



LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND SOCIETY

LANGUAGE
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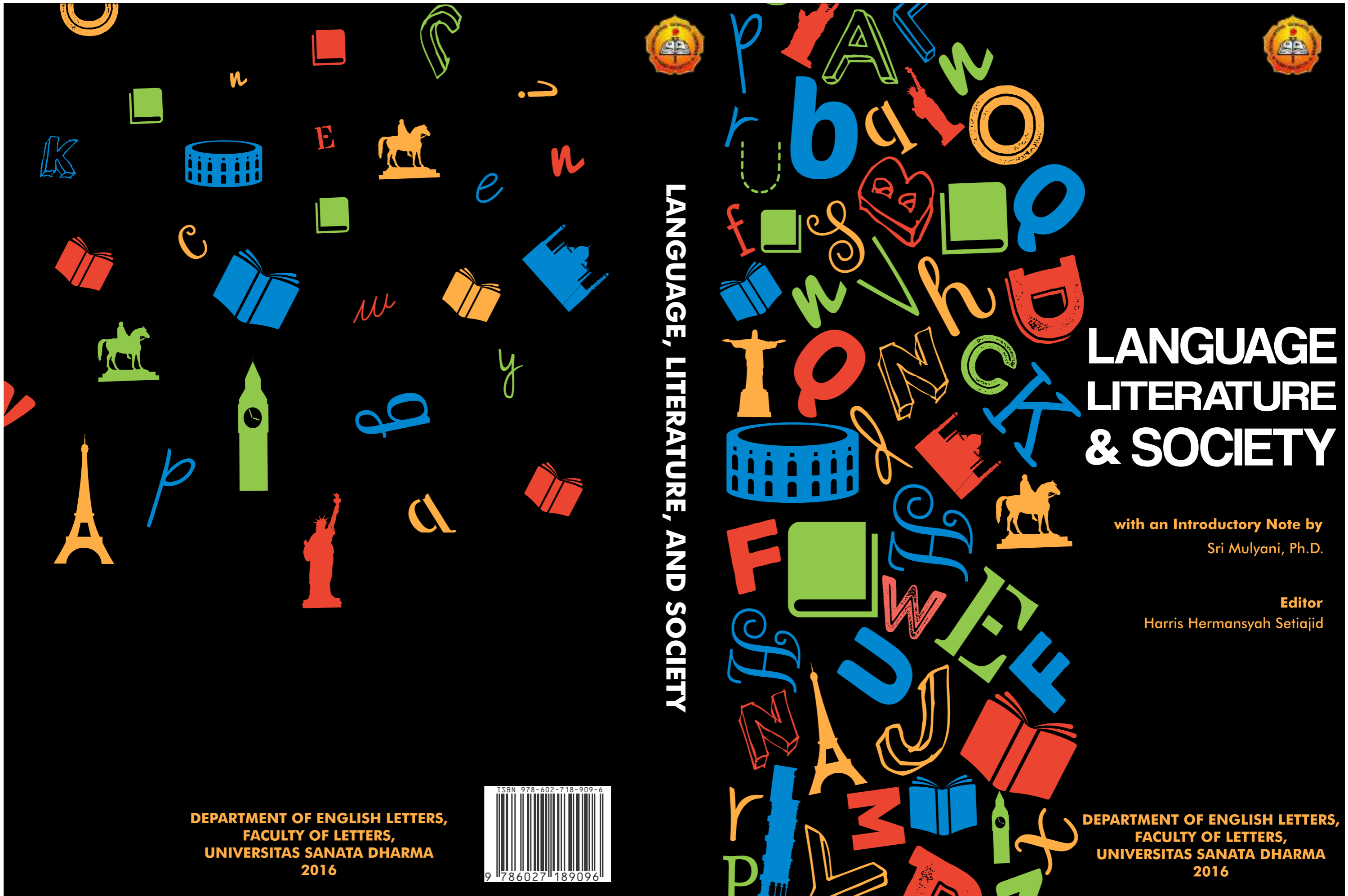
with an Introductory Note by
Sri Mulyani, Ph.D.

Editor
Harris Hermansyah Setiajidi

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LETTERS,
FACULTY OF LETTERS,
UNIVERSITAS SANATA DHARMA
2016



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Language, Literature & Society

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Sita's Representation in *Sita Sings the Blues*: A Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract

Sita Sings the Blues is a movie depicting quite a different story of the Ramayana. It depicts Sita in a very different manner. Due to the reason mentioned earlier, this research intends to find out who or what Sita represents in the movie. She might represent certain parties or ideologies. The research also attempts to seek the answer to how she exemplifies her representation. As a text, this movie is analyzed using semiotic approach. The analysis is focused on the connotative elements of each image to see what mythologies each image has and to answer the research questions.

