

Gitanjali SINGH
Banaras Hindu University
Varanasi, India
gitanjalifr@bhu.ac.in

**ANALYSING FEMICIDE AND ANTINATIONALISM IN *THE NIRBHAYA*
CASE: A FEMINIST REVISIONIST MYTHMAKING READING OF CLEA
CHAKRAVERTY'S *LA VOIX DE SITA***

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Abstract: Violence against women often stems from gender inequality, societal structures such as patriarchy, impunity, and institutional violence. Despite the remarkable progress it has made in establishing the representation of women in all fields, India still finds itself an unsafe country for women, with multiple cases of femicide reported every year. The present paper proposes a close look at violence against women in India through a multidisciplinary reading of Clea Chakravarty's novel *La Voix de Sita* [Sita's Voice] which is a retelling of the 2012 Delhi gang rape. Commonly known as the Nirbhaya Case, it ushered a lot of debates around women's modesty and morality, alongside controversial anti-feminist remarks by the dominant misinformed strata of society on women being responsible for crimes done against them and the branding of feminism as anti-national. By approaching the revisionist mythmaking of Indian epics in the novel through a feminist lens, the paper also traces the root cause of violence against women in India by analysing media reports, interviews, and anecdotes focused on the case.

Keywords: Femicide, Feminist revisionist mythmaking, Nirbhaya case, Antinationalism, Indian Feminism, Indian Epics.

Introduction

Francophone literary writing in the Indian subcontinent by writers of Indian origin dates back to pre-independence authors like Toru Dutt. Dutt's novel, *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* (1879), is often credited as the first French novel by an Indian writer. However, French writing from this minor francophone zone has experienced a dormant period, with literary creations in French seldom occurring. Clea Chakraverty's 2022 novel *La Voix de Sita* [*Sita's Voice*] represents a renewal of francophone writing from the Indian subcontinent in the 2000s, offering a postcolonial perspective on India. Her novel focuses on the critical issues of femicide and violence against women, which have plagued India since before Independence¹ and continue to do so, drawing national and international concern and criticism. The novel fictionalizes the aftermath of one of the most brutal and infamous rape cases in India over the past decade, the widely known Nirbhaya² Case, which occurred in Delhi. By incorporating anthropological findings and a supernatural element, the novel delves into the myths and mythmaking culture of India, challenging the mainstream narrative of one of its most revered, sacred, and politically significant epics, *The Ramayana*. *La Voix de Sita* is a remarkable example of feminist revisionist mythmaking, recounting the major events of *The Ramayana* set in contemporary India on the tenth anniversary of the Nirbhaya Case from the perspective of Sita, the "tragic" heroine/goddess of the epic, through the medium of an adolescent girl possessed by Sita's voice.

The narrative ties the threads of Sati, as she is possessed by Sita's voice, with the advocate Madhu Chandra Dev Singh, who has the audacious idea of accusing Ram, the hero/god of the epic. A major deity of Hinduism and the ideal mythical portrayal of men in Indian society who stand for duty, justice, and sacrifice, and husband to Sita, Lord Ram is accused of the plight of women (second-class treatment and violence against women) in society. In this knot, another thread weaves in the form of an Indian American anthropologist, Zulfiya Wallace, who has, for many years, borne the brunt of highlighting "blasphemous" alternative narratives to *The Ramayana*. The novel embarks on a deep analysis of the status and treatment of women in Indian society, with the central point being the strong social relevance of

¹ Practices like child marriage, Sati (self-immolation by widows) and dowry were still prevalent in the pre-independent Indian society, normalised and unchecked.

² Nirbhaya which means fearless in Sanskrit was the name given by the media to the rape victim. It is prohibited by law to use a rape victim's legal name in media reporting by the Indian Law.

the epic *Ramayana*, and how the mainstream portrayal of Sita in the prevalent narrative is, to a great degree, responsible for forming the social imaginary of the common masses towards women and their status. Through Sati, Sita mobilises women from all sections and classes of society at the culmination point of the much-hyped media trial of Ram against the follies of the fictional extreme right group *Veritable Armée de Ram* [*The Real Army of Ram*] (VAR), self-proclaimed guardians of the “real” Indian culture and tradition. The novel questions the role of media in producing sensationalist news, ethical reporting practices for increased viewership, and feminism being labelled as antinational by far-right groups due to its Western bearings. This paper will attempt a feminist revisionist mythmaking reading of the epic *Ramayana* and its many unorthodox narratives in the novel, which enable Sita, the epic heroine, to take centre stage and take control of her socio-cultural and political portrayal. Against the backdrop of the Nirbhaya Case, the paper will also analyse the status and treatment of women in Indian society vis-à-vis their male counterparts.

Crime and Punishment apropos of Violence Against Women in India

Crime against women in India is like a broken record, repeating the same pattern of increasing numbers every year, with no improvement. The NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau of India) report of 2022³ paints a horrific picture of crime committed against women, showing a 4% increase in the crime rate. Many might argue that this surge indicates that crimes that would otherwise go unreported are finally being reported. However, the data testifies to the alarming state of women’s security and safety in the country. Most cases remain unreported, so it is not a cause for celebration.

