

Sītā in Tulasīdāsa's *Rāmacharitamānasa*:
Implications for the Modern Hindu Woman

by

Karen E. Green

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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University of Manitoba
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ABSTRACT

The study conducted within this manuscript concerns "Indian women and religion." The goddess Sītā and her role in the *Rāmācharitamānasa* of Tulasīdāsa is of central concern. The focal point involves an examination of the role Sītā plays as a goddess and as a woman in a Hindu text.

Sītā is not examined as a *norm* for Indian women, rather possible influences that Sītā *has* had on Indian women and possible reasons behind the evolution of Sītā, an evolution resulting in Tulasīdāsa's depiction, are explored. Further, she is studied within several contexts, in terms of those aspects of her character which might be emphasized and developed in the future. Sītā, conceived as an *ideal* Hindu woman is of particular concern.

Tulasīdāsa made several changes to the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Valmīki, many directly affecting the portrayal of Sītā. In a traditional sense, many of the changes made involving Sītā may be interpreted as positive ones; however, one may also question these changes and the elimination of characteristics which portrayed her as a *dynamic* character. Earlier versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, particularly, the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Valmīki, are referred to, in order to highlight both the subtle and the obvious modifications, omissions, and additions which have affected Sītā.

The Indian television series, "Rāmāyaṇ," primarily based on the *Rāmācharitamānasa* of Tulasīdāsa and the Valmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, is referred to as a

modern version of this ancient epic. Of particular importance in the television series are certain scenes involving portrayals of Sītā and how the creators of this series have chosen to deal with them.

In conclusion, the means by which perceptions of traditional figures such as Sītā can alter and ultimately transform are pursued. One must ask if it is possible to preserve traditional texts in a manner which is relevant for today's social-ethical concerns. Education, women's groups, and the depiction of women in the media play a large role, and are therefore, addressed in this study.

I. INTRODUCTION

1) Method

My primary interest in this study involves the figure of Sītā. In this study I wish to pursue Sītā and her role in the *Rāmācharitamānasa* (hereafter RCM). Sītā will be examined as portrayed by Tulasīdāsa, as portrayed through history prior to this text, as seen through her various relationships with other characters within the text and as seen as an individual character. As a first step I intend to briefly introduce the history of the *Rāmāyana* story, the RCM and the author of the text with which I will be working, Tulasīdāsa.

My central intention and second step is to conduct an in-depth study of the role that Sītā has played in the RCM. My focal point involves a study of the role Sītā plays as a goddess and as a woman in a Hindu text. This study includes examinations of Sītā as independent, Sītā's relationships with Rāma, Sītā with other men in the text, and Sītā with her family.

Sītā is not to be examined as a *norm* for Indian women, for there is no such evidence that she has ever been a *norm*. We will look for *possible* influences that Sītā has had on Indian women (and men) and *possible* influences that Indian women (and men) have had on her development, resulting in Tulasīdāsa's depiction. Further, she will be examined, in terms of those aspects of her character which might be emphasized

and developed in the future. Sītā, conceived as an *idea*/Hindu woman is of particular concern; this matter will be addressed throughout the work.

There are several points to keep in mind regarding the methodology of this work. Firstly there is the difficult task of dealing with the many levels on which this text is structured. At least two general levels are worked with, the transcendent and the secular. Throughout this work a clarification will be made as to what level is being dealt with.

Secondly, the reader should always realize that the characters involved and their portrayals are primarily based on the work of Tulasīdāsa. Mention will be made when a different version of the *Rāmāyana* is used for comparative purposes. By examining the sources of Tulasīdāsa, I intend to expose what he has omitted, what he has added and what he has expanded regarding women, particularly sections involving Sītā, her character and her relationships. This method will be used as opposed to a method of solely comparing the works. To discover only the similarities between *Rāmāyana* texts does not tell us how Sītā has evolved, or how great was the impact of Tulasīdāsa's rendition of Sītā.

The Indian television series, "Rāmāyaṇ," primarily based on the RCM of Tulasīdāsa and the *Valmīki Rāmāyana* (hereafter VR), will be referred to throughout

this work as a modern version of this ancient epic.¹ The version used includes English sub-titles. What is of particular importance in the television series are those scenes involving portrayals of Sītā and how the creators of this series have chosen to deal with them. Which source do the creators choose to use for these scenes dealing with Sītā, and why? Where have they chosen to use Valmīki and where have they chosen to use Tulasīdāsa or the *Adhyātma Rāmāyana* (hereafter AR)? Is Sītā depicted as stronger or weaker? Is she more or less dependent on those around her?

Thirdly, vocabulary and terminology, though significant are not of primary importance. Portrayals and characterizations, especially in as far as they are significant to women in India are of central importance. It is recognized that these characters are not accurate representations of the men and women of India, especially in the contemporary context. The manner in which these characters are perceived is of crucial importance for a healthy conception of one's expectations to live up to such so-called *ideals*. It is important to note that English translations have been used for all textual works; though translations are often very accurate, they are never quite the same as the original.

In a concluding chapter, using secondary, contemporary texts written primarily by Indian women and primarily within the last decade, I intend to focus on the

¹"Rāmāyaṇ," (Sagar Enterprises, 1985), vol. 1-26, episodes 1-72.

connection that has been developed in these secondary texts between the traditional Sītā and the contemporary Hindu woman, particularly upper class women. This analysis of Sītā will lastly look at questions and analysis regarding the situation of women in India, particularly upper class, Northern, urban, Hindu women, throughout history to the present day. Through this comparative study I hope to tie together the original text and secondary sources written by contemporary women in India in a way that is relevant for contemporary social-ethical concerns.

It will be virtually impossible to entirely separate the urban from the rural, the upper classes and castes from the lower, and the North from the South within this work, for India cannot be separated as such. The connections between Sītā and contemporary women examined in chapter seven will be *based* on the Northern, Urban, woman.

I realize that in a country as large as India it will be necessary to restrict my study to a certain area or geographical region of the country. As mentioned above, my inclination leads towards the urban Hindu woman. The time that I spent in the North, in and around New Delhi strengthened my interest in that area.

While in New Delhi I made use of a women's centre called the *Centre for Women's Development Studies*. Some papers published by the centre are listed in my bibliography under 'General Literature'.

Finally, Kate L. Turabian's A Manual For Writers, and Diana Hacker's A Canadian Writer's Reference, have been referred to as guides in the writing of this manuscript.²

2) Evolution of the Rāmāyana

The RCM of Tulasīdāsa is an immense work, encompassing a vast number of themes and sub-themes. The *Rāmāyana* is a text which has passed through hundreds of years of evolution. Several versions of this story have preceded the RCM. The story has spread to other Asian countries. The *Rāmāyana*'s origins lie even before the first complete version of the *Rāmāyana*. The RCM, the version of the *Rāmāyana* upon which this manuscript will be based is a later version of the *Rāmāyana* story composed by Tulasīdāsa.

Earlier versions of the *Rāmāyana* will be referred to in this manuscript, particularly, the VR;³ and the AR,⁴ in order to highlight both the subtle and the obvious modifications, omissions and additions which have affected Sītā. The central purpose of this section is to highlight these preceding versions in order to exhibit the

²Kate L. Turabian, A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, 5d ed., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987); Diana Hacker, A Canadian Writer's Reference, (Scarborough: Nelson Canada, 1991).

³Śrīmad Valmīki-Rāmāyana, 2 vols. (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1969).

⁴The Adhyātma Rāmāyana, ed. Major B.D. Basu, I.M.S., trans. Rai Bahadur Lala Baij Nath, B.A. (Allahabad, 1913), extra vol. 1 of The Sacred Books of the Hindus, (New York: AMS Press, 1974).

differences between these versions and the RCM. Tulasīdāsa made several changes to the original VR, many directly affecting the portrayal of Sītā. In a traditional sense, many of the changes made involving Sītā may be interpreted as positive ones, for Sītā becomes a nicer and more agreeable character. However, one may also question these changes; one may question the elimination of characteristics which portrayed her as a *dynamic* character. One finds that Tulasīdāsa often eliminates decisions and choices that the character Sītā was once responsible for in earlier *Rāmāyana* versions.

Rev. C. Bulcke, who uses Hill's translation, remarks on the major episodes that Tulasīdāsa omitted from the original Valmīki work including; Sītā's placement in fire before the kidnapping; Rāma's childhood; the meeting of Rāma and Sītā in the garden; the breaking of the bow in front of many kings; the arrival of Paraśurāma after breaking of bow and the conversation of Rāvāna and Angada in the *Lankākāṇḍa*; and later the conversation of Sītā and Trijatā, based on the *Mahānātaka*.⁵ Sītā entering the fire and the meeting of Rāma and Sītā are of particular relevance in this work.

Further differences involving Sītā, listed by Daniel Smith, include; Sītā's long request to accompany Rāma to the forest as not being recorded (only her satisfaction in being permitted to accompany Rāma is noted); Sītā's cruel words to Lakṣmaṇa after the deer is killed being omitted; and Hanumān's journey across the ocean and his

⁵Rev. C. Bulcke, "Rāmacaritamānasa and its Relevance to Modern Age," in The Rāmāyana Tradition in Asia, ed. V. Raghavan (Madras: Sanitya Akademi, 1980), 63.

restating of all that has happened in order to introduce himself to Sītā being shortened.⁶

Another change in the RCM concerns the imagery of various local fauna. Smith states that the fauna is described with more detail and with more immediacy than in the VR.⁷ He hints that this has to do with, "habits and objects well known to Indian readers -- . . . etc."⁸ This too; however, may very well have a deeper significance, perhaps a connection to a portrayal of Sītā. Sītā is often connected to and portrayed as the abundance of nature. In conclusion, Smith remarks:

Most of the changes can be traced, ultimately, to the ramifications of Tulsidās' theological perspective. Given Rām's divine status it is no surprise that Sītā is . . . identified as an incarnation of Śrī. . . there is no need for any other mystery about her, she is "born" of known, earthly parents. Her identity with the "Furrow" is muted. In addition, Rām and Sītā see one another prior to their marriage and, recognizing one another's eternal identities, fall in love at first sight; . . . ; and it is not the "real" Sītā who is abducted by Ravan, but merely an illusory being . . . Finally, the ending itself is different: since Sītā is not banished, the birth of twins Lava and Kuśa is only mentioned . . .⁹

⁶Daniel Smith, Reading the Rāmāyana: a bibliographic guide for students and college teachers: Indian variants on the Rāmāyana - theme in English translations, (Syracuse: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, 1983), 35-36.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 36-37.

Sītā's identity with the *furrow* is of great importance and as Smith remarks, this identification is *muted* in the RCM. Of what significance is this deletion? Smith further remarks that it is apparent that Tulasīdāsa knew of other versions of the Rāma story, yet his work was his own synthesis.¹⁰ Gopal indicates agreement by stating that the RCM is not only based on the VR, in which Rāma is depicted as a model man, but even more so on the AR where Rāma is depicted as an incarnation of the Supreme Being.¹¹ He further remarks that *Rāmāyaṇas* in other languages may also have been drawn upon.¹²

The RCM has of course evolved from a succession of re-writings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story. The following citation displays the development and evolution evident through the VR to the AR and finally to the RCM:

Wherever there is a difference it is due to the fact that whilst the Adhyātma starts with the theory of Rāma's divinity and tries to explain away all failings of humanity wherever they come into the narrative, by resorting to the anādi avidyā (beginningless error) of the Vedānta, the Rāmāyaṇa of Valmīki describes Rāma as the best of men and tries to show how, in spite of the few failings of humanity, one can rise to godhead by setting before him the noble ideal of truth and duty as Rāma did. Of course, the story of the Valmīki is the more natural of the two and appeals to the reader more strongly than that of the Adhyātma. But

¹⁰Ibid., 34.

¹¹Madan Gopal, "Tulasī Dās" in Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata and Bhāgavata Writers, (Government of India: V. Publications Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1978), 103-104.

¹²Ibid., 104.

in India the modern man of devotion, who loves to invest his favourite deity with the attributes of the Supreme, will not listen to any imperfections of his divinity or ascribe them to the error of those who see in him such imperfections. . . .¹³

Thus, we see potential for divergence, and also the strong interconnection between these three versions. Our interest lies in the modifications made by Tulasīdāsa, particularly those modifications involving Sītā. Our goal is to work with the above within a section of strands of the RCM, those strands primarily involving Sītā and her role within the larger story. We must attempt to analyze the Sītā of Tulasīdāsa within the whole of the RCM, a work evolving from an even larger tradition. Smith argues that the reason Tulasīdāsa made so many deletions was that the reader was already familiar with the traditional story.¹⁴ One who studies this text on a transcendent level, however, cannot help but wonder, especially since so many of the changes involve crucial portrayals and value alterations, if these additions and deletions are not more significant than Smith gives them credit.

Two of the most significant deletions in the RCM are the banishment of Sītā and her ultimate self-induced destruction through a plea to the earth to receive her if she is indeed innocent; Sītā has been in the house of another man and her purity is under suspicion. The distrust of Sītā by Rāma and the people of Ayodhyā results in her

¹³ Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, i-ii.

¹⁴ Smith, Reading the Rāmāyaṇa, 35.

banishment and ultimate self-destruction, detailed by Valmiki, and omitted at the end of the RCM. Tulasīdāsa says this relatively close to the beginning of the RCM:

I reverence the exceedingly holy city of Ayodhyā . . . Again, I bow to the men and women of the city, who enjoy the affection of the lord in no small degree. Even though they were damned as a result of the heap of sins incurred by the calumniators of Sītā (who were instrumental in bringing about Her lifelong exile), they were lodged in a heavenly abode, having been divested of sorrow.¹⁵

Why did Tulasīdāsa choose to omit Sītā's exile? Did he recognize that it happened and decide to leave it out or did he omit the reality of it altogether? Did he retell the story or did he radically alter it? He has defended Sītā, yet he has also let her calumniators off the hook. Is he concerned with the image of Sītā or is he concerned with protecting the image of Rāma? Junankar remarks on the deletion of the banishment of Sita in the RCM as follows:

Sītā is throughout a victim of misrepresentation and the action which Rāma felt compelled to take in order to perform his function as a ruler. If Rāma was right in doing what he did, we must balance this against what Sītā has suffered for no fault of hers. What is most extraordinary is that after all that Sītā had to endure she was exiled towards the end of the story and we have no proper account of this part of Sītā's life in the Rāmacaritamānasa.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Bālakāṇḍa* 15.1-4, 35.

¹⁶ N.S. Junankar, Reflections on the life and themes of Tulsī Dāsa, in Rāmacaritmānas Quartercentenary Symposium, (University of London: Centre of South Asian Studies School of Oriental & African Studies, date unknown), 8.

Junankar views the absence of Sītā's banishment as an elimination of the horrors that happen to her. Tulasīdāsa makes everything all right by eliminating this episode. Is this an improvement? The addition which allows for the deletions of Sītā's banishment and ultimate self-destruction, is that crucial episode, found in both the AR and in the RCM, but not the VR, in which Rāma asks Sītā to remain in the fire until he has destroyed the demons. The Sītā therefore, who is taken to Laṅka is only a shadow Sītā. The real Sītā is never touched by Rāvaṇa; therefore, there is no need to question her purity.¹⁷ The detailed repudiation of Sītā is omitted from the RCM.¹⁸

3) Tulasīdāsa

V. H. Smith considers Tulasīdās, the author of the Rāmcaritamānas, to be "the greatest man of his age in India."¹⁹

This brief account of the author of the RCM is included in order to allow the reader an understanding of Tulasīdāsa's own life and relationships with women and to show his purpose in writing the RCM.

¹⁷Bulcke, Relevance to Modern Age, 63.

¹⁸Ibid., 65.

¹⁹Shankar Raju Naidu, S. "Re-creations of the Rāmāyana in Tamil and Hindī," in The Rāmāyana Tradition in Asia, ed. V. Raghavan (Madras: Sahitya Akademi, 1980), 316.

Though there is some disagreement, several scholars agree that Tulasīdāsa was born circa. 1532-1543 C.E. at Rajapur in the district of Banda.²⁰ It is also thought that Tulasīdāsa came from a Brahmin family or at least was connected to the Brahmin caste through his ancestry.²¹ According to Gopal, Tulasīdāsa died in 1623 on the banks of the Assi. Tulasīdāsa's mother died when Tulasīdāsa was quite young.²² Because the child was considered bad luck upon birth, the father was advised not to take even a glimpse of his son.²³ At some point in Tulasīdāsa's life, a saint named Naraharyanand took Tulasīdāsa as a disciple. He was taken to the Sarayu River and initiated. It was here that Tulasīdāsa first heard the story of Rāma. One might assume that female figures are still absent in Tulasīdāsa's life. Tulasīdāsa accompanied Narharyanand to Ayodhyā, the birthplace of Rāma, and to Kāśī (Benaras). In Kāśī a saint named Shesh Sanatan, asked Narharyanand to leave Tulasīdāsa in Kāśī to learn the ancient scriptures. Fifteen years later Shesh Sanatan died and Tulasīdāsa performed the last rites, a ritual usually performed by a son for his father. This episode

²⁰Douglas P. Hill, The Holy Lake of the Acts of Rāma, (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1971), ix; Madan Gopal, Tulasīdas: A Literary Biography, (New Delhi: The Bookabode, 1977), 1-2; Gopal, Rāmāyana, 96-97.

²¹Ramdat Bharadwaj, Philosophy of Tulsīdās, (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1979), 323.

²²Gopal Tulasī Dās, 4; Gopal, Rāmāyana, 3.

²³Ibid.

continues the positive paternalistic, male influences that Tulasīdāsa had for part of his early life. Female influences still are not evident.

Tulasīdāsa soon returned to his birthplace, where, because he was now an educated man, he was welcomed.²⁴ A man named Dinbandhu Pathak who often attended Tulasīdāsa's lectures offered his daughter, Ratnāvalī, aged twelve, to Tulasīdāsa for marriage.²⁵ Tulasīdāsa; however, was not interested in the prospect of marriage and refused until the father staged a fast outside Tulasīdāsa's house.²⁶ Tulasīdāsa subsequently consented.

Tulasīdāsa apparently fell deeply in love with Ratnāvalī and became devoted to her.²⁷ Gopal states that Tulasīdāsa's attachment to Ratnāvalī was so strong that he could not bear to be without her for even a moment. There is a strong resemblance here to Tulasīdāsa's later attachment to Rāma, and his references to the anguish of those separated from Rāma in the RCM. On one occasion, according to legend, when Ratnāvalī decided to spend time with her parents, Tulasīdāsa swam across the river to bring her home. She apparently told him that if he had for Rāma a fraction of the

²⁴Gopal, Tulasī Dās, 15.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 16.

²⁷Hill, Holy Lake, x.; Gopal, Rāmāyana, 99.

love which he had for her body, "the earth would have become gold."²⁸ According to Gopal, the very foundation of Tulasīdāsa's being was shaken. Apparently Tulasīdāsa took his wife's advice to heart and began his pilgrimage thereafter, leaving Ratnāvalī and the life of a householder behind. It is thought that Ratnāvalī did try to persuade him to stay.

At this point the relationships that Tulasīdāsa had had with women were ones of either disillusionment or obsession. One might speculate as to whether Tulasīdāsa's renditions of women in the RCM, are related to his own experiences with women.

a) Works

Sri Rāmacharitamānasa of Goswami Tulasīdās enjoys a unique place among the classics of the world's literature. . . .²⁹

Most of Tulasīdāsa's early works were composed around a feminine theme. The *Ramlala Nahachhu* written in Tulasīdāsa's youth, deals with ceremonies connected with nail-cutting, and other ceremonies like the sacred thread or marriage ceremonies:

Such ceremonies provide occasions for community singing by women. . . the songs with folk base-tended to be vulgar. . . . He gives songs which could replace the vulgar and the obscene.³⁰

²⁸Gopal, Tulasī Dās, 18.

²⁹Sri Rāmacharitamānasa or [The Mānasa lake brimming over with the exploits of Sri Rāma] (With Hindī text and English translation), (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1972), 3.

³⁰Gopal, Tulasī Dās, 16.

The *Janaki Maṅgal* is also meant for women. The text focuses on the wedding of Rāma and Sītā.³¹ The *Pārvatī Maṅgal* is on the same lines as the *Janaki Maṅgal*. The text deals with Śiva's renunciation of Satī and Satī's rebirth as Pārvatī.³² Apparently Tulasīdāsa's treatment of this story is different than the RCM; the mood is said to be erotic. Finally, the *Rāma Gītāvālī* (or *Padāvālī Rāmāyaṇa*) based on the story of Rāma, again is said to arouse an erotic mood.

What is the significance of this feminine theme within the works of Tulasīdāsa? The above works are believed to be his earliest. This theme is consistent throughout his works. A simple assumption to make is that Tulasīdāsa's life with and without women provoked an obsession with women and a resulting distortion in his renditions of them. He was determined, it seems, to remodel women.

How is it that millions of women have looked to Tulasīdāsa's feminine role models as inspiration, and still are today, when the creator of those same role models appears to have not understood women at all?

Tulasīdāsa often expresses a real fear of women; he says in the RCM:

She is like the flame of a candle; let not one's soul be as the moth, let one discard lust and intoxication, worship Rāma and hold communion with the saints (R III, 60).³³

³¹Ibid., 17.

³²Ibid.

³³Bharadwaj, *Philosophy of Tulsīdās*, 236.

Passages like this prove to be a part of a distortion in Tulasīdāsa's renditions of women, including Sītā. His female characters are either his own *ideal* or they are the antithesis of *ideal*, they are evil. Junankar remarks on the roles of women in the RCM:

While Rāvaṇa is undoubtedly the personification of evil, the evil things in the story are generally due to women, . . . It seems as though all the evil power in the story is concentrated in the women; men are only unwitting victims of their machinations. Of course, there are other women who are paragons of virtue . . . , but their virtues are only counterfoils to those of the men folk. . . . If this question of women is viewed in the context of the adoration of renunciation, generally by men, it would seem that the role of women in the scheme of things as visualized by the gods and the poets is at best one of mischief and counterfoil to men.³⁴

Bharadwaj's remarks lie in defence of Tulasīdāsa, affirming that Tulasīdāsa's views are merely a reflection of the age:

Whatever odd statements have come from Tulsī's pen are either translations of some ancient texts or traditional sayings of the age in which he lived. Judged in this light, he deserves no censure. We must not forget that more women than men, millions of them in India, have been daily reciting the *Rāmacaritamānasa* and finding solace for centuries.³⁵

One can only speculate as to the motives and basis behind Tulasīdāsa's modifications and resulting renditions of women. One can be certain, however, that the resulting influence was great. It is this influence, through an extensive examination of his heroine, Sītā, that I intend to explore.

³⁴Junankar, Reflections, 8.

³⁵Bharadwaj, Philosophy of Tulsīdās, 237.

The RCM was begun on Tuesday, the thirtieth day of March, 1574 C.E.³⁶ Apparently Tulasīdāsa was aware that he was writing a great epic as he was aware of the social and ethical implications involved in his task. According to Gopal the time was ripe for such a work. The age in which Tulasīdāsa lived was a time in which the morals of the common people were low and religion was falsely practised; Gopal remarks:

Here then was a story to be portrayed and put across to the people. It could provide the moral code for the daily life of the people. It could set standards for the life, not of the rulers alone but also of individuals, of families, and of society.³⁷

According to Gopal, Tulasīdāsa was continuously harassed throughout the writing of the RCM. Apparently there were attempts to persecute him.³⁸

³⁶Hill, Holy Lake, x.

³⁷Gopal, Tulasī Dās, 27.

³⁸Gopal, Rāmāyana, 101-102; Junankar, Reflections, 2.

b) Philosophy

[Tulasīdāsa] deftly interwove the mythology and quintessence of wisdom and projected all this through the life of the 200-odd living beings that take the stage in *Rāmācharītmānas*. He used words whose meanings have a specific relationship with the mythological themes or prevalent practices. And he did it not in Sanskrit but in the speech of the common people of Northern India.³⁹

It appears that attempts to pinpoint Tulasīdāsa's philosophy are difficult if not impossible. Examined briefly will be the central tenet of his seemingly rather eclectic philosophy or non-philosophy, but because an analysis of Tulasīdāsa's philosophy is not the goal of this manuscript, but only the tenets of this philosophy that reflect on his renditions of women, this latter aspect will be emphasized.

Many Tulasīdāsa scholars believe that Tulasīdāsa was not a philosopher at all, and according to R. Bharadwaj this view is a correct one if one is implying that he did not attempt to create a philosophy or religion.⁴⁰ One might suggest that Bharadwaj's views are meant to be complimentary to the devotional style of Tulasīdāsa's work.

According to Bharadwaj, who argues for Vaiṣṇava influence, many scholars have attempted to identify Tulasīdāsa as a Śāṅkara scholar. Handoo remarks that Tulasīdāsa was not a follower of Śāṅkara, though he appeared to be in some aspects. His writings in regards to the concept of *māyā* do not propose the world as pure illusion

³⁹Gopal, Tulasī Dās, 25.

⁴⁰Bharadwaj, Philosophy of Tulsīdās, 1.

as Advaitins believe.⁴¹ Bharadwaj too, feels that those who have identified Tulasīdāsa as a Śāṅkara scholar have misunderstood Tulasīdāsa. Tulasīdāsa often compares the world of appearance to illusion or to that of a dream world; this is not to say that the world is not real, but rather to grade it low on a scale of values.⁴² Bharadwaj further remarks that these few analogies are not enough to classify Tulasīdāsa as an Advaitin. One must look at the message of the entire work.⁴³ Sītā as *māyā*, as distinct from *brahman* and *jīva*, according to Bharadwaj does not prove that Tulasīdāsa was an Advaitin. Bharadwaj remarks, "in the Vaiṣṇava systems of thought, Māyā is generally regarded as the power or even as the spouse of the personal God; and Brahman, Jīva and Māyā are regarded as distinct though not necessarily different, whereas in Śāṅkara's philosophy Brahman is the only reality."⁴⁴

Did Tulasīdāsa believe that life on this earth is *real*? It appears that for Tulasīdāsa earthly life is *real* in a limited sense, only in so far as the *Supreme* creates it through his *Śakti*. The *Supreme*, therefore, is the true *reality*.

⁴¹C.K. Handoo, "Tulasīdāsa and His Writings" in Cultural Heritage of India, vol. 4, ed. Haridas Bhattacharyya (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1969), 400.

⁴²Bharadwaj, Philosophy of Tulasīdās, 45.

⁴³Ibid., 46.

⁴⁴Ibid., 46-47.

Of course the *Rāmāyana* story has become influential on an earthly plane. The story itself is geared towards the salvation of the common man. Through correct earthly actions one can attain a true *reality*, a *reality* with the *Supreme*. On a purely secular level, we must ask if Tulasīdāsa's renditions of women were fair ones? One must of course take into account that Tulasīdāsa's RCM is a re-writing of a story re-written several times, but recognizing that Tulasīdāsa had little fear in modifying the story as he did, and stood by his work even in the face of prosecution, we can assume that his renditions and modifications were as he wished. Again, one must ask if the changes that he did make were only in concurrence with the time period or if he had his own ideas for the portrayal of women in the *Rāmāyana* story.

Tulasīdāsa takes an important place in the *bhakti* cult.⁴⁵ Sītā, one can assume, is the example of an ideal *bhaktā* for Tulasīdāsa. One might suggest that her role as a *bhaktā* takes precedence over her portrayal as a woman, yet on a secular level, Tulasīdāsa appears to advocate the conviction that the primary *ideal* role of women involves devotion to god (or one's husband). He displays this through his rendition of Sītā. Perhaps Sītā's role as the *ideal* devotee is at least partially representative of Tulasīdāsa himself, as a devotee of Rāma. Several other characters in the story, primarily male characters, are portrayed as *bhaktās*, yet it is Sītā who devotes her

⁴⁵Junankar, *Reflections*, 1.

entire life to Rāma. She gives up the luxuries of wealth and royalty to accompany her husband in exile. She endures kidnapping without complaint. Through all this she only thinks of Rāma; she is devoted completely, yet her rewards never seem to be as evident or substantial as are the rewards for the male devotees in the story. Even the demon Rāvāna is rewarded at the end of the epic as he utters Rāma's name.

c) Evolution of *Rāmāyana* Thought

Certain *Purānic* materials; the *Devībhāgavata Purāna* (850-1350 C.E.) (hereafter DB) and the *Bhāgavata* (950 C.E.), were influential to the formation of the *Rāmāyana* story. The above texts were compiled after Valmīki but before Tulasīdāsa began to write.⁴⁶

P.G. Lalye outlines the evolution towards the philosophies expounded in the RCM. He points out the conflict between the "Āryas or Devas," and the "Asuras or Dāsas," (the hostiles) as being evident through the *Vedic* period into the *Brāhmanic*.⁴⁷ The *asuras* had a different form of worship, and not being able to follow the correct "details of the sacrifice," resulted in their constant loss in the mythology revolving around this conflict. The conflict between the gods and the *asuras* (or rakṣasas) gave

⁴⁶Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975), 17-18.

⁴⁷P.G. Lalye, *Studies in Devī Bhāgavata*, (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1973), 6-7.

rise to the entire mythology of India including the *Epics* and *Purānas*.⁴⁸ Lalye points out that both of these groups were supposed to be descendants of Prajāpati, the Prajāpati of the *Brāhmaṇa* equivalent to the *Vedic* "Ṛta."⁴⁹ By the time of the *Upaniṣadic* period, Prajāpati had declined and the idea of an "Absolute Reality" (*brahman*) was beginning to take place.⁵⁰ In some texts *brahman* was identified with the sun, reminding us of Rāma of the Sun Dynasty. Further developing in the *Upaniṣads* is the concept of the eternal *ātman*, which according to Lalye, led to the "thought of the transmigration of individual soul and the attendant law of Karma."⁵¹

He says:

This, in a way, might indicate the process of amalgamation of the cultures of the Āryas and the Asuras. It is also noteworthy that alongside Jñāna, the *Upaniṣads* at a later stage advocated *Bhakti* also.⁵²

We see here the beginnings and the evolution towards the type of thought we find in the *Rāmāyana* story. Lalye asserts that *bhakti* was practised by the *asuras* in the form of fear towards a particular deity. In the *Upaniṣads*, however, "the relation between the

⁴⁸Ibid., 7.

⁴⁹Ibid., 7-8.

⁵⁰Ibid., 8.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

worshipper and the worshipped was . . . that of reverence and unity.⁵³ This is the type of relationship we see between Rāma and Sītā; Lalye remarks:

Though the major Upaniṣads maintained a monistic (Advaita) theory which ran counter to the idea of Bhakti, we find a number of passages indicating the growth of monotheism, most likely under the influence of the Bhakti cult. It paved a way for the Epic and Paurānic conception of Bhakti.⁵⁴

Accordingly, attributes of a personal god became associated with the *Absolute*. The approach towards the *Absolute* becomes loving surrender to a personal god; therefore, the development of cults and sects.⁵⁵ These gods tended not to come from *Vedic* myths, but from opponent schools of a sectarian outlook.⁵⁶ The old deities were included, but were of a secondary nature. As far as *Devī*s concerned, in the *Purānic* material, she is "a Prakṛiti who has married with the Lord of the Universe."⁵⁷ "In the Purānas and the Upapurānas, . . . , the Devī is generally described as . . . , a War Goddess."⁵⁸ Lalye states that the "Prānaśa also glorified the Supreme Powers-Śakti or Māyā by virtue of which Śiva and Viṣṇu became the supreme gods and could

⁵³Ibid., 10.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid., 11.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid., 13.

⁵⁸Ibid.

discharge their functions. The idea of *Sakti* and *Śaktiman*, being at once different and inseparable, was also expounded in the Purāṇas. Gradually, this Śakti assumed various names like Lakshmī, Sarasvatī, Pārvatī etc. in the various Purāṇas. With the growth of Tantricism, worship of the Śakti or Devī alone became popular, resulting in relevant mythology and the appearance of the *Devī Bhāgavata*.⁵⁹

The *Rāmāyaṇa* story had become popular by the time of the DB.⁶⁰ The story is briefly narrated in the DB up to the abduction of Sītā. Interestingly, Agni came to the place where Rāma and Sita were in exile, disclosing that the abduction would soon take place, and gave Rāma a shadow-Sītā, taking the real Sītā with him. This was not revealed to Lakṣmaṇa.⁶¹

Lalve further remarks that in the *Epics*, the heroes set the plot in motion; however, in the *Purāṇas*, there are no heroes (strictly speaking), "and the personalities are mentioned and their virtues are given only to praise certain deity."⁶² It appears that along with the evolution of the *Epics* themselves, the personalities of the characters also evolve, becoming just that, personalities. Certainly in the case of Sītā, there is

⁵⁹Ibid., 14.

⁶⁰Ibid., 42.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid., 236.

more sense of a *person* in Tulasīdāsa's RCM than there is in the VR or the AR, and according to Lalye, in her *Purāṇic* form.

At this point, with an awareness of the above, we will turn to the central purpose of this manuscript, an analysis of Sītā in the RCM of Tulasīdāsa.

CHAPTER 2

II. SĪTĀ

Her upbringing in luxury - in her youth she is afraid to see even the picture of a monkey! - is in sharp contrast to the later life of hardships which she undergoes with a smile in the company of her husband.¹

In order to understand the implications that figures such as Tulasīdāsa's Sītā have for today's world, one must attempt to understand the role of the character, in all her aspects. Firstly, the history of Sītā will be examined. She will secondly be examined in terms of her character evident within the RCM. This will be done in terms of the scenes in which she is most prominent, such as pre-marital Sītā, post-marital Sītā, forest life, and time Sītā spent with Rāvāṇa (war and post-war Sītās). Sītā as a worshipper, as a goddess, as nature, and as a central player in the plot of the text, will subsequently be explored.

One must concede that it is not possible to separate Sītā from her devotion to, or from her relationship with Rāma, for as one is well aware, the text centres around devotion to Rāma, especially Sītā's devotion. However, Sītā does have independent characteristics and history independent of Rāma. Sītā has been composed of many facets; in Sītā's earlier history these facets were independent and in later history new

¹Gopal, Tulasī Dās, 109.

facets developed primarily around Rāma. In this chapter an attempt will be made to look at all of her many attributes.

1) History of Sītā

I bow to Sītā, the beloved consort of Sri Rāma, who is responsible for the creation, sustenance and dissolution (of the universe), removes afflictions and begets all blessings.²

In this section the nature of Sītā will be examined, primarily the history of Sītā and the evolution of Sītā into the form she acquires in the RCM.

How *real* is Sītā? Firstly one must ask if she is really a woman at all? If not, is she exclusively a goddess? How should she be, and how is she perceived? Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in between and perhaps the consequences of her impact are related to this. In the present context we see a Sītā worshipped by millions, yet we also see a Sītā popularized by the medium of television where she becomes personalized in a sense; she seems more human; however, the account of Sītā's history in the *Rāmāyan* television series tells us that Sītā is divine in origin.³

Sītā is a character of many facets within the writings of Tulasīdāsa. She is a woman, a goddess, a commodity, a daughter, a sister, a daughter-in-law, a sister-in-law, a wife, a whole, a part, the universe, nature, *māyā*, sacred, brave, an *ideal*, yet perhaps she was something wholly different to Tulasīdāsa. She has come alive through the pens

² *Bālakāṇḍa* 5, 18.

³ "Rāmāyan," vol. 2, episode 4.

of writers, though she originates prior to them. It is apparent that Tulasīdāsa recognized these inconsistencies or facets and rather than smooth them into one comprehensible, uncomplicated character, he has let her be what she should be, and is, that is complicated and perhaps not completely interpretable. When interpreting one must remember that this is what she is and though one may not agree with the manner in which Tulasīdāsa portrayed her as a woman one must remember that he perhaps had an idiomatic understanding of her prior existence, perhaps associated with his own understandings of religion and women. He portrayed her in several different ways, perhaps hoping to portray her as the many-faceted entity that she is and at the same time perhaps representing the confusions he, himself felt towards women.

If Sītā can be recognized primarily as a goddess, then perhaps it might be clearer that though there are several admirable qualities in her person, her perfection is not attainable. If she is recognized as human, then women would be more likely to presume that they can attain this perfection. Regardless of her constitution, her perfection is consistent. A look at the history of Sītā will help us to determine her evolution into *perfection*. Lalye cites a genesis of Sītā's birth found in the DB in which:

Vedavati, the daughter of Kusadhvaja, practised severe penance right from her birth, she gave up her body by Yoga when Rāvaṇa tried to molest her. She was to be born as Sītā to become the cause of his death (DB IX. 16. 1-21.).⁴

⁴Lalye, Devī Bhāgavata, 42.

According to C. Dimmitt, Sītā is originally found in *Vedic* literature as a fertility goddess, a goddess worshipped by farmers.⁵ Sītā was born from a furrow when her father Janaka, was ploughing a field. Tulasīdāsa omits any divine explanation of Sītā's origin, perhaps implying a secular origin. The association with the furrow is metaphorically significant; according to Dimmitt "it also implies the female vaginal furrow as the source of life." Again one must wonder why Tulasīdāsa left this particular detail of Sītā's history out of his work? It is interesting to note that in the television series, it is made quite evident that Sītā is born from the furrow; the creators of the series chose to leave this in. It may very well be that the link between Sītā's birth and the *female vaginal furrow* implies an impurity in connection with Sītā. Tulasīdāsa makes it very clear throughout the RCM that women are impure, but implies throughout that Sītā is an exception to this precept.

According to Dimmitt Sītā is recognized for divine qualities; these divine qualities, says Dimmitt, are no doubt the reason Valmīki chose Sītā for his heroine.⁶ Perhaps Valmīki was looking for a pre-existing goddess who would fill the role of the *ideal woman* or *ideal bhaktā*. K. Klostermaier remarks that Valmīki knew of several

⁵All historical information on Sītā taken from Dimmitt, Cornelia "Sītā: Fertility Goddess and *Śakti*," in Ed. by Hawley, John Stratton and Wulff, Donna Marie. The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India Beacon Press, Boston, 1986, 210-223.

⁶Ibid., 211.

Devī traditions which he tried to connect without forming a rigid system.⁷ Accordingly, sometimes the goddess is portrayed as the Great Mother and other times she is portrayed as the consort of the dominant male god. Klostermaier also refers to evidence of a plurality of Mothers in Valmīki, the standardized eight *Mātrikas* and the fusion of virtuous deceased women with the Goddess.⁸

A second mode of Sītā's personality is found in *Vedic* thought; the kidnapped bride with feminine powers of fertility. This parallel is found in the *Rgveda*, where Indra slays the demon Vṛtra, the *encloser*.⁹ Vṛtra is withholding the sources of life from humanity, including rain, cows, the sun and even the land itself. According to Dimmitt, Sītā as the feminine fertility deity is fertilized. Accordingly, in the *Kauśika Sūtra* she is "the wife of Parjanya, god of rain."¹⁰ The former and latter examples assume sexual metaphors. Both male deities in uniting with Sītā are fertilizing her, the earth. Dimmitt compares these *Vedic* themes with the VR, for example, the triangle of Rāma, Rāvaṇa and Sītā as parallel to the Vedic triangle of Indra, Vṛtra and the powers of the earth withheld by Vṛtra. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* these powers are personified.

⁷Klaus K. Klostermaier, Mythologies and Philosophies of Salvation in the Theistic Traditions of India, (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1984), 202.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Dimmitt, Sītā, 212.

¹⁰Ibid., 214.

Sītā as the kidnapped bride, is compared to the entrapment of life-giving cows in the cave by the *paṇis* in the *Rgveda* and to the containment of the waters by Vṛtra.¹¹ There is in fact evidence, according to Dimmitt, that Valmīki used these metaphors intentionally. Rāma is likened to Indra, in their capacities as heroes. Accordingly, Rāma kills Rāvaṇa for the same reason that Indra slays Vṛtra, to release the powers of fertility for his people.¹² Sītā too embodies those powers of fertility and prosperity that are withheld from earth; as long as she is held in Laṅka, the city of Ayodhyā remains in a state of suspended animation.¹³

In books one and seven of the VR, Sītā is identified as the wife of Viṣṇu, Śrī or Lakṣmī, the "official patroness of good fortune and prosperity in later Hindu tradition."¹⁴ In the VR, Sītā is declared near the end, as identical with Lakṣmī.¹⁵ Bharadwaj remarks that, "when the Supreme incarnates, He does it along with His paraphernalia. Rāma was Viṣṇu, Sītā was Lakṣmī, Lakṣmaṇa was Śeṣanāga."¹⁶ S.

¹¹Ibid., 216.

¹²Ibid., 217.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., 216.

¹⁵Klostermaier, Mythologies and Philosophies, 202.

¹⁶Ibid.

