



The Myth of ‘Sita’ and Gender in Post-Independence Indian Theatre: A Comparative Analysis of Vijay Tendulkar’s *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967) and Girish Karnad’s *Nāga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra* (1988)

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This paper proposes to examine two plays by the leading playwrights of post-independence India—Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad, to analyse how key questions surrounding gender in the contemporary Indian society were prised open via the appropriation of popular depictions/retellings of the female protagonist Sita from the ancient Indian epic poem *Ramayana*. The paper examines Sita not as a textual character but as a myth generated out of pervasive depictions in the sociocultural landscape of India; as a site reconstituted within the social structure reshaped by colonial contact. Through a critical reading of the two plays using the myth of ‘Sita’ as an analytical category, the paper argues how post-independence Indian theatre foregrounded the issue of gender using pervasive and popular mythology, and staked a critical voice in contemporary gender debates.

Keywords: Ramayana, Sita, myth, gender, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Indian Literature.

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Introduction

One of the two major Sanskrit epic poems of ancient India—the *Ramayana*, attributed to Valmiki, and believed to have been composed between 7th century BCE and 3rd century CE, is

perhaps more conspicuous for the living traditions that have built themselves around it, than the scholarly textual tradition. From generating multiple film¹ and television adaptations² to bestselling fiction,³ the trope of

¹ One of the first Indian films to win a global award was *Seeta* (1934) (TV & News, 2014), whereas the upcoming film adaptation by Nitesh Tiwari set to release in 2026 is reportedly India’s most expensive film franchise (Desk, 2025), highlighting the continuing popularity of the epic poem.

² Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayana* which was first aired in 1987 is reportedly “the most-watched TV series in the

world” (ET Online, 2024). Subsequently, the epic has been adapted for Indian television in 1993, 2002, 2008, and 2015 (Asia’s Premier News Agency - India News, Business & Political, National & International, Bollywood, Sports | ANI News, 2022).

³ The Ram Chandra Series by author Amish Tripathi released in 2015 dominated charts of book sales (HT Correspondent, 2017).



the epic continues to pervade debates and diverse interpretations in the ethical-cultural psyche of the contemporary South Asian and Southeast Asian society, and beyond. The scholar-translator A.K. Ramanujan (1991) in his seminal work observes how “[o]ral, written, and performance traditions, phrases, proverbs, and even sneers carry allusions to the Rama story” in the cultural repertoire of South Asia and Southeast Asia (p. 46). The figure of the female protagonist Sita—the consort of the divine prince Rama, has similarly constituted various configurations in the sociocultural domain, from offering an ideal to be emulated to a point of contention in debates over gender, across multiple interpretations and re-readings of the epic poem.

This paper proposes to examine the figure of Sita as a myth, where the term ‘myth’, not only signifies a character from mythology, but a site where multiple gender discourses have converged and contested with each other, resulting in an accretion of meanings. It analyses the re-appropriation of the myth of Sita to negotiate the changing gender discourse in India in the wake of independence from the British rule by analysing the work of two major post-independence playwrights.

Silence! The Court is in Session (1968; trans. 1974) by Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) and *Nāga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra* (1988; trans. 1990) by Girish Karnad (1938-2019), were both written in the decades following the independence of India from British rule in 1947. In the history of post-independence theatre, the two plays spearhead two diverse directions that were chalked out for the new literature of the country. The first direction involved the development of urban theatre in the realistic proscenium theatre tradition that would respond to the issues, challenges, and changing landscapes of ‘modern’ India. The other direction, in which Karnad writes, sought to reform national tradition by reviving its roots—its folk literary and artistic traditions whose development had been frustrated by and/or during the colonial interregnum. In this sense, the two plays seem to represent and contribute to two different literary trends in post-

independence Indian theatre. Yet, the questions they responded to were not very different.

Nāga-Mandala and *Silence! The Court is in Session* both revolved around the ‘woman’s question’. Both challenged the existing socio-psychological conventions that positioned women at the losing end of the power bargain. Pertinently, the common thematic choice of the two plays highlights that, at the crucial transformative moment in the history of the country, gender recurs as the preferred site for conducting a renegotiation of identity and power relations.

Materials and Methods

To analyse the two plays, this paper reviews the ideological debates underscoring the reshaping of the sociocultural space in the decades preceding independence in India. These debates attempted to shape the identity of a new independent India on one hand, while reinscribing gender in various domains on the other. The paper contextualizes the myth of Sita within these ideological debates to infer how the use of the trope of Sita in Indian theatre allows the mapping of gender in post-independence society.

