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**Three Tellings, Four Models and Differing Perceptions:  
The Construction of Female Sexuality in the Rāmāyaṇa**

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

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## ABSTRACT

### Three Tellings, Four Models and Differing Perspectives: The Construction of Female Sexuality in the Rāmāyaṇa

Tanisha Ramachandran

The Rāmāyaṇa has been used as a model for appropriate behavior for Hindus throughout the world. Hinduism, like many other religions, uses examples of morality derived from divine sources. The two epics, the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa, occupy a unique position in the lives of Hindus. They serve, in effect, as a guide to appropriate conduct. The Rāmāyaṇa is filled with tales, which depict, above all, dharma. Rāma, the king of Ayodhyā, is presented as the quintessence of ethical action. Although Sītā, his wife, has been singled out as the representation of the pure woman, the Rāmāyaṇa contains many characters that conform to or reject this notion of gender and sexuality. In this manner, ideal sexuality is not represented solely by Sītā. To illustrate (speaking only in a prescriptive manner) a pan “Hindu” concept of sexuality, the focus of this research will be limited to four characters, Sītā, Śabarī, Śūrpaṇakhā and Ayomukhī in the Aranyakāṇḍa of Vālmīki’s Rāmāyaṇa, Tulsīdās’ Rāmacaritmānas and Kampan’s Irāmāvatāram. The purpose, is not simply to point out the subjugated position of women in this epic, rather it is also to illustrate the dependent and fluid nature of female sexuality.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

The Rāmāyaṇa has been used as a model for appropriate behavior for Hindus throughout the world. Hinduism, like many other religions, uses examples of morality derived from divine sources: It uses the lives of gods and goddesses as models for ideal behavior and virtue. The two epics, the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa, occupy a unique position in the lives of Hindus. They serve, in effect, as a guide to appropriate conduct. The Rāmāyaṇa is filled with tales which depict, above all, dharma. Rāma, the king of Ayodhyā, is presented as the quintessence of ethical action, the embodiment of dharma. His wife Sītā has a similar role. She is perceived as the ideal wife, the exemplar of appropriate gender conduct for Hindu women. Much work has been done on Sītā, and her role as the ideal wife. Recent studies attempt to illustrate Sītā's fluid character, and to depict her as more than the subordinated woman. In doing this, much attention has been placed on Sita's actual effect on the lives of real Hindu women. (Dev Sen 1998; Hess 1999; Kishwar 1999; Peltier 1995). In conducting this research, attention has been drawn to the medium of expression--that is, how the Rāmāyaṇa is presented, whether in oral, visual or written form, as its method of expression influences its audience and perception (Blackburn 1991; Doniger 1991; Hess 1999; Lutgendorf 1991; Ramanujan 1991; Ramachandran 1999).

Although the Rāmāyaṇa is the story of Rāma and Sītā, it is filled with supporting characters that contribute greatly to the epic. It is through these characters that, both appropriate and inappropriate behavior is illustrated. Lakṣmaṇa and Hanumān are depicted as great bhaktas of Rāma, the embodiment of duty (Lutgendorf 1999). Different female characters help determine the boundaries of suitable conduct for women.



Characters such as Ahalyā and Śabarī represent purity. Whereas Śūrpaṅakhā, Ayomukhī and Kaikeyī exhibit the undesirable facets of womanhood (Doniger 1997; Erndl 1991; Rao 1978). For the purpose of this research, these supporting characters are of the same importance as Rāma and Sītā, as it is through their depiction that gender is constructed and reinforced. With this construction of gender comes a construction of female sexuality. That is, appropriate gender behavior leads to acceptable sexual practice. The two are collapsed into a dependent identity; without one, the other does not exist. Although Sītā has been singled out by dominant male members of society as the representation of the pure woman, the Rāmāyaṇa is filled with characters that conform to or reject this notion of gender and sexuality. In this manner, ideal sexuality is not represented solely by Sītā, and the undesirable through Śūrpaṅakhā. Kathleen Erndl has addressed this idea in her essay “The Mutilation of Śūrpaṅakhā”.<sup>1</sup> To illustrate (speaking only in a prescriptive manner) a pan Hindu concept of sexuality, the focus of this research will be limited to four characters -- Sītā, Śabarī, Śūrpaṅakhā and Ayomukhī -- as they are depicted in the Araṇyakāṇḍa (Forest Book) of Vālmīki’s Rāmāyaṇa, of Tulsīdās’ Rāmacaritmānas and of Kampan’s Irāmāvatāram.<sup>2</sup> The purpose is not simply to point out the subjugated position of women in this epic, rather it is also to illustrate the dependent and fluid nature of female sexual construction.

### **Innumerable Rāmāyaṇas<sup>3</sup>**

While bearing one name- “the Rāmāyaṇa”- the story or account does not have a singular representation. The characters may remain the same, but their actions, values or

behaviors are as fluid as the format itself. <sup>4</sup> Studying the Rāmāyaṇa is not about studying a story, but rather studying culture, society and religion.

The Rāmāyaṇa does not exist in a standardized form. There isn't an official version that is representative of all the regions where Hinduism is practiced. Furthermore, the format in which the Rāmāyaṇa exists and the geographic location from where it originates influence its contents. The story is constructed and reconstructed every time the story is read, performed, drawn, sculpted or sung.

The tellings of the Rāmāyaṇa by Vālmīki, Tulsīdās and Kāmpaṇ are representative of a dominant culture (that of upper caste Hindu men) which is pan-Indian in its geographic scope. It is the intention of this research to examine prescribed and not necessarily actual depictions of female sexuality. For that reason it is the dominant versions that are in need of study.

### **Vālmīki**

Historically, this narrative of the Rāmāyaṇa has been seen by scholars as the “original” version. Dated between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa is frequently presented as the foundation of all other versions of the Rāmāyaṇa. Written in Sanskrit, it is depicted as the ur-text, the true Rāmāyaṇa. From a scholarly perspective it is the telling with which the western academy is most familiar. It is hard to distinguish whether the status of Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa is a result of its popularity with western scholars, or its promotion by the Brahminical elites of India. Or perhaps this distinction cannot be made at all, as colonialism continues to have an impact on Indian society today. Vālmīki's version, unlike the other two tellings, presents Rāma

and Sītā as mortals, albeit extraordinary beings. Rāma, in this version, is the perfect king, but not a God.<sup>5</sup>

### **Tulsīdās**

Composed around the 16<sup>th</sup> century and written in Hindi, Tulsīdās' Rāmacaritmānas, or The Lake of the Holy Acts of Rāma, gained popularity throughout the world, due to its televised adaptation.<sup>6</sup> Tulsīdās presents Rāma and Sītā as deities. Throughout the text Rāma is well aware of himself as a deity, an avatāra of Viṣṇu. The characters surrounding him are also aware of this fact.

### **Kampan**

Written between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century CE, the Irāmāvatāram, or Rāma the Incarnation, is composed in Tamil. As in the Hindi text, Rāma is definitely an avatāra of Viṣṇu. However, his behavior and self-awareness are not always reflective of his divine status. As Hart and Heifetz point out: "In Kampan, his [Rāma's] status is more complex. Again and again, he is recognized as an incarnation of Viṣṇu by those who meet and confront him, but Rāma rarely shows a direct awareness of himself as the supreme god" (1988, 6). Furthermore, Kampan's narrative incorporates the rich bhakti, or devotional, tradition of Tamilnadu, which is integrated through scenic and vibrant descriptive passages.

## Historical Location

By using these three different texts, it is my intention to compare and contrast the models of female sexuality presented by three various authors from three different times and geographical locations. It is obvious that the author's regional location and language has influenced the contents, as it is reflected throughout the different narratives.

Historically speaking, the time in which it was written also has bearing on the way the story is told. However, one telling in one context does not account for all of the past. There isn't one telling that is representative of all of Hindu society at any given instance. As Romila Thapar illustrates: "The Rāmāyaṇa does not belong to any one moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places" (Richman, 1991, 4). The models of female sexuality depicted in the Rāmāyaṇa are not static and unchanging, rather they are fluid--dependent on context, format and perception. Historical approaches, in this manner, offer multiple voices that are important to study, enabling a basis for study (not a concrete foundation): somewhere to begin.

The term history is supposed to denote the account of the past. That is, history is offered as the factual chronicle of what has occurred in previous times. But who is responsible for this recovery, and how can they be certain that this is what has occurred previously? History is not the representation of the past, rather it is a version of what might have happened; it can never be depicted in a singular manner, as different contexts will yield different tellings. The story that is presented currently is the version created by those who are dominant, so that they may justify their current hegemony by claiming past status. Thus we need to view history in terms of who is recounting it and why.

Although this epic has sought to legitimize certain notions of the past, this is not my concern. My pursuit deals with the present, and involves “history” only in the manner of constructing the present. In this way the past becomes a creation of the present, a legitimating factor. The interpretation of the Rāmāyaṇa depends on context; it is the interaction of many pasts and many presents that will ultimately signify meaning. However, often one version of the telling becomes viewed as the only possibility, by each of the dominant groups. Only the versions that reflect the values and attitudes of these dominant groups is sanctioned. Consequently, that interpretation is considered valid, this being the one which enforces the current hegemony. And although the same narrative has many possible interpretations, the dominant group of the present decides on the constituents of history, thereby legitimating the present. As Romila Thapar notes:

The present selects items from the past which are used to invent or refashion what comes to be called tradition. These are generally items which the present finds attractive and which legitimise its various codes of behaviour and belief. The making of a tradition becomes yet another dialogue of the past which contributes to the construction of history, although in effect it may well derive from the perspectives of the present (1999, 4).

This notion of tradition becomes a manner through which behavior is regulated. Equivocally, placed within the epic, the rules governing female sexuality are embodied by Sītā, Śabarī, Śūrpaṅkhā and Ayomukhī. Through the concepts of subject and other, pure and polluted, and the construction of gender and sexuality, the story of Rāma and Sītā serves as the archetype of the divine couple, the heterosexual couple. This, in effect, provides society with a model to emulate. It is not enough, however, to simply present Sītā as the ideal, she must be compared and contrasted so that appropriate female sexuality may be delineated. In order for the desired to exist the undesired must be outlined. Furthermore, this identity must be presented as static and timeless, so that it

may remain free from contention. While the three versions may not be identical in their depiction of female sexuality, there is an underlying expectation by those in a hegemonic position of a generalized perception, one reinforced by the dominant class of the present-day society. That is, although many differing identities may have existed or exist, the perception of these identities by the reader must be monolithic and unquestioned in order for the current status to be maintained. The Rāmāyaṇa is a product of dominant culture, and must be understood in terms of this status.

Identities in the past have been various, and any one item can have multiple identities which change at historical moments. Creative articulations in the form of cultural items relate to the dominant ideology in various ways ranging from endorsing to confronting it; the relationship has been directed to questions of caste, class, ethnicity, gender and so on, although those dictating the dominant ideology tend to project it as free from contestation (Thapar 1999, 3).

Female sexuality, as portrayed by the epic, is an identity produced by culture. Our understanding of appropriate behavior is a result of social conditioning. The manner in which we interpret these four characters is dependent on not only the narrative, but also the codes and conducts deemed suitable by the present.

### **Female Sexuality**

It is necessary at this point to explain what is meant by female sexuality. Once again, it is important to remember that gender and sexuality for the purpose of this research are dependent identities. To be a woman, in this case, is to exhibit certain behavior (Butler 1990; DeBeauvoir 1953; Lorber 1994; Rich 1996; Wittig 1996). As we will see later on, women are thought to possess a certain nature; this nature, according to Hindu scriptures, is based heavily upon respect or disrespect of sexual codes. Often these

codes are enforced through binary identities. For the ideal to exist it has to be contrasted with unacceptable behavior. Simply put, the subject and the other have to co-exist in order to survive. In the context of the Rāmāyaṇa's representation of female sexuality, Sītā and Śabarī are placed in the subjective position, while Śūrpaṅkhā and Ayomukhī occupy the position of the other. Sītā is depicted as the ideal wife. She is a married woman and her sexuality is thereby under the control of her husband. Śabarī is an ascetic who is stripped of any sexuality as she is celibate. Śūrpaṅkhā and Ayomukhī, two rākṣasīs (demonesses), seem to be free from any sort of male control; they wander the forest alone, expressing their desire at will. The dichotomy is thus reinforced by the existence of these four models. This notion of neatly produced categories is essential for the functioning of society; it enables grouping, so that society may be controlled by the dominant male sectors of society. Patriarchy has built itself on the problematic notion of categories. These categories are placed in opposition to one another, thereby creating dichotomies. The unequal power balance between men and women is maintained through the passing off of these dichotomies as universal truths. Identity categories are instruments of regulatory administration (Butler 1990; Kinsman 1996; Weeks 1991). Sexuality, then, is not based on some innate or divinely sanctioned mandate, rather it is a calculated construction of society.

Sexuality cannot be treated in isolation: it cannot be understood [as] if it is separated from[...]such things as the relations between sexes, the cultural ideals of "love" or the institution of marriage. Sexual behavior is social behaviour; it is not the consummation of some biological drive (Jackson 1996, 62).

Sexuality comes into existence through socially learned messages. It is through the learning and reinforcement of the "social script" that women learn to be women and men learn to become men (Foucault 1978; Jackson 1996; Butler 1990; Lorber 1994). The

Rāmāyaṇa is a tangible representation of this script. It presents a seemingly literal representation of the goddess/whore dichotomy that serves to regulate women's behavior. But as mentioned earlier such a dichotomy does not always reflect reality. Even within these three prescriptive texts we will see the inconsistencies emerge. In some cases the lines between the bifurcation are blurred, illustrating the fluidity of categories.

