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A GODDESS, THE OTHER AND A SHADOW: AN ANALYSIS OF THE DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF WOMANHOOD IN THE 'RAMAYANA'

ANISHYA RAJAN

Assistant Professor (on contract)

Devaswom Board College, Thalayolaparambu

Email: [rajananishya@gmail.com](mailto:rajananishya@gmail.com)



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Abstract

The world has seen many magnificent works of art, among those works the representative work of India Valmiki's *Ramayana* needs special mention. It is the monumental work that portrays the life of Rama who is the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. But in this classical work women are treated as inferior characters. They are not given due recognition. And the treatment of women in this epic points to the fact that though women are the source of energy, in the eyes of the patriarchal society they are mere shadows. The paper entitled 'A Goddess, the Other, a Shadow: An Analysis of the Different Aspects of Womanhood in the *Ramayana*' is a Feminist study of the *Ramayana*. The three characters taken for this study are Sita, Surpanaka and Urmila. Irrespective of their different positions in the society the sufferings undergone by these three women are the same. The main intention behind this paper is to unveil the condition of women in a patriarchal world. Though these three women belong to different sections of society their sufferings are almost the same.

**Keywords:** Epic, Feminism, Womanhood, Gender Roles, Patriarchy

India being a land of multiple culture, religion and tradition is rich in its art and literature. Western world has always looked at India with awe and jealousy for its priceless treasures of tradition and literature. Ancient texts such as the Vedas and Puranas played a major role in inculcating values and morals among the people of India. These texts provided the ways in which the people could live according to the codes and conduct of the society. The existence of the oral and verse literature enriched the literary spirits of India. There were innumerable poets who recited and also wrote poems to be read and memorized by their followers. During the ancient times oral literature played an important role and it became the part of their life.

Robert Goldman has rightly observed that "Few works of literature produced in any place at any time have been as popular, influential, imitated and successful as the great and ancient Sanskrit epic poem, the *Ramayana*", (10).

Valmiki is regarded as the "the first poet" and the *Ramayana* is regarded as the "first poem" (Winternitz 3). Being regarded as the first poem it exhibits all the qualities to be labelled as the first Ithihasa. It chronicles the life of Rama from his birth to ascension. Valmiki is said to have composed the poem and taught it to Lava and Kusha, the sons of Rama and Sita, to recite it from their memory. The *Ramayana* deals with the affairs and the life of the

Solar dynasty (Suryavamsa). It covers the whole of North India, South India and even Lanka. The main intention behind Valmiki for writing *Ramayana* is to idealize the character called Rama.

From the time immemorial, literature of the world portrays the life of great men and their deeds. Indian classical literature too portrays the heroic deeds of great men. In the Indian classics such as *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata* and *Shakunthalam*, much importance is given to the central male characters and the women characters are marginalized. They are always sidelined. In *Manusmriti* women are described as unfit for standing as independent units and they need the support of men to establish themselves. Their identity is always linked to their fathers, husbands and their sons.

This paper makes a Feminist review of the *Ramayana* by analyzing the three women characters; Sita, the Goddess; Surpanaka, the demon and Urmila, a devoted wife who is a mere shadow of her husband. Each of these characters plays an important role and has contributed to the development of the story line.

The first character who is analyzed is Sita. Sita, the legendary female role model in Indian mythology, has been portrayed as the epitome of purity, love, peace and compassion. Sita is treated as a Goddess and from her childhood itself she had enjoyed a privileged status because of her unusual birth, even the man whom she married was a God incarnate. Even though she is a Goddess the sufferings undergone by her are the same as that of other female characters. But towards the end of the story the readers encounter a liberated Sita who refuses to live with her husband.

Surpanaka is the second character taken for this study. Her life depicts the sufferings undergone by a woman who is isolated from the mainstream because of her inferior social status. Being a demon, she has lots of powers but she is unable to use those powers against the patriarchal dominance. Even though she lost everything, the readers could see her liberation as she finally attains the goal of avenging the death of her husband by plotting to kill Ravana. The third character is Urmila, the sister of

Sita and the wife of Lakshmana. She is depicted as a mere shadow in this monumental work *the Ramayana*. Her sacrifice is almost equal to if not greater than the sufferings of Sita. Though she is allotted only a nominal role in this epic, from the few descriptions made about her it, is clear that she is the real epitome of absolute self sacrifice.

