

## INTERVIEW WITH NINA PALEY\*

Barbara Pollak-Lewis

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**RIASSUNTO:** Il contributo propone un'intervista di Barbara Pollak-Lewis (BPL), pittrice, curatrice di mostre ed educatrice d'arte di San Francisco (CA) a Nina Paley (NP), fumettista, animatrice e attivista della libertà culturale dall'Illinois (USA). Nina si è affermata come disegnatrice, e spesso anche come scrittrice, del fumetto *Nina's Adventures and Fluff*, dopo il quale ha lavorato principalmente nell'animazione. È nota soprattutto per il lungometraggio animato del 2008 *Sita Sings the Blues*, basato sul Ramayana, con parallelismi alla sua vita personale. Nel 2018 ha portato a compimento il suo secondo lungometraggio, *Seder-Masochism*, una rivisitazione del libro dell'*Esodo* come patriarcato che emerge dal culto della dea. Barbara ha studiato Animation alla Rhode Island School of Design e ha seguito le realizzazioni di Nina sin dalla fine degli anni Ottanta.

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** Nina Paley, *Sita Sings the Blues*, *Seder-Masochism*

**ABSTRACT:** Nina Paley (NP) is an American cartoonist, animator, and free culture activist from Central Illinois, United States. She was the artist and often the writer of the comic strips *Nina's Adventures and Fluff*, after which she has worked primarily in animation. She is best known for creating the 2008 animated feature film *Sita Sings the Blues*, based on the Ramayana, with parallels to her personal life. In 2018, she completed her second animated feature, *Seder-Masochism*, a retelling of the *Book of Exodus* as patriarchy emerging from goddess worship. Barbara Pollak-Lewis (BPL) is a painter, curator and art educator from San Francisco, CA. She studied Animation at the Rhode Island School of Design. She has followed Nina's cartoons since the late 1980s.

**KEY-WORDS:** Nina Paley, *Sita Sings the Blues*, *Seder-Masochism*

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\* The interview was not subjected to the double blind review.

BPL: Today is May 6, 2024. I'm Barbara Pollak-Lewis, and we are going to start. I'm talking to Nina Paley about her 2008 animated film *Sita Sings the Blues*. (To Nina) Your kitty is going to be part of the interview, apparently (laughter).

NP: Well, maybe... she has a pretty quiet purr.

BPL: Alright. So, let's just jump right in. So why did you decide to choose the Ramayana and what drew you to this story?

NP: Alright! My experience of it was not that I chose it, but that it chose me.

BPL: Excellent answer.

NP: It was 2002. I was in Trivandrum. That was my earliest exposure to the Ramayana was the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books. And... all I thought when I first read a couple of them was, oh, my gosh! This is so sexist! This character of Sita is such a doormat. You know, women are supposed to emulate her. Oh, no! What a doormat! And then I went to New York on a business trip as depicted in the film, and my partner dumped me by email. And then I became, well, I was already kind of obsessed with the Ramayana, because I was a Feminist. I thought, *I must do something about this*. And then I was obsessed with the Ramayana because I was like, Oh, my God! I want to build a funeral pyre and jump on it.

BPL: Ha! But didn't you wanna burn him?

NP: No, I wanted to die.

BPL: Oh, wow.

NP: And that really surprised me because you're not supposed to think that way. And, so, I thought, this is about something a lot more primal and basic about human

beings. Then, I acknowledged. And I just at that point thought, Yeah, there's a lot more to this story... and to this character.

BPL: One thing that I found really interesting was when you were going back and forth between, like the parallel between... how do you say it? The Ramayana and your own life. What I find really fascinating is that in the story... the reason Rama dumps Sita is because he doubts her purity and her faithfulness, and all of this. But then, so what happened with Dave? I mean, maybe this is too personal. But I was trying to figure out. It seems so abrupt and out of the blue, and like there was no explanation, and... Nina, flew all the way to India to be with him, and then he just like was cold and just offered no explanation. What happened? Why did he do that?

NP: That's what I was asking when it happened. Oh. why, why, why, why? And I never really did understand why I put it as well. I guess he fell out of love? With a lot of hindsight. I think the way that I am now. I could have seen tons of signs of this, but I didn't have the ability to see it then. I had some blinders on. And also some of it's just inexplicable. But I did have some blinders on in that relationship, for sure.

BPL: So, can you share with me your research process and how you approach the story? In preparing for this interview, I watched another more traditional children's interpretation of the story, and it's very different. I mean, it's all from Rama's perspective, of course. Please tell me a little bit about your research process.

