

The Dialectics of Subservience and Empowerment: Feminine Epistemologies in Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*

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Abstract

This research article investigates the dialectics of subservience and empowerment as embodied by the female figures in Amish Tripathi's Sita: Warrior of Mithila, with particular attention to Sita, Kaikeyi, and Manthara. It argues that Tripathi's mythological retelling reconfigures the traditional Ramayana archetypes of passive devotion, villainous ambition, and manipulative marginality into nuanced subjectivities that foreground feminine epistemologies of power, resistance, and moral reasoning. By granting narrative authority and psychological depth to these women, Tripathi destabilizes the patriarchal binaries of the epic tradition and reimagines the feminine as central to the articulation of dharma. The article situates this transformation within the larger cultural and philosophical discourses of gender in Indian mythology, demonstrating how the series engages with questions of justice, agency, and ethical responsibility. Furthermore, it explores how the multi-linear narrative structure, political recontextualization, and dialogic engagement with classical traditions generate a feminist mythography that resonates with contemporary debates on gender equality. In analyzing the coexistence of constraint and agency within the experiences of Tripathi's women, the article contends that empowerment in mythology is always negotiated, never absolute. Ultimately, it argues that the Sita: Warrior of Mithila exemplifies how myth, when reimagined through feminist lenses, functions not only as cultural memory but also as a dynamic space for the rearticulation of social ethics in the modern age.

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The narratives of ancient epics are often constructed around paradigms of heroism, sacrifice, and the eternal battle between good and evil, yet within these mythic frameworks, the female subject has historically been relegated to the margins. Women appear either as objects of devotion, bearers of virtue, or cautionary figures whose power is construed as dangerous when exercised beyond patriarchal control. In Indian mythology, especially in the Ramayana tradition, this binary between the virtuous wife and the disruptive temptress has long shaped cultural imaginaries of femininity. However, in contemporary retellings such as Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, the mythic feminine is reimagined in ways that complicate these binaries. Tripathi constructs women not merely as adjuncts to the male hero but as epistemological agents in their own right, whose voices, choices, and ethical dilemmas reshape the moral architecture of the narrative. The tension between subservience and empowerment becomes the crucible within which these women are defined. By situating women as leaders, strategists, warriors, and philosophers, the series articulates a dialectical vision of the feminine that at once acknowledges the weight of patriarchal tradition and gestures toward feminist rearticulations of myth.

To appreciate the complexity of this dialectic, one must first recognize how the feminine has historically been framed within mythic and cultural systems. The Ramayana of Valmiki immortalized Sita as the epitome of chastity and devotion, a woman whose identity was tied irrevocably to her husband's journey. Her endurance of exile, her abduction, and her trial by fire came to embody the patriarchal ideal of wifely duty. In Tripathi's retelling, however, Sita becomes a martial strategist, a warrior, and eventually a Vishnu in her own right—a role traditionally reserved for the savior figure who sustains cosmic balance. This reinterpretation resists the trope of passive endurance and instead foregrounds feminine agency. Similarly, characters like Kaikeyi and Manthara, often vilified in canonical tellings as instigators of disaster, are reimagined with political intelligence and nuanced motivations. Their roles cease to be caricatures of ambition or malice; rather, they embody epistemologies of power, resistance, and moral ambiguity. In presenting these women as thinkers and doers rather than symbols, Tripathi destabilizes long-standing myths of female subservience and generates new possibilities for feminist discourse in mythological fiction. In this context, Rashmi Bhatt in an essay titled "Fulfilment of new women in India is a myth" says:

Creation of New Women is possible only if women decide to be empowered to take their own decisions, going against social evils and believe themselves that they are capable equally as men and create changes all around for the betterment. Only then new women concept comes out of a concept of traditional story or a myth. (Bhat 1)

This dialectic unfolds through narrative strategies that emphasize multiplicity and perspective. Tripathi structures the *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* as a multi-linear narrative, giving individual characters entire volumes in which their subjectivity unfolds. Sita is not encountered merely as a secondary figure in Rama's tale; instead, she narrates her own trajectory, from her adoption by Janaka to her training as a warrior and her eventual rise as a chosen leader. The technique grants her epistemic authority, allowing readers to witness not just her deeds but her thought processes, doubts, and strategies. Through this lens, empowerment is not framed solely in terms of physical strength but also intellectual and ethical deliberation. Subservience, meanwhile, is depicted as a condition imposed by the structures of family, society, and tradition. The interplay between these forces becomes the central drama of the female characters, revealing how women navigate agency within constraints. Sita is not a character who just obeys order in Tripathi's mythological universe; it creates its own order. Neeru Tondon in *Feminism: A Paradigm Shift* asserts: "The 'new woman' today challenges the traditional notions of 'Angel in the house' and 'sexually voracious' image. The new woman is essentially a woman of awareness and consciousness of her low position in the family and society and tries to improve it" (Tondon, 26).

