

That's what She Said:
Sita in the Lives and Imaginations of Hindu Women: Choice, Ideals and the Oral
Tradition.

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Abstract

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Sita, the wife of Rama and the heroine of the Hindu epic narrative, the *Ramayana*, is described as the ideal wife of the Hindu tradition. Terms like demure, loyal, modest, pure, chaste, and devoted are used to depict the woman who typifies the *pativrata* (perfect wife). Putting aside what the tradition itself says about how Sita should be interpreted, this thesis asks how women of the tradition interpret Sita. By looking at women's oral tradition about Sita and through interviews with six women from the Hindu tradition, a more nuanced depiction of the ideal wife emerges. This thesis has taken from the responses of women who participated in my study two major themes: the influence of the oral tradition on women's interpretation of Sita, and concerns over Sita's apparent lack of choice throughout her life. Emerging from these subjects are questions and discussion pertaining to whether Sita's ideal character makes her a role model. The prevailing sentiments of the women in this study are that Sita is an ideal of the tradition, but her apparent lack of choice in life tempers her impact as role model for women. This thesis contributes to a small but important field of study on interpretation of Sita specifically, and women in the Hindu tradition more generally. This thesis would also be useful to those interested in religion, women in religion, *Ramayana* studies, diaspora studies, oral traditions, and feminist analysis.

That's what She Said:

Sita in the Lives and Imaginations of Hindu Women: Choice, Ideals and the Oral Tradition.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my maternal great-grandmother; a Scottish immigrant who came to Canada to marry her widowed brother-in-law after her first husband was killed at the Aswan dam in Egypt where he was a junior engineer. She left her Victorian home in Aberdeen for the unfamiliar and harsh Saskatchewan prairie where she became a farm wife. My own family oral tradition is that she fought for a full education for her girl children, believing education to be the key to choice; a conviction that greatly contrasted with the pragmatism of the prairies, where farm girls were raised to be farm wives. Because of my great-grandmother's conviction, my grandmother, desperate to get off the farm, took up one of the two acceptable professions for women in the 1940's. Eschewing nursing, she became a teacher. My own mother went on to flunk out of nursing school because in actual fact, she was a terrible nurse. Several different professions later, she found much success in working for the phone company. I have never had any ambition towards become a nurse (though I admire nurses greatly) and I believe it's because my mother exemplified the choices that our grandmothers fought for. However, I do revel in my grandmother's handed-down passion for learning and for teaching. I thank her for sharing her passion with me and I take up my great-grandmother's conviction that education means choice.

I also dedicate this thesis to the staff at the South Asian Women's Community Centre in Montreal, for they are champions of choice.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I must extend my profound thanks and gratitude to the six women who shared with me their views on Sita. Their intelligence, wit, insight, questions, opinions and concerns provided an abundance of ideas and talking points that in many cases I would not have considered without their influence. Their ideas are as much present in this thesis as are my own. I cannot thank them enough for their time and graciousness.

I wish to acknowledge Dr. Leslie Orr for her support and guidance over the course of this degree. I also wish to thank her for introducing me to- no, forcing me to see- the importance of the oral tradition, a key to understanding Hinduism and women's perspective that I had, prior to working with Dr. Orr, overlooked in favour of the text. This thesis would be no thesis at all if this very important impression had not been made on me. Dr. Orr's encouragement, kindness and helpful commentary over the course of writing this thesis has been invaluable. One final thing I wish to acknowledge is that Dr. Orr never once suggested that I put down my bass guitar and quit my rock n rollin' in favour of academics. I suspect she never did so because she's a rocker in her own right!

I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Lynda Clarke in building my confidence in my own expertise as she always took my real-life observations about things related to areas of her own expertise, very seriously. And Dr. Norma Joseph for one conversation that brought me to tears as I realized how important this project is to me. Many thanks also go to some very significant academic influences from my undergraduate years at the University of Calgary. Dr. Morny Joy, who despite having no clue who I was when I approached her for graduate school advice enthusiastically supported early ideas for this

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Introduction

“Among the first-rate, man's life is fame, woman's life is love. Woman is man's equal only when she makes her life a perpetual offering, as that of man is perpetual action.”
Balzac.

The Hindu religious tradition teaches both women and men that Sita, the heroine of the *Ramayana*, is the ideal wife and woman. Among the more orthodox, a woman is a wife by definition of her gender and she fulfills her religious and social duty when she becomes wife. The rhetoric around Sita's wifehood as a reflection of wifely duties is generally described with terms like loyalty, devotion, and fidelity. She is described by Gavin Flood as “demure, modest, beautiful and dedicated to her Lord Rama.”¹ Though from an academic text, these terms are precisely the types of words that the tradition itself uses to describe Sita. However, these words aren't necessarily used to describe the loving feelings that a wife might have for her husband, but rather describe Sita's duties in serving Rama as his wife. A good wife is a virtuous wife and the words, demure, modest and dedicated describe her virtues, in very much the same terms as how a wife is described in Hindu law books that outline morality and ethics. Sita is a powerful icon of wifely duty in the Hindu tradition that is pervasive in a way that arguably does not have a parallel in the western context. Sita's name is invoked to describe women who exemplify that ideal or to encourage women to take up Sita-like qualities. There wouldn't be any need to describe these qualities alongside the invocation of Sita's name, since her qualities and virtues are synonymous with her name.

¹ Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 66.

In a paper presented to the Second Annual Conference on Religions and Cultures in the Indic Civilization in 2005, Indologist and literary theorist, Satya Chaitanya notes that the

popular image of Sita that so powerfully shapes the Indian womanhood is essentially that [of] a very docile person, someone who gives unbounded love but accepts injustice, cruelty, neglect, humiliation and banishment quietly, uncomplainingly. This ideal wife archetype is perceived as a martyr, willingly sacrificing herself for the purposes of her man, with no purposes of her own. Her decisions are taken for her by the men in her life – her father, husband, others. Her man is God himself to her, and her salvation is through service to him. She is his to command – in this world, in the worlds to come.²

Chaitanya is speaking specifically about the Sita presented in the Valmiki *Ramayana*, the oldest known text containing the Rama narrative, composed somewhere between 300BCE and 300CE. Sita is often described in this way, but as Chaitanya goes on to say, there is more bubbling beneath the surface for Sita than what is commonly ascribed to her. This monolithic view of Sita does not consider the many and various ways that women of the tradition interpret her more positively. Meenakshi Mukherjee describes Sita in an article entitled “The Dead Weight of Tradition” as a woman “who subordinates her individual will to the wishes of her husband.”³ Feminists both from within and without the tradition find much to critique in this image of Sita, yet alternative perspectives on Sita - as strong-willed, stoic, and in some cases quite subversive, have been expressed by many Hindu women in the tradition and by some academics who take

² Satya Chaitanya. “Reimagining Indian Womanhood: Sita as a Woman of Substance.” Paper presented at *Second Annual Conference in the Indic Civilization on Religions and Cultures 2005* (17-20 December 2005, Indian Habitat Centre, New Delhi). Accessed August 9, 2012, <http://innertraditions.blogspot.ca/2009/07/reimagining-indian-womanhood-sita-as.html>

³ Meenaskshi Mukherjee. “Dead Weight of Tradition.” *Manushi* 2. (March-April 1979), 8.

their cue from such women. These different perspectives are in part dependent on which texts one is familiar with, how one learns the text, where one learns the text and who one learns the text from. This thesis will look, in part, at one factor in shaping the perspectives, which is the prevalence of the women's oral tradition as a source of knowledge about Sita. Text, while an important part of the overarching *Ramayana* tradition, will not be considered as the main source of knowledge for Sita or the narrative more generally as there is much evidence to the contrary, both in academic literature to be discussed here and as indicated by the research participants in this project.

This project aims to uncover the personal thoughts and feelings of women of the Hindu tradition about Sita, beyond what the texts say about her, and what the orthodox tradition says about how Sita should be interpreted. My method was to ask six individual Hindu women questions about Sita: who she is, what she means to the participant, how the participant came to best know Sita, what were some favourite and least favourite episodes in the narrative and whether Sita is a good wife or a good role model. This last question about Sita's significance as a role model was at the heart of my study. As outlined above, Sita's status as the ideal wife is long established, but whether or not women regard Sita as role model, and a positive one, is my central question. Sita's story, her major life events, her trials and tribulations, her successes and failures resonate with women of the tradition, and though they feel her stoicism and patience is admirable, it is also generally felt that she withstood more emotional and physical suffering than is possible and therefore is an unattainable ideal. The participants agreed that according to the tradition, Sita is the ideal wife, but they had mixed responses to the question of whether or not Sita is a role model; these responses will be explored at length in the fourth chapter. The answers to my questions could only be provided by Hindu women

themselves, and even then it is a highly personal subject for which I did not expect a uniform answer. However, my questions elicited responses that together make a treasury of ideas, thoughts, opinions and concerns, and which form the basis of this thesis.

The chapters of this thesis will at first situate Sita within the larger religious and literary framework and following that will attempt to un-situate her. Chapter one, “Sita in Situ,” gives a synopsis of the *Ramayana* narrative with special attention given to sections where the major versions of the narrative diverge from each other and also those episodes that are of interest to the participants of this study. Chapter one will also discuss how the ideal wife is described by other Hindu religious texts specifically the Dharmashastras, so that contrasts can be made between the ideal wife as described by these texts and the ideal wife as depicted by Sita.⁴ Chapter two, “Sita ex Situ” is an exploration of Sita in women’s oral tradition. I will begin with a look at what appears to be an attempt to synthesize Bengali women’s oral tradition about Sita by 16th century female poet Chandrabati. Following that, two key secondary sources for the academic discussion of Hindu women’s oral tradition will be looked at in depth. Feminist concerns from within the Hindu tradition will be raised and discussed here as they become relevant to discussions of the oral tradition and to the women who participated in my study. Chapter three, “Sita in her Words,” is a presentation of themes raised by my informants. Though several areas of discourse are presented, two main subjects underpin this chapter, the oral tradition and Sita’s choice and decision-making ability. The fourth and final chapter, “Sita (re)Considered,” is a discussion and analysis of those main subjects as discussed by

⁴ The Dharmashastras are a class of texts written by various Hindu philosophers about the religious and social duties of the castes. *Dharma* is the term for religious and social duty; *sastras* can be taken to mean treaties.

my informants. This chapter brings together the subjects of choice and the oral tradition to explore how women of the Hindu tradition have used Sita to explore their own options and life experiences. This chapter also raises questions as to how women in the tradition interpret Sita as the ideal wife, and whether or not that ideal translates into a role model. Suggestions for how this information might spur further research in this very under-researched area of study will also be made.

I would also like to briefly note that though I will be using some Sanskrit and Hindi words, I am not using diacritics as the focus of this thesis is contemporary and popular understandings of a well-known Hindu goddess-figure, and in such a setting, both inside and outside India, diacritics are generally not employed in the English transliteration of Sanskrit or Hindi words.

The organization and content of this thesis reflects the fact that two major themes emerged from my interviews. The first was that for my informants, the oral tradition, mainly learned from older, female relatives, was their first and best source of knowledge about Sita and the *Ramayana*. The second was the concern over whether or not Sita had choices in her life; Sita's choice, or lack thereof was a concern of each participant and a subject that applied to almost every question. Questions about whether or not Sita truly made choices, had choices forced upon her, or made choices overly informed by Hindu patriarchy were explored at the participant's lead. In the end most of the participants could find one example where they perceived Sita as making a decision that they interpreted positively. However, Sita's apparent lack of choice was problematic for many of the participants, who felt that Sita could not be a good or complete role model because her environment was too limiting. Despite this, most of the women could find positive

angles from which to interpret Sita, though not in every instance or episode discussed. The matter of choice will be explored in detail in chapters three and four.

The participants came from various backgrounds as the only requirements I had for participation was that one be a woman, raised in a Hindu context (whether in India or in the diaspora) and know who Sita is. My call for research participants was disseminated through Montreal's South Asian Women's Community Centre, Concordia and McGill University's Indian Student's Associations, as well as some women's online forums, all of which were successful in gaining participant interest. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 50, some are married, some are single, and one was engaged. The three women who were more than 30 years old, and one of the younger women, were born in India or Sri Lanka, one was born in Canada, one was born in Indonesia but was educated in an American school for diplomat's children. There were six participants and each interview lasted between 45 minutes to an hour and 45 minutes, and each participant was asked the same questions from a questionnaire I had prepared. I recorded each interview using my laptop's camera software. Two interviews were conducted over video-chat as I had interest from women who were not in Montreal; one in Toronto, ON and the other in Boston, Mass. These interviews were also recorded with my laptop's camera, though in this case it was primarily to record the voice exchange. The interviews were meant to serve as the foundation for my thesis in a qualitative rather than quantitative manner, the insights of the participants informed all aspects of this thesis and I have tried to incorporate their voices through out. I will introduce each participant at the beginning of chapter three, when I will look at participant responses in detail.

At the core this thesis uses a feminist methodology, if we take a feminist methodology to mean a concern with exploring women's roles within a religious tradition and allowing their voices to lead discussion and analysis. Using alternate sources, notably women's oral tradition, one can see how women have used Sita as a conduit to express their own concerns, trials, tribulations, joys and achievements; songs and oral narrative may also express religiosity, teach, entertain, bond, and - as will be shown in chapter two on women's oral tradition - subvert the authority of the dominating male within the tradition. Women have used the oral tradition about Sita as a screen upon which to project their own stories, because they identify with Sita's life experiences. The narrative tells Sita's story from her birth to her exit from earthly existence, but in the more well-known textual versions of the *Ramayana*, the major events in Sita's life revolve around men and therefore details that would relate to women's experiences are lacking. The oral tradition about Sita provides these missing details and in many cases tells Sita's stories without reference to the standard narrative. Sometimes, as will be discussed in chapter two, women's oral tradition about Sita seems to reflect a feminine solidarity and resistance to patriarchy. A word of caution must be given here that Sita's oral tradition is no revolution-in-waiting, but it does encourage women to consider how they may affect outcomes and assert themselves within the family sphere, resulting in a greater sense of agency for women within Hindu society and religion. The oral tradition about Sita also represents choice for many women as they become the inventor of their own stories and mythology; there are many different ways that one can tell the story of Sita, and how one tells the story represents the values of the storyteller and what she wishes to communicate about women's lives, and perhaps her own life. Oral tradition will always be a reflection of the concerns, beliefs, and anxieties of the people who tell stories, very often, those

people are the marginalized, the low caste, the women. If one wishes to hear the voice of women, to understand how women situate themselves within society and religion, one must turn away from the text and towards the oral tradition.

Chapter 1

Sita in Situ

It's extremely difficult to write about the *Ramayana* without providing the requisite crash course in the narrative. The two most popular *Ramayanas* are the one by Valmiki, written in Sanskrit dating from around 300BCE to 300CE (though this is uncertain and debated), and a medieval vernacular Hindi version, the *Ramcaritmanas*, by Tulsidas, composed in about the 15th century. There are countless *Ramayanas* but the core narrative remains more or less the same through the most well-known versions. There are two important exceptions to this and both are the roots of much controversy in discussions centering on Rama's treatment of Sita. The first departure is Tulsidas' treatment of Sita's fire ordeal, wherein he invents a plot device to explain away Rama's seemingly cruel treatment of his wife after she is rescued from Lanka. The second is Valmiki's epilogue, where we see a second test of Sita's virtue and her ultimate vindication, which most later versions omit. These two episodes are arguably the most controversial scenes in the *Ramayana* that involve Sita and will be discussed in greater detail below. In what follows, I will also try to parse out other instances where the major versions differ from one another.

In true *Ramayana* recitation fashion, I will recount what I know. What I know has been gathered from reading various textual versions, though the Valmiki version is best known to me; I also know the *Ramayana* through academic papers, comics, women's oral traditions, watching made-for-television *Ramayanas*, and most true to form - talking about the *Ramayana*. Since this thesis concerns Sita, we will start with her and focus on scenes that are most important to the research participants in this study.

The *Ramayana* as I know it

Sita was ploughed from the soil of a plot sacrificial land by her father, King Janaka of Mithila, and was raised the way a king would raise a prince, being instructed especially in *dharma* (religious and social duty). Rama, the boy Sita would marry, was the first son of King Dasharatha of Ayodhya and of his favourite and senior wife Kausalya. Rama was the heir apparent to his father's crown. Lakshmana was a loyal and favourite half-brother to Rama and the two were inseparable. They were both trained in the art of war from a very young age and became powerful defenders of Ayodhya and the forest surrounding the city. After Rama and Sita were married, Lakshmana and Sita developed a very strong friendship, out of respect and a genuine liking of one another.

Sita and Rama were married after Rama passed a test of strength and was able to lift Siva's impossibly heavy bow, a feat no other prince or king was able to perform.⁵ Rama, however, had no trouble with this task. He was able not only to lift it and string it, but he snapped in half like a toy when he drew it to its furthest extent and fitted an arrow into it. Janaka gave Sita in marriage to Rama, and Rama's father Dasharatha was overjoyed at the news (meanwhile, Lakshmana was married to Sita's younger sister, Urmila). This scene is called Sita's "self-choice ceremony" (*svayamvara*). Rama was one of many suitors who came to this pre-arranged event and Sita was present to judge which was the most suitable, although all other suitors failed to lift the bow. In the Tulsidas and some other versions (including the 12th century Tamil *Ramayana* by Kampan) the day

⁵ In the Tulsidas version, Sita easily lifted the bow when she was a child. But her actions were not met with pride and awe, but rather Janaka feared that he would never be able to marry Sita because of her overwhelming power. Thus, Janaka set out to find Sita a husband whose strength at least matched Sita's and used the bow as test of strength.

before the ceremony, Sita and Rama had a chance encounter and fell in love with each other on the spot. Sita knew in her heart that Rama was the love of her life, but she despaired at the thought of the impossible-to-lift bow in Rama's immediate future. Sita went to the temple of the goddess Bhavani and prayed that Rama would be able to lift the bow. Meanwhile, Rama busied himself with meditating on Sita; "He sketched Her on the sheet of His heart with the soft ink of supreme love."⁶ Of course, Rama was victorious in lifting Siva's bow and the two were married.

Once Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Urmila are married and settled back in Ayodhya, plans are made for Rama's coronation and the city is bubbling with excitement. Rama is well loved by the people and Sita is similarly received with joy by the Raghu family⁷ and the citizens of the Ayodhya. However plans are abruptly halted as one of Dashartha's other wives, Kaikeyi, mother of Bharata, calls in a favour from her husband and demands that her son be crowned as king and Rama banished to the forest for fourteen years. Dasharatha is devastated but he must grant Kaikeyi this request as he promised to grant her two boons when he lay injured from battle and Kaikeyi devoted herself to nursing him, and saving his life (in some versions, a reluctant Kaikeyi is goaded into asking for this boon by a meddling, old nurse of Bharata's who uses magic to "convince" Kaikeyi). Dasharatha breaks the news to Rama who, as the ideal son, takes it in stride although everyone, including soon-to-be-king Bharata, is heartbroken at the news. It literally kills Rama's father to have to do this, and he dies soon after Rama, Sita and Lakshmana set out for Dandaka forest.

⁶ Tulsidas. *Sri Ramacaritmanasa*, trans. by Publisher (Gorkhpur: Gita Press, 2001), 229.

⁷ A name for Dasharatha's immediate royal family.

Before their departure, Rama says his goodbyes. Initially he is prepared to go into exile alone, but Kausalya, Lakshmana and Sita all plead to go with him. In a speech meant to reassure his mother, Rama tells Kausalya that her place is next to her husband and that Dasharatha will not survive if she abandons him too. She agrees to stay but only very reluctantly and is anxious about her status in the palace, without a high-ranking son to protect her from ridicule and injury. On the other hand, Sita is successful in arguing that she should accompany Rama to the forest. Initially Rama asks her to stay behind and busy herself with fasts and vows, so as to live beyond reproach. He says, “(d)earest wife, I am going to the forest. But you, my queen, must stay here and live in such a way that no one can criticize you. This is what I want you to do!”⁸ Sita listens carefully to what Rama has to say, but addresses Rama passionately, insisting that her heart only desires to be with him whatever the cost. She reminds him that a wife shares in her husband’s destiny and tells him “it is clear to me that I, too, must go to the forest... a woman follows neither her father nor her son, not her mother nor her friends, not even her own inclinations. She follows only her husband.”⁹ She continues by telling Rama about how hardships become joys when she is next to him, that she “need(s) no advice on what (she) should do now,” and that she will all too happily find joy in concerning herself with her husband. She tells him, “I shall find joy in the fragrant, flowering forest as I care for you and live the life of an ascetic.”¹⁰ Rama is dead set on having Sita stay behind; he is worried about the dangers of the forest and that he will be unable to protect her, given the multitude of dangers lurking in the woods. Her rejoinder is to tell him again that the

⁸ Valmiki, *Ramayana*, trans. Arisha Sattar (New Delhi: Penguin Book), 139.

