Telling Sita's Story: Whose Experience? Whose Representation? 1

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Snapshot one. Anita, the feminist theologian, questioned the speaker, Jacqueline, Indianist amongst (post-) Christians, yet interested in women's issues and the study of sacred texts. 'Is there a Westerner in the world today who is truly virtuous and can speak with integrity about another tradition’s concerns?' 2

Snapshot two. If you had been in Brunswick Street in Withington, Manchester, on the evening of 16 April 1997, you could have entered the Gandhi Hall where Hindu women and men had gathered for the ninth and final night of reciting the Rāmcaritmānas, 3 the sixteenth century Hindi story of 'The Lake of Rama's Acts'. Through this annual reading and related songs and chanting, they were celebrating the birthday of the important Hindu deity, Lord Ram. 4 The temple was crowded and brightly decorated, filled with women in glittering saris, men in Indian dress or suits, most sitting comfortably on the floor, the elderly on a semi-circle of chairs at the back. The images were bedecked in festival splendour and the air was rich with the vibrations of this much-loved story, repetition creates auspiciousness and wipes away the impurities of the present Kali age. 5

1 An earlier version of this paper was given as the Manson Society Presidential Lecture, Department of Religions and Theology, University of Manchester, 7 May 1997.


3 ‘c’ is pronounced ‘ch’, hence an alternative spelling is ‘Ramcharitmanas’. Diacriticals have been omitted except in the titles of texts and in quotations.

4 Rama (Rāma) is the Sanskrit form of the name; Ram (Rām) that used in modern Hindi and other north Indian languages. I use ‘Rama’ generally, but ‘Ram’ where it is more appropriate to the context (and similarly with other names).

5 mangala karāṇi kālī māl harāṇī tulasī kathā raghunāthakā ki (Bālaṅkanda 10, in Śrī Rāmācharitmānasā [of Goswami Tulasidas], with Hindi text and English translation, fifth edition (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1989), 29.
Two ‘representations’ of ‘experience’. Which was the eye-witness’s? The answer, perhaps surprisingly, is the first. In this paper, starting from the observation that different styles of representation may incline us to read ‘experience’ in more or less naive ways, I shall try to explore some of the many complex interrelations between experience, representation and gender for a researcher working on a tradition that is not her own. My reflections will centre around the story of Sita, devoted wife of Lord Rama whose birthday is mentioned above. Or, rather, around Sita’s stories, her idealized images and the ways these are implicated in interpretations of experience, politics of representation and construction of gender in complex triangulation.

These reflections arise from my own experience of writing a book for fourteen to sixteen-year-olds entitled *Sita’s story*. This was the first book in an ongoing ‘Hindu Values Series’, published under the auspices of the Dharam Hinduja Institute for Indic Research, established in the University of Cambridge in 1995. My brief was to provide readable, accessible, attractive books, based on scholarly understanding, to help young people, whether Hindu or not, to appreciate the richness, depth and range of the Hindu tradition and its values, through characters like Sita. My intention was to base the books at least partially on fieldwork, my own and others’, to show how women and men from different regions, periods, castes, classes, migrationary history and so on, have interpreted such characters differently, appropriating, transforming or rejecting them, according to their own ends.

The book is now published but questions remain, questions which I cannot dismiss for at least three reasons, in increasing order of seriousness. First, there are other books in the series to be written. Secondly, despite the fieldwork base and the fact that almost all of those interviewed saw the final script and were satisfied with the context in which their views were presented, there remain questions of aesthetics and ethics, responsibility and power, which have prompted the direction of this paper. Thirdly, there is the wider question of the extent to which such an exercise, while rooted in recognizing diversity within Hindu traditions, is complicit with a Western-derived view of religion which

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6 My account of Ramnaumi in the Withington temple was based on the report of a friend of a friend, made plausible by my own visits on other occasions. It was noteworthy that, at the Manson Presidential Lecture, several members of the audience found it difficult to realize that I was not actually present, so persuasive was the narrative style.


8 See Jackson and Nesbitt’s reflections on ‘the artistic nature of the enterprise’ of ethnographic analysis (their emphasis) and their ‘inherent distortions’ in Robert Jackson and Eleanor Nesbitt, *Hindu children in Britain* (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 1993), 18–21.
essentializes and segregates religious traditions, sometimes with disastrous consequences as the recent history of South Asia clearly shows.

Lying behind this paper, then, is the following set of questions relating to the telling of Sita’s story and the issues of gender, representation and experience which surround it:

Do I have the right to tell it or critically examine it?

How do my questions, my academic position, my gender, my ethnicity, affect the way in which I represent the experience of those who do tell Sita’s story?

Is Sita’s story of any importance anyway? Might it be another academic misrepresentation which assumes textual bases and role models to be significant in a misleading or even dangerous way? Might interviews based on such assumptions get people to tell Sita’s story in response to questions they would not otherwise have asked?

Does anyone actually tell Sita’s story without prompting? And if so, who and to what ends?

With these questions in mind, we turn to Sita’s story.

