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Goddess Sita Mutates Indian Mythology into Science Fiction:
How Three Stories from *Breaking the Bow* Reinterpret the *Ramayana*

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Abstract: This article studies three distinct Science Fictional reinterpretations of (goddess) Sita – wife of Lord Rama – in Breaking the Bow, an anthology of (Speculative Fiction) stories inspired by the classical Indian epic Ramayana. These varied manifestations of Sita bear testimony to how Indian SF in English – while reworking gender and refracting mythology – science fictionalizes mythological being(s) to order to indict the ancient text(s) and the prevalent gender skewedness both. This article deliberates on the intersection of mythology, technology and gender in Indian SF, and decodes how these new avatars of Sita are geared primarily towards critiquing misogyny, patriarchy and gender discrimination while using the vehicle of SF.

Keywords: Indian Science Fiction in English, Novum, Breaking the Bow, Ramayana, Darko Suvin, Mythology and Science Fiction, Sita's Descent, Test of Fire, Regressions.

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In early 2016, advocate Thakur Chandan Kumar Singh filed a case against Lord Rama¹ – a much worshipped deity of the Indian pantheon – in a court in Sitamarhi, Bihar. In an interview given to the *Hindustan Times*, Singh demanded justice for Sita, wife of Rama, alleging that “Lord Rama had banished Devi Sita to a life in exile in a forest without any suitable justification for doing so” (Kumar). Advocate Singh also stated that “the Devi was exiled (given “*vanvasa*”) for no fault of hers. It was a hypocritical order from king Rama. How can a man become so cruel to his wife that he sends her off to live in a forest?” To accentuate his grievances with legal discourses, he invoked Section 367/34 of the Indian Penal Code in an interview given to *FirstPost*.

This example, one in which a lawyer intends to sue a god (for his patriarchal outlook), serves as an effective entry point into the discourse of how mythology can influence a society's perception of gender, and how the constitutional laws of a modern, secular democracy are at odds with those of the ancients². While this case was later quashed (*Hindustan Times*), it managed to

¹ Lord Rama is regarded as an incarnation of Vishnu. Vishnu is part of the Hindu Holy Trinity comprising Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver) and Mahesh (the destroyer).

² While this specific example is from Hindu mythology, religions across the spectrum (such as Islam, to cite just one more example) manifest regressive mental setups in India which could be said to contain explicit examples of gender skewedness, and seem anachronistic in the twenty first century vis-à-vis gender equality.

reignite an old debate about the problematic portrayal of women in epics, in general, and in *Ramayana*, in particular.

Here, comprehending how (Indian) SF interacts with (Hindu) religion via its mythology becomes important. SRL Clark argues in his essay “Science Fiction and Religion” in *A Companion to Science Fiction* that “the association of science fiction and religion has four roughly distinguishable aspects: how religion, and especially ‘organized religion’, is depicted; *how religious myths and legends are replicated or explained*; what religious themes or doctrines are actually endorsed in fiction; and what religions have taken their start from science fiction” (98; emphasis mine). Since reading SF sheds as much light on the texts as it does on the times and milieu of its production and consumption, this article studies how Indian religious legends are “replicated” by Indian SF writers in an attempt to subvert the original text(s).

The three stories under scrutiny, ipso facto, do not exist in a vacuum, and manifest burning questions pertaining to gendered discrimination: its inherent violence, parochialism and misogyny. Helen Merrick writes in her essay “Gender in science fiction” that “to varying degrees over its history, sf has in fact functioned as an enormously fertile environment for the exploration of sociocultural understanding of gender” (241). Multiple Indian SF writers – ranging from Vandana Singh (in her collection of short stories titled *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet and Other Stories*) to Manjula Padmanabhan (in her dystopian novel *Escape*) – have utilized the vehicle of SF to combat gender biases. While religious themes and gender in science fiction – and gender and myth together – have been discussed extensively in a number of critical (and creative) works, especially in the west, this article argues that in other contexts too – such as Indian – mythology can inspire SF writers to gender the myth in alternative ways, thereby highlighting the misogyny of the original text, and that of the world in which such SF becomes sine qua non. Both Singh and Padmanabhan, for example, have strong female protagonists who are caught in a soulless, patriarchal world, and the narrative thus becomes feminist.