⁹ Valmiki, *Ramayana*, 139.

¹⁰ Valmiki, *Ramayana*, 139.

dangers he describes are no concern of hers while in his presence, that she cannot survive in the palace without him. Sita also reminds him that he had told her previously that a woman's place is next to her husband (never mind that he also just told his mother the same thing). None of these things sway Rama; up to this point Sita was only arguing with Rama and he did not appreciate her rhetoric. Sita tries another angle and tells him that in her youth a group of *rishis* (holy men, seers, specifically) told her father that she would pass a significant portion of her life in the forest, and in preparation and excited curiosity she learned much about forest life from a female ascetic. Still none of this convinces Rama. At this point, Sita was getting desperate; she re-phrases her earlier pleas for the sake of her *dharma* as a woman and wife, re-visits the pleasures of the forest she is eager to see and finally resorts to threatening to kill herself "because she does not want to fall into the hands of my enemies" or be without Rama for "even an hour."¹¹ Finally, she collapses in a heap of sobs at Rama's feet, Valmiki writes:

His many excuses to leave her behind had stung her the way a female elephant is stung by a hunter's darts. Sita let flow the tears she had held back for so long, like a tinder emitting sparks. Her bright tears fell from her eyes like water draining off the petals of a lotus¹²

Rama finally yielded and said to her:

Darling, I would not want heaven itself if it were to make you sad! ... but I would never have taken you into the forest without knowing what you really felt. Since you are destined to live in the forest, I can no more be separated from you than a famous man from his celebrity¹³

¹¹ Valmiki, *Ramayana*, 143. Sita is alluding to the difficulties she would surely face in being a woman without the protection of a husband or son in a highly competitive and complex extended family. These were also the worries of Kausalya.

¹² Valmiki, *Ramayana*, 143.

¹³ Valmiki, *Ramayana*, 143.

The three, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana, make their way to a forest hermitage and settle in; so far the dangers of the forest that Rama worried about have not materialized. However, things are about to change and that change is precipitated by a *rakshasi*¹⁴ who sets her sights on Rama and attempts to seduce him in true *rakshasas* fashion, unremitting come-ons mixed with bullying. For her troubles, she loses her nose and both her breasts by Lakshmana's sword under Rama's direction. Shurpanakha, the *rakshasi*, runs away humiliated and bleeding, eventually landing at the feet of her brother Ravana, the powerful *rakshasas* king. Shurpanakha aims to humiliate Rama as revenge for mutilating her and sets in Ravana's mind the astounding and unmatched beauty of Sita, described here in a satirical play on the language of beauty in the *Ramayana* narratives from the animated film *Sita Sings the Blues*:¹⁵

Shurpanakha to Ravana: Dear brother Rav, have you seen Rama's wife Sita? She is the most beautiful woman in the world. Her skin is fair like the lotus blossom. Her eyes are like lotus blooms. Her hands are like, um... lotuses! Her breasts are like big, round, firm, juicy, lotuses!!

Ravana: errrhmmtttttt.

Ravana becomes enamoured with the image of perfection that his sister paints and resolves to make Sita his.

In the Tulsidas version of the narrative, an important departure from the Valmiki tale occurs at this point. A great battle has already taken place between Rama and the *rakshasas*, who all lost their lives in their attempt to avenge the mutilation of Shurpanakha. During this battle Sita was safely tucked away in a cave high up a mountain. Anticipating further retaliation from the *rakshasas*, Rama, fearing for Sita's

¹⁴ A female demon.

¹⁵ Nina Paley, *Sita Sings the Blues* (Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike 2.0 United States License 2008), <http://www.sitasingstheblues.com/watch.html>.

wellbeing, tells her “(l)isten my darling, who have been staunch in the holy vow of fidelity to me and so virtuous in conduct... Abide in a fire until I have completed the destruction of the demons.”¹⁶ Sita enters the fire without comment and a “shadow Sita” emerges, looking and acting identical to the real Sita and takes over for Sita until all is safe in the forest again. This is the plot-device that Tulsidas invents to deal with the controversial scenes to come.

Ravana devises a plan by persuading his reluctant minion Marica, to transform himself into a dazzling golden deer, with the aim of distracting Sita. This part of the plan works. As Marica, disguised as a golden deer, frolics in the bush around the hermitage he gets Sita’s attention, and she points out the deer to Rama. They are both stunned by the beauty of the deer and Sita asks Rama to capture it to be their pet. Rama, makes a side comment about the inappropriateness of a woman making demands out of greed, but then quickly adds that he is also completely charmed by this deer and therefore resolves to capture it. Only Lakshmana is wise to the trick and cautions Rama against going after the deer, but Lakshmana’s words fall on deaf ears, Rama is as determined as he is dazzled. Before leaving, Rama tells Lakshmana to stay with Sita and not to leave her alone for any reason. Sita and Lakshmana wait at the hermitage for Rama’s return, but as a long time passes, they begin to be worried. At this point they hear what they think is Rama calling out for help and are alarmed. Sita asks Lakshmana what he is waiting for and insists that he go to Rama’s aid. Lakshmana, remembering his promise to his brother to stay by Sita’s side, refuses to leave, telling Sita that this is an trick of the voice meant to bring harm. Sita begs and pleads but Lakshmana doesn’t budge. Rama continues to call out for

¹⁶ Tulsidas. *Sri Ramacaritmanasa*, 682.

help and by now Sita is incensed. She tells Lakshmana that the only reason he is not going is because he has designs on Sita for himself. This does the trick as it embarrasses Lakshmana into heading off into the forest to look for his brother, feeling both angered and hurt by his sister-in-law's cruel words.

In some later versions of the narrative, likely based in oral tradition, before Lakshmana leaves he creates a protective circle around Sita and the hermitage.¹⁷ Lakshmana tells Sita that inside the circle she is safe but outside she is vulnerable. Sita is left alone at the hermitage as Lakshmana goes in search of Rama. As she waits for the return of her husband and brother-in-law, Ravana disguised as a Brahmin ascetic, approaches the hermitage. He comes begging for alms, but at the same time compliments her charms in the *rakshasa* manner: unrelenting come-ons and leering comments about her body. Sita does seem slightly confused by this and asks the Brahmin who he is, where he comes from, and why he wanders alone, but at the same time gives him a place to sit, food, and water as would be customary. For Sita, there was nothing out of the ordinary about this occasion. In the version that includes Lakshmana's protective circle, Ravana goads Sita into stepping outside the circle with her offered alms, even embarrasses her by taunting her with accusations of being unrighteous (adharmic). In any case, Sita's hospitality to the disguised Ravana results in her being abducted, and he carries her off in

¹⁷ Many of the participants talked about Lakshmana *rekha*, the protective circle. I had never heard this version of events and I could not find it in any of the major *Ramayana* narratives. However, depictions of the circle appear in medieval miniature paintings and I have found it in recent animated versions. Wherever it comes from, it is popular and does seem to have some importance attached to it as the research participants discussed its meaning and particularly lamented how it is held up as an example of the negative wilfulness of women. In the major *Ramayana* versions, Lakshmana does make an allusion to leaving Sita under the protection of the deities of the forest (Valmiki), or entrusting her to the gods and deities of the quarters (Tulsidas). Kampan's Lakshmana makes reference to trusting Sita to *dharma* but the protective circle is not mentioned.

a flying chariot to his palace in Lanka. Rama, upon finding Sita gone when he finally returns, loses his mind.

In Valmiki's version, we find Sita in Lanka battling with Ravana who tries everything he knows to get her to submit to his desire, but it is of no use. Sita is steadfast in her devotion to Rama and rebuffs all of his advances. Ravana, however, had promised never to touch her without her consent, but there was a catch. Ravana tells Sita that she has two months to come around to his charms or he will butcher her and eat her for breakfast. Famously, Sita, during her plea to Ravana to leave her alone, places a blade of grass between them as a symbol of the barrier between her heart and Ravana, but also perhaps this is a symbol of the trust that she has no choice but to place in Ravana's promise to not molest her; a flimsy blade of grass is all that separates them, but it has to be enough. Also, Sita is sure that Rama will come for her before the two month deadline approaches, so given Ravana's promise, perhaps the blade is in fact, all that is needed. Sita manages to get Ravana to leave her alone for the moment after she tells him that she herself could reduce him to ashes with her own blazing power, but won't because her husband has not ordered her to do so, and also because she has taken vows of austerity that will not allow her to take a life. Ravana, enraged, leaves her but tells his *rakshasis* to do whatever they have to do to get Sita to submit. Sita is left alone to be taunted, cajoled and frightened by a gang of cruel demonesses. The Tulsidas version of this episode is slightly different, Sita's voice is much more measured and her speech to Ravana is shorter and only alludes to Rama's strength and mightiness, she tells Ravana that this strength will be his downfall. In this version, Ravana intends to kill her right then and there for her insults, but Ravana's chief queen Mandodari intervenes and councils him to wait, and the *rakshasis* are instructed to torment Sita as in the Valmiki version.

After Rama collects himself, he and Lakshmana embark on a long journey to save Sita. On their way Rama enlists the help of an army of monkeys and one in particular, Hanuman, emerges as a champion and companion of Rama. It is Hanuman who finds Sita in Ravana's grove and tells Sita that Ravana and his army have been defeated by Rama and to ready herself for his arrival.

Sita and Rama are reunited but not quite as Sita had envisioned. Rama is cold to her, dismissing her and telling her that she can go wherever she wants. He is plain in his cruelty to Sita when he says, "I have done my duty by rescuing you from the enemy and avenging the insult to myself. You should know that this war, which was won by the heroic efforts of my friends, was not done for your sake."¹⁸ Here, he is telling Sita that this war was about male honour, not because he loves her or even wants her back. Rama cannot take her back after she has stayed in the house of Ravana, an unknown man, where she has "lived under his lustful gaze."¹⁹ Tulsidas, evidently uncomfortable with Rama's behaviour, omits Rama's harsh words to Sita, and instead writes simply "the All-merciful addressed some reproachful words to her."²⁰

Sita is deeply wounded and asks Lakshmana to build a pyre for her. Lakshmana is also desperately confused but does as she asks. Sita is described as having all the calmness of someone about to pick flowers from a meadow as she enters the burning pyre, palms pressed together. In all versions, she emerges from the fire unscathed, but in various accounts the reasons for this differ. In the Valmiki version, she is unharmed

¹⁸ Valmiki, *Ramayana*, 633.

¹⁹ Valmiki, *Ramayana*, 634.

²⁰ Tulsidas, *Sri Ramacaritmanasa*, 929.

because her purity and chastity protect her from the fire. Her prayer before entering the fire is “if my heart has never strayed from Rama, let the god of fire, eternal witness to all that happens in the world, protect me!”²¹ Sita is vindicated in front of everyone and Rama, after being chastised by the gods for forcing Sita to prove herself, takes her back and assures Sita that he knew she was pure all along, but that it had to be proved to the rest of the world. In the Tulsidas version, “Sita” was obliged to enter the fire so that the real Sita, the Sita that was hidden for her safety, could re-emerge.²² Tellingly, however, Tulsidas writes that “(b)oth Her shadow-form as well as the social-stigma (occasioned by her forced residence at Ravana’s) were consumed in the blazing fire.”²³ In both cases, Sita’s chastity and purity were proven by her emergence from the fire, not a singed petal of her flower garland in sight.

Rama, Sita and Lakshmana’s journey more or less ends there for Tulsidas but for Valmiki, there is at least one more important scene concerning Sita.

After Rama, Sita and Lakshmana return to Ayodhya where Rama reclaims his throne, some gossip is started in the city about Sita’s conduct while in Ravana’s grove. Rama is stuck between a rock and hard place, as he has to be seen as the pinnacle of propriety in his reign as king. He orders Lakshmana to take a very pregnant Sita out on a chariot ride to the forest and abandon her there. Ever the obedient and loyal brother, Lakshmana complies with a very heavy heart and Sita is left alone in the forest once again. She manages to find shelter in a hermitage belonging to none other than Valmiki

²¹ Valmiki, *Ramayana*, 635.

²² Recall that Tulsidas created the shadow Sita as a plot device to keep the real Sita out of harm’s way to explain Rama’s insistence on the fire ordeal.

²³ Tulsidas, *Sri Ramacaritmanasa*, 930.

himself and there she gives birth to twin boys, Lava and Kusha. The boys grow up as bards under the tutelage of Valmiki and one day during a horse sacrifice ceremony, the boys wander into Ayodhya and all are charmed by their voices and stories. Rama catches wind of their talent and summons the young men to the palace. There the boys recite to Rama the *Ramayana*, in full, over several days as they had learned it from Valmiki. Thus Rama learns that these bards are his own sons. He sends for Sita to come right away, saying, “(l)et Sita prove her innocence tomorrow morning in front of this entire assembly. I can establish the sincerity of my intentions at the same time.”²⁴ Sita arrives back in Ayodhya, still wanting to do what her husband has asked, but she has her own plans. All of Ayodhya assembles to see Sita prove her innocence. Rama shows some remorse in bending to the gossip that lead to Sita’s exile and finally admits that he knew that Sita was innocent but feared scandal. But Rama still wishes for her to prove her purity to all of Ayodhya through yet another fire ordeal. Sita, knowing what Rama wants, stands in front of the assembly in the ochre robes of an ascetic, presses her palms together and speaks: “If I have never thought about any other man but Rama, let the goddess Madhavi create a chasm for me.”²⁵ Sita prays that the earth take her back, reminding us that Sita was ploughed from the soil as an infant. The earth does open up, a throne rises from the chasm and Sita is lifted bodily onto the throne. The gods that have again come to witness Sita’s powerful feat cheer her on and shower her with blossoms. The earth closes up again and Rama is left despondent and bewildered, he takes his sons into the palace, but he never remarries. As a mark of Rama’s regret, he has made a golden statue of Sita,

²⁴ Valmiki, *Ramayana*, 675.

²⁵ Valmiki, *Ramayana*, 677.

which he places beside his throne for every ceremony and sacrifice for the next millennium of his reign.

The synopsis above is meant to situate Sita within the narrative framework. In what follows I hope to establish some of the ways in which women, in particular wives, are situated within the more orthodox religious literary tradition. Looking at conceptions of women from the Dharmashastras and Dharmasutras (treaties on law) will provide some grounding in traditional gender definitions and where women are intended to fit within Hindu society. These texts are about one's *dharma*, which is one's religious and social duty, and are largely addressed to men. The law books are mainly concerned with male activities, duties, rites, rights, and general life scenarios. What little exists in the text regarding women isn't there to teach women themselves, but rather is aimed at men to instruct them on how to marry and what kind of wife to acquire, on appropriate female behaviour and what men should expect from their female relations. Where women are concerned, one generally finds instructions on how men are to relate to women. Men are prescribed far more social roles than women and women's primary function in society is to become a wife, and ideally, a mother of sons. When a woman becomes a wife, she is protected from society through virtue of her place in the home as a wife. In getting married, a woman fulfills her social duty, which is also deeply entangled, if not identical with her religious duty. The Dharmashastras and Dharmasutras, while influential, are not the final word on *dharma*, nor are they all in agreement with one another. However, from these texts a "shastric normative" model can be derived, which may be subverted in the texts and oral traditions discussed later in this thesis.

In the *Dharmasutra* of Gautama, it is said that a “wife cannot act independently in matters relating to the Law. She should never go against her husband and keep her speech, eyes and actions under strict control.”²⁶ This type of statement on women’s character typifies much what the *Dharma* literature say about women, and any elaboration on women generally has to do with their roles as wives rather than as independent actors because this is generally how men relate to women.²⁷ *The Law Code of Manu* lays out in no uncertain terms that women are not to seek independence from either her biological family or her husband and his family for in “separating herself from them, a woman brings disgrace on both families.”²⁸ A woman should take pleasure in being a wife and be good at her job to boot. In a phrase that could have been lifted from a 1940’s homemakers magazine, a good wife should always be “cheerful, clever at housework, careful in keeping the utensils clean, and frugal in her expenditure.”²⁹ Manu instructs that women should be faithful and devoted to her husband, as he is a god, even if he is totally lacking godly qualities. A woman will be exalted by the heavens, as she can offer no sacrifice, vow or fast greater than faithfully serving her husband. If widowed (especially before she has children), a woman should remain celibate in thought and deed until her own death. Interestingly, a widow’s strict celibacy is justified by the apparent existence of the “(u)ntold thousands of Brahmins who have remained celibate from their youth [and] have gone to heaven ... Just like these celibates, a good woman, though she

²⁶ Gautama. “Dharmasutra of Gautama,” *Dharmasutras: The Law Codes of Ancient India*, trans. Patrick Olivelle. (Oxford: Oxford University Press) G. 18.1-3; 110.

²⁷ Susan S. Wadley, “Women and Hindu Tradition” *Signs* (Autumn 1977), 117.

²⁸ Manu, *The Law Code of Manu*, trans. Patrick Olivelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 5.150; 96.

²⁹ Manu, *The Law Code of Manu*, 5.151; 96.

be sonless, will go to heaven when she steadfastly adheres to the celibate life after her husband's death."³⁰ However, the prescription for a man who is widowed is to remarry so that he may re-establish his sacred fires, and carry out his ritual duties.³¹

Though a woman is necessary for a man to perform his duties as a house-holder women in general are fickle and require guarding because otherwise they are given to acting on their every sensual whim.³² A Commentary on *The Law Code of Manu* describes women as needing husbands to protect them from themselves, for when they are free "(t)hey pay no attention to beauty, they pay no heed to age; whether he is handsome or ugly, they make love to him with the single thought, 'He's a man!' Lechery, fickleness of mind, and hard-heartedness are innate in them ... behaviour unworthy of an Arya, malice and bad conduct - Manu assigned these to women."³³

On the other hand, *The Law Code of Manu* also tell men that if "they desire an abundance of good fortune, fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law should revere their women and provide them with adornments."³⁴ An adorned woman is an outward sign that she is respected in her home because of her virtue, and her jewels are a beacon for more auspiciousness. Auspiciousness is also granted to a home where women are honoured because a happy wife in the home is what attracts prosperity:

³⁰ Manu, *The Law Code of Manu*, 5.159-161; 97.

³¹ Manu, *The Law Code of Manu*, 5.168; 97.

³² The house-holder is the stage at which a man marries, finds employment of some kind, has children and generally performs domestically-oriented ritual as prescribed by Manu. This the second stage of men's four life-stages; student, house-holder, forest-dweller and mendicant.

³³ Manu, *The Law Code of Manu*, 9.14-17; 156.

³⁴ Manu, *The Law Code of Manu*, 3.55; 47.

(w)here women are revered, the gods rejoice; but where they are not, no rite bears any fruit. Where female relatives grieve, the family soon comes to ruin; but where they do not grieve, it always prospers... If men want to become prosperous, therefore, they should always honour the women on joyful occasions and festive days with gifts of adornments, clothes and food... When the wife sparkles, so does the entire household; but when she ceases to sparkle, so does the entire household.³⁵

With what little exists of women in the law books it's easy to think of women as having very little role within the religion, but they do have the most important ritual role within the family, which is the centre of Hindu society. No household can be considered auspicious or prosperous without the *ghrialakshmi*, literally the goddess (Lakshmi, the goddess associated with prosperity) in the home (*griha*). A wife has ritual purpose just through her presence and function in the home as the *ghrialakshmi*. Not only will a virtuous woman attract prosperity and auspiciousness into the house through her own virtue, her presence is also necessary to perform the obligatory Vedic fire rituals of the house-holder;³⁶ that is the second stage of life prescribed for men and codified in *The Law Code of Manu*.³⁷ *Ghrialakshmi* is the term for the auspicious wife in the home, but when a woman fulfills that duty, she may also be referred to as *pativrata*, a term which denotes her perfection in serving her husband (*pati*, husband; *vrata*, vow). Sita is very often held to be the *pativrata* par excellence.

