

Transcending Exiles: Countering the Epic Master Narrative in Haga's *For the Sake of Sita*

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Abstract: In recent years, feminist scholarship of the *Ramayana* has called attention to the epic's dogmatic nature, especially Sita's characterization as the devoted wife par excellence. While Brahminical patriarchy hails Rama as a hero and Sita as his submissive consort, it pays little attention to the horrors of Sita's ultimate fate. The *Uttarakanda* addresses Sita's ordeals following her return to Ayodhya where she is accused of having become impure in the company of Ravana, and is ultimately banished from the kingdom in spite of her having proved her fidelity by undertaking the *agnipariksha*. The ordeals of the mythical Sita are similar to those faced by many women even today. In a patriarchal system, the Everywoman Sita is either a Madonna or a whore. The webtoon *For the Sake of Sita* (2013-15) by Haga showcases the ordeals of a young girl named Sita Jaruna from Nepal, who, besides sharing her name with Sita of the Hindu epic, also goes from possessing the status of a living goddess as a *Kumari* to ending up in a brothel and ultimately dying. However, the story introduces an alternate reality where the soul of the departed Sita Jaruna facilitates a different trajectory for her younger self. According to Hilde Lindemann Nelson, the counterstory is a means through which oppressed persons resist their oppression by challenging master narratives. This paper shall examine Sita Jaruna's second chance in life as the counterstory of the archetypal figure of Sita. This examination shall reveal how contemporary speculative adaptations of epics empower traditionally oppressed and stereotyped characters and liberate them. By breaking free of the original trajectory of Sita institutionalized through Valmiki's epic, Sita Jaruna opens up possible futures for herself, which are amicable, peaceful, and enduring.

Keywords: *Speculative adaptation; Counterstory; Feminism; Epic; Narrative afterlives.*

Introduction

Let us begin by pondering over three basic questions: What exactly is this monolith named the *Ramayana* that seems to have taken over all aspects of social and political life in India? What is the *Ramayana* about? Who is the *Ramayana* about? There may be no linear answer to the aforementioned questions. One's preliminary knowledge of the *Ramayana* usually comes from stories exchanged vertically across generations and horizontally between different peoples. An individual growing up in an Indian household with a tradition of storytelling is well-acquainted with the tale of a mythic hero named Ram who, along with his companions Lakshman and Hanuman, undertake a quest to rescue his hapless wife, Sita, from captivity under Ravana. This tale has a divine significance in that it tells of the incarnation and earthly exploits of one of the most important deities in the *Hindu* pantheon, namely, Vishnu. So, a part of the purpose of passing the story on to the newer generation is also indoctrination into *Hindu* culture and ethos, which not only confers religious identity upon the listener but also presents models of moral and social conduct. Sita and Ram embody the archetype of the perfect conjugal couple, where the latter becomes the epitome of the *purusha* who honours his *dharma* by actively protecting his wife and community and the former becomes the ideal wife, a fitting secondary to Ram, whose selflessness and devotion for her lord always comes at the expense of her well-being. Linda Hess observes how the subsequent composers and commentators of the *Ramayana* have readily accepted the story as a fitting framework for the self-conception of an ideal community (Hess 2). Its time-tested religious-communal significance lends the ideals double legitimacy to the point that it becomes an expectation from a certain individual to dedicate her or his life to emulating the archetypes of Sita and Ram. Since a woman in patriarchy has to bear the brunt of societal expectations, she has to show an unusual commitment to embodying Sita's sacrificial and selfless ideals to the fullest extent. Jacqueline Hirst notes from her conversations with young expatriate men of Indian origin in the United Kingdom that men take Sita as an ideal when it comes to their choice of a spouse (Hirst 19). Such is the centrality of the *Ramayana* in the

psyche of the Hindu community, and its co-option into the Indian nationalist discourse, that it situates it all the more firmly as a monumental cultural touchstone. Sikata Banerjee reflects on the unfolding of muscular nationalism in the Indian context where the epitomised view of masculinity becomes deeply entrenched in Hindutva ethos. Muscular nationalism, she notes, is the intersection of the discourse and conception of nationalism with a particular notion of masculinity (Banerjee 272). As such, muscular nationalism is militant, enforcing the idea that men are protectors of a feminised nation-state. Importantly, she notes that the traditional androgynous, almost feminine presentation of the *Hindu* deity Ram was reconfigured as an aggressive, muscled warrior to fit the agenda of militant Hindutva patriarchal politics (Banerjee 274). Banerjee's discussion on muscular nationalism and women's position under Hindutva is especially important for the purpose of this paper which we shall return to shortly.

