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From Scripture to Screen: A Study of Female Representation in the Textual and the Televised *Ramayana*

Gayatri Muna

Junior Research Fellow,
GM University, Sambalpur
&

Dr Brahmananda Padra

Assistant. Professor,
GM University, Sambalpur



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Abstract: The *Valmiki Ramayana* is not merely a religious scripture but a civilizational document that has shaped the national identity, socio-cultural values, and ethical foundation of Bharat. However, a substantial segment of modern Indian society takes its primary understanding of the *Ramayana* not from the original Sanskrit *Adikavya* but from the televised adaptation of the epic. Broadcast in late 1980s, the *Ramayana* serial of Ramanand Sagar has become the most widely popular adaptation of the *Valmiki Ramayana*, irreplaceable even by the technically advanced later adaptations. This paper aims to make a feminist evaluation of the *Valmiki Ramayana* and its televisual adaptation of Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* to identify the points of convergence and digressions between the two narratives and raises some poignant concerns about the ethical responsibility of adapting scriptural narratives with explicit acknowledgement of the interpretive departure. Grounded in feminist hermeneutics, this study will contribute to the discourse on gendered representation, mediated canon formation, and the ethical responsibilities involved in re-presenting foundational epics for mass audiences.

Keywords: Valmiki Ramayana, Ramanand Sagar, Feminist Study, Hermeneutic Study, Indian Knowledge System.

Introduction

The epic *Ramayana* is one of the largest epics in world literature that plays a pivotal role in shaping the consciousness of Bharat. Traditionally attributed to *Adikavi* Valmiki, it comprises over 24000 verses and is divided into 7 sections or *kandas*. Considered as the *Adikavya* of Indian classical literature, the text plays a significant role in shaping the social, cultural, spiritual, and literary foundation of India. Through legends and lullabies, paintings and sculptures, drama and music, the *Ramayana* has become a civilizational and historical document, and its influence has moved far beyond the frontiers of India to ignite the imagination of people all across the globe. The

saga of *Ramayana* has enchanted the hearts of millions of people all over the world, transcending the barriers of race, religion, language, and nationality.

The Genesis of Ramayana

The *Valmiki Ramayana*, being written in the classical Sanskrit language, could reach a limited section of society in its textual form. Due to the lack of access to the original text as well as the lack of knowledge of Sanskrit, the text has been received by a limited readership in the modern era. The common people could learn the tale of *Ramayana* through the available folklore, folksongs, theatrical adaptations, and dramatization in local dialects, such as in the form of *Ram Leela*. This has helped in creating a visual image of the characters of the epic and increased the spectrum of viewership.

The earliest effort of production of *Ramayan* on celluloid was possible in the year 1918, when a serial, titled *The Exile of Rama* (1918), ran in several installments. When television was introduced in India in the year 1959, *Ramayan* became a favourite topic among the film and television producers of India. The three main televised adaptations of *Ramayana* are *Ramayan* by Ramanand Sagar in the 1980s, *Jai Hanuman* by Sanjay Khan in the 1990s, and *Siya Ke Ram* by Sagar Arts in 2012.

In the late twentieth century, especially after the broadcast of the *Ramayana* serials by various producers, the primary source of understanding of the *Ramayana* has shifted from the Sanskrit *Adikavya* to its televisual adaptations. When in 1987, the first serialised *Ramayana*, produced and directed by Ramananda Sagar, was broadcast on Doordarshan, it became a national classic and gained immense popularity by reaching the masses, cutting across gender, class, region, and language. The 100+ episodes of *Ramayana* aired in 1980s proved to be the first blockbuster TV serial in India (Dwivedi). The story, being primarily taken from the *Valmiki Ramayan* and in places, from the *Ramcharitmanas* of Tulasidas, became an instant hit and created history by securing its place in the Limca Book of Records as the world's most viewed mythological series. The cast included Arun Govil as Ram, Sunil Lahri as Laksmana, Deepika Chikhalia as Sita, Lalita Pawar as Manthara, Vijay Arora as Indrajeet, Arvind Trivedi as Ravan, and Dara Singh as Hanuman. "The television made the reach of *Ramayana* to heterogeneous masses of India without any barrier of time and space unlike in *Ramleela*. The audiences found the televised epic very realistic, appealing and engaging narrative. This was a kind of rebirth of this epic" (Singh).

