

“MARIYADAPURUSHOTTAM”

THE DISTURBING IMPLICATIONS OF MASCULINITY IN THE RAMAYANA

-Girija Kaimal, January 26th, 2004

Introduction

The mythological texts of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata play a central role in Hindu culture. Embedded in these texts are numerous messages about life, choices, courage, perseverance, morality, ethical dilemmas etc. It is arguable how and to what extent these texts have influenced the psyche of the people in India.

However, given the widespread prevalence of the Ramayana for thousands of years in even the most remote villages, I am particularly interested in the following questions. What messages does it send about ideal male and female gender roles? Does it uphold gender disparities in the constructions of masculinity? I hypothesize that the roles that the Ramayana espouses for men and women have seeped into Indian culture and possibly underlie some of the cultural attitudes towards ideal manhood and the corresponding subordinate women attitude towards women. It is hard to draw causal connections given the fact there really can be no control group. However, using writings on the subject and interviews with four individuals familiar with the text and Indian society, I will put forth my analysis of the messages conveyed through this epic. The interview transcripts were coded by references to gender roles, masculinity and the cultural influence of the Ramayana. The interviewees will be cited by their initials, namely, SSK (male, 70 years), MM (female, 25 years), SA (female, 58 years) and VKA (male, 62 years) to ensure confidentiality.

Summary of the Ramayana

'Ramayana' literally means 'the story of Rama', who is the main male character in this myth. In brief, it is the tale of King Rama who is an incarnation of the Supreme God Vishnu, and whose specific mission is to rid the earth of an immensely powerful demon king, Ravana of Lanka. Rama is born the oldest son of King Dasaratha of Ayodhya. After his marriage to Sita and his anointment as crown prince, he is banished for fourteen years due to the manipulations of his stepmother Kaikeyi. Sita, and his brother Lakshmana join him in his exile. In one of their adventures in the forest, a demoness named Surpanakha who offers herself to the princes, is humiliated by Rama and Lakshmana. She complains to her brother Ravana and he in turn abducts Sita from the forest and takes her to his kingdom in Lanka. Rama, then with the help of a simian race and his devotee Hanuman defeats and kills Ravana. Sita is then made to go through a fire test ('agni-pariksha') to prove her fidelity while in captivity and the couple then return to Ayodhya to rule. In some versions, Rama then banishes a pregnant Sita when his subjects doubt her fidelity and question his acceptance of her after having been in another man's (Ravana's) house. Sita finds refuge in the hermitage of Valmiki and gives birth to two sons, Luva and Kusha. Years later, when Rama asks her to stand trial again so that he will be able to take her back, she calls upon mother earth to prove her fidelity by gathering her into the earth's bosom and she is swallowed by the earth. Rama returns to his kingdom with his sons and later ascends to heaven with his followers.

The Ramayana in Indian Society

The essential message in the epic is the triumph of good over evil with an elaborate battle thrown in between two powerful royal figures. Catalyzing the action are decisions and moral choices made by different individuals in the epic, which tend to have long-term ramifications. It is a story that resonates with people as a process of human struggle that is eventually rewarded.

The identity of Rama as a god incarnate raises the epic's telling to devotional experience. There are numerous versions authored down the ages and each version emphasizes different themes. For example, in Tulsidas' version called the 'Ramacharitmanas' the focus is on King Rama, while in the earlier versions the focus is more on the love story of Rama and his wife Sita. Thus, in one version, the role of the wife is secondary and supportive while in the others she has more presence as a romantic figure (Kishwar, 1998). SSK (2002), one of the interviewees mentions a theory that the epic was written by Valmiki as a charge sheet against Rama. He further adds that the emergence of the Ramayana as a symbol of cultural identity followed the brutal and destructive invasions of Muslim rulers from Central Asia in the 13th and 14th centuries.

