EXPLORING VALMIKI'S WORK FURTHER: A REVISIONING STUDY OF ASHOK K BANKER'S SONS OF SITA

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Abstract: This research paper aims to investigate Ashok K. Banker's Sons of Sita, which is a revisioning of Uttarkand of Valmiki's epic Ramayana. The paper will explore how Banker has incorporated various elements of modernity into the text while retaining the essence of the original epic. The study will focus on the portrayal of female characters in the novel and how their roles have been reimagined. The paper will also examine how the novel subverts traditional gender norms, providing a fresh perspective on the themes of power, patriarchy, and gender relations. The research will be conducted using a literary analysis approach, and the findings will contribute to the larger body of Ramayana scholarship and sheds light on the possibilities and offers insights into the implications of revisionist literature.

Keywords - Ramayana, revisioning, Sita, Gender, Ashok Banker

Introduction:

Indian literature is one of a kind; it is rich in meaning and has many different perspectives on ancient wisdom. Indian narratives, which includes stories, beliefs, practices, customs, and traditions, is an integral part of Indian culture and is actively maintained as a parallel memory to the modern, updated knowledge that Indians acquire through formal and informal education. Therefore, there is more than one reason to go back. Some are simply revisions of old tales, others are meant to promote translations, still others hope to provide entertainment that people of all ages can enjoy, and a select few do it for financial gain. When we talk about "Historical Revisionism," we are referring to the practice of re-evaluating the past in light of new information or different perspectives. The literary movement known as "revisionism" sought to provide new readings of canonical works. Revisionism as a genre has gained momentum in today's time and this trend is seen all around the world. Indian authors attempt to re-examine their civilisational stories in English is not new as revisionism is celebrated age-old practise in India as stories of the soil always manifested in diverse ways by different authors or narrators.

Contemporary writers have reviewed native Indian culture and community with a fresh viewpoint and provide a rational clarification of conventional social moral values. This rational revisioning or retelling of ancient legends and myths soothed the soul of new generation and solves their quest related to their cultural past. Ramayana and Mahabharat, famous epic of India is full of stories that attract these writers, so they retell the m with breathtaking imagination. Famous novelist and literary critic Meenakshi Mukherji rightly remarks about this tradition-over the centuries, most major languages of India have rewritten (it is important to remember that these are not translations) the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to fit their regional ethos and available metrical repertoire. Even to the novelists of our time, exposed as they are to global influences, reinterpretations of episodes from these epics continue to be a creative challenge. Thus, the epics in India do not belong to the past alone- they are also part of the contemporary consciousness….

(The Novel 603)

The Ramayana is one of the most important texts in Indian literature, having influenced the cultural and religious identity of millions of people. Its author, Valmiki, is regarded as one of the greatest poets in Sanskrit literature. Over the centuries, the Ramayana has been retold in various forms, including poetry, drama, and prose. A fresh breed of such writers known as Amish Tripathi, Ashok K Banker, Ashwin Sanghi, Devdutt Patnaik, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, Anand Neelakantan, Anuja Chandramouli, Koral Das Gupta, Amrita Patil, and many others are experimenting with the myths and legends of ancient India combining them with other styles of fiction. As a result of their work, these authors became successful in popularising and revitalising the Indian heritage and customs among young Indian readers who had previously disregarded their rich ancient culture in favour of a more westernised view of...
life. Ashok K Banker is an Indian author and screenwriter who has drafted several books based on Indian mythology and history. His most notable work is his retelling of Ramayana, which comprises of eight books, collectively known as the "Ramayana series." Banker's series offers a contemporary and fresh perspective on Ramayana, reimagining the characters and events in a way that resonates with modern readers. In particular, Banker's "Sons of Sita" focuses on the sons of Rama and Sita, Luv and Kush, and their journey to find their true identity. This work offers a revisionist take on the Ramayana, reimagining the characters and events through the lens of modern literary conventions.

Methodology:
This study employs a qualitative methodology, focusing on textual analysis of Banker's "Sons of Sita." The paper begins by examining the themes and motifs present in Banker's work, considering how he reimagines the characters and events of Ramayana. The paper then compares Banker's work to Valmiki's original epic, highlighting the differences and similarities between the two. Finally, the paper considers the implications of revisionist literature, particularly when dealing with religious and cultural texts.

