

Un-Tamed and Un-Apologetic 'Rakshasis': A Dichotomic Study of the Polarity of Women in *The Ramayana*

Purobi Sen

Abstract

As a text, Ramayana can be read as a mytho-epic that reflects socio-cultural imaginations of women and power. The way women are represented in the text has been analysed using many different theories and critical perspectives. A gender studies perspective is one such way to explore the text but often earlier deliberations have focused on the human women characters and their position in a patriarchal society. Ramayana being a mythical genre of epic poetry, comprises characters that are not just human beings, but the story includes animals, rakshasas, gods, demi-gods, apsaras as characters in the narrative. One such category of female genders that can be studied are the rakshasis. Rakshasis, though portrayed as villainous, fierce and hideous are seen as more emancipated than the mainstream human women of the epic in many aspects. The paper proposes to analyse the rigid polarisation between demonic women and dutiful human women. While it may seem that within a patriarchal paradigm the upright and dutiful women seem to gain praise and adulation, from a feminist perspective, the non-human rakshasis seem to possess the autonomy and an equivalence that they shared with their male counterparts.

Keywords: Autonomy; Dichotomy; Gender; Rakshasi; Submissiveness.

Introduction

The epics Ramayana and Mahabharata serve as two of the most significant texts that influence composition of literary narratives in India. Ramayana, in particular is read, translated, adapted, retold and performed through a diversity of mediums because of the simplicity of its plot and the various moral ideas that it conveys. Recently, the former President of US-

Barack Obama wrote in his book 'A Promised Land' about the influence of Ramayana and Mahabharata in his life and there are many others who would concur with him.

Valmiki Ramayana is divided into more than twenty-four thousand verses/shlokas and is considered to be one of the first poetic compositions in metre, known as the *Kavya*. Due to multiple retellings and its popularity, the Ramayana forms an important cultural source for social and moral norms of the Indian society, even in contemporary times. It is obvious that the standards for the ideal woman/wife is greatly influenced by heroines of these epics such as Sita. In her essay "*The development of the Sita myth*", Uma Chakravarti (1983) deconstructs the Sita legend through various versions of the Ramayana and the changing identity of women in the changing socio-economic environment. According to her, "classical literature of India focuses on the relationship of women to men through the role of the 'good woman' in a marriage relationship." She suggests that because of this, "the position of women is idealised as virtuous and faithful and these qualities help them overcome all the troubles in their life" (Chakravarti, 68).

Ramayana includes women who do not belong only to the human world but also other female characters that are portrayed as non-human or sub-human. These include the *Rakshasas* and the *Vanaras*. In contrast to the *naras*, the human beings, these other beings display less than ideal natures and are often portrayed as less civilised or cultured beings.

Rakshasas are an integral part of Ramayana plot and there are a number of rakshasas characters in the epic. Popularly rakshasas are seen as trouble-making beings: "In the Ramayana, another type of *jiva*, the *rakshasas*, are described as violent beings who disturb the meditation and rituals of rishis" (Pattanaik 95). Rakshasas are one of the many categories in which these so-called "evil mortals" are placed, other being *Asuras*, *Danavas* and *Daityas*. They are differentiated on the basis of their origin and notoriety levels. Wilkins describes them as possessed of magic and illusionary power, "They are said to be able to assume any form at will; and we read of them appearing as horses, buffaloes, and tigers. Some of them had a hundred heads" (182). They are translated as "demons" in English furthering their negative roles as villains in epics. Rakshasis are the female demons who play an equally crucial role in bringing together the plot of the epic. Rakshasis or demonesses are portrayed as robust and cruel. They are described as beings who can change their forms at their will, and it was also clear that they do not abide by the civilized dharmic code of conduct or

law of the *naras*. Demonesses were equally dangerous and destructive as the demons, which brings us to the point that the sharp bifurcation of duties, behavior and appearance on the basis of gender or sex was missing in the case of the rakshasas in these epics.