Singaravelu affirms his belief that Rāma's love for Sītā is a renewal of the love that Viṣṇu bears Lakṣmī.¹⁷

Further affirming a divine Sītā, Gatwood remarks that the goddess Pṛthivī *the Earth*, the prototype of Prakṛti, "the material side of the cosmic duality in Hindu Sāṃkhya philosophy. . . . has been historically identified with Sītā, the wife of Rāma."¹⁸

Sītā's identification as a goddess is strengthened in the many depictions of her as the origin of other goddesses, or as an incarnation of them. Parallel to her increasing popularity, she has become thought of as the goddess from whom others originate.¹⁹ However, although Sītā's virtues are many, they are usually not described as hers at all, but rather are glorified in connection with the virtues of Rāma. This parallels L. Gatwood's remarks that in Tulasīdāsa's era (the *Medieval* period), the decline of women's status which had begun in the late *Vedic* period, continued.²⁰ The decline of the status of the goddess began earlier, in the early *Vedic* period, paving the way for the

¹⁷S. Singaravelu, "Tulasī-Dāsa's Rāmacaritamānasa in Hindī and its Relationship to the Sanskrit Version of Valmīki, the Tamil Version of Kamban, and the Thai Version of King Rāma I," in The Rāmāyaṇa Tradition in Asia, ed. V. Raghavan (Madras: Sahitya Akademi, 1980), 456-457.

¹⁸Lynn E. Gatwood, Devī and the Spouse Goddess: Women, Sexuality, and Marriage in India, (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985), 35.

¹⁹Bharadwaj, Philosophy of Tulsīdās, 51.

²⁰Gatwood, Devī, 57-61.

decreasing status of women.²¹ By Tulasīdāsa's era (at least in orthodox circles), the goddess was primarily worshipped in relation to her consort.²²

Sītā, at least until the VR, is primarily considered *divine*. One must ask when she took on human dimensions. Does this evolution take place in Tulasīdāsa's rendition? Perhaps Tulasīdāsa wished to make his character *more human*; and thus, more attainable to the common person. The problem is that his characters really are not any more attainable, yet seem as such for they are portrayed as human. The perfection of Tulasīdāsa's human Sītā is an impossible goal for the average woman.

2) Tulasīdāsa's Rendition of Sītā

His [Tulasīdāsa's] characters, . . . , live and move with all the dignity of an heroic age. Each is a real being, with a well-defined personality. . . . Sītā, the ideal of an Indian wife and mother; . . . - all these characters as life-like and distinct as any in Occidental literature.²³

Sītā is not a simple character, nor is it probable that she was intended to be seen as such. In this section Sītā will be examined in terms of Tulasīdāsa's rendition of her, with the recognition that it is impossible to examine her only in one light. Her complexity comes through so strongly in the RCM that it likely represents Sītā's nature as observed by Tulasīdāsa. This may be related in some manner to Tulasīdāsa's own

²¹Ibid., 38.

²²Ibid., 71.

²³Sir George Grierson, The Ethnology, Languages, Literature and Religions of India, (Delhi: Academic Press, 1975), 171.

complex experiences with women, but also likely represents the truth of what Sītā has become and is. She cannot be simplified under only one light, or be identified as one facet. Therefore, though this section will primarily encompass an examination of Tulasīdāsa's rendition of Sītā, one must keep in mind that it is impossible to see Sītā as simple or uncomplicated. One must recognize all that she is and remember all that she has been.

An important factor in analyzing Tulasīdāsa's rendition of Sītā, from a secular grounding, is the rendering of Sītā as a human woman, and resulting idealizations of her as such. One forgets that she is a goddess and that most of the qualities she illustrates are beyond the attainable. One must recognize those qualities which *are* indeed human and subsequently identify those human qualities which depict strength in women. From a religious perspective, one worships Sītā as a goddess, in which case she is beyond idealization on a secular level. In the context of this chapter, in the passages examined, Sītā will be examined as Sītā, as opposed to only being examined as *Rāma's consort*.

a) Pre-Marital Sītā

One of the most important scenes in Tulasīdāsa's RCM is the pre-marital meeting in the *Bālakāṇḍa*, between Rāma and Sītā. This episode does not occur in the VR. Of great importance is Tulasīdāsa's representation of that meeting, the identification of it as *old love*, emphasizing the divinity of the pair.²⁴

In examining Sītā on a secular level, one must ask whether, as a human, she is knowledgeable of her past history with Rāma. Perhaps the asking of this question in itself is partially the reason for confusion as to her status as human or as divine. The character Sītā does not clarify her own nature. At times in the RCM, Sītā appears to be aware of her own divinity. This we see in terms of many of her actions, as when she miraculously serves all of her mothers-in-law in the same instant in the *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa*. At other times, however, she appears as a mortal woman with the fears and hopes of any. Her pre-marital *love* for Rāma seems to be no more than a crush of a young girl, as in the following:

Sītā looked timidly all round; Her mind was at a loss to where the
princes had gone. . . . Beholding the beauty of the two princes Her eyes
were filled with greed; . . . The eyes became motionless at the sight of Sri

²⁴There is no pre-marital meeting of this kind in the AR or the VR. Tulasīdāsa has included a pre-marital meeting and the reader must inquire as to the reason. In the VR Sītā does not actually make an appearance until the wedding and even there we sense little importance as to her presence (*Valmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, vol. 1, Canto LXXIII.25-26, 215).

Rāma's loveliness; the eyelids too forgot to fall. . . . Her body-consciousness began to fail; . . .²⁵

The depiction of Sītā as "timid" in the above passage is of importance; this is a human quality. She is frequently characterized as *timid* or *shy*, however, it is obvious throughout the *Rāmāyana* story that Sītā is anything but *timid* or *shy*. The character makes her wishes and needs known and causes them to transpire. As opposed to concentrating on descriptive words such as these, the interpreter of such a text should look to the strong characteristics evident in the *actions* of the female character, rather than certain descriptive words of the author.

The above passage also emphasizes "greed" in the character of Sītā, another human quality. Greed in this sense is associated with "love." Is Sītā's *greed* justified due to the fact that she desires Rāma, the Lord, her eternal consort, or perhaps her *greed* for Rāma is like that of any human. She knows, on a secular level, that she can only have him if he succeeds in winning the contest for her hand. One must wonder if Tulasīdāsa's method of introducing Sītā is meant to display her development into a stronger character through her later forest experience. It is likely that Tulasīdāsa's intention was to depict her as a weak woman who only through devotion to Rāma becomes strong. Tulasīdāsa has given no evidence as to her divine birth, nor does he portray her strengths in any detail before her first meeting with Rāma. When we first

²⁵ *Bālakāṇḍa* 228.1-4, 189-190.

meet Sītā, she is a weak, beautiful, wealthy, desirable, and vulnerable girl. She becomes a strong wilful woman, presumably through devotion to Rāma. What one hopes to discover, is the relative truth of observations such of these. Though Sītā is fictitious her influence has been real, to women and men. Although Tulasīdāsa's RCM faced opposition, he altered the *Rāmāyaṇa* story and emphasized certain aspects and characteristics of the epic and its characters; there is no reason this cannot be done again and again on a level of personal interpretation for both men and women.

Bow Sacrifice

The following description is taken from the bow-sacrifice scene in the RCM; the beauty of Sita is described in detail:

Sītā's beauty defies all description, . . . an embodiment of charm and excellence. All comparisons seem to me too poor; for they have affinity with the limbs of mortal women. . . . The goddess of speech (Saraswatī), for instance, is a chatterer; while Bhavānī possesses only half a body And Rati (Love's consort) is extremely distressed by the thought of her husband being without a form. . . .²⁶

Here, Tulasīdāsa's words suggest a divine Sītā. Even her perfection is beyond other goddesses. How then, can she be aspired to as an *ideal* woman? It appears that Tulasīdāsa does not view Sītā as an ordinary woman, at least not in the way that we see other female characters in the text. He praises her for her perfection, yet he gives her abilities that other women (those he criticizes) do not have. Is this a fair representation

²⁶Ibid., 246.1-4, 200.

for the average Hindu woman who aspires to this sort of an *ideal*? It seems that the negative statements in regards to women are often made in relation to the *ideal* nature of Sītā; Sītā does not apply when Tulasīdāsa speaks of the inferiority of women.

It is impossible to completely separate the human and the divine attributes of Sītā for she is always both. One can only emphasize one or the other. Tulasīdāsa was able to portray all facets of Sītā's multi-layered character. One's job, however, is to determine for oneself those qualities within this multi-layered character which may be labelled praiseworthy and potentially attainable.

In the following passage one delves into the mind of Sītā as rendered by Tulasīdāsa. Though her thoughts are written by a man, we must attempt to look at the passage for what it is, that is, the passage in itself. One must assume that the reader only sees Sītā as she comes alive in the text, not her origination. In the following passage Sītā has just prayed to Śiva and Bhavānī (Pārvatī) to lighten the bow:

The thought of Her father's vow agitated Her mind. She said to Herself, "Alas, my father has made a terrible resolve . . . The ministers are afraid; . . . none of them gives him good counsel. It is all the more a pity that it should be so in a conclave of wise men. While on this side stands the bow harder than adamant, on the other side we find that dark-complexioned prince of delicate frame and tender age. How then, O god, can I maintain my balance of mind?"²⁷

²⁷Ibid., 257.1-4, 207.

Sītā's mental defiance of her father and his ministers in the above passage is of great importance. She is in a situation where her roles as a daughter and as a mate are in conflict. Her role as the consort of Rāma prevails. This decision parallels modern day social systems in India where a woman is expected to choose her husband's family over her own. We observe further on Sītā's mental devotion to Rāma:

Tears remained confined within the corner of Her eyes*, . . . Sītā felt abashed when She perceived Her great agitation of mind; . . . , She confidently said to Herself, "If I am true to my vow in thought, word and deed, and if my mind is really attached to the lotus-feet of Sri Rāma, I am sure God, who dwells in the heart of all, will make me Sri Rāma's bondslave; for one gets united without doubt with him for whom one cherishes true love." . . . She resolved to love Him even at the cost of Her life.

[*Shedding of tears is regarded in India as an ill-omen; therefore, on auspicious occasions Indian women would take particular care not to allow tears to drop from their eyes.]²⁸

Rāma, the passage says, understands "it all." Sītā is agitated, she is scared and she is hopeful. On this level she is human. She feels that if she devotes herself entirely to Rāma she will belong to him. Again, one must ask if this is a fair and realistic expectation? It works for Sītā, but what about the millions of relationships that have not.²⁹

²⁸Ibid., 258.1-4, 207.

²⁹Secondly, of importance in the above passage is the statement dealing with Sītā's promise to love Rāma, even at the cost of her own life. This concept, in the *Rāmāyana* story, originates in the VR, in which Sītā offers her own life twice, in order to prove her innocence to Rāma. Throughout the latter part of the RCM, Sītā criticizes herself for

Following Rāma's victory, Sītā's companions say to her:

"Sītā, clasp your lord's feet." But Sītā was too much afraid to touch His feet.³⁰

It appears that we are examining two different characters. We see Sītā as the young Hindu bride. She is to be married to Rāma, a handsome prince, she is to spend the rest of her life with him and she is frightened. On a secular level this is a story in which a young girl marries a great man. She is frightened as is almost every young bride, but in Sītā's case all works out well. Her husband turns out to be perfect as does her relationship with his family, excepting Kaikeyī. In the above, Sītā who has been praying for this moment is too afraid to even touch his feet, a customary gesture between a woman and her mate to be. Perhaps it is not unusual for Sītā to be feeling frightened, yet it is her fright which is emphasized in the text. Her strength is only shown in her mind. What she displays to the others around her is the stereotype of a meek, shy, beautiful woman. Might this prove that Tulasīdāsa perhaps realized the inherent strength of woman. Did he fear that strength, both secular and divine? Did he know that the outer appearance was perhaps not the ultimate truth of a woman's character? One cannot be sure; however, perhaps through his own experiences or lack of experiences with women he did know this on some level. His portrayals of women

remaining alive while separated from her husband.

³⁰ *Bālakāṇḍa* 264.1-4, 212.

in the RCM, especially the character of Sītā prove that he did recognize a complexity, whether consciously or not, in women, that is expressed in his renditions of characters, particularly Sītā.³¹ The Sītā that we find in the following passage is an entirely different Sītā.³²

When Sītā learnt that the bridegroom's party had arrived in the city, She manifested Her glory . . . By Her very thought She summoned all the Siddhis . . . and despatched them to wait upon the king and his party.³³

In the above passage Sītā is depicted as more than human, but at the same time she is performing *ideal*, human duties. She is serving her future in-laws to the best of her abilities, which as evident in the above passage, are beyond that of a human. This leads to a second point; the above passage emphasizes perhaps that side of Sītā exemplified by Tulasīdāsa yet unattainable by the average woman. Sītā behaves as no mortal woman could, at least not with such ease. This behaviour is possible because of her divine nature. Tulasīdāsa compares Sītā to ordinary mortal women, yet does not account for the impossibility of an ordinary woman's ability in this respect. He

³¹None of the above is found in the VR. In the AR, Sītā, Urmilā and Janaka's nieces are given to the four brothers and the story of Sītā's birth is told (Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Chapter VI.50-69, 20). In neither the VR nor the AR does Sītā speak; it is Tulasīdāsa who lets us see inside Sītā.

³²This scene is not found in the VR or the AR.

³³Bālakāṇḍa 305.1-4, 239.

worships her due to her connection with Rāma, yet also treats her as human, as if he, himself, cannot resolve the question of her nature.

One sees little strength in Sītā in her pre-marital depiction. Her actions primarily lie in prayer. One sees some strength within her mind, but not in her actions. We must also remember that she is still a girl; and that she is a commodity as a single woman.

b) Post-Marital Sītā

It is important to take notice of the changes in Sītā after her marriage to Rāma. Sītā is not rendered as the same girl she was at the beginning of the RCM. Sītā becomes stronger and more independent. She may be considered disobedient, but rather than see her as *disobedient*, one can see her as strong-willed and courageous. These are the character traits one must highlight, the positive over the negative. Additionally, some may argue that her strength comes from her union with Rāma. This may be true, but her strength must be valued as her own.

The following passage begins one of the most significant events as far as Sītā's character is concerned. One begins to see a *new* Sītā. When Sītā discovers that Rāma will be leaving for the forest, her insistence that she must accompany him is forceful:

That very moment Sītā heard the news and rose in great agitation. She

approached Her mother-in-law, revered her lotus feet and sat down bowing Her head.³⁴

"The lord of my life would depart to the forest; it has yet to be seen who will have the good fortune to accompany Him - my body and soul together or my soul alone. What God intends to do cannot be foreseen even partly."³⁵

These passages display a powerful, devotional facet of Sītā's character. This side of Sītā is that which perhaps is the intended *ideal*. Sītā's *ideal* nature as a woman is perhaps only secondary to her role as the personification as a *bhaktā*. She not only worships her husband as a god as is expected of Hindu wives, but her husband *is* god. Therefore, though her behaviour as a woman is important, her devotion to her husband is even more so. The two are not separate, but must be distinguished.

As we find below, Sītā's duty as a daughter-in-law and as a wife, on a secular level, is secondary to her devotional duty. Following speeches by both Rāma and his mother discouraging Sītā from going, one sees Sītā's response to this discouragement:

She was filled with agony to think that Her pious and loving lord would leave Her behind. Perforce restraining Her tears Earth's Daughter took courage and throwing Herself at Her mother-in-law's feet spoke to her with Her two palms joined together, "Forgive, O venerable lady, my great impudence. The lord has tendered me only such advice as is conducive to my best interests. I have, however, pondered within myself and

³⁴ *Ayodhyā-Kānda* 57, 325.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.1-4, 326.

realized that there is no calamity in this world as great as being torn away from one's beloved lord."³⁶

"O lord of my life, O abode of mercy, handsome, genial and wise, . . . , without you heaven would be as obnoxious as hell."³⁷

Whatever ties of affection and kinship there exist - to a woman bereft of her beloved lord they are far more tormenting than the scorching sun. Life, riches, house, land, city and kingdom - all these are mere accoutrements of woe to a woman bereft of her lord. . . . Without you, O lord of my life, nothing in this world is delightful to me. As the body without a soul, and a river without water, even so, my lord, is a woman without her husband. In your company, my lord, I shall be happy in every way . . .³⁸

Does this sound like a passive woman? Sītā could stay in Ayodhyā, serve her in-laws and live a comfortable life, without swaying from her duties. Her husband has asked her to stay, as have her in-laws. Rāma has gone as far as to say that there is no other duty so sacred as serving a husband's parents; Sītā, however, refuses. She directly defies her husband and her mother-in-law. Her determination to serve her husband and her devotional nature are stronger than her secular duty as a wife and daughter-in-law. We see a stronger, more forceful rendition of Sītā emerging after her marriage. She is certainly not *timid* or *shy* in the above passages. Sītā, against all doubt as to her strength, insists again and again that she can bear such hardships. On the other hand,

³⁶Ibid., 63.1-4, 330.

³⁷Ibid., 64, 330.

³⁸Ibid., 64.1-4, 331.

she gives out a double message, for she feels that if she does not accompany her husband she will not survive, thus she insists on her strengths in one sense and her weaknesses in another. Again her role as a *bhaktā* is emphasized.^{39 40} Sītā must later insist again on her ability to endure forest life, this time communicated to Rāma and Sumantra, the latter who has attempted to persuade her to return to Ayodhyā:

"Listen, most loving lord of my life, . . . : can a shadow be torn away from its substance? . . . , She spoke these charming words to the minister: "You are as good to me as my own father or father-in-law; it is therefore most undesirable that I should urge something in reply."⁴¹

"It is due to grief that I am constrained to address you*; . . . In the absence of the lotus feet of my lord all other ties of kinship are of little account.

[It is unmannerly on the part of a Hindu woman to open her lips before the male elders of her husband.]⁴²

These passages again raise several thoughts. Firstly, Sītā continues to demand, with no support, that she will accompany her husband. Can one highlight something

³⁹In the VR, Sītā's speech to Rāma is much longer, as has been commented on by several *Rāmāyana* scholars. Regardless of the intensity of her persistence in the VR, it is also made quite clear in the RCM that Sītā will not be left behind; it is of her own will that she insists on accompanying Rāma. Tulasīdāsa lessens Sītā's persistence and any appearance of inherent strength.

⁴⁰In both the VR and the AR, Sītā speaks only to Rāma; in the RCM, Kauśalyā is present. Sītā's defiance towards her husband in front of his mother is not traditional; therefore, the significance of this inclusion must be considered.

⁴¹*Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 96.1-4, 352.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 97, 352.

positive here? No one in Sītā's life has supported her decision, her belief that she has the strength to endure forest life. No one has credited her with the strength which only she is depicted as believing she has. Perhaps it is this strength which should be emphasized to contemporary readers. Sītā has been forced to make a terrible decision. Apparently separation from her husband's family causes her great pain, but the pain apart from her husband would be even greater. Here we see a woman who has not only lost one family, but two. She has had to choose between her husband and her new family.

Tulasīdāsa knew that the correct response of a woman would be to refuse an offer to return to her natal family; therefore, we can assume that his version of Sītā is meant to know this. Additionally, we cannot forget that Sītā is a portrayal of an *ideal bhaktā*. There is only one decision she can make and that is the one that she does.

Thus we conclude this examination of the evolution of Sītā directly following her marriage. She becomes stronger, and one might argue at this point that her strength is due to her union with Rāma, but as we will see, her strength endures later in the text when she is separated from Rāma.

c) Forest Sītā

There is little evidence of an independent Sītā in the forest until the events leading to the kidnapping take place. It seems that the visit of the families and the continual companionship of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa overshadow Sītā's independent qualities. Her life, until she is kidnapped, revolves around serving others, whether it be her family or Rāma.

In the *Aranya-Kāṇḍa*, following the departure of the families, Sītā sends Rāma to fetch a beautiful golden deer.⁴³ She and Lakṣmaṇa shortly hear a cry of distress. It is at this point in the RCM that Sītā attempts to persuade Lakṣmaṇa to go to Rāma's aid. We are told that Sītā "urged" Lakṣmaṇa "with words that cut him to the quick."⁴⁴ This scene is particularly significant in terms of the complexities of this rendition of Sītā. Firstly, it is a scene which profoundly alters Sītā's character.⁴⁵

Some believe that Tulasīdāsa improved Sītā as a woman by omitting the argument between Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa. Sītā is quite vicious in the Valmīki version,

⁴³Rāvāna in disguise.

⁴⁴*Aranya-Kāṇḍa* 27.1-8, 547.

⁴⁵In the VR, Sītā's "words that cut him to the quick," are not removed from the text; her words are clear. She accuses Lakṣmaṇa, among other things, of greed for herself (*Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*, vol. 2, Canto XLV.5-7, 767). In the AR also, Sītā's harsh words are there, though in total length, are shorter than in the VR. She threatens to die if Lakṣmaṇa does not go to Rāma, and Lakṣmaṇa in turn leaves her to the "goddesses of the woods," (*Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, Chapter VII.27-36, 77).

distasteful to some. Her viciousness, does however, make her appear more real, more human. She is feeling stress, is worried about her husband and attacks her brother-in-law to the point of accusing him of wanting her for himself. Tulasīdāsa, however admirable his intentions may have been, has deleted a human characteristic of Sītā, a capacity for anger. Perhaps if such negative, yet *natural*/human qualities were evident in this character, the desire to emulate her would not be so strong.

A second issue in the above scene concerns Sītā's desiring Rāma to catch the deer at all. Why would a woman, content to live an ascetic life, desire a beautiful animal skin?⁴⁶ We are told in the RCM that Lakṣmaṇa's decision to leave Sītā "was Śrī Hari's will." Thus, one might suggest that Sītā's desire for the deer skin is Rāma's will. If this is the case, then Sītā is really not acting of her own will at all, and certainly is not acting on a human level.

One must remember also that the Sītā we are now dealing with is not the real Sītā, for Sītā, upon Rāma's request has entered the fire in order to remain safe; nobody, including Lakṣmaṇa is aware of this.⁴⁷

⁴⁶In both the VR and the AR, Sītā desires the animal, alive if possible. Still, the desire in itself appears to contradict the previous nature of Sītā. In the VR, she is referred to as "Sītā, who had been robbed of her faculty of judgement by the hoax," (Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa vol. 1, Canto XLIII.9, 761).

⁴⁷One must remember that no such act occurs in the VR, and Sītā; therefore, is Sītā.

d) Post-Kidnapping

This is the same Sītā so delicate and tender. Broken and separated from all. O the pity of helpless, defenceless Sītā. To see her piteous state brings tears to the eyes of all.⁴⁸

Trijaṭā is a demoness whom Sītā befriends; Trijaṭā's role is evident in the textual versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and is emphasized greatly in the *Rāmāyaṇa* television series. When Sītā loses hope, it is Trijaṭā who reminds her of the greatness of Rāma, and of herself and her chastity.⁴⁹ Trijaṭā lets Sītā know of her own strengths. The relationship between Trijaṭā and Sītā is very important. Trijaṭā represents, perhaps the only *friend* of Sītā in the story. She is not only female, but is of the *enemy* peoples. Most importantly, she is a woman supporting another woman. Examples of women supporting each other are rare and important, and should be highlighted for women readers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story. Trijaṭā's consistent support of Sītā, reminding Sītā of her own inner strengths, is to be revered.

Following intense fighting, Sītā learns from Trijaṭā that Rāvaṇa, even though struck by the arrows of Rāma, will not die. His heads and arms, after being severed, renew themselves. Sītā blames herself for this. She feels it is her bad luck which once

⁴⁸"Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 14, episode 40.

⁴⁹Following the injury of Lakṣmaṇa, in the *Rāmāyaṇa* television series, Trijaṭā tells Sītā of Lakṣmaṇa's recovery ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 24, episode 70). Sītā replies, "You have saved my life," and Trijaṭā replies, "Your *dharma* and chastity alone protect the brothers."

separated her from Rāma that is now affecting this battle between good and evil. Sītā says to Trijatā:

Nay, it is my ill luck that sustains him, the same misfortune which separated me from Śrī Hari's lotus feet. The fate which created the phantom of a fictitious deer . . . The same Providence . . . prompted me to speak harsh words to Lakṣmaṇa . . . keeps me alive even under such trying circumstances, - . . ."⁵⁰

Trijatā tells her the true reason for Rāvaṇa's survival. Due to Sītā's abiding in Rāvaṇa's heart, Rāma will not strike him there. Subsequently, "Trijatā's explanation filled Sītā's mind with both joy and sorrow in a superlative degree."⁵¹ Trijatā comforts Sītā and details Rāma's plan to kill Rāvaṇa when Rāvaṇa is distracted and his heart is temporarily empty of Sītā.

The above sequence of events carries many implications. Sītā is not fully convinced that Rāma will defeat Rāvaṇa. She blames herself for this, not Rāma, but what is important to take note of is that ultimately there is a lack of faith in Rāma. The text is primarily a devotional work to Rāma. What is the cause of this lack of faith? She is devoted in every way as a wife, but as a devotee, as a *bhaktā*, she experiences a moment of doubt. She sees that if she herself had acted differently, then events would have turned out differently; she recognizes her own ability to cause. Of course as a devotional work the text emphasizes that all is a part of Rāma's divine plan.

⁵⁰ *Lankā-Kāṇḍa*, 98.1-7, 724.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 98.1-7, 725.

What are the implications for Sītā as a woman? Is her primary role that of a woman, a wife, a goddess or a consort? It appears true that many of Sītā's actions cause the events in the story to happen, yet even for this she cannot take credit, for Rāma is the ultimate instigator. Rāma is the hero, the conqueror of the demons. Sītā becomes secondary, merely a means to achieve another goal. Sītā does question Rāma's delay in rescuing her; we see a human Sītā doubting her husband's love for her. It seems, however, that her primary role is that of a consort, yet her actions as a woman and as a wife have become extremely popular, resulting in a perception of her as the *ideal woman*. The post-war scenes following the defeat of Rāvāna are detailed in chapter five. These scenes do not greatly involve an independent Sītā, for she is again with her Lord.

3) Sītā as Worshipper

The primary purpose of this section is to examine Sītā as a *worshipper* as opposed to the *worshipped*. Primarily, of course, Sītā worships Rāma. Sītā's worship of and devotion to Rāma will be discussed in chapter five. In this section we are primarily concerned with her worship of other divine figures, yet we must remember that her worship of others is often directly related to worship of Rāma. Particular episodes have been chosen for examination, divided into the subheadings of *pre-marital* and *post-marital*.

a) Pre-Marital

Shortly following Sītā's first encounter with Rāma, we see her as a *worshipper*.

She proceeds to Pārvatī's temple where she prays:

"Of all good women who adore their husband as a god, Mother, You rank foremost. Your immeasurable greatness is more than a thousand Śāradās and Śeṣas could tell.⁵²

Sītā continues until, "Bhavānī . . . overcome by Her meekness and devotion; . . ."

replies:

"Hear, Sītā, my infallible blessing: Your heart's desire shall be accomplished. . . ; the suitor on whom Your heart is set shall, indeed, be Yours.⁵³

Finding Gaurī favourably disposed towards Her, Sītā was more glad of heart than words can tell. Her left limbs began to throb, indicating Her good fortune.⁵⁴

Sītā's prayer to Bhavānī in this scene is ultimately directed towards Rāma. She is unaware on a secular level that her *love* for Rāma is an *old one*. She is facing a possible life without a husband, a tragedy for a young woman in India. She is doing what any woman would do, praying for a marriage. Yet in Pārvatī's response, we again witness that which is unlikely for the average woman; how often are a woman's prayers

⁵² *Bālakāṇḍa* 235, 192.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 235.1-4, 192.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 236, 193.

answered? We also see Sītā pray at the bow-sacrifice. Sītā's prayer is to "each god in turn," as follows:

She inwardly prayed . . . : "Be gracious to me. O great Lord Śiva and Bhavānī, and reward my services by lightening the weight of the bow out of affection for me. . . . O god Gaṇeśa, . . . Listening to my repeated supplication, therefore, reduce the weight of the bow to a mere trifle."⁵⁵

One might suggest that Sītā influences Rāma's victory. Cornelia Dimmitt feels that Sītā is perhaps not as passive as she may seem.⁵⁶ According to Dimmitt, who uses the VR, Sītā is a central force in making events of the story transpire; she is Rāma's *śakti*. Dimmitt primarily uses examples in which Sītā's actions are those of a human woman or a wife, for example; Sītā's insistence on accompanying Rāma to the forest, sending Rāma after the deer, and telling Hanumān that she cannot leave Laṅka with him. One must also question those events inspired by Sītā which are not necessarily secular events. The above passage can be interpreted in such a manner, if one assumes that prayer is an act causing an event or events to occur. There is no direct evidence in the text that it is in fact Sītā's prayer which causes the bow to be lightened, but we do see

⁵⁵Ibid., 256.1-4, 206.

⁵⁶Dimmitt, *Sītā*, 219.

that Rāma, "understood it all."⁵⁷ He understood Sītā's longing and devotion. He is, "thrilled all over to perceive her singular devotion."⁵⁸ He thereafter breaks the bow.

b) Post-Marital

We further see Sītā as a *worshipper* on her journey with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to the forest, as she prays to the River Gaṅgā.⁵⁹ Again Sītā's prayer is directed towards family concerns, essentially that she will return safely with her husband and her brother-in-law to Ayodhyā. Again, she is answered; she is rewarded for her devotion. One must repeatedly ask, however, if the rewards she receives are possible for all.

Again and again, Sītā's prayers are answered. One might suggest that she is being rewarded for her complete devotion to her husband, yet one must ask if women can realistically expect the same rewards. Many believe the answer is yes, however, some may question the *actual* rewards of complete submission and obedience, for often the rewards are not as *rewarding* as one might hope.⁶⁰ Was Tulasīdāsa attempting to portray a woman whose actions resulted in reward; thereby making her actions more appealing to women?

⁵⁷ *Bālakāṇḍa* 258.1-4, 207.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 260.1-4, 209.

⁵⁹ *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 102.1-4, 357.

⁶⁰ We see in the VR, that Sītā is punished rather than rewarded.

4) As a Goddess (worshipped)

As far as possible, in this section, Sītā will be examined both on transcendent and secular levels, in her role as the *worshipped*, or as a goddess, both within and outside of the RCM. Her actions on a secular level are the actions which are possible for women to strive for. Sītā as the *worshipped* embodies divinity and independence.

It is clear that Tulasīdāsa venerates Sītā, but in the majority of the examples in which Tulasīdāsa reveres her, it is done so in concurrence with Rāma and often Lakṣmaṇa. As far as possible in this section, devotion to Sītā will be examined as only that, devotion to Sītā. It is recognized that this text is a devotional work to Rāma; however, it is also acknowledged that in this work a woman so flawless emerged that she gained her own following. There are only a few examples of Sītā being worshipped on her own, but we will look at the ones that exist.

Vasudha Narayanan cites Vedānta Deśika, a "theologian of the late thirteenth century whose views are representative of that portion of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava community who call themselves Vaṭakalais."⁶¹ Deśika wrote some time before Tulasīdāsa. Deśika frequently refers to Śrī's incarnation Sītā, in particular her complete ability to forgive and protect. Deśika also cites Parāśara Bhattar's (a younger contemporary

⁶¹Vasudha Narayanan, "The Goddess Śrī: Blossoming Lotus and Breast Jewel of Viṣṇu," in The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 224.

of Rāmānuja) verse in devotion to Sītā. Bhattar praises Sītā to the extent that he compares her greatness to Rāma's:

O Mother Maithilī! Even while the demonesses were harming you, you saved them from the wrath of Hanumān. Because [of this act] Rāma's side seems small . . . , for He only protected Vibhiṣāna . . . and the crow which had sought refuge. But you protected the demonesses at the very time they were tormenting you, even though they did not ask for protection. . . .⁶²

Turning to the text, we see early in the RCM, in the *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa*, as Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are proceeding on their journey, an encounter with an ascetic who, though said to be, "devoted to Rāma in thought, word and deed,"⁶³ worships Sītā also:

Again he placed on his head the dust of Sītā's feet and the Mother (Sītā) gave him Her blessing, . . .⁶⁴

Though the ascetic worships Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā, it is important to observe the worship directed to Sītā. Sītā is consistently referred to and worshipped as *mother*, though her connection with fertility, except on a metaphorical level, has virtually been obliterated. Her role as a human mother is only a passing mention in the RCM. She has become a mother in the larger sense of the word, that is, the *Mother of the Universe*.

⁶²Ibid., 227.

⁶³*Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 109.1-4, 362.

⁶⁴Ibid., 110.1-4, 362.

When the trio has reached a village along the Yamunā river, a significant scene involving worship of Sītā occurs, yet even in this case her veneration is related to the worship of her companions. She is venerated in this case by women:

The village women approached Sītā; in their extreme love they would put question to Her but hesitated . . . they threw themselves at Her feet . . .⁶⁵

Hearing their loving and sweet words Sītā felt abashed and smiled within Herself. Looking at them . . . She then cast Her eyes towards the earth; . . .⁶⁶

Falling at Sītā's feet in their great love they invoked upon Her many a blessing and said, "May you ever enjoy a happy married life . . ."⁶⁷

Sītā is worshipped, but almost entirely in relation to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. The women *love* her, but their *love* is intensified because of her relationship with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. They desire her blessing, but her blessing is desired in connection to her marital status. They wish her to "ever enjoy a happy married life." Their wishes to serve Sītā are connected to her idyllic marital relationship.

It is significant that Sītā looks to the earth after looking to the women. Can one assume that the earth is her sanctuary? Though not detailed by Tulasīdāsa, we know

⁶⁵Ibid., 115.1-4, 366.

⁶⁶Ibid., 116.1-4, 366.

⁶⁷Ibid., 117, 367.

of Sītā's birth from the earth and we know of Sītā's return to the earth in various versions of the *Rāmāyana*.

Further worship of Sītā takes place in Laṅka. The demonesses whom Rāvaṇa has ordered to intimidate Sītā end up worshipping her instead.⁶⁸ Trijaṭā summons the demonesses and tells that she dreamt of a monkey burning Laṅka and killing the whole demon host. She dreamt of Rāvaṇa mounted naked on a donkey with his heads and arms chopped off. The demonesses subsequently fall at the feet of Sītā. It takes the threat of disaster for these women to fall at the feet of Sītā. Traditionally the female, independent divinity has been worshipped, not for her virtues, but out of fear.

It is significant to note the conversation between Angada and Rāvaṇa in Rāvaṇa's court in the RCM. Angada refers to those who are "no better than corpses," including among them, "a follower of the Vamamarga," "a sect of Śakti-worshippers indulging in certain prohibited practices as a part of their worship."⁶⁹ One can assume that 'Śakti worship' was frowned upon by the Āryan peoples and that it is the independent "Devī" that is referred to. Thus, Sītā as the devoted consort can/could be worshipped in good conscience.

⁶⁸ *Sundara-Kāṇḍa* 10.1-4, 604.

⁶⁹ *Lankā-Kāṇḍa* 30.1-4, 665.

David Kinsley speaks of the Sītā worshipped today. He remarks that though Sītā is revered as a deity, she is "rarely worshipped in her own right."⁷⁰ It would be very unusual to find a temple dedicated to Sītā alone."⁷¹ Perhaps the answer is to worship the male and female principals together. One must, however, carefully watch the balance, and the depictions of these principals; "Though she is honoured along with Rāma, it is understood that she is not his equal."⁷²

It is perhaps impossible to regard Sītā as an independent goddess, worshipped alone. The nature of the text itself provides reasons for this. Perhaps this is relevant to the lack of evidence that worship and emulation of an independent Sītā has ever been a *norm* in India. If it once was, the independent Sītā has essentially disappeared, except perhaps for traits of the pre-*Rāmāyana* Sītā, found in her current form. It is clear, however, that Sītā has been considered divine in connection with and without Rāma; as the wife of Rāma she represents the *ideal* wife and without him she is independent and strong. She remains devoted, yet at the same time is able to defend herself. This strength can be perceived as hers. Traits like these can be emulated by women in India.

⁷⁰Kinsley, David R., *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986), 79.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid.

a) Sītā's Dream

Sītā's dream will be looked at as part of her role as a goddess, but will be examined separately, due to the unique form of *dreams* and the divine nature of *Sītā's dream*. Sītā dreams of Bhārata's agony due to his separation from Rāma:

Sītā saw in a dream that very night as if Bhārata had come with his retinue and that his body was tormented by the agony of separation from his lord. All who had accompanied him were sad at heart, . . . ; while Her mothers-in-law She found changed in appearance. On hearing of Sītā's dream Sri Rāma's eyes filled with tears . . . "This dream, Lakṣmaṇa, bodes no good; somebody will break terribly bad news."⁷³

Can we attribute this intuition as a component of Sītā's divine character or is this intuition within the realm of the secular? We observe Rāma's immediate belief in the dream. What is the significance of Sītā's prophesy? Bharadwaj speaks of the phenomenon of dreams in Tulasīdāsa:

Prediction is generally held to be as the proof of fatalism. Such prediction may assume various forms such as physical smarting, dreams, portents, phenomena, astrological readings, clairvoyance of sages.⁷⁴

He believes in foreboding dreams and mentions a few. . . . Similarly Sītā had an inauspicious dream at Citrakūṭa on the eve of Bhārata's arrival (R II, 226, 2); . . .⁷⁵

⁷³ *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 225.1-4, 442.

⁷⁴ Bharadwaj, *Philosophy of Tulasīdās*, 213.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 248.

What is the significance of the above in regards to Sītā's dream? According to Bharadwaj the dream has no real significance for it does not change one's plight in the phenomenal world.⁷⁶ Sītā's dream falls under the category of a foreboding dream which we can assume is not any different in its capacity to change anything in the phenomenal world, yet it does predict something that is going to occur. It has no independent power, but represents a prophetic ability. This reminds us of the divine Sītā. Sītā as *māyā* or the consort of Rāma has no power herself, but possesses limited powers under the ultimate power of Rāma. The dream predicts, but is not causal.

b) As Nature

Aside from Sītā's role as the consort of Rāma, perhaps her greatest independent role is her role as *nature*. Prior to and throughout the RCM we see metaphors surrounding Sītā, regarding her association with *nature*. Sītā, before her appearance in the VR was primarily known as a fertility goddess. Kinsley remarks that Sītā is "the name of a goddess associated with plowed fields in Vedic literature."⁷⁷ He further cites a hymn in the *Rgveda* addressed to the lord of the fields, in which Sītā is invoked. Sītā is referred to in the *Kausīka-sūtra*, the *Parāskara-sūtra*, the *Vājasaneyi-saṁhitā* and the *Harivamśa*, in her role as a fertility goddess.⁷⁸ Kinsley connects Sītā's role

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 65.

⁷⁸Ibid, 66.

as a fertility goddess in the *Rāmāyana* with the role that kings in ancient India were meant to play in promoting the fertility of the land.⁷⁹

Glenn E. Yocum has some significant views regarding Sītā's role as nature in the VR.⁸⁰ He looks at nature goddesses associated with south India; Sītā, primarily a northern goddess, he says, is an exception. Yocum questions Sītā's role as a fertility goddess, regardless of obvious connections she has with the earth.⁸¹ He says:

When nature echoes Sītā's actions and emotion, are these not just typical metaphorical devices being employed by Valmīki that may well have no real theological point?⁸²

It is not unusual in Indian literature for nature to reflect situations and emotions.⁸³

The significance of Sītā's identification with nature diminishes in the RCM of Tulasīdāsa. Yet we see in the modern day television rendition of Sītā that her association with the earth is re-affirmed.⁸⁴ The traditional identification of Sītā with

⁷⁹Ibid., 67.

⁸⁰Glenn E. Yocum, "Comments: The Divine Consort in South India," in The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 278.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴In the television series, we see an episode not found in the RCM ("Rāmāyan," vol. 18, episode 53). Immediately after Trijaṭā has told Sītā about Rāma's arrival in Laṅka, Sītā says to Rāma, ". . . on Laṅka's shores and I have not touched your feet."

the earth implied fertility. Valmiki carried on this tradition. This identification implied a super-human nature, yet it also suggested *womanly* (fertility) attributes, attributes lessened in the RCM. One might suggest when looking at a medium such as the television rendition of Sītā, that there are some in modern day India who wish to reaffirm Sītā as a divine woman, with womanly attributes, as opposed to only divine in connection with Rāma. One might suggest that these changes are slowly occurring in concurrence with changes in Indian society. Sītā appears to be more *divine* in a certain sense when she is with Rāma, yet at the same time she is less attainable. She is less attainable both in the sense of worship and in the sense of emulation.

