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## Reinventing Marginalized Voices: A Study of Volga's *The Liberation of Sita and Yashodhara*

By Kumari Ruchi<sup>1</sup> and Smita Jha<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

The corpus of Indian women's literature has the power to define the borders of community, class, and gender. Challenging the existing patriarchal set-up, writers from all corners of the nation speak not only to subvert the patriarchy but also to claim their authority and bring subdued voices to the fore. In Volga's gynocentric retellings of the ancient epic "Ramayana," Volga's *The Liberation of Sita and Yashodhara* deconstruct the traditional epic by recentering female characters that were marginalized in the original. *The Liberation of Sita and Yashodhara* tell the story of Buddha's wife after his unexpected departure, and they exemplify an active remaking of the past, a revision, and a reinvention of tradition. Thus, the author creates a female collective by representing ancient tradition from alternative points of view and networking with women across ages and generations. This paper interprets the depiction of the female characters in the select texts not merely as exalted figures but as bold voices. The female characters of the epic are victims of patriarchy, yet they are not depicted as mere sufferers. The author has given them a strong voice and dignity, narrating words of wisdom which are the result of their experiences of struggle with pain. Hence, the study shows Volga's evolved understanding of feminism as more than a simple conflict between men and women, but a larger issue that cannot simply be reduced to binaries.

**Keywords:** Volga, *Ramayana*, Myths, Epic tradition, Feminist literature, Gynocentrism, Indian literature, Telugu literature

### Introduction

"Male writers are thought of as 'writers' first and then 'men.' As for female writers, they are first 'female' and only then 'writers'" (Shafak 39). The art of revisioning and renewing the past involves conceiving alternatives to the same story and challenging its established notions. The story of Valmiki's epic *Ramayana*<sup>3</sup> has been in circulation for years with many critical views, analyses, and discussions. Many writers and theorists have talked about the retelling of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*<sup>4</sup> along with the feminist retelling of the characters of

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<sup>3</sup> *Ramayana* is a Sanskrit epic from ancient India written by Valmiki. It is based on the life of Lord Rama, the prince of Ayodhya. The epic belongs to the genre of *Itihasa*, narratives of past events (*purāṅgata*), interspersed with teachings on the goals of human life. Scholars' estimates for the earliest stage of the text range from the 7th to 4th centuries BCE, with later stages extending up to the 3rd century CE.

<sup>4</sup> *Mahabharata* (Sanskrit: "Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty") is one of the two Sanskrit epic poems of ancient India, the other being the *Ramayana*. It narrates the great Kurukshetra War between two groups of cousins, the

Sita, Draupadi,<sup>5</sup> and in recent years, Yashodhara.<sup>6</sup> As Adrienne Rich remarks in her essay, “When We Dead Awaken, Writing as Re-Vision,” to reassert the dormant voices of the past, revisions should allow readers to “know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on the tradition but to break its hold over us” (Rich 19). The literature on reconstructing or re-visioning myths is abundant; however, most of them are by male writers, frequently repetitive, and generally casting women as minor, supporting characters to heighten the image of the heroic male lead. In the preface to her book, *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree*, Sudha Murty talks about her disappointment after she researched books about women in mythology. Wendy Garling in her scholarly work composes the narrative of her book with the intention “that these forgotten stories be reclaimed by Buddhist women and reintroduced into mainstream Buddhism (Garling 3).

By forging a bond among the minor characters with the protagonist Sita, Volga, a revolutionary Telugu writer, stresses the importance of the female collective to elevate the oeuvre of Indian women’s writing. She has used deconstruction as a tool to discover the true significance of old, epic texts by breaking them down. Although Sita’s role in the *Ramayana* has always been at the apex and her position that of a goddess, ironically, she has been deprived of deserved recognition and has been perpetually forced to prove her innocence. To rejuvenate the female characters from the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, many writers have written deconstructed plots in their English-language novels. In addition to the male writers who have offered popular renditions of female mythic characters such as Sita (see Devdutt Pattanaik’s *The Girl Who Chose* and Amish Tripathi’s *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*), female writers have offered more diverse examples of such re-envisioned female characters. These include *Mandodari: Queen of Lanka* by Manini J. Anandani, *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* by Amruta Patil, *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree: Unusual Tales about Women in Mythology* by Sudha Murty, *Lanka’s Princess* and *Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen* by Kavita Kane.

