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Does Sita Sing the Blues?
Reworking the *Ramayana* Narrative

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty and the Honors Program

Of the University of San Diego

By

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Theology & Religious Studies

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Introduction

The famous Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, has long captured the imagination of its listeners, and provoked strong reactions, with its themes of duty, social order, and cosmological balance. Responses to the *Ramayana*'s depictions of the heroine, Sita, and the hero, Rama, having ranged from enthusiastic endorsement of their conduct, such as by the former chief justice of India, who exclaimed, "There can be no better text-book of morals which can be safely placed in the hands of youth to inspire them to higher and nobler ideals of conduct and character," to vehement condemnation, such as by the Indian writer Saroj Visaria, who asserted, "we must refuse to be Sitas, By becoming Sita and submitting to the fire ordeal, woman loses her identity."¹ As reflected by these responses, the *Ramayana* has long elicited strong reactions which have also been expressed through the many retellings of the epic narrative. Nina Paley, a secular Jewish American woman, gives her own response to this controversy through the creation of her own *Ramayana*. However, her rendition has been called desecration of the epic and the Hindu faith, as well as an "avenue of empowerment" and means to creatively embrace pain.² In wake of these controversies, this paper will analyze whether or not Paley's film is consonant with *Ramayana* traditions. I will argue that Nina Paley's interpretation of the *Ramayana* through the 2008 animated film, *Sita Sings the Blues*, is an authentic outgrowth of Hindu explications and retellings found in the Valmiki *Ramayana* and Chandravati *Ramayana*. These tellings' common

¹ Justice M. Hidayatullah, "Inaugural Address," in *Asian Variations in Ramayana*, ed. Kodaganallur Ramaswami Srinivasa Iyengar (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1983), 27; Linda Hess, "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 1 (March 1999): 16.

² Sharmila Lodhia, "Deconstructing Sita's Blues: Questions of Mis/Representation, Cultural Property, and Feminist Critique in Nina Paley's *Ramayana*," *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 2 (June 2015): 373; Kevin V Dodd, "Sita Sings the Blues," *Journal of Religion & Film* 13, no. 2 (October 2009): 5-6.

elements are that they express the narrators' own social roles, analyze their social norms, and depict the heroine, Sita, undergoing a transformation.

This research paper investigates the importance of international literature in our ever-globalizing world. To remain relevant, international literary works such as Homer's *The Illiad*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the Christian Bible, and so on, must be able to engage a multi-generational, multi-cultural audience (in their own unique time and place) in the fundamental questions of life and existence. Thus, analyzing whether a non-Hindu animator's film is consonant with Hindu engagements with the *Ramayana* gives valuable insight into the *Ramayana*'s global scope as a significant work of international literature. I specifically chose *Sita Sings the Blues* as my case study because it is a recent, controversial *Ramayana* film released in the West for an adult audience. Most *Ramayana* media released in the West only target children.

Sita Sings the Blues has generated much dispute over the question of whether it is an authentic or inauthentic Western appropriation of the *Ramayana* tradition.³ I found that *Sita Sings the Blues* shows how a Westerner can find meaning in, and reinterpret her life based on, a story from India. This supports the idea that the *Ramayana* is a globally significant literary work which is relevant across cultures and generations.

My primary methodology in this paper is historical, sociological, and textual. I apply this methodology to an analysis of several primary sources. As my primary sources, I use three *Ramayana* variants: the Valmiki *Ramayana*, the Chandravati *Ramayana*, and Nina Paley's *Sita*

³ For more detail on this controversy read: Lodhia, "Deconstructing Sita's Blues"; Lavina Melwani, "'Sita Sings the Blues' to Rave Reviews," *Hinduism Today*; *Kapaa*, December 2010.

Sings the Blues. For the Valmiki and Chandravati stories, I rely on scholarly English translations. I engage with these primary sources by studying the historical and social realities of their authors in relation to the contents of the texts to understand the narratives' possible messages and purposes. These are read next to secondary sources of critical scholarship in order to present counter-viewpoints and additional background information to contribute to my analysis and conclusions.

I chose the Valmiki *Ramayana* because it is the earliest known version of the epic and more scholarly research on this version has been performed than on other renditions. Furthermore, it is this telling of the *Ramayana* that Nina Paley's film is based upon. I also compared her film to the Chandravati *Ramayana* because it is one of the few known full women's versions. Additionally, it is by a Hindu woman who, like Paley, relates Sita's experiences to her own and who critically evaluates the patriarchal system that the *Ramayana*'s plot assumes.

The Valmiki *Ramayana*

The *Ramayana* is an extremely influential Hindu epic poem dealing with numerous themes including *dharma* (duty), gender roles, societal expectations, justice, cosmological balance, and the social order. The earliest known rendition of the *Ramayana*, composed sometimes between 500 BCE and 300 CE, is attributed to the sage-poet Valmiki.⁴ The Valmiki *Ramayana* reflects androcentric, upper-caste, social values and concerns in its depiction of Sita and Rama as the ideal woman and ideal man respectively. This ideal has persisted in the minds of many to this day. Many Indians, Hindu or not, consider Sita to be the epitome of the virtuous

⁴ John Brockington, "Ramayana," *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 667.

woman. For instance, a survey in Northern India's state of Uttar Pradesh found that the majority of young people selected Sita as the most ideal role model for women out of twenty-four other goddesses, famous historical women, and literary heroines.⁵ Additionally, according to ethnographic research by Dev Sen, many brides are advised to be like Sita when their union is blessed.⁶ The *Ramayana*, however, is not limited to its initial version by Valmiki. Estimates of the number of *Ramayana* narrative variants range from the hundreds to the thousands in a wide diversity of languages, cultures, sociohistorical contexts, and storytelling media.⁷

The Valmiki *Ramayana* presents and shapes the narrative through the lens of the male *brahmin* elite and consequently serves as a vehicle to express how to carry out social relations from the male *brahmin* perspective, especially in terms of duty. Overall, this version of the *Ramayana* functions as an epic expression of male upper-caste expectations, concerns, and experiences, as represented in classic Hindu civil law codes like *The Laws of Manu*.

