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Movies

"Sita Sings the Blues" to Rave Reviews

Nina Paley's solo production of Sita's story from the Ramayana is an enchanting, irreverent animated movie that Hindus either love or hate

Nina Paley is half revelation, half revolution. A Western woman who took an Eastern story and with a personal computer single-handedly animated a full-length film that received accolades from Roger Ebert and attacks from conservative Hindus, a story that morphed into a protracted fight with Sony and others about copyrights, catapulting the artist into an Internet hero and her struggle into a cause celebre for Creative Commons, a flexible rights model being evolved to meet the needs of a digital era. Come as we share the tale, the adventure, the trials of Nina Paley's Ramayana.

By Lavina Melwani, New York

When you see Sita rising from the ocean on a lotus, you are struck by her beauty and the sheer limpid depths of her eyes. A whimsical, record-playing peacock is nearby, the bird's neck the tone arm and beak the stylus, scratching out the liltingly lyrical music to which Sita gently gyrates. The song, sung in the honey-rich, plaintive voice of Annette Hanshaw, the popular blues singer from the 1920s, is Mean to Me: "Moanin' Low, my sweet man I love him so/though he's mean as can be/He's the kind of man needs a kind of woman like me/a woman like me...."

Welcome to Nina Paley's animated film, "Sita Sings the Blues"--yet another retelling of India's great epic, Ramayana, narrated as "the greatest breakup story ever told." Perhaps it would be more accurate to call it, as some have done, Sitayana--for it tells the tale from the perspective of Sita, not unlike the oral retellings through the ages by village women that made Sita the focus of the story. Only, here, the story is told through the jazz tradition of "torch songs," of a lovely,

smoky-voiced lament at home in a dark New York lounge or bar, not the rural outposts of India.

This low budget movie (see it for free at sitasingstheblues.com), conjured up on the computer by a single animator/artist over the course of five tedious years, has made big waves. It's probably one of the most awarded and lavishly reviewed little films of the year. It has won fans and great praise--along with ample scorn and hate mail.

Roger Ebert, the famed Chicago critic, blogged his reaction: "I am enchanted. I am swept away. I am smiling from one end of the film to the other. It is astonishingly original." He named it as one of the ten best animated films for 2009.

Watching the film, you are amazed at the lush details, the rich landscapes, the bloody battles, the burning city of Lanka and the cast of thousands, including strange demons and the mighty monkey army. All this was pulled off by a petite woman named Nina Paley, who became producer, director, creator, editor, songwriter and marketer for this whimsical little animated meteor.

The film is like a child's kaleidoscope--twirl it around and those unmatched, multicolored pieces of glass mutate and form the most amazing, unexpected patterns. Many different influences, emotions and memories--past and present--have gone into this unorthodox retelling of the Ramayana, depending a lot on intuition and serendipity.

Paley is a syndicated comic strip artist (Hots, Fluff), an award-winning short film-maker (Storks), a professor at Parsons School of Design and a 2006 Guggenheim Fellow. Ask her about her witty, slightly irreverent retelling of the Ramayana and she mulls aloud, "Well, I think really good stories are living things. The Ramayana has been alive for 2,000-3,000 years, maybe even longer. It is a living story, and that's the trait of really good stories--they live in all these different versions."

So what was the route which brought Paley to the Ramayana? She grew up many

light years away from this text, in Urbana, Illinois. The daughter of a math professor, she lived on the campus of the University of Illinois. She recalls, "Even though it's in the middle of corn country, it was in some ways a cosmopolitan, academic town with professors from all over the world, including Asian and South Asian professors." She even had Indian friends as roommates in college.

The daughter of atheist parents of Jewish heritage, she didn't develop an interest in religion till her late teens. She took some religious study classes in college, but religion frightened her initially.

"Why would you believe in some power that could be capricious and malicious? I have enough trouble pleasing my parents and my teachers, why would I want to add to that and need to please God all the time?" she asks about that early questioning. "But growing older, I became interested in my judgments, and my fascination increased."

Paley explored the literature of different religions--"That's another way of saying myths. That's not saying they are not true, but they are stories with a spiritual component. I feel the stories really talk about being human. I don't identify with any religion, but I do have spiritual experiences and I find myself relating to all kinds of religious stories--not just the Ramayana but also Biblical stories. There's a lot to relate to."

Curious and open to all the religions, she still doesn't want to identify with any one to the exclusion of the others: "I'm not into the dogma part of religion or being in an adversarial relation with others. I'd rather have none and explore all, rather than be attached to one, to the exclusion of the others," she says. Of religious mythologies, she says: "I'm moved by them. I think what the stories are talking about is another layer of reality--I don't take them literally--I think all religious stories are talking about deeper aspects of humanity."

A Woman Scorned

So how did this American version of the Ramayana come about? Paley first

encountered the epic in 2002 when she followed her husband, an animator, who had been transferred to Trivandrum, India. While visiting New York for work, she had a cryptic e-mail from him telling her not to come back. It was abandonment by e-mail. Devastated, she started seeing parallels between her own life and that of Sita, who was basically abandoned by Rama after she had been abducted by Ravana, the King of Lanka, and her "purity" was in question.

