

# Locating Womanhood in Valmiki's *Ramayana*: A Study of the Conversation between Anasuya and Sita

Rajshri R  
Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Bharathi Women's College  
Chennai  
India

**Abstract:** Sita, the daughter of Janaka, accompanies her husband Rama to "Dhandakaranya" when he proceeds to the forest to fulfill the promise that his father Dasaratha had given queen Kaikeyi. During the course of their journey Rama, Lakshmana and Sita visit sage Atri's and his wife Anasuya's hermitage. Anasuya while conversing with Sita, counsels her on the duties of a wife. She then expresses her desire to hear about the occasion of Sita's marriage to Rama. While describing the events of their marriage, Sita says that king Janaka, who was happy to adopt her as his daughter was however anxious about finding the right match for her. Sita then makes a general remark that all fathers who have daughters of marriageable age are worried as it is their responsibility to find a suitable husband for their daughters. If they failed to do so within the stipulated time they were sure to face humiliation in society.

Kautilya in his *Arthashastra*, which belong to approximately the same period as Valmiki's *Ramayana*, elaborates on the rights of a woman and her responsibilities towards her husband. It also asserts that it is the responsibility of a father to get his daughter married within three years of her attaining puberty (Kautilya, *Arthashastra* translated by Rangarajan 364). Stephen Greenblatt in his essay "Towards a Poetics of Culture" notes that the social circumstances in which a work is written undoubtedly influences it (Greenblatt 12).

This paper attempts to examine if Valmiki, through the words of Anasuya and Sita, is attempting to illustrate the notion of womanhood prevalent in society during his times, and if he is showcasing the customs and practices of his era.

**Key Terms:** *Valmiki's Ramayana, Arthashastra, New Historicism, Women, Father's Anxiety.*

## Introduction

Canto hundred and seventeen of the "Ayodhyakanda" begins with Rama, Sita and Lakshmana leaving Chitrakuta to reach the hermitage of Sage Atri and his wife Anasuya. After honouring his guests, the sage calls out to his wife, whom he describes as someone worth saluting and free from anger. Atri introduces Anasuya, an old and a frail woman whose body "shook like a banana tree in a storm" (Valmiki 550), as a person "distinguished by severe asceticism and adorned with sacred vows" (549). He does not hide his admiration for her as he talks about her calm and composed nature and her severe penance that restored vegetation and normalcy to the region by bringing back the waters of river Ganga which had dried due to drought. The sage continues that the trio could look upon her as their mother, and then instructs them to seek her blessing as she was one who had attained fame by her selfless service to society. After paying due homage to the sage's wife, Sita spends time conversing with her. It is this conversation between Anasuya and Sita that is analyzed in this paper, with the aim of locating the concept of womanhood as depicted by Valmiki in his *Ramayana*.

## The Discussion

Anasuya, on seeing Sita, who is here described as “given to the practice of virtue” (Valmiki 550), remarks that she is glad that Sita had forsaken her relations and luxuries to follow her husband into the solitary and dreadful woods. She applauds Sita for her dedication to Rama and her sense of righteousness, and states that for a woman with a noble disposition, her husband is the highest deity and greatest friend regardless of whether he is ill mannered, licentious or devoid of any riches. Accompanying him everywhere, whatever the circumstances be is the duty of a wife, she adds. An honourable woman like Sita, who is forever faithful to her husband, will undoubtedly attain fame and the heavens, she affirms, and those unlike her, un-meritorious and evil, whose hearts are swayed by desire will fall from virtue and reap infamy, she adds (Valmiki 550).

Thanking Anasuya for her advice, Sita informs her that she is already aware of what Anasuya has just said, as the same had been told to her by both her mother and her mother-in-law. Drawing on the examples of Savithry (Satyavan’s wife) and Rohini (the moon god’s wife), Sita echoes Anasuya’s thoughts as she pronounces that serving ones husband, irrespective of whether he is good or bad, is a maiden’s utmost priority. These noble women had obtained all their virtue and had gone to heaven because they had served their husbands selflessly (Valmiki 551). Sita however does not hold back her joy when she articulates that her husband Rama is a virtuous, compassionate and righteous man who is constant in love and has control over his senses. She is happy that Rama loves his step-mothers in the same way as he loves his own mother Kausalya, and that he has chosen the path of Dharma by obeying his father Dasaratha, though it meant a life full of hardships.