In this narrative, Sita, the incarnation of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, is adopted by King Janaka after she is born from the earth goddess.⁸ In order to show his worthiness to marry her, Prince Rama, the incarnation of Vishnu, the god of cosmic preservation, not only strings Lord Shiva's bow but breaks it as well.⁹ This scene emphasizes not only Rama's divine status as the incarnation of Vishnu, but also Sita's role as his *shakti*, compelling him to action

⁵ Madhu Kishwar, "Yes to Sita, No to Ram! The Continuing Popularity of Sita in India," *Manushi*, no. 98 (1997): 20.

⁶ Nabaneeta Dev Sen, "When Women Retell the Ramayan," *Manushi*, no. 108 (1997): 19.

⁷ A. K. Ramanujan, "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1991), 24-25.

⁸ Sanjukta Gupta, "Lakshmi, Sri," ed. Denise Cush, Michael York, and Catherine A. Robinson, *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁹ Kokila Ravi, "Visnu," *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 965.

and serving as the “source of his power.”¹⁰ *Shakti* is a crucial Brahmanical concept that refers to the feminine “energetic principle of ultimate reality” personified by goddesses who give their divine husbands their dynamic power.¹¹ As his rightful consort in the Hindu pantheon, Sita here is recognized as Rama’s power source, enabling him to even break the bow of Shiva, the cosmic destroyer.

The Valmiki *Ramayana* portrays Sita as the perfect doting wife who worships her husband like a god.¹² Her characterization as a loyal wife who worships her husband echoes civil code from *The Laws of Manu* that a woman must honor her husband as a god.¹³ Jealous that Rama is next in line for the throne, Rama’s stepmother forces the king to honor an old oath and banish Rama from the kingdom of Ayodhya. Ever the faithful wife, Sita insists on joining him in exile along with Rama’s younger brother Lakshmana.¹⁴ In doing so, Sita not only demonstrates her devotion to Rama but challenges Rama to perform his husbandly *dharma* to protect and care for her.¹⁵ As they wander the forest, the demoness Shurpanakha desires Rama for herself and so threatens Rama that she will kill Sita if he does not marry her.¹⁶ Rama refuses her advances and Lakshmana maims her. Outraged, Shurpanakha’s brother, Khara, approaches Rama for vengeance but Rama slays him.¹⁷ Angry and desiring the lovely Sita for himself, Ravana, the

¹⁰ Cornelia Dimmitt, “Sita: Fertility Goddess and Sakti,” in *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1986), 210.

¹¹ Lynn Foulston, “Sakti,” ed. Denise Cush, Catherine A. Robinson, and Michael York, *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 275, 730.

¹² Mary Damon Peltier, “Sita’s Story (In the Valmiki Ramayana),” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 4, no. Winter 1995-1996 (1996): 79.

¹³ Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, trans. Georg Bühler, *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. XXV (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1964), 5.154.

¹⁴ Peltier, “Sita’s Story,” 79.

¹⁵ Dimmitt, “Sita: Fertility Goddess and Sakti,” 219.

¹⁶ Peltier, “Sita’s Story,” 83.

¹⁷ Peltier, 83.

demon king and brother of Shurpanakha and Khara, commands his servant to appear as a beautiful, golden deer to Sita.¹⁸ Enthralled by its beauty, Sita sends Rama to catch the deer then sends Lakshmana after him when she worries Rama is in danger.¹⁹ Now that she is unguarded, Ravana disguises himself as an ascetic and asks for her to be his wife; Sita furiously rejects him, which leads Ravana to return to his demonic form and forcibly bring her to his kingdom, Lanka.²⁰

While imprisoned in Ravana's kingdom, Sita spurns all of Ravana's attempts to force himself upon her, and she continues to fervently worship Rama.²¹ She is so firm in her devotion that even when Rama's newfound servant, Hanuman the monkey king, comes to rescue her from Lanka, Sita insists that only Rama can touch her and that Rama must save her himself.²² In doing so, the narrator emphasizes Sita's righteousness in perfectly following her duty to avoid associating with a man other than her husband. This also plays into her role as the *shakti* that inspires Rama to act to fulfill his *dharma*.²³

After a massive, bloody battle, Rama wins against Ravana but then alleges that Sita's contact with Ravana has caused her to lose her purity.²⁴ To prove her faithfulness, Sita indignantly goes through a trial by fire in which she invokes Agni the fire god's protection and passes through the flames untouched.²⁵ Rama accepts her proof of virtue and they joyously

¹⁸ Peltier, 83.

¹⁹ Peltier, 84.

²⁰ Peltier, 84-86.

²¹ Peltier, 87.

²² Peltier, 89.

²³ Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, 5.158.

²⁴ Peltier, "Sita's Story," 90.

²⁵ Peltier, 90-91.

return to Ayodhya. There they are coronated and Sita becomes pregnant.²⁶ However, Rama overhears his subjects assert that Sita must be ruined after being in Ravana's household and thus cannot fulfill her queenly duty to be an exemplar to the women of the kingdom.²⁷ This reflects the Brahmanical view that a woman who has been separated from her husband and has stayed in another man's house is ruined.²⁸ Without a word to Sita, Rama exiles her to the forest where she continues to virtuously devote herself to Rama despite his rejection of her. Rama's decision to banish Sita reflect the Brahmanical view that a just king must put the law over his own desires to win the loyalty of his subjects.²⁹ Therefore, Rama must hold his kingly duties above his duties as a husband according to the Valmiki narrative's male upper-caste perspective. After her banishment, Sita joins a group of ascetics in the forest, bears her and Rama's twin sons, and lives there for twelve years.³⁰

One day at a ritual sacrifice, Rama sees the twin sons and realizes they are his heirs; he tells Sita she can return to the kingdom if she once again passes the trial by fire.³¹ Incensed at his request, Sita calls upon the earth goddess to swallow her back into the earth.³² She leaves Rama behind weeping to rule the kingdom without her.³³ Despite his sorrow, the Valmiki narrative depicts Rama's reign without Sita as long and prosperous. The scholar Mary Peltier offers up the androcentric explanation that Sita returns to the earth because she is freed from her queenly and wifely *dharma* to provide male heirs to Rama.³⁴ Ultimately the fulfillment of her duty enables

²⁶ Peltier, 92.

