



## Thinking on Paley's Quills: Why should Sita's give *agni-pareeksha*?

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### Abstract

This paper proposes to present a brief survey of Sita's *agni-pareeksha* sequence that resolves and problematizes Sita's character as an 'uncontaminated' spouse who remains pure despite her kidnapping and (supposed assault?) by Raavana- in Nina Paley's 2009 Anime film *Sita Sings the Blues*. Paley in her film presents a globalized perspective on Sita as a betrayed and wronged woman by divesting her of the Ramayana mythos. She represents Sita's plight by paralleling it discursively with the travails of any modern divorcee woman (here she is paralleled with betrayed Nina herself).

The film is banned in India due to its 'sacrilegious' treatment of the Indian epic *Ramayana*, which is seen as a quasi-religious text. Yet Paley's secular treatment of Sita as a betrayed woman needs a re-appraisal due to its novelty and originality. It is in her version of *Ramayana*, that the text and its patriarchal tensions are de-mystified and presented with a novel humanitarian appeal. Paley constantly questions two intricate and basic social fabrics of sociological existence that appeal to us - marriage and familial bonds which are perhaps best interrogated by the comic subversion of Sita's *agni-pareeksha* in the film.

As a film based on an epic and its oral tradition it has a potential for multiplicity of narratives with constant revision and re-consideration and accompanying shifts in temporality. Paley's feminist perspective also re-reads, subtly comments and re-interprets the Indian epic, *Ramayana*. For her the text is interesting for its global relevance, instead of its fixed social, spatial, temporal, religious, political, geographical and cultural ambit of Indic interpretations.

### Sitayana: Beginning with a known story

We are all familiar with the basic story of *Ramayana*: it eulogises the story of Ram, the prince of Ayodhya and elates his several achievements, and especially his conquest of Swarnalanka

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over Raavana, the King of demons. The ‘ayan’ of *Ramayana* means praise and again in a stricter sense, it means praise of a specific or chosen subject. However, in choosing to tell it from Sita’s vantage-point and focusing on Paley’s treatment of Sita, this paper will try to present certain parameters on which the basic arguments for it are drawn upon and based on which, it will try to analyze the event and treatment of Sita’s *agnipareeksha* as the focal point of the film, *Sita Sings the Blues*. Further this paper attempts to focus on the event – *agni-pareeksha*, and its treatment in the film, and so it will be more intent on this fixed event and would investigate it as ‘the event’ that is crucial to the film.

Let me start my argument by telling a story of *Advut Ramayana* which relates why Vishnu incarnated as Rama. The story concerns the beautiful princess Srimati, daughter of the King Ambarish of Ayodhya (a forefather of Rama’s dynasty), who prayed and achieved the boon of becoming a wife to Lord Vishnu. The tale however gathers momentum as this princess has two ascetic suitors in the form of sage Narada and Parvata, both of whom seek her hand in marriage. The story becomes more complex as both the sages are staunch devotees of Vishnu and both pray to Vishnu to defeat one another for getting Srimati’s hand. Both of them persuade the Lord so that they may resemble Vishnu’s ‘*harimukh*’ when they appear before Srimati which nonetheless is granted by Vishnu. The tension however is averted by a miraculous ploy of Vishnu: *Hari* also means ‘monkey’ in Sanskrit and so both the sages appear as monkey-faced when they go to Srimati’s *Swayambar* (marriage-court where the girl chooses her husband); in the meantime, Srimati sees a very beautiful and able-bodied man standing with arrows and bow and smiling at Srimati. Seeing him standing in the middle of the sages, Srimati chooses him as her husband and vanishes with him. Parvata recognises Vishnu’s plan and vows never to marry; however, Narada while taking the same vow curses Vishnu to stray awhile in forests in search of his beloved wife, destitute and forlorn (in the same guise as he appeared at Srimati’s marriage-court) and seeking her with the aid of monkeys (in whose guise Vishnu deceived both of the sages for getting Srimati as his wife). If we agree that Vishnu’s divine kenning permitted

