Chapter 5: Treatment of Women in both the Epic Traditions

Section 5.0 Introduction

It is important to know the long Ramayana tradition that has evolved over different periods of time and in different regions. Despite its diversity and plurality, Paula Richman says that new patterns can be identified. Each version, be it a translation or a re-telling, reflects the creator’s own ideologies, ‘according to their own theological, social, political, regional, performances and gender context.’ (Preface) Ramanujan identifies at least three hundred Ramayanas, though he accepts that it may not be a comprehensive survey. He says that cataloguing is difficult. He says they are all related to each other. Ramayana, according to him has become ‘the second language of a whole culture area’. (qtd. in Richman, 14)

In her critique of the television production, Thapar calls attention to the plurality of Ramayana in Indian history: "The Ramayana does not belong to any one moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places. Not only do diverse Ramayanas exist; each Ramayana text reflects the social location and ideology of those who appropriate it.” (1080) In the words of Thapar, “The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations which changed the conceptualization of character, event and meaning”. (ibid)
While analyzing the tellings and re-tellings of the *Ramayana* and the different critiques available on the epic, one can notice that a few instances and few characters have often been discussed and debated. The characters include the hero Rama himself, Sita, Ahalya, Ravana, Vali, Indra, and Surpanaka. The instances that invite greater attention are the punishment meted out to Ahalya, the mutilation of Surpanaka, repudiation of Sita, and the killing of Vali and Sambuka, the first three of which will be taken up for discussion here as they concern women.

**Section 5.1 Ahalya Episode**

Ramanujan compares the Ahalya episode in Valmiki and Kampan and focuses on a few differences. Valmiki draws a clear contrast of Sage Gautama and Indra, the former rich in virtues and the latter devoid of any. Gautama calls Ahalya as a woman of no virtue and of bad conduct in Valmiki. In his text Ahalya willingly commits adultery, knowing that Indra has come in the guise of Gautama. In Kampan, Ahalya knows she is wrong, but she is overpowered by desire. In Valmiki’s version, Ahalya is made to eat air and remain invisible, whereas in Kampan she is turned into a stone. Wendy Doniger points out further differences between the two literatures as she says that in Valmiki, Indra does not change form but appears in the garb of Gautama. In Kampan-Indra changes form and like a cat tries to escape stealthily. In Kampan, Ahalya knew but could not let go of the joy, whereas K R Srinivasa Iyengar’s version says that she does not know of Indra’s covert guile.

According to Doniger, there are several similarities between Greek and Hindu epics wherein she focuses on the idea of ‘doubles’ and how this has been treated in different cultures. She draws a comparison between Ahalya and Alcmena, wherein Ahalya is a tested by a god who doubles her
husband and in the case of the latter, Zeus, in the form of Amphitryon, Alcmena’a husband, seduces her. She cites the examples of Indra, Zeus and Wotan in German mythology. She finds that in many myths, the woman is aware of the illusion and does not fall a prey. Like the Indian tradition, the critic finds different versions of the doubling episode of Alcmena in Western literature. The myth is reinterpreted in western literature by Plautus, Moliere, Hernich von Kleist and Jean Giraudoux, each generation giving it all a new meaning to this episode. In Plautus, Alcmena does not know whereas according to Moliere and Kleist, she suspected the masquerade. Zeus’ sexual masquerades are quite popular and a fine proof is Heracles born of this union. Hera hates Heracles because of this.

Though in such episodes, there are different versions, Doniger raises an important question “whether the woman chooses to commit adultery or not is further related to the question of guilt: who is responsible? Who is punished?”(36) According to her, the woman is considered guilty and punished. She says such a pattern of punishments poses serious implications for future history of generations. Doniger mentions further that Ahalya is found to be innocent in early telling and later made guilty, whereas Alcmena is usually innocent and realizes when the doubles confront. Indra undergoes physical suffering while Zeus suffers inner torment and both gods not remembered today. However, it is to be noted that mythologies devote more time to the heroic exploits of men but when it comes to issues like this more discussions are there for women than men.
Section 5.2 Mutilation of Surpanaka

Kathleen M Erndl focuses on the mutilation of Surpanaka elaborately, which reflects Rama’s attitude to female sexuality. She draws attention to the treatment of this incident in at least five different versions of the epic. In Valmiki’s text Surpanaka is disfigured for her attempt at adultery. Nowhere else in the text can one find a woman being mutilated. The punishment is meted out to her as she is not a human but the ‘other’. The societal norms are different for different classes of people. In Kampan’s Iramavatharam, she is presented as a beautiful female, as opposed to Valmiki’s description of her as an ugly woman. She is also picturised as a strong woman who can protect Rama in the battlefield better than delicate Sita. Both Surpanaka and Mandodhari speak of themselves as a contrast to Sita, in strength and beauty respectively.