The emergence of anti-British sentiment in the late nineteenth century led to a redefinition of the ideological space of the feminine as the repository of tradition and spirituality. Females were assigned the prime responsibility of safeguarding these virtues in the private sphere as it was this that would help combat the onslaught of the West (Chatterjee 1989). Besides, a redefinition of the ideal of the woman in the figure of the devoted wife-mother (Sarkar 1995), educational reforms aimed at empowering women while idealising their role within the household (Majumdar 2009), as well as the creation of the conjugal family as a unit of governance resulting in the determination of the legal status of women with regard to their position as wives, widows or concubines (Sreenivas 2009), were aspects that reconstituted the figure of the woman during this time.

At the same time, the nationalist struggle resulted in the call for women to emulate the figure of the militant goddess to reclaim the lost pride and independence of the nation. A potentially major step in the history of women's struggle dissipated in the post-independence period, when women were forced to retrace their steps back to their former traditional roles.

Post-independence negotiations of gender emerge in the wake of the impact of the changed ideal of a woman, the new political consciousness of the woman post the independence struggle, as well as the economic independence afforded to woman as an educated female, on one hand, and as the epicentre of the conjugal family in contrast to the joint family, on the other. These were also impacted by the emerging significance of the individual under the lingering impact of bourgeois humanism. In brief, the woman as an individual located in the private unit of the conjugal family and as the fosterer of the spiritual sanctity of India's cultural heritage were the chief roles and meanings dominating if not exhausting the category of 'female' post-independence.

I foreground this as one of the chief reasons for the growing affinity of sociocultural ideological debates to the model of the *Ramayana*, during this period. It foregrounds the personal saga of the conjugal unit of the divine prince Lord Rama and Sita, with questions of kingship relegated to the background in popular interpretations. It essentially offers a model of an ideal code of conduct for an individual, without divorcing the individual from the larger social fabric, thereby catering to the shifting needs of the sociocultural landscape.

The post-independence citizen subject was being shaped on one hand by the humanistic idea of the individual as the smallest unit of social organisation, and the need to account for the individual's significance in community on the other, as forces working to shape India into one political entity sought to establish a heightened sense of collectiveness.

While the *Ramayana* and all the characters therein have been subjected to innumerable interpretations, I do not attempt to freeze one set

of interpretations but rather inquire into the set of meanings that became encrusted and dominant at a certain point in history. In no way do I attempt to present this as the only reading of Sita or the *Ramayana*.

Discussion

As Meghnad Desai (2009) puts it, "[s]ociety portrayed in the Mahabharata is sexually open and free with few legitimate sexual unions and many examples of unregulated conduct" (pp. 7-8). On the other hand, the idealized pair of Rama and Sita depict restraint, idealized conduct, and regulation of sexuality with a strict observance of monogamy. These dominant values, moreover, are foregrounded through the character of Sita.

The name Sita literally means 'furrow' or 'found in the furrow' (Chandra, 1998). She is identified as the daughter of Earth for two reasons: One, she is found by the tip of a plough in the fields; and, two, she gives up her life by returning to Mother Earth quite literally. The question of Sita's lineage, therefore, is unresolved. In this way, she is fertility incarnate, that is, the association of Sita with not one particular family/ancestry but Nature itself establishes her as a synecdoche for every woman, or womanhood itself. Further, being equated directly with fertility and fecundity, this ideal womanhood is essentialized to its sexual function. In other words, the woman is defined by her sexuality; her reproductive potential. Yet, it is by regulation of the same sexuality that idealness is achieved. This statement has both literal and metaphorical signification. Literally speaking, regulation of sexuality may be observed in Sita when she is able to ward off the sexual advances of the demon king Ravana. She is also one who is in control of her reproductive choices when with her own husband during exile. As Desai (2009) has pointed out, during the twelve years of marriage at home, and thirteen years of exile (before Sita is abducted), Sita does not bear children; she does so only after her husband is secure on a throne (p. 5).

In metaphorical terms, Pattanaik (2009) has equated the regulation of sexuality with regulation of Nature:

The Earth can be wild or domesticated. Wild, she is the forest. Domesticated, she is the field. Wild, she is a woman. Domesticated, she is the wife. In Hindu mythology... [d]omesticated Earth is visualized as Gauri, the goddess of civilization, gentle, demure, beautiful, draped in cloth. Gauri's cloth represents the rules that turn nature into civilization – rules such as marital fidelity, which ensure that even the weakest of men has conjugal security. (p. 18)

The mythical Sita, then, is an ideal wife—the one who embodies civilization by regulating her sexuality.

