



UMEÅ UNIVERSITET

# DIVING INTO RĀMĀYAṆA

SITĀ & SURPANAKHĀ OF VALMIKI'S RĀMĀYAṆA COMPARED WITH ORAL  
NARRATIONS OF RĀMĀYAṆA BY PAULA RICHMAN

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## Abstract

The present study is completely a literature study, where the limelight has been on Rāmāyaṇa. Focusing on the Rāmāyaṇa written by Valmiki and comparing it to the oral tradition (songs) from Andhra Pradesh, sung by Brahmin women presented in Paula Richman's book *Many Ramayanas* (1991); *The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. Two female characters have been chosen to understand the polarities of 'good' versus 'bad' in woman characters presented within the story of Rāmāyaṇa; Sitā is compared therefore to Śūrpanakhā. Two primary questions have led the study forward, the first being to understand *characteristical* similarities and differences between the female characters; Sitā and Śūrpanakhā. and the other being *narrational* differences found in Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa compared to Paula Richman's description of oral traditions of Brahmin women of Andhra Pradesh.

Qualitative content analysis is the method that runs through the veins of this study, content analysis which is a branch of textual analysis is a method used to study and describe characteristics of written messages, which in this study is Rāmāyaṇa.

In the conclusion the research question was answered and the result was that it could be argued that Sitā and Śūrpanakhā are both different but also similar to each other within the characteristical framework and also that Sitā and Śūrpanakhā are portrayed as each other's alter egos. Where Sitā is portrayed as light, good, pure, auspicious and submissive, Śūrpanakhā is portrayed as her opposite; dark, evil, impure, inauspicious and independent. And within a narrational framework it was clear that there were many differences between Valmiki's narration to the oral traditions, where Valmiki narrated Rāmā in limelight the oral traditions had women's aspects of Rāmāyaṇa in focus.

**Keywords: Rāmāyaṇa, Sitā, Śūrpanakhā, Valmiki, Oral Traditions, Andhra Pradesh, Brahmin women**



## Table of Contents

Cover Page	0
Abstract	2
Table of Contents	4
Introduction & Purpose	5
Background	7
Research Overview	10
Method	12
Result	14
Discussion	22
Conclusion	25
Word & Character Glossary	27
References	29

## Introduction & Purpose

The aim of the study is to understand how female characters are represented in the male dominant epic Rāmāyaṇa. Rāmāyaṇa has been narrated by different authors, from the Sage Valmiki to Tulsidas and even oral traditions within a specific regional language in India. Paula Richman's book *Many Ramayanas* (1991); *The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, introduces the reader to one such oral tradition (songs) from Andhra Pradesh, sung by Brahmin women. There is a significant difference between these songs and Valmiki's narration of Rāmāyaṇa. Hence within the study we will try to understand the *characteristical*, similarities and differences between the female characters; Sitā and Surpanakha, and the *narrational* differences found in Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa compared to Paula Richman's description of oral traditions of Brahmin women of Andhra Pradesh. The two driving questions of this study are as followed;

### Research Questions

- 1) Are there any *similarities* or *differences* between Sitā and Śūrpanakhā, if so, how are they portrayed in Valmiki's narration in comparison to Paula Richman's description about the Oral Traditions of women in Andhra Pradesh?
  
- 2) Does the story surrounding Sitā and Śūrpanakhā vary from Valmiki's narration in contrast to Paula Richman's description about the Oral Traditions of women in Andhra Pradesh?

The first question focuses on finding if there are any *similarities* or *differences* between the *characters* Sitā and Śūrpanakhā in Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa compared to the Oral Traditions of women in Andhra Pradesh described in Paula Richman's book *Many Ramayanas* (1991). Valmiki gives a detailed description of the events that occurred in Rama's life however as many researchers have pointed out, Valmiki's narration is patriarchal or male centric. Meanwhile Paula Richman describes Oral Traditions of women in Andhra Pradesh, that gives a different view of

Rāmāyaṇa and through their songs, in small measures, overcome male dominance in societal realms and within the household environment. Hence in the first question we try to understand the *characters* Sitā and Śūrpanakhā.

The second question focuses on the aspect of *narration*. There is a distinct difference between Valmiki's narration of Rāmāyaṇa and other authors narration, where the story has branched off to different occurrences that change the storyline. This is clear even in Paula Richman's description about the Oral Traditions of women in Andhra Pradesh, their songs give a wider scope on *women's perspective* of Rāmāyaṇa that isn't included in Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa. More specifically, we will look into the narration differences surrounding Sitā and Surpanakha story from Valmiki's narration compared to Paula Richman's description about the Oral Traditions of women in Andhra Pradesh.

