

SUBVERSIVE SITA: REWRITING MYTH AND RECLAIMING AGENCY THROUGH THIRD-WAVE FEMINIST LENS IN *SITA SINGS THE BLUES*

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ABSTRACT

Nina Paley's Sita Sings the Blues (2008) serves as a radical feminist reimagining of the Hindu epic Ramayana, offering a powerful critique of patriarchal myth-making through the lens of third-wave feminism. By juxtaposing ancient narrative with modern storytelling techniques, interweaving personal and mythic tales, and utilizing the emotive voice of 1920s jazz singer Annette Hanshaw, Paley reconstructs the figure of Sita from a passive, obedient wife into a symbol of resilience, agency, and ironic self-awareness. This paper examines how Sita Sings the Blues employs feminist revisionism to subvert dominant mythological paradigms, particularly through narrative fragmentation, visual satire, and intersectional perspectives. The analysis positions the film as a postmodern feminist intervention that not only critiques gender norms but also raises questions about authorship, cultural identity, and the reclamation of historical female voices in a digital age.

KEYWORDS: *Sita, Ramayana, Feminist Revisionism, Third-Wave Feminism, Nina Paley, Animation, Mythology, Gender, Postmodernism, Cultural Critique etc.*

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INTRODUCTION

Summary of *Sita Sings the Blues*

Sita Sings the Blues is an animated feature film by American cartoonist Nina Paley that retells the Indian epic *Ramayana*, focusing on the story of Sita, the wife of Rama. The film presents parallel narratives: the traditional myth of Sita's devotion to Rama, the autobiographical story of Paley's own heartbreak and abandonment, and a series of musical interludes featuring Sita singing 1920s jazz standards by Annette Hanshaw. The film employs multiple animation styles and interweaves commentary from three shadow puppet narrators who humorously and ambiguously interpret the story. These components collectively critique the gender roles and societal expectations imposed on women across history and culture.

CHARACTERS IN *SITA SINGS THE BLUES*

1. Sita: The Subversive Devotee

Sita stands at the center of both the traditional *Ramayana* narrative and Paley's feminist revision. While the original epic valorizes Sita as the epitome of wifely devotion, Paley reimagines her as a complex, multifaceted figure who oscillates between traditional submissiveness and ironic resistance.

In Paley's portrayal, Sita is visually represented in a stylized, Rajput-miniature-inspired animation, emphasizing her divine yet aestheticized femininity. However, her inner voice—expressed through 1920s jazz songs—challenges this visual docility. For example, in the musical number “*Mean to Me*”, Sita croons with palpable pain and sarcasm as Rama repeatedly questions her chastity and abandons her, revealing an inner emotional life that is suppressed in the epic (Paley, 2008, 23:00–25:00).

Her repeated trials such as walking through fire, living in exile while pregnant, and being cast out again etc. are not valorized but interrogated. Paley's Sita becomes a vessel for feminist critique, highlighting how women are historically punished for male insecurities and social reputation. The juxtaposition of her ornamental, traditional depiction with the bluesy jazz tracks vocalized through Annette Hanshaw constructs Sita as both a tragic and defiant figure—a woman caught in the snare of myth but not silent within it.

“She's loyal. She's pure. She's suffering. But she's also singing these heartbreak songs that are so rich with irony.” (Banerjee, 2014, p. 65)

2. Rama: The Problematic Ideal

Rama, traditionally celebrated as *Maryada Purushottam* (the ideal man), is rendered by Paley as emotionally cold, suspicious, and image-obsessed. His adherence to social dharma comes at the cost of personal empathy and marital loyalty.

Visually, Rama is depicted with limited expressions and stiff gestures—symbolizing his rigidity. His moral uprightness appears performative, as seen when he rejects Sita post-rescue: “The people of Ayodhya doubt your purity.” (Paley, 2008, 28:35). Rather than confronting the dissonance between love and public opinion, Rama consistently chooses political correctness over emotional truth, rendering him a representative of patriarchal double standards.

This portrayal is particularly resonant with third-wave feminist critiques of institutionalized male virtue that masks systemic control over female sexuality. Paley's Rama is not evil, but indifferent—making him a more unsettling figure, for he embodies the normalized tyranny of expectations that govern female behavior in myth and society.