The most disheartening aspect of this situation is the justice system, which is an abyss: the chances of filed cases seeing their day in court are staggeringly low, despite reforms and the establishment of “fast track courts”⁴ meant to expedite justice for offenders. Numerous policies introduced by the State continue to bear no fruit; examples include: “Beti Bachao Beti Padhao”⁵ [Save the Daughter, Educate the

³ The report of 2022 is the latest report available on the website of the National Crime Records Bureau of India.

⁴ Fast Track Courts are a special feature of the Indian Justice System launched in 2019 which ensures swift justice. The case of Bilkis Bano a rape victim and survivor of Gujarat Riots 2002 is poignant as it took almost 20 years for justice and closure.

⁵ It is a campaign launched by the Government of India to stabilise the sex ratio in the country.

Daughter] by the Ministry of Child and Women Development, the declaration of Triple Talaq as unconstitutional in the Muslim community by the Supreme Court of India (Bhalla 2019), the landmark appointment of Mrs. Droupadi Murmu as the 15th President of India—unprecedented given that President Murmu belongs to the scheduled tribes (minority groups) of the nation—and the recent reservation of one-third of the total number of seats for women in the state legislative assemblies and Lok Sabha (Lower House) in 2023 to improve the health of society and change its treatment towards women. This can be linked to political apathy and randomness in making and implementing gender-sensitive policies (Himabindu et al. 2014).

The National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2022 report is grim, unveiling the various crimes against women in India, topping last year's record by registering a total of 445,256 cases in 2022 compared to 428,278 in 2021, with almost 51 FIRs filed every hour. This number indicates that nationwide crime reported against women increased from 428,278 in 2021 and 371,503 in 2020. In 2022, these crimes were enumerated as follows: "Cruelty by Husband or his relatives" (31.4%), "Kidnapping or Abduction of Women" (19.2%), "Assault on Women to outrage her modesty" (18.7%), and "Rape" (7.1%). The report highlights how women remain a vulnerable demographic despite efforts by policymakers and stakeholders to implement stricter laws and deter crime against women in the nation.

Expendable Status of Women in India in the foreshadow of *the Nirbhaya Case*

Before India gained its independence from the British Raj in 1947, women did not enjoy a noteworthy status. This is illustrated by the deafening silence in recorded history regarding the treatment of women during colonial rule, except for scattered mentions in the memoirs of British officers who took multiple indigenous Indian women as mistresses (Sen 128). The only two ground-breaking and *crowning moments* that shed light on the status of women during this epoch are the bans on the practices of Sati⁶ and child marriage. Enacted by the British in the 19th century, the ban on the Sati practice—where a Hindu widow would burn herself "voluntarily" (self-immolation) on the pyre of her dead husband—may appear as a heroic act on the part of the coloniser to uplift the colonised to "civilised standards" as part of their

⁶ Sati is the mythical first wife of Lord Shiva who did self-immolation to defend the honour of her husband. It serves as the inspiration for the name of the Sati practice.

colonial mission. However, it has been argued that Hindu widows were denied both independent agency and the right to engage with the practice on their terms (Major 318-325). Similarly, the ban on child marriage in India, with amendments and exceptions made for the Muslim minority by the British, raised the age of girls to be married to 14. This was more of a strategy of the colonial mission to deny self-governance to India, with a blatant lack of concern for women, as the right to choose once again passed from Indian society to imperial power (Burton 35-36). Thus, one might argue that even though the continuation of these practices is not justified, depriving women of exercising agency dates back to the colonial era and remains true even today in the context of women in Indian society.

Chakraverty brings this colonial multitude of representations of Indian women to life through her protagonist, an adolescent girl named Sati, who is possessed by the voice of Sita. Sati transcends her spatial-temporal reality to join and become one with Sita, the mythical Princess of Mithila from the *Ramayana*. The young protagonist would incessantly repeat in her lucid moments in her present reality: “I am the dust, I am the ashes, I am the grain of sand in Men’s destiny. I am equal to the Gods themselves”⁷ (Chakraverty 43). In the novel, the adolescent girl Sati is mute, disabled, and a survivor of female infanticide from the bowels of burning wells in the state of Rajasthan, where girls as young as one day old are thrown to be engulfed in flames. Combining the mythical Sita and present-day Sati reiterates the ideal feminine models based on Indian epics. Accordingly, Sati is the epitome of the pious woman who would join her spouse even in death. Sita⁸ is the ultimate model for women to aspire to be in Indian society—an exemplary case and a lesson that women should not forget. However, in *La Voix de Sita*, these roles are reversed and reprised—neglected and left-to-die women are represented by Sati, while Sita is offered an unorthodox representation.

