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Sita Sings the Blues

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Sita Sings the Blues

Abstract

This is a review of *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008).

Sita Sings the Blues resists a quick summary, but it has already received a number of standard reviews and has its own website.¹ In this review, therefore, I wish to concentrate on some of the religious and social issues raised by the film.

The Hindu epic, *The Ramayana*,² has been gaining traction in the West over the last several decades. Nothing displays this so vividly as the rising popularity of this very personal film, which credits the story with aiding the writer and director through the pain of separation and divorce. This is particularly interesting since the director, Nina Paley, is Jewish. Through the use of diverse and highly engaging animation techniques, she tells a very pared-down version of *The Ramayana*, intersecting it with the story of the loss of her own marriage. She calls it “The Greatest Break-Up Story Ever Told,” parodying in good humor the famous designation of the Bible.

Conservative, traditionalist Hindus have not taken kindly to Paley’s homage, however. A petition posted on the internet reads, “We demand [a] complete ban on the movie and [the] initiation of legal action against all those who have been involved in [the] production and marketing of this derogatory act against the entire Hindu community of the world.”³ And Paley has responded by saying “The far right—they say that they’re Hindus but I think it’s not right to call them Hindus. They think nonviolence is bullshit,”⁴ to criticisms that have threatened

physical retaliation. But as all Jews are not Abraham Heschel or Noam Chomsky, so all Hindus are not Mohandas Gandhi or Vandana Shiva.

This controversy therefore raises the question of who has the right to interpret and who has the right interpretation of sacred texts. We, in the West, are exposed regularly to the issue in debates over the *Tanakh*, the Christian Bible, and, to a lesser degree, the *Qur'an*, but many who know Hinduism mainly through Gandhi are often surprised to learn that it has its own fundamentalist and nationalist groups who claim sole hermeneutic custody over the texts of their traditions.

The Ramayana is very clear about how it expects to be read - Rama is the main character, an incarnation of the god Vishnu, the ideal man, who restores order to the universe and righteousness to the social world. Therefore we are to honor him in all our actions and thoughts. Devotion to him is pictured for us, for example, by Lakshmana, Rama's ever-present, devoted brother and servant, who considers Rama to be his "second self," by Bharata, who places Rama's sandals on the throne during Rama's exile and serves them, instead of ruling directly in Rama's stead; by Guha who protects Rama and Sita at the beginning of their exile and revisits the places they stayed like some Christians do the stations of the cross; by Jatayu, who lays down his life trying to stop the abduction of Sita; by Hanuman, a warrior prince under the exiled monkey⁵ king, Sugriva, who serves Rama faithfully in war and in peace and who singlehandedly finds Sita after her abduction; by Vibhishana, the

brother of Sita's kidnapper, Ravana, who quarrels with Ravana about the wisdom of the abduction and eventually joins Rama's just cause against his own family. But it is primarily Sita who mirrors devotion to Rama for us. Her purity and fidelity to him are legendary; she accepts whatever circumstances come her way with a certain equanimity - her mind and heart always fixed on Rama.

Now along comes Nina Paley, setting Sita up as the main character, removing the host of devotee surrogates, and she dramatizes there and then a number of the problems that Western (and Westernized) readers have with the sacred story, especially Rama's treatment of Sita. When Rama and his forces liberate the utterly pure Sita from captivity, Rama declares in Sita's presence before everyone:

“No fond affection for my wife
Inspired me in the hour of strife.
I battled to avenge the cause
Of honour and insulted laws.
My love is fled, for on thy fame
Lies the dark blot of sin and shame;
And thou art hateful as the light
That flashes on the injured sight.
The world is all before thee: flee:
Go where thou wilt, but not with me” (6.117).

Sita throws herself on a funeral pyre, but is declared by the god of fire, Agni, to be free of any impurity whatsoever. And then, as the story is usually told, she is accepted back by Rama only to be rejected again, when Sita's disputed reputation interferes with Rama's ability to rule. Sita is banished from the kingdom and bears

Rama's twin sons in exile; they grow up learning to praise their father by memorizing and performing *The Ramayana* taught to them by the sage, Valmiki. When his sons are discovered by Rama, Sita proves her absolute fidelity in deed and thought again to Rama and all onlookers by calling upon the mother earth, who opens up and takes Sita back into herself, whence she came.⁶

Rama seems heartless and cruel, from this perspective. And it is this vantage point that Paley emphasizes. Perhaps she is most wickedly funny when she has Rama's two sons sing his praises thus:

“Sing his love, sing his praise, Rama set his wife ablaze. Got her home, kicked her out, to allay his people's doubt. Rama's wise, Rama's just, Rama does what Rama must. Duty first, Sita last, Rama's reign is unsurpassed.”

