

PERIPHERAL VOICES, CENTRAL CONCERNS: FEMINIST DISCOURSE IN RAMAYANA REINTERPRETATIONS

Dr. Reena Mishra

Assistant Professor

Department Of English

Dhanauri P.G. College, Dhanauri, Haridwar

*Affiliated to Shri Dev Suman Uttarakhand University,
Badshahithaul (Uttarakhand)*

Email: reena.m@dhanauripgcollege.com

Abstract

The ancient epic Ramayana Known for its moral lessons and cultural importance frequently centers on well-known male protagonists like Hanuman, Rama, and Bharata. But among its intricate embroidery are undiscovered beauties, underappreciated female figures whose talents and positions merit more acknowledgment. This study explores the stories, relevance, and societal ramifications of the frequently disregarded female characters in the Ramayana. This research paper illuminates characters such as Urmila, Shabari, Mandodari, Ahilya, Shanta (the Rama Sister), and others who, despite their scant screen time, are crucial in forming the themes and lessons of the epic by drawing on textual analysis and cultural interpretations. Through their narratives, we delve into loyalty, fortitude, selflessness, and autonomy, questioning established gender stereotypes and providing various viewpoints on femininity. By examining the portrayal of these unsung female characters in multiple retellings of the Ramayana across different mediums such as literature, art, and popular culture, this paper aims to highlight their cultural relevance and significance. Furthermore, it discusses the implications of their marginalization, historically and in contemporary society, and advocates for a more inclusive and holistic understanding of Ramayana's female characters.

Keywords

Unsung, Devotion, Strength, Resilience, Gender, Femininity

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Received: 02.02.2025
Approved: 15.03.2025

Dr. Reena Mishra

*PERIPHERAL VOICES, CENTRAL
CONCERNS: FEMINIST DISCOURSE
IN RAMAYANA REINTERPRETATIONS*

Article No.2

*RJPSS Oct.-Mar. 2025,
Vol. L No. 1,
pp. 007-013*

Similarity Check - 4%

Online available at:

[https://anubooks.com/journal-
volume/rjpss-2025-vol-l-no1-mar](https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/rjpss-2025-vol-l-no1-mar)

[https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjpss.2025.v50i01.002](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2025.v50i01.002)

Introduction

"There can be no better textbook of morals than (Valmiki's Ramayana) that can be safely placed in the hands of youth to inspire them to higher and nobler ideals of conduct and character." said Srinivasan Iyengar. (qtd.in GRK Murty) Ramayana the epic poem offers numerous insights into the principles of karma, duty, ideology, and relationships. The Ramayana is renowned worldwide for its portrayal of divine actions, moral dilemmas, and the bravery of its principal characters like Rama and Sita. However, inside its extensive storyline, there exist numerous female characters whose stories and voices often remain overshadowed by the dominant retelling of the epic. These unsung heroines, while playing pivotal roles in shaping the Ramayana's plot and thematic undertones, have received little attention in mainstream discourse. The lives of the female characters are not fully portrayed in either of the two Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which were written by men. To shed light on women's situation in that ancient culture, modern women writers have set out to tell all those untold experiences of their own lives.

A feminist writer is a person who upholds the idea that women ought to enjoy the same opportunities and rights as men. Several Indian women writers have explored the feminist angles of unsung female characters from the Ramayana and Mahabharata in their retellings or interpretations. These feminist writers tell their stories from their personal experiences as women to undermine the epic representation of women's lives. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni In her novels '*The Palace of Illusions*' and '*Forest of Enchantment*' offer a feminist perspective. She explores the inner turmoil and struggles of female characters and highlights their agency and perspectives. Kavita Kane is another renowned author known for her mythological fiction. In her famous book '*Sita's Sister*' she explores the story of Urmila (Lakshmana's wife) examining her sacrifices and her role in the epic narrative. Volga (P. Lalita Kumari) Volga's collection of stories titled '*The Liberation of Sita*' offers a feminist retelling of the Ramayana from Sita's perspective. Through this work, Volga analyzes traditional gender roles and explores Sita's emotions, identity, and personal growth beyond her portrayal as a dutiful wife. Anand Neelakantan while not a woman writer, his novel '*Asura Tale of the Vanquished*' provides a revisionist perspective on the Ramayana from the viewpoint of Ravana. In doing so, Neelakantan offers unusual interpretations of female characters such as Mandodari and Surpanakha, challenging traditional portrayals. Arshia Sattar a translator and writer, Arshia Sattar has engaged with Indian epics extensively. While she may not focus exclusively on unsung female characters, her work includes translations and interpretations that shed light on gender dynamics and women's roles in ancient