The ancestry of Rani, the protagonist of *Nāga-Mandala*, is unresolved just like Sita's ancestry. Although there is a reference to Rani's parents, it is cursory and the figures never appear in the entire action of the play. She is first left unnamed and then, symbolically, named Rani or the queen. The narrator introduces Rani in the following terms:

STORY: A young girl. Her name . . . it doesn't matter. But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani. Queen. (Karnad, 1990/2006, p. 6)

Rani's identity is defined in terms of her sexual allure, as the description continues:

... Queen of the whole wide world. Queen of the long tresses. For when her hair was tied up in a knot, it was as though a black King Cobra lay curled on the nape of her neck, coil upon glistening coil. (Karnad, 1990/2006, p. 6)

The allusion to the cobra at this point underlines the overtly sexual description of the woman. No other information about Rani's identity is given except that she was married off by her parents to Appanna. As the action of the play develops, Rani comes across as an obedient and dutiful wife silently suffering the injustice meted out to her. Every afternoon, Appanna comes home for lunch, subsequently locks up Rani, and leaves to

be with his concubine. The lock on the house serves to confine and restrict Rani's alluring sexuality. She, on the other hand, has no knowledge of her husband's whereabouts. In simple terms, the confinement denotes not only a regulation of sexuality, but a frustration of Rani's capacity for knowledge.

The echoes of Sita are not far. Two major episodes of the Ramayana are reflected here: first, Sita's confinement to the hut in the forest when Rama and Lakshman go in pursuit of the golden deer; second, when Sita is confined to the Ashok Vatika in Lanka. In both cases, moreover, the boundary functions both to maintain Sita's chastity as well as to make her vulnerable; as if the confinement becomes a signpost for possible vulnerability. In Rani's case, the confinement leads to intensification of the desire to know. Knowledge does not act as the opposite of sexuality here, falling into the binary logic of mind versus body. Rather, the knowledge desired is that of sexual awareness following a heightened sexual vulnerability. The episode of the golden deer stands as one of the rare instances where Sita gets projected as unreasonable and straying from ideal thought and behaviour. It is interpreted as an irrational demand, which the dutiful husband Rama seeks to fulfil. In the context of this discussion, it may be interpreted as a sign of heightened vulnerability following a desire to step outside the constraints of civilization which represents the domestication of primal impulses.

The heightening of sexual vulnerability is hinted when Kurudavva gives a love root to Rani to prepare a potion out of it. The potion, however, is not taken by the husband but a cobra living in an ant hill outside the house. Rani finally achieves the sexual knowledge unwittingly through an encounter with the cobra who assumes the form of Rani's husband Appanna and visits Rani at night. Following the spotting of a cobra in his courtyard, Appanna brings a fierce dog to keep out the cobra. In other words, the protector attempts to ward off a sexual predator. In the story of Sita, the predator is undoubtedly the demon king Ravana. Yet, the predator is victorious. Here, it implies the loss of

the protector's control over irrepressible sexuality.

Sita cannot be abducted until she steps out of the delimiting threshold. Rani cannot gain sexual knowledge until she is enamoured by the disguised cobra's amorous exhortations. In the case of Sita, the impending loss of control over sexual force is replicated in the surrounding landscape. Abduction takes place when Sita steps out of the palace and in the forest—the wild Nature. But, the case of Rani is different. In Rani's story, the lurking threat surreptitiously enters the household; the domesticated space. This directly reflects the anxieties surrounding sexuality in post-independence India.

Tendulkar's play *Silence! The Court is in Session*, depicts this crisis of the entry of the sexual offender inside the bounds of civilized society. In the eyes of the society, the woman is not cast as the victim but as the instigator of such an offence. This woman is the protagonist Miss Leela Benare. Miss Benare is introduced in the play as a carefree woman who seemingly makes sexual advances towards the unsuspecting village man Samant in the opening scene of the play. The perception of Benare's conduct by other characters of the play represents how a woman's morality is often dependent on her ability to regulate her sexuality.

This argument is further supported by the depiction of Miss Benare as engaged in antics often perceived by other characters as childish. She surprises people by hiding behind doors, enthusiastically plays games, and laughs uncontrollably at serious matters. Such conduct could be interpreted as Benare's innocence. However, this conduct could also symbolise deregulated primal impulses in Benare. The latter interpretation also aligns with the projected image of Benare as a licentious woman in the play—an image that is at odds with interpreting Benare's conduct in terms of innocence. Benare mocks the prudish and uptight Mr. Kashikar, yet she is far from unaffected by her co-actors in the drama company. Benare loves to sing, but her songs speak of deep sorrow, which heightens the paradox at the heart of Benare's self. The exterior of a carefree, chirpy, gregarious personality is fraught with internal anxiety and pain which

issues from being at odds with a hypocritical society that refuses to accept her individuality:

BENARE: ...