Sita’s Story

‘The story of Rama and Sita’, as it has come to be known popularly in British state school Religious Education (R.E.), has been told throughout South and Southeast Asia for more than two millennia in innumerable forms by Jains, Buddhists, Hindus and others. It is carved around the vast walls of the Grand Palace of the erstwhile Buddhist rulers in Bangkok. It is presented in shadow puppet plays in Kerala and Cambridge. It was watched on Indian television in 1987–88 with world record-breaking audiences of Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and Hindus. It is replayed by Hindus worldwide on videos of Ramanand Sagar’s full-length version and on a cheaper four-cassette production known as *Lavkush*, after Sita’s twin sons who are the narrators of the story to Rama himself, according to the first book of Valmiki’s Sanskrit version.

It is not a story to be ignored and it is a story which has been as much summarized as told in vastly different extended versions. So I next present an extremely condensed version, given that you

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9 For example, by ignoring the point that many Hindu values are shared widely by other South Asians, whether they be Muslims, Sikhs, Christians or others.

10 e.g. The destruction of the Babri mosque in 1992 led to riots and deaths throughout North India and repercussions in the U.K. See further below. Sikh-Muslim and Sikh-Hindu tensions often stem from decisions made at Partition in 1947. Dr Julius Lipner, Director of the D.H.I.I.R., has himself lectured on the devastating consequences of some constructions of hindutva.

11 Valmiki’s Sanskrit poem is often taken as the norm but other versions of the story circulated independently. Valmiki’s *Rāmāyana* was probably expanded from *c*. fifth century B.C.E. right up until the twelfth century C.E. (J.L. Brockington, *Righteous Rama: the evolution of an epic* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), chapter 10).
now know a little of why I might tell it. It is based on Tulsidas’s well-known version, with the longer ending from Valmiki. My justification for this is that this is how Sagar’s TV and video version largely works, a version which clearly influenced the stories I was told by my interviewees of both younger and middle generations.

At the core, it is a simple story. Ram, the eldest of King Dashrath’s four sons, wins the beautiful Sita in a competition to string a bow which she but none of her suitors can move. After a splendid marriage, Ram is banished to the forest, because his stepmother Kaikeyi wishes her son Bharat rather than Ram to inherit the throne and appeals to a boon the king had once promised her. Ram is accompanied by another half-brother Lakshman, and also by Sita who resists Ram’s attempts to persuade her to remain in the comfortable palace.

... restraining her tears, Earth’s daughter took courage and throwing Herself at Her mother-in-law’s feet spoke to her with Her two palms joined together, ‘Forgive, O venerable lady, my great impudence. The lord of my life has tendered me only such advice as is conducive to my best interests. I have, however, pondered within myself and realized that there is no calamity in this world as great as being torn away from one’s beloved lord’.

The trio lives in the forest until one day Sita sees a golden deer and sends first Ram off to find it and then Lakshman to find Ram, afraid that her beloved has been injured. But the scream she hears comes from the demon which has impersonated the deer as a decoy, so that Ravan, ten-headed king of Lanka, can come and kidnap Sita and take her to his island palace. Distraught, the brothers seek her, helped by various animals and birds of the forest, including the monkeys led by Hanuman. A war ensues in which those whose power has been built up by ascetic practices and then used adharmically (against the social and cosmic order) are defeated. Ram finally kills Ravan himself and sends for Sita to come to him. However, instead of a tender scene of reconciliation, Ram requires Sita to go through a fire test to prove that she has remained loyal to him and pure while in Ravan’s captivity. This latter is for the people’s sake. The test successfully completed, the entourage returns to Ayodhya, Ram and Sita are crowned amidst much rejoicing and the bountiful reign of Ram begins, the embodiment of dharma, of smooth-functioning ritual, cosmic and social order, of Lord Ram’s presence graciously available to all his devotees.

12 The version I give in Sita’s story is in considerably more detail.
13 Sagar credits many other versions in regional languages, part of a claim to the universality of his TV version. For details, see J.L. Brockington, ‘The Relevance of the Rāmāyana’, 3rd Surendra Lal Kundu — Sarojini Kundu Memorial Lecture, Calcutta, 18 December 1993, 11–12.
14 Ayodhya-Kanda 64, Śrī Rāmcharimā́nas (Gorakhpur: Gita Press), 330.
Here, Tulsidas's version ends. But the longer ending based on the earlier Sanskrit version has a more tragic conclusion. Ram hears a washerman gossiping about Sita's absence with Ravan. So he asks Sita to go through the fire once more. She refuses and he banishes her, pregnant, to the forest. There she gives birth to twin sons, Lav and Kush, who are taught the story of Ram and Sita, though they do not realize that Ram is in fact their father. So it is in innocence that they sing this story to Ram, when summoned to do so. Moved to tears by Sita's utter loyalty, Ram begs that Sita will return to him, but this time she refuses his request and appeals to her mother, the Earth, to swallow her up. After an incredibly long and righteous reign, Ram immolates himself. He and his whole people ascend to heaven, where some do not recognize him without his ancient consort.