Once India gained its independence and went on to become one of the biggest democracies in the world, it chose to give equal rights to all its citizens, with a strong will to protect its vulnerable demographics such as minorities and tribals, including women. However, right after *freedom was gained at midnight*⁹, there were riots

⁷ In the original text, “ Je suis la poussière, je suis la cendre, je suis le grain de sable dans le destin des Hommes. Je suis l’égale des Dieux.” All translations from French to English are self-translated.*

⁸ The mainstream portrayal of Sita is that of an “ideal wife” who suffered in silence, did not question for once, and accepted all unnatural demands of her husband Ram.

⁹ Freedom gained at midnight signifies the historical moment when on August 15 1947 at midnight Indian and Pakistan gained independence from British rule.

within the country and at the borders. The partition that took place in the bordering states of Punjab and East Bengal is associated with appalling accounts of assaults on women, including abduction and rape on both sides of the border. These crimes were unrecorded, as women continued to be subjected to the expendable status they had in the subcontinent before, during, and after the nation gained its independence. “The female body became territory to be fought over, conquered, and subsequently branded by the assailant through rape or disfigurement” (Pennebaker 1-12).

In the absence of an exhaustive social history of the Partition, writers like Manto try to give, in their literary imagination, the much-sought poetic justice to the women of this period who were victims of femicide. They retell these tales through the literary lens, painting a non-rosy tableau of these crimes committed against humanity (Chand 308-10). Among the many incidents of atrocities committed against women during Partition that never made it into the history books, some were fortunate enough to be recorded officially. One such case is the horrific mass suicide committed by 90 women of the Thoa Khalsa village in Punjab in March 1947 to avoid being assaulted by the enemy. This mass suicide, whether committed voluntarily or under pressure, since women represented the honor of the family, community, and nation to which they belonged, is a nuanced subject to be broached (Butalia 12-24).

The unofficial number of abductions of women who were on their way to Pakistan after the partition stands at 50,000, while the number of women on their way to India is higher than 33,000 (Menon and Bhasin 1998). In other nonofficial records, similar claims have been made where the numbers peak as high as 75,000, with acts of genital mutilation and branding of breasts with victory slogans, reducing women’s bodies to conquered terrain. The gain and loss of actual land in the borderland by the two nations are thus just the tip of the iceberg of the treatment the abducted women had undergone (Butalia 2017). The nonchalant ignorance on the part of the state, which did not even consider recording these crimes, was further illustrated by the India-Pakistan failed proposition called the Inter-Dominion Agreement of November 1947 to recover and return the abducted women from both sides of the India-Pakistan border, which did not work as a balm to the decimated souls and bodies of the women on both sides (Sachdeva 2017).

There is a parallel to be drawn between this forced and involuntary wandering by the women across national borders resulting in abduction and sexual violence,

and the crossing of the famous Lakshman Rekha¹⁰ [The line drawn by Lakshman] by Sita. In the Ramayana, Sita's abduction by the demon king Ravana is to avenge his sister Surpanakha, who had been disfigured and mutilated by Ram and his brother Lakshman. Dishonouring women as an act of dishonouring a family is deeply seated in patriarchal societies, and India is no different. This notion is evident in the Ramayana as well, when Ravana, the demon king, takes it upon himself to avenge the honour of his family after the disfigurement of his sister Surpanakha by abducting Sita to dishonour Ram. This episode, being retold in *La Voix de Sita* from Sita's perspective, brings a much-needed feminist revision where Sita is remorseful and full of disgust toward her spouse Ram and her brother-in-law Lakshman for what they did to Surpanakha (281). This contrasts with the mainstream narrative, where Sita's reaction to this inhumane act is hardly discussed or shown. Hence, acts of abduction and mutilation/disfigurement done in the Indian subcontinent in the name of restoring honour are very present in the epics, putting into perspective the unchanging societal attitudes and prejudices against women. The recovery of the abducted women during partition by the two nations accurately mirrors Sita's situation in *La Voix de Sita*, when she is abducted and held captive against her will by Ravana. However, the event of rescuing Sita in the novel is retold from her perspective, where Sita frees herself from the clutches of Ravana in the final battle of Good vs Evil, Ram vs Ravana. Clea Chakraverty takes inspiration from the well-known episode of the Ramayana where Ram invoked the blessings of Goddess Durga¹¹ to defeat Ravana. Sita reappears as Durga, mounted on Dawon (a liger), her battle-mount, on the battlefield to slay Ravana:

Sita floats on the back of Dawon, facing the tallest head of Ravan. As she rises in the air, her neck, her shoulders, then her sari are covered with a garland of skull relics of those who fell in the battle of Ram against the kingdom of Lanka. Without a word, she grabs the bow of Shiva, Shiva Dhanush, the bow she protected as a child, the bow that Ram lifted for her, the sacred bow, delicately enclosed between Dawon's long canines without a word she reaches for the bow of Shiva¹² (Chakraverty 409).

¹⁰ Lakshman Rekha is the line drawn by Lakshman (Brother to Ram) in the forest of Dandaka as the protection line which kept Sita safe from all kinds of harm and crossing it would make her open to danger.

¹¹ Durga is a major Hindu Goddess, representing femininity and unbound power. Power is female in Hinduism.