The popularity of the show mirrored the enduring significance and the timeless relevance of the *Ramayana* in Indian culture and tradition. In a time when televisions were in India rather rare, within months of its inauguration,

the viewership for a *Ramayana* episode added up to 40 to 80 million (Rajagopal 2001). The *Ramayana* fever seized the entire country, especially on the Sunday mornings. Lutgendorf observes:

Visible manifestations of the serial's popularity included [...] cancellation of Sunday morning shows in cinema halls for lack of audiences, the delaying of weddings and funerals to allow participants to view the series, and the eerily quiet look of many cities and towns, especially in the North during screenings [...]. Bazaars, streets, and wholesale markets became so deserted they appear(ed) to be under curfew [...] trains were delayed when passengers refused to leave the platform until a broadcast was over. (136-7)

Further, he observes:

In many homes the watching of the *Ramayan* has become a religious ritual, and the television set [...] is garlanded, decorated with sandalwood paste and vermillion, and conch shells are blown. Grandparents admonish youngsters to bathe before the show and housewives put off serving meals so that the family is purified and fasting before *Ramayan*. (136)

Since then, *Ramayana* has been produced and reproduced multiple times with the same plot, yet various new experimentations and digressions, but the lasting impression of Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayana* and the strong nostalgic influence etched in the hearts of the viewers couldn't be replaced by the newer adaptations, despite the use of ultramodern technology, high budgets and equipment. The effect is such that it has become nearly impossible for viewers to distinguish between the textual essence and the dramatized interpolation. Viewers often tend to find it difficult to accept that certain episodes from Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayana* were just a creative addition and not part of the *Adikavya*.

Plurality in the *Ramayana* and the Authority of the *Valmiki Ramayana*

It is widely acknowledged that there exist hundreds of *Ramayana* traditions across the world. The regional retellings, feminist reimaginations, tribal versions, and modern interpolations highlight the flexibility, adaptability, and evolving nature of the narrative. The "Rama Raksha Stotram" of *Padma Purana* authored by Budha Kaushika, declares,

"Charitam Raghunathasya Shatakoti Pravistaram" (1)

It means that the life and deeds of Rama, the scion of the Raghu dynasty, extend into hundreds of crores of narratives. A.K. Ramanujan, in his seminal work "Three Hundred *Ramayanas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts

on Translation” declares, “The Rama story constitutes a universe so vast that... every interpretation is also a telling and every telling also an interpretation.” (22)

There are multiple versions of the *Ramayana* available across India and even in many South Asian countries like Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, China, Malaysia, and Burma. It has been written and rewritten by many scholars belonging to different religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism. Within India, there are countless regional adaptations of the *Ramayana* in diverse languages, such as *Ramacharitmanas* by Goswami Tulasi Das in Avadhi, Tamil *Ramavataram* by Kamban, Bengali *Krittivasa Ramayana*, Odia *Dandi Ramayana* by Balarama Dasa, *Molla Ramayanam*, *Giridhara Ramayana*, *Ramopakhyanam* etc.

Amidst the myriad of reimaginations of the *Adikavya*, Ramanand Sagar’s televised *Ramayana* claims Valmiki’s version to be its primary source of reference, with occasional digressions drawn from other retellings. This approach, however, tends to create a sense of uncertainties among the audience, as it leaves them unsure of where the boundary between the original narrative and the later adaptations blurs, and it also leads to a shallow understanding of the philosophical, spiritual, and aesthetic depth of the original text. The viewers tend to misinterpret later retellings as the historical incidents from Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. For example, many episodes of the serial, when evaluated from a Western feminist lens, tend to appear overtly misogynist, and therefore modern feminists investigate serious gender issues in the serial by applying various feminist theories that originated in the West. Thus, it leads them to the conclusion that the *Valmiki Ramayana* promotes retarded patriarchal values.

However, such readings often mistakenly confuse later interpolations with the original epic, ignoring its socio-cultural complexities, historical contexts, ethical tensions, philosophical subtleties, and spiritual nuances. Therefore, an unbiased and historically grounded feminist engagement with the foundational *Valmiki Ramayana* is necessary to discern the historical authenticity and identify the points of digressions. Hence, this paper undertakes a feminist comparative analysis of the *Valmiki Ramayana* and its televised adaptation by Ramanand Sagar to explore how the gender representation has been metamorphosed in the process of translation from epic to episodes. For the study, four major female characters- Sita, a royal woman; Ahalya, a female saint; Surpanakha, a demon princess; and Mandodari a demon queen- are evaluated, who represent the various strata of the *Ramayana* society.