It is significant to note the different endings of Tulasīdāsa and Valmiki. Valmiki separates Rāma and Sītā and does not bring them together at the end. Sītā is alone with her children. The result is a very strong maternal woman. Dhruvarajan cites Jacobson and Wadley:

When women are conceptualized as mothers they are strong willed, self-directed, proud, and dignified, while as wives they are compliant and weak. The role of the mother is subsumed under the wife role, thereby leading to cooptation of mothers into the patriarchal family.⁸⁵

She proceeds to touch them through the earth. Rāma feels her touch. He prays to the earth and says, "Sītā . . . I have come to you . . . days of grief ended . . . Believe in me and don't lose heart." Sītā's association with the earth is affirmed in this modern day version of the *Rāmāyana* story.

⁸⁵Vanaja Dhruvarajan, "Religious Ideology, Hindu Women, and Development in India," *Journal of Social Issues*, 46, no. 3 (1990): 63-64.

Tulasīdāsa brings Sītā back to Rāma, and though they are rendered as happy, Sītā is brought back to square one, that is, her life again revolves around the service of others, primarily Rāma. In accordance with the above, Tulasīdāsa virtually eliminates a fertile or maternal Sītā. He lessens her earthly associations and almost completely obliterates her role as a mother. In some ways he intensifies her divinity, but he almost completely abolishes her attainability as a woman. Perhaps Sītā's abandonment and eventual destruction in the VR is more significant.

5) Sītā as Plot

Many view Rāma as the sole instigator in the *Rāmāyana* story and Sītā as the passive victim. In conclusion of this chapter we will look at Sītā's role in causing events to occur. Sītā's role as plot is directly related to an affirmation of her independence. One learns that she does have many independent qualities, qualities which can be admired.

C. Dimmitt departs from those who see Sītā as a passive victim in the *Rāmāyana* story. Without Sītā, she says, there would be no story, and not just in the sense that she is a passive pivotal point, but rather because Sītā causes events in the story to happen.⁸⁶ Firstly, it is Sītā who demands to accompany Rāma to the forest, against his better judgement.⁸⁷ Secondly, it is Sītā who insists on Rāma fetching the

⁸⁶Dimmitt, Sīta, 219.

⁸⁷Ibid.

illusory deer sent by Ravana. Without the actions of Sītā, the kidnapping of Sītā could not have occurred.⁸⁸

Dimmitt refers to the VR, however her arguments can be applied to the RCM. She uses as a further example, Sītā's refusal to accompany Hanumān back to Rāma; she will not be touched by any man other than her husband.⁸⁹ In the RCM it is Hanumān who refuses to take her back, in fact he does not offer at all. He tells Sītā that Rāma has not ordered him to. According to Dimmitt, in the VR Sītā refuses Hanumān's offer in order to force Rāma to be a hero; he must save her.⁹⁰ One may suggest that Valmīki intended that the choice should be Sītā's. What were Tulasīdāsa's motivations for taking this decision from Sītā? Tulasīdāsa gives control to Rāma and removes Sītā's part in her own destiny; he lessens Sītā's causative role.

Sītā's role in the final battle is also of significance; this is a battle between so-called good and evil. What exactly is this war about? Is it about Sītā's welfare? Is it about justifying a serious crime, that of stealing another's wife? Is it to rectify the dishonour brought upon Rāma's family name? Or is it about destroying the demon race and the destruction of ignorance? If so, is there any significance in the kidnapping of Sītā as far as Sītā, herself is concerned? Is Sītā merely an excuse to wage this war?

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Ibid., 220.

Perhaps one answer does not have to be settled upon. Like the personalities in the RCM, there are many layers and facets involved. Perhaps the war is for all these reasons. On a secular level, the war is partially about the abduction of Sītā. On a transcendent level, it is partially about the destruction of evil. Political reasons, also were likely involved. Sītā's role is represented in the standstill of nature. One does not have to read the various reasons as contradiction, but rather as a multitude of themes addressed under one event; one must recognize the genius in this method.

Thus, we see that Sītā at least on a secular level can be perceived as causing her own destiny. On a transcendent level; however, it is easy to turn this around. Yes, Sītā says and does things which affect the course of the story, but we also know, on a level of *faith*, that everything that happens is part of Rāma's divine plan; therefore, all of Sītā's actions become meaningless. Sītā is a *bhaktā*, acting with, for and through Rāma. The reader of the *Rāmāyana* must decide how significant Sītā's actions are. If one sees Sītā as causative, one can view her as independent and perhaps her independence will be emulated. Women will take their destinies into their own hands. If one sees Sītā as merely acting through and for Rāma, and as admired for this, then this is the type of behaviour we will find in woman who emulate her. India's early history tells us that changes in the goddess predated changes in women's status; however, I believe that characters like Sītā can change as and after women change.

We can hope that as women begin to take their lives into their own hands so will their idols.

CHAPTER 3

III. SĪTĀ WITH FAMILY: RELATIONSHIP AND ROLE

In the story of the Rāmāyaṇa what is really emphasized is the family relationships. In a sense these constitute what can best be described as private morality.¹

In this chapter the role of Sītā will be examined in a familial context, both her natal and her marital families. She will firstly be examined in terms of her relationship with her natal family and, secondly in terms of her relationship with her in-laws. It is significant to examine Sītā as she behaves and to look at how she is perceived in a familial context, as for example, when she is with Rāma she tends to be more meek and less wilful than when she is separated from him. She is rendered as playing the roles of the *ideal* wife and of the *ideal* daughter/daughter-in-law very well. When she is separated from her husband and family we see a woman with a wilful mind and incredible, yet believable strength. I do not mean to emphasize separation from one's family, but only to recognize inherent strength in women, strength which should not be hidden when one is in the familial context.

¹Junankar, Reflections, 8.

1) Father

King Janaka is depicted as cherishing Sītā immensely in the RCM. One might suggest that this affection is related to the fact that he has no sons. When Janaka loses his daughters, he loses not only them, but also the potential for grandsons. Without sons, he cannot gain daughters-in-law. All that he can gain is a political alliance.

Though there is much evidence as to the positive relationship between Sītā and Janaka, when it is a question of *dharma*, a decision between his duty and his daughter, his daughter must come second. King Janaka has vowed that only the man who is able to bend the bow of Siva may wed his daughter. It looks at first as if this will not happen, and Sītā therefore, will remain single, a devastating situation for any young, Hindu woman. We must, however, take into account the era of this epic. How important was public duty at this time? Though it is evident that King Janaka feels intense grief directly related to the bind in which he finds himself, he does not consider breaking the vow that he has made, even if it means life as a spinster for his daughter, a life of humiliation, due to social norms imposed upon women. We have already seen that Tulasīdāsa's Sītā considered the vow silly. King Janaka is of course excused for his actions, for all works out in the end, and Rāma was of course the only man who could conceivably bend and break the bow.

Why did such norms exist and why is it that they continue? The RCM of course, is based on earlier versions of the *Rāmāyana* story. Tulasīdāsa makes many

alterations, but many of the social values found in the RCM are found also in earlier versions. Social norms such as the above were in progress long before Tulasīdāsa's time. Gatwood cites Wendy O'Flaherty who says, that by the period of the VR (200 B.C.E.-300 C.E.), the female principle had reached "the second and final stage in the transformation of a regional Devī or Devīs into the Spouse Goddess. The first step was her marginalization during Vedic times (O'Flaherty 1975: 238)."² As the status of upper caste women continued to decline, and knowledge of *Vedic* myths became, "increasingly restricted to the educated Brahman and Kshatriya castes, they were revised, interpolated, and finally written down as epics."³ Gatwood remarks:

A central purpose of the epics was to teach new codes of behaviour based upon Brahmanic and Kshatriya values, including the rights and privileges of kingship and a cataloguing of the different caste dharmas.⁴

It is difficult to know what one is meant to believe in terms of Sītā's feelings regarding her father's vow. We can assume that one is meant to suppose that Sītā is consistently thinking and doing the appropriate. She desperately wishes for a husband, and at first sight of Rāma wishes it to be him. We must remember that in this context we are dealing on a secular level, that is, Sītā as a woman who wishes to be married.

²Gatwood, *Devī*, 50.

³Ibid., 53.

⁴Ibid.

At Sītā and Rāma's first vision of one another Sītā's thoughts are portrayed as follows:

Surveying Sri Rāma's beauty from head to foot in the reverse order, and remembering Her father's vow she felt much perturbed.⁵

Her attitude in the above citation is one of annoyance; however, of greater concern than her attitude is the role she plays. In the above citation, Sītā, though feeling perturbed, still behaves as a proper, upper class, Hindu woman should. One might suggest that it is insignificant that Sītā did not speak out, for her marriage was inevitable, in which case we are dealing on a transcendent level. Perhaps, according to social norm, it is more important that Sītā behave properly. She is behaving according to her *dharma*. However, it seems clear that though Sītā as a *person* may feel certain emotions, Sītā as a *role* is dominant. We the reader, see her feel, yet are aware that her portrayal involves those present (in the story) seeing only her proper role. It is significant that the townspeople also appear to disregard the importance of King Janaka's vow. When Rāma first arrives in Mithila, the townspeople say:

"Here is a bridegroom worthy of Princess Janaki. If the king does but see him, . . . he will abandon his vow and insist upon their marriage." . . . the king, my dear, refuses to give up his vow and, . . . , persists in his folly."⁶

⁵ *Bālakāṇḍa* 233.1-4, 191.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.1-4, p. 183.

If we can assume that the majority of the townspeople are of a lower status than the primary subjects of the story, we may assume that we are dealing with a class conflict situation. This may involve a deeper level, a deeper conditioning of values. The *ideal* situation for Sītā, is that of being an *ideal wife* to a *model man*. This is the highest she can be; her marriage only partially involves her happiness; it also involves the well-being of the community. If good political alliances are made, the people of the kingdom will enjoy a higher status.

Though the happiness of Sītā appears to come before the king's vow for the townspeople, on a deeper layer one must ponder, that even though Sītā may rank higher than the king's vow, it may be a matter of one *dharma* over another. Is it Sītā's happiness that is of concern or her *role*? As the king's daughter she is a *role model*. Is the concern in fact a concern that she be a married woman, hence raising her status, the status of the kingdom and the city.

Tulasīdāsa was of the brahmin caste and was an educated man. He had a message for the common man and that was devotion to Rāma. What was Tulasīdāsa attempting to do in portraying the common man (and Sītā) as faithless in their king's vow? Is he telling us that the union of Rāma and Sītā is more important than even one's king? Again we are dealing with a mixing of the secular and the transcendent levels.

Until Sītā is married, King Janaka owns his daughter. Evidence shows that Janaka has strong feelings towards his daughter; however, one might suggest that she is primarily a commodity first and a daughter second. This is the *role* that Sītā plays as the daughter of a king. Political alliance, of course, plays an important role. Sītā's value is reflected on a material level in the extraordinary dowry presented to the family of the groom.⁷ This dowry is described in detail, emphasizing the importance of its function and the price tag affixed to such a union.⁸ Janaka has lost his children, but he has gained a valuable connection with a powerful (and divine) family. The following passage taking place shortly before the bow-sacrifice is to take place, emphasizes the value placed upon Sītā:

"A lovely bride, a grand triumph and splendid renown are the prize; but Brahman, it seems, has not yet created the man who may break the bow and win the above rewards."⁹

Sītā herself is a beneficial part of the package. She is beautiful and has been trained in the ways of a proper young woman. Her beauty elevates her value. She is so

⁷Ibid., 332.1-4, 264-265.

⁸The dowry is described in the RCM, (*Bālakāṇḍa* 325.1-4, 258; 332.1-4, 264-265; and 333, 265), the AR, (*Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, Chapter VI.76-77, 21), and the VR (*Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*, vol. 1, Canto LXXIV.3-6, 217). Sītā's beauty is described to a lesser extent in the VR, though her value to Janaka is emphasized in all three. In the television series we see the anguish of Janaka at the thought of losing Sītā; there is little said of the dowry.

⁹*Bālakāṇḍa* 251, 203.

desirable that the most powerful families wish to have her. She is part of a package, a package encompassing her family affiliation and power, her purity and her beauty. There is little or no evidence as to her desirability being at all associated with her courage or her character. She is desired for the *roles* she plays; it is not Sītā whom these men wish to have, but an *ideal*.

As mentioned above, the incredible dowry is yet another sign of the value of this union. Is it not enough to give one's daughter away? If there is to be a dowry at all, should it not be given to the family losing a child? Within this type of system one can understand why a daughter would be utterly undesirable. However, for Janaka even pecuniary worth does not rank above his *dharma*. Though the welfare of his daughter ranks below power, it appears that power ranks below *dharma*:

"Tell me, who would not have this prize? But none could string the bow. . . . Give up all hope and turn your faces homewards. It is not the will O Providence that Sītā should be married. All my religious merits shall be gone if I abandon my vow. The princess must remain a maid; . . . ? Had I know, brother, that there are no more heroes in the world, I would not have made myself a laughing-stock by undertaking such a vow."¹⁰

¹⁰Ibid., 251.1-4, 203.

Janaka is prepared to face humiliation rather than break his vow. Or is he? Is this a matter of *dharma*? Is he admitting that he is wrong? Was his faith so strong that he knew a hero would emerge? Or was it because he was driven by Rāma's divine plan?¹¹

One might ask if Sītā is meant to be concerned about her *role* as a daughter or are we meant to assume that this rendition of Sītā assumes that her own behaviour is *correct*? Was and is such behaviour in fact taught? Did women like Sītā exist or did men like Valmīki and Tulasīdāsa invent women in order that they be idealized and subsequently come into existence? Perhaps women whose religious faith is so strong, gradually come to accept established *role models* like Sītā; they begin to emulate these role models, aspiring to be more and more like them. It is also very possible that the depictions of the nature of characters such as Sītā evolved from women as they, themselves behaved and behave. However, it is likely that even if the latter is the case, women will in fact fail such attempts to emulate these models, for as we have seen already, facets of Sītā's perfection are virtually impossible to attain. If women realize

¹¹In the AR Sītā's marriage and the contest are related to her divine origin. Following the wedding of Rāma and Sītā, Janaka relates to Vasīṣṭha and Viśwāmitra the story of Sītā's birth, that is her birth from the furrow. He feels that due to her divine origin her marriage to Rāma is ordained (Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, VI.58-69, 20). In the VR, Sītā's divine origin is also narrated by Janaka. In the Vālmīki version he does so before the wedding, at the bow-sacrifice (Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa, vol. 1, Canto LXVI.12-18, 196-197), whereas in the AR he does so after the wedding upon the departure of the bridal party (Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Chapter VI.59-71, 20-21).

the unattainability of perfection, perhaps they will change and then characters like Sītā will change.

Following the bow-sacrifice, two incidents occur involving Sītā's relationship with Janaka; the first is the departure of Sītā and Rāma. Upon Sītā's departure with Rāma, Janaka's farewell to Sītā significantly portrays the positive relationship between Sītā and her father:

Due to excess of emotion tears rushed to his eyes. . . . The king clasped Janaki to his bosom . . . All his wise counsellors admonished him; and realizing that it was no occasion for wailing, the king recovered himself.¹²

Janaka's actions reinforce one's belief that he *loves* Sītā. It is clear that we are meant to witness this emotion towards a *daughter*. What does this tell us? We see that Janaka is "admonished" for his display of emotion, and that he, thereafter, "recovers himself." Why does Tulasīdāsa mention this? One might suggest that he was perhaps challenging established social norms for men. We often observe men in the text visibly displaying their emotions, perhaps more often than women. This is also emphasized in the television series. His renderings of women result in passive, well-behaved woman, whose emotions tend to be somewhat repressed. His depictions of men, on the other hand, are almost the reverse. Tulasīdāsa's men are often visibly displaying their emotions, while the women are meant to hide such feelings.

¹² *Bālakāṇḍa* 337.1-4, 268.

A second significant event is King Janaka's instructions to Sītā and the other brides, on the duties of a woman, upon their departure. A father instructing a daughter as to her *role* is one representation of the larger culture being dealt with:

King Janaka admonished his daughters in ways more than one, and instructed them in the duties of a woman as well as in family customs.¹³

We are told earlier that the queens give advice to their daughters in the form of a blessing "to live long with their husbands."¹⁴ Should *instruction in the duties of a woman*, not be solely the responsibility of a woman, assuming there is one in a given family? We have a situation where the text is written by a man, and within the text, men are instructing women on their proper behaviour. It is men who are creating women's standards of behaviour, both fictionally in the scene above and in the real world by the author. What did women really think? Can this text be a fair account of women's behaviours? Is it not likely that women were not behaving the way they *ideally* should, according to men of this era, and that texts such as this were meant to keep order and proper behaviour intact?

Another significant aspect of the relationship between King Janaka and Sītā is that aspect involving Rāma. King Janaka's love for Sītā, it seems, is transferred through her, to her husband; at times his love for Rāma becomes primary and that for

¹³Ibid., 338.1-4, 269.

¹⁴Ibid., 333.1-4, 265.

Sītā secondary. This, on a transcendent level is the correct path for Janaka. Devotion to Rāma is of the utmost importance in the RCM; Sītā as Rāma's *Śakti*, is worshipped only in conjunction with Rāma. The divinity of Sītā, especially in Tulasīdāsa's work is downplayed and devotion to her is only in conjunction with Rāma. It appears, especially in contrast to the AR and the VR, that Tulasīdāsa's work downplays the divinity of Sītā and emphasizes her *meekness*, *timidity*, and other *feminine* characteristics. Janaka plays a decisive role in each of the three works. It is he who characterizes her as divine in the AR and the VR, and it is he in the RCM and in the television series, who emphasizes her *meekness*.

The following takes place during Janaka's visit to the forest. In it he emphasizes his love for Rāma. He is feeling grief due to the banishment of Rāma to the forest, and it is his grief that is particularly emphasized:

Can the darkness of infatuation and attachment ever approach him (King Janaka), . . . That he too was plunged in grief shows the triumph of the affection he bore for his daughter, Sītā, and Her lord, Śrī Rāma. . . . he alone is highly honoured in an assembly of holy men, whose heart is sweetened by love for Śrī Rāma.¹⁵

On a secular level, Janaka's love for Sītā is the greater of the two, but on a transcendent, religious level, his love for Rāma is higher. It is made clear that Janaka

¹⁵*Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 276.1-4, 480.

feels sadness because of the loss of his daughter, but Tulasīdāsa has reminded us that devotion to Rāma is of the utmost importance.

2) Mother

A careful examination of Sītā's relationship with her mother is important, for the future of India's women lies in the hands of the mothers. If we can examine the traditional methods involved in mothers raising their daughters, perhaps suggestions for changes can be put forth.

There are at least three important themes to take notice of within the mother-daughter relationship of Sītā and Sunayanā. Firstly are the values taught to Sītā by Sunayanā. We must examine each woman's responsibility in teaching daughters certain values; and therefore, maintaining the social system at hand. Though authors such as Tulasīdāsa depicted women in a certain manner, they could not be wholly responsible for the depiction of, and the reality of, women. Women behaved in a certain manner, perpetuating their own roles.

Secondly, the significance of Sunayanā being without sons and the possible implications this might have to her status, and consequently Sītā's status, is of some importance. Does Sītā's *rich stock of merit* make up for Sunayanā or is a message being put forth that even the meritless are graced by Sītā and Rāma?

Thirdly, of importance in the relationship between the parent and the daughter, is the fact that the parents must eventually lose that daughter. How strong are

emotional bonds likely to be for a parent towards a daughter, when that parent knows that he/she must give up that daughter? These three areas will not be completely separated in this examination of Sītā and her natal mother, for they are inherently intertwined in the RCM.

Evidence both within and outside of the RCM tells us that motherhood gives a woman a certain amount of authority, that of control over daughters, at least until they are married. This control extends also to daughters-in-law. If however, there are no sons to bring home daughters-in-law, then this authority is lost (or never gained).

Vanaja Dhruvarajan remarks:

The status of wives goes up as soon as they become mothers. Women as mothers exercise control over their daughters and daughters-in-law. The power women are accorded is to socialize their daughters and daughters-in-law to become *pātivratas*. Essentially, women as mothers are coopted into the patriarchal family and become active participants in the reproduction of subordination through generations.¹⁶

The religious ideology of *pātivrata*, according to Dhruvarajan is literally "husband worship."¹⁷ This ideology encourages the adoption of a submissive and dependent position by Hindu women.¹⁸

¹⁶Dhruvarajan, *Religious Ideology*, 59.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., 57.

What significance does this have in regards to an examination of the relationship between Sītā and her mother? Perhaps the little mention of Sītā's mother is due to a lower status; she had no sons. It is possible that because we meet Sītā as she is to be married; her new family is of more importance. However, we are told much of Janaka. If Sunayana is in fact a woman with low status why would she be associated with Sītā? We know that in the VR, Sītā is not born of parents so her biological relationship would, therefore, be insignificant. However, in the RCM, Tulasīdāsa has omitted her birth from the furrow. Again, we must ask why Tulasīdāsa leaves it out. Perhaps Tulasīdāsa omits Sītā's supernatural status in an attempt to make her more *human*. One must address this question concerning queen Sunayanā's status. Dhruvarajan remarks as follows on women's status:

Women's status goes up in the patriarchal family with the birth of children, especially sons.¹⁹

Of course, Janaka also, is without a son. All that he has left after losing his daughters is a connection with a powerful family. His status is based on the marriage of his daughter.

Sītā's relationship with her mother on a secular level appears to be intimate, though perhaps not emphasized in the same manner, or to the same extent, as her relationship with her father. The first situation of significance in the RCM

¹⁹Ibid., 67.

characterizing the relationship between Sītā and her mother occurs when gazing upon Rāma, Sītā overlooks the time and is depicted as follows:

She got afraid of Her mother; for She felt it was already late.²⁰

Her role in this context is an obedient one. Her mother plays the role of the disciplinarian in this context. One gradually develops the feeling in examining the relationship between Sītā and her mother that it is Sunayanā who deals primarily on a secular level regarding Sītā. She teaches through her example, the role of a woman. It is Janaka who is rendered as dealing primarily on a spiritual level, though we see that he frequently loses himself to emotions of a secular nature.

A later episode of significance occurs following the shattering of the bow by Rāma.²¹ Conflict occurs between the losing princes; the princes are angry that they

²⁰ *Bālakāṇḍa* 233.1-4, 191.

²¹ In the television series, Queen Sunayanā warns Sītā that no one may in fact be able to bend the bow at the bow-sacrifice ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 2, episode 5). She speaks with King Janaka, telling him, that as a man he does not understand, that whoever wins "may not appeal to Sītā's heart," and if no one can do it, "Sītā's life will be empty without marriage." She tells Sītā to pray that the one who does it will be of noble birth, worthy of her hand and can fill her with love and happiness. These are Sunayanā's concerns, as opposed to Janaka's concerns of honour for himself and honour for the kingdom. We see two messages coming from Sunayanā. Firstly, she is encouraging the idea of a *love marriage*. Secondly, she is saying that Sītā will have no life unless she is married. Queen Sunayanā further tells Sītā to pray and offer puja in order to procure a worthy husband. Only unmarried girls can attend Gaurī *pūjā* before a wedding, in a temple of the Virgin Goddess. The Gaurī *pūjā* "gives a girl the husband her heart seeks," (Ibid., vol. 2, episode 6).

None of the above is found in the AR or VR. The television series depicts Sunayanā in a similar manner to the RCM. When no one can lift the bow Queen

have lost. One of the princes suggests carrying Sītā off by force.²² Sītā is brought to her mother when she becomes afraid:

When Sītā heard the tumult, She got afraid and Her companions took
Her to the queen; . . .²³

It is her mother to whom Sītā is taken, not her father. Her mother plays the *roles* of nurturer and disciplinarian. Her mother is the protector. Her father is firstly a king and secondly a father. Sunayanā's role has primarily been that of a *mother*. She has little other significance in the epic. In order to see the deeper significance of this relationship, we must delve deeper into the cycle of mother and daughter relationships, continuing the moulding of women's ideals, values and behaviours. The following passage supports the idea of *pātivrata*. As Sītā and Rāma are to depart for Ayodhyā, the queens speak to Sītā as follows:

They took Sītā in their lap and blessed and exhorted her in the following words: "May you be ever beloved of your lord, and may you live long with him: . . . Serve the parents of your husband and other elders and do the bidding of your lord according to his pleasure." . . . Sītā's clever

Sunayanā says, "what's the use of such stubborn kingly vows . . . a daughter's life,"(Ibid., vol 3, episode 7). She doubts Rāma, "how can this youth bend it? . . . may king not add to our humiliation,"(Ibid., vol. 3, episode 8). Again, her concern is her daughter's life, a life potentially without a husband due to her husband's vow.

²² *Bālakāṇḍa* 265.1-4, 212.

²³ Ibid., 266.1-4, 213.

companions too taught her the duties of a housewife . . . The queens . . .
. exclaimed, "Why did Brahmā ever create a woman ?"²⁴

The love and affection in the above scene between Sītā, her siblings, and the queens is significant. It is intense and tragic at the same time. Why must a family lose a child, *give her away* solely because she is female? Is this a punishment for producing no sons? If the act of giving up one's daughter is the correct path to follow, why is Sītā's family so unhappy? One might perceive Tulasīdāsa's response as inadequate. He responds by portraying women as doubting their own sex, wondering why they were ever created at all.²⁵ This cannot possibly be a healthy example for a Hindu woman's self-image and self-esteem.

Sunayanā teaches Sītā how to be a good *pātivrata*. Her speech (above) exemplifies the perpetuation of the cycle in which women are caught. As Dhruvarajan suggests, women are often very involved in the process of devaluing their own sex:

The socialization experiences women go through in this ideological context is for dependence, which results in women devaluing themselves.²⁶

It is also a woman, Anasūyā, who teaches Sītā the duties of a devoted wife. Though Sītā is taught by both her father and mother, one might presume that the

²⁴Ibid., 333.1-4, 265.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Dhruvarajan, Religious Ideology, 59.

answers lie in the hands of the mothers and women. Women provide the examples. Mothers, those in political power, those with money, female celebrities, or any woman with influence, possess the power to make a difference. The answer lies, not in obliterating or changing texts like the RCM, for there is immense value in these texts, on several levels. Sītā and other female characters in the *Rāmāyaṇa* story possess much to be admired. It is these admirable qualities which need to be emphasized.

We now turn to our third point, the eventual and inevitable loss of a daughter. In the following passage Sunayanā depicts Sītā in a particular manner. The scene is one where Sunayanā commits Sītā to Rāma:

"I offer myself as sacrifice to You, . . . May you know that Sītā is dear as life itself to the whole family, nay, to the entire population of the city, much more to me and to her royal father. Therefore, considering her meekness and affection, O Lord of Tulasī, treat her as Your maid-servant.²⁷

Queen Sunayanā portrays her daughter to Rāma as "meek" and "affectionate," as did Janaka, though it is perhaps more significant in the case of Sunayanā. Sunayanā is the female example for Sītā. If she referred to her as otherwise perhaps others would be inclined to treat her as such. Perhaps women readers might be inclined to teach their daughters otherwise. As we have seen in various examples, it does not appear that Sītā is *meek* at all, and Sītā's behaviour is presumably a reflection of her upbringing.

²⁷ *Bālakāṇḍa* 336, 267.

Queen Sunayanā's request of Rāma is to treat Sītā in such a way that she will continue to behave as *meek* and *affectionate*. There is no apparent wish that Sītā were not *meek* and *affectionate*. Perhaps Rāma knows otherwise, but does the reader? Did Tulasīdāsa?

The above passage is true to the manner in which women aid in the process of their own devaluation. None of the stronger qualities of women are mentioned by Sītā's mother when she speaks of her daughter to Rāma. Sītā's mother is a product of this cycle of devaluation, and though many of the values she imparts to Sītā are perhaps valuable if interpreted appropriately, many may be harmful. We must consider this in light of female readers of the RCM and viewers of the *Rāmāyaṇ* television series (based primarily on the RCM and available to many, including the illiterate). How can women as mothers and as daughters most valuably interpret the relationship between Sītā and her mother? Though a woman may spend the majority of her life under the influence of her mother-in-law, she almost always spends her most influential years under the influence of her natural mother.

We see the influence of Sītā's mother on her values and behaviour. Every mother plays a *role model* for her daughter(s). On a larger scale, the reader must interpret these scenes carefully. How can one most valuably interpret these scenes? How true to life are these behaviours, and how can they be best interpreted in order to provide the best model for the female reader?

3) With Parents in Forest

(transition to in-laws)

In the forest, in the *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa*, the final interaction between Sītā and her parents to be examined takes place. How has the relationship between Sītā and her family changed? How has Sītā changed? When Sītā's family comes to the forest she treats them with the respect properly due, but as a married woman, does not treat them as if they are her own family. Her family is now the family of her husband. Her natal family reinforces these values as we have seen. She now belongs to another family, another kingdom. The family of Rāma comes across clearly as the dominant one in dealings between the two kin groups, not as abusively dominant, yet decisively dominant. This is especially true for the women involved, as is evident in the following scene in which the queens of both camps arrange to meet:

Sītā's mother . . . despatched her handmaids to King Daśaratha's queens . . . Having learnt that Sītā's mothers-in-law were at leisure the ladies . . . called on them. Queen Kauśalyā . . . received them with due honour and courtesy and offered them such seats as circumstances would permit. The amiability and affection of all on both sides were such as would have made even the hardest thunderbolt melt . . .²⁸

The same is true regarding "control" of Sītā. Sītā is now a "possession" of Rāma's family as is evident in the following. Following a discussion between Kauśalyā and Sunayanā, Sunayanā relays:

²⁸ *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 280.1-4, 482-483.

Her request for being allowed to take Sītā with her. And having received Kauśalyā's kind permission Sītā's mother now left for her camp with Sītā.²⁹

Sītā is truly a possession of her husband's family.^{30 31} Tulasīdāsa portrays the characters as benevolent towards each other, producing an effect which supports the underlying social structure. Janaka's reaction to his daughter as a mendicant is of significance; we are given a glimpse of the inner turmoil he deals with:

When King Janaka beheld Sītā in the robes of a hermitess he was overwhelmed with love and was highly gratified. "Daughter, you have brought sanctity to both the houses . . . everyone says that your fair renown has illumined the whole world. The river of your fame outshone the celestial stream (Ganga) . . . Her father made these flowery yet truthful remarks out of affection for Her, Sītā was drowned as it were

²⁹Ibid., 285, 485.

³⁰An interesting scene occurs in the *Rāmāyaṇ* television series which does not occur in the RCM. We see a dialogue between Sunayanā and Kauśalyā in the forest. Kauśalyā praises her four daughters, and says that they *are as if her own*. Sunayanā replies that they *are* hers, "my relationship ended the day they married." We see the shame Kauśalyā feels regarding Sītā's exile to the forest when Sunayanā gives her the credit for Sītā's nobility. Kauśalyā says, "Only the mother's teaching makes a daughter good or bad. It is from your precepts that Sītā has brought honour to womanhood today. Whenever history describes the deeds of virtuous wives Sītā's name shall be above all others," ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 9, episode 27). Again we see the significant role of the mother.

³¹Further in the television series, Sunayanā tells all her daughters to serve their mothers-in-law. She tells them that their natal home will only be open to them after fourteen years when their marital home is filled with joy. Even though they might be unhappy, their *dharma* is to serve their in-laws (Ibid). Sunayanā's responsibility is to turn them away from their natal home. We saw earlier, that Daśaratha was prepared to allow Sītā to go to her natal home for the duration of the exile. It was Sītā who refused, not because she could not go, but because she did not wish to.

in a sea of bashfulness. Her parents . . . gave Her good and salutary advice and blessings. Sītā did not speak but felt uncomfortable in Her mind because she thought that it was not good to remain with Her parents overnight. Reading Her mind the queen (Sunayanā) made it known to the king (her husband) and both admired in their heart Her modesty and noble disposition.³²

King Janaka's ability to let Sītā go appears to be weaker than Sunayanā's. We observe his struggle; he too, knows he must let go of Sītā. Sunayanā is visibly upset at times, but perhaps as woman who has gone through the same thing, is better able to deal with it. Sītā, it appears, is the strongest of all; it is her strength which can be admired, regardless of whether one approves of the underlying social structure. Though it is evidently difficult for her, she is able to let her parents go. Though always treating them with respect, her *role* now, as a married woman, is one of detachment. Her primary *role* is no longer that of a dutiful daughter, but of a dutiful daughter-in-law.

Janaka's pride in his daughter is immediately evident. She has honoured her family and kingdom. Knowledge of her idyllic behaviour has spread; thus, she has honoured both her natal and marital families. The connection between the families has been strengthened by the deal they have made; the acquisition has proven to be fruitful. Sītā's mother throughout the above scene remains quiet, yet in her silence, is supportive of Janaka.

³² *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 286.1-4, 487.

Sītā's struggle to maintain self-control becomes evident when she nearly collapses in to the *love* she has for her parents. One witnesses a conflict of *roles*; Sītā must play the *roles* of both daughter and daughter-in-law, but priority, due to social convention, must be given to her new family, regardless of attachment to the old:

Overcome by the affection of Her parents Sītā was too deeply moved to control Herself. But realizing the awkward moment and Her noble duty, Earth's Daughter recovered Herself.³³

How do we begin to understand the emotions of Sītā, as rendered by Tulasīdāsa? The strength of Sītā in the above scene is meant to be admirable. Her strength is an *ideal*, a quality to be copied. It is evident that a married woman must not be obvious if she yearns for her own family. It is obvious, however, that Sītā does. What are the significant implications of her feelings? It is her *noble duty* to conceal her affection towards her parents. Why must this be so? Does this type of behaviour emphasize the underlying knowledge that she is no longer possessed by them? Sītā eventually feels she must leave for it would not be proper to remain the night with her parents. It is not her father who relieves her from her discomfort; it is her mother who knows the proper duty for a married woman and sends her back to her new family. Again the mother perpetuates the system.

³³Ibid., 286, 487.

a) Father-in-law

Sītā as portrayed by Tulasī Dās is quoted as the model of Indian womanhood, not only as the ideal wife and companion but also as the ideal daughter-in-law. Such is the importance of this heroine that sometimes the *Rāmāyana* is called "Sītā Charit".³⁴

In this section those scenes in which the relationship between Sītā and her in-laws is prominent will be examined. Firstly, we will explore Sītā's relationship with her father-in-law. Secondly, we will look at Sītā's relationship with her mothers-in-law. Thirdly, we will briefly examine some implications involving these relationships.

The relationship between Daśaratha and Sītā appears to be of little depth, excepting where Sītā is connected with Rāma.³⁵ Daśaratha is impressed by Sītā's beauty and is delighted to ally his kingdom with the kingdom of Mithila. The following passage expresses Daśaratha's delight when he first sees Sītā:

At the sight of Janaki Rāma had His heart's desire fulfilled. King Daśaratha with all his sons was filled with delight; . . .³⁶

At this point, Sītā still belongs to Janaka; she is still his possession. The wedding of Rāma and Sītā involves the transition period examined above. Firstly, Sītā becomes

³⁴Gopal, *Rāmāyana*, 109.

³⁵ In the both the AR and the VR there is nothing mentioned of a relationship between Sītā and Daśaratha until he asks Rāma and Sītā to fast before Rāma's proposed installation. Tulasidasa introduces a new dimension to the relationship between Daśaratha and Sītā.

³⁶ *Bālakāṇḍa* 322.1-4, 253.

the possession of another family. Secondly, she becomes the possession of another kingdom. Thirdly, a new political alliance has been formed. Her father-in-law looks at her as a potential possession. It is impossible at this point that his admiration can be based upon anything but physical beauty and familial connections. Following the wedding, we see King Daśaratha's feelings of enrapture, regarding the beauty of the brides:

The king, . . . , visited the private apartments and beheld the princes with their brides. He gladly took the boys in his arms . . . he affectionately seated the brides in his lap and fondled them again and again with a heart full of rapture. The ladies of the gynaeceum were delighted to behold this spectacle; . . .³⁷

It is significant to note that this type of behaviour is admired and supported by the "ladies" in the gynaeceum. Again we observe women supporting the cycle in which they revolve.

The next significant event dealing with Sītā and her father-in-law in the RCM occurs when King Daśaratha learns of Sītā's departure with Rāma. Daśaratha like Kauśalya, attempts to persuade Sītā to remain at home. He goes so far as to suggest that she go to her parents home, yet even this does not tempt her. She is tested in her devotion to Rāma. Even after witnessing Sītā's firm resolve, Daśaratha does not give up; he commands Sumantra to tell Rāma the following:

³⁷Ibid., 353.1-4, 278-279.

‘My lord, kindly send back the daughter of Mithila’s king.’ When Sītā gets alarmed at the sight of the jungle, . . . tell her . . . : "The parents of your husband have sent this message to you: Please return home, my daughter; there is much hardship in the forest. Now with your parents and now in your husband’s home - stay wherever you please.’ . . . ; if she comes back, there will be a support to my life.³⁸

Daśaratha assumes that Sumantra will be able to persuade Sītā to come back. He does not recognize Sītā’s strength nor her devotion to Rāma. He places the unfair burden on her that her return is responsible for the outcome of his life. He depends on her lack of strength, and subsequent return to Ayodhyā, in order to provide a support for himself. Scenes like this should be identified, that is scenes in which men do not recognize inherent strength in women. We know that Sītā has the necessary strength to endure forest life, yet Daśaratha does not. Daśaratha’s central function in this respect is to test Sītā, to test her devotion to Rāma. It is through this type of testing that Sītā becomes an *ideal bhaktā*. When Sumantra appeals to Sītā to return to her in-laws, she replies:

Bereft of my lord, my parents’ home, which is such an abode of bliss, does not attract my mind . . . My father-in-law is no less a personage than the King of Kosala, . . . , Ayodhyā is my abode, agreeable is my family and my mothers-in-law love me as my own mother. But without the dust from the lotus feet of my husband . . . none affords me pleasure . . .³⁹

³⁸ *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 81.1-4, 342.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.1-4, 353.

Sītā's feelings and commitment towards her families are strong, but they are incomparable to the same for Rāma. Sītā clearly thinks highly of her father-in-law, but not higher than her husband. Which is a higher duty? According to the secular Rāma, rendered by Tulasīdāsa, the higher duty is to her in-laws. Yet Sītā passes even that test administered by Rāma. She does not listen even to he, to whom her devotion lies.

Following the kidnapping of Sītā, Rāma questions the vulture Jaṭayu as to Sītā's whereabouts. It is interesting that before Jaṭayu dies and proceeds to Rāma's divine abode; Rāma tells him:

"But on reaching there, sire, tell not my father about Sītā's abduction."⁴⁰

It is plain that the feelings that Daśaratha had for Sītā while alive were strong and do not diminish even after his death. His love for Sītā as part of Rāma attains a transcendent level, separation from Rāma and Sītā resulting in his death. He had, however, by trying to convince Sītā to stay in Ayodhyā, attempted to separate Sītā from Rāma, Daśaratha's own needs coming first. Daśaratha's love for Sītā revolved around her divine union with Rāma. Daśaratha's separation from Rāma and Sītā on a secular level brings him together with them on a transcendent level. He is

⁴⁰*Aranya-Kāṇḍa* 31, 552.

instrumental in creating an *ideal bhaktā* through his *testing* of Sītā, inspired by Rāma, to whom he is also devoted.

Thus, we see that the relationship between Daśaratha and Sītā is one based mainly on a transcendent level, on which Daśaratha depends on Sītā, only together with Rāma, for his livelihood. Sītā's relationships with her mothers-in-law are perhaps more significant in the context of her *ideal* 'secular' nature. On a secular level, the relationship between Daśaratha and Sītā is a superficial one based on admiration of Sītā's physical beauty and political connection with her family.

b) Mothers-in-law

Sītā's relationships with her mothers-in-law are of great significance. Perhaps the most important is her relationship with Kauśalya, this being the central relationship the reader observes developing. In this section Sītā's relationships with each of her mothers-in-law will firstly be examined individually and secondly as a group.

Upon Sītā's arrival with Rāma, the mothers-in-law greet their sons and their brides with much fanfare; they are enraptured with Sītā. The following portrays the reaction of the mothers-in-law when they see Rāma and Sītā together:

As they gazed again and again on the beauty of Sītā and Rāma they felt delighted and regarded the object of their life in this world as realized. The queen-mothers' companions, as they gazed on Sītā's countenance over and over again, sang and extolled their good fortune.⁴¹

⁴¹ *Bālakāṇḍa* 348.1-4, 275.