Analysis:
Banker's "Sons of Sita" reimagines the last pages of Ur-Ramayana in several significant ways. His work focuses on the sons of Rama and Sita, Luv and Kush, rather than Rama himself. This shift in focus allows Banker to explore themes of identity, belonging, and inheritance. In particular, Banker's work highlights the tensions between Luv and Kusa, who struggle to reconcile their different upbringings and identities. Additionally, Banker's work offers a feminist perspective on Ramayana, portraying Sita as a strong and independent woman who defies patriarchal norms.

Ashok K Banker’s last novel of the series Sons of Sita is based on later incidents of Uttarkanda. The story of the novel starts after the banishment of Sita. She now spends her days in Maharishi Valmiki’s remote forest ashram, where she trains her sons in the arts of war, transforming them into unparalleled warriors of remarkable wit and excellence. Banker in this novel presented that superpower Ayodhya has a powerful political group called republicans. Now, Rama is referred to as an emperor and has taken advice from a group of people who manipulated dharma for their vested interests. Novel starts a decade after Rama banished his wife, Sita. Maharishi Valmiki provides shelter to Sita in his ashrama where she gives birth to two sons named Luv and Kush. Luv and Kush are now ten years old and get their education by their mother and her assistance as well as friend Nakhu. Once they robbed Ayodhyaan wagon and ran deep into the forest before the reinforcement of wagon guards came. Here Nakhu met them and scolded them for their impunity. She told them law of civilised world and called their action robbery. Luv and Kush did not consider his mistake as this area had draught and other famine which affected the livelihood of the people for the past several years, and this is their right to claim what belongs to them and this is not a robbery. Now Nakhu told them in an angry voice -

Ayodhya makes the laws in this part of the world. By Indra’s hundred eyes, what am I saying? Ayodhya is the law. This jungle may seem depopulated and a long way from any city, but it’s still part of the Kosala nation. And by law, it falls under Ayodhyaan jurisdiction and governance. That governance includes the right to tax the people as required from time to time. So don’t call what they take unlawful. (Sons of Sita 29 hereafter SOS)

After this Nakhu watched the robbed gramas or wagons and became nervous and moved to Sita immediately. Hearing all events, Sita scolded Luv and Kush and said, that they did not know about the consequences of their doings. Hearing this Kush bows down his head to Sita, and said that they thought they were just taking back what was people’s. Sita understood them and thought about amendment. It meant taking this wagon back to Ayodhya and delivering it to them with a full apology for their actions. Hearing this, Luv and Kush stared at their mother and asked to keep all three wagons. Hearing this Sita went behind the wagon and snatched the cover. She said to her children - This is a war wagon. The treasure within the chests – for it was nothing less than a treasure – glittered, gleamed, and shone as the gold ingots, silver bars, coins, gems, and other precious items caught and refracted the light from Nakhu’s torch. Tribute collected to finance Ayodhya’s next war. (SOS 43)

Banker here gave the deviated description of Ayodhya as the concept of Ram Rajya is distorted, and ministers of Ayodhya have a war mongering attitude now. Banker presented changed Ayodhya through the eyes of captain Bejoo as he sees that now there is a wall between common citizens and royal avenues. Everything is separated from common to governance. The trade gates of Ayodhya are now like a forbidden military enclosure. Bejoo is happy as a soldier, but as an Ayodhyaan and Arya citizen, he feels more pity and sadness at what had been lost in order to gain this superior level of protection. In the name of security and defence, all beauty of freedom was compromised. When Bejoo reached the lockhouse, he found that Pradhan Mantri Jabali was already waiting for him at the entrance of the lockhouse. Before he speaks anything about gramas, and ambush in the woods, Jabali speaks before and told him that he knows everything and soon offenders will be crushed by iron fist. Hearing this, Bejoo suggested Pradhan Mantri that it could be solved by diplomatic action and this process would avoid needless bloodshed. Jabali looked towards Bejoo and told him that
it is imperative as a kingdom is ruled by force, not by words. Jabali also told Bejoo that he had received a full report of ambush in woods-

The so-called Maharishi Valmiki’s colony of brigands and rogues masquerading as sadhus. They are behind the theft of the Maharaja’s war wagon and this time; they have gone too far. They must be entirely wiped out, down to the last man, woman, and child, and I shall see to it that it is done.