## Background

In this chapter an overall view of Rāmāyaṇa will be given, from the variational differences to the different authors that have published their versions of Rāmāyaṇa. Moreover a brief summary of the story of Rāmāyaṇa will be introduced as well as the predominant characters of the story will be brought to limelight.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* which was initially orally composed and then written down into seven parts/books, known as kāṇḍa-s, was penned down by the Sage Valmiki. These books follow Rama's life in great detail, starting from (1) Bālakāṇḍa, (2) Ayodhyakāṇḍa, (3) Aranyakāṇḍa, (4) Kiṣkindakāṇḍa, (5) Sundarākāṇḍa, (6) Yuddhakāṇḍa, (7) Uttarakāṇḍa. The story has been passed down from generation to generation and due to the spread of this epic there are many variations, just in Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* there is said to be three hundred versions (Richman, 1991, 10-35). In the subcontinent of India there are many regional variations, some of them are; *Sri Ranganatha Ramayanam* (Andhra Pradesh), *Ramavatara Charita* (Jammu - Kashmir), *Ramacharitamansa* (north India written by Tulasidas), *Bhavartha Rāmāyaṇa* (Maharashtra written in the 16th century by Eknath), *Katha Rāmāyaṇa* or *Kotha Rāmāyaṇa* (Assam written by Madhava Kandali in 15th century), the Bengali *Krittivasi Ramayan* written by poet Krittibas in 15th century and the Tamil version *Kambaramayanam*, written by poet Kamban in the 12th century are popularly known. There are many more Rāmāyaṇa's including oral traditions of Rāmāyaṇa, puppet plays, Jain as well as Buddhist traditions of Rāmāyaṇa (Richman, 1991).

Despite the variety of variations, one thing remains throughout all versions of *Rāmāyaṇa*, that is *Sitā*'s pristine character, her devotion to her husband as well as her grace. This has made her an inspiration to womanhood throughout Hindu scripture and culture. *Rāmāyaṇa* might seem to be a male centric story, the text emphasizes on its great heroes like Rama, Laskmana, Hanuman and many more. But within the story and perhaps behind these great heroes are the female characters that bring the story to life and are important threads in it. *Sitā* being the central and most



important female lead, there are however other female characters presented, for example; the queen of Lanka *Maṇḍodarī*, who is described as righteous, devoted and virtuous, always tried to lead her husband, the demon king of Lanka - *Rāvanā*, in the path of Dharma (rigorousness) and truth, her wisdom and advice often fell on deaf ears. *Kaṣalyā* was the *Māhārānī* (Queen supreme/first wife) of Ayodhya and wife of King *Dāsharathā* and mother to *Rāmā*. Few other female characters from *Rāmāyaṇa* are *Kaikeyī*, *Ūrmilā*, *Śumita*, *Śūrpanakhā* and *Śulochanā*. These vital gems play a lead role and crucial part in shaping *Rāmāyaṇa*. Even in today's modern world, mothers would advise their children (specially daughters) in etiquette and manners based on these characters, example of this would be to behave and be virtuous like *Sitā* and not ill-behaved and sinful like *Śūrpanakhā* (Richman, 1991. 83-84).

To summarize the *Rāmāyaṇa* would be a tragedy due to the fact that within its 7 books of Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, it shows how complicated life can become even for a God bound to human form. After reading the *Rāmāyaṇa* it's clear that the whole plot is a tragedy similar to Shakespear's *Romeo and Juliet*. However in a nutshell *Rāmāyaṇa* is a story of one family, Dashratha the King of Ayodhya, makes his oldest son, Rama, heir to the throne. In Ayodhyakāṇḍa (chapter 34, V 10-13) Dashratha is said to have 350 wives, out of which Kaushlya was main queen or first wife and one among his favorite, other two being, Kaikeyi and Sumitra. Kaikeyi learning about, Kaushlya's son, Rama, being heir to the throne plots and makes her son Bharata heir, which in turn ends with *Rāmā* being banish to the forest for fourteen years. *Rāmā* accompanied by *Sitā* and his brother Lakshmana leaves the palace to serve Rama's exilement.

While they live in the forest, the demon-king of Lanka, Ravana's sister *Śūrpanakhā* falls for Rama's aesthetics and tries to seduce him. Unable and being humiliated by the brothers *Śūrpanakhā* blames *Sitā* for *Rāmā* not choosing her and tries to attack *Sitā*, whereupon Lakshmana defends *Sitā* by cutting her ears and nose off. *Śūrpanakhā* in range goes to her brother, the antagonist of *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Ravana*, who was the eldest son of sage Vishrava and Rakshasi (demoness) Kaikesi. He had many siblings including *Kumbhkarṇā*, *Vibhīshanā* and

Śūrpanakhā. After hearing about who had wronged his sister, Ravana abducts Rama's wife Sitā and keeps her in his kingdom in a garden called Ashok-Vatika. Then to save his beloved wife Rāmā gathers an army of monkeys with the help of the monkey-king Sugriva and monkey-God Hanuman, Rāmā goes to Lanka, Ravana's kingdom. Where he defeats Ravana and rescues Sitā, however Rāmā demands that Sitā shows her purity by *agni pariksha* or trial by fire which she passes.

After returning to Ayodhya Rāmā is enthroned as king and all is well for sometime. Rumors start spreading in the kingdom and Rama's subjects are unhappy that he had taken Sitā back after her captivity and her chastity is in question again. As king and ruler he decides to banish Sitā to the forest and at which point Sitā was pregnant. She finds refuge in Sage Valmiki's Ashram and gives birth and raises two twins named Lava and Kusha. At a later point Rāmā and his brothers are defeated by Lava and Kusha, Rāmā gets to know who they are and asks for Sitā. When she appears in front of him Rāmā asks her to prove one last time if she had been faithful by another trial by fire to which Sitā refuses. Sitā turns to the Earth, Bhumi, known in the story as her mother and asks to take her back if she has been pure and true to Rāmā throughout her life, to which the earth cracks open and Sitā is taken in. (Luthra, R. 2014. 5-6) The whole epic is based on this family's tragedy.