*Ramayana* the greatest epic written by Valmiki can essentially be considered as patriarchal document that chronicles the life of Rama the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. It is written by a man about a man and for men. As a work it totally neglects the position of women and they are presented as secondary character to enhance the position of men in the epic. The intricate lives of women in *Ramayana* are used by Valmiki to give some insight to the society regarding the code of conduct that women need to follow within the family, society as well as nation. Women are always treated as the 'other' and they are deprived of the rights that are enjoyed by men in the society. The central theme of this epic is the destruction of evil and the sustenance of goodness in the society. The women in *The Ramayana* especially the characters like Sita, Surpanaka, Urmila etc are used as a means to achieve the final goal of life that is the triumph of goodness.

In *The Ramayana* Sita makes her first appearance in the Bala Kanda. Cornilia Dimmitt notes that Sita shows many characteristics of a goddess who is intimately related to the fertility of earth. She is regarded as ayonija, born without the benefit of a human womb, for she springs directly from the ground while her father was the ploughing land for sacrifice. And finally at the end of the epic she does not die but on the other hand she reenters the earth on a throne sent by her mother, the earth. Throughout the epic, nature consistently echoes her actions and moods as if she was the divine mistress of plant and animals (88). The description of Sita by her father Janaka the King of Mithila proves that she has an unusual birth and she is equal to a Goddess. Janaka says to Rama " And as I was ploughing the mead, arose a damsel, -and as I obtained her while hallowing the field (for sacrifice), she hath come to be known by the name of Sita. And arising from earth, she grew as my daughter. And un sprung

from the usual source, she was then established here as my daughter, whose hand must be obtained by bending the bow(151).

Rama gets Sita as his wife in exchange for bending the bow given by Lord Shiva to the forefathers of Janaka. She is here equated to a gift or a commodity or a prized treasure that Rama got for bending the bow. Women are always asked to be beautified with ornaments in order to appear beautiful before men and this is especially true in the case of Sita. She was made to appear before others on the occasion of marriage by beautifying herself with various ornaments.

As India is the land of traditions and culture, its citizens especially women are forced to obey certain codes and conduct in their everyday lives. These moral laws are taught to them by their parents. The parents teach their daughters the duties that they need to follow after their marriage. Even though Sita is regarded as the incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi, she too was given certain guidelines before her marriage. Janaka's words to Sita show how women are forced to act according to the moral codes set up by the society. Janaka spoke to Rama "This Sita, my daughter, do thou accept, good betide thee, as thy partner in the observance of every duty: do thou take her hand by thine. May she be of exalted piety, and devoted to her husband; ever following thee like thy shadow!"(167). These words show the duties and responsibilities that an ideal woman must follow in her life. In order to be a 'pathivrita' a woman must follow where ever her husband goes.

Sita is regarded as the epitome of virtues and values and she makes the greatest sacrifice by accompanying her husband to the Dandaka forest. The society strongly holds the view that a woman must obey whatever her husband says to her, and after her marriage her duty is to look after her husband's family and surrender herself to the wishes of his family. Rama gives a long and lengthy advice to Sita before he was ordained to spend her life in the forest for fourteen years. Rama spoke to Sita in the following words :

Oh high minded one, live here engaged in religious rites and fasts, when I shall wend my

way unto the forest inhabited by the great ascetics. Rising from the bed early in the morning, adore the dieties every day, and then bow down unto the feet of my father Dasaratha, the lord of men. My mother Kausalya is old and much pressed down with sorrow; do thou show proper respects unto her, considering it to be a pious deed.(269).

The words of Sita to Rama show how an innocent woman is bound by the laws set on her by the society; " Unto woman is preferable under all circumstances the shade of her husband's feet to the tops of a palace, the celestial car or excursion in the airy path. I have been taught; by my father and mother to follow my husband in any conditions of life; I shall not abide by any other counsel"(270). Rama throughout the epic regards Sita as the " the weaker sex"(272). For men women are the weaker sex and they can never be treated as equals, they are always regarded as belonging to the inferior sect. Women are made to believe that they do not have an existence independent of their husbands. Husbands are their saviours and their life would be incomplete in the absence of their husbands. Valmiki, through the character of Sita shows the essential qualities that a woman should possess to be an ideal wife. She says to Rama that" a woman without her husband, cannot live"(274), " thy company is a heaven unto me and thy absence a hell"(277).

