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The Peripheral and the Patriarchal: A Feminist Close-reading on Valmiki's *Ramayana*

“Benevolence, compassion, learning, good character, restraint, and equanimity--these are the six virtues that adorn Raghava, the best of men.” (Valmiki, 611)--the public speak in the 30th sarga as the poet Valmiki writes of his esteemed protagonist, Rama. Across various sargas in the Sanskrit epic poem, *Ramayana*, these qualities are found and embodied in the protagonist who hails from noble virtue and kingly descent. While the protagonist Rama, in the *Ramayana* is revered as a paragon of princely virtue however, his character also emulates stark undertones of the patriarchy exemplified in the over idealization and valorization of a patrifocal rule, in the treatment of women as peripheral, auxiliary, and burdensome characters in the story, and in the exclusively gendered dharmic responsibilities that hamper the opportunity for women to transcend their roles.

The twentieth century feminist writer, Simone de Beauvoir once argued in her groundbreaking work, *The Second Sex*, that while women are mystified or reduced to a “mystery” beyond comprehension of men, “masculine mystery” is nonexistent although women conversely, do not always understand men (1405). In the *Ramayana*, Beauvoir’s observation echoes in the clear-cut characterization of the protagonist Rama whose goodness and eminence is no mystery to the people of Ayodhya. With the entirety of Sarga 1 dedicated to contouring the prince’s qualities, Rama is unequivocally informed as an even-tempered, honest, kind-spoken, insightful, upright prince who did all that was required to please and benefit the people of Ayodhya and was wise in the ways of righteousness. Furthermore, “his

conduct and invincible valor made him so like one of the gods who guard the world that Earth *herself* desired to have him as her master” (Valmiki, 582)

With Rama revered like a god, the townsfolk, children, and kingdom of Kosala within their public squares and private houses, beautified highways, gave offerings, and fragrant incense in glory and praise of Rama, especially in anticipation of his consecration as king (Valmiki, 586). Rama is not an isolated figure praised in the story as, in a similar vein, King Dasaratha who rules over Kosala is also given definite attributes for his virtuous and righteous nature, with veneration heard from the public, saying: “ah, what a great man our king is” (Valmiki, 586). Beyond these qualities and exaltations, the deeply entrenched patrifocal society within the epic is also palpable at the height of the conflict, where Rama’s instigated exile is met with objections from his mother and wife.

In response to their grievances and lamentations in protest, Rama’s responses in the name of righteousness foreground an all-reigning patriarch where the word of the righteous king is prioritized above all. Rama reasons that he cannot disobey his father’s injunction, that the command of his Father is based on righteousness and is absolute, and that it is “not within his power to defy his father’s bidding” (Valmiki, 600), for it is not him alone who acts as his father instructs as he only follows “the path sanctioned and taken by those men of old” (Valmiki, 600). This traditionalized overidealization and valorization of the patriarch posed its own demise not only in the exile of the hero that caused the king’s death in sorrow, but also in the disillusionment of the hero’s character who eventually abandons his wife in exile (India’s Heroic Age, 577) to crystallize his reputation by appeasing public censure.

Aside from what emanates from the primary male figures in the epic, the patriarchal function also trickles and operates in the treatment of women as peripheral, auxiliary, burdensome, and even demonic, characters in the story and in the womens’ internalization of these qualities. Unlike the overtly worshipped and clearly established identities of the males,

the women in the story are not only gleaned upon, but also struggles or ceases to exist without Rama. Beauvoir, who unravels the myths on the woman in *The Second Sex*, pronounces that, in sexuality and maternity, women as a subject can claim autonomy, but to be a “true woman” however, is to accept oneself as the inessential Other (Simone de Beauvoir, 1404). Beauvoir’s assent is realized in the lamentations of the immediate female figures in the protagonist’s life: Rama’s mother Kausalya, and his wife Sita.

When queen Kausalya receives news of her son’s terminated consecration and exile in Sarga 17, she mourns: “And what could bring a woman greater sorrow? Even with you present, this is how I am spurned. What will it be like when you are gone, my child? Surely nothing is left me but to die.” (Valmiki, 600). Albeit fictional, within this line, the *Ramayana* discloses the reality of the Hindu social order. In *India’s Heroic Age*, it is explained that the entire system of Hindu tradition excludes women and *sudras*--the lowest of the four social classes--from the moksa, the ultimate goal of religion where “one seeks liberation from the constraints of worldly existence” (570). While men are bound by a prescribed program of sacred duty in *dharma* where they are afforded the ascendancy towards moksa, a woman’s *dharma* is defined in the constraints of being a wife or a mother (India’s Heroic Age, 570). *Dharma*, as a social and cosmic order, substantiates the “categorical imperative” that Beauvoir coins in her philosophy. Beauvoir explains that identifying women with altruism--where they are set with a vocation as women in the patriarchate, no more than slavery being the vocation of a slave--guarantees man absolute rights in her devotion imposed by the categorical imperative (1408).

While Rama fulfills his *dharma* in exile, Kausalya is left losing her own *dharma* as her sacred duty is entwined with Rama as her son. Because Kausalya as a woman in the patriarchate consigned to the Hindu tradition is left to define her purpose in being a mother, losing Rama ultimately equates to losing both her womanhood and personhood. Left

grappling with the constraints of maternity as a dharmic responsibility, she ultimately laments for her own predicament in being “childless”; in losing all that she is meant to live for. In this way, Kausalya assumes full cognizance and acquiesces to being the inessential Other. In recognition of her “usefulness” being limited to her maternity and in easily disposing herself upon exclaiming that nothing is left but for her to die upon Rama’s exile, Kausalya relegates herself as a peripheral and auxiliary character whose significance, purpose, and existence is overdependently built on Rama.

