation from a variety of perspectives. The writers
have opportunities in the new forms of expressions to assess and rethink the ancient narratives and to ask fresh questions. They have done it so resourcefully and creatively. Their retellings of the episodes of *The Ramayana* differ from the narration of them in authoritative Ramayanas. The modern writers have prompted the modern readers to reconsider a story heard many times before.

The retellings by south Indian modern writers focus on the gender and caste prescriptions in Valmiki’s Ramayana. They differ with the authoritative telling about the role of caste, a form of hereditary social stratification. Keeping in mind, the modern ideals of equality, liberty and individuality, they reshape the incidents.

The minor characters like Shambuka and Ahalya appear in Valmiki’s Ramayana within a couple of short chapters. Both characters are stigmatized characters. Shambuka for contravening the ‘Dharma’ of a Shudra by indulging in Tapas and Ahalya for transgressing her wifely ‘Dharma’ by committing adultery with Indra. These two characters, which are at the periphery in the authoritative Ramayanas, move to the centre of the action in these modern retellings. The characters are looked at with fresh perspectives and emphatically.
The Two Stories on Ahalya

K B Sridevi wrote her Malyalam short story *Shilperupini* (woman of stone) in 1990. The story is translated from Malyalam into English by Gita Krishnakutty, as *Woman of Stone*.

The story *Woman of Stone* takes place after Ahalya is released from the curse of Goutama with the touch of dust from Lord Ram’s feet. Ahalya is transformed into a living woman from her ‘stone form’ (Ahalya was cursed to be a stone by Goutama, her husband, for the sin of committing adultery with Indra who had seduced her in the guise of Goutama). Ahalya, in the beginning of the story is shown to be travelling through the forest towards Valmiki’s Ashrama to participate in a ritual. While travelling alone through the forests she re-captures in her memory, the earlier moments of her life. She is grateful to Ram, who recognized her penance even as a stone. She remembers the words of Ram,

*Ahalya, I see your heart. Awaken from the sleep which traps you in illusion.*

(Paula Richman 2008:142).

Ram’s gentleness had enraptured Ahalya’s spirits. She compares Goutama with Ram.
Goutama, like many other sages had mastered the curses with power to destroy. Ram was gentle and compassionate. Sridevi suggests that the stony state enabled Ahalya to perform penance for her misdeed.

Ahalya re-assesses her action and her husband’s curse as to who is to blame. She puts into contrast the gentle compassion and nobility of Ram with the anger of her husband. She wishes how nice it would be if all men could be like Ram. Ram for her is an epitome of ‘Dharma’.

At the end of the story, she learns from a woman, a resident of valmiki’s Ashrama that Sita is banished. The woman tells Ahalya that Lord Ram has abandoned his wife Sita, full with child. Ahalya is shocked to know the terrific truth. The image of Ram which she had worshipped all through gets shattered. Ahalya is disillusioned with the realization that even a great man like Ram cannot transcend the anger of a jealous husband.

She cannot bear the grief of the unjust treatment meted out to pure and gentle Sita out of frustration Ahalya turns into a story statue again.

**Deliverance from the Curse**

The Tamil short story *Deliverance from the Curse* by Pudumaippittan C. Virudhachalam, (Sabavimosanam) is translated into English from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmstorm.
The Creative retelling of Ahalya’s episode by Pudumaippittan treats the story of Ahalya differently. Those who are familiar with Ahalya’s story in authoritative Ramayanas will feel it incomprehensible, as the writer has changed the theme according to his creative needs. He makes fresh inquiries into question like what is real Dharma? And is it real Dharma that ceases to be humane because of its rigidity? The story also explores alienation and loneliness in the mythic story of Ahalya and Goutama.

The story begins with Ahalya’s deliverance from the curse by the touch of the dust raised by the ‘Young Avatara’ Ram’s feet. Ram releases her from the curse of Goutama. Ahalya comes alive from her stony state. Goutama, her sage husband had cursed her to turn into a stone for her sin of adultery with the God Indra.

Ram absolves Ahalya of adultery, saying that any action must be judged by its intention or lack of it. Indra had seduced Ahalya deceitfully and Ahalya could not be held responsible for Indra’s deceit to which she had not given consent.

There is also an element of psychological depth into the story. Life for Ahalya after her deliverance from the curse is not natural as it was before. Goutama’s life also changes after the incident. He cannot speak to her naturally, from an unblemished heart as Ram’s views on Dharma.
have made a deep impact on him, making him to re-assess his actions in the light of new awakening. His thoughts turn into different kind of enquiry – about Dharma and sin. He now feels that all the fences and strictures of Dharma should be applied to those who act in full consciousness of what they are doing. If violation of the moral law happened without one’s awareness and assent, it should not be judged as a sin. For Goutama, Ahalya is now sinless. Now his concern is whether he is right for Ahalya. Ahalya also questions herself whether she is right for Goutama.

Ahalya and Goutama start their life afresh in a hut, some distance away from the outer walls of Ayodhya, on the banks of Sarayu River. Ahalya serves him with love but she is too cautious that no body should doubt her now. The curse haunts he all the time. She forgets how to be natural. Those around her appear as Indras to her. She forgets to speak naturally and weighs each word spoken by Goutama. Even the casual words of Goutama appear to have some other meaning.

Living becomes a hellish torment for her. She feels too shy to meet even an ordinary gaze from other people. Atlast Ahalya hides herself in the hut. Ram and Sita keep meeting them every now then and their visit soothes her heart. Sita’s presence in particular eases the burden upon Ahalya’s heart. Both Goutama and Ahalya travel to Mithila to see their son Sadananda. Ahalya feels that even her son has become a stranger to her. They go on a pilgrimage that parallels the exile of Ram Sita. But
the landscape merely reflects their inner state of mind – aridity and wasteland, wherever they go. The symbolism of aridity and desert-like landscape reminds us of T S Eliot’s symbolic ‘Waste land’. In the meanwhile many incidents happen in Ram – Sita’s life – the exile, the abduction, war and victory over Ravan.

After returning from the exile, Sita visits Ahalya and tells her story of abduction by Ravan and her fire ordeal. Ahalya is shaken to the core after hearing the episode of Sita’s fire-ordeal. It does not convince Ahalya. She cannot understand the double standards of Ram – one law for Ahalya and another for Sita.

Ahalya’s hope for possibility of an alternate, more daring definition of Dharma is finally lost.

Goutama thinks that they should have a child in order to ease their heavy hearts. When Goutama embraces Ahalya, Ahalya is shaken with fear as she feels it is Indra, in the guise of Goutama, re-enacting the role of Goutram, as he did in the past. Her heart hardens into a stone.

Ahalya turns into a stone in the arms of Goutama. The symbolism of stone has a special significance. It is the punishment for passion in the beginning and at the end it is voluntary withdrawal in protest against betrayal. Ahalya’s turning into stone, as pudumaippittan implies, is Ahalya’s real deliverance from the curse given to her long ago.
In both Sridevi’s and Pudumaippittan’s stories, Ahalya turns into stone once again in protest against the false ideal of ‘Dharma’, Ram projects by his act of injustice towards Sita. Ahalya identified her tragedy with that of Sita, which is the outcome of unjust treatment from their husbands in the name of Dharma. Ram relieved Ahalya from the curse but commits the same mistake as Goutama did, by punishing his innocent wife Sita.

Both Ahalya and Sita express their anguish and protest by withdrawing themselves voluntarily from the meaningless existence on the Earth.

**Modern Ahalya’s Predicament**

N. S. Madhavan’s Malayam short story *Ahalya* (translated into English by Rizio Yohannan Raj)- contemportizes Ahalya’s story, showing the re-enactment of Ahalya’s painful story by setting it in the modern city of cochin, Kerala.

K. B. Sridevi and Pudumaippittan portray Ahalya as a stone because of Ahalya’s husband Goutama’s curse, but in N. S. Madhavan’s story *Ahalya*, Ahalya turns into a ghostly presence. In the two authoritative tellings about Ahalya – in Valmiki’s rendition of the story and Kamban’s rendition in *Iramavataram* there are differences.
Valmiki’s Ahalya eagerly welcomes Indra’s embraces, and Kamban’s Ahalya is deceived by Indra in the guise of her husband Goutama. She finds out only later that it was Indra who seduced her. In Kamban’s version, Ahalya is not adulteress, a sinner. She is portrayed as a true wife, longing for the affection of Goutama. Because of Goutama’s celibacy and intense *Tapas*, Ahalya could not enjoy the marital intimacy.

In Valmiki’s text, Goutama Curses Ahalya to become a ghostly presence in the *Ashram*, consuming nothing but air, lying amidst the ashes, invisible. In contrast, Kamban’s ‘Iramavataram’ depicts Goutama cursing Ahalya to turn to stone, incapable of the ability to feel pleasure.