The Shifting Representation of Sita

The character of Sita in Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayana* is often presented in a strongly devotional and emotionally heightened visual mode. The exaggerated use of cinematic techniques, such as melancholic music, prolonged close-

ups, overly simplified dialogues, extended scenes dwelling on her tears, silent endurance, and submissiveness, reinforces an image of Sita as the archetype of the voiceless victims of patriarchal oppression. She often appears as a meek and weak figure embodying feminine tenderness and patriarchal obedience, devoid of any agency and voice. Many modern feminists, such as Nina Paley, often use this submissive version of Sita as a weapon to criticize the social order of the *Ramayana* age. In *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008), Nina Paley fiercely criticizes the Valmiki *Ramayana* as follows:

Sing his love, sing his praise,
 Rama set his wife ablaze.
 Got her home, kicked her out,
 To allay his people's doubt. (12)

Such portrayal, while deeply moving, often overshadows the complexity of a character as depicted in the original text. The *Adikavya* proclaims the significance of Sita's character as:

"*Kavyam Ramayanam Krttsnam Sitayascharitam Mahat*" (1.4.7).

The representation of Janaki in Valmiki's narrative reveals a far more complex and assertive personality who possesses agency and a voice of her own. Her choices shape the trajectory of events, and her will prevails at crucial junctures. While her devotion to Rama is unquestionable, it in no way diminishes her distinct individuality. In the *Adikavya*, she boldly voices her opinion and defies the societal expectations of a submissive wife. Readers find a significant display of her assertiveness in her response to Rama, who suggests that she remain in Ayodhya while he endures the hardship of exile. However, Sita's response shatters his assumption. Sita, the obedient wife, fiercely taunts Rama by saying:

"My father, the ruler of Mithila, had no idea that you, his / son-in-law, have a male body but your inner nature is that of a woman" (2.30.3).

What a striking reproach by Sita, who is portrayed in the *Ramayana* serial as someone venerating her husband as God on earth. Even the modern women do not dare to use such words.

Furthermore, Valmiki, as a true feminist, highlights the striking contrast between Sita and Rama in the "Aranya Kanda" and the "Sundara Kanda" by highlighting how Ram ran hopelessly in the woods, crying and asking the trees, birds, animals, and mountains if they knew the whereabouts of Sita. In the words of Rama:

Was a young lady comely of every limb, bereft of me,

seen by you in a delightful part of this forest,
O lord of mountains?
Show to me Sita, possessing a golden hue
and endowed with golden limbs, before I shatter all your crests,
O mountain (3.66.28-31).

In contrast to Ram, Sita is found sitting like a courageous lioness in the Ashoka Vana of Lanka, asserting her agency with unwavering courage. This portrayal of Sita challenges the conventional perception of her as a paragon of feminine gentleness and vulnerability. When Ravan approaches Sita with his lustful intentions, Sita doesn't opt for armed resistance or call upon divine aid. Instead, she places a blade of grass as a boundary between herself and Ravan. This gesture of Sita symbolizes her defiance, a manifestation of her inner strength drawn directly from nature.

"Trumamantaratah Keitva Pratyuvacha Siuchismita

Nirvartaya Mano Mattah Swajane Priyataam Manah" (5. 31.3)

The use of the blade of grass as a protective shield is profoundly symbolic. Grass is tiny yet enduring, gentle yet unyielding - Sita, thus, represents the virtue of a seemingly insignificant entity, a blade of grass, to face the greatest storm of her life. This episode presents the core of ecofeminism, where nature and women as an intertwined force resist the patriarchal domination and exploitation. Thus, nature becomes her ally, her voice and the source of her courage and confidence to fight her solitary battle all by herself.

In Madhu Kishwar's article, "Yes to Sita, No to Ram", she unfolds the popular notion of Sita as a woman "whose sense of Dharma is superior to and more awe-inspiring than that of Ram -"as someone who puts even Maryada Purushottam Ram, the most perfect of men, to shame" (1). This narrative of Sita's personality can be much more fascinating and inspiring than the surface-level understanding drawn from the televisual adaptation. She is not a meek or shy woman, and her rejection of Rama's second test is the ultimate manifestation of her agency and dignity.

Ahalya: Televised Redemption vs. Textual Evolution

The televised representation of Ahalya's transformation is yet another point where the divergence between the original text and the adaptation is clearly visible. The episode showcases a dramatic moment when Ram enters the hermitage and transforms Ahalya from the form of an inert stone to a beautiful woman by the mere touch of his

feet. The scene reaches the pinnacle of dramatization with the camera lingering on Rama's feet, the background music intensifying with an ethereal tone, and an actual stone lying motionless in the hermitage of Rishi Gautama. As Ram's foot touches the stone, the lifeless and cursed stone miraculously transforms into Ahalya. While such representation is aesthetically and visually appealing to the viewers, it overly simplifies the narrative into a moral allegory of sin and redemption. Within such representation, Ahalya appears primarily as a fallen woman waiting for a male savior for her redemption. In the process of skillful dramatization, the series reduces the complexity of one of the most powerful episodes of the *Adikavya* and reduces Ahalya to a passive figure devoid of agency.