Even from this brief summary, it should be clear that within a single version and between different versions there is diverse narration. The story is also framed and retold in different ways. For example, Lava and Kusha are taught the story by the poet Valmiki who has learned it from the sage Narada. Lava and Kusha then sing Rama's own story back to Rama, in the added beginning and ending to Valmiki's Sanskrit. But in Tulsidas, through a different story-telling chain beginning with Lord Shiv and his wife Parvati, Tulsidas hears the story and decides to retell it in Hindi, so that more people will understand, justifying himself like this:

*Wise men who hear this uncommon legend marvel not; for they know there is no limit to the stories of Śrī Rāma in this world. They are convinced in their heart that Śrī Rāma has bodied Himself forth in diverse ways, that the Ramāyaṇa, though consisting of a thousand million verses, is yet infinite.*

So the story, according to its own tradition, can both be summarized and told in multiple ways. But is this *Sita's* story? And can it be told by a non-devotee? Several of my interviewees were dubious as to whether they could tell Sita's story without telling Ram's. This was not just because no individual can stand alone apart from a web of relationships but specifically because, as a married woman, Sita is seen as the ideal wife of Ram, whose *dharma* is fulfilled in serving him as her husband and lord. She is also his *shakti*, or female energy, without whom he cannot function. She further does not exist apart from him. Unlike other female deities, her image never appears on its own in household or temple shrines. She is worshipped along with him. And when

15 Not actually in Vālmiki.
16 Their personal names are almost certainly derived from kuśilava, 'bard'. See Goldman, *The Ramāyaṇa*, critical notes at Bālakānda 1.4.3.
17 In the context of Vālmiki, I use the Sanskrit spelling, above, for Tulsidas, the Hindi.
18 *Bālakānda 33, Śrī Ramacharitmānas*, 51. A complex theology of sound and name underlies this comment, as the Prologue makes clear.
Ram is understood as Lord, as ultimate reality or its foundation, as in Tulsidas, Sita is seen as Maya, his creative power which makes this world both a screen which hides our understanding of its true nature and the way to comprehending it. In cosmic, ritual and social terms, she appears inseparable from him.

In the light of such a view, it is interesting to note the various ways in which the story describes itself in Book 1 of Valmiki's Sanskrit Rāmāyaṇa. In chapter 1, the story is said to be the story of Rama. In chapter 3, it is the story of Rama, Lakshmana, the rākṣasas and Sita. But in chapter 4, where Lava and Kusha are about to tell the story — the main story of the rest of Book 1 and Books 2–6 as framed by this chapter — it is described as the story of Sita. The whole Rāmāyaṇa is none other than Sita's story. The experience of the singers as well as the content of their story is perhaps acknowledged to affect the way that these are represented. So there seem to be grounds for different approaches to telling the story, even within a single version.

We may accept, then, that Sita's story can be told and proceed to look at ways in which this has been done. Sometimes it coincides with Rama's story, Sita the third in a trio. At others, Sita is Rama's necessary counterpart. But in yet further instances, Sita may hold centre stage herself, particularly in women's songs. In the next section of the paper, I shall consider four very different examples in which Sita is variously appropriated, transformed and rejected in representations which are both shaped by and shape the gendered experience of their narrators and audience. First, though, as a counterpoint, we must consider the idealized Sita often presented in textbooks.

Moulding Sita's Story

In chapter 5 of her much-criticized book, Hindu women: normative models, Prabhati Mukherjee presents the 'eternal triumvirate' of Sita, Savitri and Parvati, 'the paragons of Indian womanhood' whose stories 'demonstrate that for women nothing matters more than their husbands'. I quote her summary on Sita:

19 See, for example, Arāndyakāṇḍa 7, where Sītā, likened to the goddess, Śrī, is described as Māyā, walking between Brahma (the ultimate, Rāma) and the embodied self (jīva, Lakṣmaṇa), Śrī Rāma-charitāmānas, 524–5.
20 On the religious pattern of the Bāllākāṇḍa in Valmiki, see J.L. Brockington, Righteous Rama, 212f.
21 'demons', but specifically here Ravana and his ilk whose power derives from ascetic practices but is misused.
22 If this seems an odd way to proceed, it is not from an Indological devotion to texts above anthropological investigation. Rather, it is to ground the possibility of diversity in precisely that textual tradition which some now call on to legitimate monolithic understandings of Sita, as an ideal and index linked with Hindutva. See further below.
Sita and Savitri are the foremost of all ideal women and their names are household words among devout Hindus. 'This land of Sita/Savitri' is a cliche which emphasizes the heritage of fidelity of Hindu women to their husbands.

Situ is always remembered as an ideal woman, docile, uncomplaining and a silent sufferer. She would die rather than question the justification of her husband’s conduct or waver in her loyalty to him. If sorrow is an index of greatness, then Sita is the greatest of all women whose life was nothing but a succession of sorrowful experiences.