N.S. Madhavan’s Ahalya lives in the modern era. Ahalya’s email address is unploughed@yahoo.co.in as one meaning of ‘Ahalya’ is unploughed. Readers discern the symbolic undertones as the modern Ahalya’s story unfolds. The mythic Ahalya has never enjoyed the marital intimacy because of Goutama’s rigidity as a sage. Only in Indra’s arms (who came in the guises of Goutama) she tasted life. N.S. Madhavan’s Ahalya never gets the pleasure of being with a man, after marrying Goutaman. Goutman treats her as an object of his pleasure and never responds to her needs and sentiments. Only during her single meeting with the film star Devraj, she discovers the pleasure of the touch of a man. She reminds us of Valmiki’s Ahalya when, before her marriage, in a party, she reveals her wish to be a ghost, spirit, no
one would be able to see, there would be no need to eat anything, no
need to cover oneself. Ahalya marries Goutaman, an engineer in Cochin
port. Ahalya’s experience of married life with Goutama turns frustrating
as Goutama never treats her as an individual. She is only an object of
his pleasure. When a renowned filmstar Devraj who lives in the same
apartment happens to see her, he desires for her. Ahalya commits
adultery with Devraj and gets hit on head, by Goutaman. She is beaten
into a comatose state. The narrator in the story, Raghavan is likened to
Ram who tries to enliven her.

Raghavan is a neurologist and a very good friend of Ahalya. His skill
restores Ahalya temporarily. Ahalya is very beautiful like the mythic
Ahalya, but her beauty becomes a form of oppression rather than a
means of fulfillment. The physical beauty creates pressures for women
in all the ages. Men are attracted towards them and desire to enjoy the
beauty but no one cares whether she has the sense of fulfillment.
Ahalya’s coma is like Mythic Ahalya’s ghostly state.

The modern re-tellings are Ahalya-centred, exploring her
experiences the events. Instead of glorifying Ram in ‘Ahalya episodes’ in
Valmiki and Kamban the stories by K.B. Sridevi, Pudumaippittan and
N.S. Madhavan focus on Ahalya protesting the injustice meted out to
her. The stories bring to light the plight of beautiful young women who
are paired off with older husbands who leave them alone due to their
self – absorption. The focus is on the women that fall victims to the
injustice that lies in the society’s basic framework. The stories imply that a wife should be paired with a spouse with whom she can share life. Ahalya haunts the modern writers in twentieth century.

5.9 Creative Interpretations

Shashi Deshpande’s - “The Day of the Golden Deer”

The modern women writers voice their concerns of women who are silenced by patriarchal and hegemonic forces. They are aware of the potency of our myths, and the reinstatement of the myths in Indian consciousness. They are aware of the extraordinary vitality of myths that continue to give people truths about themselves and also about the human conditions in all the times. The women writers do not want to reject myths thereafter, but think about a meaningful and creative re-interpretation of the myths and an adaptation of the old myths to suit the needs of a modern woman. They are keen on thinking about social transformations in modern India regarding the status of women.

The genre of Creative fiction has enabled many modern women writers to treat the myth in new ways in new imaginative directions. They take contexts, figures and situations from mythologies in their fiction, presenting the responses and reactions of their protagonists akin to those of contemporary enlightened women.

Shashi Deshpande uses myths to articulate her women character’s predicaments. Her novel The Binding Vine has a
In her short story ‘The Day of The Golden Deer’, a creative interpretation of Sita’s story, she presents a fresh perspective. The story explores the feelings of Sita, when banished second time by Ram, in her state of pregnancy. Shashi Deshpande’s women learn to break free of the stereotypes which surround them. Shashi Deshpande does not reject the myths but rejects the stereotypical archetypes. She requestions the myths which have shaped the image of women in India, as she knows how traditional Indian societal framework is biased against women. She says,

*I always feel kind of wronged when people say, I write about women’s problems because I always feel I write about human beings, many of whom happen to be women. But then when I look back at my work and I think about what issue has mattered most, it is the conflict between the idea women have of themselves and the idea that society imposes on them of what being a woman is. And there is a struggle to conform to this image, the guilt when you can’t do that. I think this image, especially in India comes through religion, through myth, through cultural stereotypes. They are all very strong. So I have been discarding all those stereotypes and all the mythical images.*
Deshpande’s story “The Day of The Golden Deer” explores Sita’s feelings on her desertion by Ram. Here Sita is defiant. She has her own insights regarding Ram’s action. Sita is not a believer in fate - but believes that one cannot escape one’s consequences of one’s actions. Her abduction by Ravan was a consequence of her desire for possessing the golden deer and her obsessive love for her husband Ram that made her afraid that he had been hurt. Sita realizes her faults but at the same time she assesses Ram’s actions rationally. She finds that Ram is a victim of his own idea of himself – idea of a righteous king Sita desired for the golden deer and Ram chased the deer of perfection. Sita was sacrificed for Ram’s idea that his image as the righteous king, perfect ruler should not be tarnished – So her question to Lakshman who takes her to forest:

*What happens to those who are crushed under the chariot of his righteousness?*

(Deshpande Shashi 2009:205)

There are no tears, reproaches or entreaties on the part of Sita when she hears her ‘banishment’ from Lakshman. She conceals them as they are to be expressed before her husband not before Lakshman who at that time was only a “messenger”. She is angry; angry to see the passion of Ram, to be loved and admired as a great and just king.
“A man can get drunk with the wine of too much love and admiration”- muses Sita. *They are alike*, Sita refers to Ravan, “The two men who have ruined my life – with their passion”

(Deshpande Shashi 2009:204).

Sita speaks out the truth in her rage. Ram’s passion to become a great king led him to become sensitive to the gossip of common people of his kingdom, neglecting the pure wifely love and devotion of Sita towards him. Sita in the context of her desertion hates the formal title ‘Queen’, when Lakshman calls her so. I am no queen – only a woman who wants to live in peace with the man she loves, with the children born out of their love. But the passion of king Ram to become a righteous king did not allow it to happen. When Lakshman calls his brother great king, Sita reacts, “Yes great king, but do you know, Lakshman, how many ordinary people have to be crushed so that one man can become great?” Sita thus voices the anguish of the subaltern, the language of the subaltern.

Sita discards the element of fate in the events of her life – The exile of Ram was because of the weakness of a doting husband-Dasharatha for a young and beautiful wife Kaikeyi.

Her abduction by Ravan was her fault – fault for sending her husband after the golden deer, and sending Lakshman after him. Ram’s description of his wife was due to his belief in the “Dharma” of a king.
'Dharma' is ‘God’ to him. Sita tells Lakshman “That is his god. And he has sacrificed me to it”.

Sita knows that people continue to revere Ram even more as the king, who put duty before self, before his own happiness. Her silence will make people think that she submitted, endured and forgave. Sita will forgive him out of pity that Ram became the victim of his own idea of himself. He chases the “golden deer of perfection” and will continue to do it. But for Sita the day of golden deer is over, she is disillusioned. She knows that the deer was only a “mirage” an illusion, or rather a ‘delusion’.

Sita prepares herself to enter the forest of demons, fears, hate, self-pity and bitterness. For a moment she thinks that her “Surrender of golden deer is not complete” Now it was time to give up the idea of perfection in any man, in any human.

Shashi Deshpande portrays Sita as protesting and defiant. The feminine consciousness of the female protagonist in the story is tapped from an awakened woman’s point of view, deconstructing the “Male-devised” mythological female models and creating new ones, adapting them to suit the needs of a modern woman.
Myth Alive in Modern Context

Indians not only revere myths, they live them. Myths are reflected in our actions, traditions and social living. The age old mythical stories are still re-enacted even in the modern era.

Vijayalakshmi Chouhan brings in the element of the myth of *The Ramayana* in her short story ‘Janaki’ (From the collection of stories Pomegranate Dreams and Other Stories). The mythical characters, episode, and situations are still living in India, in contrast to the others, which are locked in the past of “Western Cultures”. The “Washerman myth” gets re-enacted in the story ‘Janaki’.

In her article, Navneeta Devesn mentions about a Telugu wedding song that advises girls to be cautious. There are so many ‘no no’s for girls, for example:

- Don’t visit your neighbours after sunset
- Don’t go to the Washerman in the evenings
- Never walk the street with your hair open and so on.

Vijayalakshmi’s story shows how Indian social life is always haunted by the myths.

Mungu, a twelve year old boy, a dropout from school is an orphan and is sheltered by Sudhir Thakur, a manager in a textile firm and his wife Janaki a successful lawyer. Mungu helps around the
house – making tea, purchasing groceries, cleaning car and attending to other light housework. Later Mungu takes the place of cook in Thakur household. The story is narrated by Mungu. For him, Sudhir and Janaki are like Ram – Sita and he is like Hanuman, taking care of them, particularly of Janaki Memsaab who loves him, like her own child. She even sends him to school. Sudhir and Janaki are a happy couple but with no children of their own. They treat Mungu as their own child. They have a fancy home, two cars, money, fame, position and friends. The peace of the house is sometimes destroyed due to the violent squabbles between a washerman and his wife who live in a tin-shed in the neighbourhood. The dhobi is a drunkard, a ruffian, who beats his wife whenever drunk.