Putting women in a homogeneous category defies the foundation of feminism which includes a diverse range of religions, races, classes, castes, genders, and sexualities. With her provocative writing, Volga impels the readers to think and question age-old stereotypical concepts and to modify them according to our contemporary understanding. As Volga stated, “it is only through experience that one understands the truth” (Volga, *Liberation*, 48). Though there is the presence of revolution, challenge, denial of a fixed authority, and radical voice in Volga’s texts, she does not follow the stereotypical image of feminists as fireballs tumbling over to seek revenge from the men. The beauty of her writing lies not in the decorative language or varied use of figures of speech but in the boldness of her views and plotline. Volga strongly believes in women’s active participation in politics as it will give them the power to reconstruct and modify the structure of society.

Similarly, unlike other writers who offer detailed lamentations of Yashodhara, Volga neither villainizes the role of Buddha<sup>7</sup> nor turns Yashodhara into a victim. Instead, she depicts

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Kaurava and the Pandava. It is not merely a mythical epic but the ground and benchmark of politics, strategies of war, philosophical discussions, familial relationships, and life lessons.

<sup>5</sup> In *Mahabharata*, the character of Draupadi is popular for her marriage to five husbands. When Draupadi married Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers, he took her to meet his mother, Kunti. Kunti did not see her and made the grave mistake of interpreting Draupadi as an object and ordered Arjuna to distribute “it” among all five brothers. Thus, Draupadi is famously known as *panchali*, the wife of five husbands for her supposed polyandry. Many works have been written on Draupadi in the modern age, voicing her narrative in different ways.

<sup>6</sup> Yashodhara is the wife of Prince Siddhartha who later became the Buddha. Later Yashodhara is said to have followed the path of Buddhism, turning into a Buddhist Nun. They had a son named Rahul who also followed the path of Buddhism.

<sup>7</sup> Buddha (also called Gautama Buddha; Siddhārtha Gautama, Shakyamuni, and The Buddha) was an ascetic and spiritual teacher of South Asia who lived during the 6th or 5th century BCE. He was the founder of Buddhism and

the union of Buddha and Yashodhara as a sincere and beautiful amalgamation of husband and wife which motivated Siddhartha<sup>8</sup> to turn into Buddha and Yashodhara to become the Yasho Buddha. The misconception about women taught to Siddhartha by the monks at the *sangha* baffled him, and he could not reach clarity on his own. After the arrival of Yashodhara in his life, she guided Siddhartha on the path of awakening, with a specific emphasis on women, not just as a subordinate gender but as possessing sense and individuality. Yashodhara was depicted as a bold woman who chose her own suitor for marriage and approached Siddhartha, placing flowers in his palm.

This paper is an attempt to examine and analyze the deconstruction of the marginalized female characters from myths and history in Volga's works such as *The Liberation of Sita* and *Yashodhara*, women who are otherwise relegated to the sidelines in the original texts. It emphasizes the deconstructed narrative and the voice of the popular character of Sita and a few other marginalized female characters in *Ramayana*. This paper analyzes Volga's re-envisioning of the subdued story of Yashodhara who was previously seen only as the wife of Gautam Buddha. The motive is to study the concept of revision used by Adrienne Rich in her essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," to focus on the delineation of old stories from ancient myths retold. By highlighting the minor female characters in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, this paper stresses the importance of a female collective in Indian women's writing.

### **Volga: Voicing the Marginalized**

Volga, the pen name of Popuri Lalita Kumari, is one of the most significant figures in contemporary Telugu literature, known for her feisty writing and bold remarks. Presently the executive chairperson and founding member of Asmita Resource Center for Women, Volga has a record of nearly fifty publications including novels, plays, short story collections, poetry as well as translations. The recipient of several awards, Volga received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2015 for her novel, *Vimuktha*, published in English as *The Liberation of Sita*. Her work ranges from deconstructing the narrative of women in the myths to feminist political praxis in Andhra Pradesh, India. Her novel, *Sweccha*, focuses on the problems faced by middle-class women, which created not only a wave in favor of Indian women's writing but also huge controversy in the Telugu belt. Along with being a writer, Volga has also been considered an activist, as revolutionary ideas run through her writings. She uses creativity to address many social issues, making her work effective as both literary fiction and political discourse.