Our feet tread on upon unknown
And dangerous pathways
evermore.

Wave after blinded wave is
shattered

Stormily upon the shore.

(Tendulkar, 2003, p. 62)

Just as Benare's internal conflicts break through her cheerful exterior, clandestine discussions about rumours surrounding Benare's chastity break through the genteel surface of small talk and pleasant conversations among the members of the theatre troupe. The action reaches a climax when the troupe decides to conduct a mock trial to explain court proceedings to Samant who has to fill in for the absentee actor Professor Damle. The mock issue taken up is the trial of Miss Benare for the charge of infanticide.

The turn of events leads to the second important episode in the myth of Sita—the episode of the Trial. The first trial is the *agnipareeksha* or Trial by Fire that often represents a metaphor for the strife and suffering of a woman's life in popular debates over gender. In the court of patriarchy, the woman is accountable for her sexual conduct. The presence of fire scaffolds this reading. Fire is generally interpreted as a symbol of one's struggle to uphold one's chastity or integrity by comparison with gold which has to undergo the test of fire to prove its purity. However, I propose to interpret fire as symbolic of passion for the purpose of the current discussion. If Sita can pass the test of fire, it means she was able to protect herself in the presence of potent sexual advances of the mighty and overpowering Ravana, symbolized here by the flames.

This climax is echoed in Rani's story. Rani is impregnated as a result of the sexual encounters with the cobra leaving her absentee husband startled. Appanna's complaint is admitted in the village court and Rani is ordered to undergo the snake ordeal. Rani must hold the King Cobra in her hands, and if it does not bite Rani, her chastity is proved. The scene comes across as a

spitting image of Sita's trial. An overt sexual symbol represents the potential sexual possibilities that the woman should have warded off to retain her position as a wife. Essentially, the woman must prove that she continues to represent domesticated nature and has not given in to her wild desires. Both Sita and Rani emerge from the trial with an unquestionable warrant of their chastity.

But, the case of Miss Benare is different. Miss Benare's trial does not surround the question of whether a sexual offence was committed, but the consequences of one. Miss Benare is charged with infanticide or killing an unborn child. Miss Benare has an illegitimate affair with Professor Damle who already has a wife, and refuses to father Benare's offspring. Benare who does not wish to foster the child as an unmarried mother and avoid the slander of society is charged with committing the murder of the unborn child. In the mock trial, this charge does not revolve so much around the murder of the foetus; rather it focuses on the murder of the sacred concept of motherhood. Motherhood is celebrated as the ultimately empowering state of being for a woman:

SUKHATME: Motherhood is pure... We have acknowledged woman as the mother of mankind. Our culture enjoins us to perpetual worship of her... There is great responsibility devolving upon a mother. (Tendulkar, 2003, p. 79)

Before I further consider its implications for Benare, I would like to pause and return to Sita and Rani.

Sita's second trial in the popular *Ramayana* narrative occurs after the populace of Ayodhya cast aspersions on Sita's purity. Following this, Sita is banished to the forest with the help of Lakshmana. This instance is devoid of any anguished exhortation or effort to return to the palace on Sita's part. The explanation is straightforward: a wife can only exist alongside the husband, but the mother exists alongside the child(ren). In this trial, one sees a transformation in Sita's approach as she questions Rama regarding his unethical and unjust action. In Pattanaik's (2009) words, here Sita becomes Kali

who has "shaken off the mantle of civilization" (p. 20). However, I argue that far from being outside the confines of 'civilized' womanhood, this action secures the triad: regulation of sexuality – trial and punishment for transgression – sexual sublimation through motherhood.

Arguably, this scene in the *Ramayana* is when one sees Sita as an outspoken individual and not merely a dutiful or obedient wife. Paradoxically, this power or independence is not drawn from the heightened sexual potency of the female, but the desexualisation of the woman in the figure of the mother.

After Rani takes her oath with the cobra in her hand, it slides up her shoulder, spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head, and then becomes docile and symbolically hangs limp like a garland in Rani's neck. Very effectively the sexual force has turned tame, it is delegitimized in the self-effacing state of motherhood.

Yet, in Miss Benare's case, it is difficult to ascertain whether she is incriminated for killing a child, or for conceiving one. Miss Benare is accountable for how she has governed her body:

KASHIKAR: . . .