Sita emerges as perhaps the most radical reconfiguration of the feminine archetype in the series. No longer limited to the silent sufferer of canonical tradition, she assumes the role of protector, strategist, and leader. Tripathi crafts her as one who embodies shakti not merely as metaphysical power but as pragmatic competence. She is skilled in combat, capable of wielding weapons, and trained in the art of governance. Yet what distinguishes her is not merely martial valor but intellectual clarity. She is unafraid to question the legitimacy of laws and traditions, asking whether dharma is truly served by obedience to authority or whether justice requires defiance. It is evident from the writings of Amish Tripathi in *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*,

Happiness is not an accident. It is a choice. It is in our hands to be happy. Always in our hands. Who says that we can have only one soulmate? Sometimes, soulmates want such radically different things that they end up being the cause of unhappiness for each other. Someday I will find another soulmate, one who also wants what I want. He may not be as fascinating as Bharat. Or, even as great as Bharat will be. But he will bring me what I want. Simple happiness. I will find such a man. In my tribe. Or, outside of it. (59)

Through her deliberations, the reader encounters an alternative epistemology of dharma, one that centers compassion, fairness, and responsibility rather than rigid adherence to patriarchal codes. Sita questions Ram, "Why can't there be two Vishnus? If we work together, we can end this stupid fight between the Malayaputras and Vayuputras. We can all work together and set India on a new path" (251). Her abduction by Ravana, often narrated as a moment of helplessness in other retellings, becomes in Tripathi's narrative a moment that underscores her

strength of will, her endurance, and her refusal to cede moral agency even in captivity. She does not passively await rescue but engages in psychological resistance, maintaining her dignity and moral clarity despite external circumstances. In this sense, subservience and empowerment coexist; her captivity symbolizes constraint, but her responses to it mark her as an empowered agent. This reinterpretation of Sita becomes more significant when placed in dialogue with earlier literary and cultural depictions. Valmiki's Sita, while revered, embodies the feminine ideal of sacrifice, while Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* reinforces her as a paragon of obedience and domesticity. Kamban's Tamil epic amplifies her devotion but confines her within the emotional terrain of wifely loyalty. Amish Tripathi also says, "Sita reached out and placed her palm on Ram's hand. 'You share my fate and I share yours. That is what a true marriage is.' She entwined her fingers through his. 'Ram, I am your wife. We will always be together; in good times and bad; through thick and thin'" (*Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, 200). Woods rightly says, "Married new woman did not want to be defined primarily by their roles as wives and mothers, and they worried more about self - identity..." (Woods 7-8).

By contrast, feminist reinterpretations such as Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* present her as a woman discovering independence outside the orbit of Rama. Tripathi's Sita occupies an intermediate position: she is both fiercely devoted to her duties and yet unapologetic in her pursuit of agency. She presents her ideas, "Freedom is good, but in moderation. Too much of it is a recipe for disaster. That's why the path I prefer is that of balance. Balance between the Masculine and Feminine" (*Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, 280). This balance enriches the dialectical framework, reminding readers that empowerment in patriarchal contexts rarely occurs in absolute terms. Instead, it is mediated through negotiations with tradition, affection, loyalty, and circumstance.

Kaikeyi, traditionally cast as the villainous queen whose ambition leads to Rama's exile, undergoes a similarly radical reinterpretation. Tripathi situates her within the complexities of royal politics, where alliances, power struggles, and strategic foresight shape the destiny of kingdoms. Far from being a scheming consort manipulated by greed, she is envisioned as a woman of political intelligence who understands the fragility of succession and the necessity of preparing for uncertain futures. Her demand for her son Bharata's ascension is not a whim but a calculated decision shaped by her reading of political realities. As Tripathi depicts,

On the day before the court ceremony to announce Emperor Dashrath's abdication, some dramatic developments had taken place. Queen Kaikeyi had lodged herself in the kopa bhavan, the house of anger. This was an institutionalised chamber created in royal palaces many centuries ago, once polygamy had become a common practice among the royalty. Having multiple wives, a king was naturally unable to spend enough time with all of them. A kopa bhavan was the assigned chamber a wife would go to if angry or upset with her husband. This would be a signal for the king that the queen needed redressal for a complaint. It was believed to

be inauspicious for a husband to allow his wife to stay overnight in the kopa bhavan.