A careful reading of the *Valmiki Ramayana* reveals that Ramanand Sagar's televised adaptation of *Ahalya-Uddharan* doesn't come from the *Adikavya*; rather, its primary source is the later versions such as *Adhyatma Ramayana* and *Ramcharitmanas*. The transformation of Ahalya as depicted in Valmiki's work is not external but internal, symbolic, and metaphorical. Valmiki meticulously uses the word '*Shilaavat*' i.e. stone-like, to depict the mental state of Ahalya after her association with Indra, and it clearly suggests the inert nature of her existence and not a literal metamorphosis into a stone. Furthermore, Valmiki's Ram does not emancipate Ahalya from her stoney existence. When Ram and Laksmana arrive in the hermitage, Ahalya has already evolved herself through the power of her intense *Tapas* which is clearly visible through the aura that radiates from her body; a divine light so powerful that it illuminates the entire surrounding. Thus, Ahalya's redemption is not bestowed by a male savior; rather, it is attained through her own spiritual discipline and inner strength. Therefore, Valmiki's Ram and Laksmana fall at the feet of Ahalya in stark contrast to what is shown in the serial. Valmiki depicts:

"*Raghabau Tu Tada Tasyah Padau Jagruhaturmuda||*" (1:1:17).

Surpanakha: A Victim or a Villain

The character of Surpanakha is one of the most caricatured figures in the televised *Ramayana*. Many modern feminists, whose understanding of *Ramayana* is primarily drawn from Sagar's televised version, often fail to understand the gravity of the episode as found in the "Aranya Kanda" of *Valmiki Ramayana*. Many critics sympathise with Surpanakha by calling her a subaltern and innocent woman and criticise Rama and Lakshmana as oppressors who disrespect female desire and sexuality. Kathleen Erndl in "The Mutilation of Surpanakha" criticises the epic as a text promoting misogynist values. This kind of simplified understanding of the text reduces the entire episode to a metaphor of patriarchal oppression over the subaltern woman.

However, an unbiased return to the *Adikavya* reveals a far more complex moral and ethical context. The epic depicts how Surpanakha first approaches Rama in disguise of a beautiful woman, which itself is an act of deception and a breach of ethical conduct. However, Rama, embodying profound reverence for women, doesn't retaliate against her with violence; instead, he suggests Surpanakha approach Laksmana. At this point the readers find an immediate shift in the love interest of Surpanakha, from Rama to Laksmana, which raises questions about the sincerity of her feelings. Laksmana too humbly refuses her desires by explaining how he is the servant of Ram and therefore he cannot marry Surpanakha, as it would reduce her position also to that of a servant.

Insulted by the rejection from both the brothers, Surpanakha channels her anger towards Sita, considering her to be the sole reason for her dejection. When Sita, being unarmed and unalarmed, is being attacked by Surpanakha, that is when Rama intervenes as a protective husband and signals Laksmana to chop off her nose and ears. Hence, Surpanakha is not punished for her desire, but for her violence.

The Visual Racial Binary

Another significant point of divergence between the textual and the televised *Ramayana* is the binary racial representation of the women characters. In Sagar's *Ramayana*, the women of the Aryan domain are visually presented in stark contrast to those of the non-Aryan domains. The women of Lanka are visibly darker, ugly, and uncivilized, while the women of Ayodhya are inherently fair-skinned, beautiful, and refined. On the contrary, the textual narrative dismantles this racial binary. A revealing episode occurs in the "Sundarakanda" when Hanuman mistakes Mandodari for Sita, observing her extraordinary beauty and grace.

While the televised adaptation uses visual contrast as a dramatic device to guide the perception of the viewers, it may unconsciously impose interpretations that are not supported by the original text. Valmiki depicts the beauty of the asura queen as follows:

Kapirmandodarim tatra shayanam charurupinim

Sa tam drustva mahabahurbhushitam marutatmajah

Tarkayamasa siteti rupayouvanasampada

Harshena mahata yukto nananda hariyuthapah || (5:10:53)

Conclusion

The comparative reassessment of the textual and televised *Ramayana* reveals that many feminist criticisms stem from the dramatized distortions and not from the epic itself. The effort of Ramanand Sagar to make *Ramayana*

accessible to the common mass is commendable, yet in the process of heightening the dramatic and aesthetic appeal, it tends to simplify the complex layers of meaning and at times, digress from the original narrative. When such representation is consumed without an awareness of the context and the textual source, the fictional adaptations risk acquiring the status of historical truth. In the process the original text loses its relevance. Therefore, an informed and responsible engagement with the televised adaptation of the *Ramayana* by Ramanand Sagar is essential to critically appreciate the artistic creativity, contextual digression, and the textual diversity. This will ensure a genuine feminist engagement with the epic grounded in historical and philosophical contexts.

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