



REPRESENTATION OF STATUS OF WOMEN IN MADHAVA KANDALI'S RAMAYANA

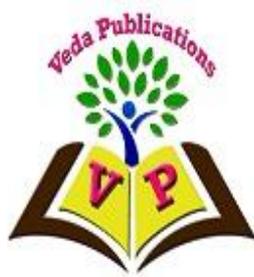
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ABSTRACT



The *Ramayana* is a social document. It records and depicts the time and society of contemporary Indian civilization. The epic has a universal representation of women's position irrespective of temporal and spatial boundaries. The paper tries to explore the hegemony of women constructed by the social structure. The women in the great epic are in the marginalized position in society. The fire test of Sita and the humiliation of Surpanakha are the outcome of the racial and the gender politics. The situation of Sita under the captivity in Ashokabana marginalizes woman's position in society. The very moment also exposes the fear of physical assault and humiliation from the opposite sex. To understand the mental agony that a woman undergoes in such a situation needs lots of sensibilities. The projection of women as stereotyping of female as unchaste women, virgins and prostitutes is a patriarchal domination over women. The typecast of women as 'Mother Nature' reduces the role and status of women to the perpetual 'giver'. Religious doctrines aid the representation of women as Mother Earth and Mother Nature, who is only the giver. An analytical interpretation of the undertaken project tries to make a comparative study between the *Ramayana* age and the present time. Uncovering of women's position beyond temporal and spatial boundaries in the *Ramayana* and present society leads to the theorization that women's so called positions in society is still a myth. Objectification and commoditifying of women in present time degrades their status in society leads to disastrous consequences. The paper tries to uncover women's positions and issues from socialism and Marxist Feminist perspectives.

Keywords: *Social Document, Humiliation, Commoditifying of Women, Gender-Parity.*



INTRODUCTION

The *Ramayana* is an Indian epic which is the social document of Indian 'epic age' civilization, culture, and society of the Hindu society. It gives the socio-cultural idea of that particular time of Bharat. It is read as a Hindu religious book to imbibe human qualities and virtues among the Indian people. It reflects the Indian civilization and the status of men and women along with all these. It is one of the most read texts in the country and all over the world too. *Ramayana* existed in the oral tradition perhaps from 1500 BC and in the 4th BC before it was composed by Mahakabi Valmiki.

Reading and re-reading of a canon is a modern concept of reading a text from modern and modernist perspectives and re-interpretation of the text. Reading of *Ramayana* from modernist perspectives overt many unrevealed ideas and concepts. The text of *Ramayana* can be re-interpreted from various critical points of views. The modern interpretation of the epic from feminist perspectives leads to reinterpretation of the text and the context suitable for a modernist understanding of the *Ramayana*. It exposes and questions the status of women from an unconventional representation. It makes us interrogate many aspects of the text which are accepted as taken for granted without any question.

The *Ur* text of *Saptakhanda Ramayana* in Assamese composed by Madhava Kandali, Sri Sri Sankardev and Sri Sri Madhavdev is taken for discussion. *The Ramayana* is written in verse form and in old Assamese language. Kandali's *Ramayana* was written in 14th century and is one of the oldest *Ramayanas* written in Indian regional languages. The *Aadikanda* and the *Uttarakanda* were not written by Kandali which was later completed by Sri Sankardev and Sri Madhavdev. Sri Sankardev wrote the *Uttarakanda* and Sri Madhavdev wrote the *Aadikanda*, which is also known as *Balkanda*.

FEMINIST METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

The hegemony of women is the outcome of the patriarchy of the social structure in any civilization. The patriarchy dominates the oppressed and the 'others'. The social structure determines the status of women in the society. The mechanisms of

patriarchy produce the cultural mind-set of men and women.

Simone de Beauvoir in her famous book, *The Second Sex* argues that there is no such thing as 'feminine nature'. Women should not be referred to as inferior for physical and psychological reasons. But throughout the history and across the culture women are the second-class citizens. In Indian culture they are being worshipped and adored but they do not have recognition as equal human beings. Women do not have autonomy even. Biological difference can not be the sole reason of women oppression, but the reproductive function of women placed them at a disadvantageous position by putting them into the domestic sphere. This reproductive system associates them with the body and this concept positions them to mere animals and nature. Just as man considers himself superior to nature, he considers himself superior to women too. Over the centuries women's role remains covert and not getting recognition. This passive maternal role of women is enrooted in culture and society as it is presumed that it is women's natural destiny. This hierarchical division of man and woman is not based on natural division between them.