²⁷ Peltier, 92.

²⁸ Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, 9.13.

²⁹ Manu, 8.173-175.

³⁰ Peltier, "Sita's Story," 92-93.

³¹ Peltier, 93.

³² Peltier, 94.

³³ Peltier, 95.

³⁴ Peltier, 94.

Sita to assert her independence and reject the ill-treatment she suffered at the expense of Rama fulfilling his *dharma*.

The Chandravati *Ramayana*

Chandravati's *Ramayana* is a semi-fragmentary ballad composed by Chandravati. Chandravati was a female *brahmin* poet who lived in late sixteenth-century Bengal, India. As I will argue, it is *Ramayana* narratives like hers that Paley's film is most consonant with because they utilize the narrative to relate their experiences with Sita's and critique their androcentric societies. Unlike the Valmiki story, these emphasize the Sita's experience over that of Rama's. Chandravati's *Ramayana* especially emphasizes—from her perspective as a *brahmin* woman in late-sixteenth century Bengal—the suffering of women in a society of male hegemony, as represented by the righteous Sita's plight.

In Chandravati's time, eastern Bengal was dominated by corrupt local rule caused by the disintegration of the region's central government.³⁵ Corrupt governance heightened the predominance of violating and oppressing women supported by religious justification.³⁶ In response, society imposed strict laws to confine women and stringent methods to judge women's virtue.³⁷ Furthermore, according to Nayancand Ghosa's biographical poem, Chandravati's promised husband abandoned her and converted to Islam for a Muslim woman he fell in love with. After she ignored his pleas to pardon his betrayal, she discovered him drowned in a nearby river.³⁸ It was after these alleged tragic events and in this social context that Chandravati began

³⁵ Candrāvati, *A Woman's Rāmāyaṇa: Candrāvati's Bengali Epic*, trans. Mandakranta Bose and Sarika Priyadarshini Bose, Routledge Hindu Studies Series (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 8.

³⁶ Candrāvati, 9.

³⁷ Candrāvati, 9.

³⁸ Candrāvati, 7.

to devise her *Ramayana*. Through female characters, especially Sita, Chandravati's work powerfully portrays the brutal circumstances under which she and her female contemporaries lived.³⁹

From the opening, the Chandravati *Ramayana* depicts a male-dominated world which overwhelmingly subjugates women and thereby echoes the poet's own social realities of despotic governance and the abuse of women. Her account opens with Ravana, the demon king, conquering the celestial realm by overthrowing, imprisoning, and enslaving the gods.⁴⁰ The goddesses, then, either are mercilessly raped by Ravana or drown themselves to escape such a fate.⁴¹

Horried by the infidelity of Ravana, his wife Mandodari ingests a vial of what she believes is poison in order to kill herself. However, it instead contains the blood of sages tortured by Ravana and causes her to give birth to an egg.⁴² The egg is prophesied to contain a girl who will be Ravana's ruin and so Ravana wishes it to be destroyed.⁴³ Nonetheless, the egg survives after Mandodari sets the egg in a golden casket in the ocean which is found by an impoverished fisherman. His loyal wife, Sata, worships and cares for the egg and thus gains the favor of Lakshmi.⁴⁴ Following instructions received in a dream, Sata gives the egg to King Janaka's queen and it hatches a girl with the auspicious marks of Lakshmi; the girl is named Sita after

³⁹ Candrāvātī, 5.

⁴⁰ Candrāvātī, 55-56.

⁴¹ Candrāvātī, 56.

⁴² Candrāvātī, 55-57.

⁴³ Candrāvātī, 57.

⁴⁴ Candrāvātī, 59.

Sita and raised by the queen.⁴⁵ Later, Queen Kausalya of Ayodhya gives birth to Rama after eating a fruit per a sage's advice.⁴⁶

Interestingly, Chandravati stages her *Ramayana* in a way that upsets the traditional patriarchal framing of epic stories to center on male action. Instead, Chandravati puts women at the forefront of the storyline. For instance, it is Sita that has the prophetic dream, brings the egg to the kingdom of Ayodhya, and becomes the namesake of Sita. Likewise, it is the queen who adopts and raises Sita, not King Janaka. As noted by Nabaneeta Dev Sen, the usual androcentric formulation of epics puts the birth of the hero before that of the heroine.⁴⁷ By thwarting this formulation, Chandravati deftly rejects the patriarchal focus on the actions and experiences of men and instead presents a gynocentric story.⁴⁸ In doing so, she asserts her opposition to the patriarchal system and illustrates the horrors, such as Ravana's rape of the goddesses, inflicted on women by men in her society. The contrast of focus between the Chandravati version and Valmiki version demonstrates that many *Ramayana* stories reflect the narrator's lived experience.

Following these opening scenes, Chandravati transitions the narrative to Sita recounting her luckless life story to some female companions and mourning, "Vidhata [the ordainer of fate] made me a born victim."⁴⁹ One misfortune she particularly decries is that she does not know her

⁴⁵ Candrāvātī, 60.

⁴⁶ Candrāvātī, 61.

⁴⁷ Nabaneeta Dev Sen, "Chandravati Ramayana: Feminizing the Rama-Tale," in *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India*, ed. Mandakranta Bose (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 186,

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/sandiego/detail.action?docID=271443>.

⁴⁸ Dev Sen, 186.

⁴⁹ Candrāvātī, *A Woman's Rāmāyaṇa*, 68.

true parents or brothers, forcing her into absolute reliance on Rama, her husband.⁵⁰ This reflects Hindu civil codes which state that a woman must always be dependent on a male relation such as a father, husband, or son.⁵¹ Then, she tells the story of how she came to marry Rama. King Janaka proclaims that only a man who can break Shiva's mighty bow is to marry her. Afterwards, she has a dream of Rama telling her to wake up because he has come to break the bow; she then wakes up to hear that Rama broke the bow and they will marry.⁵² After their union, she dreams of Rama's coronation, but instead he is banished from Ayodhya as a result of a plot by Kaikeyi, his stepmother.⁵³ These dream sequences of Sita in the narrative occur during scenes of male action and serve to diminish the centrality of men in the narrative. It also contributes to a complete focus on Sita's experience as opposed to Rama's.