NP: When I was still in Trivandrum before I had my being dumped experience but was interested in Sita and the Ramayana. I got as many English language Ramayanas there as I could. There weren't that many. Then, when I moved to New York I had access to the NYU Library, and I got as many. I just read as many English Ramayanas as I could, and then I read as many articles about Sita as I could again limited to English and my favorite English version is Arsha Satar. Ramayana, the

Penguin, India. Valmiki, Ramayana. And I found hers, not in the NYU library, but because artist's Satar turned out to be a friend of mine. She was the friend of a good friend of mine, and she was in town, and then I got her book, and it was great. It's also very popular. I just you know, any connection I could find to Ramayana as I pursued, and I talked to as many Indians in New York as I could and got as many books of art related to the Ramayana as I could. And I was just immersed in it. It's not like I knew what I was doing. I just had to do it. I was possessed.

BPL: So, you took a deep dive.

NP: I took a deep dive, but, really... more like... it took me. I haven't had anything like that happen since, like nothing else has ever possessed me this way. I went in deeply, but I wasn't possessed. This thing's the Blues. My experience was this film must exist. It just has to get made. I'm the only person who can make it. I must do it. *Seder Masochism* was more like: I want to make another film. I want to explore these things regarding my father, the Jewish religion, and my heritage.

BPL: Yeah.

NP: But it was not this, like, I will die if I don't make this.

BPL: Well, maybe. Do you feel like that? Was, I mean, these are just personal questions. But do you feel like this was part of just like the healing of the breakup, or the way to process it? All that.

NP: For sure, for sure. I mean I was devastated. Also... I don't know what it all is, but I know that when I was younger, things seemed a lot more intense... everything was Life or Death. My love was, you know, it was just utterly devastating, and that breakup, and I was not getting over it. And I kept thinking I was gonna get over it. And I just wasn't. And so, I went all in. I finished when I finished *Sita*

*Sings the Blues*. I was clean. And maybe that's because it took 5 years, and after 5 years you're going to be clean. But I think that some magical process happened. Which is what they actually say in the Ramayana. They say that you get booms for telling the Ramayana. You know you get.

BPL: Okay. The next question is, how does the idea of the hero's journey play out in this tale? What role do you assign to the theme of travel and leaving home.

NP: Right. Well, there's the question of who's the hero of this movie.

BPL: It's Sita.

NP: But it's also me, right? I could say that my hero's journey is: I left home. I encountered the Ramayana through travel, and that story allowed me to grow through, or even transcend a personal tragedy that happened to me. Sita's hero journey. I hadn't really thought about that. So she starts out in love with Rama, and she ends... well, she ends by transcending him. Right? She ends getting beyond him and going back to her mother, which is the earth. But I didn't start. Well, I did kind of start the film with the earth right like I did start at the very beginning. There's that scene with all the cosmic gods. And it does end with that as well. It's the story of the life of an avatar. Right? This LOVE thing is a human experience. It happens on this earth, and you transcend it. I guess if you're Sita, or if you're me.

BPL: I really like your answer. Which leads me to the next question: Narratives featuring women as protagonists are often connected to everyday life, career, marriage, children, etc. How do you reconcile the epic of Ramayana with the epic of the everyday... I guess you kind of answered that. But does that make sense?

NP: I definitely made it more like epic. But, Sita, you know she does. She gets pregnant. She raises twin sons. She's a good mother, although, apparently, she's crying all the time.

BPL: I thought was really interesting. Is that so? The sons are learning about their dad as this Hero. But yet he did like really a crappy thing which was to banish their mother, and yet they side with him, and they don't ever take their mother's side, which seems weird to me. They just sort of go along with what they're taught like, they're these obedient children. And she's a doormat, as you say.

NP: But Sita was glorifying Rama also. And no matter how poorly he treated her, she loved him, and that's why she's a goddess, right? This perfect model of perfect heterosexual woman to man love. He can do wrong, but she still loves him. That's why those blues songs were perfect. Those songs are basically songs of abused women who are with terrible men.

BPL: I like how you juxtapose the visuals of beatings, with the beautiful, lovely singing. I thought that was very effective. What meaning do you think epic myths could have for women?

NP: Epic myths. I mean name some other epic myths... Obviously I have my ideas of what the Ramayana meant for me as a woman. What are some other epic tales?