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him to formulate Rama and Sita's story as he vied with his devotees for Srimati's hand, then one may as well think and analyze *Ramayana* as an epic, as a stereotypical mythic tale of 'timeless mythical pattern of divine antagonism and reconciliation' because this story justifies Rama and Sita's fourteen years plight in the forests while also meting out the injustice of deception done to the two suitor-sages:

Rama, *avatara* of Visnu, born without man's intervention and Sita, *ayonija*, born without cohabitation, are united. It is the marriage of heaven and earth, of Curanos and Gaia, the primeval union which will be attacked by and assailed by the destructive powers of violence and greed. When the gigantic cosmic struggle will culminate in the defeat and transfiguration of the forces of evil, Sita will return to the earth and Rama to heaven, their union in the fleeting passage of time having, as it were, incarnated in human history the timeless mythical pattern of divine antagonism and reconciliation.<sup>1</sup>

In this single critique, we see how modern secular myth and structuralist critics have stressed on the mythic and structural aspect of the oral and rhizomatic *Ramayana* story while ignoring the human aspect of the tale. It is this site from which I propose to derail myself by stressing on the human part of the story which animates Paley's narrative intention in her film, *Sita Sings the Blues* (2009).

The second parameter follows from the first: telling the story from Sita's perspective. *Ramayana* as Sita's story, is her retelling her own story to the sage Valmiki in the latter's hermitage when she is banished by her husband on being held a suspect, of being a supposedly 'contaminated' woman- who has betrayed her husband's trust. Valmiki, it seems from this vantage-point, realized the worth of Rama's conquest over Raavana: he saw through Sita's experienced plights and found material for grafting a legendary tale that had the potential to make him eligible for fame and royal patronage. If this representational shift is really a 'calculated' move as it appears through Paley's re-telling, then surely, the notion of purity-partnership is the most complex arena that becomes the central focus of Paley's 'postmodern' *Ramayana*, - *Sita Sings the Blues*. Surely the text is deftly feminist in its focus but again I would

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try to argue that power-play is the central to the film, as it offers us an alternative model for the Ramayana story. If Paley's reading of Valmiki's betrayal of Sita for gaining fame is true, then we surely are in a position to interrogate the very quasi-religious aspect of the Ramayana story.

### **Patriarchy and its Grand Weapons: Of Constructions and Confusions**

To quote from Srinivasa Iyengar's *Sitayana*: "In the Ramayana as we have it, and as Valmiki clearly visualised it ... (it is) Sita's tragic history that fatefully links the Rama and Raavana stories"<sup>iii</sup> Iyengar further characterizes Sita as "*Sitayah Charitam Mahat*" in his book on the pretext of Sita's sacrifices for Rama and also for her inner strength in the *Ramayana* story. In this regard, one may also point out that epic-time is an interesting factor in the *Ramayana* if we see it as an epic. Schematically speaking, the textual device, 'epic-time' acts a great deal in constructing epic characters and events in the mythic framework: time becomes a homogenous notion in the text since every action and event acts as a causal link to other "to-be-happening" future events. Therefore, every event of the present legend acts as a source that is a reference point to a distant past or a connector that begets the seeds for some future event. Word is of paramount importance in this schematic structure since knowledge is something that gives power to a tale. The main logic is the restoration of order that has gone astray due to some crises or aberration and therefore society needs a saviour who will perform supra-human deeds to restore balance. This performance creates a hero with a ritualistic notion whose acts cannot be interrogated or critiqued. Of course, an order that is unquestionable as a symbol of divine plan is something that makes sovereignty monocentric and, vested in a singular subject, we have the birth of an arch-patriarch who comes to fulfill the role of a hero and so establish or reify patriarchy. This creates in the long run certain detractors, no doubt, but nonetheless it also creates critics who in their confusions reify the set epic order. Thus, epic time not only creates order it also gives us an idea of a system that reifies due to it. For instance, Madhu Kishwar eulogizes the epical Sita countering her portrayal in the patriarchal order:

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Sita is a woman who(m) even Gods revere,(as) a woman who refuses to accept her husband's tyranny even while she remains steadfast in her love for him and loyalty to him to the very end. ...Most women (and even men)... refer to her as a flawless person. ...whereas Ram is possessing a major flaw... because of the way he behaved towards his wife and children.

