



Women in the Ramayana: A Critical Exploration of Virtue, Patriarchal Construct

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the construction of feminine virtue and the operation of patriarchal norms within the Rāmāyaṇa tradition, focusing on prominent female characters such as Sītā, Kausalyā, Kaikeyi, Māndodarī, Ahalya, and Urmila. The analysis encompasses Valmiki's Sanskrit epic as well as significant vernacular adaptations and modern reinterpretations. By integrating detailed textual analysis with feminist and gender theory alongside comparative reception analysis, the research argues that the epic not only establishes and enforces an ideal of feminine virtue—characterized by chastity, obedience, and loyalty—but also incorporates narrative elements and retellings that provide space for dissent, negotiation, and alternative identities. Furthermore, the paper investigates how vernacular and contemporary retellings reclaim female perspectives and challenge dominant gender norms.

Introduction:

This paper investigates the construction of feminine virtue and the enforcement of patriarchal norms within the Rāmāyaṇa tradition, with a particular focus on key female figures—primarily Sītā, but also including Kausalyā/Kaikeyi, Māndodarī, Urmilā, and peripheral figures such as Śurpankhā/Tārā—across Valmiki's Sanskrit epic, prominent vernacular retellings, and modern reinterpretations. By integrating close textual analysis with feminist and gender theory and comparative reception analysis, the study contends that the epic both establishes and regulates an ideal of feminine virtue (chastity, obedience, loyalty) while simultaneously offering narrative resources and retellings that facilitate dissent, negotiation, and alternative subjectivities. Furthermore, the paper examines how vernacular and contemporary retellings recover female perspectives and challenge dominant gender prescriptions.

**Literature Review:**

Scholarly investigation into the representation of women in the Rāmāyaṇa encompasses several domains: philological and critical editions of Valmiki's work, such as the Princeton/Goldman project and the critical Baroda edition; feminist reinterpretations that scrutinize gender norms and agency; and comparative analyses of regional retellings and performance traditions that emphasize variation and reception. Robert P. Goldman's translation and critical analysis provide a reliable textual foundation for Valmiki's Sanskrit epic, while Paula Richman's edited collections and related research underscore the Ramayana's diverse, vernacular existence and the varied portrayals of women across different retellings. Contemporary scholarship on modern retellings, including graphic novels and feminist rewritings, demonstrates how Sītā's perspective has been foregrounded to challenge patriarchal interpretations. Numerous recent publications examine Sītā's exile and the Agniparikṣā incident as focus points for feminist critique. Sītā's dual role as an ideal and sacrificial figure continues to spark controversy, as seen by contentious current receptions of these occurrences in journalistic and scholarly discourses. Finding a single definition of feminine virtue is made more difficult by comparative studies of individuals like Māṇḍodarī and regional variations like the Thai Ramakien.

Methodology:

Select incidents from Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa (namely Ayodhyā, Araṇya, Sundara, and Yuddha kāṇḍas) are closely analyzed in this article using the Princeton/Goldman translations and the Baroda critical edition as textual anchors. Comparative readings chart changes in focus and reinterpretation using representative vernacular retellings (such as Tulsīdās's Ramcharitmanas and a few regional tales and performance materials) and contemporary reworkings (such as feminist rewritings and modern graphic retellings). Textual interpretations are complemented by current essays on reception and contemporary retellings as well as secondary study.

Sītā as locus of virtue

Sītā is characterized by hardship, faithfulness, and purity in Valmiki's story. The most contentious instances in which the epic simultaneously sanctifies and disciplines feminine virtue are the agniparikṣā (trial by fire) event and Sītā's subsequent banishment. A detailed reading of Valmiki reveals occasions where Sītā speaks firmly and defends her dignity, confounding the straightforward interpretation of the "passive ideal," even while later retellings and devotional stories emphasize her quiet and spiritual purity.



Scholars and critics have emphasized how the book portrays Sītā as a person subject to male-dominated honor norms and as an ethical ideal.