texts. These authors and their works provide diverse perspectives on the Ramayana, highlighting the identity, struggles, and complexities of female characters often sidelined in mainstream retellings. Through their narratives, they have challenged traditional interpretations and offered feminist insights into the roles and experiences of these women within the epic framework. The focus of the present study will be those unsung heroines of Ramayana the epic whose roles are supporting but their absence would leave a gap in the narrative; in fact, their existence helps in shaping the plot of great epic.

Feminist Insights into Unsung

Sita the most dominant female and influential female character of Ramayana, in Swami Vivekananda's views "Sita is unique; that character was depicted once and for all." There could have been several Ramas, but no more than one Sita". But from a feminist perspective, Sita's character in the Ramayana represents a complex interplay of strength and constraint within patriarchal structures. Although she is portrayed as the epitome of virtue, loyalty, and sacrifice her story also shows significant limitations imposed upon her. Her forced exile and the fire trial, which she underwent to prove her chastity exhibit her sufferings and show how society judges her value about ideals of female chastity and submission. Such elements of her narrative demand a re-evaluation of her persona in contemporary feminist discourse, which recognizes and celebrates her strength and dignity while also challenging the limitations that shaped her role.

Although Sita's character revolves around Rama the center she is not at the periphery like many others whose voices remain unsung. In the Ramayana, while the narrative predominantly celebrates the virtues of Sita, several unsung female figures also play crucial roles that often go unnoticed. Urmila, Mandodari, Tara, Shabri, Ahilya, Anusuya Trijata, Shanta (Rama's sister), Kaikeyi, and Shurpnakha are some names of the women who are voiceless, unrecognized, remain in the background. In this discussion, the crucial character that is worth examining from a feminist standpoint is Urmila, her status as Laxmana's wife, although frequently being eclipsed by Sita, the main female character, shows the frequently unnoticed strength and perseverance of women under patriarchal structures. Kavita Kané in her work *'Sita's sister'* asserts her individuality and positions herself as a worthy counterpart to the predominantly male Ramayana in her work. In one of her interviews with New Asian Writing, Kané talks about Urmila and says: "It is her untold story, her exile, her travails, trials and tribulations as she waited for him, but yet lived her life without tears and self-sympathy". (NAW, 2014 <http://www.newAsianwriting.com>). Her choice to stay behind in the kingdom while Laxmana accompanies

Rama into exile reflects a complex interplay of duty and personal sacrifice. The pillar of the family, Urmila connects them all with a single cord. She handles state affairs in addition to her domestic duties. She raises her voice against the unfairness and the patriarchal norms objectively and sensibly. By challenging the Dharma, she overcomes the usual image of a woman and depicts her as an empowered and independent woman. Her self-imposed exile of fourteen years aided her in discovering her individuality, which allowed her to make a name for herself. Vidhya Vijayan finds Urmila an audacious heroine of Ramayana. He says, "Like a combatant, she fights against all the malevolence that exists in society and also questions the injustices and atrocities shown towards the submissive category of society, especially to Sita" (Vijian, 2018, 141). Feminist analysis of Urmila's story highlights the quiet power and influence of women who are quiet and remain on their own, challenging the traditional view of female roles as purely supporting and encouraging a deeper appreciation for her silent strength.

