

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

URMILA - THE FORGOTTEN HEROIN: REREADING RAMAYANA

NANDHITHA. U. M

Assistant Professor of English, Gurudeva College of Advanced Studies, Koyilandy, Kozhikode, Kerala

Email: nandhitha.anju6@gmail.com



Article Received: 19/07/2021

Article Accepted: 28/08/2021

Published online:06/09/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.3.176](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.3.176)

Abstract

'Ramayana' is a living epic, not dead literature. It has been constantly reinvented and reinterpreted by performers and writers of all genres across the world. Throughout Indian history, Ramayana has been reproduced with diverse retellings of the story of the exiled prince Rama who rescues his abducted wife Sita by battling the demon king Ravana. There have been many Ramayana's. In Valmiki's Ramayana, Rama is invested with all supreme qualities, strength, wisdom, honesty, truthfulness, credibility etc. Many of other characters are silenced throughout the epic among which Urmila, Sita's sister and Lakshmana's wife is a most neglected figure. The present paper attempts to analyze the voice of Urmila who has barely been given three to four lines in Valmiki's Ramayana. A woman who was asked to stay back to take care her in-laws by her husband who was leaving for the forest for long fourteen years. As the main story line follows Rama, Sita and Ravana, Urmila is left behind unseen and unheard. She fades into the crowd of minor characters that populate Ramayana, living out the rest of her life largely invisible to the readers. The suppressed emotions, unheard voices and unseen sufferings of Urmila are analyzed in this paper.

Keywords: Discrimination, Forgotten Heroine, Inequality, Ramayana, Retelling, Urmila.

Introduction

Ramayana has always been an integral part of Indian tradition, culture and values because of its hold as an ancient epic as well as a sacred divine text. Thus, there have been many Ramayana's. Like all classics, the story of Rama and Sita remains meaningful even today because of its scope, depth, range of characters and episodes. Since most telling's of Rama's story has focused on Valmiki's Ramayana, people gain new perspectives by focusing upon the multiple adaptations of the epic. Apart from that, most people associate the story of Rama with the ancient epic world and these modern

retellings explore how these characters and their dilemmas connect to the present world. Nevertheless, Rama is Valmiki's 'Hero', a man of perfect, complete existence. The same person is presented as a less prominent, minor character in some other Ramayana versions. Socially marginal groups of Indian society like the Telungu women, untouchables or tribals have retold the Rama story to reflect their own views of the world. While in other hands, the epic has become the basis for spiritual liberation. So a single epic story has been told by different people from different backgrounds based on their local culture and environment. As

Ramayana is associated with different cultures of people from different classes, we have folk Ramayana's, performed Ramayana's, painted and carved Ramayana's as well as written Ramayana's. Most of the diverse epic traditions have been silenced throughout the history, left unseen and unheard. This silencing leads to the loss of understanding our culture. Because our culture will not be complete without this entire diversity in which these texts have been written or performed. In general, excavations of those silenced tellings of epics will obviously result in a much more developed, deep sense of understanding our culture. In A.K Ramanujan's controversial essay 'Three Hundred Ramayana's', he directs us to view different tellings of Ramayana neither as individual stories nor as divergences from the real version by Valmiki, but as the expression of extraordinary imaginative resources existing throughout history. In Malayalam literature, Sarah Joseph and C.N Sreekandan Nair attempted different tellings of Ramayana and what makes their telling different from others is that important characters become unimportant and unimportant becomes important. Sarah Joseph's series on the women characters of Ramayana and C.N Sreekandan Nair's three plays *Lankalakshmi*, *Kanchanasita*, and *Saketham* presents a new outlook on Ramayana. Urmila, for example is a minor character in most of the main stream Ramayana's while she becomes a powerful character who questions what Rama did to Sita in their works. The portrayals of women in The Ramayana bring to light a noteworthy collection of stereotypes found in myths, folklore and fairy tales from every period and country many times over. Thus, these myths came to be retold in new ways through the act of revisioning and rewriting.