The mothers, like Daśaratha are at first, enraptured with Sītā's beauty. Their kindness towards her is her good fortune, yet in what context is this kindness applied? Even in their welcome it is not felt that Sītā is liked or welcomed because she may be frightened, rather emphasis is laid on the good fortune of the family in attaining such an asset. She is an asset politically, she is an asset because she is beautiful, and on a higher level an asset because of her divine relationship with Rāma. There is a completeness so to speak, "an old love." The people of Ayodhyā are blessed, for the presence of the Mother and Father of the Universe can only be beneficial.⁴²

One of the more significant scenes between Sītā and her mothers-in-law is that scene which takes place between Sītā and Kauśalya, Rāma's natural mother upon hearing the news that Rāma will be banished to the forest for fourteen years; Sītā immediately approaches Kauśalya who has been speaking with Rāma.⁴³ This begins Sītā's insistence that she must accompany Rāma. The dialogue between herself and

⁴²In the AR little is said of the meeting between the mothers-in-law and their new daughters-in-law. In the VR we are told upon the arrival of the wedding party in Ayodhyā that:

Kauśalyā and Sumitrā as well as the graceful Kaikeyī and whatever other queens there were busied themselves with ceremonious reception of their daughters-in-law. Thereupon the queens conducted (into the gynaeceum) the highly blessed Sītā and the illustrious Urmilā as well as both the daughters of Kusadhwaḥ . . . All those queens forthwith got the brides to offer worship to the temples . . . (Valmiki-Rāmāyaṇa, Canto LXXVII.10-15, 226).

⁴³*Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 57, 325.

Kauśalya is important, for there is a question as to which is a higher duty, that to Sītā's husband or to her in-laws. Kauśalya speaks as follows:

Sri Rāma's mother broke the silence: "Listen, my dear child: Sītā is exceedingly delicate and the pet of her father-in-law and mothers-in-law and the whole family."⁴⁴

"Again I have found in her a beloved daughter-in-law, who is amiable and accomplished, and beauty personified. I have treated her as the very apple of my eye . . . , my very life is centred in Janaki. . . . Sītā has never set her foot on hard ground. . . . The same Sītā would accompany you to the woods, and awaits your orders, O Lord of the Raghus!"⁴⁵

. . . how, my son, will Sītā live in the forest; - she who is frightened to see even the picture of a monkey? Is a female cygnet, who disports in the lovely lotus-beds of the Mānasa lake, fit for a muddy puddle? First ponder this; then as you order I will instruct Janaka's daughter. "If she stays at home," . . . "that will mean a great solace to me."⁴⁶

Again, a woman is contributing to the cycle of characterizing another woman as weak. Though Kauśalya is by no means a cruel person, she contributes to the characterization of Sītā as a *timid, weak* girl. She is portrayed as caring for her daughter-in-law, which many would consider an idyllic situation, yet one must question how this type of concern affects perceptions of women. A mother-in-law might be portrayed as caring, yet encouraging at the same time; it seems as if most mother and daughter-in-law portrayals are either that of a terrible mother and daughter-in-law relationship, or too

⁴⁴Ibid., 57.1-4, 326.

⁴⁵Ibid., 58.1-4, 326-327.

⁴⁶Ibid., 59.1-4, 327.

flawless to be believable and subsequently damaging for the image of the women involved.

In the above passage Kauśalya makes it clear that she would prefer Sītā to stay home with her, but leaves the decision to Rāma. Perhaps formally duty to one's in-laws is the higher duty, but it seems that in practice, duty to one's husband is *ideal*. Kauśalya, in a round-about-way supports Sītā, by giving the decision to Rāma; Kauśalya is the one who must order her, but she will order her as Rāma commands. Kauśalya in this way is also involved in the *testing* of Sītā. Rāma finally concedes and allows her to come. Sītā seeks blessings from Kauśalya as follows:

Janaka's Daughter then threw Herself at Her mother-in-law's feet and said, "I tell you, mother: I am most unlucky in that at a time when I should have served you heaven has exiled me to the forest . . . cease not to entertain kindly feelings towards me. . . . The mother-in-law was so distressed . . . she pressed her Daughter-in-law to her breast and recovering herself admonished and blessed Her: "May the blessed state of your wifhood (the longevity of your husband) know no break and endure so long as the streams of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā continue to flow."⁴⁷

Sītā states that "heaven" has exiled her to the forest at a time when she should be serving her mothers-in-law; her exile is immanent in Rāma's. Tulasīdāsa, through Sītā, attributes her fate to bad-luck. If heaven has refused to grant Sītā's desire, is it Rāma who has refused to grant Sītā's desire? Rāma, of course is the divine, driving

⁴⁷Ibid., 68.1-4, 333.

force, throughout the RCM. How does this possibility affect Sītā's relationships with her mothers-in-law and the *norm* of mother and daughter-in-law relationships? It is plain that in this case devotion to one's husband prevails over serving one's in-laws.⁴⁸

It is significant to examine the relationship between Kaikeyī and Sītā. At least one of Kaikeyī's reasons for banishing Rāma to the forest is her jealousy of Kauśalyā. She is jealous that Kauśalyā's son will be king and not her own. She is concerned about the possible implications that this will have for her own status. Is it possible that Kaikeyī is meant to be jealous of Sītā? Kaikeyī has always been the youngest queen. As several are attempting to persuade Sītā not to go to the forest, we are told in the RCM that:⁴⁹

⁴⁸It is significant to note the differences between the RCM, the AR and the VR. In the AR there is no interaction between Kauśalyā and Sītā. Rāma comforts his mother prior to his meeting with Sītā (Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Chapter IV.4-49, 35-38). Lakṣmaṇa is also given permission to accompany him before he speaks with Sītā (Ibid., Chapter IV.50-52, 38). In the VR also, Rāma first takes leave of Kauśalyā, and then goes to see Sītā (Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa, Canto XXIV.1-38, 333-336). Why does Tulasidasa include this meeting between Sītā and Kauśalyā? One might suggest that he is increasing the authority of Kauśalyā.

The next episode of significance is the farewell to Rāma and Sītā. There is little between the mothers-in-law and Sītā in either the RCM or the AR. Emphasis, especially in the former is on King Daśaratha's grief. Sītā, in the latter, we are told gives wealth to the servants of Rāma's mother, Kauśalyā (Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Chapter IV.83-84, 39).

⁴⁹In the VR the dressing of Sītā in bark is of great significance (Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa, vol. 1, Canto XXXVII.1-37, 379-383; and Canto XXXVIII.1-17, 383-384). As in the RCM, it is Kaikeyī who brings the ascetic clothing for the trio to wear. In the Valmīki version, Sītā has much trouble putting the clothes on, for she does not know how to do it; Rāma ends up putting the bark over her clothes. The females who are

Kaikeyī flared up She brought hermits' robes, ornaments and vessels . . .⁵⁰

Upon the arrival of the people of Ayodhyā in the forest; Sītā upon first seeing her mothers-in-law is depicted as follows:

The tender girl closed Her eyes in dismay. They appeared to Her like so many female swans fallen into the hands of some fowler. . . . They too were sore distressed when they gazed on Sītā. . . . Janaka's Daughter then took courage . . . She approached and embraced all Her mothers-in-law. Earth was enveloped in pathos at the moment.⁵¹

Sītā's attachment to her mothers-in law by this point, is rendered by Tulasīdāsa as strong. The following episode introduces a supernatural aspect to the relationship between Sītā and her mothers-in-law. We see her as follows:

Sītā assuming as many forms as She had mothers-in-laws, waited on each with equal attention. No one but Rāma knew the mystery behind it; for all delusive potencies form part of Sītā's delusive power. Sītā won over the queen-mothers by Her services, . . .⁵²

present begin to wail; and King Daśaratha and Vasiṣṭha reproach Kaikeyī. Sītā is virtually ignored, except as an object of pity. Kaikeyī has little sympathy for Sītā; of course, the reader is meant to believe her mind is poisoned. This mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship has been emphasized so as to highlight the cruelty of Kaikeyī, yet she is the only one who does not emphasize the weakness of Sītā. The same is true in the RCM.

⁵⁰ *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 78.1-4, 340.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 245.1-4, 457.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 251.1-4, 462.

We observe Sītā performing her *dharma*, with the help of the powers of *māyā*. We witness Sītā performing exemplary duties at a level impossible for the average woman to aspire to.^{53 54}

At the end of the epic, upon the arrival of Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa to Ayodhyā, the mothers-in-law treat Sītā as follows:

. . . bathed Janaka's Daughter with all tenderness and carefully attired Her . . . On Śrī Rāma's left side shone forth Rāma (Laksmī) Herself, a mine of beauty and goodness. The mothers were all delighted at the sight and accounted their life as fully rewarded.⁵⁵

The reader learns that Sītā performs flawless duties in service to her mothers-in-law; she does this at a level unattainable for the average woman. The following passage exemplifies this:

⁵³Very little of the above scenes involving Sītā and her mothers-in-law in the forest are mentioned in the AR; Rāma's mothers run to him only (*Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, IX.14-16, 56). In the VR, this family scene in the forest is depicted in greater detail, and significantly, it is only Sītā's in-laws who are in the forest. Kauśalyā speaks to Sītā on the hardships of the forest (*Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*, vol. 1, Canto CIV.2222-23, 604).

⁵⁴An interesting sequence occurs in the television series (not found in the RCM), upon the arrival of Rāma's family in the forest ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 8, episode 24). We see Sītā with each of her mothers-in-law, one at a time, massaging them. Firstly, we see Sītā and Kaikeyī; Kaikeyī asks Sītā to have Rāma pronounce death for her. Sītā tells her that Rāma only has praise for her; and Kaikeyī replies, that that is the hardest thing. Secondly, we see Sītā and Sumitrā; Sumitrā asks if Lakṣmaṇa is serving them well and Sītā replies that he is. Thirdly, we see Sītā and Kauśalyā; Kauśalyā asks if Rāma ever thinks of her. She says, "He's very dispassionate isn't he?" Sītā replies that Rāma has asked her to support her (Kauśalyā).

⁵⁵*Uttara-Kāṇḍa* 11 A-C, 760.

Devoid of pride and conceit, She waited upon Kauśalya and all the other mothers-in-law . . . Sītā was no other than Goddess Rāma (Laksmī), the Mother of the universe, who is adored even by Brahmā and other gods and is ever flawless.⁵⁶

The relationships of the mothers-in-law with Sītā are of tremendous importance when considering the implications and possible influences these depictions have for interpreters of the *Rāmāyana* story. One must be careful when analyzing these relationships not to underestimate the importance of criticizing given interpretations. The *roles* of Sītā and her in-laws as portrayed in the RCM are idealistic. Perhaps these actions are possible, but uncommon. Contemporary evidence shows that a relationship such as the one Sītā has with her in-laws is idealistic, yet uncommon. Is it fair that women expect these *ideals*? Even though Sītā is treated well, she misses her family, yet must pretend she does not. Perhaps the true *ideal* is not that of replacing one's husband's family as one's own, but how well one makes it appear that this is the case. An *ideal* daughter-in-law, therefore, is perhaps an exceptional actor. An *ideal* woman is one who plays her part well. As long as she keeps her individuality hidden, she is admired. As portrayed by Tulasīdāsa, Sītā plays this *role* well. She holds her head high, hiding any anxieties and fears she may have. One may admire this, yet can also ask why a woman has to go through this? On a positive side, it is strength building for

⁵⁶Ibid., 23.1-5, 773.

women, yet on the other hand, if one cannot play the role, one believes it is her own fault for not being able to be what she is expected to be.

Many women have no support system. In many cases one would not have her sisters with her, as Sītā does, nor a husband as understanding as Rāma. She may find considerable envy and jealousy in the household of her in-laws. The women in the family have each other, but the daughter-in-law in most cases is alone. Women do not in general have a great deal of sympathy for one another, perhaps due to the traditional *divide and conquer* method of the patriarchal matrimonial system.⁵⁷

The readers know that Sītā longs for her family and we must not forget that Tulasīdāsa lets us see this. This in a sense is helpful, for women know that even Sītā missed her natal family, but this is not an answer for women. Women need more than the knowledge that others feel the way they do. The circumstances in which such feelings arise need to be dealt with and dealt with by women themselves.

⁵⁷See pp. 228-233.

CHAPTER 4

IV. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SĪTĀ AND RĀMA

The Story of the Rāmāyaṇa draws up a vivid picture of family relationships: husband and wife, brother and brother, wife and wife, etc. The locus classicus of this picture undoubtedly is the relation between Rāma and Sītā.¹

So far we have looked at Sītā alone and we have looked at her in relation to her family. In the former case we have looked at her as independent, as a goddess and as a woman. With her natal family she comes across as a girl and when she is with her in-laws she is obedient. In this section we will look at her in connection with Rāma, the hero of the story. How does Sītā behave when she is with Rāma? For most, Sītā is a secondary character; she is only important in connection with Rāma. We will examine the validity of this in this chapter. Is her secondary importance inherent in the text or is it based mainly on interpretation?

In the first half of this chapter this relationship will be examined as far as possible on a secular level, using examples throughout the text. We must remember, however, that it is virtually impossible to separate the secular and transcendent levels. The subtitle, *secular*, involves Sītā and Rāma's relationship as portrayed in the text on a *human* level; however, this human relationship inherently involves a transcendent level. The subtitle *transcendent*, involves Sītā and Rāma beyond their relationship in

¹Junankar, Reflections, 8.

the story portrayed, as god and *māyā*, and Sītā as the *Śakti* of Rāma, as an *ideal bhaktā*. In the latter half of this chapter, the same relationship will be examined on the transcendent level. The concept of *love* will be examined within the relationship between Rāma and Sītā, a concept crossing the secular-transcendent distinction; subsequently, Rāma and Sītā will be examined as god and *māyā*; and finally, Sītā as the *Śakti* of Rāma will be examined.

1) Secular

a) Pre-Marital

There are at least three sequences of importance in the pre-marital relationship of Sītā and Rāma in the RCM. These are firstly, the meeting of Sītā and Rāma in the garden of Janaka; secondly, the development of their relationship at the bow-sacrifice; and thirdly, the wedding itself. An examination of the role Sītā plays in these scenes is significant, especially in terms of comparison with later scenes.

i) Meeting in Garden

Sītā and Rāma's meeting in the garden is significant for the following reason. Firstly, we observe in this meeting the basis for the entire relationship between Sītā and Rāma. Their marriage is not typically Indian; it is not arranged beforehand. Nor is it typically western, Sītā and Rāma do not 'fall in love' in a western sense. They have only seen one another; however their relationship is deeper than only a secular

knowledge of one another. It is made obvious that the relationship between Sītā and Rāma is eternal. Therefore, though it appears to be *love at first sight*, it in fact is not.

On the occasion that Rāma and Sītā first meet in the garden of Janaka, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa have come to the garden to gather flowers. Sītā arrives there, sent by her mother to worship Girijā (Pārvatī), accompanied by her girl-companions. One of Sītā's companions sees the princes and quickly tells Sītā:

". . . We must see them, for they are worth seeing." The words of this damsel highly pleased Sītā; . . . ; no one knew that Hers was an old love.²

Sītā's reacts as follows:

Recollecting Nārada's words She was filled with innocent love; and with anxious eyes She gazed all round like a startled fawn.³

Sītā distinctly comes across as a young girl in these passages. There is none of the strength and seriousness one sees later in the epic. On a secular level, Rāma as a human incarnation too is conquered by *love*:

While Sri Rāma was talking to His younger brother in this strain, His mind, which was enamoured of Sītā's beauty, was all the time drinking in the loveliness of Her countenance, like a bee sucking the nectar from a lotus.⁴

²*Bālakāṇḍa* 228.1-4, 188.

³*Ibid.*, 229, 188.

⁴*Ibid.*, 231, 189.

On a transcendent level, we know, as has been made clear by Tulasīdāsa, Rāma is in control of all that happens. His *love* for Sītā, their marriage and so on, is all part of his divine plan, yet on a secular level the admiration is mutual.⁵ Another dimension of this meeting involves an ignorance of the true nature of themselves. In the RCM Rāma says to his brother:

My heart, which is naturally pure, is agitated by the sight of Her transcendent beauty. The reason of all this is known to God alone; . . .⁶

Is Rāma not the *Supreme*? Again we recognize this conflict between Rāma (and Sītā's) reality as the *Supreme*, and their lack of knowledge of this reality. Rāma (and Sītā) are portrayed as both. At times we are not sure if Rāma knows of his own divinity. The *Supreme* has become two. Rāma has incarnated himself in order to save all mankind. Sītā is a part of this divine plan. We cannot lose sight of this. It appears

⁵The portrayal of the *pre-marital relationship* of Rāma and Sītā in the *Rāmāyan* television series is significant. In contemporary India how does one choose to portray the *Rāmāyana* story? Changes made to modern depictions of ancient texts reflect changes in Indian society, possibly predicting future trends. Valmīki does not speak of a *pre-marital* meeting between Sītā and Rāma, nor does he imply that Sītā has a choice. The breaking of the bow and the winning of Sītā does not involve Sītā at all. These dimensions of *choice* and *love*, have been added, since Valmīki, to the relationship of Rāma and Sītā. The creators of the television series have chosen to include the pre-marital meeting of Rāma and Sītā in the garden. The viewer observes Rāma and Sītā gazing at one another across the garden. Later we are told that this meeting is their first "human meeting;" Sītā is thrilled and "even Rāma" is, though "serious and calm by nature," ("Rāmāyan," vol. 3, episode 9). Later the same night, we see Rāma and Sītā thinking of one another (Ibid., vol. 2, episode 6).

⁶*Bālakāṇḍa* 230.1-4, 189.

that in the pre-marital meeting, he feels as a human would. He does not know why he feels as he does. We are aware that it is due to their eternal relationship, yet at the same time we are dealing with a secular Rāma and Sītā.

ii) Bow-Sacrifice

The fascinating story of Sītā's choice-marriage is the delightful charm surrounding the river. . . . The festivities connected with the wedding of Sri Rāma and His younger brothers represent the graceful swell in the river which is a source of delight to all. . . .⁷

The bow-sacrifice is significant for several reasons. It is important in regards to the common conviction that Sītā's marriage was a choice-marriage. It is during the bow-sacrifice that we discover the true meaning behind the phrase *choice-marriage*. Secondly, during the bow-sacrifice, we observe the developing relationship between Rāma and Sītā, one that takes place on a higher level than the secular.

One must ask if Sītā's marriage really was a choice-marriage. Whose choice was it? It certainly was not Sītā's. At least two lines of thought suggest that it was not a choice-marriage. Firstly, is the notion that Rāma and Sītā's relationship is *an old love*. They therefore, cannot help but be together. There is no choice involved, for the

⁷Ibid., 40.1-4, 58.

workings of *karma* are in action. They have been *one* for all eternity and will be *one* for all eternity.⁸

A second point of importance is that the whole marriage and relationship, on a purely secular level, is based on a contest. Excluding Sītā and Rāma's eternal relationship on a transcendent level, it is possible on a secular level that any man may have won Sītā. Sītā wishes for Rāma to win, but are her wishes any influence? On a secular level we cannot assume they were. We must assume that for women in similar situations they would not be. Do women readers of this text feel that their wishes might result in the same good fortune? Turning to the bow-sacrifice itself, we see knowledge of others of the inevitability of the relationship of Sītā and Rāma. Upon the commencement of the bow-sacrifice:

All the kings . . . felt inwardly assured that Rāma would undoubtedly break the bow; or, . . . princes, who were blinded with ignorance and pride, . . . said, ". . . Should Death himself for once come forth against us, even him we would conquer in battle for Sītā's sake." At this other princes, who were pious and sensible . . . said:⁹

⁸One must wonder how the exile of Sītā in the VR fits into this scenario. Rāma part in this is often excused, by claiming that he knew of her innocence, yet had to answer to the townspeople's suspicions first. However, her exile contradicts the *eternal love* between Rāma and Sītā. Is this the reason that later versions have omitted it, in order to enforce that *love*? Perhaps these changes were made not only to enforce *their love*, but to enforce *love* itself.

⁹*Bālakāṇḍa* 244.1-4, 198-199.

. . . be inwardly assured that Sītā is no other than the Mother of the universe. And recognizing the Lord of Raghus as the father of the universe, . . .¹⁰

Several of those present know that Rāma will win. They have attained a higher knowledge. They are aware at some level of the eternal relationship between Sītā and Rāma. Again, the secular and the transcendent are combined. There are also those present who have not reached this level and are able only to observe the secular; and are thus, ignorant. These are the ones who do not realize the inevitability of Sītā and Rāma's union. As Rāma approaches the bow he is depicted as follows:

The gracious Lord then turned His eyes towards Sītā and perceived Her in deep distress.¹¹

The Lord looked at Janaka's Daughter and thrilled all over to perceive Her singular devotion.¹²

Turning to the above question of Rāma's self-knowledge of his divinity, it appears that he is more aware of his divinity than Sītā. Though Rāma feels the sensations of a human, it seems he is more confident in his relationship with Sītā. He shows no fear in attempting to break the bow of Siva.¹³

¹⁰Ibid., 245.1-4, 199.

¹¹Ibid., 260, 208.

¹²Ibid., 260.1-4, 209.

¹³In the television series also, he only looks amused when the others fail. We have witnessed Sītā's fears and doubts, and her turnings to prayer, yet we see little of Rāma in this respect.

In the RCM, though Sītā is able to place the wreath of victory over Rāma's head she has much difficulty with the idea of touching Rāma's feet. Sītā is still depicted as a girl. We see little strength or independence in Sītā. Rāma is decisively in control. Rāma is depicted as seeing Sītā's shyness as positive, as a display of devotion to him:

Remembering the fate of the sage Gautama's wife, Ahalyā, She would not touch His feet with Her hands; the Jewel of Raghu's race inwardly smiled to perceive Her transcendent love.¹⁴

It appears almost as if Tulasīdāsa has created and formed Sītā's supposed *choice-marriage*.¹⁵ Has she really been given any power to choose or has this sequence of events been misinterpreted to lead the reader to believe this is the case? There is no doubt that the marriage of Sītā and Rāma is often referred to as a *choice-marriage*. Is Valmīki's account, perhaps more honest?

For Sītā, all has worked out idyllically. One must not forget, however, that Sītā is an unusual case. One may aspire to a marriage that will work as Sītā and Rāma's, but few possess the circumstances necessary. Firstly, Sītā and Rāma are an eternal and divine couple. It is inevitable that they should be together. Secondly, Sītā summons the help of the gods in order that Rāma should win the contest and the

¹⁴ *Bālakāṇḍa* 265, 212.

¹⁵ In the television series, the bow-sacrifice is portrayed fully. This is likely taken from the RCM.

assumption is presented that she is helped. Perhaps he would have won regardless, but nevertheless, powers of a higher level are in operation. Thirdly, this is a story. One cannot expect to live up to the *ideals* in a story, *ideals* which have been laid down by the various authors of the story.

b) Post-Marital

Examining the development of Sītā and Rāma's relationship as husband and wife is of crucial importance in terms of possible contributions to the *ideologies* which exist in India today. This relationship will be examined in terms of events and sequences relating to this relationship. Firstly we will examine their relationship while still in Ayodhyā; secondly, we will look at their forest relationship; thirdly, we will look at their relationship while apart, beginning with the *Aranya-Kāṇḍa* and; fourthly, we will examine their reunion in Ayodhyā.

i) Ayodhyā

Upon Sītā and Rāma's arrival in Ayodhyā, little is exposed of their relationship in the RCM until Rāma's banishment.¹⁶ Sītā's insistence on accompanying Rāma in his exile is one of the most crucial scenes in the relationship between Rāma and Sītā in the *Rāmāyana* story. It is a scene where Sītā, against the advice of her marital

¹⁶In the television series, we observe an interesting agreement between Sītā and Rāma regarding Daśaratha's wish to crown Rāma king; they feel it is too soon for Rāma to become king ("Rāmāyan," vol. 5, episode 13). They act as husband and wife in this agreement. In a modern context communication is emphasized.

family and new husband, insists on a life in the forest. It is also the scene where we begin to see a strong-willed Sītā, a matured Sītā.

We saw in chapter three above, the attempt of Rāma to discourage Sītā from accompanying him to the forest; she was "filled with agony," at the idea that Rāma would leave her behind. Though she realizes that his advice is in her "best interest," she insists on accompanying him, for nothing would be as horrible as separation from him.¹⁷ We observe a Sītā dealing with a dilemma as a wife. Her desire is to fulfil her duty as a wife, yet her husband on a secular level is advising her in a contrary manner to what she believes her duty as a wife is. She is in a circular conflict. She must obey her husband, yet her husband's orders conflict with what she feels is her duty towards her husband. She *chooses* to demand that Rāma take her. According to Dimmitt she does so because she is demanding to be protected and cared for, a wife's right.¹⁸ Sītā likens Rāma's potential abandonment of her to being worse than any horrors the forest may offer:

"If you leave me in Ayodhyā till the expiry of your exile, . . . I shall not survive, . . ."¹⁹

¹⁷ *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 63.1-4, 330.

¹⁸ Dimmitt, *Sītā*, 219.

¹⁹ *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 66, 332.

She pleads her case. She admits to her weakness as she insists that she can endure forest life. It is as if one is meant to believe, that Sītā believes, that only if she is with Rāma can she evoke her strength:

"As I walk along the road I shall know no fatigue gazing on your lotus feet all the while. I shall render all sorts of service to my beloved lord . . . How true it is that I am delicate of body while my lord is fit to bear the hardships of a forest life, that it behooves you to undergo penance while it is worth while for me to loll in luxuries!"²⁰

I am sure my wretched self shall live to bear the terrible pangs of separation from my lord!"²¹

Sītā firstly threatens not to survive and secondly blames herself for being able to survive without her lord. What sort of a message is this? Sītā acknowledges her strength in two ways; firstly as inspired by devotion to Rāma and secondly as negative, as surviving without him. On a secular level, Sītā directly challenges Rāma's judgement in these passages.

In assuming Rāma as the *Supreme Incarnate* we can assume that all plot twists in the epic are entwined with the workings of *karma* and Rāma's divine plan. We can also assume that Rāma is aware at a transcendent level that Sītā must and will accompany him. He is not firm in his resolve that she stay; and thus, one must ask if he is meant to be testing her faith in him. How can we understand that the all-

²⁰Ibid., 66.1-4, 332.

²¹Ibid., 67, 332.

benevolent Rāma puts his wife, his eternal consort, through such tests of devotion? This is the first painful test he makes her endure. How do northern Hindu peoples today justify the banishment and self-induced destruction of Sītā in the original *Rāmāyaṇa*? Her self-destruction is initiated by the distrust of her husband towards her. Do the Hindu people of India today accept Tulasīdāsa's deletion of these acts? Does these deletions better the person Sītā? Some feel it does, such as Bharadwaj and others feel that it does not, such as Junankar. The creator of the television series, R. Sagar, tells us that many angry letters were received due to the creators choice to portray the ending of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story in a fashion similar to Tulasīdāsa.

Rāma informing Sītā that she may not accompany him, though perhaps less dramatic than the above examples, is a similar act. Rāma knows she will come, for Rāma's plan is divine. Rāma is omniscient and omnipotent. Rāma's response to Sītā is as follows:

Convinced in His heart of hearts that if left behind against Her will She would not survive. The all-merciful Lord of the solar race, therefore, said: "Give up lamentation and accompany me to the forest. Grief is out of season to day."²²

Rāma allows her to come. However, he is portrayed (on a secular level), as believing that Sītā will not survive without him. Perhaps we are being convinced that she will not survive without him and additionally we are meant to believe that she believes this

²²Ibid., 67.1-4, 333.

too (yet, she does survive without him!). Has she passed the test? There is no credit given her for her courage, devotion and perseverance. Her certainty of her ability to endure the hardships of forest life after a lifetime of luxury is not recognized. Only recognized is her inability to live without her husband which her own words confirm, though she is horrified at the thought that she might. We see a Sītā who views her ability to live without Rāma as a negative capability. To die if separated from one's husband is reinforced as an *ideal*. Examples such as this are to be clearly identified in texts such as these and read for what they are. They are *ideals* of the past which can change. *Ideals* such as these, still strong today in India must be recognized in order to present stronger cases for change.

If Rāma is indeed meant to be testing Sītā, we must assume that we are dealing primarily on a transcendent level. Yet, of course perhaps on a secular Rāma is not meant to be aware of the motives behind his own actions. Perhaps he wishes for the accompaniment of Sītā all along, yet for the sake of social duty and duty to one's parents and in-laws (on a secular level), must attempt to persuade her to stay at home. He has to be aware that she must and will obey if absolutely commanded, yet he does not command her absolutely. Thus, he has to be aware that she possesses the strength to endure a life of hardships.²³

²³In the AR, Rāma tells Sītā in response to her questioning that he has been given "the empire of the whole of Dandaka forest," and that in order to protect it, he will go

Sītā's demand to be taken along is significant for many reasons. Some might find this a reason to blame Sītā for her fate. Others might see a Sītā in this sequence who is strong, self-willed, and for the first time making a choice and acting upon it.

ii) Forest

The true beginning of Sītā and Rāma's relationship on a secular level, takes place in the forest. Sītā and Rāma are apart from both of their families for the first time. It is rare for a Hindu husband and wife to have such time alone together at the beginning of a marriage. It is standard to live with a husband's family until producing a family of one's own. Of course one must remember that this is not a standard

there (*Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, IV.57, 38). He tells her the reasons why and says, "I shall therefore forthwith go there, do thou not stand in my way," (Ibid., IV.62, 38). Sītā, politely requests to accompany him. She barely insists upon accompanying him, yet threatens to die if separated from him. Sītā further refers to "one" in her childhood "skilled in the science of astrology," who said that she would someday live in the forest with her husband (Ibid., IV.75-76, 39). This is a dimension omitted in the RCM. In the AR Sītā's insistence is affected by this prophesy.

In the VR, after receiving Kauśalyā's benedictions, Rāma "proceeds to the apartments of Sītā in order to see her," (*Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*, Canto XXV, 336). Firstly, Rāma lengthily tells Sītā of all that has happened and tells her that she is to look after her in-laws and to "treat Bhārata and Śatrughna as her brothers or sons and never harbour malice towards them," (Ibid., Canto XXVI). Sītā begins her lengthy reply, a reply filled with bitterness and anger. She continues in this manner for some time, insisting on being taken with him (Ibid., 345-356). In the VR too, she states more than once that she cannot and will not live if separated from him (Ibid., Canto XXIX.5, XXIX.7 and XXIX.21, 350). She also speaks of the prediction of a hermitess when she was a child (Ibid., vol. 1, Canto XXIX.13-14, 351). In the RCM she demands to be taken not because she believes it is ordained, but solely because she believes it is her duty. Her insistence in the VR is longer than either the AR or the RCM.

marriage. The following quotation provides a general description of the life they lead in the forest:

In Śrī Rāma's company Sītā lived a happy life, forgetting Her home (Ayodhyā), family and home. . . . Can the charm of sensuous enjoyments ever enchant Her whose very look confers the sovereignty of a sphere.²⁴

Fixing their thoughts on Sri Rāma, His devotees spurn the pleasures of sense as worth no more than a piece of straw. It is no wonder, then, in the case of Sītā, Śrī Rāma's beloved Consort and the Mother of the universe.²⁵

At least two significant lines of thought arise in the above passage. Firstly, Ayodhyā as Sītā's home is stressed. This enforces the *ideal* that when a woman marries, her husband's family becomes her own in thought, word and deed. It is evident that Sītā has mastered this duty in word and deed, but the portrayal of her shows that this is not always the case in thought. Why is a woman's family no longer considered her own after marriage?

The latter passage emphasizes Sītā's role as a devotee. She is the consort and a devotee of Rāma first, and Mother of the Universe second; the two are intimately intertwined. She has the necessary strength to endure the hardships of the forest, yet we are lead to conclude that her strength is enhanced through union with Rāma. As we saw above, Sītā too, is depicted as realizing that she has the strength necessary to live,

²⁴ *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 139.1-4, 382.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 140, 382.

but if apart from Rāma, she sees this strength as negative. She values her strength only as it relates to Rāma. Yet, the reader can value the strength of Sītā as an independent strength. We see Rāma and Sītā still in Chitrakūṭa, further depicted as follows:

The Lord of Raghus would do and say only that which would please Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa. He would narrate old legends and stories, . . . The gracious Lord became sad when He recalled His father and mother, His family and brothers . . . He recovered Himself when He realized that the time was unpropitious. Perceiving this, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa felt distressed even as the shadow of a man behaves just like him.²⁶

The Lord watched over Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa . . . ; while Lakṣmaṇa in his turn waited upon Sītā and Śrī Rāma.²⁷

There are several significant themes in the above passages. Firstly, it appears that Rāma is educating Sītā as he narrates old legends and stories. Which old stories and legends is he telling her? Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, man and woman, are told the same stories. One might suggest that this is relevant to Tulasīdāsa's determination to write for the general population. Did the general population include women?

Secondly, on a transcendent level, one sees Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa as god, *māyā* and *jīva* in the above passage. Rāma watches over Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa watches over Rāma and Sītā. God protects the personal soul and *māyā*, and secondly, the personal soul protects god and *māyā*. *Jīva* and god belong together as does god and *māyā*. To the *jīva*, *māyā* is merely an obstacle in reaching god.

²⁶Ibid., 140.1-4, 382-383.

²⁷Ibid., 141.1-4, 383.

Furthermore, *māyā* cannot operate without god; thus, *jīva* and god are protected as are god and *māyā*.

Thirdly, one sees that Rāma grieves for his own family; however, we know that it is not appropriate for Sītā to grieve for her own natal family. It appears that Sītā's attachment to Rāma's family is rendered as being genuine, but it certainly cannot be as deep as Rāma's is. How can it be after such a short time? Has Sītā as a woman been taught not to feel this grief of separation from her family. Sītā has been raised by women who have gone through the same separations, as have most Indian women. Would it not be preferable to teach daughters to avoid this grief? One might further suggest that it is probable that women do not let themselves form attachments as such to daughters and; therefore, become emotionally stronger than men due to the separations they will inevitably face.

Women are criticized for being emotional; and thus weak creatures, yet at the same time are taught and expected to detach themselves from their own families and to effortlessly accept another. Rather than learning emotion, women are taught to hide emotion. In the television series the men are often depicted as weeping and crying, but rarely are the women. They are taught to live their lives for the sake of their husbands. How much can a woman in this context feel? In the context of a *normal* situation, how can Sītā genuinely grieve for Rāma's family or even her own, in the context of the

values involved in a woman's upbringing. This is not her family, attachments like these do no happen at once.

iii) *Aranya-Kāṇḍa*

In the *Aranya-Kāṇḍa*, the circumstances are such to begin the separation of Sītā and Rāma and the resulting battle between the armies of Rāvaṇa and Rāma. The entrance of Śūrpaṅkhā, Rāvaṇa's sister in the *Aranya-Kāṇḍa*, begins the triangular conflict pivoting around Sītā. Sītā is the most inactive in this conflict, yet cannot be considered passive. In this section, involving the character Rāvaṇa, our concern is not the relationship between Rāvaṇa and Sītā, which will be detailed in *chapter six*, but how the involvement of Rāvaṇa (and Sītā's separation from Rāma) affects the relationship of Sītā and Rāma. It is significant to notice how Sītā changes when in the custody of Rāvaṇa, separated from Rāma. Several major episodes occur in this section, including Śūrpaṅkhā's entrance, the fire ritual and the kidnapping of Sītā.

Śūrpaṅkhā, after rejections from both Lakṣmaṇa and Rāma, attempts to frighten Sītā. Following a cutting remark made by Lakṣmaṇa, "He alone will wed you, who deliberately casts all shame to the winds," Śūrpaṅkhā reveals her demoniac form.²⁸ Rāma noticing that Sītā is terrified, signs to Lakṣmaṇa who subsequently

²⁸ *Aranya-Kāṇḍa* 16.1-10, 536.

strikes of her nose and ears, "thereby inviting Rāvaṇa through her to a contest as it were."²⁹

The invitation for battle begins with Rāma's *concern* for Sītā. Śūrpanakhā subsequently complains to Khara and Dūṣaṇa; thus, setting the ground for the first battle, a battle in which the latter are killed at the hands of Rāma. It is this justification for war that might be questioned. Tulasīdāsa clearly states that the action of Lakṣmaṇa towards Śūrpanakhā and inspired by Rāma invites Rāvaṇa to a contest "as it were." We know that Rāma's incarnation on earth is for a purpose, the primary, secular purpose being to kill the demons rampaging the earth, the purpose around which the *Rāmāyaṇa* story revolves.

However, there are of course other levels involved in Rāma's mission. Rāma's purpose as a man is to re-establish *dharma* on earth and to show all people the true path. There is also a political level involved, a battle between those of Āryan descent and those of Śrī Laṅka, depicted as demons. However, as to the accuracy and historicity of this battle, we cannot be certain. Where does Rāma's relationship with Sītā fit into all of this? As we see, it is Sītā who is used as an excuse to invoke battle, and later it is Sītā again who is utilised as the cause of battle. A significant episode

²⁹Ibid., 17, 536.

occurs when a member of the demon army says, "kill them and carry off the woman."³⁰

Rāma subsequently commands Lakṣmaṇa as follows:

"Take Janaka's Daughter to some mountain-cave; a terrible array of demons has come. . . ."³¹

Our concern here is the significance of Rāma's actions concerning Sītā. Sītā's supposed *fear* was in fact the reason for the battle in the first place. When the battle is to take place, again in a protective spirit, Rāma hides Sītā.

Following the loss of the demons in battle against Rāma, Śūrpaṅkhā directly approaches her brother, Rāvaṇa. Upon his inquiries, she replies that it was Lakṣmaṇa who chopped off her ears and nose, but also informs him of Rāma and his beautiful consort, "the very embodiment of loveliness."³² Perhaps the most crucial addition to the original *Rāmāyana* story included in the RCM is the following scene in which Rāma requests Sītā to abide in fire:

"Listen my darling, who have been staunch in the holy vow of fidelity to me and are so virtuous in conduct: I am going to act a lovely human part. Abide in fire until I have completed the destruction of the demons." No sooner had Śrī Rāma told Her everything in detail than She impressed the image of the Lord's feet on Her heart and entered into the fire, leaving with Him only a shadow of Hers, though precisely of the same

³⁰Ibid., 17.1-7, 537.

³¹Ibid., 17.1-7, 537.

³²Ibid., 21 A-B.1-6, 542.

appearance and the same amiable and gentle disposition. Lakṣmaṇa too did not know the secret of what the Lord had done behind the curtain.³³

A central tenant of the VR involves Sītā's stay in the house of another man. Her purity is in question for her physical body has remained in the house of the *man* Rāvaṇa for such a long period. Her devotion to her husband was under scrutiny. The tests regarding her purity all revolve around this. In the RCM and the AR all doubt has been removed regarding Sītā's behaviour. One might suggest that the relationship between Sītā and Rāma is improved. She cannot have been unfaithful, for in truth, she was never physically in the presence of Rāvaṇa. The above passage is all that is mentioned of the incident, yet it is crucial to the portrayal and treatment of women as represented in the character of Sītā. This action takes place on another level within the relationship between Rāma and Sītā, for we witness Rāma's agony on a secular level, when separated from Sītā. If he in fact knew as a human, that Sītā was not *safe*, he would not be depicted in such agony on a secular level. One does see in the AR, Rāma mentioning that he will act sad for the benefit of his brother, who knows nothing of the above act.³⁴ One do not see anything of this kind in the RCM and of course there is no such scene in the VR.

³³Ibid., 23.1-4, 544.

³⁴Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Chapter VIII.3, 79.

The events of the kidnapping are not relevant in a discussion of Rāma and Sītā, yet as Rāvaṇa takes Sītā away one sees the following:³⁵

Perceiving some monkeys perched on a hill She dropped some cloth uttering Sri Hari's name.³⁶

This is an intelligent act on Sītā's part. Following the kidnapping, Rāma speaks to Lakṣmaṇa:

"Alas? You have left Janaka's daughter alone and come here against my instructions. Hosts of demons are roaming about in the forest; I, therefore, suspect Sītā is not at the hermitage."³⁷

Lakṣmaṇa insists that it is not his fault.^{38 39} Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa return to the hermitage. When Rāma observes Sītā's absence he is depicted as follows:

He felt as perturbed and afflicted as any common man. "Alas! Sītā, Janaka's daughter, the very mine of virtues, of such flawless beauty, character, austerity and devotion!"⁴⁰

³⁵In both the VR and the AR, Sītā throws her jewels to monkeys (Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa, vol. 2, Canto LIV.1-3, 797; Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Chapter VII.62-64, 78). Sītā's action is clever and relevant to Rāma's later search.

³⁶*Aranya-Kāṇḍa* 28.1-13, 549.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 29 B.1-9, 550.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 29 B.1-9, 550.

³⁹In the VR, Rāma is depicted as being angry with Lakṣmaṇa, more so than in Tulasīdāsa's version or in the AR. His lamentation in the VR is long and intense; as in the RCM he questions the birds and trees (Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa, vol. 2, Canto LVII, 809 to Canto LXIII, 839).

⁴⁰*Aranya-Kāṇḍa* 29 B.1-9, 550.