BPL: I have been trying to figure that out, like, what other epic tales have like women as heroes, I mean, the only things I can think of are sort of like modern day interpretations of, like – you know – like Disney movies, where they have like the woman is the hero. But this is a very recent phenomenon.

NP: And I'm not sure how well it works. I saw *Dune 2* recently. There is this trope now of, like the female warrior. A female soldier. A female that's fighting alongside the man.

BPL: Like the recent *Wonder Woman* movie she's gotta be like this Amazon Warrior... She's the warrior goddess, right? But she's basically acts like a male and she's embodying typical male characteristics, right?

NP: Right. Exactly. So, like with *Dune*. It's like what happens when these women get pregnant... (laughs) who's actually raising the babies when they're all being Badass warriors? But I also feel weird, saying that because I myself never wanted babies, and I always wanted to be like a Badass warrior type, but, at age 56, with just some more understanding of the world... it doesn't make sense like you can't have a society where all the women are soldiers. I mean not long term...

BPL: Somebody's got to raise the babies.

NP: Yeah, right? Somebody's got to do that. And it's pretty impractical to be a soldier and also be a mother. I'm sure there's a movie now of, like, you know, Badass, mama soldier where she's got it... while she's wielding a gun (laughs).

BPL: We're also sort of told that you can do everything, you know. But it's not really true. I mean, I have kids. I have 2 kids. They're in college now. So, it's almost like they're out of the picture. I can focus on myself again, which is nice, but it's very, very difficult to balance all these things that you've got this expectation as a woman where you're supposed to do and be everything. You're supposed to be the caretaker you're supposed to be this strong person. You're supposed to be a career woman. You're supposed to be a great mother. You're supposed to do everything perfectly, and it's exhausting.

NP: Yeah. Anyway, I don't. I don't know. Obviously, I really related to Sita, which is, if you had asked me shortly before that would I want to do that? The answer would have been an emphatic NO! But what other epics? The epic that I've been... well if you can call it an epic... Are the New and Old Testaments considered an epic?

BPL: I mean... Well, don't, don't we have like Lilith?

NP: She's not actually in the Old Testament. And she's in the other writings. There are not female protagonists, or very few female ones.

BPL: The women in the Old Testament are just minor characters. They're sort of like Sita, like they're faithful. They're sort of like behind the scenes. They're raising kids, and they're faithful to the men. Or else they are prostitutes.

NP: Like, do we need female characters? Do women need female characters to be their way into epics... or?

BPL: I think we need female heroes in whatever way... or at least female role models. They don't have to be warriors. When I was a kid, I looked up to the character of *Harriet the Spy* because she was smart, scrappy and independent and she always told the truth and had no interest in pleasing anyone. I just thought she was the most amazing, coolest. I mean, there are very few books like that where you had this badass girl kid.

NP: Well, there was also *Pippi Longstocking*.

BPL: Yeah, I liked her, too, but I felt like she was a little... um... odd (laughing).

NP: Yeah. She was.

BPL: Pippi had that monkey. I don't know. It was odd, like she was the strongest girl in the world, I mean. She was cool, but not like *Harriet the Spy*, who I could somewhat relate to. She was a loner. She's spying on people. She's taking notes. I tried that out. I had a spy route. She didn't care what other people thought of what she was doing (at least at first) and she was always true to herself. And I just I looked up to that.

NP: Yeah. She was a cool character. I mean there were a lot of good... There were books with some decent female characters. I recall having some good kids' books when I was growing up. Don't know if they're epics. Yeah, I don't. I don't know. I just saw this movie, *The Fall Guy*. It's funny cause like I see movies usually like once every 2 years. But I saw 2 movies in the last month. And it had this modern trope of female characters who get in these action scenes. Action fights with male characters, and they're like beating up men, even though they're these tiny women. So that's not really role models that we need, because... it's just so unlikely.

BPL: So right? Exactly like. So, if you have no real power, then maybe that's your fantasy is that you could actually beat up men. Yeah, I mean, that's kind of funny. But it's also kind of appealing? Maybe, I don't know... But we're not. Obviously, women and men are not equal in strength, physical strength. We're totally different.

NP: So that being a role model, it's like, it's like... you can't. That's not going to happen. Even if you're even if you're very, very highly trained in martial arts.

BPL: The man has to also be a total wimp.

NP: Right. But in these movies, in these movies they're badass, you know. They're like women, you know, with their ninja moves and their swords. Whatever. Beating up. Also. You know, male warriors. Not gonna happen.