Dashrath had had no choice but to visit his aggrieved spouse. No one knew what had happened in the chamber, but the next day, Dashrath's announcement had been very different from what the rumours had suggested. Ram had been banished from the Sapt Sindhu for a period of fourteen years. Bharat had been named the crown prince in Ram's stead. (*Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, 220)

Tripathi highlights the epistemology of political foresight through Kaikeyi, a knowledge domain from which women have often been excluded or condemned when they dared to exercise influence. Her actions, while still catalyzing exile and conflict, are framed not as the machinations of a jealous stepmother but as the deliberations of a queen invested in her kingdom's stability. Therefore, Mukerjee asserts, "The new woman has become more vulnerable and her problems have increased. No longer can she retreat to the seclusion of her kitchen and at time the male domination has tried to overpower her. But she has fought on to seek an identity" (Mukerjee 245). The dialectic here is striking: Kaikeyi's empowerment lies in her political agency, yet she is remembered as subservient to negative archetypes in cultural memory. By re-narrating her choices, the series underscores how patriarchal narratives vilify women who seize political space.

Kaikeyi's figure gains further resonance when compared with historical queens in Indian history such as Razia Sultan or Rani Durgavati, who were often scrutinized for their political ambitions despite their effectiveness as rulers. Patriarchal cultures have tended to interpret female leadership as transgressive, regardless of context. Tripathi's recasting of Kaikeyi challenges this tendency, reminding readers that women's political intelligence is not an aberration but a dimension of governance unjustly suppressed in cultural memory. Her political decisions, even when flawed, reveal a willingness to embrace responsibility and foresight, qualities that align her more with statecraft than selfishness. Thus, Kaikeyi exemplifies the dialectic of empowerment claimed through authority and the subservience imposed by narratives that demonize her legacy.

Manthara, perhaps more than any other figure, embodies the dialectic of subservience and empowerment in complex ways. In traditional tellings, she is the hunchbacked servant whose manipulations incite Kaikeyi's demands, a figure of cunning and malice whose lower status amplifies her moral corruption. Tripathi's portrayal also depicts her as,

The disfigured Manthara sat on a specially designed chair that offered a measure of comfort to her hunched back. The scars on her face, remnants of a childhood affliction of small pox, gave her a forbidding appearance. At the age of eleven she had fallen ill with polio, leaving her right foot partially paralysed. Born to poverty, her physical disfiguration had added prejudice, not sympathy, to her formative years. She had, in fact, been

teased mercilessly. (*Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, 206)

But Tripathi reclaims her as a woman whose marginality itself sharpens her awareness of injustice. As one excluded from the privileges of royalty, she observes the hypocrisies of power with critical clarity. Simone de Beauvoir in her monumental text entitled *The Second Sex* (1949) claims that it is the whole process by which femininity is manufactured in society. She writes in *The Second Sex*, “Throughout her childhood the little girl suffered bullying and curtailment of activity; but the less she felt herself to be an autonomous individual” (Beauvoir, 14). Her advice to Kaikeyi stems not merely from selfishness but from an acute recognition of the systemic inequalities that shape their world. As a servant, she is subservient by social position, yet her counsel exerts transformative influence on royal politics. As portrayed by Tripathi,

She was in the residential office of Manthara, the richest businesswoman in Ayodhya; arguably, the richest in the Sapt Sindhu. Rumours suggested that Manthara was even richer than Emperor Dashrath. Druhyu, her closest aide, could swear that there was substance to these rumours. Indeed. Very substantial substance. (206)

Empowerment emerges not in spite of her marginality but through it; she manipulates structures that deny her status, thereby asserting agency in unexpected ways. By foregrounding her motivations and inner life, Tripathi reframes Manthara as an epistemic subject, not simply an instrument of chaos. Tripathi says, “Manthara had sworn vengeance. Spending huge amounts of money, she had ferreted Dhenuka from jail and had had him killed in a slow, brutal manner. But her thirst for vengeance had not been quenched. Her target now was Ram. She had been patiently waiting for an opportunity” (206). Her presence forces readers to reckon with the possibility that marginalized voices, often demonized, possess forms of wisdom ignored by dominant traditions.

The rehabilitation of Manthara’s voice also invites reflection on the politics of memory. She becomes an example of what Simon de Beauvoir says, “once she ceases to be separate the system based on her dependent crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator” (Beauvoir, 142). Why have traditions consistently vilified women like Manthara while celebrating men who employ equally manipulative strategies for statecraft? Figures such as Krishna, revered for his cunning, are seen as divine strategists, while women employing similar tactics are condemned. This asymmetry reveals how gendered frameworks of morality shape narrative memory. Tripathi’s choice to complicate Manthara reorients this moral compass, positioning her as a commentator on the very hypocrisies of power. She demonstrates that empowerment may sometimes take the form of disruption, of forcing history to unfold in directions that reveal hidden truths. Her epistemology, therefore, is one of critique, forged in the crucible of marginality and misrepresentation.

