

Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly
Journal of Literature and Cultural
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614

E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

**Vol. 1, Issue 4, September
2026**

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A Literariness.org Project

DOI: 10.67147 literariness.v1i4.068

Reclaiming the Lived Body: A Merleau-Pontian Reading of Sita in *The Valmiki Ramayana* and *The Forest of Enchantments*

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Abstract: What happens when the woman who has been looked at begins to look through her own body? This article explores the transformation of Sita's corporeal identity from a body constituted by external perception to a body that perceives, experiences, and creates meaning. While scholarship on twenty-first-century women-oriented mythological retellings has extensively examined agency, resistance, subjectivity, and feminist revisionism, the role of embodiment in the formation of feminine consciousness remains comparatively underexplored. Through a comparative reading of Sita in Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, this study foregrounds the body as a crucial site of identity formation. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, particularly his concepts of the lived body, embodied intentionality, and the primacy of perception, the article examines how Sita's corporeality is differently imagined across the two narratives. In Valmiki's epic, her body is predominantly rendered through external descriptions of beauty, auspiciousness, chastity, vulnerability, and marital honour, making it a site upon which cultural ideals of femininity are inscribed and evaluated. Divakaruni's retelling, however, relocates corporeal meaning within Sita's own experiential consciousness. Her encounters with the sacred bow, martial training, tactile relationship with nature, bodily desires, pain, fear, and resistance reveal the body as a medium of perception, knowledge, agency, and self-understanding. The article argues that Divakaruni's intervention lies not merely in giving Sita a voice but in reconfiguring the body from an object of representation into a subject of experience. It consequently proposes embodiment as a significant, yet insufficiently explored, dimension of feminine consciousness in contemporary mythological rewriting.

Keywords: *Sita; Embodied Perception; Merleau-Ponty; Lived Body; Feminine Consciousness; Mythological Retelling; The Forest of Enchantments*

The twenty-first century women-oriented retellings is a flourishing field in the reinterpretation of canonical narratives through feminist perspectives. The critical studies conducted in this area are often based on women's agency, subjectivity, resistance and the recovery of subjugated female voices from the patriarchal narrative traditions. While such studies have enriched the discursive dimensions of female identity, the representation of women's body cannot be left unexplored. This study attempts to highlight the significance of body in framing a woman's identity within literary and cultural traditions and also to analyse how the body of a woman has been reframed in the contemporary mythological retellings through the analysis of Sita in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* and in the epic *Ramayana* of Valmiki.

In order to understand the politics of body, it is important to look at the traditional usage of it. Classical texts projects body not just as a mere biological entity but as a primary site upon which social and cultural meanings are inscribed. In the epic *Ramayana* of Valmiki, Sita's identity is confined largely to her physical form. Even the introduction of Sita in the epic is highly objectified. She is introduced as a *Viryashulka*, which means, she is introduced as an offer prize to the suitor who lifts the divine bow. Besides, she is always addressed glorifying her body parts such as, "one with the beautiful face!", "one with thighs like an elephant's trunk", "one with excellent hips!" and so on (Debroy, *Valmiki Ramayana I*, 211). Addressing a woman in this manner was depicted as a way of praising and respecting them. In this sense, Valmiki tries to inculcate the patriarchal ideals of feminine body through his writings.

Bryan Turner in *The Body and Society* affirms that "[f]rom a sociological point of view, 'the body' is socially constructed and socially experienced" (52). In the epic, Sita herself insists that her body possesses no such inauspicious signs which are often seen on the bodies of widows and women of misfortunes. Her self-analysis of her body, stating, "My hair is extremely fine, black and smooth. My eyebrows do not touch each other. My hips are round and possess no hair. There are no gaps between my teeth" and so on manifests her internalisation of the male ideals of female body (Debroy 3: 85). Accordingly, Sita's body in the epic narration is repeatedly mediated, through which her purity, virtue and social worth are evaluated. Her corporeality, hence became a symbol of man's honour and social morality for centuries. Therefore, women's bodily subjectivity is constructed based on the cultural expectation of the society.