The male characters in the Rāmāyaṇa help delineate codes of acceptable behavior through their actions and reactions. In this way, Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Rāvaṇa become important to this discussion, as it is through them that the codes are enforced and outlined. What is deemed appropriate sexual behavior for women is often measured by the reactions of male society. With this in mind, it is important to realize that study of female sexuality as depicted by Vālmīki, Tulsīdās and Kampan must also include the male characters.

### **The Araṇyakāṇḍa - A Brief Summary**

Although I am looking at three different versions of the "Forest Book" of the Rāmāyaṇa, the basic story remains the same. The scene opens with the exiled king Rāma, his wife Sītā and Rāma's brother Lakṣmaṇa in the Daṇḍaka forest. Rāma kills the rāksasa Virādha, and then meets the sage Śarabhaṅga, who eventually immolates himself. Rāma is visited by many sages and ascetics who beg him to rid the forest of rāksasas (immoral demons). The trio passes the next ten years with the sage Sutīkṣṇa and then visits the sage Agastya, who provides Rāma with magical weapons and directs him to Pañcavaṭī. At Pañcavaṭī, Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa come into contact with Śūrpaṇakhā, a rāksasī (female demon) who is subsequently mutilated by Lakṣmaṇa for her attempt to



abduct Sītā. In order to seek revenge, Śūrpaṅakhā goes to her brother Khara, who advances on Rāma. Khara and his army are killed by Rāma. Śūrpaṅakhā then makes her way to Lankā where her elder brother Rāvaṇa rules as king and tells him of Khara's death and her mutilation. She also tells him of Sītā. Rāvaṇa decides to abduct Sītā, and enlists the help of the rākṣasa Mārīca. Mārīca turns himself into a golden deer, in order to separate Rāma and Sītā, as Sītā sees the deer and wants it, sending Rāma to pursue it. Mārīca is killed by Rāma, but before he dies he simulates Rāma's voice and cries for help. Sītā sends Lakṣmaṇa to see whether Rāma is alright at which point Rāvaṇa, disguised as an ascetic, approaches Sītā and eventually seizes her, taking her to Lankā. On his way he is attacked by Jaṭāyus, the vulture king who attempts to save Sītā. In the struggle Jaṭāyus is mortally wounded, and Sītā is carried off to Lankā, where she is confined in a grove of Aśoka trees and guarded by fierce rākṣasa women. Rāma, meanwhile realizes the whole thing was a trap, and rushes back. He sees Lakṣmaṇa and they both return to find Sītā gone. They then begin the search for Sītā, and see the dying Jaṭāyus who informs them of Sītā's abduction. Rāma cremates Jaṭāyus, and continues his search for Sītā. The two brothers then come into contact with Kabandha, a headless monster whose arms they cut off. Upon his request they cremate him, and from the pyre arises a celestial being who instructs them to go to Lake Pampā and Mount R̥ṣyamūka where they will find the monkey king, Sugrīva who will help them find Sītā. He, also tells them of an old female ascetic Śabarī who has been waiting for them. On Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa's way to Śabarī's ashram, they have an encounter with Ayomukhī, a rākṣasī<sup>7</sup>; she expresses her desire for Lakṣmaṇa and is consequently mutilated by him. The Forest Book closes with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa meeting Śabarī, who enters the fire and attains

heaven (or attains liberation). Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa then continue their search for Sītā coming to the shores of Lake Pampā.

The Forest Book, as we can see, contains the catalyst, Śūrpaṅakhā's mutilation, that sets off the war between Rāma and Rāvaṇa. Śūrpaṅakhā's disfigurement is important in two respects, as it provides the basis for Sītā's abduction, and more importantly, for this research, it contains pertinent information on the construction of female sexuality. The Forest Book is thus one of the most, if not the most important book of the Rāmāyaṇa as it here that the interaction that sets off the subsequent chain of events occurs.

The five scenes of great importance to this study are, first, the meeting between Śūrpaṅakhā and Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, and Śūrpaṅakhā's interaction with Rāvaṇa after she has been mutilated. Then, following the epic's narrative, I will examine Sītā and Rāvaṇa's encounter before he abducts Sītā. The third scene will be the interplay between Ayomukhī and Lakṣmaṇa. And finally, I will end with Śabarī's welcoming of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to her hermitage. By examining these scenes we are able to compare and contrast four models of female sexuality depicted in the three narratives. This comparison also extends to how each woman is portrayed, whether similarly or differently, by each of the three authors, and thus how each author constructs female sexuality. This comparison enables a differing perspective to previous research conducted by scholars of the Rāmāyaṇa. In the past scholars have only examined the character of Sītā (Coburn 1995; Hess 1999; Kishwar 1999; Peltier 1995), or viewed Sītā and Śūrpaṅakhā as embodying the only two possibilities of female sexuality (Erndl 1991). This simplifies and limits sexuality to solely two characters embodied by the

goddess/whore dichotomy. My work will illustrate the complex and fluid nature of female sexuality depicted throughout the Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa..

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Erndl, "The Mutilation of Śūrpaṅakhā" in *Many Rāmāyaṇas*, ed Paula Richman, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> I am using the translations of Vālmīki by Sheldon I. Pollack, trans., *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, vol 3: *Aranyakāṇḍa*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991. and the *Śrīmad Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa (With Sanskrit Text and English Translation) [Aranya-Kanda, Kiskindha-Kandha and Sundara-Kanda]* Gorakhpur: Gita Press. For Tulsīdās' Hindi text I am using the English translation by F.S. Growse of *The Rāmāyaṇa of TulasīDāsa*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1978. and consulting the *Śrī Rāmācaritmānas (With Hindi Text and English Translation)*. Gorakhpur: Gita Press. And for Kampan's Tamil narrative I am using the English translation by George L. Hart & Hank Heifetz of *The Forest Book of the Ramayana of Kampan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Paula Richman has demonstrated the multiplicity of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition in her book *Many Rāmāyaṇas* Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> In the Adbhuta version of the Rāmāyaṇa, it is Sītā, not Rāma, who kills Rāvaṇa.

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of the Divine King see Sheldon Pollack's Introduction in *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, vol 3: *Aranyakāṇḍa*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the impact of the serial Rāmāyaṇa see Lutgendorf 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Tulsīdās does not include the interaction with Ayomukhī.

## **Chapter Two: Śūrpaṅakhā and the Trio**

The three tellings of Rāma, Sītā's and Lakṣmaṇa's meeting of Śūrpaṅakhā vary in both length and content. In both Vālmīki's and Tulsīdās's versions, the encounter with Śūrpaṅakhā happens in one episode, explained in 51 ślokas and 17 lines respectively. In Kampan, due in part to his lengthy descriptions, the confrontation extends to 143 verses describing a two-day period. Kampan depicts Śūrpaṅakhā's thoughts, desires and actions before she actually approaches Rāma. Lakṣmaṇa is not present for the first encounter and Sītā only enters the scene towards the end. Overnight, Śūrpaṅakhā suffers lovesickness and decides to carry Sītā off and take her place. On the second day, when Śūrpaṅakhā comes to abduct Sītā, only Lakṣmaṇa is with her. All the characters are present, in the other two tellings, for the first and only encounter of Rāma and Śūrpaṅakhā.

In terms of appearance, Śūrpaṅakhā is depicted in different forms in all three versions. For Vālmīki, Śūrpaṅakhā appears in her rākṣasī form even though she can take any form at will (3.16.18).<sup>1</sup>

ˆ Rāma was handsome, the rākṣasa woman was ugly, he was shapely and slim of waist, she misshapen and potbellied; his eyes were large, hers were beady, his hair was jet black, and hers the color of copper; he always said the right thing and in a sweet voice; her words were sinister and her voice struck terror; he was young attractive, and well mannered, she ill mannered, repellent, an old hag (Vālmikī 3.16.8-10).<sup>2</sup>

Tulsīdās depicts Śūrpaṅakhā as changing to a beautiful form, but she changes back to her rākṣasī form towards the end of the scene.

Having assumed a beautiful form, she approached the Lord and with many smiles thus addressed him: "There is not another man like, you, nor a woman like me; there is a match that God has taken some pains to make. I have searched the three spheres, but have not found anywhere in the world a man with beauty equal to mine."

And after Lakṣmaṇa insults her:

Then in a fury she returned to Rāma, revealing herself in a shape of terror  
(Tulsīdās Caupāi 16).<sup>3</sup>

In the Tamil telling, Kampan provides us with a description of the whole process of Śūrpaṅkhā's change from her rākṣasī form to one of beauty. We are told of her concentration and recitation of mantras so that she maybe as beautiful as Śrī.

“He will refuse me, ” she thought, “if he sees me as a Rākṣasī with fangs and a belly that eats any and all life. Therefore better to go to him with lips as red as a kōvai fruit with speech as soft as a kokila bird and all the beauty of a peacock.”

She visualized the goddess Śrī seated on the lotus, uttered a mantra she had in her power and appeared as a beautiful woman, her face shining brighter than the moon and the radiance of her rose, glowing into the sky.

All the loveliness of bright red cotton  
and cool shoots  
were shamed by her as she moved  
on her small feet  
like graceful red lotuses. With words that were sweet  
like a young peacock,  
a wild goose, swaying like a vañci vine, like poison, the  
the wily woman came.

Beautiful as Śrī on her flower flowing gold,  
like a streak of lightning  
fallen, never to vanish, out of the sky,  
with her jeweled chariot,

fresh as that of a young girl and  
softly clothed,  
and her shining face, the swords of her eyes,  
like a lovely myna bird,

she came as if a peacock were coming,  
with eyes like a deer,  
of a sweet, abundant beauty, with a perfumed  
honey of words  
that would draw out desire for her who had taken

a body just like the valli,  
glowing vine of heaven, given its life by the tall  
and fragrant Wish-Granting Tree.

...

Like sweet amṛta coming as a gift  
from those in the sky,  
she came to him with her lovely breasts  
her waist swaying,  
and Rāma, who grants the eye of true knowledge  
that rises and wipes away  
all ignorance once he has entered the mind looked  
toward her with his two eyes.

As he saw a body so soft and gentle  
it could never be found  
in the immense world of the Nāgas, in heaven  
or on this earth,  
he thought, “Who is she and who could equal this woman  
wearing ornaments  
that are lovely and is there any limit  
to the beauty within her?” (Kampan 3.5.29-33, 35-36) <sup>4</sup>

What is interesting is that Śūrpaṅkhā's performance of these rites is similar to the vratas performed by Hindu women in order to assure that they will obtain a good husband. It is at that this point that one sees a stark contrast between Śūrpaṅkhā's character in Kampan's Iṛāmāvatāram and that found in the Rāmāyaṇa and Rāmacaritmānas. For Kampan, Śūrpaṅkhā is depicted as a woman in love, whereas Vālmīki and Tulsīdās portray her in wholly negative terms. In Vālmīki, Śūrpaṅkhā is depicted as no more than a lustful demon, “a misshapen slut, this potbellied, lustful rākṣasa woman” (3.17.20).<sup>5</sup> And Tulsīdās, taking Śūrpaṅkhā as representative of the female sex, uses this opportunity to comment on the lustful character of women in general. “One day Rāvaṇa's sister Śūrpaṅkhā, foul hearted and venomous as a serpent, came to Pañcavaṭī and was excited when she saw the two men. A woman ... must look after a handsome man,

whether he be her brother, father or son ” (Caupāi 16).<sup>6</sup> Rākṣasas are viewed in both the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa as antithetical to morality. Their existence consists of violence and lascivious sexuality. Vālmīki tells us that the goal of a rākṣasa is “to master the sports of lovemaking” (3.36.20).<sup>7</sup> Śūrpaṇakhā exhibits these two qualities of violence and aggressive sexuality in Tulsīdās and Vālmīki. This unrestrained sexuality is evident by her overt desire for both Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Both Vālmīki and Tulsīdās indicate that Śūrpaṇakhā is willing to settle for Lakṣmaṇa if she cannot obtain Rāma. This is illustrated by the teasing Śūrpaṇakhā is subjected to by Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa.

In Vālmīki, Rāma addresses her:

But I am already married, my lady, and I love my wife. And for women such as you, to have a rival wife is a source of bitter sorrow.

But my younger brother here is of good character, handsome, powerful, majestic, and still unmarried. His name is Lakṣmaṇa.

He has never has a woman before and is need of a wife. He is young and handsome and will make a good husband, one suited to such beauty as yours.

Accept my brother as your husband, large eyed, shapely lady.  
With no rival wife the two of you will be inseparable as sunlight  
And Mount Meru.

When the Rākṣasa woman, wild with desire, heard Rāma address her in this way, she promptly forsook him and said to Lakṣmaṇa:

“I shall make you a lovely wife, one befitting your beauty. And together we shall roam so pleasantly all through Daṇḍaka. ”

Lakṣmaṇa smiled at the words of the rākṣasa woman Śūrpaṇakhā and with customary eloquence made this fitting reply:

Why should you want to be my wife, lotuslike beauty? I am completely subject to the will of my noble brother; I am a slave, and she who is my wife must be a slave as well.

Become instead the junior wife of my noble brother, large-

eyed lady of unblemished beauty. He is prosperous, and with him your fortunes, too will prosper and be happy (3.17.2-10).<sup>8</sup>

The same banter occurs in Tulsīdās as well.