Rāma's emotions in this context are distinctly human, that of a man grieving for his wife, yet their separation also rises above the secular level. Sītā as the controller of nature, of the phenomenal world, is absent. Rāma is without his wife, his consort, his *Śakti* and his *māyā*. Rāma questions the trees and the animals as to the whereabouts of Sītā:

Listen, Janaka's daughter: in your absence today they are all glad as if they have got a kingdom. How can you bear such rivalry? Why do you not reveal yourself quickly, my darling?" In this way the Lord searched and lamented like an uxorious husband sore smitten with pangs of separation. Śrī Rāma, . . . , behaved like a mortal.⁴¹

Nature is victorious, for her greatest competition is nowhere to be seen. The translator includes the following notation in reference to this search:

The idea here is that though models of earthly women are concerned, none of these analogues stood comparison with Sītā's limbs and hence they dared not face the latter out of shame. Now that Sītā was no more to be seen they all regained their supremacy and exulted over their good fortune.⁴²

Significant developments take place at this point both within Sītā and Rāma's relationship and within the character development of Sītā alone. Again a weaving of transcendent and secular levels is apparent, but it is interesting that in this circumstance it is Rāma who is portrayed as merely mortal and Sītā who is portrayed as the divine, the *Mother of the Universe*. It is customary to observe Sītā portrayed as unable and

⁴¹Ibid., 29 B.1-9, 551.

⁴²Ibid., 29 B.1-9, 551.

unwilling to be without her husband. In this case, it is Rāma who is lost without Sītā. He laments, "Like one smitten with pangs of separation."⁴³ If we look to the *Bālakāṇḍa* in which Siva speaks to Pārvatī on the condition of Rāma when he loses Sītā, we see as follows, the depiction of Rāma apart from Sītā:

Infinite was his sorrow due to the loss of his wife; and flying into a rage he slew Rāvāna in battle.⁴⁴

We witness, here a human Rāma, an angry Rāma whose wife has been abducted by another man, a Rāma perhaps unaware of his own divine purpose. Again one observes Rāma's grief:

Having killed the antelope Sri Hari returned with His brother (Lakṣmaṇa); and His eyes were filled with tears when He saw the empty hermitage. The Lord of Raghus felt distressed at the loss like a mortal man, and the two brothers roamed about in the woods in search of Her. He who knows neither union nor separation showed unmistakable signs of grief born of separation.⁴⁵

It is stated in this passage that Rāma roams "like" a mortal man. This does not say that he is a mortal man, but in that in this instance he is "like" a mortal man. Possibly Tulasīdāsa, in order to help the common person understand, felt that this was the best method of portraying the divine couple. The common person might be better able to relate to a human facet within the divine.

⁴³Ibid., 36.1-5, 558.

⁴⁴*Bālakāṇḍa* 45.1-4, 62.

⁴⁵Ibid., 48 A-B.1-4, 64.

When Rāma encounters the King of Vultures, Jatayu, he is told upon questioning, that Sītā was taken by the ten-headed Rāvaṇa. Furthermore, he says, as she was carried away she screamed:

I have survived, my lord, only to behold You; my life now is about depart, O fountain of mercy."⁴⁶

Sītā is depicted as feeling, or perhaps hoping, that due to separation from her Lord, she will die. As we find out, she does not die. She is stronger than she herself thinks, or stronger than one is meant to think she is upon one's first impression. However, she is depicted as seeing this strength as a downfall. Do others see this strength as a downfall? What about Rāma? In Tulasīdāsa, we know that Rāma knows she will survive. In Valmīki, however, one might ask if her final testing is related to a suspicion of her survival apart from Rāma. Is this how the townspeople feel? Does she wish to die because that would be the ultimate in devotion to Rāma or does she feel she is too weak to survive without him? It is in cases like this where the interpreter must make a conscious decision as how to interpret. Women and men must highlight that interpretation which portrays the female character as strong. Sītā should not be highlighted as wishing to die, but rather highlighted for her strength in living. Her shame, not her survival should be recognized as a downfall.

⁴⁶ *Aranya-Kāṇḍa* 30.1-5, 552.

Rāma's subsequent encounter in his search for Sītā is with the low-caste, yet pious woman, Śabarī. Śabarī sends Rāma to Sugrīva, who she says will tell him everything. Śabarī casts her body into the "fire of Yoga" and we are told that, Rāma conferred "final beatitude" on her even though she was a low-caste woman.^{47 48} As Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa continue through the forest, Rāma remarks to Lakṣmaṇa:

"Lakṣmaṇa, mark the beauty of the forest; . . . The elephants would take their mates along with them as if to teach me a lesson (that a man should never leave his wife alone) . . . See, brother, how pleasant the spring is; yet to me, bereft of my beloved, it is frightful."⁴⁹

The above passage contains several, underlying themes. Rāma is depicted as a man. One might suggest that without Sītā he has in a sense become a man. Perhaps he can only be absolutely divine or completely whole with Sītā. He feels fault at having left Sītā alone. In addition he feels a helplessness regarding women. This helplessness is possibly related to Tulasīdāsa's own relationships with women, relationships which contradicted what he had been taught regarding the proper behaviours of women. Possibly, without Sītā, Rāma even feels fear. Is this how Tulasīdāsa felt without Ratnāvalī? Did his separation from her enhance his feelings of mortality? Perhaps this is a reason for Tulasīdāsa's attraction to the *Rāmāyaṇa* story. He could identify with

⁴⁷Ibid., 36, 557.

⁴⁸In both the AR and the VR, Śabarī enters the fire, committing Satī (Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Chapter X.41, 86; Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa, Canto LXXIV.32-35, 862).

⁴⁹*Aranya-Kāṇḍa* 36.1-5, 558.

Rāma's plight and; thus, set out to teach the common man. Without Sītā even the most pleasant is frightening as we see in the above passage. Is this due to Sītā's dominance and control over nature? In the absence of Sītā, nature dominates. The possibilities are mysterious and somewhat frightening. This fear is possibly not of nature, but of the control of *vidhyā* by *avidhyā*.

iv) *Kiṣkindhā-Kāṇḍa*

This section contains little information on the relationship between Sītā and Rāma, and will be only briefly examined. There is a different feeling in this section; Rāma has become pessimistic:

"The clouds are fast gathering in the sky and making a terrible noise. Bereft as I am of my darling (Sītā), my heart trembles to see all this."⁵⁰

We have received no news about Sītā. If only once I could anyhow come to know of her whereabouts I would recover her out of the hands of Death himself. Wherever she may be, if only she is still alive I would make an effort to rescue her, dear brother. Sugrīva too has forgotten me . . . I will shoot the fool tomorrow with the same arrow which I used in killing Vālī."⁵¹

We see an irate and frustrated Rāma.⁵² Is Rāma's loss of Sītā directly related to his loss of self-control? Are the two the same thing? Can one justify blaming Sītā for this?

⁵⁰ *Kiṣkindhā-Kāṇḍa* 13.1-4, 579.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 17.1-4, 582-583.

⁵² We see the same anger on the television series, an anger we have not seen before this scene ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 14, episode 40).

Some might suggest that she can be blamed; Sītā, of course fell into Rāvaṇa's trap. However, we also know, on a devotional level, that Sītā's fall into Rāvaṇa's trap was an aspect of Rāma's plan, and on a secular level she did what she thought was proper for an Āryan woman.

Rāma's anger and frustration are easily invoked due to the loss of Sītā; however, his anger is also due to the frustration of witnessing the frivolities of Sugrīva, a supposed devotee, a being who is losing his way, further delaying the search for Sītā and the ultimate destruction of Rāvaṇa.⁵³ In the RCM Rāma instructs Lakṣmaṇa to merely frighten Sugrīva and bring him to him. Soon, Sugrīva arrives; he has come to his senses. Sugrīva subsequently summons Angada, Nala and Hanumān in addition to thousands of monkeys, in order to commence the search for Sītā. Rāma speaks privately to Hanumān, whom he knows will be the one to find Sītā:

"Comfort Sītā in various ways and return quickly after telling Her of my might and the agony of my heart due to separation from Her."⁵⁴

The monkeys begin their search for Sītā on behalf of Rāma. They reach a garden and a lake with a beautiful temple and a woman who is referred to as *austerity*

⁵³In the VR, Rāma is comforted by Lakṣmaṇa when he is grieving for Sītā (Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa, Canto XXVII.33-40). Rāma's agony without Sītā is depicted over and over again, in great detail by Valmīki, less so then in the RCM or the AR.

⁵⁴*Kiṣkindhā-Kāṇḍa* 22.1-7, 586-587.

incarnate.⁵⁵ Who is this woman? Can she be a manifestation of Sītā? One knows that Sītā is within the fire and that her physical presence with Rāvaṇa is only a manifestation. Can she not appear in other manifestations? Is the austere woman guiding the monkeys towards Sītā and Rāvaṇa actually a manifestation of Sītā? We know that Rāma's primary purpose on earth is to rid the world of demons. His search for Sītā leads him towards the demons. Perhaps Sītā herself in her role as Rāma's *Śakti* or power is guiding him towards herself and Rāvaṇa. The RCM tells us that she tells them her story from beginning to end, but we are not told this story, nor given any reference to it. She instructs the monkeys to fill themselves on fruits and tells them:

Close your eyes and you will find yourself outside the cavern. You shall find Sītā; you need not feel remorse."⁵⁶

The search party of monkeys find themselves on the sea-shore, where it is decided that Hanumān will cross the ocean to Śrī Laṅka. One must wonder why Rāma does not go himself. Why is it that Hanumān is the one to find her? When Angada and Jāmbavān are deciding who should jump across the ocean to Laṅka it is the following words which motivate Hanumān to action, "It is for the service of Śrī Rāma that you have come down upon earth."⁵⁷ Jāmbavān tells him:

⁵⁵Ibid., 24, 587.

⁵⁶Ibid., 24.1-4, 588.

⁵⁷Ibid., 29.1-6, 593.

"All that you have to do, my son is to go and see Sītā and come back with Her tidings. Then the lotus-eyed Śrī Rāma will recover Her by the strength of His arm taking with Him a host of monkeys for mere sport."⁵⁸

"Taking with Him an army of monkeys Śrī Rāma will exterminate the demons and bring back Sītā: . . ."⁵⁹

v) *Sundara* and *Lankā-Kāṇḍas* (Fire Ritual)

We begin the *Sundara-Kāṇḍa* and Hanumān's meeting with Sītā. Two relevant incidents occur in this section; firstly, Hanumān's meeting with Sītā, in which the messages between Sītā and Rāma are of importance;⁶⁰ and secondly, the fire ritual, in which Sītā is returned to Rāma.

It is Hanumān who allows us to witness Sītā's continued devotion to Rāma.

Upon Hanumān's first glimpse of Sītā, in the RCM he sees her depicted as follows:

She wore a single braid* . . . and repeated to Herself the list of Sri Rāma's excellences.

*It is customary with Indian women to wear a single braid of hair when separated from their husband.⁶¹

We witness Sītā's devotion to Rāma while they are separated:

⁵⁸Ibid., 29.1-6, 593.

⁵⁹Ibid., 30, 593.

⁶⁰This meeting between Hanumān and Sītā will detailed in Chapter 6.

⁶¹*Sundara-Kāṇḍa* 7.1-4, 602.

She had Her eyes fixed on Her own feet, while Her mind was absorbed in the thought of Śrī Rāma's lotus feet.⁶²

Sītā confides in Hanumān as she begins to trust him; she confesses her doubt as to Rāma's feelings for her as follows:

Wherefore has the tender-hearted and compassionate Lord of the Raghus become so hard-hearted? Does the Chief of the Raghus ever remember me, - . . . , Hanumān addressed Her . . . Śrī Rāma loves You twice as much as You love Him.⁶³

Hanumān proceeds to relay Rāma's message to Sītā, in which Rāma speaks of the love he feels for her and the anguish of separation from her. In answer to Sītā's wondering as to why Rāma has not come himself, Hanumān says to Sītā:

"Had the Hero of Raghu's line any news about You, the Lord of the Raghus would not have tarried."⁶⁴

Is this a convincing answer? In the television series, Sītā asks why she has been forgotten, if it is because of her behaviour towards Lakṣmaṇa; she says she will beg Lakṣmaṇa's forgiveness.⁶⁵ Hanumān tells her Rāma will come when he knows where she is, and proceeds to relay Rāma's message and receive Sītā's.⁶⁶ Has Sītā been

⁶²Ibid., 7.1-4, 602.

⁶³Ibid., 13.1-5, 607.

⁶⁴Ibid., 15.1-5, 608.

⁶⁵"Rāmāyaṇa," vol. 15, episodes 44-45.

⁶⁶In the AR, Hanumān witnesses Sītā's faith in Rāma. Sītā tells Rāvaṇa, that after Rāma defeats him, he will come for her (Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Chapter II.32-37, 118).

set up by Rāma? One knows that in the RCM, the AR and in the television series, Sītā is not really Sītā; however, in the VR she is. We know that Sītā is the justification of the war, though she is really not of the greatest importance. Are we meant to believe that Rāma purposefully used her as a part of his strategy to defeat Rāvāna? If this is the case, Sītā is put through much suffering as a means to an end. When Hanumān returns to Rāma, Rāma enquires as to Sītā's well-being as follows:

"Tell me, dear Hanumān, how does Janaka's daughter pass her days and sustain her life?"⁶⁷

Hanumān replies:

"Your Name keeps watch night and day, while Her continued thought of You acts as a pair of closed doors. She has Her eyes fastened on Her own feet; Her life thus finds no outlet whereby to escape."⁶⁸

Hanumān relays Sītā's message to Rāma as follows:

I am devoted to Your feet in thought, word and deed; yet for what offence, my lord, have You forsaken me? I do admit one fault of mine, that my life did not depart the moment I was separated from You. That, however, my lord, is the fault of my eyes, which forcibly prevent my life from escaping. The agony of separation from You is like fire, my sighs fan it as a gust of wind and in between stands my body like a heap of cotton, which would have been consumed in an instant. But my eyes, in their own interest (i.e., for being enabled to feast themselves on Your

However, immediately after, we see a depressed Sītā with little hope. She feels that the demon women will eat her. She is "determined to die, not knowing any other means of death," (Ibid., Chapter II.57-58, 119).

⁶⁷ *Sundara-Kāṇḍa* 29.1-4, 618.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 30, 618.

beauty) rain a flood of tears; that is why the body fails to catch the fire of desolation.⁶⁹

"Each single moment, O fountain of mercy, passes like an age to Her. Therefore, march quickly, my lord, and . . . , recover Her."⁷⁰

Rāma replies:

"Do you think anyone who depends on me in thought, word and deed can ever dream of adversity ?"⁷¹

Thus, the love between Rāma and Sītā grows stronger with separation.⁷² With separation the love on both sides has increased rather than decreased, and it appears to be reciprocal. The devotion to one another is intense. Can this be interpreted on a

⁶⁹Ibid., 30.1-5, 618-619.

⁷⁰Ibid., 31, 619.

⁷¹Ibid., 31.1-4, 619.

⁷²The depiction of this scene on the television series shows Rāma's anguish more blatantly ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 16, episode 47). Rāma is shocked that Hanumān found Sītā, "You saw Sītā?" "You truly saw her?" "Is she well?" He continues, "I wish my eyes had seen her face through yours." Rāma wishes to know everything and when told of her condition, says, "I will not delay, nothing can hold me back. Take heart Sītā . . . I'm coming." He gives him the hair ornament and Rāma takes it crying, he remembers putting it on her head at their wedding. Hanumān tells the story Sītā told him, as proof that he saw Sītā, but Rāma already believes him.

In the AR, Rāma is grateful to hear of Sītā, but little is told of his emotions (Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Chapter V.60-62, 130). In the VR, Hanumān is very descriptive in his depiction of the condition of Sītā (Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa, vol. 2, Canto LXVI.1-28, 1360-1362). Further, we see that Rāma is very upset upon learning of Sītā's condition (Ibid., vol. 2, Canto LXVI.1-15, 1362-1364). He further grieves upon reaching the ocean (Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Chapter I.49, 133).

secular level? Perhaps the relationship between Rāma and Sītā is exactly the same on a secular level as on a transcendent one, yet is perceived differently by the secular minded reader. We must remember that it was for the common person that Tulasīdāsa wrote. Though the devotion is reciprocal, it appears that it is more intense on behalf of Sītā. Not only is she willing to die for her lord, but wishes to. She is ashamed to have remained alive while separated from her lord. Though Sītā has never been a *norm* for Indian woman, and none have *had to* behave as she is depicted, there is evidence that there are *ideals* which (northern) Indian, Hindu women have been taught to attain. This *ideal* is emphasized in the RCM in the character of Sītā.

What is crucial here is that Sītā is surviving when she has been portrayed as believing that she would not. She is stronger than she, indeed, thought she was. Rather than losing strength, the exact opposite is in fact occurring. She is becoming stronger. Perhaps her increased strength on a religious level may be interpreted as strength through devotion to Rāma, but on a secular level, what emerges, is that separation from her consort has forced her to survive on her own.^{73 74}

⁷³Later in the television series, Rāma sends a message to Rāvaṇa through spies sent by Rāvaṇa and caught in Rāma's camp. He says, "Seeing size and formation does not ensure victory, only *dharma* and ethics. You abducted Sītā confident of your power. Show us that power. I Ram am not fighting only for my wife . . . To preserve the honour of women of the entire world . . . I'm engaged in a war of *dharma*," ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 18, episode 54). He later, when sending Angada to give Rāvaṇa one last chance, "Our goal is to have Sītā returned with honour to avoid all bloodshed," (Ibid., vol. 19, episode 56). Again we see, Sītā as the justification, but not the true

We will move at this point to those crucial scenes in the text following the recovery of Sītā (*Lankā-Kāṇḍa*). The following scenes are portrayed quite differently in different versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. We will look at several examples, remembering that the later depiction of Tulasīdāsa is of central concern.

Following the battle we see Rāma order Hanumān, Angada and Vibhiṣāna to escort Sītā to him. The demonesses washed Her body and decked her with "ornaments of every description and then brought a beautiful palanquin duly equipped." Upon her arrival, Rāma says the following:

"Follow my advice, Vibhiṣāna and bring Sītā on foot." "Let the monkeys gaze on Her as they would on their own mother," . . .⁷⁵

The following is an addition to the text:

Sītā (it will be remembered) had been previously lodged in fire (*vide Araṇyakāṇḍa* XXIII. 1-2); Śrī Rāma (the inner Witness of all) now sought to bring Her back to light.⁷⁶

purpose, of the war.

⁷⁴Another significant scene occurs within this section in the television series. Upon the near death of Lakṣmaṇa, Rāma says, "I will die if Lakṣmaṇa does," and, "(I) suffered parting for 14 years . . . I waged war to recover my wife and for that, I sacrificed your husband, Urmilā," ("*Rāmāyaṇa*," vol. 23, episode 67). Almost as proof that Sītā is really not the reason for this war, Rāma regrets his actions to recover her in the event that his brother should die. Rāma's love for Lakṣmaṇa is comparable to Sītā's for Rāma.

⁷⁵*Lankā-Kāṇḍa* 107.1-7, 735.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 107.1-7, 735.

It was for this reason that the All-merciful addressed some reproachful words to Her. . . .⁷⁷

Tulasīdāsa has omitted the words of Rāma, but not the idea of them. Anyone who is familiar with the Valmīki version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* will be acquainted with these words. The scene continues:

Sītā, however, bowed to the Lord's command - pure as She was in thought, word and deed - and said, "Lakṣmaṇa, help me as a priest in the performance of this sacred rite and quickly kindle me a fire". . . . Videha's Daughter rejoiced at heart to perceive the blazing fire and did not flinch at all. "If in thought, word and deed I have never set my heart on anyone other than the Hero of Raghu's line, may this fire, which knows the working of all minds, become cool like sandal-paste to me."⁷⁸

Further in the RCM:

With Her thoughts fixed on the Lord, the Princess of Mithila entered the flames as though they were cool like sandal-paste, crying "Glory to the Lord of Kosala, . . . Both Her shadow-form as well as the social stigma (occasioned by Her forced residence at Rāvaṇa's) were consumed in the blazing fire; but no one could know the secret of the Lord's doings."⁷⁹

What is the significance of this consummation of the *social stigma*? Is the shame felt by Rāma's family eliminated in this act? Tulasīdāsa recognizes the predicament and eliminates it through this simple act. It is Sītā's shadow-form which is the cause of this *social stigma*; therefore, the real Sītā is not the cause. Did the real Sītā have control

⁷⁷Ibid., 108, 735.

⁷⁸Ibid., 108.1-4, 735.

⁷⁹Ibid., 108.1-2, 736.

over this shadow-form or was this a manifestation solely of Rāma? One might suggest that this illusionary Sītā in Lañka was really an illusionary Rāma. One might further ask why no-one was allowed knowledge of Rāma's act. Would knowledge of this action not erase all doubt? One might suggest that the common people are perceived as incapable of grasping a higher concept such as this. The scene continues as follows:

Fire assumed a bodily form and, taking by the hand the real Śrī (Sītā), celebrated alike in the Vedas and the world, escorted and presented Her to Śrī Rāma . . .⁸⁰

The beauty of Lord reunited with Janaka's Daughter was beyond all measure and bound.⁸¹

It is significant at this point to include other versions of these scenes for comparative purposes. These scenes are controversial in India today. Looking at the AR and the VR are important to show what Tulasīdāsa changed and omitted. Looking at the television series is important to look at how these scenes have been depicted in modern day India. In the *Rāmāyaṇ* television series, it is some time after the battle before anything is done about Sītā.⁸² It is Lakṣmaṇa who reminds Rāma that he has not "even thought of our purpose." One must remember that Lakṣmaṇa

⁸⁰Ibid., 108.1-2, 736.

⁸¹Ibid., 109 A-B, 736.

⁸²All scenes in this section from the television series are taken from, "Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 26, episode 76.

knows nothing of the initial fire ritual. Rāma orders Hanumān to tell Sītā the news, and Sītā in response asks Hanumān why Rāma delays. Hanumān returns to Rāma with news of Sītā's condition and asks why Rāma delays. Rāma says there will be no further delay and sends Hanumān and Angada to escort her, and Vibhiṣāna to attend to her.

Rāma tells Lakṣmaṇa that he is going to have to put Sītā through fire before she can come back to him. Lakṣmaṇa becomes quite angry, for as in the RCM and the AR, he is not aware that Sītā is not the real Sītā. The difference between the television series and the RCM is that we the viewers also are unaware. Rāma replies to Lakṣmaṇa's anger as follows:

How could you think I am putting Sītā to test!? Or that I doubt her! Sītā has not left my heart for even a moment . . . And I see her with my inner eye every moment. Can anyone else testify her chastity to me!? Lakshman, if any man cannot in his heart trust a woman . . . no proof given by anyone else can create this trust. And . . . Are Ram and Sītā two separate beings . . . ! They're one. If I have to subject Sītā to test, it means . . . I do not trust myself! . . . I must be put on trial. There's no question of trial or doubt in what I have said. You do not know. If Rāvaṇ had really laid hands on Sītā the radiant power of her virtue'd have burnt them.

Lakṣmaṇa replies:

If it's not a test, why must she pass through fire . . . What's all this?!

Rāma replies:

I must reclaim my real Sītā from the Fire God. And so . . . this illusion has to be staged.

Lakṣmaṇa replies:

Stage this illusion! Reclaim Sītā from the Fire God! What illusion is this? What mystery is this? Tell me!

Rāma finally tells Lakṣmaṇa the truth, that he had Sītā enter fire with the fire god Agni. We the viewers turn back and observe Sītā's entrance into the fire. Rāma says to Sītā:

Sītā, now the time has come for us to play momentous roles as man and woman. This needs your total participation. To this end, until I destroy the demons the Fire God will keep you safe.

Sītā replies:

As you command, my lord. O God of Fire, I seek your protection. Please bestow your help on me.

Rāma concludes by telling Lakṣmaṇa the following:

And thus, Sītā left, to be kept safe by the Fire God and to help us we have Sītā's image, her shadow form.

The fire ritual in the television series is similar to that found in the RCM. Sītā is brought to Rāma and though we are told of his words of reproach in song, we do not hear them. Sītā requests the fire to be built by Lakṣmaṇa and proceeds to pass through it. At the end of this episode, we see the director of the series, R. Sagar, comment on this scene. He remarks that the scene in which Sītā enters the fire is taken from the Tulasīdāsa's RCM. There is no banishment of Sītā or final self-destruction in the television series. He continues:

"We have been faithful to this version . . . angry letters . . . we must not forget our present social condition . . . perhaps people assume that . . . threats from Doordarshan and government . . . not true . . . must also inform viewers Tulasīdāsa has not written of Sulochana's self immolation . . . neither have Valmīki or the Tamil Sage Kambar . . . written it . . . something added on later . . . we have shown only what sage poets have written," "Our aim is a story based on research."⁸³

One must wonder if the disclosure of the shadow-Sītā at the end of the series was done in such a manner in of fear of losing viewers early on in the series. One might suggest that the creators of the series wished that the viewers would not have knowledge of the Rāma's actions, as was true for the characters in the epic; thus, involving the viewer in the story.

In the VR, Sītā ultimately perishes in attempting to prove her innocence. There is no shadow-Sītā, thus her innocence cannot be absolutely proven. In the AR, Hanumān is sent to inform Sītā of the defeat of Rāvaṇa.⁸⁴ There is mention of an illusionary Sītā. We also are told of Rāma's reproachful words, but again, do not hear them in detail. Sītā asks Lakṣmaṇa to light the fire, "not tolerating those words uttered by Rāma."⁸⁵ In the AR it is Sītā's intolerance towards Rāma, that drives her to ask Lakṣmaṇa to light the fire which she will pass through. The AR also contains a chapter

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Chapter XII.51-52, 171.

⁸⁵Ibid., Chapter XII.76, 172.

entitled *Sītā's ordeal*. In this chapter, the gods appear to Rāma.⁸⁶ The god of fire gives Sītā back to Rāma and Rāma takes her in his lap.⁸⁷ As in the RCM, the god of fire presents Sītā to Rāma. The editor of the AR comments in note form on the Valmīki version of this scene. Due to the fact that the English translation I am using of the VR does not extend to this sequence, Nath's description is used:

NOTE. - The Adhyātma according to its theory of the illusive Sītā being abducted by Rāvaṇa makes the latter enter the fire, and the real Sītā who has already entered it come out. This theory does not find a place in the Valmīki. There it is only one Sītā who enters the fire and comes out unscathed.

The scene as described by that ancient poet is very pathetic.

By the command of Rāma Sītā is being brought in state by Vibhishāna when the monkeys out of curiosity rush to see her. . . . Rāma angrily tells Vibhishāna to let every one see Sītā and orders her to walk up to him. . . . he tells her: - "All that I have done in the shape of bridging the ocean and killing Rāvaṇa has been done to save my honour. I have saved my character as well as myself from dishonour. I have saved the honour of my family and avoided the calumny of the evil-minded. None of these things was done for thy sake. Thou art now free to go anywhere thou chocest, I have nothing to do with thee, who is there who shall take back a woman who has lived in another's house. How can I take thee back when thou wast carried in the arms of Rāvaṇa and looked upon with evil eye, consistently with the honour of my family? My work has been accomplished to-day. Thou art not fit for my company, go where thou pleasest, and take any thou pleasest as thy husband."

Thus stung to the quick Sītā replies full of just indignation, showing her characteristic strength of character and confidence in her own goodness.

"Why art thou, O brave man, making me hear these improper words, like an ordinary man speaking to an ordinary woman. I am, O great

⁸⁶Ibid., Chapter XIII.1-18, 173-174.

⁸⁷Ibid., Chapter XIII.19-23, 174.

armed, not what thou takest me to be. Do thou have confidence in me. I swear by my own virtue. Seeing the actions of ordinary women thou suspectest me to be like others, do thou leave off all suspicions, if thou has ever tested me. If I touched the body of another it was by force, not of my own will. That which was subject to my will was always thine, viz., my heart. If from having lived and grown up together, thou hast not yet known me, then I am lost for ever. When thou despatchedest Hanumāna to Lañka to see me why didst thou not then renounce me. Then in the presence of this monkey I would have relinquished my life-breath and thou wouldst have been saved all this trouble of a fight, nor wouldst thou have fruitlessly troubled thy friends. O tiger amongst men, by giving vent to thy anger like a narrow minded man thou hast acted like a woman. Neither my being born and bred in Janaka's family, nor my own good conduct has been taken into account by thee, O thou wise man, the knower of others' characters. Thou hast not taken into account the fact of my marriage in early life, thou hast turned thy back at all my good character and devotion to thee. So saying she tells Lakshmana to light the fire and boldly protesting her innocence and relying upon her goodness and purity, fearlessly enters it."⁸⁸

What is pathetic? Is the treatment of Sītā pathetic? Or is Sītā's condemnation of Rāma pathetic? Perhaps the answer to both is yes. Junankar feels that the deletion of the above scene from the RCM implies a deletion of all that Sītā has suffered.⁸⁹ Is Junankar referring only to the ordeal of Sītā or is he referring also to Sītā's condemnation of Rāma, a condemnation she wholly deserves to give? The RCM is much closer in the context of this scene to the AR than it is to the VR. It is significant to examine Goldman's summary of the end of the VR (*Uttarakāṇḍa*):

⁸⁸Ibid., XII, 172-173.

⁸⁹Junankar, Reflections, 8.

It comes to Rāma's attention that, despite the fire ordeal of Sītā, ugly rumours of her sexual infidelity with Rāvaṇa are spreading among the populace of Ayodhyā. In dreadful conformity to what he sees as the duty of a sovereign, Rāma banishes the queen, although she is pregnant and he knows the rumours to be false.⁹⁰

Dimmitt remarks that Rāma's "right and power to rule," in the VR, "are dependent on Sītā's virtue."⁹¹ There are several implications involved in the various depictions of Sītā's fate at the end of the *Rāmāyana* story. Tulasīdāsa chose to bring Rāma and Sītā together; this is also the case in the AR. Sītā is cleared of any possible wrongdoings. Whether or not this is an admirable move on Tulasīdāsa's part, this is the depiction we are dealing with and thus, the depiction we must interpret as wisely as possible for ourselves. One might suggest that Tulasīdāsa's bringing Sītā back to Rāma, weakens Sītā to a certain extent. She strengthens Rāma by becoming one with him again, but her independence is lost. Her life again revolves around service to others.

In conclusion of this section we will look at Elizabeth Bumiller in her chapter entitled "Flames: A Bride Burning and a Satī." Bumiller looks at Sītā's ordeal as an

⁹⁰Robert P. Goldman, trans., "General Introduction," in *The Rāmāyana of Valmīki: An Ancient Epic of India*, vol. I, *Bālakāṇḍa*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 13.

⁹¹Dimmitt, *Sītā*, 221.

influence on the lives of Hindu women.⁹² From her description of the story one might assume that she has not referred to the Tulasīdāsa version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, yet like Dimmitt, her conclusions are not irrelevant. As we have seen above, Sītā in the RCM also steps into the fire to demonstrate her purity, yet we know that Rāma knows she cannot have been touched by Rāvaṇa. Bumiller remarks:

Fire is also a special presence in the lives of Hindu women. From earliest childhood, little girls are told the story of Sītā, the paradigm of the loyal, long-suffering wife, who threw herself onto a burning pyre to demonstrate her purity.⁹³

She continues:

Sītā's ordeal has left an indelible mark on the relationship of Indian women to fire, which remains a major feature of their spiritual lives, a cause of their death and a symbol, in the end, of one of the most shocking forms of oppression.⁹⁴

⁹²Elizabeth Bumiller, May You be the Mother of a Hundred Sons: A Journey Among the Women of India, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), 45.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid.

vi) Reunion in Ayodhyā

There is little relevant to the relationship of Rāma and Sītā in the RCM's depiction of the reunion in Ayodhyā, excepting perhaps what it omitted. Sītā is not exiled, nor is she again tested. This section will look at the return of Sītā and Rāma to Ayodhyā in the RCM, but more importantly, will look at events omitted from the RCM.

Following the ending of the story, the AR includes a chapter entitled *Banishment of Sītā*, within the *Uttara-Kāṇḍa*, explaining the banishment which takes place in the VR. A utopian age is spoken of, Rāma is depicted as treating Sītā well, and "all women became devoted to their husbands."⁹⁵ Sītā and Rāma are depicted in a "celestial temple," in a "pleasure grove."⁹⁶ Rāma replies to a speech from Sītā as follows:

"Oh goddess, I know all this, yet I shall tell thee of how it can be done. Making a pretext of a public scandal with reference to thee, I shall abandon thee in a forest, afraid of scandal with reference to thee, I shall abandon thee in a forest, afraid of scandal of the world, like an ordinary person, There thou shalt beget two sons in the Āshrama of Valmiki."

"Thy pregnancy is apparent now. Then having come to me and for convincing the world taking an oath, thou shalt by entering through a

⁹⁵ *Adhyātma Rāmāyana*, Chapter IV.22-27, 200.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, Chapter IV.32-34, 201.

hole in the earth go to heaven. I shall follow thee, this is the settled conclusion."⁹⁷

Sītā is taken to Valmīki and "greatly distressed wept like a foolish woman."⁹⁸

The editor of the AR comments on these events in the VR.⁹⁹ When Rāma finds out that the townspeople are suspicious of Sītā's stay in the house of another man, Sītā is taken to the Āśrama of Valmīki, by Lakṣmaṇa, without her knowledge. This action is taken even though Sītā has already been purified by the fire ordeal. As the editor says, "For one whose good name was lost hell is ordained." Sītā says to Lakṣmaṇa upon their arrival:

"My body has verily been created for suffering, for I see nothing but sorrow in embodied form every time. What sin did I commit in my former life, whom did I separate from his wife, that I even of virtuous conduct and devoted to my husband, have been abandoned by him? Formerly I bore the troubles of life in a hermitage patiently because of my husband being with me. How shall I now live alone, . . . I cannot leave this body by drowning in the Gaṅges, as by doing so, I shall be cutting off the line of the royal dynasty, for I am with child. . . ."¹⁰⁰

Sītā continues in this manner, expressing her devotion to Rāma. Lakṣmaṇa returns to Rāma, finding him distressed. Lakṣmaṇa says to Rāma:

⁹⁷Ibid., Chapter IV.41-44, 201.

⁹⁸Ibid., Chapter IV.58-61, 202.

⁹⁹Ibid., 202.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

"Let not, therefore, one attach himself too much to sons, wives, friends and wealth, as separation from these is inevitable. You Rāma can teach the world whole of why are you giving way to grief. Now there was one sort of scandal, now it will be another of your grieving for the loss of a wife."¹⁰¹

The depiction of Lakṣmaṇa's attitude in the television series is a direct contrast to this statement. Later in the *Uttara-Kāṇḍa* of the AR, the final test of Sītā is referred to. We see the appearance of Sītā's two sons, and Rāma's wish that Sītā's innocence be tested before an assembly.¹⁰² Rāma refers to the proof which Sītā gave him in Laṅka and says to Valmīki:

This very same Sītā, though free from all faults and of pure conduct, was abandoned by me for fear of the world. Thou shouldst forgive me that.¹⁰³

We then witness Sītā's plea to the earth, "As I have never cherished any one but Rāma in my heart; by that vow of mine let the goddess of earth make an opening for me."¹⁰⁴

The earth opens and the "goddess of earth" takes Sītā and places her on a throne.¹⁰⁵

Rāma we see, grieves "for the purpose of worldly duty."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Ibid., Chapter VII.2-17, 215-216.

¹⁰³Ibid., Chapter VII.35, 217.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., Chapter VII.40, 217.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., Chapter VII.41-45, 217.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., Chapter VII.47-50, 217.

According to the editor of the AR, the VR is similar in its depiction of Sītā's final demise. Rāma, however, becomes angry with the earth and threatens to destroy all upon it.¹⁰⁷ Brahmā and other gods present, remind him that he is an incarnation of Viṣṇu and that Sītā is waiting for him in the heavens.¹⁰⁸

The alteration of the ending of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story is significant. Why did Tulasīdāsa omit Sītā's final demise and Rāma's resulting anguish. The addition of the *shadow-Sītā* justifies his omission, yet we must wonder why Tulasīdāsa has chosen this depiction. The television series follows in this manner, apparently to the anger of many in India, yet some must have felt that this was the appropriate version to follow for today's audience. Yet it is in these later versions that we see the deletion of the above scenes. Is it the people's actions which are reflected in these alterations or will these alterations be reflected in the actions of the people?

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 219.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

2) Transcendent

Thus, Sītā, who in one dimension is the dutiful and obedient wife of Rāma, may also be viewed as a goddess whose power is the source of earth's fertility, and as the *śakti* of the hero Rāma whose energy motivates him to perform feats of heroism and whose fidelity underlies the strength and enduring qualities of his reign as king.¹⁰⁹

The second level of Rāma and Sītā's relationship is a transcendent, philosophical one in which their relationship reaches a higher plane. Perhaps in this context they cannot even be referred to as man and woman, but rather as *god* and *goddess*, as *masculine* and *feminine*, as *god* and *māyā*, and as *love*. In this first section we will examine Sītā and Rāma in their roles as *love*, and in a second and concluding section as Sītā as a *bhaktā*, Sītā and Rāma as *god* and *māyā*, and Sītā as the *Śakti* of Rāma.

c) *Love*

There is no denying the fact that Vaiṣṇavism, in its many forms, with its basic message of love, has universal appeal to religiously minded persons.¹¹⁰

Tulasīdāsa deals with the *love* between Rāma and Sītā on several different levels. Firstly it will be helpful to attempt to define *love* in the relevant context; secondly we will examine the notion that their *love* is an *old love*; thirdly, we will look

¹⁰⁹Dimmitt, *Sītā*, 223.

¹¹⁰Klostermaier, Klaus K., *A Survey of Hinduism*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 243.

at the *love* that Sītā has for Rāma as devotional or in other words, her role as a *bhaktā*; and fourthly, we will examine their *love* on a secular level.

i) Definition

The concept of love deserves special attention in an examination of the relationship between Sītā and Rāma. A problem, however, lies in defining *love*. The concept of *love* in the context of this relationship cannot be defined in only one sense; therefore, we will endeavour to examine the many interpretations of *love*, and apply them to the relationship between Rāma and Sītā.

R. Bharadwaj remarks on the concept of *love*; he says that "Love and Charm (*premā* and *śṛṅgāra*) are close associates."¹¹¹ He further states:

Love is sometimes excited by fear, R VII, 13, Ch. 1; V 60. The sentiments of fear, hesitation and love can exist together, R I, 84, 4. Love and faith also go together. Unlike lust, love is free from all calculations. It is quite pure, and an end in itself. Pure love is either exclusive (*ananya*) or partial (*sānya*). Again pure love is either one-sided (*ekāṅgī*) or reciprocal (*paraspara*). As examples of the exclusive and the one-sided love, Tulsi cites the *cātaka*, the snake, the fish, and the lotus.¹¹²

The above conception of *love* interprets *love* as very pure. Sexuality is not included within the scope of *love*, though one-sided *love* is allowed for. In matching fear, hesitation, and faith with *love*, we discern a devotional *love* as dominating this definition of *love*. This is primarily what we have seen in the Rāma-Sītā relationship

¹¹¹Bharadwaj, Philosophy of Tulsīdās, 317.

¹¹²Ibid.

of Tulasīdāsa. According to Bharadwaj, Tulasīdāsa understood sexual pleasures as robbing one of one's understanding; he was very aware of the misconception that sexual pleasures are related to love. Bharadwaj says:

Tulsidas has not laid less emphasis on sex (*kāma*) than Sigmund Freud, . . . Cupid whose greatest strength is woman influences every one, R I, 155, 4; III, 47, 6. . . . Tulsi holds that both Love and Envy are blind, D 326. Sexual pleasures (*visaya*) rob one of one's understanding, R IV, 21, 2. The antidote to infatuation (*moha*) is the cultivation of knowledge and non-attachment, R I, 283, 2. Sublimated love can be witnessed in the vicinity of Rāma; for even birds and beasts forget their animosity and sport together, R, II, 138, 1; 250.¹¹³

Love for Tulasīdāsa appears to have been primarily devotional *love*. In the following discussion we will look beyond Tulasīdāsa's definition and intentions. Regardless of Tulasīdāsa's original intentions the text has come alive on its own, and has been interpreted many times. Sītā's marriage is commonly referred to as a *love-marriage*, thus, Rāma and Sītā are often seen in the context of a *lesser*, secular kind of *love*, likely more so than Tulasīdāsa intended. They have become more than an example of *devotion*, but a *marital* example as well. As times change so do people's perceptions of and vulnerabilities to such texts. Bumiller remarks:

Social historians say that procreation and duty were traditionally more important in Indian marriage than sexual satisfaction. Husband and wife have never been regarded as equals. Two thousand years ago, the upper-caste law codifier Manu wrote that a husband, "though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities," must

¹¹³Ibid.

be "constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife." Only the lower castes married for sexual pleasure, . . .¹¹⁴

ii) *An Old Love*

"Śrī Rāma said: . . . The reality about the chord of love that binds you and me, dear, is known to my soul alone; and my soul ever abides with you. Know this to be the essence of my love."¹¹⁵

The *love* between Rāma and Sītā is not only Sītā towards Rāma, but also Rāma towards Sītā. One might remark that on a transcendent level it is not possible for a devotee to love *god* as intensely as *god* loves. Even though Sītā's *love* is powerful, it cannot match the *love* that Rāma has for her. We are not speaking of a western sense of *love*, but an intense, devotional type of *love* on behalf of Sītā and a unbreakable bond between the two, felt by Rāma in his incarnation as a human man.

