

SITA AND SURPANAKHA IN VALMIKI'S *RĀMĀYAṆA* AND KALIDASA'S *RAGHUVAMŚA*

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Abstract

This paper analyses the character of Sita and Surpanakha in Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* and Kalidasa's *Raghuvamśa*. Sita and Surpanakha display opposing characteristics of behavior. Sita's devotion towards her husband, her fidelity and chastity are put in stark contrast to Surpanakha's actions. In *Rāmāyaṇa*, Surpanakha's introduction is of high consequence to the story, this paper discusses the way in which Valmiki and Kalidasa deal with this incident and brings out the subtle differences. Valmiki advocates the ideals of womanhood throughout the text; *Rāmāyaṇa* reinforces these ideals through various characters and events. The character of Sita provides ample opportunity to highlight the virtues of a good woman like gentleness, beauty, kindness and chastity. Surpanakha's character is villainized for her outgoing and vengeful nature.

Keywords - *Rāmāyaṇa*; *Raghuvamśa*; Kalidasa; Sita

Rāmāyaṇa has been orally transmitted through generations before it was finally written down. F. Max Muller in his introduction for R.C.Dutt's *Rāmāyaṇa* calls this period of oral tradition of literature as mnemonic period of literature.

¹ The oral renderings of *Rāmāyaṇa* have gone through several changes before they were penned down. The earliest version of written *Rāmāyaṇa* that we have is of Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, which was transmitted orally earlier. Scholars generally agree that this extant version of Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* was possibly conceived in the period 500 BCE to 300 CE. *Rāmāyaṇa* is composed mostly in *śloka* metre and divided into seven *kāṇḍa*, of which first and last (*Bālakāṇḍa* and *Uttarakāṇḍa* respectively) are considered later interpolation. J.L. Brockington in his book *Righteous Rama: The Evolution of an Epic* has conceived five cultural and chronological stages in the development of this epic. In the first stage, *Rāmāyaṇa* was transmitted orally from about the fifth to the fourth century BC and it included book 2-6 of the epic. Second stage covers third century BC to first century AD. In the third stage, *Bālakāṇḍa* and *Uttarakāṇḍa* were added. The fourth stage of composition lies between fourth and twelfth centuries AD and the fifth stage begins twelfth century onwards. Brockington has elaborated on the economic, social, religious and other transformations that take place at each successive stage. According to Brockington, the position of women lowers with each stage.²

Kalidasa's *Raghuvamśa* is a *mahākāvya* about legendary kings of *Ikṣvāku* lineage. *Raghuvamśa* is divided into 19 cantos or *sarga*. Rama belonged to the *Ikṣvākul* lineage so Kalidasa writes about life of Rama based on Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. There is very scanty material available about personal life of Kalidasa so very little is known about him. Scholars generally agree to date him around 4/5th CE. He was a Brahman but not a sectarian, was quite popular, and financially well off. He was well acquainted with various philosophies, medicine and a little bit of knowledge about astronomy.

Sita has an extra ordinary birth story in *Rāmāyaṇa*. She is considered the daughter of earth as Janaka found her while ploughing for sacrificial purposes. In *Bālakāṇḍa*, Janaka says,

¹ Valmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, (R.C.Dutt, Trans.) New Delhi, 1899.

² Brockington, *Righteous Rāma: The Evolution of an Epic*, Delhi, 1984

“Now one time, as I was plowing a field, a girl sprang up behind my plow, I found her as I was clearing the field, and she is thus known by the name Sita, furrow.”³

Sita means furrow, which shows that it was associated with agriculture. In the *Rigveda*, Sita is the personification of agriculture or furrow. In addition, she is invoked for fertility and fecundity.⁴ Kalidasa does not go into details of Sita’s birth circumstances and hints at her well known birth story by referring to her as ‘the one not born of a woman’ at several places in *Raghuvamśa*.

The episode involving Surpanakha was a major turning point in the story of *Rāmāyana* because Sita’s abduction by Ravana was directly connected to it. This incident started a chain of events that ultimately lead to destruction of Lanka city and fall of its mighty king Ravana.