Erndl says that Adhyatma Ramayana is a spiritual text wherein Surpanaka is neither beautiful nor ugly. She is just an instrument to bring about Ravana’s death, leading to his salvation. In Tulsidas, Surpanaka represents female nature with no self-control or restraint. Erndl brings to light three inter-related themes and motifs that emerge from this episode. Mutilation as a punishment given to woman, as cutting of nose implies that her honour is destroyed. In the Tamil version of Kampan, there is reference to cutting of breasts also, as they symbolize female power. There are both sexuality and austerity in the forest according to Erndl. Surpanaka appears as a threat to marital bliss and domesticity whereas Indra poses a threat to both domesticity and asceticism. The critic draws our attention to yet another contrast, between Sita and Surpanaka. Sita’s sexuality is of a controlled nature whereas Surpanaka does not show any restraint. Men are distinguished as good or bad according to their nature. But the distinction between a good and
bad woman is in terms of sexuality. Good women like Sita are controlled both physically and mentally by men. Erndl shows how Sita was made to live under the shadow of Rama always. If they were controlled by men to suit their purpose they were considered a source of power. She also says that the punishment given to bad woman is a kind of warning given to good women not to go astray. The stories of Ahalya and Anasuya bear such a signal to Sita.

Surpanaka’s role is differently expressed by Velacheru Narayana Rao. She seems to be scheming against Rama’s blissful married life, by sowing the seed of suspicion in Rama’s mind about Sita’s fidelity. This is done by showing the drawing of Ravana’s feet by Sita. Rama suspects her but other women defend Sita.

Section 5.3 Repudiation of Sita

The views on the original text apart there are several interpretations to repudiation of Sita in the epic traditions. David Shulman focuses on the problematization of Rama’s test of Sita. He draws attention to the ‘bitter overtones’ attached to the fire ordeal. He brings out the ‘cultural distinctiveness’ between Valmiki and Kampan. Valmiki-woman cannot be seen in public-Rama allows her to be seen and assures that no harm can be done to her ‘in his presence’. According to Shulman, the fire ordeal is more of a test for Rama to know his identity, to know his divinity, to be precise. He comes to this consciousness occasionally. So the critic says, “…then, one discovers that Sita’s trial by fire is actually a testing of Rama than of her”. (Richman, ed. 93) Kampan follows the bakthi tradion of Tamil literature, wherein he says the meeting of Sita and Rama after the battle is more of the union of the body and soul. Here again, Rama is the uyir, the soul that was bereft of the body, that is Sita.
Doniger discusses the idea of Maya Sita in the Ramayana tradition and compares it to that of Helen in Greek literature. There exists a different version that Ravana did not take the real Sita but only the illusory one. Sexuality was even attributed to the past wherein Vedavati, a chaste woman was also eyed upon by Ravana according to Vedas and that she was reborn as Sita. To escape from him she commits suicide. In *Adyatma Ramayana*, Rama knows about the maya Sita yet forgets it at times. The shadow Sita enters fire and gets burnt and the real Sita emerges. This is by way of justification of Rama that he did not censure real Sita unnecessarily.

According to the version of Tulsidas, there was no need for Rama to test Sita, as he knew that real Sita was not in Ravana’s household at all and to bring back real Sita from fire he made phantom Sita enter fire. It is to be noted here that Tulsidas shows great adoration for Rama and his divinity and he brings in the idea of Maya Sita to prove that he is without blemishes. Tamil text attaches sexual future to Sita who incarnates as Padmavathi, wife of Lord Venkateswara.

Doniger asks: “why did the authors of later texts create the idea of double for Sita?” (27) It was mainly to protect Rama from criticism. The attitude to women changed and obsession with chastity reached its peak after Muslim invasion in order to protect women from invaders. Doniger says that probably these texts were written at that time. In the Ramayana tradition all talk about doubles but express different attitudes; some project the chastity of Sita while some present her in bad light.
Doniger draws a parallel with the idea of phantom Helen though there are subtle differences between the two. Sita is innocent and Helen is guilty. According to Homer, Helen ran off with Paris but in pre-Homeric texts the idea of double is present. In post-Homeric literature also there appears the idea of double for Helen. Doniger finds that even in Homer, Helen is duplicitous as she settles with Deciphobus after Paris’ death. In the Iliad tradition too there are different versions after Homer while real Helen went to Troy in Homer. In Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, the shadow Helen was in Greece and the real in Troy. According to the version of Herodotus, the real Helen was not in Troy. She ran off with Paris, but a storm took her to Egypt and Paris returns empty-handed. Herodotus accuses Homer of suppressing the fact that Helen did not go to Troy. He says that historically there was no idea of a false Helen at all. He says that Trojan War was fought in vain, for someone who was not there.

Doniger drives home an important aspect that both Valmiki and Homer brought in no double in their versions. Later texts have infused this to defend Rama against criticism and to defend Helen against adultery. A very significant observation by the critic here is the fact that the episodes in both the epics traditions reflect the kind of societies where both the pure woman and the adulteress received the same treatment. She mentions that the intention behind was that Sita was too good to be true and Rama too good to be accepted. To make him a realistic model, a lapse on his part was presented. Stesichorus, cited by Plato, brings in the idea of phantom Helen in Troy and real Helen in Sparta, to fool Paris. The intention here is to absolve Helen of adultery. In Euripedes’ play, Helen, Helen never slept with Paris nor did she reach Egypt. Menelaus captured phantom Helen and lived in a cave. She is presented as a pure woman.
Doniger does not talk about just character contrasts alone. She is of the view that two traditions tell the same story differently. She says: “Two traditions tell the same story about two diametrically opposed women”. (34) Sita is a goddess and Helen is born of God-mortal union. The difference between the two heroines is that Sita is fooled by others whereas Helen fools others. She says, “But Sita is fooled and therefore innocent, where Helen fools and is guilty” (ibid 35)

She asks ‘why the same story be applied to the whore of ancient Greece and the revered chaste wife of ancient India’ (ibid 34) Even though both traditions handled same issues differently, there are similarities as well. Textually both were victims and politically both were victimized. Culturally speaking because both were women they were treated differently from men. Doniger concludes that this comparison highlights the fact that the epic traditions show more of gender discrimination than even cultural differences.

