

Revisiting the Ramayana with a Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

This research article critically examines the Ramayana, an ancient Indian epic, through a feminist lens to uncover the complex portrayal of its female characters and challenges traditional narratives that often marginalize their voices. The study focuses on prominent women characters such as Sita, Kaikeyi, Surpanakha, Mandodari, and Urmila, exploring their agency, challenges, and resistance within patriarchal structures. Each character's narrative highlights societal pressures, constraints, and the repercussions of deviating from prescribed gender roles. The article also takes into account the contemporary reinterpretations and adaptations of the Ramayana, for their contributions to gender equality discourse. By engaging with the Ramayana from a feminist perspective, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural narratives, gender dynamics, and ongoing struggles for equality.

Keywords: Ramayana, feminist perspective, Sita, Kaikeyi, Surpanakha, Mandodari, Urmila, gender roles, patriarchy.

The Ramayana, attributed to the sage Valmiki, stands as a cornerstone of Indian epic literature, renowned for its exploration of duty, loyalty, and the eternal battle between good and evil. It's a story based on the Ram saga and the narrative of Ram and Sita. However, a feminist perspective sheds new light on this ancient narrative, revealing complex gender dynamics and challenging traditional interpretations that often marginalize female characters. A feminist reinterpretation of the Ramayana challenges traditional narratives by highlighting the struggles of female characters against patriarchal structures. This perspective critiques the glorification of passive female roles and underscores women's quests for autonomy and recognition within ancient texts. The women characters in the Ramayana appear to be the very embodiment of various human traits.

Sita, wife of Prince Rama, is traditionally upheld as the epitome of feminine virtue, known for her unwavering devotion and self-sacrifice. Her character is one of the major literary tools through which women writers often attempt to review the Ramayan and subvert the male-centric reading of the epic. A feminist reading of the epic unveils the constraints imposed upon her by patriarchal expectations. Her abduction by Ravana and subsequent trial by fire, intended to prove her purity, exemplify societal pressures that reduce her agency (Chakravarti, 1990). Sita's banishment to the forest while pregnant further underscores the precarious position of women within the epic (Lal, 2001). Kaikeyi, the stepmother of Rama, is often vilified in traditional narratives for her role in

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Rama's exile. She has been depicted as a demonized queen. She is depicted as Dasharath's favourite wife and is introduced in polarity. She is the most complicated yet an accomplished and intrepid charioteer; she is a healer and a counsellor to King Dasharath, yet she is the most untrustworthy. She becomes the metaphor for 'subaltern silence', and continues to exist in the 'object' position. Kaikeyi's denouement is articulated to be fulfilled only with Rama's embrace, implying forgiveness for the catastrophe. The entire narrative positions Kaikeyi in two facets. As the centre of the action, asserting her rights is proved flawed, and she even receives admonitions in varied forms. Her 'authority' is taken away and doomed to believe that she must face a catastrophic fate for her deed. The text works to re-establish the hierarchy structure by putting Kaikeyi in a rightfully 'subordinated' position. However, revisiting her character reveals her political agency and maternal love for Bharata. Her actions challenge stereotypes of women as driven solely by personal vendettas, highlighting instead her strategic maneuvering within a male-dominated court (Richman, 1991).

Surpanakha, Ravana's sister, represents unbridled female desire in the Ramayana. Her pursuit of Rama ends in rejection and mutilation by Lakshmana, illustrating the epic's discomfort with female sexuality that deviates from societal norms (Rangarajan, 2014). Surpanakha's portrayal reflects patriarchal efforts to control and suppress women's autonomy and desires. Mandodari, Ravana's wife, exemplifies loyalty and wisdom that are overshadowed by her husband's actions. Her marginalization underscores broader patterns in the Ramayana where female voices and counsel are often disregarded (Pattanaik, 2010).

Urmila, Lakshmana's wife, provides another perspective on the sacrifices made by women in the Ramayana. While her husband accompanies Rama to the forest, Urmila remains behind in Ayodhya, agreeing to sleep through the fourteen-year exile so that Lakshmana can remain fully alert and devoted to his duties. This act of self-sacrifice, often overlooked in traditional retellings, speaks to the silent endurance and strength of women in supporting roles within patriarchal structure. Ahalya, wife of sage Gautama, is another female character whose story intersects with that of Rama. Cursed by her husband for being seduced by Indra in disguise, Ahalya is turned to stone until Rama's touch frees her from the curse. Her tale raises questions about agency, victim blaming, and the consequences of patriarchal judgment in the Ramayana narrative.

It's really a good thing that contemporary authors and scholars have begun reclaiming and rewriting the narratives of female characters in the Ramayana. Works like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Forest of Enchantments" offer nuanced and empowered portrayals of Sita, contributing to a broader discourse on gender equality and representation in literature (Divakaruni, 2019). Such retellings not only enrich the portrayal of female characters but also challenge entrenched patriarchal narratives. The feminist reinterpretation of the Ramayana resonates with modern struggles for gender equality, offering insights into historical roots of gender inequities. By examining ancient texts through a feminist lens, scholars and readers alike can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of cultural narratives and their implications for gender dynamics.

Thus, the feminist reinterpretation of the Ramayana challenges conventional readings by foregrounding the agency, challenges, and resilience of its female characters. By critically analyzing

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these narratives, scholars contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics, cultural heritage, and the ongoing struggle for gender equality. Revisiting the Ramayana with a feminist perspective reveals the complexities of its female characters and critiques the patriarchal norms that shape their narratives. By highlighting women's agency, challenges, and resistance, this reinterpretation enriches our understanding of the epic and contributes to ongoing dialogues on gender equality. Our Hindu society has hinged upon its culture, tradition, moral, Kasher and values on great epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These sagas have and will always rule our values and belief system. As Roland Barthes asserts in his *Mythologies*, myth is a special form of the myth told with an intention. However, while writing such epics, there are voices that are often left unheard and not paid much heed, to name a few like Ahalya, Urmila, Vrinda, Mandodri and Shilavati. Revisiting mythology thereupon gives voice to the quiet characters in the epics. The paper thus relates to the present issues of society like gender discrimination and insecurity based on looks and skin colour, feminism and violence by intertwining through the mythological representation of the characters. The persona of Urmila and Surpanakha has always been eclipsed by the other prime characters in Ramayana. A critical analysis of the narratives of various female characters of the epic, scholars contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics, cultural heritage, and the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

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