## Research Overview

Rāmāyaṇa has been a vast subject and a treasure pot for many who have wanted to dive deeper and understand it. In this study the focus has been on Sitā and Śūrpanakhā, where there hasn't been a study that has specifically targeted these characters together however there has been several studies on both characters. One such paper is Pauwels, H. R. Maria (2008), *The Goddess as role model: Sitā and Radha in scripture and on screen*. She compares Śūrpanakhā with the sophisticated lover of Krishna from Mathura, Kubja, and compares Sitā with the heroine of Bhagavad-gita, Radha. It's interesting to read how Pauwels gives Śūrpanakhā another light, 'the other woman' (Pauwels, H. R. 2008, 314) and names Śūrpanakhā as a free-spirited woman that has been judged by a harsh male dominated environment (313–378).

In the journal article *Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of his Wife*, Linda Hess (1999) argues against the unfair treatment of Sitā, she gives the reader a new perspective of Sitā's life. She furthermore explains how the bhakti or fervent devotionism idealization of the man creates a 'Rama' without error even though he was human (1999, 7-9). Over the period of time, explains Hess (1999, 7) many different Rāmāyaṇa have been produced but one thing remains common in all, it's the devotion and love for Rāmā - "Rāmā had to be made as lovable as possible" (Hess, L. 1999, 7). Kamban or Kambar was the Author of Ramavataram, the Tamil version of Rāmāyaṇa. According to Hess, Valmiki's version of Rāmāyaṇa was harsh towards Sitā but Kamban makes it worse. He narrates the story in a different tone and Rama's cruelty is especially shown in Kamban's narration, Rāmā for instance makes nasty remarks of Sitā's birth. Stating that she was not of royalty and found like a worm from the soil and her greatness and purity is perished by such birth(1999, 7-8).

In Paula Richman's book *Many Ramayanas; The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (1991), chapter author Velcheru Narayana Rao gives light to another form of narration of the Rāmāyaṇa, he shares his personal experience and the commonly practiced tradition of oral narration (songs) of Rāmāyaṇa by brahmin women of Andhra Pradesh. Narayana Rao (Richman, P. 1991, 114-116) explains in great detail how these women through songs overcome male dominance and suppression by giving off hints through the narration of the song. The song holds

events that took place in Rāmāyaṇa, for instance, the songs sung by these women narrates details about Kausalya's labor pain and morning sickness etc. Details which are not included in Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa, this in its own are interesting and will be further discussed in the 'discussion' section. These upper caste brahmin women of Andhra Pradesh, according to Narayana Rao (Richman, P. 1991, 115), don't consider Valmiki as an authoritative figure or that he narrates the story of Rāmāyaṇa correctly.

## Method

This chapter describes the method that has been used within this study and the error markers that can affect the result as well as the benefits of the method that has been chosen to analyze the two female characters, Sitā and Śūrpanakhā from Rāmāyaṇa.

This study is completely a literature study, where the limelight has been on Rāmāyaṇa. As mentioned above Rāmāyaṇa has many variants and different authors however the authoritative figure for this particular Indian epic is the Sage Valmiki. Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa will be compared to Oral Traditions of Brahmin women of Andhra Pradesh described in Paula Richman's (1991) book *Many Ramayanas; The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*.

Qualitative content analysis fits this study best, content analysis which is a branch of textual analysis is a method used to study and describe characteristics of written messages, which in this study is Rāmāyaṇa. Within religious studies content analysis is one of the more acquired forms of textual analysis, the way researches approach this methodology may differ. (Cotter. 2015, 109-110) (Atkinson, J. D. 2017. 84-85)

There are many functions of content analysis, it is for instance useful for researchers that are tracking data to identify and study a change or direction in an occurrence over time, in the instance of Rāmāyaṇa different authors present the story of Rāmā and Sitā differently. Or to *identify commonalities* within a specific genre, and/or to *identify differences* by comparison between similar patterns in two different contexts, which are more applicable to this study. Where the main goal is to identify similarities and/or differences between two female characters from Rāmāyaṇa. And to compare the narration by two different sources; Valmiki and Oral Traditions of Brahmin women of Andhra Pradesh.

The benefit of the content analysis method is that rather than producing material, researchers examine text that is already available. Both female characters; Sitā and Śūrpanakhā aren't given a grave importance in Valmiki's narration, his narration is more male centric even though Sitā and Śūrpanakhā plays a major role in the catapult of circumstances displayed with the story of Rāmāyaṇa. Due to this lack and in order to understand the subject better different other research

texts have been used and referred to, as mentioned above in the ‘research overview’ section. Using text that already is available rather than creating new ones, according to Cotter (2015, 111), eliminates researcher's bias on the study and lets the work be based on more realistic terms. Another advantage is that using existing text gives an insight to important cultural and historical perspectives to the research theme and predicament (Cotter. 2015. 111). Which is evidently clear when we researched about Oral Traditions of women in Andhra Pradesh (Richman. 1991), where women today struggle in a patriarchal system that was practiced during the time of Valmiki so, through their songs these Brahmin women show discontentment to that system.