The words of her mother-in-law are the sacred commandments that Sita needs to follow in her life. Sita's mother-in-law spoke to her thus," Those women that although having always been carefully tended by their husbands, do not regard them during the incident of adversity, are in this world reckoned as unchaste...Therefore although my son is going to the woods, you should by no means disregard him. Whether he be wealthy or poor, he is unto you like god"(303).

Sita is a Goddess having a human form. She too has divine powers based on her divine birth but Valmiki had presented her as a weak person who was always in need of the support of men for her existence. This is indicated by the way the trio Rama,

Lakshmana and Sita walk towards the forest. "Rama went first; in the middle, Sita; and bearing a bow in his hand, Lakshmana went in the wake"(526).

Women by birth are seen to be very fragile and they are easily captivated by the appearance of beautiful things. In this epic also Sita is presented as a person who is easily deceived and charmed by the appearance of a golden deer and she sends her husband after the golden deer. Women are seen to be incapable of understanding the evils in the society they easily succumb to evil. This is indicated through the words of Lakshmana "O Raghava, O Lord of earth, there is no doubt that this is nothing but illusion" (603). Even after hearing these words Sita insists on Lakshmana getting the golden deer for her. When Sita lashes out at Lakshmana for not rescuing Rama, Lakshmana spoke to her in the following words "Women by nature are crooked, fickle, devoid of religious knowledge, and bring about difference between father and sons"(610). These words indicate that the patriarchal society regard women as incapable of making correct decisions.

Lakshmana rekha or the code of conduct is the greatest barrier that is put before a woman. Valmiki says that whenever a woman tries to cross the boundaries set on her by the menfolk she is doomed to suffer. Valmiki paints these restrictions imposed on women in such a way that it appears as a beneficial boon for woman. Men imposes restrictions on women in order to protect them from the dangers in the society, since women are unable to protect themselves it is the duty of men to put restraints on them. Valmiki says that, Sita by crossing the restriction set by Lakshman is doomed to suffer. Her one false step to resist the authority of the patriarchy resulted in all the dangers in her life and in the society of which she was a member. Valmiki criticizes Sita for taking this false step. Lakshmana rekha can be interpreted in a broader manner as the socially imposed restrictions that curtail the freedom of women. Women from time immemorial are considered as uncontrollable and it is the duty of men to control this untameable element in a woman.

Women everywhere are puppets in the hands of patriarchy, they are unable to attain their

freedom from patriarchy. This is true in the case of Sita. Sita at first was forced to follow her husband in order to fulfill her duties as an ideal wife but later she was taken away by Ravana for his own selfish ends. Men are always attracted by the physical beauty of women rather than their inner beauty. Ravana's words to Sita proves this:

O thou having the color of gold and silver, O thou wearing silken cloth, O thou appearing like a lotus wearing a garland of lotus petals, O thou of beautiful countenance!. Thy hip is fleshy and spacious. Thy thighs are like those of elephant, round, fleshy and perfectly strong. Thy nipples are bulky, pointed, high... the lock of thy hair is exquisitely fine, thy breast very close and thy waist is so thin that they may be got around even by fingers.(613)

These words of Ravana reveal how women are looked upon by men. They see women as mere commodities that can be exploited.

Sita's life in Lanka reveals the height of oppression that a woman is subjected to. She is both mentally and physically tortured by Ravana. Ravana tried to tempt Sita by showing her many worldly things but Sita who is highly virtuous never surrenders to the will of Ravana. This act of Sita proves her inner strength and stoic resistance. Though she is in deep grief she is totally free from fear. She saves herself from Ravana through her sheer will power and chastity. It is this will power of Sita that raises her above the level of Ravana. She is able to protect herself from the mighty Ravana by using a blade of Grass. This blade of grass denotes her inner strength. Her life in Dandaka forest sandwiched between the protective hands of Rama and Lakshmana made her believe in the fragility of woman but later on her life in Lanka made her realize her inner strength.