The *shastras* contribute to a variety of interpretations of one's *dharma*; even amongst themselves various interpretations emerge. However, I hope this very brief

³⁵ Manu, *The Law Code of Manu*, 3.56-62; 47.

³⁶ Apastamba, *Dharmasutra of Apastamba*. *Dharmasutras: The Law Codes of Ancient India*, trans. Patrick Olivelle. (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 2. 22.7; 2.23.10, 65-66. Also see, K.D. Upadhyaya "On the Position of Women in Indian Folk Culture" *Asian Folklore Studies* (Vol. 27:1, 1968), 84.

³⁷ Admittedly, a pre-occupation with marriage so that one can perform Vedic fire rituals would be out of date now, but this should help us understand marriage's importance within the history of the religion.

outline of religious law and women provides some framework for thinking about normative models of women within Hindu society in their roles as wives and how Sita might exemplify that role. Sita represents the normative wifely model; she personifies the dependent, devoted, and chaste wife that the law books describe, yet as we will see in the coming chapters, the Sita of the many various *Ramayanas* does not always line up with the Sita of orthodox tradition or even of the popular imagination. The *Ramayana* is a book of ideals; Rama is the ideal man in his many roles, his role as son, older brother and eventually as king. Rama exemplifies the perfect *Kshatriya* warrior, a protector of righteousness and a just ruler to his people; his duty as a husband is not a theme in the narrative in the same way as is Sita's duty as an ideal wife. If one wants to look for examples of the perfect husband, one has to look outside the *Ramayana* narrative. Similarly, to understand how Sita is imagined to be the perfect wife one must look beyond the shallow image that law books draw. Given how little exists in the law books about the lives of women, it perhaps isn't surprising that Sita's character is developed and discussed in both the textual and in the oral tradition. Though Sita is described as possessing all the qualities of the ideal wife, she is much more, or in any case her wifely virtues are elaborated by narrators and storytellers alike who imagine her through a complex of qualities: loyal, devoted, in love, doting, beautiful and strong, yet fragile.

Chapter 2

Sita ex Situ

Before this chapter begins in earnest, some thoughts about the historical roots of the *Ramayana* in oral tradition should be shared and kept in mind throughout the coming discussion of Sita outside the text. What I hope to establish in this chapter is that there is a long and deep-rooted culture of imaginative retellings of the *Ramayana*, some of which centre on the more marginalized characters of the narrative, namely, Sita and Ravana; there is even a version told from Rama's sister's point of view.³⁸ There are also *Ramayana* versions in which Rama is a champion of the lower castes, despite some controversy over a Valmiki scene wherein Rama kills a Shudra for practicing Brahmin meditation techniques.³⁹ There are even *Ramayanas* that depict Rama as the bad guy that are meant to criticize Rama's treatment of the lower castes.⁴⁰ An in-depth discussion of these texts, while very interesting, lies outside the scope of this thesis, however this does help confirm lively oral or alternate textual traditions, which re-imagine events in the narrative. These types of narrative may serve to elaborate on the *Ramayana* story-line and fill in gaps in the storyline where women's voices are missing.

The oral tradition has made a significant, if not the most significant, contribution to the formation of a rather vast and dynamic literary tradition in India and Hinduism.

³⁸ Such as Chandrabati's 16th century *Sitayana*, discussed below. Also, one of the research participants in this study discussed with me versions of the story that depicts Ravana as the hero.

³⁹ Whereas Rama is seen as a righteous organizer of society in the normative versions, he is certainly no friend to the lower castes. Rama, in fact, rather controversially chops off the head of a *shudra* (lowest caste) who crosses caste lines. This episode is simply left out of these versions.

⁴⁰ E.V. Ramasami (d 1973) wrote a controversial, but popular alternate version of the narrative.

Oral traditions are the basis for many of India's well loved narratives, and the Epics, that is the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, typify this tradition of "oral text." The oral nature of the Valmiki *Ramayana* is found, according to Nabaneeta Sen, in the Sanskrit metre (*shloka*) in which Valmiki composed, which hints at an expectation that it will be recited verbally in a poetic form.⁴¹ Sen emphasizes that the Sanskrit *shloka* is an "easygoing" and "non-exacting" metre meant to give the reciter freedom of expression.⁴² Through the use of this metre the poet becomes the narrator of the tale without having to alter the story to suit the needs of an oral (re)telling. As Arisha Sattar puts it when writing on the orality of the text in the introduction to her translation of the narrative, "(e)ach teller has the privilege, perhaps even the duty, to tell the tale in his/her own words, dwelling on well-loved parts, elucidating on morality and ethics, adding comic relief."⁴³

Both Steven Collins and Sheldon Pollock have theorized on the history of oral text in South Asia. Collins shows connections between a complex of versions of the Buddhist text, the *Vessantarajataka*, composed in Pali but with roots in the oral tradition, and the Sanskrit narrative of the *Ramayana*, developing the concept of "a single story-matrix."⁴⁴ In this story-matrix Collins finds "both structural and general" thematic similarities that together make up a network of related stories and "(f)rom this matrix emerged Valmiki's monumental version, culminating but not ending the Sanskrit

⁴¹ Nabaneeta Sen, "Comparative Studies in Oral Epic Poetry and the Valmiki Ramayana: A Report on the Balakanda," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. (86 1966), 399.

⁴² Nabaneeta Sen, "Comparative Studies," 399.

⁴³ Arisha Sattar, "Introduction," *The Ramayana* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1996), xliv.

⁴⁴ Steven Collins, "What is Literature in Pali?" *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*. ed. S Pollock. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 659.

tradition.”⁴⁵ Similarly Sheldon Pollock imagines such a network of oral narrations mapped onto the *Ramayana* and the other great Epic, the *Mahabharata*. He writes:

(t)he oral traditions of all the various genres [...] must have been continuously interactive and cross-fertilizing. [...] This fact coupled with the structural similarity of the two poems (the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*), forces us to think of the two epic traditions as coextensive processes...⁴⁶

Collins’ and Sheldon’s argument regarding a latent “story-matrix” is helpful to us here in thinking of the oral origins of the Valmiki ‘text’ which is, as far as is known, the earliest written version. The reasoning is that there is not a single oral telling which gave rise to a single physical text, but rather a complex of oral traditions which together produced just one (the Valmiki version) of many *Ramayanas*. A modern-day version of this matrix of oral traditions is reflected in the sources of knowledge of the Rama-narrative mentioned by the women who participated in my study - multiple versions that were a part of their family tradition. Though for many the *Ramayana* is a religious narrative, its various forms and the oral nature of the story conflicts with Western concepts of scripture. However, if a definition of scripture expands to include the oral tradition’s story-matrixes, that is, intersecting narratives, the oral history of the *Ramayana* strengthens the relevance of religious scripture, making it a continuing and self-perpetuating source of religious, social, ethical and moral knowledge. These themes will be discussed in chapter three more fully.

Sita is the ideal wife, an ideal rooted in religious righteousness that continues to hold meaning for many women of the Hindu tradition. Yet she and the many other

⁴⁵ Steven Collins, “What is Literature in Pali?” 659.

⁴⁶ Sheldon Pollock, “Ramayana Book II: Ayodhya: Ancillaries,” *Ramayana*, ed. Robert P. Goldman (Clay Sanskrit Library Online, 2005), Accessed August 27, 2012. http://www.claysanskritlibrary.org/volumes_sanskrit.php.

characters of the narrative are not remote archetypes that render the *Ramayana* an inaccessible tome. Sita, for many, is beloved precisely because her story reflects the concerns of women within the Indian cultural milieu. She faces the pressures that women of the tradition face in relation to marriage, relationships with one's husband, her extended family, and her eventual children. The expansive oral tradition makes Sita a personal icon, as orality allows for interpretation, co-optation, appropriation, acceptance and rejection. The *Ramayana* maintains a beloved status as a story, and as scripture, because of this malleability. For these reasons, I choose to avoid terms like the book or the text, unless specifically referring to the printed format. Instead, terms like narrative, story, and plot line, and scene or episode (instead of chapter) will be used as they more accurately describe the *Ramayana* as most people of the tradition think of it.

One woman's re-telling of the *Ramayana* narrative is that of 16th century female poet Chandrabati. Her version, dubbed the *Sitayana*, fell into obscurity according to Nabaneeta Sen. Sen describes the reasons for the poor reception of the *Sitayana*. It was considered to be weak in structure, poor in form, stylistically lacking character, and generally incomplete, when compared to Chandrabati's other works, taken to be important and beautiful works of poetry by scholars of the Indian literary tradition. Sen's article, "Rewriting the Ramayana," is an in depth look at why it was received so poorly and thus largely ignored over the centuries by scholars.⁴⁷ The short answer is that Chandrabati wrote a *Ramayana* that is about a woman and is for women and is based on

⁴⁷ See also" Nabaneeta Sen, "Lady Sings the Blues," *Manushi* (September-October 1998), accessed July 18 2012.

oral tradition. Scholars didn't understand the poet's efforts in trying to reframe the narrative from Sita's perspective, nor did they understand that Chandrabati was acting very much like a compiler or editor, and was synthesizing pre-existing women's oral traditions about Sita, which reflected their own tales of hardship and woe. As a result, the concerns that Chandrabati focused on were not of interest to the male scholars, who up until recently dominated the field of religious and literary criticism.

Chandrabati's *Ramayana* uses an oral narration style called the *baromassi*, which is used by women to describe the hardships that they suffer in daily life.⁴⁸ Chandrabati made Sita the narrator of the story and we see the *Ramayana* through Sita's eyes as she recounts her life experiences unfolding through the generally accepted plot line of the narrative. Chandrabati ignores the general convention of describing Rama's heroic virtues and plunges directly into Sita's story. The poem is presented to the reader as Sita recounts her life's events to her friends, using the common *baromassi* refrain, "listen my girl friends," as though experiencing a flashback.⁴⁹ Sita dwells on her hardships such as being separated from Rama and her abandonment. Sita speaks: "It burns my heart like a fire when I recollect my misfortunes and what I have suffered in the past."⁵⁰ Sita says her life has been miserable, despite having been married to this great man, Rama, and recounts those misfortunes. However, Sita also contrasts those misfortunes with descriptions of happy times and tells of idyllic forest life with Rama in loving and sweet terms,

⁴⁸ Nabaneeta Sen, "Rewriting the Ramayana," *Crossing Boundaries* (New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited, 1997), 165.

⁴⁹ Nabaneeta Sen, "Rewriting the Ramayana," 171.

⁵⁰ Chandrabati, "Sitayana," *The Ballads of Bengal*, ed. Dineschandra Sen (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988), 339.

I remember how happy I felt when I made a pillow of his handsome and manly arm. Each night to me was the record of the joys of paradise ... a *suka* and *sari* – the happy pair – were my pets. They were my neighbours in that wild life of ours – sometimes they sweetly sang and we were their delighted audience, and at others hand in hand I walked in the forest with my lord.⁵¹

Chandrabati also weaves in distinctly women's concerns, like Kausalya's pregnancy, that are described in great detail but which are more common to the oral tradition than to the textual.⁵²

Both the preface to Chandrabati's *Ramayana*, written by Dineschandra Sen, and Nabaneeta Sen's article maintain that Chandrabati's *Ramayana* follows an oral tradition already established in Bengal. Dineschandra Sen remarks, "Chandrabati follows the traditions spread in the country not through the medium of Sanskrit but through earlier songs stored in the memory of the people and sung by women and the peasantry."⁵³ Nabaneeta Sen describes Chandrabati's efforts as the result of finding her "voice in the folklorist world of women's oral tradition."⁵⁴ N. Sen wonders if the reason that Chandrabati's text was so poorly received is because it was written in the fluid and informal character of oral folk traditions in its form and was therefore considered stylistically weak and non-exacting. N. Sen notes in Chandrabati's work the repetition of phrases and formulas that are essential in oral tradition, but considered substandard in the literary tradition.⁵⁵ Certainly a text based on oral tradition would feel and read much differently from one carefully and methodically composed within the framework of

⁵¹ Chandrabati, "Sitayana," 342. A *suka* and *sari* are like lovebirds.

⁵² Nabaneeta Sen, "Rewriting the Ramayana," 170.

⁵³ Chandrabati, "Sitayana," 316.

⁵⁴ Nabaneeta Sen, "Rewriting the Ramayana," 172.

⁵⁵ Nabaneeta Sen, "Rewriting the Ramayana," 174-5

conventional textual styles.⁵⁶ However, a text based on oral tradition must be judged on its own merits and virtues and not according to literary standards, since surely the oral based text, not meant for literary criticism, won't measure up. N. Sen writes that literary critics cannot truly be "blamed for rejecting Chandrabati's *Ramayana*. If it calls itself a *Ramayana*, it is expected to follow the classical rules." But Chandrabati didn't write a classical text, instead she "tried to lend the rural woman's voice a larger identity by calling the work a *Ramayana*, and by adding her own anxious and caustic comments to it under her own signature."⁵⁷ Chandrabati's efforts may have gone unnoticed by literary scholars, but she does give those of us interested in the various facets of medieval Bengali life, including rural women's oral tradition and re-tellings of the *Ramayana*, some fascinating insights.

Remarkably, this Bengali women's oral tradition is still in existence some five hundred years later, as Nabaneeta Sen discovered when she travelled to Bengal in search of Chandrabati's legacy. Sen discovered that the women there sing songs very similar to Chandrabati's *Ramayana*, but the singers claimed not to know who the author of these songs was nor were they aware of Chandrabati's *Ramayana*. If Chandrabati were pulling together threads of an oral tradition already in existence before her time, then is she really the author of this *Ramayana*? N. Sen noticed that in comparing Chandrabati's text with the women's songs that women leave out parts where Chandrabati refers to herself, though the rest of the form and content is virtually the same from the women's songs to

⁵⁶ As I write this I think of the book of Scottish oral folklore I have on my bedside table. The short stories are recorded and written exactly as the storyteller related them. Some tales are nearly impossible to follow and I find myself skipping over pages at a time looking for one that's an easier read or not so "weird."

⁵⁷ Nabaneeta Sen, "Rewriting the *Ramayana*," 175.

the text. Therefore the Chandrabati text fits into a narrative tradition in existence before her textual composition, and which continued in oral form afterwards. She makes an important contribution, but it's important to note that the printed text in this case did not replace the oral tradition.

It is the lament of the few scholars interested in Chandrabati's *Ramayana* that the women of Bengal only know the possible pre-existing oral versions and not Chandrabati's full textual version. No complete manuscript exists and the books that have published portions of Chandrabati's *Ramayana* were few to begin with and are increasingly rare.⁵⁸ Dineschandra Sen's book, used here, is now out of print (but fortunately some parts are available online), and even so his book only contains fragments of Chandrabati's text, as he was unable to find someone who knew it in its entirety.⁵⁹ K.C. Moulik's book entitled, *Purva Banga Geetika*, which published portions of the text, is now also out of print.⁶⁰ Thus the majority of what we can know is only available through the oral tradition that both D. Sen and N. Sen have found to be still, thankfully, prevalent in Bengal.⁶¹

As will be seen in chapter three, the oral tradition is the most common source of knowledge for the research participants in this study and this is similarly indicated in the findings of other recent studies on the subject. Two books edited by Paula Richman,

⁵⁸ Nabaneeta Sen, "Rewriting the Ramayana," 174.

⁵⁹ Dineschandra Sen, "The Ballads of East Bengal" *The Ballads of Bengal* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988), 317.

⁶⁰ Nabaneeta Sen, "Rewriting the Ramayana," 164.

⁶¹ Dineschandra Sen, "The Ballads of East Bengal," 317. Sen notes that this ballad is repeated at wedding ceremonies and even then the memory of most singers fail them in producing the entire piece, if it was ever known to them.

Questioning Ramayanas and *Many Ramayanas*, are an important source of inspiration for this thesis, as they contain much of the scholarship that exists on women's relationships with the *Ramayana* tradition. Two articles in the Richman series, the first by Velcheru Narayana Rao and the second by Usha Nilsson, demonstrate how women relate to Sita through extra-textual means, such as song or poetry. Velcheru Narayana Rao's article "A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu," focuses on high caste women's songs that tell the story of the women in Rama's life: Sita, Rama's mother Kausalya, his older and rarely mentioned sister Shanti, and a similarly side-lined Urmila (Lakshmana's wife/Sita's sister). Rao notes that the songs about the women of the Raghu family reveal a complex hierarchy of women within a high caste extended family. It is interesting that Sita, though a popular subject, is not always the focus of the songs, but often the authors of the songs chose to create lives and stories for female *Ramayana* characters completely outside the text. Rao documents a song about an endearing scene between Urmila and Lakshmana when he arrives back in Ayodhya after a fourteen-year absence. Interestingly, Rao also finds a *Ramayana* version narrated in its entirety by Shanti, Rama's older sister.

Before discussing the songs, let us consider Rao's argument that women are the authors of these songs. It is often assumed that men are the ones to author any kind of text, but Rao points out that most of the songs deal with issues that only women would be able to describe with any delicacy, or would even be interested in. Issues such as morning sickness, the pain of birth, how to properly wash an infant, puberty, and relations with one's mother-in-law are the principal themes in the songs. Most songs deal specifically with Sita and depict a woman's experience, from her youth to maturity, through Sita. Songs dwell on moments in Sita's life, great and small, such as her wedding and being

entrusted to the care to her parents-in-law, the journey to her mother-in-law's house, games between Sita and Rama which feature Sita as the winner and Rama as a cheating scamp, and Sita's efforts to deal with a grumpy husband. There are also songs that tell about major events from the *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective, songs about Sita's trial by fire, events that took place in Lanka, Rama's coronation, and Sita's pregnancy.

There is an interesting song that Rao describes where the major theme is solidarity and sisterhood among the women of the palace in defence of Sita. The song explains the doubt that is raised after the return to Ayodhya about Sita's chastity while in Lanka. Ravana's sister Shurpanakha disguises herself as a female ascetic and visits Sita in Ayodhya. Through a series of tricks, the disguised Shurpanakha creates doubt and suspicion in Rama's mind about Sita's fidelity while she was Ravana's captive and he decides to throw Sita out. When the women of palace hear of Rama's plan they all come to Sita's defence and plead with Rama to see how the strange ascetic woman had tricked them all and created scandal where none truly existed. Rama will hear none of it and even rudely speaks to his mother (an unacceptable breach in family relations). All the women of the palace try to reason with him, but finally a sister-in-law tells him that because of his unrighteous and rash actions, they all love Ravana now, so he might as well banish them all. The conclusion of the song is still many stanzas away, but the message comes through that although joint family life "is filled with tension and fear, frustration and suspicion" it can also be a place of security, love and affection.⁶²

⁶² Velcheru Narayana Rao, "A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu" *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 129.