The idea that Rāma and Sītā's *love* is an *old love* is of great significance.¹¹⁶ It seems that Sītā and Rāma have been *one*, united for all eternity and will be for all eternity. They are, therefore, in their earthly manifestations inevitably drawn together again. What does *love* in this sense mean? Does it imply something of the *eternal*? Is true *love* beginningless and endless? For Tulasīdāsa it is; however, the relationship

¹¹⁴Bumiller, May You Be the Mother, 41.

¹¹⁵*Sundara-Kāṇḍa* 14.1-5, 608, when Hanumān relays Rāma's message to Sītā.

¹¹⁶*Bālakāṇḍa* 228.1-4, 188.

between Sītā and Rāma, though divine and thus beginningless and endless, is also an earthly manifestation; thus, their relationship takes on a secular dimension as well.

Can the notion that *love* is infinite represent a fair *ideal* for average Indian people? Are arranged marriages proper because the two people in question are destined to be together, now and forever? Bumiller refers to women who have been through terrible arranged marriages who still feel that the arranged marriage is the best way.¹¹⁷ Can this be called *love*? One must wonder if it can be. It is inevitable of course, that a western sense of *love* is seeping into this discussion. One has to try to look at these questions in light of an Indian view, which is very different from the modern day western sense of *love*. The typical Indian sense of *love* reaches a higher plane than does the western sense. *Love* is beyond the earthly and the physical; it is beyond the romantic; it is eternity and selfless devotion. However, problems arise when this devotion becomes one-sided, as when devotional *love* is directed only towards the husband and is not reciprocated towards the wife.

It is interesting to note that the garden scene where Sītā and Rāma first see one another was not found in the VR.¹¹⁸ We also know that this scene is not depicted in the AR, yet it is found in the television series. Had the concepts of *love* and marriage changed from Valmīki's day to the day of Tulasīdāsa? Has it changed between

¹¹⁷Bumiller, May You be the Mother, 43.

¹¹⁸Naidu, Re-Creations, 318.

Tulasīdāsa's day and our own? Has the western evolution of the concept of *love* had any influence on India's sense of *love*?

iii) *Love* Between a Man and Woman (arranged marriage)

In this section we will turn back to the secular, primarily looking at *marital love* both within the relationship of Rāma and Sītā as depicted in the RCM, and within other contexts. We must return to the secular level in order to complete an examination of the many faceted concept of *love*. One must include the secular sense of *love*. One cannot entirely separate the facets of *love*, but rather must recognize the separate levels. Tulasīdāsa portrays the *love* between Sītā and Rāma several times in the RCM, for example the following:

Śrī Rāma and Sītā shone as if beauty and the sentiment of Love had met together in human form.¹¹⁹

All that Sītā and Rāma are can be defined as *love*. One can deduce from the above passage that this *love* in human form is illusionary, as are Rāma and Sītā. Is *real love* only that *love* which Sītā and Rāma represent on a higher level, or can we know something of *love* through *secular love*? Are the levels of *love* that we have discussed interconnected? Can we taste the highest level of *love* through experiencing it on a lower level? Can we reach the *love* that Sītā and Rāma represent firstly through

¹¹⁹ *Bālakāṇḍa* 264.1-4, 212.

devotion and secondly through their human example? Rāma and Sītā as *love* are further described by Tulasīdāsa at their wedding as follows:

Lovely images of Rāma and Sītā were reflected on the pillars of jewels and shone as if Love and his consort, Rati, witnessed Sri Rāma's matchless wedding appearing in numerous forms.¹²⁰

Again and again one sees the idea of Sītā and Rāma as the manifestation of *love*.¹²¹ Aside from the above metaphorical examples we see other scenes in the RCM in which Rāma and Sītā relate to one another as man and wife, emphasizing a *love* that those in the west can relate to. In a culture where arranged marriages have always been the *norm*, how is it that the relationship between Sītā and Rāma is portrayed as one at least partially based on *love*? This is made especially clear in the pre-marital context of the later *Rāmāyaṇas*. According to Bumiller it is only within the last three hundred years that *love* has come to be seen as a part of marriage in the west.¹²² Perhaps this has had an impact on the evolution of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. She later states in a contemporary context that, "Middle-class India defines love as long-term commitment

¹²⁰Ibid., 324.1-5, 256.

¹²¹In the *Rāmāyaṇ* television series Rāma is asked by his younger brother how he learned the art of *love*, for it was not taught at the Ashram. Rāma replies that the one destined to be one's wife is preordained by god. When one meets her he must give all his *love* and trust and "never think of another," ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 3, episode 9). This contradicts the polygamy evident throughout textual versions.

¹²²Bumiller, May You be the Mother, 26.

and devotion to family, . . . In their view, Americans instead define love as passion."¹²³

Bumiller further notes that in the contemporary context, "marriage for love exists only among a very small slice of India's urban elite."¹²⁴ Indian people do not experience a great deal of western influence, yet the urban elite has access to western ideas and technology that the lower classes do not. It is interesting to note Bumiller's ideas on what love has become in India in relation to the concept of marriage:

For the large majority of Indians, love and passion have never been synonymous with marriage.¹²⁵

Ritu Nanda, a director of one of India's most successful home appliance companies remarks, "It's the biggest gamble of one's life, so why not just leave it to destiny?"¹²⁶ The belief that one will marry who one meant to marry is deeply ingrained in the Indian psyche, in all classes. Thus, in a certain sense the Rāma-Sītā marriage is attractive for it represents perhaps a *love* which is not only *love* as we in the west know it, but *an old love* with the benefit of *new love* intertwined. Doranne Jacobson examines marriage in north and central India. She speaks on the so-called, "love marriage":

¹²³Ibid., 31.

¹²⁴Ibid., 26.

¹²⁵Ibid., 42.

¹²⁶Ibid., 33.

An unarranged "love marriage" is considered by most Indians to be a daring and perhaps ill-fated alternative to an ordinary arranged marriage.¹²⁷

Bumiller also remarks on the *new* arranged marriages in which the potential mates involved may veto their parents perspective choice:

In that sense, the "new" Indian arranged marriage is something of a breakthrough after all. The middle class has essentially created an odd hybrid by grafting the Western ideal of romantic love onto the traditions of Hindu society - . . .¹²⁸

Bumiller compares this idea to *love* and marriage in the West:

In the end, the result is something completely and peculiarly Indian, including the notion that it "works." It is of course possible to match up two people of common backgrounds and interests and then watch as they fall in love. What are the American personal ads and dating services, after all?¹²⁹

Furthermore, Bumiller sees contradiction in the above with what she calls the "extraordinarily rich tradition of love and passion that is India's heritage." As examples she points out the *Kāmasūtra*, meant largely for the aristocracy; the erotic temple sculptures at Khajurāho, likely built and enjoyed by the king and his court; examples

¹²⁷Doranne Jacobson and Susan S. Wadley, Women in India: Two Perspectives, (New Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1977), 45.

¹²⁸Bumiller, May You Be the Mother, 33.

¹²⁹Ibid., 42-43.

set by Indian gods; and finally the passionate tale of the Lord Kṛṣṇa and his consort

Rādhā.¹³⁰ Bumiller remarks on this story as follows:

One key to understanding the relationship between marriage and love in India. The *Gītāgovinda* made them the most popular couple in the Indian pantheon, coinciding with the Bhakti movement in Hinduism, which emphasized an intense personal devotion to a god, almost like that of a lover and beloved.¹³¹

Though it is emphasized to a lesser extent, there is a passionate element also within the *love* between Rāma and Sītā. We see this in Rāma's agony when separated from Sītā. Contrary to the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa relationship, however, is that the passion within the Sītā-Rāma relationship perhaps comes more from Rāma than it does Sītā. Sītā plays the *ideal* woman and wife; thus, she is reserved and devoted in her behaviour. Rādhā on the other hand plays the *ideal* devotee; her need and passion for Kṛṣṇa comes before proper etiquette and adherence to social norms. Though this is not a comparative paper on the two relationships, it is as if Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa and Sītā-Rāma, represent or emphasize to different degrees the diverse facets of *love*. Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa are very erotic, whereas Rāma and Sītā represent an *ideal love*, they yearn for one another, but not in a sexual manner. It is as if they are yearning for their other half. Perhaps the *higher-than-human* behaviour of Rāma and Sītā is just that; we sense an attachment beyond the secular within this relationship. Here again we see a break

¹³⁰Ibid., 41-42.

¹³¹Ibid., 41.

between the transcendent and the secular; marriage it seems fits into the *dharma* of both men and women in this world, but does not go beyond, into that higher realm of *love*.

d) As a *Bhaktā*, as *Māyā* and as *Śakti*

In this section we will look at Sītā as a *bhaktā*, as *māyā*, and as *Śakti*. We will endeavour to understand the differentiation between these roles, the sameness between them, and their functions in relation to Sītā and Rāma as one.

i) As a *Bhaktā*

The life and works of Tulsī Dās occupy an important place in the Bhakti cult.¹³²

Bhakti or devotional love, is *love* as Tulasīdāsa saw *love* and as he intended it to be viewed and experienced. We will look at the concept of *bhakti*, but will also address questions concerning Sītā's role as an *ideal bhaktā*, and the relationship between being a *bhaktā* and *the marital relationship*, particularly that relationship of Rāma and Sītā. Can this type of devotion transcend from the transcendent to the physical, and if it can, can it be one-sided? Handoo outlines the nine kinds of *bhakti* described by Rāma to Śabarī, a female ascetic devotee.¹³³ The following quote is taken directly from the Gita Press version of the RCM:

¹³²Junankar, Reflections, 1.

¹³³Handoo, Cultural Heritage, 403.

The first in order is fellowship with the saints and the second is marked by a fondness for My stories.¹³⁴

"Humble service of the lotus feet of one's preceptor is the third form of Devotion, while the fourth type of Devotion consists in singing My praises with a guileless purpose.¹³⁵

"Muttering My Name with unwavering faith constitutes the fifth form of adoration revealed in the Vedas. The sixth variety consists in the practice of self-control and virtue, . . . He who practises the seventh type sees the world full of Me without distinction and reckons the saints as even greater than Myself. He who cultivates the eighth type of Devotion remains contented with whatever he gets and never thinks of detecting others' faults. The ninth form of Devotion demands that one should be guileless and straight in one's dealings with everybody, and should . . . cherish implicit faith in Me . . . Whoever possesses any one of these nine forms of Devotion, be he man or woman or any other creature-sentient or insentient-is most dear to Me, . . . As for yourself, you are blessed with unflinching devotion of all these types.¹³⁶

Bhakti is devotion to god and every other kind of *love* is secondary. Of course we must remember that the central theme of the RCM is that of loving devotion to Rāma, of which Sītā is a central player. According to Klostermaier, the word *bhakti* can be traced to either of two word roots. The first, *bhañj-*, has the meaning to *separate*, thus, *bhakti* would mean separation.¹³⁷ This makes sense, for *bhakti* systems, "presuppose the Supreme, Absolute Being to be non-identical with, and separated from, the

¹³⁴ *Aranya-Kāṇḍa* 34.1-4, 556.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 35, 556.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.1-7, 556-557.

¹³⁷ Klostermaier, *A Survey*, 210.

individual human being."¹³⁸ The majority of Indian scholars however, derive the word *bhakti* from the root *bhaj*, meaning *to worship*, also making sense, "since *Bhakti* religion consists of acts of worship and loving devotion toward God."¹³⁹ We see this within the relationship between Sītā and Rāma. Sītā and Rāma are one; it is when separated from Rāma that Sītā performs her role as an ideal *bhaktā*. Her actions while apart from Rāma prove her devotion to Rāma. When apart, Sītā is the *ideal* devotee or *bhaktā* and when together she is the *ideal* wife.

Lalye remarks on the "Doctrine of Bhakti in the *Devī Bhāgavata*." The *Devībhāgavata* (hereafter DB) is of course, a significant source of the *Rāmāyana* story. He begins, "the aim of the Purānas was to propagate the Bhakti of certain deity."¹⁴⁰ There are three types of *bhaktā* and thus, *bhakti* (*guṇas*) expounded in the *Bhāgavatas*. The first is *sattvika bhaktā*, or one who dedicates *his* works to *his* deity in order to wipe away sins. The second is *rājasa bhaktā*, or "one who sees duality even in Bhagavan and follows the path of devotion for the sake of pleasure and power."¹⁴¹ The third is *tāmasa bhaktā*, or "one whose devotion springs from hatred and aims at

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Lalye, *Devī Bhāgavata*, 170.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

the tormentation of others."¹⁴² According to Lalye the *tāmasa bhaktā* is most prominent in the DB.

Bhaktā should "maintain the purity of mind, body and speech, by keeping them under proper control."¹⁴³ Also is the "Disinterested Bhakti," stressed in the DB.¹⁴⁴ *Bhakti* should be "devoid of any desire." The DB "classifies *bhakti* into two categories," that is the one leading to the "Highest Bliss," and secondly, that leading to "unison with Hari."¹⁴⁵ Klostermaier further remarks that the *Epics*, including the *Rāmāyana*, and the *Purānas* "are the sources from which *bhakti* religions have drawn their inspiration for centuries."¹⁴⁶

What is the connection between *Sītā* and *bhakti*? In the television series we see in an introduction to episode ten a man by the name of Bapu discussing *Sītā*. He stresses *Rāma*'s search for *Sītā*, *Rāma*'s building of the bridge, and the killing of *Rāvaṇa* as metaphorical goals for all *men*:

"We in India have seen *Sītā* through many view points, as a symbol of devotion, of power and the inner mind. We have seen *Sītā* in many forms. So what the *Rāmāyana* first teaches a man is that he must first

¹⁴²Ibid., 171.

¹⁴³Ibid.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 172.

¹⁴⁵Ibid.

¹⁴⁶Klostermaier, *A Survey*, 211.

search for his power, search for his inner mind, search for his devotion, search for one's own inner resources and innate power, and after completing this search, for Sītā's symbols, men must build bridges."¹⁴⁷

Metaphorically speaking, he continues to say that every individual must search for Sītā, or Rāvaṇa cannot be killed. We see in the above that Sītā, *a woman*, is an example for *men*. It is Sītā's *devotion, power* and representation of the *inner mind* which must be aspired to by *men*. One might suggest then that Sītā is to be aspired to on two levels, for men as an example of devotion and for women as the model wife.

Gatwood speaks of the *bhakti movement* during the *medieval period*, the period of Tulasīdāsa and the period when the *bhakti* movement, "came into its own."¹⁴⁸ She remarks:

In Bhakti pūjā the soul of the devotee was viewed as feminine, while the deity, except in Shaktism, was regarded as masculine. The ideal relationship between deity and worshipper was believed to parallel that between husband and wife, or male and female lovers, in which the woman longs for and is finally merged with her husband or lover.¹⁴⁹

Gatwood speaks of *svakīya* and *parakīyā bhakti's*, two forms of *bhakti*, which had taken place by the *late medieval period* (700-1700 C.E.); thus, most likely an evolution under way by the time of Tulasīdāsa. The latter, "more popular form" saw the female as unmarried or married to another while the former based on the Rāma-Sītā

¹⁴⁷"Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 4, episode 10.

¹⁴⁸Gatwood, *Devī*, 69.

¹⁴⁹Ibid.

relationship emphasized the "Spouse Goddess."¹⁵⁰ *Svakīya bhakti* "was and is characterized by "its total lack of sexual-erotic connotations" (Callewaert 1980:195).¹⁵¹ Sītā loses the *Devī* quality; she is primarily a devotee.

Klostermaier remarks that a significant dimension of the appeal of *bhakti* was and is its availability, "*Bhakti* became the way of salvation for everyone: women and children, low castes and outcastes, could become fully recognized members of the *bhakti* movement."¹⁵² Perhaps this is a reason that Sītā, in her incarnation of a human woman, has become an example of an *ideal bhaktā* to so many. It is also presumably the reason that Tulasīdāsa employed and emphasized it in his works.

Rāma is *love* and *the loved*. His *love* for Sītā is a *love* for one who *loves*. Their *love* is reciprocal and, therefore, represented by their human incarnations in the form of marriage.

Klostermaier cites the *Rāmabhaktas*, which he remarks, Tulasīdāsa taught:

Avoid those who do not love Rāma and Sītā, as your most bitter enemies, no matter how near of kin they may be. . . . Only insofar as they are related to God and are children and relations worthy of one's love.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰Ibid., 69-70.

¹⁵¹Ibid., 70.

¹⁵²Ibid., 212.

¹⁵³Klostermaier, *A Survey*, 218.

According to Klostermaier, "*Bhakti* means not only love for god, but also enmity toward those who do not love him in the same way."¹⁵⁴

ii) Rāma and Sītā as God and *Māyā*

On His left side shone His primordial energy, Sītā, who is ever devoted to Him, and who is a storehouse of beauty and the source of the universe. . . . the mere play of whose eyebrows brings the cosmos into existence.¹⁵⁵

In this section we will endeavour to examine Sītā and Rāma as *māyā* and *god*.

We must attempt to understand and differentiate between Sītā's roles as a *bhaktā*, as Rāma's *Śakti* and as *māyā*. We looked at her role as a *bhaktā* above in some detail and will examine in this section Sītā as *māyā* representing the power of her consort, Rāma. She is his creative energy and entwined with this power she encompasses *māyā*. However, we have seen that *māyā* is not always necessarily positive, and it is used by several characters in the story including Rāvaṇa. How does Sītā relate to *māyā*? Is she the totality of *māyā*, or is she only that positive aspect of *māyā*, *vidyā*? Rāma controls *Śakti*; is he, therefore, also in control of *māyā*? We will firstly look at the concept of *māyā*, both within the text and as discussed by others, and secondly look at Sītā's depiction as *māyā*.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 216.

¹⁵⁵*Bālakāṇḍa* 147.1-4, 132.

Sītā and Rāma together are two parts of a whole. They are partners, two parts of perfection combined, *merit* and *virtue*. Rāma encompasses the virtuous side of the relationship, accepting all and loving all. Sītā's *merits* allows her to be one with Rāma. Together they are the *mother* and *father* of the universe or *māyā* and *god*.

Lalye defines *māyā* as, "the power of the Gods."¹⁵⁶ *Māyā* did not exclusively belong to the gods, for in the Vedic days the *asuras* used it also. *Māyā* in the Upaniṣadic era was an attempt to figure out, "the riddle of the universe."¹⁵⁷ In the *Epics*, *māyā* acquires the, "Vedāntic idea of Illusion."¹⁵⁸ *Māyā* became very popular from the "period of Bhramasūtras," in the sense of cosmic illusion.¹⁵⁹ In the *Purāṇas*, *māyā* was the, "Supreme power of the Deity."¹⁶⁰ Lalye remarks:

Māyā is depicted as a female part or consort of the male part of the Infinite. The Purāṇas also maintained the idea of inseparability of Māyā and Brahman, . . . In the usual way, they have personified the possessor as husband, and the power as his consort.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶Lalye, *Devī Bhāgavata*, 147.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., 148.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 149.

¹⁵⁹Ibid.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., 150.

¹⁶¹Ibid.

A change takes place in the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, "on account of its stress on the Bhakti cult."¹⁶² The Supreme Being alone is personified and *His māyā* is, "maintained as power only."¹⁶³ In the DB, *Śakti* is referred to as *māyā*, "the feminine aspect of the Lord."¹⁶⁴ Lalye states:

Whereas in other Purānas, Śakti is the power of some Supreme deity, in the DB the power itself is Supreme and its own user. Here Māyā Herself is personified as 'Devī' and a number of legends are developed around Her.¹⁶⁵

Lalye refers to some examples, one on a narration of some incidents in the life of Rāma. For example, "the reduction of the burden on the earth (by destroying the demons) is done by the Supreme Goddess *Māyā*, "Māyā caused the birth of Viṣṇu on the earth (DB IV.20-50)." Further, on the delusive nature of *māyā*, "Even Rāma was carried away by cravings. Rāma, being tormented by separation, wept bitterly (DB.IV.20.40)."¹⁶⁶

According to Bharadwaj, *māyā* is that which causes the world and influences the individual. *Māyā* cannot influence *god*; *māyā* is Rāma's power, his *Śakti*. The

¹⁶²Ibid.

¹⁶³Ibid.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 151.

¹⁶⁵Ibid.

¹⁶⁶Ibid., 152.

relationship between *māyā* and *brahman* is parallel to that of wife and husband.¹⁶⁷ Rāma is *brahman*, the absolute and Sītā is, therefore, *māyā*. She has the power to create, but is subject to Rāma; she cannot influence him, "She is a zero by herself, but gets exalted in association with Brahman, the digit (D 200)."¹⁶⁸ According to Bharadwaj, Tulasīdāsa compares *māyā* to a dancing-woman, reminding us of the relation of *prakṛti* (Primal Matter) to *puruṣa* (Soul) in the *Sāṃkhya* System:

Māyā and bhakti (Devotion), mark me, both belong to the feminine group, as everyone knows. Again, Bhakti is beloved of Śrī Rāma (the Hero of Raghu's line); while poor Māyā is a mere dancing girl. The Lord of the Raghus is well-disposed towards Bhakti; hence Māyā is terribly afraid of her. Nay, Māyā shrinks at the very sight of the man in whose heart ever abides unobstructed the peerless and guileless spirit of Devotion, and cannot wield her authority over him. Knowing this, sages who have realized the Truth solicit Bhakti which is the fountain of all blessings.^{169 170}

Thus, Sītā is *māyā*, but only that aspect which is creative. *Māyā* originates in Rāma; therefore, he alone is responsible for its distribution. Sītā, his beloved, encompasses *māyā* in its creative aspect, while those such as Ravana of the demon race encompass the negative, ignorant, destructive side of *māyā*. Although, Sītā does encompass *māyā*

¹⁶⁷Bharadwaj, *Philosophy of Tulasīdās*, 44.

¹⁶⁸Ibid.

¹⁶⁹*Uttara-Kāṇḍa* 115 A-B.1-4, 847.

¹⁷⁰The line, "Māyā is a mere dancing-girl" is from the AR, II, 2, 32; 9, 92 (Ibid., 47-48).

it appears that her role as a *bhaktā* is prominent; at least in the RCM it appears that Sītā as the devoted defines her most important role. Any acts related to *māyā* are performed ultimately for her lord, Rāma. Does Sītā possess the power of *māyā* because of her role as a *bhaktā*? The translator of the AR speaks of *māyā* in his introduction:

The theory of *māyā* (nescience) being the cause of the world-process, which was in germ in the Upanishads, became subsequently an integral portion of Indian thought and is now associated in the popular mind with the energy of the Lord. It is also considered sufficient to explain away all that is beyond the reach of human experience.¹⁷¹

In the Upanishads Brahmā alone was. He thought, "I am one, may I be many." He made *tapas*(thought) and by the force of thought created the universe. Having created it he entered it, became all that moves and all that does not move, all that is differentiated by name and form as well as that is not so differentiated. Creation according to the Upanishads was thus the thought power of the supreme. Subsequently it proceeded from the union of the male with the female principle. The male is Brahmā, Rāma or Krishna, the female Māyā, Sītā or Rādhā.¹⁷²

And Rāma speaks to Lakṣmaṇa on *māyā* in the *Aranya-Kāṇḍa*:

The feeling of 'I' and 'mine' and 'you' and 'yours' is Māyā (Illusion), which holds sway over all created beings. Whatever is perceived by the senses and that which lies within the reach of the mind, know it all to be Maya. And hear of its divisions too; they are two, viz., knowledge and ignorance.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, ii-iii.

¹⁷² Ibid., iii.

¹⁷³ *Aranya-Kāṇḍa* 14.1-4, 533.

Rāma continues to say that the latter, ignorance is, "vile and extremely painful." The former is knowledge, "which brings forth creation . . . is directed by the Lord and has no strength of its own."¹⁷⁴ The former we can deduct is that form of *māyā* embodied by Sītā; the latter is perhaps Rāvaṇa. Shortly following Sītā's disappearance, Rāma and Nārada discuss *māyā*; Rāma describes *māyā* as follows:

"Lust, anger, greed, pride etc., constitute the most powerful army of Ignorance. But among them all the fiercest and the most troublesome is that incarnation of Māyā (the Lord's deluding potency) called woman."¹⁷⁵

Again we see a double picture of *māyā*. Rāma speaks of the negative side of *māyā*, excluding that creative side of *māyā* represented by Sītā. Soon after Rāma has reached the ocean on his way to Laṅka to rescue Sītā, the ocean speaks to Rāma on *māyā*:

"Forgive, my lord, all my faults. Ether, air, fire, water and earth - all these, my lord, are dull by nature. It is Māyā (Cosmic Nature) which brought them forth for the purpose of creation under an impulse from You; so declare all the scriptures."¹⁷⁶

And in Ayodhyā after the battle between Rāvaṇa and Rāma, Rāma describes *māyā*:

"Listen, dear brother: the numerous merits and demerits are all products of Māyā. The greatest merit is that they should cease to exist in one's eye; to discern them is ignorance."

¹⁷⁴Ibid., 14.1-4, 533.

¹⁷⁵Ibid., 43, 563.

¹⁷⁶*Sundara-Kāṇḍa* 58.1-4, 638.

That Māyā, however, is Śrī Rāma's own handmaid; though unreal when understood, there is no release from her grip except by Śrī Rāma's grace: . . .¹⁷⁷

Is the *māyā* depicted in the above passages the same *māyā* represented by Sītā?

According to Tulasīdāsa it is; *māyā* acts according to her Lord's approval. At the coronation, "the bards began to recite His praises" as follows:¹⁷⁸

We adore You with Your Spouse. Subject to Your relentless Māyā (deluding potency), . . . , all animate and inanimate beings wander for numberless days and nights . . . impelled by Time, Karma (destiny) and the Gunas (modes of Prakṛti).¹⁷⁹

And Bhuṣuṇḍi speaks to the King of Birds in the *Uttara-Kāṇḍa* as follows:

Even though this difference, which has been created by Māyā, is false, it cannot disappear except by Śrī Hari's grace, whatever you may do.¹⁸⁰

Sītā's behaviour and depiction relating to *māyā* is of particular importance. When the families arrive in the forest one sees Sītā's ability to serve all of her mothers-in-law at once

No one but Rāma knew the mystery behind it; for all delusive potencies form part of Sītā's delusive power.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ *Uttara-Kāṇḍa* 71 A-B, 807.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 12 A-C, 762.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 12 A-C.1-6, 763.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 77 A-B.1-4, 812.

¹⁸¹ *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 251.1-4, 462.

This rendition of Sītā sets an unattainable *ideal* for women involving a mixing of her roles as a woman, and her role as *māyā*. Does only Rāma know this mystery because Rāma is omniscient, or is it because Rāma is *māyā* and all *māyā* originates in him? Perhaps it is both. Bharadwaj presumes these passages to be evidence that Tulasīdāsa maintains the general principle of *Vaiṣṇavism*, which regards *māyā* as the *Śakti* or power of the Supreme.¹⁸² Bharadwaj states that, "No one but Rāma could notice the miracle; for she is the very power and source of Illusion, RII, 252, 2."¹⁸³ Bharadwaj further examines Sītā as *māyā* in the following:

Śrī Rāma walked in front while Lakṣmaṇa followed in the rear, both conspicuous in the robes of ascetics. Between the two Sītā shone like Māyā (the Divine Energy) that stands between Brahman (God), on the one hand, and the individual soul, on the other.¹⁸⁴

When Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa and Rāma reach the hermitage of Valmīki, Valmīki speaks to Rāma:

"While You are the custodian of the Vedic laws and the Lord of the universe, Sītā (Janaka's Daughter) is Your Māyā (Divine Energy) who creates, preserves and dissolves the universe on receiving the tacit approval of Your gracious Self."¹⁸⁵

¹⁸²Bharadwaj, *Philosophy of Tulsīdās*, 45.

¹⁸³Ibid.

¹⁸⁴*Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 122.1-4, 370.

¹⁸⁵Ibid., 126, 373.

In the above passage one sees Sītā's role as *māyā* clarified. Within her role of *māyā* she is *bhakti*, and within her role as *bhakti* she is *māyā*. In the television series a man by the name of Swami Chinmayananda speaks of Sītā.¹⁸⁶ He asks who is the mother of Sītā. He mentions the fact that Sītā was found while ploughing the earth, and ultimately (in the VR) she returns to the earth. She is from, "no cause," and she returns to, "no cause." This is *māyā*. Sītā lives for Rāma. When she, "turns out" for a moment towards the deer, she is, "stung by desire." She rejects Rāma by sending him away. Chinmayananda also speaks on Ravana who's, "attention is constantly turned outward." Sītā, a prisoner in Lañka refused to cooperate; thus, the material world can never touch her. She contemplates on Rāma, she surrenders herself, and thus recognizes her mistake.¹⁸⁷

Wendy O'Flaherty has some significant notions on the divinity of Rāma and Sītā.¹⁸⁸ O'Flaherty uses the VR as a source; however, her comments in this area are relevant to this discussion. O'Flaherty suggests that the *Rāmāyana* shows traces of, "Both Vedic and pre- (or non-) Vedic marriages."¹⁸⁹ She further states:

¹⁸⁶"Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 11, episode 31.

¹⁸⁷Ibid.

¹⁸⁸Wendy O'Flaherty, "Śiva and Pārvatī," in The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 230-231.

¹⁸⁹Ibid., 130.

Rāma, a god incarnate and mortal king, marries Sītā, daughter of the earth and by implication herself a true earth-goddess. But there is a serious ambiguity in the immortality of both partners, for Rāma is merely a mortal king in the early layers of the epic and only explicitly becomes a god in the later portions, whereas Sītā, . . . , shows traces of having *been* a goddess but is almost always treated as a mortal woman.¹⁹⁰

In the RCM this ambiguity is even more pronounced than in VR or the AR, for we are not told of Sītā's divine birth in the furrow, nor does she return to the earth at the end of the epic; however, there are several points when we witness her relationship to the earth.

In conclusion, *bhakti* and *māyā*, it appears are personified in the RCM in several forms. One could identify Rāvaṇa as *māyā* and Sītā as a *bhaktā*, Meghanāda as *māyā* and Vibhīṣaṇa as a *bhaktā*, Kaikeyī as *māyā* and Kauśalyā as a *bhaktā* and Śurpanakhā as *māyā* and Mandodarī as a *bhaktā*. There are several pairs in the RCM acting in these roles, in which the former acts out of fear of the latter as we see throughout the RCM. This may remind one of the, "dancing-girl" metaphor. Sītā as a *bhaktā* blesses those who are dear to her. One might suggest that Sītā therefore, primarily represents *bhakti*, and secondarily *māyā*.

¹⁹⁰Ibid.

iii) Sītā as the *Śakti* of Rāma

Thus does Sītā, as Rāma's *Śakti*, his motivating power, actually move the story forward by her actions. Not the passive victim she appears to be at first, Sītā is rather the subtle *provocatrice* whose actions inspire the heroism of her spouse.¹⁹¹

A third facet of Sītā's partnership with Rāma is her role as Rāma's *Śakti*, or as the *energy* of Rāma. In this section we will look firstly at the concept of *Śakti*, and secondly at Sītā as Rāma's *Śakti*.

Lalye speaks on the evolution of the concept of *Śakti*, an idea which he says, "is quite kindred to *Māyā*."¹⁹² The idea of *Śakti* goes back to the *Indus Valley Civilization*. In the *Vedas* there is no direct mention of female deity worship; however, there is mention of powers possessed by the gods:¹⁹³

In many Vaiṣṇava Saṁhitās and Purāṇas, the female deity was described as the consort of Viṣṇu. She is often called Śrī or Lakṣmī, as a creative potentiality of Viṣṇu.¹⁹⁴

Lalye comments on the connection to *māyā*, and the idea of the Consort, "The commonly used word 'Śakti' was employed by the Purāṇas and the sectarian works to

¹⁹¹Dimmitt, *Sītā*, 220.

¹⁹²Lalye, *Devī Bhāgavata*, 159.

¹⁹³Ibid.

¹⁹⁴Ibid., 160.

indicate the Supreme power as the wife of a particular deity."¹⁹⁵ In the DB the *Śakti* is not a consort, but is the Supreme Deity.¹⁹⁶

Dimmitt remarks that Sītā instigates actions herself. She accepts these actions as *Śakti*, as the female energizing the man.¹⁹⁷ Throughout the RCM we see women in the role of *Śakti* directing the plot. Kaikeyī directs Daśaratha, Śūrpanakhā directs Rāvaṇa, and Sītā directs Rāma. From the above examples we can discern that it is women in their roles of *avidhyā* who influence the direction of the story. Kauśalyā, though good, has little importance in the direction of the story, Mandodarī tries to influence her husband, but to no avail. One can speculate that ignoring one's *Śakti* (or wife) will produce harmful results.

Dimmitt further examines Sītā as *Śakti* in her capacity as Rāma's virtuous wife. A chaste and virtuous Sītā is the source of Rāma's power as king.¹⁹⁸ There is evidence in the *Rāmāyaṇa* that Sītā and Rāma are to be regarded as one being. Furthermore, Sītā's complete devotion while in captivity is similar to the power of

¹⁹⁵Ibid.

¹⁹⁶Ibid., 161.

¹⁹⁷Dimmitt, *Sītā*, 220.

¹⁹⁸Ibid.

tapas according to Dimmitt, and supplies the power by which Sītā has her husband rescue her.¹⁹⁹

Yocum on the other hand questions Sītā's role as *Śakti* in the VR.²⁰⁰ He expresses wonder as to whether Valmīki consciously portrayed Sītā as such. He remarks, "if there were no woman in the story, there would be no action," but he does not see this as proof that Sītā is depicted as the *Śakti* of Rāma.²⁰¹

An interesting dialogue between Angada and Rāvaṇa in Ravana's court relates directly to the idea of Sītā as the *Śakti* of Rāma and the strength of that role. Sītā is the power of Rāma; without her he is weak:

"Listen Angada; tell me which warrior in your army will dare encounter me. Your master (Rāma) has grown weak due to separation from his wife, while his younger brother (Lakṣmaṇa) shares his grief and is consequently very sad."²⁰²

In a pre-battle context Rāvaṇa is convinced of his forthcoming defeat of Rāma for he is conscious of the power he holds, that power being Sītā. *Śakti*, however, is not transferable. Sītā is an independent force and is not willing to unite with Rāvaṇa. The only advantage that Rāvaṇa has is that he has separated Rāma and Sītā; thus,

¹⁹⁹Ibid., 221.

²⁰⁰Yocum, Comments, 278.

²⁰¹Ibid.

²⁰²*Lankā-Kāṇḍa* 22 A-B, 1-5, 659.

weakening Rāma. As *avidhyā*, or that *māyā* which causes ignorance and delusion, Rāvaṇa is aware of that other side of *māyā*, that of *vidyā*, or the creative aspect, that aspect which works with the *Supreme*, the *Śakti* of the *Supreme*. A significant scene displaying another angle of Sītā as *Śakti* occurs when Trijaṭā speaks to Sītā about the battle between Rāvaṇa and Rāma:

". . . : the enemy of the gods will surely die if an arrow pierces his breast. But the Lord is careful not to strike him there; for He knows that Videha's Daughter (Yourself) abides in his heart."²⁰³

"He is prevented by the thought that Janaka's Daughter dwells in Rāvaṇa's heart and that Janaki's heart is His own abode; in His belly, again, are contained the numberless spheres, which will all perish the moment His arrow pierces Rāvaṇa's heart."²⁰⁴

We again see the unity of Sītā and Rāma. Of course the above is metaphorical, yet is truth on a higher level. Sītā as the *Śakti* of Rāma is trapped within the kingdom of Rāvaṇa, yet metaphorically she is trapped within the negative powers of *māyā* (*avidhyā*). Due to her turning away from Rāma for only a moment (in desire of deer), she has been caught in the grasp of negative *māyā*. Sītā sins, yet by sinning causes action. Again we see women's power when under the influence of evil. Rāvaṇa realizes Rāma's need of Sītā as his *Śakti* or power. Rāvaṇa's lust for Sītā has engulfed her

²⁰³Ibid., 98.1-7, 725.

²⁰⁴Ibid., 99, 725.

within his heart. In order for her to be released Rāvaṇa must be distracted. Her release means Rāvaṇa's death and the return of *vidhyā* to the *Supreme, Śakti* to her Lord.

To conclude we will look to Uma Paraswaram of the University of Winnipeg; Paraswaram has lectured on the status of women in India.²⁰⁵ She speaks of the status of women as being linked to a, "feminine force." She uses the goddesses Durgā, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī as examples of those goddesses playing complementary roles. Sītā we know is directly related and commonly thought to be an incarnation of Lakṣmī. Paraswaram views India as a, "society where women are respected, a society of moral power." Further she states that "anything anyone says about Hinduism, is both true and misleading." She provides Kerala as an example of a state where women's high status has remained, yet Bumiller tells us that even in Kerala, "men and women are far from equal."²⁰⁶ Paraswaram attempts to show a positive side to being a woman in India. She remarks that women perhaps even have an advantage because of the importance of *Śakti*.

²⁰⁵This information is taken from a videotape viewed at St. Paul's College, U. of M, in 1990.

²⁰⁶Bumiller, May You be the Mother, 177.

CHAPTER 5

V. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SĪTĀ AND OTHER MEN

The characters to be examined in this chapter, Rāvāṇa, Hanumān and Lakṣmaṇa, will be done so in the context of their respective relationships with Sītā.

1) Rāvāṇa

Rāvāṇa is significant in several ways to an analysis of Sītā. Firstly, he is that man who kidnaps another man's wife. He is the man in question regarding Sītā's purity, particularly in the VR. Secondly, he is an important component of a higher transcendent level, as he proves through investigation to represent that aspect of *māyā* called *avidyā*.

a) Secular

While Rāvāṇa is undoubtedly the personification of evil, the evil things in the story are generally due to women.¹

The Rāvāṇa we meet in this story is a man who is so overcome by greed and desire, he is unable to differentiate between right and wrong. His wife and brother clearly come across as wiser than himself. Rāvāṇa serves many purposes. He represents evil in the world; without the incarnation of Rāvāṇa, the manifestation of Rāma would have no purpose. Without Rāvāṇa, Sītā's devotion while in the house of another man would not have become the exemplary story it has. We must question and examine the

¹Junankar, Reflections, 8.

relationship between Sītā and Rāvaṇa. We will begin on a secular level, by examining the circumstances surrounding the kidnapping of Sītā by Rāvaṇa.

i) Kidnapping

O vicious stealer of women, storehouse of impurities, O sense-bound dull-witted wretch, . . .²

The kidnapping's importance, like the final test sequence, partially revolves around what is omitted in the RCM. In this section we will look at other versions of this scene in order to understand the importance of Tulasīdāsa's depiction.

It is Śūrpanakhā who initiates the kidnapping. Following rejections from both Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, Lakṣmaṇa's attack upon her, and the subsequent death of her brothers, Śūrpanakhā goes directly to Rāvaṇa. She tells him of the attack upon her and the great beauty of the woman with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Śūrpanakhā's situation is an excuse to kidnap Sītā. Rāvaṇa's greed for Sītā is the motivation behind his actions. On a higher level he is acting according to divine ordinance. Upon hearing of Śūrpanakhā's woes, Rāvaṇa is aware of the possibility that it is the "Lord Himself" he is fighting; thus, he says:

If therefore the Lord Himself . . . has appeared on earth, I will go and resolutely fight with Him and cross the ocean of mundane existence by falling to His arrows. Adoration is out of question in this (demoniac) body, which is made up of the principle of ignorance, Tamas. . . . And if

²*Lankā-Kāṇḍa* 32 A-B.1-5, 667.

they happen to be some mortal princes I shall conquer them both in battle and carry off the bride."³

Is this Rāvaṇa's true goal, to die at the hand of Rāma? Does Sītā have anything to do with the battle? Perhaps his lust for her is real on a secular level, but his desire for her is only that. On a higher level he knows that she is connected to Rāma. One might suggest that Sītā is a route towards Rāvaṇa's own salvation. Sītā's first encounter with Rāvaṇa takes place when she has been left alone at the cottage in the forest and Rāvaṇa disguised as a mendicant has approached her:

Said Sītā, "Listen, O holy father: you have spoken like a villain." Then Rāvaṇa revealed his real form; and She was terrified when he mentioned his name. Sītā plucked all Her courage and said, "Stay awhile, O wretch; my lord has come. Even as a tiny hare would wed a lioness, so have you wooed your own destruction (by setting your heart on me), O king of demons." On hearing these words the ten-headed Rāvaṇa flew into a rage, though in his heart he rejoiced to adore Her feet.⁴

It seems that upon Sītā's encounter with Rāvaṇa her character or at least what we can observe of her character takes on a new dimension. We also must take into consideration that Sītā is not really Sītā; she is an illusion. If she is perhaps a stronger character with Rāvaṇa, can that be dismissed because she is only an illusion. We must keep in mind; however, in analyzing her character that we must examine her first as if she is Sītā, for to her audience she is Sītā. What relevance does her being only an

³*Aranya-Kāṇḍa* 22.1-4, 543.