The ancient Indian society always assigned a superior status to men. A husband was to act as a provider and was called upon to cohabit with his wife. Failure to perform such roles and responsibilities would attract punishment. The husband was also required to provide identity, leadership and physical protection to his wife (Misra

63). Hanuman the mighty warrior offers his super human powers to Rama in his quest for Sita. He could have easily rescued Sita from the bondage without a war. But Valmiki depicted the battle of Lanka to fulfill the aim of Ramavathar that is killing Ravana and redeeming the world from evil forces. Sita refused the offer of Hanuman. Being a goddess she herself possessed all the powers to liberate herself from the clutches of Ravana, but she never uses them as she finds it not suitable for a traditional Indian woman to assert herself. Thus she awaits Rama her husband to arrive at Lanka to rescue her by avenging her oppressor. Here also Sita chooses to be a subdued wife under her husband as expected from a cultured Indian woman. Rama fought a war against Ravana in order save his wife from the hands of another man. He sought the help of Sugriva and Hanuman and won the war against Ravana.

In Indian society chastity plays a crucial role in determining the value of a woman. In Sita's life it is the play of chastity that had precipitated her entire sufferings. Though Rama rescued Sita from Ravana he questioned her chastity. The words spoken by Rama to Sita made her completely disheartened. Rama spoke these words to Sita :

What powerful man, born in a family, take back his wife considering her as a friend dust, who hath lived long in another's house? Thou taken by Ravana on his lap, beheld by him with sinful how can I, taking thee back, bring disgrace upon my family? The object, with which I have gained thee hath been accomplished. I have got no attachment to thee do thou wherever thou wishest, O gentle one...Ravana hath overlooked thee, who in his house, beholding thee so graceful and beautiful.(1507)

Sita on hearing these words from her beloved spoke to him the following words:

Why dost thou, o hero, like a common man addressing an ordinary woman, make me hear these harsh and unbecoming words painful unto ears?... I do swear by own character...though my person was touched by another but it was not in my power; nor was it a wilful act(of mine); accident is to

blame in this. My heart is under my control and that is in thee...our affection towards one another was increased by our living continually for long time; even then if thou hast not been able to understand me I am ruined for ever"t.(1508)

Though she remained chaste throughout her life in Lanka her heart was brutally pierced by the words of Rama. The husband had complete control over the mind and body of wife, and if she is touched by another man she is regarded as unchaste. It is said that the only thing a woman can do if her husband doubts her chastity is to jump into a funeral pyre. The fire is seen as a purifier that purifies a woman's self. She wins over in the test and proves her serenity. Through the fire ordeal Rama could show Sita's purity before the public though it was a painful act for Sita. She is twice victimized on grounds of chastity.

Once a woman is doubted for her chastity the stigma of unchastely behaviour is attached to her. This is true especially in the case of Sita. Though she wins in the fire ordeal people cast doubt over her chastity " Ravana did forcibly place Sita on her lap; how can then Rama enjoy in her company? Having taken her to the city of Lanka, Ravana did keep her in Asoka forest and Sita was brought under the control of Rakshasees. Sill Rama hath not been worked up with hatred by Sita"(1718).

For Rama his duties towards his subjects is more important than his duties towards his wife.. Rama sends her to the forest. Rama forces Lakshmana to send her to the forest. And it is only when she reached the forest she came to know that she was actually abandoned by Rama. Lakshmana leaves the pregnant Sita alone in the forest.

Even though Rama knows the purity of Sita he sends her off from the palace and she is forced to live the rest of her life in the forest. Sita is unable to escape from the rigid patriarchal concept of morality. She could do nothing but lament over her fate. Sita spoke to Lakshmana the following words " Child, why hath the high soulded Raghava renounced thee? What sin hast thou committed? (1727). She asked Lakshmana to convey her words to Rama "O Raghava, that Sita is pure, ever devoted



unto thee and engaged in thy well being. She knows it full well, that afraid of a bad name thou renounced her. It is her duty to put a stop to thy ill name and censure; for thou art her excellent refuge"(1727). These words of Sita shows her concern and care for her husband. Even though she proved her chastity through the fire ordeal, her husband as well as his subjects cast doubt on her purity. Though she sacrificed her whole life for the well being of her husband, she was finally abandoned by the man whom she loved the most in her life.