The following examples will interrogate this representation to investigate the possibility of what has been called ‘a theory of struggle within the ideological’. Here ideology or representation is understood as ‘an articulation of complex, sometimes contradictory and unevenly determining practices’. This diversity coupled with the idea of ‘relative autonomy’ is what allows the possibility of struggle. Here I have given Susie Tharu’s formulation of the issue, but a similar approach is used by other Indian feminists like Rajeswari Sundar Rajan as well. It and the examples I shall offer raise further serious issues about resistance, reform, authenticity, responsibility and the relevance of ‘tradition’ to discussions of experience, representation and gender in a post-colonial context and these will in turn interrogate my final section on my own fieldwork on Sita’s story, in the broader context of education and South Asian representation in the U.K. So to my first example.

Around 1703, in the Benares area of North India, a holy man called Rampriya Sharan composed a seven book Sitāyan, whose title and structure proclaimed it a legitimate companion to the works of Valmiki and Tulsidas. Its audience were the rasik devotees of Ram and Sita, who held that Tulsidas’s account only related to an earthly level of the story and who themselves wanted to participate at an ultimate level in Ram and Sita’s creative play of līlā. To aid them in the visualization necessary for this, the devotees thought of themselves as female companions or relatives of Sita, envisaging themselves as intimately present during her childhood and marriage, the events on which the Sitāyan exclusively concentrates. Out of a context of devotion in which males adopt female persona and manners, Rampriya Sharan creates a representation of the experience of Sita and her intimates

24 She refers to Vivekananda, Our women (Calcutta, reprinted 1970), 24.
25 Mukherjee, Hindu women, 49.
29 literally, ‘having a discriminating taste’; ‘delighting in’.
which will structure in turn the devotional experience of those who hear it and use it in visualization to realize the ultimate beyond the everyday world yet manifested within it. For the rasiks, this representation was one of reality in its fullest sense. In Tharu’s sense, it can be seen as part of the articulation of sometimes contradictory and unevenly determining practices in terms of which gender roles and identity are nowhere nearly as sharply fixed as, for example, Manu’s much-quoted prescriptions\(^{31}\) and books like Mukherjee’s would have us believe.

Moreover, if we follow Singh’s analysis cited by Lutgendorf,\(^ {32}\) the rasik tradition was at its height in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a time of foreign domination. Singh argues that it enabled the former Vaishnava regal cult of Benares and its environs to be internalized, so that ‘true’ sovereignty was not of Mughal (or later British) powers but of the transcendent realm of Sitaram. Lutgendorf points out, however, that in the simultaneous development of the Rāmātā what began as a play was transformed, under the guidance of the Banaras rulers and their rasik advisors, into a city and kingdom not only reimagined but physically transformed into an enduring ideological statement.\(^ {33}\)

Imaginative conception (bhāvanā)\(^ {34}\) becomes real — but in whose representation?

If this transformation of Sita’s story can be read as a form of resistance, so too can women’s songs which appropriate the sorrow of her second exile as their own.\(^ {35}\) In March 1982, several village circles of impoverished peasant women from Maharashtra around Pune formed the S.S.M. (Stri Shakti Mandal, Union of Women’s Power). A year later, they composed a manifesto of eleven propositions, including the following:

1. Men and women should be granted the same respect and dignity.
3. We shall struggle for our rights.
6. We are concerned with the poor whereas leaders are concerned with themselves.

\(^ {31}\) e.g. ‘She should do nothing independently even in her own house.
In childhood subject to her father,
in youth to her husband,
and when her husband is dead to her sons,
she should never enjoy independence . . .’ (Manusmrti 9.3).


\(^ {33}\) Lutgendorf, Life of a text, 321.

\(^ {34}\) cf Lutgendorf, Life of a text, 318.

\(^ {35}\) The following section draws on Guy Poitevin and Hema Rairkar, Indian peasant women speak up (English translation, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1993).
8. Hitherto, men have spoilt women's minds; henceforth this shall not be permitted.³⁶

Through meeting, discussion and action, changes in village life have been effected: different castes now eat together, women elect their own representatives at various local levels, they visit other villages in new roles as health workers and school assistants. From October 1983 for eighteen months, Guy Poitevin and Hema Rairkar convened volunteer groups of about fifteen of these women to reflect on the circumstances which had led them to espouse change for themselves. The oppression of their mothers-in-law was a common theme. Several were forced, for example, to walk miles in the heat to draw water. The grind of daily work was contrasted with a lack of power to choose what kind of work to do, its ceaselessness was seen to be imposed by dharma, the women felt themselves to be non-entities and their own work depreciated by contrast with men's.³⁷

In earlier chapters of Poitevin and Rairkar's book, Indian peasant women speak up, mill-songs from women of an earlier generation in Gujarat and Maharashtra are presented in juxtaposition to these reflections. In these, Sita's life in the forest is equated with the life of a woman with her in-laws:

To Sita, the harsh lot of a daughter-in-law brought troubles as numerous as the hair on one's head.
She sent a share of it to her sisters, country after country.
To Sita, the harsh lot of a daughter-in-law came a grain at a time.
She sent a share of it to her relatives, village after village.
To Sita, life in the forest was imposed upon her in a thousand ways.
She handed it out on tamarind leaves³⁸ to her friends, country after country . . .³⁹