(SOS 50)

Shatrughan came to Ayodhya after years as he is the king of Mathura. He wanted to meet Samrat Rama, so he told his desire to Lakshman. Then Lakshman told him to wait as someone is in sabha hall with the Samrat and He cannot be disturbed until the conference is over. Shatrughan smiled and thought that there was a time when sabha hall was open for everyone and discussions were open for all, even for a street sweeper also. Lakshman tells him that time has changed, so Ayodhya has also changed. Shatrughan moved back with his entourage and met with his mother and queen Kausalya. Queen Kausalya told him that Ayodhya was preparing to go to war with the entire world and no one knows the reason behind this. After this, Shatrughan meets with Bharat, who also came from his kingdom Gandhara. Bharat told Shatrughan that he established two cities Puskalavati and Takhashila. Former got his name from his daughter Puskala and second is named after his son Taksha. Shatrughan then told Bharat about the preparation of a large-scale war that is going to be started by Ayodhya. Bharat says that they must find out the political ambition of Rama. Then Shatrughan reminded Bharat that they did not belong to Ayodhya any more so no one is going to tell them about military affairs as it is a treason for foreigners to talk about military. News about the meeting of Bharat and Shatrughan soon reached the ear of minister Jabali. The war council instantly summoned Bharat and Shatrughan. In the war council they faced the charges of conspiracy against Ayodhya. Hearing this, Bharat became frowned and asked Rama about his previous loyalty, but Rama said, that past does not matter here as he is charged here with the present transgression against the state. Bharat arrogantly said that he had the right to know about the allegations against him. Then Bhadra member of the war council, told Bharat and Shatrughan that Rajya sabha has already heard the charges against them and found charges meritorious. Now the sabha is discussing the danda which is imposed on you two. When Bharat talked about the law of Ayodhya than Rama said, “he is not facing a Lok sabha. This is a Rajya sabha, hence there is no requirement for an open public court. We are in a time of war, now everything is operated under the rule of martial law so all decisions and judgements are summary and immediate and not subject to the usual process of public hearings and trials.” (SOS 94) Bharat’s heart sank as he realized what this meant and what Rama was leading up to. Seeing the stunned Bharat, Rama announced that Bharat and Shatrughan transgressed against the state of Kosala and the throne of Ayodhya, so they both are stripped of their kingships and all other possessions and placed under house arrest within the bounds of the Royal Palace with immediate effect and for an indefinite period of time. At that moment Kausalya reached there and asked Rama to leave Bharat and Shatrughan. Rama made no response and ministers also opposed any decision outside the war council. But Kausalya continued her speech and reminds Rama, his father Dasaratha’s pedigree and asked for forgiveness. Rama first did not heed any attention to Kausalya’s words, however, after some minutes he ordered Jabali to release them. After this Rama calls everyone in a tower called Seer’s eye, Bharat, Shatrughan, and all queen mothers are invited. When they reached there, they saw that Rama was present here with his war council and advisers. Far below, a mighty army assembled. Rama denoting to army, said to everyone-Behold, the greatest army ever raised in the history of the world. A force of mortals and Vanars together comprising greater numbers than all the other armies of the Arya nations combined. With this great force we shall perform the Ashwamedha yagna and go forth today to challenge all the nations of the known world.