When one talks about the epic narrative of the *Ramayana*, one automatically connects it to the epic composed by Valmiki in approximately the 3rd century BCE. However, as A. K. Ramanujan observes, there have been as many *Ramayanas* as there have been storytellers and with each act of telling the story has undergone subtle changes indicative of the location of the teller (Ramanujan 133). At this point, it might be appropriate to reflect upon the questions of who and what the mythic tale is about. It depends upon the position of the teller, and various factors come into play in deciding who becomes the central figure in it. For instance, while mainstream Hindutva voices may claim the Valmiki/Tulsidas texts as the only authoritative ones with Ram as the pivotal figure, a folk narrative like that composed and sung by Chandrabati in the 16th century situates Sita and her woes at the forefront to reflect critically upon the female experience that is almost always understood as passive in male-centric telling (Chakraborti 4).

Given the existence of countless telling of the myth and their construction from various vantage points, one understands that the acceptance of a few narratives over others is politically motivated to sustain the dominant powers in place, and it is this constructivist knowledge that may help one challenge the idea of the monolith. Hence, Sita need not always be the passive, devout female

secondary whose life follows the same trajectory laden with woes and misfortunes, solely dependent on the men in her life to come to deliver her, only to be rejected when she is seen to be threatening the norm. There are, in fact, already extant telling where Sita is portrayed in more radically subversive terms, such as in the *Adbhuta Ramayana* and the *Satakantharavana* where she is shown to take up arms against Ravana, and in Santhali telling where she enjoys a free sexual life (Ramanujan 155). The tradition continues in the numerous adaptations throughout the last few decades. Since Sita's predicament is not peculiar to herself but speaks to the experiences of most women in the patriarchy, it is not uncommon for the reader to identify a pattern similar to that of the trajectory of Sita's life in various other stories about women survivors and victims of abuse. This is not a simple coincidence but stems from the policing power of religious patriarchy, which institutes divine feminine figures as role models to be emulated by women of a given community. Most often, these female models also undergo a similar reconfiguration as the one observed in muscular nationalism, where the purity and conservatism of the deities are over-emphasised, leaving out any other element that might threaten patriarchy.

Sita is an ideal candidate for obvious reasons and her qualities of passivity, chastity, and devotion to her husband are upheld as doctrinal. Hilde Lindemann notes that these kinds of idealised visions emerge as master narratives that perpetuate inequalities and marginalisation in a given culture. All women are either identified as or expected to be like Sita to suit the purpose of the power-holders, who are invariably male and Savarna. Women are also romanticised as hapless, needing support from the men of their community to survive. Lindemann also notes that a culture uses these master narratives to render a group of individuals intelligible for its convenience, thus stripping them of agency to form their own identity (Lindemann 152). The genre of speculative adaptation becomes particularly subversive in this scenario, which takes an institutionally typified narrative and introduces alternatives to the story elements that sustain and perpetuate oppression. Since categories of identity are narratively constituted, they can also be rehabilitated and repaired through complex narrative structures. The radically reconstituted narrative that debunks oppressive master narratives of

identity is termed 'counterstories' by Lindemann. With this as the guiding theoretical framework, this article shall examine Haga's 2013-15 serialised webtoon, *For the Sake of Sita* as a speculative adaptation of Sita's story that challenges the typically accepted trajectory of her life using the novel subgenre of *Isekai*.