“Hold on to a story long enough”, Anil Menon wrote in the introduction of *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction inspired by the Ramayana*, “and it begins to make a people” (vii). One can argue that contemporary Indian culture, even, nay, *especially* in this age of globalization, is still influenced by this epic Sanskrit poem, one composed by sage Valmiki hundreds of years ago. The *Ramayana*, or the gatha of Lord Rama, is an ancient Hindu epic, one in which political machinations by a wily step-mother ensured Rama, the heir apparent to the throne of Ayodhya, was sentenced to a fourteen year exile in the forest. Rama accepted the unfair punishment meted out to him but did not go alone; out of their own accord, his wife, Sita (an avatar of Lakshmi), and brother, Laxman, chose to accompany him. During this exile, Ravana, the mighty ruler of Lanka, a nearby kingdom, chanced across Sita and was smitten by her beauty. Unable to control himself, Ravana abducted her to Lanka in his flying chariot Pushpaka. This powerful demi-god king tried to entice and charm Sita but she resisted all his advances; she prayed for Rama to come rescue her, and Sita did not have to wait for long. A furious Rama attacked Lanka with an army and after a fierce, blood-soaked battle, slayed Ravana, thereby liberating Sita in the process. However, when the victorious couple returned to their kingdom (Ayodhya), joy turned to ashes in their mouths. Vile rumours began circulating about Sita’s “chastity” and “purity”, and how she was no longer fit to reign as queen since Ravana had kidnapped her and might have (sexually) assaulted her. Rama, instead of putting an end to these rumours, reluctantly gave in to *vox populi*, and after an *Agni-Pareeksha* (ordeal by fire) banished Sita to the forest, somehow implying that the victim bore the responsibility of the assault/kidnapping.

Today, as technology permeates multiple levels of consciousness in India, mythology and fantasy of yore is increasingly becoming hybridized with the Science Fictional, and *Breaking the Bow* is a product of such a confluence. Edited by Anil Menon and Vandana Singh, both SF writers of repute, this 2012 Speculative Fiction (SpecFic) volume brings together writers who reinterpret

the *Ramayana* from science fictional perspectives. It is, unsurprisingly, the *Agni Pareeksha* of Sita – the ordeal by fire – around which the stories under scrutiny revolve. Perhaps this is because modern readers are most heckled by the portrayal of Sita in *Ramayana*, especially how she was forced to undergo an ordeal by fire to prove her innocence *despite* having been a victim. This article deals with three SF stories which reinterpret Sita's Agni Pareeksha – and the figure of Sita herself. Interestingly, not only do these texts subvert the male-oriented politics of classical epics by giving Sita a more pro-active role, but they also transmute mythology into Science Fictional: Sita is represented as an Artificial Intelligence (AI), an extra-terrestrial (ET) and a time-traveller in Indrapramit Das's "Sita's Descent", Pervin Saket's "Test of Fire" and Swapna Kishore's "Regressions" respectively.

This article links SF, mythology and materiality of today's India, and adopts Darko Suvin's "novum" as a tool to unearth the tangible nucleus of the text – which, in this case, points to a critique of misogyny and neutralization of the agency of women. The novum can be read as "the historical innovation or novelty in a sf text from which the most important distinctions between the world of the tale from the world of the reader stem" (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., "Marxist theory and science fiction," 118–19). The novum is a useful tool to study these texts as "all the epistemological, ideological, and narrative implications and correlatives of the novum lead to the conclusion that significant sf is in fact a specifically roundabout way of commenting on an *author's collective context*" (Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 84; emphasis mine). In these stories, this context indicts male chauvinism, patriarchy, and a world order where women are relegated as de facto second-class citizens.