The Lord glanced at Sītā and said in reply: “My younger brother is a bachelor. ” The demon’s sister took the hint and went to Lakṣmaṇa. He looked to the Lord and said in gentle tones: “Hearken, fair lady, I am his servant; it is not right that you should be subject to anyone. My Lord is the mighty king of Kosala, and whatever he does is all done at his own pleasure. A servant who expects ease, a beggar who expects honor, a spendthrift who hopes for wealth, a profligate who hopes for heaven, or an avaricious man who expects renown, these are four dreamers who would expect milk from from milking the air. ” Again she turned and came to Rāma, but he sent her back to Lakṣmaṇa (Caupāi 16).<sup>9</sup>

In keeping with her rāksasī nature, the threat of violence is implicit in Śūrpaṅkhā’s gestures toward Sītā. This threat is more apparent in Vālmīki’s version, while in Tulsīdās we are to assume that her physical appearance is indicative of her nature, and due to her reversion to the rāksasī form violence will ensue. Although Sītā was frightened Śūrpaṅkhā made no move towards her (Caupāi 16).<sup>10</sup>

Kampan’s depiction of Śūrpaṅkhā is quite different. If we take her beautiful physical form as representative of her nature, Śūrpaṅkhā is a woman in love. This is not the generalized lustfulness of a rāksasa, but love directed toward one man, Rāma. And while Śūrpaṅkhā wants to marry Rāma in all three tellings, she is willing to settle for Lakṣmaṇa in the Sanskrit and Hindi tellings. This is not the case in Kampan; it is Rāma, and only Rāma whom she wants as her husband. It should be mentioned that at the end of the scene Śūrpaṅkhā approaches Rāma, after having been disfigured by Lakṣmaṇa, and offers to marry Lakṣmaṇa. Her proposal is, however not born out of lust, rather it is the only way that she thinks that she can be close to Rāma. She offers to marry Lakṣmaṇa in



order to form an alliance so that she can help defeat the rākṣasas. Her motivation for this is to be near Rāma.

If you feel that you must keep this woman in your heart, still you should realize that if you intend to fight and prevail on the battlefield against the Rākṣasas, we three here together could make that field a pool of blood! Should that give you pain? And if then you will marry me to this young prince who does not realize what there is to gain, I would never weaken even before him who has imprisoned the sun and the moon (Kampan 3.5.140)<sup>11</sup>

Śūrpaṅkhā's love for Rāma can be seen in the context of the bhakti tradition, Hindu devotionalism, and more specifically viraha bhakti devotion, in which the sentiment of love in separation is elaborated. For, after all, for Kampan, Rāma is the Lord, an avatar of Viṣṇu, the "Source of the Vedas" (3.5.38).<sup>12</sup> It is to be expected that seeing the divine form would cause anyone to fall deeply in love. The verses Kampan uses to describe Śūrpaṅkhā's torment of separation from Rāma, are very similar to the songs by the Tamil poet Nāmmaḷvār, who lived a few centuries before Kampan, in which a girl meets Kṛṣṇa and is stunned and then haunted by his beauty.

My friends!  
My mother!  
Are they a pair of deaths  
Devouring the heart of a girl?  
I do not know  
Or are they the eyes of Kṛṣṇa?  
I do not know.  
See! Like lotuses opening everywhere.  
My gaze cannot avoid them.  
I cannot sleep.  
What can I do!

Is it a flashing lightning  
that radiates everywhere  
with golden splendor?  
Or is it a fine pearl  
That hurts my heart?

I do not know.  
 The smile of Kṛṣṇa hurts my heart.  
 My mother!  
 I know no place to protect me from it (Tiruvaymoli VII, 7,1 and 5).<sup>13</sup>

In Kampan's text, Śūrpaṅkhā is similarly frequented with visions of Rāma, thinking that she sees him everywhere.

The form of the hero took shape before her burning eyes  
 And thinking she was seeing him, huge and dark as a monsoon cloud,  
 She was pained and ashamed as that body  
 Vanished away and she fell to the ground, in great suffering (3.5.83).<sup>14</sup>

She is so consumed with love for Rāma, that she experiences great discomfort; she is on fire, literally burning with desire (3.5.82).<sup>15</sup> We see the same sentiment in the poem, entitled "The Agony of Desire (Kaṇṇan ennum)" by Āṇṭāl, another of the Tamil poet saints who lived in Nāmmaḷvār's period, who expresses her love for Kṛṣṇa (Kaṇṇan):

I hunger and thirst  
 for a sight  
 of Kaṇṇan, my dark lord.  
 Don't stand aside  
 mocking me-  
 your words sting  
 like sour juice  
 poured upon an open wound.  
 Go bring the yellow silk  
 wrapped around the waist  
 of him who knows not  
 the sorrow of women-  
 fan me with it,  
 cool the burning of my heart.

Like an arrow  
 from the bow of his eyebrows,  
 the sidelong glance  
 of him who destroyed Kaṁsa  
 enters my heart,  
 makes me sore with pain,  
 weak and worn.  
 I yearn, I melt,  
 Yet he says not

“have no fear.”  
 If willingly  
 he gives his garland  
 of holy basil,  
 bring it,  
 place it upon my breast.  
 (Nācciyār Tirumolī, verses 1 & 3).<sup>16</sup>

These feelings also afflict Śūrpaṅakhā, who cannot endure the pain of love and is consumed by Rāma’s beauty. If we see Śūrpaṅakhā as a bhakta, a devotee, her shamelessness proves to be a great sacrifice, for she has given up a very important component of womanhood, her honour. In this, she is like the poet-Saint Āṅṅāl, or like the cowherd women, the gopīs, of Kṛṣṇa mythology. Śūrpaṅakhā’s desire for Rāma is not lustful in Kampan, but indicative of her status as a bhakta, illustrating her need to possess and be possessed by god.

Śūrpaṅakhā is well aware, in Kampan’s telling, that due to her desire, any sense of pureness she once possessed would disappear(3.5.87).<sup>17</sup> In Tamil culture, purity, karpu, is an important quality for women to possess.<sup>18</sup> However, her self-perception is not so accurate in Vālmīki and Tulsīdās, as she is not aware that she is the brunt of a joke-- that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are mocking her form and her request for marriage. Unaware that neither of them is interested in marrying her, she concludes in Vālmīki that the reason that she cannot be with Rāma is because of Sītā. Thinking this, she attempts to kill Sītā, and is consequently mutilated by Lakṣmaṇa.

It is on account of this misshappen slut, this hideous old wife  
 with her pinched waist that you care so little for me.

I am going to devour this human female at once, before your  
 very eyes; then, free of any rival, I shall live happily with you (3.17.15-16).<sup>19</sup>

It is not clear in Tulsīdās' version whether Śūrpaṅkhā intends to hurt Sītā. Rama just looks over and sees that Sītā is afraid. Śūrpaṅkhā assumes her frightening form only after Lakṣmaṇa has insulted her, and is subsequently mutilated.

Said Lakṣmaṇa, "The bridegroom for you must be a man lost to all sense of shame! "

Then in a fury she turned to Rāma, revealing herself in a Shape of terror (Caupāi 16).<sup>20</sup>

Kampan's telling does not include Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa's teasing. Śūrpaṅkhā decides, after a restless night, to abduct Sītā, and take her place, as she sees that this is the only way that she can be with Rāma.

She was enduring this overflowing pain of love  
when the sun rose as if it were the coming of Rāma  
to free the sky of its utter darkness that seemed like  
like the Rākṣasas clouding over all the three worlds.

As soon as she saw the dawn, she knew that she had lived  
through the night though her body was burning,  
and she thought, "He will never look at me while she  
who has no equal is near him.  
Best for me to run there fast, take her  
and hide her away somewhere quickly  
and then I will assume that form that  
he loves and I will live with him" (3.5.89-90).<sup>21</sup>

Śūrpaṅkhā's mutilation is similar in Vālmīki's and Tulsīdās' version. Lakṣmaṇa cuts off her ears and nose, whereas in Kampan's version he also cuts off her breasts. Moreover, although motivated by the same intention, the protection of Sītā, Rāma orders Lakṣmaṇa, in the Sanskrit and Hindi version to "deal" with the demoness, but in the Tamil telling, Lakṣmaṇa acts on his own accord, as Rāma is not present. The fact that Lakṣmaṇa acts on his own accord leaves us to wonder whether Rāma would have meted out the same punishment, as he is Śūrpaṅkhā's Lord. Only Lakṣmaṇa saw Śūrpaṅkhā's attempt to abduct Sītā; Rāma was not present. Rāma's resistance to Śūrpaṅkhā may not have been

for the protection of Sītā. In Kampan's telling, Rāma, "who grants the eye of true knowledge" (3.5.35)<sup>22</sup>, knew that Śūrpaṅakhā was a rāksasī, but did not seem to be threatened. Rather he questioned whether there was "any limit to the beauty within her" (3.5.36).<sup>23</sup> His rejection of Śūrpaṅakhā may be due to the fact that in this incarnation he is sworn to monogamy, and can therefore not reciprocate her love.<sup>24</sup>

It may be argued that Kampan depicts Śūrpaṅakhā as exhibiting the nature of a bhakta, rather than that of a rāksasī. Her desire in this case is not motivated by the lascivious sexuality exhibited by rāksasīs, but rather by that of a woman, or any person for that matter, desiring to be united with the Lord. Her demon qualities have been transformed by her tapas, her austerities, if her physical form is indicative of her nature; her beauty would have been transformed internally as well. Furthermore, the rules governing female sexuality are no longer valid, as the object of desire is not a human male but rather God. Rāma's interaction with Śūrpaṅakhā is not that of man to woman, but rather that of divine Lord to devotee. However as we see later, Śūrpaṅakhā still exists within a social context in which she is assigned to the category of woman, and is subjected, thereby, to the rules of this category. If we do not view Śūrpaṅakhā as a bhakta, but as simply a woman in love, her desire for Rāma is considered impure. (3.5.26).<sup>25</sup> She is contrasted with Sītā, who by Śūrpaṅakhā's own observation is "the fire of purity" (3.5.58).<sup>26</sup> But Sītā, in the beginning of this scene, is depicted as desirous of Rāma's physical form as they walk through the forest (3.5.6).<sup>27</sup> However, this desire is deemed acceptable as it is exhibited within the confines of marriage.

In the Rāmāyana and the Rāmacaritamānas, Śūrpaṅakhā's story is presented differently from the Tamil telling. That is, she is, unequivocally, the undesired, the lustful

demon, in contrast to Sītā, the pure goddess. These two tellings exemplify the two categories of women depicted by both western and non-western dominant cultures. Sītā represents the good, as she is married and under the control of her husband, and Śūrpaṅakhā represents the evil, as she not under the guidance of a man and her sexuality is thereby unchecked.

Female sexuality when left unchecked is considered destructive and lascivious; it is only when controlled by men and channeled towards child bearing does it become auspicious (Sheth 1992). Sītā is a married woman, under the “protection” of Rāma. Śūrpaṅakhā is not subject to the controls of men; her sexuality is no way subdued as exhibited by her lust and desire for Rāma. In the Tamil and Sanskrit versions, Rāma demands to know where her “protectors” are.

Vālmīki has Rāma ask:

“But I shall like to know about you. Tell me, who are you?  
To whom do you belong? For what purpose have you come here?  
Tell me truthfully ” (3.16.16).<sup>28</sup>

And in Kampan:

“If you are the younger sister of him  
who rules the three worlds  
that even the king of gods  
obeys his orders at once,  
then, woman, for what reason  
do you come alone now  
without a companion, without  
any show of your enormous wealth? ”(3.5.42)<sup>29</sup>

Moreover even when Rāma is teasing Śūrpaṅakhā about marriage in Kampan’s telling, he says he will only take her if she is given by her brothers. She responds that they can be married by the Gāndharva rite, described in the Manu Smṛti as “the voluntary union of a maiden and her lover... which springs from desire and has sexual intercourse for its

purpose” (Sharma 1986,51). This suggestion illustrates Śūrpaṅakhā’s unrestrained sexuality and freedom from male control. Sītā, in contrast, was “won” in a competition, and she was given to Rāma by her father in the Prajāpatya rite. She was thus transferred from father to husband.

Feminine sexuality then becomes heterosexuality, not just in terms of desire for the opposite sex, but also within the framework of monogamous subservient relations, which result in offspring. This notion of sexuality is enforced through a rigid gender separation, dividing male and female roles. Masquerading under the concept of duty, women are subjected to physical, mental and sexual control. It is only once she conforms or accepts her dharma, her duty, that she becomes auspicious. Female power, according to the prescriptive or proscriptive texts, is only considered desirable when regulated by males, for alone it is considered malevolent, hence the inauspiciousness of widows and unmarried mothers.<sup>30</sup> Marriage becomes a means by which female power is regulated, and rendered auspicious. Śūrpaṅakhā, along this line of thought, becomes a malevolent force in need of male restraint. Symbolically speaking, Śūrpaṅakhā is stripped by Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa of her honour and power, as the nose is representative of honour and the breasts of power (Erndl 1991; Wadley1980).

The mutilation of Śūrpaṅakhā becomes in effect a punishment, not only for her attempt to harm Sītā, but also as a result of non-conformity. This incident served as an example in some ways to women who stray from their prescribed roles. Śūrpaṅakhā’s freedom and desire were unacceptable. By cutting off her nose, ears and breasts (in the Tamil version) Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa express their disapproval under the guise of protection. This can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it can be seen as protecting the

virtuous, pure woman from the polluted lustful woman. Second, it establishes the penalty, indicating the consequences should the “pure woman” decide to stray from her duties.

On the surface, Rāma’s and Lakṣmaṇa’s protection of Sītā seems somewhat chivalrous. They are protecting the “weak” woman from the “lustful demon”. However the notion of protection raises another issue. Protecting ones wife is considered a principal duty of a husband (Sharma 1986). The question that needs to be addressed is: protection from what? It would seem that the protection is from her own sexuality, as it is perceived as malevolent.

Protection of women’s honour is one of the principal duties of the male kin. In the case of the unmarried woman, this duty falls to her father or brothers. In the next scenes, Śūrpaṅkhā seeks out her brothers Khara and Dūṣaṇa to avenge her mutilation. Rāma subsequently kills them. Śūrpaṅkhā then goes to her oldest brother Rāvaṇa.