Urmila: The Neglected Figure

Urmila is definitely a neglected figure in Valmiki's Ramayana. One among the four daughters of Janaka and the four daughter's in-laws of Dasharatha, she does not have a major role to play in the epic written by Valmiki. She is often referred as the forgotten heroine due to the paucity of references in Valmiki's Ramayana. When Lakshmana decides to accompany Rama and Sita into exile, he comes to bid Urmila farewell. When she requests the

permission to accompany them to the forest, he says that it would not be nice since all his attention would be concentrated on protecting Rama and Sita. She would better stay at home to look after the three mothers in-law. There ends the story of Urmila for Valmiki. He does not tell us about how Urmila lived those agonizing fourteen years of her youth, without her husband. The significance of Urmila begins when Lakshmana decided to accompany Rama and Sita during their 'vanavas'. Just as Sita expressed her wish to accompany Rama, Urmila too was ready to go with Lakshmana. But Lakshmana declines the request reminding her that since Sita, the 'Laxmi' of the family is leaving for the forest which will cause the destruction of the family's prosperity, it is the duty of Urmila to replace Sita's role. Urmila was asked to step back. Urmila reluctantly had to agree her husband's request. When Sita's love for Rama is often applauded everywhere, Urmila's love is seldom celebrated. Actually, Sita is lucky enough to make her wishes come true. She wanted to be with Rama and has always been with Rama. It was Urmila who had to bottle up and stay back. But Urmila is not heard or seen anywhere in Valmiki's text. Sita was the adopted daughter of king Janaka. He had found Sita while ploughing the land as part of a ritual. Urmila, on the other hand, was the biological daughter of Janaka. If Sita was separated from Rama by Ravana, Urmila too suffered that separation for a longer spell. She is almost equal to and sometimes even greater to Sita in terms of her sacrifices, love and devotion. Despite this, Urmila's story is often relegated to the background. The untold story of Urmila inspired many writers to imagine and recreate her hidden life. Rabindranath Tagore has even classified Urmila as one of the forgotten heroines of Indian literature.

However, in Telugu literature, Urmila occupies as important role as Sita. Urmila Devi nidra or the sleep of Urmila Devi is the most celebrated Ramayana ballad in the language. The story goes like, when the goddess of sleep or Nidra Devi approached Lakshmana on the very first night of exile, he expressed his reluctance to fall asleep so as to maintain his vigil. The goddess informed him that not sleeping for fourteen years is an act against nature. However, impressed by Lakshmana's

devotion towards his brother, the goddess put forth a solution that someone has to bear the burden of Lakshmana's share of sleep for fourteen years. Lakshmana requested Nidra Devi to approach his wife, Urmila, to help him. To help her husband, Urmila took the share of Lakshmana's sleep and fell in a deep sleep for fourteen years. The devoted wife remains asleep throughout the fourteen years, waking up only when Lakshmana returned to Ayodhya. Thus, Urmila becomes a celebrated figure as a sleeping princess. Urmila's decision to share Lakshmana's sleep had far reaching consequences. Without Urmila he could never defeat Meghanath, son of Ravana. Because Meghanath had received a boon that only a person who had not slept continuously for a long period could kill him. Urmila gave her husband a powerful chance to defeat Meghanath by sleeping his share of sleep. However, Lakshmana's sagas and valiances have been praised everywhere, while the actual person behind his success stories is undermined and forgotten. So there is the need to recreate Urmila, who has many untold stories to be told.

Bhargavram Vitthal Warkerkar's 1955 play *Bhoomikanya* Sita can be considered to be a part of such efforts to rehabilitate Urmila in her rightful place. It is said that Warkerkar had been waiting to write a play based on Ramayana in which Urmila would be the chief protagonist. We find an Urmila who bursts out at Rama's decision to abandon pregnant Sita in the forest as his subjects are suspicious of Sita's chastity in the play. Urmila doesn't remain silent in the play. She bursts out angrily at Rama, why are women alone doubted constantly? Why are men entirely blameless? Shurpanakha came to you in disguise of a beautiful woman urging you to avoid your wife and accept her. Did Sita doubt your character then? Unfortunately, this play received great resistance from the public. They could not even imagine 'a woman questioning Rama'. The play was not allowed to be staged. Thus, Warkerkar's play became a forgotten play about a forgotten woman. The hidden story of Urmila inspired the Hindi poet Mythilisharan Guptha to write his poem 'Saket'. He presents Ramayana from a highly emotional perspective in the poem. He speaks from the

emotional mind of the characters whose perspectives have gone unamplified in the mainstream versions of the epic.