Later on Sita was forced to rear her two children Lava and Kusha all by herself. The world never accused Rama for sending the pregnant Sita to the forest. Even Valmiki tried to justify it by saying that it is the duty of a King to safeguard the interest of his subjects. A man has the absolute authority over his wife. He could either accept her or abandon her according to his wishes. But women are forced to become the hapless victims of their husband's likes and dislikes. Rama abandoned Sita on hearing the words of his subjects. Though he knew the truth, he never tried to prove that truth before others, on the other hand by abandoning Sita in the forest he has actually justified what others have said about Sita. Sita who is the epitome of sacrifice and suffering haplessly obeyed the wishes of her husband. She sacrificed her life in order to fulfill the dreams and responsibilities of an ideal man.

When Rama saw his two sons he summoned Sita again, so as to prove her purity before the society. Rama could have done this earlier but he postponed it till his sons became mature enough. His words to Valmiki shows that his understanding of Sita was very limited "O foremost of Munis, the words,of the high souled Rishis, are divested of sin; therefore thy words only I shall consider Sita as having pure ways...I shall therefore be greatly delighted if Janaki gives in before them a testimony of her pure character"(1910). Sita's answer to her husband shows her dignity and strength "I have never thought of any other person in my mind but Rama; but the strength of this virtue let the goddess Vasundhara give me room. I have always with my mind, body and words prayed for Rama's well being and by virtue hereof may the Goddess Vasundhara

give me room in her womb"(1910). Her act of going with the Goddess Vasundhara shows her protest against the patriarchal norms of society that undermines the value of women. Sita refuses to go with the man who had twice doubted her chastity, instead she is happy to go back to the place from where she is begotten.

Throughout the epic Sita is depicted as an ideal women or a perfect model of an Indian woman who follows her husband where he goes. But this notion of an ideal woman is a trap that curtails the freedom of Indian woman. At first she blindly follows the wishes of her husband but towards the end the readers encounter a more liberated Sita. Sita liberates herself from the patriarchal clutches by refusing to go back to the man who had abandoned her. Though at first she appears as the representative of the oppressed section of the society, later she liberates herself from the role of an oppressed wife.

Surpanaka the demon makes her first appearance in the Aranya Kanda and it is only in the Uttara Kanda that the readers get a detailed life of Surpanaka. Surpanaka by race is a demon and she is the sister of Ravana. Her life as a woman and as a demon caused many miseries in her life. Indian society is a patriarchal society that puts restriction on women and these restrictions are more acute for a woman who is a demon. Like Sita, Surpanaka is also sidelined by the male dominated society. Valmiki highlights the inferior status of Surpanaka by making a comparison between her and Rama:

Rama was graced with a beautiful countenance, that Rakshas had a hideous face; Rama had slender waist, she had a huge abdomen; he had expansive eyes, she had terrible eyes; he was gifted with an elegant head of hair, she had coppery hair; Rama was of a fair presence, she had a hideous voice; Rama had a sonorous voice, she had a hideous voice; Rama was youthful, the Rakshasi was an old hag; Rama was ever abiding by justice, she was unruly; Rama was handsome, she was ugly.(545).

Valmiki instead of comparing Surpanaka with a woman like Sita compared her with a man. A

woman especially the one who is denoted as a demon is compared with a man who is the incarnation Lord Vishnu. By making a comparison between these two characters, Valmiki has actually heightened the position of Rama.

Surpanaka's life is a strange mixture of alienation and unfulfilled desires. When she sees Rama for the first time she introduces herself to him as Surpanaka, the sister of the ten necked Rakshasa. A woman in the traditional Indian society does not have an identity of her own. Her identity is always linked with the identity of her men folk. The depiction of Surpanaka as an ugly creature points to the attitude of Valmiki towards women who are rakshasis. They are presented as black and ugly and can never be equated to higher levels. They will always be marginalized and there is double discrimination in Valmiki's attitude to Surpanaka.