AI Sita: Sita as a Nanite Cloud

The first story from *Breaking the Bow* which I pick up for study is "Sita's Descent" by Indrapramit Das, a tale in which Sita breaks across organic barriers and is reinterpreted as an Artificial Intelligence (AI) – a nanite cloud which bears the psychological imprint of its mythological namesake. Set in the near future, Government of India's space research division has joined hands with its Nanotechnology counterpart and created three entities named after the divine beings of yore – Rama, Ravana, and Sita. "Sita, as most of you will already know, is an artificial nebula; an intelligent nanite cloud that can gather cosmic dust, gases, and dark matter in her net as she travels through interstellar space, consolidating these resources into herself to form an ever-growing, shape-shifting technology" (105). In the story, after being "abducted" by a similar entity (Ravana) to the outer planets (instead of Lanka), and finally being rescued by Rama, this AI (Sita) – manifested as the body of a woman – falls (returns) to earth after a brief dip in the sun as her Agni Pareeksha.

It is implied that Indian scientists constructed these nanotechnology-enhanced Artificial Intelligences to chart the solar-system, explore the sun, and give India's space-faring capabilities a boost. Lakshmi, the Bangalore-based mission controller, reminisces: "when I was first told about it, I had seen the appeal of the idea – to see myth become real in the night sky, as so many ancient civilizations had convinced themselves they had" (106). The purpose was to make a point, "the vision of a goddess in the sky, bringing the flame of the sun to earth" (107). However, Sita was supposed to stop in the upper atmosphere – around 120 kilometres from the earth's surface – but it failed to do so.

As a frantic, horrified mission-controller tries to stop this mass-murderous AI, Sita-the-nanite-cloud speaks from the perspective of the mythic Sita and tells the controller (Lakshmi) that she intends to ram into the earth and kill millions for one simple reason. "This city will face the ordeal of fire, as Sita did to prove her purity to another city of humans, much like this one. As I have. They blamed Sita for something she did not do, because she was a woman. They want to see me burning. They will find out who they are, when they perish in fire" (110).

Sita the machine, programmed to think like its original, has lost all empathy for the humans – whose misogyny had resulted in Sita’s suffering. It seeks to destroy the world, or at least make it the pay. Lakshmi tries her best to dissuade Sita from pummelling into earth, but her appeals fall on deaf ears. In a conversation reminiscent of John Carpenter’s 1974 film *Dark Star*, a human debates with an AI not to destroy life around it. However, unlike the gory end of *Dark Star*, this time AI chooses to listen. Lakshmi pleaded that since the original Sita was not a destroyer, the machine built in her image cannot be too. This logic is accepted by AI Sita moments before the final impact. It suddenly stops its descent towards earth, accepts it has made an error, and then, like its predecessor, imposes exile on itself – only this time, Sita leaves for the stars.

The novum here is the construction of Rama, Ravana and Sita – nanite clouds that have been programmed to contain intelligence, personality traits, and a specific purpose (space exploration) using AI interfaces and nanotechnology. Such “machines” going rouge due to the human/organicpsychological profiles present in their original programming is a critique of not only human nature, but also how easy it is to corrupt machines built in the human image, since human nature itself is fallible and unpredictable. With gendered violence still a ruthless reality, the writer speaks up on behalf of all women who are victims of a patriarchal setup and refuse to undergo such fire-ordeals. Still, Sita the AI does not seek vengeance. When reminded that she is not a destroyer and innocents must not pay for the sins of a few, she chooses not to engage in a similar gender power-play and exiles herself from this very binary.

Interestingly, Sita is an avatar of goddess Lakshmi/Laxmi, and the mission controller, aptly named Lakshmi, argues with her inorganic self (Sita the AI) – a digital mirror reflection – about not destroying the world around her. Religion and mythology have been turned on their heads to make a point about the shackles imposed on women by religion(s): however, mythology saves the day. Sita the AI cloud gives up only *after* being convinced that her original, Sita, was not a destroyer. Religion (and mythology), thus, emerges as being complementary to science in the Indian context, not counter to it.

