
The Woman as Other: Analysing Complex Gendered Narratives in *Ramacharitmanas*

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This research uses *bhakti* as an interrogative tool to analyse the modalities through which the Other is constructed in *Ramcharitmanas*, Tulsidas's sixteenth century retelling of Ramayana. The Other as this research studies is the female self who when transgressive of the social norms is chastised. It argues how the discursive field of *bhakti* is defined only by ceaseless and unquestioning devotion to the Lord and dissent is abruptly stamped out. In the text underpinned by *bhakti*, the devotees are not difficult to locate. It is an eclectic mix including Gods, humans and other sub human creatures like monkeys, vultures and demons. In contradistinction to this, the dissenters or the Other as studied in the paper include Sati, the Consort of Shiva and Surpanakha, sister of the mighty demon king Ravana. The latter two are united in their fate of earning the opprobrium of either Ram or his devotees because of their reluctance to passively submit to the path of devotionism. A study of the asymmetries of gender in this text is intriguing considering the widespread receptiveness it enjoys among a major section of the North Indian population.

The Text as Heritage

Among the multitudinous versions of the Ram *katha* tradition including Valmiki's Ramayana, Kamban's *Iramavataram*, Krittibasas's *Ramayana*, Eknath's *Bhavarth Ramayana*, etc

Tulsidasa's *Ramcharitmanas* has received widespread receptiveness among a major section of the North Indian population. Such is the popularity of the text that its theatrical and performative aspect, the Ramlila tradition has been recognized as an intangible cultural heritage of India by UNESCO. *Ramcharitmanas* is instrumental in creating a heritage of shared bonds, encompassing social customs, a sense of cohesion and identity which is transmitted intergenerationally. The aspirational character of the epic can be comprehended in the manner in which it has succeeded in circumscribing ideal roles and identities through its characters with the protagonist Ram of exemplary filial devotion, of Sita for wifely devotion, Lakshmana for brotherly affection and Ravana as the model enemy.

Composing the text in the sixteenth century, Tulsidasa drew upon the rich materials available from a vast variety of sources, which included not just Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Kamban's *Iramavataram* but from Vedas, Puranas like *Bhagvata Purana*, *Kurmapurana*, *Markandeya Purana Adhyatama Ramayana*, etc. *Ramcharitmanas* derives its authoritative status through the skilful manner in which Tulsidas uses vernacular as a medium for disseminating epic, masterfully weaving rich strands of both Vaishnavism and Shaivism, and *nirguna* and *saguna* forms of *bhakti*, as well as stressing on the oral performative aspect of the epic.

Right from the beginning of the epic he decries any lyrical skill preferring simplistic Hindi over the more ornate Sanskrit. This vernacular rendition of the text helped in gaining widespread acceptance from various sections of the society. Imbued with Tulsi's ethical and moral sensibilities the readers are informed right from the beginning of the epic the divine status of Rama and the boons and curses precipitate into the birth of Ram as reliever of the sufferings of his devotees.

Reaffirming the readers of Rama's divinity, establishing Him as the supreme Lord of the Universe administered by Shiva, Brahma and thousands of other deities as well as articulating the benefits of incantation of Rama's name, Tulsī focused on the oral recitation of the epic. As a result daily recitals are arranged in temples, ghats, religious complexes in UP till this day. Philip Lutgendorf in his seminal text reflects upon the milieu of the contemporary performance of the *Ramcharitmanas* as an essential oratorical tradition. Ramlila, one of the most popular dramatic traditions is performed by a number of actors, musicians spanning from 9-30 days culminating with the death of Ravana on Vijayadashami, the tenth day of the auspicious Dusshera festival. All the above factors have thus restored the heritage value of *Ramcharitmanas* and its pre-eminent position as a living tradition, playing an essential role in the cultural lives of a large section of the population in North India.

Examining the nature of bhakti, devotee and the Other

The word *bhakti* has its roots in the Sanskrit word *bhaj* which means to “partake, divide, share.” The word has been appropriated by authors, poets and lyricists like Vyas, Caitanya, Ramanuja, Sandilya, etc to articulate their visions and sensibilities. Tulsī defines the term *bhakti* as having ceaseless devotion to Ram's lotus feet, a complete dependence upon him and regarding him as the only source of help and happiness. The relationship between Lord and his devotee is akin to a master and servant and willing submission to Ram as an essential precondition to it. The Lord then assumes the role of a benevolent patriarch who protects his devotee from the clutches of *maya* or illusion. The redemptive nature of Ram is impressed upon the reader when, “Even the most horrible of sinners and culprits are forgiven by the Lord when they come and submit themselves with humility and devotion before the Lord.”¹ Tulsī also issues a stark warning about

¹Goswami Tulsidas, *Ramcharitmanas*, Gita Press, Gorakhpur, 2001, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, Book 2, 2-3, pg 605

Ram's terrible wrath when his "devotees are harmed...thousands of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh were incapable of protecting one who is inimical to Rama."²