Pleased with Sita’s reply, Anasuya offers to grant her a boon. Surprised by this offer, Sita replies with a smile that being in the presence of a lady as pious as Anasuya is in itself a boon granted; besides there is nothing more that she wishes for, as all her desires are duly fulfilled by her husband. Happy that Sita is contented with her life Anasuya gifts her a celestial garland, a robe, ornaments and balsam. She blesses her that she would always be able to please her husband just as goddess Lakshmi pleases “the imperishable Lord Vishnu” (Valmiki 552).

After accepting the gifts, Sita sits down along with Anasuya and they continue their conversation. Raising the topic of Sita’s marriage Anasuya tells her that she is aware of how Rama had won her at the “swayamvara” but is desirous of hearing the whole story from Sita herself. Narrating the tale of her life starting from birth until marriage, Sita recalls that Janaka, the “...just, brave and strong...” ruler of Vidheha, had discovered her as he dug the earth at the sacrificial site to perform a “yagna”. Childless as he was, the king was overjoyed to adopt the baby and bring her up as his own daughter. “In childless love the monarch pressed/ The welcome infant to his breast:/ ‘My daughter’ thus he cried ‘is she’/ And as his child he cared for me” (*The Ramayan of Valmiki* Griffith 272).

Continuing with her narration, Sita says that as the king became more and more conscious of the fact that his daughter had come of marriageable age, he began to get anxious and worried; “My sire was vexed with care, as sad/ As one who mourns the wealth he had” (*The Ramayan of Valmiki* by Griffith 272). Like a man who felt helpless and anxious on losing all his fortune, the king too felt powerless and worried as he was unable to finalize his daughter’s marriage, recalls Sita.

After describing her father’s troubled and restless state, Sita makes a general statement about fathers who had daughters of marriageable age and says that even if they were as powerful, respected and wealthy as Indra, they were sure to face humiliation in society if they failed to marry off their daughters on time. “The virgin’s father all despise, / Though Indra’s peer, who rule the skies./ More near he saw, and still more near./ The scorn that filled his soul with fear” (*The Ramayan of Valmiki* by Griffith 272). Society did scorn upon a man who was unable to find the right suitor for his daughter, observes Sita and it was this scorn that the king too was afraid of, she assumes. Similar to a man who tossed aimlessly in the sea failing to cross it without the right kind of a bark, the king too tossed in the sea of anxiety, unable to find the right suitor for his daughter. Fully aware that Sita was no ordinary child, Janaka wanted to ensure that his beloved daughter married only the most suitable man. Finally deciding on a “swayamvara” he announces that his daughter would marry the man who succeeds in manipulating the bow of Shiva “my daughter shall become the wife of that man who, having lifted the bow,

forthwith strings it” (Valmiki 554). The bow that Janka mentions here is the one that had been given to his ancestor Devarata by Varuna, the God of oceans. Shiva had used this bow during his fight with Daksha, and Janaka was sure that no ordinary man could lift or string it as it was extremely heavy. By setting up this contest the king had ensured that his daughter would marry only a befitting person.

Rama and Lakshmana, on reaching Mithila along with sage Vishwamitra express their desire to see the aforesaid bow. As per Vishwamitra’s instruction, the king permits Rama to attempt stringing the bow and while attempting to do so, Rama breaks the bow. Janaka, pleased that Rama had succeeded in the contest, offers Sita’s hand in marriage, but Rama however does not confirm his acceptance until he gets an approval from his father. After the arrival of king Dasaratha at Mithila, their marriage is solemnized and from then on, “I remain devoted with piety to my husband...” Sita says. Happy to hear the tale, Anasuya informs Sita that though she would like to listen to more from her, it had gotten late and it was time for Sita to go to Rama. She then instructs Sita to adorn the robe and ornaments gifted to her before she leaves to meet Rama. Reminding Sita to wait upon Rama with devotion she permits her to leave.

## Analysis

With the transition of *Ramayana* from the oral tradition to the written form there is a transition in the narrative too, notes Upinder Singh in her book *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century*. The society then was by and large a patriarchal one which advocated the dominance of men and the subordination of women. Even as this conversation between Anasuya and Sita ends on a happy note, the message that it conveys can be read as a social construct which seeks to emphasize the subjugation of women. Every work of art is a product of a set of manipulations, says Greenblatt in his essay “Towards a Poetics of Culture”: in order to establish dominance over the womenfolk and to keep them subservient, the patriarchal society uses various narratives that aid them fix their discourses firmly. The emphasis on the husband being the “highest deity...no matter whether he be ill mannered or licentious or entirely devoid of riches” (Valmiki 550) foreshadow the prevalent patriarchal thought of the times. The allusions of Savithry, an ideal wife who follows the god of death to bring back to life her husband Satyavan; and Rohini, the faithful and favorite wife of the moon god, have been used to reinforce the notion of absolute devotion and submission to one’s husband.