The Ramayana, in its basic form is read or narrated as a devotional experience. In addition, two of the major festivals, at least in Northern India revolve around the war with Ravana and the return home of the victorious Rama. During the festival celebrating the war called Dussehra, a ten-day dramatization of the epic takes place with a ritual burning of giant effigies of Ravana, his son and his brother. The second festival Diwali is a festival of lights and is the day of the New Year for many communities. It

commemorates the day Rama returned to Ayodhya with his wife after the battle. Many who are not Hindus also celebrate this festival. In the eighties, a long serialized television version of the epic was created and became one of the most watched shows in television with the stars being accorded near godly status.

The gendered messages of the Ramayana

Indian society implicitly accepts a sharp distinction in the roles of men and women and the exercise of political power is generally considered a male prerogative. Women are associated primarily with the home and their role in the outside world has not always been accepted as desirable. The gap between the position and roles accorded to Indian women by the constitution and the laws and those imposed by social traditions is wide, often because religious traditions have a strong bearing on the role and status of women. There tends not be a radical difference in the position of women in India across diverse religious communities.

The messages I that will specifically explore are the definitions, challenges and consequences of masculinity for both good and evil characters. As an essential corollary to the predominant masculine theme of the text, I will also include the depictions of femininity. For each gender, I will cite incidents from the text that valorize these specific behaviors. I will examine the messages inherent in the roles of the main two characters of Rama and his consort/wife Sita, as well as some of the other key characters.

Masculinity and its manifestations in the Ramayana

RAMA (the ideal male)

Rama is considered the ideal male (mariyadapurushottam) and often references to his rule as a king indicate a time of great happiness and prosperity (SSK, 2002). Rama's personality however, tends to match the traditional notions of manhood defined by Robert Brannon (1976). Brannon (1976) rather derogatorily describes four aspects of traditional manhood as being a '*sturdy oak* (reliable, unswerved by emotion)', '*not being a sissy* (not crying or showing any vulnerability)', '*being the 'big wheel* (being a major mover and shaker)' and '*giving others hell* (violent and aggressive).' Rama is the *strong oak*, unflappable and in control, driven not by emotion but some higher purpose. He is certainly *no sissy* as is evident in the actions he takes: willingly forsaking his life of royal privilege to be a mendicant in the forest, never shirking from what is needed of him in terms of action and never showing any signs of vulnerability or weakness. *He cries but* once when his wife is abducted. However, it quickly turns into a masculine mission to save her and in the process kill off the demon, Ravana, who he has been sent to earth to kill in his incarnation. Rama does not display any regrets about abandoning his wife or making her go through the test-by-fire. Although he never takes on another wife, he displays no remorse or sadness when he leaves his wife destitute in the woods or when she is swallowed by the earth. (She meanwhile spends quite a lot of time crying over her situation.) Rama also symbolizes the *big wheel*: he is a god incarnate which makes him all-powerful over any mortal male. What is more, he is a warrior, always shown in images with his bow and arrow and in war attire. He '*gives anyone who stands in his way, hell.*' This is justified as his right since he symbolizes 'good' and anyone who

disagrees with him is either reviled forever as evil or quickly destroyed. He wins his wife through a contest of strength. He essentially defeats all other males in a test of strength by lifting and stringing a bow winning him the hand of Sita. He becomes the most powerful king in the land after killing Ravana and on returning to Ayodhya. He is unsurpassed in wealth, success and is revered as the ideal male for eternity as he ascends to heaven after his reign, fulfilling practically all the criteria as delineated by Brannon (1976).

One interviewee (MM) sums up his role and that of males in the epic:

...The men in the Ramayana are very typical of what I would think of as typical male figures in any sort of cultural piece. They are heroic and virtuous...they need to go on some sort of journey...they have physical strength...they are capable of fighting things both spiritually and physically. There is this sense that as long as they are right and pious that they are going to win. (MM, 2002)

Rama's actions are almost always guided by duty and morality that is driven by concerns other than his relationship with his wife. Rama's conjugal life is sacrificed more than once at the altar of higher duties. His decisions are his alone and the others have to follow suit to in order to be in relationship with him. In his decision to make Sita go through the test-by-fire to prove her fidelity, he insists that it is not he that doubts her, but that it is the larger society that will doubt her fidelity after being held captive in another man's house. He is willing to forsake her trust of him and the sanctity of their relationship to prove a greater goal for society. However despite going through the test and emerging triumphant as expected, Sita is still suspected of adultery by the subjects of his kingdom. He chooses his duty as king over his role as a husband and partner.