The social order and hierarchy of gender in ancient India was established by allocation of duties and roles based on gender. Gender as a social construct is intersectional with other forms of social orders, "Gender interacts with other hierarchies based in such socially constructed categories as class, age, ethnicity, and race: we find, for example, sexualized racism and racialized sexism" (Eckert and McConnell 19). Among this the Aryan men and women considered themselves as the most cultured and civilized. In the vedic/ Brahminical society, men and women were allotted appropriate spheres of action, the word *Stri-dharma* (trans: code of conduct for a woman) was used to indicate the duties of a woman of noble birth. Though these divisions of labour were not very rigid in the early vedic period, later periods of religious development such as those during the smriti and mythological periods of history saw these roles become more rigid, particularly the control of chastity or womanly purity (Chakravarti 579). The Aryan society was perpetually entangled in the web of 'Gender Order' and any diversion from the same caused a havoc and disruption in the set pattern of ideology. Pilcher and Whelehan comment, "It is through the gender order of a society that forms, or codes of masculinities and femininities are created and recreated, and relations between them are organised" (61). These very patriarchal norms are reflected in the textual imaginations of the Ramayana, particularly some of its classical mainstream versions such as Valmiki's Ramayana.

Differences and Polarities within Women

The creation of a dichotomy between the rakshasi and the human womanhood plays a crucial role in defining the strict polarisation that has been established for binary opposition as per the societal norms. "The first feature of dichotomy is the extension of a difference between two entities, into an opposition. Each part is dependent on the other part for its position, and each part is defined by its not being the other" (Prokhovnik 24). Instead of seeing women as graded based on other criteria such as geography or cultural backgrounds, the stereotypes instead rely on patriarchal norms that excludes and polarises the differences. Analysis of the women characters in Ramayana shows a sharp contrast between two types of females, submissive and un-tamed. Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert in their prolific work "*The Madwomen in the Attic*" have identified and criticised

the splitting of the females into categories framed by the patriarchal society. The ideal women according to the patriarchy was 'Angelic' and the one who tried to break through the rigid confinements and gives up the idea of living passively were 'Monstrous'. The extreme polarisation in this epic between the wild rakshasi and the complete noble lady is based on standards of patriarchy for what an ideal woman should be like. The imagination of such women as ideal companions to the male protagonists with no autonomy even as literary characters is only illustrative of the gendered norms that are portrayed. As a result, these noble women in the epic seem to lack any independent voice or agency in the plot.

In contrast to this, the demons in Ramayana are described as doing away with any such gender order and there seemed to be no control of male rakshasas over their female counterparts, particularly in the forest. The closer they are to the codes of conduct/ dharma, the tamer the rakshasis became, for instance those living in Lanka city were less wild. In the narratives, rakshasis are not treated stereotypically like other human women in Ramayana were. Instead, they were considered as worthy opponents and resilient rivals to the heroes, who had a challenging time defeating them. Rakshasis were themselves self-sufficient enough to protect themselves and attack their aggressors at the same time. In contrast, the human heroines needed constant support and protection. This self-reliance of the rakshasis has often been categorised as their "un-tamed behavior" that is almost masculine. In *Doing Gender*, "to "do" gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behaviour at the risk of gender assessment" (West and Zimmerman 136). In a similar fashion the rakshasis never abided by any normative conceptions of gender which questioned their femininity in these epics.

