

"The Sitā Mystique"

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Our oldest version of the Ramayana Hindu epic, attributed to the Sanskrit poet Valmiki, dates from about 650 BC. But the story has been told in virtually every language and often it is the first main work found in a language, such as Tamil. Several other religions have their own versions: Jain, Buddhist, Muslim. Versions appeared in Thailand, Cambodia, Viet Nam, and the Philippines. (Why it is so widely spread in Asia but not in Greece or Rome or Spain is curious: other Indian fable literature traveled from Asia to Europe and ended up in *e.g.* Aesop, but the Ramayana did not.) In all of Ramayana variants, some elements are consistent, such as the characters of Rama, Sita, Hanuman, certain important monkeys, and the plot featuring Sita's abduction. But there is also a lot of regional variation, for instance, in some versions, Sita is even Ravana's daughter born to assure his destruction.

All of our many extant versions of the Ramayana story have seven books. The Ramayana's first book, the *Bala Kanda* or Book of Boyhood, narrates the story from the hero Rama's birth up to his marriage to Sita. The second book, *Ayodhya*, is named after King Dasaratha's capital city. The third book is the *Aranya* or Forest Kanda. The fourth book, the *Kishkindha Kanda*, takes place in the Monkey Kingdom: Rama acquires monkey allies to search for Sita. The fifth is the *Sundara Kanda*, the "beautiful" kanda, the most poetic book of the epic: in it we find out who our heroine really is. The sixth is the *Yuddha* or Battle Kanda. The last is the *Uttara Kanda*, meaning the last and also the best; in it, everyone goes to Heaven.

Females' ability to speak is a charged issue. In many versions, Sita develops an independent personality, but many people do not realize this. She has a life of her own: this life begins back in the Valmiki narrative, but the academic and cultural community has largely silenced Sita. She is absent through the first book until her marriage. Other women's voices are also silenced with the exception of a demoness named Tathika who tries to eat the baby Rama. Mothers do not talk: they appear at the birth but say nothing. Even when Sita appears, we are only told that she is married; we have little description and no words.

In the *Ayodhya Kanda*, Rama's father Dasaratha (whose name means 'ten chariots') decides that Rama, the son of his first wife should be crowned king. The city is excited, but a problem arises in the harem. Manthara, a childhood nursemaid of the king's second wife Sumitra, slyly advises the queen against accepting the challenge to her own son's position. Thus the first female voice suddenly heard in the text is a negative or evil voice. When Rama visits his mother we hear the second female voice. Then Sita is the third female voice we hear. Rama tells Sita that she cannot come to the forest with him; but she wants to join him in exile. She starts her speech submissively, but by the end of the dialogue she accuses her husband of being a eunuch to get her way. In Valmiki, this voice keeps rising up. Later tradition

has hidden and subverted this independent voice. Whereas David Kinsley's book on the goddesses describes Sita as the perfect wife, a symbol of fidelity in Valmiki, one never gets the impression from Valmiki when she is defending what is important to her. But most often, she defends the patriarchy, reminding Rama what is important to the ruling status quo.

Banished, the couple goes to the forest accompanied by Rama's brother Laksmana, beginning fourteen years of exile. Sita gains more of a voice here. Eventually they live happily in the forest, until one day when the brothers meet the demoness Surpanakha. Her name means "she who has nails like winnowing baskets," that is, long pointed nails – a sign of sexual excess. Without a man controlling her in the forest she falls in love with Rama, attempting seduction. He jokingly suggests she marry his brother Laksmana, who is already married. She tries to seduce Laksmana who in turn asserts Rama's importance; she sees that the other woman is the real problem and so she decides to eat Sita. Laksmana as punishment cuts off Surpanakha's nose and ears.