Rao also reveals an interesting structure to the songs that mimic the layout of a high caste home and that strengthens the bond created through a female-only oral tradition. Rao tells of how he only vaguely remembers hearing his mother softly singing songs to Sita from the notebook she kept, which she would also sing with the other women who visited her. One reason that he doesn't recall these songs very well is that men are generally not allowed in the part of the house where women work, relax and sing. Accordingly, Rao notes the necessity of having female Indian research assistants record these songs for him, although he may have heard them as little boy. Rao describes a typical Brahmin house as being made up of men's rooms, neutral rooms, and women's rooms, starting from the front of the house moving further inwards. Brahmin men inhabit the front of the home until they are called for a meal or retire to the neutral areas of the home for the night. However, Brahmin men will not even come into the middle section of the house until women receive them; usually a cough or polite greeting to get someone's attention suffices. The back of the house is the sanctuary of women, "a kitchen and a verandah opening into the backyard, often with a well in it. It is here that women gather. Women visitors, servants and low caste men use the back entrance of the house to converse with the women."⁶³ Rao says that the structure of the songs replicate the structure of the home. The songs pay respectful tribute to Rama, not only the king and god of the devotional (*bhakti*) *Ramayanas*, but as the symbolic lord of the house as well. As the song progress, it focuses on neutral characters until finally resting on female characters and their concerns for major portions of the story. Rao notes that generally the only male characters who make appearances in the later "girls only" portions of the

⁶³ Velcheru Narayana Rao, "A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu," 128.

songs, are men of the same relation to the female characters in the song as the men who would be welcomed by the singers into the interior of the house: that is young sons like Lava and Kusha or a beloved younger brother-in-law, like Lakshmana.⁶⁴

During one discussion with a research participant on the question of whether or not Sita is a good wife, the participant brought up Urmila and wondered aloud whether or not Lakshmana's wife was really the good wife for dutifully staying behind in Ayodhya, while Sita accompanied Rama to the forest. Laughing, the participant wondered whether perhaps it was Urmila who made the greater sacrifice, saying, "what sacrifice did Sita really make? She got to go with her husband!" Though this was meant to be a humorous, throwaway comment, there was quite a lot of insight in her question, and if I might divert attention from Sita for a moment, an interesting answer to this question presents itself in Rao's article. It seems that my participant wasn't the only one to ask such questions and the Telugu women that Rao documented have come up with a creative way of explaining how Urmila survived those fourteen long years in the absence of her husband. One song has Lakshmana and Urmila devise a pact between them. Urmila trades all her waking hours for all of Lakshmana's sleeping hours for the next fourteen years. This means Lakshmana can stay awake for fourteen years straight to keep watch over Rama without interruption and Urmila can sleep the whole time, thereby making it seem like no significant time has passed when Lakshmana finally returns and wakes her. The song continues on through the standard narrative, finally arriving at the restoration of Rama to the throne. Lakshmana goes to wake his wife. But, either because of the lapse of time or sleepiness (or both), Urmila does not recognize him. She scolds this strange man in her

⁶⁴ Velcheru Narayana Rao, "A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu," 128.

bedroom against the sin of desiring another man's wife, invoking all the principles of Hindu *dharma*, and thereby proves her loyalty and virtue. She threatens the "stranger" in her room first by saying that her father Janaka will punish him, and then that Rama and Sita (!) will kill him but refers to them only as "elder sister" and "brother-in-law," this being the most proper way for a junior family member to refer to older relatives. Urmila then tells Lakshmana that "(m)y elder sister's younger brother-in-law (meaning Lakshmana) will not let you live on earth."⁶⁵ She then goes on to describe how Indra suffered for desiring another man's wife and, in the know despite her slumber for the past fourteen years, cites Ravana's downfall as a result of his lasciviousness. After Lakshmana identifies himself and Urmila recognizes him, the song lovingly describes their tender reunion after such a long separation; they bathe together, and Lakshmana braids Urmila's hair while she asks questions about the events of the last fourteen years. They eat side-by-side; this seems to strike Rao as significant because amongst conventional Brahmins, husbands and wives do not eat together. Rao seems to momentarily forget that Lakshmana and Urmila are of the Kshatriya (warrior) caste and not Brahmins, which may be why the Brahmin singers are comfortable depicting such a cozy arrangement. Additionally, Rao notes early in his article that the mutual love between Rama and Sita (and evidently other characters of the tale) is often a dominant theme in songs of Telugu women and the love story serves as "a wish fulfillment" as often "women in this community find that there is little real love between them and the husband who has been chosen for them."⁶⁶ Certainly the portrait painted of Lakshmana and Urmila's encounter is a depiction of the tenderness a loving couple would share upon being reunited after a

⁶⁵ Velcheru Narayana Rao, "A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu," 124.

⁶⁶ Velcheru Narayana Rao, "A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu," 121.

long separation, enough to make any heart sigh. And since the oral tradition often fills in the gaps left in the imagination, one wonders whether the song is a stand-in for the affectionate reunion expected between Rama and Sita after her rescue from Lanka, but which never materialized.

Usha Nilsson's article "Grinding Millet But Singing of Sita' Power and Domination in Awadhi and Bhojpuri Women's Songs," provides further insight on how Northern Indian women often appropriate the female characters of the *Ramayana* narrative to express issues related to their life experience. The songs function on various levels, gesturing toward the complex social situations that women of tradition negotiate. On the one hand the songs represent a united resistance against the male dominance that Tulsidas reinforces in his text, but on the other hand, implicit in the songs are the tensions and hostilities that exist among women of various castes and standing. Nilsson notes that when women of mixed social and economic statuses sing the narrative as a group, they follow the Tulsidas storyline without diverting into subversive or controversial versions. The expectation of the familiar and the sacred from the audience guides the singers. However when the female singers are alone and/or in the company of women from the same high caste, a different repertoire emerges and they "sing about the events close to their life experiences, (and) new forms of the Rama and Sita story emerge."⁶⁷ Here, the character's humanity takes centre stage and their divinity, the subject of public songs, is put away. The women "sing songs of marriage, childbirth, domestic tensions, and quarrels, dealing freely with topics such as tensions among Sita's conjugal kin, Rama's

⁶⁷ Nilsson, "Grinding Millet But Singing of Sita' *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*. ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 141.

insensitivity to Sita's needs and wishes ... (w)omen bring in their own worldview."⁶⁸ The songs reflect the issues that women who are part of complicated social and family structures, might deal with in their roles as women. Sita, and other women of the narrative are used to voice frustrations of women in these circumstances, but also sometimes, as we will see, provides guidance and coping mechanisms.

Nilsson describes a song in which the narrator gives Sita the power when Sita's friends ask her how she got Rama as her husband. Sita says that it wasn't Rama who won her through lifting Shiva's bow, but rather Sita's worship and penance that won her Rama. A similar song exists but with Kausalya responding to her husband's questions regarding how she properly performed rituals, vows and charity in order to become pregnant; Kausalya tells Dasharatha, "I got Rama as the fruit of my penance."⁶⁹ The song challenges Dashartha's performance of elaborate Vedic sacrifices in his attempt to bring about the conception of a son and affirms a woman's belief in the power of women's rituals, rather than those performed by male priests.⁷⁰ The extra-textual versions are revealed here as Nilsson also tracks down a repertoire of songs that are repeated from community to community. The songs are not verbatim from one community to the next but there are enough similarities among the songs in form and content that a mini story-matrix emerges. Nilsson places Kausalya's song discussed above, alongside another shorter version of the song where instead of Dasharatha; an unnamed relative asks

⁶⁸ Nilsson, "Grinding Millet But Singing of Sita," 141.

⁶⁹ Nilsson, "Grinding Millet But Singing of Sita," 142.

⁷⁰ Nilsson, "Grinding Millet But Singing of Sita," 142.

Kausalya “what ritual did you follow to give birth to Ramaiyaji” (meaning Rama).⁷¹ The basic message of the song is the same, though the description is much less elaborate and follows more or less the religious duties that a woman would do anyway. This song is interesting because it instructs high-caste women in particular that if they perform their daily rituals dutifully, they will be rewarded with boons that confirm their virtue as wives.

Significantly, Nilsson has collected songs sung among lower-caste women that tell stories completely out of character for the *Ramayana*, but centre on themes that women may encounter in their own lives, namely jealousy, temptation and infidelity. In one song, not likely to be accepted by the orthodox, Sita asks Lakshmana to go fetch Rama from the forest after he has disappeared for some length of time from the palace in Ayodhya. Lakshmana finds Rama sitting under a tree playing a flute in the company of another, and for some reason, hunchbacked woman. Lakshmana tells Rama that Sita is pining for her husband and the two men go back to the palace. Here Sita does her wifely duties, but will not speak to Rama even when spoken to. Rama seems to take the silent treatment in stride but he finally breaks when Sita refuses to go to his bed with him, telling Rama that it’s because he left her behind and to go back to his forest exile. He promises to give up his hunchbacked mistress.

A song regarding Rama’s infidelity would be unimaginable in the mainstream versions, but in this women’s song, there seems almost a near expectation that Rama

⁷¹ Nilsson, “Grinding Millet But Singing of Sita,” 142.

would stray.⁷² The song is both instructive and consoling. Sita's response is to continue to be the good wife, helping Rama go about his daily business, but she draws the line at sharing his bed. Sita makes a distinction by her actions; she will fulfill her duties as Rama's helper, but will not engage in intimacy since he has another lover. Nilsson writes, "she serves him as a good wife, but refuses his bed, since he has a mistress. By doing so, she affirms her feelings of hurt and pride."⁷³ The song suggests to women that they have a right to be hurt by infidelity and that they have a right to withdraw from sexual intimacy because of it. Given that these songs reflect the life experiences of women, it is telling that issues such as infidelity arise.

Similarly, Nilsson finds a song that again has to do with Rama's disappearance; in this song, when Lakshmana cannot find Rama, he invites Sita to become his wife and Sita flatly refuses. Sita's language is peppered with sensuality when she tells Lakshmana "I have tasted the sweet mango/ I can't eat tamarind/ I've called you Lachhman, the brother-in-law/ How can I call you my man?"⁷⁴ This song has to do with the sexual tension that sometimes arises between a woman and her husband's younger brother. Since often women are younger than their husbands and closer in age to a brother-in-law, close friendships often emerge between the two, and undoubtedly, tension and temptation. But if a woman's husband dies or is absent for a certain amount of time it would be customary that she would stay with her brother-in-law, and in some groups, marry him. So, although the temptation may be realized within the lower castes, higher caste women

⁷² I use the word mainstream to denote major versions of the text that are generally well-known in the Hindu context, and which are textual in format. Generally, the Valmiki, Tulsidas and Kampan versions are what I am referring to here.

⁷³ Nilsson, "Grinding Millet But Singing of Sita," 144.

⁷⁴ Nilsson, "Grinding Millet But Singing of Sita," 145

are expected to remain widowed, especially if they've fulfilled their duty of producing a family and, in particular, a son. Nilsson explains that initially the woman who sang her this song refused at first because she considered Nilsson to be of a high caste and the thought of Rama being replaced by any man, even his loyal and well-meaning brother, is beyond imagination. It would be quite scandalous to higher-caste women to hear of Lakshmana's sexual desire for Sita, even though she refuses him; it is in marked contrast to high-caste morality that Lakshmana would proposition his sister-in-law. This song reveals tensions between the high and low caste. Whereas it would be shocking to high-caste ears, low-caste women's songs do deal with sexual desire as a part of one's normal life experience.

Much to my delight, one of the research participants in my own study mentioned a song during the course of our discussion that is sung on the occasion of a wedding. Though Sita and Rama's marriage is one of the more happy occasions in the standard narrative, there exists a folk-song that tells of the sadness Sita and her family experience as she leaves her father's house. The participant described how when this song is sung, everyone adopts a sad demeanour with symbolic crying, but sometimes, real tears are shed as the song describes Sita's anxieties. Sita laments the loss of her childhood and asks herself "will I ever come back?" Surely, everyone who has left her childhood home has felt this way and everyone can relate to the loss of one's innocence. However here, we have a very young woman about to become a wife with major responsibilities. The carefree days are over and she is no longer under the protection and care of her parents, now she will become the caregiver. Sita would have been aged between twelve and fourteen when she married Rama (at least she would have hit puberty), so the loss of childhood for her would have been felt acutely for one so young. The custom of leaving

one's natal home for one's in-law's home, is a source of sadness for any bride, thus making this song relevant even today.

It is worth mentioning that Nilsson also discusses songs wherein the joy of Sita's marriage is the focus. One song tells the story of Dasharatha's efforts to welcome his daughter-in-law to his home by digging a special well just for her to wash at, instead of washing with everyone else at the river. Another song sung on the occasion of a wedding changes the whole story of the *Ramayana* and praises the great goddess Devi for responding to Sita's pleas to destroy an amorous demon (Ravana becomes a generic demon) who is harassing Sita because he wants to marry her though she is already married to Rama. Nilsson explains that around the time a woman is to be married she is especially vulnerable to the evil eye and Devi is a protecting and nurturing goddess worth invoking for protection. The song also possibly prepares the bride for inappropriate propositions from strange men.

It is tempting to begin a feminist deconstruction of these songs. In many ways the songs reinforce the Hindu patriarchy instead of offering that united front against male-domination that Rao finds in a song about sisterly solidarity. For example, the song dealing with Rama's infidelity does not instruct the wife to leave him for his actions, but to behave in a passive-aggressive manner that will hopefully result in a renewed promise of fidelity from Rama. The song about Urmila depicts her as becoming inanimate, akin to Sleeping Beauty, in the absence of her husband. But, Nilsson and Rao are careful to frame these songs in terms of women's own culture and religion. Rao insightfully notes that these oral traditions are languages "with which a host of statements may be made" and women of the tradition "have long used this language to say what they wish to say, as

women.”⁷⁵ Yet that does not mean that the women who sing or listen to these songs can be labelled feminists, although the songs do deal with distinctly female concerns within the religious and cultural milieu. For the women in Rao’s study, the songs are acts of devotion and singing them is the right thing for a virtuous woman, considered the goddess of the home, to do. Conversely, Nabaneeta Sen finds that songs of Sita connected with Chandrabati are secular in nature and do not have religious justification. She asserts that Chandrabati’s text is “plain human drama and not divine mystery.”⁷⁶ However, Dineschandra Sen calls the Chandrabati text *Puranic* in subject.⁷⁷ The *Puranas* are a Hindu tradition of stories about the gods’ lives in various realms, and if one accepts the divinity of Sita (an *avatar* of Lakshmi), then drawing parallels with Chandrabati’s text and the *Puranas* gives it authenticity and authority as a religious narrative. To be fair to N. Sen, it’s possible that for Chandrabati, a Saivite, there is little of religion in her text. For example there are no devotional aspects like the long prayers and meditations that open each chapter in the Tulsidas version, but there is a heavy dose of mythology borrowed from the established oral tradition. And, given the evidence that Rao, Nilsson and D. Sen give for how the songs are used, keeping in mind that the oral tradition is “scriptural” when viewed as part of a religious tradition, N. Sen’s assertion of secularism in women’s oral tradition is perhaps missing the mark. Nonetheless, the two Sens, Rao and Nilsson all find voices of dissent against male oppression within the songs; the aim is

⁷⁵ Velcheru Narayana Rao, “A Ramayana of Their Own: Women’s Oral Tradition in Telugu,” 114.

⁷⁶ Nabaneeta Sen, “Rewriting the Ramayana,” 164.

⁷⁷ Dineschandra Sen, “The Ballads of East Bengal,” 317.

not, however, to overthrow the patriarchal family-structure, but to find ways to work with it.⁷⁸

Sharada Sugirtharajah has discussed the relevance of feminist analysis for the Hindu tradition. Feminism is made largely to address concerns of western women and though she admits there are many helpful ideas and theories in feminist methodology, there is also a limited purchase when applying this method to the study of religions in India. One goal of this thesis is to establish that one must look to alternative sources of knowledge to find out what roles women in society fulfill, including the oral tradition. Sugirtharajah adds to this and suggests that if western scholarship wishes to discover the role of women, scholars must learn to look outside the religious text (or, perhaps as Pollock suggests, expand the definition of scripture). Besides the oral tradition, she also posits that dance, music and art as well as the religious orientations of *Bhakti* or *Tantra* “offer a far more varied and realistic picture of women’s position in society.”⁷⁹ There are two reasons that one should turn to sources besides the text for knowledge on women. The first is that no normative Hindu text is female-focused, in that such texts (like the Dharmashastras) primarily deals with high-caste males’ roles in society and religious ritual. Secondly, the Hindu religious text also projects the ideal state but not the reality. Textual prescriptions have, by Sugirtharajah’s estimation, been taken as descriptions of reality far too often. Sugirtharajah suggests that the text be considered among a host of other sources of knowledge, which ultimately must transcend the text. She also points out that within the text there are ambivalences and contradictions that can be confusing even

⁷⁸ Dineschandra Sen, “The Ballads of East Bengal,” 133.

⁷⁹ Sharada Sugirtharajah, “Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (Fall 2002), 99.

for one within the tradition. She suggests that though the tradition is patriarchal, it does not have the monolithic character that is often ascribed to it. The Hindu patriarchy is diverse in form and contains internal contradictions; for example, the *Ramayana* in many ways propagates the patriarchal norm, yet at the same time it challenges notions of male-domination and good wife behaviour. As Sugirtharajah notes, even the classical versions of the epic carry “instances of disruption of conventional patriarchal norms,” such as Sita’s rebellion in telling off Lakshmana and stepping outside of the protective circle he instructed her to stay within, her argumentative insistence in going along to the forest with Rama, her criticism of Rama as being prone to violence, or her final rejection of her husband. In women’s oral traditions such disruptions and challenges become even more prominent.

As seen in this chapter, oral tradition and song gives women an outlet for specifically female concerns, including issues like family interactions and dynamics, pregnancy, infant health care, marital bliss and breach, as well as personal sorrows and happiness. Sugirtharajah uses the word disruption to describe how women’s religious expression might challenge the patriarchy just as both Rao and Nilsson find voices of dissent in women’s oral traditions. There is a patriarchy-challenging element to women’s oral tradition, but some caution is necessary before one ascribes a revolutionary feminist agenda to what is really a centuries-old tradition within a larger religious framework. Examples of narrative and song in which women’s concerns are emphasized over traditional androcentric narratives do provide a lens on how women in the tradition may subvert authority away from male figures. Men can have authority over many aspects of a woman’s life, particularly in the religious realm, and some aspects of the oral tradition circumvents or sometimes disregards the need for male authority. An example of this was

seen in Nilsson's fieldwork on songs about how to get pregnant through dedication to daily practice of women's domestic ritual. The songs do not advocate elaborate ritual through the use of a Brahmin, or the need for a man to play any role in an extraordinary ritual, in fact one song suggested that Dasharatha (the song is about Kausalya, Rama's mother and Dashartha's wife) did not need to do any special ritual at all to aid in a pregnancy. The song puts the authority in the hands of the woman by allowing women to instruct and support each other on issues related to reproduction, a specifically female concern. However, again a word of caution must be given. The song is about the birth of a prized male child, which will be the result if a woman dutifully practices the domestic ritual of a *pativrata* (perfect wife). Similarly with the songs and narrative that Rao finds in his fieldwork, which deal with female issues within a larger framework of religious and social duty (*dharma*) such as getting married, leaving home, deference to one's in-laws, or even songs which reflect a loving relationship between father and daughter-in-law or how to make an ally of one's mother-in-law. These songs reflect a woman's experience in that larger framework of one's life in Hindu society more generally, so the songs also reflect that context, which means in part reflecting the patriarchy. The songs and narratives reflect how women find ways to work within that framework or create a position of authority among other women. The oral tradition provides instruction in some senses as well; within the narrative women might get clues on how to maximize whatever authority she does have from within the family unit. For example, one song mentioned by Rao sees Sita locked out of her rooms as Rama throws a little temper tantrum while she is finishing her chores for the night. Rama does not open the door as she knocks so she enlists the help of her mother-in-law, knowing that Kausalya will support her, given that she was delayed to bed because of household chores. Sita knows that Rama will not

disobey his mother and through Kausalya's intervention, Sita is able to resolve things with Rama and create or strengthen a bond with her mother-in-law. In a song like this we find suggestions for handling marital squabbles, how to take advantage of family bonds, and a consoling element, as surely anyone who lives in a household with an extended family will find traces of their own lives and identify with Sita's situation.

The oral tradition is reflexive to the needs and observations of women and Sita is used as a conduit for expressing those needs. Chandrabati's *Ramayana* may have been an attempt to synthesize threads of that tradition into a larger text, though what her intentions for that text was, we can't know. However, it is fair to say that it wasn't for women to read. The extremely low literacy rate for women during the 16th century wouldn't have warranted a textual version of the *Ramayana* meant for women. However, as N. Sen describes, that the still-existing Bengali oral tradition is very similar to the stories found in Chandrabati's *Ramayana*, indicates that the women's oral tradition, particularly that which uses Sita as the central figure, has very deep roots in Northern India at least. There is lasting power in the oral tradition surrounding Sita because women see parts of their lives reflected in the things that Sita deals with, but more importantly, women have used the oral tradition to graft their lives on to Sita's. So, where Sita's narrative, as it appears in the major versions, is silent on things relating to everyday lives of women, the oral tradition fills those gaps. The major versions do not deal with details of events in Sita's life that does not involve Rama. For example, a great deal of space and time is given to a description of their marriage, the proceedings of the ceremony, and in the Tulsidas version much is said about Sita's feelings about Rama and vice versa. However, other life events such as a detailed description of the birth of her sons are lacking, as are the day-to-day events in the four or five years that Rama and Sita lived

together as newlyweds in the palace. But the oral tradition has a different orientation, as in the song that describes Sita being locked out of her room by Rama because she was too long at her evening chores. One has to ask, how likely it would have been that Sita as a princess and future queen would have had chores around the palace? Not very. But, everyday chores around the house that may require working late into the day is very much a reality for many women. Where daily activities are not so strenuous, relationships with in-laws is another major source of inspiration for the oral tradition and that topic likely has a very wide appeal given the nature of extended families in close quarters. These interactions are still very much a concern for most Hindu families as marriage is generally seen as a relationship between two families, and care needs to be taken to not upset the family dynamic. Families typically consist of a couple and the husband's extended family, so the wife is often the interloper in the home and much pressure falls on her to keep the peace. Anxiety over family interactions is very much present in the oral narratives and songs that Rao and Nilsson discuss, and if we take into view that women's oral tradition fills in the gaps left by the textual tradition and which reflect the lives of women of the tradition, one can see how issues such as these find a prominent place in song and oral narration.