Adaptation in a Participatory Platform

Webtoon, a free online platform for the publication and consumption of digital comics, is an essentially participatory zone where content creation is most often a dialogic process. The content is largely influenced by the responses of the consumers, and the latter also interpret and explain plot points in the comments, thereby adding to the narrative, from which other readers can derive insights. This dialogic-participatory tendency is much akin to the open-ended nature of oral folk cultures that resist the totalisation of narratives in their democratic approach to storytelling. Platforms like Webtoon are, therefore fertile spaces for the rise and proliferation of subversive modes of storytelling as they are largely shared and sustained by a diverse fan community.

Isekai has come to be one of the most popular sub-genres of portal fantasy in East and South-East Asian manga, light novels, manhwa, and anime industry and its presence and proliferation are associated with the consolidation of online media spaces and fan communities in the new digital economy. The term itself has a Japanese lexical origin where the word '*sekai*' indicates 'world' and its prefix '*i*' denotes anything different, unusual, and non-conforming (Levy 87). Statistical research states that the use of the term had been rare on online platforms before the year 2013 (Price 60), though conceptually, traces of it can be found in several earlier transmigration or portal fantasy texts, the earliest of its kind to be found in Japanese folktales, especially in that of Urashima Tarou. To break it down, it is a speculative device that transports the protagonist of a narrative from the world that they inhabit to another world where the brunt of the action takes place. The reason for transportation may vary depending on the context of the tale.

Online forums such as *Reddit* and *Royal Road*, which document trends in fan communities, list the various types of *isekai* of which three can be found to recur across platforms — the *shoukan* or summoning type, where the protagonist is evoked into another world for a particular purpose; the *teni* or transference, where the protagonist crosses over to a different dimension; and *tensei* or reincarnation, where the protagonist having passed away in their own world, usually by getting hit by a truck¹, is reincarnated into another world. Besides, several subtypes have been listed as well. The *isekai* subgenre embodies a kind of subversion reminiscent of the radical reversal of expectations in the speculative fantasy genre. In its unique way, the *isekai* provides the underdog avenues to reclaim their purpose in a narrative. Where death and oppression cast their shadow, the trope of transmigration offers second chances to the protagonist to live and assert the validity of their existence. As such, the radical subversive possibilities of this subgenre are endless in that it may be utilised to weave stories that resist the persistence of master narratives and constant typification of characters in terms of their gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, or any other basis of identity.

For the purpose of this study, let us take Sita as such a character whose identity and being are wrapped up in a dominant, overarching narrative of deeply gendered qualities of passivity and self-sacrifice. In most of the stories recounted, Sita has to meet the same kind of tragic suicidal end, no matter how radical some of her actions may have been. The institutionalised narrative imposes a very specific structure on her life: usually, it begins with her birth and adoption by Janaka, which follows the *swayamvar*, where a Sita of age is won over by Ram. After her marriage and coronation comes the expulsion of the triumvirate — Sita, Ram, and Lakshman — into the forest, where Sita gets abducted by Ravan. Later comes the episode of her apparent liberation when Ravan is defeated by Ram in the battle of Lanka, but this does not ensure a happy ending for Sita. Following her liberation from captivity, she is faced with yet more ordeals. Ram curtly spells out

¹ One of the most popular tropes used in *isekai* manga and anime to depict the death of the protagonist is by making them get hit by a truck. The popular usage of this trope has led to the image of the truck becoming an Internet meme in the fan community.

that he had undertaken the siege of Lanka not entirely for her sake, but primarily to safeguard his own *dharma* as a man and king². He expresses his unwillingness to accept her because she has been under the auspices of a man other than her husband. He questions her fidelity and firmly rejects her, much to Sita's dismay. This is when Sita undertakes the infamous ordeal of fire, or the *agnipariksha*, where she walks through blazing flames to prove her fidelity to Ram. Having passed this ordeal, she is accepted into Ayodhya for the time being, but once again, gossip about her infidelity amongst the subjects of the kingdom taints her image, and this time, Ram orders Lakshman to banish a now pregnant Sita into the forest by deception. There she is sheltered and harboured by Valmiki, a sage residing in the forest.