Volga strives to create a female collective that transcends victimhood; her female characters are strong, independent, mature women who, despite their struggles with injustice due to patriarchy, make paths for their own lives. She challenges the notion that women are unable to peacefully coexist and redefines the shape of sisterhood that is often treated with suspicion. In the chapter, "The Reunion," Sita and Surpanakha strike a bond not as victims of patriarchy but as two mature women pursuing sisterhood. Volga represents sisterhood as the best path to emancipation for women. In *Yashodhara*, Kusala<sup>9</sup> was the one who witnessed Yashodhara's gradual transformation into Yasho Buddha and accompanied her on the journey of serving humanity. After Yashodhara breathes her last breath, she vows to convey the narrative of her journey to the world.

Although Volga emphasizes a female collective, she has been influenced by works by male writers, like *One Part Woman* by Perumal Murugan and *Dopehri* by Pankaj Kapur, which focus on female characters to some extent. In an interview with T. Vijaykumar that was

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is revered by Buddhists as a fully enlightened being who taught a path to Nirvana, freedom from ignorance, craving, rebirth, and suffering.

<sup>8</sup> Siddhartha is the son of Suddhodana, the king of the Shakya dynasty. He later transformed into the Buddha.

<sup>9</sup> In *Yashodhara*, Kusala is the attendant and supporter of Yashodhara in service to society.

published in *The Liberation of Sita*, Volga herself admits that her ideals have been shaped by the political fervor and literary quality of many male Telugu writers. This may also be attributed to the fact that there were not many works by women of a revolutionary political nature (Volga, *Liberation*, 107).

### **Re-visioning of the Past**

The American feminist and poet, Adrienne Rich, in her essay, “When We Dead Awaken, Writing as Re-Vision” (1972), remarks that re-vision, which she defines as the act of looking back, of seeing with a fresh eye, and of entering an old text from a new critical direction, is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Adrienne Rich in her article has used re-vision as a tool for looking back into the archives, to look into the old political order and to reassert a new revolution. She describes it as an “act of survival,” seeing the old texts with fresh new perspectives (Rich 18).

Since the publication of Rich’s essay, re-visioning has figured prominently in the agenda of women authors, and political, social, and religious institutions have been subjected to a critical re-vision in women’s writing (Wadhwa 1). In the process, re-vision has evolved from an act of survival to an active remaking of the past and reinvention of tradition:

A radical critique of literature, a feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see-and therefore live-afresh. (Rich 18)

There are numerous examples of the playful re-vision of myths in Indian women’s writing across different regional languages, such as Mahasweta Devi’s *Dopdi* (Bengali), Yashodhara Mishra’s *Purana Katha* (Odia), Sara Joseph’s *Ramayana Kathakal* (Malayalam). For instance, *Dopdi*, written by the eminent Bengali novelist Mahasweta Devi, derives its significance from the popular character of Draupadi from *Mahabharata*, and depicts the narrative of violence against the bodies of women through the story of a tribal woman named Dopdi. Sara Joseph, a renowned feminist writer from Kerala, examines women characters in Valmiki’s version of *Ramayana* from a subaltern perspective in her book *Ramayana Kathakal*.

Volga uses myths re-visited from the gynocentric perspective in her texts, primarily in *The Liberation of Sita* and *Yashodhara*. *The Liberation of Sita* is a unique example of the retelling of five stories intermingled with the journey of Sita and Rama. It is not only narrated from Sita’s point of view but explores the other female characters’ psyches as well. At the end of the novel, the character of Rama also takes a different shape when he is shown struggling between his duty as the king of Ayodhya and his loneliness caused by the separation from his love, Sita. *Yashodhara*, which came after *The Liberation of Sita*, explores the dynamics of the life of Yashodhara, Buddha’s wife, whose identity has not been explored beyond the role of a grief-stricken wife and a single mother. Yashodhara in this novel is depicted as an insightful woman who strives to establish her opinion against the patriarchal reign of her father and holds profound discussions with her husband, Siddhartha. Volga breaks the image of Yashodhara as a sorrowful wife and presents her as a catalyst for motivating her husband to seek enlightenment. Thus, Volga “does not use re-visioning merely as a strategy to subvert patriarchal structures embedded in mythical texts but also to forge a vision of life in which liberation is total, autonomous, and complete” (Volga, *Liberation*, 95). Writers like Kavita Kane contribute to the opus of the female collective with works like *Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen* respectively. Kane’s book discusses caste and gender through the portrayal of

an entirely new character, Uruvi, Karna's<sup>10</sup> wife, and thus represents "not one but two subaltern voices—of the woman and of the low caste" (Chanda-Vaz).