She points out that stern Rama supporters agree to Sita's dignity as against Rama, arguing in her favour, that "even Valmiki wants to show (us) how difficult it is for even supposedly perfect men (like Rama) to behave justly towards their wives"<sup>iii</sup>. As Kishwar's critique shows, there is a fault line inherent in the *Ramayana* epic mythos where Sita can gain priority over her war-hero husband Rama for her 'flawless' character. My argument here is this: in critiquing Sita as an epical object, both Kishwar and Iyengar actually reify the same patriarchal-epical order. Interestingly, Paley breaks out of this circularity which I will analyze shortly.

Sita's character in *Ramayana* has two distinct traits: unconditional loyalty or subjection and rebellious upright steadfastness. And if Kishwar and Iyengar support Sita for the first trait it is Paley whose artistic vision tries to remodel Sita as based on the second, which is a rarely noted feature. This quality does not only make Sita a model for Paley's revision; rather it also proves the timelessness and universality of *Ramayana* as an epic that needs more and more detailed and incisive exploration by modern, secular critics who will break the notions of epic-time and interrogate it as a humanistic creation created to reify social order. The notion of Orality and flexibility inherent within the *Ramayana* mythos makes Paley confident enough to secularize the epic of its Indic and by extension mythologic-epic normativity, and merge it with her own life along with the plights of various modern betrayed divorcee women. In fact, Paley's postmodern playfulness is all too evident in the film because she never judges and concludes her story. Rather her revelation of Sita and her own sufferings evoke our sympathy and make us question the morality of the male figures both in the film and in reality. We are made to perceive them as they are because she successfully creates a human Sita torn apart by the questions of loyalty, purity and partnership. This transforms the film into a postmodern document that tries to question the nuances of the set social order and the nuances of an oral

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epic tale about a ‘national’ hero, as we have seen in the singular Valmiki-Sita sequence in the film.

### **An Area of Tension “Partnership”: Issues of Dissent**

In fact, a central locus within both the epic and the film is the question of purity. In the epic, it becomes synonymous with the restoration of a larger social patriarchal order. In the film, the notion of ‘purity’ creates a secular tension in contemporary modern society and there is more focus on the themes of alienation, betrayal and pragmatic issues concerning the question of ethics in recent partnerships. In both, - the traditional text and the film, questions raised remain the same, though they are treated differently: Is Sita pure or as Rama suspects “contaminated”, and if so is she carrying Rama’s progeny or Raavana’s? And is Sita a male enticer, like a Kaikeyi or Surpanakha, a lecherous woman like the Dhobi’s wife or is she a potent *femme fatale* whose rage and determination, if, once awakened, has the power to change and transform the brutal society of which she herself forms a part? All these questions are interrogated by Paley in the film where a loyal woman partner is betrayed by her male counterpart on no fault-lines in her own character as far as social ethics and values of partnerships are concerned.

Paley’s radical vision seems to affirm the second quality in the mythic Sita’s character because she shows the potency and power of the victimized and wronged woman who vocalizes her pain by singing the Blues. Her context for such appraisal seems to follow in the same lines of Kishwar and Iyengar on a first reading. The two final scenes lauding Vishnu serving his spouse Laxmi preceded by the ironic choric song: “*Rama’s great, Rama’s good*” warns us about what will happen when the Sitas of the world will start singing *Blues* instead of lamenting: “*O Rama, mera pyaar pavitra hein*”.<sup>iv</sup> This reversal of gender roles further secularizes the film and grants it an almost prophetic quality. Paley, like Iyengar and Kishwar suggests that *Ramayana* is primarily Sita’s life history as it is of Rama’s but her focus remains outside the notions of epic-time and she humanises Sita as a woman.

