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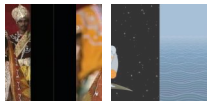
Silencing Sita

Why the Ramayana's many voices provoke outrage

By AUDREY TRUSCHKE | 1 June 2018



Sita's censure of Rama in Valmiki's Ramayana finds no place in the Doordarshan version of the tale (left), or in many other popular adaptations. The Ramayana tradition has seen plenty of a more assertive Sita, but her recent incarnations in this guise, as in *Sita Sings the Blues* (right), have prompted Hindu—and primarily male—anger.



From the beginning, the Ramayana resisted singularity. Valmiki's Sanskrit Ramayana is the earliest extant version of Rama's story, written 2,000 years ago, give or take a few centuries. Thousands of handwritten manuscripts of Valmiki's text survive today, and no two are identical. Like the Mahabharata, its sister epic, Valmiki's Ramayana was an "open" text, subject to alterations and additions with every new handwritten copy in premodernity.

Over time, the thousands of editors substantially changed Valmiki's epic. Valmiki, or at least some single individual, likely authored the bulk of books two through six of the seven-book text, and most of the first and seventh books were added later. Notably, for Valmiki, Rama was probably more a man than a god. His deification was grafted onto the epic—or at least seriously amplified—in later centuries, transforming Rama into Lord Ram, an incarnation of Vishnu, as he is known to Hindus today. But, whether he was viewed as human or divine, Valmiki's Rama was never beyond reproach.

Valmiki could pack quite a punch in his poetry, and he used derisive language to admonish Rama at times, often voiced by other characters in the tale. For example, when Rama shoots Vali in the back, a blatant violation of the rules of war, the monkey king upbraids him for being two-faced, treacherous, vile, and cruel. When Rama tries to leave Sita behind in Ayodhya while he goes to the forest, Sita likens him to a *sailasa*. In a 2004 article titled "Resisting Rama," the scholar Robert Goldman, who has devoted his career to studying Valmiki's text, translated the term, a bit zestily, as "pimp."

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During the fire trial to test her chastity on her return from captivity under Ravana in Lanka, Sita calls Rama *prākṛta*, meaning vulgar or uncouth, and smears him as *laghuneva manusyena*, which the scholar David Shulman has translated as “like a little man.” Sita also accuses Rama of prejudice against women or, more succinctly, misogyny. In her words, “*prthakstrīṇām pracāreṇa jātim tvam pariśaikase*”—“You suspect all women because of the vulgar ones’ behaviour.” Valmiki himself appears uncomfortable with Rama’s treatment of Sita during the fire test, and the poet describes his speech as *rakṣam*, or cruel, and, in some north Indian versions, as *ghoram*, or horrible.

All of this is little remembered today. On Twitter, I recently colloquially summarised Sita’s criticism of Rama during the fire test, as narrated by Valmiki. An explosion of anger—predominantly from men—followed. Many expressed their rage about a perceived insult to Lord Ram—articulated in a woman’s voice—by threatening to rape or kill me. In a sick twist of irony, the grotesque language these men employed displayed the very misogyny that, in their minds, Lord Ram, the ideal man—*maryada puruṣottam*—could never harbour. When I called attention to these hateful threats, many critics accused me of just playing the victim and refused to themselves describe the attacks as misogynistic. This was again a patriarchal tactic—the dismissal of gendered threats of violence—designed to intimate and silence women. Unsurprisingly, most of my critics focussed on the perceived insult to Lord Ram, without much consideration for Sita and her point of view. Such is the logic of modern misogyny that it demands female voices in the grand Ramayana tradition remain subordinate to male feelings. In order to understand Valmiki’s text it is important to recover Sita’s voice, and to resist any soft-peddling of it despite our own prejudices.

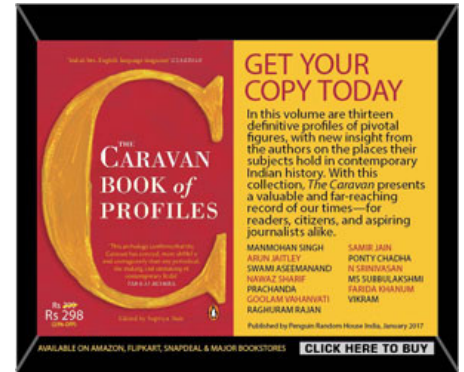
While Valmiki’s text was changed over the centuries, the criticisms of Rama contained in it were preserved. Valmiki’s Ramayana holds within itself the tension of a perfect man-cum-god who acts brutally, giving the reader plenty of ethical dilemmas to mull over. The epic also has a way of crafting episodes to simultaneously advance conservative social values and offer glimmers of resistance. For instance, Sita’s fire test is designed to prove her sexual purity, a gendered concern in the patriarchal society of the time, but it is Sita’s idea, which can be read as her exercising agency.