As Surpanaka is a rakshasi or a demon even the basic human are denied to her. A man in the patriarchal society is given complete freedom to satisfy his desire as he pleases. When Lord Indra desired to have Ahalya he without any scruples approached her and satisfied his desire. But when Surpanaka proclaimed her desire to have a husband she was mutilated by the seemingly kind and considerate Lakshmana. She asked Rama to be her husband, Rama meanwhile asked her to approach Lakshmana:

This young brother of mine is good looking, and is of an excellent character; he is graceful, and is still unwived. The powerful one is named Lakshmana. He hath not yet tested the pleasures of a wife's company, and is desirous of having a spouse. And he is youthful and of an inviting presence. He will become a fit husband for thee, considering this thy beauty. O thou of expansive eyes, seek this brother of mine as thy husband, even as the solar beam seeks Meru. (By doing so), thou O supremely beautiful damsel, wilt not have to fear a co wife.(547)

Having rejected by Rama Surpanaka approaches Lakshmana. The words spoken by Lakshmana indirectly ridicules her:

Why wishest thou to be servant of me who am a servant myself? O Lotus hued one, I am dependent on my noble brother, O thou of expansive eyes, be thou securing the *summum bonum*, with a joyful heart, become, O superbly beautiful wench, the younger wife of the noble one of great good fortune...O paragon among damsel, O supremely charming lady, what man possessed of discernment, passing by such grace, would bear affection to a human female?.(547)

Both Rama and Lakshmana plotted against her and their main intention was to make her realize that she was a rakshasi and as such she does not deserve the company of men born of high family. These words provoked Surpanaka and she tried to get rid of Sita.. Valmiki says that Surpanaka tried to eat Sita, and on seeing this Lakshmana cuts off her nose and ears. Surpanaka reacted against Sita as both Lakshmana and Rama provoked her. The people who are regarded as the protectors of dharma unwittingly mutilated her.. This act of mutilation points to the fact that a woman is denied access to assert her right in the patriarchal world.

Having mutilated by Lakshmana she approaches her brothers for help. Khara tried to help her and he fought against Rama but he was killed by Rama and justice was denied to Surpanaka. It is said that woman cannot act independently and they need the support of men in order to fulfill their rights. Being a rakshasi Surpanaka is presented as an inferior being who is unable to take revenge against the person who had mutilated her. It is this injustice inflicted upon her by Rama and Lakshmana that finally resulted in the abduction of Sita by Ravana..

Both Sita and Surpanaka play an important role in the *Ramayana*. Valmiki presents Sita as good, pure, light, auspicious and subordinate where as Surpanaka is presented as evil, impure, dark, inauspicious and insubordinate. This divide between these two women are expressed in terms of their sexuality. When Surpanaka commits a wrong deed it is ascribed to her female nature where as Ravana's evil deeds are never said to be spring from his male nature. The evil acts of the male characters are

recast as devotional acts leading to eventual salvation but in the *Ramayana* the salvation of Surpanaka is not mentioned (Dimmit 210).

Throughout the epic Sita is presented as the chaste woman. Sita comes to the forest as a companion to her husband and she is watched over and protected, every step of her way by her husband. But Surpanaka is not subjected to the care and control of man. Valmiki presented her as an unattached, wayward female who wanders freely.. She is a widow, and widows are considered to be dangerous, inauspicious. Their chastity is also under suspect as they are uncontrolled by their husbands. It is her unmarried status that had assigned to Surpanaka her evil reputation. An independent woman like Surpanaka is seen as a threat to the patriarchal forces. But this status of an independent woman holds a certain fascination for the male imagination and that is why Rama and Lakshmana flirts with her for a while, egging her rather than rejecting her immediately. Rama uses Sita as an excuse for the punishment of Surpanaka (Erndl 84).

A detailed account of the life of Surpanaka is presented in the Uttara Kanda. And it is only in this section that the readers get to know about the life of Surpanaka and how and why she tried to force both Rama and Lakshmana into marrying her. Uttara Kanda describes the life of the Rakshasa dynasty. She was the youngest daughter of Rashasi Kaikasi and the ascetic Visrava. "Then was born she that, having a frightful visage, goeth under the name of Surpanaka" (1583). Soon after she was married to Vidyujibha. "The lord of Rakshasas was installed along with his brothers. And then he thought of giving away in marriage his Rakshasi sister. Then that Rakshasa bestowed his sister, the Rakshasi Surpanaka, on that lord of the Danavas and kings of the Kalas Vidyujibha"(1593). But in the course of time Ravana kills Vidyujibha and Surpanaka is doomed to become a widow.