Given that the wife is often the centre of the family, the place from which women seek to influence the tradition is within the family structure. The structure is deeply complex for women and men, and the reasons for this complicated family structure are rooted in religious and cultural beliefs that the women themselves adhere to. Women's roles in many Hindu social groups are very clearly demarcated and there exists very high expectations that women (and, to be fair, men also) fulfill their roles. In such a highly organized social system, an unattached woman may be seen as dangerous as she

represents uncontrolled sexuality.⁸⁰ I believe that there is another, deeper and more context specific way of explaining the danger of an unattached woman to Hindu social organization. Women who are without a male protector, that is, ascetics, widows, and spinsters, are living outside a social role that society expects them to fulfill, and this expectation is based on concepts of *dharma* (religious and social duty). Here the social and the religious are essentially coterminous. A woman's *dharma* is to serve her husband. As one research participant wryly put it "when we marry, according to *dharma*, husband is god." Now, there is most certainly an element of controlling women's sexuality through the expectations of the doting fidelity that a wife ought to observe. But, *dharma* is based on the concept of *rita* (cosmic order), which affects not only the order of society and worldly concerns, but also the cosmic order. If earthly creatures are working according to their *dharma* the cosmos will function accordingly. If humans are adharmic, that is, unrighteous, cosmic order will be thrown out of whack. The highly stratified society of Hindu culture assures that righteous order is kept, but those who move outside those boundaries are dangerous not just to society, but the cosmic order as well.

The above diversion from the topic of women's oral tradition and Sita is to reinforce the fact that these songs and the meaning these songs have for the women who sing them, are religious in nature. Emerging from women's oral tradition is an appropriation of the mainstream Sita by women who then mould Sita into their own ideal. The mainstream Sita already mirrors the life experience of the women in the tradition; starting from her divine beginnings, but then following her very human experiences of childhood, falling in love, marriage, in-laws, loneliness and separation, heart-break,

⁸⁰ Sally Sutherland "Suttee, Sati and Sahagamana: An Epic Misunderstanding?" *Economic and Political Weekly* (June 25, 1994): 1600

accusations, hurt pride, pregnancy, child rearing and the triumph of vindication. The songs discussed here show how women identify with Sita because several aspects of Sita's life reflect the experiences of Hindu women. It doesn't seem particularly surprising that there exists an oral tradition that uses Sita as prop to further reflect on, explain, teach, console, and maybe sometimes laugh at women's life experience. The songs give women authority over their life experience as they hear their own stories and aspirations shared in the song's content. Women who sing songs of Sita are not just telling one individual's stories, but many women's stories, which creates a story-matrix with Sita as the centre. The question as to whether Sita is a role model emerges from this discussion of women's oral traditions. Clearly women relate to Sita's life as the oral tradition shows and she remains an ideal of the Hindu religion, but what specifically is it about how she handles various situations that women find compelling? What of her personality and character? What are Sita's limits and how might she fail in providing women today with an example? Sita is an ideal of the tradition, but whether or not she is a role model is a question to be taken up in the coming chapter.

Chapter 3

Sita in Her Words

Introducing....

Six women were interviewed for this study, I used connections made through Montreal's South Asian Women's Community Centre (SAWCC), the Indian Student's association at Concordia and McGill Universities and through online communities. In providing some biographical details and reflections on our discussions, I hope to provide context and a deeper insight into the participant's responses. I have assigned each research participant a pseudonym and no family names are given in what follows.

Kulbir is a married 38 year old project manager with a financial firm and she is from the Bihar region of India. She was very familiar with the *Ramayana* and much of our conversation revolved around her retelling parts of the story to me. She was very thorough and very often anticipated my follow-up questions. Her insight gave me many different issues to think about, such as the unpopularity of Sita as a name for girls in her region, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

Geetika is a 20-year-old choreography student at a Montreal university. She was born in Indonesia to Indian parents and was raised Hindu. She has a very complex relationship with Sita as a character and role model. Sita doesn't seem to inhabit a place of religious significance for Geetika but Sita certainly has cultural and personal meaning for her. The most striking thing about Geetika was her lucid and insightful descriptions of Sita. Geetika had ways of talking about Sita that, for me, reinforced Sita's role in the story and produced an artist's vision of Sita.

My call for research participants was disseminated online and I made a connection with Vanitha by this means. Vanitha contacted me from Boston, so we arranged an interview via video-chat. Vanitha is a very bubbly 33-year-old researcher in neuroscience and is based in Boston. She is single and has been living in the United States for 10 years. She, like Kulbir, is from the city Darbhanga in the Bihar region of India. The city is the historical seat of the lineage of the Janak kings, one of whom was father to our very own Sita. This history (mythical or not) was a point of pride for Vanitha.

Priyanka is a 22-year-old software engineer student and she is single but unofficially engaged. She is now a Canadian citizen living in Montreal, but was born in North India and has a Brahmin background. She repeated several times that her family were from the priestly caste and talked about this in a very matter-of-fact manner, but often in relation to how it affects her choices and her family's expectations of her because of their status. Priyanka is engaged to her boyfriend and her family has met her boyfriend but she says they expect her to have an arranged marriage. Her father, in particular does not accept the boyfriend as a potential husband because he is of a different caste, a Kshatriya. Priyanka's feeling about it is that in Canada it is difficult enough to practice religion the way it is practiced in India, and finding a Brahmin to marry is an added pressure she does not want. Priyanka doesn't explicitly discuss arranged marriages as a problem but rather the difficulty lies in finding a Brahmin in the community to marry. She says that in the days of "the book" (she often refers to the *Ramayana* as "the book"), communities were small, so knowing who was a good candidate for marriage was much easier. She tells me that if she is able to get married, which she expects to happen this year, she will be the first in her family to have a love match marriage.

Anupriya is a community worker, 50 years of age, and a Tamil Saivite from Sri Lanka. Several times throughout our interview she reiterated that for her Sita is just a literary character without religious significance. Anupriya stressed that Sita's lack of choice is a major deterring factor for seeing Sita as a positive role model for women. However, she is quite familiar with the narrative as well as subversive versions such as the Tamil version that depicts Ravana as the hero and presents Rama as a malevolent and entitled prince who asserts a North Indian, high-caste hegemony over the South of India and Sri Lanka.

Manju is a 22-year-old Canadian-born, graduate student of Biochemistry who was raised in a Hindu-Sikh blended family. She is from Montreal but at the time of our interview had just moved to Toronto, Ontario. I had a difficult time interviewing Manju as she was quite guarded, gave short cursory answers, and I sometimes felt hostility coming from her as we spoke. However, at the end of the interview she shared with me the reason for some of this guardedness. Manju's family comes from the Punjab region of India and were the minority as Hindus, but shared in a Sikh culture. Manju indicated that her family was influenced by Sikh traditions and though she was raised in a Hindu household, she mentioned that both her brother and father have Sikh names. Manju feels that although Sikhism teaches equality between the sexes, the culture of the Punjab reinforces a patriarchal culture that condones domestic violence and inequality between men and women. Similarly, she doesn't have a very positive view of the religion she was raised in and questioned me as to whether or not she is a good candidate for this project because she doesn't identify very well with the Hindu religion the way she did when she was younger. She elaborated on this in our interview, that apart from of the religion's teachings on the role of women, which she viewed negatively, she felt that she could not

understand Hinduism because it comes in so many variations. Manju explained to me that she feels resentful of the patriarchy that is reinforced culturally through religion and mythology. The resentfulness Manju felt was communicated to me through her responses and our heroine, Sita, was not spared either.

Decisions, Decisions.

Choice and decision-making abilities (or lack thereof) was the crux of whether or not Sita could be regarded as a good model for women for participants of this study. When asked about a favourite scene, one that held a personal meaning for them, all of the women's answers centred on an episode in which Sita faced choice. The participants universally felt that Sita lacked the ability to make decisions for herself through most of her life, and often they cited her marriage to Rama as an example of her lack of choice. But where Sita resonated the most with the women was when they perceived Sita as making a decision. Similarly, when asked about whether or not Sita makes a good model or is a good wife, answers were again based on Sita's ability to choose. Vanitha and Kulbir noted to me that Sita's ability to choose is hampered by her unwavering support for her husband, and that within the confines of her marriage Sita is too docile, that she makes too many sacrifices. Geetika feels that Sita has good personal qualities but that she does not assert herself and feels that Indian wives need a more assertive role model to look to in shaping their lives in marriage. Manju didn't mince words when responding to questions about Sita's suitability as a role model for marriage, calling Sita a Hindu symbol of women's slavery in marriage. Anupriya commented that Sita seems to have no real desires and asks how Sita could have choices and make decisions if she doesn't have her own desires. Priyanka, however, sees Sita from another angle; she feels that Sita is

continually making the decision to follow her *dharma* as a wife, so because of this Sita is acting in accordance to her desires and interests.

The element of choice was often raised by my informants in relation to the Valmiki epilogue, in which Sita asks the earth to witness her chastity by taking her back into it. The earth complies, and splits itself open to receive Sita and she is gone forever.⁸¹ This scene is very controversial and is often, and perhaps erroneously referred to as the “suicide scene” by academics. But whether or not Sita commits “suicide” here isn’t the core of its meaning for the participants. Vanitha had a very complex understanding of Sita’s final scene and believed that it is the only time that Sita stands up for herself and makes a choice. Vanitha anticipated that I might ask her about whether or not she thought Sita commits suicide and told me without prompting that Sita is finished with earthly life, and leaves it behind when she returns to her mother, the earth. Like Rama, Sita does perform super-human feats in the Ramayana, but arguably, none is as impressive as Sita’s final feat and in this episode she reminds everyone that she is no mere human. For Vanitha, however, this is Sita’s most human act in the story. Vanitha feels that for the first time Sita shows some spine and makes a decision that best reflects her needs. Throughout the rest of the story Sita’s enduring of hardship and suffering is super-human: she withstands more than any mere mortal could put up with. In the end Sita shows us her humanity, her personhood, through a divine display. Sita says no to Rama’s request that she prove herself once again, in front of the citizens of Ayodhya and the gods that gathered there, so that he could love her once again. She not only proves that she is innocent, but proves her power as a goddess as well. Vanitha feels that Sita’s example

⁸¹ Recall that Sita was born from the earth.

here is that women have within them the great power of saying no, and that it is possible to put themselves ahead of the needs of those around them. Kulbir too felt that this scene was important because she sees Sita finally rejecting Rama, after he refused her so cruelly when she was rescued from Lanka, but was rather ambivalent about my questions regarding Sita's divine status and whether or not she commits suicide in the end. Kulbir holds a rather pragmatic view of the whole thing and says that interpretations of these things depends on whether or not one views the story as a myth (return to the earth, her mother, and acting as a semi-divine being) or a true account of actual occurrences (suicide?). In either case, Sita makes a stand for herself and does not allow Rama to humiliate her again in front of Ayodhya's population and the host of gods gathered there to cheer her on.

The women in the study who discussed Sita's final scene positively interpreted her actions as evidence of Sita's ability to stand up for herself. Some of the women discussed this positive interpretation in contrast with another commonly held assumption that interprets Sita's final scene as suicide. To Kulbir's mind, Sita finally says that she's had enough and chooses to remove herself from the situation entirely, but not by way of suicide. For Kulbir, the assumption that Sita commits suicide is based in a literal interpretation of the story; a way of understanding the narrative that Kulbir prefers to distance herself from. Vanitha also did not interpret Sita's final scene as suicide, saying specifically that Sita did not commit suicide, but considers instead that Sita went back to the place from where she came: mother earth. Vanitha rejected the suicide interpretation because she felt that Sita made a decision to protect herself and put her needs first, whereas interpreting this episode as "the suicide scene" makes Sita too passive a victim. Insightfully, Vanitha considered Sita to be removed from her role as wife, and points out

that Sita hadn't been living as Rama's wife in at least 14 years by this point. Therefore, Rama's banishment although cruel and undeserved, may have given Sita more autonomy to act as she pleased, so when Rama summoned her, she felt no duty to return to him. Both Geetika and Manju had awareness of Sita's final scene, but to a lesser extent than Vanitha and Kulbir. Both knew that Sita "died" in the end, yet both struggled against defining her death as suicide, and instead they described Sita's actions as a rejection of Rama. Additionally, Geetika felt that Sita had completed a cycle, that her work was done and it was time for her to move on. Manju - who otherwise didn't have much praise for Sita - thought that, in rejecting Rama, Sita was sending the message that it was time for her to move on as well, and in that one moment Sita became "kinda badass" for Manju. Remarkably, Geetika and Manju learned of this episode from their mothers, but their lack of detailed knowledge of events in the episode suggests that their mothers shared their own views on the meaning in this part of the story, instead of relating the events of the narrative to their respective daughters. Geetika and Manju have perhaps taken up their mothers' views without feeling it necessary to inform themselves about how events unfold. This, I don't think suggests indifference on their part to learning the narrative, but rather that they trust their mothers' interpretations. Additionally, this positive view of Sita's final scene has likely been reinforced by other social and cultural influences, given the prevalence of this interpretation among Hindu women.⁸²

For the respondents in this study there is a disconnect between what is interpreted as Sita's rejection of Rama and defining her exit from earthly existence as suicide.

⁸² Madhu Kishwar's study in a similar vein shows that women interviewed 15 or more years ago had some similar feelings about this final scene. Kishwar's article reveals on average what women's responses regarding this episode were: one woman in Madhu Kishwar's study described Sita as saying "no more of this shit," and moving on from Rama.

Interpreting Sita's final scene as suicide seems to mean taking the story literally, which the women discussed here do not. Sita may be an ideal, or a goddess or at least a semi-divine being, but she is not a real woman in history and should not be seen as such. The women taking part in this study have demonstrated their belief that Sita displays an important ability to choose to put her needs first, for as Vanitha described, too often Indian women and wives are taught only to think of other's needs and never their own. Though Sita herself is not real, the interpretations of her actions have real meaning for some women in the tradition. Vanitha remarked that it's not a bad thing if Sita's final scene helps women find the courage to stand up to victimizers or even over-demanding husbands. There is a wariness of labelling Sita's final scene as suicide because it implies a literal interpretation that sends an unhealthy message to women in the tradition. As Anupriya points to in our discussion of the trial by fire (discussed below), interpreting the story literally can have dangerous real life consequences.

The choices Sita makes were somewhat problematic for at least one participant. Manju was hard pressed to think of a favourite scene because she couldn't recall one where Sita was convincingly making a decision for herself. Episodes in which it might appear that Sita is making a choice seemed to Manju to depict Sita conforming with Hindu patriarchy, such as Sita's argument with Rama that she should be allowed to accompany to the forest although he has told her to stay in Ayodhya. Sita convincingly argues her way onto the chariot, so to speak, by telling Rama (among other things) that a woman's place is next to her husband, but Manju questioned whether Sita was making a real choice or not. Sita's argument in the narrative is laced with Hindu morals, specifically that a woman is incomplete without her husband, indeed a body without a soul, and therefore Manju feels quite strongly that Sita is unable to choose for herself

because she does not know any other reality, that she is a victim of her context. Sita “chooses” to go with Rama to the forest because she must choose this, because she cannot imagine other options. Manju wasn’t the only participant to discuss this episode and question how much choice Sita has. Anupriya also questioned Sita’s ability to make choices because she felt that Sita had no desires. Anupriya felt that Sita did not honestly choose to go to the forest with Rama because this is what her heart desired, but because she knew it was her duty to go. Similarly in the case of Rama winning Sita as his bride: Manju questions the appropriateness of calling the ceremony a “self-choice,” when her groom was chosen not by Sita but in a test of strength. Anupriya also mentions that Sita had very little choice in whoever her husband would be. Because of the lack of choices presented to Sita throughout her life Anupriya feels that Sita cannot have happiness.

Of Decisions and Divinity

Three of the women discussed with me the scene leading up to Sita’s abduction as their favourite episode. All three identified Sita’s humanity in making a choice to step outside Lakshmana’s protective circle to give alms to the old Brahmin (Ravana in disguise), as the endearing element. Her choice ends up being a mistake, but a mistake that many would make, and, as Anupriya sees it, a mistake that is made with kindness and caring at heart; she trusted that no harm would come in giving to a needy person. Geetika echoes Anupriya’s sentiment and notes the motherly quality to Sita’s action, in the same way a mother will step into harm’s way to help her child, Sita leaves the protective circle to give food to a seemingly elderly and hungry man.

In this episode, Sita makes a judgment call, without regard to outcome. The participants who discussed this episode with me felt that Sita was demonstrating positive

decision-making abilities, which came from her caring attitude and because she followed correct *dharma*. With this particular episode, Sita is also shown to break the rules (Lakshmana's command that she remain inside the protective circle) and that act of rebellion is appealing to those who talked about this scene with me. Kulbir adds that this scene is an important turning point in the story. Sita's decision to step outside the circle has consequences not just for her, but also for changing the course of the story. Up until Sita's abduction, this exiled branch of the Raghu family was biding their time in the forest until they could return to Ayodhya. Sita's abduction turns the story into a tale of odyssey and war for Rama and Lakshmana and a drama of forbearance for Sita. Sita's abduction marks the point in the story where Rama's fate as vanquisher of unrighteousness (i.e. of Ravana, the Rakshasa king) is set in motion. Kulbir's comment that Sita's abduction marks a turning point in the story alludes to the idea that Sita also plays a shared role in Rama's destiny to destroy Ravana. There is a suggestion here that Sita knows what her role is in her shared destiny with Rama, although she is coy about letting anyone else in on the secret. In the Valmiki version, Sita knows very well what her divine roots are and has an awareness of her power in that divinity. She tells Ravana that she could never love him because she is bound to Rama "the way the rays belong to the sun."⁸³ Though meant to appeal to the heart, this is not simply romantic metaphor. Sita is intimating toward her cosmic relationship with Rama's higher self, Vishnu, as his consort Lakshmi. This brings her to her most powerful self and lets loose a tirade against him in which she threatens him with her own destructive power, saying she herself could reduce him to a heap of ashes. Similarly, Aubrey Menen, a 20th century satirist, retells the

⁸³ Valmiki, *Ramayana*, 437.

Ramayana in such a way that he believes highlights Sita's active role in the narrative. In Menen's *Ramayana*, Sita has an encounter with Ravana in the days leading up to her abduction in which she talks and acts seductively towards Ravana, inviting him to take her away, and this marks the beginning of the end for Ravana.⁸⁴ In the same way that Menen makes plain Sita's knowledge of her divinity and her shared destiny with Rama, Kulbir argues that without Sita's actions the story would not have progressed, and that the shared destiny would go unfulfilled.

Sita as a Concept

Geetika and Priyanka were less familiar with the entire story of the *Ramayana* and instead had a more general sense of the story and some knowledge of the better-known scenes, yet each participant had informed opinions about Sita. The similarities between Geetika and Priyanka are that they are under twenty-five years of age, and were born outside of India. Both cite similar sources of knowledge as do the older participants, mainly the oral tradition, but being further away from extended family, and from the cultural context, contributes to their lack of detailed knowledge of the story. Geetika and Priyanka, unlike the other participants, were unconcerned with the question of whether or not Sita makes choices and decisions. It seems that the reason for this lack of concern is that they feel a more religious or "spiritual" connection to Sita. For Priyanka (twenty-two years old) and Geetika (twenty years old), Sita is a concept, not a character in a narrative who necessarily must make decisions and choices. Both these participants see Sita as an ephemeral ideal to aspire to, but not necessarily to emulate.

⁸⁴ Aubrey Menen, *The Ramayana as told by Aubrey Menen* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972).