⁴*Ibid.*, 27.1-8, 548.

illusion have? Is her illusionary character perhaps more relevant? Is it more relevant in terms of its non-existence in the VR?

One of the most important changes from the VR found in both the RCM and the AR involves Sītā entering the fire before she is kidnapped by Rāvāna.⁵ Bulcke remarks on the central reason for this action:

By this expedient Sītā is saved from the touch of Rāvāna, who carried a shadow Sītā to Laṅka.⁶

⁵In the *Rāmāyaṇ* television series, Rāvāna does touch Sītā when he kidnaps her ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 11, episode 32). Rāvāna approaches the cottage as a holy mendicant begging for food. Sītā brings him food, but cannot cross the line drawn by Lakṣmaṇa. She asks that Rāvāna come for the food himself. He becomes angry, asking what kind of an Āryan she is; a guest is god. She insists that she cannot cross the line; she means no disrespect. Rāvāna threatens to curse her and Rāma, whom he claims to have seen wounded. Sītā crosses the line. Rāvāna comments on Sītā's beauty and stresses that she is worthy of being a wife of Laṅka; all his wives will serve her. Sītā becomes angry, and the real Rāvāna emerges. It is at this point that Sītā speaks harsh words to Rāvāna. Rāvāna says, "Woman! Once you cross the line of rectitude . . . impossible to cross back . . . no one can save you." Sītā calls for Lakṣmaṇa; Rāvāna grabs her physically, puts her into his chariot and flies away, while Sītā screams for help (Ibid.).

⁶Bulcke, *Relevance to Modern Age*, 63.

Naidu, using Hill's translation of the *Rāmāyana*, explains the same:

Kamban and Tulasī want to avoid Sītā being physically touched by Rāvaṇa as has been portrayed in *Valmīki Rāmāyana*, and consequently Kamban tells that Rāvaṇa 'uproots the very hut with Sītā in it, up to one mile radius with his pillar-like arms, puts it in his aerial vehicle and flies off through the air.'¹² Tulasī adopts, however, a different method. He introduces the element of Māyā Sītā.

12 *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam* 3-8-74.⁷

It may be mentioned here that the real Sītā re-manifested only after the death of Rāvaṇa, during the fire-ordeal.⁸

Can Sītā not be physical until Rāvaṇa is dead? Can *vidyā* not flourish until *avidyā* is destroyed? Gopal refers to Sītā as the manifestation of *Ādi Shakti* and alludes to her attributes of divinity. Rāvaṇa takes her away but cannot touch her.⁹ The kidnapping in the VR is partially depicted as follows:

With his left hand he caught hold of the lotus-eyed Sītā by her locks, while with his right hand he clasped her by her thighs. (17)¹⁰

⁷Naidu, *Re-Creations*, 320.

⁸*Ibid.*, 321.

⁹Gopal, *Rāmāyaṇa*, 109.

¹⁰*Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*, vol. 2, XLIX.17, 782.

In the AR the same scene is as follows:

Then tearing the earth with his nails and lifting Sītā up in his arms and balancing her he threw her into his car and speedily went towards the welkin.¹¹

In the RCM we witness Rāvaṇa's fear during the kidnapping:

Full of rage, Rāvaṇa now seated Her in his chariot and drove through the air in great flurry: he was so much afraid that he was scarcely able to drive.¹²

After the kidnapping Sītā is now faced with survival under the roof of another man. Despite the reader's knowledge that Sītā is a shadow Sītā, she comes across as *real*, therefore, this is how she must be examined. It is easy to forget that the Sītā we are dealing with is not the real Sītā. The primary significance of the illusionary Sītā is to justify the deletion of Sita's self-destruction found in the VR.

How does Sītā deal with this man/demon? Upon their first encounter Sītā does not appear the shy, frightened girl she is so often made out to be. Immediately upon separation from Rāma she becomes stronger. She is strong, as independent goddesses are often depicted. It is Rāma who becomes weaker. This tells one of the strength of *Śakti*. We are told that Sītā is frightened, and that she "plucked" all her courage. This only enhances her humanity, for it is natural that one would be afraid in such a

¹¹ Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, VII.51-52, 78.

¹² Aranya-Kāṇḍa 28, 548.

situation. The importance of her actions is that she does have the necessary strength to survive. She does not die without Rāma, and she does not give in to Rāvaṇa.

On a secular level of course, Rāvaṇa has kidnapped Sītā, a grave crime, and it is Rāvaṇa who must pay, with his life. Who really pays in the end? Rāvaṇa dies at the hand of Rāma, ensuring him immortality. It is clear throughout the war scenes in the text that Rāma will kill Rāvaṇa. Though Sītā does not go through the final trial she does in the VR, she is never compensated or recognized for the ordeals she goes through; Rāvaṇa is never punished. It is Sītā who suffers.

ii) Rāvaṇa and Sītā

Again the significance of several scenes in the RCM dealing with Rāvaṇa and Sītā is affected by the omissions and differences from previous versions. We will examine the VR and the AR renditions of several of these important scenes. The following section involving Sītā and Rāvaṇa will be examined in the context of Sītā and Rāvaṇa's relationship. Sītā will be examined in terms of her development while with Rāvaṇa. The following scenes are as observed through the eyes of Hanumān.

The wretch tried to prevail upon Her in many ways through friendly advice, allurements, threats and estrangement. . . . : I will make Mandodarī and all other queens your handmaids, I swear, provided you cast your look on me only once."¹³

¹³ *Sundara-Kāṇḍa* 8.1-5, 603.

Following Rāvāna's threats, Sītā, while "Interposing* a blade of grass between Herself and Rāvāna," replies:

"Listen, O ten-headed monster: can a lotus flower ever expand in the glow of a fire-fly?" "Ponder this at heart," . . . ; "perhaps you have no idea what Śrī Rāma's shafts are like, O wretch. You carried me off at a time when there was none by my side; yet you do not feel ashamed, O vile and impudent rogue!"

*According to the Hindu etiquette a lady must not talk to a male stranger without a medium. Being forced to violate the above rule at this emergency Sītā takes recourse to the aforesaid expedient.¹⁴

Does this sound like a *meek, fearful* woman? Perhaps we are meant to feel that she feels she has nothing left to lose. We certainly get the feeling at times that Sītā would like to die, but what is important in terms of her character development is that she contains the ability to behave in such a manner, as does she contain the necessary strength to survive. One may be inclined to believe that Tulasīdāsa's aspiration was to substantiate Sītā as an *ideal bhaktā*. The majority of her actions can be interpreted as such. In a secular, modern light in India, as well as in the west, Sītā comes through as more than a *bhaktā*, perhaps more than Tulasīdāsa intended. The text lives past the era in which it was written and, therefore, its interpretations may alter in concordance. She strengthens through her ordeal and the references to her as "doe-like" and "shy" become less and less convincing.

¹⁴Ibid., 8.1-5, 603.

The development of Sītā results in a catch-22 situation. Sītā it appears, comes across as a stronger female character when she is separated from Rāma. Perhaps the world does not run properly unless the two are together, but Sītā herself appears stronger without her complement, typical of an independent goddess. It is true that when she is without Rāma, he is all she thinks of; her devotion does not change. Nevertheless, her strength is evident; she survives, though she thinks she will not. Rāvaṇa replies to the above attack from Sītā as follows:

"Sītā, you have offered me an insult; I will accordingly cut off your head . . . " "My lord's arm is lovely as a string of blue lotuses and shapely and long as the trunk of an elephant, . . . Either that arm or your dreadful sword will have my neck : . . . You possess a cool, sharp and good blade; therefore, relieve the burden of my sorrow," Sītā said.¹⁵

It is Queen Mandodarī who intervenes between Rāvaṇa and Sītā and stops him from killing her. Rāvaṇa responds by ordering the demonesses as follows:

"Go and intimidate Sītā in every way. If she does not accept my advice in a month's time I will draw my sword and behead her."¹⁶

The demonesses begin to intimidate Sītā until Trijaṭā tells them of her dream about a monkey burning down Laṅka and Rāma's subsequent request for Sītā; upon hearing this the demonesses fall at Sītā's feet:

¹⁵Ibid., 9.1-5, 603-604.

¹⁶Ibid., 9.1-5, 604.

Then they all dispersed in various directions and Sītā anxiously thought within Herself: "At the end of a long month this vile monster will slay me*"

*As appears from what follows, it is not death that Sītā dreads, but the long interval of a month which has to elapse before Her threatened death.¹⁷

In the VR the episode in which Hanumān is in Laṅka is quite long.¹⁸ Much is similar to the above; Rāvāna attempts to convince Sītā and she also places a blade of grass between them.¹⁹ Rāvāna gives her two months to succumb or he will kill her.²⁰ However, an interesting event occurs in the VR which is not found in the RCM; Sītā is restored to confidence by Rāvāna's consort's glances.²¹ One sees here an example of women strengthening women. Sītā reproaches Rāvāna as above and Mandodarī and Rāvāna's junior consort stop Rāvāna.²² Subsequently Sītā is intimidated by the demonesses; she wails until Trijaṭā tells of her dream.²³ Immediately following the

¹⁷Ibid., 11, 604.

¹⁸Valmiki-Rāmāyaṇa, vol. 2, Canto IV, 1131 - Canto LVI, 1323.

¹⁹Ibid., vol. 2, Canto XXI.2-3, 1193.

²⁰Ibid., vol. 2, Canto XXII.8-9, 1197.

²¹Ibid., vol. 2, Canto XXII.10-12, 1197.

²²Ibid., vol. 2, Canto XXII.38-43, 1200.

²³Ibid., vol. 2, Canto XXIII-XXVII, 1200-1217.

above scene Sītā decides to commit suicide by tying her hair cord around her neck; she is stopped by auspicious omens which appear on her body.²⁴

In the AR this scene is similar, yet again there are variations. One major variation is the omission of Rāvāṇa's dream found in the RCM. Rāvāṇa's dream is of a monkey coming to Laṅka, commanded by Rāma, assuming a diminutive size, and seeing Sītā from a cluster of trees.²⁵ One sees the same as above in Rāvāṇa's coaxing and anger; one sees Mandodarī's intervention and Sītā's use of a medium, a piece of straw.²⁶ Rāvāṇa gives Sītā two months to share his bed or she will be killed.²⁷ Trijaṭā subsequently arrives and tells of her dream.²⁸ Also in the AR, Rāvāṇa tells Mandodarī that in the event of his death, she should kill Sītā, perform his funeral, and enter the fire with him.²⁹ In doing so, he asks her to commit sati.

²⁴Ibid., vol. 2, Canto XXVIII.17-19, 1219.

²⁵Adhyātmā Rāmāyaṇa, Chapter II.15-17, 117.

²⁶Ibid., Chapter II.20-38, 117-118.

²⁷Ibid., Chapter II.41-42, 118.

²⁸Ibid., Chapter II.47-52, 119.

²⁹Ibid., Chapter X.43, 163.

We see in the above that Rāvaṇa's relationship with Sītā up to this point involves his lust for her and her resulting strength and refusal. Her devotion to Rāma is only heightened, in turn frustrating Rāvaṇa.^{30 31}

It is almost as if Rāvaṇa's actions are compulsory. We witness those closest to Rāvaṇa, such as Mārīcha, Vibhīṣaṇa, Mandodarī and Mālyavān, warning him again and again of Rāma's might. Those who are not close to him also warn him, such as

³⁰The television series portrays an earlier confrontation between Rāvaṇa and Sītā not found in the RCM ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 11, episode 33). Sītā shows no fear in her confrontations with Rāvaṇa. She shows only contempt and makes this clear to him. Again one sees Sītā threatening to die. Rāvaṇa's anger is calmed by a man that we see in the sky who curses him for raping his wife. Rāvaṇa insists that Sītā be given anything she desires and that the demonesses try to win her over. He gives her one year (Ibid., vol. 11, episode 33). In the RCM we do not see Rāvaṇa attempting to touch her, but only are told that he, "tried to prevail upon Her in many ways," (*Sundara-Kāṇḍa* 8.1-5, 603).

This earlier scene is found in the VR immediately after the kidnapping. We see Rāvaṇa attempting to coax Sītā and her refusal and admonishment. Rāvaṇa orders the demonesses to intimidate her (*Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*, vol. 2, Canto LV, 799 - LVI, 806). This scene is not found in any detail in the RCM or the AR.

³¹Another significant scene occurs in the television series which is not found in the text of Tulasīdāsa ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 18, episode 53). Rāvaṇa wishes to make Sītā his before she hears of the news of the bridge and Rāma's arrival in Laṅka. Rāvaṇa approaches Sītā and tells her that she is free. Sītā says, "really . . . are you sending me to my husband or mocking me?" Rāvaṇa replies, "he was the bondage from which I am setting you free. You are free from your dharma. Nothing is in the way of our union." He subsequently orders Trijaṭā to place a tray in front of Sītā which has on it, Rāma's head. Sītā is stunned and upset. Rāvaṇa assumes that since Sītā believes Rāma dead she will consent to be with him, but Sītā insists that the bond between a husband lasts beyond death. She says, "the bond between Rāma and Sītā is above the physical." She wonders why her soul was not aware when Rāma died and asks him to forgive her error. After Rāvaṇa leaves, Trijaṭā tells her the head was illusionary.

Hanumān, Angada, Sītā and Rāma. Shortly following the initial conflict, Mālyavān,

Rāvāna's maternal grandfather says to him:

"Listen, my son, to a few words of advice from me. Ever since you carried off Sītā and brought Her here, there have been ill-omens more than one can tell. By opposing Śrī Rāma, whose glory has been the theme of the Vedas and Purānas, none has ever enjoyed happiness.³²

During the battle when things are not going well for Rāvāna, he approaches his younger brother Kumbhakarna to whom he tells the whole story in desperation.

Kumbhakarna replies as follows:

"Having carried off the Mother of the universe, O fool, you still expect good out of it!"³³

Rāvāna is beyond understanding the correct path to take. Rather than coming to understanding he sinks further into ignorance. Is Rāma responsible for this?

Kumbhakarna speaks to Vibhīṣana as follows:

Rāvāna is in the clutches of death and would not listen even to the best advice at this stage.³⁴

Death for Rāvāna is of course at the hands of Rāma. How is the omnipotent Rāma involved in Rāvāna's obstinacy? In order to fulfil his purpose on earth, that of wiping out the demon race, Rāvāna, the head of the demon race, must fit into a divine plan.

³² *Lankā-Kānda* 47.1-4, 679.

³³ *Ibid.*, 62, 690.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.1-5, 691.

Perhaps Rāvaṇa's actions are compulsory; perhaps he has no choice in the higher scheme of things, for the kidnapping of Sītā is part of a greater plan. How does this affect the character of Sītā in terms of her relationship with Rāvaṇa? Tulasīdāsa we know chooses to protect Sītā's purity by including the fire scene in which Rāma hides Sītā until the ordeal is over, therefore, saving her from the touch of Rāvaṇa. However, if Rāma is truly responsible for all that happens, then it is Rāma who is responsible for the kidnapping of Sītā and not Rāvaṇa at all.

On a secular level, the relationship between Rāvaṇa and Sītā provides examples of character behaviour. Rāvaṇa's greed and lust is emphasized as is Sītā's devotion; however, their relationship extends to other levels, which are examined below.

b) Transcendent

On a transcendent level the relationship between Rāvaṇa and Sītā is important in an analysis of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Rāvaṇa and Sītā play secondary roles to Rāma. Sītā's entire being is devoted to Rāma and Rāvaṇa's entire being is bent on the destruction of Rāma. Sītā represents union with Rāma and Rāvaṇa represents separation from the *Divine*. In this section we will briefly look at the roles of Rāvaṇa and Sītā in their roles as *māyā*.

i) *Vidyā* and *Avidyā*

The observation might be made that though Rāvaṇa and Sītā have very little in common, they do have one very important characteristic in common, a characteristic

emerging on a transcendent level. Both Sītā and Rāvaṇa possess the power of *māyā*.

According to Bharadwaj, Tulasīdāsa uses the word *māyā* in both its popular and its philosophical senses:

Popularly, it is used to denote the inexplicable nature of a woman or the cunning and craft of a juggler or demon (R VII, 165, 4). Philosophically it means Prakṛti or Prapañca, that is, illusion or super-imposition, or the divine willpower or sport.³⁵

The above is relevant to both Sītā and Rāvaṇa; Sītā is the woman and Rāvaṇa, the demon. Can Sītā however, be only considered in the above sense, as a woman? She is more than a mortal woman and thus, her role as *māyā* is greater. From Sītā all originates; she is creation and Rāma is her source. Rāvaṇa is the antithesis to creative *māyā*. One might suggest that Sītā and Rāvaṇa represent *vidyā* and *avidyā*. As Bharadwaj outlines, the former involves the redeeming function of *māyā*, and the latter involves that aspect of *māyā* which causes ignorance and leads the *jīvas* or souls astray from god:

Avidya-Māyā operates in relation to those who are given to self-enjoyment and do not care for God, while Vidya-Māyā operates in relation to those who are devoted to Him. Ignorance or Avidya has no power over the devotees of God, because Vidya emanating from God pervades their whole being, R VII, 116.1.³⁶

³⁵Bharadwaj, Philosophy of Tulasīdās, 40.

³⁶Ibid., 44.

This passage is particularly relevant to the relationship between Rāvana and Sītā on a transcendent level. Rāvana as *avidyā-māyā* represents that part of *māyā* which allows him the power of illusion, yet he does not encompass the redeeming aspect of *māyā*; thus, the result is an unbalanced super-being. He has earned his power through past deeds. Sītā, on the other hand represents *vidyā-māyā*, that power, guided by and in conjunction with the power of god. Rāvana as we have seen, lusts after Sītā, physically. He does not appreciate her divine connection with Rāma nor does he recognize the divinity of herself.

Bharadwaj speaks of the inferiority of *māyā* to *bhakti*.³⁷ He makes it clear, that in this sense Sītā is not *māyā*. She represents its creative aspect. In the context of Rāvana and Sītā, Sītā is a *bhaktā* and Rāvana is the negative aspect of *māyā*; he is the opposite of a *bhaktā*, the dancing-girl who cowers in the presence of *bhakti*. We saw his fear when he kidnapped Sītā.

Rāvana has lost control over even his younger brother, Vibhīṣana. Vibhīṣana represents *bhakti* also. It is Rāvana as *māyā*, in fear of *bhakti*, who banishes his own brother. Vibhīṣana worships Rāma with all his heart, yet in keeping to his *dharma* is conscious of his duty to his family. One might suggest that Śūrpanakhā and Mandodarī also represent *avidyā* and *vidyā*. Śūrpanakhā can also, as the younger

³⁷Ibid., 47-48.

sister of Rāvaṇa, be contrasted with Vibhīṣana, the younger brother. Vibhīṣana represents *bhakti* while Śūrpanakhā represents the antithesis of *bhakti*. She feels no *love*, only lust, anger, revenge, vanity, and jealousy. She is much like Meghanāda. Trijaṭā is like Mandodarī and Vibhīṣana. Almost all of the characters in the text appear to fall into one or the other categories. Kaikeyī is perhaps an exception; she is used by the powers of *avidyā-māyā*, yet does not begin or end as such.

Dennis Hudson refers to the disproportionate reverence for Sītā and Rāma which several characters possess in the *Rāmāyana*.³⁸ Firstly is Śūrpanakhā, who scorned Sītā, but sought Rāma and ended up with her nose and ears being chopped off. Secondly is Rāvaṇa, who sought Sītā and scorned Rāma, resulting in his destruction. Thirdly is Vibhīṣana, who worshipped both and prospered.³⁹ Thus, only those who revere Sītā and Rāma in unity will prosper.

Junankar comments on the following episode, taking place during the war between Rāma and Rāvaṇa:⁴⁰

³⁸Dennis Hudson, "Pinnai, Krishna's Cowherd Wife," in The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 253.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰In the television series we see the same justification for not immediately killing Rāvaṇa ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 25, episode 75). Indra says to Brahmā, "Why doesn't he aim at his heart?" Brahmā replies, "Rāma knows . . . Sītā is in Rāvaṇa's heart and Rāma dwells in Sītā's heart and in Rāma's heart . . . spheres and creation, therefore, all will be destroyed."

In his Rāmcaritamānasa Tulsī has posed a dilemma of tremendous significance. When Sītā heard the news that in spite of the destruction of the head and arms of Rāvaṇa he still was alive, she was naturally perturbed about the prospects of her liberation. She confided her thoughts to her companion Trijaṭā as follows:

Trijaṭā said, O Princess listen:
When an arrow pierces the heart
of the enemy of the gods,
Death will surely overtake him.
But knowing that Rāvaṇa's heart
Is the place where Sītā dwells
The Lord does not aim at it.
Wounded in the head and through pain
His remembrance of you will be lost;
Then Rāma the wise will kill him
With his arrow in Rāvaṇa's heart. (6)

6. Rāmcaritamānasa, VI, 98/6-7; VI, 99. Quoted by C.H. Handoo: Tulasīdāsa, loc.cit., p. 158.⁴¹

It is significant to ponder the fate which Sītā encounters in the VR. This fate is directly related to Sītā's so-called *relationship* with Rāvaṇa. Tulasīdāsa effectively erases this relationship and thus, any possibilities for flaws in Sītā's behaviour. In both the VR and the RCM Rāma knows that Sītā is innocent, yet admonishes her for the sake of his own reputation. He knows that *avidyā-māyā* cannot touch *bhakti*.

⁴¹Junankar, Reflections, 4-5.

2) Hanumān

The relationship between Hanumān and Sītā is one of a devotee to a part of the *Divine*, or of a son to a mother. Hanumān worships Sītā as a part of Rāma. Hanumān is the one whom Rāma knows will find Sītā; he trusts Hanumān, and Hanumān proves to be worthy of his trust. In this section we will look firstly at various scenes in which the relationship between Hanumān and Sītā is emphasized (mother-son); secondly at the incidents leading to Sītā's refusal to return with Hanumān; and thirdly at scenes in which Hanumān's role as messenger between Rāma and Sītā is emphasized.

a) Hanumān and Sītā

The relationship between Hanumān and Sītā is particularly important in respect to the fact that Hanumān is another man, yet unlike Rāvaṇa, he is a man trusted by Rāma. Hanumān is not interested in Sītā, the woman, only Sītā the *Mother*. Hanumān is portrayed as follows upon first seeing *Mother Sītā*:

He mentally bowed to Her as he saw Her.⁴²

The son of the wind-god felt supremely miserable to see Janaka's Daughter sad.⁴³

⁴²*Sundara-Kāṇḍa* 7.1-4, 602.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 8, 602.

Hanumān also watches Rāvaṇa threatening Sītā, and Sītā's subsequent plea to Trijaṭā to aid her in ending her life. Trijaṭā refuses and Sītā continues to herself:

"Heaven itself has turned hostile to me; there is no fire to be had and I cannot be cured of my agony . . . The moment seemed like an age to Hanumān as he beheld Sītā extremely distressed due to Her separation from Her lord.⁴⁴

The agony of Sītā is witnessed through the eyes of the compassionate Hanumān; no other man sees this agony. In this instance Sītā is unaware that she is being watched. When she does realize, she believes she is being watched by a woman. Hanumān drops the signet ring that Rāma has given to him in order to prove his identity; he proceeds to "recount Śrī Rāmachandra's praises." Sītā says:

"Wherefore does she who has told this tale, which is like nectar to my ears, not reveal herself?*"

*Obviously the orchard in which Sītā had been confined was open to the fair sex alone. Naturally, therefore, when She heard an unseen voice utter Śrī Rāma's praises, She concluded that it must be some female.⁴⁵

Hanumān drew near Her, while Sītā sat with Her back turned towards him, full of amazement.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Ibid., 11.1-6, 605.

⁴⁵Ibid., 12.1-6. 606.

⁴⁶Ibid.

It is important to note here that because Hanumān is a man, Sītā cannot look directly at him; she sits with her back to him. He proceeds to tell her who he is, and she responds:

Perceiving him to be a devotee of Śrī Hari She developed an intense affection for him. Her eyes filled with tears and a thrill ran through Her body. "To me who was being drowned in the ocean of desolation, dear Hanumān, you have come as a veritable bark."⁴⁷

And Hanumān replies:

"Mother, compose Yourself now and hear the message of Śrī Rāma (the Lord of the Raghus)." Even as he uttered these words, the monkey's voice was choked with emotion and his eyes filled with tears.⁴⁸

Hanumān relays the message of Rāma and receives Sītā's blessing in return.

This discourse between the two illustrates Sītā's growing trust of Hanumān. She is aware of the delusionary capacity of *māyā*, yet realizes that the ring belonging to her Lord cannot have been, "prepared through Māyā." One sees that there are limits to *māyā*, and those limits are those imposed by or connected with Rāma. Upon her realization that Hanumān is in fact genuine she immediately accepts him as her son. She recognizes his devotion to Rāma. Hanumān proceeds to tell Sītā that he is hungry:

⁴⁷ *Sundara-Kāṇḍa* 13.1-5, 607.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 14, 607.

"I tell you, my son, this grove is guarded by most valiant and mighty demons." "Mother, I am not at all afraid of them, only if I have your hearty approval."⁴⁹

Like a son to a mother, Hanumān asks Sītā's permission. She warns him first of danger, but gives her permission.⁵⁰ The relationship that Sītā has with Hanumān emphasizes a maternal Sītā. We do not experience Sītā as a mother in the RCM, but we realize her capacity as one in her relationship with Hanumān. Grierson refers to Sītā as, "the ideal of an Indian wife and mother; . . ."⁵¹ Where do we see Sītā as a mother, except towards her devotees? We hear only mention of her sons at the end of the epic. It is within her relationship with Hanumān that this facet of Sītā is most clear.⁵²

⁴⁹Ibid., 16.1-5, 609.

⁵⁰Ibid., 17, 609.

⁵¹Grierson, Ethnology, Languages, Literature, 171.

⁵²The above scenes are similar in both the AR and the VR (Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa, vol. 2, Cantos XXVIII-XL, 1217-1267). There are; however, some important variances in later scenes dealing with Hanumān and Sītā, which will be noted in the following sections. Smith in his description of the differences between Valmīki and Tulasīdāsa says that Hanumān's narration of the tale while introducing himself to Sītā is drastically shortened in the RCM (Smith, Reading the Rāmāyaṇa, 36). Further, the entire meeting is longer in the VR. Sītā tells Hanumān her life story and he does the same; thus, their relationship is deeper than merely a mutual connection to Rāma (Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa, vol. 2, Cantos XXXIII-XXXV, 1229-1244).

b) Refusal to Return

Possibly the most significant event in Hanumān and Sītā's relationship in the RCM is that Sītā does not return with Hanumān to Rāma. Sītā does not return with him in any version of the *Rāmāyana*, but the reasons vary. The physical welfare of Sītā is not of primary importance. On a secular level we can assume that if Sītā's safety was an issue she would immediately be removed from Lañka. This move would additionally obliterate any need for war. It is also interesting to note the variations on this scene and the significance that these variations have for the portrayal of Sītā. Again, in this section variations of this scene are of particular importance and references will be made in the main text to the AR, VR.

It is significant to note Goldman's portrayal of this scene between Sītā and Hanumān, in his introduction to the VR. Hanumān, after meeting with Sītā in the Aśoka grove offers to carry Sītā back to Rāma, but she refuses:

Reluctant to allow herself to be willingly touched by a male other than her husband, and argues that Rāma must come himself to avenge the insult of her abduction.⁵³

One sees in the VR Sītā's anger that Rāma has not come for her himself. Hanumān tells her that it is because Rāma doesn't know where she is and that Rāma is upset. Sītā, upset because of Rāma's grief, wants Rāma brought to her. Hanumān offers to

⁵³Goldman, The Rāmāyana of Valmīki, 11.

take her to him. Sītā first refuses because Hanumān is so small she doesn't think he could take her. However, when he reveals his size she still refuses.⁵⁴ In the RCM we see a Sītā who believes that Rāma is angry with her and subsequently, she blames herself. Hanumān reassures her and relays Rāma's message, following which, he says:

I would take You to Him this very moment; but, I swear by Rāma, I have no such orders from the Lord.⁵⁵

Why did Tulasīdāsa choose to change this scene? Was he increasing Hanumān's authority, or was he clarifying Rāma's authority over Sītā's? Hanumān makes it clear that he will not take her because he has not been ordered to. Perhaps Tulasīdāsa is attempting to intensify the relationship between Hanumān and Sītā, or conceivably it is Sītā's character which is being played with. We no longer see any anger in Sītā, instead she blames herself; her anger is obliterated.⁵⁶

⁵⁴Valmiki-Rāmāyana, vol. 2, Canto XXXVII.1-68, 1248-1254.

⁵⁵*Sundara-Kānda* 15.1-5, 608.

⁵⁶It is interesting to note how this scene in which Hanumān and Sītā meet is portrayed in the television series ("Rāmāyan," vol. 15, episode 45). In the RCM, as above, Hanumān tells Sītā he cannot take her due to a lack of such orders from Rāma. Tulasīdāsa has given control to Rāma. Hanumān's statement makes it clear who he takes his orders from. Sītā is powerless. In the television series however, this scene is portrayed in a very different way, one chosen for the contemporary audience. Hanumān says to Sītā, that if she commands him, he will take her on his back to Rāma. Sītā replies that though she trusts him, it is against her *dharma* to willingly touch any masculine body. Her travels with Rāvāna were against her will; therefore, her *dharma* was not destroyed. What is crucial in this scene is that the control now belongs to Sītā; Hanumān is ready to obey her command. The creators of the television series have given control over the situation to Sītā. Of course, if she was to

If Sītā were to command Hanumān to take her, would he obey? This was up to Tulasīdāsa. He omitted her refusal, but did not show her opinion either way. Does she have an opinion? Did Tulasīdāsa mute the character of Sītā by removing her decision and letting Hanumān make it for her? Further, if Sītā is not really Sītā as is the case in Tulasīdāsa, why can she not go with him? In the AR Hanumān offers to take Sītā; she replies:

"If Rāma after having dried up the ocean or bridged it with nets, arrows and having come here together with the monkeys kills Rāvāna in battle and takes me away, then it will redound to his ever-lasting glory. Therefore, do thou go. I shall somehow keep my self being alive."⁵⁷

She wishes for Rāma to come for her, not because of her *dharma*, or because of an insistence that her husband rescue her, but in order to enhance Rāma's glory. Her strength again, revolves around Rāma.

We move from an angry Sītā in the VR who refuses of her own will to return with Hanumān, demanding that Rāma avenge her abduction, to a Sītā in AR who though still refuses, does so in order to enhance Rāma's glory, to a Sītā in Tulasīdāsa's RCM who has absolutely no say in the matter.

It is significant to note that Angada while speaking with Rāvāna, also says that he would have taken Sītā back and implies that the reason for not doing so is fear of

go with him the story could not continue; Rāma would not go to battle with Rāvāna and Rāma's lesson to mankind would never be taught.

⁵⁷Adhyātma Rāmāyana, V.7-8, 128.

insulting Rāma.⁵⁸ Thus, Tulasīdāsa makes it clear that the possibility of Sītā returning is completely out of the hands of Sītā. He takes away any authority she may have had. It is important that the creators of the television series chose to return this authority to Sītā.

c) Hanumān as Messenger

Hanumān also plays the role of *the messenger* between Sītā and Rāma. He relays Rāma's message to Sītā, and Sītā's message to Rāma. She gives him a jewel from her head for Rāma and conveys her message to Rāma. For Sītā, Hanumān becomes a substitute Rāma; her closeness to him is based on his relationship with Rāma. Also, Hanumān's closeness to Sītā is based on her association with Rāma. For each, the other is a substitute for Rāma. Hanumān plays the role of messenger in both the AR and the VR. We will not look so much at the messages themselves in this section, but rather at Hanumān's role as *the messenger*, and the significance of this role for Sītā and Rāma.

⁵⁸ *Lankā-Kāṇḍa* 29.1-4, 665.

In the AR, Hanumān tells Sītā that Rāma will come for her.⁵⁹ Sītā wonders how Rāma can cross the ocean with an army of monkeys.⁶⁰ Hanumān later tells her that if Rāma knew she was there, Rāma would reduce Laṅka to ashes.⁶¹

One must ask why Rāma does not do any of this himself. One knows that Rāma is the *Supreme*, he is the source of creation; therefore, Rāma is not the one who acts. Throughout the epic we see others acting on Rāma's behalf. He inspires, he blesses, and acts when absolutely necessary. Each of Rama's devotees play the role of *Śakti* in their mission to rescue Sītā, the primary *Śakti*. Are these devotees then working on behalf of Sītā? One might suggest that they are, for Sītā's powers are held captive while she is in captivity. They take her place, ultimately working on behalf of Rāma.

Hanumān's role as *the messenger* is rooted in his relationship with Rāma, a relationship of trust and devotion. Rāma trusts Hanumān; thus, Sītā does also.⁶² We see evidence of the strong relationship between Hanumān and Rāma in the

⁵⁹Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Chapter III.44-45, 122.

⁶⁰Ibid., Chapter III.46-47, 122.

⁶¹Ibid., Chapter III.61-62, 122.

⁶²In the television series, we see further evidence of the strong relationship between Rāma and Hanumān ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 14, episode 41). Rāma places his trust in Hanumān. He knows that it will be Hanumān who will find Sītā. Thus, upon the commencement of the search he gives Hanumān his signet ring to give to Sītā in order to prove he is a messenger of Rāma. He also sends a message, "Tell her, ever since she was parted from me . . . corpse from which life has fled . . . once I know where she is (will get her)."

following passage taking place in the *Kiṣkindhā-Kāṇḍa* in the RCM, shortly after Hanumān and Rāma meet:

"Listen, O Hanumān: be not depressed at heart; you are twice as dear to Me as Lakṣmaṇa. Everyone says that I look upon all with the same eye; but a devotee is particularly dear to Me because he too depends on none but Me.⁶³

One sees Rāma feeling something amounting to guilt when Hanumān returns with news of Sītā's condition:

When the all-blissful Lord heard of Sītā's agony, tears rushed to His lotus eyes. . . . "No one endowed with a body, - a god, human being or sage, - has put me under such obligation, Hanumān, as you have done. Even my mind shrinks to face you; . . .⁶⁴

Hanumān again plays the role of *the messenger* towards the end of the epic, following the defeat of Rāvaṇa. It is Hanumān who is sent to tell Sītā of the victory, and to enquire as to her welfare. Why does Rāma not go now? Can Rāma not enter the polluted spot in which Sītā has been kept for all this time, the space in which she was *kept* by another man? Rāma sends Hanumān, who tells her the news and in return receives her blessing; Sītā is portrayed as follows:

Her soul was overjoyed, a thrill ran through Her body and with eyes full of tears Rāma (Sītā) said again and again. "What can I give you? There is nothing in all the three worlds equal in value to this information."⁶⁵

⁶³ *Kiṣkindhā-Kāṇḍa* 2.1-4, 570.

⁶⁴ *Sundara-Kāṇḍa* 31.1-4, 619.

⁶⁵ *Lankā-Kāṇḍa* 107, 734.

Sītā gives him her blessing. Sītā is actually referred to as Rāma in this passage. For Hanumān, she is Rāma.⁶⁶

Thus, we see in the relationship between Hanumān and Sītā several levels at play. Hanumān is a support for Sītā; he plays the role of the son, and he connects her to Rāma. Thus, Hanumān on both a secular and a transcendent level plays that role which connects; he is responsible for the connection between husband and wife, or the Lord and his *Śakti*.

⁶⁶In the AR there is nothing of the above; Hanumān only fetches her. In the television series, Hanumān is sent to tell Sītā the news ("Rāmāyan," vol. 26, episode 76). Sītā asks why Rāma delays. Hanumān returns and tells Rāma of Sītā's condition; Hanumān asks Rāma why he delays. Rāma replies that there will be no more delays and orders Vibhīṣana to attend to Sītā, and Hanumān and Angada to escort her.

3) Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa

a) Secular

Different from Rāma in humility, forgiveness and generosity, Lakṣmaṇa's character is somewhat unusual. He passed fourteen years with his brother in exile, and never slept at night because he stood guard over his brother and his sister-in-law into whose eyes he never looked, .

⁶⁷

Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, though rarely speaking or even looking at one another, symbolise an important relationship, perhaps one of the more interesting and significant relationships in the epic.⁶⁸ There are important variations of important scenes dealing with Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā in different versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Aside from Sītā's role as Lakṣmaṇa's sister-in-law, the two share a transcendent relationship with Rāma. In this section, we will firstly examine the relationship of Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa on a secular level, including the lack of communication between them; Rāma's order to Lakṣmaṇa to take Sītā to a mountain cave, and their return; Lakṣmaṇa leaving Sītā in the hut alone; and, lastly the final fire episode. On a transcendent level we will look primarily at the relation between Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa, and Rāma as *māyā*, *jīva*, and god.

⁶⁷Gopal, *Rāmāyaṇa*, 109.

⁶⁸In the television series, Sumitrā tells Lakṣmaṇa, upon his departure that Sītā will now be his mother. She also tells him that he should serve Sītā and Rāma well, in order that Sītā might forget the comforts of the palace ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 5, episode 15). One does not feel that the relationship between Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa is meant to be that of mother and son, yet this relationship does not come across as the same as that between Sītā and Hanumān. There is a different feeling in Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa's relationship. Lakṣmaṇa is not safe as Hanumān is; he is to be avoided.

Again the RCM is written in a particular manner which is significantly different from the VR and the AR. References will be made in the text.

The avoidance of physical communication (speaking and touching) sets the tone for the relationship between Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā. They are to be in exile together for fourteen years, yet they cannot and will not communicate directly with one another.⁶⁹ For example, in the RCM, Sītā tells her dream to Rāma, who in turn tells it to Lakṣmaṇa.⁷⁰ The exception to this rule occurs when Sītā believes Rāma is injured and demands that Lakṣmaṇa go after him. Tulasīdāsa chose to cut this scene substantially from what it was in the VR. In both the VR and the AR, Sītā goes as far as to accuse Lakṣmaṇa of wanting her for himself. The nasty words directed towards Lakṣmaṇa from Sītā are omitted. Tulasīdāsa lessens the communication between Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā. One might suggest that Tulasīdāsa supported Sītā's lack of communication with any man other than Rāma, by omissions such as the above. The

⁶⁹Several interesting scenes occur in the television series, affirming this social behaviour between Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā. When Sītā narrates her dream to Rāma, Rāma in turn narrates the dream to Lakṣmaṇa; Lakṣmaṇa in turn questions Sītā, and upon doing so his questions are answered by Rāma ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 8, episode 23). Secondly, in Panchavati, Lakṣmaṇa builds a cottage to live in; he asks Sītā if anything is lacking, but looks away as he asks. This *turning away* is made very clear (Ibid., vol. 10, episode 29). Again, shortly later, Lakṣmaṇa asks Rāma how one can atone if not enlightened. Sītā replies to his question, and Lakṣmaṇa looks down (Ibid.). In every case, physical communication between Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā is avoided. There is yet another example; Lakṣmaṇa bring berries to eat, but it is Rāma who give them to Sītā (Ibid., vol. 9, episode 26).

⁷⁰*Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 225.1-4, 442.

apparent rationality behind this type of protocol is that Lakṣmaṇa is another man; he is one other than her husband. We saw the same between Sītā and Hanumān in Tulasīdāsa. Even with Rāvana we saw Sītā use a medium so as not to speak directly with him.

A second event of significance occurs when Rāma requests Lakṣmaṇa to take Sītā to hide in a mountain cave, until after the defeat of Khara and Duṣaṇa in the first battle.^{71 72} Following the defeat of the enemy by Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa brings Sītā back from the mountain cave; Rāma firstly embraces Lakṣmaṇa. One might suggest an element of competition here. In the television series, Sītā speaks of competition between Lakṣmaṇa and Bhārata for Rāma's love; it is possible that there is competition between Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā also.