The analytical categories that will be used to compare Sitā and Śūrpanakhā are the degree of independence both characters show within the narrative. There is room for error due to the view of interpretation and no theoretical markers are available nor needed for a literature study as this. But the markers used in qualitative aspects are how Sitā and Śūrpanakhā are presented in an ‘*independent*’ dimension within the narrative and how the narrative changes while representing male characters to change or force the female characters (Sitā and Śūrpanakhā) into action or to exemplify them by posing them as each others polar opposites/ alter egos.

## Result

In the result chapter *Sitā* and *Śūrpanakhā* will be presented separately to give an eagle eye view of the characters background and their narrative presented by Valmiki and the Oral Traditions. Later on within this chapter other dimensions, i.e. male dominance, that influence the characters, *Sitā* and *Śūrpanakhā* will be discussed. Furthermore the narrative and characteristical differences and similarities will be presented which in hand will answer the studies two research questions and fulfill the studies purpose.

*Sitā* is described as ‘the’ ideal woman, the ideal wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law etc. Her reputation and character is well-known to all familiar with *Rāmāyaṇa*. Her courage and strength was an inspiration even to Mahatma Gandhi, who used *Sitā* as an anchor for Indian women to fight for independence (Pauwels. 2008. 243). *Sitā* is described as a character who goes through a lot of pain and suffering in Valmiki’s narration, where most of the time she is described as fragile and submissive. However she also has shown great spunk and outspokenness at times, for instance when she criticizes Rama when he suggests her to stay in Ayodhya when he was banished (Goldman. 2022. 39). One thing that is common in many of Hindu epics is the explanation of why things occur and the subject of karma and rebirth, Valmiki gives the reader a detailed picture of this cycle of karma and rebirth in Uttarakāṇḍa, explaining why things occur the way they do for *Sitā* (Goldman. 2022. 37-40).

It’s said in the verses of Uttarakāṇḍa that *Sitā* in her previous life was a pious brahmin woman named Vedavati born in the Kṛta Yuga. She was molested by Ravana and in order to preserve her honor she immolated herself vowing that she will be born again to a good man but not to a human womb. In Treta Yuga, *Sitā* was reborn and was a part of the destruction of Ravana, who had wronged her before (Goldman. 2022. 39). As the story is narrated by Valmiki, *Sitā* was never born to royalty; she was found by king Janaka while he was plowing the land and therefore considered a child of Mother Earth (Singaravelu, S. 1982. 235-240). Narayana Rao (Richman, P. 1991, 121) presents an interesting twist to *Sitā*’s birth story, in the women’s oral traditions of Andhra Pradesh there is a song called ‘*Sāntagovindanāmālu*’, which narrates the marriage of *Sāntā* who is the foster daughter of Dasaratha. Even though she isn’t given prominent importance in Valmiki’s narration, she plays key importance in the women’s narrative of *Rāmāyaṇa*

(Richman, P. 1991, 121). Within the song's she is often portrayed as a supportive sister-in-law to Sitā even though she is Rama's elder sister. Within the song narrates the story of the Goddess Lakshmi who is the wife of Vishnu (Rāma's first/primary avatar), takes birth on earth to help her husband who is being born as Rāma. She is born as Sitā on a lotus flower in Lanka, where Rāvana finds little baby Sitā and gives her to his first wife Mandodari. When Sitā becomes twelve years old Rāvana wishes to take her hand in marriage making her his second wife. Rāvana is advised against this by brahmins and says that Sitā will eventually one day destroy Lanka and suggest Rāvana to cast her to the sea (Richman, P. 1991, 121-122). This episode is not mentioned in Valmiki's narration and gives the reader a completely different view of Sita's backstory.

There is a great deal written about Rama within the Sargas of Rāmāyaṇa by the narrator Valmiki. However the readers of Valmiki's narration can quickly recognize that Sitā endures tremendous pain and suffering even though Valmiki might not always show her side of things. In the journal article *Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife*, Hess, L. (1999. 1-3) categorizes Sitā's peak points of ill-treatment, first being the *agni pariksha* or trial by fire. At the end of the great war, Sitā had been held prisoner in Lanka in Ravana's Kingdom, gets allegations considering her chastity and must prove her purity and faithfulness by throwing herself into fire (where if she was impure she will not survive), which she passes. This is something that was practiced even after Rāmāyaṇa, Queen Padmavati or Padmini of the kingdom Mewar (13th - 14th century) was the wife of Ratan Sen, the Rajput ruler of Chittor fort. Her beauty was glimpsed by Ala-ud-din Khalji, the Sultan of Delhi from 1296 to 1316, who desired her. Ala-ud-din Khalji defeated Chittor and men of the kingdom were dead, to save the honor of herself and the woman of the court, Queen Padmini led all the women of the court to commit *jauhar* - mass self-immolation by jumping into a flaming pyre. (Narayan, S. A. 2009. 631). It hence could be argued that Sitā's story could have influenced society even back then as it does now.