We find that, demoness in Ramayana were not under any dependency on male counterpart and were not also portrayed as domestic. They were proficient enough to defend themselves and even seek vengeance from their rivals of any gender, class, or race. Even when the rakshasis are seen asking for support or appealing to their male kin, it is shown as a cunning strategy or as a scheme, not as vulnerable appeal for help. The rakshasis are not depicted as vulnerable as the other women in the epic, instead they are pictured as females with vigour and purpose. Richman comments on Kathleen M. Erndl description of Surpanakha in contrast to Sita as:

she reveals a fascination within the Ramayana tradition for Surpanakha, a woman who moves about the forest independent of a male protector and boldly articulates her passionate feelings, as a

kind of alter ego of Sita, often considered the model of the chaste and submissive wife. (9)

The polarity of the stereotype is further reinforced in the epic through the moral value accrued to the rakshasi. For instance, the code of dharma forbids the killing of a woman (*stree-hatya*) or by a warrior as one of the five cardinal sins (*mahapaapa*). Being violent towards a female was considered to be unethical by the society, even Rama before getting into a duel with the rakshasis was concerned with breaking the code of conduct. Even as Rama hesitates to kill the demoness Tataka, he is encouraged by his teacher:

You should not be revolted at the prospect of killing a woman. O son of a king! This is what must be done for the welfare of the four varnas. This is eternal dharma for someone who has been entrusted with the burden of a kingdom. O Kakutstha! Slay the source of adharma. There is no dharma in her. (Debroy 57).

From this passage it is clear that the title of “woman” is not given by one’s being a woman but being morally deserving of being one. One is treated as a woman only if one displays appropriate womanly behavior that is accepted as a norm. Breaking womanly behavior norms relegates one to lose privileges that are associated with the gender.

The term ‘monstrous’ ‘demoness’ and ‘rakshasis’ needs to be re-defined as they have been used according to the prerequisites and implied negative connotation encapsulated within a patriarchal idea of femininity and woman hood. If we evaluate the differences and similarities between the rakshasis and other women characters, we will be able to understand the prejudices and unfairness in the narrative.

The Wronged Women: Tataka, Surpanaka and Sita

Chronologically the first rakshasi to appear in Ramayana narrative is Tataka- a female yakshi cursed to be a rakshasi. Rama and Lakshmana are on a mission to make the forests safe for the sages and kill the demons who disturb the penance of the holy men. She has been described as, “a female yaksha was born and she could assume any form at will. She possessed the strength of one thousand elephants. O fortunate one! Her name is Tataka” (Debroy 55). Rama was surprised to find that a female yaksha could possess such immense strength though she was a woman. In the description of the rakshasi, her female nature as mother and wife is

suppressed and hidden away in contrast to her physical description as a monstrous non-human creature. Tataka's form was so fierce that even Rama and Lakshman were astonished to behold her, "This female yaksha possesses a fierce and terrible body. On seeing her, the hearts of cowards will be shattered. Behold her. She is invincible and possesses the strength of maya" (Debroy 58). Tataka thus unlike a 'proper woman' was demonic as she possessed all the qualities of female as well as that of a male such as anger, valour and willpower. She was the amalgamation of all the masculine traits in a female body which made her an equal to other male counterparts and gave men a right to fight her as equal. The episode of Tataka demonstrates how by blurring the so called hyperfeminine characteristics of a rakshasi, the male-female polarity is replaced by an interfemale polarity of 'rakshasi' (demoness) and 'devi'(noble woman) that is based on racial or caste divides.

The story behind the Tataka's becoming a demoness also is a tale of gender subjugation, that is specifically related to a sub-human woman. Tataka, a yakshi sought revenge against the sage Agastya who through a curse caused the death of her husband, Sunda. Yet again when confronting the powerful Rishi Agastya, both Tataka and her son Maricha are cursed that they would become rakshasas. Though Sage Agastya was the original cause of creating a cannibal demoness who was dangerous to the humans, there is no repercussion for him. Contrast this with the story of the noble Savitri in mythology who challenges the lord of death for her husband's life and tricks death to gain back her husband. In case of Tataka, we find that the not-so human woman as a subaltern faces censure and curse even if her cause of anger against the sage was justifiable as a good wife (Pativrata). Tataka was powerful, determined, and courageous enough to seek revenge and stand against all odds to avenge her husband's death. Yet descriptions of her hideous looks and terrible form were other factors which established her further as a rakshasi and defeminises her. The only redemption for her life as a cursed state of living as a rakshasi is death at Rama's hands.