It becomes imperative to understand the perspective of different communities regarding adultery in *Rāmāyana*. In the ideal kingdom of Ayodhya, there was nobody going after other people’s wives. The kings of Ikṣvāku dynasty banished their sons or were expected to banish them if they were guilty of such a crime.⁵ These statements from *Rāmāyana* go on to show that adultery was such a serious crime that even members of royal family received severe punishment. The difference can be seen in the way *Vanaras* conduct themselves in these matters. On one hand, Rama refused to accept his innocent wife while Sugriva had no scruples in taking back Ruma after her adulterous connection with his elder brother Vali. Still Hanumana, the *Vanara*, thinks that he had committed crime even by looking at other people’s wives and by talking to Sita. Shakambhari Jayal opines that these improved morals may have been due to his individual standard or the *Vanaras* also were gradually changing their morals as they were exposed to Aryans.⁶ *Rākṣasas* had totally different outlook in this sphere. In *Rāmāyana*, Ravana states that it was a virtue of *rākṣasa* to visit other people’s wives or take them by force.⁷ As we will see in the discussion below, Surpanakha, Ravana’s sister, had no scruples in proposing to a married man. Although not every *rākṣasa* conformed to these ideal, for example, Vibhishana was against forceful abduction and keeping of Sita by Ravana.

In Valmiki’s *Rāmāyana*, Rama along with Sita and Laxmana lived happily in Panchavati after taking leave from sage Agastya. It was during their stay here that *arākṣasi* named Surpanakha spotted Rama and company. Surpanakha word literally means, “having nails like winnowing basket.”⁸ Valmiki compares Rama’s physical beauty and behavior with Surpanakha to show how undeserving she was to be with him.

“Rama was handsome, the *rākṣasa* woman was ugly, he was shapely and slim of waist, she misshapen and potbellied; his eyes were large, hers were beady, his hair was jet black, and hers the color of copper; he always said just the right thing and in a sweet voice, her words were sinister and her voice struck terror; he was young, attractive, and well-mannered, she ill mannered, repellent, an old hag. And yet, the god of love, who comes to life in our bodies, had taken possession of her”⁹

Surpanakha was love struck at the sight of Rama and decided to propose her love for him. She could take any form with her magical powers so decided to take a beautiful physical form to woo Rama. She then approached and enquired about them. Rama introduced himself and also his wife

³ Goldman, R. P. (Ed.), *The Rāmāyana of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India*, Vol. I, Bālakāṇḍa (R. P. Goldman, Trans.), 1990, 65.14.

⁴ Guruge, A., *The Society of the Rāmāyana*, New Delhi, 1991, p- 13.

⁵ Jayal, S., *The Status of Women in the Epics*, Delhi, 1966, p- 206.

⁶ Ibid, p- 207.

⁷ Ibid, p- 72.

⁸ Kalidasa, *The Raghuvamśa of Kalidasa with the commentary (Sanjivini) of Mallinatha* (3 ed.), (M. R. KALE, Trans.), 1922.

⁹ Goldman, R. P. (Ed.), *The Rāmāyana of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India*, Vol.III, Aranyakāṇḍa, (S. Pollock, Trans.), Delhi, 2007, 16.8-10.

and brother. After telling her about their purpose of stay, Rama asked her to introduce herself and tell how she roams freely in this dangerous forest. Rama is surprised that a woman could roam around in a dangerous forest without a protector. It could be because in their homeland the idea of women without protection was not strong. People mistrusted woman who did not have immediate protectors. People used to avoid marriage with a brotherless and fatherless girl as she did not have proper protector in her maidenhood. Valmiki and Kalidasa both lament the fact that a woman like Sita who was rarely seen in public had to go out of the palace and into forest.

Surpanakha is more independent than Sita as she roams around forest freely. Surpanakha introduces herself as the sister of *rākṣasa* king Ravana, Vibhishana, Kumbhkarna, Khara and Dusana. She proudly declares that she can venture about freely in this forest because all creatures are terrified of her. Surpanakha is proud of her lineage and thinks that it would help her win Rama's heart. If she did think this way then she was completely wrong because the author in this work completely abhors the idea of *arākṣasa* and *Aryan* together. The author shows that *Aryans* were superior to *rākṣasas* whether in terms of physical beauty or moral integrity. So *arākṣasa* could be infatuated with the *Aryan* hero or heroine but it could not be otherwise. Kalidasa highlights the righteous character of Rama in a *śloka* that occurs just before Surpanakha's introduction, making it clear beforehand that her seductions are not going to work on him.¹⁰

Finding Surpanakha's proposal quite ridiculous, Rama mocks her. He replies that as he is already married, a woman like her would surely mind being a co-wife to Sita so she should instead direct her feelings towards Laxmana, who is unmarried. Surpanakha fails to grasp the humor in his tone and takes his words literally. She then proposes her feelings to Laxmana who again directs her towards Rama saying that he is a slave to Rama and if she marries him then she would have to become a maidservant. Surpanakha becomes agitated as both brothers toss around with her feelings and realizes that Sita is the cause of her distress; if she gets rid of; her then these men would have no qualms accepting her. Rama stops her as she marched to devour Sita who seeks her husband's lap out of terror. Then Rama orders Laxmana to punish Surpanakha and he obliges by cutting her nose and ears. Uma Chakravarti does not consider that it was only symbolic castration because cutting off the nose is a common 'punishment' for alleged infidelity or sexual crimes, but it is a warning to all other women who may give expression to their desire.¹¹ Laxmana wants to kill her but Rama stops him by saying that she is a woman. Surpanakha runs into the forest shrieking with pain. There she pleads with her brothers Khara and Dusana to take revenge for her injuries. Surpanakha lies to her brother that she approached the anchorites to make them her prey and in turn, they attacked her. She pleads with them in a helpless manner to ignite their anger.

In Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, it seems that Surpanakha got angry at her rejection by Rama and Laxmana and wanted root out the cause of their rejection, which she thought, was Sita. Rama realizes that it was wrong of them to jest with a person of fierce and vicious nature. Here Rama accepts the fault in his judgement.

Kalidasa states that Surpanakha approached Rama totally infatuated with him and professed her love for him in the presence of Sita. At this stage, Kalidasa makes a remark about general nature of women implying that they do not have any self-control when it comes to love,

"In the very presence of Sita, she wooed him, telling him her lineage; for a woman's love, when grown to excess, bides not proper time."¹²

In *Raghuvamśa* too, Rama and Laxmana both reject Surpanakha. Kalidasa compares her to a river that sweeps either bank as she approached both brothers. Sita knew that Rama and

¹⁰Devadhar, C.R., *Works of Kālidāsa*, Vol. II, Raghuvamśam, Delhi, 2018, 12.31.

¹¹Chakravarti, U., *Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories: Beyond the Kings and Brahmanas of Ancient India*, New Delhi, 2006, p- 235.

¹²Devadhar, C.R., *Works of Kālidāsa*, Vol. II, Raghuvamśam, Delhi, 2018, 12.33.

Laxmana were just teasing Surpanakha so she laughed at the sorry state of Surpanakha. Kalidasawrites:

“Sitā’s laugh roused her from momentary softness to rage, as ocean’s tide, that sleeps in the wind’s absence, is agitated by moonrise.”¹³

Surpanakha took it as an insult and threatened Sita that she will pay for it. Then she assumed her real form but before she could do, anything Laxmana disfigured her with his sword. This sort of patriarchal violence towards women is justified by incorporating it into daily lives through stereotypes of good women and bad women. Here, female sexuality is considered grotesque if it is not properly under male control. It normalizes male violence against women by suggesting that it is a justified way of disciplining women.¹⁴

In Valmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rama accepted the responsibility of misjudging the situation by mocking the wrong person. However, in *Raghuvamśa*, the author seems to imply that it was Sita’s fault for laughing at Surpanakha and thus making her angry. The onus of responsibility has shifted from Rama to Sita. Considering this incident had severe repercussions for the life of not only Rama and Sita but the whole *rākṣasa* clan, it is quite significant that Kalidasa chose to make Sita accountable for it.

Surpanakha is not afraid of expressing her desires and takes action to achieve what she wants. She does not require male protection and roams around the forest alone but she has her brothers to depend on. She does not sit back and blame her fate for her misfortune rather she ignites the anger of her brothers to take revenge. Sita on the other hand refuses to protect and save herself without Rama’s permission. In Valmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sita says that she possessed the power to save herself from Ravana but she could not use her powers, as Rama had not given her the permission to save herself. At various points in *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sita expresses her desire to die if she is separated from her husband.

As Uma Chakravarti states that, the contrast between the developed Aryan society and the undeveloped tribal society in the *Rāmāyaṇa* indicates an inverse relationship between economic development and the position of women: the higher the economic development of a society, the lower is the position of its women.¹⁵ “In patriarchy, men are classified as good or bad according to their deeds, whereas women are perceived as good or bad in terms of either their sexual behavior or their lack of docility.”¹⁶

Both of these epics also clearly make a distinction between good and bad woman. Here a woman who is entirely devoted to her husband and does not defy his order obviously comes in the first category and the other category is sexually promiscuous women like Surpanakha who are shorn of every redeeming quality. This hierarchy of women based on their total devotion to husband to the extreme makes Sita an ideal to be followed, she is exemplary in every way a wife should be.

References:

¹³Devadhar, C.R., *Works of Kālidāsa*, Vol. II, Raghuvamśam, Delhi, 2018, 12.36.

¹⁴Chakravarti, U., *Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories: Beyond the Kings and Brahmanas of Ancient India*, New Delhi, 2006, pp- 235-36.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp- 226-227.

¹⁶ Shah, S., “Articulation, Dissent and Subversion: Voices of Women's Emancipation in Sanskrit Literature”, *Social Scientist*, 45(9/10), 2017, pp- 79-86. Retrieved June 24, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/26380457