Doniger says out of such comparative studies interesting patterns emerge. She sums up saying, “Ahalya is to Alcmena what Helen is to Sita. Ahalya is, like Helen, the paradigmatic beauty and paradigmatic whore in Hindu civilization, directly contrasted with Sita”. (ibid 47) In her opinion, “Alcmena, in contrast, becomes a paragon and paradigm of virtue in Greek and European mythology, like Sita in Hindu mythology”. (ibid 48) She presents her insights in the following words: “Together, the two sets of myths provide double paradigms for two cultures, one virtuous woman and one whore per culture. Yet they assign different sorts of stories to the two women, the whore is given the shadow double in Greece and falls for the god in Hinduism, while the
chaste wife is given the shadow double in Hinduism and falls for the god in Greece”. (ibid)

There is an assumption that women are seductresses and such an image is presented in many cultures. Based on the assumption that women are tricksters, the text often asks:”was she really fooled?” even when the woman is a victim of a masquerade. When being victimized also, there is the assumption that she pretends to be tricked. She concludes saying, “It shifts the blame from the perpetrator to the victim”. (ibid) Stories assume that men are fooled by women. Worse condition is “When the women seem to be fooled, the story questions whether or not they are faking it”. (ibid 49)

Doniger has taken the aspect of doubling more elaborately for comparative study and comes to a conclusion that the doubles of women like Sita and Helen are created to escape from man’s seduction. Whereas the doubles of men like Indra and Zeus are created to seduce women. She says rather emphatically, “What similarities there are in these stories are there because men in different cultures depict women in similar ways (and as different from men) I think these contrasting stories show that differences in gender are more significant than differences in culture: Women in Hindu stories are more like women in Greek stories than they are like men in Hindu stories. The Women resemble one another, across cultures, in certain ways more than they resemble were within their own cultures that is; gender transcends culture in establishing lines of convergences between texts that tell the same sorts of stories about men and women in different cultures… We began by assuming that the two sets of text, Hindu and Greek were shadows of one another; and we may conclude by noting that in each set of text, culture is the shadow of gender” (ibid)
Robert P Goldman, while studying the *Ramayana*, ‘uncovers the narrative process by which ideologies of gender and power are formed’. (Bose, ed. 10) He cites that notions of gender and power speak for its social and political impact. Though Valmiki laid norms already question arises whether all the characters behave in strict adherence to them, though it is said that the *Mahabharatha* is about ‘conflict’ and the *Ramayana*, ‘conformity’. Goldman says that though there are many instances in the epic to show Rama’s ideal nature, Rama’s testing of Sita is a matter of gender concern. It shows how man controls woman’s sexuality and how ‘sexual purity’ of woman is –highlighted. Female sexuality and male honour are often linked. In his observation, in the ancient society what is right depends on class, caste, gender.

Sally Sutherland ‘correlates the representation of gender and space to show how they affect the narrative structure of the epic’. (Bose, ed. 10) Though there is a view that the first and last chapters are later additions, she tries to prove that Balakanda is very much the part of the narrative. The very idea of sexuality begins in the first canto itself wherein the story of the two birds is narrated. The male killed by a hunter and the female left in sorrow is symbolic of the impending sorrow of separation of Rama, who is bereft of Sita.

Sutherland throws light on the two trials of Sita, where there is difference in audience, place and time. First time Agni, God of Fire testifies for Sita’s chastity that shows divine intervention. In the second instance Valmiki himself vouches for her, this time the defense is provided by a human being. She also focuses on man’s attitude to female sexuality. Rama is projected as a hero, being a symbol of masculinity whereas the woman’s sexuality is presented as a threat to the
male. That is why the writers have brought in the idea of the golden image of Sita and Ahalya, turned into stone, both posing no threat to the male.

The critic highlights the kind of image presented of other women characters as well. In the case of Rysasrnga, women are presented as seductresses and the man as being so innocent. Tataka is depicted as possessing an ugly and repulsive feminine form, like Manthara, who is also presented as a repulsive woman whose physical deformity had estranged her from society. In another instance, the hundred daughters of Kusanabha are deformed because they were cursed by Vayu who is rejected by them. She cites the examples of Ramba and Menaka who appear to lure the rishis and Kaikeyi who is an envious woman. Sutherland says:

> Additionally the episodes all reinforce the dangerous and threatening nature of women. The phallic, uncontrolled woman like Tataka is to be destroyed, but what of the others-those that live within our own walls, as it were, the young maid, the married woman, the pregnant mother, the adulterous wife? The message is clear; sexuality is pervasive in the adult world, in the control of women and a threat to the male. Marriage is the culturally normative way to control women, but even within it women pose danger to the male, especially when pregnant or adulterous.