Geetika is a choreography student who was born in Indonesia to Hindu parents; she attended an American-run school for diplomats' children that focused on the arts. Indeed, Geetika sees Sita through the eyes of an artist and has quite a complex relationship with the ideal woman as a whole. Geetika was poetic in her descriptions of Sita and told me that she was drawn to the tactile imagery used to depict Sita, such as comparing her skin to lotus flower petals, and that she feels that Sita truly must have been very beautiful. Geetika's conception of Sita as the ideal woman concerns not the choices or decisions she makes, or is barred from making, but rather her intrinsic characteristics. Geetika uses the imagery of the lotus flower to create a metaphor for Sita's inherent nature. The lotus flower is delicate and beautiful; it represents purity, yet it grows from the muddy bottoms of stagnant pond water. That the flower is delicate but strong-rooted has currency for Geetika in thinking about Sita. This speaks to her about the ideal nature of women in a more comprehensive sense, not just as a wife or daughter.

This is in fairly sharp contrast to Priyanka who thinks of Sita as a religious model of perfect wifedom (*pativrata*). Priyanka made it plain to me that she is from a North Indian Brahmin family who very much adheres to traditional notions of religiosity and gender norms. Priyanka, at the time of our interview, was engaged, but she was concerned about her parent's disapproval a marriage to her boyfriend. Yet she feels that her relationship is worth the risk with her parents. Priyanka's engagement and problems with her parents was also a gateway for her in thinking about Sita. For Priyanka, Sita is a good role model because of her devotion to religion; the way that Sita thinks and talks provides a positive model for women and wives, but Priyanka admits that it's a hard model to follow. Despite that, Priyanka wants to emulate Sita in her marriage because Sita represents someone who knows what is good and bad in life and for relationships.

Sita has everything she needs to make a good life, and she respects her husband, she takes care of her in-laws, and respects their feelings, emotions and decisions. Sita is not only about *dharma* for Priyanka, however; Sita is also motivated by love for Rama and his family and that love seems to be what is behind Sita's actions, including what Priyanka felt was Sita's individuality and ability to make decisions for herself. Priyanka indicates that Sita's decision-making capabilities are a mix of love for Rama and concern for her *dharma*. To pull all of these ideas together, she gives the example of Sita leaving Lakshmana's protective circle to give alms to the approaching "Brahmin." Sita is conflicted because Lakshmana has told her to stay within the circle, yet a sage is begging alms at her doorstep. So in concern for *dharma* she disobeys Lakshmana and steps outside the circle. Like the other participants, the result of this choice is immaterial for Priyanka; what is important is Sita's choice to act in her own best interest (and Priyanka adds that she acts out of a genuine feeling of kindness for the Brahmin). The flip side of this is that Sita is obedient to Rama because as Priyanka says, "once we get married, the husband is god." The obedience Sita shows to her husband is rooted in her religion and Priyanka believes that is what makes Sita an ideal wife.

Of Decisions and the Beautiful Fragility of Humanity

Sita's ability to make both choices for herself and be obedient to Rama is illustrated by Geetika as well. Geetika feels that Sita makes a very human choice in stepping outside of the circle to offer food to the Brahmin, the error in judgement reveals Sita's human quality, but also her kindly, motherly quality, even in the face of possible danger. However, Geetika also described Sita's "solid" character as she bravely withstands her imprisonment in Ravana's garden. Geetika noted that although Sita had

moments of anxiety and sadness, she always believed in her husband and knew she would be rescued. Geetika related to me her vision for the scene in which Hanuman encounters Sita in Ravana's garden, wherein Hanuman tells Sita that Rama is coming to rescue her. Geetika finds that Sita has a casual air about her, as if she were expecting Hanuman to come to deliver this news, that she trusted this would happen all along; although inwardly she is relieved that Rama is finally coming, she remains composed.

Geetika's likening Sita to a lotus flower in its delicacy and strength was an unintentional elaboration on how the participants universally described Sita's character. When asked to describe Sita, invariably the participants described her as both fragile and strong, often in the same sentence, sometimes reinforcing this paradigm throughout our conversations. For Vanitha, Sita displays an unshakable confidence in her marriage and love for Rama, as well as an "inhuman" ability to withstand hardship, while at the same time her marriage has made her docile. Kulbir and Manju see Sita as a victim of an abusive marriage, in particular because of Sita's having to endure the trial by fire. Kulbir tells me that Sita "allowed Rama to take her for a ride," even though Sita had done everything she could to be a good wife to Rama, including, as Kulbir noted, staying faithful to a man who was essentially destitute even when the wealthy and powerful Ravana was making lavish offers of his love and his kingdom to her. Sita made many sacrifices and endured hardships in order to be with Rama (we both ask: out of love? out of duty? both? neither of us know). Anupriya, who only sees Sita as a character from a story, also describes Sita as innocent, obedient, and strong.

Geetika further elaborates on this juxtaposition of Sita's strength and her fragility and it echoes in some interesting ways how Sita has been interpreted and used by

political organizations in India, including Gandhi's mobilization of a particular image of women in his *satyagraha* (holding to truth) movement for India's independence, something Priyanka picks up on as well. In fact, some of Vanitha and Kulbir's interpretations of Sita's nature have also been adopted by the 1989 Shektari Sangathana campaign to strengthen women's economic rights of women in the Maharashtra.

In terms of Sita's strength and fragility, Geetika notes gentle manipulation on Sita's part. Sita finds power in her role as the protected wife, seeing that Rama finds his motivation in protecting her and uses that to her advantage. She is able to control situations because she asserts her right as the protected wife. Because of this, she acts through inaction; she leads through passivity. This action through passivity is the very heart of Gandhi's *ahimsa* (non-violence) movement and he used Sita's passivity and strength as a model of *satyagraha* (holding to truth); "woman is the embodiment of sacrifice and therefore non-violence."⁸⁵ But Gandhi's Sita is no pushover either - passivity should not be conflated with enslavement to men - and he cites Sita's moral courage in resisting the powerful Ravana; Gandhi extends this to include women's bodily autonomy within their marriages. "(D)azzling purity," according to Gandhi, is women's best protection against being dishonoured; a woman who is "fearless" knows this.⁸⁶ Gandhi's interpretation of Sita seems true to the way Valmiki depicts her. Sita often acts as a moral compass in several instances in the narrative and she seems to possess the ability to subtly coerce Rama or even outright shame him into doing the right thing. For

⁸⁵ Madhu Kishwar, "Yes to Sita, No to Ram: The Continuing Hold of Sita on the Popular Imagination of India," *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 298.

⁸⁶ Madhu Kishwar, "Yes to Sita, No to Ram," 298.

example, Sita admonishes Rama at one point for being prone to violence. Gandhi felt that women could play a role in instigating non-violent *satyagraha* in India because of their inherent passivity, and encouraged women to refrain from joining their male relatives who were involved in petty communal squabbles. Gandhi believed that it was women's "special vocation and privilege" to lead a non-violent "war against war."⁸⁷ Geetika came to understand Sita through her family's oral tradition and though Geetika and her family may not have such lofty goals for the "Sitas" of the world, there are similar shared sentiments between Gandhi's appropriation of Sita and the ways in which Geetika thinks of Sita. That is, finding power through passivity, assertion through non-action, and the ability to control situations through her rights as a wife.

This beauty in passivity and strength is a complex issue that can reinforce patriarchal stereotypes. Women's value has long been based in the ability to withstand hardship with grace and stability. Right or wrong, it is observable that this ideal is not just a relic of the Hindu patriarchy, but prevalent and deeply rooted in religious and cultural traditions everywhere. Within the Hindu tradition, Kishwar posits that "ideals set in bygone ages are still valid and worth emulating," difficult as they may be to follow.⁸⁸

During the late 1980s a campaign was launched in Mithila (Maharashtra), Sita's home province, to empower women economically through land endowments. Madhu Kishwar gives an account of her involvement in this movement, and describes a program called Lakshmi Mukti designed to communicate to the peasantry that they had been economically enslaving their *grihalakshmis* (household goddess of prosperity, or wives)

⁸⁷ Madhu Kishwar, "Yes to Sita, No to Ram," 299.

⁸⁸ Madhu Kishwar, "Yes to Sita, No to Ram," 303.

because of a curse put on the land by Sita (given that Sita is considered to be an incarnation of Lakshmi). The local lore is that Sita cursed the land because she was refused food by the villagers after she was banished by Rama, and according to Kishwar's account, villagers maintained that until the advent of hybrid wheat (perhaps a curse in itself), no grain grew in that region, though grain crops were plentiful in neighbouring villages. Organizers of the Lakshmi Mukti appealed not just to the belief in the local lore, but to the hearts of the land-owners in the villages, who were all men. Sharad Joshi, the leader of the organization centred his campaign on Sita's story, which as Kishwar notes, was a powerful way of couching his program, as it carried cultural and religious currency. Joshi was then able to link the cruelty of Rama to the ways in which men expected their wives to toil in the home and fields, selflessly and without economic reward. Joshi praised Sita's virtues as a dutiful and faithful wife who was always at Rama's side, and what does she get for it? Banishment. He suggests that if Rama wasn't able to withstand the public suspicion against Sita, despite her having proven herself, then he should have made an arrangement to give Sita her own place to call home. Joshi links the precarious economic situation of the Lakshmis of Maharashtra with Sita's banishment. Where do the women go when they've lost their homes if they have no ownership stake in the land or the buildings on the land? The plight of widows in India is well known, but other circumstances such as abuse or being banished (like Sita) may cause a woman to lose her home. Interestingly Kulbir makes exactly the same suggestion as she discusses with me the supposed happiness of Sita and Rama's marriage. She asks why if Rama trusted and loved Sita did he so cruelly abandon her in the forest, with no place for her to call home? Kulbir suggests that Rama, if he cared about Sita, but felt that he must bend to social pressures, should have set her up in a safe home away from

Ayodhya and out of the public eye. Like an ancient alimony arrangement, Rama, a king, could have taken the financial burden of caring for Sita and his eventual children even though they were not living as a married couple do, for what does Sita have if not the protection of her marriage?

Anupriya says that Rama is not her ideal man: instead she holds up the god Shiva as the ideal, this may be because Anupriya was raised in the Shaivite tradition. But as Kishwar notes, among Hindu women generally there is an affection for Shiva, “Bhole Shiv Shankar-the innocent, the trusting, the all-devoted spouse who allowed his wife to guide his life and his decisions.”⁸⁹ Shiva’s wife, Parvati, is strong in her ability to influence Shiva and women of the tradition find his devotion to her appealing. Why then does not Parvati become an equal role model for women? One reason is that many women identify with Sita because she has concerns similar to that of their own.⁹⁰ Everyday issues that women face rarely surface in stories about Parvati (although she does suffer her father’s disapproval of her choice in husband). Sita’s life experiences are more familiar and women have created an entire oeuvre of folk tradition, in particular song, expands on the *Ramayana* narrative. Kishwar writes that “Sita-like behaviour makes sense to many Indian women” and one area where Sita-like behaviour might make the most sense has to do with relationships with in-laws.⁹¹ Sita was loved by her extended family and they, in particular Lakshmana, defended her when she was at her most vulnerable; at the same time, her behaviour helped keep things harmonious within the

⁸⁹ Madhu Kishwar, “Yes to Sita, No to Ram,” 304.

⁹⁰ Madhu Kishwar, “Yes to Sita, No to Ram,” 305.

⁹¹ Madhu Kishwar, “Yes to Sita, No to Ram,” 305.

large and complicated family unit. This is, in part, what Priyanka is getting at when she talks about how Sita knew what was good for her relationship and life and how she respected her in-laws' feelings, emotions, and decisions as well as showing care and love for Lakshmana. That Vanitha does not find Sita very compelling as an ideal seems to be because for Vanitha, Sita's actions are based on her love for Rama, not her adherence to religion, whereas for Priyanka, Sita is a religious ideal, perhaps more precisely a religious concept; the perfect wife or *pativrata*.

Sita as *Sati*

One of the most talked about and contentious scenes in the *Ramayana* is Sita's trial by fire. It seemingly has escaped no one's notice that Sita was unfairly and cruelly treated by Rama despite the efforts of many narrators and interpreters since Valmiki to obscure or justify Rama's harsh treatment of his wife. Five of the six participants in this study name Sita's trial by fire as their least favourite scene and point to the sexism and unbalanced power relations underpinning the episode. Both Kulbir and Priyanka specifically see the scene as a reflection of the Hindu patriarchy and an example of how women, and wives in particular, suffer under the pressure to be perfect in the terms set out by the *pativrata* model. Sita, according to Kulbir, acts as the perfect wife in this scene; she is obedient and trusting, she submits to Rama's power over her and as a result loses her autonomy. Priyanka feels similarly; Sita has no real voice in this scene and must prove her innocence by a terrifying and ultimately unnecessary ordeal. Priyanka points out that this scene is not a symbol of a bygone era, but still holds meaning today because Priyanka's own experience is that society hasn't really changed and that men hold power over women; she finds this particularly frustrating in her own family

dynamic. However, Priyanka also felt that Sita was vindicated (she was not familiar with Valmiki's epilogue) and though the ordeal was unfair, Sita did prove her strength of character, despite the cost. Geetika discussed several scenes with me that she felt negatively about and the trial by fire was among them. Geetika was somewhat at a loss to explain how Sita could go through with such an ordeal and not seem angry with Rama. She recalls her mother recounting this scene to her, telling her that Rama made Sita go through with it even though Sita was obviously innocent and he was not tested similarly. Geetika, like Priyanka notes that Sita was vindicated and perceived Sita to be a "strong Indian woman;" but Geetika thought that given Sita's obvious innocence Rama "should shut (his) eyes to" the opinions of others and demonstrate his trust in Sita. Manju calls the scene outright sexist since Rama was not also asked to prove, or even expected to prove his chastity, as Sita was. When asked if Sita was vindicated, Manju replied that Sita was only temporarily vindicated and that Rama was too easily persuaded by the gossip that led to Sita's exile later on. Anupriya made connections with *sati* and Sita's fire ordeal; that Sita burned herself to prove her loyalty and purity as a wife. Although the point is that Sita did not burn, thus proving herself pure, Anupriya associates Sita's entry into the fire with the act of *sati* since there is no point in going on if you've been turned out, or have survived your husband.

Although the link between Sita's trial by fire and widow immolation (*sati*) initially seemed like a conflation of two separate issues, Linda Hess' thoughts on this same issue sheds some light on the deep-seated belief that burning her can test a woman's devotion to her husband.⁹² Interestingly, iconography of Sita prior to the 20th century

⁹² Linda Hess, "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of his Ideal Wife" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (March, 1999).

depicted Sita in an active role during the fire ordeal (*agni pravesh*), as she was portrayed walking toward a burning pyre. This has changed however, since the advent of devotional posters of modern day *satis*, most famously Roop Kanwar, who is photographed smiling with her husband's corpse and then in a subsequent photograph, she is sitting calmly on the funeral pyre while the flames are lit and the goddess Sati herself appears in the sky (although the photo itself appears to be from the time of Kanwar's *sati* in September 1987, an image of Sati was obviously added in). Devotional posters of Kanwar sitting cross-legged, palms pressed together and in flames appeared soon after, alongside posters of Sita's trial by fire, which now depict Sita sitting calmly in a devotional manner on a pyre alight with flames. Hess draws a connection between the many sources for images of Sita surrounded by flames as a kind of deep-seated, unconscious "permission for wifeburning," pointing to the number of horrific crimes carried out by husbands on their wives in which they are maimed or murdered by being burnt.⁹³ Certainly concepts wife burning and of *sati* can be separated out from the images and mythology of Sita, for, in the end, Sita was not burned; she emerges from the pyre without a scorch mark or soot smear to be seen. However, Linda Hess and Anupriya's point is that the myth and iconography can reinforce dangerous ideologies already in place. Sally Sutherland's comments on Sita's fire ordeal and its connection to *sati*, is based on the meaning of the word *sati*.⁹⁴ A *sati* is a virtuous woman, her virtuosity being related to her role as a wife. Since Sita was removed from her role as Rama's wife for the time she was captive in Ravana's grove, her status as a wife is ambiguous. Sutherland discusses a belief that a

⁹³ Linda Hess, "Rejecting Sita," 24.

⁹⁴ Sally Sutherland, "Suttee, Sati and Sahagamana: An Epic Misunderstanding?" 1600.

woman who is unaccompanied by a male is at risk for sexual promiscuity and this makes the unaccompanied woman a threat to a male dominated society. Whether or not Sita was unchaste while separated from Rama, she is still under suspicion and thus impure.

Sutherland interestingly turns the issue in on itself and depicts the downfall of men when their own sexuality remains unchecked. Ravana is the pinnacle of male lust, the king of a culture whose norm was to carry off married women according to unbridled male desire.

Despite her best efforts to remain pure throughout her captivity, Sita became impure because a man with an especially uncontrolled sexuality touched her. Sutherland also points to another episode in the Valmiki *Ramayana* that sets a precedent for Sita's fire ordeal, but which commentators and scholars of the Epic often overlook. Early in the narrative, Ravana meets and tries to carry off a powerful female ascetic named Vedavati.

Ravana fails to account for her ascetic powers and when he attempts to drag her off by her hair, she transforms her arm into a sword and cuts her hair, thus freeing herself from Ravana. On her feet again, she tells Ravana that he has violated her and because of this she has no wish to live and, "right before your eyes, I will enter the fire."⁹⁵ But just before she enters the fire, Vedavati sets a curse on Ravana that he will be destroyed for want of a woman. This woman, in the end, is Sita. Opportunistic Ravana violated both Vedavati and Sita because they were without male protection, and furthermore not fulfilling typified gender roles of the wife; Vedavati by choice was an ascetic, and Sita was momentarily left alone and then forcibly removed from that role. Both are alienated from the role of wife, and as a result are violated and made ritually impure. Fire has a purifying effect, similar to water, even in the traditional understanding of *sati*, where a wife will follow her deceased husband to the funeral pyre. Vedavati immolates herself to

⁹⁵ Sally Sutherland, "Suttee, Sati and Sahagamana: An Epic Misunderstanding?" 1600.

regain purity after being violated by Ravana's touch, even if it means death. Sita must go through the ordeal to prove her innocence and/or remove the marks of Ravana's touch, and because *Agni*, the god of fire, would not even touch her it is proven that she was indeed pure.⁹⁶

Sita's fire ordeal is a controversial episode that many have trouble interpreting positively because of the potential violence indicated by fire and strongly associated themes of women's purity. As the women in this study felt that Sita's fire ordeal is detrimental to the struggle for equality have indicated, it is a reminder of violence, carried out or threatened, linked to oppression through impossible standards of wifely purity and the expectation of submission to those standards.

Character Break

Two of the participants talked about the golden deer scene leading up to Sita's abduction as their least favourite episode. Interestingly they both felt that Sita's request, or demand, that Rama hunt the deer breaks character for Sita, Rama and Lakshmana and the *Ramayana* generally. Vanitha explicitly stated that Sita is so distracted by the golden deer that she breaks her vows of austerity, and her demand that Rama go after it is out of character and therefore unbelievable. Vanitha does have a point; in most cases Sita is not reluctant to tell Rama what to do, but she never makes trivial demands on Rama. When Sita gives instructions to Rama these are dharmically charged instructions on proper behaviour. Nowhere else in the story does Sita tell Rama to do something for her unless it is couched in dharmic terms. Vanitha also noted that the episode does not fit with the values and message of the *Ramayana*, which is ideal behaviour of men and women.

⁹⁶ Sally Sutherland, "Suttee, Sati and Sahagamana: An Epic Misunderstanding?" 1600.

Geetika also finds this scene problematic. She finds it contradictory that Rama would leave Sita alone in the hermitage, even with Lakshmana's protection, to fulfill a material desire. She finds it strange that everyone would disregard their duties and vows: Sita forgetting her vow of asceticism, Rama leaving Sita alone, and Lakshmana breaking his promise to watch over Sita in Rama's absence. Geetika insightfully points out that in other Hindu moral and ethical mythologies, it is up to husbands to provide for their wives and that their wives should not want for anything. However, husbands should also artfully control what their wives want and need and not give in to the nonsense material demands of their wives.

Is this episode a cautionary tale then? Is the result of this scene, i.e. Sita's abduction, a moral and ethical lesson about abandoning one's duties out of desire for needless luxuries? Geetika and Vanitha's assessment of this episode is based on their belief that the tale is about ideal personhood, and the ideal man or woman could not be tricked by an equally powerful being. Certainly ideal archetypes are the crux of the story, but for any story to advance, there must be plot devices in the form of events. Is there a *Ramayana* that could be composed without this scene? How else would Ravana get Sita alone? Menen imagines that Sita has an encounter with Ravana and actually willingly goes with him, but Menen writes satire. Some might argue that Sita was acting out of some divine tacit knowledge of her and Rama's destiny and that she had a hand in creating an opportunity for Ravana to take her so that Rama, the upholder of *dharma*, could defeat him. Others might argue that this scene was an interpolation by an

insensitive writer who did not consider proper character development.⁹⁷ Whatever the rationale for the scene, Geetika and Vanitha's comments provided a further line of questioning that I had not previously considered.