Thereafter, in the narrative we have the very infamous rakshasi of all times Surpanakha who appears to create havoc in the life of Rama, who now is exiled and lives with his wife and brother in the forest. She has often been blamed for causing the battle between Rama and Ravana through her obstinate and egocentric behaviour. She was self-willed and owned what she wanted and her free expression of desire pushes her nature into the polarity of untrammelled sexuality which again breaks from the ideal woman stereotype. Surpanakha has been established in the scriptures as an un-

scrupulous female who lusts over a man and shamelessly confronts her feelings. This goes without saying that she is mal-formed and un-pleasant to look at. Even when beautiful through magic, she is seen and portrayed as a seductress. Surpanakha has been imagined as morally wrong for her desire to want Rama. Though in the society of Ramayana, many kings had many wives including Rama's father, her desire to marry Rama as another wife could not have been wrong. Yet given her origins as a rakshasa, she was unfit to wed Rama, it was presumptuous of her to try and seduce the Ayodhya Princes. Surpanakha was un-apologetic for being vocal about her desires. She said, "O Rama! O Purushottama! As soon as I first saw you and approached you, I was overcome by the thought that you should be my husband" (Debroy 40).

No noble woman (human) in Ramayana is portrayed as if she is yearning for anything based on her desires, even if she does, she is shown as transgressing her boundaries and being the cause of catastrophes. Kaikeyi, one of the queens of Dasharatha, Ahalya, the wife of rishi Gautama all are seen as examples of women whose desire and ambition lead them to their misfortune. Their transgressions are punished by destiny, but they find redemption and forgiveness in the epic. Yet we notice that the destiny of rakshasa women is worse. While the epic itself does not recognize the free ideals of feminist womanhood expressed in the text, modern analysts have suggested that Surpanakha represents some ideas of women's liberation. But we will discuss about it more subsequently.

Surpanakha represents female agency. She wasn't dependent on her family or the father figures in the family to search her a husband, instead she was self-sufficient enough to choose for herself. In contrast, Sita's swayamvara though meant for a bride to choose a husband was a sham. It was arranged as a competition of masculine powers, not as an event to win the favour of the bride. In contrast Surpanakha had the complete agency on her sexual desires and liberty to choose her partner which most other women didn't possess. In Dandakaranya she roamed all alone like a free bird unimpeded by anyone or anything. Surpanakha was equally perilous and furious like her brothers. Even her brothers considered her to be one of the most resilient rakshasis in their lineage and were utterly stunned to see their sister in a pitiable state after her encounter with Rama and Lakshmana. Khara one of Surpanakha's brothers was surprised that someone could harm or hurt his sister who possessed valour and strength equal to that of hundreds of men. We also note that the brothers acknowledged their sister's capabilities and never questioned her freedom or tried to cage her down in any sort of boundaries.

Dirghangi and Mohanty have rightly described Surpanakha as:

the character of Surpanakha has more similarities with an accomplished and liberated 21st century woman than any of her contemporaries. Here, Surpanakha is not a submissive or a feeble character but a strong independent woman who never fails to express her choices, needs and emotions. (9).

In contrast, Sita is never alone in the forest or in Ravana's captivity. The only time she is alone is when Lakshmana leaves her to search for Rama. And as a vulnerable, non-violent woman she is kidnapped, helpless against Ravana's powers. It is interesting to note that Sita's kidnapping begins to assume a victim blaming episode with the introduction of versions of the story where she transgresses a line of protection. Later versions of the Ramayana began to include the episode of 'Lakshmana Rekha' the line of magic drawn by Lakshmana on the ground (that incident is not available in the original Valmiki epic or Ramacharitmanas), which has come to represent a chastity boundary for women that is not to be crossed, a divide between the private and public sphere.

