

**Treatment of Women Characters in Valmiki's *Ramayana* and  
Homer's *Iliad*- a Comparative Study**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

SASTRA Deemed University

by

S.Urmila

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

of

Doctor of Philosophy

January 2012

## **Chapter VI-Conclusion**

As the study pertains to the portrayal of women in the epics of Valmiki and Homer, it throws light on the position and status accorded to women in ancient times when civilization had just begun and helps one relate their position to today's world. Through a common motif of the exploitation of women, the poets have given expression not only to their imagination but also to the actual society and culture in which the characters had lived. The literary writings act as historical documents in this sense. Considering the relevance of such a study in the present, one has to reflect on what these older writings have for the present generation. By studying these writings down the ages one can trace the evolution of the society and culture. Despite the parallels between the two epics regarding the themes, plot and characterization, the differences cannot be ignored.

Characters play a very significant role as the poets use them as a vehicle to drive home their point. Both the poets have drawn several parallels and contrasts of characters to show how the average and the ideal were found existing together in their respective societies. The very purpose of the poets was to suggest a movement towards the ideal by presenting reality as they only visualized an ideal society in future. That was why the poets had brought in different constructs to set ideals of human behaviour in society. The purpose of these poets was to convey to the future generations that reforms were necessary at personal, familial and social levels. In the light of the observations made in the previous chapters it can be inferred that the poets suggest changes at personal level, wherein negative qualities like jealousy, insecurity, lack of judgement, submissiveness, emotional outbursts and over-reaching ambition, need to be changed. In the family,

rivalry, polygamy, servitude, dependence of women, need to be changed. In the society at large, attitude of men and lack of respect of women and lack of recognition of their potential, all need to undergo change, thereby enhancing women's self-image and empowerment.

Characterization of the principal character is essential for a writer to deliver the message to the readers. A comparative study of the texts chosen reveals many facets of the characters of the heroines. The very purpose and conception of the heroines are different. It is essential to understand that the main difference between the two epics is regarding how each woman reacted or behaved in the given situation and the value or principle driven home by the writers. The situation appears the same for Sita and Helen, but their behaviour was different and the treatment meted out to them was also different. The characters are remembered for the ideals that they symbolised. Sukhadeva says that our concern is not with the characters themselves, but the principles contained: "We are not concerned with the form or persons but with the contents and principles. Persons come and go but principles are eternal. It is a principle that guides mankind, and not the persons". (38)

Trikha mentions how the poet is grateful to the society for his characters. He says:

It is difficult to fathom the working of a poet's mind in composing a great poem. Still, however, if collaboration and clash of characters, relation of incidents, working up of a climax and other similar features in the structure of a plot are the creations of a poet's genius, his characters which

are indeed the nucleus of his great plot, are inevitably drawn from society. It is for this reason that the readers' identification is more universal with characters than with events. As representative of the ideas that a society has inherited from its past, and as monuments of the ideals that it has labored to maintain, these characters are the lighthouses that guide the poet, as well as the readers through their trying moments in their reflective lives. For his characters, a poet is always grateful to society. His sympathies with his characters are an expression of this gratefulness. Valmiki, too, was grateful to the age which had produced the great characters of the *Ramayana*. His proud claim to the Vedic sanction was an expression of his homage to the Vedas for their having moulded the ideals of the society of which the *Ramayana* is a poetic record. (64)

In Vedic times, women enjoyed equal status as men, whereas it was not the same with the West. Ram observes: "Their status excelled that of the contemporary civilizations of ancient Greece, Rome and even early Christianity." (17) Though Vedic tenets spelt equality, it was not followed in spirit in later ages. Ideally women were respected. But in practice they were suppressed, deprived, exploited. Ram says, "While the 'ideal' was worshipped, the 'real' was neglected." (ibid) The critic quotes Cormack: "Ideally women were accepted as a living force in society, the embodiment of 'shakthi' and a symbol of purity, religiousness, spirituality and sacrifice." (ibid) In actuality, "They were denied equal rights in marital, familial, social, educational, economic and political fields. They were assigned a subordinate status." (ibid) Neera Desai refers to "the dual concept that

woman has power but not in visible terms and she is presented as being both benevolent and aggressive. However, it is a very valuable concept in understanding the seemingly high and really inferior position of women in India”. (31)