¹² In the original text, "Sita flotte sur le dos de Dawon, face à la plus haute tête de Ravan. À mesure qu'elle s'élève dans les airs, son cou, ses épaules, puis son sari se couvrent d'une guirlande de crânes

Taking stock of the current times, the Nirbhaya Case appals and enrages all, even with a slight reminder of the horrors committed on the ominous night of December 16, 2012. On that night, a 23-year-old woman returning home after seeing a movie with a male friend was gang-raped on a bus by six men and then left to die on the streets of New Delhi, the capital of India (earning New Delhi the infamous title of "Capital of Rape"). She was admitted to a nearby hospital where she succumbed to her injuries sustained during the rape when she tried to fight back, leading to her death on December 29, 2012 (Times of India 2019). This became the most prominent case of femicide the country has witnessed in current times.

Nirbhaya becomes the centre of gravity in *La Voix de Sita*, as the novel opens on the tenth anniversary of Nirbhaya's death, reflecting on her tragic fate and the failing social health of India, with no significant change enabled since that cold night in December 2012. Zulfiya contemplates, "The culprits were arrested, new laws were promulgated, and a special fund was created for victims of sexual assault. We had promised a lot. The vigils had ended. The women had returned home. Nothing had changed" (Chakraverty 25)¹³. Nirbhaya's fate evoked century-old questions and anger among women who found themselves at the same crossroads, reminiscent of the border crossing during the partition in 1947, or even earlier, walking up to the funeral pyre to be burnt alive with their dead spouse. The case was not an isolated incident that shocked everyone; femicide is a real crisis in the nation, and it does not seem to be going away anytime soon. In the aftermath of the case, many debates and protests broke out across the nation, forcing lawmakers and government agencies to rethink punishments for such crimes. Femicide committed by a perpetrator would now earn a death sentence, and the existing life sentence and other laws concerning sexual crimes were amended to reduce sexual violence and crime in the country (The Gazette of India 2013). However, as far as reducing or deterring femicide is concerned, it turned out to be much ado about nothing, as the number of crimes against women continues to be at an all-time high, 12 years and counting since Nirbhaya's fate. This raises serious concerns about the country's social health.

reliques de celles et ceux tombés dans la bataille de Ram contre le royaume de Lanka. Sans un mot, elle s'empare l'arc de Shiva, Shiva Dhanush, l'arc qu'elle protégeait enfant, l'arc que Ram a soulevé pour elle, l'arc sacré, délicatement enserré entre les longues canines de Dawon."

¹³ In the original text, "On avait arrêté les coupables, promulgué de nouvelles lois, créé un fonds spécial pour les victimes d'agression sexuelle. On avait beaucoup promis. Les veillées avaient pris fin. Les femmes étaient rentrées chez elles. Rien n'avait changé."

The heated debates that ensued bear witness to Indian society's attitude towards women in public spaces. Many argued that women are themselves responsible for their safety. This led to irresponsible and insensitive statements in public forums that held Nirbhaya “responsible” for her fate. Her character and presence in a public space at an unholy hour were scrutinised, and her being out with a male friend was dissected into countless pieces (Bhattacharya 1340-1356). Her case was brought to court, and all six men were given the death sentence within a year, apart from the juvenile offender who was tried in juvenile court. That a rape victim received justice in such a short period marked a milestone in the Indian justice system. However, the verdict had its twists and turns, with the defense arguing that women who engage in premarital sex and go out with male friends at night deserve to be burnt alive (Times of India 2019). In parliament, too, noise was made in favour of the perpetrators. In a cliché manner, cruel excuses were dished out, arguing that “boys will be boys” and that the perpetrators did not deserve the death penalty, undermining the seriousness and disturbing nature of sex crimes against women (Hindustan Times 2019). These statements are not just archaic; they stand as evidence of the deep-rooted complexities of attitudes and social prejudices towards women, examined through the lens of *La Voix de Sita* in its feminist revisionist re-reading of the epic *Ramayana*.

Women’s Movement in India and *La Voix de Sita*

The word ‘feminism’ did not debut in India's sociopolitical and sociocultural context until it surfaced in the West in 1848. However, the history of the women’s movement in India can be traced back to the pre-independence era, encompassing the local demand to ban the Sati practice, child marriage, and an outcry for widow resettlement reforms. Feminism and its understanding in the Indian context have largely been awkward topics, with its relevance for Indian women being questioned time and again. These apprehensions towards embracing feminism as an ideology stem from its Western roots, where it is viewed as an evil concept on par with Capitalism (Mehrotra 1-17). *La Voix de Sita* explores this rejection of feminism through the words of the Godman Yogi Abhinavay, a so-called guardian of Indian traditions and values of the extreme right. He is misinformed and holds a non-negotiable approach to how one must understand the “real Indian/Hindu culture and tradition.” Nonetheless, his words, which cut deep, do have a ring of truth to them:

No! These are the aggressors, single-minded fanatics, anti-India, anti-Hindu, who advocate separatism and instil their nauseated ideas of the Imperialist West! [...] They want to transform our heritage! They ask us to be ashamed of our history! But culture, and history, are what unite us¹⁴ (Chakraverty 23-24).