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Rama's orders of banishing the pregnant Sita in the forest- as she was banished by Rama on publicly alleged suspicion of being an 'impure' woman after her return with him from the penitent exile of fourteen years and Valmiki's immortalization of the saga of heroism through his *Ramayana*, makes us further question Valmiki's own intentions in the epic. This intention is further interrogated by Paley on another oral pretext: Lav-Kush, Rama's own sons, were made to sing this saga at the initial stage to gain royal patronage, which later grew to a full-fledged epic, *Ramayana*, lauding Rama's glory all over the Indian subcontinent over Sita's "tragic (life) history" as Paley very mockingly reveals in her film. Thus, Paley focuses on the issue of conjugal partnership and reveals male betrayal even before *Ramayana* was conceived as a saga or epic and was given the seal of being a canonical, almost quasi- religious text by the sage, Valmiki. In Paley's scheme then, Sita's reunion with her mother, Earth is both symbolic and prophetic. It marks the end of her submissiveness towards both patriarchy and its veneration of feminine 'purity'. Sita's celebration is both symbolic and exhilarating because here she is able to transcend male dominion in all of its explicit and implicit forms by comically singing and subverting its inherent fault lines, caught so beautifully in Annette Hanshaw's sentimental Blues. This celebrated 'impurity' is, in fact, the essence of any gender movement, because it acts as the bedrock that challenges the very foundations of an established social/sociological order. As Judith Butler aptly puts it: "There is no political position purified of power, and perhaps that impurity is what produces agency as the potential interruption and reversal of regulatory regimes" .<sup>v</sup>

Another factor that makes Paley's adaptation postmodern and celebratory is Paley's comic and irreverent treatment of the epic that almost reduces it to absurdity. In the film, this is done by giving us an inconsistent narration of Sita's life as it is imperfectly represented and debated over by the three Indonesian shadow puppets. This treatment not only highlights the oral origin of the epic but rather gives us an agency to reformulate and re-graft it as viewers, and facilitates the director-artist to re-visualize the text as she is working with it. To quote Lyotard, this shows

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the postmodern artist's capacity to recapture the '*unpresentable*' or to remodel his/her view of art on the basis of "working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done"<sup>vi</sup>. In fact, this makes Amardeep Singh title his essay on Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* as "Animating a Postmodern Ramayana" highlighting and celebrating Paley's Sita's postmodern spirit in such glowing terms as the following: "... in representing the text as fragmentary, heterogeneous and shifting, she (Paley) has created an accurate, if still fragmentary characterization of the broader Ramayana tradition."<sup>vii</sup>

This view actually re-affirms my argument, that Paley remodels her Sita by giving her a new agency that enables her telling her own story in her own voice from the viewpoint of a subservient woman devoted to establish her husband's glory; and thus, by extension, also telling Paley's own "*life history*": through giving Paley's Anime Sita Annette Hanshaw's melodious and heart-rending 'voice' in the musical form of what Bill Benzons terms '*the Freakin' Gorgeous Blues*' and reviving her story and womanly character through the graphic device of *Flash Animation*.

Paley's adaptation of *Ramayana* as a narrative text for a post-modern film, thus, builds on the basic assumptions of a post-modern aesthetics and its notions of culture and society because formally, the idea of *postmodern condition* can be defined according to Jean-Francois Lyotard as "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward(s) metanarratives"<sup>viii</sup>. The epic *Ramayana* is a '*metanarrative*' because it has all the definite '*epic*' factors, "*its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goals*"<sup>ix</sup>. Accordingly, Professor Nabaneeta Dev Sen notes both 'formulaic' and "general pattern(s) of basic themes (textual/sociological/cultural mythos and matrix) that have emerged from the recent studies of World epic poetry".<sup>x</sup> In fact, her essay, "The Thematic Structure" cites *Ramayana* as an effective example of a formulaic metanarrative in the strictest sense of the generic-critical terminology. However, when Paley adapts the same text (her film's tagline named, "*Ramayana*

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of Valmiki”), she re-models it. First, she enters into a *dialogue* with Sita’s story by inserting a fictional Nina into the text and then develops the story into a *bricolage*<sup>xi</sup> by a comparative *juxtaposed* reading of these two texts simultaneously, thus catering to the *polyphonic*<sup>xii</sup> nature of the orphic *Ramayana* text. But what makes it Paley’s own narrative is the connection that she makes with the mythic betrayed being, Sita and the modern woman. This then is our third parameter: the highlight is now on the human Sita divested of her mythic-schematic divinity.