Sources of knowledge

The question, *how do you best know Sita?* was put to each participant. Without fail every participant named the oral tradition as a major source, if not *the* major source for knowledge of the Ramayana narrative. It has been established early in this thesis the of oral nature of the narrative, a narrative that is not just entertainment but holds religious, ethical and moral code for ideal conduct of both men and women. The orality of the text is so latent that most participants couldn't name specific sources of oral instruction but knew that someone, often an older female relation, had first told them what they were currently relating to me.

Kulbir said she learned the story as a child and that she never had trouble remembering or understanding the narrative even as a very young child; starting at the

⁹⁷ Sheldon Pollock, "Ramayana Book III: The Forest: Ancillaries." *Ramayana*, ed. Robert P. Goldman, (Clay Sanskrit Library Online, 2006), accessed August 23 2012 <http://www.claysanskritlibrary.org/excerpts/aranya/aranya-introduction.php>. In his long introduction to The Forest Book found on the Clay Sanskrit Series website, Pollock introduces some attempts to split the *Ramayana* between two sections of the book because of a seeming disparity in the style. He notes that books one and two deals with "correct sociopolitical behaviour" (*dharma*) and the third book, The Forest, (and everything after) is "the entertainment of a romance." Pollock is speaking tongue in cheek here; certainly The Forest Book, where we find Sita's abduction is fantastical, full of myth and adventure in nature. However Pollock notes that in all the epic literature available to us from the Indian tradition there exists something like The Forest Book. In other Epic texts there is a transitional stage "within the social, political, and ethical problematic they all share." The Forest Book represents that transitional stage for the *Ramayana*. However, motivations for seeing the epic as two separate and unrelated texts joined sloppily by a "nature myth" (i.e. The Forest Book), is based in a Eurocentric view of text, that fails to consult the tradition for further evidence of a literary tradition. In light of this, Pollock urges that we view the *Aryanakanda* by its "receptive history" rather than its "genetic history." The receptive history approach allows a more holistic view of the text as it is interpreted, presented and internalized by members of the tradition. Whereas if we are starting from the "hypothesis of meaningless, irrational disunity, we cannot ask meaningful and rational questions" of a textual tradition that considers itself complete.

age of three or four, her mother was telling her *Ramayana* stories. She recalled to me that she attempted to read the other great Indian Epic, the *Mahabharata*, when she was about ten but was not able to follow the narrative with the same ease as the *Ramayana*.

Geetika learned both Indian and Indonesian versions of the story at home from her family, and she noted some differences in the way that the two traditions presented Sita. She felt that the Indian *Ramayana* presented Sita as needy, often in trouble, and requiring protection, but with a motherly quality to her. She called this version the “damsel in distress” version of Sita. However, the Indonesian version presented Sita as the “damsel in success,” meaning that Sita was cunning, with her wits about her, in control of her life and able to get herself out of trouble. Geetika felt that her parents presented her both models and allowed her to inform her own opinions about Sita and draw from the ethical and moral lessons presented in the two narratives.

Priyanka, from a Northern Indian Brahmin family, first heard the stories at home from her grandmother and later during our discussion told me that she and her father argue about Sita’s role and about women’s duties based on interpretations of Sita. She felt her grandmother set an early, more female-centric and positive interpretation of Sita that her father undermines with a Brahmin, male understanding of women’s roles in the family.

Manju recalled with some amusement in her voice that her mother told her stories from the *Ramayana* as true and literal events because the place names in the story reference real-life place names in India. Manju, on the other hand, sees it simply as a story.

The oral tradition became a strong and recurrent theme in the interviews, as not only did the women say that they learned it from their family members, but also my conversations with each participant were oral re-tellings of their own. For many of the questions I asked, the participant would often give me their version of an episode to elaborate on in their answers. I found that many of the women, in particular the younger group, would stop to ask me if their rendition was correct, or for reminders of details.⁹⁸ I also noticed several instances where the women did not know the narrative in sequence. The women knew most of Sita's major scenes, or at least could make reference to them, though filling in the gaps between these episodes was not always possible. Additionally, participants often did not know the rationale behind some of the major events, such as Marica disguised as the golden deer, or the "shadow Sita" plot device in Tulsidas, or that Sita was born from the earth (as it relates to her final scene). This suggests that their familiarity with these episodes is based not in an interest for the entire narrative (though that cannot be ruled out), but rather that the episodes' meaning for the women themselves and/or the relatives who taught my participants these sections, supersede the story-arc. For the participants, the *Ramayana* seems not to be a story with a beginning, middle, and end, but rather a patchwork of smaller stories built on a framework of a larger narrative, and that there were missing sections in their knowledge of the narrative didn't seem to matter much. This was a little difficult for me to understand at first, but this is also indicative of learning through the oral tradition of the family. Oral tradition usually would not take the shape of a start-to-finish recitation of the narrative, but talk of *Ramayana* episodes is more likely to surface in everyday interactions where appropriate,

⁹⁸ I refrained from telling them if they were right or wrong, but in cases where they couldn't remember a detail and asked me to fill in the gaps, I would only provide enough to jog their memory, if in fact I did know the missing piece.

and this generally seemed to be the case with the women in this study. Though the women could identify a family member or two from which they learned about Sita and Rama, they did not say how or when these “lessons” took place. For example, Geetika noted that her parents used the narrative as an ethical and moral teaching tool when she was a child. Geetika sees this now that she is an adult, but as a child the stories just appeared as her parents saw fit. Priyanka said that she remembered her grandmother telling her parts of the story, but it is only now, again as an adult, that she challenges her father’s Brahmanic interpretation of Sita as the ideal woman with what she learned from her grandmother, thus reinforcing that the interpretation of Sita is what is meaningful to women. Vanitha and Anupriya’s memories of when and how they learned the stories were more vague. However, both women knew that they learned the narrative from relatives, but couldn’t remember attending a family recitation of the story or going to any other type of theatrical production that presented the narrative in full.⁹⁹ Both participants also were unsure of the sequence of events and recalled the story as the other participants did, which is to say, in bits and pieces mainly focussing on Sita’s major episodes, suggesting the family influence in learning the narrative.

This seems to form a similar pattern to how the women’s oral tradition takes shape as discussed in chapter two. Though the women in this study may recall individual episodes about Sita from the mainstream narrative, as opposed to a tradition that exists outside the text, their focus was often not on how that episode contributed to the rest of the story, but rather how Sita behaved in that episode. The women’s oral tradition

⁹⁹ Philip Lutgendorf’s book *The Life of a Text*, documents the types of *Ramayana* recitation done by family members at certain times of the year. This falls under some type of oral tradition, but the narrative that is used is generally the Tulsidas version and it is read aloud from start to finish continuously over a given period of time. Vanitha and Anupriya have no memory of ever attending of such a family event.

discussed in chapter two is similarly centred on Sita's conduct in her various challenges, whether those challenges are found in mainstream narrative or not. Women's oral tradition generally does not draw a narrative in sequence, but rather pulls out key events and finds ways to expand on aspects of that event, while using Sita as the central figure. The women in this study have a similar approach in talking and thinking about Sita as the central figure in a story, from which they draw conclusions about conduct based on her stories (and these conclusions can be positive or negative). This focus on Sita's conduct is how the other major theme of this project, choice, came to light. The women drew my attention to the issue of choice through their own interpretations and concerns about the few episodes that interested them, just as the oral tradition sheds light on the concerns of those who tell their stories through it; in this case, the concerns of women. This similarity, I believe, takes shape because of the way individual women have learned to talk about Sita from their family's oral tradition. The women were comfortable expressing and deconstructing their well-formed opinions about Sita within a framework that places her at the centre. This relaxed attitude in speaking about Sita as a central figure, and that separates her out from the narrative as whole, suggests that the women are familiar with a type of discourse that casts her similarly.

Second to the oral tradition, the women also acknowledged the televised *Ramayan* series produced in India in the late 1980s and early 90s as an important source of knowledge for the story. The series, directed by Ramanand Sagar, is based largely on the narrative credited to Tulsidas. According to Heidi Pauwels, however, Sagar was sensitive to the concerns and queries of his audience members and often shaped episodes with his audience in mind. Sagar claims to have been a part of a Ramayana debate group for many years prior to directing the television series and felt that a dialogue between the director

and audience was in step with the oral and interactive history of the narrative. Notably, the series originally ended with the Tulsidas “happy ending” of Rama and Sita’s return to Ayodhya, where Rama was installed as the King and lived with Sita, happily ever after.¹⁰⁰ However, Sagar did take license to soften one of the more contentious scenes, that is, Sita’s fire ordeal. Rama does not come off well in many people’s eyes in most versions of the *Ramayana* during this scene; he is cold to Sita, cruelly addresses her and humiliates her in front of his army. One participant said that she thought she would be “okay” with the entire *Ramayana* story if it weren’t for Sita’s fire ordeal. Sagar either anticipated the audience’s discomfort with this scene, or as Linda Hess points out, is himself one of the many interpreters who has difficulty understanding Rama’s motivations in this scene, and re-wrote it in a way that softens Rama’s cruelty. Sagar makes up new dialogue between Rama and Lakshmana wherein Rama divulges his intentions and reasons for having Sita enter the fire, and Lakshmana is Sita’s enthusiastic champion, yet remains inevitably obedient to Rama in Sagar’s scene.¹⁰¹ Sagar’s Rama states that he trusts Sita’s chastity because not only are they (Rama and Sita) one, so that he can see Sita every moment with his divine eye, but that even if Ravana had laid a hand on her he “would have been burned up by that supreme *sati*’s glory.”¹⁰² Despite the popularity of the Sagar series as a source of knowledge, the participants in this study still believe that Rama was unnecessarily cruel to Sita and she was meted out a raw deal.

¹⁰⁰ Due to pressure from some segments of the public, Sagar later added the Valmiki epilogue to end the series.

¹⁰¹ Linda Hess, “Rejecting Sita,” 12.

¹⁰² Linda Hess, “Rejecting Sita,” 14.

Nearly all of the participants in this study name the Sagar TV series as a source of knowledge along with the family's oral tradition, although Vanitha was the only participant to elaborate on this version of the *Ramayana*. Kulbir said that she had watched the series in school (Manju was unsure about whether or not she'd seen the series, though she thought she'd seen something on television). Vanitha felt that her family watched the program for cultural or historical reasons, and not because of their religious views on the text. Although she draws from the television version as a source of knowledge, she says she never took to the series because of its melodrama and sappy acting. Vanitha also didn't care for the "damsel in distress" version of Sita that was presented in the televised version.

There were interesting other sources of knowledge as well, ranging from stage productions to language classes, art films, comics and cartoons. Anupriya grew up in Sri Lanka and though she was Hindu she did not learn the *Ramayana* from an educative-religious context; instead the *Ramayana* was taught in schools as part of the Tamil language arts curriculum. Vanitha also mentioned that she learned the story through reading comics as a child and more recently by reading retellings such as those of C. Rajagopalcahari and Narendra Kohli, which, as she described, take out the magic and make the narrative purely historical.¹⁰³ Books in general were generally noted as sources, though often participants couldn't remember which version they'd read, whether it be the Valmiki, Tulsidas, Kampan or other versions in print. Priyanka, however, knew exactly which version she'd read: Tulsidas' Hindi version. She said that she preferred reading this text to watching the televised version, because the book allowed her to use her

¹⁰³ There is a vast array of comic books that tell many of India's religious narratives; it is not terribly surprising that someone who grew up in 1990s India would be familiar with India's religious comic books.

imagination in creating a detailed narrative. Manju and Vanitha brought up a recent animated version of the *Ramayana* made by the American animator, Nina Paley, called *Sita Sings the Blues*. This version is controversial in India because it portrays Sita as the victim of Rama's cruelty as she croons the songs of the 1930's blues singer Annette Hanshaw. Paley's narrative weaves in the breakup of her own relationship and the feelings of abandonment that went along with it. Many in India feel that Paley had misappropriated a sacred Indian narrative for her own purposes, and the fact that she is an American probably has not helped her cause. However, both Manju and Vanitha feel that it is a good rendition and said that was probably closer to the message that was intended in early versions. Manju also had an interesting source of knowledge of Sita that the other participants did not mention. Although Manju noted that her family blended Hinduism and Sikhism, they did attend Hindu temples in Montreal, first the Hindu Mission in the neighbourhood of Rosemont, and then later her family began to attend the larger, multi-purpose, multi-sect *Mandir* that was built in the West Island of Montreal. She noted that she learned about Sita from the idols installed at the temple, although Sita remained a bit of a mystery to Manju because her family never paid much attention to the statues of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana, always placed together. Nonetheless, the three statues together made an impression on Manju and she could not think of one without picturing the three Raghus together.

From the discussion above, an image of Sita as the ideal for the participants in this study emerges. Sita is often depicted in terms of her strength or stoicism as well as her beauty and delicacy. This image is drawn from the many sources of knowledge that my informants have mentioned and contribute not only to imagining aspects of the ideal woman, but also raising concerns and questions as to whether or not this is a healthy

ideal. The next chapter focuses on the conception of the ideal reflected in Sita as a combination of beauty and strength, and examines whether or not Sita serves as a role model for women in the Hindu tradition.

Chapter 4

Sita (re)Considered

The participants in this study believed Sita to be an ideal Hindu wife, but not necessarily a role model. The reason that Sita is generally not seen as role model is because of her apparent lack of choice, something the women in this study were critically concerned with. In working out issues with regards to Sita's ideal nature the respondents universally pointed toward a definition of the ideal they saw in Sita as a mix of strength and beauty. This strength + beauty = ideal formulation was both explicit and implicit in our discussions. When asked to describe Sita, the words "strong" and "beautiful" or "delicate" (but in a way that implies beauty, such as Geetika's likening of Sita to a lotus bloom) were given, and as our conversations continued, Sita's identity was further unpacked in these terms.

To begin with the issue of choice, family and social expectations within a more traditional Hindu milieu tend to dictate people's needs and thus their decision-making processes, and these expectations extend outside of India and can have an effect on women in the diaspora. Consider Priyanka's anxiety about her choice to get engaged to her boyfriend, even though she knows her family, her father in particular, will object and may outright reject her for making that choice. She feels she is making this choice not just because she is in love with her fiancé, but for practical purposes; as she stated, she felt it was too unrealistic to expect to find someone who is a good match for her from the very small, local Brahmin community. Priyanka and her fiancé are mediating a world where their families and community's expectations of them do not match their own

desires and aspirations. Priyanka says that she feels this acutely because she was raised in a western context where values around marriage are different than her parent's values. Nonetheless, Priyanka wants to have elements of a traditional Hindu marriage in her own - for example, respect and deference to her in-laws - and she sees Sita as someone who emulates perfection in this aspect of traditional Hindu marriage. Meanwhile Manju explicitly links the Hindu concept of gender roles in marriage as being a prison for women because they lack autonomy. The other women in the study also talk about Sita's inability to freely choose for herself; ranging from choosing her husband to choosing to go with Rama to the forest and her choice to prove her chastity through supernatural feats.

The participants worried about whether or not Sita made decisions throughout the course of the narrative; however, none of the women thought that she was not personally capable of making decisions, but rather that her reality restricted her from doing so. The participants were quick to criticize Rama and Rama's actions for limiting Sita, rather than criticizing Sita herself for not being more aggressive, though all mentioned this as Sita's major flaw. However, most of the women were able to discuss examples where they perceived Sita as able to make a decision or affect outcomes through her actions, such as the episode leading up to Sita's kidnapping or her final scene. Despite the outcomes (abduction) or the resulting reality (Sita ceases to exist on earth) of these episodes the women felt that it was important enough to see her make a decision based on her own judgement of a situation. Any negative outcome was not seen an important factor when considering the overall importance of Sita's decision-making process, as it shows that she is able formulate a judgement and act of her will and desire. Additionally, negative outcomes can be interpreted as positive overall, as in the case of Sita's abduction.

According to at least two of my informants, in reality, Sita's abduction has an positive effect, since Rama's destiny is to destroy the evil and havoc-wreaking Ravana: her abduction leads Rama directly to Ravana. Despite the positive spin put on some of Sita's more tragic episodes by my informants through assigning Sita some agency, the women of this study were unable to see Sita as role model. Sita has agency, but in limited quantities, as her environment does not support her full agency, thus restricting her ability to make choices and decisions fitting of a role model.

Though Sita is most definitely thought of as the ideal woman/wife, the women I spoke to do not relate to her in the way that archetypes are used as role-model figures in New Age, feminist-derived spiritualities.¹⁰⁴ These Hindu women may find certain qualities of Sita appealing, but those appealing qualities vary depending on family and personal values, as well as the region and religious sect that one is raised in. The study of archetypes as it is used in feminist spirituality creates monolithic character profiles from which one might take cues for personal development. A "single or composite figure" of a goddess is a construct that may have meaning for some feminists in North America seeking to reorient their religiosity toward a feminine divine.¹⁰⁵ Tarot cards aimed at women's spiritual growth are a good example of this. A card might contain an image of goddess, deity or character from any range of religions or myths on the face and on the back of the card give a short description with keywords that describe the character of this figure. The person using the deck will pull cards randomly and glean some kind of

¹⁰⁴ I will use the term feminist spiritualities for short, but this term refers to new age religions based on a type of feminist theology, which includes goddess worship as a way of connecting oneself with an inner feminine divinity.

¹⁰⁵ Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?" *Economic and Political Weekly* Oct 31 (1998): WS-34; Carol P. Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections," *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, eds. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 273-87.

meaning or guidance from the results, usually a combination of archetypes to give an overall picture of directions for personal growth or inner strengths one should muster for a difficult task ahead. Because goddess worship is found in some regions and sects of the Hindu religion, and because feminist spirituality seeks to invoke a feminine divine, eastern religious traditions like Hinduism are used as a resource for re-imagining the divine as female.¹⁰⁶ But, in reality the use of archetypes in feminist spirituality is related to theories of psychoanalysis and uncovering unconscious character traits that are archetypal in form. Carol P. Christ illustrates this by describing how a character from a play rises from her despair and exclaims that she “found God in [herself] and [she] loved her fiercely.”¹⁰⁷ Finding the goddess within oneself is particular to this kind of North American feminist spirituality but this generally does not reflect how individuals in the Hindu religion relate to their gods. Specifically, the character traits of goddesses that feminist spiritualities often say are based in eastern wisdom, is in fact a mapping of modern theories of the unconscious onto so-called archetypes found in religions such as Hinduism. But for Hindu women themselves, Sita does not have this kind of significance. Perhaps the archetype of the perfect wife is one way of understanding her. However, I would suggest based on how my informants have described her that looking at Sita in this way is only part of the story. Sita may be described as the tradition’s “archetypal” ideal wife, but that doesn’t make for a complete picture, because it does not take into account how Hindu women, Hindu wives, actually receive her. Feminist spirituality based on character archetypes is said to reveal latent character traits in the individual. If this were true of Sita as an archetype of the perfect wife, it would mean that virtues such as

¹⁰⁶ Rita M. Gross, “Hindu Female Deities as a Resource,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46 (1978): 278-89.

¹⁰⁷ Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess,” 273.

modesty, purity, loyalty, and devotion to one's husband are latent in every woman. But as the women in this study have cautioned, there are deep problems with the assumption that women's innate characters reflect Sita-like virtues. Though the women have said there are some things about Sita that are worth adopting, taken together these are the character traits of a woman who does not have choices. As Anupriya remarked, Sita's kindness and generosity are positive character traits, but she is too obedient, and because of this she is like an abused wife. Vanitha also recognizes Sita as the ideal of the tradition, but Sita is not Vanitha's ideal because features of her personality, and her situation, prevent her from making her own decisions. Vanitha and Anupriya's thoughts reflect the overall sentiment of the women in this study with reference to Sita's lack of choice. In North American culture, the archetypes used in feminist spirituality create complete character profiles out of mythological figures that are adopted for personal growth. If this were true of Sita, then I believe a much different estimation of Sita would emerge from my informants; Sita would be seen as an ideal to adopt *in toto*, and not a figure to distance oneself from.