Ramesh, a friend of Sudhir, a film maker settled in America visits the couple before going to shoot a documentary of fishermen in Kerala. Sudhir is busy writing a report. Janaki takes care of Ramesh, keeps him company for shopping, keeps him busy talking to him. The day before Ramesh left for Kerala, he had taken photographs of Sudhir and Janaki. The dhobi had also desired for a photograph with her children. Ramesh had taken photograph of the dhobi with him which had turned the dhobi wild.

When Janaki is away for her work and Sudhir is alone at home, the dhobi’s drunken babble is heard.
He can let his wife run around with another man, I won’t. Rich people have their own foolish rules.

(VijayLakshmi 2009:214)

Mungu tries to hush him up, but dhobi continues “My wife is not your Saab’s wife who can – you – know – go around with another man. I am not blind like your Saab.

(VijayLakshmi 2009:214)

When Mungu threatens dhobi that he would ask his memsab to send him to jail, dhobi shouts, “Me? She’s no Sita herself”

Janaki returns from Delhi only to face her angry husband who suddenly begins doubting Janaki. The boy Mungu hears Ramesh’s name bouncing between the couple.

“You went to Delhi to be with him didn’t you”?

The old myth comes alive destroying the happy conjugal relation. Janaki leaves the house driving her car madly in the dark ending up in an accident. All is over in such a short time.

Mungu cannot understand why even educated and wise behave thus, why bad aspect of the myth haunts men even in the modern world?

(Vijayalakshmi 2009:209-17).
Re-conceptualization of “Sita” in Volga’s story “Re-union”

The modern women writers have depicted Sita with modern sensibility, portraying Sita’s character recognizable as the iconic “Sita” in the ancient epic, but also as relevant to modern readers. Their stories decenter the parts of Sita’s life, which aid in glorifying Ram’s actions or those which lead the plot towards the war with Ravan. The modern women writers imagine Sita as a multi-dimensional character, who learns from the difficult situations of her life and shapes her ability with wisdom, practicality and resourcefulness. By adding fresh dimensions to Sita’s character, these writers depart from Valmiki’s portrait of Sita as an iconic and unchanging image of a “Pure wife” and as victimized woman, who is driven by circumstances to renounce her earthly life due to male hegemony. Women’s oppression is denounced in the modern tellings.

Volga (Popuri Lalithakumari) re-imagines Sita in her later years. Sita’s “renunciation,” her retreat to mother earth is re-conceptualized. In her imagination, Sita continues to live a rich and meaningful life, after Lava and Kusha leave for Ayodhya. Sita embarks on a new phase of life after the fulfillment of her responsibilities as a mother. She re-envisions the life of Sita after her children have grown.
**Sita with Shurpanakha**

Volga (Popuri Lalitha Kumari) (b. 1950) is a Telugu writer known for her feminist activism. She has edited an anthology of feminist Telugu poetry and keeps fighting patriarchy through art, classical dance and re-interpretation of myths and religious narratives. Volga’s short story ‘Reunion’ is also a part of her larger project to protest against male hegemony. She re-interprets the gendered stereotypes in authoritative religious texts which uphold the concept of ‘Patriarchy’.

The story ‘Reunion’ is translated in English by Krishna Rao Maddi Pati. The reunion is of Sita and Shurpanakha. In authoritative tellings of Ramayana, Sita and Shurpanakha are opposites. Volga depicts Sita and Shurpanakha as two individuals in quest of their identities. Both are multi-dimensional characters, striving to make their lives meaningful through self-realization. Sita and Shurpanakha are not the stock images of “Pativrata or chaste wife” and ‘demoness’.

The forest provides space for both women to reflect upon their past lives and rebuild their lives in the proximity of Nature free from all the worldly distractions. Twelve years’ span in Valmiki’s Ashrama has helped Sita gain equanimity of mind. She has learnt to calm the waves of her mind. She overcomes her grief and cultivates ascetic ethos of the hermitage, imbibing the wisdom of asceticism and piety practiced in Valmiki’s Ashram.
Forests turn a ‘space’ for Shurpanakha too, to re-think her life. Both middle aged women embark on a new phase of life in the forest. Like Sita, Shurpanakha also re-interprets her life. Forest provides her possibilities to change her outlook towards life. Like Sita, Shurpanakha turns to be a nature-lover and a gardener. She runs a nursery of rare flowers.

Both Sita and Shurpanakha find alternatives to conventional life by reshaping their lives in the forest, outside the conventional expectations of married life. Sita has gained peace of mind in Valmiki’s ashram enjoying her motherly duty of raising her two sons while Shurpankha grows mature amidst the bounty of nature and has learnt in course of time to reject the binary opposition between beauty and ugliness as she has realized that ugliness and beauty, form and deformity contribute to Nature’s bounty. After enduring resentment and self-hatred caused by her disfigurement, Shurpanakha has gained equanimity of mind and cultivates a garden which is unrivalled in beauty on earth or in heaven.

Lava and Kusha discover the garden cultivated by Shurpanakha and describe its beauty to Sita. They describe it as more beautiful than ‘Nandana Vana’. Both the boys talk about the beauty of the garden and the ugliness of its owner who has no nose and ears. Sita suddenly recognizes her as Shurpanakaha, whom she had seen eighteen years back. She is reminded of the cruelty of the two males – Ram and Lakshman who disfigured her. Sita is filled with pity for Shurpanakha,
who had led a loveless life. The garden nurtured by her seems symbolic of Shurpanakha’s desire for beauty and her inner goodness and kindheartedness. Sita remembers Shurpankha’s first appearance and her grace and also the heart – wrenching wails of her, when Lakshman cut her nose and ears. Sita feels that the curse of Shurpanakha always haunted her. No man could love Shurpanakha and the one whom Sita loved, distanced her, banishing to the forest.

Sita meets Shurpanakha, introducing herself as not wife of Shri Ram but as ‘Janaka’s daughter, Janaki the daughter of Earth. Shurpanakha notices a great change in Sita. The love and kindness in Sita’s eyes, melt Shurpanakha’s heart. Shurpanakha tells her story of agony after the mutilation of her beautiful nose and ears and explains how the infinite beauty of form and deformity in nature. This observation had transformed her into a mature person who could see manifestations of love and beauty every where in nature.

Sita is happy to know that Shurparanakha’s interpretation of ‘fulfilment’ is not just in the companionship of a man. Shurpanakha has fortunately got a partner called Sudhir who is a friend to her.

When Sita suggests that she will return to Mother earth after Lava and Kusha are sent to Ayodhya, Shurpanakha convinces her to retire to her garden and savor the presence of Mother Earth, without renouncing the world. The writer thus re-conceptualizes the notion of
‘renunciation’. The two identify with each other in their agonies caused by men. Sita rethinks her life after meeting Shurpanakha and seeing the beautiful garden tended by Shurpanakha. After years of sacrificing her happiness for others needs Sita thinks of herself as an individual and realizes the need in her life at this stage to cultivate artistic fulfillment in her own life.

**Sita’s sartorial choices**

Kumudini (Ranganayaki Thatham 1905-1986) chooses an episode from *The Ramayana* for her short story “Letters from Lady Sita”, re-telling *The Ramayana* episode in her own creative way. The Mythical Sita is domesticated as new bride in king Dasharatha’s house hold, encountering the kind of problems and pressures that every new bride does in her new marital household.

Kumudini was Gandhijian in her thought and action. She had the experience of staying in *Sevashram* for some time. Kumudini shocked her orthodox Tamil relatives by wearing *Khadi* (home spun cloth) even on weddings. Married into a traditional family of *Tamil Brahmins* in Srirangam, she had her own constraints as a female. Her mother-in-law disapproved of women reading and writing. She woke up in the early hours of morning to read, and write stories. Her husband and her father helped her publish her stories.
Though confined in constraints, Indian women writers have shown enormous imaginative powers, shaping their talents by their creative abilities. Lots of room for creativity exists in our myths and new perspectives emerge, when events are considered from different points of views. Kumudini’s story “Letters from Lady Sita” is written with Sita’s perspective and Sita’s point of view. Kumudini’s writings break out of stereotypical portrayals of women. Sita emerges as a woman who speaks in new ways. The story appeared in the popular Tamil weekly magazine “Anant Vigathan” in 1934. The story is translated into English by Kumudini’s daughter Ahana Lakshmi.

As the title suggests, the story is an epistolary account of Sita’s experiences as a new bride in Ram’s house in Ayodhya. The story is in the form of letters of Sita to her mother in Mithila. It contains four letters (equivalent of four pages). Sita supposedly wrote to her mother, the Queen of Mithila. Kumudini domesticates this section of Ramayana story between the period of Sita’s arrival in royal house of Ayodhya after her marriage with Ram and her departure to forests with him.