BPL: Right? I mean, yeah, we have like, yeah, I guess like 1970s heroes... Linda Carter, Wonder Woman. She was this kind of like this Amazonian crime fighter. She would get the criminals, you know, with her magic lasso.

I was just thinking about the *Bionic Woman* TV show. Her powers were really limited. Did you ever watch that? The Bionic man actually had powers. The Bionic Woman, on the other hand, was always breaking. She was always malfunctioning. It's very, it's very sad. I think her powers were limited to where she

could like hear she could eavesdrop on people's conversations, and from really far away. I don't know. It wasn't as good as the *Bionic Man*.

NP: So, I know there are ancient stories of goddesses... so...

BPL: I have, like 2 or 3 more questions. I'm not really that familiar with Indian culture, but I noticed the appearance of the monkey, and I thought you might be able to speak to the importance of the monkey, and what his role is, and how it relates to Sita.

NP: Yes! Hanuman, the monkey God! I believe he's an avatar of Shiva helping Ram, who's an avatar of Vishnu, which I think is a message about Shyites or followers of Shiva, should be submissive to and help Vaishnavites or followers of Vishnu. Because India doesn't have... like we call it Hinduism, but it's just a bunch of different gods that were worshipped differently in different regions. Polytheistic. And like Lanca Ravana, who was the demon King of Lanca, Lanca's in the south. Ravana was a worshipper of Shiva. Whereas Ram is an avatar Vishnu Guy from the north. I think there are a lot of messages in the Ramayana about the Southern groups should be submissive to the Northern groups and gods should be submissive to the northern gods. So, he's you know devoted friend of Rama and Sita, and he has other adventures. He shows up in the Mahabirata also, which is the other epic of India, and I believe he's older; much older in the Mahabrata. Hanuman. Let me just double check on that... it's been a while. Alright! Answer from web search: Hanuman played a key role in the Marabaraba, though he didn't directly take part in war, but he indirectly helped the side of Dharma. Hanuman is worshipped in his own right. He's the god. Also. There are Hanuman temples.

BPL: Okay. So, here's another question: I read that there were some protesters when the movie was initially shown. Can you talk about how the movie was received? And I guess there was what I did read in, I think, was an interview with you a while

back, where there was a controversy about cultural appropriation or like, why are you doing our culture? It was framed as “Why don’t you do your own culture?” And then and then you did the *Seder Masochism* movie. So yeah, I just wanted to get your take on what that was like. Well, I’m not sure what my question is. Maybe just talk about that a little bit.

NP: Yeah. Well, it was overall very well received among modern Hindus. “Hipster” Hindus... because they got all the jokes. It was targeted by The Hindu Jana Jagruti. It was janajagruti.org. So, there are these Hindu fundamentalist Nationalists that target works and they are looking to be offended by things, and it makes sense because it gives them something to cohere around... Which, I learned more about this when I got canceled later for unrelated reasons... They were screaming and yelling about that, but there was not initially any bad feedback, my initial reaction. That was like. “Oh, no, but I don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings, and... no, I don’t want to hurt you at all, and I have reverence for this. And oh, it’s a misunderstanding, and don’t misunderstand me”. And after about 10 times, I was just like, yeah f-- off.

BPL: Yeah, that’s really the only attitude you can have.

NP: This is not about me. This is because you guys have an agenda, and it’s helping you politically to have something to cohere around and have fun with that. And you know, after a few years of it, I was grateful for them, because every time interest would die down around *Sita Sings the Blues*, they would refresh people’s interest in it and awareness of it. And it turned out there were people that followed them specifically to discover artists because they tended to like whatever this group was demonizing.

BPL: Ha! Talk about unintended consequences...

NP: So, if any of you are out there, please – I could really use a fresh denunciation of *Sita sings the blues*. You know I depicted Moses, and Moses is also a prophet of Islam, and I was acutely aware of that with *Seder Masochism*. And it's like, Yeah, why does no one give a sh-t about Moses? You aren't supposed to depict any prophets. I thought they'd go after me for Moses. But they didn't. They went after me for saying that women don't have penises on Facebook! It was actually good that I had all those experiences because they prepared me for more such experiences. And who knows what future experiences my present is preparing me for! But mostly the response was great... and the biggest fans of *Sita Sings the Blues* are Hindu.

BPL: Yeah, that's so cool. I think that's all the questions I have for you right now. Thanks again for being so generous with your time.