



---

**Book Review**

***Sitayan* (1978), Mallika Sengupta**

**Mayuri Bhakat**

---

We find the concept of retelling the stories of classical texts from very early ages, be it European or Indian. For example, Dante was highly influenced by Virgil's concept of the underworld in his one of the most important literary texts, *Aeneid*. Thus, by keeping tradition in his mind, Dante weaved his individual talent to retell the underworld story in his *Inferno* (1321). It is an example from European classical literature. If we come to the field of Indian classical literature, we find that the later writers have often taken some fragments from the great epics to create their own works of art. For example, Kalidasa has been dramatically shattered by the plight of Sakuntala in *Mahabharata*, thus creating his seminal work *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* from a newer perspective.

Similarly, Mallika Sengupta's *Sitayan* (1996) also come in this field of retelling of stories and is also an exceptional one. The very title reflects how it is a replica of the *Ramayana*. This retelling, on the one hand, portrays the classic story of Rama from a different angle and on the other hand, it enforces a feministic approach too. Though we glorify the Victorian women-novelist for bringing this new trend, but women have taken the seat from the classic ages. Sengupta's this text finely weaves stories within a grand story and reflects how Sita has provided the plot of the *Ramayana* for Valmiki to write. Generally, we bypass Sita's contribution and focus on the boon of the God Brahma to Valmiki. From the very beginning to the end of this novel, Sengupta keeps us aware that Sita is the speaker of the incidents that are explained in the *Ramayana*, not Valmiki or Kush and Lab (Ram and Sita's twin sons). This work is highly introspective as it reflects the voice of the marginals, as the women are categorised as subordinate ones. By blending the plight of Sita on the one hand and the struggle of Shambuka and his clan on the other hand, it threads the issues of gender and race to protest against authority and patriarchal institutions. I can trace that Sita and other marginal characters have got the role of anchoring their plight. Thus, it brings the periphery into the centre and ultimately asks for a borderless world.

On the one hand, Shambuka's death by the Aryan king Rama represents a literal death of not only of a person but the death of a non-Aryan clan, which in the end highlights the death of humanity. Similarly, despite being guilty, Sita has to lose her position and power, reflecting the metaphoric death of humanity. By weaving the plot of the love story between Mitra and Shambuka on the one hand and Sita and Rama on the other hand, it again questions the role of women in terms of any race, what I may say is the position of women in the patriarchy. Both these love story has a third person, and what is far more ironic is that both the females (Sita and Mitra) are taken to be guilty, not the men. Both the so-called male partner questions the purity and virginity of the women and also claims that they are the cause of these conflict and war. Mitra is doubly marginalised in her position, which is similar to the black women of Africa and other places. This kind of treatment towards women makes their life vulnerable. This condition and the situation of the women keep them in a blank space of society. Sengupta, in

this book, has tried to point out this blank space and highlights the injustice towards the female, and this injustice, on the one hand, makes the man an incomplete human being, and on the other hand, this injustice leads the women to gain their right and flourishing of humanity.

By using the myth as a guise or trope, here, Sengupta tries to reflect the so-called history from a peripheral position. In the *Ramayana*, we find the supreme glorification of Rama as a son, brother and king, but this text points out the loopholes of the character Rama and also the text *Ramayana* and questions how much apt Rama is in performing the role of husband and father. On the one hand, this text portrays how Rama is drowning himself in the blindness of religion; on the other hand, it portrays the self-realisation of Sita about her identity and existence. This realisation of both characters is simultaneously going on to bring justice and empowerment of women over the rigid patriarchal dogmas. This text somehow problematises to identify, ultimately, who the king is. King is someone who will not be partial and blind with rigidity. Here, Sita surpasses Rama in terms of all these qualities. Though literally, Rama remains the king of the empire, Sita highlights the qualities of a perfect king. She not only invokes the qualities of a perfect king but also highlights the flourishing of humanity. She questions the killing of Shambuka and asks for justice for it. The rearing and growing of the twin son in the hermitage in the father's absence glorify Sita as a single mother. This add-on portrays her multiple potentialities. This text also portrays the characters of Lakshman and Bharata, who are bounded by the promises and thus neglect the plight of Sita.

What is more interesting in this text is that Sengupta brings a beautiful nameless lady twice in front of Sita, who energises her with different thinking and a challenging mindset. I may claim that it is the rational self of Sita, which helps her to destroy the fake veil of the code of conduct. At the end of the text, the presence of this self, helps Sita fight for her right, and she finally leaves the patriarchy at a loss. Thus, I may say that Sengupta's this text is a highly appreciative one which helps us to anchor the perfect point. Sengupta's this work finely approves Helen Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*. In her *The Laugh of Medusa* (1975), Cixous argues that women should take the role to deal with women's issues from a woman's perspective to bring the marginal to the front. Sengupta follows this idea of Cixous; thus, she creates an entirely new world where I can feel the sufferings, pangs, and plights of the female protagonist, Sita. Thus, by invoking a female gaze, Sengupta questions the male supremacy in the *Ramayana*. As Mahasweta Devi, in her *Draupadi* (1978), which is also a contemporary retelling of the plight of Draupadi from the *Mahabharata*, creates her own language of protest, Sengupta, too, does this justice with Sita.

### References

- Aligheiri, D. (1998). *The Inferno* (T. Griffith, Ed.; H. F. Cary, Trans.). Worsworth Editions Limited.
- Cixous, H., Cohen, K., & Cohen, P. (1976). The Laugh of the Medusa. *Signs*, 1(4), 875–893. *English prose Vana parva, part 2*. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Ganguli, K. M. (2018). *The Mahabharata of Krishna-dwaipayana vyasa translated into* <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343169>  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>
- Kalidasa: Vol. I* (pp. 249–354). Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited.
- Kalidasa. (2005). Abhijnana Sakuntalam. In C. R. Devadhar (Ed. & Trans.), *Works of Sengupta, M.* (1978). *Sitayan*. Ananda.
- Spivak, G. C. (1981). "Draupadi" by Mahasweta Devi. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(2), 381–402.
- Valmiki. (1952). *The Ramayana of Valmiki* (H. P. Sastri, Trans.). Shanti Sadan.
- Virgil, V. (1697). *The Aeneid (Dryden trans.)*. P. F. Collier. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/dryden-the-aeneid-dryden-trans>

**Bio-note**

Mayuri Bhakat, a final year M. Phil research scholar in the department of English, Visva Bharati, has completed her Undergraduate and Postgraduate degrees from the same institution. Her M. Phil research area is on Memsahibs writings and British Raj fiction. Her interest lies in Memsahibs literature, Feminism and Gender Studies, Psychoanalysis, Folklore, Dalit Studies, Memory Studies, Partition, Film Studies, Uncanny tales etc. She also works as a guest faculty at a state-aided college in Birbhum, West Bengal.

Email Id: mayuri.bhakat201997@gmail.com