After his banishment, Sita insists on joining Rama (along with Lakshmana) in the ascetic life, demonstrating not only her devotion to him but her inability to live independently according to societal expectations. According to social norms, a woman separated from her husband or without the protection of a male relation would be ruined and devoid of virtue.⁵⁴ This probably especially reflected Chandravati's experiences due to the hegemony of harsh rules for maintaining a women's reputation of rectitude in her times. During their banishment, Sita's feet are cut up by rocks and she faints of exhaustion.⁵⁵ In spite of her suffering, Sita continues to personify the perfect wife, according to the ideals of civil law codes, wholly dedicated to her husband as if he were her god even in hardship.⁵⁶ She venerates him as her "Lord" with garlands

⁵⁰ Candrāvati, 68.

⁵¹ Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, 5.148.

⁵² Candrāvati, *A Woman's Rāmāyaṇa*, 68-69.

⁵³ Candrāvati, 69.

⁵⁴ Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, 9.3, 9.13.

⁵⁵ Candrāvati, *A Woman's Rāmāyaṇa*, 69.

⁵⁶ Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, 5.154, 5.158.

of wild flowers, makes him a bed of grass, and washes his feet.⁵⁷ Overall, Chandravati depicts their time exiled in the forest as an experience of joyful romance. Sita even exclaims, “The happiness of a hundred kingdoms lay at my Lord’s feet.”⁵⁸

Misfortune strikes after Sita sends Rama to catch a golden deer and then sends Lakshmana as well when Rama cries that a demon is killing him.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, a renunciant, who is actually Ravana in disguise, comes to her hut and Sita offers alms and homage to him. Ravana then kidnaps her and brings her to his kingdom of Lanka.⁶⁰ Sita’s righteousness and Ravana’s immorality are highlighted in this scene because Ravana exploits her obligation as a householder to give offerings to sages and guests.⁶¹ Through this scene, Chandravati communicates outrage that patriarchal domination results in the abuse of all women, even the most virtuous such as Sita. This is especially powerful because Sita is literally the incarnation of a significant goddess in the Hindu pantheon and consequentially is the highest epitome of perfect womanhood. On the other hand, Ravana personifies the evils perpetuated by patriarchal systems with his exploitation of Sita’s social obligations and molestation of the goddesses after conquering heaven. Ravana’s sexually illicit intentions become apparent after he confines her in the same location in which he previously assaulted the goddesses, the *ashoka* garden.⁶² These events parallel contemporary ills observed and likely experienced by Chandravati in a context in which men commonly abused their social power to violate women.⁶³ The lack of an explicit explanation for Ravana’s motive to abduct Sita in this account reveals the semi-fragmentary

⁵⁷ Candrāvātī, *A Woman’s Rāmāyaṇa*, 70.

⁵⁸ Candrāvātī, 70.

⁵⁹ Candrāvātī, 70-71.

⁶⁰ Candrāvātī, 72.

⁶¹ Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, 3.80.

⁶² Candrāvātī, *A Woman’s Rāmāyaṇa*, 56, 72.

⁶³ Candrāvātī, 8-9.

nature of the Chandravati *Ramayana*. The narrative assumes its listeners are well-acquainted with the basic *Ramayana* storyline. Her intended audience would know that he sought vengeance for Rama's attack on Khara and Shurpanakha and that he had the adulterous desire to marry Sita for her great beauty.

Sita remains imprisoned in Lanka for ten months but remains steadfast in her devotion to Rama. She garbs herself as an ascetic, fasts, weeps in longing for Rama, and wishes to kill herself.⁶⁴ During her time there she has a series of dreams briefly portraying Rama's progress to find and save her. These dreams are only punctuated by the coming of Rama's servant, Hanuman, to inform her that Rama would soon rescue her.⁶⁵ Thereafter, Sita dreams of Rama and Ravana's armies' battle which concludes with the slaughter of Ravana's entire line of descendants and the total annihilation of Lanka.⁶⁶ These events occur without any description outside of the short, vague descriptions of Sita's dreams. This fulfills the earlier prophecy that Ravana would be ruined by Sita as a consequence of his shameful treatment of women, including his disloyalty to his spouse and his abuse of the female celestial beings. It is important to note that it is the fulfillment of prophecy and Sita's dreams, not Rama's heroism, that are accentuated. In fact, no gory, heroic details of the battle are even mentioned, unlike in the Valmiki *Ramayana* where the battle takes center stage in thousands of verses.⁶⁷ This once again subverts the androcentric epic formulation for a gynocentric formulation which condemns male-domination.

Unlike the Valmiki *Ramayana*, Sita does not suffer a trial by fire, but rather goes straight to the palace at the Kingdom of Ayodhya with Rama. They are back to living in marital bliss

⁶⁴ Candrāvati, 72.

⁶⁵ Candrāvati, 72-73.

⁶⁶ Candrāvati, 72-74.

⁶⁷ Dev Sen, "Candravati Ramayana: Feminizing the Rama-Tale," 187.

until Rama's ill-intentioned sister, Kukuya, persuades Rama that Sita engaged in adulterous relations with Ravana.⁶⁸ He becomes furious and commands Lakshmana to exile Sita to Valmiki's hermitage in the forest without explanation to Sita, who is now five-months pregnant with Rama's twin sons.⁶⁹ Kukuya's cruelty to Sita parallels the common occurrence in India of women being maltreated by their husband's family, which presumably occurred in Chandravati's time as well.⁷⁰

Chandravati foreshadows that Sita's unjust exile would not only harm Sita and Rama but also bring devastation upon Ayodhya due to the absence of its Lakshmi, the bringer of prosperity.⁷¹ Rama's banishment of Sita after Kukuya's counsel portrays him as a dishonorable man according to patriarchal Brahmanical expectations because he followed a wicked woman's advice.⁷² In doing so, Chandravati casts Rama in a negative light because he fails his *dharma* to his wife and kingdom. She explicitly suggests that this additional instance of male-inflicted cruelty upon a woman will bring another kingdom to ruin just as how Ravana's cruelty to women led to Lanka's ruin. These details reinforce that this *Ramayana* is strongly swayed by its composer's social positioning and personal experiences. As a *brahmin* woman, Chandravati utilizes Brahmanical concepts throughout the storyline so as to communicate how harmful male domination is for not only women but society as a whole. Provocatively, the use of patriarchal Brahmanical concepts to condemn Rama weaponizes these ideas against the patriarchal treatment of Sita, and, by extension, other oppressed women at the hands of men in authority.