It appears that his own relationships, particularly with women are dispensable for what he perceives as higher goals, namely, upholding the status quo of social norms. To pacify the suspicions cast by his people, Rama decides to forsake his wife who is pregnant and leaves her alone and destitute in the forest. However the cowardice in this act is heightened by the fact that he commands his brother to secretly take her and abandon her, without her consent. He leaves her no support and she roams desperately in the forest eating leaves from trees, until taken in by a sage in his hermitage. She gives birth and raises her twin sons in this hermitage.

MM (2002) summarizes Rama's role and his challenges as follows:

...I feel that they are all centered around these universal principles of loyalty, truth, justice, good triumphing over evil. So when Rama is told that he has to go to jungle for fourteen years.... I think the way it is portrayed is that it is sort of like this coming-of-age that involves going forth to meet the demons psychologically, spiritually and also the very literal conquering... Being accountable to a lot of people: being accountable to society to community...if you look at Indian men on the whole, there is that cultural thread that still exists...that they are supposed to study and find intellectual things that are important and find work...the flip side of that I think is 'duty.' (MM, 2002).

Rama clearly finds it easier to abandon relationships for what he thinks is right for social order. This relationship of morality and gender has been studied by Gilligan (1993) as the morality of rights versus the morality of responsibility. Gilligan (1993) argues that morality that tends to be based traditionally on interdependence or responsibility to self, others and society was considered by Kohlberg as inferior to morality where relationships

are subordinated for rules and rules are subordinated to universal principles of justice. Since women have historically been more interdependent and socialized to care, their morality thus appears to fall short of that of men.

Kishwar (1998) argues that in Indian society, those who sacrifice self-interest and exhibit unselfishness are given far more respect and reverence than those who pursue their own pleasure without taking the concerns of others into account. The idea of voluntary renunciation in pursuit of a higher goal or for the interest of others continues to hold (Kishwar, 1999; SSK, 2002; VKA, 2003) in Indian society and is a common thread throughout the Ramayana. Some still debate the morality of Rama's decisions and exonerate his actions as representing this choice of social rules and sacrificing the self-interest of intimate relationships. Even women have learned to deny the limitations of masculine lovers for both psychological and practical reasons (Chodorow in Rich, 1982). This is seen in the societal reluctance to accept the wrongs of Rama (Kishwar, 1998). Sometimes his acts are interpreted as a virtuous. As one interviewee, SA suggests:

...Sita even accepted to be separated from her husband when his honor was at stake as a king. She accepted that as a king his first and foremost duty was towards his subjects... (SA, 2002)

Even in a televised depiction of the epic, alterations were made to the text so that Rama's act would come across as valorized by Sita (Zacharias, 1994). I will discuss this further later in the section on Sita.

The morality of some of the other actions of Rama also raises this question. Rama marries off Ravana's wife to the new king, Vibheeshan, after Ravana is killed. Nobody is

known to have asked Ravana's wife Mandodari if she wanted to be married to this new king. Now, admittedly in India when wars were won, the queen of the defeated king was usually added to the harem of the new king. Although Vibheeshan is a far more virtuous individual than Ravana, there is still this undeniable acceptance that somehow Rama must be right. He represents male privilege: the god incarnate and the first-born male child of the king.

It is argued that Rama, to his credit, despite the manner in which he forsakes personal attachment and care for societal acceptance, never betrays Sita as a woman. He does not have a relationship with any other women. When he does need to replace for a special ceremony, he uses a sculpted image made of gold. This could alternatively be interpreted as his wife representing nothing substantial in his life: that she could easily be replaced by an inanimate object. He did fight to get her released from the clutches of Ravana but that was because his mission on earth was to kill Ravana. When he no longer had any such mission, abandoning her in the forest when she was pregnant, did not appear to be particularly difficult or conflict ridden.

