

**Gender roles and representation of feminine identity in
Ramayana:A Critical Study**

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Abstract

Though Hindu psyche is suffused with the ideals of *Ramayana*, an attempt is being made to interpret this most popular epic to examine gender, identity, feminist concerns etc which demands a feminization of thought and the enthronement of woman values. The women voice in *Ramayana* shows concern about men's behaviour towards women and their position in the family and society. Sita, a legendary female figure in Indian mythology, has been seen as the supreme model of purity, love, peace and compassion, at the same time, shows the supreme embodiment of femininity as much womanhood. The role of Sita can be seen as how a woman have to struggle for her identity and space of honour in *Ramayaniera*. Women in *Ramayana* are emancipatory and they attempt to liberate themselves from all arbitrary beliefs. Lizbeth Goodman thinks in 'Introduction' in "Literature and Gender", "Gender refers to ways of seeing and representing people and situations based on sex difference". The overall objective of the study is to highlight the interaction of gender and identity, particularly in the complex construction of femininity in *Ramayana*. It also wants to show how patriarchy comes to exercise its sinister control over her position and begin to suppress her identity.

Introduction

The *Ramayana* belongs to a class of literature known in Sanskrit as *kavya* (poetry), though in the West it is considered to belong to the category of literature familiar to readers of Homer, namely the epic. It is that epic which has had a decisive influence in shaping the nature of Indian civilization. The great sage Valmiki has produced the *Ramayana* which is one of the great Hindu epics and forms an important part of literature. Women in *Ramayana* desire to achieve what they lack, revolt against the patriarchy and male dominance, enslave male ego, and demolish culture and tradition anticipating transformation in the outlook of the male dominated society. They are passionate, lustrous and philosophical and take emotional intelligence in their strive for survival and in search of identity in the society. Lizbeth Goodman observes in "Literature and Gender", "Feminism is a politics: a recognition of the historical and cultural subordination of women (the only world-wide majority to be treated as a minority), and a resolve to do something about it". In the patriarchal era of *Ramayana*, women are struggling to establish their identity and space of honour. Depicting the patriarchal nature of Indian society, Valmiki's *Ramayana* represent 'Sita' as the ideal wife who follows her husband when he is exiled for fourteen years, upholds her chastity when she is abducted by the 'Rakshasa' king Ravana, goes through the ring of fire or the 'Agnipariksha' to prove her chastity during the tenure of the abduction and even after passing all these tests quietly leaves her husband Lord Rama when he forces her to leave him after hearing the general public of his kingdom casting doubts on her character.

Valmiki's *Ramayana* has several leading female roles which included Sita, Surpanakha, Kaikeyi etc. Each of these characters plays an important role to the story line. The *Ramayana* upholds the ideal of the 'Pativratastree' - a woman for whom her husband is the entire world. "After marriage, within a patriarchal family structure, the bride was physically transferred from her natal family into her matrimonial family and she lost her right of residence and maintenance within her natal home" (Chatterjee, Jeganathan, p.112). Sita has been seen as the supreme model of the virtuous, self-sacrificing and obedient wife, the supreme embodiment of femininity as much as womanhood. "She is also Rama's shakti, the energy that inspires him into action, the source of his power as King" (Padia, p.97). Kavita A. Sharma mentions in her article "Exploring the Icons: Sita and Radha" about Sita that, "She embodies

in herself Grace, Compassion, Peace, Purity and Endurance, the values required for the redemption of the earth from strife and hatred''. In the commonly accepted version of the story, after Rama had rescued Sita and brought her back to Ayodhya, numerous rumors arose about the questionable fidelity of Sita that had the effect of unsettling Rama. Though Rama realized that his wife was the very paragon of virtue untainted, and that she would not have submitted to the sexual advances of Ravana, in whose captivity she had remained for many years, some doubts began to creep into his own mind. Besides as a king it was his duty to put to rest the anxieties expressed by his subjects. Consequently he subjected Sita to a public test if she could emerge from the flames of the fire unscathed, that would be the impeachable moral character. Sita warns Rama that he will be blamed in all ages for his rejection of his 'lawful loyal wife' which is mentioned in K. Srinivasa Iyengar's "Sitayana: Sita's Fire" as,

' will in all future time set the pattern
of vulgar, selfish, prideful,
one-sided, pitiless desecration
of supportless woman-kind'. (Sitayana: Sita's Fire, p.171)

Though Sita passed the test (agnipariksha) with flying colors, but surprisingly Sita was sent to pass the rest of her life at the hermitage of Valmiki, where she gave birth to the twins Lava and Kusha showing a great threat to her identity.

Two such episodes—the mutilation of Surpanakha and Sita's ordeal—to discern how a gendered notion of Indianness is constructed in the Valmiki's *Ramayana*. In the first episode, Surpanakha fell in love with Rama and decides to approach him. When she expressed her love, Rama immediately rejected her. Surpanakha is a sexually assertive woman and when she informed bluntly of her sexual desires, she is not just mocked for it, but is punished. Ravana's sister Surpanakha whose unrequited lust for Rama ends in her disfigurement. She goes to Ravana to plead for revenge shows her struggle for identity to a great extent. As a consequence of this, Sita is abducted by Ravana. Surpanakha and Sita are both victims of domestic abuse at the hands of two business competitors intent on proving their masculinity. The story of *Ramayana* shows only men could be the rulers and leaders in the patriarchal society and women are traditionally expected to serve their husbands and to have no autonomous

interests. Power is transferred from father to son in order to provide for the people's needs and for the community as a whole.

