

ADITYA IYENGAR'S 'BHUMIKA': REDEFINING MYTHOLOGY IN THE PRESENT

Dr. Digambar M. Date

Jr. Lecturer in English

Parth Sainiki Jr. College

Kharapudi Road, Jalna (Maharashtra)

Abstract:

Aditya Iyengar is a highly regarded Indian writer who mostly writes about the Indian mythology. His novels deal with the history and historical characters from the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. His fictional works include five critically acclaimed novels, The Thirteenth Day (2015), Palace of Assassins (2016), A Broken Sun (2018) and The Conqueror (2018). Iyengar's latest novel, 'Bhumika' was published in 2019. The novel, 'Bhumika' was longlisted for the Mathrubhumi Book of the Year 2020. Along with novels, Iyengar also writes poetry and screenplays. The aim of this research paper is to explore and analyze the relevance of Ramayana in general and the depiction of Sita's alternative-life in particular, through the novel, Bhumika. Originally, the novel is inspired by Volga's novel The Liberation of Sita.

Keywords: *Queendom of Mithila, Ramayana, agnipariksha, swayamvara Valmiki, hermitess, Sita, Bhumikka etc.*

Introduction:

Aditya Iyengar is a highly regarded Indian writer who mostly writes about the Indian mythology. His novels deal with the history and historical characters from the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. His fictional works include five critically acclaimed novels, *The Thirteenth Day* (2015), *Palace of Assassins* (2016), *A Broken Sun* (2018) and *The Conqueror* (2018). Iyengar's latest novel, '*Bhumika*' was published in 2019. The novel, '*Bhumika*' was longlisted for the Mathrubhumi Book of the Year 2020. Along with novels, Iyengar also writes poetry and screenplays. The aim of this research paper is to explore and analyze the relevance of Ramayana in general and the depiction of Sita's alternative-life in particular, through the novel, *Bhumika*.

Basically, the novel, '*Bhumika*' is a story of Sita after the major events of the Ramayana, when she is living out her days in the forest as a hermitess. Revealing the theme and source of '*Bhumika*', the author notes, "It is inspired by Volga's novel '*The*

Libration of Sita' owes much of its conception to her thought-provoking ideas on Sita's life after leaving Rama. This book imagines an alternative life for Sita--one where she never met Rama."

The novel '*Bhumika*' is divided into four Acts. In the novel, initially, the writer has depicted Sita's original, historical life, where Sita, in Valmiki's Ashram, is asked to watch a play performed, which was based on the eternal love story of Ram-Sita, an account of love and sacrifices. At the moment, Sita is seen eagerly thinking –What if she didn't marry Rama? Would her life be different? If so, how different would it be? Then, Valmiki gives an opportunity to Sita to seek the answers for her all hypothetical, complex ifs. Later, as the narrative proceeds, Iyengar brilliantly unfolds an alternative life for Sita –where she never met Lord Rama and leads her independent life as Bhumika. As an independent and self-esteemed queen of Mithila, Bhumika stood up firmly with her people for the removal of gender biases in a male-dominated society.

Validating the feministic base of Bhumika's character, Mridula Gupta rightly observes in her review, "Bhumika's choices are very different from Sita. She refuses to believe that she needs a man to complete her, or that her skill sets should involve only the tasks meant for a princess. Her governance is as shrewd as any King and her decision making radiates confidence and determination. However, she has her fair share of self-doubt and is seen in a dilemma time again about her reign and how she is perceived by the world." (A Book Review by Mridula Gupta, ecstaticyetchaotic.in)

While depicting an alternative-life for Sita, through the character of Bhumika, the writer has successfully underlined the 'inferiority' imposed on the women. This long lasted inferiority imposed on the women in a male-dominated social set-up, is prevalent in the novel. It can be traced here as the novel reads:

I learnt then that a woman could only be less than a man. Only at times he is equal. She could never be better than him. Otherwise, how could she get married?

It was a rare man who would marry someone better than him. Or rather, better than him in the things he had told himself he should be doing, like fighting or protecting the family or earning for its upkeep. ‘Protection’ and all that it implied--strength, domination, decision-making and physical courage – was a man’s territory, and he would not cede it. He would guard it ferociously. At times he would cede certain privileges in decision-making to the woman, to give the illusion of equality. But that was all. In the name of protection, a man would go out and lead his life, and keep his wife, mother and daughter locked away at home. Once a man had someone to protect, he had ‘honour’, and if he could not protect that person, he lost his honour. (Iyengar, 2019.p.90)

In the novel, as an author, Iyengar skillfully questions the overall socio-cultural and political domination of men. Consequently, Bhumika, as an embodiment a powerful woman, who resembles today’s well-educated woman with modern views, directly challenges the biased social norms where she questions Ram, “If I were to tell you then that I did not believe your story, and asked you to take the *agnipariksha* to prove you were telling the truth, would you?” (p.104). Furthermore, the essence of the ‘marriage’ is equally highlighted in the novel as Bhumika, the female protagonist, explains the base and meaning of the marriage, “I believe in marriage. That the institution binds two people together to face all the challenges life has to offer. A marriage is like a tree. It needs love and respect to grow strong. But if the roots are mired in suspicion and mistrust, the marriage will rot.” (p.105). Bhumika’s explanation, regarding the meaning of the marriage is timeless and even applicable in the present time irrespective of the social complexities resulted by the development and so called modernity.

After the fictionalization of a possible alternative-life for Sita, through the character of Bhumika, the queen of the ‘queendom of Mithila’ the writer has sharply delivered his message to the readers: “It is important not to regret whatever choices you make and feel self-pity. This principle should be the foundation of the temple because how we build the

past in our minds will ultimately determine how we perceive ourselves in the present and when we are old. Bhumika could look at herself as the woman whose *swyamvara* was a failure, or as the woman who made life better for the people of Mithila.” (p.189)

Conclusion:

After the thorough analysis of the novel ‘*Bhumika*’, through the socio-cultural point of view, I came to the conclusion that as a writer of fiction, Aditya Iyengar has exemplified the capacity of the writer to explore the alternative possibilities of the personal as well as social life. In the novel, Iyengar has succeeded to correlate the myth with the present, with a new dimension of human life where he concludes, “Bhumika does not need Rama. She had a good and fulfilling life without his presence.” (p. 190) The relevance of the novel ‘*Bhumika*’ is exactly emphasized by the author as he answers the question, “Do you think it draws any parallels to today’s society?” As he answers: “I think it’s basically being open-minded, for one being kinder to yourself, making the choices that work for you rather than going with what society’s choices are. Whether you choose to be a Sita or Bhumika both choices are relevant and good. As long as you’re convinced with what you do, nobody else should judge you or your decisions.” (An interview with the author by Priyanka Parmar. July 25, 2019. Social Ketchup June,2021. Online)

Works Cited:

1. Iyengar, Aditya. *Bhumika*. Gurugram (New Delhi): Hachette Book Publishing India Pvt. Ltd., 2019. Print.
2. <<https://valleyofwords.org/people/adityaiyengar/>>
3. <<https://ecstaticyetchaotic.in/2019/08/20/book-review-bhumika-by-aditya-iyengara-feminist-retelling-of-sita>>
4. <[https:// www.socialketchup.in/bhumika-a-story-of-sits-aditya-iyengar/](https://www.socialketchup.in/bhumika-a-story-of-sits-aditya-iyengar/)>
5. <<https://scroll.in/article/885585/i-wanted-to-write-a-mahabharata-novel-that-spoke-about-the-nature-of-masculinity/>>