LAKSHMANA (*expression of emotion*)

Lakshmana, Rama's younger brother who accompanies him in all his journeys, plays an interesting role in this epic. He is sometimes outraged by the decisions made by his brother, particularly the insensitive manner in which he treats his wife. Lakshmana admonishes him but is powerless to disobey him. This sends an interesting message about the efficacy of men who are supportive of women. He displays a broader range of emotions than Rama and acts on them. Ironically, much as he fights for the rights of Sita, he is quite nonchalant about leaving his own wife Urmila for fourteen years, in order to

be with his brother during exile and war. Here again, we see a denigration of intimate male–female relationships, particularly relationships that have sexual undertones. These relationships become secondary to other non-sexual male-female relationships as well as male-male relationships.

What is interesting however is the greater freedom in emotional expressiveness and spontaneity that is granted to sons lower in birth order than the first born who is meant to assume more of a strong, stoic, father-like role in the family. The lesser the power, the greater the emotional range. In many movies and cultural productions even today these patterns birth order and emotional expressiveness are replicated.

RAVANA: (power and ambition)

Ravana is the primary ‘bad guy’ of this myth. He is supposed to be a powerful, highly knowledgeable king, but is presented as having few if any redeeming personal qualities about him. He is known to have intense amorous drives for women. Once after he rapes a celestial maiden, he is cursed to die if he ever touches a woman against her will. To this extent the Ramayana does not condone sexual violence against women. However, it does not seem to question the sheer neglect and denial of voice to women.

Gough (1975) lists eight characteristics of male power in archaic and contemporary society: men’s ability to deny women sexuality or to force it upon them, to command or exploit their labor to control their produce, to control or rob them of their children, to confine them physically and prevent their movement, to use them as objects in male transactions, to cramp their creativeness, to withhold them from large areas of society’s knowledge and cultural attainments. She considers them some of the ways in

which male power is manifested and maintained. Ravana and sometimes Rama display practically all these characteristics at different points in the epic.

We also repeatedly see in the Ramayana, the powerful games of power played by men and men alone. It is the battle of one *sturdy oak* and *big wheel* against another. It is suggested that Ravana decided to abduct Sita because he was driven by an ulterior motive of challenging a God's incarnation (Rama). Thus men are depicted as 'active agents' while women are merely consorts or catalysts in the ultimate battles between them.

Whether on the side of good or evil, males seem to have allies and their allegiances with other males are celebrated and revered. There exists no such corollary for women. Men are companions, brothers in arms and supports to each other through their journeys in the 'outside world.' Even when Sita is abandoned in the woods it's a man, the sage who wrote the Ramayana, who gives her shelter. Until then she is a helpless destitute with no place to go and no woman to help her. This denial of women's connection to each other is referred by Rich (1982) as an aspect of the patriarchal culture of compulsory heterosexuality: a political institution which disempowers women. This leads me to the next section on the roles that women play in this epic.

Femininity and its manifestation in the Ramayana

The themes I will be exploring include women's sense of agency, the so-called ideals of femininity, denigration of desire and women's sexuality, and the limited options offered in the roles of women. I begin with Sita, Rama's wife who is often also referred to as his 'consort.'

SITA (*the ideal woman*)

The Sita image lends itself to diverse appeal, which is why it has continued to hold sway over the minds of the people of India over the centuries (Kishwar, 1998). For instance in a study in 1957, carried out in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, 500 boys and 360 girls between the ages of 9 and 22 years were asked to select the ideal woman from a list of 24 names of gods, goddesses, heroes and heroines of history. Sita was seen as the ideal woman by an overwhelming proportion of the respondents (Pratap, 1978). Sita, is at present mentioned as an ideal more by married women than by girls or unmarried women (Kishwar, 1998). In her research, Kishwar (1998) finds that Indian women are not endorsing female slavery when they mention Sita as their ideal. Sita is not perceived as being a mindless creature who meekly suffers maltreatment at the hands of her husband without complaining. Nor does accepting Sita as an ideal, mean endorsing a husband's right to behave unreasonably and a wife's duty to bear insults graciously. She is rather seen as someone whose sense of morality is superior to anyone else in the Ramayana and as one who has only well wishers, no enemies (Kishwar, 1998). This is similar in construct to Gilligan's (1993) description of the morality of care and responsibility. However, it is still debatable whether Sita's actions were morally driven or whether her morality was simply a response to the circumstances thrust on her by the actions of the males in her life.