A closer look at the words of the self-styled saviour of Indian culture and tradition, Yogi Abhinav, reveals that his misconceptions about feminism arise from a lack of contextualization of the concept within the Indian paradigm. As a result, feminism and feminists are often still defined as men-hating, egocentric, westernised, and careerist. Feminism in India falls short because it fails to embrace Indianness in terms of tradition, culture, and epics, which are necessary for it to thrive on Indian soil. *La Voix de Sita* addresses this gap by drawing inspiration from the warrior princess and heroine Sita to show how women can mobilise better with her as their voice when rallying for safety and security in both public and domestic spaces. The narrative of *La Voix de Sita* embarks on a mass movement of women from all sections and corners of the country, led by the voice of “choti devi” [little Goddess], an infusion of Sita/Sati. In the novel, the gap in the concept of feminism is filled with the local context and tradition:

I am Sita, child of Mother Earth, I am Sita, the warrior of Mithila, the bride of Ram, the prisoner of Ravan. I am Sita, I am every woman and every woman is me. I am the shepherdess, I am the mother, I am the peasant, I am the business executive, I am the student, I am the teacher, I am the nurse, I am the airline pilot, I am the stillborn child, I am the journalist, I am the politician, I am the domestic help, I am the fisherwoman. I am Nirbhaya, I am the Earth. O women, listen to me! O women sing my story! Howl to the Gods the rage that breaks your hearts.¹⁵ (Chakraverty 343-344)

The way Sita’s version of her story from the Ramayana in *La Voix de Sita* intersects with the women’s mass movement in the novel exemplifies how feminism can successfully operate in the Indian subcontinent. For feminism to be effective, it must

¹⁴ In the original text, “Non ! Ce sont des agitateurs, des fanatiques de la pensée unique, anti-Inde, anti-hindous, qui prônent le séparatisme et importent leurs idées nauséabondes de l’Occident impérialiste ! [...] Ils transforment notre héritage ! Ils nous demandent d’avoir honte de notre histoire ! Or la culture, l’histoire, c’est ce qui nous unit !”

¹⁵ In the original text, “Je suis Sita, l’enfant trouvée dans la terre, je suis Sita, la guerrière de Mithila, la promise de Ram, l’enlevée de Ravan. Je suis Sita, je suis toutes les femmes et toutes les femmes sont en moi. Je suis la bergère, je suis la mère, je suis la paysanne, je suis la femme d’affaires, je suis l’étudiante, je suis l’institutrice, je suis l’infirmière, je suis la pilote d’avion, je suis l’enfant mort-née, je suis la journaliste, je suis la politicienne, je suis la femme de ménage, je suis la poissonnière. Je suis Nirbhaya, je suis la terre. Ô femmes, écoutez-moi ! Ô femmes chantez-moi ! Hurlez aux Dieux la rage qui déchire vos cœurs !”

integrate with the traditions and customs of the geographical region it aims to positively impact. The extract mentioned above demonstrates the fusion of feminism with the local context of women's societal position. By considering the cultural, political, and social representation of women in a non-Western space, as the novel does through the epic of the *Ramayana*, feminism can reiterate this representation in alignment with women's perspectives. Furthermore, feminism should not be confused with women's politics in either the global or local context, as these form distinct categories. During the struggle for independence in India, and even after it, nationalism occupied the same place as religion, allowing women to participate in national politics irrespective of their conservative or liberal statuses. However, this reproduced the same model for women in society as in the pre-independence era, with "an extremely fragile feminine moral vulnerability" (Ghosal 793-821). Any departure from this model would henceforth be considered anti-national. Yogi Abhinav defends this morality in the novel:

If women today made better choices in life and how they dress, if they accepted the protection of men, nothing of this sort would ever happen! Besides, somehow, these rapes as you call them, this violence, women are responsible for it. It is up to them to know their place in society and to behave as the holy scriptures teach us. Why defy tradition? Why go out so late in the evening or take unnecessary risks?¹⁶ (Chakraverty 22-23)

A mere analysis of this statement unveils how the construct of pre-independence fragile feminine morality continues to haunt women in present times. Additionally, the biggest roadblock in the trajectory of the women's movement/feminism has appeared in communalism (Kumar 20-29). This can be defined as tensions between different communities along religious lines. Seeing women in light of their religious identity—despite the importance of women freely exercising their religious rights within their respective religious spheres—also has its flip side.

Often, women are denied fundamental rights in the name of religion. Moreover, violence against women due to communalism has a long history in the Indian subcontinent, spanning from pre-independence to contemporary times.

¹⁶ In the original text: "[...] Si les femmes d'aujourd'hui faisaient de meilleurs choix de vie ou de vêtements, si elles acceptaient la protection des hommes, rien de tout cela n'arriverait ! D'ailleurs, quelque part, ces viols comme vous dites, cette violence, relèvent de la responsabilité des femmes. C'est à elles de tenir leur place dans la société, de se comporter comme nous l'enseignent les écritures. Pourquoi défier les traditions ? Pourquoi sortir tard le soir ou prendre des risques inutiles ?"