A woman without her husband cannot lead a normal peaceful life. She will always be tortured by the society. She is seen as vulnerable and the society tries to evict her from the centre of the society. What happens to the wife when her husband dies depends on the degree of her dependence on being

married. Surpanaka too was rejected by the society as she became a widow. In order to reestablish her position in the society she must either commit suicide or take another man as her husband. In the hope of reestablishing her position in the society she tried to find an ideal husband like Rama. But her hopes were shattered as both Lakshmana and Rama rejected her proposal of marriage.

Her marriage proposal to Rama can be interpreted in a different manner. As Surpanaka was widowed by her beloved brother she wanted to avenge the murder of her husband Vidyujibha by plotting against Ravana. It is a general notion that women are incapable of fighting men on the basis of physical strength as they are physically weak. Surpanaka also believed in this weakness of women. So in order to find an ideal man who could avenge the murder of her husband she sought the help of Rama, but Rama banished her from his presence. Having failed in the attempt to marry a man who is more powerful than her brother Ravana, she made another plan to kill Ravana. In order to make both Rama and Ravana fight against each other she instills in the mind of Ravana the desire to make Sita his Wife. She gave an elaborate description of Sita's beauty to Ravana so that he could abduct Sita to Lanka and that in turn resulted in the war between Rama and Ravana. Surpanaka spoke thus to Ravana:

And Rama's virtuously wedded beloved wife, having expansive eyes, and a face resembling the full moon, is ever to the welfare of her lord. and that fair haired, fair nosed, fair thighed illustrious one possessed of beauty, graceth the forest like a goddess, as if a goddess of wealth herself. Of the lusture of burnished gold, with her finger nails reddish and projecting, and graceful, that surpassingly lovely wench is named Sita... He that shall live longer in the world than the Lord of celestials himself...is a worthy wife for thee; thou too art a fit husband for her... Understanding their incapacity, do thou, O lord of Rakshasas, formaking her thy wife, by force carry away the frail Sita of a blameless person.(587).



It is these words of Surpanaka that forced Ravana to abduct Sita. Surpanaka knowing the strength of Rama was sure that Rama would definitely fight against Ravana and would fulfill her desire of killing Ravana.

Surpanaka finally fulfilled her dream of killing her brother Ravana in order to avenge the death of her husband. In order to fulfill this dream of hers she was forced to sacrifice many things. She sacrificed her youth and vigour in order to fulfill her desire. Though Valmiki is reluctant to give further descriptions about Surpanaka it is very clear that she had fulfilled her aim. Though she exhibited many qualities of a demon, she is also a hapless female manipulated and buffeted by the patriarchal powers.

In Valmiki's *Ramayana* all the other characters are presented in such a way that they contribute to the development of Rama as an ideal hero. Among the absent heroines of the *Ramayana* Urmila the sister of Sita and wife of Lakshmana needs special mention. In Valmiki's *Ramayana* Urmila is depicted as a mere shadow living under the towering personalities of the menfolk. She is introduced for the first time in this work through the words of Janaka the king of Mithilla. "O powerful ascetic, well pleased will I confer on thee these as thy daughters-in-law, Sita on Rama, good betide thee, and Urmila on Lakshmana"(163). It is through the words of Janaka that the readers get to know that she also is his daughter. This negligence in the portrayal of Urmila points to the fact that the main intention of Valmiki was to give importance to the life of Rama and to promote this all other characters are sidelined.

Urmila is the daughter of Janaka but she is not given much prominence by him. Urmila was given in marriage to Lakshmana whereas Sita was given to Rama. Though she was his real daughter, Janaka gave greater importance to Sita as she was the incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi. He gave Sita in marriage to a man who breaks the bow given by Lord Shiva. But when it comes to the life of Urmila she was given in marriage to the second best. The King gave her to Lakshmana as he was the brother of the ideal man Rama.