In a text underpinned by *bhakti*, the devotees are not difficult to locate. The list of devotees is an eclectic mix including Gods, humans, sub human creatures like monkeys, vultures, demons, etc. As studied earlier, Shiva, lord of the Universe, adored by saints, gods and sages is the foremost devotee of Ram. Hanuman the monkey chief of Sugriva is the peerless devotee of Ram whose unflinchingly loyalty was recognized by Gods and saints alike. Bharata, Ram's younger brother made one of the most striking requests of demanding neither "Dharma (scriptural sanctioned path of righteousness), nor Artha (material prosperity), nor Kaam (erotic or sensual desires), nor Moksha (spiritual salvation) but undiluted love and devotion for the holy feet of Rama for all generations to come and all future births."³ Even Ravana is portrayed as a devotee who through his penance desired to be killed at the hands of a human and on hearing Surpanakha's lament about the killing of Khara and Dhushan realized it was "Lord himself, the reliever of Earth's burden who had appeared on Earth"⁴ and resolved to "attain salvation from the mundane existence by challenging him."

In contradistinction to this, the dissenters or the Other as illustrated in the epic include Sati, the Consort of Shiva, and Surpanakha, sister of the demon Ravana. Both are united in their fate of earning the opprobrium of either Ram or his devotees because of their reluctance to passively submit to the path of devotionism. This led to both Sati and Surpanakha suffer the ignominy of renunciation and public humiliation. The asymmetry of gender is hard to ignore as both

²Ibid, V, no. 23, pg 769

³Ibid, II, 204, pg 545

⁴Ibid, II, 1-4, 681

women were doomed to disgrace which is preserved through posterity.

The renunciation of Sati: Narrated in the first book of the epic, Tulsidas writes on returning from sage Agastya's hermitage during the *treta yuga*, Shiva found Ram wandering desolately in the Dandaka forest looking for his wife Sita who was abducted by the demon Ravana. On seeing Ram's visage, Shiva exclaimed, "Glory to the Redeemer of the Universe who is all Truth, Consciousness and Bliss."⁵ Sati, His Divine Consort beholding Shiva in that stage wondered why did he make obeisance to a prince and "whether Eternal who is beyond *maya*, and whom the Vedas cannot comprehend wander in search of his consort like an ignorant man."⁶ Realizing Sati's doubts and gently admonishing her for her skeptical feminine nature, Shiva instructed Sati to verify her doubts. Assuming the form of Sita, she moved along the same path as Ram was passing. Rama on realizing Sati's deception enquired of her whereabouts and that of Shiva and wondered what made her roam alone in the forest.

Dejected by the turn of the circumstances, Sati returned to Kailasa and concealed the truth from Shiva. Shiva realized his devotion to Ram would be tainted and it would be indecorous on his part to have any conjugal relations with Sati, thereby renouncing her for a period of 87000 years after she tested Ram's divinity in such a blatant manner (despite having reassured her of the contrary). The moment he made this decision a voice from heaven exclaimed, "Glory to Shiva who has so staunchly upheld the cause of Devotion, Who else than You can take such a vow? You are a devotee of Sri Rama and all powerful Lord at the same time."⁷

At this juncture Tulsi brings in an episode from *Markandya Purana*

⁵Ibid, I, No.49, 1-4, pg 61

⁶Ibid, I, No 49, 1-4, pg 62

⁷Ibid, I, No. 52, pg 66

of Sati's immolation at Daksha, her father's house to drive home the point how desirous of shedding the identity so renounced by Shiva, she immolated herself. Her dying words were, "Whenever you hear a saint, Sambhu or Vishnu being vilified, the rule is that if it lies within your power, you should tear out the tongue or run away closing your ears."⁸

The chilling manner in which Tulsidas wove the two episodes together, the first of Sati's doubts regarding Ram's divinity causing it to be a motivating factor for her immolation speaks volumes of the way Other is treated. The path to *bhakti* required ceaseless and willing submission to Ram. Any deviation from that was regarded as a deterrent and the Other subsequently punished. In this particular instance, Sati refused to recognize Ram's mystical status whereby she had to suffer public disgrace for it. On the other hand, Shiva deliberately pursuing the path of *bhakti* and devoting himself to Rama at the cost of renouncing his wife was blessed as a devotee par excellence. Thereby we see the route to devotionism had no place for ambiguity, misapprehension and skepticism.

The Mutilation of Surpanakha: The mutilation of Surpanakha is one of the most often cited episodes from the Ram katha tradition and has been studied from a number of perspectives. In this paper I explore how Surpanakha, the sister of demon Ravana, has been perceived as the Other by Tulsidas. Here we examine how she did not devote herself to Ram's lotus feet like Shabari but met him as an equal, openly propositioning him and declaring her love. We are all too well aware of how the particular episode ends yet it would be an interesting exercise to study it once again, this time from the prism of *bhakti*.

Surpanakha was smitten by Ram when she saw him spending his

⁸Ibid, I, No.63, 1-4, pg 74

days in exile in Pancavati. Assuming the form of a charming woman she propositioned Rama saying, “There is no man like you and no woman like me. I have ransacked the three spheres but have found no suitable match for me in the whole universe.”⁹ To this Ram casually remarked, “My brother is a bachelor.”¹⁰ After ridiculing and taunting her for some time, Lakshmana at Ram’s behest cuts off her nose and ears.