<sup>1</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Aranyakāṇḍa*, trans. Pollack, 123.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* 123.

<sup>3</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Tulasī Dāsa*, trans. Growse, 437.

<sup>4</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 89-90.

<sup>5</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Aranyakāṇḍa*, trans. Pollack, 126.

<sup>6</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Tulasī Dāsa*, trans. Growse, 436.

<sup>7</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Aranyakāṇḍa*, trans. Pollack, 163.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* 125.

<sup>9</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Tulasī Dāsa*, trans. Growse, 437.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 115.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid* 91.

<sup>13</sup> In Hardy, 1983, *Viraha-Bhakti: The early History of Kṛṣṇa devotion in South India*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 102.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>16</sup> *Āṅgāḷ and her Path of Devotion: Poems of a Woman Saint from South India*, trans. Dehejia, 123.

<sup>17</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 102.

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion of karpu see Wadley ed, 1980, *The Powers of Tamil Women*.

<sup>19</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Aranyakanda*, trans. Pollack, 126.

<sup>20</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Tulasī Dāsa*, trans. Growse, 437.

<sup>21</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 103.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid* 91.



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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> There is a story in which 60,000 sages want to become one with Viṣṇu as Rāma. However Rāma tells them he can not as he is sworn to monogamy in this incarnation. But in his next incarnation as Kṛṣṇa, the sages will be reborn as gopīs.

<sup>25</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 89.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 96.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 85.

<sup>28</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Arāṇyakāṇḍa*, trans. Pollack, 124.

<sup>29</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 92.

<sup>30</sup> For further discussion see, Holly Baker Reynolds, 1980, "The Auspicious Married Woman" in *The Powers of Tamil Women*, ed. S. Wadley.

### Chapter Three: Śūrpaṅakhā and Rāvaṇa

Śūrpaṅakhā sets out for Lankā, where her older brother Rāvaṇa resides. Although the interaction between Śūrpaṅakhā and Rāvaṇa is described in all three versions, it is presented differently and more elaborately in *Kampan*. Once again, the Tamil version is full of descriptive passages, which capture the emotional states of the characters. When Śūrpaṅakhā enters Rāvaṇa's kingdom we are provided with a vivid portrait of his capital city. Furthermore, *Kampan* narrates the reaction of the members of the court upon seeing Śūrpaṅakhā disfigured.

As soon as she arrived, the Rākṣasa women of the ancient city  
ran out toward her, beating their bellies, in grief and pain.  
How could they bear her coming, with her nose cut off,  
all alone, and her brother master over the three worlds?

They saw how she was at once and when they had seen her,  
they didn't know what to say, and the Rākṣasa men clashed  
their hands together as if they were thunderbolts from which  
fire rose to their eyes and they stood there, biting their lips. (*Kampan* 3.7. 26-27)<sup>1</sup>

The scene continues to describe the thoughts of the rākṣasas as they attempt to figure out who could have done this to Śūrpaṅakhā. At first they wonder whether it was any of the gods, or maybe the wounds were self inflicted (3.7.30).<sup>2</sup> Or did Śūrpaṅakhā behave in an unchaste manner, and was therefore punished by her brother Khara?

And others said, "No one would dare do this to her,  
famous for so high a family. It must have been Khara,  
her protector, thinking she was unchaste and had soiled  
the honor of the family, who took away her beauty" (*Kampan* 3.7.32).<sup>3</sup>

We are then provided with a description of Rāvaṇa's appearance. In *Vālmīki*, the scene begins with a description of Rāvaṇa's splendor and form. *Vālmīki* describes Rāvaṇa more favorably than he does Śūrpaṅakhā, even though Rāvaṇa is also a rākṣasa.

He was seated upon a golden throne radiant as the sun, and he looked like a fire on a golden altar blazing with rich oblations.

A hero invincible in combat with gods, *gandharvas*, spirits, or great seers, he looked like Death himself with jaws agape.

He carried lightening-bolt wounds received in clashes with gods and *asuras*. His chest was seamed with scars where Airāvata's pointed tusks had gored him.

He has twenty arms and ten necks. His regalia was a wonder to behold. A broad-chested, mighty king, he was marked with all the marks of royalty.

He sparkled with earrings of burnished gold and the glossy beryl he wore. His arms were handsome, his teeth bright white, his mouth huge, and he was as tall as a mountain (3.30.5-9).<sup>4</sup>

Tulsīdās forgoes any description and begins with Śūrpaṅakhā asking her brother how he could bear to see her like this. “O Ten headed, to think that you should live and see me thus treated” (Dohā 21b).<sup>5</sup> Śūrpaṅakhā, in Vālmīki's narrative, scolds Rāvaṇa saying that because he is too consumed by sensual pleasure, he has allowed this to happen to her, and not only suggests that he is a bad brother but also an incompetent king, as he is not even aware of the threat posed by Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa.

Drunk as you are on sensual pleasures, so licentious and unbridled,  
you overlook the one thing you must not, the presence of  
terrible danger.

When a lord of the earth is lustful, addicted to vulgar pleasures,  
a slave to his passions, his subjects see him as no better than  
a cremation fire.

If a king fails to attend to affairs himself and in timely fashion,  
those affairs come to grief, so too his kingdom and the king himself.

The rule of men who is not his own master, grants no audience,  
or makes no use of spies is shunned by men as elephants  
shun a muddy riverbank.

She goes on to say:

But you are a fool, Rāvaṇa, and devoid of such virtues, and so lack the spies to tell you of the massacre of the rākṣasas.

A king who misjudges his enemy, is addicted to sensual pleasures, fails to recognize the proper time and place for things, gives no thought to weighing the pros and cons of an issue-such a king soon ruins his kingdom and himself (Vālmīki 3.31.2-5 & 21-22).<sup>6</sup>

While Śūrpaṅkhā approaches Rāvaṇa in Vālmīki and Tulsīdās as the wronged sister seeking vengeance, this is not the case for Kampan. In the Tamil version, her motivation is to possess Rāma, and thereby fulfill her love. In the other two versions, she is no longer consumed with love or lust, rather she is vindictive, and wants Rāvaṇa to retaliate against Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. She wants Rāvaṇa to kill them. She tells Rāvaṇa about Sītā, in Vālmīki, describing her beauty, in effect providing Rāvaṇa with a motivation to kill Rāma.

Rāma has a lawful wife named Sītā, princess of Videha. And what a glorious woman she is, with her large eyes, slender waist, and full hips.

No goddess, no gandharva woman, no yakṣa or kinnara woman, no mortal woman so beautiful have I ever seen before on the face of this earth.

He who claims Sītā as wife and receives her delighted embraces has more reason to live than anyone else in all the worlds, the breaker of fortresses, Indra himself, included.

She is a woman of good character, with a form beyond all praise, a beauty unequalled on earth. She would make a perfect wife for you, and you a perfect husband for her.

How broad her hips, how full and high her breasts, how lovely her face. Why, I all but brought her back to be your wife.

The moment you saw Vaidehī's full moon-face, you would find yourself at the mercy of the arrows of Manmatha, god of love.

If you have any interest in taking her to wife, put your best foot forward at once to win her.

At the same time, lord of rākṣasas, do one last act of kindness for the Rākṣasas, and slay that cruel Rāma, who is living a hermit's life.

When you have killed him and Lakṣmaṇa, the great chariot-fighter, with your sharp arrows, you will then enjoy the widowed Sītā to your heart's content (Vālmikī 3.32.14-22).<sup>7</sup>

Śūrpaṇakhā uses Sītā's beauty to entice Rāvaṇa. For Rāvaṇa, the abduction of Sītā is not only a way of satisfying his lust, but also way to weaken Rāma, so that he will be easier to defeat in war (3.34.20).<sup>8</sup> In Tulsīdās, Sītā's abduction is presented as a product of war, she is simply a trophy. Kampan, on the other hand, presents Rāvaṇa as completely in love with Sītā, as Śūrpaṇakhā is with Rāma. He falls in love with Sītā when Śūrpaṇakhā describes her in great detail (3.7. 69-75).<sup>9</sup> His motivation then is to be with her, to have her as his wife.

He forgot Khara and he forgot the power  
of the man who was living even though  
he had cut off the nose of his sister.

He forgot the shame that he had suffered  
and forgot the curse he had once incurred,  
but because of the arrows of the God of Love  
which have conquered even Śiva, he could not  
forget the woman he had heard described (Kampan 3.7.83).<sup>10</sup>

After that he spends a restless night, longing for Sītā, much as Śūrpaṇakhā did during the night after she met Rāma. Similarly, the fact that he is a raksasa whose very nature is evil, does not seem to be an issue. He, like Śūrpaṇakhā is entranced by the divine.

It couldn't be calmed. His love was growing  
by hundreds and hundreds of leaps.  
The flowers on his soft bed though moistened  
by the cooling drops of water  
from the fragrant north wind turned black.  
His arms that has defeated the eight

Elephants of Space and his body grew thin.  
His heart weakened. His life caught of fire.

When sandal paste to cool him mingled with  
sweet-smelling powders and lovely  
soft shoots and buds were spread on him,  
then as if the skin were burning up  
from caustic salve, his body burned, burned  
as he suffered. He sucked his breath and sucked  
his breath like a powerful bellows blowing  
and blowing up a raging fire.

Without firm virtue, not thinking himself evil,  
the sinner had his thoughts never away  
from that woman. Desire rising in him to see  
her body, she whose eyes were like  
dark lotus, a spear, a blue water lily,  
the green flesh of an unripe mango,  
he went on suffering and his life  
was pain for him, was pain for him (3.7.90-92).<sup>11</sup>

In all three versions it is Śūrpaṅkhā who motivates Rāvaṇa to abduct Sītā. For Vālmīki, Rāvaṇa, although lustful for Sītā, wants to kidnap her in order to weaken Rāma. Śūrpaṅkhā tells him to kill Rāma so that he may take her as his wife. Tulsīdās presents Sītā's abduction as part of war; Sītā is just the property of Rāvaṇa's enemy. Furthermore, Rāvaṇa speculates that if Rāma is actually God, he will escape transmigration if killed by him. "If God himself has become incarnate, in order to gladden the gods and relieve the earth of its burden, then if I go and fight against him and lose my life by an arrow of the Lord's, I shall escape further transmigration; prayer will not do for one like me in demon form" (Caupāi 21).<sup>12</sup> Here we see that Tulsīdās places Rāvaṇa in the role of bhakta, seeking salvation, an escape from samsāra. Tulsīdās, allows the rāksasa to have this opportunity, regardless of his demon form. His negative depiction of Śūrpaṅkhā, it would seem then, has little to do with her being a rāksasī, and more to do with being a woman. Only in Kampan's telling is Rāvaṇa's motivation love. This is similar to

Śūrpaṅakhā's feelings for Rāma as presented in the Tamil version. While she is no longer interested in Rāma and wants him dead in Tulsīdās and Vālmīki, she is still deeply in love with Rāma in Kampan, and wants Rāvaṇa to abduct Sītā not for vengeance, but so that she may have Rāma. At one point she tells him how her feelings for Rāma are similar to his for Sītā.

“As your consciousness, ” she said, “obsessed,  
fixes on nothing else  
and your great desire, spreading wide,  
burns within you,  
everywhere that your eyes turn,  
they light on her,  
and she appears for you! Look!  
This is an old story. ”

When she had spoken, the Rākṣasa said to her,  
“Let all this be.  
Why is that you see only that Rāma?  
What is the reason? ”

And she said, “Since the day that he imposed  
incurable suffering on me,  
From that day forward I have not been  
able to forget him” (Kampan 3.7.151-152).<sup>13</sup>

In Kampan's narrative, Śūrpaṅakhā does not tell Rāvaṇa that the reason she was mutilated was because she tried to abduct Sītā so that she could be with Rāma. Rather she says that the attempted abduction of Sītā was for him, so that she could give Sītā to him. In Tulsīdās' telling she blames her disfiguration on her identity as Rāvaṇa's sister saying, “It was his younger brother who cut off my ears and nose and made a mock of me when he heard that I was your sister” (Caupāi 20).<sup>14</sup> In Vālmīki's version, it is unclear whether Śūrpaṅakhā tells Rāvaṇa the reason for her mutilation. Śūrpaṅakhā, in Kampan's account, is still tremendously lovesick for Rāma. Still keeping within the framework of devotion, she continues to try to find a way to be with him. Even though he has rejected

her, she still desires him. Likewise, Rāvaṇa's thoughts of vengeance against the man who has shamed his sister, and thereby dishonored the family are subordinated to his feelings of love towards Sītā.

This interaction allows the foundation to be laid for the eventual confrontation between Rāma and Rāvaṇa, as it is at this point that Rāvaṇa decides to bring Sītā to Lankā. In all three versions, he goes to Mārīca for help. Mārīca is a rāksasa who turns himself into a golden deer who tricks Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa into leaving Sītā alone, allowing Rāvaṇa to approach her.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampaṇ*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 165.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* 166.

<sup>4</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Araṇyakāṇḍa*, trans. Pollack, 150.

<sup>5</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Tulasī Dāsa*, trans. Growse, 441.

<sup>6</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Araṇyakāṇḍa*, trans. Pollack, 152-153.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* 154.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* 159.

<sup>9</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampaṇ*, Hart & Heifetz, 173-174.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* 176.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid* 178.

<sup>12</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Tulasī Dāsa*, trans. Growse, 442.

<sup>13</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampaṇ*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 192-193.

<sup>14</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Tulasī Dāsa*, trans. Growse, 442.