The Good Rakshasis: Dhanyamalini, Trijata and Sarama

Ravana after abducting Sita, brings her to Lanka and keeps her in the Ashok Vatika under the vigilance of rakshasis. Ravana gave the rakshasis the command to guard upon Sita and not particularly the rakshasas, this shows he thought well of the rakshasis in terms of power and strength. Rakshasis were considered capable enough to follow his orders and Ravana didn't doubt their abilities in comparison to his male attendants. In the clan of rakshasa and rakshasis it can be underlined that in comparison to humans their gender roles bifurcation is much more flexible and not rigid. One will witness in the narrative that Ravana's kingdom and its boundaries were well protected both by rakshasa and rakshasis, who were regarded as equal threats to their rivals and not given stereotypical roles in the palace. They guard Sita while yet frightening her to persuade her to accept their master as her husband. Most of them were vicious and terrible to even glance at because of their disfigured bodies. These rakshasis are described as malicious, nasty, and completely un-feminine and are hostile towards an oppressed Sita. The visual contrast between these two kinds of women becomes pronounced through the perspective of Hanuman. When Hanuman searches for Sita in the palace of Ravana, he comes across countless numbers of rakshasis in Ashokvana garden guarding the place. Hanuman gives a detailed explanation of all the rakshasis he wit-

nesses in the beautiful garden of Lanka. A sharp contrast can be seen in the description of the Ashokvana in which the scenic beauty of the picturesque garden has been described, the emaciated form of a helpless yet spiritual Sita, while the rakshasis in the garden have been described in the most grotesque way possible. Sita is beautiful, sorrowful, yet her beauty is controlled by propriety:

She possessed a firm and slender waist. With eyes like lotus petals, Sita was like Manmatha's Rati. She was desired by the entire world, like the radiance of the full moon. With her excellent body, she was seated on the ground, controlling herself like an ascetic. The timid one sighed a lot, like the terrified wife of an Indra among serpents. Since she was immersed in an extensive and large mass of grief, she was no longer radiant. (Debroy 355).

Writing about gender and sexuality in texts of traditional India, Goldman opines: "In many texts women are idealized as pure, spiritual, and nurturant when the de-erotized and placed in clearly defined and sexually tabooed blood relationships such as those of mother, sister, or daughter" (375). Further, he suggests that the same sexuality is considered as dangerous and destructive to men. So, the emphasis on Sita's control and ascetic looking figure makes her pure and unavailable as a sexual object.

The contrast of a rakshasis was Dhanyamalini, who openly invites Ravana to indulge in sexual relations with her. She expresses that she had the desire to be with Ravana and was ready to give in to his desires. In the text she is read as wanton but still possessed of an understanding of love. She was one of the only sensible rakshasi who tries to make Ravana understand that love can't be forced:

O great king! Sport with me. What use will this Sita be to you? As a vehicle for desire, if someone uses a person who is not interested in desire, that only torments his body. A greater pleasure is obtained from a person who wishes to use herself as a vehicle of desire. (Debroy 373).

Again, like Surpanaka, she had the complete freedom to feel desire and ask for what she desired. By suggesting that the rakshasis were lax about their propriety and sexually free, we can read freedom into the way these women behave in their society, in contrast, Sita never expresses sexual desire. This causes a male ideology to be projected:

By such projective devices, male-dominated cultures have been able to establish a univocal yet hegemonic ideology of gender. A central and defining tenet of this ideology is that sexuality itself, especially when viewed negatively, arises chiefly through the agency of women who are unregulated by the societally defined constraints of kinship (Goldman 376).