It is indeed a gripping tale where instead of desiring a passive reception of Rama’s grace she asserted herself, proclaiming her love. Challenging Ram as a peer and not like a helpless devotee she is represented as the Other. There is a deep suspicion of her power and sexuality. What seems ironic is how Ravan’s lasciviousness was ignored by Tulsidas in his effort to portray him as a devotee whereas Surpankaha was punished for the same crime as she was the Other. As a result of her transgressions she was dishonored, derided and still serves as a perpetual reminder of the indignities lying in store for the dissenter.

Innately dangerous?

Deeply disturbed with the degenerations emblematic with the Kali Yuga, Tulsidas penned apocalyptic passages evidencing the widespread moral and social decline. One of the most debilitating concerns were the unbridled freedom enjoyed by the women. Tulsi writes, “every man and woman taking delight in revolting against the Vedas, Sudras instructing twice born in spiritual wisdom and even arguing with the Brahmins, challenging them, “Are we in anyway inferior to you?”¹¹ Expounding further on the pernicious environment of the Dark Age he states how men would dance at the tune of their wives and the latter would desert their established and

⁹Ibid, III, no. 5, 1-4, pg 670

¹⁰Ibid, III, no. 6, pg 670

¹¹Ibid, VII, no. 96 (1-4). pg 1052

handsome husbands, bestowing their hearts upon a paramour.¹² Women would have enormous appetites and treasure nothing other than their tresses, whereas widows adorn themselves in the latest trends.¹³

To remedy such colossal degeneration, Tulsi invites his readers to tread the path of *bhakti* which was the only way to escape the impurities of the Kali Yuga. Tulsi ardently exhorts his readers to willingly submit themselves to Rama. When Shabari, after paying obeisance to Rama asks, “How can I extol You, lowest of descent and dullest of wit as I am? A woman is the lowest of those who rank as the lowest of the low. Of women again I am the dullest headed.”¹⁴ Replying to Sabari’s dilemma, Ram remarked, “Listen O good lady, I recognize no other kinship as that of devotion. Despite caste, kinship, lineage, piety, reputation, wealth, a man lacking in devotion is of no more worth than a cloud without water.”¹⁵

Characteristics of the Other is strewn all over the epic and the vocabulary tailored by Tulsidas is compelling. This detailed repertoire for the Other includes them being “dim witted”, “lustful”, “vindictive”, “fools”, and steeped in, “anger, arrogance, greed, vile of descent, self harming.”¹⁶ They consciously ignore *bhakti* and try to swim across the ocean without any vessel. Tulsi also trenchantly castigates the Other condemning them of, “wallowing in the basest pleasure of senses...throwing away the philosopher’s stone from the palm of the hands and take bits of glass in exchange for the same.”¹⁷

Conclusion

A critical reading of the text thereby shows how the woman was always held suspect, her nature perennially considered impure and

¹²Ibid, VII, no 98 (A-B), pg 1053

¹³Ibid, VII, no 99 1-4, pg 1054

¹⁴Ibid, III, no 34, 1-4, pg 697

¹⁵Ibid, III, no. 34, 1-4, 697

¹⁶Ibid

¹⁷Ibid, VII, No 85, 1-4, pg 1045

her capacity to achieve spiritual grace only when she willingly subordinates herself to the male devotee. Perhaps the most egregious is the statement which states,

“A drum, a rustic, a Sudra, a beast or a woman
All these are fit for a beating”¹⁸

It would be an interesting exercise to study how in order to prevent a woman from being wayward, she deserves to be physically chastised. Strong criticisms of woman also include the eight evils which are inherent in woman as explained by Ravana and which include “recklessness, mendacity, fickleness, deceit, timidity, indiscretion, impurity and callousness”.¹⁹

Wifely virtues, responsibilities and even the categories of wives are subjects which the text deals with. Anasuya, wife of the sage Atri explains to Sita how a woman who treats her husband with disrespect even if he is “old, sick, dull-headed, blind, deaf, wrathful or most indigent shall suffer the torments in Hell”²⁰ The woman of the highest category does not dream of any man apart from her husband while the lowliest kind is doomed to be widowed as soon as she attains her youth if she is disloyal to her Lord. Such vexatious passages are difficult to explain and justify.

Similar snide and disparaging anecdotes can be found by a discerning reader and its relevance cannot be overstated. Given the remarkable impact and popularity the poem has on a wide spectrum of audience, study of the crucial issue of gender as addressed in the poem becomes essential. Situating the timeless poem within the threshold of contemporaneity when politics of Ram is being revived from Parliament to the streets, a nuanced reading of the gendered aspect is worth investigating. Such an analysis unpacks and problematises notions of the “ideal woman” who is glorified and deserving of spiritual grace when subservient and demonized when assertive.

¹⁸Ibid, V, No. 59, 6, Pg 657

¹⁹Ibid, VI, Nos. 1-4, pg 811

²⁰Ibid, III, No. 4(1-10), pg 534