> (Bose, ed. 71)

The critic concludes saying that the feminine is tightly enboxed within the masculine. Throughout the epic the feminine is present but not given voice. “The women are only given voice when they are represented as sexually unrestrained or dangerous. Ultimately that voice is
destroyed or controlled. Thus figures such as Tataka, the daughters of Kusanabha, Diti, Ahalya, all have a voice, but are all defeated, contained or silenced”. (p.76) She expresses her view that Sita being buried into the earth is symbolic of woman’s voice being suppressed.

Paula Richman draws our attention to the diversity of the Ramayana tradition by citing how even the TV Serial of the epic directed by Ramanand Sagar had great impact on the masses and that it reflected the middle class concerns. While tracing the history of the Ramayana tradition, Romila Thapar stresses on the ‘plurality’. According to her, the different tellings and retellings of the epic in different forms and genres, display the ‘vitality and diversity of the Ramayana tradition’.

Ramanujan, in his essay, ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas’ observes that the explorations of these telling reveal that they are all related to each other. He calls every version or telling a ‘crystallization’. Richman says that a study of them reveal ‘intriguing patterns’ within the tradition. Different writers have created different versions “according to their own theological, social, political, regional performances and gender context”. (preface) Ramanujan says that “These various texts not only relate to the prior texts directly, to borrow or refute, but they relate to each other through this common code or common pool. Every author, if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context.” (qtd. in Richman, 46)

It is to be taken into consideration that many transformations have taken place with regard to both the epics because the original texts were not dogmatically fixed as Doniger observes. Both
retellings and critical material were manipulated to suit one’s purpose over a different period of
time and space. Heidi Powels while studying about the gender constructs and roles asserts the
significance of such studies: “It is imperative to reach a more nuanced view. A comparative
study of different versions can reveal a lot about the historical evolution of gender relational
ideals in different times and places”. (Bose, ed. 165) Philip Lutgendorf while writing about the
different versions of the epic in south and south-east Asian countries, points out 3 principal ways
in which Rama tale has undergone transformation:

i) expansion or contraction (for some characters motives are attached leading to
rationalization)

ii) counter-narrative/anti-Ramayana (deviant versions have gained or sought regional
popularity)

iii) ‘organic’ or ‘characterological’ expansion (not to subvert or challenge the original.
Yet some roles are given more importance, for example the character of Urmila)

Mandakranta Bose says that there is ‘no need to justify Ramayana as an object of study. Our
concern is what meaning it presents to the literary audience.’ In recent studies on the Indian epic,
there appears a shift of focus from literary to other non-literary forms. There is also a ‘shift of
focus from ‘textual, philological, historical, philosophical commentary to cultural and political
instrumentality of the Ramayana’ according to Bose. However, the literary aspect is concerned
with whether the text is used to exercise or resist hegemony. She says the “studies grounded in
these perceptions rely upon the methods and theoretical frameworks of postcolonial criticism,
subaltern history and gender studies”. (4) This is because large corpus of work on *Ramayana* recently is engaged with “retellings of the racial, caste and gender sensibilities”. (ibid 5)

Bose traces how the feminine is represented in the tales of Bengal. Kirthivasa in the 15th century presents women with self-defining roles and mystical powers. Candravati looks at Sita’s story and presents it from women’s point of view in the 18th century. Madusudhan Datta of the 19th century, presents a more secular version.

Velacheru Narayana Rao, while writing about the Woman’s Oral tradition in Telugu brings out the significance of the songs of women that were used to subvert the authority of men. Rao observed the songs in Brahmin families where women enjoyed limited space. The songs were centered on the interests of women, like pregnancy, childbirth, lullaby, child-rearing, wedding, puberty, journey to in-laws’ place, and so on. In traditional families, woman’s duty primarily was to bring up children and bring prosperity to the family. Men did not share work in the household. Women expressed how the birth of a son was pleasant but not the process of child birth. Girls were not given choice of the groom and like ancient societies Swayamvara was practised only in the Kshatriya families.

Wife was expected to be obedient and defiant woman was to be disciplined by the mother-in-law. They believed that the code of obedience if creatively manipulated can be a source of power. Rao draws attention to the attitude that man was accused as being ‘hen-pecked’ or
effeminate if he allows his wife to be dominating. He stresses that “Female sexuality is severely repressed” (Richman, ed. 116) This was more so with Brahmin families, whereas non-brahmin songs do not bring in much of gender difference because women were not so dependent on the men folks as their Brahmin counterparts. He says further that it is significant to note that time and place of the songs being sung. Women occupied the back of the house and sung in the afternoon while men occupied the front of the house. This brings out how there was a difference in the ‘space’ given to women.

