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Women’s Roles in Ancient Cultures

Although women in contemporary society have awakening ideas and voices on their rights and the roles they play, it is nearly impossible to find anything comparable at all in ancient epics. When prompted to consider the role of women in ancient cultures, most people will probably immediately think of the stereotypical image of a household woman who is not involved in men’s affairs, cares for men, and is submissive to men from all aspects of life. Women at the time are often seen as subordinate objects within social norms when the societies in the epics all happen to be patriarchal and men-dominant.

For example, Sita and Dido from *Ramayana* and *The Aeneid* respectively represent the women’s role in Ancient Indian and Ancient Roman societies. In *Ramayana*, Sita is the daughter of King Janaka and the wife of the main hero Rama. Sita and Rama deeply love each other, despite the fact that Rama wins her hand from her father as a prize for raising Shiva's bow. “I will go with you, Rama; my place is at your side. With you, I would walk down the paths of hell. The jungle will be like heaven for me”(Valmiki, 89). After Rama tells Sita of his exile, Sita expresses her iron will of escorting him without a second thought. Together with Rama, she is willing to face whatever is on their way. Later, months after Sita’s captivity by the demon king Ravanna, she never loses faith in Rama and remains loyal to him, affectionately and confidently asserting that “even if an ocean of stars lay between us, my Rama would come to find me”(Valmiki, 311). The imagery of crossing “an ocean of stars” especially emphasizes the romantic love between Rama and Sita. Throughout the epic *Ramayana*, the profound love between Rama and Sita cannot be highlighted more.

Slightly different from Sita in *Ramayana*, in *The Aeneid*, Dido is a widow and the lover of the main hero Aeneas. Dido loves Aeneas, but Aeneas does not love her as much in return. However, Sita and Dido’s fates are much alike in their roles as a woman. Dido loves Aeneas as much as Sita loves Rama. Like Sita, Dido is willing to sacrifice anything for Aeneas, even her life. Although Rama loves Sita much more than Aeneas loves Dido, when it comes to making a choice between woman and duty, Rama and Aeneas both relentlessly take duty as their first priority. In *Ramayana*, Rama exiles Sita to the forest after his people propose her impurity with Ravanna. Upon seeing Sita again, he feels guilty for her yet contends that he banishes her virtuous wife because he believes it is the righteous act to adequately fulfill the responsibilities to his people as a renowned king.

"Muni, I never doubted Sita's purity. I beg you, do not accuse me of a sin I never committed, to add to the one that I did. Indeed, I did banish my queen for fear of what the people were saying about her. But then, my lord, I am a king, and my first and final dharma is toward my people. It would never have done for them to have doubted their king, for even a moment: that he was weak and took back a tainted woman"(Valmiki, 649).

As one of the themes in *Ramayana*, dharma, which means duty, is the main cause of his mistreatment of Sita. According to Rama, dharma forces him to rank love to his people higher than love to his devoted wife, even if that means treating her as an object and putting her in exile. Besides, in *The Aeneid*, Aeneas also feels grievous for Dido when he sees her in the underworld in Book VI:

“And I could not believe that with my going I should bring

so great a grief as this. But stay your steps.

Do not retreat from me. Whom do you flee?

This is the last time fate will let us speak”(Virgil, 610).

Under both circumstances, the male hero prioritizes honor and duty to his people and finds excuses for the abandonment of his beloved woman in the confession. The outcome is the same as well. Sita cannot accept Rama’s explanation and vanishes into the earth. Dido does not love Aeneas anymore. Regretful of such immoral love she once has, she flees with her husband into the dark. In both epics, duty becomes a double-edged sword. It brings a man glory at the expense of his loved one. Sarcastically, in many ancient cultures including Ancient Rome and Ancient India, men’s glory and heroism are often what attract women, which causes a tragic cycle. These women who fall in love with heroes will all eventually face consequences from such a dilemma that Rama and Aeneas have faced. Such a consequence may be ignorance; it may be endless devotion and compromise on the women’s side; or it may be that women do not receive the same level of love from their loved men. Given all of these possibilities, *Ramayana* and *The Aeneid* perfectly portray women’s roles in their cultures at the time.