Raj endorses a similar view when he says that ‘reality is different from transcendental level’ (119) He substantiates his view by saying that in spite of certain legal and political rights given to women of today, one still finds evils perpetrated on women in any society. He refers to the prevalence of dowry, desertion, divorce and death in today’s world. As pointed out by N.Desai, even in present times, the “patriarchal norms and normative structure still continue in some garb or the other.” (26) Tiwari acknowledges that the social evils like dowry, etc are not sanctioned by tradition “but social practices committed in this system of prestige and power where values shift according to various contexts” are responsible for the social evils. (Padia 243)

In the present scenario, Feminist Criticism takes into account the kind of image presented of women in general and how a change in this would lead to the betterment of the lot of women in a society. This basic tenet of feminist criticism can be applied to myth criticism to find out what value these myths offer for the women of today while trying to resolve the dichotomy that exists regarding the image created of women in them. Murphy and Shana Sippy present the problem in the following words: “The images presented are to do with models and ideals, “models to construct and deconstruct, to emulate or reject, to reconfigure or maintain in different settings; telling new and old.” (p.18)

A superficial reading of the epics of India and Greece would only limit the perspective and also further decode the message that they were written in denigration of women. There is a popular opinion that there exists the victimisation of female identity in both epics and that their roles were not specified. A close reading, especially a study in comparison would reveal that atleast some of the mythical women have exemplified positive qualities like fortitude and perseverance, though they are usually associated with suffering and submissiveness. The behaviour of the victim was based on individual's belief system and the choice made by the victim determines the kind of honour that she was given in history. This is traceable in the characters of Sita and Helen though the difference between the two lay greatly on the choice that each one made. Sita grows into a strong individual because of her determination and her strength lies in the choice that she made which was not just culturally imposed but self-made. She did not swerve from her tenacity. Sita is born to stand for honour which cannot be tainted by anyone. She says about herself, "It is not possible for me to give a bad name for myself on earth." (689: Vol.I) Though the treatment meted out to the victim was determined by society's norms, Sita breaks the shackles of the society. She grows out of the stereotypical framework and emerges as a self-actualised woman. Going by Jung's theory of 'individuation', Sita reaches the level of self-actualisation as she knows her self fully and did not expect other characters to vouchsafe for her character. This is where her influence on women's thinking remains potent even in the present generation.

Sita's character is open to innumerable interpretations. She has acquired different images by different readers depending upon their socio-cultural matrix. She remains a living

ideal, an iconic character till date in India. Outside of her native land also, Sita has remained a source of inspiration for single parents to face challenges of life. In foreign countries like the United States of America, a survey presented by Murphy reveals that many mothers cite the example of Sita for chaste living so that the young generation can be guided to uphold certain ethical values. This becomes imperative at a time when there is moral degradation due to a change in the value system. Some of the characters like Sita, Savithri, Andromache and Penelope, also remain an ethical frame of reference.

Sita symbolizes the Eastern, particularly the Indian concept and ideology of inner strength, spiritual strength and beauty. Helen was alluded greatly in literature and thereby grew into a mythical character as she symbolises the Western ideology of Beauty, Greeks' zest for life, art and pleasure. Sita having undergone so many trials and tribulations in life emerges as a role model for endurance and self-assertion, despite failings. Her endurance need not be taken for weakness. The classical tradition glorified Sita for her devotion and duty which is questioned by the modern thinking. Some ask whether modern women should be so submissive and endure all that treatment. At the same time, according to the modern view, Sita is eulogized for her fortitude and strength to face the challenges of life. Sattar feels that Sita is to be seen not as a victim but as a woman of enormous strength and fortitude. "But as contemporary women, we see a host of other much more interesting reasons to celebrate the challenges that Sita presents to the male universe by which she is bound." (12) It was Sita who posed a challenge to the society and not otherwise. As Devdutt Pattnaik observes, Sita represents the two faces, that of Gowri and Kali, the former symbolising benevolence and the latter, determined

aggression. Where it is needed, like Sita, woman has to develop and exhibit that determination. As Pattnaik says Sita appears as both Gauri, as the Goddess when she plays the role of a dutiful wife. She undergoes transformation as she appears like Kali to destroy the demon king Ravana. Sita is equated to Gauri as she takes care of her children. But she is like Kali, who discards the 'mantle of civilization' as she is no more bound by its rules.