Each song had a different focus and for an instance Kaikeyi episode was generally eliminated, probably because she is often shown as a scheming woman. In one of the songs of the women Lava and Kusa do not allow Sita to meet Rama, angered by the story of their mother being ill-treated by their father. Despite the fact that women used the epic narrative to voice their grievances to some extent, Rao observes that no open defiance was shown by women, ‘no overt or aggressive opposition to male domination’ (ibid 128) These songs even highlight the merits and demerits of joint family wherein women suffered ‘internal stress’, though tender love and affection were present. The critic says “However, the underlying meanings reveal an atmosphere of subdued tensions, hidden sexuality and frustrated emotions”. (ibid 129) Rao concludes that the songs are an expression of desire to subvert male authority. They were a part of education “that constructs women’s consciousness in a way suitable to life in a world ultimately controlled by men”. (ibid 133) He is of the view that the singers and listeners were not feminists but the songs reflect their ‘feminism’ wherein they cherished internal freedom.
Paula Richman takes up Sambuka vadha to show how caste and power relations were discussed by different writers. This incident in the epic received condemnation of Rama and Richman focuses on how this was treated in Tamil, Telugu and Kannada plays in South India. Valmiki gives a brief note of this in Uttarakanda wherein Sambuka belonging to low-caste, desired to practise asceticism. A Brahmin’s son dies mysteriously and he comes to Rama. He rushes to the forest, sees Sambuka, a sudra, doing tapas and beheads him. The Brahmin’s son comes back to life.

In the 8th century Bhavabhuthi expressed discomfort over the lapse on the part of Rama in Uttararamcharita. In the present century, Tripuvaneni Ramaswami Choudhari in Telugu accuses that the Upper class distorted the Vedic texts to assert their superiority. The Sudra posed a threat to Brahminical superiority, which is similar to a woman being a threat to male power. In Tamil Thiruvarur K Thangaraju who belonged to E V Ramasami’s group used this incident to propagate his political ideologies. All the three episodes involving Vali, Surpanaka and Sambuka were re-visioned. Kuvempu Puttappa in Kannada takes a difference stance and he is more faithful to Rama than even Valmiki. He defends saying Valmiki himself being a Sudra was chosen by Brahma to write the epic. In his Kannada play instead of discussing no caste issues, he shows how the Brahman comes to realization and undergoes transformation. In his version both sons don’t die. The critic tried to bridge the gap between the two, as his life exemplified it, himself being an intellectual and a low-caste who rose to great heights. He devoted his entire life to this cause.
Paula Richman writes a critique on EVR’s reading of the *Ramayana* who used the epic for propagating his political ideologies. Like many critics, EVR reads it ‘as a text of political domination’ (176) Some deem it as a text that tried to establish the domination of the Aryans over the Dravidians. EVR conducted campaigns to project himself and his principles. Ravana is projected as a hero and Rama is shown in poor light, like Vimalasuri and Michael Madhusudan Dutta. Richman says that he accuses Rama of duel nature, not knowing that he was both human and divine. He condemns a character by focusing on minor flaws, ignoring the positive aspects and actions performed by that character. Different image is given of Sita as if she were attracted towards Ravana. Richman says that EVR’s arguments are contradictory and there are no textual evidences for the same. According to her, he used his gift of the gab to influence popular readers and masses not scholars. She says that he made literal readings of the text ‘to discredit the assumptions of orthodox Hinduism’. (ibid 190)

Heidi Powels speaks about the relationship between gender roles and the narrative design. He mainly focuses on the wedding of Rama and Sita and how the same is narrated in ancient, medieval and modern versions, taking for instance the texts by Valmiki, Tulsi and Sagar, representing each era respectively. In the general Indian ethos, *Ramayana* is valued for its normative models and values symbolized by the ideal couple. He takes into consideration 3 major episodes that are relevant to the construction of gender relationships:

i) Choice of bride/ groom-svayamvara

ii) Hierarchical relationship between the bride-givers and bride-takers

iii) Leave-taking of the bride to her in-laws family
In Valmiki Ramayana, Ram does not participate in Sita’s svayamvara but goes to see only the bow. One comes to learn of the event when Sita gives an account of her wedding to Anasuya later. Tulsi gives a detailed description while in Ramanand Sagar’s teleserial Sita’s excitement is kept in check. Powels feels that Sagar gives an implicit warning to younger generation against choosing one’s life partner.

Yet another aspect of the father’s anxiety to marry his daughter off finds reference in later texts, while in Valmiki, Janaka- expresses no such anxiety. Both Tulsi and Sagar bring in the anxiety of the parents probably keeping in mind the prevalent dowry system. It is observed by Thapar that Sagar has followed Tulsidas more than Valmiki for projecting some of the modern ideologies. According to Powels, even in Valmiki one can find more of woman’s perspective than even Sagar. In Sagar’s view family is more significant than the individual. The critic finds Sagar exhibiting a conservative approach that may not lead towards empowerment of women. Patriarchal standards are projected by him, with wifely devotion and submissiveness being highlighted. He concludes saying that Sagar’s serial was not well taken by the westerners but it struck a chord in India. The popularity of the serial in India only goes to prove that in India woman is still being considered as a dependent individual with little freedom. Powels’ observation speaks volumes about the status of women in India and it is still a long way to go.

The Hindi version of Radheyshyam Ramayan, woman’s status as an unmarried daughter, wife, widow, speaks of her dependence on others. This version brings out the modern relevance of the text as a girl cannot choose a life partner and family honour rests on her chastity. Though Paula
Richman, in the introduction, starts with the great impact that the TV serial of Ramanand Sagar had on the Indian people even in the twentieth century, she also observes that Sagar’s serial echoes modern implications against love marriages and the duty of the girls to keep family honour.