The first letter is the longest one and half page that tells about her new house. Sita writes in response to her mother’s invitation to celebrate Deepavali festival at Mithila. Sita is doubtful about their celebration of Deepavali at Mithila. She writes about her father-in-law Dasharath who spends most of his time with his youngest wife Kaikeyi and that makes her mother-in-law (Koushalya) furious. But Koushalya
conceals her anguish by getting engrossed in prayers, worship and serving food to Brahmins. Sita has to get up early in the morning, bathe and help her mother-in-law; she does not have a moment’s rest. Sita writes that brother-in-law Bharat is taken away by his uncle and Shatrughna has followed him. She and Ram could leave the house only after their return. Sita is doubtful about their celebration of Deepawali at Mithila, as Ram thinks it better to spend Deepawali in Ayodhya itself.

Sita requests her mother to send gifts to her husband; *Your son-in-law likes only yellow silk so buy only that for him.* Sita has come to know that a gold bracelet of new design is being fashioned for the son-in-law of the royal house of Ayodhya – Rishyashringan. She wants her mother to gift the same kind of bracelet to Ram. Sita now expresses her deep anxiety about her dressing in royal house; she is ridiculed in the palace for her unsophisticated clothing as all her sarees have broad borders whereas narrow bordered sarees are a fashion in Ayodhya. Ayodhya being a cosmopolitan city, traders from foreign land bring silk with elegant narrow borders. Sita likes the sarees worn by her sister-in-law Shantha, particularly a blue silk sari. Sita writes about her “sartorial dilemmas” and her feeling of embarrassment when ridiculed for her old fashioned wardrobe.

Second letter of Sita is very short with only eight sentences. This is the continuation of the mention of her sartorial dilemmas. She has come to know that her sister-in-law’s blue silk sari is not fast in color
and fades soon – she does not want blue sari. As planned earlier, she would like to have *Sindoor*-color sari (vermillion color sari) of traditional type.

The third letter of Sita states *suddenly an idea has occurred to father-in-law.* He says that he wants to have coronation ceremony for your son-in-law. Sita expresses her anxiety over the selection of sari on the coronation day, as she is going to be the cynosure of the gathering and she is going represent “Lakshmi” on the coronation platform. Once again she is confused what kind of sari is to be worn - whether *jasmine*-colored, tiger-colored or sari with spotted deer decoration in the border. Her father-in-law Dasharath does not like cuckoo-coloured or peacock-coloured cloth. She writes her head is spinning thinking all the time about the saris. She expresses her panic over what should be worn on the coronation day. The post script of her letter reads:

You could combine the *Deepavali* sari and coronation sari and get me a really good sari”

The climax of the story is her hurried fourth letter presented in completely different tone.

Fourth letter to Mother:

*Mother,*
No need to send any sari. All is over. We are going away to the forest. The coronation will now be for Bharatan. The person who is bringing this letter will tell you everything. I have only one dress made of bark skin. If it rains in the forest and I get wet, I will have nothing wear. Therefore, if possible send a bark skin. Your son-in-law says that only your appalams taste heavenly. We are going to Chitrakoot. Nobody need know this.

Yours in haste

Sita

PS: There is no need to worry any more about the color of the saris. Peace of mind is now mine. How helpful it would be if all women were to go to the forest! Half of the worries would disappear.

Sita

The letter has its own significance. It is very brief with no details of the reasons for Ram’s exile in to the forest. Every Indian has an access to the story of Ramayana and the episode of Ram’s exile to forest. Instead Kumudini is keen putting forth her ideology and her way of thinking. In only four pages of prose in the form of letters, Kumudini makes Sita contemporary to her readers, imagining her as a new bride experiencing pressures that many new brides encountered in her time (1930). While the ‘Sita of Valmiki’ and ‘Sita of Tulasidas’are depicted as ideal characters (divine too), Kumudini’s Sita grows and matures. This section of Ramayana is transformed into a domestic tale. Kumudini uses this episode of Ramayana to subtly campaign for Gandhijian ideological commitments and gender equality. Also she addresses
contemporary political issues about *swadeshi* goods. Kumudini allegorically campaigns for simplicity and high thinking through the episode of Sita’s disillusionment with foreign-made saris. Kumudini likens the exile to forest of Ram and Sita to “living in Gandhijian Ashram”. Gandhiji was inspired by Sita’s character as Sita was never attracted to Ravan’s riches and luxuries. Her refusal to yield to Ravan’s desires despite threats, promises and luxurious gifts was a source of inspiration for Gandhiji for non-cooperation movement. The incident of Ram’s banishment to forest transforms Sita’s mind and evolves her thoughts.

Kumudini’s “Sita story” makes Ramayana a way of thinking not only about ancient times but also the present.

The genius of the writer lies in her creative ability to transcend the trivial matter like clothing to communicate a thought for simple living. The small episode suddenly attains a potential to give out messages for young as well as adults of all times of simplicity and practicability.

(Kumudini 2009:239-41)
5.10 Reflections of *The Ramayana* in Indian English Drama

Indian English Drama came into being in the year 1871 year with Michael Madhusudan Datt’s play “Is this called civilization”? Later, writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo T P Kailasam, Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar and Uma Parameswaran wrote plays in English, using myths in their plays. Indian English playwrights take the mythological elements to project their thoughts on the present condition of the inner or external struggle of men and women. Mythical thoughts have given more meaning to their plays, widening the horizon in a more thoughtful way. As our myths have abundant storage of stories relating to the present conditions, the playwrights have used them symbolically and metaphorically. The Indian English dramatists have used the mythological stories to reach the inner recesses of the audience. The plays by Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo T P Kailasam, Girish Karnad and Badal Sircar have become popular across the world and have gained a wide readership.

The English translations of the plays by regional writers in Telugu, Tamil, Malyalam and kannada have enriched Indian English Drama. Writers like Gudipati Venkatachalam (Telugu) Kuvempu (Kannada), C N Srikantan Nair (Malyalam) have taken sources from *The Ramayana* myth.
Telugu writer Gudipati Venkatachalam popularly known as ‘Chalam’, was known for his relentless advocacy of women’s liberation. He uses epic tales and epic heroines and reverses the stories of pativratas. His heroines (from epic stories) are powerful, confident, independent and witty. In his Telugu play ‘Sita Agnipravesam’ (1924) Chalam rewrites the episode of the reunion of Ram and Sita after the battle of Lanka. The episode of the ordeal by fire in which sita’s chastity is tested is transformed in Chalam’s play. The play is a critique of Ram’s patriarchal egoism which is expressed through the rational arguments of Sita with Ram. Sita is bold confident and convincing. The play is translated into English by Sailaza Easwari Pal, with the title “Sita Enters the Fire’.

Sita is overwhelmingly happy to see Ram after the battle of Ram with Ravan. She is looking forward to the moment of reunion with Ram, after spending years in captivity in Lanka. But Ram calls her impure and says.

“You were touched by another. You are impure. I am the moon rising over the sea of Bharat, the precious gem of the solar dynasty. You are no longer fit to be the queen of this great empire”. When Ram says that Ravan loved Sita, Sita answers back.

*Ram: Ravan loved you*
Sita: Is it my fault that he loved me?

Ram: He stole you away

Sita: Is that my fault?

Ram: You lived with him in his Palace gardens.

Sita: No, in the grove. Is that my fault too?

Ram: It is your bad luck.

Sita criticizes Ram’s concept of Dharma which never respects a wife’s true sentiments. She calls him “a machine run by the Shastras”. She expresses her regret for wasting her life time in devotion to Ram, who in turn ruins her life in the name of “Dharma”.

Sita’s speech in the play voices the ridicule of the tradition, of Chalam:

“Of course you want to be renowned as a perfect king, dazzling future generations with your deeds. But just remember, you will also be a role model for all the men who treat their wives like dirt and throw them out. You are just hungry for fame, Ram!”

And this is a country that claims to worship women! Right? So this is the respect a devoted wife, a pativrata gets in this world! When people think of a model for low standards, they will think of you. Sita praises Ravan, Ram’s arch – enemy for his true love towards sita, who, to gain her love, lost his people’s faith, his family, his brothers and sons, his kingdom and at last his life at the hands of Ram.
Sita refuses to be renounced by Ram calling Ram a heartless machine. She declares that she rejects Ram as a husband. She says, she regrets for not returning the love of Ravan. She expresses her hatred towards Ram who never recognized her fidelity and her pure love for him.

Instead of undergoing the fire ordeal arranged to test her purity and fidelity, Sita enters the fire – the funeral pure of Ravan.

**T. P. Kailasam’s Burden**

T P Kailasam was a prominent playwright and a poet in Kannada and English. Kailasam had mastery over Kannada and English languages. He is known for his pun, wit and humour in his plays. T P Kailasam belongs to Pre-independence phase. He chose mythical themes for his plays like ‘The purpose’ ‘Fulfilment’ and ‘the Curse of Karna’.

