

Myth and Modernity: A Feminist Reading of Dr. Malinee's *Bideh Nandini* (Agony of Sita)

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of myth and modernity through a feminist reading of Dr. Malinee's *Bideh Nandini* (Agony of Sita: Translated by Pranab Jyoti Neog), a contemporary retelling of the Ramayana from Sita's perspective. Retellings of myth in modern literature function not merely as narrative revisions but as critical interventions that question patriarchal authority embedded in classical texts. Dr. Malinee's work reclaims Sita's silenced voice and repositions her as a conscious moral agent negotiating duty, dignity, and selfhood within oppressive social structures. By foregrounding Sita's inner conflicts, emotional resilience, and ethical reasoning, *Agony of Sita* transforms the idealized, submissive figure of tradition into a modern woman asserting autonomy. This study explores how mythic memory is reworked to address contemporary feminist concerns such as gender justice, identity, and agency. Drawing upon feminist literary criticism, myth criticism, and theories of modernity, the paper argues that Dr. Malinee's retelling challenges dominant patriarchal interpretations while retaining the cultural essence of the epic. The text emerges as a dialogic space where tradition and modern consciousness intersect, allowing marginalized female experiences to be articulated. Ultimately, the paper highlights how the novel, *Bideh Nandini* contributes to feminist discourse by redefining women's agency within mythological narratives and affirming the relevance of myth in negotiating modern gender realities.

Introduction

Mythological narratives have long played a central role in shaping cultural values and gender norms in Indian society. Classical epics like the Ramayana have traditionally portrayed women through idealized frameworks of sacrifice, obedience, and moral purity. However, contemporary literary retellings have begun to interrogate these representations by revisiting myth from marginalized perspectives. Dr. Malinee's fictional work *Bideh Nandini* (*Agony of Sita*) is a significant intervention in this tradition, offering a modern feminist reinterpretation of Sita's life and suffering. The novel shifts focus from heroic male exploits to the emotional and ethical struggles of Sita, thereby exposing the patriarchal structures that govern her existence. By engaging myth with modern sensibility, Dr. Malinee not only revises the narrative voice but also redefines women's agency. This paper seeks to explore how *Bideh Nandini* negotiates the tension between myth and modernity to foreground feminist consciousness and reclaim Sita's subjectivity.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the representation of women's agency in Dr. Malinee's *Bideh Nandini*.
2. To analyze the interaction between mythic tradition and modern feminist thought in the text.
3. To explore how Sita's voice is reclaimed through narrative revision and emotional articulation.

4. To assess the significance of mythological retellings in contemporary feminist discourse.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach based on close textual reading of *Bideh Nandini*. Feminist literary criticism serves as the primary methodological tool, supplemented by myth criticism and modernity studies. The analysis contextualizes the text within Indian epic traditions while examining its departure from classical narratives. Secondary sources such as feminist theory, mythological studies, and critical essays on retellings are used to support interpretation.

Discussion

In classical versions of the Ramayana, Sita is often portrayed as the epitome of virtue and endurance, her silence serving as a marker of ideal femininity. Dr. Malinee disrupts this tradition by allowing Sita to narrate her own experiences. Through introspection and emotional depth, Sita articulates her anguish, doubts, and moral dilemmas. She didn't protest directly but raised some questions. After receiving the orders of exile for twelve years Ramachandra advised her thinking that she would have to leave Sita in the palace. Then he continued,

"I repeat, don't ever do anything against the wish of Bharata. Co-operate with him the way he wants you to."

This advice made her angry and then she replied in anger and resentment,

"O, descendent of Raghu, what do you think I am? It is very unfortunate that I should hear such words from you after I have accepted someone like you as my husband. You didn't even know or understand me all these years. I am not the kind of woman to fancy another man after accepting someone as my husband. What really surprise me is how you can bring yourself to utter such words." (P: 59, Tr: Pranab Jyoti Neog)

This narrative strategy transforms her from a passive symbol into an active subject, thereby asserting her agency.

The novel, *Bideh Nandini* exposes the patriarchal logic that governs Sita's trials, particularly her abandonment and repeated tests of purity. Dr. Malinee critiques these practices by foregrounding their psychological and ethical implications. Sita's suffering is no longer glorified as sacrifice but questioned as injustice. Ramachandra was not seemed as pleased as Sita to meet her husband.