⁶⁸ Candrāvati, *A Woman's Rāmāyaṇa*, 79.

⁶⁹ Candrāvati, 81.

⁷⁰ Dev Sen, "When Women Retell the Ramayan," 22.

⁷¹ Candrāvati, *A Woman's Rāmāyaṇa*, 79-80.

⁷² Dev Sen, "Candravati Ramayana: Feminizing the Rama-Tale," 188.

During her banishment in the forest, Sita gives birth to their twin sons, Lava and Kusha.⁷³ Due to Sita's absence, Rama is unable to uphold cosmic harmony without his *shakti* which results in a major deterioration of Ayodhya's wealth and moral integrity.⁷⁴ Consequently, he commands that an *asvamedha* sacrifice is organized. However, according to the Vedic, Brahmanical system he must have his consort, Sita, present.⁷⁵ Despite the necessity of Sita's role in the ritual, Rama still insists that Sita must pass through fire unharmed to ascertain her purity, thus mirroring the predominance of rigid purity tests in late-sixteenth century Bengal.⁷⁶

Kukuya fails to light the pyre but is herself set on fire. Remarkably, the blaze is extinguished by only the touch of Sita. Obstinate ignoring this miraculous turn of events, Rama ignites the pyre himself.⁷⁷ His disregard for signs of Sita's innocence further discredits his righteousness and heroism which enhances the impression that Sita is the embodiment of uprightness. Sita steps into the fire when the Ganges River arises from the ground to douse it.⁷⁸ Subsequently, Sita's mother, the earth goddess Vasumati, shakes all of Ayodhya and invites her to return to the earth.⁷⁹ After Sita sinks into the ground, Rama, Lakshmana, Sita's sons Lava and Kusha, and "all good people" are left bitterly wailing.⁸⁰ Hanuman laments, "What calamity have you brought upon us, Rama... by listening to the gossip of evil folk! You have lost Sita forever from your life."⁸¹ Hanuman's lamentation finalizes the impression on the audience that Rama is a weak-minded man who failed his kingly and husbandly *dharma*. Sita's permanent absence

⁷³ Candrāvati, *A Woman's Rāmāyaṇa*, 84.

⁷⁴ Candrāvati, 85.

⁷⁵ Candrāvati, 85; Dimmitt, "Sita: Fertility Goddess and Sakti" 219.

⁷⁶ Candrāvati, *A Woman's Rāmāyaṇa*, 9, 87.

⁷⁷ Candrāvati.

⁷⁸ The Ganges is a major sacred river in India and goddess in the Hindu pantheon.

⁷⁹ Candrāvati, *A Woman's Rāmāyaṇa*, 88.

⁸⁰ Candrāvati, 88-89.

⁸¹ Candrāvati, 89.

implies that under only Rama's rule Ayodhya will descend into a complete collapse without the cosmic balance brought about by Sita's *shakti* nature. This deviation from the Valmiki narrative (where Ayodhya continues a prosperous existence without Sita's physical presence) suggests the brutal social critique that men's subjugation of women is not only unjust but will lead to society's destruction and consequentially men's personal ruin.

An interesting detail to note is that the narration continually switches between the third-person perspective of Chandravati, the narrator, and the first-person perspective of Sita. The first-person perspective is used emotively with a particular emphasis on her grievous distress at her fate. The third-person perspective either briefly summarizes what happened or expresses a lamentation relating to the suffering of life. Sita's grieving of her cruel circumstances is echoed in the third-person by Chandravati. Consequentially, the line between Sita and Chandravati's anguish is blurred to imply Sita's suffering is an experience common to Chandravati and many other women.

Through her rendition, Chandravati uses Sita to embody her social role as an upper-caste woman living in sixteenth-century Bengal. By depicting Sita suffering at the hands of more socially powerful men, Chandravati presents a compelling critique of patriarchal Brahmanical social norms. For example, male social ascendancy results in the ruin of both Lanka and Ayodhya in the narrative and thereby she asserts women's welfare is necessary for the welfare of all society. Its conclusion, where Sita returns to the earth and leaves Rama to rule a declining kingdom, effectively transforms Sita from the stereotypically meek, abused, passive woman dependent on male protection to an assertive, dignified, independent woman who demands to be treated respectfully.

Sita Sings the Blues

In 2008, Nina Paley, a female Jewish American animator, released the film *Sita Sings the Blues*. Written, produced, directed, and animated by Paley, the film loosely retells the *Ramayana* in relation to a difficult time in her own life with commentary by some of Paley's Hindu friends. The soundtrack features 1920's music performed by American jazz singer, Annette Hanshaw. Most of these consist of love songs in which the singer expresses her total infatuation with her man despite his cruelty to her. Notably, *Sita Sings the Blues* is not a detailed *Ramayana* narrative. Instead, it consists of major and well-known scenes involving Sita and only portrays Rama in relation to her. Each *Ramayana* scene is preceded and followed by cartoons portraying the story of Paley's estrangement and separation from her husband as well as commentary on each *Ramayana*-related scene. The commentary is by three of Paley's Hindu friends, whom she animates as Indonesian-style shadow puppets. In Indonesia, shadow puppet theater depicting the *Ramayana* is a long tradition. Specific clownish shadow puppets explain scenes in simple language because the main characters speak an ancient language unknown to the audience. Together, the music, the friends' commentary, and the juxtaposition of Sita's story and Paley's experiences transform the film into a medium for Paley to confront a difficult time in her life and confront controversial aspects of the epic.