### Chapter Four: Rāvana and Sītā

Before Sītā is abducted by Rāvana, she and Lakṣmaṇa are alone, as Rāma has gone to pursue the golden deer at Sītā's request. In all three versions, Sītā sends Lakṣmaṇa to see whether Rāma is alive since Mārīca, simulating Rāma's voice, had called out to Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa in distress. Lakṣmaṇa does not want to go, as he is aware that Rāma can take care of himself, and he does not want to leave Sītā alone. In Vālmīki's telling, Sītā accuses Lakṣmaṇa of desiring her, and therefore being happy that Rāma is out of the way.

You treacherously followed Rāma to the forest, the two of you alone: You are either in the employ of Bharata or secretly plotting to get me (Vālmīki 3.43.22)<sup>1</sup>

To this, Lakṣmaṇa responds to what he perceives as the general character of women:

Such were the words Sītā spoke to Lakṣmaṇa, so harsh they made his hair bristle with horror. But he controlled himself, and with hands cupped in reverence he addressed her:

I dare not answer, Maithilī, for you are a deity in my eyes. And yet inappropriate words from a woman come as nothing new.

This is the nature of women the whole world over: Women care nothing for righteousness, they are flighty, sharp-tongued, and divisive.

May all the inhabitants of the forest give ear and bear me witness how my words of reason met so harsh a reply from you.

Curse you and be damned, that you could suspect me, when I am only following the orders of my guru. How like a woman to be so perverse (Vālmīki 3.43.25-29)!<sup>2</sup>

After hearing this, Sītā begins to weep, and threatens suicide (3.43.33-34).<sup>3</sup> At this point Lakṣmaṇa leaves to find Rāma. In Tulsīdās' version, Sītā convinces Lakṣmaṇa to go,

without a threat of suicide. Furthermore, Tulsīdās indicates that this is all part of a divine plan.

“Make haste, your brother is in some sad strait”  
Lakṣmana answered with a smile, “Hearken, mother;  
he, by the play of whose eyebrows this world is annihilated, cannot be imagined as having fallen into any difficulty. ” But when Sītā urged him with taunting words, Lakṣmaṇa’s resolution- for such was Hari’s will- was shaken; he made over charge of everything to the forest and its gods, and went after Rāhu of the moon-like Rāvaṇa (Tulsīdās Caupāi 26).<sup>4</sup>

In the Tamil telling Lakṣmaṇa tries to convince Sītā that if Rāma were dying, the order of the world would come to an end and therefore no real danger could have come to him (3.8.10).<sup>5</sup> Sītā then scolds Lakṣmaṇa, asking how he could be so calm when his brother was in trouble. She then threatens to commit saṭī, moving towards the fire (3.8.13).<sup>5</sup> Fearing that Sītā would kill herself, Lakṣmaṇa decides to go, ignoring Rāma’s orders to stay with her.

“If I stay here, she will not be, she will die in the fire,  
and if I should go to him who is like an immovable mountain,  
evil will arrive without fail and unfold. What should I do,  
who seem to have a great desire for my dear life? ” and he wept.

If the god Dharma is able, he will make it come out well.  
Rather than have her die, I will dare to do this, leaving  
her here and going. I am an ignorant man, I feel this  
suffering because I was born, because of the actions in some other life (Kampan 3.8.17-18)!<sup>6</sup>

With this, Lakṣmaṇa departs, leaving Sītā alone. In all three versions, Rāvaṇa had been watching, and seeing that Sītā was unaccompanied, takes this opportunity to approach her. Rāvaṇa does not, in any of the three tellings, approach her in his rākṣasa form, rather he changes into a holy man. In Vālmīki’s narrative, he approaches her wearing a saffron robe, and in Kampan he carries the three bamboo sticks and is singing the Sāma Veda.

What is interesting is that both Vālmīki and Kampan make reference to the fact that the animals and other elements of nature trembled with fear when Rāvaṇa approached Sītā.

In Vālmīki's narrative:

At the appearance of the dreaded, evil creature, the trees that grew in Janasthāna stopped rustling and the wind died down.

At the sight of him peering around with his blood-red eyes, the swift current of the Godāvarī river began to slacken in fear (3.44.6-7)<sup>7</sup>

And in Kampan's telling:

The mountains and the trees trembled and the birds, their tongues reined in, were quiet. The animals were afraid. The snakes shrunk up their hoods and cowered, because all of them had eyes that could see the Rākṣasa in cruel and sinful action (3.8.25)<sup>8</sup>

One wonders, at this point, why Sītā was not aware of the imminent danger, as she is considered to be connected to the earth and is seen as "mistress of the plants and animals" (Dimmit 1982, 210).<sup>9</sup> One would think that Sītā should have been aware that this wandering mendicant was not a Brahmin, but some sort of evil creature. It would seem that this did not even cross her mind as she bowed to him (3.8.34).<sup>10</sup>

Sītā, in all three versions, welcomes Rāvaṇa, and treats him as an honoured ascetic. In the Sanskrit narrative, he praises her form, asking her whether she is Śrī, and at one point even cautions her about the danger of rākṣasas.

I urge you to go home, this is no place for you to be living.  
For this is the lair of dreaded Rākṣasas, who can change their form  
at will. (Vālmīki 3.44.23).<sup>11</sup>

Vālmīki comments on Rāvaṇa's feelings for Sītā: "With the arrow of Manmatha, god of love, lodged deep within his heart" (3.44.13).<sup>12</sup> But Kampan has a much longer passage describing Rāvaṇa's desire- his love for Sītā.

With his body sweating like flowing musth of an elephant,  
like an ocean of desire crossed by rolling waves of love,  
he saw her way with own eyes, she who was an ornament  
to beauty itself, repository of fame, the queen of purity.

When he saw the form of her whose beauty surpassed  
the women of the gods and whose bright words were like singing  
of the sleepless kokila, what can I say of his thoughts as he felt  
longing? His heroic shoulders grew thin and wasted away.

Why say his row of eyes were as ecstatic as a swarm of bees  
Whose humming is music when they settle and drink from a spring  
Full of flower nectar, at her beauty as lovely as a  
peacock in the forest? No! They were ecstatic as his heart!

“Are twenty eyes enough here for me to look at the body  
the color of a ruby of her who has left home  
on the lotus with his red petals. I have no thousand  
eyes that never blink!” he said and he felt pain.

“Are all the thirty-five million lives that I have gained  
through my faultless tapas enough,” he thought, “for this lovely  
ocean of beauty without any shores, this woman  
standing here with a row of bangles on her wrist?”

And he thought, “Now I am saved. I will carry out her orders  
while she rules, as she should, over all the three worlds,  
and the gods and the Asuras together with their wives will be  
slaves to her, their duty only to do what they are commanded!”

“If she has this radiance in her face as she suffers pain,  
what must her smile be like with the tender leaves of her teeth  
glistening?” he thought, “I will give my kingdom away  
to the younger sister who drew me to this women with loosened hair.” (Kampan  
3.8.26-32).<sup>13</sup>

Absent in Tulsīdās’ narrative, but occurring in both Vālmīki and Kampan, Rāvaṇa asks  
Sītā who she is. To which she tells the story of the exile of Rāma accompanied by his  
brother Lakṣmaṇa and herself. Like Śūrpaṇakhā, in both the Sanskrit and Tamil tellings,  
Sītā identifies herself with regard to her male kin.

In Vālmīki:

I am the daughter of Janaka, the great king of Mithilā. My name is Sītā, may it please the best of twice-born, and I am the wife of Rāma (3.45.3)<sup>14</sup>

In Kampan, unlike in Vālmīki, Sītā responds to Rāvaṇa following the custom found in Caṅkam literature as well as classical Sanskrit of not uttering her husband's name.<sup>15</sup>

“Holy man! you who follow the great path free of sin!  
My name is Jānakī, elder daughter of Janaka, who in his heart recognized no other gods, other than men like you, and I am the wife of Kākutstha,”<sup>16</sup> she said, whose purity was flawless (3.8.39).<sup>17</sup>

Śūrpaṅkhā, if we recall from earlier in the Forest Book, responds to Rāma's queries in a similar manner. However instead of identifying her male kin first, in Vālmīki's version she tells him of herself, without regard to her family.

My name is Śūrpaṅkhā. I am a rākṣasa woman, who can take any form at will, and I roam this wilderness all alone, striking terror into every living thing.

The rākṣasa named Rāvaṇa, the lord of all Rākṣasas, is my brother, so too the powerful Kumbhakarna, who lies ever fast asleep

So is Vibhīṣaṇa, but he is righteous and does not behave like a rākṣasa. My brothers are Khara and Duṣaṇa, famed for their might in battle (Vālmīki 3.16.18-20).<sup>18</sup>

In Kampan:

I am granddaughter of Brahmā, the god  
in the flower, younger sister of Kubera.  
his hands filled with wealth, who is the ally  
of Śiva, destroyer of the three cities,  
and I am sister to the overlord of the three worlds  
who has defeated all the elephants of the air,  
who has lifted up the silver mountain of Kailāsa.  
I am a virgin and my name is Kāmavallī (3.5.39).<sup>19</sup>

While Sītā and Śūrpaṅkhā respond to the question of identity in a similar manner, Sītā truly is bound to her male kin. That is, for Sītā, there does not seem to be any thoughts of unfaithfulness, her loyalty is to her husband. Śūrpaṅkhā, on the other hand, is willing to betray her ties; she has no qualms about forsaking her brothers to be with Rāma. In Vālmīki she states: “But I am prepared to defy them all Rāma, for I have never seen anyone like you” (3.16.21).<sup>20</sup> In the Tamil telling, she goes as far as to say that she does not associate with her brothers, as they are not virtuous.

As soon as the hero had spoken,  
 the lying woman said, “O perfect man!  
 I do not mingle with those beings  
 who are without virtue. I seek  
 the presence of the gods or of sages  
 who are noble. Lord! Because  
 there is something I am in need of,  
 I have come to see you here.” (Kampan 3.5.43)<sup>21</sup>

Sītā also asks Rāvaṇa, in the Sanskrit and Tamil versions, who he is. In Vālmīki’s version he immediately tells her that he is Rāvaṇa, and he intends for her to be his wife.

I am he who terrifies the worlds, with all their gods, asuras,  
 and great serpents. I am Rāvaṇa, Sītā, supreme lord of the hosts  
 of rākṣasas

Now that I have set eyes on you, flawless, golden lady dressed  
 in silk, I shall no longer take pleasure in my own wives.

From one place and another I have carried off many splendid  
 women. May it please you to become chief queen over every one  
 of them (Vālmīki 3.45. 22-24).<sup>22</sup>

Sītā responds very angrily, stating three times that she is faithful to Rāma. She shows her loyalty to Rāma, and, following the Laws of Manu, considers her husband to be a God.

I am faithful to Rāma, my husband, the equal of the great Indra,  
 unshakable as a great mountain, imperturbable as the great sea.

I am faithful to Rāma, the great armed, great chested prince,  
who moves with the boldness of a lion, a lionlike man, a lion  
among men.

I am faithful to Rāma, the king's most cherished son, a great-  
armed, mighty prince of wide renown and strict self control,  
whose face is like the full moon. (Vālmīki 3.45.29-31)<sup>23</sup>

Just as Śūrpaṅkhā attempted to deceive Rāma by assuming a beautiful appearance, and false virtue, Rāvaṇa, in the Tamil narrative, lies and tells Sītā that he is helping a great king find a worthy wife. Speaking, obviously of himself, he proceeds to tell of the king's greatness and virtue. Sītā, realizing he is not who he seems, questions him as to how he can live among the rākṣasas who do not respect the order of the world (3.8.52-53).<sup>24</sup>

Rāvaṇa tries to defend the rākṣasas, stating that they "are no more evil than the gods" (3.8.53).<sup>25</sup> This can be contrasted to Śūrpaṅkhā's response when Rāma talked about the evil nature of the rākṣasas. Śūrpaṅkhā, referring to the rākṣasas as beings without virtue, was prepared to help Rāma defeat them in battle. As mentioned earlier, she wanted to form an alliance with Rāma and his brother, and was prepared to help them eradicate the rākṣasas.

"Yes you can kill them," she said, "you can be told what strategies  
they will try, you can win  
and end their string of victories, you can overcome everyone  
of their tricks if only you see me  
not as a woman with a gapping mouth, with all my teeth showing  
because my upper lip has been cut away!  
Listen to me! You who come from a land where water nourishes  
all grains and offers them to people! "

Even if you don't give her up, she whose arms are as graceful as bamboo  
would I be nothing to you?  
If you are determined to go into battle against the Rākṣasas who are outlaws,  
who are ignorant and murderous, then  
since I understand the various magic powers of their intricate weapons,  
won't I be able to repel them?

Don't you know what the proverb says, that a snake is the one to search out the lair of a snake?(Kampan 3.5.138-139)<sup>26</sup>

Rāvaṇa, in contrast, comes to the defense of the rākṣasas. Sītā becomes more and more suspicious, and tells Rāvaṇa of how Rāma has killed many rākṣasas. Angered that she is implying that human men had the power to do this, to bring down the rākṣasas, Rāvaṇa swells with anger. It is not clear in the Tamil narrative whether he changes to his rākṣasa appearance at this point, but he does threaten her, saying that he could kill her, but because of his love for her, he will not. He, unlike Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa (when confronting Śūrpaṅakhā), has no qualms about killing a woman.