Sita’s remark on fathers with daughters of marriageable age being worried and anxious for fear of being scorned by society, too speaks volumes about the then society. The king, whom she initially describes as being “just, brave and strong” is later spoken of as being anxious and worried. Srinivasa Shastri in his *Lectures on the Ramayana* wonders as to how Sita, who was very young when she got married to Rama, could have made such an in-depth observation about society to make such an empathetic statement. He deduces that, Sita’s remark that even though a father was equal to Indra in every respect, be it position, power, honor or wealth, if he had an unmarried daughter was bound to face humiliation and censure from the world is just Valmiki speaking through Sita. Valmiki was so obsessed with the idea of a father’s anxiety and humiliation that he goes back earlier in time and narrates the story of Sumali, Ravana’s maternal grandfather who had found himself in a similar difficult situation when he had to marry off his daughter Kaikasi (Ravana’s mother). The ninth canto of Uttarakanda depicts Sumali as telling his daughter that in spite of her being beautiful and learned he was unable to find a suitable husband, and that a daughter is a source of anxiety as she risks the honor of her parents. The tale of Maya and Mandodari, Ravana’s wife, has also been illustrated in a similar fashion. In canto twelve of Uttarakanda, Maya informs Ravana that he is on a lookout for a suitable bridegroom as he feels that his reputation is at stake with an unmarried daughter. Maya is depicted as being relieved when Ravana accepts Mandodari as his wife; he even gives Ravana a handsome dowry for choosing his daughter.

The *Arthashastra*, a socio-political-economic treatise belonging to the same era as the *Ramayana*, emphasizes that it is the duty of a father to get his daughter married within three years of her attaining puberty (Kautilya, *Arthashastra* translated by Rangarajan 364). A girl is considered to be a major at twelve and a boy at sixteen. Any delay in fixing the marriage would mean that the daughter could marry a man of her choice; and even if the man was from another “varna” the father could not object. This could probably have been the reason for the father’s worry and anxiety.

The period of written *Ramayana* was one in which men dominated society and hence the excessive emphasis on women's chastity and obedience (Singh 21). The *Arthashastra*, records that "adultery was treated as a serious crime, the punishment for the wife being the amputation of her nose and an ear" (Kautilya 51). Women were considered as begetter of sons and nothing more, "The aim of taking a wife is to beget sons" (Kautilya 48). If a woman failed to procure a son, then the husband was permitted to take another wife. A woman's rights to property too were restricted and no widow was permitted to inherit any property. A woman was not permitted to have an independent voice of her own; she had to remain subservient all her life, first to her father, then to her husband and finally to her son. She could not go out alone or even with other women, nor was she permitted to leave the house when her husband was asleep or drunk. "A woman's status was equated with that of other dependent people..." (Kautilya, *Arthashastra* translated by Rangarajan 53). Many of the images presented in the *Ramayana* can be seen as corresponding to this concept of womanhood. Texts testify the social life by which they are informed and a parallel reading of it alongside other non-literary texts would facilitate a better understanding of not only the text, but also the society in which it is produced, says Gallagher in her article "Marxism and the New Historicism" (37). The *Ramayana* "...reflects more truly the customs and beliefs of the times" (407) says S. Radhakrishnan in his *Indian Philosophy*. Hence it would be right to deduce that the conversation between Anasuya and Sita as illustrated by Valmiki in his *Ramayana* throws light on the status of women in ancient Indian society.

Discussing about the situation of women in ancient India does indeed give us an understanding about the gender gap that existed then, but deliberating upon their condition today, in the contemporary society is even more important. The result of one of the recent gender studies made by Pew Research Center and published in the Forbes magazine does not provide a very positive picture about gender equality. It states that though the gender disparity has diminished over the years, it still does exist. Be it in terms of freedom, parity of wages or opportunity to the top executive positions, the full equality between men and women still remain an elusive goal. A high percentage of men still hold that women are inferior to them due to biological differences, and the physical attractiveness of women are given far more importance than her leadership qualities, ambition or success as an individual contributing to the development of her society. Until and unless this scenario changes no initiatives designed to help women advance in society will bear fruit. A whole hearted support from society, a fair treatment with no discrimination or prejudice and the right opportunity will undoubtedly enable them to prove their mettle.

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