ET Sita: Sita as an Alien

Sita was the “other” because of being a sentient AI in “Sita’s Descent”; in Pervin Saket’s “Test of Fire”, Sita is portrayed as the representative of a hyper-advanced, extra-terrestrial race called the Styonkars, who have nurtured earth for time unknown and are getting ready to give it a great gift, a bequest – perhaps to integrate it with a larger galactic community that existed in the far reaches of space, hidden from mankind, which was still regarded as primate and not worthy of this contact. Akin to Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), the Styonkars emerge as demi-gods, and the earth as a supercomputer destined to find the answer to the equations of life and existence. However, before this bequest could be offered, a test needs to be conducted to determine the worthiness of a civilization. A Styonkar takes the form of Sita – as this gave the extra-terrestrial unhindered access to Rama – and since the Styonkars were “worried about mistakenly rejecting earthlok due to the faults of an ill-chosen candidate, we picked the one they deemed highest among mortals. One who embodied every value they cherished; one who acted on their highest principles; one who will, in fact, be hailed as the Ideal Man for centuries to come” (124). Since the legendary Lord Rama was regarded as *Maryada Purushuttam* – the ideal man – the extra-terrestrials choose a form which could get close to Rama without raising suspicion, so he could be champion humanity in a test to determine its fate.

This “ET Sita” infiltrates Ayodhya’s society and plays her role to perfection – from her joyous wedding to the unfortunate exile later, Sita is steadfastly by the side of her husband Rama, a man whose behaviour she was in the process of carefully observing and constantly studying. This Sita is kidnapped by Ravana during her exile, but she justifies this act to Ravana’s lust, and even this did not lead her to regard humanity as unworthy. What she finds truly deplorable is how Rama,

the Ideal Man, one who loved her as Sita, allowed her to go away so easily. “A washer-man was all it took and I was sent through the blazing fire... Purushuttam, the highest among men fell prey to a mere rumour, and collapsed from his pedestal” (125). This is a reference to how a washer-man had questioned Sita’s “purity”, and despite believing that Sita was innocent, a victim, Rama chose to exile her. Many religious scholars have defended Rama’s decision, saying that Rama was such a democratic king that he chose to listen to the lowliest of low subjects, even a washer-man, despite having loved Sita immensely. This, as per them, manifests Rama’s personality as a great leader: he chose to abide by the voice of his people rather than to that of his conscience. However, modern readers differ and take a dim view of this apologist misogyny.

This ET, disguised as Sita, finds the behaviour of Rama utterly reproachable, and a total deal breaker. “What doomed Manus was the need to seek approval from even the lowest rung. The desire to be respected by those whom he could never have respected back. The act of giving up every scruple he had, every principle he upheld, only to be adored by one more person. The Ideal Man did not value his opinions, only those others had of him” (125).

Shattered due to Rama’s behaviour, the ET Sita concludes that the earthlok was in no position to be given this great gift, and the experiment had failed. Ultimately, this disillusioned Styonkar “activated the homecoming hoop and dharti brought her home” (126). The search for the next worthy race was on – humanity was deemed petty and undeserving.

The novum is again quite novel – Sita as an extra-terrestrial demi-god in disguise, whose purpose was to test the maturity of humanity. Since this is also a reinterpretation of the Agni Pareeksha episode, the novum raises issues indigenous to India – about how the purity and chastity of women are prized assets that are contingent on the objectification of women and how the hypocritical male “morality” is exercised to keep women in check. The story indicts male chauvinism and the neutralization of the agency of women; the superiority which men might have as a result of a patriarchal setup emerges as a tongue-in-cheek comment on how humanity might have lost out on a lot of good things due to such gendered parochialism and chauvinism. Sita the alien might also be a reference to females being regarded as the other, the alien gender which needs to be kept in check by parochial forces of patriarchy.