### Unshackling Sita and Other Minor Voices

*The Liberation of Sita* is a collection of five short stories, with Sita<sup>11</sup> from *Ramayana* as the protagonist who meets several other women who play minor roles in the epic—Ahalya, Surpanakha, Renuka Devi, and Urmila. Written originally in Telugu, it has been translated into English by two professors of English at Osmania University, T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree. The plot of the book does not follow chronological order, and each story is independent yet connected. The minor characters in Valmiki's epic, Surpanakha, Renuka, Urmila, and Ahalya occupy center stage and assume a major role in educating Sita. In the epic *Ramayana* by Valmiki, Renuka, a dutiful wife of her husband (the sage Jamadagni<sup>12</sup>) was decapitated by her son, Parasurama<sup>13</sup> on the orders of her husband. The section "The Sand Pot" is based on her life story where she has a unique and articulate talent for making a sand pot and helps her husband in his rituals. One day, Renuka is distracted by merely looking at a man. Jamadagni becomes enraged and orders his sons to kill her. Later he repents and brings her back to life. In her book, Volga brings back her character as an independent woman living her life by making use of her astounding talent of sculpting in her ashram. Ahalya, wife of the sage Maharishi Gautama,<sup>14</sup> was lured into an intimate relationship with Lord Indra who came in the disguise of Gautama and deceived Ahalya. When the sage Gautama found out about this, he cursed Ahalya in his distrust and turned her into stone. In the section "Music of the Earth," Volga portrays Ahalya as a woman who neither pleads for mercy nor tries to prove the truth of her sanctity. She rises beyond her status of victim as portrayed in the original narrative and teaches Sita how Brahmin men have tried to tie women to the definition of words like cleanliness, purity, and impurity. In the epic, *Ramayana*, Urmila is the younger sister of Sita and the wife of Rama's brother, Laxmana. Urmila has been depicted as a dedicated wife of Laxmana who sacrifices her fourteen years of sleep, giving Laxmana the liberty to protect Rama and Sita in the forest. Her role in Valmiki's narration of *Ramayana* was not at the forefront. In Volga's version, Urmila is in a self-imposed exile of fourteen years which began as wrath but ended in her achievement of wisdom and knowledge. She is represented as a woman who spends years in solitude observing her feelings, thoughts, and body and gradually gaining peace. Surpanakha is another character in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. She is the sister of Ravana, Lanka's king, a *rakshasi*<sup>15</sup> who is unpopular for forcefully trying to make Rama her husband. In *The Liberation of Sita*, Volga transforms her small character into a significant, positive shape. She is a woman who transcends the grief caused by the disfiguration of her face and nose, and she dwells in the lap of Nature. She emerges as a woman of dignity who finds love and also creates a garden similar to the beauty of heaven. The bond of sisterhood is shown via their budding friendship, especially when she invites Sita to spend her time in the peace of her garden. This book narrates not only the women characters but also the story of Ram, trapped in the vicious circle of his loneliness, burdened by the crown in the role of a noble king of Ayodhya.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Karna is popularly known as the tragic hero in the epic, *Mahabharata*, the son of the sun god Surya and princess Kunti. He fought the Kurukshetra War against the Pandava brothers whose mother was also Kunti.

<sup>11</sup> Sita is the leading character and wife of Rama in the epic, *Ramayana*, who is worshiped as a Hindu goddess.

<sup>12</sup> Jamadagni is a sage and father of Parasurama.

<sup>13</sup> Parasurama is one of the five sons of Jamadagni and Renuka, known for his anger and anti-Kshatriya.

<sup>14</sup> Maharishi Gautam is a sage in *Ramayana* who is known for accusing and cursing his wife Ahalya for allegedly having a relationship with the deity Indra. Maharishi means the sage of the highest order.

<sup>15</sup> In Hindu mythology, *rakshas* are a clan of demons who are often seen as the antagonists of *devas* (gods).

<sup>16</sup> Ayodhya is an ancient city of India, the kingdom ruled by king Dashratha, and the birthplace of Rama.