Keywords: *Sita, semiotic analysis, connotative elements, and representation*

Introduction

Movies have been moving very fast recently. Corrigan and White state that movies have been such an important part of everyday experience for more than a century (2009: 6). Since they have been an important part of our lives then it is important to understand how they show and bring social significance. Movies tell specific stories of a certain society.

A movie to be studied in this research is Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues*. This movie is chosen to be studied in this research because it depicts quite a different story of the Ramayana. The basic outline is the story of Ramayana. However, some matters are very different. First, from the title *Sita Sings the Blues*, it can be concluded that Sita, the main character of the movie, involves a genre of music marking the struggle for survival although she does not sing the songs. Historically, blues is defined as follows.

Blues is an African-American music that traverses a wide range of emotions and musical styles. "Feeling blue" is expressed in songs whose verses lament injustice or express longing for a better life and lost loves, jobs, and money. But blues is also a raucous dance music that celebrates pleasure and success (retrieved on 2 September, 2015 from <http://www.internationalbluesmusicday.com/blues-history.html>)

Second, Sita appears to be a different woman. She is different from the "ordinary" Sita. According to Chanda, Sita in this movie finally rejects the man she loves (Rama) because he proves again and again that he cannot respect her bears (2011: 6). The extraordinary Sita is really featured in this movie. Further Chanda suggests that Sita has long been depicted as a long suffering, devoted doormat (2011: 7). In this movie, she refuses to be badly treated by her husband, Rama.

In most of the Ramayana stories, Sita is not given any space or chance to speak. Not only is she not given a chance to speak, but also there is absolute requirement of Sita's wifely fidelity to her husband under any circumstances and is considered as

cultural conservatism, not to say misogyny (Singh, 2009: 167). Moreover, Singh claims that while many contemporary Indian women accept the moral core of the story, especially as it relates to women, Sita may be thought of as more an unattainable ideal than a realistic model to emulate (2009: 169).

Some scholars, according to Richman, have explored ways to recover voices of silenced and/or marginalized groups, searching for vestiges in texts (2001: 16). Some efforts, however, have been made in realizing the “speaking Sita”. To mention some, first, Richman’s *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology* where in Part 1 (Sita in Context), there are ten stories about Sita showing readers her strength as a heroine of the epic as well as the heroine of India; second, Agarwal’s *Sita Speak* where Sita is not as imprisoned but as able to undergo constant renewal and all is written in a poem (in Richman, 2001: 17); finally, other effort is made by Paley in *Sita Sings the Blues*.

Just like other literary texts, the Ramayana is open for interpretation. One of the ways in interpreting it is by making a movie. Singh suggests that it is one thing to merely take a position of principle in favor of the right of writers, musicians, and artists to interpret the Ramayana in their own individual way (2009: 170). As one of the efforts to interpret the Ramayana especially through Sita, this movie offers the researcher to find out the meaning (s) of her actions she does in the movie. In the movie, Sita “is given” a space and chance to speak.

Nina Paley, as described by Singh, is an American animator with no particular connection to India prior to moving to join her husband, Dave, who happened to have been offered a job there in 2002 (2009: 171). Her break-up with her husband inspires her to create this movie. This movie bases its story on the Ramayana. This movie is unique because it combines shadow puppets and cartoon. In a scene, for example, it displays narrators in the form of shadow puppets and cartoon characters.

The movie as a text consisting of signs is going to be studied in this research using semiotic approach. Semiotics is the study of signs (Chandler, 2007: 1). There are two questions to answer in this research, namely (1) who and what does Sita represent, and (2) how does she exemplify her representation.

As the object to study, this movie is called genre. Danesi suggests that the various types of books, movies, and TV programs that are produced for mass consumption are called genres (2002: 22). Danesi adds that the study of media genre from the semiotic perspective was initiated by Roland Barthes in the 1950 (2002: 23). This research employs Saussure’s and Barthes’ Semiotics in Danesi’s *Understanding Media Semiotics*, Chandler’s *Semiotics: The Basics*, and Berger’s *Media Analysis Techniques* because it is much more prevalent to study the genre.