Her second ordeal comes when Ram is brought to Valmiki's residence by the singing of Lava and Kusha, and he seeks to take Sita back on the condition that she undertake the *agnipariksha* again. This time she does not comply and, taken up by rage and despair, descends into the earth. Therefore, the tale of Sita is never quite happy in its ending, but is upheld as the epitome of female suffering and termination of life. This begs the question of whether there can be any alternative to this insistent pattern. The speculative subgenre of *isekai* might come in handy in this context to create a rift in the linearity of the narrative that is Sita's tale and turn it into a counterstory.

Research Question

Haga's *For the Sake of Sita* falls under the subgenre of *isekai*, which is a story about a girl named Sita Jaruna in Nepal whose life takes a similar trajectory as that of the mythical Sita. Initially, the webtoon begins with introducing Sita Jaruna as a "fallen goddess" who now haunts the alleys of Baglung, the red-light district of Nepal, earning a living as a sex worker³. There is some hint as to her striking fall from grace, but none of it is clearly recounted in the first part of the story until her

² Debroy, Bibek. "Yuddha Kanda, Chapter 6(103)" *The Valmiki Ramayana*. Translated by Bibek Debroy, Penguin Books India PVT, Limited, 2017.

³ Haga. "Ep. 0." *For the Sake of Sita*. Webtoon, 2013-15. Webtoon.

death since the story is told from the perspective of the male lead, Sangmin, a doctor from South Korea who marries Sita after having met her. The tragic essence of Sita Jaruna's life reaches its peak when, despite having pulled herself out from her wretched life in Baglung and coming to South Korea with her now beloved husband, she loses her life after being diagnosed with an unnamed disease, which, there is ample evidence for the reader to surmise, may have been contracted amidst the unhygienic surroundings of the brothel she inhabited.

Like the archetypal Sita, though happiness and contentment come very close to her, she has to get tied down by the constraints of life, and if we may, of narrative. That is until a narrative shift takes place with Sangmin getting *isekai'd*⁴ into a parallel dimension, which is the same world as the one he inhabited, except that he goes back in time and wakes up on the streets of Nepal as a middle-aged man. *For the Sake of Sita* falls under the *shoukan* or summoning type of *isekai* where the male lead is evoked into another world by a transcendent spirit emanating from the sculpture of *Taleju*⁵ to help change the course of Sita's life. Although the rest of the story is also told from the primary perspective of Sangmin, I argue that since the moment of transmigration, the perspective of Sangmin is overridden by the will of the transcendent spirit, who is revealed at the end of the story to be none other than the departed Sita Jaruna herself now closer to the cosmic embodiment of the goddess.

For the convenience of the reader, a distinction between the two Sitas can be made by referring to the soul of Sita Jaruna as Sita the Soul. The unfolding of Sita's story in the *isekai* world takes place under the guidance of Sita the Soul, who places Sangmin in Nepal right where he can find a six-year-old Sita Jaruna before she is inducted into the Kumari initiations. At the level of narration, I argue that the unfolding can be read as Sita the Soul narrating her own story, situating Sangmin therein as he follows through and addresses his purpose of protecting and guiding the young Sita. This act of self-narrating one's story as a *Kumari* becomes doubly

⁴ *Isekai'd* is the finite verb form of the term *Isekai*, widely used in the fan community to indicate the phenomenon of getting transported to another world.

⁵ *Taleju Bhawani* is the royal goddess of the Malla dynasty of Nepal.

imperative for this study given the striking lack of first-hand narratives by ex-*Kumaris* in general, a few of which have only emerged very recently. The life and being of the young girls who are selected as *Kumaris* are ridden with an air of mystery, and the legends and lores around them are always already narrativized by society at large, which compromises the self-identity of these girls, as shall be discussed further in the essay. To return to the plot, it is as much as Sita the Soul's own will to protect herself in a parallel world and make space for an amicable future as it is of Sangmin's to safeguard the future of the person he loves. When read from this perspective, *For the Sake of Sita* opens itself up to be read as a counterstory where the figure of Sita is no longer a passive victim but actively challenges the master narratives to reconstitute her identity through storytelling and affirmative narrativization.