न पिता नात्मजः वात्मा न माता न सखीजनः ।

एह प्रेत्य च नरिणा पतिः एको गति सदा ॥i

It depicts the virtue and loyalty of Sita towards her husband. There is nothing important than her husband. When we go through the Valmiki's Ramayana, we see there Sita is very strong character. She has potential to leave her husband. She starts living without her husband and nurturing her children. This shows the power of a women how she challenges stereotypical society. Not only in this but when she chooses the decision to go for "Vanvaas" with her husband. She left luxurious life, comfortable and everything for her husband. Her decision making was brilliant. If we see how she was born, it was completely different. She was abnormal, she was not born from a women's womb. She removed the unfortunate of Mithila and when came out of earth, it had been raining there. She challenges patriarchy directly. Patriarchy directly dominates other sex including women and transgender. They made rules as per their requirements. All the traditional texts widely support patriarchy, there are several rules how a woman behaves, walks, talks and to live in a society. On the contrary, Sita as a woman breaks her silence here and asks questions against patriarchy. She becomes the voice of all subaltern which are unheard, unspoken and misunderstood in society. She shares her bond with Rakshish also who protects her in Vatika. She is the one who lifts up Shiva's bow with one hand as a baby, and thus has to find one who is stronger than her to marry. Rama is definitely not the ideal man, and Sita repeatedly questions his motives and his treatment of her.

Amish Tripathi's Sita

Amish Tripathi has broken all the myths and traditional way of thinking about Sita. His Sita is not a submissive and oppressed woman. She participates in fight with Ram and Laxman against Ravan. She runs Mithila with her father.

The *agniparikṣā* and patriarchal authority

For the greater polity, the *agniparikṣā* serves as a narrative tool to dispel skepticism regarding Sītā's virginity; patriarchal honor and public image, not Sītā's subjectivity, control the outcome. It is possible to see Valmiki's event as dramatizing the conflict between public honor standards and private loyalty, which justifies patriarchal surveillance of female bodies. Nonetheless, contemporary retellings that reinterpret



the experience from Sītā's perspective and re-inscribe agency into Sītā's story, transforming the trial from a place of passive affirmation to one of critique.

Kaikeyi, maternal agency, and political patriarchy

The "villainous stepmother" cliché is commonly used to describe Kaikeyi's character; her calls for Bharata's coronation and Rama's banishment are interpreted as self-serving. A more thorough analysis places Kaikeyi in the context of maternal tactics and court politics, since her actions are entwined with succession politics and dynastic worries. Despite being presented in a negative light, feminist interpretations demonstrate how Kaikeyi's voice and actions indicate a woman navigating power within patriarchal systems. Furthermore, regional myths and vernacular retellings may soften or reframe Kaikeyi, presenting her motivations in a nuanced manner. The image therefore illustrates how, when women's political action deviates from prevailing masculine narratives of legitimacy, it is frequently portrayed as deviant.

The most compelling evidence for Sumitra's profound character lies in her reaction to Lakshmana's decision to accompany Rama to the forest. While Kausalya is overwhelmed with grief and attempts to dissuade her son, Sumitra's response is one of astonishing clarity and profound wisdom. She does not mourn her son's departure. Instead, she blesses his decision, urging him to serve Rama as his shadow. Her famous words to Lakshmana are a testament to her deep understanding of dharma and her unwavering faith in Rama's divine nature:

"Go, my son, and serve Rama with all your heart. For where Rama is, there is Ayodhya. Where Rama is, there is the forest. Let your love for him be your constant guide."

This is a radical departure from the expected maternal sentiment. Sumitra's counsel is not a display of emotional attachment but a philosophical and spiritual directive. She recognizes that Lakshmana's true dharma lies not in staying in the palace to serve his mother, but in serving Rama, his elder brother and the rightful heir. By encouraging her son to leave, she willingly gives up the comforts of having a son by her side, an act of immense self-sacrifice. This action elevates her from a mere mother to a spiritual guide who understands the larger cosmic order.