Discussion

This research, as has been mentioned before, relies heavily on the semiotic theory of Saussure and Barthes in Danesi’s, Chandler’s, and Berger’s. Saussure pioneered the structuralist semiotics in the nineteenth century. He believes that language is a purely semiotic system (as cited in Chandler, 2007: 5). In Semiotics, there are terms to understand. Among them are sign, signifier, signified, signification, code, representation, and connotation. Each term will be explained thoroughly. The explanation of each term will be followed by the elaboration of how the term applies to the movie being studied.

Sign is a meaningful unit which is interpreted as standing for something other than itself (Chandler, 2007: 260). Sign can be in the form of images, sounds, words, acts, and objects. In Saussure’s theory, sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier and signified (as cited in Chandler, 2007: 15). Danesi adds that sign is

defined as something physical (X) standing for something else (Y), material or conceptual, in some particular way (X=Y) (2002: 23).

Sita Sings the Blues consists of signs in the form of images, acts, and objects. In this research, the researcher does not include the words (in the dialogs) to study. In other words, this research excludes the words. It is because the researcher plans to do another research in the following term with the same object researching the signs in the form of words in the dialogs of this movie. Therefore, the signs to be studied are in the forms of images, acts, and objects.

Sita in this movie also presents signs in the form of acts, images, and objects to portray and depict something or some things which she feels and experiences. Anything that she does and shows is the language (in Hall's term) to represent certain matters. In other words, the language is the medium by which Sita shares her meanings.

Signifier is the sound pattern, or in Danesi's term, it is called the physical form (X), constructed with elements that can be seen (rather than heard, felt, smelled, etc) (2002: 24). Signified is the concept and this is psychological in nature. In relation to signifier and signified, Danesi elaborates that semiotically speaking, a message is a signifier and its meanings are its signifieds where the message can be routed directly from sender to receiver through physical link or electronic, mechanical, or digital media (2002: 18).

In *Sita Sings the Blues*, there are kinds of shots. Berger mentions that in a movie, there are important kinds of shots (close-up, medium shot, long shot, and full shot) which function as signifiers where each shot is signified something (2004: 33). Other matters to be considered as signifiers are camera work and editing technique. Shots, camera work, and editing techniques (pan down, pan up, dolly in, fade in, fade out, cut, and wipe) are, in Berger's, called "grammar of movie" (2004: 33).

The next semiotic term to explain is signification. In Saussurean model, signification is the relationship between the signifier and the signified (as cited in Chandler, 2007: 15). The term signification has so much to do with the primary object of media semiotics. Danesi mentions that the primary object of media semiotics is to study how the mass media create or recycle signs for their own ends (2002: 34). An example of signification is the semiotic story of Superman.

The story of Superman might remind us of Hercules, the hero in Greek mythology. Both of them share many things in common. They are both sent to Earth. Hercules and Superman sent to Earth to help humankind. They are endowed with ideal human nature such as honesty, truth, strong intuition, moral and physical strength, and courage. The two stories were created differently in accordance with the spirit of the age. Hercules was sent from the afterworld, while Superman was sent from another planet called Krypton. In the era of Greek civilization, it was hard, perhaps, to create and figure out the term "another planet". However, in the era of early modern technology in 1933, readers or viewers found it easy to figure out the term "Krypton".

Other things to note down in relation to the spirit of the age are occupation and costume. Clark Kent lives a double life as a hero and reporter working for a newspaper called the Daily Planet. In living his life as hero, he wears a very different and distinctive costume. This is the "Superman code". This costume is known worldwide. It is marking the fame of becoming a super hero. Thus, the "Superman code" makes it easy for people to tell Superman and, let us say, Batman apart.

From the discussion on the previous paragraphs, it can be concluded that Superman has values possessed by Hercules. In other words, he is a recycled hero (Danesi, 2002: 35). People of the old time and modern-day all need heroes to make things right.

Accordingly, Sita in *Sita Sings the Blues* also reminds the audience of Sita in the Ramayana since the movie is the reproduction of the Ramayana (Wedhowerti, 2014:

114). Sita is the loyal wife of Rama. She dedicates her life to her husband. When there are unpleasant things experienced by her, especially regarding Rama's treatment to her, Sita in the Ramayana does not do anything. It is different, however, from Sita in the movie. Therefore, in the Analysis Section, the researcher will provide the signification system of Sita in the Ramayana and Sita in the movie.

Code refers to the means or devices where people or viewers interpret the signs. Besides the code of both Superman and Hercules, another example of a code is rock music. There are codes in rock music because this genre of music has developed well over time. There are stylistic differences, such as how the songs are composed and performed; how the vocalist appears; how the other members of the band appear; and the difference in logo of each band. Accordingly, there are 1970s rock code; 1980s rock code; classic rock code; sweet rock code; and heavy metal code.