The significant yet frequently ignored character is Mandodari, Ravana's queen, who, despite her husband's wrongdoings, is shown with dignity and intelligence, offering guidance and grieving the road Ravana chooses. From a feminist perspective, Mandodari in the Ramayana represents a captivating figure of moral power and agency. She retains her dignity and wisdom despite being the powerful and frequently unjust Ravana's wife. She gives insightful advice and voices her strong moral doubts about her husband's misdeeds. Renowned Indian author C. Rajagopalachari remarks, "Mandodari stands out as a beacon of dignity and wisdom in a world dominated by Ravana's hubris. Her counsel, though often unheeded, reflects a deep understanding of righteousness and justice" (Rajagopalachari, *Ramayana*, p. 132). Her character challenges gender stereotypes by showing that, even in patriarchal environments, female characters are capable of exerting strong influence and standing up for their moral principles. Mandodari's presence emphasizes how important it is to acknowledge and value the talents and complexity of female characters, who regularly overcome challenges and defy expectations to significantly alter the story.

Kaikai although we see her in a negative role is also one more unsung character that can be reinterpreted through a feminist lens as a celebration of female empowerment and self-sufficiency. In mainstream patriarchal society, Kaikai is a challenge to conventional gender conventions and prejudices. With the support of Kaikai's character, women may redefine their roles and visibility in a profession often dominated by male perspectives. They can also reimagine femininity as a celebration of strength, creativity, and self-expression. As a result, Kaikai evolves

into a means of feminine empowerment and resistance, going beyond simply being a cultural phenomenon. Trijata the demon, viewed through a feminist lens from the Ramayana can be interpreted as a rebellious figure who goes against the restrictions placed on women by her society and the epic's overall story. Unlike the other Rakshasis, Trijata shows empathy and support, particularly in her kindness towards Sita, the captive heroine. Her actions go against the typical representations of female demons and demonstrate that she is a character with her own choices and concern for others. Through offering Sita solace and optimism, Trijata takes back control of her own story within a male-dominated structure, illustrating how women can surpass traditional roles and make an impact through understanding and opposition.

While most of the names listed above are well-known, one name remains hushed and unsung, she is Shanta. She was the daughter of King Dasharatha and sister to Lord Rama. Shanta was given in adoption to the childless king of Anga, Romapada, due to a promise made by Dasharatha to Romapada's father. Her story is not extensively discussed in the main plot of Ramayana but is mentioned in some versions. Shanta's story can be viewed through a feminist lens by examining issues of patriarchy and gender roles. Her adoption of King Romapada highlights how women's lives were often determined by male decisions in ancient societies. Shabari is another woman character though heard but unsung, whose figure defies social standards and represents the strength of unwavering loyalty. Her story emphasizes the power of personal integrity and spiritual commitment to transcend society's limits. If we analyze the character of Shabari from the feminist lens in the Ramayana she shines out as a symbol and spiritual devotion that defies social norms. Shabari's low caste status causes her to be hated and rejected by her people, but Rama himself respects her for her knowledge and persistent faith. Her story questions the strict gender norms and caste systems of her time, showing how true devotion and inner strength may break down social barriers and reshape the roles that women play in a patriarchal culture.

Another interesting but little-known character who is frequently portrayed as a villain and brings misery to her brother's country, Lanka, is Surpanakha. From a feminist lens, her character is multifaceted whose deeds and intentions highlight the difficulties and limitations faced by women in a patriarchal society. Because of her attraction to Rama and Lakshmana, she is most often portrayed as a villain, but her personality may also be seen as a representation of a woman's quest for identity and acceptance in a world ruled by men. Surpanakha's desire for Rama and Lakshmana, and her subsequent rage, stem not only from personal rejection but from a deeper sense of being unnoticed and undervalued. Her story reveals the struggle of a woman who defies the constraints imposed upon her and suffers the consequences of her

defiance. Surpanakha's response to the rejection and humiliation she faces shows how women's desires and identities are often suppressed and misunderstood. Her transformation from a rejected suitor to a revengeful figure highlights the terrible results of dealing with a system that continuously silences the desires and voices of women. Therefore, Surpanakha's story demands a reevaluation of how women's behavior is assessed and how cultural norms influence their roles and reactions.

