

Reclaiming Women's Voices: A Feminist Comparative Study of Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* and Anand Neelakantan's *Valmiki's Women*

Vavilapalli Srujana

Research Scholar, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam

Abstract

This paper examines the representation of women in contemporary retellings of the Ramayana through a comparative study of *The Liberation of Sita* by Volga and *Valmiki's Women* by Anand Neelakantan. The study focuses on how these texts revisit marginalized female characters such as Sita, Ahalya, and Surpanakha and reinterpret their roles within a patriarchal narrative structure. Drawing on key feminist frameworks, including Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "Other," Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the subaltern, and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the paper analyses the extent to which these narratives challenge or sustain traditional gender roles.

The study argues that while both authors recover women's voices and provide psychological depth to their characters, their approaches differ significantly. Volga's work presents a radical feminist reimagining that emphasizes autonomy, self-realization, and resistance to patriarchal norms. In contrast, Neelakantan offers a sympathetic and humanized portrayal of women but remains within the emotional and structural limits of the epic tradition. The paper concludes that the distinction between the two texts lies in the movement from representation to transformation—between articulating women's experiences and enabling their liberation.

Keywords: Feminist Retelling, Ramayana Reinterpretation, Women's Voices, Gynocriticism, Subaltern Studies, Gender Performativity, Myth Revision

I. Introduction

The *Ramayana*, traditionally attributed to Valmiki, has occupied a central place in Indian literary and cultural imagination for centuries. Beyond its religious and ethical significance, the epic has also shaped ideas about gender, duty, family, and womanhood. Within this framework, female characters such as Sita, Ahalya, Surpanakha, and Urmila have often been interpreted through patriarchal values that emphasize purity, obedience, sacrifice, and endurance. Their identities are frequently constructed in relation to male characters rather than as independent selves. In this sense, the epic tradition reflects what Simone de Beauvoir identifies in *The Second Sex*: woman is often positioned as "Other," a being defined by relation rather than autonomy.

In recent years, contemporary retellings of the *Ramayana* have attempted to recover the silenced or underexplored perspectives of these women. Among such works, Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* and Anand Neelakantan's *Valmiki's Women* stand out for their engagement with female experience. Both texts move away from the dominant heroic narrative and bring women to the center of attention. However, they differ in tone, purpose, and ideological depth. Volga's work presents a more explicitly feminist reimagining, while Neelakantan's text offers a sympathetic but more restrained reconstruction of women's stories.

This article compares the two texts through feminist critical frameworks, especially the ideas of Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Judith Butler. It argues that while both authors challenge the silence imposed on women in the epic tradition, Volga goes further by questioning the very structure of patriarchy, whereas Neelakantan mainly humanizes women within the same broad narrative world.

Feminist Rewriting

A major feature of both texts is their attempt to rewrite the *Ramayana* from a women-centered perspective. This approach can be understood through Elaine Showalter's concept of gynocriticism, which focuses on women as writers, interpreters, and creators of meaning within their own literary tradition. Instead of treating women merely as supporting figures in male-centered stories, these retellings give importance to their emotions, doubts, desires, and inner conflicts.

In *Valmiki's Women*, Neelakantan presents female characters with emotional depth and personal pain. He allows readers to see how these women may have felt within the epic's broader events. Bhoomija (Sita), Shanta, Manthara, Tataka, and Meenakshi (Surpanakha) are no longer only symbolic figures; they become

individuals shaped by suffering and social expectations. This is a meaningful shift because it encourages readers to question the limited ways in which women have been represented in traditional retellings.

Volga, however, moves beyond reinterpretation toward ideological intervention. In *The Liberation of Sita*, the female characters, Sita, Ahalya, Urmila, Renuka, and Surpanakha, do not merely gain sympathy; they gain critical consciousness. The text encourages them to question accepted norms and to understand the violence hidden behind ideals such as chastity and devotion. In this way, Volga does not only narrate women's pain; she exposes the system that produces that pain. This makes her work more radically feminist in its orientation.

Sita and the Question of Agency

Sita becomes a powerful site for feminist reading. In the traditional epic, Sita is often celebrated as the ideal wife, but this idealization also limits her freedom. Her worth is tied to loyalty, purity, and acceptance. Beauvoir's argument about woman as the "Other" is clearly relevant here, because Sita is frequently valued not as an independent person but as Rama's consort, the embodiment of his moral world.

In Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, this framework is directly challenged. Sita is not portrayed merely as a submissive or suffering figure. Instead, she is imagined as someone who becomes aware of the injustice surrounding her and gradually refuses to accept patriarchal control as destiny. Her liberation lies not only in speaking but also in thinking differently about womanhood, duty, and dignity. Volga's Sita becomes a subject who begins to define herself.

Neelakantan's version is more restrained. His Sita is thoughtful, observant, and emotionally complex, but she remains largely within the moral and emotional boundaries of the epic world. She is not reduced to silence, yet she does not fully break away from the structures that define her. This makes the character more relatable in a conventional literary sense, but less transformative in feminist terms. The difference is significant: Volga's Sita moves toward selfhood, while Neelakantan's Sita remains closer to relational identity.