(SOS 105)

Queens Kausalya and Sumitra watched the navigation of army and talked with each other about the misuse of power and rituals. Kausalya says that the Ashwamedha yajna in itself is a ritual and every Arya king undertakes it from time to time. It is a ceremonial and symbolic act. Dasaratha conducted it once and she, as his Queen at the time, performed the yajna. But now, it is no ceremony or ritual as it is converted in a war campaign which is carefully planned to spread Ayodhyan rule from one corner of the sub-continent to the other. She also told Sumitra that Rama is under the influence of his advisers who like to call themselves republicans-

Yes, Republicans. A fine ideal. A lofty purpose. But often a murderer will pretend to be a patriot in order to justify his killing spree. Some thieves will proclaim themselves levellers of wealth and friends of the poor to gain sympathy for his cause. So also, a war-thirsty group of tyrants who seek only their own aggrandization and self-benefit will pose as benefactors of society in order to go about their selfish business with the full approval and consent of the very people they exploit and abuse. Republicans. Supporters of democracy. Peacemakers. They come in many guises but always with the same purpose: To enrich, empower and aggrandize the few at the expense of the many.

(SOS 130)

Ashwamedha stallion is left for the conquest and Lakshman with all other warriors trails it silently. Some questions are consistently running in his mind about Rama and his campaign of conquest. He thinks about the distortion of ritual as Ashwamedha has no meaning without the consort that means Sita as Lakshman knew the fact that Rama has no other wives or concubines. The purohits had urged Rama not to undertake the yagna as it would be inauspicious to do so in...
the Queen’s absence. One or two bold pundits had even suggested timidly and with appropriate deference that perhaps Rama might choose to take a wife in order to fulfil the ritual requirement. After all, *Arya* kings were required by *dharma* to produce progeny, and Rama had none. Rama listened none and ordered a statue of Sita. The statue had been used as a stand-in for the ritual, despite the disapproving protests of the purohits, and that statue followed close behind the unbridled horse at the head of the great procession winding its way out of Ayodhya.

Nakhudi came to Ayodhya and met with Bejoo and told him everything. Bejoo with Nakhudi travelled to dense forest to take grama back as it is important to refrain Ayodhyan forces from the poor villagers. But a violent incident is already taken place in Valmiki *ashram* as Jabali sends mercenaries for punishment. In the *ashram*, a meeting is taking with survived people. Maharishi Valmiki talked about ahimsa and gave pravachan on Vedic scripters in this difficult time. Sita listened the *pravachan*, then told Maharishi that Someone in Ayodhya had ordered their extermination. Valmiki considered it terrible and denied for hasty assumptions as Rama never acts against *dharma*, so he is sure that it is not done by Rama’s order. Sita is not happy with the interpretation of *dharma* as she sees enough violence in the name of *dharma*, so she said-

They were monsters driven by a misguided madness, a fanatical devotion to an aberrant sense of *dharma*, soldiers who had the power to mete out life and death and were abusing it to slaughter rather than save, to murder rather than protect. They were exterminators driven by a distorted interpretation of *dharma*. *Dharmanators*, to coin a phrase. And there was no arguing or speaking to such *dharmanators*. They could only be stopped in one way: by killing them as quickly and efficiently as possible.

(SOS 189)

Sita further said they must act as there is no other way to survive, and asked his blessings so she can ensure the survival of the inhabitants of this *ashram*. Luv and Kush thought Rama Chandra was not entirely the great exalted being that he was often made out to be. The long epic poem written by Maharishi is a quite unflattering version of the *itihasa* of the great King of Ayodhya’s life and adventures. Though they recited it daily as per instructions of Maharishi but now it became ironic for them. They realised that Rama’s story was full of violence, so their belief was completely broken. Seeing them irritated Valmiki said with benign tone-

A life must speak for itself, on its own terms, in its own words. It is a mistake to listen to interpretations and versions of any fact and assume that they too are fact. Only truth itself is truth. Anything that refers, references, or even repeats it is but a version. For no repetition can be perfect and exact in every detail. A man is a man. A portrait of a man, no matter how accurate, is not the man himself, merely a portrait. Similarly, a story of a man is not the man himself, merely a story. My *Ramayana* is already a version of *itihasa*, not *itihasa* itself. To know that truth, one would have to live and observe those events oneself—not merely as a bystander, or even a participant—but as Rama himself! Until you can walk in his *paduka* and be Rama, you can never truly know what he was and why he did what he did, you can only offer individual interpretations—and when it comes to interpretations, each one is as valid as any other. So be careful of judging him. For by doing so, you are judging only an ephemeron.