Along with juxtaposing *Ramayana* scenes with personal life events and commentary, the film presents an array of animation styles resembling medieval Mughal art, her own modern, cartoonish style, and others.⁸² Paley herself has stated that in making the film she read a variety of *Ramayana* versions translated into English, including Valmiki's, read scholarly articles about the epic, watched part of the Indian *Ramayan* TV series from the 1980s, and researched diverse

⁸² Melwani, "'Sita Sings the Blues' to Rave Reviews."

Ramayana art traditions.⁸³ Thus, her diverse animation styles reference the vast diversity of the *Ramayana* tradition and acknowledge it is not monolithic. As noted by Nina Paley and many scholars, such as A.K. Ramanujan and Nabaneeta Dev Sen, there are countless ways to retell the *Ramayana* as well as numerous versions of the narrative created and cherished throughout the world by a variety of social and regional groups, especially in South and Southeast Asia.⁸⁴ Paley's breadth of engagement with *Ramayana* narratives, scholarship, and art demonstrates she intended the film to be consistent with the *Ramayana* tradition.

Paley's interpretation of and interactions with the *Ramayana* narrative result in a retelling consonant with Hindu *Ramayana* variants such as the Valmiki version and the Chandravati version versions, although hers is not told from a Hindu perspective. Instead, Paley's *Ramayana* reflects her own social realities and social commentary based on her status as a middle-class, secular Jewish American woman living in the early twenty-first century. Her narrative juxtaposes her own painful separation from her husband with the suffering of Sita at the hands of patriarchal systems and Rama's ill-treatment of her.

The film opens with a glittering cartoon Lakshmi dancing to a record of Annette Hanshaw singing of how much she loves her man despite his meanness and how he "needs a kind of woman like me."⁸⁵ "A woman like me," repeats because of a stuck phonograph needle until

⁸³ Alex Remington, "Interview with Nina Paley, Animator and Director of *Sita Sings the Blues*, a Fantastic Jazz Musical Retelling of the *Ramayana*," *Huffington Post* (blog), April 3, 2010, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/alex-remington/interview-with-nina-paley_b_445444.html.

⁸⁴ Remington; Dev Sen, "When Women Retell the *Ramayan*"; A. K. Ramanujan, "Three Hundred *Ramayanas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," in *Many *Ramayanas*: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1991).

⁸⁵ Nina Paley, *Sita Sings the Blues* (GKIDS, 2008), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgQm3V3cuKs>, 1:16-1:47.

Lakshmi leans over to fix it, falls over, and explodes into nothingness.⁸⁶ The repeat of that phrase along with the explosion after Lakshmi falls foreshadows the ill-fate that results from overattachment to an intimate partner to a harmful degree in both Sita's and Paley's stories. It then depicts Lakshmi rubbing the legs and feet of a reclining Vishnu.⁸⁷ This is a particularly striking image if one takes into account traditional Hindu attitudes regarding feet. The feet are the most ritually impure parts of the body; therefore, touching them is a sign of possessing low hierarchical position in relation to the owner of the feet.⁸⁸ Moreover, touching the feet of a "ritually superior person or deity," can be performed as a sacred act that could even have not only devotional but also salvific qualities.⁸⁹ This subtle detail in the film indicates Lakshmi has a lower hierarchical position than Vishnu and that she is highly devoted to her consort. Lakshmi rubbing Vishnu's feet represents the patriarchal social norms where the woman is subordinate to men, especially her husband. This echoes not only Brahmanical rules that a wife worships her husband, but also traditional expectations in the United States where, up until early the nineteenth-century, the wife only legally existed as the same person as the husband.⁹⁰ In the U.S., it is still customary for a woman to take the surname of her husband; in courts, the husband is more often legally obligated to provide for his wife than vice versa.⁹¹ Likewise, Hindu civil law codes require that men care for women's well-being.⁹² These reflect similar patriarchal

⁸⁶ Paley, 1:50-1:54.

⁸⁷ See *figure 3*; Paley, 3:27.

⁸⁸ John E Cort, "Feet & Footwear in Indian Culture," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 9, no. 1-3 (January 2005): 172-73.

⁸⁹ Cort.

⁹⁰ Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, 5.154; "Husband and Wife," *Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia* (Chicago: World Books, 2017), <https://sandiego.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=funk&AN=HU111800&site=eds-live>.

⁹¹ "Husband and Wife."

⁹² Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, 3.55-3.60.

attitudes between Brahmanical expectations reflected in the *Ramayana* and social norms in the U.S. that Paley is familiar with. More generally, the Lakshmi-Vishnu imagery demonstrates Paley has some degree of nuanced understanding of the Hindu tradition, from which the *Ramayana* originates, and intends to draw parallels between this system and her lived experienced as an American woman. It additionally foreshadows a recurring theme in the film of women unhealthily prioritizing their male partners over themselves, as personified in the pairs Nina (representing Nina Paley) and Dave (representing Paley's former husband), Lakshmi and Vishnu, and Sita and Rama.

The film next shifts to Nina's husband announcing he got a six-month contracted position in India and leaving on a plane. Then shadow puppet animations of Paley's Hindu friends (Aseem Chhabra, Bhavana Nagulapally, and Manish Acharya) introduce the *Ramayana* beginning with Kaikeyi's boon, which forces the King of Ayodhya to banish Rama, followed by a scene depicting Rama leaving Ayodhya in exile.⁹³ In their narration, Chhabra, Nagulapally, and Acharya squabble over the details of the story. Visual depictions of their words appear on and off the screen as they agree and disagree on details such as the epic's time period, how Rama's father dies, and the many names of Sita. Their squabbling contributes to the film's humorous, unpolished quality which reflects the *Ramayana*'s deep influence even on ordinary people and its diversity of traditions exemplified by the numerous names used for Sita. In fact, many of these names for Sita appear in Chandravati's rendition.⁹⁴

⁹³ Paley, 7:04-11:39.

⁹⁴ Candrāvati, *A Woman's Rāmāyaṇa*.