Women's identity is, therefore often overshadowed by the representation of their bodily appearance in the traditional texts over their bodily agency and embodied experience. In *The Forest of Enchantments* Divakaruni makes it a point to reclaim women's bodily subjectivity through Sita's character by reconfiguring her identity beyond patriarchal paradigms. The paper studies the identity

portrayal of Sita through the lived experience of her body drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodied perception.

According to Merleau-Ponty, "The body is our general medium for having a world" (Merleau-Ponty 169). Our body is not a passive object. It is the primary way through which we encounter the world. Let us examine how Divakaruni represents Sita's body in a social and cultural space. Initially, Sita's identity as a gift of God is based on the material representation of her body when she was miraculously discovered from the earth "swaddled in a gold fabric finer than anything . . . Mithila weavers could produce, with strange and intricate designs the likes of which no one had ever seen" which manifests the social construction of her infant body (Divakaruni 6). But Sita grows up as a woman who challenges the social construction of female body. Generally, women give more importance to their physical appearance as they have internalised the patriarchal ideology that the worth of a woman is based on their bodily appeal. However, Sita in Divakaruni's is not concerned of her external beauty. Her statements like, "I didn't mind being out of fashion," and "fashion wasn't as important to me as to Urmila" challenge the cultural imposition of a woman's body to be dolled up with jewellery (Divakaruni 64, 65). While leaving to the forest with Ram her action of donating all her ornaments to the poor in the kingdom emphasises her indifference towards the material happiness.

In *The Forest of Enchantments* Sita has a great passion to learn martial arts and she dreams of becoming a warrior. She secretly managed to learn martial lessons from the women of the outskirts arranged by her mother, Sunaina. Sita's body here is not a passive carrier of the constructed ideals but actively reinforces the bodily agency of a woman. The novel portrays her as a physically strong woman. In terms of Merleau-Ponty, her skill in martial arts is a motor skill which requires both bodily perception and movement. In *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception* Komarine Romdenh-Romluc states, "Merleau-Ponty claims that motor skill constitutes a practical form of knowledge" that are "exercised in perception and action" (84). Before engaging in a duel with Kaikeyi, Sita tried to judge her skill and style contemplating, "Kaikeyi was older, and she'd already practiced today. Thus she might tire easier. But she was more experienced, and because of the sword, her reach was much longer than mine" (Divakaruni 81). Here, her perception gave her an understanding of the situation and helped her to act accordingly. Sita's practical understanding of her surrounding through perception is a way of understanding her own bodily capacities. Her description, "I leaped high in the air with a yell and kicked, aiming for her sword hand . . . I grabbed her from behind in a strangle-hold and kept my arm tight around her neck until she raised her hands to signify that she'd given up" (82), illustrates her knowledge of her bodily capacities and configuration.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the body is simultaneously the perceived and the perceiving. Sita explains how she can intentionally manipulate her own body. When Shurpanaka came to attack her in Lanka after the defeat of Ravana, Sita employed her self-defence techniques. She asserts, “I let my body go slack and heavy, like a sack of potatoes, and as Shurpanaka braced herself to accommodate the sudden weight shift, I twisted my head sideways, slipping out of her clutches” (Divakaruni 228). Sita’s conscious shifting of her bodily weight and twisting of her head sideways to create an opportunity to escape is an example of bodily intentionality of Merleau-Ponty. This illustrates the practical knowledge of the body. Also, her Statement, “I ignored the burning pain in my arm and shoulder and aimed a sudden kick, with all my strength, at the back of my captor’s knees” which is the perfect example of the dual status of the body as both object and subject. (Divakaruni 167). The burning pain in the arm and shoulder depicts Sita’s body as an object of experience. Here, the body is something that Sita possess. Whereas the immediate kick as a response to the pain shifts the body into a subject of action. By acting through the body, she expresses her resistance and agency. This shows that body is not a mere object but also a subject of perception and action. Sita’s body is a medium through which she can act upon the world. In this way the body that suffers become the same body that acts. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls the “double sensation” of the body which is capable of “seeing” and “suffering” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 106, 109). Her kick at the back of the captor’s knees shows her motor intentionality where the body sees the possibility of action and immediately organizes itself towards it. In this manner Divakaruni has reconfigured the body of Sita from an object subjected to control to a subject with embodied perception and resistance.