T P Kailasam’s one act play *Burden* (1933) deals with the story of Bharata of *The Ramayana*. The playlet handles the theme that the Sanskrit playwright Bhasa dramatized in his Sanskrit work *Pratima Natakam* (The Statue Play) Kailasam’s playlet has a power and beauty of its own. Bharata and Shatrughna’s return from their grand father’s place after the death of Dasharatha and the banishment of Ram, has been plainly narrated in Valmiki Ramayana, but Nandkumar says,
…both Bhasa and Kailasam have elevated this incident to tragic heights in their plays.

(Nandkumar 2008:84).

While returning from their grandfather’s place to Ayodhya, Bharata and Shatrughna notice certain changes in the behavior and appearance of the people. The dimlit royal path looks suggestive of some catastrophe in the Capital. The strange silence in the city appears to be maddening to Bharata and Shatrughna. They first meet two aged chamberlains at court, who stand tongue tied. Then Bharata and Shatrughna get at the terrible truth that their father Dasharatha is dead and crown prince Ram has been banished for fourteen years. Both are shocked to hear the news. Bharata is wrathful against his mother Kaikeyi. He even takes the Royal priest Vasishtha to task for not saving his father.

Finally Guru Vasishtha consoles Bharatha and directs him to do his duty which is the Burden that fate placed on the shoulders of Bharata. In his wrath, Bharata denounces his real mother Kaikeyi for manipulating kingship in his favour. He renounces such kingship and kingdom.

As T P Kailasam belonged to the pre-independent phase, he had seen the manipulation of the British lords in India, their lust for power and supremacy. The theme of Bharata’s idealism and renunciation of
worldly pleasures inspired him to write the play in English. By the creation of the ideal character of Bharata, an exemplary brother of Ram, Kailasam wanted to pass a message and teach a lesson to those English lords and petty Indian rulers who were struggling hard for their supremacy and independent identities during the years of ‘Freedom struggle’. He wants to show the contrast between the greed of power and brutality and the noble, ethical values the epic ‘Ramayana’ renders to Indians. ‘Bharata is exalted by Kailasam. Bharata’s love for all, respect for elders, his super human attitude towards worldly affairs, his meaningful renunciation of material wealth are highlighted in the play let. *Burden* familiarizes the non – Sanskrit knowing world with India’s elevate culture and concept of sacrifice and a brother’s love for his brother, represented by Bharata in *The Ramayana*.

*Burden* a powerful and moving scene from *The Ramayana* (probably inspired by the fourth act of Bhasa’s well known play, *Pratima*) takes up the story from the moment of Bharata’s return to Ayodhya after Dasharatha’s deaths and Ram’s banishment and dramatizes the slow realization of his ‘burden’ by ‘Bharata’.

Modified Reflection of Shudra Shambuka in Kuvempu’s *Shudra Tapaswi*

Kupalli Venkata Puttappa, known as Kuvempu a renowned Kannada writer who won Jnana Peetha award for his retelling of Ramayana, *Ramayana Darshanam* rewrites Shambuka’s story in his three-scene play *Shudra Tapaswi.* (1944)

The episode of killing of Shambuka appears in Valmiki Ramayana Book 7, in the final chapter, in the ‘Uttara Kanda’, in Sargas 73-76. Like Ahalya Shambuka is also considered a ‘minor’ figure within *The Ramayana* traditions large cast of characters. The modern south Indian writers suggest in their writings that each character in *The Ramayana* tradition has its own significance. Many scholars view ‘Uttara – Kanda’ book 7, as a later interpolation. But it has become part of the ongoing Ramayana tradition. A humble aged Brahmin comes to Ram weeping, with his dead son in his arms. He tells Ram that his son was virtuous child who had never deviated from Dharma. The Brahmin declares that an underserved death never occurs in a kingdom where a just ruler like Ram ensures that each citizen performs Varnashrama-dharma (duty enjoined according to one’s social rank and stage of life). The sage Narada explains to Ram that a Shudra is practicing penance, which is the transgression of Dharma and this is the cause of the child’s death. Ram goes on a tour inspection in his flying chariot and finds out the ascetic shudra doing austerities. Ram asks who he is.
Hearing Ram’s words, the ascetic, his head still hanging downwards (as part of his austerities) answers – O Ram I was born of a Shudra alliance and I am performing this rigorous penance in order to acquire the status of God in this body. I wish to attain the celestial Region. Know that I am a Shudra and my name is Shambuka”. As he is yet speaking, Ram draws his brilliant and stainless sword and cuts of Shambuka’s head. The Shudra being stain, all the Gods cry out well done! Well done! Ram is overwhelmed with praise and a rain of celestial flowers of divine fragrance falls on all sides scattered by Vayu (God of air).

The Brahmin’s son returns to life and God’s praise Ram for protecting Dharma. Criticism of this episode of killing Shambuka dates back to eighth century. When the playwright Bhavabhuti composed his Sanskrit play *Uttara Ram Charita*. Bhavabhuti critiqued Ram’s act of killing a person whose only alleged misdeed was performing Tapas. By the twentieth century, the veiled criticism of Bhavabhuti gave way to explicit attacks on Ram’s killing of Shambuka. Some critics interpreted that Ram killed Shambuka under the pressure of Brahma’s advisors though he thought Shambuka’s Tapas was valid. Other critics attacked all religious practices as superstition. Kuvempu (K. V. Puttappa) rejects both of these interpretations and writes his own interpretation in his play *Shudra Tapaswi*. An ardent devotee of Ram, puttappa wants to show Ram as a perfect ruler. As the king Ram had to perform his duty
as a law maker and at the same time as the protector of the devout, he had to safeguard Shambuka.

“By depicting Lord Ram in the role of the king and protector of the devout, the poet shows that any one can become a ‘Brahmin’ by his good deeds and not necessarily by birth”


“K. V. Puttappa seeks to rewrite the conclusion of this gruesome story by attacking Brahminism and rescuing the glory of Ram by his surprise gracing of the learned Shudra and turning of his divine wrath on the bigoted Brahmin himself”.

(The Hindu online Oct 22, 2010 http://www.hindu.com/fr/10/22/stories)

Puttappa has depicted Ram both as the king and protector of the devout. Also the writer has shown his ire against the Caste- system and Caste-hierarchy. Puttappa wrote this play in mid-forties. By then he was among the most successful, prominent and respected ‘shudras’ of his day obviously his imagination was a product of his time. The fresh perspective and interpretation of the episode reflects the changing social milieu.

In the play Shudra Tapaswi, a three scene play (Translated into English by Girish Karnad and K. Marulasiddhappa) a Brahmin comes to Ram complaining that some transgression of dharma somewhere has
taken place which has caused the untimely death of his son. He tells Ram that he saw Shambuka a Shudra, doing ‘Tapas’ in the wild jungle. He requests Ram to punish Shambuka and save his son. Ram knows that Shambuka is a great yogi. He decides to teach a lesson to the bigoted pedant drunk with the pride of Varna. Both Ram and the Brahmin fly to the hermitage of Shambuka in celestial chariot. Ram finds Shambuka lost in meditation. Ram recognizes that it a real ‘Sage’s abode’. He does obeisance to Sage Shambuka. The Brahmin is startled to see Ram offering respect to Shambuka. Ram recalls the memory of Valmiki, the great sage, who gave shelter to Sita. Valmiki was also a Shudra like Shambuka who was born as hunter but achieved greatness through Tapas. He tries to convince the Brahmin that the person who performs tapas, is worthy of reverence and Tapas is an act to be venerated.

The Brahmin refers to the shastras saying,

\[
A \textit{Shudra has no right to perform Tapas} \\
\textit{In the Krita age} \\
\textit{Only the Brahmin had the right} \\
\textit{In the Treta, it was extended to the Kasatriyas} \\
\textit{In the Dwapara, to the Vaishyas and in the Kali age} \\
\textit{even shudras will aspire to it}
\]

The Brahmin defends his argument
Protector of Varnashrama Dharma, Milk is worthy of worship and nourishes life. But that doesn’t mean you can drink dog’s milk. A Shudra’s tapas is like dog’s milk.

(Paula Richman (Ed) 2008:130)

The Brahmin requests Ram to launch ‘Brahmastra’, the divine weapon to kill Shambuka. Ram warns the Brahmin that it is a terrible weapon and once it bursts forth, it will not relent until it has destroyed its enemy. Ram commands to Death (Death is seen as a person), “Seek out the sinner and destroy him”! (Death in Sanskrit texts is a male, ‘Yama’, but puttappa has portrayed Death as a female figure in the play). Death hovers in the place, near the hermitage of Shambuka, where the brahmin’s son is lying dead). Ram launches the arrow. Thunder storm and lightening ensue. Death pursues the Brahmastra, which approaches Shambuka, becomes docile and postrates itself in front of him. Death does the same. The Brahmastra turns towards the Brahmin to his terror. Ram tells the Brahmin that he (the brahmin) has insulted those who deserve worship. He calls the Brahmin

The one who has insulted
those who deserve worship
the one whose brain
is addled by the shastras,
the one who is irreverent
towards his betters".
Ram appeals to the Brahmin to open the “eye of intellect” and convinces him that a good act prompted by a good mind does not need the support of Shastras. A voice in sky is heard in Sanskrit “Recourse to scriptures alone will not help decide duty”.