Current examples abound, such as the Gujarat Riots in 2002, which witnessed the rape and murder, in short, femicide of several Muslim minority women, and the recent Kathua Rape and Murder case of 2018, involving an 8-year-old Muslim minor in the region of Kashmir. These post-Nirbhaya atrocities once again left a big stain on the social health of the nation. The Kathua case also finds its fictionalised mention in *La Voix de Sita* (301), raising questions about what has changed for women in post-Nirbhaya India. The novel brings together women of different religious identities, united by the voice of Sita/Sati: “The women are mobilising. Muslims, Hindus...all are headed towards Delhi half naked and barefoot too!”¹⁷ (301). Thus, religious diversity cannot be a hindrance to women’s cause when seeking fundamental rights of security and safety in public and domestic spaces. Religion is often perceived as a roadblock in the process of development, even though the dogmas of faith promote an ideal society of “equals” (Bradley, 2010). This can be achieved if a social theory such as feminism blends with the dominant discourse of the land. *La Voix de Sita* accomplishes this within its literary space by attempting to blend feminism with the sacred text of the dominant class, the *Ramayana*.

In more recent times, women have mobilised and formed different welfare organisations to provide a sense of community, aid, and rescue, especially for women of marginalised sections of Indian society such as Dalits¹⁸, tribals, and religious minorities. This phenomenon emerged in the late 1970s in India, marking the debut of the third phase of feminism (Pande 1-17). *La Voix de Sita*’s penchant for the mythical and supernatural transforms this representation of welfare organisations/NGOs. When Sita/Sati is abducted and sexually tortured in the present time of the storyline, none other than Hanuman¹⁹ (the Hindu god, half-human, half-monkey) comes to her rescue. The narrative beautifully transcends the fine line between the real and the supernatural, showing that the actual god rescues Sati/Sita from the brothel where she is held captive. However, when Sati/Sita gains lucidity, she finds herself in the safe custody of the NGO Hanuman Bachao Andolan [Hanuman Saves You Mission], which works to rescue trafficked adolescent girls:

Sati watches as it lifts the one-eyed man three feet above the ground, growling, and throws him against the wall. [...] Hanuman, Monkey god, son of Vayu the Wind, leans

¹⁷ In the original text, “Les femmes se mobilisent. Musulmanes, hindoues...toutes se rendent à Delhi, certains à moitié nues et à pied en plus !”

¹⁸ Dalit is the lowest strata of castes in the Indian Subcontinent.

¹⁹ Hanuman is a major deity in Hinduism loyal companion to Ram in Ramayana.

towards the one-eyed man and, with a single gesture, tears off his testicles”²⁰ (Chakraverty 396).

However, the novel shifts its focus to the NGO Hanuman Bachao Andolan following the crackdown on the brothel where Sati was held captive, a brothel where underage girls were forced into prostitution (403). Thus, the women’s movement and feminism in India, despite its difficult transition from pre-independence to post-independence, highlights not only losses but also some wins. Undoubtedly, the road ahead for women’s rights and safety to be accomplished through feminism is a long and winding one, but it has gained the necessary momentum required to reach its destination while keeping the local Indian context in mind.

Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking and *La Voix de Sita*

The need to revise a myth lies in the social or political change it can bring forth, as these changes are often positive. However, for a long time, myths were perceived to be timeless and unchanging, and thus no attempts were made to challenge their prevalent narratives. This timeless and unchallenged consumption of archetypal images produced and propagated in myths changed with the publication of works in the West by writers and poets like Margaret Atwood, Louise Glück, Carol Ann Duffy, Adrienne Rich, and Alicia Ostriker. A myth’s social and cultural significance can be easily assessed by its hold on the gender bias of a society, among other malpractices. Thus, the mainstream myths of a society call not just for revisitation but for revision. In the literary canon, revisiting and revising myths has been accomplished through what is now called Feminist Revisionist Mythology/Mythmaking. During the second wave of feminism, Adrienne Rich, in her famous essay "When We Dead Awaken," wrote, "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival" (Rich, 18-30). It is a "challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embedded in a myth" (Ostriker 68-90).

In the Indian context, Valmiki's epic *Ramayana* has long served as the holy grail of extreme right political groups. Their mission is to remake India in the style of Ramraj. Ramraj is the period in the *Ramayana* when Ram ascended to the throne of Ayodhya after returning from exile and defeating Ravana. Ramraj is depicted as a

²⁰ In the original text, "Sati la [forme de Hanuma] regarde soulever le borgne un mètre au-dessus du sol en grondant et le projeter contre le mur. [...] Hanuman, dieu Singe, fils de Vayu le Vent, se penche vers le borgne et, d'un seul geste, lui arrache les testicules."

utopian society where virtue and law are at the helm of every decision, coupled with righteousness and freedom. During India's freedom struggle from the British Raj, Gandhi redefined Ramraj as a society with equality and transparency. However, extreme right-wing groups have misappropriated this “utopia” of the *Ramayana* and Gandhi to suit their political agenda. The homogeneous and hierarchy-maintaining society reimagined in this new “Ramraj” of the far-right strips away all kinds of political and social agency from vulnerable demographics such as Dalits, tribals, minority religions, and women (irrespective of caste, class, or religion). The reimagined Ramraj, which appears more dystopian than utopian, is in direct conflict with the constitutional principles of secular India.