Rama tells Sita that forest is too dangerous for her but she insists, “I will accept any hardship. I cannot live without you.”⁹⁵ Once again Sita echoes complete dependence on Rama, with the words “I cannot live without you,” skipping on the same animated phonograph as earlier. Paley illustrates Sita singing her joy at being together with Rama while comedically exaggerated animations play by of Rama smiling, dancing, and twirling while killing demons.⁹⁶ The absurdity of Rama casually killing scores of demons in the background as Sita sings serves a similar purpose as Chandravati’s use of brief dream sequences of Rama’s battles to de-emphasize bloody heroic deeds. Moreover, Rama’s and Nina’s husband’s seemingly detached personas parallel each other, bringing the women’s unquestioning acceptance of their husbands’ indifferent attitudes into focus.

Juxtaposed scenes of Nina and Dave kissing good-bye in the airport, the narrators introducing Ravana, and the events leading up to Ravana’s abduction of Sita communicate that Paley feels a connection between her physical separation from her husband with Sita’s physical separation from Rama.⁹⁷ Paley uses the basic *Ramayana* plot as a device to express her experiences like the Valmiki and Chandravati renditions. However, Paley’s account has an individualistic focus. Her individualistic focus mirrors the predominant social attitudes favoring individualism in the United States as opposed to more collectivist attitudes reflected in the Valmiki and Chandravati versions.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Paley, *Sita Sings the Blues*, 10:55-11:36.

⁹⁶ Paley, 11:39-14:33.

⁹⁷ Paley, 14:37-22:41.

⁹⁸ George Gao, “How Do Americans Stand Out from the Rest of the World?,” *Pew Research Center*, March 12, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/12/how-do-americans-stand-out-from-the-rest-of-the-world/>.

Shurpanakha convinces Ravana to kidnap Sita by saying, “Dear brother, Ravana, have you seen Rama's wife Sita? She is the most beautiful woman in the world. Her skin is fair like the lotus blossom. Her eyes are like lotus pools. Her hands are like... um... lotuses. Her breasts like big, round, firm, juicy lotuses!”⁹⁹ *Sita Sings the Blues*, like the Valmiki *Ramayana*, emphasizes the physical beauty of Sita, but in an absurd manner. The Valmiki *Ramayana* describes Sita as a “beauty without equal on earth” and repeatedly describes her attractive attributes.¹⁰⁰ Paley visually depicts Sita in multiple styles which all show her as an attractive woman with smooth skin, a slim waist, and long, smooth black hair. In a cartoonish, squiggly style, Sita is depicted with exaggerated proportions with large circular breasts, wide hips, and an extremely slim waist.¹⁰¹ This specific depiction of Sita presents her in a manner which exaggerates a common beauty ideal in Paley’s contemporary society that a woman must possess an “hourglass figure” to be the most attractive.¹⁰² Paley’s critique of the patriarchal conception that a woman’s value heavily relies on her appearance, as is made clear in the aforementioned interaction between Ravana and his sister. Her social commentary resembles Chandravati’s in her portrayal of Ravana kidnapping Sita against her will out of lustful desire.

Meanwhile, prior to and during her abduction, Sita sings next to an altar with Rama’s image. She describes herself as a slave to Rama, loving him more than herself, and that she would do anything for him.¹⁰³ By repeatedly exaggerating the extent of Sita’s devotion to Rama, Paley paints her as unhealthily obsessed with him to a degree that she does not care for herself.

⁹⁹ Paley, 16:51-17:36.

¹⁰⁰ Peltier, “Sita’s Story,” 83.

¹⁰¹ See *figure 1*

¹⁰² Barnaby Dixon et al., “Eye-Tracking of Men’s Preferences for Waist-to-Hip Ratio and Breast Size of Women,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 40, no. 1 (February 2011): 43, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-009-9523-5>.

¹⁰³ Paley, *Sita Sings the Blues*, 19:21-21:55.

Although Sita is also shown treating Rama like her god in the Valmiki and Chandravati *Ramayanas*, Paley does this in order to problematize Sita's behavior and in doing so reflects Paley's identification with modern feminist values not found in the Hindu Brahmanical tradition. Just as Sita's separation from Rama is caused by her abduction, Nina's separation is prolonged after receiving a brief, late-night phone call from Dave informing her his contract was extended an additional year.¹⁰⁴ Distressed, Nina cries, "What about me? What about Lexi [the pet cat]? What about our apartment? What about us?!" Dave only replies with an "um," a statement of his love for her, and an invitation for her to come to India to see him.¹⁰⁵ Nina's great anguish over her separation from Dave contrasts sharply to his lukewarm response. Likewise, Sita's disproportionate devotion to Rama in relation to Rama's more lukewarm devotion to her is reflected in his, usually, monotone voice.

Paley's shadow puppet narrators describe Sita, trapped in Lanka, fervently praying to Rama despite the demonesses scaring her.¹⁰⁶ When Rama finally comes to save her, Sita joyfully sings "I had a feeling something good was going to happen today," while Rama and his army, with smiles on their faces, massacre Ravana and the demons.¹⁰⁷ The disturbing juxtaposition of bloody body parts flying in the air, Sita's joyous singing, and the smiles of Rama and the army call into question the righteousness of Sita's insistence that Rama saves her. As the puppet narrators note, Sita's refusal to go with Hanuman causes much bloodshed for the sake of glorifying Rama.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Paley, 24:48-25:08.

¹⁰⁵ Paley, 25:08-25:36.

¹⁰⁶ Paley, 25:33-26:00.

¹⁰⁷ Paley, 33:15-36:05.

¹⁰⁸ Paley, 31:00-31:32.

After Sita is saved from her trial by fire by Agni, the god of fire, Rama simply says, “Oops, I guess you were pure after all” and Sita replying “I live only for you.”¹⁰⁹ The scene of the first trial by fire generally portrays Rama as disturbingly uncompassionate and Sita as overly forgiving of him. It also allows Paley to critique the patriarchal emphasis on a woman’s worth being based on her “purity” because she portrays Rama’s love being contingent on her “purity” (even, for example, if she was raped) as ridiculous and harmful.