Among the worshipping and glorification of the sacrifice of Sita and Rama, the contribution of Urmila, Laxmana's wife, has been overlooked in previous versions. Urmila's strength is a reason Laxmana is able to look after Rama and Sita. The chapter "The Liberated" focuses on how women abandoned by their husbands break their shackles. Urmila, who is left abandoned and dejected by her husband, Laxman, turns her wrath into a quest for truth. She begins to study herself, her feelings, her emotions, and her relationships and arrives at a state of inner peace. The transformation of her character, from a grieving wife to a woman of wisdom, shows Volga's vision of challenging the stereotype not with rage but with wisdom and a poised demeanor. In Chitra Divakurni's reinterpretation, *The Forest of Enchantments*, Urmila's character has not undergone much change and is not brought to attention, while in Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* Urmila emerges as a wise woman who has transcended the image of merely a grief-stricken woman lamenting for her husband.

In "Music of the Earth," the conversation between Ahalya and Sita depicts Ahalya as a woman neither characterless, as stated by her Rama and others, nor victimized by her husband, Maharishi Gautama, nor seeking pity. Those years she remained as a stone were the times when she meditated over her identity in the universe. She uses her isolation and solace as a source of wisdom, similarly to Urmila in those fourteen years, locked in her chamber. The deconstruction of the character of Ahalya is unique in the sense that it evades the stereotypical aspects of victimization; she is not an object of pity but she stands tall, taking the authority into her hands without feeling the need to prove her moral chastity to the society. Ahalya considers the infamous question of whether she sees through the disguise of Indra or not. But she does not think it to be a topic worthy of addressing as her husband does not even wait for the answer. Following the concept of purity and impurity, he casts her off as a befallen woman. The punishment of turning into stone for years unless touched by Rama turns Ahalya into a wise, rational being, polished with experience. The character of Ahalya is transformed from the popular notion of her portrayal as a victim of patriarchal norms of female chastity to an astute person enlightened about the complexities present in the popular notions of female chastity. She advises Sita intently, "Don't grieve over what has already happened... Observe nature and the evolution of life. You belong to the whole world, not just to Rama" (Volga, *Liberation*, 81).

"The Sand Pot" is another chapter re-telling the story of Renuka, the wife of Jamadagni, whom her own son Parasurama tries to behead in obedience to his father's injunction. Renuka tells Sita about the fickle and fleeting nature of *paativratyam*,<sup>17</sup> or fidelity, of a married woman by comparing it to a sand pot. When Rama asks Sita to declare her innocence in the royal court as a condition for her return, she questions, "Do I need to do that? Is there any sense to such an effort?" (Volga, *Liberation*, 82). The writer raises pertinent questions for Sita; these questions seem confusing to her due to her lack of experience and innocence at that stage, but they feel real when she is left in exile by her husband. Renuka urges Sita to question the concepts of marriage and motherhood which are imposed on women as the universal truth to be followed and embodied unhesitatingly.

Volga dexterously uses the specific duration of the women facing penance in the myth as a period to ponder over life and gain wisdom for them. For Urmila, it is during those fourteen years locked in the boundaries of her chamber when Laxman was in exile; for Ahalya, the time when she is punished by her husband and turned into stone is used to think about the subjectivity of truth. In the case of Renuka, the question of the fragile concept of *paativratyam* occurs during her struggle between life and death. While Surpanakha makes peace with her disfigured face during the battle between her beauty and ugliness, Sita uses her exile to gain clarity and peace. In an interview with T. Vijay Kumar, Volga said that she had read many folk-based *Ramayanas* to deconstruct the role of Sita in Valmiki's famous *Ramayana* (Volga, *Liberation*, 95). In *The*

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<sup>17</sup> *Paativratyam* is a word in Telugu that means a married woman faithful and loyal to her husband.

*Liberation of Sita*, Sita frees herself from all the boundaries imposed by the patriarchal world but also from the agony of inferiority. She achieves the freedom to understand herself, to rise above the self-doubt and stereotypical notions of women having less strength, less courage, and the need of eternal dependency on a family, husband, or children.

