

Sita

Sita is the principal female character in the *Ramayana*, an Indian epic said to have been composed by the sage Valmiki. Her name means “furrow”, a reference to her birth story where her father found her in a field after ploughing. Rama, the hero of the story, won the right to marry Sita when he succeeded in stringing and breaking Siva’s bow. Sita accompanied Rama back to his home and, when Rama was banished to the forest instead of being crowned king, decided to go with him because it was her Dharmic duty to stay with her husband. Rama tried to persuade her to stay at the palace but she persisted and he gave in. They lived in the forest until Sita was captured by a demon king named Ravana. Rama and his brother Laksmana set out to rescue her while Ravana tried to seduce Sita. Rama and Laksmana eventually rescued Sita, with the help of an army of monkeys, but Rama doubted Sita’s purity, having lived with the demon for over a year. Sita endured a trial by fire and proved herself untouched by any but Rama. They went home and Rama became king, but the people did not believe Sita was loyal to their King, so he banished her to the forest. Sita met the sage Valmiki and, while staying with him, gave birth to Rama’s twin sons. At the end of the epic, Sita once again proved her purity and, instead of returning to Rama, was taken into the earth.

Sita’s origins have been the subject of scholarly study. In one version of the *Ramayana*, Sita is the rebirth of a woman named Vedavati, who had thrown herself into a fire to escape Ravana’s lust and swore revenge (Doniger 22). Many versions of the *Ramayana* hold Sita as being an incarnation of a goddess or a holy maiden (Singaravelu 239). In other stories, Sita is Ravana’s daughter who was abandoned, put in an urn or a

lead box and buried in a field or set afloat on the ocean. Some of the stories also present Sita as being the natural daughter of King Janaka or King Dasaratha (Singaravelu 240).

Sita's purity has also been the concern of scholars and writers. In the fifteenth century *Adhyatmaramayana*, the Sita that begs for the deer and is kidnapped by Ravana is not the real girl at all, but a shadow Sita, created by Sita on Rama's orders to keep her safe. It is this Sita that is kidnapped, rescued and eventually disappears into the fire, upon which time the real woman rejoins her husband (Doniger 23). In this version, Sita's purity is unquestionable because the genuine Sita never spent any time in Ravana's home. There are also texts where the shadow Sita survives and goes on to live her own life (Doniger 25).

Sita is supposed to be the ideal woman for the ideal man, the embodiment of right thought and right action. Because Rama is the ideal man, many readers feel that there is something wrong with his treatment of his faithful and loving wife. Sita is forced to prove her chastity not once, but twice in a trial of fire, and when she is taken into the forest, it is by Laksmana, without an explanation from Rama (Hess 2-3). "[M]any devotional *Ramayanas* from the twelfth century on eliminate the episode of Sita's abandonment." and many fans of the *Ramayana* have expressed discomfort with these episodes when talking to Hess (Hess 3-4).

The word "furrow" not only refers to the act of plowing the earth, but also to the female reproductive organ (Peltier 85). Sita is a fertility goddess, intimately connected with nature, and Sakti, "the energy that inspires the hero Rama to action" (Dimmitt 210-211). Throughout the *Ramayana*, the plants and animals echo Sita's moods, and nature is thrown into chaos when she leaves Ayodhya with Rama and Laksmana and again when

she is kidnapped (Dimmitt 214). The forest delights Sita, “she is the one who prays to and propitiates the river deities and the holy fig tree. Dwelling places are chosen to please her. The flowers and trees delight her” (Peltier 80).

Sita, though, thought to be a perfect embodiment of womanhood, is not as submissive as we might suspect. “Sita’s first clear act of will” is to insist on going into the forest with Rama. She “is defining for herself just what a devoted wife is, choosing what she sees as the substance rather than just the form of marriage. She is also insisting on her own needs and feelings, her desire to be with Rama” (Peltier 79-80). Sita also demands that Rama capture or kill the golden deer, the demon Marica in disguise, for her. Sita is not reacting as a woman seeing something pretty that she must have, but as an Artemis figure, a goddess of the forest that has dominion over all things in her realm, so the creatures are hers and she has a right to treat them as she pleases (Peltier 84). The golden deer possesses her. “She is a woman enchanted by an image of herself.” Throughout the *Ramayana*, Sita is described as “doe-eyed” and “golden-skinned” and the “golden deer is an image of her beauty and her forest wildness” (Peltier 84). When Marica, dying, calls out for help in Rama’s voice and Laksmana, convinced that Rama would never be in trouble, refuses to go help him, Sita again has to assert her will. She pleads with Laksmana, accuses him of “having designs on her” and finally threatens to kill herself if Laksmana does not go to Rama’s rescue (Sutherland 75). After being rescued from Ravana, Rama rebukes her and asks her how he can take her back now that she has spent time in another man’s house. “Sita weeps bitterly, then wipes her face and gives a spirited speech. It includes a passionate rebuke of his cruelty and a rational analysis of where moral responsibility lies in the case of violence against women. Not

mincing words, she says, "Why do you talk to me like that, oh hero, like a common man talking to an ordinary woman? ... You, lion among men, by giving way to wrath and passing premature judgment on a woman, have acted like a worthless man.'" (Hess 6). In the final chapter of the *Ramayana*, when Rama comes to take Sita back with him, realizing she had bore him two sons, instead of meekly submitting, she chooses her own fate. "After suffering countless insults and rejections, Sita finally takes revenge on Rama in the most aggressive manner she knows. In carrying out her characteristic and oft repeated threat of self-immolation, she brings to a culmination her passive-aggressive response to Rama" (Sutherland 78). She chooses to return to the earth, instead of remaining with a man who has twice abandoned her.

Works Cited

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Related Terms

Ramayana, Rama, Hanuman, Laksmana, Ravana

Related Resources

-<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sita> - wikipedia article on Sita

-<http://www.sitayanam.com/> - Website dedicated to Sita

-<http://www.sitasingstheblues.com/> - online cartoon of the *Ramayana* focusing on Sita's role.

-http://www.sanatansociety.org/indian_epics_and_stories/ramayana.htm - a short text version of the *Ramayana* with some illustrations.

-*The Ramayana: A Modern Retelling of the Great Indian Epic*, by Ramesh Menon- an accessible novelization of the *Ramayana*.

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