Subaltern Voices

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's idea of the subaltern is highly relevant to these retellings. Spivak asks whether the marginalized can truly speak when their voices are historically filtered through dominant power structures. In the context of the *Ramayana*, many women have been spoken about, judged, and morally categorized, but not always allowed to speak for themselves. Both Volga and Neelakantan attempt to address this problem, but in different ways.

Volga's text gives greater narrative freedom to women such as Surpanakha and Ahalya. Their pain is not reduced to a moral lesson or background detail. Instead, they are allowed to explain their suffering and express anger, disappointment, and resistance. This creates a stronger sense of voice and interiority. The text does not treat them as passive victims; it presents them as consciousness-bearing individuals whose experiences matter in their own right.

Neelakantan also attempts to recover the voices of manthara, shantha and few other, but his method is more literary than political. He humanizes the characters and helps readers sympathize with them, but their speech remains more closely guided by the authorial frame. The result is a partial recovery rather than a full subaltern articulation. In Spivak's sense, Volga comes closer to enabling the marginalized voice to emerge as a force of critique.

Gender and Performance

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers another useful lens for reading these texts. Butler argues that gender is not simply natural or fixed; it is produced through repeated acts, social expectations, and cultural performances. In the *Ramayana* tradition, womanhood is often performed through obedience, patience, sacrifice, and silence. Such ideals are not neutral; they are culturally enforced norms.

Volga actively disrupts this pattern. Her women are aware that the roles expected of them are socially produced and not divinely natural. As a result, they resist the pressure to perform ideal femininity in the traditional sense. This does not mean that they become identical or simplistic feminist symbols. Rather, their resistance is rooted in reflection, contradiction, and self-awareness. Their struggle is therefore both personal and political.

Neelakantan's characters, on the other hand, remain more embedded in these gendered expectations. They may question them, but they do not fully dismantle them. Their responses are often shaped by endurance, compassion, or emotional resilience rather than direct rebellion. This gives the text a humane quality, but it also limits its critical force. Volga presents gender as something that can be refused; Neelakantan presents it as something to be navigated.

Women and Solidarity

Another important distinction between the two works lies in the way they imagine relationships among women. Volga places strong emphasis on female solidarity. Her text suggests that liberation is not purely

individual but collective. Women recognize one another's suffering, share experiences, and build a form of emotional and political awareness through mutual understanding. This collective dimension gives the text depth and urgency.

In contrast, Neelakantan focuses more on individual responses to suffering. His women are often isolated in their pain, and while their stories are moving, they do not always develop into a broader critique of the social order. The emphasis remains on personal endurance rather than shared resistance. This does not weaken the text entirely, but it does place it in a less radical position than Volga's work.

Female solidarity is important because oppression often works by isolating women from one another and making their suffering seem private. By bringing women together conceptually and emotionally, Volga challenges that isolation. She transforms personal pain into a collective question about justice, voice, and identity.

Critical Difference

The most important difference between the two texts lies in their purpose. Neelakantan's *Valmiki's Women* is an empathetic retelling that tries to recover neglected perspectives and make readers think differently about the women of the *Ramayana*. It succeeds in making these characters more visible and more human. Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, however, is more openly ideological and more firmly feminist in its method. It does not simply narrate women's suffering; it questions the structure that normalises that suffering.

This distinction is important for literary criticism because it separates representation from liberation. A text may give space to women and still remain within patriarchal logic. Another may go further and challenge the terms on which women are represented in the first place. Volga's work belongs more strongly to the second category. It is not content with sympathy; it seeks transformation.

II. Conclusion

Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* and Anand Neelakantan's *Valmiki's Women* both contribute to the larger project of re-reading the *Ramayana* through women's experiences. They recover characters who have often been marginal in traditional interpretations and make them central to the narrative imagination. This is a valuable literary intervention in itself, especially in a culture where epic women are frequently idealized, simplified, or silenced.

At the same time, the two texts differ in the scale of their feminist intervention. Neelakantan offers a compassionate and readable reconstruction of women's lives, but Volga pushes further by turning feminist critique into the core of the narrative. Through ideas that resonate with Beauvoir, Showalter, Spivak, and Butler, *The Liberation of Sita* reimagines women not as an accessory to the epic, but as thinking, resisting, and self-defining subjects.

Ultimately, the distinction between the two works can be understood as the difference between voice and freedom. Neelakantan gives women a voice; Volga seeks to give them freedom.

Works Cited

- [1]. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.
- [2]. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- [3]. Neelakantan, Anand. *Valmiki's Women: Five Tales from the Ramayana*. Penguin Random House India, 2022.
- [4]. Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press, 1999.
- [5]. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.
- [6]. Valmiki. *The Ramayana*. Translated by Arshia Sattar, Penguin Books, 2000.
- [7]. Volga. *The Liberation of Sita*. Translated by T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree, Harper Perennial, 2019.