Another elderly rakshasi named Trijata in the Ashoka Vana was exceptional and unlike the other rakshasis. She has been projected hideous just in tune with the other rakshasis but at the same time she is shown to be much more mindful and rational. She possessed the power to foresee the future and prophesized the end of Lanka and its rakshasis was near. The character of Trijata has been sculpted by Valmiki as a rakshasi who manifests terror and morality parallelly. He gives traits of rationality and goodness to a rakshasi which is rare. She supported and comforted Sita throughout her painful time in Ashokvana. Trijata tried to warn all the rakshasis not to agitate Sita and torment her as it will be the reason for their end. Rakshasi Trijata was rational and did not blindly follow the commands of her master. She knew the repercussions of the immoral deed her master had committed would doom them and she didn't accept the immoral orders of her master to please him and followed the righteous path by protecting Sita and reassuring her of her reunion with her husband. At every point of time when Sita is deceived by Ravana and his magic tricks to believe Rama is dead, Trijata used her magical powers to disclose Ravana's devious tricks to Sita. Other than Trijata other rakshasis in the Ashokvana were Vinata, Vikata, Chandodari, Ajamukhi, Praghasa etc.

Another rakshasi named Sarama who also was protective of Sita had developed a soft corner for her and considered her as a best friend. Once Ravana using 'Maya' which means illusion convinced Sita about Rama's death by showing her the chopped head of Rama. Sita lost her senses and wailed and howled. Sarama had heard Ravana's plan and revealed it to Sita without fearing for her own life. She being a rakshasi, opposite to the general perception of 'demon behaviour' had morals and a sense of right and wrong. Sarama just like Trijata, was Sita's constant support. Sarama informs Sita of Rama's wellbeing by eavesdropping Ravana's plans "I abandoned all fear of Ravana and hid myself in the desolate sky. O large-eyed one! That was because of you and I do not care for my own life" (Debroy 53). Sarama also eavesdrop on the instruction of Sita to know the battle plans of Ravana against Rama. So, Sarama helps Sita in every possible way and defying the representation of rakshasis. Sita was greatly thankful for the favour done by the 'rakshasis' upon her and found con-

solation in Sarama's company as she informed her about Rama's safety.

Rakshasi Challengers and Warriors: Surasa, Simhika and Lankini

There are also many demonesses that encounter and challenge Hanuman on his way to Lanka to follow Rama's command and search for Sita. Each of them is overcome by the Vanara, who incidentally is also not a human-*nara*.

One encounters a strange episode in the Sundara Kanda, wherein Hanuman is obstructed by a rakshasi, who is a divine goddess and on the instruction of gods, gandharvas and rishis had changed her form into a rakshasi to test Hanuman's strength and valour. The gods ordered:

Assume the form of an extremely terrible rakshasa that is like a mountain, with horrible fangs and coppery eyes. Assume a face that rises up into the firmament. We wish to ascertain his strength and valour.... Surasa assumed the fearful form of a rakshasa. It was disfigured, malformed and fearful everywhere. (Debroy 314).

She being a goddess is given the charge to check Hanuman's potential for the battle and mission ahead and for the same she transformed herself into a rakshasi. This is eccentric in terms of the dichotomy, the goddess could have accomplished the task in her own real form but her assigned feminine and dutiful good woman role did not suit the task because of which she has to assume the form of a rakshasi as the task she was going to perform required a fierce, repulsive and tough façade. So, Surasa assumed a horrible, disfigured form and hampered Hanuman's journey. She when disguised herself as a rakshasa, she tried to inflict Hanuman in every possible way and her physical appearance added to her fearful symmetry. Though Hanuman tricked Surasa and freed himself from the trap of the rakshasi but Surasa as a rakshasi was arduous to handle. This occurrence proves and confirms that for creating problematic situations, acting as an antagonist or building a conflict only rakshasis were held guilty as they were subjected for performing all the evil deeds. This episode again makes it clear and evident how in order to perform malicious activities the support of the form of a rakshasi was needed. The rakshasis were stereotyped into being an impediment for all the righteous deeds.