“In his obsessive need to uphold his image, Rama fails Sita—and in doing so, the ideal man becomes a symbol of systemic misogyny.” (Kapur, 2005, p. 113)

3. Nina: The Contemporary Echo of Sita

Nina is Paley's autobiographical stand-in, whose story of abandonment by her partner Dave mirrors Sita's betrayal. Her narrative arc is rendered in fluid, sketchy animation indicating emotional vulnerability and the rawness of modern heartbreak. Nina's subplot humanizes the divine tragedy by grounding it in everyday experience: relocation, distance, emotional detachment.

By paralleling Nina's story with Sita's, Paley underscores the timelessness of female abandonment and the continuity of emotional trauma across time and culture. Nina's story is not just a modern interpretation but it's a testimonial. It also reflects third-wave feminism's embrace of personal narrative as a legitimate form of political expression.

In a meta-feminist gesture, Nina both controls the narrative (as animator and filmmaker) and becomes subject to it (as heartbroken woman), demonstrating the contradictions and multiplicity within feminist self-expression.

“By collapsing the gap between the ancient and the modern, Paley turns Sita’s epic suffering into a contemporary woman’s heartbreakreclaiming myth as emotional truth.” (Butler, 2006, p. 147)

4. Shadow Puppets: The Deconstructionists

The three Indonesian shadow puppets (two male, one female) serve as informal narrators of the *Ramayana*. Their casual, often conflicting retellings destabilize the assumed clarity and sanctity of the myth. The narrators openly admit forgetting details through “I thought Sita went into the fire after that? No wait, maybe before?” (Paley, 2008, 14:22)underscoring the fallibility and subjectivity of cultural memory.

These narrators symbolize the postmodern, third-wave impulse to interrogate fixed narratives and truth-claims. They add a layer of humor and skepticism to the film, allowing viewers to reflect critically on how mythology is constructed and perpetuated. Their presence mocks the rigidity of traditional storytelling and encourages reinterpretation.

This form of narrative polyphony aligns with Bakhtinian dialogism: multiple voices interacting without a central authority. The shadow puppets illustrate that myths are not divine truths but contested interpretations shaped by memory, power, and social norms.

“The puppets are not narrators of truth, but commentators of confusionexposing the myth as an ideological artifact.” (Rajan, 1998, p. WS36)

5. Annette Hanshaw’s Voice: The Sonic Soul of Sita

Annette Hanshaw, a 1920s jazz singer known for her emotive and ironic tone, provides the singing voice for Sita in musical interludes. These interludes are neither mere embellishments nor anachronistic experiments but they are integral to Sita’s character development.

Through songs like “*What Wouldn't I Do for That Man*” and “*Am I Blue?*”, Sita articulates grief, longing, and betrayal with nuanced self-awareness. The irony of a flapper-era jazz voice singing in the context of an ancient Indian epic deepens the universality of female suffering and critiques the idea that love must entail suffering.

The emotional inflection and gentle sarcasm in Hanshaw’s vocals transform Sita from a silent sufferer into a woman who articulates her disillusionment without losing her dignity. Music becomes Sita’s subversive voice i.e. a voice denied to her in the original epic.

“Hanshaw’s voice gives Sita a feminist soundtrack which is an emotional range that allows pain and irony to coexist.” (Banerjee, 2014, p. 69)

Each character in *Sita Sings the Blues* functions as a symbolic agent within a broader feminist critique. Sita becomes the epic’s unwritten subtext brought to light. Rama is stripped of sanctified heroism. Nina bridges the personal and the mythic. The shadow puppets mock narrative authority. Annette Hanshaw’s voice reclaims emotional expression.

Together, these characters dismantle the idealized, patriarchal portrait of the *Ramayana* and reconstruct it as a narrative of emotional truth, irony, and feminist resistance. In this film, character is not static—it is a site of struggle, redefinition, and liberation.