Though some characters were presented as stereotypes, some grow out of the frame. Some characters are endowed with special, distinct qualities that elevate them from being a mere literary character to the status of becoming a mythical character as they continue to exercise a normative influence on future generations. Mukarjee relates how the Indian tradition speaks about a horde of women characters like Ahalya, Draupati, Tara, Kunti, Mandodhari, Sita, Savithri, Parvathi, Damayanti, Maitreyi, and Sakuntala. But, according to her all were not held in the same degree of esteem though some of them were clever and wise. Among them, Sita and Savitri were held in high esteem along with Parvati. Only some characters become normative models. Sita is contrasted with them in subtle ways whose ideals are stronger than those of others. Though Tara and Draupati were regarded on account of their activities outside of their homes, they were not recommended often as Sita or Savithri.

Sharma holds a different view of the Panchakanyas, the five greatest examples of the glorified ideal of womanhood in Hindu history. He asks: "But there are questions here: Are they really so? Are they portrayed really as authentic ideals of womanhood? Are they



projected as adorable women? Are the holy honest and the faithful correct in their references to idealized womanhood?” (202)

Chandrabali Tripathi gives a definition of ideal woman and he observes that the pativrtyas occupied an exalted position in Indian culture. There is a misconception that the qualities of a pativrtya are only devotion to husband and duty. He gives the examples of Parvati, Savithri, Damayanthi, Sukanya, Gandhari, Amba and Sita. He spells out the chief attributes that go to making a woman a pativrtya: “Pativratya is the sum total of righteous determination, fortitude, and pointed devotion, qualities which make a man truly great and a woman, perfect.” (128) He says assertively, “Surely, none of these women have lost their individuality.” (ibid) He also distinguishes between two kinds of pativrtyas—a woman who having thought of a man to be her husband, remains so even if she were to stay unmarried. There is another class of women who out of their own free will remain ever devoted to their husband.

The difference between Sita and Rama lies on their priorities. Sita chose to remain loyal, not just because of societal compulsions, but more out of her own personal devotion and bond she had with Rama. Rama is different in that gave precedence to society’s expectations, keeping aside his personal happiness and concealing the trust he had in his wife. He succumbed to society’s pressure whereas Sita, rejects the societal norms that insisted on a woman’s loyalty in letter but did not recognise a woman’s resolve to remain loyal to her husband in spirit. Sita’s choice to go back into Mother Earth should not be

taken in the literal sense; in actuality it represents the beginnings of a woman's assertiveness and readiness to abstain from the society which rejected her.

Ghurye mentions the parameters that go to making a woman ideal. The qualities include assertiveness, duty, courage, righteousness, loyalty, devotion, ability to question when someone deviates from the path of righteousness and self-respect. Sita, along with the qualities mentioned above was also endowed with practical wisdom and presence of mind. The passive character 'emerges as a strong woman with a will of her own' according to Meganad Desai (Lal 5)

The problems of women have been universal as they try to bring about an ambience between their role at home and in society. Gender roles were not clearly specified in the epic age. The exploitation of women started in the epic age when male domination started. After a long gap of many generations there arose consciousness as to what exactly is the role of woman at home and in society. Though the women characters in the epics are associated with sufferings and problems, some of them have shown fortitude and great mental power in facing the challenges of life. Such characters are still considered as point of reference for the positive qualities of women and their ideals. Modern women might identify themselves with these characters.