Ramayana recognized that women has been traditionally oppressed. In the Valmiki's *Ramayana* both the mutilation of Surpanakha and the fire ordeal of Sita are narrated; both of these events may certainly be considered unpleasant. The unpleasant act of Rama abandoning Sita, then pregnant with two boys and again Surpanakha is mutilated at Rama's order because as a sexually assertive 'other' woman she represents a threat to the community and it is the patriarchal man's duty to eliminate the threat of the 'other' community. Rama abandons Sita in the forest after hearing of the scandalous rumours spreading amongst the common people, he is fulfilling his dharma as the king of Ayodhya showing his patriarchal dominance. He is a ruler always willing to put duty before his own or his wife's happiness. In the Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Rama is the ideal king, not the ideal husband. Sita is portrayed as the ideal, self-sacrificing and long suffering wife. The traditional Hindu wife represented by Sita, who stands in the centre of the society, and the sexually corrupt 'other' woman, represented by Surpanakha, who stands at the margin of the society, marking and clarifying its boundaries. Though oppositional these categories are similar in that both women are marginalized in the patriarchal society, restricted from active citizenship. Thus a brief portion of *Ramayana* shows violence and exclusion towards women.

Kaikeyi establish her identity by banishing Rama into exile. Manthara, Kaikeyi's maid who turns Kaikeyi into a destructive force and is persuaded to fight for her own benefits. Kaikeyi, Rama's stepmother convinces her husband Dasaratha to banish Rama and her own son Bharata, be crowned by remembering her husband king has once promised to grant her any two wishes she desire, thus showing femininity to a great level. Kaikeyi's fathers' treatment of her mother and the latter's subsequent exile led to Kaikeyi harboring a deep distrust of men in general and husbands in particular, and to considering their love as 'fickle' and 'passing' in nature. In addition, she was very insecure in her position as secondary consort to Dasaratha and so she demand the two boons granted to her years earlier by Dasaratha. Sita- the silent power of strength has to undergo a lots of trials and tribulations in her marital life and it was her courage, chastity and adherence to Dharma that finally emerge her as ultimate winner. The mission of Sita's birth on Earth is to destroy the arrogant Ravana, the demon king of Lanka. Sita abandons her husband, Lord Rama, who suspected her

character and chastity after proving her innocence. Sita also finally emerges by refusing to undergo the second *dagnipariksha* and departs from Rama—a woman not afraid to stand up to her husband and instead chooses to seek final refuge in the arms of her loving mother, *Bhoomidevi* or Mother Earth.

FINDINGS

Gender is one of the most central and most contested issue in *Ramayana*. It is one of the defining cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in ancient India. In *Ramayana*, in the case of every great woman, the initial stroke of calamity from outside or the surging up of greed from within did as a matter of fact produce the normal human reaction of desperation. But as the first effects subsided, every woman regained her balance, very slowly in some cases, but at last she reached the highest values of life. The *kathas* of *Ramayana* which give every Hindu eternal peace in their inner soul of heart can be seen as a medium to understand the discrimination of girls and women or the assaults happening on them at present. On one hand we can see how Sita as one of the female divinities are worshipped with greatest reverence. Sita's passion for liberating herself is symbolically reflective of her own mindset. Each act reveals some kind of self-discovery and arising a sense of liberal-mindedness in the hearts of audience. These women of Indian drama have practically shaped the psyche of Indian women in the past which is continued to do so even in the present age of modernity. These women are considered as the icons of womanhood in Indian mythology and they continue to shape the modern Indian women. Most of the Indian women have to undergo sufferings throughout their life but finally emerging victorious.

CONCLUSION:

The current subordinate position of Indian women in social, legal and cultural realms is based on Hindu tradition and supported by religious scriptures. Invoking religious tradition to justify the subordination of women is a powerful and persuasive argument to enable society to perpetuate their oppression. The *Ramayana* continues to serve as a moral guardian of this patriarchal system in Indian society and exercises an unparalleled influence on the way of thinking of the Indian people. But at the same time, *Ramayana* gives a prominent place to women and elevated their position by placing them in the centre of action, who struggle audaciously against patriarchy, male dominance and male favouring culture by adopting the

'discourse of gender'.Hole and Levine thinks that the socially unequal position of women throughout history is not the result of biology, but is due to the value which society has placed at any given time on the biological differences between the two sexes and they observes that feminism questions the political, social and cultural institutions,ways of thinking and the very articulations of those thoughts(Hole and Levine,1975,p.225).Bauer in an article ‘‘India-Women in the society’’ says ‘‘Women in modern India must be moreaware of their strength, their own potential, their still open possibilities and have thecourage to express their views and put them into practice in everyday life, perhapsonly intended as an existentialist thoughtful design, along with the famous dictum ofSimone de Beauvoir: *On ne naît pas femme, on le devient*(One is not born as a womanbut becomes one). It is rather seen as to become free .Nevertheless, the hope remains that India would reflect and even use its old valueson the way to modernity. The woman is and will remain a source of strength and love.She will always remain the embodiment of the values Dharma (righteousness) andKama (love, care)’’.

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