Secondly in the last books of Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa, Sitā is pregnant and despite having passed the *agni pariksha* she is banished to the forest due to rumors doubting her chastity spreads within the kingdom. Thirdly and towards the end of the character of Sitā, after having raised Rama's two



twin sons into manhood in Valmiki's Ashram, is yet again asked to prove her chastity to which Sitā rejects this request and calls to her mother, Bhūmī (Mother Earth) and jumps and disappears for good. (Hess, L. 1999. 1-3)

In Aranyakāṇḍa, Sarga 16, *Śūrpanakhā* is described as a ugly, slim misshapen demon woman, who has a deep desire to make Rama her husband (Goldman, Robert P. 2007, 123). However her appearance is not compared to Sitā in this verse but to Rama, Valmiki describes Rama's beauty in great detail, from his eyes to his words. And to all his great attributes Valmiki poses *Śūrpanakhā* as his negative opposite. Furthermore, in the Sarga 16, *Śūrpanakhā* is depicted as a woman of determination who knows what she wants. *Śūrpanakhā* sees Rama's strength and beauty and tries in many ways to get Rama's approval to marry her but Rāmā introduces *Śūrpanakhā* to Lakshmana who rejects Surpanakha. It's clearly stated in the next Sarga (Goldman, Robert P. 2007, 125) that the two brothers teased *Śūrpanakhā* and she naively believed that their words of her beauty were earnest. As Rāmā sits next to Sitā, Surpanakha, filled with even more desire, says once more to Rāmā how she wants him to be hers but this time she's enraged with Sitā. *Śūrpanakhā* explains to Rāmā how it is Sitā's fault that he is not willing to marry her, so she charges towards Sitā to kill her but Rāmā and his brother Lakshmana intervenes and cuts off Surpanakha's ears and nose off (Goldman, Robert P. 2007, 126). Mutilated and humiliated *Śūrpanakhā* runs to her brother Khara.

According to Narayana Rao the oral traditions narrate a different story than the one by Valmiki narrates (Richman, 1991, 114). The women narrate the Rāmāyaṇa through song and add statements to speak their mind, in a way females of both upper and lower caste use this method to subvert authority. Even though Valmiki is perceived as the highest authoritative figure when it comes to retelling of the Rāmāyaṇa, upper class women of the caste Brahmin, don't perceive Valmiki as an authoritative figure in this matter. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, these women don't believe that Valmiki has dotted down the events of Sitā's and Rama's life correctly. (Richman, 1991, 114-115)

Brahmin is one caste in the Varna system of India, in this fourfold order of hierarchy of Hindu society, they are placed at the top. They mostly attain priesthood and have a very high percentage in literacy where the men mostly hold scholarhood. This caste has more respect within society and people look up to these families with honor (Richman, 1991, 115-116). It is important to state that Valmiki's caste is unclear, he is considered to be a Brahmin (Deepak, K. 2023). However his marriage to a Sudra woman (Deepak, K. 2023) might have caused a rift in his reputation and acceptance into society's standards, especially among women. According to Narayana Rao (Richman, 1991, 116) in Hindu society a female's opinion and sexuality is severely subjugated. So through these songs and accounts of the female's point of view of Rāmāyaṇa, these women get out their thoughts and overthrow male dominance. Women sing these songs while doing their chores around the house and men do hear them but choose not to take them seriously (Richman, 1991, 117).

What is interesting about these songs are the perspectives that are not accounted for in Valmiki's version. Rāmāyaṇa is a very male centric story, where the heroes that tend to fly and do heroic gestures are predominantly male, while women have a more submissive role to play in most instances. The songs of these Telugu Brahmin women portray mostly the women's side of Rāmāyaṇa. They include in detail about pregnancy, morning sickness, love for husbands, childbirth, wedding rituals etc. For instance, Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa describes Rama's glorious birth and the delight it brings the Kingdom but little is known about Kausalya's labor. This is however mentioned in the songs of Telugu Brahmins women. They give a detailed description of how Kausalya delivers the baby standing upright holding ropes of gold and silk and how she screams and tells her mother how she can't bear the pain, where each minute feels like a hundred years. (Richman, 1991, 118-119)

Surpanakha's narrative in the songs are interesting as well, Narayana Rao (Richman, P. 1991, 126) describes how Śūrpanakhā feeling the sorrow of her brother, Ravana's, demise (after the great battle in Lanka) and sees Rama and Lakshmana wherein she wishes that she was a man, for if she was a man she could have avenged her brother's death and fought Rama. But since she is a

woman “*she could only disrupt his happiness*”(Richman, P. 1991. 126) . So she couples up a plan to plant doubt in Rama’s mind about Sitā’s fidelity. This narration of the story shows how the time after the great battle affects and complicates Rama’s and Sitā’s love and married life.

Surpanakha, who has the ability to shapeshift, changes into a female hermit and visits Sitā in the palace. Śūrpanakhā asked Sitā to draw a picture of the demon but Sitā never had seen the demon’s face, she never looked up at him, she only saw his feet. So she draws a painting of Ravana’s big toe. Cunning as Śūrpanakhā was she completes the painting herself and asks the God Brahma to give life to the painting and the God does so. Then Śūrpanakhā leaves the painting with Sitā and runs away, Ravana in the painting eventually starts to drag Sitā asking her to come to Lanka. The women in the palace helps Sitā to get rid of the painting by burning it but it is indestructible. When Sitā utters Rama’s name the painting temporarily stops. Rāmā comes home and eventually finds the painting and without further thought accuses Sitā of being in love with Ravana. And that a woman with such action is untrustworthy. The song continues to tell that Rāmā banished Sitā to the forest along with her painting, the women of the palace protest and tries to explain to Rāmā what happened but he refuses to listen to anyone and orders Laksmana to behead her and bring back the sword as evidence. (Richman, 1991, 126-127). This song narrates a very different story to Valmiki’s narration and shows another light to Rama.