The rejection of these patriarchal expectations and ill-treatment in the film begins after Nina leaves India to New York for a short business trip and receives an email from Dave reading, “Don’t come back. Love, Dave.”¹¹⁰ Nina’s heart literally shatters, she screams, and a song sequence (titled *Agni Pariksha* meaning “fire ordeal”) of an Indian woman immolating herself and dancing follows.¹¹¹ Next, Paley juxtaposes Sita’s despair during exile of Rama’s rejection with Nina’s despair. While Sita cries and does *puja* to Rama every day, Nina calls Dave to beg him to take her back.¹¹² Some of the narrators insightfully comment that Sita, and by extension Nina or any woman, “shouldn’t love someone who treats her so badly.”¹¹³ In these details, Nina Paley expresses a powerful critique of romanticized ideas of unconditional love that convince women to stay in abusive or one-sided relationships. Paley then reinforces the idea that the ideal man should not be cruel or abusive by presenting a mocking song, taught by Valmiki to Sita and Rama’s sons, that ironically calls Rama a “perfect man... always right, never wrong,” then lists his wrongdoings such as lighting Sita ablaze, exiling her, and putting “duty first, Sita

¹⁰⁹ Paley, 43:15-43:25.

¹¹⁰ Paley, 51:14.

¹¹¹ See *figure 2*; Paley, 51:33-54:36.

¹¹² Paley, 1:00:05- 1:04:35, 1:06:39-1:07:03.

¹¹³ Paley, 1:07:10-1:08:07.

last.”¹¹⁴ As in Chandravati’s version, Paley clearly rejects the Valmiki *Ramayana*’s presentation of Rama as the ideal man.

After Rama finds the twins singing his praises, Rama demands a trial by fire again for Sita to prove her purity and return to the kingdom.¹¹⁵ Sita responds, “If I have always been true to Rama, if I have never thought of another man, if I am completely pure in body and soul then may Mother Earth take me back into her womb,” and eagerly jumps into the belly of the goddess of the earth.¹¹⁶ Sita gleefully sings and sinks into the earth while those watching, including Rama, Valmiki, and the sons, watch in shock.¹¹⁷ A single tear goes down Rama’s face once she disappears signaling he has finally realized his wrongdoings.¹¹⁸ This is followed by a scene showing Nina contentedly living on her own with her pet cat, animating (presumably) the film, and reading the *Ramayana*.¹¹⁹ These scenes show both Sita and Nina Paley coming to terms with their separation from their partners with the message that women should not tolerate maltreatment, including by their partners. Additionally, the scene of Nina reading the *Ramayana* signify that engaging with its narrative served as a powerful means for Paley to come to terms with a painful event in her life in a way that parallels Chandravati writing her *Ramayana* to deal with her ex-fiancé’s rejection and suicide.

Finally, while the film’s opening shows Vishnu reclining with the universe spinning around his finger and Lakshmi massaging his feet, the ending reverses this image.¹²⁰ Instead,

¹¹⁴ Paley, 1:05:03-1:06:18.

¹¹⁵ Paley, 1:11:31-1:11:56.

¹¹⁶ Paley, 1:11:58-1:12:58.

¹¹⁷ Paley, 11:12:47-11:15:45.

¹¹⁸ Paley, 1:16:08.

¹¹⁹ Paley, 1:16:19- 1:17:04.

¹²⁰ See *figures 3 and 4*; Paley, 3:15.

Lakshmi reclines with the universe spinning around her finger and Vishnu massages her feet.¹²¹

Therefore, Lakshmi becomes Vishnu's superior and he worships her as opposed most of the *Ramayana* narrative in which Sita worships Rama. This reversal declares that women should be empowered, not subjugated whether by their partners or society and that men are not superior to women. Overall, the Chandravati *Ramayana* and *Sita Sings the Blues* powerfully express their female composers' experiences, social critiques, and promote a message of female empowerment through their representations of the narrative and characters.

Conclusion

Chandravati's *Ramayana* and Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* are narrative responses which retell the *Ramayana* in a way which allows them to critically engage, from a woman's perspective, with the patriarchal messages communicated in the original story. They utilize the narrative to relate their experiences with Sita's and critique their androcentric societies by rejecting the widely held notion that Rama is the ideal man. Unlike the Valmiki story, these narratives emphasize Sita's experience over that of Rama's. The Valmiki *Ramayana*, on the other hand, is rooted in a hierarchical, patriarchal society dominated by male *brahmin* elites. The Valmiki rendition expresses social norms, social commentary, and represent Sita's transformation from the perspective of the same male *brahmins* who set the rules for society at that time. The Valmiki *Ramayana*, Chandravati *Ramayana*, and *Sita Sings the Blues* all use the *Ramayana* narrative and tradition to convey their tellers' respective social statuses, scrutinize societal expectations, and portray Sita undergoing a transformation. The profound reinterpretation and retelling of the *Ramayana* in *Sita Sings the Blues* support that a non-Hindu

¹²¹ See figures 3 and 4; Paley, 1:17:30.

Westerner can produce an authentic engagement with the *Ramayana* epic. Nina Paley's 2008 film, *Sita Sings the Blues*, compellingly supports that the *Ramayana* is an internationally significant literary work which can inspire, engage, and challenge a multigenerational, multi-cultural audience regardless of time, place, or identity.

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Appendix
Stills from *Sita Sings the Blues*



Figure 1: The heroine, Sita.

Paley, Nina. *Sita Sings the Blues*. GKIDS, 2008.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgQm3V3cuKs>, 12:03.



Figure 2: Woman dancing in fire.

Paley, Nina. *Sita Sings the Blues*. GKIDS, 2008.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgQm3V3cuKs>, 52:05.



Figure 3: Lakshmi rubbing Vishnu's feet.

Paley, Nina. *Sita Sings the Blues*. GKIDS, 2008.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgQm3V3cuKs>, 3:15.



Figure 4: Vishnu rubbing Lakshmi's feet.

Paley, Nina. *Sita Sings the Blues*. GKIDS, 2008.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgQm3V3cuKs>, 1:17:30.