In their study of women in North India, Raheja and Gold emphasize the way in which women's songs can be read as a form of resistance to dominant values, their irony being of supreme importance.⁴⁰ They wish to reject a view of women as passive victims of oppression, their experience solely constituted in terms of the representations and entrenchment of a dominant patriarchal ideology. Yet such a reading can be criticized as a form of collusion with if not complete delusion by such an ideology. For those who would support this latter view, the key to the practical achievements of the Stri Shakti Mandal (Union of Women's Power) was the introduction of village circles and training for

³⁶ Poitevin and Rairkar, Indian peasant women, 9–10.
³⁷ Ibid., 140–1.
³⁸ Used in Indian cookery to give a bitter flavour.
³⁹ Poitevin and Rairkar, Indian peasant women, 67.
⁴⁰ Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold, Listen to the heron's words: reimagining gender and kinship in North India (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
health workers by people who came from outside this mountainous and deprived area. Poitevin and Rairkar, however, hint that the creative energy of this generation derived at least in part from the awareness of a former generation of their own conditions of oppression and that the songs both encapsulated that experience and ensured that others would experience it as such.

Where the rasiks espoused and transformed Sita’s story and the mill-workers appropriated it to express the harshness of their own lives, E.V. Ramasami rejected it as part of a heritage of North Indian and brahmanical domination to be thrown off by the Tamil South in its assertion of Dravidian identity.

On the first day of August in 1956, E.V. Ramasami . . . set out for the Madras marina to lead his followers in burning pictures of Lord Rāma, hero of the Rāmāyaṇa. This symbolic action would represent a reversal of the culmination of North Indian performances of the Rāmāyaṇa, in which images of the epic’s villain, Rāvana, are put to flames as spectators watch in delight.41

Ramasami, following earlier Jain and South Indian tellings, saw Ravana as the hero of the story. Though he was arrested and only one supporter managed to burn a picture of Ravana, his various re-readings of this story were critical in fusing religious texts with political issues at the time. Richman argues42 this underlay the later success of the D.M.K. (Dravida Munnetra Kazagham, Progressive Dravidian Federation). The D.M.K. has been a key (anti-brahmin) party in Tamil politics in the last three decades and has negotiated reservations in education and employment for so-called Other Backward Castes.43

While Ramasami’s re-readings centred on Rama, Sita was also re-presented. Far from being the faithful wife who performs her family dharma to perfection, she is shown as challenging her mother-in-law (compare the quotation cited earlier), as being attracted to and unfaithful with Ravana and as being obsessed by beautiful jewellery.44 Thus she participates in North Indian hypocrisy and superficial values and, as an unfaithful and rebellious woman, is an index of the poverty of North Indian so-called civilization. The representation of Sita and the other North Indian characters is intended to contrast with the values and experience of ordinary (non-brahmin) Tamilians, to help assert their political marginalization, to aid them in experiencing this marginalization as such and to create a new rallying point.

To represent women’s experience as an index of a criticized group’s metaphorical impoverishment is, of course, a common strategy. The East India Company’s legislation to abolish sati in Bengal in 1829 served as a potent example of ‘white men . . . saving brown women from brown men’, as Gayatri Spivak puts it bluntly. The subsequent history of colonialism, nationalism and reform is complex and well beyond the scope of this paper. However, the use of women’s ‘experience’ as an index of civilization and a justification of power over the other goes on, as, for example, in negative treatments in the Western media of veiling and women’s status in Islam and in similar rhetoric against Muslims by the new Right in India. The two are, of course, not unconnected because of a colonial history which proceeded by a policy of divide and rule, denoted women as indicators, criticized Hinduism for its lack of history by contrast with Islam in India and thus contributed to the current historicist approach to the Ramayana and the claimed birthplace of Lord Rama and so to the violence surrounding the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodha in December 1992. The two do, however, sharply confirm Avtar Brah’s important observation that, when ‘difference and experience are used primarily as a “commonsensical term”’, they cannot explain ‘contradictions of subjectivity and identity’. One example she gives to explain what she means is of ‘the racism of one racialised group towards another racialised group’. If we apply her example in the current instance, it would yield the apparent contradiction that the new Right purports to speak out of the (true) experience of being oppressed or marginalized by secular governments (which have drawn on a legal and constitutional legacy shaped by colonialism and reactions to it), yet acts to marginalize and oppress Muslims in its turn, despite its sometimes inclusive rhetoric.

It is because such examples belie the notion that experience transparently reflects truth that Brah theorizes ‘experience’ as ‘the

45 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern speak? Speculations on widow-sacrifice’, Wedge 7–8, 1985, 121, quoted in Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan, Real and imagined women, 42.
46 For a refreshingly complex analysis, see Kumari Jayawardena, The white woman’s other burden: Western women and South Asia during British rule (London: Routledge, 1995).
50 Avtar Brah, Cartographies of diaspora, 116.
site of subject formation’,\(^{51}\) quoting Joan Scott to the effect that, ‘Experience is at once always already an interpretation \textit{and} in need of interpretation’ (her emphasis).\(^{52}\) She also distinguishes ‘difference as a marker of the distinctiveness of our collective “histories” from difference as personal experience inscribing individual biographies’.\(^{53}\) Further, she holds that ‘identities are inscribed through experiences culturally constructed in social relations’ (my emphasis). At an individual level, identity is the ascription of stability and continuity to the multiple, contradictory and unstable subject-in-process that I am, indeed the sense that there is an ‘I’ at all. At a collective level, ‘identity is the process of signification whereby commonalities of experience around a specific axis of differentiation, say class, caste, or religion, are invested with particular meanings’.\(^{54}\) As such they tend to erase the memory of the internal differences of the group.