In the episode, "The Reunion," Sita finds Surpanakha living in a house with a beautiful garden, harboring nature's most exquisite creations where she appears to be in a different state altogether—neither angry nor sad but satisfied with her creation. She has made peace with herself and her disfigured face and has transcended the realm of doubts, agony, and revenge. Though Surpanakha's face is physically distorted, Sita sees Surpanakha's beauty, calm, strength, and power over her life, something which Sita was also looking for in her own life. Volga creates such a space for women in this novel where they are responsible for their own lives and also feel a sense of joy in that freedom. They are answerable to themselves, bearing the responsibilities of any danger or happiness in "an act of survival" (Rich 18). A bond of sisterhood has sprouted between Sita and Surpanakha, two women who are supposed to be enemies. Initially, for Surpanakha, an admirer of beauty, being mutilated had turned her into "a walking volcano. A stormy sea of grief" (Volga, *Liberation*, 12). Later both Sita and Surpanakha seek refuge in nature; however, unlike Sita, Surpanakha's fulfillment and ineffable joy lie not in raising children but in discovering herself. Influenced by Surpanakha's happiness and satisfaction in the beauty of nature, Sita compares Surpanakha's distressing past to her soulful present and vies to look for a new meaning. Replying to Surpanakha's unsolicited affection for her, Sita says that "after my children leave me and go to the city, I'll become the daughter of Mother Earth. Resting under these cool tresses, I shall create a new meaning for my life" (Volga, *Liberation*, 17).

The authority of Rama over Sita since the beginning of their marriage is visible in the way he treats Sita as a delicate flower who needs protection and security offered by his masculine power. Rama is also a perfect example of a man upholding patriarchy by considering every male as the ideal. When Sita expresses surprise over the incident of Parasurama trying to kill his own mother on the order of his father, Rama treats it as something normal, "Is there a higher *dharma*<sup>18</sup> than carrying out the wishes of one's father?" (Volga, *Liberation*, 42). Similarly, in Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, Luv and Kusa, two sons of Rama and Sita, raised by Sita in her exile, crave to experience the court life of their father, the king. Though they love their mother dearly, they also have immense admiration for a man whom they have never known.

In "The Shackled," Rama, a noble and heroic man who adheres to his vows, is left alone in the corridors of his loneliness and pain, in the shackles of morals and kingdom. Rama deems himself the savior and guardian of Sita, seeking a promise from her to let him fulfill his duty to cast his protective shadow over her head. At last, after Sita is merged with Mother Earth, Rama is left tormented in agony and pain and realizes that Sita has been his protective charm. In the case of Sita, liberation from Rama marks the true emancipation for her. Urmila makes her realize that her despair lies in the connection with Rama, "You must liberate yourself from Rama... Fight meditates, look within until you find the truth that is you" (Volga, *Liberation*, 82). The focus on Rama's side of the story—the tension between Rama, the emperor, and Rama, the husband, handcuffed by power—demonstrates not the heroic but the sensitive aspect of a male character. Ironically all these men in *Ramayana* who cast off their wives or suitors in some way or other are widely read intellectuals who are skilled in various arts, but their sensitivity is replaced with ego when it comes to women. The concept of an ideal man and an ideal woman is often associated with Rama and Sita, Rama for being a dutiful son and a sincere

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<sup>18</sup> *Dharma* has multiple meanings in different Indian religions, but in Hinduism, it means a proper code of conduct of righteousness, abiding by duties and law.

king, and Sita as a perfect wife exemplifying the ideal, self-sacrificing woman who is devoted to her husband. Because it is difficult for people to digest the flaws of their revered Lord Rama, loving devotees of the myth often exclaim how the infamous fire ordeal of Sita could not be a deed of Rama: “My Rama couldn’t have done that” (Hess 2). In another narrative, Chitra Divakaruni’s *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita is seen as unhappy with the one-sided narrative of Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. So, she secretly writes her own version, *Sitayan*, which is a silent revolt to put her side of the story in front of the world. In her review of Divakaruni’s text, Saha argues that “Sita assumes the responsibility of bringing those women to the fore who contributed their bit in making *Ramayana* ‘the cosmic drama of good and evil’” (Saha 2).