Beyond individual characters, the series interrogates the larger philosophical framework of dharma. In classical narratives, dharma is portrayed as a divine order to be upheld, often requiring submission to established hierarchies. Tripathi reimagines dharma as a contested and evolving principle, open to interpretation and subject to ethical scrutiny. Women become central interlocutors in this debate, challenging the assumption that dharma is solely articulated through male experience. Sita's questions, Kaikeyi's decisions, and Manthara's critiques together constitute a polyphony of feminine voices that destabilize monolithic visions of duty. Subservience in this context is not merely obedience to male authority but adherence to rigid interpretations of dharma that suppress dissent. Empowerment, conversely, is the act of questioning, reinterpreting, and reshaping dharma in light of lived experience. In highlighting these feminine epistemologies, Tripathi's series suggests that the survival of moral order itself depends on the inclusion of women's perspectives. The dialectic thus moves beyond personal empowerment to a broader cultural reimagination of ethics.

This becomes particularly significant when we consider how dharma has been invoked historically to justify women's subordination. The insistence on wifely obedience, ritual purity, and chastity often masqueraded as moral imperatives under the umbrella of dharma. By having Sita, Kaikeyi, and Manthara reinterpret dharma from their lived positions, Tripathi effectively rewrites the script of tradition. Amish Tripathi in his work *Immortal India* says that one of the important reasons why women suffer is because of "the patriarchal prism to interpret our past and myths" (22). He reminds readers that dharma, if it is to remain a relevant principle, must respond to the lived realities of all, not merely the privileged few. Feminine epistemologies here serve as a corrective, drawing attention to the gaps and exclusions that patriarchal interpretations have long produced.

The relevance of this reimagining extends into contemporary discourse. In an India grappling with questions of gender justice, equality, and cultural identity, mythological retellings carry significant ideological weight. Tripathi's decision to foreground empowered women resonates with feminist movements that seek to reclaim space within patriarchal traditions. By situating women as warriors, leaders, and thinkers, his narratives align with the cultural aspiration to reconfigure gender roles in the twenty-first century. Yet the persistence of subservience within the narratives ensures that empowerment is not depicted as unproblematic triumph. Women continue to face exile, marginalization, and vilification, underscoring that empowerment is always negotiated within constraints. This dialectic mirrors contemporary struggles, where women assert agency in political, economic, and social arenas yet encounter systemic barriers. Tripathi's reimagined women thus function not only as mythic figures but as allegories of ongoing feminist negotiations in Indian society.

The literary technique underpinning this retelling also deserves attention. Tripathi employs a cinematic style, weaving action, dialogue, and internal reflection to construct characters as multidimensional. His choice to dedicate separate

volumes to individual perspectives demonstrates a narrative commitment to plurality. This pluralism itself becomes a feminist act, resisting the singular hero's journey that dominates most epic traditions. By giving Sita, Kaikeyi, and even marginal voices narrative space, the series enacts epistemic justice, acknowledging that truth is not singular but constructed through dialogue. Such techniques align with modern narrative strategies that seek to de-center hegemonic voices and foreground alternative perspectives.

The factor that makes *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* distinctive is its refusal to reduce women to unidimensional archetypes. By exploring the dialectics of subservience and empowerment, the series reveals that feminine epistemologies are not singular but plural, shaped by context, choice, and consequence. Sita embodies moral courage and intellectual rigor; Kaikeyi illustrates political foresight and the price of agency; Manthara reveals the wisdom of marginality and the power of counsel. Together, they articulate a feminist mythography that resists erasure and caricature. Empowerment is not depicted as absolute freedom, nor is subservience portrayed as absolute victimhood. Instead, the interplay of these forces produces complex subjects whose stories invite readers to rethink the boundaries of myth, gender, and power. In this synthesis lies the radical potential of Tripathi's retelling: by allowing women to speak, act, and think in ways denied to them in tradition, he reframes the epic not as a story of male heroism with women in attendance but as a multivocal exploration of what it means to seek justice, identity, and dignity in a world marked by inequality.

The dialectics of subservience and empowerment in Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* illuminate how myth can be reimagined to foreground women as epistemic agents, capable of reshaping moral and cultural paradigms. In giving voice to Sita, Kaikeyi, and Manthara, Tripathi transforms the Ramayana tradition into a space where feminine perspectives are not supplementary but central. The tension between constraint and agency, obedience and resistance, marginality and influence becomes the very ground of their subjectivity. These women embody epistemologies that expand the scope of mythological fiction, offering readers not only entertainment but also a lens through which to examine gendered power structures in both past and present. Ultimately, the series demonstrates that myth, far from being a relic of tradition, is a living discourse, capable of absorbing new meanings and generating feminist possibilities. By re-narrating women's stories with depth and dignity, Tripathi crafts a mythology for the modern age—one in which the feminine is not silenced but resounds with power, complexity, and truth.

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