The other rakshasi we come across is Simhika or also known as Angaraka. She is also represented as an obstruction in the path of virtue. Simhika is a sea demoness who resides and survives on her own will without any pro-

tection by a man. She is self-sufficient for her survival and self-reliant unlike any other human woman. Simhika was pathetic to behold and created fear in the hearts of the onlooker. Simhika possessed immense strength and valour. She could change her form at will and caught hold her prey by catching their shadows. She could increase and decrease her size and was infamous in all the three worlds. When Simhika caught hold of Hanuman's shadow Hanuman was stunned for a while with the strength she possessed. He said, "I am being violently seized and my valour has been disabled. It is as if a giant boat in the ocean is being pulled back by a contrary wind" (Debroy 317). Only Hanuman possessed the potential to slay the demoness, no one else could ever defeat her as she was so terribly fierce and vigorous. This event again highlights the capabilities of the rakshasis which were no less than their male counterparts and man from all clans found them lethal. Hanuman being a supreme ape is able to slay Simhika by entering into her mouth and 'with his sharp nails, the ape tore into her inner organs' (Debroy 317).

Hanuman next encounters another rakshasi, the guard of Lanka who is known as Lankini and acts as a guardian goddess and possess the potency to withhold threat entering Lanka. Valmiki represents Lanka as a sinful land wherein all the arrangements and models set by human society are shown getting collapsed and breaking the paradigms. Lankini as represented by Griffith,

In semblance of a Rakshas dame
The city's guardian Goddess came,--
For she with glances sure and keen
The entrance of a foe had seen,--
And thus with fury in her eye (Book V Canto III).

Conclusion

Rakshasis present in the epic have been represented as a stereotypical entity and the representation smells of misogyny and pushes these women further towards the fringes. The depiction of women in the male authored text has a strict demarcation of the gender roles, the rakshasis digressing from the appointed role ends up being in the extreme of the polarisation.

Ortner explains:

we can account easily for both the subversive feminine symbols (witches, evil eye, menstrual pollution, castrating mothers) and the feminine symbols of transcendence (mother goddesses, merciful dispensers of salvation, female symbols of justice, and the strong presence of feminine symbolism in the realms of art, religion, ritual, and law). Feminine symbolism, far more often than masculine symbolism, manifests this propensity toward polarized ambiguity – sometimes utterly exalted, sometimes utterly debased, rarely within the normal range of human possibilities. (86).

The epic in order to entertain and set up ethical norms have denoted two categories which can also be termed as dichotomies. Though from the view point of the epic these women are less than ideal, within contemporary ideals we can recast these women in our discourses as subaltern and appreciate their autonomy and actions. Rakshasis had complete independency and agency to make their own choices, they were un-apologetic for their actions and thus termed as un-tamed. As we have analysed all the rakshasis in the Ramayana we can conclude that each one has been depicted as potent and dangerous individuals just like their male counterparts within the text. Yet as feminist subjects they are a good example of equality and freedom, just as it is in the 21st century.

All the other 'ideal' women in the epic chronologically beginning with Kaushalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi are showcased as an epitome of pure women. They have submitted themselves to their husband, Dasharatha. Though the man had rights and liberties to polygamy but the same could never be allowed for any women. Sita, the supreme example of dedication towards her husband has been cited as an example many times. She has been glorified as a superhuman for her conducts towards her husband. She is the epitome of chastity and submission. These women are the other side of the polarization of women in the epic. They are represented with unrealistic morals and ethics in order to teach the mankind the ideal role to be played by the women. In most cases we do not know who these women were except through their relationship with other male protagonist. As characters in the plot, they are objects of patriarchal manipulations. In Ramayana "The decentring of women in their own lives and issues is a common theme throughout the Ramayana ..." (Variyar 77).

They are represented as 'Angels' and 'Goddess' on the earth who have performed such extra-ordinary deeds which has raised them to an unfathomable stature. These women (human) are picturized in such divine light

so that the women in real life could follow them and always fall short of the ideal.

These angelic women in the epic have been defined as beautiful and naïve, submissive and silent, fatalist and frail. They are represented as a complete opposite of the other side of the polarization i.e., rakshasis with no agency of their own.