Hilde Lindemann comes up with the concept of the counterstory, which she envisions as an analytical tool that would challenge master narratives and how they perpetuate and reinforce oppressive hierarchical structures based on different identities. Identities, Lindemann argues, are complex sites of contestation where an individual or group's self-conception interacts with how others see them. As such, identities are not only centred around the self but also interact with and draw from what others ascribe to the individual (Lindemann 6). Often, there is a clash between the two perspectives where the personal sense of self is overshadowed by the gaze of another, usually an oppressive group, which narrates the identity of the individual or group it oppresses. A pertinent example of the same would be how patriarchy has narratively constituted the oppressive gendered identity of women as overly emotional and weak. When the said individual or group is oppressed, they are usually stripped of independent moral agency and are viewed as inferior and lowly situated. Such an identity under epistemic and moral violence becomes what Lindemann calls a damaged identity, the possessor of which is understood to be unworthy of full moral respect. The persistent oppression of identity results in the distortion of the self-conception of the individual or group who accept the hierarchy as given and begin to see themselves through the gaze of the oppressor. This is called infiltrated consciousness, which essentially means the hijacking of one's

sense of self by a larger narrative. This, in turn, leads to deprivation of opportunity where the oppressed individual or group is denied a meaningful, identity-constituting social role based solely on their social inferiority (Lindemann xii). This kind of oppression is instituted through narrative.

Counterstories, on the other hand, are narratives woven by the oppressed individual or group themselves to replace the harmful stories with better ones. Hence, the genre of *isekai* is conducive to the building of counterstories given the opportunity it provides for its characters.

Comparison between Sita Jaruna and Sita Janaki

As noted above, the action of *For the Sake of Sita* primarily takes place in Nepal, where the tradition of instituting and worshipping the *Kumari* is still extant. It is a major attraction for pilgrims and tourists from all across to witness the *Kumari* either on the balcony of her residence or during the *Indra Jatra* and other festivals. In the words of Isabella Tree, the *Kumari* is Nepal's "Living Goddess." The word '*kumari*' means a virgin girl, and the ideal candidate for the position of the *Kumari* is a female toddler who must belong to the Buddhist Shakya lineage, the highest caste in the *Newar* community, second only to the priestly *Vajracharyas* (Tree 75). She acts as the earthly representative and vessel for the Goddess Taleju, who is regarded as the highest form of Durga, and thus, her adoration can only be performed by *tantrics* through esoteric practices that remain shrouded in dark mysticism. The first recorded Buddhist tantric worship of a *Kumari* can be found in the *Samvarodaya Tantra* composed around the 11th century CE in Nepal (Tree 7). The *Kumari*, all-seeing and all-knowing, is said to be the protector of the country of Nepal and is worshipped by both Hindus and Buddhists alike (Tree 13). The first royal *Kumari* was established at Bhaktapur in 1491 (Tree 7). In the webtoon, the origin of the cult of *Kumari* is attributed to the lapse and repentance of a Nepali king who instituted the practice of initiating young girls into *Kumarihood* to contain and appease the goddess⁶.

⁶ Haga. "Ep. 0." *For the Sake of Sita*. Webtoon, 2013-15. Webtoon. Accessed 10 March 2024.