In *The Valmiki Ramayana*, the body is a site of patriarchal conditioning. Sita’s accompanying of Ram to the forest is her own choice and is not imposed upon her forcefully. This choice of hers arises from her internalised cultural discourse of femininity. Sita in the epic declares, “In this world, and in the next, for a woman, the husband is alone the refuge – not a father, not a son, not her own self, not a mother and not a friend” which emphasises Sita’s rejection of her autonomous subjectivity by explicitly displacing ‘her own self’ (Debroy 1: 206). She identifies herself only as Ram’s wife that her existence is defined only in relation to her husband. Sita affirms that “[o] Raghava! If you leave for the impenetrable forest today, I will proceed in front of you In every situation, the shadow of a husband’s feet is superior to being on the top of a palace or travelling in a celestial vehicle I will serve you always, devoted to the vow of brahmacharya” (Debroy 1: 206). Her willingness to follow Ram and serve him in the forest can be understood as her embodied internalisation of the patriarchal ideals of femininity.

In the novel, Sita's awareness of her own bodily capacities builds up her confidence. Sita was not afraid when the beautifully appeared Shurpanaka came to attack her transforming into a fearful monster. Instead, she was prepared to defend herself from the attack. In the same way, she sees herself as a support to Ram in the hardship he is going to encounter in the forest. Sita says, "[N]ot all women are weak and helpless like you think. For all you know, I might be of help to you" (Divakaruni 111). Sita's choice of following Ram to the forest is not because she sees him as her sole 'refuge' as in the epic. On the other hand, her choice is solely based on her knowledge of her own bodily capacity that she firmly believes that she is capable of helping him. Even though the action is same, the depiction of Sita's embodied consciousness is different in both the narratives.

Romdenh-Romluc, following Merleau-Ponty, writes, "One is able to unthinkingly adopt one's skills to physically dissimilar environments that share a common form" (102). In *The Forest of Enchantments* Sita's using of self-defence techniques against Ravana illustrates the practical knowledge of the body to employ its skill in dissimilar situations in a suitable manner. Sita remembers, "I was ready to leap on him and gouge out his eyes in an instant, as I'd been taught. Sometimes the move made an opponent fall face forward – in which case I was prepared to bring down the side of my arm like a blade on the back of his neck, paralysing him" which illustrates the body schema of Sita (Divakaruni 167). Her martial skills is not merely a knowledge she attained but is incorporated as a bodily capacity to understand the situation to respond accordingly. Her anticipation of the opponent's changing position indicates her body's capacity to adapt its movement to the possibilities presented by a situation. Hence, Sita sees herself as capable through the capacity of her body to act.

In the novel, when Sita was attacked by Shurpanaka in Lanka she invokes the power to reckon with the possible as she proclaims that "[f]rom the depths of memory, I called up the martial moves I'd been practising, mentally, all these months" (Divakaruni 228). This means that she performs her martial lessons mentally. Merleau-Ponty states, "The normal person *reckons with* the possible, which thus, without shifting from its position as a possibility, acquires a sort of actuality (*Phenomenology of Perception* 125). In this way Sita was able to access her martial skills even the situation is not present. By mentally practising Sita brings in what Merleau-Ponty calls a "pseudo-presence" of the situation in demand for the action (396).

Valmiki asserted that the knowledge about Ravana, his lineage and his strength, distressed Sita "and her body trembled, like a delicate plantain tree swaying in the wind" (Debroy 2: 101). Understanding Merleau-Ponty, like perception and action, emotions also have motor-intentionality. Emotion is not an inner item or internal mental states, it is lived through the body and is expressed through the body. In this sense, Sita's fear of seeing and knowing Ravana's whereabouts instilled a fear

in her which is made visible through her body. Ravana's power is represented through the reaction of Sita's body. Here, the female body becomes a site upon which the male dominance is narratively constructed.