Introduction: Myth, Memory, and Modernity

Mythology is not merely a repository of ancient tales; it is a living discourse, constantly reshaped by memory, culture, and politics. In India, the *Ramayana* has long shaped gender ideals, portraying Sita as the paragon of female virtue like obedient, loyal, and self-sacrificing. However, these mythic constructs continue to influence contemporary gender roles, often uncritically. As modernity confronts tradition, artists like Nina Paley question whose voices are preserved in myth and whose are silenced. Through animation and irony, *Sita Sings the Blues* revisits the *Ramayana* to foreground memory both personal and collective as a site of feminist struggle and artistic intervention.

Feminist Revisionism in Mythological Retellings

Feminist revisionism seeks to reclaim female figures from canonical texts by reinterpreting them in ways that resist patriarchal readings. As Adrienne Rich posits, re-visioning is “an act of survival” for women who must reinterpret history to locate agency within it. In Indian literature, retellings of Sita’s story have been a battleground for feminist resistance, from Volga’s *The Liberation of Sita* to Samhita Arni’s *Sita’s Ramayana*. Paley’s retelling contributes to this tradition by infusing the tale with satire, irony, and contemporary relevance. Her film critiques the cultural romanticization of suffering and instead portrays Sita’s trials as systemic gender oppression.

Sita and Third-Wave Feminism: Subversion of the Ideal Wife

Third-wave feminism, emerging in the 1990s, emphasizes intersectionality, individuality, and resistance to essentialist views of womanhood. It embraces ambiguity, hybridity, and diverse expressions of identity. Paley’s *Sita* embodies these qualities as she is both traditional and rebellious, emotional and ironic. By giving Sita a voice through jazz songs that lament abandonment and celebrate self-worth, the film subverts the notion of Sita as the eternally submissive wife. Her repeated return to Rama despite his cruelty is framed not as virtue but as tragic social conditioning. Ultimately, Sita’s character becomes a critique of how cultural ideals imprison women within roles of passive devotion.

Visual Irony and Narrative Polyphony in Paley’s Animation

Paley uses a multiplicity of visual styles to differentiate narrative layers and create critical distance. These include traditional Rajput painting-inspired figures, vector-based modern animation, and silhouette puppetry. This narrative polyphony serves to deconstruct the authority of the single, “truthful” narrative. The three shadow puppets, who serve as unreliable narrators, frequently contradict one another and forget details, symbolizing the fragmented, contested nature of myth. This visual and narrative collage reflects postmodern skepticism of grand narratives and encourages viewers to question dominant cultural interpretations.

Voice, Music, and Emotion: The Jazz Motif as Feminist Expression

The use of Annette Hanshaw’s 1920s jazz songs such as melancholic, witty, and emotionally rich etc. gives Sita an expressive voice beyond her traditional constraints. Songs like “Mean to Me” and “Am I Blue?” offer Sita a space to articulate emotional pain while also subverting it through irony. Jazz, a genre historically associated with female expression in the face of male betrayal, becomes a transhistorical feminist language in the film. This sonic layer undermines the stoic portrayal of Sita in classical texts and allows for a cathartic, self-aware emotional discourse.

Reception, Controversy, and Cultural Critique

Sita Sings the Blues has been widely praised in feminist and artistic circles for its innovation and subversive spirit. However, it also sparked controversy among conservative Hindu groups, who accused Paley of cultural appropriation and blasphemy. Some critiques centered on her status as a Western woman interpreting a sacred Hindu narrative, raising complex questions about cultural ownership, diaspora, and postcolonial critique. Despite these tensions, the film has been lauded for initiating dialogue about gender, tradition, and artistic freedom. It challenges the sanctity of myth as an untouchable cultural artifact, insisting instead on its adaptability and political relevance.

CONCLUSION: RECLAIMING SITA IN THE DIGITAL AGE

In *Sita Sings the Blues*, Nina Paley reclaims a cultural icon and infuses her with modern feminist consciousness, ironic self-awareness, and emotional depth. The film exemplifies third-wave feminism's strategies: hybridity, parody, personal narrative, and intersectionality. By refusing to depict Sita as either wholly submissive or purely rebellious, Paley complicates the binary and presents a figure who resists easy categorization. In the digital age, where traditional stories are constantly reimagined, this film stands as a landmark in the feminist reappropriation of myth. Sita no longer belongs to patriarchy as she sings, speaks, and subverts.

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