### **Reena’s Graphic Dance: An Example**

With these parameters, let us come to the central question that this essay tries to interrogate in the film, which in the Valmiki text resolves the question of Sita’s purity. I will just elaborate a single scene of the film: Reena’s graphic dance that complements, succeeds and substitutes Sita’s *agnipareeksha* in the film and relocates it in the contemporary context. Further, let me remind the reader/receptor that the epic nexus makes Rama-Sita relationship *unquestionable* by attributing it with divine and ritualistic characteristics, wherein every event is linked as a divinely set plan. Interestingly, this homogenous schema contains within it the orally heterogeneous text that reifies social order, and in the long run, the socio-religious-political-patriarchal order in the Indian Subcontinent. Paley, however, reworks with the partnership tensions inherent within the *Ramayana* loci and this becomes most explicit in the graphic dance choreographed by Reena Shah after the brief animated scene of the mythic *agni-pareeksha*. The dance sequence is succeeded further in the film by Dave’s rejection of Nina that is parallel to Rama’s rejection of Sita. The use of the animated fire as the background, the fragile throbbing pumping heart full of emotions about to break, and the use of the lit-up matchstick to demonstrate Sita’s desires makes her an anonymous betrayed woman who is left alone by both the people whom she loves and the larger society which has taught her the rules of loyalty and the codes of purity in a complex and subtle matter like husband-wife relationship within a postmodern culture.

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Paley narrates her Sita-Story because it draws on the historiographic tradition as it originally existed within the arena of Indic style of orphic narration. In a slightly different context, William J Glover sums up the nuances of oral historiographic tradition:

The invocation of a chain (*silsila*) of spiritual ancestors at the outset of biographical and other historical accounts is a stable feature of Islamic historiographic writing. On the Indian subcontinent, as elsewhere, this formula remained common well into the twentieth century. The codification of attitudes of esteem, deference, and reverence toward some social classes or types of behavior and of contempt, censure, or dismissal toward others was a feature of South Asian literatures more generally. These were the codes that mattered in a social milieu where distinction devolved largely upon one's personal or familial comportment and location in a nexus of hierarchical relationships.<sup>xiii</sup>

This complex origin also makes *purity* idyllic in our postmodern society/culture wherein its very nexus is betrayed every time it refers to its idyllic progenitor/predecessor. It is also interesting to note that Paley's radical vision of Vishnu serving Lakshmi and Sita singing her song of rejection for Rama or Lav-Kush singing the subversive praise-of-Rama song (Animation) followed by Paley's own finding the Sita story in the *Ramayana* text to show her plight through the figurine of Sita that ends the film- are all prefigured and predicated on the pretext of disloyalty of the male partner towards the female, whose origin nonetheless happens within this *epic-time* framework. Interestingly, here we have the genesis of feminist aspirations as a result of the males' betrayal of patriarchal codes of *righteous* living such as honour, loyalty and balance in an ethically codified and established sociological order. A question needs to be asked here that stops us for reconsideration/s: Is *Feminism*, then, a product of the male-sections' betrayal of the patriarchal codes that stresses on an idyllic distribution of sociological values such as purity, loyalty, fellowship and mutual respect as among both the sexes for one another? Since the betrayal of equity-based values generate disparity and disharmony among the partners, gender and the question/tension of power-relations haunt us in all grades and nuances of sociological order and by extension, existence.

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Seen within this niche of complexes, the event of *agni-pareeksha* in the *Ramayana* text resolves points of sexual confusion among married partners but outside its set-context, it becomes in this film an arena where the crises of loyalty and modern norms of sexuality and compatibility in partnership are interrogated and a case for securing equity-based social and sexual justice is undertaken both by Paley and her Jazz-singing animated Sita and the graphic dancer, Reena Shah. Further, Lav-Kush's song and Sita's subversive song of liberation in mother Earth's womb suggests two modes of *meta-existence* outside normal sociological order. The first suggests how the realistic becomes mythologic and then betrays the original source as it is interrogated or demystified; while the second song suggests a utopic transcendental position that almost re-enacts the Lacanian pre-natal existence where sociological normativity had yet not intervened on a to-be-being of future society. This anti-clockwise subversion, then, is the Butleresque notion of *impurity* that proliferates the normative society as it betrays its own rules that try to create and maintain gender-equality in the established social order.