Can you tell the court how you came to stay unmarried to such a mature – such an advanced – age? [Waits; then]...How many chances of marriage have you had so far in your life? And how did you miss them? Tell the court. (Tendulkar, 2003, p. 98)

Later, the charges are read out explicitly:

SUKHATME: Milord, the nature of the charge against the accused Miss Leela Benare, is truly dreadful. The woman who is an accused has made a heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood – which is purer than heaven itself. ... The charge against the accused is one of infanticide. But the accused has committed a far more serious crime. I mean unmarried motherhood. ... Moreover, if the accused's intention of

bringing up the offspring of this unlawful maternity is carried to completion, I have a dreadful fear that the very existence of society is in danger...Woman bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society. (Tendulkar, 2003, p. 115)

In her long soliloquy post the accusation, Benare does not attempt to prove her chastity much like Sita in the second trial. And this is her chief offence. This, however, cannot be equated with eschewing social accountability as Benare does offer an explanation to rationalise her actions. The persisting problem is that her motherhood is unresolved. It does not fulfil the conditions of the economy of sexual power because Benare's motherhood does not lead to a neutralization of her sexual self. It falls outside the social economy of marriage that seeks to regulate and/or confine it.

Though Benare is offered a voice, an opportunity to present her point-of-view, there is no stepping outside the structure of patriarchal control. The defining identity of a woman remains unchanged and the perception towards Miss Benare does not change in the eyes of any character in the play. This effect is further achieved by using the device of a mock trial. Offering Benare an opportunity to voice her perspective is only make-believe; an illusion. Thereby, it is not made clear whether Benare's soliloquy is heard on stage or addressed to other characters, ironically indicating that there is no available position from which a woman may speak; the verdict is passed before she can speak.

The defining elements of womanhood remain untransformed. Sita resists the questioning of her character repeatedly by Rama and prefers to become part of Mother Earth than suffer further humiliation. She merely disappears from the economy of marriage, kinship, and power relations. Karnad offers three alternative endings to Rani's story creating an illusion of choice—by keeping an open ending. But, none of the three endings allow Rani to endorse Naga as her partner of choice, even after she is pronounced to be a goddess. In Rani's case, then, the problem of autonomy is unresolved as she does not step outside, but is reclaimed by and collapses

back into the patriarchal economy. In the case of Benare, while the mock trial ends, there is no judgement pronounced in the real trial; the trial by the society. Benare is still in the liminal space between the approved and the rejected. The question remains: if she carries out the punishment, will she be reclaimed by the economy of (patriarchal) power in the society?

To sum up, when the myth of Sita is used as an analytical strategy, it has two effects. Firstly, it offers a different perspective on the general feminist interpretations of the two texts in question. Secondly, and more importantly, it uncovers how gender and power were negotiated in post-independence India.

Results

The distinction between sex and gender is often laid out thus: while sex is a biological concept, gender is a cultural construct. The analysis of the iconic and pervasive myth of Sita and its impressions on depiction of seemingly feminist characters in post-independence theatre point to a different direction. As Seemanthini Niranjana (2005) points out, “[t]he body, even as a biological entity ... is always mediated through the socio-cultural, such that even one's own experience of the body is invariably through this register. The moral injunctions and norms that are seemingly part of the social realm are, in fact, inseparable from a culture's imaging of the female body” (p. 474). When it comes to the female self, the defining characteristic is the sexed/sexualized body. This sexuality gains legitimacy “only in the context of marriage and [legitimate] childbearing” (Niranjana, 2005, p. 477).

A comparative analysis of the two plays raises the issue whether Rani and Miss Benare are echoes of the age-old heroine Sita. While there may be repetition, it is never a repetition of the same. The two modern heroines of Tendulkar and Karnad set up the stage to open up a dialogue on contemporary gender struggles and to realign the characters of the saga of patriarchy. Their stories bring Sita centre-stage depicting events from her eyes and her vantage point.

In conclusion, the two plays by Tendulkar and Karnad represent the impact of Victorian moral ideals on Indian society during the colonial interregnum that generated a more rigid gender divide. In this context, specific aspects of the character of Sita disseminated through popular retellings came to dominate the sociocultural psyche. The myth of Sita as viewed through the postcolonial and post-independence lens serves as a pertinent and rich cultural metaphor to prise open the complexities surrounding the woman's question in post-independence India. This analysis, on one hand, highlights how the figure of Sita offers itself to multiple discourses and interpretations at different points in history, representing the complexity of the ancient Indian epic *Ramayana*. On the other hand, it establishes how theatre became a site for the staging of contemporary gender debates in post-independence India. In doing so, the playwrights, perhaps, also bridged the tradition-modernity divide, emphasising the continued relevance of cultural myths and symbols in addressing questions of the contemporary society.

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