There is no doubt that even the Brahmin Telugu women's songs contain small doses of misogyny likewise in Valmiki’s narration and both women, Sitā and Śūrpanakhā are victims of it. Interestingly Paula Richman (1991, 83-84) sheds light into a subject that answers this study's purpose and questions, the heading on page eighty-three states as follows; “*Sita and Surpanakha as alter egos*” (Richman, 1991, 83). Where Sitā is portrayed as light, good, pure, auspicious and submissive, Śūrpanakhā is portrayed as her opposite; dark, evil, impure, inauspicious and independent. This distinctive split of characters showing their alter egos is even portrayed in the male characters however the split between the female characters are far more clearer and according to Richman (1991, 83) always shown in terms of their sexuality. This split of good versus bad is not new or only found in Hindu mythology, it is present even in other lores and mythologies for instance Medusa, could be argued, was Athena’s alter ego. More interestingly, female characters that tend to do ‘wrong deeds’, like Surpanakha, are given far more severe

punishments than their male co-characters. Furthermore when a wrong deed is made by a female character it is attributed to her 'feminine nature', while Ravana's wrong deeds or Rāmā lying to Śūrpanakhā claiming Lakshmana unmarried is not attributed to their male nature (Richman, 1991, 83).

Hence there are more differences than similarities between Sitā and Surpanakha, due to the fact that they are portrayed that way, perhaps to exemplify to the reader. Sitā is narrated as a woman controlled, obedient and always circulating her husband. She is according to Richman (1991, 83) controlled both mentally and physically by a male character, first being her father and towards the end of the story, her sons. And her sexuality is intertwined with her *duty*; being of service to her husband and childbearing. Richman (1991, 83) refers to *Manusmṛti* (V.147, IX.3) where it's pointed out that a woman should never be independent, her life is bound to her father at youth, her husband in marital life and her sons at old age, which is how Sitā is portrayed in Rāmāyaṇa. This however isn't seen as a weakness or that she is fragile, rather, this image of a woman is idealistic, she is the embodiment of *Shakti*; power and strength; auspiciousness and nourishment. However, this power has to be suited to fit the purpose of a patriarchal society, in which Sitā experiences the highs and the lows; from being the eye of Rama's love to the focal point of his doubt about her chastity. (Richman, 1991, 83)

In contrast a bad woman isn't bound to these rules and etiquette, Śūrpanakhā is more free and independent than Sitā. She wanders off in the forest unguarded and unprotected, she is independent and speaks her mind, knows what she wants and isn't afraid to ask for it; which in turn is frowned upon. Śūrpanakhā is said to be a widow, who in India are considered inauspicious and dangerous, due to circumstances making them unable to bear children. Which is a sign of bad luck. Chaisty therefore is a big question since women without the controlling hand of their husbands are believed to have an unquenchable hunger for sexual desires. It is unclear whether Supankha is a widow or unmarried however according to Richman (1991, 84) the fact that she is unmarried is a major problem and attributes to her evil nature. It's not purely based on her being a rakshasi (demoness), in contrast to Surpanakha, Mandodari, who is Ravana's first

wife, is also a rakshasi. Mandodari was praised for her loyalty, devotion and strength. Therefore Surpankha's evil nature depends more on the fact that she is independent and not bound to any man, which is also a point Richman (1991, 84) argues for, she states that the two brothers linger on to Surpankha teasing her rather than banishing her immediately. There perhaps is a level of curiosity and fascination that the narrator Valmiki shows through the characters. Furthermore it is clear that the narrator is sending a moral lesson in the episode of Surpankha's mutilation. Rāmā punishes the "bad" woman Śūrpanakhā and protects the "good" woman Sitā and gives in turn a lesson to the "good" woman showing what would happen if Sitā the "good" woman went "bad", which in turn gives a lesson to all who reads and understands this moral lesson. This division is seen even today in hindu festivals, the Goddess Lakshmi is invited and honored by driving away her sister, Alakshmi, through lighting lamps. In Bengali Lakshmi festivals to ensure good luck and prosperity for the coming year an image of Alakshmi is destroyed by cutting her ears and nose off, later an image of Lakshmi is installed. (Richman. 1991. 84). This deformation of Alakshmi and the mutilation of Śūrpanakhā has an interesting resemblance.