The actual myth, which is associated with the popular Malla king Jaya Prakash, follows a similar trail. The myth tells that the goddess would visit the king's chamber every night to play *Tripasa* with him on the condition that her visitations are not disclosed to anyone. However, once the queen became aware, the goddess left in a rage, and later, Jaya Prakash Malla dreamt of her telling him that she would timely incarnate as a girl child in the *Shakya* and *Vajracharya* communities. To honour her, the king instituted the practice of *Kumari* worship (Tree 18). The Malla king is also accredited with the installation of the royal abode of the *Kumari*, also called the *Kumari Ghar* or the *Kumari Chen*, on Durbar Square in Kathmandu in 1757 (Tree 7). During her reign as the goddess's vessel, the *Kumari* stays at the *Kumari Chen* and is attended to by a hoard of caretakers and family members. The child who is supposed to become *Kumari* has to fulfil a list of almost unattainable requirements to be eligible to represent the goddess. She must be exceptionally beautiful without any blemishes or birthmarks on her skin, embodying the thirty-two *lakshinas*, that is, physical perfections of a *bodhisattva*. She must exhibit divine calmness and patience, unusual for a toddler of her age (Tree 15). The most imperative rule for the *Kumari* is that she must never bleed. If she does cut herself or bleeds, even by accident, it is believed that the goddess inside her will disappear. Tree notes that the people of Nepal view blood as the creative energy or *shakti* of the goddess, which is contained by *Kumari*. All the energy is supposed to remain inside the child's body (Tree 66). If and when a *Kumari* shows signs of puberty, she is dismissed before she begins bleeding (Tree 14-15). From her interaction with several Nepali people on the matter of the dethroned *Kumari*'s fate, Tree observes that former *Kumaris* have a history of being viewed through a superstitious gaze where they are thought to wreak havoc wherever they go and how accepting them into a family through adoption or marriage brings misfortune and death. The people also insisted, she says, that the former *Kumaris* go into sex work and are trafficked into brothels in Mumbai or Bangkok (Tree 16), though that is not the case with the ex-*Kumaris* from more privileged backgrounds such as Rashmila Shakya, as Tree documents later in her book. The female protagonist of the webtoon, Sita Jaruna, the daughter of an

extremely underprivileged family, is unfortunately not lucky enough to return to the comfort of her home once she is dismissed from *Kumari* Chen.

In the context of this analysis, the choice of the name Sita is interesting. Besides its function as an approximate phonetic replacement for the name *Shakya*, it also becomes a fitting name for a character like Sita Jaruna. Sita Jaruna embodies all the ideals of femininity that a patriarchal culture asks of a female individual. Like the mythical Sita, she is beautiful, compassionate, kind, and selfless. Portrayed as possessing captivating beauty both through the perspective of Sangmin as well as through the visual medium of the graphic narrative, Sita is always shown to test limits in her attempts to lift up the people around her. When an older Sangmin lands in the parallel universe, Sita is the first to find him. Despite her family's abject poverty and starvation, the six-year-old Sita manages to smuggle food for him. Although she is repulsed by the sight of blood and dead animals, she pushes herself to get used to touching them so that she can help her ailing family in the only way that she can. Like the mythical Sita, she is elevated to the level of a goddess in her lifetime but suffers a humiliating fall once she starts menstruating. The once reverent vessel of *Taleju* is cast out into the streets with no apparent explanation as to why she is being thrown out and where she must go thereafter. Even though there have been laws in place for the last two decades to adequately rehabilitate a former *Kumari*, the universe of the webtoon does not bring in any governmental intervention for two plausible reasons.

Firstly, the story takes place in the 20th century — possibly in the second half, given the visual depiction of the world — when Nepal had been undergoing deep political turmoil as protests for a move towards democracy surged through the country. Amidst such unrest, the question of rehabilitating the former *Kumari* may not have been the utmost priority of the people in power. Moreover, there may not have been any provision in place to help the menstruating girls to begin with. Secondly, the superstitions surrounding the figure of the ex-*Kumari* were so deeply entrenched in the culture that no one would be willing to help her. In the webtoon, Sita Jaruna's own family abandons her for fear of being cursed by her presence. The circumstances of her expulsion also make her akin to the Sita of the Ramayana.

While the latter Sita was expelled during her pregnancy, Sita Jaruna is thrown out while she is menstruating. Both women who had been idolised as goddesses now found themselves slandered and reduced to homelessness. For Sita Jaruna, the only option becomes to leverage her sexuality to earn a living since she possessed no assets with which she could find some other kind of employment. For her, it is not an automatic choice but comes as an impulse to self-destruct as a result of men degrading and trying to violate her, as well as starvation and lack of a proper place to lodge.