Sumitra also plays a crucial, albeit understated, role as a mediator and a pillar of strength for Kausalya. When Kausalya is in despair over Rama's exile, Sumitra consoles her with words of wisdom and hope. She reminds Kausalya of Rama's virtues and assures her that he will return. Her calm and composed demeanor provides a much-needed counterbalance to the emotional turmoil of the other queens. She is a



silent but strong force, providing stability and support in the midst of chaos. This role is a subtle subversion of the patriarchal expectation of female rivalry, showcasing a bond of sisterhood and mutual support that transcends their shared position as co-wives.

Sumitra's unconditional love for her sons is not possessive or selfish. Unlike Kaikeyi's desire for the throne for Bharata, Sumitra's love is rooted in a desire for her sons to fulfill their highest potential, which she sees as intrinsically linked to serving Rama. Her acceptance of Lakshmana's and Shatrughna's devotion to their elder brothers, Rama and Bharata respectively, is a testament to her selflessness. She does not demand that her sons prioritize her or their own interests. Instead, she actively encourages them to subordinate their personal desires to the greater good of dharma. This stands in stark contrast to the self-serving actions of Kaikeyi and highlights Sumitra as a symbol of pure, unconditional love.

In a world often dominated by a male-centric narrative, Sumitra's character serves as a powerful counter-narrative. She is not defined by her relationship to her husband or her co-wives, nor is she a passive recipient of the epic's events. Through her actions and her profound wisdom, she actively shapes the narrative, albeit in a subtle and understated manner. Her willingness to sacrifice her own comforts for the sake of dharma, her radical acceptance of her son's duty, and her role as a source of strength and wisdom for others, all challenge the conventional patriarchal constructs of the Ramayana. Sumitra's character offers a more nuanced understanding of female agency, demonstrating that even within a restrictive framework, a woman can embody profound spiritual depth and exert a significant, though silent, influence on the course of events. Her story serves as a reminder that a true understanding of the epic requires looking beyond its surface, to appreciate the hidden depths and quiet strength of its often-overlooked characters.

A feminist analysis of Kaikeyi's character reveals how her story is deeply intertwined with and, in many ways, a critique of the patriarchal society depicted in the epic. Rather than simply being an "evil queen," her motivations can be seen as a product of her environment.

In the patriarchal society of the *Ramayana*, a woman's value and power are often tied to her relationship with men—specifically her husband and her son. Kaikeyi, despite her warrior background, is ultimately defined by her status as a wife and queen. Her fear of losing her influence after Rama's ascension is a direct consequence of a system where her position is not guaranteed and can be easily eclipsed by another queen's son. The epic often presents women in binary roles: the virtuous and submissive wife (Sita, Kausalya) or the cunning and destructive one (Kaikeyi, Surpanakha). Kaikeyi's story, particularly as a stepmother, fits into this latter category, becoming a cautionary tale of female ambition and jealousy. Her



character is held responsible for the epic's central conflict, even though it is men who hold ultimate power and make the decisions that dictate the course of events (Dasharatha's promise, Rama's exile, Bharata's refusal of the throne).

Many modern retellings of the *Ramayana*, such as Vaishnavi Patel's novel *Kaikeyi*, offer a fresh perspective that challenges the traditional patriarchal view. These narratives often reimagine Kaikeyi as a more complex and sympathetic figure. Some argue that her actions were not driven by simple jealousy but by a deeper understanding of the societal pressures and power politics at play. Other versions suggest that she was aware of Rama's divine destiny to defeat the demon-king Ravana and that her demand for his exile was a necessary, though painful, act to set this cosmic plan in motion. These retellings give Kaikeyi a voice and an internal life, exploring her struggles as a woman who wants to forge a different path for herself and others in a world where men dictate the rules. They highlight the misogyny and constraints she faces, such as her father's banishment of her mother and the societal expectation that women be subservient.

While the traditional *Ramayana* paints Kaikeyi as a villain whose actions are driven by personal greed and jealousy, a deeper analysis reveals a character whose choices are shaped by the patriarchal society in which she lives. Her story serves as a powerful illustration of the limitations placed on women and has become a subject of modern feminist retellings that seek to reclaim her as a complex, resilient, and even heroic figure.