The body also plays a significant role in building up Sita's self-confidence in *The Forest of Enchantments*. The body is not merely an object through which one experiences the world; it is the medium through which one acquires a practical understanding of oneself and one's surroundings. Sita's confidence that she could rule Mithila does not arise from abstract self-belief alone. Her understanding of governance is acquired through embodied participation in her social world. She observes her father in court, watches how he exercises judgment, and listens to her mother's counsel in the private chambers. These are perceptual experiences through which knowledge becomes incorporated into her understanding of herself. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, perception is not simply the reception of information. To perceive is already to engage with and acquire a meaningful relation to the world. Thus, Sita does not merely see her father ruling Mithila; she learns what ruling means through her lived observation of him. Similarly, listening to her mother's advice gives her access to another mode of political and ethical understanding.

Also, Sita's ability to heal plants and humans and her capability to know the healing properties of plants by simply touching it are all her embodied capacity. It is through her body that she engages and experience the world outside. Here, knowledge is not obtained through detached intellectual analysis. Her body itself becomes a mode of knowing. For Merleau-Ponty, the body has its own pre-reflective intelligence. The body can know how to move, respond, perceive, and engage with things without converting every experience into explicit intellectual reasoning. Therefore, Sita's healing capacity can be interpreted as embodied knowledge.

Sita's relationship with the sacred bow also marks a significant transformation in the construction of her identity. In *The Valmiki Ramayana*, the bow functions within the marriage episode as the test that determines who is worthy of marrying Sita. Sita's marriage is consequently organized around a male contest in which her body and marital identity are implicated in a system of selection. The emphasis falls on the man who can perform the feat. In Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, however, the narrative relationship between Sita, the bow, and marriage is reconfigured. The bow is not simply a test of male strength; it is already part of Sita's embodied history. She has touched it, trained with it, developed her strength through it, and established an intimate relationship with it. Consequently, the person who seeks Sita must encounter the very object through which Sita herself has developed power.

Divakaruni's portrayal of the extraordinary bond between Sita and the bow transforms the conventional subject-object model. Here, the bow becomes something she experiences through her body. Sita says, "Under my palm it thrummed and grew flesh-warm, and I felt its spirit . . . I felt a thrumming energy passing from it into my body" (Divakaruni 25-26). Here Sita's body comes in direct contact with the bow through touch. Therefore, perception here becomes tactile and embodied. The bow acquires meaning through this embodied perception.

Sita's assertion that "[w]ithout words, the bow began to convey to me mysterious truths" manifests that she acquires knowledge through her bodily encounter with the bow and not through verbal instruction and intellectual reflection (Divakaruni 25). Body here not merely receives information from its engagement with the external world but actively participates in the production of meaning. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is not a passive reception of sensory data but a pre-reflective engagement through which the body acquires an understanding of the world. Sita recalls, "I spent many afternoons polishing the bow, telling it my thoughts, singing to it" which illustrates that for Sita the bow is not an inert weapon, it becomes a part of her lived bodily experience (26). In this sense, the bow is perceived in relation to the body's possibilities for action.

In *The Body in Culture, Technology and Society* Chris Shilling reflects on Merleau-Ponty stating that "humans are lived, intentional body subjects, always practically oriented towards the world, assumes that individuals gradually become integrated, coordinated and aware of their capacities and limitations" (55). Beyond training Sita in attaining physical strength, the bow gives her practices to improve her embodied mental resilience. By creating mental images like she being put in a tiny dungeon, sinking in quicksand or stuck in a cave as the raging fire approaches are not simple mental representation or "inner items" as termed by Romdenh-Romluc, instead it is an embodied experience. The relationship of Sita with the bow illustrates Sita as a lived and intentional body subject in alliance with Merleau-Ponty. Hence, through the repeated engagement with the bow Sita developed an embodied awareness of her physical capabilities, limitations and her possibilities for action which forms a part of her identity.