To reduce instances of perceived moral lapse in Valmiki’s version, especially regarding Rama’s interactions with Sita, premodern Indians often rewrote the epic. For example, book seven of what we now call Valmiki’s Ramayana—one of the books that was added, in part or whole, in later centuries—depicts Rama abandoning a pregnant Sita in the forest and later attempting to subject her to a second fire test. These episodes sought to wrestle with moral crises raised by the narrative, especially doubts about Sita’s chastity during her time in Lanka. But some of these later episodes also showed Rama behaving harshly towards his wife, which discomfited many later premodern readers who decided to change them.

Bhavabhuti, the great Sanskrit dramatist of the eighth century, composed his *Uttaramacarita*, or Rama’s Last Act, precisely as a revision of Valmiki’s treatment of Sita. Bhavabhuti concluded his drama with Rama and Sita living happily ever after. But during the several acts it takes to reach that ending, he singles out Rama for admonishment. As translated by the Sanskrit scholar Sheldon Pollock, he depicts Janaka, Sita’s father, exclaiming, “Why, who in the name of heaven is this god of fire to presume to purify my daughter? How dare anyone speak like this and insult us more when Rama has already insulted us enough?” Bhavabhuti also expresses criticism of Rama in the hero’s own voice. The dramatist has Rama bitterly rebuke himself as immoral when he feels compelled to slice off the head of Shambuka, a Shudra who had upset the caste system by practising asceticism.

O my right hand, bring down this sword
upon the Shudra monk
and bring the dead son of the Brahman
back to life. You are a limb
of Rama’s—who had it in him to drive
his Sita into exile,
weary and heavy with child.
Why start with pity now?

Rama’s treatment of Sita at the end of the tale often served as a focal point for changes to Valmiki’s story. Some devotional Ramayanas, which advocated Rama’s divinity, preferred a cleaner narrative, devoid of even the suggestion of bad behaviour on Rama’s part. For example, the fifteenth-century Sanskrit *Adhyatma Ramayana* and Tulsidas’s sixteenth-century Hindi *Ramcharitmanas* fundamentally altered Sita’s fire test so that it is no test at all. Rather, both works introduced a shadow Sita, a replica



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who replaces the real Sita during her abduction in order to avoid uncomfortable questions of sexual misconduct and contamination. In these versions, the shadow Sita enters the fire, and the real Sita emerges to reunite with Rama. The plot device absolves Rama of blame for cruelty or mistrust, since in these retellings he did not subject his distraught wife to a chastity test. Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* has been highly influential in shaping modern knowledge of Rama's story, and served as the primary inspiration for the director Ramanand Sagar's television adaptation of the Ramayana for Doordarshan.

In eastern India, a series of more critical Ramayanas—versions which often took up gender issues—were written starting in the fifteenth century. For instance, Candravati—a female poet—dwells on Sita's grief in her sixteenth-century Bengali Ramayana, thus forefronting her perspective. Candravati also introduces other female characters into her narrative, such as Kukuya, Rama's sister. In Candravati's narrative, Kukuya acts malevolently against Sita and manipulates Rama, thus playing into the gendered trope of the scheming woman. Arguably, however, she also displaces some of Rama's male agency and so might direct readers' attention to Sita's plight rather than Rama's morality.

Still, some premodern retellings of the Ramayana found revering Rama to be fully compatible with depicting his behaviour as heartless. Most notable here is the poet Kamban, who reimagined Rama's story in Tamil in the twelfth century. Valmiki depicts Rama as speaking to Sita cruelly during the fire test episode, telling her to get lost (*gaccha hyabhyanuññata yatheṣṭam*), that she is worthless to him (*kāryamasti na me tvaya*), and that she should go live with one of his brothers or even a monkey. Kamban makes Rama's words even harsher. He depicts Lord Ram—he was, for Kamban, a god—telling Sita to die. As Shulman has translated the Tamil,

What is the point of talking?
Your conduct has destroyed forever
all understanding.
The thing to do
is to die
or, if you won't do that,
then go somewhere,
anywhere,
away.