“Witness my heroic strength through which  
I conquered and the gods do my bidding!  
When you said that men have the power  
who live like worms in the mud,  
not because you are a woman did you survive! ”  
he said, “I would have decided to crush you  
into a handful of food and chew you up,  
but had I done it, I would have lost my life. ”(Kampan 3.8.67)<sup>27</sup>

In Vālmīki and Tulsīdās' narrative it is clear that Rāvaṇa reverts to his terrifying form. In Vālmīki's telling, Sītā declares that though Rāvaṇa may abduct her, as long as Rāma is around he will never enjoy her. She also tells him that should he abduct her, he will lose his life. Ignoring her words, Rāvaṇa tells her to give up her love for a mortal being, as she was to become his wife. He assumes, at this point, the appearance of a rākṣasa. In Tulsīdās' telling, Rāvaṇa takes on the rākṣasa form after he speaks inappropriately to Sītā. There is no mention of her becoming his wife.

After repeating a variety of legends and moral sentiments, he had recourse to threats and blandishments. Said Sītā, “Hearken, reverend father; what you say is hateful to me.” Then Rāvaṇa displayed his proper form; and she was terror-stricken When he declared his name (Tulsīdās Caupāi 26).<sup>28</sup>



What Tulsīdās and Kampan share in common is that they show Rāvaṇa, before abducting Sītā, bowing to her feet, reinforcing both authors' view that Sītā is a goddess. Sītā rejects Rāvaṇa's love or worship, comparing him to "a dog who desires the oblation pure men offer into the rising fire!" (3.8.69).<sup>29</sup>

Only in Kampan's telling, however, does Rāvaṇa respect her purity, and not touch her when he takes her. Rāvaṇa, especially in Kampan, can be seen as a bhakta, a devotee, of Sītā.

As he came and bent to the ground at her feet,  
she cried out in grief, "Lord! Young prince!"  
beautiful as endurance itself, like someone whose life  
is quaking below a descending bloodstained sword.

Then, right there, in his evil, without touching her  
whose ornaments were lovely, remembering the curse that he was  
never to seize a woman, he dug out a yojana of earth below  
and around her with his strong arms high as columns.

He lifted it onto his tall chariot and the woman  
with dense bangles, her precious life obscured,  
fainted away like lightening fallen to the earth.  
Then he hurried to fly off across the sky (Kampan 3.8.73-75).<sup>30</sup>

The curse that Kampan is referring to is the one placed upon him by Nalakubara. It would seem that Rāvaṇa raped Rambhā, the wife of his brother's son. She tells her husband, Nalakūbara, who curses Rāvaṇa that he may never approach a woman, unless she returns his love, or else he will die.<sup>31</sup> This curse does not seem to be an issue for either Vālmīki or Tulsīdās, as Rāvaṇa physically grabs Sītā in both tellings.

And so speaking to Sītā, princess of Mithilā, who deserved the same kindness she always showed others, Rāvaṇa seized her as the planet Buddha might seize the star Rohiṇī in the sky.

With his left hand he seized the lotus-eyed Sītā by her hair and  
with his right hand by her thighs.

With his long arms and sharp fangs he resembled a mountain peak; seeing him advancing like death himself, the spirits of the forest fled overpowered by fear.

Then with a dreadful rumble Rāvaṇa's great chariot came into view, that unearthly chariot fashioned by magic, with wheels of gold, and harnessed with asses.

With loud, harsh threats he then clutched Vaidehī to his breast and boarded the chariot. (Valmiki 3.47.15-19).<sup>32</sup>

In Tulsīdās' telling, even though she is definitely a deity, Rāvaṇa's physical contact with her does not pollute her, as we have to remember that this is not actually Sītā, but rather Sītā's shadow. In Tulsīdās' narrative, after Rāma had killed Khara and his army, fearing for Sītā's safety, Rāma instructed Sītā to enter the fire, leaving her shadow.

“Hearken, most lovely and amiable of faithful wives, I am about to act a fantastic human part. Be you absorbed into a fire until I have completed the destruction of the demons.” As soon as Rāma had finished speaking, Sītā laid her lord's feet upon her heart and entered into the fire, leaving only an image of herself, of exactly the same appearance and the same amiable and gentle disposition. Even Lakṣmaṇa did not know the secret of what the Lord had done (Tulsīdās Caupāi 22).<sup>33</sup>

The existence of Sītā's shadow is unique to the Rāmācaritmānas, as it is actually Sītā who is abducted in both Kampan and Vālmīki's tellings. However, in both Kampan's version, in which Rāvaṇa doesn't touch Sītā, and Tulsīdās' version, where he touches only her shadow, Sītā's purity remains unaffected. Only in Vālmīki does she suffer the indignity of being touched by a man other than her husband. Another interesting point is that although Kampan depicts Rāvaṇa and Śūrpaṇakhā as bhaktas, they do not transcend their evil rāksasa natures. Kampan still attaches immoral qualities to both rāksasas, regardless of their love for the divine forms of Sītā and Rāma, respectively. However, Rāvaṇa, despite his nature, seems to respect the rules of purity and pollution by not touching Sītā.

Lakṣmaṇa physically touched Śūrpaṅakhā when disfiguring her. He did not accord Śūrpaṅakhā the courtesy shown to a pure woman.

“You! Stop! ” he shouted, hurrying toward her,  
 deciding not to take his bow  
 since this was a woman, and with his fine hand,  
 he seized her strong, thick hair  
 that was welling out like a glowing fire  
 and dragging her down by it,  
 he kicked her and then he drew out his curving  
 sword that flashed radiance.

In anger, she tried to get up, thinking  
 to hold her back by strength  
 and escape into the sky, but easily Lakṣmaṇa  
 pulled her down and saying these words,  
 “Don’t make people suffer! ” he cut off first  
 her nose, then her ears, then the nipples  
 of her hard burning breasts and his own anger then  
 cut off, he released her hair (Kampan 3.5. 93-94).<sup>34</sup>

For in his mind and by her own admission she was not pure. She had, by approaching Rāma, lost all virtue.

The news of Sītā’s abduction was relayed to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa by Jaṭāyus, the vulture king, who was mortally wounded when he attempted to stop Rāvaṇa from taking Sītā. Having heard this, and after performing funeral rites for Jaṭāyus, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa attempt to find Sītā, whereupon Lakṣmaṇa encounters the rākṣasī, Ayomukhī.

<sup>1</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Aranyakāṇḍa*, trans. Pollack, 178.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* 179.

<sup>4</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Tulasī Dāsa*, trans. Growse, 446.

<sup>5</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 219.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* 220.

<sup>7</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Aranyakāṇḍa*, trans. Pollack, 180.

<sup>8</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 223.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of Sītā’s connection to the earth see Dimmit 1982 and Kinsley 1986.

<sup>10</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 223.

<sup>11</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Aranyakāṇḍa*, trans. Pollack, 181.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid* 219.

<sup>13</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 223

- <sup>14</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Araryakāṇḍa*, trans. Pollack, 182.
- <sup>15</sup> See end note 3.8.37 in *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Araryakanda*, trans. Pollack, 366.
- <sup>16</sup> <sup>16</sup>Kākutstha – an epithet of the kings of the solar dynasty, sometimes used for Rāma (Hart & Heifetz), a common epithet of princes of the Ikṣvāku dynasty, especially Rāma and his brothers (Pollack).
- <sup>17</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 224.
- <sup>18</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Araryakāṇḍa*, trans. Pollack, 124.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 92.
- <sup>20</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Araryakāṇḍa*, trans. Pollack, 124.
- <sup>21</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 93.
- <sup>22</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Araryakāṇḍa*, trans. Pollack, 184.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid* 29-31.
- <sup>24</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 226.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid* 245.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid* 245.
- <sup>28</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Tulasī Dāsa*, trans. Growse, 446.
- <sup>29</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 230.
- <sup>30</sup> *Āṅṭāl*, also compares human males to dogs in her Nācciyār Tirumoḷi. See Dehejia, *Āṅṭāl and her Path of Devotion: Poems of a Woman Saint from South India*.
- <sup>31</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 231.
- <sup>32</sup> For Further discussion see Doniger 1997.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīkī: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume 111 Araryakanda*, trans. Pollack, 188.
- <sup>34</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Tulasī Dāsa*, trans. Growse, 443.
- <sup>35</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 104.

## **Chapter 5: Ayomukhī and Lakṣmaṇa**

The interaction between Ayomukhī and Lakṣmaṇa is absent in Tulsīdās' version. Kampan and Vālmīki present the scene in different contexts. For Vālmīki, Lakṣmaṇa is walking just ahead of Rāma when he stumbles upon the rāksasī, Ayomukhī. In Kampan, Rāma has sent Lakṣmaṇa to fetch some water; it is here that he meets Ayomukhī. In both tellings Ayomukhī expresses her desire for Lakṣmaṇa, and is eventually mutilated by him. It would seem that Kampan uses this scene to show Rāma's great attachment to Lakṣmaṇa, as during their separation Rāma becomes worried about Lakṣmaṇa's whereabouts. This illustrates Rāma's relationship with his devotee, it signifies the classical devotional paradigm of friendship, and in this case, it is also a relationship between brothers. God needs the devotee just as the devotee needs God

He has been the eyes for me who am alone  
in this black darkness that has arisen. I have  
no other eyes. I feel anguished! My heart is wounded.  
I cannot even think! How will I find him?

He goes on further to say:

I will not live through this day. And all  
of our own will surely perish when someone  
tells them that I am dead. You are cruel! You have killed  
all of your kinsmen together! Is this too a virtue?

“When I gave up becoming a king in the line of kings  
that begins with Mandhātā, those who are truly  
connected to me each left but when I was alone,  
you went with me. Have you left me now and gone?”

He said this and rose to his feet but fell back again.  
Sitting there and thinking, he was deeply confused.  
More than one trouble had happened. “It does not thunder without lightning.  
How will it end in this darkness?” thought he who is the Lord.

He searched for him everywhere, in many places. He ran  
and he suffered as he called out his brother's name. He grew

so tired that his life was ready to wither and vanish. He was bewildered. He seemed a great elephant charging around in the ecstasy of rut (Kampan 3.9.67, 72-75).<sup>1</sup>

Lakṣmaṇa's encounter with Ayomukhī is important for our purpose since it illustrates an attitude to overt female sexuality complementing what we see in the Śūrpaṅkhā episode. It can be argued, however, that, at least in Kampan's version, Lakṣmaṇa's mutilation of Ayomukhī was out of fear for his life, as she did intend to abduct him if he did not comply with her request.

“When I approach him, if he will not consent to what I ask of him but refuses himself to me, then I will seize him and go to my cave where I will make love to him as much as I wish,” she thought, and she who was fiercer than fire came quickly then, closer to him (Kampan 3.9.42).<sup>2</sup>

Ayomukhī approaches Lakṣmaṇa in her rākṣasī form in both versions. Although Kampan presents the rākṣasī Śūrpaṅkhā in a beautiful form, Ayomukhī is of terrifying appearance.

She exhaled fire in her breath and she could chew up a herd of elephants with her teeth and swallow them into her stomach with pleasure. Her breasts were bound with a rope fit for tying a strong cruel mountain snake. Her eyes were sunken.

She had selected an anklet made of strong lions and of yālis which she had captured and lashed together with a snake. Her face was like the enormous sun that rises on that day when the universe is destroyed and all things come to their end.

Her mouth was a huge cave like a ladle that could be used for drying up the ocean in a single scoop, while her red hair spreading out around her and moving in waves resembled the look of the fire that blazes at the end of the universe.

She wore strips of fat clinging to guts and intertwined with man heads and chunks of flesh that all hung down to graze her feet. Around her waist she wore a hooded snake which touched the ground, and she was gnashing her teeth like thunder.

Her glances seemed to say, “These eyes are like the burning eyes of Śiva!” but the flaming of her teeth made the eyes seem cool. She staggered the world, displacing mountains and uniting oceans. As she walked, the faultless earth felt shame at being a woman too.

She had filled her wrists that hung low with bangles of long snakes. The necklace she wore was of male tigers with a snake linking them. Her tāli was formed of many yālis all tied to one another. Her earrings, that were dangling down were made of muderous lions (Kampan 3.9.43-48).<sup>3</sup>

Here we see Kampan indicate that the “earth felt shame at being a woman.” Ayomukhī is powerful, aggressive and destructive, characteristics not deemed suitable for a woman.

And in Vālmīki:<sup>4</sup>

..[A]nd eternally enveloped in darkness, the two sons of Daśaratha, tigers among men, beheld not far from that cave an ogress of gigantic form and hideous appearance. The aforesaid two brothers, Śrī Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, found her there to be a source of terror to men of deficient strength, loathsome and grim of aspect, with a protruding belly and sharp teeth and a hard skin, fierce and tall of stature, given to devouring fearful beasts, her hair disheveled (3.65.8-13).<sup>5</sup>

This time the rāksasī's attention is not on Rāma, but rather on Lakṣmaṇa. Vālmīki has Ayomukhī appear and, on sight, proposition Lakṣmaṇa, by embracing him and asking him to “revel” with her. She also tells him what a “veritable acquisition” she would be to him. Just as Śūrpaṅkhā offered to form an alliance with Rāma, Ayomukhī wants to form one with Lakṣmaṇa. It is not clear whether Ayomukhī's offer is sexual or rather strategic in terms of the goal of ridding the forest of rāksasas. One would deduce that it is probably sexual as she just chanced upon Lakṣmaṇa and has no idea who he is. In response, Lakṣmaṇa cuts off her nose, ears and breasts. Vālmīki adds the breasts, quite

similar to Śūrpaṅakhā's mutilation in Kampan's telling. No indication is given as to why Vālmīki has Ayomukhī receive a harsher punishment than Śūrpaṅakhā in his telling. In the Tamil version, Ayomukhī follows Lakṣmaṇa for a while, yearning for him, expressing her love.

She followed him like a snake that does not retreat even  
when venerated mantras are uttered by men of excellent knowledge,  
and her pride and her cruelty softened and dwindled within her  
as she thought in her heart that this was the God of Love.