### **Yashodhara and Her Journey to Yasho Buddha<sup>19</sup>**

Yashodhara is not a mythological character but a minor part of the history of the life of Siddhartha Gautama who later transformed into the Buddha. Her presence is merely registered as a sideline in the grand life of Buddha. In *Yashodhara*, Volga gently reconstructs history through her imagination and presents Yashodhara as a multi-dimensional character. She assists Siddhartha in his spiritual journey of gaining enlightenment, and she herself becomes a prominent member of the *sangha*,<sup>20</sup> devoting her life to meditation, preaching, and healing the sick. Yashodhara changes Siddhartha’s one-dimensional mindset about women, and she makes him realize the partiality bestowed upon women. When she establishes her identity as a woman of substance in front of her father, he at once declares her behavior as a contagious disease of madness:

I have realized that our society doesn’t accept women as rational beings capable of independent, intellectual inquiry. It may take thousands of years for us women to stand on our own legs...only when you open the gate to the path of knowledge and let women enter the arena. (Volga, *Yashodhara*, 89)

In an interview with *First Post*, Volga says that in resurrecting Yashodhara, she wants to resurrect the intellectual and spiritual history of women (Thatipalli). Volga gave Yashodhara a new identity, and the lost character from history was rejuvenated even after the departure of her husband, Siddhartha. Not only did she partake in spiritual learning and preached the Buddhist *dharma* but also learned about medicines and attended to the sick. Siddhartha, who later became Buddha, aimed to know the cause of suffering, while Yashodhara, who became Yasho Buddha, sought to relieve the sick of their suffering by treating different kinds of sickness not only with medicines but also with kindness and compassion.

Though the text is a re-visioning of the narrative of Buddha’s and Yashodhara’s life stories, Volga digs into crucial points from history. The *sangha* where Siddhartha visits to learn about life and philosophy treats women as inferior beings who do not possess the ability to think or act rationally; rather, they are just the puppets of their whims and fancies. It is Yashodhara who shows Siddhartha the other side of this misconstrued concept which he has learned since his birth. When Yashodhara takes her stand to talk to his father to stop the tradition of winning her hand through the contests of bravery, Siddhartha realizes that Yashodhara is a self-sufficient, strong woman with integrity and “not a trophy or territory that can be won at the end of the competition” (Volga, *Yashodhara*, 32). She explains to Siddhartha the need to educate women, because of her belief that their confinement within the four walls of their homes can stunt their intellectual growth. She also highlights the role of Gotami in bringing up

<sup>19</sup> In the book, *Yashodhara*, the writer has used the term Yasho Buddha for Yashodhara after she transforms into a Buddhist nun.

<sup>20</sup> *Sangha* is a Buddhist monastic community.

Siddhartha as she provides an atmosphere suitable to the intellect of her son. Instead of treating Siddhartha as a stubborn child Gotami understands him as unique and never deprives him of her affection. Though his decision to be aloof from the materialistic world gives her extreme pain, she never stops being supportive of Siddhartha. The role of a mother and a wife is entwined in his life which at last persuades him to embark on a new journey toward enlightenment.

Yashodhara, though challenging the patriarchal structure, embarks on her own journey, supporting the Buddha; she is not presented as a stereotype of a feminist who carries hatred for men. She does so with sheer calmness and sincerity. Her anger can be seen at an early stage of her life when she is chided and punished by her father, the king, for standing against his religious beliefs. Seeing her rebellious nature, her father is shocked and assumes her to be mad, possessed by some incurable disease. The comely, vibrant, shy demeanor of Yashodhara as a child is replaced with a determined, strong, intelligent woman who becomes unbearable to the king.

The philosophical and deep conversations between Yashodhara and Siddhartha in the text yield budding spirituality in their relationships. Siddhartha had been this way since his childhood, pondering over every little thing and the reasons behind them. Yashodhara comes to the knowledge of the quest after knowing Siddhartha, but she emerges as a powerful character with great devotion towards the path of finding eternal truth especially after facing shock and insults from her father for stating her opinion. She realizes how little space a woman carries if she chooses to speak her mind with rational and logical comments. That is when she loses her usual charm and innocence and encourages Siddhartha to embark on his journey with the promise that he will impart his knowledge to women as well and not keep limited to the world of men.