De Beauvoir's work is influenced by existentialism which denies the existence of a pre-ordained 'human nature'. Existentialism emphasizes the freedom of man and woman and the responsibility of each human being as the self-governing individual. The German philosopher G.W. F. Hegel establishes that every conscious individual struggles for recognition with every other conscious beings and every conscious individual being concludes he or she is the essential subject or the 'self'. This existential philosophy recognizes each and every conscious being as 'self' while all others are the inessential object or the 'other'. Hence, the subject is the 'self' and the object is the 'others'. This gives a sense of recognition and identity to every conscious being.

On the basis of this existential philosophy de Beauvoir tries to seek the women identity. She examines the femininity of every woman. De Beauvoir argues that women are always positioned as the 'other' in relation to men's positions. The man is always the subject, the 'self' and the woman is



always polarized at the object position that is the 'other'. This belief about women continued from the beginning of human civilization and permeates in the mind-set of both men and women and both of them accept this belief and concept.

The famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud established his theory of sexuality on the possession of the phallus/penis. It is represented as the image of power and fertility. Man is a man because he possesses the phallus and therefore he is a man with power; he is the 'self'. On the other hand, woman is a woman because she does not possess the sex organ of a man, she is not a man, and therefore, she is a woman. Hence, she is powerless, passive, negative and the object. And she is the 'other', as she is not the 'self' as man. Women are the object desired and feared by men. Therefore, women are metaphorically depicted as virgins or whores or prostitutes. Women are not regarded as complex autonomous individuals. Women are always associated with the passive body and the men are always positioned with the active mind. Simone de Beauvoir who is an anti-essentialist believes that sexual difference between man and woman is the consequences of cultural conditioning. Society has created women as the 'other' and to make a homogenous treatment to women it is necessary to over throw this difference created by society. This is the only means to create and gain equality between man and woman.

Shulamith Firestone, the radical American feminist in her book *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) opined after de Beauvoir that technology can be applied to free women from the difference based on the biological factors. These biological factors are basically related to right to take decision regarding childbirth and motherhood. Culture and society are not normally grown things, but created by human beings based on instinct and desire of their own.

American feminist theologian Mary Daly wrote in her book *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) that religion, law and science were all methods of patriarchal control working to define and limit women. She wanted to celebrate femininity as it has connection to nature and the body. She argues that the image of 'God the father' is constructed to validate the rule of the father in the patriarchy. Daly concludes that Christianity was anti-female and abandoned it

entirely. She argued that Christianity had violently over-thrown an earlier, goddess-based religion and assimilated the original female fertility myths. The coming of patriarchy had involved in the murder of women living outside patriarchal control, such as unmarried or widowed women, and the wise women healers, who were burnt as witches by the church. Daly concludes that this is the Christian perception about women.

Daly opines that women have a tendency towards pacifism to live with harmony with nature and environment. On the other hand men compete with nature and have an urge to control nature. Thus they have the tendency to dominate and control over women as the role of woman is found similar to the role of the nature.

Women are perpetual giver. They are taken for granted that it is their duty to give only. In 1974 Sherry B. Ortner in her essay, 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' explains in terms of structuralist anthropology that women are subordinate to men. She finds from her analysis that women accept their subordination peacefully because of this concept of women as natural giver. As the utilizers of nature never give back to nature, women also never get back anything from men. Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land* examines the way in which colonial nature writers in the USA represented the land as female.

Ecofeminism believe in pacifism influenced by the peace movement of the 1960s. It is a movement where women involved against any kind of violence whether nature or women. This is protest or standing against from rape to war or deforestation which are connected to the male colonial aggression. Ecofeminists argue that women, nature and the Third World are the victims of the male dominant technology and aggression. The image of 'the web of life' is the theme to express co-operation, interdependence and harmony.

In Marxist social feminism the critique is that women are looked upon as perpetual giver and the producer of things. They are the giver only to the male dominated patriarchal social system. They are like Mother Nature as man dominates nature for their own use and they dominate women too for their use and utility. As man never things of returning



something to nature they never think of woman to give recognition to them. After ecofeminism women are the land used for fertility, reproduction and to use as commodity. This dichotomy creates a trajectory for women identity and status of recognition.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE RAMAYANA AGE

Rama myth is exploited by the patriarchal system to construct an ideal Hindu male and Sita has been exploited to create an ideal Hindu female to serve the social system of patriarchy. Rama and Sita are the traditional upper class male and female in the 'epic age'. Sita's character was constructed to depict a perfect and devoted wife in that society. The patriarchy has created dichotomy between man and woman. The existence of woman is dependent on the attitudes of males in society. Women' identity and existence are being framed by the recognition of the male counterpart. Sita's life and existence are described in the Ramayana only in context of Rama, otherwise individually she is an invisible character. In this context we can talk about Urmila who is the wife of Laksmana, is only introduced at the time of their marriage. Her existence is silent throughout the whole epic. It is because her identity is only accepted with her counterpart Laksmana. As she is not living with her husband she is not being recognized as a conscious being and her identity is not considered by the social structure.