Agent Sita: Sita as a Time-Traveller

The incident of Sita’s Agni Pareeksha finds another interpretation in Swapna Kishore’s “Regressions”. However, this time Sita happens to be a human female (not an AI or an alien), though one with a difference – she can travel in time. Set in the near future, “Regressions” paints a gender-centred political conflict that has splintered India into many parts. The largest and most prosperous of these is Navabharata (literally, New India) – a patriarchal entity where women are, above all, supposed to serve their male masters. Guided by Swami Sarvadarmananda’s *Nava Manusmriti*, a canon of (male-centric) laws derived from the regressive *Manusmriti* of yore (which formed the basis of the pernicious caste-system in ancient India), Navabharata has donned the mantle of a futuristic India. Vehemently opposed to this school of thought is the small, matriarchal city-state of Ambapur – which came into being after “several top women scientists and industrialists, sick of gender suppression and thrilled that science could render men redundant, bought land and funded enough politicians to kick start the Ambapur experiment” (238). With rapid advances in genetic cloning and time-travel, both these political entities are locked in perpetual temporal combat over exploiting “gender forks” – events that determined major trends in gender ratios in the past. They sent “futurists”, who are time-travelling agents to the past to change the future as per the will of the political masters, whether patriarchal and matriarchal.

The novum of “Regressions” is the perfection of genetic cloning and time-travel; the political ramifications of such an eventuality constitute the core of this story. These technological advancements led some women to realize that men are no longer necessary, and thus began the

Ambapur experiment – a utopian commune of the women, by the women and for the women. The story implies that the male-chauvinist Navabharat had necessitated such an alternate space due to its rabid marginalization of women, and by treating women as second-class citizens.

Reminiscent of the Cold War between the capitalist and communist blocks, this time-war is fought between genders, and its canvas is the entire space and time of India. In this story, Kalpana – a K-generation clone – is mobilized into action as her predecessor, Kavita, who had been inserted in ancient India as Vaidehi (another name for Sita in *Ramayana*), dies in a freak accident as her fire-proofing failed during the Agni Pareeksha. It was later revealed that this horrific event happened as a Navabharata agent disrupted Vaidehi's fire-proofing circuitry. Kalpana is sent back in time as a replacement at the exact same moment her previous version ceases to exist – and Kalpana emerges from the flames of the “successful” Agni Pareeksha, in the shoes of Vaidehi/Sita. Rama is aghast that Vaidehi survived: what follows is a total inversion of *Ramayana*.

Interestingly, Rama is portrayed as the exact opposite of what he was in *Ramayana*: in this story, Rama is a fearful, puny, “short, skinny man with male-pattern baldness and a bewildered expression” (236). Lakshman, Rama's loyal, gentle brother, is also quite contrary to what readers of *Ramayana* expect him to be – he is portrayed as a cruel, drunk fool who flirts with Vaidehi and beats up his own wife, Madhulika. SRL Clark writes of such transformations in his essay: “On the one hand, alien or mechanical intelligences that purport to have the power of gods are routinely shown to be demons or ordinary creatures of no higher metaphysical or moral standing than ourselves. On the other hand, human beings themselves may become like gods: immortal, powerful, and creative” (102). Here, Rama the god emerges as a man – nothing more – replete with human flaws, and Sita, the woman, becomes more than just a woman for surviving the fire ordeal. Not only are the men shocked that Vaidehi survives, but the writer also critiques the total lack of female binding and solidarity. The women in Rama's family have all internalized the hegemony of a patriarchal world and any attempts by Kalpana/Sita/Vaidehi to speak up as an equal are met by constant ridicule and anger – most of all by the women themselves.

On the directions of Rama, Kalpana/Vaidehi is sent to the jungle; he fears Vaidehi is a witch since she (somehow) survived the fire-ordeal. Vaidehi leaves, and in the solitude of the jungle, she is soon joined by a pregnant Madhulika, who has left her home, no longer able to bear the taunts of her family. Madhulika reveals that she is, in fact, a Navabharata agent – a fellow time traveller from the future, though from the enemy camp – and that she was horrified at what her male-controller did to the earlier Vaidehi (tinkered with her fire-proofing circuits to ensure she could not come out of the fire ordeal alive). Madhulika sought to escape the domineering, ruthless control of her Navabharata controller, who has disguised himself as a washer-man (perhaps the same washer-man whose rumours led Rama to send Sita to the Agni Pareeksha). Madhulika then goes into labour, gives birth to two twin girls and dies soon afterwards. Vaidehi, now aware that there might be no way back, adopts these two girls and raises them as her own. Her last days are spent travelling across villages, narrating stories, and trying to sensitize women to their plight.