In the twenty-first century, the Ramayana continues to enliven imaginations, retellings and criticism. Indeed, one of the many beautiful aspects of Hindu religious traditions is that they encourage dynamic dialogue with the dramatic stories of their sacred texts. But modern Ramayanas—especially when they criticise Rama or dwell on Sita—have been met with escalating pushback.

Many modern Indian retellings of the epic strike a censorious tone regarding Rama, specifically regarding his treatment of women. Women's songs and folktales across South Asia are notable in this regard, and often focus on Sita's sorrow and mistreatment. Critical Ramayanas are rather common in south India, and some have been met with violence. For instance, in 2000, the Hindu chauvinist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh attacked the offices of *Andhra Jyothy*, a popular Telugu weekly magazine, after it published the first two parts of a three-part story in which Sita condemns Rama and Ravana as womanisers.

Attacks on those who retell the Ramayana are generally led by followers of Hindutva, who seek to narrow the range of ways to be Hindu as part of a bid to create a more monolithic, hypermasculine tradition. The Ramayana is a logical place for Hindutva ideologues to focus their efforts because the Ramayana tradition—in its stubborn multiplicity and refusal to eradicate criticism of men—is a grave threat to their vision of singular Hindu identity.

Academics, too, have come under heavy fire for engaging with the grand Ramayana tradition. In 2003, the Indologist Wendy Doniger had an egg thrown at her after she explored the Lakshmana-Sita relationship in a public lecture in London. In 2011, Delhi University scrubbed AK Ramanujan's "Three Hundred Ramayanas," a seminal essay on the awesome breadth and depth of the Ramayana tradition, from its syllabus. Hindu right-wing groups raised many objections to the essay, several of which concerned sex and gender. They fumed that Ramanujan mentioned variations on Sita's story, including south Indian tales in which Sita is born when Ravana sneezes and an oral tribal tradition that claims Sita was seduced by Lakshmana. Notably, Ramanujan's essay had been taught widely, and peacefully, for decades before the controversy.



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9m



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Unhealed Wounds

Artists have found themselves maligned for using the Ramayana as creative material, especially when they focus on Sita. In 2011, Nina Paley, an American animator, saw a screening of her much-acclaimed film *Sita Sings the Blues* cancelled in New York after protests. The renowned Indian artist MF Husain was vilified in the 1990s for his highly stylised paintings of Indian deities, created a few decades earlier. Adherents of Hindutva objected, sometimes violently, to Husain's omission of clothing, including in a portrayal of Hanuman carrying Sita, and they drove him out of India in 2006. Husain died in exile.

Indian society is changing fast these days as Hindu nationalism morphs into a mainstream ideology, placing previously accepted ideas out of bounds. Whether Rama's self-appointed defenders succeed in silencing Sita and those who wish to explore, honour or revise her story remains to be seen. It is a distasteful reality that scholars and artists alike are increasingly willing to toe the line drawn by the Hindu right and avoid commenting on potentially controversial topics. Some uphold academic and artistic integrity despite physical assaults, book bans, death threats, lawsuits, bad-faith interlocutors and intense hate campaigns on social media. But others choose to remain mute and so wind up endorsing—by the power of their silence—hateful Hindutva ideas. It is an apt moment to underscore that the Ramayana tradition has, historically, not silenced multiple voices and provocative perspectives.

Audrey Truschke is an assistant professor of South Asian history at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey. She is the author of *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* and *Aurangzeb: The Man and The Myth*.

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KEYWORDS

- gender, misogyny,
- Ramayana, Sita,
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READER'S COMMENTS

ONE THOUGHT ON “SILENCING SITA”



Venkateswaran Abhiraman

June 1, 2018 at 6:06 pm

The author speaks about Vali's comments after being injured fatally by Rama. But does the author speak about answers provided by Rama and what Vali does aafter listening to Rama? The problem with modern authors is Ramayana is treated like any other novel. It is indeed Valmiki's greatness that he presents the facts without colouring the narrative with his opinion. But can these modern day authors claim to be unbiased?

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