Urmila's Role in the Ramayana

In the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, Urmila is the younger sister of Sita and the wife of Lakshmana, Rama's devoted brother. While her role is relatively minor in the traditional narrative, she is a figure of immense sacrifice and is often celebrated as an unsung heroine. When Rama is exiled for fourteen years, his brother Lakshmana chooses to accompany him and Sita to the forest. While Urmila initially wants to join her husband, Lakshmana asks her to stay in Ayodhya to care for his aging parents. A legend, known as "Urmila Nidra," states that on the first night of their exile, Lakshmana asked the goddess of sleep, Nidra, for the boon of perpetual wakefulness so he could guard Rama and Sita. Nidra granted his wish, but only if someone else would take his share of sleep. Urmila willingly accepted this burden and slept continuously for the entire fourteen years, allowing her husband to remain vigilant and perform his duty.

During her husband's long absence, Urmila remains in the palace and takes on the responsibilities of caring for her mothers-in-law and the household. Her presence and quiet strength are seen as a vital part



of the family's survival during a time of great sorrow and political turmoil. Urmila's sacrifice is also considered crucial to the epic's climax. A specific boon granted to Ravana's son, Meghnath, stated that he could only be defeated by a person who had not slept for fourteen years. By taking on her husband's sleep, Urmila enabled Lakshmana to fulfill this condition and ultimately kill Meghnath in battle.

Urmila and the Patriarchal Construct

The character of Urmila offers a compelling lens through which to examine patriarchal constructs within the *Ramayana* and the broader cultural values it represents.

- **The Ideal of the Self-Sacrificing Wife:** Urmila's story is often held up as the epitome of a devoted and self-sacrificing wife. Her willingness to give up her youth, her husband's companionship, and her own desires to support his "dharma" (righteous duty) is celebrated. However, a critical analysis reveals how her role reinforces a patriarchal ideal where a woman's purpose is defined by her husband's needs and ambitions. Her agency is often limited to a choice that enables a man's success.
- **The "Forgotten Heroine":** In traditional versions of the epic, Urmila is a peripheral character who receives very little attention. Her story is often overshadowed by the narratives of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana. This marginalization of her sacrifice has led many to refer to her as a "forgotten heroine." Her story, while important, is often relegated to the background, showcasing how the central epic narrative focuses on male heroes and their exploits.

Modern authors have reinterpreted Urmila's character to challenge these traditional patriarchal readings. For example, Kavita Kane's novel *Sita's Sister* gives Urmila a voice and a central role. These new retellings portray Urmila not just as a silent, dutiful wife, but as a woman of resilience, intellect, and emotional strength. These retellings highlight her independent thought and her ability to find purpose in her solitude, resisting the notion that a woman is incomplete without her husband. They also portray her as a woman who questions the injustices faced by women in the epic, including her sister Sita, even while fulfilling her duties. By giving Urmila a strong, feminist voice, these retellings argue that her sacrifice was not an act of subservience, but a conscious choice of a woman who understands her own strength and worth.

Urmila's role in the *Ramayana* is traditionally one of silent sacrifice that upholds patriarchal ideals. However, modern interpretations have reclaimed her story, using it to critique the very structures that marginalized her and to celebrate her as a complex and empowered figure.



Kaushalya's Role in the Ramayana

Kaushalya is one of the most revered female characters in the *Ramayana*, primarily known as the senior queen of King Dasharatha and the biological mother of Rama. Her role is defined by her piety, immense maternal love, and quiet strength in the face of immense sorrow. As the first and senior wife of the king, Kaushalya holds a position of high respect and authority. She is a woman of great virtue and religious devotion. Her character is often described as an embodiment of grace and purity. The central tragedy of Kaushalya's life occurs when her son, Rama, is exiled to the forest for fourteen years. She is the one who bears the most profound pain and sorrow. The epic vividly describes her anguish, her pleas for Rama to take her with him, and her accusations against King Dasharatha for his unjust decision. Her grief is compounded by the death of her husband, which occurs shortly after Rama's departure.