The next term to discuss now is representation. Movies are also a form of cultural representation. How is that so? What is meant by representation? According to Danesi, the process of recording ideas, knowledge, or messages in some physical way is called representation in semiotic theory (2002: 3). In addition, this can be defined more precisely as the use of signs (pictures, sounds, etc.) to relate, depict, portray, or reproduce something perceived, sensed, imagined, or felt in some physical form (2002: 3).

Media are chosen to show how something is represented. Years ago, people enjoyed the story of Ramayana through books, story-telling, cards, and watching performances of shadow puppets in an auditorium. However today, people easily find the series or movies of Ramayana on TV, DVD, and other advanced devices. These different ways of portraying King Rama, therefore, mediate the meaning of how the heroic sense of Rama is represented. In short, the way something is represented, and the medium chosen to do so, can greatly influence how people perceive it (Danesi, 2002: 18).

Paley chooses movie as a medium to reproduce the Ramayana. The reason for choosing this is because of its fast movement. Movies are worldwide and widely accepted. Therefore, Sita and the meanings that she brings through the signs are easily accessed and reached by the audience worldwide.

The next term to introduce is connotation. The term is often described in terms of levels of representation or levels of meaning (Chandler, 2007: 139). Moreover, Barthes argues that connotation comprises signifiers, signifieds, and signification (1964: 91). This term is more cultural. It means that it refers to socio-cultural and personal associations (ideological, emotional, etc.) of the sign or is closely related to the interpreter's class, age, gender, ethnicity, and so on (Chandler, 2007: 138).

This movie can be interpreted connotatively. This process involves and heavily depends on the researcher's cultural background. The process of interpretation might be different; especially regarding the fact that the researcher is a person being familiar with the Ramayana of Valmiki. The interpretation is provided below.

There are seven images to analyze. The analysis is sequenced from image 1 to image 7. The numbering of image is based on the sequence of scenes where the images are taken in the movie.

1. Image 1



Image 1 depicts Sita and a broken record player both standing on a lotus flower. Sita has four hands which is also the resemblance to goddess Laxmi. She wears sari (Indian cloth worn by women). Goddess Laxmi, in Indian tradition, is the goddess of beauty. Sita's physical appearance represents Eastern style (in Indian's *sari* or specific Indian cloth worn by women). The scene is mostly blue meaning that there is mystery. The close medium shot on Sita signifies the personal relationship with audience that the audience can take a look at her closely to see what is going on. Her face is also sad while singing. A prop (a broken record player) connotes Sita's feeling. She's feeling blue, sad, and desperate because of something mysterious. This is also led by camera work where the camera is moving in showing the observation or focus on how Sita's feeling.

2. Image 2



Image 2 shows Sita and Rama where each of them standing on a snowy mountain. Snow is frozen cold. This connotes Rama's heart which is frozen cold. The color is mostly blue representing mystery. The kind of shot is long meaning that there is a

distance between Sita and Rama. Snowy mountain connotes big complicated problems. The color of the snow is grey symbolizing dullness and mystery. There are snowflakes representing beauty. Sita is singing beautifully. Despite of her feeling, she shows her beautiful face with wide-opened eyes. She is brave to sing to conquer her sadness and problems. This is represented by her position of standing on the mountain.

3. Image 3



Image 3 shows Sita and her friends singing. The medium shot type allows audience to see her closer looking at her expression while singing. She is highlighted by being put in a light. She's given a prominent position. Stars above and beside her connote dreams. She has dreams, hope, and light to go through her life no matter how sad she is. The background is red symbolizing passion yet anger to her husband, Rama, over his unkind treatment to her. She is singing with wide-opened eyes showing her bravery. Sita's physical appearance, according to Singh, resembles Betty Boop related to Annette Hanshaw's era in the late of 1920s (2009: 171). This cultural reference is certainly clear. Sita's image is in accordance with Hanshaw's. This image provides *Sita's code*. She wears *sari* where the upper part is relatively open showing the upper part of her breasts and the lower part is also tightly designed showing her body curve. This sort of cloth reminds us of a two-piece bathing suit worn by western women.

4. Image 4



Image 4 shows Sita singing in the rain. The medium shot type reveals her facial expression while singing. She is singing happily. She puts on make-up. Her blue eyeshadow connotes hope in her that she maintains. Singing in the rain connotes her bravery to face the hard time of her life with a joyful feeling without losing hope. Hanuman is there accompanying her in hard times. Hanuman is loyal character. The background of the image is colorful showing cheerfulness.