In Ayodhya Kand not even a word is used to describe her. All the crucial actions in this epic take place in the Ayodhya Kanda but here again Urmila is totally neglected. When Dasaratha sends Rama to exile he takes with him Sita and Lakshmana but Urmila is left behind. When Lakshmana insisted on accompanying Rama to the forest Rama spoke the following words, "If thou dost accompany me unto the forest, O son of Sumitra, who shall console Kausalya and the highly renowned Sumitra? (280). Even Rama the ideal man ignores the loneliness of a young bride like Urmila. In addition to this Rama further ignores Urmila when he asks Lakshmana to seek "permission from all thy relatives"(281). Here too Urmila's name is not mentioned. She is destined to lead a life of isolation during the long fourteen years of exile. The period of exile thus become a period of mental exile for her. This in turn leads to her exile from the epic itself.

Lakshmana considers his duties towards his brother as of greater importance than his conjugal responsibilities towards his wife. So he neglected his wife. He never sought permission from Urmila before accompanying Sita and Rama to the forest. He serves them as their devoted servant. Further reference to her comes in the Aranya Kanda. It is through the words of Sita to Anasuya that the readers come to know about Urmila's earlier life. "My father bestowed me on Rama, having a knowledge of self. And my father bestowed on Lakshmana for his wife, my younger sister, the beautiful and chaste Urmila"(501). Valmiki encloses the reference to Urmila with few references and diminishes her importance in *Ramayana*.

Though there are clear cut evidences to prove that Urmila is the lawful wife of Lakshmana, Rama says to Surpanaka that Lakshmana is 'unwived' that is a man living under the absence of his wife. Rama's words here clearly indicate her presence but he offers Lakshmana to Surpanaka:

This young brother of mine is good looking, and is of an excellent character; he is graceful, and is still unwived. The powerful one is named Lakshmana. He hath not yet tested the pleasures of a wife's company, and

is desirous of having a spouse. And he is youthful and of an inviting presence. He will become a fit husband for thee, considering this thy beauty. O thou of expansive eyes, seek this brother of mine as thy husband, even as the solar beam seeks Meru. (By doing so), thou O supremely beautiful damsel, wilt not have to fear a co wife"(547).

This shows the patriarchal concept of thinking that a married man should always need the presence of his wife to satisfy his life. If his wife is not with him he is free to choose another woman as his wife. Here Urmila is not given the status of Lakshmana's wife.

Valmiki's *Ramayana* makes no significant reference to the life of Urmila, even when she had played a crucial role in the development of the central character Rama. This negligence can be understood in the light of Patriarchal oppression that existed in the traditional Indian society. The value of her sacrifice is completely eclipsed by the charisma of Lord Rama.

The most unfortunate woman in this work is perhaps Urmila. She always had the status of a mere shadow. Though born as the daughter of a King she never enjoyed the status as a princess. She was always doomed to be a shadow under the life of her sister Sita. She was given into marriage to Lakshmana mainly because of the reason that Lakshmana was the brother of an Ideal man. She was never given the right to choose her husband. For King Janaka it is his affection towards the one who is got from the earth the more important than an the one who is born of his own blood. This is evident as the swayamwara is mainly organized for his elder daughter than Urmila. She is absent throughout this epic. Valmiki gave only few references to her as his major concern was to portray the life of Rama to the fullest essence. Though there are clear evidences to prove her existence she is totally neglected in this epic. This negligence from the part of Valmiki can be seen as the reluctance on the part of men to accept the values of women. They are reduced to the status of a wife. The society is reluctant to see the inner strength of these women. And this reluctance to

accept the inner strength can be seen throughout this epic.

By analysing the *Ramayana* and by taking into the lives of these three women characters we get to know that all these women have suffered a lot in their life under the forces of patriarchy. The first two women, Sita the goddess and Surpanaka the demon get some kind of liberation in their life from the oppressive patriarchal system through their superhuman powers. But an ordinary woman like Urmila is always destined to remain in the status of a mere shadow throughout her life.

Epics act as a mirror placed on to the society. They reflect the society true and exact with no preconceptions. And so is the *Ramayana*. The position of women is same throughout the ages. Women are the source of power and energy. They represent the manifestation of the celestial energy of creation. But for the world they are mere materials that define the pleasure of masculine power. Being born as a woman, many suffer even today in many wretched hands of the so called cultured modern world. Every life born to a mother's womb is equal irrespective of their gender. Society must close its evil eyes that poke and pierce female body as a material and hold her hands in hand to understand the true strength and purpose of womanhood.

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