In a canonical text, *Māhavagga*,<sup>21</sup> translated by Paul Carus, the portrait of Yashodhara is painted as a wife in deep grief but it is also shown that due to her sincere affection for her ascetic husband, she has also lived the life of a humble monk all the years she spent away from Siddhartha. When Siddhartha returned as Buddha to Kapilavastu, the king, his father Suddhodana<sup>22</sup> explains to him how Yashodhara has spent all these years living a life similar to Buddha, cutting her hair, renouncing luxuries like ornaments, perfumes, and expensive dresses, and abstaining from the proposals of marriage by princes. In the text, the gentleness and ardent devotion of Yashodhara are considered invaluable for the contributions of *Bōddhisatva*.<sup>23</sup>

The character of Yashodhara is explored in various dimensions in many *Sinhala*<sup>24</sup> folktales based on her accounts of lamentations at the departure of Siddhartha. In a prose version entitled *Bimbā's Lament* translated by Donald Swearer from a Thai text, the lamentation of Yashodhara is a much more elaborate version of her suffering and agony. She complains to the servant, who came with the king's message to summon her for the Buddha's preaching, about her fallen status and the blame of illegitimacy on their son Rahul. In contrast to *Māhavagga*, in *Bimbā's Lament*, Yashodhara wishes "to die or put a rope around my neck and hand myself from the palace" due to society's insult after Siddhartha left his family to seek enlightenment (Obeyesekere 8).<sup>25</sup> The poem "Yashodhara," written by the eminent Hindi poet,

<sup>21</sup> *Māhavagga* is the fourth book of Vinay Pitaka in Pali, narrating Buddha's life.

<sup>22</sup> Suddhodana is the father of the Buddha.

<sup>23</sup> Bōddhisattva is a person who reaches *nirvana* (enlightenment).

<sup>24</sup> *Sinhala* is the language of Sri Lanka, and many narratives of Buddhist literature can be found in *Sinhala* folktales.

<sup>25</sup> Ranjini Obeyesekere is a Sri Lankan researcher who has translated into English Sinhala folktales based on the life of Yashodhara.

Maithilisharan Gupt, also narrates Yashodhara's lamentation, wailing, and questioning of her father-in-law and others at the departure of Siddhartha.

In another reinterpretation by Janet Surrey and Samuel Shem, *The Buddha's Wife*, the narrative of Yashodhara plays the role of a fierce, aggrieved individual in contrast to Volga's Yashodhara who is a challenging woman but also an appendage to her spouse. *The Buddha's Wife* advocates the female bond by depicting a strong relationship between Yashodhara and her mother-in-law Gotami. She vehemently questions and rebukes Buddha for not being able to hold love and compassion for his family and for choosing monastic life and universal truth over them. However, Volga's perspective on the story of Yashodhara differs from these folktales in the *Sinhala* canon and other modern interpretations. Instead of lamenting, Yashodhara is depicted as a spiritual partner who guides Buddha in his quest and assures him to abandon the materialistic world and embark on his journey. This character of Yashodhara is a challenge to all other models of Yashodhara as a grief-stricken, victimized spouse in earlier works. Hence, the Yashodhara in Volga's feminist novel is empathetic and quick-witted and guides the Buddha to impart his spiritual learning to women as equals to men.

### Conclusion

With her technique, Volga creates a female collective by representing the tradition from alternative points of view and by networking with women across ages and generations using liberation as the tool to explore the dynamics of the female characters in earlier works. Through the retelling of the past, women not only break the hold of tradition from its fixity but take it to a free zone where multiple mutations and transmutations become possible. In her balanced approach to reconstructing the female characters as well as the character of Rama, Volga shares her views on her evolved understanding of feminism not as a conflict or rivalry between men and women; rather she emphasizes moving beyond gender polarization.

Volga efficiently points out the biased portrayal of women in mythology, where heroes fight for protecting tradition and women seek justice and liberty, either vocally or silently. The writing style of Volga does not have a flair for drama like Divakaruni and other writers, but it is more direct, straightforward, and brief in its description. Though the female characters of the epic have been victims of patriarchy, Volga does not depict them merely as suppressed or suffering. She has given them a strong voice replete with dignity, narrating words of wisdom which come as the result of their experience of struggle with pain. In the difficult yet inspirational task of convincing readers of a new version of the popular myth and history, Volga succeeds in introducing intellectual, brave female characters and lifting them out of their positions at the margins. It would be unjustifiable to say that the characters of women in the myths originally constructed are pitiful or only quiescent wives or mothers. They are strong and hold the power to express their opinions, but unfortunately, their role has rarely been celebrated the way the male leads have. Nevertheless, this reinvention of myths has given agency and voice to both the major and minor women characters, transcending the singular male perspective and the limited space given to them in the original narrative by the male writers.

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