In Malayalam literature, Vijayan Chalode attempted to recreate the least remembered of Valmiki's characters, Urmila. He gives her a life in his debut novel 'Urmila' and incorporates many imaginary elements in an attempt to refresh the blurred picture of Urmila. In that sense, Urmila gets recreated. The novel opens up another world of Ramayana from the perspective of Urmila. Chalode focuses Urmila's life after Lakshmana's return to Ayodhya. In his depiction, Urmila continues to be lonely even after her husband's return. Lakshmana has always been restlessly working for Rama and his kingdom with his busy schedules. The first chapter of the novel itself presents the still awaiting Urmila. The novel begins with Urmila waiting for Lakshmana to have lunch. It is the only time when they get some space to spend together. Her most beautiful moments of the day are when Lakshmana takes rest after lunch. Even though he doesn't speak much, she loves to have his presence. It is the only time when she is relieved from the formal talks, comments and flattering of the maids. She could either command or order. Nothing more nothing less. In order to keep her sweet, the court women always treat her with exaggerated and saccharine words. Sometimes she would like to laugh with those flattering talks. But she won't. How can the queen be capricious? Thus, the first chapter of the novel continues with Urmila's endless thoughts. Urmila becomes the only person in the palace who is unaware of Lakshmana's decision to accompany Rama and Sita into the forest. She gets later informed by the court women. Immediately she prepares herself to accompany Lakshmana and wholeheartedly places her future in the forest. A correction was made in her dreams from the palace to the forest. But Urmila never had her wishes come true. She doubts on the court justice which denies her rights. The young bride curses the fate which offered her a damned life. What else can a muzzled character do?

The palace of Ayodhya without Rama is nothing for Sita. Then how it will be for Urmila without Lakshmana? Nobody thinks of it, even her own sister Sita. Urmila questions the justice which

doesn't even accept her 'existence'. But her questions echo within her harem. Mother Kousalya's advice to the parting Sita was about the virtues of a wife. But these virtues did not mean for Urmila. Also, sage Vasishtha was of the opinion that Sita shall accompany Rama, because wedded pairs should be souls to each other. Doesn't Urmila have any soul? What ethics is this? Discriminations and inequalities are not only experienced by the poor and powerless, but also by the princely and the powerful, especially women. Urmila has always been outside the picture, outside her life even. Somewhere in the wastelands. King Janaka's biological daughter Urmila practically becomes the 'other' before Sita. Chalode presents an Urmila who questions the ethics of 'royal' discrimination. It unravels Urmila's transition from behind the curtain in to the lights. In some versions of Ramayana, Urmila is said to be a great scholar and a talented painter. They go on to say that she not only spent the fourteen years alone serving her mothers-in-law Sumitra, Kausalya and Kaikeyi, but also painting a splendid piece on Rama's wedding to Sita. "The last detail we get of Urmila's life is that she had two sons, Angad and Chitraketu" (Kumar).

One of the collections in the oral songs of Telugu women is about Urmila and Lakshmana. After the trio's return from the forest, Rama regains the throne of Ayodhya while Lakshmana serves him in the court. Sita reminds Rama that Lakshmana should be advised to go to visit Urmila who has still been sleeping. Lakshmana goes to Urmila's bedroom and gently wakes her up. Urmila does not recognize Lakshmana and questions him for intruding in to her bed chamber. She warns him about the sin of coveting another man's wife.

Why are you and why do you come to commit this crime?

Lurking through narrow paths and lanes

You came to commit a sin.

If my father Janaka comes to know about this,

He will punish you and will not leave you.

My husband will not let you escape with life.

(6, Rao)

Lakshmana gently identifies himself and gets her to realize that he is none other than her husband. Lakshmana and Urmila sit side by side- a rare occasion in conventional Brahmin families and the members of the family tease them. When they are sent to the bedroom Lakshmana combs and braids Urmila's hair skillfully. She asks him about the events of past fourteen years. She wonders how Ravana could kidnap Sita when a courageous man like Lakshmana was present. When Lakshmana shared the story of the golden deer, he tells Urmila about how Sita spoke harsh words to him forced him to leave her alone in the forest. The rest of the song beautifully details how affectionately they embrace each other.