Meanwhile, Sita and Dido make sharp contrasts too. Sita, on one hand, is the perfect woman figure that a man can dream of - pure, loyal, obedient, warm, humane, and caring. She loves her husband deeply Dido, on the other, is somehow the opposite - disloyal, capricious, insane, yet affectionate. Although Dido loves Aeneas deeply, such a love breaks her own words, goes against conscience, and is essentially a betrayal to his dead husband.

The other crucial difference between Sita and Dido is that Sita exemplifies the classic paradigm of a wife who is oppressed and submissive to her husband. However, Dido questions and proposes her doubts. She asks Aeneas to love her and marry her. Unlike Sita, who follows every order of Rama, Dido questions Aeneas’ decision of leaving for Italy. Although her effort makes no change to either Aeneas’ decision and Dido’s destiny, it marks a significant breakthrough as Dido challenges the social norms restrained on women and speaks up. Dido, unlike Sita, is not completely submissive to men since the power gap between Aeneas and Dido is much smaller than that between Rama and Sita, considering Dido’s previous queen status.

Furthermore, there exist some inconsistencies between the literal depiction of the female characters in the epics and the realistic women’s figure in their cultures. In *The Aeneid*, Dido loves Aeneas deeply despite her promise of not loving anyone after her dead husband. While it is unclear if Virgil intends to imply the prevalence of bad faith and infidelity in Ancient Roman women, he emphasizes the emotional side and the fickleness of women. Dido is the competent queen before meeting Aeneas, but soon she becomes nothing but a loser in both the reign of her people and her love affairs.

Virgil possibly also implies that the love relationship in Ancient Rome is not as romantic as many people imagine. Sometimes one loves for no reason other than an instant “flame”. Just like duty, this “flame” of love is also double-sided. Dido wildly falls in love with Aeneas to the extent which she is willing to risk and sacrifice anything. When her love fails to match that of Aeneas’, she suddenly loses everything and feels guilty for her past husband, eventually causing her to commit suicide.

Regardless of the differences in their personalities, Sita, the perfect good wife, and Dido, the good and bad woman, both face the same fate in the end: death because of love. Combining *Ramayana* and *The Aeneid* together, Valmiki and Virgil present a pathetic portrayal of women in ancient cultures. No matter what their characteristics and talents are, women are expected to be gentle and subordinate to men, to the extent that they are seen as properties of men rather than human beings. In *Ramayana*, when Rama tells Sita to do the fire tests, he obviously no longer treats Sita as his beloved wife. Instead, he treats her as his property and expects her to do what he demands. Though not as condescending as Rama, Aeneas’ statement of leaving Dido for Italy in *The Aeneid* treats Dido as an emotionless object too, without realizing his words’ consequences.

Today, people live in a much more fast-paced society than the Ancient Indian and the Ancient Roman societies. Nevertheless, the problem has not been fixed. Women are still more or less submissive in a lot of love relationships. Their love for men is usually purer and deeper than men’s love for them in return, like Dido to Aeneas. Women today are still expected to take good care of their husbands and children, speak softly, and be loyal like Sita, while the same social norms applied to men are obviously less strict. In fact, the social norms sometimes incline towards men as if they are the center of the universe.

Admittedly, most of the aforementioned issues are either solved or being solved as people become more educated and considerate. But a lot of mistakes can be learned and avoided from studying the epics and women’s roles in ancient cultures. For example, in a lot of modern romantic relationships, there usually is a lack of respect in men’s attitude toward women as well as a lack of equal, understanding communication with women. Rama speaks commandingly to Sita and forces her to do what he wants, whereas Aeneas decides to go his own way without listening to Dido. And such a lack of respect and communication in today’s love relationships will likely result in similar outcomes to the ancient tragic women: from mental abuse to break up, from infidelity to suicide, etc. On some occasions, men today step into the same dilemma as Rama and Aeneas. Rama and Aeneas weigh duty over love. Men today have to make their own choices between work and family, devotion to work, or love for their wives. Valmiki and Virgil have both accomplished an iconic portrayal of women in ancient societies, and studying the epics will aid people today, learning from their mistakes and avoiding the mistreatment of women alike.