Sita sets an example that most recognize as the highest bar, but not one that is, or should be attainable. For example, Priyanka told me in our conversation that she would very much like to emulate Sita in her marriage, but knows that it's impossible to fully do so because of Sita's stoic ability to endure hardship. Furthermore, the characters who feature in the *Ramayana* are regarded by most Hindus, not as human beings, but as gods and goddesses. Though Vanitha and the other participants speak of Sita's humanity, Sita is clearly no mere mortal when a simple and carefully worded prayer can cause the earth to split itself open in order to receive her. And though Sita and Rama display human characteristics that make them accessible and loveable icons of the tradition, much

importance is placed on their divinity within the narrative through their super-human feats or description of their beauty in divine terms. Though some have attempted to situate historically the events of the *Ramayana*, for most Hindus the narrative is reflective of a time and place that existed long ago and in an age where real life interactions with the gods were not figments of the imagination, though they are now.¹⁰⁸ Gods are imperfectly perfect; they are powerful and omnipotent, but they have squabbles amongst themselves, they feel jealousy, anger and fear. The gods make mistakes and make amends. In light of this, it's a tenuous claim at best that Sita is invariably perfect as the ideal. We have seen there is much to criticize about Sita, her environment and how it affects her. Furthermore, it has also been shown that the gods are not above reproach, as Rama in particular was the recipient of much criticism by the women in this study for the ways he treated Sita.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, what does the ideal really mean if it is so frequently deconstructed by the very people who are meant to emulate it?

The descriptors that were given by the participants pull together an image of Sita's ideal nature as a combination of beauty and strength. The participants used some formulation of the terms beauty (and sometimes delicacy) combined with strength to describe Sita as an ideal. The terms beauty and delicacy generally derive from the ways that narrators have described Sita's physical attributes and her personality. Sita's beauty is very often described in terms of delicacy in nature; skin like lotus petals, eyes like

¹⁰⁸ Pollock believes that the narrative is making reference to a political situation some 500 years before Valmiki.

¹⁰⁹ Women in this study often complained about Rama's unjustified mistrust and coldness towards Sita. He is also often the subject of academic scrutiny since he represents the ideal Hindu man and later the ideal ruler, and there appear to be inconsistencies in his behaviour. Linda Hess, Sheldon Pollock, John Brockington, Roderick Hindery, and David Shulman have written on this subject.

those of doe, a face like the moon.¹¹⁰ Similarly, her character is generally described as delicate, careful or soft-spoken. From a textual standpoint strength is not normally a term one sees associated with Sita. I believe that women on their own estimation apply the descriptor, or may rely on how older female relatives have described her. Sita's strength, I think, has more to do with Sita's ability to withstand hardship, and with her endurance and self-discipline, particularly while being tested in Ravana's garden. Geetika, as mentioned above, was very attracted to the tactile descriptions of Sita and carries the metaphor of Sita's beauty even further when describing how the lotus root is very strong, like Sita. In this way, Sita is the embodiment of both a delicate beauty and strength, and this for Geetika is what makes her ideal. Geetika laughed when she told me that she doesn't even know where she got these descriptions from, yet this is how she thinks of Sita. Though Geetika was the only participant to go into detail about Sita's beauty, Manju also told me that her mother often remarked that Sita was the most beautiful woman India had seen, insisting that the story was based on actual events. Discussions of Sita's strength were often couched in terms of the difficulties she had to confront. Geetika called Sita's unflinching reaction to Hanuman's arrival in Ravana's garden as showing her very "solid" character, as she explains to Hanuman that Rama must come to rescue her himself. Priyanka also used the term strength to describe Sita's character in relation to her trial by fire, as she felt that Sita must have possessed a great amount of courage to prove her innocence in such a manner in front of so many people. In this way courage is equated with strength. When I asked Anupriya to describe Sita, she gave me keywords "strong, virginal, morality, innocent, pure and obedient." These keywords are indicative

¹¹⁰ It should be noted that these are fairly normal descriptors of beauty in the text. Rama is similarly described as having a face like the moon.

of how most women described Sita, although the words weren't exactly the same each time, descriptive terms generally associated beauty or delicacy with strength or stoicism to form Sita's ideal nature.

These descriptive terms used so frequently by the participants in this study are also found in mainstream textual versions where Sita's name is often prefixed with words describing her purity and moral virtues.¹¹¹ Strength, as related to a character trait, has to do with how she handles her various difficulties. Sita may be described as soft-spoken and demure, but when she does speak up she is quite forceful and steadfast. As discussed in Chapter One, the type of Sita one finds depends on which version of the narrative one is looking at. If one takes the Tulsidas narrative alone, one will find a passive or laconic Sita. However, in the Valmiki version Sita speaks at length and with conviction in several key instances, such as her impassioned speech to Rama arguing that she should accompany him in his forest exile; her chastising of Rama for his use of violence; her goading of Lakshmana to go after Rama in the forest; her speech to Ravana rebuffing his advances; and in her verbal shaming of Rama for doubting her in both her trial by fire and the final scene. While a core narrative exists, each version of the story is unique. The oral tradition presents another arena for interpretation and self-expression through the narrative, and was no doubt an inspiration for Valmiki, Tulsidas and Kampan draw inspiration. Given the numerous sources of knowledge that participants drew on, it is possible that some women who describe Sita as strong are referencing her more vocal moments in versions such as Valmiki's. Meanwhile others could be referring to her

¹¹¹ For example, she is often addressed as "Virtuous Sita," or described as "Sita, who was so good natured and modest." Rama in one speech to her refers to her "delicate and lovely" nature while also calling her "sensible and fair."

ability to withstand hardship and ridicule, or interpreting her stoicism in the Tulsidas version as strength of character. Finally, it is likely to be a combination of sources and interpretations learned from their family traditions and contemporary representations. Just as Geetika commented on her inability to name a source for her interpretations, so was the case of the other women in this study (myself included). An image of Sita as the ideal is the embodiment of strength and beauty (or delicacy, or innocence, or purity), but what kind of strength and what kind of beauty is up to the imagination to piece together.

The women in this study asked “who is Sita?” and their responses varied depending on a variety of personal and situational circumstances. In general the women who were over thirty years old saw Sita as an important cultural and religious icon, but their personal feelings regarding Sita was slightly more empathetic and nuanced as they discussed the ways in which Sita was restricted by her context and the ways in which she challenged those restrictions. The younger women were less homogenous in their assessments of Sita. In the eyes of the younger participants, Sita’s characteristics ranged from the ephemeral, to the real-life exemplar in family dynamics, to a relic of the patriarchy; although that ever-present equation, ideal = strength + beauty, was expressed by all. The difference between the two groups interpretations of Sita is related to a few factors. The first is that the women thirty and older were raised, and in some cases married, in the Indian context and came to North America in their adult years. The empathy that this group displayed can in part be attributed to having had more Sita-like life experiences, and perhaps having encountered Sita-like women. It seems that because of this group’s upbringing in India, where Sita, and indeed the *Ramayana*, has more religious and cultural currency, they were more familiar with the story and rhetoric about Sita. Anupriya was able to discuss with me her memories in Sri Lanka where Sita’s name

was invoked to describe the virtues of a real-life virtuous woman (“so and so is just like Sita”), or to compel a woman to be more virtuous (“be more like Sita”). Anupriya in particular, despite being raised in Shaivite family, had empathy for Sita’s situation that I feel can be attributed to her career as a community worker in an immigrant women’s outreach centre, where I also work as a volunteer teacher. I have seen many “Sitas” access the centre, in fact one woman who had volunteered to be a research participant for this study was just like Sita, brutally turned out by her husband while in the last trimester of her pregnancy and seeking emergency shelter. I obviously did not pursue an interview with her during that very difficult time. When I asked Anupriya what she would tell Sita if she met her at the centre today, she replied that she would assure Sita that she had choices she could make to help her lead her own life, and that she should not rely on Rama to make the right choice for her. Additionally, Anupriya would also tell Sita that Rama should trust her, as one ought to trust one’s spouse. Anupriya continued on to say she felt women take marriage much more seriously than men and because of this they trust that their men will be good husbands; however, often and early in the marriage that trust is broken. While women experience the pressure to be good wives, she did not think men receive a similar message to be good husbands, or at least not to the same degree. Manju also echoed what Anupriya said. When I asked Manju what she would say if she met “a Sita” today, her response focused on Sita’s ability to choose her own lifestyle. Manju felt that she would want to be assured that Sita had chosen the life she lived because that is what she wanted, and not that her lifestyle had been forced upon her.

Alongside the strength + beauty = ideal formulation that was common to all participants was the distance that the women put between themselves and Sita. Both Anupriya and Vanitha stated that Sita was the ideal, but for someone else. Similarly,

Geetika, while very carefully choosing her words, said that Sita might be a good role model for women who have fewer options in life, but that she is far too unrealistic in her flexibility even when her own best interests are at stake. Manju felt that the importance placed on Sita as the ideal and other issues she saw related to women in her religion was in part what made her distance herself from Hinduism. She explained that she agrees Sita exemplifies the good wife according to the Hindu tradition, but that's a problem inherent to the tradition; women are compelled to adopt harmful values about what it means to be a good wife. Similarly, Priyanka, who had the most positive interpretation of Sita, placed distance between herself and Sita as a role model, saying that Sita was a too high ideal and none can live up to her example.

All the participants agreed that Sita was the ideal wife according to the tradition but in reality that does not make her a good wifely role model. None of the women believed that Sita was an ideal to emulate in full, though all felt she displayed good qualities, such as compassion and kindness. Additionally, for some participants who also enjoy the *Ramayana* as a love story, Sita's love and devotion to Rama (and vice versa) was thought of as admirable. However, when the question "was Sita a good wife?" was put to each participant, answers generally followed the "Yes, but..." formulation. It seems that participants were dividing the one question into two. The "Yes" half of this response depicts how Sita how is conceived of by the tradition; it's as if I had asked, "Is Sita seen as a good wife by the tradition?" to which the response would be "yes, she is the perfect wife according to the tradition." The second half of the question then would have been, "do you think Sita is a good wife?" to which the response would be tempered with discussions of her lack of choice and her too loyal, too flexible, too giving nature. To illustrate, Vanitha's responses were always very provocative and in some cases

unexpected, Vanitha felt that Sita was one version of the ideal but reiterated to me several times that Sita is not her ideal or role model. Vanitha thought that Sita was a good daughter and mother and that she displayed confidence in the security of her marriage at times, but not confidence in herself, which Vanitha feels is crucial to being a good role model. Vanitha also thought that some of Sita's motivation was her love for Rama and if she did play the "good wife" it was in part because she was in love with Rama. But, perhaps this love was too much, that Sita was too dependent on Rama for her own happiness. Vanitha tells me that Sita only made decisions that best reflected her needs when she was removed from her role as a wife. Here Sita doesn't play the good wife because she had been separated from Rama for so long that she had ceased to be anyone's wife, and because she was not a wife, she could make a decision for herself. Here we see this "Yes, but..." way of responding to this question, though Vanitha feels that Sita is a good wife because of love and not necessarily *dharma*. The "but" is that her love for Rama becomes the motivating factor in all of Sita's decisions to the point where she is not really making decisions at all while in the role of Rama's wife. Here Sita becomes a cautionary tale for allowing one's love for another person to overwhelm one's self-confidence. Kulbir felt similar about Sita's lack of confidence in herself as the factor in ruling her out as good role model. Kulbir felt that Sita may represent some sort of role model, but is conflicted about what kind as Sita displays some character traits that she feels are not conducive to a good example, such as being too delicate, too soft natured and insecure. For Kulbir, Sita sets a far too extreme example, a sort of "too good to be true" ideal that should not be taken up by women anywhere. Kulbir and Vanitha are both from the same part of Northern India and they both related to me that there is a taboo on naming daughters Sita (though derivatives such as Janaki, Maithili and Vaidehi are

common); both Vanitha and Kulbir felt that the taboo represented the anxiety of parents who do not want their daughters to share in Sita's fate. The other names maybe appropriate because they associate Sita with her father, Janaka (Janaki and Vaidehi), or the region of her birth, Mithila (Maithili).¹¹² In connection with this taboo, they feel that if Sita had ever been an explicit role model, those days are over and neither see much of a place for Sita as role model in modern times. Anupriya feels that Sita is too obedient and docile to be a good role model. Though careful not to blame the victim, she felt that Sita was too steadfast in withstanding Rama's abuses of her trusting nature. Overall Anupriya feels that Sita cannot be a good role model because she lacks the all-important power of choice. However, Anupriya sees some good qualities in Sita that could be adapted by women, or for that matter by anyone, such as kindness and purity of heart. These types of characteristics are in general a positive thing, but perhaps as Sita's story indicates, need to be tempered with self-confidence and independence.

I turn now to the younger women in the group where some similar thoughts regarding Sita as a role model emerged but from within a somewhat different framework. Geetika tended to look at Sita as a whole woman; she felt that Sita was in reality quite dynamic as a person but that her character development as a wife was relatively static. Geetika thought that Sita was a good wife for Rama, but not a great model for wifehood because of the lack of development in her wifely role; Sita did not assert her own needs in her marriage. Geetika found it frustrating when Sita did not speak up in decision-making processes out of deference to her husband. Overall, Geetika felt that Sita was

¹¹² Vidyut Aklujkar, "Family, Feminism and Film in Remaking Ramayana" *Indian Literature and Popular Cinema: Recasting Classics*, ed. Heidi Pauwels (New York: Routledge, 2007), 42-53. Aklujkar explains that Vaidehi associates her with Janaka because of a title he earned, Videha, which referred to his ability to transcend his body.

strong in character but hardly ever asserted herself, and this lack of assertiveness does not hold up when testing the strength of a good role model, because the result is that she does not speak up, even when her own interests are at stake. Priyanka on the other hand, very much thought of Sita as role model, but remarkably not so much when it comes to her wifely duties to Rama. Priyanka's answers about Sita as a role model had to do with loyalty to family and genuine love for her husband. Priyanka felt in particular that Sita was an ideal daughter-in-law and she stated explicitly that she wanted to emulate Sita in that regard. Priyanka was the only participant on the cusp of marriage, and in some ways idealized married life. She talked about Sita's respect and caring attitude toward her in-laws and her husband as the key to Sita's good wifhood. Sita had a loving and respectful attitude toward Lakshmana that made her a treasured sister-in-law. For Priyanka, Sita also makes a good role model because of her devotion to her religion, that she not only talked the talk, but she walked the walk as well. Despite the glowing review of Sita, Priyanka admits that Sita is a hard model to follow, perhaps impossible. At the end of the interview I asked Priyanka specifically what she was hoping to adopt from Sita's example; she expressed that it was Sita's love for her husband and family that she hoped to adopt. Manju, our final participant, feels that Sita is not a good role model because she reflects a too-powerful patriarchy in the Hindu context. Like the rest of the participants, Manju agrees that Sita represents the ideal wife for the tradition, but she thinks that it is an unhealthy ideal. She sees Sita as the justification for women's entrapment in abusive marriages. Manju's reasoning was that Sita was so deeply entrenched in the patriarchy that her supposed good qualities become a mirror for patriarchal values, and this disqualified Sita as a role model *in toto*. Again, the lack of choice remains a sticking point for Manju; these patriarchal ideals that Sita mirrors are displayed most clearly in

her lack of choice and decision-making ability. These patriarchal ideals as reflected by Sita make her a harmful archetype and not one that women should look to for cues on wifehood, or womanhood more generally.

The participants in the study draw a distinction between what makes an ideal figure and what constitutes a role model. Sita is the ideal wife within a larger context of a religious tradition, but she's no role model for women within that tradition. Given the numerous times that participants referred back to their grandmothers, mothers and sometimes fathers throughout the course of our discussions, it seems more likely that role models were found among immediate relations, rather than the ideal reflected by Sita. For the women in this study, the ideal is an unattainable standard that is best left that way. However, the relationship they have with their family and personal interpretations of Sita are meaningful, and those interpretations can inform some aspects of their lives, even if it means creating distance between oneself and the ideal they interpret.



The aims of this project were to discover the thoughts, feelings, opinions and criticisms of women in the Hindu tradition about Sita and about the *Ramayana*. The women who participated in this research guided the form and content of my investigation, providing me with a wealth of ideas, insights and knowledge to draw from. Though I came to the table with some idea of what prevailing attitudes about Sita might be, in no way was I able to anticipate several of the themes that emerged from my conversations with this group of women. The emphasis on the oral tradition was an unexpected but rich source of inspiration and although the connection between Sita in the imagination of the

women and the oral tradition wasn't immediately clear to me, what did emerge was further proof that Sita has "a continuing hold" over the oral tradition, and that the oral tradition is still a major source for knowledge of Sita.¹¹³ Though there were many and various other sources, the oral tradition was the one constant. Many of the most illuminating phrases uttered by the research participants started with "my (grand)mother told me....." Sometimes, as in Priyanka and Geetika's case, Sita continues to be a talking (or arguing) point in the home and a tool for teaching ethics and morality. The connection between the oral tradition and what women think of Sita lies in the common and ongoing practice of talking about Sita. Though she may be a marginalized character compared to Rama or even Lakshmana, and she loses more of her voice as later textual versions reduce her role, she is most alive in the oral tradition. And she is *alive* in the oral tradition! Sita's life is only half-told in the text, yet women are told that she is the ideal: how can a woman interpret an ideal whose story is incomplete? This is where women have picked up the oral tradition and Sita's life outside of the text, her agency, her mistakes, her cunning, and her decisions are presented in full, with commentary. It is said over and over that Sita is the ideal woman, yet she is an example that no one can live up to. In some ways women have appropriated Sita precisely because they initially accept her as the ideal, but have found the opportunity to re-shape her to reflect something of their own lives. Sita as she appears in the oral tradition is a far more personal and engaging version of the textual Sita, and it is this version that elicits a greater range for her narrative and thus her meaning.

¹¹³ I take this phrase from the title of Kishwar's study, which served as inspiration for this project.

Often when talk of Sita revolves around the textual version, it's her ordeal by fire or her last moments on earth that dominate the conversation (and this is especially true of academics). Much ink has been spilled over the scenes in which Sita's life is in danger or coming to a close, yet very little has been said on the scenes which feature Sita's vivaciousness. When talking with women of the tradition much more airtime is given to Sita's life (whatever we know about it). Discussions showcasing her agency are favoured, whether it is her decision to offer alms to Ravana, or her desire for a beautiful pet, or her final scene where she takes a dramatic and unexpected step. These scenes are potent for the women of the tradition because they carry both personal and cultural meaning and invite interpretation. These interpretations can be positive or negative, but in either case, interpretation implies affect and engagement. For some women Sita's last scene represents her greatest moment in finally standing up and saying no to being victimized, for others it might mirror the overwhelming Hindu patriarchy and represents something to be rejected. Such interpretations by women of the tradition reinforces the ability to choose, and are available to women in large because of the existence of the oral tradition.

The theme of choice dominates both the conversations with research participants and the discussions of the oral tradition. For women to find meaning in Sita, they must find her agency, even if they must create a venue for her to exercise that agency. Finding ways in which Sita exercises that agency helps uncover what is important to women in the tradition since Sita of the oral tradition is a reflection of their own lives. Though some aspects of the oral tradition may not be relevant to all women today (perhaps women today are less concerned with home birth methods described in some of the songs), the beauty of the oral tradition is its malleability. The oral tradition is whatever women as group, large or small, make it out to be. The matrix of an individual's songs and stories

will always reflect the overall needs and interests of a community. The bigger project implied in this very small offering is a call for renewed interest in Sita's stories in the women's oral tradition in India, and attention given how that tradition might change in the diaspora, as in India. Studies done on this and similar subjects are small in number and my hope is that this thesis has contributed some thoughts towards how we might further research and analysis on interpretation of Sita and characters like her. As Sugirbarajah and others have suggested, women's religious knowledge and expression is generally found outside the text. Here I have suggested that this is true for women even in the Hindu diaspora, as my informants confirm that the women's oral tradition about Sita to be a first source of knowledge for Sita.

This thesis has revolved around women's voices and I would like to give the final say to one of those voices. Geetika, our young artist describes Sita as "the root of the story, but at the same time, not the story... everything is in orbit with her, even though, she is not moving... Sita is the gravity." Sita has certainly been the gravity of this story, and this version is only one of many, and yet I hope, a positive contribution to the matrix orbiting around Sita and one that advocates for choice.

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