"Sita, you should know something very clearly. I didn't kill Ravana solely to get you back. I also killed him to pay him back in kind the insult that he heaped upon my head. And one more thing, I can bear everything, but not any blemish to my name or character. I simply cannot bear infamy. Ravana kidnapped you by making you sit on his lap. He looked at you with lustful eyes. Your character is no longer above suspicion. Therefore, I am not glad to see you. If I could not have rescued you, it would have reflected badly on my name, but if I again accept you as my wife, it would be a blot to our great dynasty. I have done my duty by rescuing you and no one can point a finger of accusation at me. Now I don't have any tenderness or weakness towards you." (Agony of Sita. p: 219, Tr: Pranab Jyoti Neog)

This critical stance aligns the text with modern feminist concerns about bodily autonomy and social control over women.

A defining feature of the novel is Sita's moral reasoning. Rather than blindly accepting destiny, she reflects upon her choices and their consequences. Her decision to withdraw from oppressive social structures

becomes an act of resistance. Though Sita was unable to protest directly but she cast the question aroused in mind. “She realized that Ramchandra was a very selfish king. He only wanted to be the lord of the universe.” She further asked three questions to her husband through Lakshmana in a clear voice,

“O son of Sumitra, ask your brother three questions on my behalf. First, ask him whether women are subject of his kingdom or not? If yes, is it not a king’s duty to protect them? Secondly, it is I who has been exiled. Will he accept the child in my womb? Or whether he has also exiled his yet unborn child along with his wife? And the third question, whether I shall bring up my yet to be born child like the rakshasas that you destroy or shall I teach him to live by begging like Brahmins?” (P: 11, Tr: Pranab Jyoti Neog)

This portrayal reflects modern notions of selfhood and ethical autonomy, positioning Sita as a figure of quiet rebellion rather than submissive compliance.

Dr. Malinee places significant emphasis on Sita’s emotional world—her loneliness, resilience, and inner strength. These emotions function as sources of empowerment rather than weakness. The text also gestures toward female solidarity by emphasizing shared suffering among women, suggesting a collective feminist consciousness that transcends individual experience. In Chapter 1, Sita uttered,

“It was twelve years ago that I was exiled by my husband, King of Ramachandra of the Great Raghu Dynasty, a person whom the world venerates and worships. At the time I was five months pregnant. I do not know whether I still have any right to think of this person as my husband. Repeated insults from my husband have transformed me into a different woman. Three questions have always jolted my mind during the last three years. Why I was exiled? What was my offence? What is to be the future of my children?” (P-1. Tr: Pranab Jyoti Neog).

By reworking the epic narrative, *Bideh Nandini* demonstrates that myth is not static but dynamic. Dr. Malinee retains the cultural framework of the Ramayana while infusing it with contemporary values. Sita has been humiliated by her husband at various times in her lifetime. But her character portrayal reflects an Indian traditional woman.

“Therefore, sometimes I wanted to know whether my husband alone is like that or is every women’s husband similar. Sometimes I think they consider it to be a matter of great pride to win a wife by performing the most difficult feat. Once they have won and enjoyed that wife, their warmth towards her diminishes.” (P:12, Tr: Pranab Jyoti Neog)

This synthesis of myth and modernity allows the text to question tradition without rejecting it, making myth relevant to present-day gender discourse. Myth thus becomes a dialogic space where past and present interact, enabling reinterpretation without cultural erasure.

Situated within the broader landscape of Indian feminist writing, Dr. Malinee’s retelling also resonates with regional literary movements that seek to recover marginalized voices. Assamese and regional women writers have increasingly employed myth to interrogate gender injustice and social exclusion. *Bideh Nandini* participates in this tradition by blending epic memory with lived female experience, thereby grounding universal feminist concerns in a culturally specific context. This regional-modern perspective strengthens the novel’s critique of patriarchy while affirming the relevance of indigenous narrative traditions.

Conclusion

Dr. Malinee’s *Bideh Nandini* stands as a powerful feminist retelling that bridges myth and modernity. By reclaiming Sita’s voice and foregrounding her agency, the novel challenges patriarchal interpretations

embedded in classical mythology. The text redefines femininity through ethical strength, emotional resilience, and self-awareness. This study concludes that mythological retellings such as *Bideh Nandini* play a crucial role in reimagining cultural narratives and empowering marginalized voices. Through feminist intervention, myth becomes a site of resistance and renewal, affirming its enduring relevance in contemporary literature.

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