Tara, a significant female figure in ancient Indian texts, deserves recognition. Like Sita, she was not born from a mother's womb. As a reward for Bali's victory over the Daityas during the churning of the ocean, the gods gifted him Tara as his wife. Known for her intelligence, courage, and devotion, Tara was highly regarded by both Bali and Sugriva. She appears twice in the Ramayana, demonstrating exemplary conduct in both instances. The first is during Bali's death, and the second is when Lakshmana reprimands Sugriva for delaying the search for Sita. Tara's wisdom is evident in her counsel to Bali: "Dear Lord, don't go at this time. In my mind, there are so many serious doubts and misgivings. He has come back in spite of his severe defeat. That means there is somebody who is very strong that is backing him. He would not have dared to come to fight with you again if he did not have this kind of reliable support." (*Adhyatma. Ramayana* 22-24) Her plea stemmed solely from her concern for Bali's safety. Later, when Lakshmana arrives in Kishkindha, enraged at Sugriva's delay, Tara's words, imbued with humility, courage, and dharma, pacify and please him.

Ahilya in the Ramayana provides a moving feminist commentary on the concepts of female autonomy and justice. Ahilya was falsely accused of infidelity and was cursed to become a stone by her husband, Gautama. Her story highlights the harsh consequences that women in patriarchal societies face when their actions are misinterpreted or brutally judged. Despite her innocence, she endures a long period of suffering, illustrating how women's voices and truths are often dismissed. Her ultimate salvation and restoration by Rama shows the justice and recognition needed, but this also reflects the restrictions placed on women and the need for societal support to reclaim their dignity.

In conclusion, examining feminist viewpoints in the retelling of the Ramayana reveals a diverse range of women's experiences that go against conventional norms. Within a patriarchal framework, characters such as Urmila, Mandodari, Kaikai, Surpanakha, Shanta, Trijata, and Ahilya, demonstrate the intricacies of female characters and their challenges, suffering, and perseverance. Through a feminist analysis, we can reveal these characters' complex roles and shed light on their fights against societal norms. This method not only deepens our understanding of the epic but also promotes a more comprehensive awareness of how historical tales can both reflect and critique gender dynamics, providing enduring

insights into the changing conversation surrounding women's responsibilities and rights. This research contributes to a broader discourse on gender representation in ancient narratives and underscores the importance of acknowledging and celebrating the diverse roles of women in cultural heritage.

References

1. Adhyatma. Ramayana. IV.2. Pg. **22-24**
2. Kané, Kavita. NAW interview with Kavita Kané. <http://www.new-asian-writing.com> December25, 2014. Web. June 15, 2024.
3. Narayan R.K. "The Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic", 4th ed. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006.
4. P. Pooja. "A Study On Women Characters Portrayed In The Ramayana". Indica Today, 2008. Online. Internet. 15 July. 2024. <https://www.indica.today/research/research-papers/a-study-on-women-characters-portrayed-in-the-ramayana/>
5. Pundir, Ishita and Singh, Alankrita. "Portrayal of Woman in Indian Fiction" https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332190170_Portrayal_of_Women_in_Indian_Fiction
6. Rajagopalachari. C. "Ramayana". Delhi, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2007.
7. Ramanujan, A.K. (1999). "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation. In: The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan, (1st ed.). India: Oxford University Press.
8. Shastri GRK. "Sita in Valmiki Ramayana: A Feminist Archetypes" The IUP Journal of English Studies, Vol. VIII, No. 4, 2013, Pg. **67**.
9. Vijayan, Vidhya. "Unveiling the Doubly Marginalised: A Feminist Reading of Kavita Kané's Karna's Wife and Sita's Sister". Literary Endeavour. 9.4 (2018): Online Internet, 20 june. 2024. www.literaryendeavour.org ISSN: 0976-299X Web.