One of the crucial episodes in the story is Sita's desire to own an unusual deer with a shining golden skin. The golden deer is not simply an external object that Sita wants. Her response to it reveals how desire is experienced through the lived body. Sita argues, "My need for the deer grew like an ache, an addiction. It merged with my hunger for a baby, which I'd carefully kept secret from Ram" (Divakaruni 156). The word 'ache' is crucial. Sita does not describe her desire as merely a rational decision or intellectual preference. She experiences it somatically. Ache is a language we use for the body. Therefore, her desire is not something that is in the mind, instead it is something she felt in the

body. As Ponty argues that perception has an affective dimension. Merleau-Ponty states, “[P]erception is . . . already charged with a *meaning*” (*Phenomenology* 4). This is important because Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea that perception begins with neutral sensory data that the mind subsequently interprets. We perceive things as meaningful from the outset. Sita sees the deer not just as an external animal but as something deeply connected to her and emotionally compelling. Her statement that “[i]t merged with my hunger for a baby” expresses Sita’s desire for motherhood which has been suppressed or denied. Therefore, here the deer becomes a material object through which an otherwise unexpressed desire becomes perceptible to Sita herself. In this sense body is not projected only as a medium through which Sita resists the social and cultural impositions but it is also presented as a ground of her entire experience.

In *The Valmiki Ramayana*, seeing Sita for the first time, Hanuman describes her as:

She was tormented by grief and her radiance had faded. Her hair was covered in filth She was without her excellent ornament, the ornament of her husband's love Her form was suffering, like that of a veena that is not touched Her limbs were smeared in filth and her body was devoid of ornaments. She was like a lotus in mud The beautiful one was attired in a wrinkled and dirty garment There were marks of distress on the queen’s face. (Debroy 2: 361)

This manifests Sita’s condition in Lanka where her body becomes a site through which suffering is represented. Also, his description involves a striking contradiction between the external appearance and the internalised feminine beauty. His statements like “[s]he shone, but did not shine” and “she was radiant even without her ornaments” which demonstrates that even though her external beauty is affected by captivity her idealized feminine qualities are maintained (Debroy 2: 361). Moreover, his noticing of Sita’s faded bodily radiance in the absence of her husband’s energy insists the ideology that the construction of a woman’s identity is based on a man and that a woman is nothing without her husband.

Besides, Sita’s body becomes the locus of moral identity in *The Valmiki Ramayana*. The statement of Rama, “[V]aidehi being touched by another is a greater misery for me than my father banishing me or the loss of my own kingdom” depicts that Rama is more concerned about Sita’s body being touched by another male than her emotional experience of captivity or the violence she has endured (Debroy 2: 5). His statement connects Sita’s body with marital possession, male honour and chastity. Hanuman’s proclamation, “Sita, the dark-eyed one, protected herself through her own good conduct” illustrates that even in her physically deteriorated state Sita maintained her chastity, purity and virtue (Debroy 2: 361). His association of her physical feature with a moral quality is also

noteworthy. Hanuman states, “Her well-proportioned limbs were full of forgiveness” signifies how woman are conditioned to reduce their idealised feminine worth to their body (361).

Shurpanaka’s description of Sita in the epic of Valmiki as “illustrious and large-eyed,” and “beautiful and slender-waisted” projects Sita’s body as a cultural text on idealised feminine beauty (Debroy 2: 71). Shurpanaka asserts, “Earlier, I have never seen a woman with her kind of beauty on this earth She is good in conduct. Her form is praiseworthy Her hips are wide. Her breasts are full and peaked Vaidehi’s face is like the full moon” demonstrates how women have internalised the patriarchal beauty norms. This description is important since it is delivered by a woman who has internalised and normalised the objectification of the female body. Also, from the description of Shurpanaka it is clear that a woman can be hailed as ideal not just by her appropriate body but also through the possession of an appropriate behaviour which is culturally conditioned (71).