"Four out of the five ideal women are from Ramayana- Sita, Ahalya, Tara and Mandodari" (Kumar). If the so-called idealness is attributed to these women characters for their love, loyalty and sacrifices, Urmila should have been added to this group. When Sita willingly gave up her luxurious life to accompany Rama, Urmila was not allowed to do so. However, we often praise the names of Sita, Shurpanakha, Kaikeyi, Manthara and many others, not of Urmila. It is said that she remained in the same room where she was when Lakshmana left for the forest, for fourteen long years, till he returned and she wore the same Sari till he returned. The sufferings of Sita, the queen of Ayodhya in the forest have been praised everywhere and by everyone. It is true that a queen like Sita who lived in all luxuries had to suffer a lot in her life in the forest. But her vale of tears is almost equal to the one Urmila experienced in the palace. Sita did not have any luxuries in the forest, but always had a loving husband near her. Meanwhile Urmila had all the luxuries in the palace, but not her dear one. What else a young bride like Urmila longs for other than her husband? So what Sita experienced in the forest is almost similar to the experiences of Urmila in her chamber. Palace or shacks, doesn't matter. Patriarchal society always undermined women. If we start listening to Urmila, there will be a new Ramayana. A Ramayana of suppressed emotions, loneliness and seclusion. Then it will turn into 'Urmilayana' [story of Urmila].

The Ramayana is quite popular for showcasing the love story of its protagonists Rama and Sita. It praises of how Rama moved heaven, earth and hell to find Sita when Ravana abducted her which led to the battle of Lanka and as usual the end of the evil. This story is engraved in the soul of Indian culture. But we are unaware of the fact that just like Sita, there was a feminine figure, Urmila who shared a similar fate. She, being the first biological, becomes the second daughter of King Janaka. Maybe, Urmila being the 'other' is a story from her childhood itself. Rama was the incarnation of lord Vishnu and Sita was the manifestation of goddess Laxmi and so they were expected to lead a virtuous life and make some great sacrifices mainly for the betterment of their people. But there are other two individuals who performed their duties silently, seeking nothing in return, Lakshmana and Urmila. Urmila is often referred as 'the forgotten heroine' due to very little references in Epic.

Conclusion

The Ramayana is not exactly a text, but a tradition, that is various and diverse. This research paper analyses those diverse telling in order to gain new perspectives of the Ramayana story. Excavations of those telling's lead to the deeper cultural understanding especially for the future generations. The story lines of each version are very different and unique. The present paper attempts to analyze Urmila, one of the most neglected figures in the mainstream Ramayanas. Ramayana is the story of Rama, who battled with Ravana for Sita. It is the story of Sita, who always kept the virtues of a wife. It is the story of Lakshmana, who is an epitome of brotherhood and it is also the story of Ravana, Hanuman, Bali and many others. However the mainstream Ramayanas have never been the story of Urmila, whose part in the story is praise worthy. This silencing of Urmila enabled many writers to recreate her. Rereading Ramayana from the perspective of the women characters unfolds the both the stories of neglect as well as those of strength and determination. On the one hand there are Sita suspected of her chastity, the insulted and abused Shurpanakha, the forgotten Urmila, the cursed Ahalya and many others. On the other hand, there are many instances in the story when these

women characters show their strength. Kaikeyi becomes powerful enough to control the decisions of King Dasharatha. Another such significant character in the story is Mandodari who constantly urges Ravana to return Sita with honour. When war comes upon Lanka, she does not abandon her husband, as his blood brother Vibhishana did. The gate keeper of Ravana's golden city of Lanka is a woman called Lankini and the caretaker of his most precious possession, Sita in the Ashokvana is a woman, Thrijada. However, Urmila is the forgotten heroine of Ramayana. Sita's harsh experiences in the forest are almost equal to what Urmila experienced in her chamber for long fourteen years. Rama and Sita seemed the salient heroes of Thretayuga, until I re-read Ramayana. It looks as though Valmiki has deliberately left Urmila for the future writers to work upon her as her story alone has the resourcefulness and richness to bring forth another epic, the 'Urmilayana'.

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