Brah is dealing with complex articulations of difference and, though she spells these out in more detail in \textit{Cartographies of diaspora} than in her earlier article on the subject,\(^{55}\) she is not always easy to follow. However, in my final example in this section on the appropriation of Sita’s story, I shall try to apply her analysis to its use by the new Right in India. I use as my source various articles from the collection on \textit{Women and right-wing movements: Indian experiences}, edited by Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia.\(^{56}\)

In the rhetoric of Partition, it was held that Pakistan had not returned as many Hindu women to India as it should have done. The motif of the pure Hindu woman, abducted and raped by Muslim men, not only acted as an indicator of India’s greater civilization, but was linked with the notion of the body of Mother India dismembered by Partition and expressed through the story of Sita whereby every unreturned Hindu woman was represented as Sita herself.

We all know our history [sic] of what happened in the time of Shri Rama when Sita was abducted. Here, when thousands of girls are concerned, we cannot forget this. We can forget all the properties, we can forget every other thing, but this cannot be forgotten . . . As descendants of Ram we have to bring back every Sita that is alive.\(^{57}\)

In Brah’s terms, a collective history of experience is being asserted, culturally constructed in the social, political and


\(^{53}\) \textit{Cartographies}, 117.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 123–4.


economic context of Partition, a collective identity is being invoked, in which personal experience and fractured subjectivities are to be forgotten in the name of a Hindu India in which every ‘I’ is a (male) descendant of Ram, ready to rescue those ‘girls’ whose subjectivities are relegated as they are made not just victims and objects, but indicators of exclusively constituted nationality.

The rhetoric of the new Right, while continuous with this in its anti-Muslim stance and its invocation of the Rāmāyana as a national history of India, mobilizes Sita in rather different ways. Now, according to Kapur and Cossman, the new Hindu woman, often educated and working outside the home (and, we may add, middle-class) is presented as strong, but strong as matri shakti, mother and wife, and chaste, pure and loyal like Sita. She is the mother of heroes, as she once was in the nationalist discourse of Bengal earlier in the century. Her role is to provide, support and sacrifice, as did the elderly women pressing food on the kar sevaks actually engaged in taking bricks to Ayodhya and later storming the mosque, not many of whom were women.58

Sarkar, also critically studying the new Right, emphasizes, however, the place of the female kar sevikas, noting that all ‘were bursting with speech — with arguments and descriptions — each had an accent very distinctively her own’,59 whether it were a vision for a whole new world once Ayodhya was liberated or the assertion of self-respect against oppression, often couched in very violent terms. Sita’s sex is now seen as coming to the rescue of Ram, liberating his birthplace from the oppressor. As Sarkar comments: ‘The reversal of roles equips the communal woman with a new and empowering self-image. The woman has stepped out of a purely iconic status to take up an active position as militant’.60 It is a situation she, dedicated feminist and anti-communalist, finds deeply disturbing.

Here we see experience as the site of subject formation, in Brah’s terms, for such women now able to function in the public arena. It is constructed in terms of the ‘trajectories of material circumstances and cultural practices’,61 which have brought such women to support the V.H.P.62 and allied organizations, that is, one in which reservations for backward castes and feelings of government favouritism to Muslims have led middle-class women

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58 ‘Women are intended to inspire and strengthen not so much through example, but through sacrifice and tears,’ say Kapur and Cossman, ‘Communalising gender’, 97. See also n.45.
60 Sarkar, ‘Heroic women’, 192.
61 Brah, Cartographies, 118.
62 Vishva Hindu Parishad (‘World Council of Hindus’ in their own translation), a religious organization linked with the Bharatiya Janata Party amongst others, and responsible for the mobilization of the kar sevaks.
and men to feel that the security of their consumerist success is threatened. If, however, this forms a ‘shared collective narrative’ for such Hindu women and men, the active position of the women is ambiguous to say the least.