This was a sad, dispirited time for Paley. She could not return to their apartment in San Francisco, since it had been sublet, so she slept on the sofas of friends in New York. In one such home, she encountered the vocals of Annette Hanshaw and identified with them completely. Hanshaw was one of the first popular jazz singers, well liked in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Like the pieces of a puzzle, Hanshaw's sad, lamenting lyrics fit in totally with Paley's story--and with that of Sita. "I thought it was so obvious, I was surprised that no one had combined them together before," she says. She found it cathartic to work at the computer on her own personal Ramayana, and bit by bit it came into being.

Ramayana tells the story of Prince Rama, who has been banished to the forests for 14 years due to a boon given to his stepmother by his father, King Dasharatha. Ever the good son, Rama heads to exile with his loving wife Sita, who insists on accompanying him. When Sita is abducted by the ten-headed Ravana, King of Lanka, Rama battles the evil forces and gets her back. But the relationship is never the same, for doubt about his wife's fidelity has set in, and Rama, ever the king and Ideal Man, feels he must uphold the moral dharma.

Paley's rendition is not so much feminist as personal. She sees herself in Sita; and in Rama, she sees all callous, spouse-abandoning men--including her ex-husband (who actually signed off on the film). Paley's focus is on Sita and her inner struggles revealed through song. As she writes, "Sita's story moves from total enmeshment and romantic joy (Here We Are, What Wouldn't I Do for That Man) to hopeful longing separation (Daddy Won't You Please Come Home) to reunion (Who's That Knockin' At My Door) to romantic rejection (Mean to Me) to reconciliation (If You Want the Rainbow) to further rejection (Moanin' Low, Am I Blue) to hopeless longing (Lover Come Back to Me) back to love--this time self-love (I've Got a Feelin' I'm Fallin').

The film came into being as Paley listened to these songs in her friend's apartment. She feels there could be no film without them, because they capture the emotions so well. One wonders what Annette Hanshaw's reaction would have been

to the movie. Paley says, "Hanshaw didn't have any children, but her nephew told me that Annette would have liked it. I was very pleased with that."

What gives the movie its bite is that Rama is portrayed with little sympathy, though his reasons for abandoning Sita are voiced by the puppets. They offer the traditional view: as the king, Rama had to remove any source of criticism in his personal life, even if that required abandoning his pregnant wife.

A Medley of Animation Styles

Paley's film juxtaposes several different animation styles, ranging from ancient Mughal renderings to a hasty, hand-drawn, squiggly animation used to tell the subplot of her own love, marriage and abandonment. "I wanted to give a little taste of the different styles of Ramayana that exist--different times, regions and traditions," she says, mentioning the different Ramayana art she had seen during her research. "I also wanted to keep myself from being bored!"

While most of the animation is computer generated, the Mughal miniature figures were hand-drawn on parchment paper using antique water colors and were quite time consuming.

Indeed, the different styles actually reflect Paley's experience of the Ramayana. "It's not as if I grew up with the Ramayana," she explains. "I came to the story when I was 34. The first one I read was a comic book; and since then, I have read different Ramayanas and talked to different people about the Ramayana--and no two stories were the same, and that just gets reflected in the film."

As times change, perhaps there will be more and more ways of telling ancient stories. Nabaneeta Dev Sen gives an analysis of the many interpretations women have made of the Ramayana in her Manushi magazine essay, "[Lady Sings the Blues: When Women Retell the Ramayana](#)" "There are always alternative ways of using a myth. If patriarchy has used the Sita myth to silence women, the village women have picked up the Sita myth to give themselves a voice. They have found a suitable mask in the myth of Sita, a persona through which they can express

themselves, speak of their day-to-day problems, and critique patriarchy in their own fashion." Nabaneeta never thought an American would do just that.

The Songs Copyright Fight

Annette Hanshaw's stirring songs, so tightly woven into the movie, proved to be another trial by fire for Paley. Only after pouring all her resources into *Sita Sings the Blues* did she learn that releasing it was illegal: though the recordings of the songs were in the public domain, the lyrics were not.

Unable to pay the huge amount demanded to license the lyrics, Paley decided to resolve the copyright impasse by donating her film to the public. It can be seen and downloaded freely on the Internet, and it has been shown at countless film festivals, winning many awards. The law prohibits its entry into the Academy Awards.

Paley's offering of her work to all is in the tradition of the Ramayana itself--a story freely shared by all through the centuries. "Imagine if the Ramayana was copyrighted, nobody would be able to share it--there wouldn't be all those diverse retellings," she elucidates. "I think the Ramayana aspect of the movie did make me open up more to the idea of freeing up my movie."

Paley finally went into debt to completely "decriminalize" her film, paying a negotiated fee of \$50,000 and almost \$20,000 in legal fees for the right to use the songs in the film and market it freely. She says, "Having paid off the licensors, I could have chosen conventional distribution. But I chose a Creative Commons license to allow the film to reach a much wider audience; to prohibit the copyrighting--'locking up'--of my art; to give back to the greater culture which gave to me; to exploit the power of the audience to promote and distribute more efficiently than a conventional distributor; and to educate about the dangers of copy restrictions, and the beauty and benefits of sharing."