* A thought act
* *can only do harm to dharma.*

* A tapaswi is to be venerated,

* whoever it may be.*

The Brahmin realizes his mistake as he had been hidebound by tradition, warped by shastras and blinded by Jati.

The Brahmin prostrates himself infront of him The woods exult and the heavens shower flowers. The shadow of death disappears. The Brahmin boy sits up alive. Both the Brahmin and his son get the blessings of Shambuka.

Puttappa, a devotee of Ram, believed that Ram loved all the creatures, irrespective of their social rank. Therefore in his play “Shudra Tapaswi”, Ram determines to end deviation from Dharma, rather than slaying Shambuka, he destroys misperceptions of Tapas in the mind of the Brahmin. Between 1920 and 1960, many other writers retold the story of Shambuka, criticizing Ram’s actions prompting public controversy. Examples can be given of Tripuraneni Ramasvami chaudari’s Telugu play “Shambuka Vadha (1966: 1-79) and Thiruvayur K. Tangaraju’s Tamil play Ramayana Natakam (1954). Puttappa, instead of criticizing Ram’s act of slaying Shambuka transforms the
Characters of Ram and Shambuka. Shambuka in Puttappa’s play is the real Tapaswi and Ram venerates real Tapaswis to whatsoever cast or Varna they belong to.

**The Ramayana in Srikantan Nair’s Plays**

The three plays of C. N. Srikantan Nair, the renowned Malayalam playwright adapt the theme from *The Ramayana*, presenting different interpretations. The first of the plays in the trilogy is ‘Saketham’, that marks the beginning of Ramas journey and the third play *Kanchana Sita* marks the finale of the journey. The second play of the trilogy ‘Lanka Lakshmi’ is the tale of Ravan, a character who aspires for power but has to bear witnessing the inevitable catastrophe in his ‘Lanka’. The abduction of Sita, leads him to his doom. Srikantan Nair presents the mythic heroes – Ram and Ravan as purely human.

Dasharatha in his first play ‘Saketham’ is presented as the king trying to retain his individuality and lose his ideology of the kingship and of statecraft while Ram of *Kanchana Sita* tries to lose his individuality in the quest to uphold the ideal of Ramarajya. Midway between them is Ravan whose weakness leads to the destruction of Lanka. Ravan rises to the stature of a tragic hero who faces his doom.

The play *Kanchana Sita* (1961) won Kendra Sahitya academy award in 1962. The play questions Ram’s Dharma from diverse points of view. It also deals with the tragedy of power and idealism in the search of
which the king’s life leads to solitude and an unhappy end. Srikantan Nair looks deep into the continuing conflict between ideology and human relations.

“The work looks at the exemplary ethical deity Ram from a woman’s point of view”


Srikantan Nair took inspiration from Uttarakanda of Valmiki Ramayana. The playwright shows how the sacrifices that adherence to Dharma demands, including abandoning a chaste wife.

The women in the play are bold and eloquent and question the ‘Dharma’ of Ram. Urmila and Kousalya argue with Ram that abandoning a chaste wife is not Dharma.

Urmila’s character emerges very powerfully in Nair’s play ‘Kanchanasita’. In the play, during fourteen years when Lakshman was separated from Urmila, Urmila undertakes serious studies of Hindu Shastras under the guidance of learned scholars. She whiles away her separation by studying seriously the shestras, sitting with most learned pundits to study Dharma Shastras and by the time fourteen years are up, she is an expert. So when Ram banishes Sita, Urmila does not keep quiet. She has a big debate with him.
When Ram justifies his banishment of Sita on the basis that he had to submit to the will of the people who suspected Sita’s chastity during her stay in Ravan’s place, Urmila wonders how Ram managed to ignore the will of the people of Ayodhya and went on his exile, inspired by his own will and judgment, Ram is speechless.

“What about your own banishment? That was against the will of people. But you insisted on upholding the king’s personal commitment” (Richman Paula, The New Indian Express Oct 21, 2002)

The play works as a diatribe against the exploitation of women and the evil aspects of caste systems. Urmila criticizes Ram and Lakshman who believe in the caste hierarchy. She addresses Lakshamana saying.

“Aryaputran, my beloved husband, you must forgive me. I said in sorrow watching the unbelievably strong kshatriya heroes demeaning themselves as the slavish messengers of Brahmins”.

(Nair Srikantan 2005:28)

Urmila is against punishing Shambuka a shudra for doing penance. She criticizes Brahmins for decreeing that learning Vedas is restricted only to Brahmins.

The art critic of The New Indian Express says,

“Ram is reduced to playing Bourgeois Ram, a heartless king who exploits his position and who in turn is exploited by wily Brahmins sage
Vashista, an embodiment of love and compassion is turned into a cunning adviser whose salacious purpose in life is to maintain the unfair ascendancy of the Brahmins”

(The New Indian Express Sunday Feb. 18 2007)

Urmila remarks,

“The Brahmins have a powerful slave”, as Ram himself utters “I am just a Kshatriya (ruler) who is the servant of Brahmins (advisors), just a human being.

(Nair Srikantan 2005:33).

Urmila strongly protests banishment of Sita by Ram.

Urmila: you have not cleared my doubt about Sita’s chastity…

Raman: people doubt it

Urmila: Does Sita’s husband doubt it?

Raman: Sita’s husband is primarily the serven of the people.

Urmila: Is king Ramchandran the servant of ignorant people?

(Nair Srikantan 2005:32)

The play begins at the point when preparations for Ashwamedha Yaga (Horse sacrifice) are going on. In order to perform the Aswamedha Yaga, the ‘Yajamana’ must be present in the sacrificial hall along with his wife.

The sages Vasishtha, Ashtavakran and Rishyashringa advise Ram for his second marriage. Ashtavakra (Guru of king Janaka),
Rishyasringa and Vashistha try to persuade Ram that for the welfare of people, Ram should remarry. Vasishtha says that a second marriage for Ram is not more difficult than leaving his wife. The sages convincingly advise Ram that a king is not an individual. He has no individuality and he is the personification of the will of the people Vasishtha suggests that Ram should marry the daughter of the ruler of Kashi.

In Act II, Urmila indulges herself in the hot argumental exchanges with Ram. She calls Ram as the great king who observes truth as a ritual.

“Enslaved by the cruel thoughts of inferior people, you brutalize the truth. What protection does a chaste and pure woman have in this Ayodhya? If in future a woman’s life is unsafe in this Aryavastham, don’t forget that you are responsible. Also don’t forget that tomorrow you may be labelled as the one who showed the way for heartless men to drive their wives out”

(Nair Srikantan 2005:42).

In Act II, Bharatan comes to Ayodhya from Kekayam to take part in the Aswamedha Yaga. He too protests the banishment of chaste Sita. In Act III Lava (Lavan, in the play) seizes the sacrificial horse of the Yoga and gets ready to fight with Lakshman, not knowing who Lakshman is. Valmiki convinces Lavan to untie the horse and give it back to Lakshman.
The sacrificial hall gets ready in Naimisaranyam in Act IV Bharata expresses his grief and anguish over the killing of Sambuka a Shudra who had transgressed Dharma by doing penance. Bharata declares that his unwillingness in participating in Aswamedha Yaga. Sambuka’s wife enters and curses Ram that Ram will never have the happiness of living with a wife.

Valmiki brings Lava and Kusha to Naimisaranya who sing the poem on Ram’s story written by Valmiki himself. A golden statue is placed to replace Sita by the side of the Yajamana (Ram). Hanuman enters and is dumbfounded to see the metal statue of Sita. He offers that the will go and bring Sita Devi on his shoulders for the Yaga. Ram does not allow Hanuman to bring Sita. The argument between Hanuman and Ram ensues.

Raman: Son of Anjana, tell me, which is greater, Sita or the Kingdom?

Hanuman: Blessed one! Are Sita and the kingdom opposing forces? A kingdom without Sita! Lika a man without soul?

Further Hanuman says, “You are inventing a new interpretation for state craft. You are putting it to test and making it practically usable. But I fear that this state craft which breaks and smashes relationship of the soul is an eternal curse to this earth.

Please allow me to depart… I do not wish to stay here any more...
And a little later says, “Please permit me to leave... this is my last Darshan to you... May the lord who is all powerful, bless you”!

(Nair Srikantan 2005:82-83).

The eternal devotee Hanuman, who is generally visualized as always being in deep meditation of Ram, turns around and vents his bitterness on Ram, accusing Ram of injustice and cruelty.

Thus Urmila, Kousalya, Bharata Valmiki and Hanuman question Ram’s inhuman abandonment of his pregnant wife. Bharata and Hanuman quit the sacrificial hall, not willing to partake in the Adharma.

Valmiki tells Ram that Lava and Kusha are Ram’s sons.

