



The Goddess as Role Model: Sita and Radha in Scripture and on Screen

Heidi R.M. Pauwels

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This book seeks to understand the major mythological role models that mark the moral landscape navigated by young Hindu women. Traditionally, the goddess Sita, faithful consort of the god Rama, is regarded as the most important positive role model for women. The case of Radha, who is mostly portrayed as a clandestine lover of the god Krishna, seems to challenge some of the norms the example of Sita has set. That these role models are just as relevant today as they have been in the past is witnessed by the popularity of the televised versions of their stories, and the many allusions to them in popular culture.

Taking the case of Sita as main point of reference, but comparing throughout with Radha, Pauwels studies the messages sent to Hindu women at different points in time. She compares how these role models are portrayed in the most authoritative versions of the story. She traces the ancient, Sanskrit sources, the medieval vernacular retellings of the stories and the contemporary TV versions as well.

This comparative analysis identifies some surprising conclusions about the messages sent to Indian women today, which belie the expectations one might have of the portrayals in the latest, more liberal versions. The newer messages turn out to be more conservative in many subtle ways. Significantly, it does not remain limited to the religious domain. By analyzing several popular recent and classical hit movies that use Sita and Radha tropes, Pauwels shows how these moral messages spill into the domain of popular culture for commercial consumption.



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