Kishwar (1998) also suggests that there are many practical reasons why Sita –like behavior makes sense to Indian women. The outcome marriage in India often depends not just on the attitude of the husband but as much on the kind of relationship a woman has with her extended family and kinship group. Their support often times can keep the husband in check and provide support. By shaping themselves in the mould of Sita, who

had the unanimous support of her husband's family, women often manage to acquire enormous clout and power over their husbands and family (Kishwar, 1998). In fact in the region of the country where Sita was born, there are folk songs that wish daughters that they find a husband like Shiva (one of the trinity of Gods) and not a husband like Rama (Kishwar, 1998).

Besides family, children too are seen as major allies of the mother. Even when marriages are good, women often rely on children for emotional support, possibly because of the power dynamic inherent in the husband-wife relationship (Kishwar, 1998). In the Ramayana, the sons of Rama are the ones who first recite the epic to the court of Rama and bring to his awareness the existence of his children and his long suffering wife. Note that all the children born in the epic are males. The roles of the mothers are to produce sons after which they may or may not play any role. Those who have daughters play no role in their life after the marriage as evident in the fact that Sita's parental home plays no role in her life after her marriage.

As mentioned earlier the concept of sacrifice is a powerful concept in orthodox Hinduism. It embodies the ideal of what women should be in a male dominated society: silent, subservient and self-effacing (Liddle & Joshi, 1986). Sita patiently endured all privations, resisted all attempts at seduction, and later undertook without voiced complaint, the ordeal by fire to prove her innocence and fidelity to her husband making the ultimate sacrifice. According to Dhruvrajan (1989) this andro-centric ideology has effectively sustained the patriarchal social structure which gave rise to it in the first place: on assumptions and beliefs regarding the nature of men and women and their proper inter-relationships. People have a strong opinion that there is a basic difference in the

natures of men and women. Men are ritually pure, physically strong and emotionally mature. Women on the other hand are ritually pollutable, physically weak and lack strong will power. Thus it becomes clear why the ideal woman should be conceptualized through her relationship to a man (Dhruvrajan, 1989).

Kishwar (1998) argues that Sita might symbolize the ideal wife and woman and Rama might symbolize the ideal male but he does not represent the ideal husband. However, I think this is a view held by very few in the culture. It is also interesting that Rama's role as a husband is secondary to his role as a man while Sita's role as a wife overrides her role as woman. Mukerjee (1978) suggests that in many cases the ideal woman is the ideal wife. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata function as universalizing mechanisms to reinforce this conception of women (Mukerjee, 1978). Both celebrate male bonding and female chastity or the expression of female sexuality under male control. The values of these epics pervade the fabric of our society and by extension the media as well.

Kishwar (1998) further argues that the shabby treatment of Sita meted out by Rama has left a deep sense of guilt on the culture. In fact the story was changed in a televised version and it was made out to be Sita's idea to be abandoned in the forest when she was pregnant (Zacharias, 1994). Ridiculous as that sounds, it highlights the culture's reluctance to see flawed behavior of men, being the responsibility of men.

Barry (as cited in Rich, 1982) suggests that male identification is the act whereby women place men above women, including themselves, in credibility, status and importance in most situations, regardless of comparative quality the women may bring to

the situation...Interaction with women is seen as a lesser form of relating on every level. One interviewee, MM (2002) reflects of the life of Sita and finds that:

... I remember the word 'consort' being used really often...I don't get the message that she necessarily has her own life journey. There is no life journey. I think her challenge, if it can be called a challenge, is to sort of stay present with Rama's journey.