In the 'Sundarakanda' Sita is abducted and kept in Ravana's Asokabana in desperate and vulnerable position. She is out of any protection of her husband and kept in inner apartment of another male. Such situation is a much desperate one for a woman. There is the danger of her life and chastity without any protection. Sita is aloof, desolate, isolated and desperate. She represents the women who are emotionally and physically vulnerable in the time of abduction and threatening of chastity. Sita's emotional plight broadens when Ravana comes to Asokabana in an attempt to seduce her. She is forced by the system to interact with a male with whom the social code of conduct prohibits her to interaction and from whom she would be normally guarded. In the text it is described as,

"Iaje bhoie devir sakhur bohe loh"(Kandali Ramayana)

Throughout the interactions Sita remains chaste in thought and her deed. Ravana's seduction turned to futility which made him angry and behaved as patriarch threatening Sita of her death by eating her in his meal. The male chauvinism shows how they can turn cruel when their love is not accepted and then their love idol is turned into a mere object and commodity to be chewed and eaten up. The social structure of the patriarchy never obliges to accept the voice and opposition of the 'other'. Ravana first offered his love to Sita cajoling her with sweet words which made Sita empowered to reject his love and marriage proposal. The poet says through the words of Ravana,

"Nirvoi swarupe matante aasoho, janos streek nomari"

Empowered Sita strongly rebuked Ravana for his lust which changed the male behavior with a different discourse. Reaction of Ravana was,

"Sitar sunia hen noiras basan/ krodhe dasagriv voila rakat nayan// uru dui kompawaoi pise hata hat/ katekse krodhia aansoroi dasa math//"

Ravana's threatening to Sita giving her two months to agree to his proposal leaves the latter in great plight of her life and chastity. The desolate and desperate woman is vulnerable to the situation and she is emotionally exploited. Sita's rejection threatens Ravana's masculinity. It is an attack on his male ego how can Sita disobey him and his offerings. The encounter in this part can be understood as a sexual power struggle between Sita and Ravana. Confronted with the threat of the 'other' Sita was empowered through her devotion to her lord and defended her chastity,

"Tothapito prabhu mor param devote/moi shhanti potibrata naree bibahita//"

This thought of Rama gives Sita strength to remain chaste in this desperate situation. Again Sita's empowerment gains sanction only in the service of the patriarchy.

Sita was always loyal towards her husband and she never gave her to Ravana though there was danger for her life. Depiction of her rejection of Ravana's love and marriage proposal was possible only creating her as a chaste. But this chaste woman's loyalty was disbelieved by her own husband



when she was abducted by Ravana and made Sita to undergo the fire test. The traditional attitude towards women are based on the concept of 'others' the attitude towards women as chaste and prostitute. After Ravana was killed Sita had gone to meet her husband Rama. But Rama expresses his anger and says that he has rescued Sita for the sake of the good reputation of his family lest people would not get a chance to laugh at them that the daughter-in-law of a respectable royal family is abducted by another male. This shakes Sita and she can easily understand the mind of her husband. Rama was angry after Sita was freed from abduction after the death of Ravana,

*"Mahakrodhe basan bulila Raghunathe/
Janakar jeev hera bolohon tomate//Ravanak
maria erailo lokbad/tomak aanilorakhi
bangsar morjad//loke bulilanta Rama haril
ontore/he karone tiree boiree nomarila
dore/nindak erailo moi aapon bongsor/kutsa
bane erailoho samasta lokar/doibo dose raja
hori aanila tomak/poirusata bole aami
molosilo tak"*

These words of Rama's discourse revealed his male ego and there was no place for Sita who was chaste and eagerly waiting for him to meet. The patriarchal social structure wants women chaste and there is no recognition of woman as living and conscious entity. The Ramayana creates a situation from which Sita cannot escape without social censure. This social censure is based on the patriarchy where women's character is determined by the social structure.