- **A Symbol of Unconditional Love:** Despite her pain, Kaushalya's love for Rama is unwavering. When Bharata, her stepson, returns to Ayodhya and refuses to take the throne, she displays remarkable compassion and accepts him, recognizing his noble intentions. She consoles him and acts as a stabilizing force in the family, preventing further conflict. Throughout the fourteen years of exile, Kaushalya waits patiently for her son's return. Her unwavering faith and piety are what sustain her. Upon Rama's return, she is finally reunited with her son and assumes the respected position of Queen Mother, demonstrating immense resilience and endurance.

Kaushalya and the Patriarchal Construct

While Kaushalya is traditionally celebrated as the ideal mother and queen, a feminist perspective reveals how her character operates within and, at times, challenges the patriarchal framework of the epic.

Kaushalya's primary role and source of power are tied to her status as the mother of the future king. In a patriarchal system, a woman's value often hinges on her ability to produce male heirs. Kaushalya's happiness and significance are elevated when she gives birth to Rama, and her entire identity becomes intertwined with his. Her profound suffering is a direct result of the perceived loss of this identity when Rama is exiled. This reinforces the idea that a woman's fulfillment is found through her son's success. Despite her senior status, Kaushalya's agency is ultimately limited. She has no power to prevent her husband's decision to exile Rama. She can only express her grief and plead with her son. When she suggests going with Rama to the forest, he reminds her of her "dharma" (duty) to stay and care for the household, reinforcing her subservient role within the patriarchal family structure. Her position is one of emotional and moral authority, but not of political power.



Kaushalya is a complex character precisely because she embodies the internal conflict of a woman in a patriarchal society. She is torn between her love for her son and her duty as a wife and queen. While she openly laments her fate and criticizes Dasharatha, she ultimately complies with the patriarchal order by accepting Rama's exile and his instruction to remain in the palace. Her compliance, while seen as virtuous, also highlights the constraints placed upon her. Kaushalya's grief is a central theme, but it is often used to emphasize the righteousness of Rama's actions and the tragic consequences of Kaikeyi's ambition. While she is a figure of pity and reverence, her sorrow is ultimately subsumed within the larger, male-centric narrative of dharma and duty. The focus remains on Rama's sacrifice and Lakshmana's devotion, with Kaushalya's enduring pain serving as a backdrop to their heroic journey.

In essence, Kaushalya's character is a reflection of the patriarchal values that define the *Ramayana*. She is a figure of great moral strength and love, but her story is a testament to the fact that even the most powerful queen's life is largely dictated by the roles and expectations assigned to her by men.

Mandodari's Role in the Ramayana

Her role in the epic is primarily that of a voice of reason and a moral compass for Ravana. Her key actions and contributions include:

- **Wise Counsel to Ravana:** Throughout the epic, Mandodari consistently advises Ravana to follow the path of righteousness and return Sita to Rama. She understands the divine nature of Rama and warns her husband of the catastrophic consequences of his actions. However, Ravana's ego and lust prevent him from heeding her advice.
- **Saviour of Sita:** In a key moment, when Ravana threatens to kill Sita with his sword for refusing his advances, it is Mandodari who intervenes and stops him, reminding him that the murder of a woman is a heinous sin.
- **A Grieving Wife and Mother:** Mandodari's character is one of deep sorrow. She witnesses the downfall of her entire family—her sons, her brothers, and her husband—due to Ravana's hubris. She mourns Ravana's death not as a villain, but as her beloved husband, and she expresses a profound sadness over the tragedy that has befallen Lanka.
- **The "Panchakanya":** Mandodari is revered as one of the "Panchakanya" (five virgins), a group of five revered women from Hindu mythology whose names are believed to dispel sin. The others



are Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, and Tara. This inclusion highlights her moral purity and spiritual strength, despite her circumstances.

Mandodari and the Patriarchal Construct

Mandodari is a significant but often overlooked character in the *Ramayana*. She is the chief consort of Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka, and is known for her exceptional beauty, wisdom, and piety. Despite being the wife of the epic's primary antagonist, she is a righteous and compassionate figure who stands in stark contrast to her husband's arrogance and unrighteousness.