Others argue that Sita can be interpreted as a strong woman independent of her husband (Barua, 1996). Her story shows a woman who walked out of a comfortable home to face the hardships and dangers of the world, a woman who had to overcome sexual harassment and a woman who was a single mother- all conditions that are familiar to women today. Although of royal origin, she is routinely cast into a lower socioeconomic class existence. Yet, she holds herself to the highest ideals and brings up her children single handedly which are admirable qualities independent of her marital status (Barua, 1996). Yet Barua (1996) concedes that a role model of the ideal wife such as Sita cannot be dethroned and the power of myth would continue to exert its hold on Indian consciousness. The mythology of the good wife tells us that domestic and social harmony has always been possible through this ideal woman, and even that Indian culture and tradition have been preserved through her. A woman's achievements outside the domestic sphere are often minimized and even considered failures, if she falls short in her role as wife, daughter-in-law, and homemaker. This sensitivity to social expectations results in a perpetuation of the traditional role model (Barua, 1996).

SURPANAKHA (*Reponses to female desire*).

In the Ramayana, Surpanakha is a demoness who can change her form at will. She disguises herself as a beautiful woman and offers herself very overtly in marriage to Rama and Lakshmana. They in turn humiliate her and lie to her about their availability. Not content with verbal insults, the heroes of our epic maim her by cutting off her nose. Despite having powers of her own, she runs to her brother Ravana to seek help. She is depicted as unable to take revenge and requires her warrior brothers to take revenge on her behalf (VKA, 2003). Ravana then decides to take on Rama by abducting his wife Sita.

The message is that to express one's desire for a male sexually is to humiliate oneself. Surpanakha is worthy of shame because she is acknowledging her attraction to a male. Barry, (1979) finds that through the social experience of their sex drive, girls learn that the locus of sexual power is male. Fine (1988) suggests that female subjectivity including the desire to engage in sexual activity is placed outside the prevailing conversation. The naming of sexual desire, pleasure, entitlement, barely exists.

Women are routinely punished for expressing any desire at all in the Ramayana. This might be because desire tends to be equated with selfishness, which as mentioned earlier is repugnant to the culture in general. Furthermore beautiful and sensual women are somehow dangerous and need to be tamed. Sita is abducted for her beauty. Surpanakha tries to use beauty to seduce the two princes. The lying and humiliating by Rama and Lakshmana seems to be justified because Surpanakha used her beauty aggressively. Interestingly, no fire tests are ever conducted to ensure that the men in this case, Rama and Lakshmana were loyal to their wives.

Kishwar (1999) suggests that women are rewarded in Indian culture for foregoing sexual desires and sexual needs. Both men and women acquire greater respect for subjugating and controlling these desires or better still refusing to accept the existence of such desires. Particularly for women, sexuality is a means to please the husband and to beget children, preferably sons. It has nothing to do with their own needs. Sexuality and beauty are often depicted as tools used by men to threaten other men. Women and their bodies become pawns in the grand drama and real action between men.

KAIKEYI (consequences of ambition)

Rama's father, Dashratha was once saved by his second wife Kaikeyi, in the field of battle. He then granted her two wishes. She decided to use them at another more appropriate time. It is notable that Kaikeyi is the most beautiful and seductive of the three queens. Kaushalya, Rama's mother is the passive, benign older lady while the sensuous Kaikeyi is the king's favorite (Knapp, 1997). Here again we see the theme of men being powerless to the machinations of beautiful women. When it is time to crown Rama the king, Kaikeyi, on her maid Manthara's suggestion, uses this opportunity to ask for her wishes. She asks that Rama be sent to the woods and her own son, Bharata be made king. In all popular imagination, the king is made out to be the helpless father made to act against his wishes by the devious queen. Admittedly, her actions were not the most ethical, but she had earned the right to those wishes by saving his life earlier. Furthermore, she had only wanted Rama to be sent to the woods, not Sita or Lakshmana who chose to join him.

One interviewee SA(2002) interprets Dasaratha's behavior as a sign of respect to women; that Kaikeyi's wishes were followed despite the king's reluctance to send his favorite son to the forest. Alternatively in reference to Kaikeyi, another interviewee, MM (2002) finds that:

... women have always had limited access to power and have fought for those crumbs of power through different means. Some women are just very accepting and neutral of that...some women are turn to virtue and other women are angry and vengeful and manipulative. – MM(2002)

It is still pertinent to note that women allying together to plan, scheme or be ambitious is seen essentially as an act of evil and an act of selfishness. Women's allegiances are seen as valuable only when they are directed towards men: their husbands, fathers or brothers.