This becomes clear when, once more, Sita’s story in invoked, in all its TV splendour. Here Sita is, in Amrita Basu’s description of her, ‘silent, decorous, glamorous and subservient’.63 Sarkar is quite clear that this is ‘a broader normative disciplining’ to keep under control women attracted to the Sangh64 and increasingly working in white collar jobs and that ‘the televised version of the Ramayana epic ... was made to coincide with the building up of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement’65 and ‘restated the older codes of patriarchal command through the irresistible, erotic appeal of the self-abnegating figure of Sita’.66 Basu further shows how such representations were made part of the social ‘reality’ when ‘the BJP actually nominated Deepika Chikalia, the actress who played the role of Sita, to run on a BJP ticket in the 1991 parliamentary elections. Throughout the campaign, her demeanour remained exactly the same as in the television series: unable to represent herself, she had to be represented’.67

Sita’s Story in the United Kingdom
And so back, briefly, to my telling of Sita’s story or stories in the U.K. ‘Unable to represent herself, she had to be represented’? Was it a story she would choose to tell? To find out, I interviewed six families of two or three generations each, though I also drew on earlier fieldwork of my own as well as that of other interviewers in this country and in India when I actually wrote the book.68 Two of the families I interviewed were Hindi-speaking of different brahmin status from Uttar Pradesh. The other four were Gujaratis, who had migrated via various countries in East Africa. Two of the families were potter caste, one Lohana, one bania (business people).69 All six were middle class, though one of the Gujarati families was much less well off than the others. In this family, the mother (middle generation) spoke English only with difficulty and preferred to talk in Gujarati, a friend and her son translating for

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63 Amrita Basu, ‘Feminism inverted: the gendered imagery and real women of Hindu nationalism’, Women and right-wing movements, 174. Contrast one of my interviewees on her portrayal in the video as ‘a bimbo — Sita wasn’t like that at all’.
64 The combine of ‘rightwing’ organizations including B.J.P. and V.H.P.
65 That is, the liberation of Ram’s birthplace at Ayodhya.
68 The scope of the fieldwork was severely limited by deadline and the fact that such books do not have weight in Research Assessment Exercises, in my view quite unacceptably.
69 The broad category, bania, sometimes includes Lohanas.
her. None of the members of the senior generation spoke in English.

The six women of the middle generation were all unanimous. As young girls and teenagers being prepared for marriage, they had all been told, ‘Be like Sita’. This came from their own unprompted statements. Yet for various reasons they all rejected the idea that Sita was a role model: as a shakti she was too great to be emulated by ordinary women; she herself was only performing her strīdharmā, that is, duties as a woman; family members were the actual models for action. All were familiar with the basic story in some detail, though the two who still read the Rāmcaritmānas regularly were unsurprisingly much better versed.

In the younger generation, the situation was quite different. Knowledge of the story varied enormously, from virtually none to capacious detail remembered from comics and video versions. Apart from two young pre-teens girls, none of them saw Sita as the source of their own values, though they tended to espouse the values of purity, faithfulness and gentle tenderness which authors like Kakar and Mukherjee have associated with Sita, often disparagingly. On self-sacrifice, they were more divided. The young Gujarati man in his twenties who knew least of the story was nonetheless the one whose view of the woman he wanted to marry most nearly conformed to the ideal of Sita as subservient devoted wife. This was despite, or perhaps because of, having two sisters, one of whom wanted to modify this ideal substantially, the other of whom rejected it radically. All three attributed their values to the experience of social relations within the household and through wider contacts especially at weddings.

This then raises sharply the issue of whether, in a British context, Hindus will want to go on telling any version of Sita’s story. Mulling on my question as to whether she would take Sita as a role model, a Hindi-speaking brahmin university student of Geography and English commented that ‘she was not all that relevant in the West’. Of her own volition, she then considered other deities and epic figures, like Parvati and Kunti, but felt that her father’s mother, still living in India, had been most influential for her. Still musing on her own identity, shaping herself as subject-in-process just about to visit India after thirteen years, she continued:

‘I don’t think bhangra and Hindi films give a true sense of identity. A lot of people at university are into these, but my friend and I aren’t ... Maybe Sita is being faithful to one’s own identity far from home ...’.

It is almost certain that she would not have articulated that last thought in this way if I had not asked her the question. Is this then an example of a fusion of horizons, in Gadamer’s terms? Or an illegitimate prompting to fuse experience with this particular representation? In the case of this student who is continually reflexive about herself and her tradition, I personally have no qualms about participating in her musing. However, while Sita’s Story seeks to show great diversity of response, it tends as a whole to take Sita’s story itself as read — or watched. And this paper, so far, has done the same. Yet we now have to consider the uncompromising rejection of Sita by feminists like Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon. Writing in the wake of Sagar’s television serial, they assert:

Eternal mythologies like the Ramayan are revived and popularised via state controlled media at the mass ‘entertainment’ level, and the negative values they convey regarding women find more than adequate reflection in textbooks and children’s literature at the ‘education’ level. With Sita as our ideal, can sati be far behind? It is this overarching ideology of male superiority and female dispensability that sanctions sati and leads to its glorification, and accepts the silent violence against women that rages in practically every home across the country.

Moreover, many Indian Women’s Movements are damningly silent on religious stories, practices, ideals. So I am forced to ask whether a book on Hindu values telling Sita’s story, however diversely, may not just be reinscribing values inextricably linked with the history of colonialism: the valuing of text as authenticator, the ascription of individuals to separated religious traditions envisaged on a Western view of religion and administration, the repromotion of a figure repressive to women or used militantly to inflict violence.