Every society evolves and changes are inevitable. In spite of the scientific and technological advancements in the twenty first century, myths are still alive. Modern thinking may not accept the way some of these women behaved in olden days. The

practicality of the ideals or values upheld by the characters is being questioned by the modern generations, given the conditions of living and changes in thinking. Yet myths are often referred to because these issues and situations are still discussed in the modern context because such situations arise, even if conclusions are not accepted. Murphy and Shana Sippy state: "Conversations about Sita become heated largely because Sita acts as a vehicle through which people speak of other issues in their lives-such as the role of women and the difficulties that South Asians face maintaining their traditions and cultural commitments in a new and diverse environment". (23)

While disclosing the different images of Sita in New York they affirm that "...even though Sita's status is contested, she remains a powerful symbol of continuity and change." (ibid) No one may be expected to behave like Sita in this modern world but her image still influences the thought of Indian women. Sita need not be taken as a symbol of rebellion. Chellappan denounces the modern versions which present Sita as a rebel who protests against male tyranny. Modern women need not turn out to be rebels which would take away the peace and harmony in family and society. The solution lies in bringing about an attitudinal change in men to recognize the strengths of women and give them their due and also enable women to know their own strengths and be assertive when needed.

Diverse interpretations are found regarding the legendary character of Sita due to various representations of the stories. Sita's legend is a mix of various 'aspects which were grafted on to an originally simple story.' (N. Desai 26) It had tremendous influence on

women's thinking in India. While speaking about the evolution of Indian myths, Namita Gokhale points out, "But Indian myth is never static, it is constantly in the process of reinterpreting and revalidating itself, and the society that it defines." (Lal xvii) She insists on the need to present a new image of Sita. The epics and other old writings are rendered new by women, as a protest against the patriarchal society, looking at the world from the point of view of women. In addition, the sufferings of a woman are often highlighted. Their endurance need not be taken for weakness, as they have shown great mettle and mental power. For instance, Sita's life is deemed to be full of suffering and in the Hindu tradition of India, parents even declined to name their daughters after Sita, fearing that their daughter's life would also turn out to be one of suffering. Despite this dimension added to the name of Sita, on the occasion of marriage, many parents wish their daughters to lead a life of devotion like Sita and they exhort their sons to be like Rama.

Though the village women of India have expressed their tales of woe through many songs, the mythical character has been transformed into that of a woman of fortitude and perseverance, upholding certain ideals in life. Sen says further, "If patriarchy has used the Sita myth to silence women, the village women have picked up the Sita myth to give themselves a voice." (19) The old myths are rewritten, giving it all a new dimension. In actuality and in their original conception, the mythical characters by themselves have exemplified certain virtues and values. Examples of Savithri and Sita are taken, for the former has saved her husband's life, whereas the latter has saved her husband's honour, by her tenacity and adherence to loyalty. The characters have been exemplary and exercised strong influence on the thinking of women in modern times as well.

Kapoor observes that in spite of their sufferings, Hindu women are very vital today. He quotes the words of Sadhvi Vivekaprajna of the Ramakrishna Order who observed in her 1994 discourse:

The only field in which some of Swamiji's (Swami Vivekananda) vitality is visible is in the field of women. Women, modern Indian women, Hindu women are very vital today. They have tremendous problems. I would rather call them challenges. All around these challenges abound and women accept them and try their best to come to terms with them. (Padia 41)

Gandhiji presented a new and a true image of Sita, through which he tried to involve the women of India in the freedom movement. He recognised their potential and inner strength and tried to assign new roles outside of their homes. He is one of those seers who have recognised the strength of women and used the models from ancient tradition to motivate modern women.

Recently there was a report in one of the Tamil monthly magazines about a woman who retrieved her husband from the Naxals. Sanjana Singh alias Gudia got the greatest shock of her life when she learnt over phone that her husband Ajit Singh was kidnapped by Chambal Naxalites. The couple was living in Greater Noida. The Naxals demanded a big ransom. With little money and time in her hands, Sanjana Singh decided to meet the Naxals and plead them to leave her husband. She went alone to the place mentioned by them and her cries and pleadings and above all her love for her husband and her courage to go alone, all had tremendous impact on the leader of the gang. He released her

husband, moved not only by the plight of the woman but also by her love and courage. Sanjana Singh was referred to as the 'modern' Savithri who retrieved her husband from the throes of Death. She is a living testimony to the modern proverb "Courage, thy name is woman" replacing the old saying "Frailty, thy name is woman".