A feminist analysis of Mandodari's character reveals a woman who, despite her high status, is largely powerless within a deeply patriarchal system.

Mandodari is intelligent, knowledgeable, and has a strong moral compass, but her wisdom is consistently disregarded by the male figures in her life, particularly her husband. This illustrates the fundamental nature of patriarchy, where a woman's counsel, no matter how sound, is often rendered inconsequential by male pride and ego. Her story is a testament to the tragic consequences of ignoring the female voice. Mandodari's character is a classic example of a woman's "dharma" (duty) being defined by her loyalty to her husband, regardless of his unrighteousness. Despite her deep opposition to Ravana's actions, she stands by him until the end. This places her in a difficult position, caught between her moral beliefs and her prescribed role as a devoted wife. Her suffering is a direct result of this patriarchal obligation.

Mandodari, despite her wisdom, is still primarily valued for her beauty. Hanuman, upon entering Ravana's palace, initially mistakes her for Sita due to her stunning appearance. This moment underscores how a woman's worth, even for a queen, is often first and foremost judged by her physical attributes. Furthermore, her lack of control is evident in her helplessness when the monkey army, led by Angad, assaults her to draw Ravana out of his ritual—a scene present in some versions of the epic. She is used as a pawn in a war fought by men.

Mandodari's story is ultimately a tragic one. She is forced to remarry Vibhishana, Ravana's brother, after the war. This remarriage is not based on love but on political necessity, a patriarchal custom to ensure the continuity of the kingdom. Her fate is decided for her, reinforcing the idea that a woman's destiny is often tied to the male lineage.

Modern feminist retellings of the *Ramayana* have sought to reclaim Mandodari's character, giving her a more prominent role and a more complex internal life. These reinterpretations often portray her as a



woman who actively struggles against her circumstances, a symbol of quiet resistance against a destructive male ego. By focusing on her internal turmoil and moral strength, these narratives elevate her from a tragic figure to an unsung heroine who embodies wisdom and grace in the face of profound adversity.

Ahalya's Role in the Ramayana

Ahalya is a figure from Hindu mythology, most famously featured in the *Ramayana* as the wife of the sage Gautama. Her story, while brief in the epic, is one of the most poignant and debated. Ahalya is often described as the most beautiful woman created by the deity Brahma. He gives her to the much older sage Gautama. In some versions of the story, Ahalya is brought up by Gautama, and Brahma, impressed with the sage's asceticism, gives her to him as a wife. The central plot of her story is her encounter with Indra, the king of the gods, who is infatuated with her beauty. Disguising himself as Gautama, Indra comes to her and seduces her. When Gautama discovers the deception, he curses both Indra and Ahalya.

The curse on Ahalya varies in different versions of the story. In the most popular version, she is turned into stone and left to wait for thousands of years in a state of invisibility or immobility. Her curse is destined to be broken by the touch of Rama's foot. When Rama and his brother Lakshmana are passing by the hermitage with the sage Vishwamitra, Rama's foot touches the stone, and Ahalya is restored to her human form. She is then reunited with her husband, Gautama.

- **The "Panchakanya":** Like Mandodari, Ahalya is one of the "Panchakanya" (five virgins), revered women from Hindu mythology whose names are believed to dispel sin when recited. This inclusion highlights her eventual purity and redemption despite her past.

Ahalya and the Patriarchal Construct

Ahalya's story is a powerful allegory for the challenges faced by women within a patriarchal system. While traditionally framed as a cautionary tale about female infidelity, modern feminist interpretations offer a more nuanced view: Ahalya's life is controlled by men from the very beginning. She is created by Brahma, given as a wife by him, and then cursed by her husband for an act initiated by a male god. She has no say in her marriage to a much older man and no power to stop Indra's advances. Her redemption is also dependent on a man, Rama. This demonstrates how a woman's existence, identity, and fate can be entirely dictated by the decisions of men.