(SOS 227)

Now Luv and Kush suspended their judgment on Rama due to lack of right and better explanation. After this they came outside the *ashram* and found a beautiful stallion. They captured stallion immediately. When Sita and Nakhudi saw them with a horse became terrified as the horse was related to the *Ashwamedha* ritual. Sita shouted on them and ordered to leave it. Before boys left the horse, Bharat reached there and saw two women and two boys with horse. Bharat realised that horse is calm and not captivated against his will, so the capture is not against the *Ashwamedha* *Yagna* rule. When Bharat closely saw boys and women, he became surprised to see them and identified them his sister-in-law Sita and her close aid Nakhudi. Now he was sure that boys who stood with them were definitely the sons of Sita. Before Bharat made any decision, Aarohan the Captain of Rama’s army came forward and warned them to leave the horse and asked them to surrender to the emperor. Hearing this, Luv said that if the emperor Rama wanted his horse back, he should come to get it, but he should first you pay the price for the slaughter of innocent people in Valmiki *ashram* and lost the arrow towards the captain. But he was cautious, so he instantly raised his sword and deflected the arrow. After this, captain commanded the force to attack. Seeing this Sita commanded them to run into the forest so boys went deep in forest with the horse. Captain ordered the company to follow the horse but they did not move as Bejoo and his PF as well as Sita and Nakhudi came forward with the weapon pointing against the king’s guards. On the other side, Lakshman and Bharat came forward and advised captain not to take any action. Then Captain said, he was ordered by the king and they were obstructing him. Hearing this Lakshman said that he is also the emperor’s brother and protector of the horse. After this captain said that he saw how easily did they let the horse stolen by those vagabond boys. Now Lakshman said that boys did not intend to steal the horse but he and his men provoked them. At last, the captain said, that Lakshman’s action is against Ayodhya as he did not follow the *dharma*. Hearing this Lakshman said that he wanted to clear certain things and asked Sita, about the boys. When Sita admitted that boys were her sons, Lakshman felt relaxed and further asked that did her boys want to challenge the emperor as they stole the Ashwamedha horse? Sita replied bitterly- my sons did not lure, capture, or steal that horse. They have no interest in challenging the authority of your emperor. They were merely trying to get away from that man and his gang of murderers,” she stabbed a finger at Aarohan and
the rest of the king’s guard behind him, “who, by the way, were sent by your precious emperor this morning to find and massacre all peaceful people dwelling in these woods, including but not limited to your Brahmins, rishis, sadhus, sadhinis of Valmiki Ashram as well!

(SOS 249)

Lakshman was astonished and asked the captain about this incident. Then captain said that these women were whores and outlaws. Every Arya knows that the South woods are fit only for asuras and outcastes. No decent Arya people reside here, so what he did is under the authority of Samrat Rama Chandra of Ayodhya. Lakshman immediately took charge from the captain and ordered him to return to his superior officer and report to him until further notice. Captain Aarohan said that he would return with a mighty force and moved. Lakshman went behind the horse, and Aarohan reached back to Rama. Jabali interpreted things differently and proved that there was a conspiracy against the emperor. After this, Rama ordered to bring horse back at any rate, no matter what it cost. Luv and Kush meet with Sita and ask her what to do further. Sita says to them, “There comes a day in every child’s life when he or she must become a man or woman. As a Kshatriya child, that is the day when they become a Kshatriya.” (SOS 278) They bowed to her and went for battle. Sita watched them wondering if she would ever see them alive again. Lakshman, Bharat, and Shatrughan met and talked about the further steps from Rama’s side. There is no hope as Jabali is filling his car with venom. But suddenly, Lakshman says that Rama will definitely hear their sons, and this madness will stop. He will try to bring Rama here alone without Jabali and others and hopes for family reunion. Lakshman goes to bring Rama for peace, but here on ashram’s outskirts, Captain Aarohan reaches with a new army to attack the boys. Luv and Kush took shelter near a r queen with inheritors. But for Sita, things are not still...
Rama, King of Dharma, can pass this final Agni-pariksha. The test of trust. Prove that you believe without question in my so-called purity and need no superstitious ritual to confirm it for the naysayers and doubters of the world.