Sita at last appears at the sacrificial site and descends into the opening earth rather than undergo a second ordeal of purity at Ram’s behest.

Srikantan Nair’s play ‘Kanchanasita’ was adapted by Aravindan, the malyalam filmmaker for his film. Using Nair’s play only as a starting point, Aravindan transformed the script according to his interpretation of Indian philosophy and his minimalist aesthetics. The film carries the concept of Sita as prakriti to its visual limit. “Sita does not appear in the film at all but is depicted as prakriti or all pervading nature. The different moods of Sita are shown as different aspects of nature. He replaced Nair’s crisply articulated exchanges of dialogues with a cinematic
mediation on Ram’s separation from and eventual union with Sita, thus carrying the concept of Sita as Prakriti to its visual limit (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/kanchanasita).

As Paula Richman says, “Throughout the film, Ram is caught in a dharmic predicament. The external world, which Brahmin ritualism takes as the place for the proper exercise of kshatriya royal power, comes into conflict with his own inner self which detached from kingly power, appears to hear and feel Sita’s presence everywhere”.

(Richman Paula [Ed] 2008:102)

**Evam Indrajit**

Badal Sircar, a great Bengali playwright is among the three great contemporary writers – Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar. The Bengali play *Evam Indrajit* (1965) was translated into English by Girish Karnad, and was staged first in 1970. Badal Sircar makes use of the myth to examine the dilemmas of the Indian middle class youth and the vague feelings and undefined frustrations gnawing at the hearts of the educated urban middle class. *Evam Indrajit* is a three act play.

The play opens with the writer’s dilemma which is related to what he considers the limitedness of his experience. The writer also is a character in the play. The writer has not experienced life at its primitive and basic reality. He knows something of only middle class society, to
which he belongs. His aunt is irritated to see him always scribbling something that does not make any sense. In the meantime a girl called Manasi comes on stage and asks him about what he has written so far.

“What shall I write? Who shall I write about?” cries out the writer. Later, following the advice of the girl Manasi, he suddenly turns towards the audience and calls out to four late comers in the audience, asking them to come on the stage. On his asking, they give their names as Amal Kumar Bose, Vimalkumar Ghosh, Kamalkumar sen and Nirmal Kumar. The writer does not accept the fourth name ‘Nirmal Kumar’.

He shouts, “No… it can’t be! You must have another name. You have to have. Tell me truly what’s your name?”

(Sircar Badal 1999:4)

On the writer’s insistence, Nirmal reveals his identity as Indrajit Ray, a man of about ‘A hundred’ or ‘two hundred years, but according to his Matriculation certificate, he is thirty five. Badal Sircar significantly names the character as ‘Indrajit’, a mythical rebel better known as Meghanad in *The Ramayana*. Nirmal Kumar finds himself as a misfit in the prevailing system. He wants to revolt against the existing social set up and break the taboos.

Like mythical rebel Meghnad, Badal Sircar’s Indrajit opposes the system and negates the rules. He expresses his frustration over the situation.
One can hate rules. Why should they be there at all? What’s the point of worshiping the rope that binds you? Tear it into shreds. Bring down all these walls which surround us.

(Sircar Badal 1999:21)

Indrajit (Nirmal) loves Manasi but cannot marry her as she is his first cousin on the mother’s side. He wants to break the social taboo but fails to accomplish it.

In Act II, the writer and Indrajit come across after about seven long years. Indrajit is not settle in a place. All and his friends, Amol, Vimal and Kamal have got married and have their own houses. Indrajit is still unmarried. Manasi is also not married. Though his anger and frustration make him think about suicidal act, he remains through out the play a rebel as mythical Indrajit remains a proud and arrogant rebel in *The Ramayan*. He maintains his revolting tone and temper through out the play.

The feeling of frustration and exhaustion indicates the dissatisfaction and depression of the educated middle class people, who even with their imaginative mind and revolting mood are forced to yield to their circumstances.

In Act III, Indrajit expresses his philosophic approach towards life. He emphasizes upon the need of faith in life. He realizes that one needs faith to live; faith in God, faith in fortune, faith in man, faith in
work, in revolution, in oneself and in love. But Indrajit has lost ‘faith’ in all worldly things. The writer feels that the character of Indrajit is unmanageable to comprehend. He says,

_The more I tie him up in a plot the more he escapes, says it isn’t real. The more lines I write for him the mire he stands outside them. Say they are not real. Oh! He knows too much altogether too much._

(Sircar Badal 1999:50)

Then Indrajit appears before the writers reciting certain poetic lines expressing his apprehensions suggestions and conclusion regarding man and his nature.

Indrajit sings:

keeping afloat  
_ Clutching at a piece of straw,_
_ Life resting on stretched faith_
_ Of a believer._
_ The land is blurred_
_ In a grey mist of sighs,_
_ The bright realms beyond the clouds_
_ Are lost in lies_
_ In this love sojourn…_

Towards the end of the play, Indrajit Shakes off his name and repeatedly says to the writer “I am Nirmal Kumar Ray… I am just an ordinary man.” The writer says. Walk! Be on the road. For us, there is
only the road we shall walk. We are the cursed spirits of Sisyphus. We have to push the rock to the top even if it just rolls down.

The play ends with the song by all the three – The writer, Manasi and Indrajit, suggesting the endlessness of the stream of life, perennial struggle for perfection and incessant devotion to duty.

And hence
There’s no end
There’s no hope
Of fulfillment
By the holy shine
At the journey’s end.
Forget the grief
And have faith
In the road
The endless road, No shrine for us
No God for us
But the road
The endless road
(Sircar Badal 1999:60)

As Nandkumar says, “Like the mythical rebel Meghned, Indrajit stands against the whole social set up and system and boldly negates the rules and taboos. He actually represents the depressed and frustrated youngmen who inspite their high educational qualification and middle class status in society, move here and there in search of some
respectable position” (Nandkumar 2003:192). Unlike Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar makes use of myths as a technique rather than as theme. Badal Sircar has not delved into mythology in search of theme; he uses the mythical name ‘Indrajit’, Ravan’s invincible son and erects the plan around him dramatizing suffocation, depression and frustration among highly educated youngmen of middle class Indian society.

**Snehalata Reddy’s Sita**

Snehalata Reddy was a social activist, rebelling against patriarchy, the British rule in India and all forms of discriminations. She was a dancer, actor and ardent social activist who was deeply inspired by Gandhiji and Ram Manohar Lohia, in whom she found a reasonance of Gandhijian thought, a kindred soul and an ideological basis for the revolutionary transformation that India needed. She was influenced by the ideas of Ram Manohar Lohia, and Simone Beauvior and her husband Pattabhi Ram Reddy who was a film director. Snehalata Reddy’s play *Sita* in two acts (1973) is a radical and controversial play on the theme of exploitation of women in Indian society. Her play is a comment on the Man-woman relationship embedded in the mythical ideal couple Ram – Sita.

The play *Sita* deals with the treatment of Sita at the hands of Ram after she is rescued from Ravan’s cluthes. Snehalata Reddy portrays Sita as a victim of male prerogatives. Ram and Sita in the play are individual human beings in the modern terms and not as mythic
symbolic characters of the epic. The play endeavours to uphold the right of Sita as wife, as an individual and as a woman.

The play radically revises ‘Agni Pariksha’ (Fire ordeal) scene, in which an angry Sita rejects Ram, his Dharma and his ‘trial by fire’. The play was performed extensively by radical political activists in south India.

Reddy’s Sita is shocked when Ram rejects her after the Lanka war. She starts musing over Ravan’s caring attitude, that he never forced himself on her. She wonders whether she did the right thing in rejecting Ravan and preserving herself for Ram. Ram does not seem to understand respect or care for her in the same way. Embittered she exclaims,

“Remember me not as a goddess of virtue but as a defenseless woman fighting for her self respect. History has never recorded the whole truth. They will gloss over my suffering and camouflage their sins with my submissiveness and devotion. I know that the world will not change overnight... If I dare now, more women will dare... I hope and pray that, by exposing your masculine pomposity, absurdity and injustice, who knows I may be able to sow the first seed of revolution”

(As quoted by Deepti Priya Mehrotra in “Reinterpreting Ramayana”)

(http://www.boloji.com/index.cfm?md=content&sd=Articles & Article ID = 753)
Ram, enraged by Sita’s words, says, “Come to your senses! My word is law! I cannot take it back… If you do not do your duty, I must reject you!

Sita : (fiercely)- How dare you! It is I who reject you….

Nandana Reddy, daughter of Snehalata Reddy writes,

“My mother wrote a play just before she died, called ‘Sita’ In this play Ravan is the hero, not Ram. My mother felt that Ravan was the superior human being as he was capable of love. He was willing to risk his kingdom for Sita, whereas Ram sacrificed Sita for his kingdom. Ram followed the liberation ethic without respecting the egalitarian ethic and he subjected Sita to the worst form of humiliation and subjugation. Ravan on the other hand, balanced and internalized an integrated ethic that combined the two and that was expressed in the powerful force of love”.