The mutilation of Śūrpanakhā plays a key role in the purpose and questions of this study and can be broken down to three distinctive perspectives. The mutilation of Śūrpanakhā can be viewed from a narrative, ethical and cultural point of view. Firstly from a *narrative perspective*; it was this event that triggered and catapulted Sitā's abduction, great war between Rāmā and Ravana, marital rift between Sitā and Rāmā to Sitā being banished to the forest while pregnant. Secondly from an *ethical perspective*; when dissecting the events of Rāmāyaṇa many occurrences where Rama's behavior to them question so called his exemplary character narrated by most authors. Even though Valmiki narrates Rama's heroism and chivalry; there are errors of his behavior that leak through and are evidently clear especially in Surpanakha's mutilation. In the Yuddhakāṇḍa Sarga 103 [16-25] to 104 [1-27] (Goldman, P. R. 2022. 918) describes in great detail how Rāmā is disgusted by Sitā's presence and how he refuses to believe that she was faithful to him while she was captured in Ravana's palace. Rāmā says to Sitā "*your presences has become as profoundly disagreeable to me as is a bright lamp to a man afflicted with a disease of the eye*" (Yuddhakāṇḍa Sarga 103 [17-21]). Furthermore he states that he has no further use for Sitā and asks her to leave and choose another, offering her to choose anyone including Lakshmana,

Bharata, Sugriva or even the Rakshasa (demon and Ravana's brother) Vibhishana. He states that after Ravana has seen her heavenly beauty he must have molested her in some way, he states that his superior family doesn't need this kind of mud on its pristine name. At the end of this Sarga the author Valmiki points out that this tone of addressing Sitā was indeed beyond limit and cruel. Continuing to the next Sarga (Yuddhakāṇḍa Sarga 104 [1-4]) the author describes even more how the situation and Rama's hurtful cruel words have brought tears to Sitā's eyes, then when no one stands and speaks in Sitā's defense she speaks and defends herself (Yuddhakāṇḍa Sarga 103 [5-27]). She states how wrong Rāmā is and finally tells Lakshmana to build a pyre because her reputation is at stake and no one believes her it is rather better to die and through a trial by fire her innocence might be proven. Rāmā stays silent during this whole episode.

His exemplary character is in doubt even in the songs from the Telugu Brahmin women, where the song 'Sita Locked Out' (Richman. 1991. 121) describes Rāmā grown impatient waiting for Sitā in the bedroom, locks her out. Furthermore the song about Sitā's wedding (Richman. 1991. 120) describes how picky and particular Rāmā is about knowing how beautiful Sitā is, he asks his brother Lakshmana to *make sure* that she has a slim waist, that her skin is fair and features of her hair is black as well as her feet are small, which in turn is rather alarming however it is all masked even in these song due to the fact that they more prominently utter of Rāmā and Sitā's love for each other. Thirdly from an *cultural perspective*; Surpankha's mutilations sheds light on Hindu attitudes on female sexuality especially using the two characters Sitā and Śūrpanakhā to show drastic polarities between good and evil; light and dark; beauty and ugly to exemplify and in some way control the notion of female sexuality (Richman. 1991. 84).

## Discussion

Within this chapter the author of this study argues consciously and relies on the result chapter to understand what has been learnt to further hypothesize and reflect on the two research questions.

Even though Rāmā in Valmiki's narration is described as the ideal man it can be argued that his perfection was created by Valmiki. In other narration, as in the oral traditions (Richman, P. 1991. 114-126) Rāmā was no God but a mere human and had faults like everyone else. Furthermore it can be argued that Valmiki's narration is cruel and misogynistic, due to the fact of how he narrates and 'creates the *'ideal female'* contra showing an *'atrocious female'*'. There are many examples of female characters throughout Valmiki's narration who are portrayed as opposites of each other; from Kausalya contra Kaikeyi, Sitā contra Śūrpanakhā, Mandodari contra Surpanakha, Manthara contra Urmila etc.

Even though Sitā was blamed till the end about her faithfulness to Rāmā due to her being held in Ravana's kingdom, Goldman, R., & Masson, J. (1969. 97), states how Rāmā is to blame majorly for the catapult of scenarios following Surpanakha's humiliation. They describe how Rāmā is quite unaware of the repercussions of his actions after Śūrpanakhā's mutilation. Furthermore Rāmā seemed to have forgotten the whole incident almost directly after it happened, whereas he wonders what wrong he has done to Ravana (Goldman, R., & Masson, J. 1969. 97). Dash, P. C. (1993. 264) shows how Rāmā has more faults to him than what Valmiki chooses to show in his narration, and his cruel actions towards Śūrpanakhā is to blame as Goldman, R., & Masson, J. (1969. 97) stated as well. Dash, P. C. (1993. 264-266) gives six clear points in which the author shows how Śūrpanakhā's mutilation was an unjust punishment. Firstly according to vedic tradition if a woman asks to be sexually satisfied explicitly, her request has to be fulfilled, this was the case in the 'Yama-Yami' ballad that's mentioned in Rigveda (Dash, P. C. 1993. 265). Yami asks her own brother, Yama, to fulfill her sexual desires - which he does. According to social customs at the time, a man was allowed to have more than one wife. For instance Dashratha, Rama's father had 350 wives according to Ayodhyakāṇḍa (chapter 34, V 10-13), so there is no accurate reason for Rāmā to refuse Śūrpanakhā's plea (Dash, P. C. 1993. 265).

Valmiki narrates Rāmā as just and chivalrous but Dash, P. C. (1993. 265) brings light upon how he had lied to Śūrpanakhā saying that Lakshmana was not married, cruelly joking upon the fact that Śūrpanakhā could take him as a husband. Naively she believes him, here Valmiki's narration shows a misogynistic side through the character of Rāmā, giving the impression that women foolishly believe everything said to them. The narration of Rāmāyaṇa which is presented by Valmiki and most male authors, according to Hess, L (1999. 6-7) keeps Rāmā at the highest level of perfection.