(SOS 341)

Hearing this, Rama became silent and Sita waits for his response. finally, Rama said he could not do this. At that moment Sita raised her head and cried for her mother earth. The earth heaved and cracked beneath Sita’s feet. Other ashrmites tried to save her but she refused. Rama asked again for forgiveness and said, he knew that he transgressed against her. He came here for amends, hearing this Sita said-

You failed utterly. That is why you will always be a broken god. Revered and worshipped, honored, and admired, but also doubted and despised. Each time someone speaks of your great works and exploits, another will remind them of your banishment of your wife and ask what god would do such a thing and question your divinity? Today you had a chance to answer them once and for all, to silence those doubters, and you failed yet again. Now, for as long as your memory shall live, you shall be adored as a Deva yet doubted as a man.

(SOS 345)

Sita entered into earth and Rama came to Ayodhya and decided to take samadhi. Rama wanted to issue some writ or diktat, forbidding everyone from doing as he did, but it would be pointless once he had gone. He knew only one thing that there was nothing left in this world for him to live for. In the water, a vortal opened and took all four brothers into Brahm state. Here Rama emerged naked like a fresh born child and was welcomed by Brahma by his real name Vishnu. At that moment Vishnu thought about his identity as Rama and his brothers and his other past avatars and amass as he still carried the vestiges of memories, fragments of half-remembered sensations and experiences. He then asks Brahma about the people of Ayodhya who chose to take samadhi with Rama and his brothers as they proved themselves worthy beyond the shadow of a doubt. Brahma assured Rama that they all live in peace in a realm known as santanika, second only to his own Brahma -Loka. Vishnu nodded and felt fresh. Then he reminds himself of the Vanars and rksaas and asks Brahma about them. Lord Brahma replied-

Of course. The Vanars and bears too. I created them myself, you knew! Some of my best work. I am very fond of those furry friends. They shall go back to their original forms as Nagas and yaksas, for those are the beings I transformed in to furry warriors. I have left a few of their ilk on the mortal realm, but those are deprived of the power of speech or the superior intellect of the Vanars and rksaas, they shall be mere brute beasts, acting as reminders of the age of Rama Chandra of Ayodhya. The Age of………

(SOS 357)

After this, Vishnu said, that he must go home as he had passed a long absence. Garuda presented himself in front of him, and he went to Vaikuntha.

Here Banker narrated the events after the exile of Sita. He narrated a modern tale and used power politics to describe the events after the coronation of Rama. The ambitions of Rama’s ministers are all time high and they want to control everything. Here Senate and its members became much powerful, and they like to call themselves republicans. Every narration deal with the corruption in the system and presents the anti-thesis of Ram-rajya and advocates for the Janak-rajya. Here Rama is portrayed as a villain who is completely manipulated by his ministers. The Ashwamedha yagna was never a military conquest but Banker presented it as military conquest. In Valmiki Ramayana, when Rama proposed for Rajyoga yagna for conquest, Bharat rejected the proposal as it was against humanity. After this, Lakshman proposed the Ashwamedha Yagna, which was a ritual of peace. In a twisted narration, when Bharat wanted to stop the military conquest in the guise of Ashwamedha yagna, then he was declared a traitor and faced house arrest. Sita consistently questions the Power, and gender stereotypes and as consequences of social stigma she revolted against the decision of Rama and chose self-immolation The epic scale storytelling based on Ramayana, reached into a tragic climax as Rama who faced his whole life many trials and hardships, decided to give up his life.

Thus, the analysis of the novel of Banker’s Ramayana series shows that there is always something to say in every time. These revisioning are magnificent in narration and with his breathtaking narration author tries to fill the gaps of parent epic. Here author tries to give some answers by appropriating the events in accordance with the psyche of the characters. As a modern writer, he does not go totally with fabulous narration and successfully separates the myth from reality. He tries to rationalise certain situations, which he thinks should not be read as a simple narration. That is why, he presents them with more interest and embellishes them with the language and scientific outcomes, just to come to par with modern sense and attitude.

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