There are two trends regarding the way the classics are read: i) read classics and judge them by modern standards ii) understand the true import of the classics and see their relevance for modern generations. The second approach would be more productive in that it would lead to individual development and better social order. Belief system has seen a paradigm shift. As Tarun Vijay states one need not sacrifice or denigrate the past, to glorify the present. (Lal 23) But today there is a tendency to interpret her character in the light of western standards of morality. She is projected as a rebellious and uncompromising character. Vijay questions this when he writes, "Today there is an attempt to put Sita in the framework of the so-called 'modern' value systems that a western-oriented contemporary writer would like to see in a woman." (ibid) She is seen as a self-effacing woman who can only be pitied and not venerated. He argues that Sita has to be judged by the standards of her Age and accept her for what she was.

The world is moving towards a universal standard, a universal ethic. Indian philosophy has much to offer to the entire world. Gokak points out that a study in comparison may lead to the formation of a single culture society. He finds "that the East and the West have influenced each other ever since the Eurasian hearth of civilization." (24) Despite the common factors both nations have had 'distinct culture styles' and the critic says that

when the West paved the way for scientific and technological advancement, the East provided the direction for spiritual life. When both complement each other, the nations can move towards what he calls a 'global culture'. (23)

That the mythology of a nation has remained the bedrock of its culture goes to validate the point that they still offer a lot of insight for man. RP Sharma says how mythology constructs a continuum between this world and the other. It also constructs a continuum between past and present and future. Comparative literature studies lead to an exchange of what is significant in each culture. Feminist approach enhances a better understanding of the self that would further lead to better social conduct. There exists a conflict whether the mythical characters, especially women, have any relevance at all in present situation. There is the dichotomizing view whether the mythical characters, ideas and ideals should be judged according to modern standards or whether present generation should seek their reference for betterment of the individual and society. Certainly the second view holds good that one should try to see the validity of the myths. Certain values which were held dear by a society have become valueless and created an ethical vacuum.

It is significant to quote Abhai Maurya: "In the ultimate analysis, the comparative study of literature aims at bringing both the national specificity and the universal character of different literatures into sharper focus." (Confluence 49) At the same time, the uniqueness of each literature and culture need be acknowledged and established. According to S.S Kumar,

Universality and the discovery of the uniqueness of each culture are the historic motivations of comparative literature. Universality according to the *Dictionary of World Literature* is “that the quality of a work of art whereby its significance is made to exceed the limits of the particular (incident, situation, place, time, person) and to extend itself throughout the universe.” (Chandra 406)

Comparative literature does not confine itself to looking for universals and unity alone. S.S Kumar asserts that “it also studies the divergences as well as the silences. Cultural differences can be more essential than the commonplace “essence”. (ibid 407)

In the words of Swami Chinmayananda, “The culture of a country has always been serving as a handmaid to man to meet his own challenges in the society.” (qtd. in Nathan 26) He rather expresses his anxiety that the people in the modern age have failed to apply the religion in their daily lives, which alone can be held as the reason for all the social evils. The fact that, ‘the inner man is not tuned up at all’ has led to all present day problems. (ibid) Kapoor quotes the words of Jorge Armand who expresses that there are several common problems the world over and suggests that the solution lies in “acknowledging the intrinsic oneness of man and the universe, and as a corollary to that unity, a universal ethic.” (Padia 31) Armand voices out a similar idea like Swami Chinmayananda, when he says that solutions... “must come from a critical reappraisal of the modern world and culture itself.” (ibid 30) Kapoor refers that the “Universal human ethics of dharma is the overall framework applicable to all both men and women.” (ibid 46)