It is true that Kaikeyi was cruel in her demanding Rama's exile. However, it is a patriarchal system that allows the king and the king alone to decide which son should succeed him. From Kaikeyi's point of view it is relevant to ask why the oldest son would be king when her own son Bharata was as qualified. Eventually, Bharata did actually run the kingdom, humbly and efficiently in Rama's absence. He was also found to be a favorite character by both the male interviewees in the study.

KAUSHALYA, URMILA, MANDODARI (passive, powerless and accommodating)

Kaushalya is the wife of king Dasaratha and Rama's mother, Urmila is the wife of Lakshmana and Mandodari is the wife of Ravana. These women accept their fate and rarely try to change their circumstances. They are generally passive, standing by their

men through thick and thin, routinely negating their own needs. SA (2002) cites Kaushalya's sacrifices as inspiring and says:

...a woman on her part should always be besides her husband - whatever the circumstance.- SA, 2002.

However it is hard to overlook the impression that these women are property. They rarely voice their thoughts and even if they do, they are not usually successful in seeing fruits to their actions. Evident in their characterizations are the secondary role of women in society. One interviewee, MM (2002) says:

...I think there is that sense that men need to go off and do their things for the greater good of society and to fulfill some kind of destiny or journey...there is no sense that the woman has a journey of her own. Or if she has one, it is tied to or intertwined with the man's...if Rama and Lakshmana decide to go into the jungle, their wives are going to sit and wait for them and not only that but be proud of their husbands for undergoing that struggle. Women's agency seems to be intersubjective and men's agency seems to be , "I am going to do what I am going to do," and women need to fall into that pattern.- MM, 2002.

The real battle in the Ramayana of good and evil is a fight between an evil man and a good man. Women are not resolving their differences or fighting any battles. Women's battles are all internal: their battles are of moral strife contained within themselves. Sita has to fight to keep her body from being violated by a man. However it is not any agency that she displays that prevents the man from molesting her. Ravana does not molest her because he has been cursed to die if he touches a woman against her

will. Society is what determines whether a woman is respected or valued. At least in this epic, nothing in her own agency seems to allow for self-determination.

Conclusions

The main questions I wanted to investigate in this paper were the messages sent by the Ramayana about gender disparities, the ideals of masculinity and femininity the role of the text in maintaining these disparities. Although the epic is very ancient and written in the time of a different social order, I was also interested in reflecting back on the relevance of the Ramayana today and the means by which people do or do not identify with it.

The process of researching these questions revealed the themes to be far more complex than could adequately be tackled in one paper. The epic is much more than a story in Indian culture. Its moral connotations intertwine with issues of gender roles and disparities. One drawback is that the critical opinions in the literature or that of the college-educated interviewees probably do not represent the general attitudes of the Indian people towards this religious text.

Although, I personally found many constricting messages, the Ramayana as a metaphor allows for many conflicting interpretations as evident in the responses of the interviewees. All except one of the interviewees found that gender disparity in India could be related to the Ramayana, albeit to differing extents. SSK (2002) mentions that the roots of disparity lie in the effort to vest economic control, not in the mythological texts. MM (2002) finds that although these myths do not really help the cause of women, it would be hard to draw causal connections. SA (2002) finds that women are respected

greatly in the Ramayana, as evident in the family's support for Sita, but VKA (2002) suggests that gender disparities evident in the Ramayana might be playing a very small role in the social systems in India today. MM (2002), the youngest of the interviewees suggests that even with things opening up in India, men are still judged by their occupations and women by how good a wife and mother they can be.

Although few would deny the influence of the Ramayana in society, it would be hard to concur to what extent this influence is internalized and accepted. Further research could explore the messages about gender roles in the epics as interpreted by young people today. This is an epic transmitted through the culture mostly through narration and imagery, not school curricula. Since it holds such sway in popular imagination, it would be pertinent to note the generational differences in the interpretations of moral and social development generated by the text, in both boys and girls.

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