One of the most critical scenes involving Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa on a secular level is that scene in which Lakṣmaṇa leaves Sītā alone in the forest. In the RCM Sītā requests Rāma to kill a deer for her and bring her its hide.⁷³ Rāma knows that the

⁷¹ *Aranya-Kāṇḍa* 17.1-7, 537.

⁷² This incident occurs in both the AR and the VR, but is not depicted as such in the television series (*Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, Chapter V.30-31, 73; *Valmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*, vol. 2, Canto XXIV.12-13, 711). In the television series Rāma merely tells Lakṣmaṇa to stand guard over Sītā or demonesses will attack ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 10, episode 30).

⁷³ In the television series she wants it brought to her alive ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 11, episode 31).

deer is illusory, but does as she asks; it is part of his divine plan. Rāma says to

Lakṣmaṇa:

"A host of demons, brother, roam about in the woods. Take care of Sītā with due regard to your strength and circumstances and making use of your intellect and discretion."⁷⁴

Nevertheless, Lakṣmaṇa does leave Sītā. Sītā hears Rāma's cry of distress (Rāvana's illusionary voice); assuming it to be Rāma, she orders Lakṣmaṇa to go to him.

Lakṣmaṇa reacts as follows:

"Listen, mother: By the very play of Śrī Rāma's eyebrows the entire creation is annihilated; could He then ever dream of being in danger?"⁷⁵

But when Sītā urged him with words that cut him to the quick, Lakṣmaṇa's resolution - for such was Śrī Hari's will - was shaken. He entrusted Her to the care of all the sylvan gods and the deities . . . and proceeded to the place where Śrī Rāma, . . . , was.⁷⁶

Perhaps the reader is meant to assume Sītā's words to Lakṣmaṇa. We must also consider Rāma's role in this; every action is part of Rāma's divine plan. Sītā must force Lakṣmaṇa to go to Rāma in order for her kidnapping to take place. Can Lakṣmaṇa be blamed if this is all designed by Rāma? Can Sītā? Perhaps Tulasīdāsa feels she cannot. By omitting her nasty words, one might suggest that he takes the blame away from her, or perhaps he is merely attempting to fashion her as *more ideal*.

⁷⁴ *Aranya-Kāṇḍa* 26.1-9, 546.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.1-8, 547.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.1-8, 547.

In the AR, as outlined by Pandey, Sītā accuses Lakṣmaṇa of planning to win her after Rāma's death.⁷⁷ The same is true in the VR. The following, from the VR, conveys Sītā's *sharp words*:

"You are as it were an enemy of your brother in the guise of a friend, . . . you do not rush to the help of your brother . . . For my sake, O Lakṣmaṇa, you wish Śrī Rāma to perish. (5-6) Surely due to greed for me you do not follow Śrī Rāma . . . I believe that your brother's sad plight is dear to you and that there is no affection in you for him. (7) That is why you stand unperturbed without seeing Śrī Rāma, . . . Indeed what purpose will be served by me, remaining . . . here when he with whom as your leader you have come has fallen into danger?"⁷⁸

Did Tulasīdāsa intend for these words to be forgotten?⁷⁹ According to Pandey, Tulasidas did not wish for his *deity* to use such "strong language."⁸⁰ Pandey supports the following view:

⁷⁷S.M. Pandey, "Abduction of Sītā in the Rāmāyaṇa of Tulasīdāsa," Rāmcaritmānas Quartercentenary Symposium (London: Centre of South Asian Studies: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London), 16.

⁷⁸Valmiki-Rāmāyaṇa, vol. 2, Canto XLV.5-7, 767.

⁷⁹In the television series, following Rāma's departure, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa sit in separate cottages ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 11, episode 32). We hear the illusionary voice of Rāma calling out in pain. Sītā asks Lakṣmaṇa to go after him, and when Lakṣmaṇa says that he knows Rāma is not in danger, Sītā speaks cruelly to him. She says, "Are you afraid the demons will get you? . . . coward . . . You're a mouse . . . afraid to peep from your well." Lakṣmaṇa, does not look at her; he asks her, "What misfortune has weakened your mind?" Sītā threatens to die and asks that he give her the bow and arrows; she will go herself. It is at this point that Lakṣmaṇa decides to go, but before doing so encircles the cottage with an invisible line. Anyone crossing this line will be burnt to ashes. He asks Sītā not to cross that line.

⁸⁰Pandey, Abduction of Sītā, 16.

In all the Rāmāyaṇas except for Tulasīdāsa's Rāmāyaṇa, there is a long dialogue between Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā criticises Lakṣmaṇa very harshly for his reluctance to go away and leave her alone there. Tulasīdāsa only says that Sītā spoke harsh words without saying what those words were. Tulasīdāsa does not want his deity Sītā to behave like an ordinary woman.⁸¹

In the AR, Sītā has been previously placed in fire, and Lakṣmaṇa knows that the deer is Mārīcha. Sītā speaks harsh words to him, including accusations of him wanting her. Lakṣmaṇa finally leaves, but there is no mention of him drawing a circle.⁸² In the VR also, there is no circle drawn. It is interesting to note; however, Lakṣmaṇa's reply to Sītā:

"I dare not make a reply (to you), since you are a deity to me. (27-28) It is no wonder at all for women to utter words which are not worthy of them, O princess of Mithila! For such is the nature of women, . . .⁸³

The above words sum up the dichotomy into which Sītā so often falls. On the one hand Lakṣmaṇa reveres Sītā as a deity and on the other he reinforces a negative stereotype of women, a stereotype applied to Sita; he reveres her as a deity and condemns her as a woman. Sītā reacts as follows:

Crying and bathed in a gushing stream of tears, when spoken to in these words, Sītā (the daughter of Janaka) forthwith replied as follows: - (35)
"Bereft of Śrī Rāma, O Lakṣmaṇa, I shall take a plunge into the

⁸¹Ibid., 12.

⁸²Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Chapter VII.9 - VII.30-34, 76-77.

⁸³Valmiki-Rāmāyaṇa, vol. 2, Canto XLV.27-29, 769.

Godāvarī or hang myself or cast off my body . . . But I shall never touch any other male . . .⁸⁴

Following Rāma's return to the empty hermitage in the RCM, Lakṣmaṇa says, "Lord, it is no fault of mine."⁸⁵ Rāma is not angry, but worried. Rāma becomes angry with Lakṣmaṇa in the VR. Tulasīdāsa, however, does not allow for any anger towards Lakṣmaṇa. One might suggest therefore, that Sītā is responsible, but one may only suggest this if one can accept the concept of a woman's responsibility for her own actions. One cannot claim Sītā's complete dependence, and at the same time blame her for the consequences of the above conflict. If her self-responsibility is recognized, then she can be blamed.⁸⁶

The final fire episode is significant to the relationship between Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā for several reasons. This scene also varies in the different versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Lakṣmaṇa is willing to defy Rāma. In both the AR⁸⁷ and the RCM, Sītā asks Lakṣmaṇa to prepare the fire which she will walk through. In the AR

⁸⁴Ibid., vol. 2, Canto XLV.35-37, 770.

⁸⁵*Aranya-Kāṇḍa* 29 B.1-9, 550.

⁸⁶In the television series, Lakṣmaṇa says, "Bhābī forced me out . . . spoke cuttingly," ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 11, episode 32).

⁸⁷Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Chapter XII.76-81.

Lakṣmaṇa simply makes the fire and stands silently by Rāma. In the RCM we are told that, "tears rushed to his eyes" upon Sītā's request that he build the fire.⁸⁸

b) As *Māyā* and *Jīva*

This chapter will be concluded by looking at the relationship between Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā (and Rāma) on a transcendent level. Rāma is the Supreme, and Sītā is *māyā*; Lakṣmaṇa forms the triad in his representation of *jīva*, or the individual soul:

Śrī Rāma walked in front while Lakṣmaṇa followed in the rear, both conspicuous in the robes of ascetics. Between the two Sītā shone like

⁸⁸The television series is of particular significance; this particular scene is based on the RCM in the television series, yet it is handled in a very unique manner. In the television series, it is Lakṣmaṇa who reminds Rāma after the conflict has ended that they have not yet attended to their purpose, that purpose being Sītā ("Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 26, episode 76). The placing of Sītā in fire is the same as the RCM, but this is not revealed to us until the end of the story. No one, not even the viewer, knows that Sītā has been kept in fire. Lakṣmaṇa's shock at Rāma's decision to have Sītā pass through fire before coming to him is of great significance; he is angry and shocked, and says the following:

Sītā who renounced all of Ravan's palace, followed her husband to the forest, suffered in cold, heat, rain . . . a trial instead of rendering worship to her? . . . for what fault of hers?" (Ibid.)

If someone forcibly abducts a helpless woman does it make her guilty? I am guilty . . . left her alone . . . she's not guilty . . . we are for not protecting her . . . and the innocent woman must burn in fire? There can be no worse crime against womanhood than this! And you'll be unjust . . . remember! I revere Bhābī as my Mother . . . And as her son, I can even revolt against you!" (Ibid.)

One might suggest that the creators of this series chose to portray this scene in such a manner because of contemporary questions as to the *justness* of such a test.

Māyā (the Divine Energy) that stands between Brahmā (God), on the one hand, and the individual soul, on the other.⁸⁹

Handoo refers to the following discussion between Bhuṣuṇḍi and Garuḍa in the *Uttara-Kāṇḍa* of the RCM which describes the *jīva* or the embodied soul.⁹⁰

The soul is a particle of the Divinity, immortal, conscious, untainted by Māyā and blissful by nature. Such a soul, my lord, has allowed itself to be dominated by Māyā and has been caught in its own trap like a parrot or monkey*.⁹¹

The Jīva is dependent (subject to Māyā), while God is self-dependent.⁹²

Lakṣmaṇa requests Rāma to tell him of the difference between god and the individual soul, so that he may be devoted to his feet and that his, "sorrow, infatuation and delusion may disappear."⁹³ Rāma's reply is as follows:

"That alone deserves to be called a Jīva (individual soul), which knows not Māyā nor God nor one's own self. And Śiva (God) is He who awards bondage and liberation . . . , transcends all and is the controller of Māyā."⁹⁴

⁸⁹ *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* 122.1-4, 370.

⁹⁰ Handoo, *Cultural Heritage*, 401.

⁹¹ *Uttara-Kāṇḍa* 116 A-B.1-8, 848.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 77 A-B.1-4, 812.

⁹³ *Aranya-Kāṇḍa* 14, 533.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15, 534.

Lakṣmaṇa is perhaps the true example for man. We see several human attributes in Lakṣmaṇa. We often see his anger, his misunderstandings, and his regrets.

One sees that through Sītā's relationships with other men in the epic, further facets of her character appear, whether they be secular or transcendent. These relationships prove to enhance an *independent* Sītā, as an entity separate from Rāma. Though the majority of her actions revolve around Rāma, they are still her actions and she performs them by choice. There is no one ordering her to behave in any manner except herself.

CHAPTER 6

VI. CONCLUSION

1) Connection Between Traditional Sītā and the Contemporary Hindu Woman

The ladies strode along purposefully in their saris, all of them intellectual ladies, graduates, wage-earners, emancipated and on equal footing with men - the pride of modern India!¹

Is it possible to connect the traditional Sītā of the *Rāmāyana* story to the contemporary Hindu woman? One might suggest that it is indeed possible. The *Rāmāyana* story has been evolving for hundreds of years; it is still evolving, as is evident in the creation of the television series. The characters continue to provide examples of exemplary social conduct. This does not necessarily mean that every Hindu person aspires to act in accordance with these examples, but there is evidence that the characters of the *Rāmāyana* are aspired to by many or are at least considered *ideal*. In this concluding chapter the contemporary influence of Sītā in light of the preceding chapters will be contemplated. The majority of secondary sources used in this chapter will be sources written within the last ten to fifteen years; therefore, defining *contemporary* as primarily within that time period. This concluding chapter will look

¹Ruth Praver Jhabvala, *A Stronger Climate*, (London: Granada Publishing Ltd., 1983), 139.

mainly at questions concerning the contemporary Hindu woman; answers can only be speculated upon.

Of primary concern is the idea that Sītā is an *ideal* woman. It is impossible to prove the extent of Sītā's influence on Indian women, but it is apparent that Sītā is revered by many in India. She and Rama are extremely popular in India, particularly northern India. We will firstly look at Sītā as *ideal*, questioning and examining the ways in which women learn of such ideals. Secondly, we will look at the performing tradition of the *Rāmāyana*, reasons for its popularity, and the parallel popularity of the figure Sītā. Thirdly, we will look at the possible relations between Sītā and contemporary *social evils*. Fourthly we will look to the upper, urban, educated class as an influence and potential aid to all women.

It is important to remember that Sītā is primarily a *rendition* created by authors. She has evolved through hundreds of years. Even if she was once a person, her character has gone through so many changes, adaptations, and translations that this original character cannot be considered. She is a *role*, a *portrayal* of a woman, created by a man. That man for our purposes is Valmīki. Though the idea of Sītā existed before Valmīki, it is primarily Sītā's evolution in the *Rāmāyana* leading to the RCM of Tulasīdāsa which is of central concern here.

What then is Sītā's role? The conception that she is *ideal* lies primarily in her role as a wife. Though she is considered *ideal* in many respects, her *ideal* attributes

revolve around her role as a wife or as a consort. She has come to be considered an *ideal*, but is she a *norm*? There is no evidence that Sītā has ever been considered a *norm* in northern India, or anywhere in India.

It is also important to remember that the primary concern in this manuscript is to examine Sītā as she is perceived today. Of course it is important to examine the evolution of people's perceptions of her, but it is only in the present that interpretations, particularly women's interpretations can continue to evolve.

a) Ideals and Ideology

Sītā was an ideal lady. Moved at beholding her bed of grass in the forest Bhārata utters: "I gaze the couch of Sītā, that jewel of good women who regard their husbands as gods."²

One must ask what the components of the *ideal* nature of Sītā are. Where do these ideologies originate from? Dhruvarajan speaks of the "Hindu religious ideology of *pātivrata*," or "husband worship."³ As we have seen, much of Sītā's character and resulting nature as *ideal* revolve around this ideology of *pātivrata*. Her attributes in the *Rāmāyana* are based on her undying devotion to her husband. One must ask how this ideology developed. How does Sītā's history relate to her development as an *ideal*? Perhaps she was always an *ideal*, or on the other hand, perhaps the changing history of the development of women's status affected the development of notions of *ideal* social

²Bharadwaj, *Philosophy of Tulsīdās*, 235.

³Dhruvarajan, *Religious Ideology*, 59.

conduct and therefore, the depiction of Sītā, resulting in the depiction of her as an *ideal* character. Will she always be considered *ideal*? Can we change Sītā and expect that people's conceptions of *ideal* will change, or do *ideals* and values have to change first, and then depictions of characters such as Sītā will change? The *Rāmāyaṇ* television series may be such an example.

It is likely that conceptions and *ideals* must change within people themselves before figures such as Sītā will change. Renditions such as Sītā can be seen as an indicator of the changing values of a people. Sītā cannot be blamed for the state of women in India. However, we can perhaps suggest, that characters such as Sītā help to perpetuate the cycle of oppression of women in India today, and perpetuate the ideology of *pātivrata*.

Again, One must question the development of these *ideologies*. How much control have women had? How oppressed have women been and through what mechanisms? How responsible are women in the development of such characters? How does women's lack of action help to mould such *ideologies*? Can the Āryan invasions so very long ago be blamed for the state of women today? How much influence did the British have on these ideologies? These questions require in-depth research and cannot be answered within the scope of this work; it is likely, however, that all of the above social factors have contributed to the development of *ideologies* in India.

According to Gatwood's remarks on the history of women's status, women's status has continually declined since the *Vedic* period. Prior to this time however, women's status was directly related to marital relationships.⁴ In the early *Vedic* period marriage exhibited such features as marriages based on equality, post-pubescent marriages, the allowance of love marriages (though arranged marriages were the norm) (Upadhyaya 1974:192), and the idea of choice marriage as opposed to obligatory marriage (Altekar 1962:32,49). Further, women were not punished for exercising "verbal and psychological autonomy," (Upadhyaya 1974:158). Finally, the later seriousness of chastity for both wives and widows was not nearly so obsessive in early *Vedic* times (Hart 1973:247).⁵ Despite this high status, a trend was emerging towards the importance of bearing sons and "sweetness of speech" in a good wife (Altekar 1962:96-102).⁶

Two important changes took place in the *Vedic* period concerning the role of the goddess.⁷ The first is that the goddess was no longer independent; she became dependent on a husband or son. Secondly, her ethical nature became problematic. In most instances she was portrayed as purely benign, having been purged of her *Devī*-like

⁴References in parentheses are Gatwood's.

⁵Ibid., 32-33.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., 36.

capacity for anger, assuming instead the role of the god's "yes-girl."⁸ One might suggest that the latter is indicative of the changes evolving in Sītā. Subsequently the status of women declined. Women were denied the education they once had the right to, directly related to a decrease in marriage age.⁹ Further, the rise of asceticism gave way to an increasing view of women as an obstacle to enlightenment.¹⁰

A later development, directly related to the relationship of Sītā and Rāma that we see in Tulasīdāsa's RCM included, "the eternal nature of the dharmic marriage bond."¹¹ Brahmin couples were thought to remain together through successive incarnations; thus, the impossibility of re-marriage within a lifetime.¹² Though this was meant to apply to both sexes, in practice it only applied to women. A husband's death meant that the woman had sinned against her husband in a past life.¹³ Now, as opposed to earlier times, when women and men were to be god and goddess to one

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 39.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 45-46.

¹³Ibid., 46.

another, only the husband was considered a god.¹⁴ This type of conduct is found in the RCM.

Doranne Jacobson, in her discussion on "Women's Status," refers to the decline in women's status over history. She quotes from the *Laws of Manu*:

She should do nothing independently, even in her own house.
In childhood subject to her father, in youth to her husband,
And when her husband is dead, to her sons, she should never enjoy
independence. . . .
Though he be uncouth and prone to pleasure, though he have not good
points at all, the virtuous wife should ever worship her
lord as a god.¹⁵

The following is in reference to Tulasīdāsa:

It can never be denied that in his works there is nobler and more ideal
characterization of womanhood than in those by Valmīki and others.¹⁶

The above quote possibly represents a substantial part of the problem; do Indian women need an *ideal*, especially an ideal created by a man? Perhaps it is time for a new version of the *Rāmāyana* story, a rendition created by or with substantial input by women. Should women feel guilt because they cannot live up to these *ideals* created in such works? Are fictional women the best *ideals*? There are many great women in India, *real* women. Can one suggest that any fictional depiction a women is an

¹⁴Tbid.

¹⁵Jacobson and Wadley, *Women in India*, 59.

¹⁶Bharadwaj, *Philosophy of Tulasīdās*, 237.

improved woman? Bharadwaj remarks that Tulasīdāsa has polished all traits in the characters of Kauśalyā, Sumitrā and Sītā, where they would have been criticized.¹⁷ For example, in the VR, the AR and the *Hanumānnataka*, they are quite outspoken. However, it might appear to some that these passages changed by Tulasīdāsa *deadened* these characters rather than *polish* them.

According to Dhruvarajan, "*pāṭivrata* has sustained the patriarchal social structure that gave rise to it in the first place."¹⁸ Does this excuse women of responsibility? Dhruvarajan points out that *pāṭivrata* and basic Hindu values help to perpetuate the patriarchal structure. Women become convinced that their goals are those which maintain this pattern. A woman becomes convinced that she should live "through and for" others.¹⁹ The answers are not simple, nor are the questions. At best we can suppose causes and speculate upon answers.

¹⁷Ibid., 231.

¹⁸Vanaja Dhruvarajan, Hindu Women and the Power of Ideology, (Granby: Bergin and Garvey, 1989), 26.

¹⁹Ibid., 100.

i) How Women Learn Their Roles

By most definitions, . . . [Indira Gandhi] was never a feminist. Although she was more strong-willed and ruthless than most men, she insisted that motherhood was a woman's greatest fulfilment and often held up the mythical Sītā, the long-suffering wife of Rāma, as the exemplary Indian woman.²⁰

There are several ways in which women learn their roles. Firstly, they learn them from each other, from public figures and figures of authority, particularly from their mothers and mothers-in-law, as we see in the *Rāmāyana* story. Where were they learned from in the first place? From texts? Very possibly this is at least partially the case. Regardless of where these values originated, the case is that now women primarily perpetuate these values through themselves. Examples of women teaching women are evident within the *Rāmāyana* story itself such as the following citation of Anasūyā's wifely advice to Sītā:

"Hearken, royal lady, mother, father, brethren and friends are all good in a limited degree; but a husband is an unlimited blessing; and vile is the woman who worships him not. . . ." ²¹

In the *Rāmāyan* television series, this scene between Sītā and Anasūyā is significant and is portrayed as such, perhaps more so than in the RCM. Rāma tells Sītā to go with Anasūyā, for even, "the very sight of a virtuous wife confers merit."²² Sītā

²⁰Bumiller, *May You be the Mother*, 149.

²¹Bharadwaj, *Philosophy of Tulsīdās*, 235.

²²"Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 9, episode 27.

replies to Anasūyā's advice (similar to the above from the RCM) that she has been taught by her mother and her mothers-in-law the same *ideals*. She asks for Anasūyā's blessing so that she may follow these *ideals*; thus, she implies that the *ideals* already exist. Anasūyā replies, "Sītā, my prophetic vision forecasts that in time to come, women, by merely chanting your name will find the strength to follow a wife's *dharma*. This gives me the greatest joy. How shall I express my happiness!"²³

Again we must ask, how do women learn the *roles* that they perpetuate? Perhaps the answer lies in the question. However, one might suggest that it also lies on a deeper level. We have studied the example of Sītā in great detail; she is instructed by her father, her mother, her mothers-in-law, and her husband. She is of an upper class, yet is not educated that we know of; Sītā is a character of another era, yet she lives on. Why do women of today continue to venerate such renditions?

Dhruvarajan speaks of the perpetuation of *pāṭivrata* through mothers and daughters. Often it is the women maintaining the system, they are "agents" in maintaining the system. Mothers, she says, teach daughters how to be good *pāṭivratas*.²⁴ A daughter's behaviour reflects on the mother. One sees this in the *Rāmāyana* story, in the pride queen Sunayana holds in regards to Sītā's actions and

²³Ibid.

²⁴Dhruvarajan, *Hindu Women*, 105.

behaviour. One also sees the pride of the mothers-in-law. Do the stories reflect women or do women reflect the stories?

Mothers-in-law are also involved in perpetuating this system. Dhruvarajan's examples, though rural ones, are relevant. She states that a man will not contradict his mother in favour of his wife.²⁵ Doranne Jacobson speaks on the same issue; she speaks of the village bride in Northern and central India:

If she quarrels with her mother-in-law, her husband cannot take her side without shaming himself before his elders.²⁶

The mother-in-law has control, but this control is over other women. Instead of supporting one another, competition between women within the household pulls them apart. Furthermore, mothers-in-law ensure that their daughters-in-law remain subordinate to their husbands.²⁷ In this manner mothers perpetuate the patriarchal system, perhaps even more strongly than do men. It is, therefore, difficult for women to organize.²⁸ As Dhruvarajan remarks, "women betray each other before losing

²⁵Ibid., 107.

²⁶Jacobson and Wadley, Women in India, 58.

²⁷Dhruvarajan, Hindu Women, 107.

²⁸Ibid., 103.

favour with a man . . . therefore women work toward maintaining the patriarchal structure."²⁹

ii) Purity

A large aspect of Sītā's ideal persona lies in her *purity*. Her purity, however, also revolves around the conceptions of men. In order to be an *ideal*, virtuous wife, she must be *pure* and chaste. We have seen several examples verifying her *purity*; therefore, her *ideal* character. Dhruvarajan comments in her rural study that a woman's body is structured so as to be easily defiled; therefore, men must protect it, in order to keep it pure.³⁰ Doranne Jacobson expands this issue to include the goddess aspect of every woman. During a Hindu wedding the bride is likened to Lakṣmī.³¹ Yet the view of women by men and by themselves, according to Jacobson, is ambivalent.³² Mothers are revered, yet sexuality is considered dangerous. As discussed earlier, Sītā is seldom depicted as a mother, except in a general sense towards her devotees. Also, Sītā is rarely shown in a sexual light; she is *pure*. As discussed earlier, Sītā contrasts with Rādhā who *is* shown in a sexual light. However, it is Sītā's example which is aspired

²⁹Ibid., 107.

³⁰Ibid., 28-29.

³¹Jacobson and Wadley, Women in India, 60.

³²Ibid., 61.

to on both secular and devotional levels, and Radha's which is aspired to primarily on a devotional level.

The idea of purity is a crucial part of the *ideology* of pativratiya. The significance of this *ideology* revolves around the idea of the coming together of the male and female principles, the male principle representing consciousness and the female, energy.

Dhruvarajan further says:

For an orderly life that is in keeping with nature, the man who provides the seed and the embodiment of consciousness would be in control of the woman with her pollutable body and undirected energy.³³

The distinction between the *virgin* and the *mother* is also significant in terms of the *purity* concept; the concepts of the ideal and the goddess. Klostermaier speaks of Devī as both the former and latter. He speaks of the amalgamation of Umā, the mother goddess, and Durgā the virgin goddess, into the consort of Śiva. Vindhyavāsini becomes connected with Viṣṇu.³⁴ He further remarks:

Indeed, in both cases the dual character of Devī as Virgin and as Mother (Spouse) is clearly discernible. Thus Devī, whether identified with Umā or with Vindhyavāsini, is found to kill the demons in her virgin state. The earliest form of the Goddess seems to be the virgin who then becomes the Mother of the gods.³⁵

³³Dhruvarajan, *Religious Ideology*, 59.

³⁴Klostermaier, *Mythologies and Philosophies*, 196.

³⁵Ibid.

Of course, we see both in Sītā, on a general, transcendent level towards her devotees she is the *mother*, and on a secular level she is the *virgin*. The problem of the *dangerous* sexuality being necessary for motherhood is overcome in the character of Sītā. Sītā is able to take on the *mother* role, yet remain virginal at the same time; she is *purity incarnate*.

b) Performing Tradition

It is through this performing tradition of the *Rāmcharitāmānas* that the great ideals and values of the epic have become part of the social and ethical life of the Indian people and integrated with the traditional culture.³⁶

The *Rāma Līla*, or the reenactment of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a dramatization of the *Rāmāyaṇa* through which every person can know the characters of the story. The illiterate and literate alike can become familiar with this ancient story and the renditions of the various characters.

Induja Awasthi's comments on the *Rāma Līla* (above), tell us of the many variations; however, one common feature to every *Rāma Līla* is that all the parts are played by men from brahmin families, including Sītā. Females are completely prohibited from performing in the *Rāma Līla*.³⁷ The *ideal* woman, Sītā; therefore, is portrayed by men.

³⁶Induja Awasthi, "Performing Tradition in the Rāmāyaṇa," in The Rāmāyaṇa Tradition in Asia, (Madras: Sahitya Akademi, 1980), 516.

³⁷Ibid., 514.

The popular television series, the *Rāmāyaṇ*, is really a variation, a modern day version of the practice of re-enacting the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*:

India Today (15 February 1987): 84, reported: "Britain's most influential body - the Inner London Education Authority is to stage a £100,000 spectacular based on the *Rāmāyaṇa* to be performed by school children in London's Battersea Park in June this year." *India Today* (30 April 1987), under the title "Rāmāyaṇ: Divine Sensation," reported the unexpected success of a current TV dramatization of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in India.³⁸

The *Rāmāyaṇ* television series is interrupted during one videotape in order to show the viewer some of the many headlines and the overwhelming reaction to the series.³⁹ We are told in the headlines of the Times of India, of the thousands of people waiting to catch a glimpse of the actors who played Rāma and Sītā, and of guests at a wedding ceremony kept waiting because the bride refused to come until a *Rāmāyaṇ* episode was finished. We are shown several of the headlines:

"'Rāmāyaṇa' serial appreciated by President"
- Deccan Chronicle, Delhi

"London school kids take to 'Rāmāyaṇa'"
- The Daily

"Divine Sensation"
- India Today

"'Rāmāyaṇ' a rage in Pakistan"
- The Hitavada, Bombay

³⁸Klostermaier, A Survey, 448.

³⁹"Rāmāyaṇ," vol. 16.

"Patients suffer, hospital staff watch T.V. serial"
- Statesmen, Delhi

"'Rāmāyaṇa' a huge success; drawing millions"
- India-West, Los Angeles

"Hindu T.V. supersoap brings nation to its knees in prayer"
- Sunday Times, London

"Riots as power fails during 'Rāmāyaṇa'"
- Free Press Journal, Bombay

"Worshipping T.V. during Rāmāyaṇ"
- News Times, Hyderabad

"The Rāmāyaṇ makes its bow"
- The Hindu Times

We are further shown news specials, international advertisements, lists of awards, a scene where the man who played Rāma makes a public appearance attended by thousands of people. We are told that the producer/director, Sagar has become almost deified. Thus, we see that the *Rāmāyaṇa* story and the story's heroes are as influential and popular today as they ever were.

c) Relevance to *Social Evils*

One can only speculate as to the possible influence of the character Sītā on the perpetuation of the so-called *social evils* of contemporary India. *Social evils* includes dowry, bride burning, and satī. The list continues. However, because our primary concern is the *role* of Sītā, and she is secondarily being examined as a possible influence on the perpetuation of *social evils*, this discussion will not establish any concrete

opinions, but will look at examples which may or may not prove a potential influence. It is likely that the figure of Sītā has had some influence on the existence of *social evils*, but it is also likely that the same *social evils* helped to mould her character in the *Rāmāyana*.

The following shows a desperate Sītā in Laṅka; she speaks to Trijaṭā as follows:

"Mother, . . . , quickly devise some means whereby I may be enabled to cast off this body; for this desolation, which is so hard to bear, can no longer be endured. Bring some wood and put up a pyre; and then, my mother, set fire to it. Thus prove the genuineness of my love for the Lord, O wise lady.⁴⁰

This passage exposes Sītā's desperation and lack of will to live, while being held captive by another man. At this point in the epic she has sunk to her lowest; she is willing to terminate her own life. Not only is she willing, but she believes that such an act will prove her love for her husband.

Secondly, it is significant to note that Sītā wishes to die in fire. Sītā is diverted from the above decision by Hanumān, who chooses this particular moment to drop the signet ring of Rāma; thus, she is saved by a male character. Sītā blames her own emotional state for her lack of the necessary strength to end her own life. Her tears drowning out the fire of satī are metaphors for her own attachment to Rāma, disabling her to do what she considers *ideal*, that is ending her own life.

⁴⁰*Sundara-Kāṇḍa* 11.1-6, 605.

Elisabeth Bumiller speaks of contemporary Sītā worship in relation to satī, or the act of burning oneself when one's husband dies, a longtime Indian tradition:

From earliest childhood, little girls are told the story of Sītā, the paradigm of the loyal, long-suffering wife, who threw herself onto a burning pyre to demonstrate her purity.

Sītā's ordeal has left an indelible mark on the relationship of Indian women to fire, which remains a major feature of their spiritual lives, a cause of their death and a symbol, in the end, of one of the most shocking forms of oppression.⁴¹

Bumiller provides several contemporary examples of women who perform satī, either because it is what they think is right, or because it will get them out of marriages in which they are miserable. In other cases the wife is killed by the husband and his family for dowry purposes. She interviews Kanwaljit Deol, the woman running the New Delhi police department's antidowry division:

In Deol's view, the story of Sītā and the tradition of satī had been reinterpreted by the desperate twentieth-century bride. "Fire in particular has had this significance," she said. "When all of us are small children, we hear these stories."⁴²

Perhaps parts of Sītā's history came about because of such actions, or is an influence on these actions, yet we must ask if it is possible to blame the character Sītā? Satī has existed for a long time. In order to end its existence, to stop it from being socially acceptable, changes must come from the people.

⁴¹Bumiller, May You Be the Mother, 45.

⁴²Ibid., 57.

d) Possibilities for the Future of Hindu Women

Insights and Suggestions

"Why has God created woman in the world, seeing that she is always in a state of subjection and cannot therefore even dream of happiness," (R I.125, 3).⁴³

Two areas which can influence the future of Hindu women are educational and upper class influences. *Educational influences* encompass *education* in the broadest definition, in the *school book* sense, in terms of educational *media*, and in terms of women's groups, that is of women teaching themselves and each other. If texts like the RCM can be read in a manner as to emphasize positive aspects of women, such as strength, will, independent decision making, intelligence and so on, perhaps women will begin to see themselves in a positive light.

i) Education

An examination of the history of women in India, shows a gradual decline in the status of women, and perhaps an increase in ignorance due to a gradual lack of education. How has this changed to the present day? Has it changed?

Bharadwaj comments that in ancient times women intuited the *Vedic* hymns, studied the *Brahmavidyā* and even the secular sciences.⁴⁴ He continues, that later these privileges were withdrawn. Further, women were not any longer allowed to study

⁴³Bharadwaj, Philosophy of Tulsīdās, 234.

⁴⁴Ibid., 235.

the *Vedas*, nor were they to be recited in a woman's presence. The sacred thread too, was denied to women. According to Bharadwaj, women became on par with the śūdra caste. He remarks that it was especially bad under the rule of Mohammadans, when even basic literacy was denied to women.

Bharadwaj also highlights what he considers to be positive examples of women in religious texts. "Woman is inseparable from man," Bharadwaj cites from *Manusmṛti*, I, 32.⁴⁵ "No Hindu ceremonies of any importance could be performed in the absence of a wife. Rāma had to erect his wife in gold and keep the image beside him before he commenced the aśvamedha sacrifice."⁴⁶ Bharadwaj further cites Manu, who he says, "rightly observes that where women are honoured, there reside gods," *Manusmṛti*, 3, 56.⁴⁷ The woman, Bharadwaj continues, is the symbol of peace and prosperity of the home. Bharadwaj's positive examples, however, are primarily examples of women with men, and women in the home. Women appear to be mainly revered as objects of fear and therefore, worship. They are necessary for certain functions.

Indira Kulashreshta, a Reader in English and Women's Studies in the National Council of Educational Training and Research in New Delhi, comments on the portrayal of female figures in classroom texts:

⁴⁵Ibid., 229.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

Communication of the total meaning is made possible through a particular way of presenting the thematic content with the help of the linguistic content. Obviously, presentation is of paramount importance and is to be taken into consideration by evaluating the book from the viewpoint in question. The image of a person is elevated or tarnished by the way it is projected. Ample care has to be taken to find out in each lesson whether or not the female characters are portrayed in a biased manner, and if so, how this can be modified.⁴⁸

The same can be applied to the understanding of female characters in *religious* texts. There are strong, independent qualities in the character of Sītā. These qualities can be highlighted and emphasized. Scenes where Sītā is strong, such as that scene where she insists on accompanying Rāma to the forest can be seen not only as examples of devotion to Rāma, but also as scenes in which Sītā makes decisions and fights to stick to them. Scenes which portray oppression of women, such as that scene where Sītā must endure tests in order to prove her purity, should also be pointed out to women. They should be highlighted as examples of oppression.. Hindu women can also be aware that some of Sītā's so-called positive or *ideal* qualities do not necessarily have to be, or are impossible to aspire to. Her positive human qualities, those which are attainable, are those which are most admirable and those which can be considered as positive examples for women.

⁴⁸Indira Kulashreshta, "Elimination of Sex-Bias," *Religion and Society*, 36, no. 3 (September 1989): 14.

ii) Urban Upper Classes

Lastly, we will look at the upper urban classes as a potential trigger to change. The upper classes possess the money, power and potential influence to trigger change through media, outreach group work etc. They also have the greatest access to education. However, according to Bumiller and Dhruvarajan the upper classes are as caught in the system as anyone. This is in a large part due to an evolutionary process. A glimpse at the historical development of class evolution, particularly in regards to women and their relationship to figures such as Sītā, will help.

Gatwood states that by the *Classical* period, "Socio-economic realities for high caste women had by this time caught up with the late Vedic ideology of the spousified Devī. . . . During the succeeding Medieval period the two forms were refined and further polarized."⁴⁹ These two forms are in reference to two ideologies, "mirroring the . . . status of women at the two caste levels."⁵⁰

Bumiller speaks of the time she spent in the village Khajuron, in northern India; she stayed with an upper class family. Susheela Bajpai, the woman of the house had a "television set that kept her caught up with the programs from Delhi."⁵¹

⁴⁹Gatwood, *Devī*, 60-61.

⁵⁰Ibid., 60.

⁵¹Bumiller, *May You be the Mother*, 79.

On Sunday mornings, she and her husband invited in about thirty people, all from the upper castes, to watch the exploits of Rām and the anguish of Sītā in the *Rāmāyana*, a popular television series based on the great Hindu epic.⁵²

And Dhruvarajan remarks:

The principle of subordination of women to men espoused by this ideology [*pātivrata*] is applicable to all castes.⁵³

Even those women in middle and upper-middle classes in urban areas, who have taken advantage of the educational and occupational opportunities, do not question this belief system. They try to accomplish their professional goals the best they can - if they can - by negotiating their way through the system as it exists.⁵⁴

Where do the answers lie? Education can be a primary tool in changing attitudes. The upper classes have greater access to education; if the educational system can begin to emphasize positive qualities in women, perhaps upper class attitudes can change, in turn causing a *trickle down effect*. The power to initiate change lies within the peoples of India. Old ideologies have developed within a patriarchal structure of power and control, a structure which has used and uses the peoples of India against themselves. We see this in certain actions of women which act to further oppress themselves. Women are taught to distrust each other. All classes of peoples have been trapped within this structure throughout a long history of domination in India. Independent

⁵²Ibid., 79-80.

⁵³Dhruvarajan, Religious Ideology, 59.

⁵⁴Ibid., 60.

India is still new and it may be a long time, if ever, before deeply ingrained attitudes will change. However, it seems that changes are beginning to happen, at least within urban areas, and as they do one must hope that so will the renditions of characters in epics such as the RCM.

2) Concluding Remarks

How important is Sītā on a secular level? We see her secondary importance to Rāma, in terms of her status on a transcendent level. What significance does she represent in her role as a wife on a secular level? How does this significance change from the era in which the text was written to the present day? Sītā, on a purely surface level represents the submissive wife; she worships her husband above all else. The duty of her life, she feels, is to serve her husband and her husband's family. Can one look farther and deeper than this on a secular level? It is true that Sītā, on one level is portrayed this way, and it is also true that this has become a standard for many women, one that several women have sought to change. Some of these reformers have blamed characters like Sītā for setting ideologies which substantially contribute to the oppression of women in India.

Is the only answer to eradicate these characters? Sītā in Tulasīdāsa's RCM, as I hope we have seen, is much more than a woman controlled by her husband; she is also a woman who displays incredible strength. These characters have continued to evolve through the RCM to the present day. Sītā comprises a complexity. She is submissive, and perhaps this side of Sītā cannot be buried. However it can be emphasized as a possibility of marriage which women must make less and less possible. Women must realize that reciprocal respect can be more important than submission. Indian women have to look at the history of their own gender and understand the

process of oppression. They must see what went wrong in order to find solutions in the present day.

Texts such as the RCM are far too important and complex to dismiss easily. However, in terms of potential ideologies they must be read carefully, with an open mind; one must be able to see what may be harmful, and be able to grasp that which is valuable. Sītā was created in a past time, yet she lives on today. Sītā as a wife and as a woman should not be seen as an *ideal*, but as a rendition of a character, one who possesses both negative and positive qualities, and one who has evolved into the character she is today. The rendition of Sītā within the *Rāmāyana* story is still evolving as is evident in the modern day television series. Sītā *has* been considered an *ideal*, particularly in northern India, where the *Rāmāyana* story has been so popular. People in charge of projects involving renditions of the *Rāmāyana*, such as the television series, must realize the influence these projects have. They must consider carefully how both male and female characters will be portrayed. They must look carefully through the *Rāmāyana* history in order to compile a rendition which portrays women in a positive light.

Even the intense devotion Sītā displays towards her husband does not have to be viewed as negative or as merely submissive. Women can be taught, and can teach themselves, to channel this devotion in many directions, whether it be religious or secular. There is much to be learned from Sītā. Each individual must make choices;

teachers must make choices as how to portray Sītā to their students, and mothers and fathers must do the same for their children. Sītā made choices in the *Rāmāyana*, some against the will of her husband. One does not have to agree with her choices, but one must recognize her ability and desire to make choices.

In conclusion, one may remark that through careful analysis we have come to know a character, a character who has left the pen and the mind of the authors, and has come alive on her own. Regardless of her source or her evolutionary development, she is a character of impact today. She is admired and venerated by millions and it is unlikely that this will change. I believe that the answers lie not in condemning this character, or the texts and other forms in which she exists, but in viewing her critically. In today's India, with increasing amounts of religious strife and renewed fundamentalism, this will be an especially difficult task, but it is necessary for the future of India's women.

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