Both the epic and the novel portray Sita as experiencing profound grief and fear during her year of captivity in Lanka. However, the representation of her emotions through the body in both the narratives varies greatly. Valmiki’s description of Sita’s tone as “miserable and afflicted,” shows how her grief is voiced through the body (Debroy 2: 368). Her emotions of fear and grief are repeatedly illustrated through the images such as the “trembling” body, “eyes overflowing with tears”, “wan”, “distressed” and “pale” face, “faded” garment, “terrified” and “indistinct” voice brings out her internal emotion onto the bodily surface. The comparison of her physical collapse to a “plantain tree in the storm” and the trembling of her long braid of hair to a “wriggling snake” demonstrates her body as weak and delicate and is susceptible to the external forces. Her corporeality in the epic becomes a marker of her suffering and pain and the surface on which the violence of captivity is inscribed. From a phenomenological perspective, emotions become visible through the body which is an exemplification of affective intentionality.

In the novel of Divakaruni, Sita kept her voice neutral because she does not allow her fear to control her body completely. She develops an embodied capacity to self-regulate her response. She can control her body consciously which shows her bodily agency. Sita recalls, “[I] placed my palms against” the trunk of the Ashoka tree “to draw in comfort” (Divakaruni 187). Her tactile relationship with plants and Ashoka tree manifests Ponty’s phenomenology that nothing is perceived in isolation. Everything is perceived in relation our perception of it. Mandodari’s description of Sita’s stubborn way of tilting her chin and the bravery with which she refuses Ravana emphasises that Sita’s body in Divakaruni becomes a language of resistance. Sita’s action of turning her back and closing her eyes on the approach of Ravana signifies her intentional bodily act of refusing to be an object of male gaze. Sita explains, “Nausea rose in my throat at the images his words conjured, overcoming all caution”

illustrates an embodied affect where the disgusting images in Ravana's words are physically experienced (Divakaruni 202). Her actions of spitting on the ground at Ravana's words, turning away and closing her eyes, and controlling of her voice are all gestures of embodied resistance. However, this should not give the impression that Sita is portrayed as invulnerable in Divakaruni's novel. Her statements like "My body was stiff with fear" and "I wept as silently as I could" depicts Sita's vulnerability and exhaustion (202, 205). Embodied agency does not signify the absence of fragility and vulnerability. She is vulnerable but can still resist. Sita's corporeality turns into a site of both vulnerability and resistance. The resistance need not always be verbal. Sometimes silence also takes the form of resistance. Sita proclaims that rakshasis were "tired of my silent endurance" that they admit that "[i]t was like punching the tree or kicking the ground" which exemplifies her embodied endurance (205). Thus, Divakaruni's Sita is neither a disembodied rational subject nor an invulnerable feminist heroine. She is a lived body that experiences fear, nausea, grief, and vulnerability while simultaneously perceiving possibilities for endurance and resistance. This corresponds to Merleau-Pont's conception of the body as both the site of affective experience and the medium through which the subject engages with the world.

The comparison consequently reveals a significant shift from the body as an externally constituted object to the body as a lived subject. In Valmiki's narrative, Sita's body is predominantly a body that is seen, described, evaluated, and interpreted; in Divakaruni's narrative, it becomes a body that sees, feels, perceives, acts, and understands. This shift also transforms the understanding of female consciousness. Sita's identity in *The Forest of Enchantments* is not simply imposed upon her body through cultural expectations; it gradually develops through her embodied encounters with people, objects, spaces, nature, desire, suffering, and resistance.

Thus, the contemporary reframing of Sita does more than recover a female voice from a patriarchal narrative tradition. It reconfigures the very ground from which that voice emerges. By transforming Sita from a body that is predominantly represented by others into a body that experiences and narrates itself, *The Forest of Enchantments* challenges the reduction of feminine identity to bodily appearance and reclaims embodiment as a source of subjectivity. The body, therefore, is neither merely an object of patriarchal regulation nor simply an instrument of feminist resistance; it is the lived ground through which Sita perceives the world, negotiates its constraints, develops agency, and constitutes her sense of self. The contemporary retelling consequently reframes Sita's body from a site of objectification and cultural inscription to a site of embodied consciousness and self-formation.

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