The Rākṣasī, her heart set on him, came with a love so great  
pain rose up within her. She halted, across from him. She thought,  
“with anguish that torments me know, how could I do anything except  
embrace him? How could I ever consume him?” and she was weeping (Kampan  
3.9.40-41).<sup>6</sup>

Just as Surpanakha fell in love with Rāma, so did Ayomukhī fall in love with Lakṣmaṇa, in Kampan's telling. The difference is that Lakṣmaṇa is not a god, so Ayomukhī's love cannot be fit into a devotional framework and would more aptly be classified as lust. She, unlike Śūrpaṅakhā, was not interested in marriage, rather her primary motivation was sex: she wanted to keep Lakṣmaṇa in her cave in order to make love with him at will. Śūrpaṅakhā's desire for Rāma, although overt like Ayomukhī's love for Lakṣmaṇa, was kept within the confines of socially accepted norms- that is, she wanted to be Rāma's wife. There is no mention of Ayomukhī wanting to marry Lakṣmaṇa. However, in keeping with codes of accepted behavior she, like Śūrpaṅakhā, also claimed to be virgin(3.5.39).<sup>7</sup>

He spoke to her and she, who was not ashamed to speak out before  
a strange man, said to him, with her heart aching and swaying  
within her like a swing, “I am Ayomukhī and I have come  
in happiness to you, out of my desire, with faultless love.”

And she had more to say: “O great, handsome hero!  
Give me back my sweet life quickly by pressing  
my breasts which no one ever before has touched  
to your broad lovely chest that is like gold ”(Kampan 3.9. 52-53)!<sup>8</sup>



After he rejects her and threatens her with violence unless she retreats she grabs him and attempts to fly to her cave at which point he cuts off her nose, ears, and breasts. He does not kill her, and is commended by Rāma, once they are reunited, for his honourable behavior.

The young prince said, “When I cut off her ears and they fell along with her nose and when I had rid her of her breasts that were tied up with a band, then it was that she made that noise, screaming,” and he cupped his hands in respect.

“You did not kill her though she followed you to kill in the thick darkness but you cut away and rid her of her nose! You have acted with grace, you of the line that begins with Manu! ” and sobbing and weeping for happiness, Rāma embraced him (Kampan 3.9.91-92).<sup>9</sup>

So while it can be argued that Lakṣmaṇa mutilated Śūrpaṅkhā in order to protect Sītā, similarly it may be said that Lakṣmaṇa disfigured Ayomukhī out of fear for his own life. However, if protection of Sītā or self-defense were the reasons for Lakṣmaṇa’s actions, it seems suspect that he chose to cut off the nose, ears and breasts—symbols of honour and femininity. By sparing both Śūrpaṅkhā’s and Ayomukhī’s lives, he left a constant reminder of their indiscretions.

Following Lakṣmaṇa’s encounter with Ayomukhī, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa then continue their search for Sītā and subsequently come into contact with the monster Khabandha who tries to devour them. The brothers cut off his hands at which point he tells them that he was cursed by a sage and had been waiting for them to liberate him. Khabandha also tells them about the monkey king, Sugrīva who will help them find Sītā, and of the ascetic, Śabarī who has been waiting for them.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampaṇ*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 280-281.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* 276.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* 276-277.

<sup>4</sup> I am using the translation in *Śrīmad Vālmiki- Rāmāyaṇa* (With Sanskrit Text and English Translation) as Pollack does not include this episode. See *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki: An Epic of Ancient India- Volume III Aranyakāṇḍa*, trans. Pollack, 349.

<sup>5</sup> *Śrīmad Vālmiki- Rāmāyaṇa* (With Sanskrit Text and English Translation) [Aranya-Kāṇḍa, Kiskindha-Kandha and Sundara- Kanda], 840.

<sup>6</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampaṇ*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 275.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* 92.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* 277.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* 284.

## Chapter 6: Rāma and Śabarī

After liberating Khabandha, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa set off to Śabarī's hermitage. In all three versions, Śabarī has been awaiting Rāma so that she may join the other sages in heaven. Śabarī represents for all three authors an ascetic, a pure woman. Her love for Rāma is apparent, especially in Tulsīdās' and Kampan's telling.

When she saw that Rāma had come to her abode, she remembered the words of the sage and was glad. With lotus eyes, mighty arms, hair fastened up in a knot on their head, and a garland of wild flowers upon their breast, one of dark hue, the other fair stood the two brothers. Śabarī fell down and clung to their feet. She was so drowned in love that no speech came to her lips, but again and again she bowed her head at their lotus feet, then reverently brought water and laved their feet and finally conducted them to seats of honour (Tulsīdās Caupāi 32).<sup>1</sup>

And in Kampan:

And with love then, she praised him,  
her eyes waterfalls of weeping,  
and she said, "My delusion of attachment  
is gone! The achievement of all the difficult  
tapas I have done for endless time  
is here! I have come to the end  
of my lives!" and she gave them what  
they needed... (3.11.3).<sup>2</sup>

The love exhibited by Śabarī confirms her position as a bhakta in these two tellings. In Vālmīki's narrative, Śabarī, like Lakṣmaṇa, views Rāma as her guru, and with his permission she enters the fire and joins the other sages in heaven. Rāma, in this version, if we remember, is a king, rather than a god. And although Śabarī treats both brothers with great reverence, she was waiting only for Rāma so that she could go to heaven.

Unlike Śūrpaṅkhā, Śabarī is praised by Rāma for her actions as a bhakta. The difference can be seen by the fact that Śabarī is an ascetic (a role not necessarily suggested for women), and her sexuality is thereby restricted. She does not desire Rāma

sexually, her love for him is that of a daughter for filial relationship. For Śabarī, there is no trace of sexual desire. She performed austerities in order to go to heaven. Her need for Rāma is to attain the world of the gods.

she said, "My father! Śiva came  
and Brahmā who sits in the lotus  
and all the gods. Indra himself,  
here looking at me with happiness,  
then declared, 'The goal of your faultless  
tapas has arrived. Worship  
Rāma as he should be served. That done,  
come to our world!' And they left me. "

"I have remained here, my father,  
because I knew that you would come.  
My pure actions have today  
flowered! " He looked with love  
at the empress of difficult tapas  
when she spoke and he said, "You  
are a woman who has lifted away our trouble  
and pain may all go well for you"(3.11.4-5)!<sup>3</sup>

In this manner Śabarī is loved and revered by Rāma for her austerities (tapas) and her dedication. She is ideal, as she has remained pure, patiently waiting for Rāma, and is thus rewarded. Śūrpaṅkhā, on the other hand, was perceived by Rāma as impure, since she approached Rāma unabashedly. Śūrpaṅkhā also performed austerities, however her goal was not liberation, but rather a union with Rāma. Furthermore, when she approached Rāma he was awed by her beauty as a woman, rather than treating her in a parental manner as a child. It is therefore not only Śūrpaṅkhā's actions that sets up the contrast between her and Śabarī, but Rāma's also. Kampan describes Rāma's response to the sight of Śūrpaṅkhā:

As he saw a body so softly gentle  
it could never be found  
in the immense world of the Nāgas, in heaven  
or on this earth,

he thought, “Who is she and who could equal this woman  
wearing ornaments  
that are lovely and is there any limit  
to the beauty within her?” (Kampan 3.5.36)<sup>4</sup>

Tulsīdās also presents Śabarī as an idealized bhakta. Taking this opportunity, once again, to comment on the general character of women, he makes Śabarī herself denigrate her female nature, as she encounters Rāma:

She stood before him with folded hands and as she gazed upon the Lord, her love waxed yet more vehement. “How can I hymn thy praises, seeing that I am of meanest descent and of dullest wit: the lowest of the low and a woman to boot; nay, among the lowest of women the one who is the most ignorant, O sinless god” (Tulsīdās Caupāi 33).<sup>5</sup>

But Rāma tells Śabarī that her gender does not matter, as it is right practice that leads one to heaven, and he tells her the nine practices of faith.

Said Raghupati: “Hearken, lady, to my words:  
I recognize no relationship save that of faith; neither lineage,  
family, religion, rank, wealth, power, connections, virtue, nor  
ability. A man without faith is of no more account than a cloud  
without water” (Tulsīdās Caupāi 33)<sup>6</sup>

[He goes on to explain the nine practices of faith.]

Verily, lady, whoever practices anyone of these, whether he be man or woman, animate or inanimate, is my friend; and you have them all in the highest degree. The heavenly prize, which the greatest ascetics scarcely win, is today within your reach. The result of seeing me is something most marvelous; every creature at once attains its proper consummation (Caupāi 34).<sup>7</sup>

This dialogue occurs only in Tulsīdās’ telling. Although Tulsīdās comments negatively on the general character of women throughout the Rāmacaritmānas, Rāma in his speech to Śabarī states faith makes it possible to overcome even women’s nature.

The interaction between Rāma and Śabarī lies in stark contrast to his interaction with Śūrpaṅkhā. Here we see the contrast between the pure and the polluted. Rāma, in

all three versions, feels definite love and admiration for Śabarī. And, by his grace and permission she attains liberation.

If we look at Śabarī's main desire, it is to be united with her teachers in heaven. She does not seem to be yearning for Rāma, or longing to be one with him. It would seem that desire is not even at play in a religious context. For Śabarī, Rāma is like a father. Śūrpaṅkhā's aim, in contrast, is to become one with Rāma and here, the sexual overtones are unequivocal.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Tulasī Dāsa*, trans. Growse, 452.

<sup>2</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampaṇ*, Hart & Heifetz, 298.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* 299.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* 91

<sup>5</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Tulasī Dāsa*, trans. Growse, 452.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* 453.

## **Chapter Seven: Conclusion**

The four models of feminine behavior presented here, embodied in the characters of Sītā, Śabarī, Śūrpaṅakhā and Ayomukhī, illustrate the manner through which sexuality is deemed acceptable or unacceptable. One thing that all four models share is that they all originate from the same subordinated position. The mere fact that these characters are women automatically signifies that their sexual nature is unsuitable for the functioning of society. Even Sītā, the ideal wife, is unable to escape the condition of her gender. Lakṣmaṇa, in Vālmīki, reminds her of this fact after she orders him seek out Rāma, thinking that he is in trouble. Both Vālmīki, and Tulsīdās made negative references to the nature of women. And Kampan, although less overtly misogynist, still maintains the need for control over women, through the reactions of his male characters to unregulated female sexuality.

### **The Four Models- A General Analysis**

Sītā is the ideal type, she is the ideal woman, or rather the ideal wife, as her subject status is not a result of her gender, but rather by her role as a wife. As Baker Reynolds states:

A *cumaṅkali* is, in short, a married woman and mother. However, “*cumaṅkali*” refers not only to a biological and social status, but also and more importantly, to a particular mode of female being characterized by beneficent and benevolent uses of power. What is so striking about the state of *cumaṅkali* is that it depends not on woman’s own being as female, but on woman in relation to others, particularly husbands and children. Since it is derivative, it is a precarious state, and its dependence on others indicates that by nature a woman is something other than auspicious and her powers are something less than beneficent (1980,38).

Sītā’s position is therefore heavily dependent on her role as Rāma’s wife. And although in the Forest Book she is childless, the potential for motherhood is there. Her status is

not a result of any given innate nature, rather it is her role as a wife that accords her a place in Hindu society. She typifies strīdharmā, the duty of women, by exhibiting the qualities of loyalty and fidelity to Rāma.

The Manu-dharma-sāstra describes the ideal wife as a woman who always remains faithful to her husband, no matter what his character might be: "Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, a husband must be constantly worshipped as god by a faithful wife (5.154)" (Kinsley 1987, 70).

Sītā displays these qualities in the Aranyakāṇḍa; she verbalizes them to Rāvaṇa when he abducts her and asks her to be his wife. She will in no way even consider his proposal as her loyalty is to Rāma and Rāma only.

Marriage becomes a manner of rendering female sexuality acceptable; it is the controlling factor that transforms the malevolent into the benevolent. Sītā is married and her sexuality is restrained and domesticated through her husband Rāma. Furthermore, Rāma's character is protected and reinforced, since Sītā is chaste and pure. It is thought in Hindu culture that a man is strengthened by his wife's chastity (Kinsley 1987, 76). So while women are dependent on men through marriage to render their sexuality acceptable, men in turn are dependent on women to maintain their position.

In Tamil culture, there exists a further paradox to this dependent relationship. Married women are considered powerful, and in some instances this power is deemed greater than that of men.

Moreover, marriage is an austerity. The greater the austerity-- the self-control of woman, including their submission to men--the greater is their resulting power. The primary powers of the chaste woman derive from her self-control and her submission, from her *karpu* and her *tapas*, that is from her nobility. Hence through being bound and binding oneself, women's powers increase and develop, until they are much greater than those of a virgin. They are also much greater than those of men (Wadley 1980, 160).



We are told of Sītā's purity in all three versions. This is a fact acknowledged by almost every character who comes into contact with her. In this manner Sītā is the ideal typification of feminine sexuality. She is a married woman who is obedient and faithful to her husband. It should be mentioned that Sītā defied Rāma twice in the Rāmāyaṇa. Firstly, she ignored his orders to stay in Ayodhyā, when he was exiled to the forest. And secondly, when Rāma wanted to subject her to a second trial by fire, she refused and returned to the earth.