In this light it could be argued that there are more similarities between Sitā and Śūrpanakhā. They are both victims of a misogynistic atmosphere and society. Sitā is portrayed as a helpless naive and obedient wife meanwhile Śūrpanakhā as a bold and forward independent woman, but both are right in their own ways. They both received unjust treatment from the men presented in Rāmāyaṇa, mainly Rāmā. Rāmā repeatedly humiliated Śūrpanakhā, even though she was, as Dash, P. C. (1993. 265) explains, within her rights in her plea and he went to the extreme point of mutilating her. One could argue Rāmā also broke a moral and chivalry code, harming a person that wielded no weapon who also was a woman. In Sitā's instance Rāmā repeatedly doubted her fidelity, she was casted out of her own home while he continued to live in comfort and even though Valmiki was witness to Sitā's devotion towards her husband even in exile, Rāmā doesn't trust her. Which eventually ends in Sitā sacrificing her life and reuniting with her mother.

In the end it is important to keep in mind that the story of Rāmāyaṇa was written by Valmiki around 3rd century BCE (Encyclopædia Britannica. (n.d.).) and for that time and era, had a completely different set of moral code and view on feminism, even for the oral traditions the same could be said. Depending on social structures and education, views on a subject could be changed and even in this study bias could be visible due to the culture and society the study is influenced by to the culture or narration the research is being done upon.



## Conclusion

The conclusion chapter gives a short reflection upon the study and gives an idea of what the future holds and ties all the strings in a tight knitted basket to end this study.

This study might have changed the perspective of Rāmāyaṇa and give this ancient epic a new light. As analyzed in the discussion section, the first question of this study focused on the *character* Sitā and Śūrpanakhā and if there were any *similarities* or *differences* between how they are presented in Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa and the oral traditions of Andhra Pradesh. It's argued in this study that, while reading Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa in an overview, there are more differences between the two characters than similarities. They are not at all alike from their behavior to their appearance, however through the studies progression it was clear that there were similarities as well. Both characters, in the light of Rama's behavior, were branded good versus evil. In a society (and author) that wanted to exemplify these characters, showing what was accepted and what wasn't.

The second question of this study focused on *narrative point of view*, how does Vamki narrate the two chosen female characters of this study; Sitā and Śūrpanakhā compared to the oral traditions of Andhra Pradesh. It was evidently clear that the oral traditions had a different narrative, scenes from Rāmāyaṇa that were not included in Valmiki's narration. Although the characters Sitā and Śūrpanakhā, were described the same in both narrations, stories surrounding them were narrated differently.

Sage Valmiki was a man and mostly wrote from his knowledge of things as a man, furthermore there is a huge bias towards Rama. To portray Rāmā as the hero and more importantly to love him. Rāmā was indeed a man but he was an incarnation of God and Gods are majestic and always right. Brahmin women of Andhra Pradesh through their songs narrates a different story (Richman. 1991), a woman's Rāmāyaṇa, as previously mentioned. India is a vast land and it would be an interesting research subject to know other oral variations of Rāmāyaṇa and if the storyline changes. Moreover this study has awakened another question that would be a fascinating research topic, the misogynistic aspects of Rāmāyaṇa, how women are portrayed and if Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa affects the society today, if so in which ways. In this study these topics

have been briefly discussed, however it could be more deeply dived into. To understand if Rāmāyaṇa has changed societal views, interviews of a group of people would give a broader perspective of the topic. Observations of ritualistic rites and festivals would be another beneficial addition to the subject.

## Word & Character Glossary

Agni Pariksha	Meaning; trial by fire; where one jumps into a flaming pyre
Bharata	Son of Kaikeyi & Dasharatha
Brahmin	One of a caste in India; paradigmatic social classification
Dasharatha	King of Ayodhya, father to Rama & Bharata
Kaikeyi	One of Dasharatha's Wives & Bharata's mother
Kaushalya	One of Dasharatha's Wives & Rama's mother
Lakshmana	Younger brother of Rama
Lakshmi	Goddess of fortune and wife of God Vishnu
Mandodari	Ravana's Wife & sister-in-law to Surpanakha
Rama	Son of Kaushalya & Dasharatha, husband to Sita, Prince & King of Ayodhya after Dasharatha, incarnation of Vishnu
Ravana	King of Lanka, brother to Surpanakha
Rigveda	A collection of ancient Indian Sanskrit hymns
Sita	Daughter of Mother earth (Bhumi) & king Janaka, Wife of Rama, an incarnation of Lakshmi
Sudra (woman)	Lowest in the Indian paradigmatic social classification system, often depicted as artistrians or laborers
Sugriva	King & Ruler of Vanara (monkey) kingdom who supported Rama in the battle against Ravana
Sumitra	One of Dasharatha's Wives
Surpanakha	Sister to Ravana & Vibishana, demoness

Telugu	Spoken language in the state of Andhra Pradesh & Telangana, India
Vibhishana	Brother to Ravana, inherits the Kingdom of Lanka after Ravana's death
Vishnu	One of the principal deities of Hinduism, husband to Lakshmi

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