

The Depiction and Recreation of Ramayana's Women in Assamese Poetry Through A Gendered Lens

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Abstract: *Although originally classified as kāvya (poetry), the Rāmāyaṇa is now regarded as an epic in nature. The Rāmāyaṇa, which was authored by the sage Valmiki, holds significant literary value in India. Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa comprises a number of prominent female characters, including Sitā, Suparnakhā, Urvashī, and others. The Rāmāyaṇa espouses the notion of "husband worshipping," wherein a woman views her husband as her entire universe. It is believed that women exemplify selflessness, femininity, and virtues. The elusive negative aspects of the Rāmāyaṇa have consistently piqued the curiosity of literary innovators. Additionally, the Assamese poets have endeavored to reveal the anguish and suffering endured by the afflicted female figures in the epic. This paper endeavors to examine the reconstruction of Sitā and Urmilā, the two principal female characters of the Rāmāyaṇa, in the poems of Ratnakanta Borkakoti and Karabi Deka Hazarika, respectively.*

Keywords: The gender role; Rāmāyaṇa; Rāmāyaṇa recreation; Contemporary Assamese poetry

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender role refers to the attitudes and behaviors that are considered permissible, suitable, or desirable for individuals of the same sex. An examination of history or mythologies reveals the gendered practice of distinct roles. The Ramayana, an ancient epic, constitutes a significant component of Indian literature. Each of the film's prominent female characters—Sit, Urmil, Suparnakh, Mandudari, and others—plays a significant role in the plot. The "husband worshipping" woman, for whom her husband is her entire universe, is portrayed in the Rāmāyaṇa. In patriarchal societies, a female is required to relinquish all rights pertaining to her natal family upon marriage. [1] The female protagonists of the Rāmāyaṇa were portrayed as paragons of femininity and womanhood—emblemans of virtue, selflessness, and submission. Their aspiration to attain what they have not yet attained, their resistance against male dominance and the ability to destroy culture and traditional values of a society dominated by men, have consistently captivated the imaginative forces of literature. The Assamese writers have also endeavored to reveal the sorrows and agony of the Rāmāyaṇa characters through their recreations. Sita, Urmila, and Mandudari are particular figures who have captured the interest of Assamese authors. The Rāmāyaṇa comprises a multitude of prominent female characters who are regarded as paragons of womanhood and femininity. This paper attempts to analyze how Ratnakanta Borkakoti and Karabi Deka Hazarika, two Assamese poets, reconstruct and deconstruct the gender roles of Sita and Urmila, the two principal female characters of the Ramayana. An endeavor has been undertaken to examine the personas of Sita and Urmila as they are portrayed in Assamese poetry in this paper. I have employed an analytical and descriptive approach in order to accomplish the goal. From both primary and secondary sources, the information was gathered. The fundamental source comprises The Rāmāyaṇa, poetic compositions by the chosen poets, and literary histories. References, research articles, theses, dissertations, and other works of research that are pertinent to the research topic constitute the secondary source. The study primarily aims to examine the portrayal of women in the epic Rāmāyaṇa in terms of their gender role, as well as the ways in which this gender role has been deconstructed and recreated in contemporary Assamese poetry. In this scholarly investigation, I have chosen two Assamese compositions in which endeavors have been undertaken to reenvision the personas Sita and Urmila from the Rāmāyaṇa. The chosen poems for this analysis are "Urmilā" by Ratnakanta Borkakoti and "Sitā" by Karabi Deka Hazarika.

II. WHAT IS GENDER ROLE?

The term "gender role" refers to a social construct consisting of a variety of attitudes and behaviors that are generally regarded as desirable, acceptable, or suitable for individuals on the basis of their perceived or actual sex.[2] There is a clear and distinct gender role in Indian society, in which men are expected to be assertive, strong, and materially successful, while women are expected to be more subdued, sensitive, and preoccupied with quality of life. As defined by the Oxford dictionary, a gender role is "the behavior or role that an individual acquires in accordance with the dominant cultural standards that are considered suitable for their gender.