‘Is there a Westerner in the world today who is truly virtuous and can speak with integrity about another tradition’s concerns?’ I return to an actual conversation styled courtesy of Goldman’s translation of the first verse of Valmiki’s Rāmāyana. Almost certainly not, if true virtue is the criterion and objectivity the purported stance. And insofar as Sita’s story might appear to the reader as a straightforward ‘representation’ of ‘experience’, it may belong to a genre which, while accessible, may be misleading. However, even as I feel myself torn over speaking with integrity, I want to reject categorically the conservatism and isolationism implicit in the variety of post-modernism adopted by the person I

have called Anita. I prefer rather Brah's version of post-modernism. So I want to look with her at the different modes of difference, at the articulations of gender, experience and representation, in which relations of power and of consequence are not avoided, in which, as subjects-in-process, we can understand how the narratives of our various collective identities are framed in relation to one another's.

And I take heart that, for Narada replying to Valmiki, the only properly virtuous truth speaker is Rama, who is wise and grounded in proper conduct... He knows the ways of righteousness and is always true to his work. The welfare of his subjects is his constant concern. He is renowned, learned, pure, disciplined and contemplative... the protector of all living things and the guardian of righteousness. 74

In other words, his virtue is grounded both in disciplined study and practice and in his exemplification of dharma. And even for him this latter turns out to be not beyond question when, for example, he shoots Valin from behind a tree. 75

However, if Rama is the only one who can be considered truly virtuous, this does not disqualify Valmiki from telling his story nor Lav and Kush from telling Sita's nor indeed peasant women from singing their resistance into being. Yet between the welfare of a people, the protection of all living beings and different constructions of cosmic and social order are tensions to which Valmiki's opening chapter does not advert. They are, though, manifestly clear, I suggest, when we hear even a limited repertoire of Sita's stories alongside our own, whatever our own may be. If such narrations of transformation, appropriation and rejection force us to face up to such tensions and to start to understand them in terms of the complex articulations of difference which Brah's analysis proposes, then, in my estimation, the telling will be justified.

So I have tried to move in this article from the idea of mentally composed 'representations' of uninterpreted material 'experience' (in my opening snapshots) through the realization that experience shapes both our representations (the ways we think about things and embody them in texts, images, institutions, actions) and our responses to these representations. These become elements in our continuing psychosomatic experience and therefore shape this mental-material experience in turn. There is nothing particularly new in this though it is noteworthy that Brah feels she has to cite Scott to this effect. Indeed, the language of Indian philosophical

74 Balakanda 1.9, 12-13, translated by Goldman, The Rāmāyana of Vālmīki, 121-2.
75 On various ambiguities in Rama's behaviour, see, for example, Kathleen Erndl, 'The mutilation of Sūrpaṇakha', and David Shulman, 'Fire and flood: the testing of Sītā in Kampan's Irāmāvatāram', Many Rāmāyaṇas, ed. Paula Richman.
texts and meditation is only too well aware of how we are simultaneously constructed by and construct the social, ritual and cosmic world which is the site of our personal and collective experience, of our constitution (śaṃskāra) of ourselves as subjects-in-process, in social relations, producing shifting and often delusory accounts of our personal and collective identities.76

But I have also been looking at ways gender may articulate with particular mutually conditioning representations and experience to produce women as indices of family honour, national civilization or the lack of it, the potential for intimacy with the divine sometimes denied to women themselves, the strong who can rescue beleaguered religion, middle-class rights and so on. The last is a particularly dangerous production although it is only one of many ways in which women have used representations to mitigate and criticize the experience of daily life and to create new arenas of experience for themselves. It is a production which Tharu and Niranjana suggest is, paradoxically, intimately linked with a liberal view of the subject,77 pointing up in yet another way the messy implications of colonialism which make it disingenuous for those of us who are not South Asian to query, 'How could women act like that?' Rather, in seeking to understand diversity of representation and experience in a more complex way, we may recognize more clearly the intersecting trajectories of our personal and collective subjectivities and identities and have the courage to act.

So I offer in conclusion a poem by Naseev, the pen-name of one of my interviewees, written of her own volition in Hindi after our discussions, and here translated by her daughter. Naseev remarks that by 'death' in verse 5 she is referring not just to actual death but to the torture of oppressive relationships:

O Lord Rama, during your reign, men had many rights, while women were oppressed and regarded as a toy; that is what they thought. Women were good for companionship during the hard times, but were forgotten during the good.

O Sita, at the peril of womanhood, you drove yourself to extremes, just to prove your wifehood. Since these times, men have made many customs — to burn widows in the funeral pyre of their dead husbands. The customs started then are still being observed, resulting in the death of numerous innocents.

O women of the world, in the name of progress, change history. You are not weak. You are the power. Make sure everyone is aware of it.

76 See, for example, Śaṃkara's commentary on the Brahma-sūtras, introduction and 1.1.1, trans. Gambhirananda, third edition (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1977). For an excellent discussion of such construction, see Steven Collins, Selfless persons: imagery and thought in Theravāda Buddhism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), parts I and IV.

77 'Problems for a contemporary theory of gender', 248–52.