But there is much more bubbling below the surface of the story that can bother Western readers as well. The trial by fire can be used to justify the horrible dowry deaths, especially bride burning, on the Indian subcontinent, for example.⁷ The blaming of Sita for impurity when she is violently abducted sounds very much like the blaming of rape victims for their own brutalization. These, and many other issues, have to be addressed, no matter how much one is equally concerned with sensitivity to other cultures and alert to the history of Western imperialism. But this also brings up an important point. We must be alert to the fact that Sita is now being understood from the modern Occidental preoccupation with the individual. This

reading is strongly at odds with ancient communal traditions where their epic heroes embody social values and act on behalf of the community.

Paley has rendered to us a very great service, and a very fine film.⁸ We can now add Paley's rendition of *The Ramayana* to the many other retellings and compare and evaluate it in their own context. Among the additional issues one may want to raise after watching the movie are the following: What does it mean for Rama (and Sita) to be incarnate? This is very close to traditional Christian debates about the nature of Jesus. How far are we going to press finite limitations on divine incarnations? Is Rama really fully human, even fallible, or is he simply a divine agent who voluntarily curbs his infinite power to conform to human finitude, in which case, he may only "seem" human?⁹ So does Rama err in his treatment of Sita or is he demonstrating a wisdom that is ultimately beyond human abilities to comprehend? A related concern deals with the nature and importance of duty, a concept which is terribly atrophied and underplayed in the West. Duty is used as the justification for Rama treating Sita as he does. Turning the perspective a little, do we also tend to downplay fidelity and devotion as forms of weakness in this culture? This is something Paley does address, because it concerns Sita directly. Nina is empowered, in the movie, not just by "moving on" from her husband abandoning her, but also by embracing the pain creatively. Yet this is not Sita's way. Sita creates her identity in such a way that she is defined by her devotion to

Rama. And this is accepted as another avenue to empowerment in the film. The movie starts with the goddess Lakshmi (who will incarnate herself in Sita) massaging the feet of Vishnu. After Sita re-enters Mother Earth, Rama's eye tears up and he seems to have a conversion. At the end, the celestial image is of Vishnu massaging the feet of Lakshmi, who looks into the camera and winks to us. Finally, we can discuss Paley's dependence on extreme summarization. By paring the text down so drastically, she short-circuits a number of traditional strategies for reading it, thus reducing it to an archetypal "break-up" story. To what degree is this fair? On the other hand, how resistant will we want to be about abridgements, since the story is one of the longest epics in human history and has so many variations?

Paley has given those of us who teach religion an unusual opportunity to address issues like these, and the film's rising popularity gives us a larger forum than usual to be heard.

¹ Nina Paley, for reasons that will become clear when one reads her website and when one hears how she uses some eleven songs sung by Annette Hanshaw from 1927-29 in the film, has placed *Sita Sings the Blues* on the internet to be streamed or downloaded for free. See <http://www.sitasingstheblues.com/>

² Valmiki's very famous rendition is available on the internet in a nineteenth-century translation by Ralph Griffith at the sacred texts site: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rama/index.htm>

³ <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/sitasingstheblues/>

⁴ <http://www.wired.com/entertainment/hollywood/news/2008/04/sita?currentPage=all>;
<http://www.sitasingstheblues.com/faq.html>

⁵ Technically they are known as *Vanaras* and are special creations of the gods.

⁶ The story is that she was found as a baby in a furough by the king, Janaka, who then adopted her as his daughter. The ending of the narrative by Sita returning to the earth has more symmetry overall than Valmiki's happy ending after the trial by fire and so the myth is usually told with both ordeals.

⁷ This is brought to the forefront in Deepa Mehta's movie masterpiece, *Fire*, released in 1996. Equally problematic is the famous story of Sati, who publicly incinerates herself to protest the way her father has treated her husband, Shiva. The story may be found in the *Bhagavata Purana* 4.3-4; see <http://srimadbhagavatam.com/>

⁸ In this review I have wanted to deal with the religious and social issues raised by the film, so I have not been able to convey how the uses of animation techniques, of internal commentary, and of musical scoring merge with the telling of the stories of Sita and Nina to create the overall effect of the movie. Paley says repeatedly in interviews that she was trying to avoid boredom for her audience. I may say that she succeeds admirably.

⁹ This is, of course, a reference to the Christological position known as "Docetism" from the Greek word "to seem."