It all starts with the rebuilding of a temple on the site of a demolished mosque in the city of Ayodhya, the presumed birthplace of Lord Ram, by extreme right groups. Lord Ram is projected as the god of the nation and the foundation for national identity, which should be accepted, followed, and aspired to by all (Wariavwalla 593-605). However, in this grand scheme of nation-building and identity formation, Sita is nowhere to be found. The novel *La Voix de Sita*, with its revisionist project of the mainstream narrative of Valmiki's *Ramayana* and anthropological database, corrects or rather reintroduces Sita in contrast to Ram by highlighting her presumed birthplace, Sitamarhi, located in the ancient kingdom of Mithila, in present-day Bihar (Chakraverty 49).

This interjection occurs in the novel when a young advocate from Sitamarhi, seeking to make a name for himself, has the outrageous idea to file a case against Ram in a court of law in the name of Sita, not just for her plight but for the plight of women across the country. He believes his arguments hold water, as Ram's treatment of Sita in the epic *Ramayana* permits the second-class treatment of women in Indian society. The complaint filed in the court would read as follows:

[...] Requests the condemnation of the above-mentioned [Ram] for physical and moral abuse towards our client [Sita] [...]. Requests a revision of the *Ramayana* and that its apostles and exegetes recognise that it is a misogynistic version inciting violence and hatred against women for more than 10,000 years. Finally, request a rehabilitation of the moral and intellectual image of our client [Sita] by public and effective declaration.²¹ (Chakraverty 62)

²¹ In the original text, “Demande la condamnation publique du susnommé (Ram) pour maltraitances physiques et morales envers notre cliente (Sita), [...] Demande une révision du *Ramayana* et que ses

The word “revision” from the cited fragment opens all doors to alternative and unpopular narratives of the *Ramayana*, including the one presented in the novel, in a very *mise en abyme* and internal dialogue style by the writer. Throughout the novel, many folkloric interpretations of the *Ramayana*, in the form of Madhubani paintings, bard songs, Rajput miniature paintings, and Baluchari motifs of Indian sarees, are quoted by the character of Zulfiya Wallace, the anthropologist. Apart from these alternative mediums expressing their version of the *Ramayana* embedded in the narrative, the end of the novel provides an exhaustive list of all recent publications of revised literary *Ramayana*. All these alternative narratives register Sita’s resistance to being heard and seen.

Similarly, *La Voix de Sita* revises the *Ramayana* through Sati, the protagonist, who retells the major events of Sita’s life in a memoir style through internal dialogues between Sati and Sita, using retrocognition. This is where feminist revisionist mythology comes in handy in the reading of *La Voix de Sita*, transforming the attributes of the mainstream narrative (Keating 483-591). The goal of this revisionism is to instantiate the already existing narratives of the *Ramayana* and at the same time transform the attributes of the mainstream *Ramayana* through the voiceless/mute Sati voicing Sita’s life story. Didima, the adoptive mother of Sati, anguishes, “It is too early...Bhagwan, why now? And even if she could have spoken. These stories, this language...I never taught them to her”²² (Chakraverty 43). This transformative approach applied by *La Voix de Sita* paves a path for new myth formation within the scope of the novel by quoting and resurrecting the already existing folkloric versions of the *Ramayana* present in the form of paintings, music, and art.

Revising a myth with social and cultural implications serves the purpose of reestablishing an already accepted, yet unapplied principle of society (Sreelakshmi and Sanny 236-249). In the case of *La Voix de Sita*, it is the elimination of gender biases and femicide in the Indian context. The deconstructed Sita in the novel roams freely in her kingdom of Mithila on her liger, Dawon: “The liger grunts gently. Sati watches the princess [Sita] pass a section of her sari between her legs like baggy pants and another across her chest. Then she climbs astride the last of the Great

apôtres et exégètes reconnaissent qu’il s’agit d’une version misogyne incitant à la violence et à la haine contre les femmes depuis plus de 10,000 ans, Demande enfin une réhabilitation de l’image morale et intellectuelle de notre cliente (Sita) par déclaration publique et effective.”

²² In the original text, “C’est trop tôt...Bhagwan, pourquoi maintenant ? Et même si elle avait pu parler. Ces histoires, cette langue...Je ne les lui ai jamais enseignées.”

Whites”²³ (Chakraverty 99). This updated representation of the Sita archetype in the novel aligns well with feminist inquiries. Hence, revising a myth is not done to abandon the conventional narrative of the myth but rather to remove it from its pedestal and make room for the lesser-known narratives as well (Taylor 2017).

Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking does not aim to create a “separatist canon” different from the mainstream one. Instead, it seeks a more inclusive expression where all versions are highlighted with their respective importance (Rozelle 2020). This can be observed in *La Voix de Sita*, where Sati, possessed by Sita, with her background as a female infanticide survivor and a mute (disabled individual), falls in love with Raghu (another name for Ram), a shepherd Dalit boy who lives on the outskirts of the village (Chakraverty 140). By retelling the love story of Sita and Ram through the love story of Sati and Raghu, the text becomes more inclusive in its expression. This inclusivity is further observed in the novel's climax when advocate Madhudev takes centre stage in the media trial of Ram to defend Sita. He presents his version of the *myth*, reimagining what Ram would have wanted to say to Sita after abandoning her on the grounds of not being virtuous due to her time in imprisonment in Ravana’s Lanka and her exit from the human world:

Sita, oh Sita, I finally understood, If being a man means living without you If being a man means dominating you, enslaving you, humiliating you, doubting you, If being a man means forbidding you to make choices If being a man means preventing you from being born, from growing, from loving, from hating, from growing old, from dying, If being a man means closing eyes to your sufferings and your joys, Then, I renounce to be a man, I renounce you, And I know it, without you, my world will disappear.²⁴ (Chakraverty 432)

Furthermore, differences in gender, as observed in the case of Sita as a woman, Sati as a survivor of female infanticide with a speech disability, and Raghu as a Dalit, should not be reasons to outcast or banish these individuals from human connection in society or the literary space (Beyer 276-298). There is much richness and diversity

²³ In the original text, “La ligresse grogne gentiment. Sati observe la princesse (Sita) passer un pan de son sari entre ses jambes comme un pantalon bouffant, et un autre en travers de sa poitrine. Puis elle grimpe à califourchon sur la dernière des Grands Blancs.”

²⁴ In the original text, “Sita, ô Sita, j’ai enfin compris, Si être un homme signifie vivre sans toi, Si être un homme signifie te dominer, t’asservir, t’humilier, douter de toi, Si être un homme signifie t’interdire de faire des choix, Si être un homme signifie t’empêcher de naître, de grandir, d’aimer, de haïr, de vieillir, de mourir, Si être un homme signifie fermer les yeux sur tes souffrances et sur tes joies, Alors, je renonce à être un homme, je renonce à toi, Et je le sais, sans toi, mon Monde disparaîtra.”

to be found in the subjectivity of the experiences of these marginalised individuals. *La Voix de Sita*, through its feminist revisionist writing, creates a space to accommodate these varied experiences. Thus, it achieves the essential combination of political discourse and academic concerns.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be argued that for feminism to work in the Indian context without being branded as a Western concept, it must embrace the cultural and social contours of Indian society. In short, it should try to blend with the dominant discourse and find solutions from within it rather than turning a blind eye to it or outrightly rejecting it. *La Voix de Sita* does this by empowering Sita, a secondary character in the most revered Hindu text, the *Ramayana*, to tell her own story. Femicide and violence against women are deep-rooted issues and stark realities in India. Society and government agencies working to eradicate this evil have run out of excuses for why the country continues to fail to create safe spaces (public or domestic) for half of its population. In this regard, works like Clea Chakraverty's *La Voix de Sita*, with its literary retelling of violence against women from mythical times to the present day, embrace feminism and feminist ideology with a much-needed Indian touch. The novel takes cues from the rich world of Indian epics present in different mediums (written texts, paintings, music, folklore, art, and others). This blending of epics and the women's movement is necessary in the Indian context since epics like the *Ramayana* hold significant cultural, social, and religious importance and implications in the everyday discourse of Indians. The focus of *La Voix de Sita* is unique in highlighting the violence and mistreatment that women undergo irrespective of class or religion. This is illustrated through the characters of Didima, a survivor of domestic abuse among the upper class; Princess Roshni, royalty caged into traditions with no free will; and Zulfiya Wallace, an educated anthropologist subjugated to violence for being perceived as too *American* and *Western*. It is important to consider the social class and religion in the context of Indian women because their experiences might differ, but what stays true for all of them is the second-class treatment they receive on account of being women (Chapman 49-61). This second-class treatment often leads to them being exposed to various forms of violence. *La Voix de Sita* brings together women from different social, religious, and economic sections of society, united against this second-class treatment and violence.

This paper has attempted to provide a plausible understanding and solution to femicide and violence against women in India. The proposed solution lies in women mobilising and coming together, shedding the inhibitions that cage them in class, caste, or religion, to work towards achieving equality, safety, and just treatment. The State cannot shirk its responsibility by passing random laws and bills in parliament that do not translate well into the reality of everyday India. It must engage in dialogue and form equal partnerships with women, associations, and NGOs working at the grassroots level to assess and develop better solutions (Roychowdhury 2020). The way forward is a partnership between NGOs and government agencies to sensitise society. Adding a historical and mythological angle to this mix, as shown through Sati becoming Sita, becoming the Goddess Durga, becoming every woman, can wave the magical wand Indian society hopes for against the problem of violence against women (Pitra 283-294). This is achievable through the rich culture of supernatural constructs present in its epics, traditions, and culture.

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