As defined by Kuniyath and Sankaranarayanan:

A woman was expected to serve her husband like God. Epics and Puranas are replete with examples of ladies such as Sita, Ahalya, Mandodari, Savithri, Seelavathi, Anasuya, Arunthadi, Ghanthari, etc. who treated their husbands as God. Some of the Holy books also glorify examples of woman's servitude towards her husband. Chastity is nothing but an imposed sexual behaviour on women that is acceptable to the moral standards and guidelines of society and religion. (para 4).

Women, in the narratives and the discourses of social life society have had to submit themselves to a male gaze of desire or control as required. To be tame and submissive and follow their male kin was the ideal moral life for a woman whose chastity was considered more virtuous than any moral principle she may choose to follow. A woman was also naturally considered to be devious and kept under the control of a male relative and at the same time she had to be protected, often treated as property. The human women, gentle women in the Aryan society, as described in the epic – Dasharatha's three wives, Sita and other so called angelic women – had no free will or agency to lead their life on their own terms, they had to follow the path prescribed for them. If they attempted to stray away a bit, they were categorised as 'monstrous' or deviant a category suggested by Gilbert and Gubar. Unlike these ideal women, the rakshasis such as Tataka, Surpanakha, Lankini etc lead a more independent life and were not subjugated in their behaviour. All the rakshasis have been portrayed as infamous for their notorious behaviour whereas some of them defied the gender stereotype and voiced themselves though opposed by the patriarchal society and so they were demonized and represented as 'Rakshasis.'

Works Cited:

- Chakravarti, Uma. "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 28, no. 14, 1993, pp. 579-85. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4399556?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.
- Chakravarti, Uma. "The development of the Sita Myth: A case study of women in myth and literature." *Samya Shakti* 1.1 (1983): 68-75.
- Debroy, Bibek. "The Valmiki Ramayana." *Penguin Random House India*, vol. 1-3, 2017.
- Dirghangi, Aditi, and Seemita Mohanty. "De-Mythifying the Ramayana: A Study of the 'Devoiced' Surpanakha." *TIIKM*, 2020, pp. 08-15. <https://doi.org/10.17501/23572744.2019.6102>.
- Eckert, P ; McConnell-Ginet, S. "Chapter 1 : An Introduction To Gender." *Gender and Language*, 2013, pp. 1-37.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. "Madwoman in the attic: A Study of women and the literary imagination in the nineteenth century." *Yale University Press*, 1979.
- Goldman, Robert P. "Transsexualism, gender, and anxiety in traditional India." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1993, pp. 374-401.
- Griffith, Ralph T. H. *The Ramayan of Valmiki*. Benares, E.J. Lazarus and co.; London, Luzac and co., 1873.
- Kuniyath, Jayasree K., and K. C. Sankaranarayanan. "Divine Gender Inequality: A Study of Mythological Degradation of Hindu Women in India." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, vol. 1, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2949781>.
- Kang, Miliann. "Introduction to Women , Gender , Sexuality Studies." *Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies Educational Material*, vol. 1, 2012, pp. 1-101.
- Ortner, Sherry. "Is female to male as nature is to culture? Woman culture and society." 1974, pp.68-87.
- Pattanaik, Devdutt. "Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols, and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent." *Inner Traditions Rochester, Vermont*,

2003, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004>.

Pilcher, Jane, and Imelda Whelehan. "50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies." *Sage Publications*, Sage Publications, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-012373985-8.00071-4>.

Prokhovnik, Raia. *Rational Woman: A Feminist Critique of Dichotomy*. Routledge, 1999.

Richman, Paula. *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. *University of California Press*, 1991.

Variyar, Suvarna. *Saving Sita : The Ramayana and Gender Narratives in Postcolonial Hindu Nationalism*. *University of Sydney*, 2018.

West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman. *Doing Gender*. no. 2, 2007, pp. 125-51,

Wilkins, William Joseph. *H̄ Mythology, Vedic and Purānic*. *Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co.; London: W. Thacker & Co.*, 1900.