5. Image 5



Image 5 depicts Sita singing in a garden accompanying by two big birds. She is pregnant. All image color is blue giving the impression of mystery, mysticism, and hope. She is rejected by her husband doubting her pregnancy. He thinks that she is bearing someone else's baby. The medium shot type gives audience a chance to see her facial expression closer. She is lying while singing a blues song. She sometimes closes and opens her wide eyes. The two birds connote freedom and transition. A big beautiful bird is on her stomach. It implies that she is strong in her carrying moment, waiting and ready for freedom and transition in her life. Another bird is staring at her.

It signifies freedom and transition which are really close to her. The camera looks down or pan down implying Sita's power.

6. Image 6



Image 6 depicts Sita singing in the fire. This is sort of long shot. This gives an overview. Camera moves in implying focus, which is on Sita. Fire signifies power, energy, and action. The yellow color behind Sita gives an impression of liveliness. Sita sings happily in the fire. Fire does not put her into death. Rather, it gives her more power and energy.

7. Image 7



Image 7 shows the Mother Earth takes Sita back into her womb proving that she is pure. The long shot gives an overview of how she is taken back. Ray of light welcomes her and embraces her. Mother Earth symbolizes a mother. Sita is taken back to her

mother’s womb and becoming an innocent baby. Baby signifies purity. Light embracing her represents truth. It is the truth about her purity.

Interpretation and Conclusion

The interpretation, conclusion as well as the answer to the research questions are provided in this section. *Sita Sings the Blues* depicts Sita in a quite different manner. As mentioned in the earlier section, this movie is based on the Ramayana. Therefore, Sita reminds us of Sita in the Ramayana of Valmiki. She possesses values, virtues, and nature that Sita in the Ramayana has. It is in line with what Danesi says that in this case, Sita is a “recycled heroine”. Within different media genres, both depict Sita as the wife of Rama.

However, Sita in the movie turns out to be the different Sita. In a way, she possesses values, virtues, and nature of Sita in the Ramayana. In other ways, she has different ways in dealing with the bad treatment and rejection done by her husband. In the Ramayana, as previously mentioned, Sita is not given a chance and space to speak up her mind. In the movie, however, Sita is given a chance and space to speak up her mind through blues songs. She does not remain silent facing the hard times due to her husband’s rejection and treatment.

She also does something surprising when Rama asks her to prove her purity (again). She does not do what Rama tells her to which is jumping to the river. Instead, she chooses to do something more extreme, i.e. asking the Mother Earth to take her back into her womb in order to prove that she is pure. This makes Rama, her two twin sons, and other people around her shocked. They do not expect that at all. She is then taken back by the Mother Earth. This answers Rama’s doubt. This is also a turning point of her bravery and purity. This is also a shocking matter, especially for those who are familiar with the Ramayana of Valmiki and their reproductions, since in the stories, Sita and Rama live happily after all. Thus, to summarize, the signification system of Sita in the movie and Sita in the Ramayana of Valmiki is presented in a table below.

Sita in the Ramayana	Sita in <i>Sita Sings the Blues</i>
The wife of Rama	The wife of Rama
A loyal, dedicated wife	A loyal, dedicated wife
Considered as an unattainable ideal	A more “realistic” model to emulate
Stays silent (or not given a chance and space to speak) in facing Rama’s bad treatment, rejection, and banishment	Does something to face hard times and Rama’s bad treatment and rejection by singing blues songs. Blues songs become her media (spaces) to speak up her mind
Does everything Rama tells her to do	She does not do what all Rama tells her to do, e.g. in the last scene, she chooses to ask the Mother Earth to take her back into her womb as a proof of her purity

After presenting the signification system of the two Sitas, the answers to the research questions and conclusion shall be provided. Sita represents resistance over oppression and suppression and the oppressed and suppressed. She represents those who suffer from oppression, suppression, rejection, and even banishment. She exemplifies her representation by singing blues songs and asking the Mother Earth to take her back into her womb.

Sita, as a loyal and dedicated wife, has long been suffering from oppression and suppression of her husband. She, then, sings blues songs marking her survival where the verses of the songs she sings lament injustice or express longing for a better life and lost love, Rama. However, the blues songs also imply that she celebrates her

success of conquering the hard times. Besides, she asks the Mother Earth to take her back into her womb. This is such a brave and honorable deed as a proof of her purity. She is brave to take all risks and one the significant risks for going back to the Mother Earth's womb is that she leaves her twin sons, Rama, and all people she loves.

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