Erndl says that the *Ramayana* can be approached on many levels. She observes that western scholars exhibit a ‘detached and impersonal approach to Sanskrit texts’ and they have ignored the ethical implications of the texts. She says that the epic ‘constitutes a universe’ and cannot be defined by a single text or even a group of texts’. (Richman, ed. 69) She writes further, “Because of this, every interpretation is also a telling and every telling also an interpretation”. (ibid)

Narayana Rao says that women believed *Ramayana* to be fact and not fiction. He says that only fact can have many versions whereas fiction can have only one version: “Contrary to the usual opinion, it is fiction that has only one version; a factual event will inevitably have various versions depending on the attitude, point of view, intent and social position of the teller”. (Richman, ed. 115) Richman asserts that the text is being read and re-read in modern times too. She wants us to ‘re-read in ways that reflect and shape the concerns of both exegete and audience”. (p. 194) She says, however, every new telling is built around the skeletal work of Valmiki.
Rama-Katha being the original form, Thapar says historically what is of great interest is the multiplicity of versions of the epic. She ascertains the function of each version: “As the same story or a relatively similar story is treated variously in terms of ethics, values, social and political norms and religious identities, the purpose and function of each version are significant and they cannot all be labeled as manifestations of a single religious expression.” (1055)

As a historian she says that the date of an epic composition cannot be exact, because it is actually ‘the literature of a later age looking back on the earlier’. Many interpolations have taken place from 500 BC – AD 500. The reason is while Vedas were more accurately produced from memory, with Ramayana more open method of preservation had taken place. It is said that even the first and last cantos were interpolations. She explains how Ramayana in its original form was not a ‘sacred book’ but only a poetic composition, called either kavya or adhikavya. Some versions of the epic story can be transformed into religious statements, as was done in the rewriting of Valmiki Ramayana.

She briefly traces the historical changes that have taken place in the Ramayana tradition. The original bardic form does not exist now and Valmiki version is popularly accepted as the standard version as it happens to be the first written one. The popularity of the story may be due to several factors because they contain nature myths, wherein Sita is goddess of fertility, Rama, the solar deity. The ethical aspect of the battle between good and evil cannot be ignored. Rama as an incarnation of Vishnu came later, an idea conceived by the Brahmanas. In the beginning of the epic, a detailed description of Rama as the perfect man and as an incarnation is given by the
poet. But later in the Sakta tradition, new image of Sita is given as an all-powerful goddess, who kills Ravana single-handedly.

Different versions speak for the sectarian interest, for instance, Buddhism and Jainism, as opposed to Hinduism, present different versions. Spread of Rama story can be assigned to the 2nd millennium when Sanskrit rose as a popular language and the text was rendered in its simple form. Regional languages brought in innovations due to changes in the society. With the rise of Hindi, Tulsidas’ *Ramcharitmanas* gained immense popularity in the 16th century, next only to Valmiki. The reason, Thapar says, may be due to the ethical aspect of the text as morality was on the decline. It was believed that if Rama were worshipped, the Utopian society of Rama could be restored. Bakthi texts needed to be established because other religious movements posed a threat to Hinduism and to Brahminical authority. Some lapses and narrative inconsistencies were overlooked as it was considered a sacred text.

Thapar decries the exploitation of popular faith and beliefs of people for political gains which was dominant in the 20th century. TV was used for it. Richman quotes the words of the critic who sends a note of caution against sidelining of other versions of the epic. She

“emphasizes that, traditionally, local references and topical remarks play crucial roles in many performances of the *Ramayana*. Were the television *Ramayana* and the broadly distributed videocassette tapes of it to achieve widespread acceptance as the version of the epic, Thapar warns of possible negative effects for Indian
cultural. The homogenization of any narrative tradition results in cultural loss; other telling of the Ramayana story might be irretrievably submerged or marginalized”. (qtd. in Richman 4)

Each text, in the view of the critic, is authentic to its sectarian interest and local community. According to Thapar, the multiplicity of the versions is mainly due to cultural idiom. She says that distinction has to be made ‘between the story as a cultural metaphor and as sacred literature’.

(1064) She says further that these variations are not for just adding flavor: “They were deliberate attempts at taking up a well-known theme and using it to present a new point of view arising out of ideological and social differences of perspective”. (ibid 1081)

Section 5.4 Insights

As Mandakranta Bose stresses there are two views regarding the Indian classic, one that considers it as a hegemonic social text and the other as a resistance to that hegemony. Both have to be considered for discussion. Not only does the original telling raise these issues. Each version or telling down the ages raise either political, cultural, caste or gender issues, questioning the domination of one over the other, some of which pervade the societies the world over in some guise or the other. The kinds of domination include Aryan over Dravidian, Brahman over Shudra, male over female, rich over the poor and so on. Several questions arise that need to be discussed, like who suffers in silence and who protests such hegemony. The consciousness to arrive at equality and respectful living are the reasons for social change that are reflected in the different tellings. Each re-telling or critique is an attempt to find a solution to resolve the conflict.
Few episodes apparently deviant raise several questions and provide scope for pragmatic discussions and clarifications in future. Valmiki suggests a system of behavior that will change according to time and space. Lapses on the part of individuals are deliberate so as to suggest reforms. Though Shulman talks about the cultural distinctiveness, it is to be noted that there is gender distinction within the nation, leave alone the cultural differences between India and Greece. In the opinion of Wendy Doniger there is not much of cultural difference as there is gender distinction all over.