Akin to Kausalya, the same dharmic predicament also applies to Sita whose significance is anchored in being Rama’s wife. As Rama informs Sita: “My beloved, I am going to the great forest and you must stay here. You must do as I tell you, my lovely, and not give offense to anyone”, he proceeds to stipulate dharmic responsibilities for Sita to fulfill in staying in Kosala while he is in exile. In Sarga 23, Rama orders that Sita must be a humbled follower in reckoning with the new king, explaining to Sita: “You are never to boast of me in the presence of Bharata. *Men in power cannot bear to hear others praised*” (Valmiki, 605). Rama also instructs that Sita must never show opposition to Bharata as both the “king of the country and master of the House” (Valmiki, 605).

Apart from these, Rama assigns Sita as a caretaker to the crestfallen Kausalya who subordinated all righteousness, the rest of Rama’s mothers who must receive no less homage from Sita, and, most importantly, Rama’s brothers, Bharata and Satrugna, whom Sita must look after as though they were her brothers and sons--fully exercising the maternal *dharmā*. If Kausalya as a woman in the story is seen in the periphery, Sita’s character as Rama’s wife, in being expected of subservience, is identified as burdensome. Sita herself articulates this in her clamor to go with Rama in exile in Sarga 24, stating: “Take me oh please grant my request. I shall not be a burden to you” (Valmiki, 606) to which Rama responds with “My

frail Sita, you must do as I say (...) No more of your going to the forest, you could not bear it.” in Sarga 25.

While Sita is able to circumvent the matter and eventually join Rama in exile, her means to achieving this nonetheless reinforce both her categorical imperative as a woman in the Hindu social order and her dharmic responsibility as Rama’s wife. In her protest and dissent, while she does reject being the “inessential Other”, she is still unable to transcend her role or *dharma*. Sita merely subverts it, reasoning in Sarga 26--similarly to Kausalya--that “A woman whose husband has left her cannot go on living” and setting the condition that if Rama refuses to take her to the forest, she shall have no recourse but to end her life.

(Valmiki, 608). Sita heightens and underscores her devotion to Rama as she claims that her husband is her deity, that she wants nothing more than to serve her hero and husband in the forest, that she is to remain with Rama even in her death as her father gave her to Rama, that there is no reason that she must not be taken with Rama as she has been of good and faithful conduct to Rama, and that, as Rama’s devoted wife, she must be taken with Rama to share in both his joy and his sorrow (Valmiki, 607-608). Ultimately, Sita struggles for existence and autonomy as she is still tied to and hampered by her *dharmic* responsibility as Rama’s wife.

Outside the exchange of Rama and Sita, in Sarga 30, as Rama’s exile is brought in the public sphere and people thronged to witness his departure to the forest, the patrifocal society continues to operate in their peripheral view of Sita, whereas, while Rama is venerated for his heroic humility clad free of kingly power in heading to the forest to fulfill his father’s word, the public, in diverting their gaze to Sita accompanying her husband in exile, preoccupies themselves more with Sita’s appearance, stating:

People on the royal highway can now look at Sita, a woman whom even creatures of the sky have never had a glimpse of before. Sita is used to cosmetics and partial to red sandalwood cream, but the rain and the heat and the cold will soon ruin her complexion (Valmiki, 611).

Despite not being immediately linked to the protagonist in dharmic responsibility, Kaikeyi as a primary figure in the excerpted chapters and as the instigator of the exile whose character can persist independently of Rama, still serves as a prime vantage to observe the ways of the patriarchy. In her exchange with king Dasaratha in Sargas 10 and 11, Kaikeyi shifts from Dasaratha's beloved wife to an accursed woman upon demanding Rama's exile as her boon from the king. As opposed to being labelled as "evil Kaikeyi", Dasaratha throws attacks directly at her femininity, and maligns her instead as "an evil woman" coming in variant expressions: "Malicious, wicked woman, bent on destroying this House! Evil woman (...) It was sheer suicide to bring you into my home. I did it unwittingly thinking you a princess--and not a deadly poisonous viper" (Valmiki, 593-594). Apart from this, in the 11th Sarga, the narrator juxtaposes Dasaratha as the "pure-hearted king" (Valmiki, 594) who laments, with Kaikeyi, the malicious, "black-hearted" (Valmiki, 594) woman.

In this regard, if Kausalya is reinforced as auxiliary and Sita is burdensome in the eyes of the patriarchy, Kaikeyi here is blatantly demonized as a woman. Beyond Dasaratha's incessant slander, his deeply ingrained patriarchal makeup is also manifested in his plea for exception in Sarga 11, where he begs Kaikeyi: "Dear lady, have mercy on me, after all, *I am king*" (Valmiki, 594) and in his claim in Sarga 10, where he expresses that he would sooner renounce his wives Kausalya or Sumitra than "Rama, who so cherishes his father" (Valmiki, 593). The idealization of both men and women within a royal, political, and religiously ordered patriarchy has posed many detriments that ultimately harm the sexes who participate in crystallizing the gendered structures within these domains. While it is no question that Rama and Dasaratha does retain valor and virtue, it remains just as true that they are nonetheless both complicit in maintaining and reinforcing the hierarchy that advantages, compromises, persecutes, and tyrannizes one sex over the other.

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