As the poster child for shared culture, artist/activist Paley has gained fans and fame. Word of mouth has built up the buzz, and speaking engagements as well as revenue sharing, artwork and product sales are in the works. She is proving that

society rewards artists who refuse to sell their soul.

How She Made the Film

Paley's film came about very much by serendipity as she encountered second-generation South Asian actors and dancers in New York City, and found the voices in them for her Gods, kings and demons. While Valmiki's Ram and Sita are consistently good (and hence a trifle boring), Paley's Ram and Sita are more human and show the mixed emotions, angst and egos of real humans.

Paley enlisted three New Yorkers, Manish Acharya, Bhavna and Aseem Chhabra, to improvise and offer their thoughts on the Ramayana, its characters, their halos and their warts. These became the voices of three Indonesian shadow puppets in the film, irreverent and outspoken commentators on the Ramayana, bringing it right into today's contemporary world. Amazingly, these critical scenes were not scripted, but recorded spontaneously.

"We sat in a recording studio and she threw questions at us in chronological order--who was Dasharatha? How many wives? How many sons?" recalls Chhabra. "Our responses, which became a part of the narrative of the film, were completely improvised, unprepared and organic. At some stage we started giving a human face to the characters from the religious text. Then it was Nina who decided how to use our conversations -- as a narrative to bind together the three different strains of animation."

Chhabra, an entertainment writer, believes the film is unique--funny, creative and, overall, respectful of the Ramayana story while viewing the narrative from Sita's perspective. While Sita Sings the Blues has received many awards, it has been through a ton of trouble and also been vilified in some circles. Yet its very existence tells us something about Paley's tenacity and sheer chutzpah.

"Nina truly enjoys controversy, and nothing scares her," says Chhabra. "She has gone through so much financial hell making this film. But it is wonderful to see her get recognition and love from the audience and the critics. She is a rare filmmaker,

who always wants to share the accolades with her cast and crew."

That a single animator/artist could create an entire 80-minute film is only possible in the age of high-powered personal computers. Paley started with a Macintosh PowerBook G4 laptop in 2002 and completed the 1920 x 1080 rendering in 2007 on a 3 GHz Intel-powered Mac Pro tower. She worked mostly in Flash (creating over 500 individual files) from original watercolor paintings she rendered by hand and scanned in, using After Effects for the animations. People accustomed to hundreds of names on a film's credits marvel at her achievement, but she notes that great novels have historically been done by dedicated individuals, and computers make moviemaking on a par with complex novel writing.

A Hindu Backlash

One Hindu group called it "derogatory and extremely insulting to Hindu culture." The movie has been shown in some private settings in India but has not been distributed there yet in any centralized way. It has generated a lot of comments on the Internet, including personally abusive comments. "You should see the ones I haven't published," she laments. "They are grotesque!"

Positive comments have outweighed the negative ones. "The Ramayana is complex, dynamic, and relevant to life today, and the film exemplifies this," one viewer wrote after watching a segment on YouTube. "All Hindus should be happy that it still resonates around the world."

"Grow up! The world is changing all around you! Your old voice will not be able to continue unless you adapt to new ways of telling old stories!" wrote another.

"In India a holy book, even Ramayana, was never considered to be unchangeable.... in fact, almost 200 versions of Ramayana exist all over India, each having a different depiction and even a different character assuming the central role.... so no need to be so touchy," wrote yet another viewer.

To those who criticize Paley for showing Sita as curvaceous and scantily clad, she points out that she uses three different forms of animation to depict Sita--including a well-covered Indian Mughal miniature-style. She uses the more buxom version during the jazz musical numbers to highlight the heroine's physical beauty. "It makes overt what Sita's burden was. She is so pure and devoted to Rama, and she's so attractive. It was her beauty which caused Ravana to objectify her and steal her--she was really a pure soul."

Paley points out that many ancient texts, including the Sanskrit Valmiki version, of which there is an elaborate English translation online, depict Sita's physical endowments in great detail. She reasons, "We consider that depiction of the woman degrading to women somehow--showing these aspects of women is considered bad--yet why should a womanly depiction be anything to do with her character?"

Paley says the film has no agenda, let alone a feminist agenda. She does put harsh words into the mouths of Luv and Kush, about how their father treated their mother. "The Ramayana devotes pages and pages to how righteous he was, that he was a perfect man, and the fact that he abandons his wife seems to be no big deal. No matter what Rama does, he is praised."

One could say it's a Ramayana for our times. We've all seen the image of the mighty Lord Vishnu reclining on the Sesh Naga with Lakshmi massaging His feet. In Nina Paley's ending, you have Lakshmi reclining on the Sesh Naga with Lord Vishnu massaging Her feet! There is a delicious irony in this, and somehow Nina Paley gets the last laugh. P!pi

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