The place of the *Kumari* in the cultural imagination of Nepal is extremely crucial, as is that of Sita in India. Both the figures are important for the self-conception and preservation of nationalistic identity — the *Kumari* because she is heralded as the custodian of harmony in Nepal, and Sita because she is the consort of Ram and is deemed to embody the ultimate *dharma* of women. To invoke Banerjee again in this context, she has observed that the male-centric notion of militant muscular nationalism is predicated upon the mapping of the nation upon the body of the woman. Women become border guards whose chastity is to be maintained at all costs. The nation is thus symbolised through images of women in multiple forms, such as that of a suffering mother, a vulnerable virgin, a treasured wife, or a warrior goddess (Banerjee 273). Most often, it is the dichotomy of the warrior goddess and vulnerable virgin that is found in metaphorical narratives of nationhood, where the invocation of either is dependent upon context. In the case of Nepal, the *Kumari* represents both the embodiment of a fierce goddess and a vulnerable virgin in the form of the girl child who is overly supervised by the elders around her to ensure her purity, which is emblematic of the health of the nation. The men who act as the so-called protectors of the feminised nation-state attribute the sustenance and advancement of their militancy to the image of the woman envisioned as a virgin/warrior.

In Nepal, the festival of *Dashain*, which is also the occasion for the installation of the new *Kumari*, is observed by the country's military forces as an auspicious day to honour the goddess's victory over *Mahisashura*. On the ninth day of *Dashain*, popularly known as *Maha Navami* or the Glorious Ninth, it is a

tradition to make blood sacrifices in the name of the goddess. In her book, Tree specifically describes the military sacrifice at Kot Square, where hordes of victims were gathered to be slaughtered by the army. The significance of the mass sacrifice in the career of a military man is described to be critical as it either spells his success or fall. The spraying of the ritual blood on the weapons works as a sacrament to bless the weapons and enhance their efficiency. The sacrifice also stands in for military training and makes them virulent, increasing their tolerance to blood and gore (Tree 46-50). This aggressive brand of nationalism with the tradition of *Kumari* worship in place invariably translates to the sustenance of gender roles in society as women are insisted to be passive goddesses at home to be protected by active, weapon-wielding men in the public sphere. The notion of the *Kumari*'s power in the political sphere is in itself a dubious claim, as her only task has been to validate the reign of the King of Nepal.

The same culture that places such a heavy premium on a girl child also degrades her as she begins to come of age. In this world Sita Jaruna succumbs to death while having no say in the formation of her identity. From the beginning, it is her clan that places expectations of becoming a *Kumari* upon her shoulders. It is her family and socio-economic circumstances that prompt her to become a *Kumari*, and that is how her identity as a living goddess comes into being. Later, when she is dethroned and thrown into the streets, she is forced to take upon herself the identity of a fallen goddess turned sex worker. Throughout her life, her identity is narrativized by the gaze of the patriarchy that repeatedly oppresses and strips her of the little fortune that came her way in the form of love through Sangmin.

For the Sake of Sita as Sita's Counterstory

The genre of *Isekai* endows Sita Jaruna with a second chance in life where, with adequate intervention, she is able to steer herself towards a safer, healthier future. It also provides her with the security to take control and sustain her choices as her identity is no longer narrativized by an outsider's gaze. Since narratives have emphasised how stories perform a moral function in society, it becomes doubly imperative for Sita the Soul to intervene and narratively repair her story

(Lindemann 36). If the story of Sita is supposed to teach girls codes of feminine conduct, they might as well be empowering ones. The repaired narrative will also help numerous girls and women like Sita reinvent themselves as human beings with social and moral agency.