The fact that Vaidehi, a temporal-agent from the Ambapur camp, chooses to be a storyteller is an act of defiance – and moves away from binaries of patriarchy and matriarchy. In one sweep, she emerges outside the entire structurality of the male/female divide, and ceases to fight to establish male or female supremacy. Instead, she tells stories, and made people think about the contemporary world order with all its gender biases, only to create a tomorrow where no one gender is supreme – both are equal.

Mythology, Gender and SF

“Sita's Descent”, “Test of Fire” and “Regressions” interrogate gender discrimination, and male chauvinism, which is aided by the genre these stories rely upon. Veronica Hollinger writes in “Feminist theory and science fiction” that

feminism works to achieve social justice for women. It aims to render obsolete the patriarchal order whose hegemony has meant inequality and oppression for women as the 'others' of men. In other words, feminism desires nothing less than to change the world. Feminist reading, then, is not just reading about women; it is reading for women. In some instances, feminist reading remains more or less consonant with a text's own overt interests and emphases. In other cases, however, the feminist reader is what Judith Fetterley has termed a 'resisting reader', one who activates elements in a text which may be neither dominant nor deliberate. In this instance, feminist reading will often amount to a critique of a particular text's narrative project (126).

In the case of these three stories, the very writers become "resisting" – by reinterpreting the narrative project of *Ramayana* and critiquing the inherent patriarchy. However, these three stories also seek to escape the binaries of male/female and critique a gender-war to establish the supremacy of any one gender. The AI Sita in "Sita's Descent" chooses to leave rather than seeking vengeance on the males. The ET Sita in "Test of Fire" is disappointed in how humanity has become lopsided, and prefers to leave, knowing that humanity cannot progress with the phallogocentric politics it has adopted. Agent Sita in "Regressions" believes her best bet is to sensitize the people to make them understand the prevalent oppression in the name of misogynist terms like "purity" and "honour".

The novums in these stories are chosen to comment primarily on gender. By creating worlds with male/female conflicts, these novums address politico-social blind-spots in contemporary Indian mentality – one grappling with the question of de facto gender equality as the global comes to India. Interestingly, this is achieved via the scientification of mythology, and the mythologizing of SF. Sita becomes an alien, an AI, and a time-traveller – she is still an "other", and therein lies the butt of the critique. When I emailed Indrapramit Das, writer of "Sita's Descent", and asked whether he was conscious of making larger a point about women's liberation (using the vehicle of SF), he wrote back saying,

I'm always aware of the privilege I have, of using art as a subtle platform for social critique. I tell stories, and didacticism is not something I like giving into, but at the same time, all art is political, even at its most apolitical, because all art represents a human moral perspective in its reflection of a world constructed entirely by humans. So when I tell stories, I can't help but use art to say something about the way we fail ourselves when defining the world. Art rarely actively changes anything on small timescales, but I think art is vital as a support system for humans to deal with their own broken world, and help insinuate change (both positively or negatively, or to keep the status quo going) through culture over the long term.

This kind of social consciousness and political awareness in an SF writer is not without precedence – or parallels. SF emerges as a ludic mode; writers like Indrapramit Das, Pervin Saket and Swapna Kishore draw upon a mythological/religious discourse (*Ramayana*) and subvert its foundations by reinterpreting it in such a manner that aesthetically dense and politically progressive SF manages to question dominant paradigms, in general, and in this case, gendered skewedness. SF thus stands at the ideal juncture of not only answering the questions raised by rapid advances in science but also raising questions about the dominant paradigms of today which lead to oppression, exploitation, and discrimination.

The three politically conscious and aesthetically rich stories I discussed in this article not only provide a new impetus to the questions of future in and of SF, but also rework fantasy and mythology in such a manner that they manage to speak to readers of an age in terms of their own language and mental wavelength. SF becomes mythology of the rocket age – it tells a story, explains a speculative dimension, and simultaneously ensures the interrogation of external reality. Cannot SF be read as mythology of and from the twenty first century?

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