The behavior of Rama and Laksmana towards Surpanakha is a kind of racial discrimination. Rama makes Surpanakha the object of his jests. She is the 'other' and both the brothers make Surpanakha the object of jests when she offers love to Rama and when rejected then she goes again to Laksmana. Her love is refused by insult and has to undergo humiliation by cutting her nose and ears as her identity is the 'other'. She is the sister of a rakshasa lord and does not belong to the 'self' of Rama, Laksmana and Sita, the Aryan Society. All of them are in the polarization of Aryan and non-Aryan social structure where the Aryans are regarded the so called civilized class. Surpanakha is called a "siyalee",

the vixen. The culture and the identity of the non-Aryan in the 'epic-age' are constructed by the social structure. Even Sita, being a woman also does not think that the humiliation of Surpanakha can be avoided in such a cruel way. No voice of Sita in the Ramayana can be heard to forgive Surpanakha, though Sita is depicted as a woman full of feminine nature. Surpanakha who is the 'other' is not being recognized as a living conscious being. Here Surpanakha is double marginalized as she is a non-Aryan woman and a female. She is the victim of the racial discrimination of the patriarchal social structure of the 'epic-age'. But at that time women at least had some space in society as she was saved from killing because she was a woman,

"streejatir karonesee raksasee jeelek"

Surpanakha was not killed because she was a woman.

The killing of Ravana in 'Lankakanda' is a poetic justice in the Ramayana. The village and common folk of Indian society are influenced by the life of Rama and Sita. The tradition of reading and hearing of the Ramayana by the common and uneducated people of India keep away from wrong doing. Rama is the Dharma and the incarnation of Lord Vishnu and Sita is the truth and the enlightenment. The story of Ramayana strengthens Indian culture with morality and truthfulness.

STATUS OF WOMEN AT PRESENT TIME

The Constitution of India grants equality for both men and women. The equality is based on the grounds of caste, religion, sex, race, place of birth. These ensure equal opportunities of employment to increase women empowerment. Equal law, equal right for both men and women is granted by the Indian Constitution to ensure a dignified position for the Indian citizens. All are equal before the eyes of law.

But the social reflection of the present time depicts another picture of the conditions of women. Crime against women is increasing day by day. Including murder, robbery, cheating etc. and any types of offences against women are directed specially as crime against women. These are broadly classified under two categories-



1. The Crimes under the Indian Penal Code (IPC)
 - I. Rape
 - II. Kidnapping and Abduction for specified purposes
 - III. Homicide for Dowry, Dowry Deaths or their attempts
 - IV. Torture- both mental and physical
 - V. Molestation
 - VI. Sexual Harassment
 - VII. Importation of girls (upto 21 years of age)
2. The Crimes under the Special and Local Laws (SLL)
 - I. Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956
 - II. Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
 - III. Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986
 - IV. Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987

Although all the crimes of SLL are not gender specific, the provisions of law affecting women significantly have been received periodically and amendments carried out to keep pace with the emerging requirements.

The following are the records of the crime against women from the year 2006-

- 2006-1,64,765 cases
- 2007-1,85,312 cases
- 2008-1,95,856 cases
- 2009-2,03,804 cases
- 2010-2,13,585 cases
- 2011-2,28,650 cases

All these cases of crime against women include both under IPC and SLL. The statistics show crimes against women are increasing in a horrified way though the law is treating both men and women equally.

The death following a brutal gang rape and assault of a 23 year old paramedical student in the country's capital Delhi on December 16, 2012 is a horrified example of crime against women. Gender-based violence is increasing in the country. National Crime Record Bureau Records show crimes against women increased by 7.1 percent nationwide since 2010. Rape cases recorded in 2011 were 24,206 rising a 9 percent from the previous year. Various types of crimes against women are increasing day by day in our country.

While any reform and affirmative action should be taken by the Indian government it is

important and necessary to change the attitudes towards women based on a particular mind-set of society. Crime against women in India is enrooted in the social patriarchal tradition and system, misogyny and repressive attitudes towards women prevailing in the mind-set of people across classes. An education system based on humanity and moral education can only help male to respect womenfolk by giving them recognition as conscious beings, but not as mere objects.

CONCLUSION

Feminist approaches help readers to understand the plight, condition and status of Indian women in the 'epic-age' through reading *The Ramayana*. The patriarchal societal system plays an important role in the hegemony over women. The un-recognition of women as the 'self' creates a trajectory for women condition and status in Indian society. Racial discrimination doubled the dichotomy of male and female in the time of the *Ramayana*. Women's status beyond temporal and spatial boundaries is still a trajectory. Objectification and commoditifying of women in present time degrades their status in society which leads to disastrous consequences.

The Constitution of India provides equal status for both men and women based on caste, religion, sex, race, and place of birth. Gender based discrimination has no provision in Indian Constitution. The Constitution provides equal opportunity for women empowerment too. The dichotomy between men and women can be lessened by providing knowledge to women about their own rights as conscious beings. The status of women is determined by the patriarchal societal system. The status of women was better at the 'epic-age' than the modern time though women of present time are more empowered. The change of the mind-set of people to a positive attitude towards women can bring equality to women.

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