Each version of the Indian epic shows there is cultural difference within the nation itself. Though there are regional differences, throughout the Ramayana Tradition one can get certain insights that majority of the versions belonging to different times and regions reflect. In both the epics the faults of men are not discussed or debated much. In Ahalya’s episode, some critics feel that other characters tell the story to warn her against such acts. It is used not only to present an antithesis to Sita but also to give a warning to Sita not to go astray.

Regarding the idea of illusory heroines there are several insights one can get regarding the image of women presented and the purpose of the composers. Sastry in his series of lectures on the Ramayana characters dismisses the very idea of Maya Sita as the work of a lesser poet and does not attach any importance to it as it takes away the interest of the readers and believers. He observes that the very conception of Sita’s character is unparalleled in literature. He begins his lecture on Sita saying,
Only one word of general introduction: though I have said it before, it is worth repeating. No woman that I have read of, certainly no woman that I have seen comes near Valmiki’s conception of Sita. She is unapproachable. He has conferred on her all the attractions a woman could conceivably have. Beauty, tenderness of heart, compassion of the extreme type, fidelity, wisdom of the truest type, courage of the heart, endurance (what has Sita not endured) all these qualities find in her a harmonious abode. (359)

The idea of Maya Sita and phantom Helen does not feature in either Valmiki or Homer. Such later additions also show gender prejudices down the ages that not only take away the individuality of the women but also denigrate them. It shows how the later composers introduced something that was not part of the original versions to suit their purpose.

As Doniger puts it the same story is used differently in both traditions. Yet there are subtle differences between the two epics. Though in the case of Ahalya, the double seduces her according to some versions, in the case of Helen no double seduces her. Paris in his own person seduces her and so Helen is considered guilty. But Ahalya, despite the taint, is included among the pativrtyas. This shows that Ahalya’s elevation was based on the assumption that she was innocent and that her penance was rewarded, though some versions consider her guilty. When we compare Ahalya and Sita, the latter was pure in thought and deed but both are considered pativrtyas. Doniger says that both the innocent Sita and the guilty Helen received the same kind of treatment. It is to be noted that within the Indian tradition both Sita and Ahalya are treated on par with each other. The social norm is subjected to questioning in this case.
When one compares Sita and Helen, as Doniger voices out, both the woman who is fooled and the woman who fools are said to be guilty. The difference further extends to the point that in the Indian context the idea of phantom Sita cropped up to defend Rama despite Sita being pure. The idea of Maya Sita did not protect her from public censure nor from the husband’s abandonment. In the Greek context the notion of phantom Helen was created to defend Helen, though she was not pure. According to Valmiki’s telling Sita was pure of body, mind and heart, but in a few later tellings, Sita is presented guilty of having an attraction towards Ravana. Contrary to this, in Homer, Helen is found guilty but a few later versions presented her as a pure woman. This speaks for the change in societal attitude, wherein in India, mud is thrown on an otherwise pure woman, as the society is said to be undergoing evolution, whereas in Greece Helen’s character is whitewashed.

The issue of illusory heroines raises a few more questions. If the real Sita and Helen were not abducted why there was an accusation the women were the main cause of war. Both wars had acquired political connotations yet women were considered the cause of war. Greek war was problematized because there was a belief that the war was fought to bring back a woman who willingly ran away with Paris. Lanka war justified from the religious point of view. By removing Sita from the picture and by assuming that the Maya Sita was sent in her person, Hindus deproblematized the war. They appropriated the war because it was felt that it was fought for a just cause.
Valmiki who is believed to have belonged to a remote past when society had not evolved had visualized an ideal society. He is problematizing the subordination of women to patriarchal authority and raises the possibility of resistance to male hegemony. Seeds of feminism were sown by the poet-visionary. Valmiki does not prescribe but only suggests. He gives a clue to future generations to reason out. Though there was no need for Sita to vouchsafe for her chastity, two men, Agni, God of Fire and later Valmiki himself vouch for her in the first and second instances of the ordeal respectively. In both instances that only men vouch for her shows their broad-mindedness, in contrast to the common man, who slanders her image. No woman speaks ill of Sita in the text and it is another female form, the Mother earth who gives her refuge.

It is also to be noted that when women are suspected, the affected men pronounce judgement on the women, to defend their own honour. But when a woman is affected she does not vindicate the man. It is ironic that Sita waited for Rama to come and rescue her though she had the power. While Rama was concerned about his own honour, Sita also was more concerned about bringing honour to him. Nor did the woman have any chance to punish the man who inflicted sexual assault on her. This shows that though chaste women, it was said, had the power to destroy the man, she was not given a chance to execute her powers. In many such instances, men cursed women for their wrong doing, whereas there is no account of any woman who used her powers to curse a wrong-doer. Though Sita, Vedavati were ill-treated by men, they never used their power of chastity to inflict any curse on men. Though Sita had the power to burn Ravana to ashes she waited for Rama to take the credit for annihilating Ravana. But it is ironic that such a Sita was rejected by Rama in the end.
In the *Mahabharata*, Draupati takes an oath to avenge the wrong-doers and through her husbands, effects the revenge of destroying the Kauravas. In Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, when Sita was abducted by Ravana, there is reference to Brahma who heaves a sigh of relief for the mission of Ravana’s destruction was to be completed. Though Sita was only used as an instrument to bring about the destruction of Ravana, she, as an individual, as a woman, had to undergo inexplicable suffering. She was treated as an instrument and not as an individual.