The curse on Ahalya is far more severe than the curse on Indra. While Indra is marked with a thousand "yonis" (which are later turned into eyes), Ahalya is dehumanized, turned into stone, and forced to endure a long period of penance. The disproportionate punishment highlights the patriarchal double standard where women are held to a much higher standard of chastity and punished more harshly for perceived transgressions. A crucial element of Ahalya's story is the ambiguity of her knowledge. Some texts suggest she was a completely innocent victim who was deceived by Indra's disguise. Others, including the oldest versions, imply she was aware of his deception but was either flattered or tempted by his status as a king of the gods. In either case, her punishment is severe, demonstrating that in a patriarchal society, a woman's virtue is paramount, and a lapse in judgment—or even simply being a victim of male deceit—can lead to her downfall.

Ahalya's story is also used in the *Ramayana* to showcase the divinity of Rama. Her redemption through his touch serves to emphasize his divine nature and his power to liberate and purify. Her character's primary function in the epic becomes a vessel for a man's spiritual and heroic journey, rather than a story about her own plight.

Feminist retellings of Ahalya's story challenge these traditional interpretations. They aim to reclaim her as a woman with her own desires, agency, and a voice that was silenced by the patriarchal narrative. These retellings often explore her emotional turmoil, her intellectual understanding of her situation, and her ultimate resilience. They reinterpret her story not as a warning, but as a commentary on the unjust and unequal treatment of women in a world where their bodies, actions, and identities are controlled by men.

In the *Ramayana*, Ahalya is the wife of the sage Gautama. Her story, though brief, is a well-known episode in the epic. According to the narrative, she was created by the god Brahma as a woman of unparalleled beauty and was given in marriage to the much older sage Gautama.

The central event of her story is the seduction by Indra, the king of the gods, who desired her beauty. In a common version of the story, Indra disguises himself as her husband, Gautama, to trick her. While some older texts suggest she was aware of the deception but gave in to her "curiosity" or "pride," later versions often portray her as an innocent victim who was completely deceived. Upon discovering the act, Gautama curses both Indra and Ahalya. The nature of Ahalya's curse varies, but in the most popular version, she is turned to stone and left to wait in a desolate hermitage for thousands of years. Her curse can only be broken by the touch of Rama's foot. When Rama, Lakshmana, and the sage Vishwamitra pass



by her hermitage, Rama's foot touches the stone, and she is restored to her human form. She is then purified and reunited with her husband.

A feminist analysis of Ahalya's story reveals how her narrative is deeply shaped by patriarchal norms and values. From the very beginning, Ahalya's life is controlled by men. She is created by a male deity (Brahma), given to a much older man (Gautama) as a wife without her consent, and is then deceived by another male god (Indra). She is punished by her husband and ultimately redeemed by another man (Rama). She is often a passive figure whose fate is decided by the men around her, serving as an object rather than a subject in her own story. Ahalya's punishment is disproportionately harsh compared to Indra's. While Indra's curse (to be covered with a thousand vaginas, later turned into eyes) is a punishment, it is often seen as less severe and is later partially reversed. Ahalya, however, is turned into an inanimate object, dehumanized and left in a state of immobility for a very long time. This highlights a patriarchal double standard where women are held to a much stricter code of chastity and are punished more severely for perceived transgressions.

The traditional story of Ahalya is often interpreted as a cautionary tale about the dangers of female desire or a lapse in chastity. Her punishment serves as a stark reminder of the social consequences for women who deviate from the patriarchal ideal of a "pure" and "loyal" wife. Modern retellings, such as Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening*, challenge these traditional interpretations. These versions give Ahalya a voice and a sense of agency, exploring her inner life, her desires, and her struggles within the constraints of her society.

Conclusion:

This paper explores the themes of women's role and patriarch construct in Ramayana. Women Characters' of Ramayana focuses on the reawakening and resilience. These retellings argue that they were not victims but a complex human being who were wronged by a system that denied their right to self-determination. They present them not just as a figure of purity and redemption, but as symbols of female resistance against patriarchal injustice.

They fought for their right. They were not only submissive but retaliated. They gave a new direction of thinking to upcoming generations' women. This study explores their strength, virtue, decision making, and way of thinking as a women.



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