So far, Sita has inhabited an identity damaged by patriarchy. Her idolised life as a *Kumari* prevented her from access to basic education, both institutional as well as societal. When she emerges from the *Kumari Chen*, her social awareness is less than adequate, which drives her into unpleasant situations. The overprotection and reverent treatment distorted her sense of self to the point where her consciousness gets infiltrated with the idea that she is truly a cosmic being who would be adored and provided for no matter what. This illusion caused Sita to rudely intrude into a stranger's house in the middle of the night, who naturally throws her out and shuts the door on her face.⁷ Another case of infiltrated consciousness can be found when, upon being constantly viewed as nothing more than a sexual object by the men on the street, Sita starts to believe that her sexuality is the only marketable asset that she possesses. Sita's encounter at the public eatery with the men who want to sexually exploit her convinces her that she is not fit for any job other than to sell her body. The lack of social knowledge prevents her from being aware of manual employment opportunities other than sex work. Her inexperience as a social being prompts her to take up sex work, the first opportunity that she sees as conducive to her condition. Here, she suffers from deprivation of opportunity as her body seems to her to be the only sellable asset, and she decides to capitalise on it.

It is at this point that the middle-aged Sangmin intervenes and helps her make a wise choice by telling her of the health hazards of the occupation she has decided to opt for. In this context, it is possible to read Sangmin as a figure identical to that of Valmiki, similar only in his efforts to guide and shelter Sita. Unlike the epic poet who narrativizes the tale of the *Ramayana* and through it Sita's, Sangmin remains in Sita Jaruna's life solely as an acting father to help her evaluate her

⁷ Haga. "Ep. 7." For the Sake of Sita. Webtoon, 2013-15. Webtoon. Accessed 10 March 2024.

choices. He never forces her to make a decision but lays bare the reality for Sita to take the final call. Here, Sangmin performs what Lindemann calls emotional work.

Lindemann defines emotional work as a set of useful functions performed by the inhabitants of the survivor's community of choice that reinforces the will of the survivor to counter and stand up to the narratives that oppresses them. She invokes Marilyn Friedman's definition of two kinds of communities in this context, namely, the found community and the community of choice. The found community is often the community in which an individual is placed without choice or say, such as the family, which tends to impose values and suppress non-group members. A community of choice, on the other hand, helps the survivor relocate and renegotiate their identity (Lindemann 9-10). While her family, the *Kumari Chen*, and the hostile street life are Sita Jaruna's found communities, that is, communities in which she found herself by chance, Sangmin becomes her community of choice. He performs meaningful emotional work, such as giving her a sense of companionship and security, helping her get accustomed to the mundane social world and look for alternative employment opportunities, boosting her confidence, and encouraging her to become independent and self-assertive. In this space, she finds a chance to adequately assess herself and make well-guided choices.

Growing out of absolute self-abnegation, she learns how to put her happiness first, all the while sustaining her deep sense of empathy and compassion. When she meets the young Sangmin on the streets and fosters a romantic tie with him, she decides to leave Nepal and build a happy conjugal life for herself rather than throwing the opportunity away. At the same time, she makes sure that the old Sangmin has enough sustenance to keep well after her departure. This is how she achieves a balance between self-love and love for the other, hence breaking the cycle of tragedy. To sum up, one may say that she saves herself — with Sangmin's assistance — as Sita the Soul takes it upon her to tell her own story in a way better than the one that has been told through the centuries. Her counterstory is powerful enough to equip young girls with the knowledge that they can help themselves, find communities of choice, and thrive no matter how hostile the world may become.

Conclusion

Haga's *For the Sake of Sita* ends with the revelation of the identity of the cosmic spirit that had been guiding Sangmin to help his departed wife, and the spirit, he discovers, is none other than that of Sita Jaruna herself. Breaking the norm of passive silence, Sita then emerges as an agential being who is perfectly capable of mending her own identity. She does not wait for Ram's mercy to deliver her. This also critically challenges the stereotypical notion that a woman's ultimate purpose in life is to marry a 'suitable man' who would free her from spinsterhood. Instead, Sangmin is shown to be a supportive companion who strengthens her rather than dehumanising her as a dependent. Counterstories like these highlight the absurdity of the oppressive hierarchies in society and emphasise the need to challenge them through individual or collective action. They also stress the importance of affirmative community as a driving force in the reconfiguration and repairing of a damaged identity. Hence, one need not stand alone in their fight against oppression, but be supported, encouraged, and fuelled by others in whom they find a sense of community.

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