III. GENDER ROLE OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE RĀMĀYAṆA

Male cultural traditions have historically exerted the greatest influence on Indian culture. The mythical epic Rāmāyaṇa is not exempt from this rule. The feminine characters depicted in the Rāmāyaṇa have conformed to the prevailing social and cultural conventions of their era. Balmiki appeared to be cognizant of the feminine conventions that are manifested in the portrayal of the female characters. The narrative of Rāmāyaṇa features several significant female characters, including Kausalya, Sumitra, Kaikeye, Sita, Urmilā, Suparnakha, and Mandudari, among others. Sita is portrayed in the Ramayana as the embodiment of feminine identity; she simultaneously embodies virtue, obedience, and sacrifice. Following Sita's deliverance and return to Ayodhya, a multitude of rumors surfaced that cast doubt on her chastity. The rumors in the common version of the Rāmāyaṇa were the source of Rama's unease. Despite his conviction regarding Sita's chastity, as a monarch it was incumbent upon him to assuage the concerns of his subjects. As a result, Rama forced Sita to endure the fire trial. Sita was subsequently banished to the hermitage of Saint Balmiki, where she gave birth to two sons, despite having passed her examination. An additional instance of such mutation is observed in Urmila's marginalization. Urmila is among the less preoccupied female protagonists in the epic. She was identified as the junior sibling of Sita and the spouse of Lakshmana. Upon the fourteen-year exile of Rama by King Dasaratha, Lakshmana accompanied him. Urmila begged her husband for permission to accompany him, but he denied her request, stating that her presence would impede his ability to render servitude to his brother. Additionally, she was requested to be present in Ayodhya to assist her in-laws while her spouse was absent. Urmila embodies the archetype of a selfless woman. She set her desires and aspirations aside in order to provide for her family and spouse. She even assumed the responsibility of sleeping with her spouse during their fourteen-year exile.

IV. WOMEN CHARACTERS OF RĀMĀYAṆA IN MODERN ASSAMESE POETRY

Assamese literature, a noteworthy subset of Indian literature overall, is enhanced by a number of epic characteristics. Epical aspects are clearly present in Assamese literature, both in traditional and contemporary works. The primary epical texts for Assamese poets are the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa. Several topics that are concealed in these two epics have been attempted to be brought to light by Assamese poets from antiquity to the present. Assamese written literature dates back to the fourteenth century. Part of the Rāmāyaṇa was translated by the well-known writer of the fourteenth century, Sankardeva. In addition, he wrote several verses praising Rama, the protagonist of the epic Rāmāyaṇa, including "Ram Vijay" (Victory of Rama). Another writer who was unaffected by the Vaisnavite Movement was Durgabar, who penned "GitiRāmāyaṇa" (Lyrical Rāmāyaṇa). A few poem lines from the Rāmāyaṇa were also translated by Sankardeva's contemporaries, Rama Swaraswati. After the Yandaboo Treaty, the British arrived in Assam and brought with them profound changes in the social, political, economic, and literary spheres. Based on stories from the Rāmāyaṇa, Bholanath Das penned "Sita Haran" (Abduction of Sita) during the Orunodoi era. During the Jonākī era, two additional notable poems with epical features were written: "Ramayan" and "Urmila." There are several allusions to epic figures from the Ramayana in the poems of Hiteswar Borbarua. His two poems from Malach (1918), "Jakh" and "Urmila," are based on stories from the Ramayana. There are allusions to Rameshyani figures in a few other poems by Raghunath Choudhary, Dahikatarā. Ratnakanta Through his poems, Borkakoti has initiated a new literary movement in Assamese literature. The modernist movement made its way into Assamese writing around the 1940s. Consequently, it is easier to discern the commonplace rather than the romantic type of love in Borkakoti's poetry. Additionally, he has attempted to bring the disorganized characters from the Ramayana into focus. In his poem "Urmila," which is based on the Rāmāyaṇa persona Urmila, Borkakoti attempts to convey the inner anguish and

suffering of this less deliberate lady figure. Rabindranath Tagore's essay "Upekhiyta" had a big impact on Borkakoti. [4]Here, the distracted, neglected Urmila by Borkakoti is shown as the embodiment of selflessness. Urmila, the daughter of King Janak, married Lakshmana and moved to Ayodhya. Her desire for a blissful married life, however, was not realized since Lakshmana wanted to go with Rama during his fourteen-year exile. Lakshmana was too busy to give his wife a second thought. What does the poet want? Jidinataswibese

Rajhanya story Kidarelunthitahola Kunebadekhile, Hidina Urmila tumi BaajholSita hate Andhariayodhya? In Indian culture, a woman's job is to submit to her husband and follow his lead. Adhering to the same philosophy, Urmila too imagined a happy married life with Lakshmana, only to have it destroyed after a few days of union. Lakshmana chose to go with his brother despite being in a relationship, which caused him and his wife to stay apart for fourteen years. In a patriarchal culture, a woman's love becomes her whole existence, while for a male, love is merely a responsibility. Urmila, the recently married wife, had to give up her dreams and love in order to fulfill her husband's ideal of love for Rama, his brother. As stated in the poem: Kune Jane Hidinar Abala Urmila, Sulmeliakalai Kidarebyakula; the poet illustrates how Urmila finds life intolerable in the absence of a spouse. The poet speculates as to whether those loving moments had been reignited after Lakshmana's return. Even with Sita's blessing and the fire test, the poet believes that Urmila's suffering is unbearable. The poet speculates that Urmila's suffering may have prevented the wise Balmiki from using his vibrant poetry to convey it as well. Ratnakanta's poem "Urmila" The role of a lady experiencing the agony of being apart from her spouse is portrayed by Borkakoti. Furthermore, Borkakoti depicts the position of a woman in ancient India, when she was obligated to follow her husband's instructions. By doing this, the poet purposefully seeks to connect his sentiments with Urmila while simultaneously highlighting her less focused nature. In her poem named "Sita," acclaimed modern Assamese poet Karabi Deka Hazarika recreates the main Ramayaniwoma character Sita. The poet has captured the extraordinary traits of a lady in this poetry. In addition to being the poem's embodiment of selflessness, Sita is also shown as a respectable lady with the guts to defy societal conventions. Sita had to pass the fire test to appease Rama and the people of Ayodhya after being saved from Ravana. Sita was assigned to dwell in the ashrama of the sage Valmiki, despite having shown her virginity. In the Ramayana, Sita is portrayed as a lady who is fully aware of the gender stereotypes that the patriarchal society imposes on her. In her poetry, Karabi Deka Hazarika bemoans the fact that the traditional, gender-biased society of the past has not transitioned to the modern day. Between the ancient civilization of long ago and the modern one, not much has changed. Women are still oppressed, degraded, and compelled to uphold the standards set by the patriarchal culture. Thus, the poet would rather dwell in a wilderness than in a human society:

Prithiviekeise
Haratetiyou and Heikei
Raj-Prasadat
Hajar Pradipjwale
Etiyaase chayare tat
Pradhanya

There are still plenty of guys who abuse women in the guise of upholding their moral obligations or dharma. Rama is not the perfect husband, but rather the ideal monarch in Valmiki's Ramayana. Sita, on the other hand, is portrayed as the perfect wife—selfless and patient. Because of Rama's actions, Sita decided to oppose her own spouse. Says the poet:

Premmisa Bhuaparichay
Nemieke Banchanamathurekal
Otamahuwa Karubarpriyo
Kapunarjundekhapuwa
Karubarduchokurtaralnilat.

Sita's life's suffering was attributed to Rama's trek into the jungle. As a result of this blessing, Sita was taken hostage by Ravana and had to undergo the fire test to demonstrate her virginity. Both Ravana and Rama are exemplars of the patriarchal culture. They both took great satisfaction in their status, which they used to subjugate Sita. At Ashoka Vatika, also known as Ashoka Garden, Sita had constant mental and physical struggle. The poet claims that women are

harassed every other minute and that the world has now become an Ashoka vatika. She goes on to suggest that when Ramas, or husbands, are preoccupied with indulging in worldly pleasures, men are becoming devils. However, from the beginning of time, women have endured the psychological and physical abuse of patriarchy while remaining quiet about it. The poet expresses great optimism in women's abilities to resist male tyranny in the modern world. Hazarika has highlighted the ways in which contemporary women are redefining established gender roles. In this instance, the poet has made Sita universal by equating her with all other women. According to the poet, Sita becomes a "new woman" by rejecting patriarchal dominance, rather than being a husband-worshipping, selfless ideal wife. In the last section of her poetry, Lajgol Bhoigol Gol arubiswakharkathinbandhun Sitaajikalhariya Bandhuhina, Hangihina Hunikhalhankharatakaleithiodia Diptaagnisikha, the author has masterfully idealized the powerful Sita.

V. CONCLUSION

A few points may be used to summarize the main conclusions of the study on gender roles and the recreation of the female characters from the Rammāyaṇa by the Assamese poets Ratnakanta Borkakoti and Karabi Deka Hazarika. They are as follows: (i) By exposing the hardships faced by women in a patriarchal society, Assamese contemporary poets attempt to convey the emotions of the female characters in the Rāmāyaṇa via their poetry. (ii) The contemporary poet from Assam challenges the rigid gender norms upheld in the Rāmāyaṇa. By giving voice to the female characters who are voiceless, they subvert this rigid order in their poetry. (iii) By equating Sita and Urmila with every other oppressed woman in patriarchal society, the figures become universal. (iv) Ratnakanta Borkakoti, a romantic poet, expresses melancholy in his poetry, lamenting Urmila's suffering and destiny. Karabi Deka Hazarika, on the other hand, is upbeat about the future of modern women. Because of this, the contemporary woman refuses to put up with the misery any more and instead speaks out against it. (v) Karabi Deka Hazarika challenges patriarchy in the modern world by promoting the role of the "new woman" in her poetry "Sita."

End Note

- [1] Munmi Hazarika, "Gender roles and representation of feminine identity in Ramayana: A critical study" International Journal of English language, Literature and Humanities, 2:5(Sept. 2014), p. 295
 [2] Sandra Alters, Wendy Schiff (2009). Essential Concepts for Healthy Living. Jones & Bartlett Publishers. p. 43.
 [3] "Gender Role", https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/gender_role
 [4] Rabindranath Tagore, "KabyerUpekhiyta" Rabindra Rachanawali, Vol.5, Vishwa Bharti Edn., p.550

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