M. Krishnamachariar, while comparing the epics of India, contrasts the characters of Sita and Draupati. According to him, Sita is ‘more simple and cowardly’ and that “Sita belongs to an age of ignorance and timidity: Draupati of wisdom and courage. Draupati’s religious convictions are looser than the god-fearing instinct of the daughter of Janaka”. (69) Some critics even question the very image of Draupati, whether she was a wife or a public woman? No other woman has undergone an identity crisis like her. Her question to Dharmaputra (isn’t it the husband’s duty to protect his wife and defend her honour) cuts at “the very roots of the Hindu social tradition, especially in relation to its attitude to the position and rights of women.”(Lal 27) She emerges as a strong rebellious woman at the end. Down the ages one can trace change in values and relationships as Valmiki’s concept was more inclined towards an idealized society whereas Vyasa society appears ‘more turbulent’ as Krishnamachariar puts it . (70)

In the case of Sita, though she does not ask Rama directly, the question arises why Rama, who could protect Ahalya and Tataka, could not protect his own wife from slander. Rama was able to give a new lease of life to Ahalya who went astray and whom he had not known. Similarly Rama
was able to rejuvenate Tataka from a cursed yaksa woman back to her normal self. According to the past of Tataka, she was the beautiful daughter of Suketu and later married to Sunda. As both husband and wife tried to disrupt the penance of Sage Agastya cursed her and turned her into an ugly, repulsive woman. It raises questions as to why he could not accept Sita without censuring her, though he says he knew of her fidelity.

It is pointed by some critics that the distinction within male and female genders also shows bias. In the Hindu tradition male distinction is in terms of good or bad nature that includes ethical aspect. As Sutherland points out while talking about Sita and Surpanaka, within the female the difference is being expressed in terms of sexuality. For the Greek hero valour marks the difference with little stress on ethical element. But the female is adjudged according to her beauty, which is another form of sexuality. As mentioned earlier, female sexuality is often linked with male honour. But is there a link between ‘male sexuality’ and ‘female honour’? When men went astray the wife’s honour was never considered. Sexuality is predominant, in that it is presented as if either women on their own seduce men or are sent by rishis to seduce ordinary men or even the sages to disempower them. This is also done by way of justifying the wrong-doer, as in the case of Indra, because motive is attached to his act as if the gods sent him to disrupt the tapas of the sage.

Regarding the punishment given to Indra there are different versions. In Valmiki Indra was castrated and later he was fitted with a ram’s testicles. Many references are made to Indra as ‘thousand-eyed’ God, while in fact he was covered with the female private part that he coveted the most. Later it was believed they were converted into thousand eyes. Even this punishment
was covered by men and converted into something of a pride for Indra to be called ‘thousand-eyed’. Popular version is this whereas the actual one is hidden. Many have only heard of Ramayana but not read to know the actual happenings. In addition people have used their imagination to bring in more interpretations. Similarly the idea of ‘Lakshman rekha’ does not find place in Valmiki which was only a later interpretation. It is symbolic of the line of control drawn by men, for women. Popular stories among the masses do not highlight the nuances of characterization. What is there explicitly in the text, such interpreters miss out and look for what is not there. In fact many may not have read the Ramayana. As Richman says only scholars who read and re-read the text and know the details can bring about the real essence of the epics based on textual evidences that can be accepted.

There are two kinds of Hindu texts, Shruti and Smrti. Texts like the Vedas and Upanishads belong to Shruti, which means ‘divinely inspired’. The epics and the texts on law and many others come under Smrti which are supposed to have been produced from human memory. It is claimed that Valmiki was inspired by Brahma to pen the epic which may be to validate the tenets found in the text. The choice of the title also raises few questions. Why did the poets choose the titles they have attributed? Why did Homer choose the title Iliad? Is it because he wanted to give more importance to Troy, war and heroism? It is also significant to note that Helen is more popularly referred as ‘Helen of Troy’ and very few know that she was originally ‘Helen of Greece’. Homer has particularly used the title, the Iliad, which is the story of Ilium, that is, Troy. In the instance of Ramayana, though it is the story of Rama, Valmiki proposed other titles, one of which refers to it as the story of Sita, referred by its Sanskrit equivalent namely ‘Sitayach
caritam Mahat’. Valmiki-proposed other titles for the epic-but why he didn’t boldly assign the title to his epic. Though he voices out in favour of women, was he under the pressure of his times to talk about the story of Lord Rama by way of eulogy? Though he might have also been under pressure to follow the cultural norms, Valmiki brings out a few instances to suggest changes regarding the status of women. So wherever possible, he gives women a voice.