### **An Unresolved Question: Solution/s?**

As I have argued throughout this paper, the ambivalences of the gender question go much deeper if we try to re-graft the problem of power-relations (here the socio-marital issue concerning the husband-wife relationship) outside the binary divide of gender specific and culture specific position. Such an interrogation shows that often the problem of a radical social event/movement/act of protest generates out of a desire for equality<sup>xiv</sup>. And, in this whole schema, balance and mutuality are the two most complex notions that need to be harmonized and negotiated from time to time. That an almost utopic myth-oriented oral tale/legend is used to tell a modern woman's experience of betrayal in our time also shows us how our own desire

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in contemporary times is also predicated on certain idyllic values such as loyalty and devotion in partnerships though we have come a long way from the socio-religious ritualistic notion of *purity*. Further, the dismantling of *Word* or divinity as inherent within an epic-time and structure to secularize a general area of tension such as partnership also demonstrates to us how even the mythic had once originated out of a need for setting up the pragmatic codes that are calculated in the mythologic design to bring about a harmonious social existence. But let me also remind the reader-receptor that any search for solution in this contesting arena will ever remain *unfinished*. The only way to confront these issues is to interrogate these problems synchronously and within 'a' specific context since each position is unique, acts itself within a contextual paradigm and thus remains, both open and dynamic. This also shows us that all 'isms' are problematic be they old or recent, like the patriarchy/feminism binary that often get blurred as we try to open them up for analytical exploration. Thus, the issue of partnership raised in Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* (Annette Hanshaw) remains at its best, both contested and unresolved.

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup> S.J. Robert Antonie, "*Calliope and Rama's Initiation*", 17. <sup>ii</sup> K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar "Preface" *Sitayana*, iii. <sup>iii</sup> Kishwar, "*Yes to Sita, No to Ram!*" *Manushi* Issue 98. January-February 1997.

<sup>iv</sup> My Translation of the song line reads, "O Rama, my love for you is uncontaminated". <sup>v</sup> See Butler's argument: "Preface (1999)" *Gender Trouble*, xxvi. <sup>vi</sup>

Lyotard "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?" *The Postmodern Condition*, 82. <sup>vii</sup> Amardeep Singh, "Animating a Postmodern Ramayana", 178. <sup>viii</sup> Lyotard "Introduction" *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv. Also see note ix below. ix

For any postmodern rendition of metanarratives, Lyotard's observances on postmodern as a mental condition for interpretation is worth noting :

*"Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives (My Emphasis for citation herein). This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds; most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and*

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*of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements- narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.” (xxiv)*

In film the audio-visual medium transforms such textual graphing makes the narrative *connotative*.<sup>x</sup> Nabaneeta Dev Sen, “*Thematic Structure of Epic Poems in the East and in the West*”, 31; also see pages 39-40 and 50-70. <sup>xi</sup> For better explanation of the terms ‘*dialogue*’ and ‘*bricolage*’ in the context of Film Criticism and Adaptation Studies see Sanders and Hutcheon citations. <sup>xii</sup>

See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* “Discourse in the Novel”, 259-422 and “Epic and Novel:

Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel”, 3-40.

<sup>xiii</sup> William J. Glover, *Making Lahore Modern*, Chapter 6, “Thinking With the City: Urban Writing in Colonial Lahore”, 185-201. <sup>xiv</sup> Even in lesbian-gay relationships, one of the partners is feminine whereas the dominator therein is surely masculine but that argument needs an altogether different paper. Here, I stress on the fact that masculine and feminine are attributes that form the root of all known social bondages/relationships-be they human or animal; and the idea that a female can be masculine or that a male can be feminine now forms the very basis for Queer, Sexuality, New Gender and Masculinity Studies under the umbrella term of Gender/Sexuality Studies.

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