The conflict in the play Sita centres around Ram’s duty as husband and lover, his duty as king in the illustrious line of Raghu, his duty as the male prerogative and the misconception of Dharma.

“Sita: I am not afraid of death Laxmana, but I am afraid of the fraud that will be perpetuated in the name of Ramarajya! In the name of Dharma! I am afraid of this awesome male domination and the helpless, pathetic and unbelievable martyrdom of women… This king you all
worship, is a cruel, heartless tyrant. For the sake of his glory, he wants to sacrifice your queen (turning to the audience) I beg all of you to fight this injustice and not submit to it. We women have been kept under the yoke for centuries in the name of dharma. Please remember my pain, my rejection, my humiliation – for they will bury it all in silence. Remember me not as a goddess of virtue, but as a defenseless woman fighting for her self respect. History has never recorded the whole truth. They will gloss over my suffering and camouflage their sins with my submissiveness and devotion. I know that world will not change overnight. If I dare now, more women will dare.

(from an Article by Linda Hess in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67/1 (http://www.academicroom.com/article/rejecting sita-indian responses)

Snehalata Reddy’s play *Sita* reminds us of the Telugu writer Gudipati Venkatachalam (1924 play *Sita Agni Pravesham* (Translated into English from Telugu by Sailaza Easwari Pal with the title “Sita enters the fire) Where in Chalam rewrites the episode of the ordeal by fire in which Sita’s chastity is tested. Sita outrightly rejects Ram when he orders for second trial by fire. She refuses to be renounced by Ram. Sita praises Ravan for his true love for her, who lost everything in life, to gain her love. Instead of undergoing the fire ordeal, Sita enters the fire – the funeral pyre of Ravan.)
Sita in the play revolts against Ram and his Dharma in bitterness and anger. Sita rejects Ram as a husband, lover and as a father of her unborn children. In the end in order to expose masculine pomposity, absurdity and injustice she burns herself on Ravan’s funeral pyre. The play is almost the first feminist response to Sita’s story in *The Ramayana*, which totally reverses the traditional account.

Sita’s Promise is a bold digression from the epic theme of *The Ramayana*.

Uma Parameswaran’s play, *Sita’s Promise* (1981) is a dance drama. The main characters of the play – Ram, Sita and Lakshman have been taken from *The Ramayana*. The story is purely imaginary, though there are abundant mythical references. As Uma Parameswaran herself comments on her play, it is only a point of coincidence with the original epic that Ram was exiled for fourteen years.

Uma Parameswaran’s characterization of Ram is interpretive not traditional. We see in the play, Ram’s growth from a narrow preoccupation with codes of kingship to awareness of what is it to be human to a point where he rises to realize his divine mission.

The play opens with the appearance of the Narrator the stage, who offers his salutations to Goddess Lakshmi, consort of Vishnu. Then he narrates the incident of Ram’s banishment for fourteen years by his father king Dasharatha, at the behest of his youngest queen Kaikeyi,
who wanted to secure the throne of Ayodhya for her son Bharata. Ram leaves for forest along with Sita, and brother Lakshman. Ram Lakshman and Sita travel far and wide in the forests of India help the wise and holymen and kill the demons who spoil the holy rituals of the sages. From the eleventh year onwards, the story runs as follows:

Lakshman appears on the stage with a bird in his hand, uttering to himself that Sita would be pleased to see the bird and have it. Ram looks worried to see their children like behavior and thinks how Sita will take up the role of the queen after returning to Ayodhya. He says, “A queen must have the majesty of Goddess Shakti, the compassion of Goddess Sri, She should be mother to the highest and the lowliest.”

Lakshman offers the bird to Sita who feels extremely delighted and commits to take care of the bird.

Sita in scene II is presented as a change-loving girl. She is contrasted with the ideal ‘Sita’, depicted in *The Ramayana*. She complains to Ram.

“Can’t I be bored with our routine here and still not look forward to the duties that await us? Can’t I long for something else, to see the world? We don’t have much time and there is so much to see. So many lands so many peoples, so many skies so many birds”

(Parameswaran Uma 1998:49,50)
Lakshman brings an injured Arctic tern for Sita. Sita is curious to know about it. Ram tells them that the bird belongs to the countries of the west, its destination now is the primeval ocean where Lord Vishnu reposes on snake Adishesha. Here Uma Parameswaran intelligently associates the bird with Lord Vishnu and Snake Adishesha with a view to acquainting the people of west (Particularly Canadians) with Indian mythology. Sita expresses her eagerness to go to the place. Ram says “Even had we the wings of an Eagle, it would take us two months to fly there” (Sita refers to mythical Jatayu bird and says that Jatayu, the king of Eagles would carry them. Ram brushes aside Sita’s suggestion saying that they don’t have time as they still have to visit sage Agastya and then proceed to Ayodhya” Sita remarks, “Once we return, we shall never be able to get away” (Parameswaran Uma 1998:51) Sita’s remark is indicative of the facts that she has followed Ram to the forest for a change and for enjoyment rather than as her duty to follow her husband. Here the character of Sita is shown in sharp contrast with Mythical Sita.

In scence III, Sita meets a gypsy Queen who convinces her that their fortune telling never goes wrong. Sita wants to show her palm to the Gypsy Queen, but Ram forbids her saying that it is not for man to know his future as he has been given memory to learn the past but has not been given eyes to see into the future as it is good to accept each day as it comes so that he works with hope.
In scene IV, Ram replies convincingly to Sita’s questions, “Why did we climb this steep hill?”

Ram replies, “It is human nature to climb ever high hill one sees, to swim every deep river one comes across. There is something in us that drives us to undertake more than seems possible.”

(Parameswaran Uma 1998:52).

In the latter part of the scene, the writer presents her thought providing dialogue on duty. Ram says, “It is weakness to let emotions rule instead of reasons, to let desire rule instead of duty”. Lakshman’s reaction to the remark of Ram is a bold digression from the original theme of The Ramayana, Lakshman says,

Oh, you talk by the book, Ram always by the book. Everything you do, you do because it is your duty not because you enjoy it, not for itself. You help the hermits not because you admire their renunciation, but because it is your duty, you risk your life fighting demons not because you are angry at their vileness but because of duty, you love your wife not because she is so lovely, so pure, so devoted, but because it is your duty. If your book ever told you she was impure, you’d act by the book and abandon her though every beat of your heart, every nerve in your body cried out in protest. Oh! Ram, who are you to preach, you who have never felt temptation or the sorrows of separation never felt torn between love and duty?
Ram tries to convince his brother Lakshman that duty always comes first and that is why Lakshman, forsaking the pleasures of the rich palace followed Ram to the forest. To this, Lakshman replies,

_No Ram. It was not my sense of duty but my love for you. My duty was to my mother and yours, who all of a sudden were left childless, my duty was to my father, who might have lived had I been there to comfort him, my duty was to my wife, whose youth I have abandoned to fade and wilt, in solitude and barrenness. What can you know of the soul’s anguish or the body’s hungers, my noble brother, you whom God has blessed with his perpetual presence and your wife’s_

Ram is convinced by Lakshman’s words admitting that though sages have given him knowledge, whatever little wisdom he has received, is from Sita and Lakshman. Ram at last agrees to visit the far north region and take the bird to its home.

In the sixth scene, Ram, Sita and Lakshman reach the northern mountain regions. They see the summer palace of king Himavan. Sita enjoys the beauty of Nature. Sita feels guilty and sad that Urmila Lakshman’s wife never enjoyed moving into beautiful nature. Lakshman expresses his love for Urmila and says, he is nothing without Urmila.
In scene VII, Ram and Laxmana are welcomed by king Himavan. In scene IX, Jatayu carries them to the shores of the primeval ocean, called Lake Agassiz. Sita leaves the Arctic tern (little bird) there. In scene XI, Sita appears surrounded by Native children who believe that flowers grow wherever Sita goes. Children request Sita to stay with them for some more time. Sita is sad that she cannot stay with them for long. A child says “If you must go, promise, you will come back to us”. To this Sita says,

I promise that children! I shall come again to this lovely land of lakes and blue skies and snow. I, through my people, shall surely come again and we shall build our temple and sing our songs with all the children of all different lands who make this their home.

(Parameswaran Uma 1998: 62)

Myths are used in the play but are changed by the dramatist according to her own choice and requirement. Here Ram is not the incarnation of Vishnu, but Vishnu’s son.

The writer concentrates on dance and myths. The play links epic India with modern Canada through myth and dance. As S. Usha Kalyani Says,

The play Sita’s Promise presents Ram, Sita and Lakshman in their elevenths year of exile, travelling for and wide through the forest, helping the holy men who live in hermitage. The characters from legends are not
some remote concoctions but symbols, possessing psychological validity when seen against the contemporary background. The play has veiled reference to exile, alienation and migration. The pain of exile of Ram, Sita and Laxmana from their home and nostalgia are also typical of immigrant mentality”.

(Balachandran K 2004:179)
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