The other positive model of a woman, and hence female sexuality, presented to us in the Forest Book is that of Śabarī. Śabarī is a respected woman, and although she is not married she is deemed an appropriate model for female sexuality. The fact that she has denied her sexuality, as she is an ascetic, allows her to escape her female nature. In this case her identity and purity is legitimated by a lack of relations with men. Although not quite the model of perfection that Sītā is, she is still a praised character in the Rāmāyaṇa. She exhibits self-control, by denying any sexual behavior; she does not need to be controlled. Rāma praises Śabarī in all three tellings, and in Tulsīdās, Rāma even tells her that because of her great austerities and devotion, her identity as a woman does not matter. What matters is her faith. She is able to escape her condition as a woman, as she has denied her sexuality, in effect denying her nature. Her status is elevated due to abstinence.

It is not just the rishi-munis and mahatmas who practise rigorous *tapasya* with *brahmacharya* as an essential component in order to acquire powers greater than gods, but even ordinary men and women living a life of voluntary sexual abstinence come to be highly respected. Such women tend to be treated as a special category, are subjected to much less scrutiny and restrictions, and tend to get much greater respect from men provided they don't show signs of sexual frustration. Many of the most revered women in Indian religious history opted

out of sexual relations altogether, as the lives of Mirabai, Mahadevi Akka, Lal Ded and many others attest. They are treated as virtual goddesses (Kishwar 1999, 213).

Śabarī shows no sexual desire towards Rāma or Lakṣmaṇa in any of the three versions.

We can see by Rāma's interaction with her that there is no trace of sensuality as he responds to her, in Kampan's telling, as a father. In this manner Śabarī, like Sītā, is dependent on male interaction to legitimate her position. It is true that Śabarī has achieved this position through self-control. However, through Rāma's reactions and responses, her position is secured, in effect sanctioned. She may be free from the constraints of marriage, as she has removed the need for control by denying any form of sexuality, but her position is acquired through her denial of womanhood.

Having described the two acceptable models of womanhood, let us move on to Śūrpaṅakhā and Ayomukhī, the two rāksasīs. It is arguable that the nature exhibited by these two is that of rāksasīs and therefore not of human females. However, the depiction of Śūrpaṅakhā and Ayomukhī as rāksasīs only serves to strengthen the qualities of negative female behavior. Their physical deformity is supposed to signify their moral deformity, their state of otherness to humans. However, Śūrpaṅakhā's and Ayomukhī's rāksasī nature seems to be subordinated to their identities as women. For example, physical deformity seems to be particularly enunciated in the case of the two rāksasīs, while Rāvaṇa, though a rāksasa, is described more favorably in terms of appearance. His overindulgence in food and women is not viewed negatively, but rather illustrates his power as king.

Looking at Śūrpaṅakhā first, we see that Tulsīdās comments negatively on her lustful nature as a woman as soon as she sees Rāma: "A woman... must needs look after a

handsome man, whether he be brother, father or son” (Caupāi 16).<sup>1</sup> In Kampan’s narrative, Śūrpaṅakhā appears to Rāma in a beautiful form, but as Rāma is one who is “the source of the Vedas” and divinely omniscient, should know that she is a rāksasī. He nevertheless comments on her as a woman. Rāma thought “the ideas of women with foreheads so lovely are not easily understood nor do they follow the path of virtues” (Kampan, 3.5.44).<sup>2</sup> He suspects her nature as a woman, not as a rāksasī.

Another point that illustrates Śūrpaṅakhā’s depiction as a woman, rather than a rāksasī, is the manner in which Rāma questions her kinship ties. It would seem that he addresses her the same way that he would address a human female, demanding to know where her protectors are, in both Vālmīki and Kampan’s narrative. Śūrpaṅakhā also follows the conventions placed on women in Hindu society by claiming to be a virgin, a prerequisite for any unmarried woman. Also, in all three versions, her desire for Rāma is expressed in a socially accepted model. That is, she wants to marry him.

Śūrpaṅakhā’s depiction as a bhakta, in the Tamil version deserves further discussion. Her desire to be with Rāma is typical of woman overcome with love at the sight of God. And although Śūrpaṅakhā does not follow the rules governing female sexuality, these are deemed unnecessary, since in the expression of intense devotion by the bhakta, the rules governing everyday social interaction do not apply.

In anthropological terms, Hindu society is structured through caste, with rules governing exchanges; the Hindu is (notoriously) homo hierarchicus. Taboo, nontouching, defines the boundaries between the categories. But bhakti depends on mana, touching, merging. In some forms of bhakti, breaking the taboos on touch and pollution becomes quite central.

[...]

In later bhakti cults, this impulse to touch and merge results, however briefly and often only in theory, in a breakdown of barriers and distinctions between caste and caste, between touchable and untouchable, between male and female; it also

neutralizes and distinctions between sacred and profane in time and space (Ramanujan 1993, 148).

With this in mind, Śūrpaṅakhā's behavior was perfectly acceptable within her role as a bhakta. The lines of male and female and pure and polluted need not be drawn or enforced as her object of desire is not a human male, but rather God. Similarly, Āṅṅāl did not respect the rules governing purity and pollution. Āṅṅāl used to wear the garland that was set aside for the evening worship of Viṣṇu. She would then return it to its appropriate place without anyone knowing. One day her father Viṣṇucitta discovered what Āṅṅāl had been doing, and that night performed the worship service without the garland, as it had been desecrated according to śāstric rules. However, that night Viṣṇu appeared to Viṣṇucitta in a dream and told him that the garland worn by Āṅṅāl was very dear to him. From that day forward, irrespective of the pollution taboos, he offered to God the garland worn by Āṅṅāl (Dehejia 1990; Ramanujan 1993).

We turn now to consider the depiction of Ayomukhī as a woman. She, like Śūrpaṅakhā, claims to be a virgin in Kampan's narrative. However, her desire for Lakṣmaṇa is completely sexual, she has no intentions of marrying him. Kampan depicts her as a woman, even though she is in her terrifying rāksasī shape. We are told that "as she walked, the faultless earth felt shame at being a woman too" (Kampan 3.9.47).<sup>3</sup> Their identities as rāksasīs enable the reader to "other" them, literally, to the two positive models of womanhood discussed earlier, to see the contrast overtly. It simplifies the contrast, so that reader is aware of the desired and the undesired,. Furthermore, even though punishment is meted out because of their deviation from the acceptable norms of female sexuality, it does not seem as cruel, as they are, after all, demonesses. What this does is reinforce the goddess/ witch dichotomy in a literal fashion.

Sītā and Śūrpaṅakhā exemplify two types of women who appear universally in folklore and mythology. Sītā is good, pure, light, auspicious and subordinate, whereas Śūrpaṅakhā is evil, impure, dark, inauspicious and insubordinate. Although male characters also divide into good and bad, the split between women is far more pronounced and is always expressed in terms of sexuality (Erndl 1991, 83).

However this is not the case, not only are innumerable models of female sexuality available, variation exists within each of them-- identity is fluid. If we take Śūrpaṅakhā as an example, it is evident that she can be perceived as more than “the whore”, she can also be viewed as a bhakta. To view women only within the goddess/whore paradigm is to oversimplify the cultural construction/perception of female sexuality.

One more point of consideration is the fact that Śūrpaṅakhā and Ayomukhī are not human females. Why then are they subject to the same rules? It is apparent by their appearances that they are physically strong and are capable of protecting themselves, in contrast to Sītā who is described as deer-like and slender to the point of fragility. However, it is not physiological factors other than the fact that they are female that determines their location, rather it is the immediate association of biological sex with gender and hence sexuality. That is, those who are female are women, and hence exhibit a certain sexual nature.

### **Male Characters- The Reinforcing of Appropriate Sexuality**

Even though this study is based on an exploration of female sexuality, male sexuality is in need of examination as well. It is through the male character's reactions and responses that socially accepted behavior is taught. Those who exhibit the appropriate behavior are rewarded and those who stray are punished. The first character that comes to mind as a protector of the social order is Lakṣmaṇa, as he is responsible for

punishing women who stray from their prescribed role. Lakṣmaṇa is responsible for the mutilation of both Śūrpaṅkhā and Ayomukhī. In the case of Śūrpaṅkhā, he follows Rāma's orders in Vālmīki and Tulsīdās' tellings but the mutilation that follows is at his discretion. That is, he chooses not to kill Śūrpaṅkhā, but instead just maim her. In Kampan's narrative, Rāma is not around, so he acts on his own accord. Lakṣmaṇa punishes the "impure" woman and leaves her alive so that she may be a constant reminder for any other woman who does not follow the "rules". It is interesting that he does the same thing to Ayomukhī in Vālmīki's and Kampan's versions, once again not killing her but leaving her deformed. Rāma even praises Lakṣmaṇa in the Tamil telling for not killing a woman.

Rāma's behavior towards women can be seen in two contexts. His view of Sītā is that of respect, a man in love. However his interaction with Śūrpaṅkhā illustrates his contempt for unregulated women. In Vālmīki and Tulsīdās' accounts, he is cruel. As result of his teasing of Śūrpaṅkhā, she concludes that the only way that he will be with her is if she kills Sītā. And when she attempts to do so, he orders Lakṣmaṇa to deal with her.

It is revealing that Rāma uses Sītā as the excuse for Śūrpaṅkhā's mutilation: the "bad woman" is punished in order to protect the "good woman" or perhaps to serve as an example of what would happen to the "good woman" if she decides to go "bad"- for the division of women onto two types in fact reflects a basic mistrust of all women (Erndl 1991, 84).

In Kampan's narrative, the story is different. It is clear that Rāma is enticed by Śūrpaṅkhā's beauty. Furthermore, she is a bhakta and he her Lord, so he should expect that she would become obsessed with him. However, when she returns to see him after Lakṣmaṇa has mutilated her, he does not even recognize her at first. To him she has now

become a hideous creature, and he takes the word of his brother that she deserved this.

Rāma's interaction with Śabarī stands in stark contrast. There is no mention of any sexual attraction as Śabarī is old and has rejected her female nature. He respects her and treats her with reverence, and as a daughter.

Rāvaṇa's portrayal also provides invaluable information pertaining to female sexuality. He is a rāksasa, and his character depiction reinforces the fact that Śūrpaṅkhā and Ayomukhī are not punished for their rāksasī nature, but because rather because they are women. Rāvaṇa exhibits the qualities of overindulgence, violence and lascivious sexuality, in both Kampan and Vālmīki's versions. In Kampan's telling, we are told of his decadent kingdom filled with rāksasa women and in Vālmīki, Śūrpaṅkhā scolds Rāvaṇa for being too consumed with sexual pleasure. In Tulsīdās' text, Rāvaṇa is presented in a more conservative light. Even though Rāvaṇa exhibits these qualities, he is treated more kindly than his rāksasī counterparts, as these characteristics are not considered antithetical to male behavior. Furthermore, all three authors place the blame on Śūrpaṅkhā for inciting Rāvaṇa to seek revenge. Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā is not his own idea. It is because, in Vālmīki and Kampan's tellings, Śūrpaṅkhā entices him with Sītā's beauty. And in Tulsīdās' narrative, it is because of his kinship ties; Śūrpaṅkhā is after all his sister. Furthermore, Tulsīdās presents him as a bhakta, thinking that if he engages in war and dies at the feet of Rāma, he will attain instant liberation. His interaction with Sītā illustrates the same point, as he bows at her feet. In Kampan's version, he also does this, and rather than touch Sītā he lifts the ground around her thereby respecting her pure status. Erndl states:

Similarly, when a woman such as Śūrpaṅkhā performs a wrong deed, it is typically ascribed to her female nature, whereas Rāvaṇa's evil deeds, for example,

are never said to spring from his male nature. It is also worth noting that in bhakti-oriented Ramayanas, in which evil doings of the male characters are acts recast as devotional acts leading to eventual salvation, Śūrpaṅkhā's salvation is not mentioned (1991, 83).

### **Three Different Versions- A Fluid Perception**

Although the three different narratives presented in this research depict the four characters differently, the underlying message seems to be a common factor. It would be incorrect to say that the goddess/ whore dichotomy is what delineates female sexuality, although in Vālmīki and Tulsīdās' narratives this seems to be the case. However, the dichotomy is not rigid, in that it is apparent that even the identity of a pure woman is subject to continuous factors of reinforcement. Śūrpaṅkhā may have been punished for her behavior, however the fact that it happened in front of Sītā is intentional on the part of these two authors. It served as a caution as to the consequences of stepping out of the socially prescribed role. Furthermore, in Kampan's text, the question arises of whether we even place Śūrpaṅkhā in the position of whore, because the qualities that she exhibited are that of a bhakta. One thing seems to be clear, and applicable to all four models. Women's nature and therefore sexuality is in need of control. Sītā is controlled through her marriage. Śabarī exhibits self-control by denying her sexuality. Śūrpaṅkhā is uncontrolled, however she is willing to be subject to the social norms as her desire is expressed through her intention of marriage. What was unacceptable was the fact that she sought this out herself. And as for Ayomukhī, she was out of control, and was consequently punished.

All three versions tell a similar story, one of female subjugation. However, differences in the three narratives are apparent. The character that is subject to the



greatest variation is Śūrpaṅakhā. Kampan depicts this character in stark contrast to Vālmīki and Tulsīdās. Śūrpaṅakhā, although eventually punished, is a bhakta, a devotee to God. One wonders why she did not receive the same praise as Śabarī, as social norms governing female sexuality are no longer binding in the Tamil bhakti paradigm. What this does illustrate is the complex and inconsistent nature of constructions of female sexuality, and the need for continual reinforcement through elaborate social, cultural and mythological structures. Female sexuality cannot be simplified into the goddess/whore dichotomy. It is necessary to examine the context and situation that each character is presented in. In this manner, we are able to see the multitude of depictions available for research, thereby enabling us to move beyond bifurcation, into the fluid nature of female sexuality.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Rāmāyaṇa of Tulasī Dāsa*, trans. Growse, 436.

<sup>2</sup> *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, trans. Hart & Heifetz, 93.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* 276.

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