Surpanakha takes word of this outrage and of Sita's beauty to her brother Ravana, the demon king. When Ravana tries to seduce Sita, her voice comes through in different registers: when she is by herself she presents one figure; when defending herself against Ravana, she presents another. When she talks to Ravana she defends Rama to the hilt, saying that Rama will come to kill Ravana and save her, and that no promises will make her gaze upon Ravana: she is very pro-patriarchal. When left alone she goes into more personal soliloquies and gets so desperate as to threaten to kill herself. Although possessing neither weapons nor her husband's permission to kill herself, she has no other options. She makes her hair into a noose, but at that moment Rama's monkey general, Hanuman, appears as a messenger from Rama. An interesting dialogue between Hanuman and Sita follows, giving us a third dimension of Sita. Sita treats him like a servant and refuses his offer to help her escape on his back. She prefers to remain in captivity rather than suffer the dishonor of being rescued by someone other than Rama or even touching another male.

In the *Yuddha Kanda*, Rama and his monkey troops come to save Sita. Although the book focuses on Sita, she says almost nothing, and we learn little about her voice here until the very end, when Ravana is killed. After Ravana's defeat, Hanuman asks Rama if he would like to see Sita. Rama declares he cannot take her back because she has been tainted by living in the house of a man. Sita undergoes *Agniparitsa* or examination by fire to try her innocence. The fire testifies to her supreme purity, as do the gods. Rama, satisfied, takes her back.

Valmiki's long seventh kanda tells of Hanuman's birth and history, then returns the heroes to Ayodhya. Rama and Sita live happily at first; but when Sita becomes pregnant, rumors about her fidelity fly again, and Rama expels Sita. Now we have the *Sitayaga*, a controversial episode. Sita's voice is not heard until Laksmana leaves Sita in the forest although she swears her fidelity. Valmiki, composer of the epic, takes her into his ashram. She gives birth to two sons. At the text's end, Rama decides on a sacrifice and hears a beautiful tale being told, the Ramayana, and his sons, taught by Valmiki, are singing it. Remorsefully, Rama summons Sita. She says, "If I have been faithful, let my mother the earth goddess

take me in." The earth obediently opens and takes her in. So her last words are a final charge against her husband and the patriarchy that has treated her so badly.

The Valmiki Ramayana is not known by everyone and thus not hegemonic. A few Sanskrit versions of the story exist, like the *Adbhuta Ramayana*, the "marvelous" Ramayana, which even elevates Sita to the level of a goddess. Some people, such as northern Hindus, use a different text, the *Tulsi Das* version of 1500 AD or so. And women have lately used Sita as a counter-voice, taking Sita's voice to make certain feminist statements, creating an interesting category of women's literature. It is perhaps best to think of Sita as belonging not to the past, but to a living tradition resonant throughout the entire world. People manipulate her for their own purposes.

Is there a tension between Sita being outspoken versus supporting the patriarchy? On the one hand, Sita comprises an instruction book on how good wives should behave. But some aspects of her character are "resistant." It is good to remember that these texts are written by men, for men; we must sift through this perspective. When facing outside dangers Sita is more likely to defend patriarchy; when speaking to her husband in private, she does not defend patriarchy at all. Women's folk versions, on the other hand, portray Sita more as a familiar human being.

Was Sita unfaithful to Rama in the seventh book? No; in some traditions she draws a picture of Ravana but that is all. What about Rama's character? He neither defends Sita, nor stands up for himself when condemned to exile. Perhaps the Ramayana did not become famous in the West because Western heroes are not like that: they are defined by resistance, but in India, by subservience and deference to the elders. Rama is not easy for Westerners to understand: they expect a hero to fight for his kingdom. Laksmana talks about killing the king, but Rama says no: a man never questions his elders but must do what they say.

Is the story of Ramayana indigenous? Or does it date to the putative invasion of members of the Indo-European linguistic group into the Indian subcontinent? Valmiki is the earliest version, but some argue that Buddhist jataka literature has parts of it. Valmiki is probably earlier and is probably an Indian story.

Was Valmiki trying to silence an early goddess cult tradition? The upper Khyber pass area features good archaeological evidence of a widespread mother goddess cult that traveled lower into the Indian subcontinent, including worship of a woman warrior goddess. Valmiki in his epic may be countering this cultural threat with this story.

Summarized by Dr. Timothy Doran