

Sītā's Sacrifice

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Abstract of Sītā's Sacrifice

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the epic heroine Sītā, particularly with respect to her role in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, the sixth and longest book of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. This will be done primarily in light of Sally Sutherland Goldman's article "Sītā 's War: Gender and Narrative in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*," and Stephanie Jamison's *Sacrificed Wife*. The thematic elements and framing of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* bear many similarities to those of the sacrifices Jamison discusses, with Sītā playing the part of the Sacrificer's Wife. This paper begins with an examination of the roles of women in *śrauta* ritual as put forth by Jamison. The Sacrificer's Wife, Jamison argues, is central to the rite despite her limited activity. She provides both a physical and temporal frame for the ritual. It continues with a look at the Wife's role in dispensing hospitality and then turn to the ways in which these themes play out in the epics. The paper goes on to address Sītā's appearances within the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, rejecting Goldman's assertion that they represent ruptures to an otherwise masculine narrative, while agreeing that these appearances correspond to "crucial transitions" in the text, providing a frame in which the events of the narrative may unfold (2009: 140), just as the Sacrificer's Wife provides a feminine frame for the ritual. It further maintains, in agreement with Goldman, that Sītā's repudiation is, rather than unforeseen, the obvious conclusion to the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, a position confirmed by examining the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* in the context of the larger *Rāmāyaṇa*, and consistent with Vālmīki's presentation of a *dharma* of the limit situation (Hiltebeitel 2009: 200).

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Introduction

A 1966 pamphlet put out by the Ramakrishna Mission entitled *The Indian Ideal of Womanhood* quotes the nineteenth century Hindu reformer Swami Vivekananda,

"Any attempt to modernize our women, if it tries to take our women away from the ideal of Sita, is immediately a failure, as we see every day. The women of India must grow and develop in the footprints of Sita, and that is the only way."
(Hess 1999: 22-23)

In one contemporary survey conducted in Uttar Pradesh "an overwhelming percentage" of men and women chose Sītā as their ideal female role model (Sutherland 1989: 63). To many Indians Sītā is the paragon of Indian womanhood. But she is also a polarizing figure. Of the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*'s heroine Madhu Kishwar, founder of the Indian feminist publication *Manushi*, writes,

"My impression is that 80-90% of the poems that came to us for Hindi *Manushi*, and at least half of those for English *Manushi*, revolved around the mythological Sita, or the writer as a contemporary Sita, with a focus on her steadfast resolve, her suffering or her rebellion. Sita loomed large in the lives of these women, whether they were asserting their moral strength or rebelling against what they had come to see as the unreasonable demands of society or family. Either way,

Sita was the point of reference - an idea they emulated or rejected." (Hess 1999: 25)

This ambivalence toward Sītā is not a modern phenomenon; it is woven through many tellings of the Rāma myth. In this paper I intend further examine our epic heroine, particularly with respect to her role in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, the sixth and longest book of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. I will do so primarily in light of Sally Sutherland Goldman's article "Sītā 's War: Gender and Narrative in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*," and Stephanie Jamison's *Sacrificed Wife*. Viewing the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* while bearing in mind these works I will assert that the thematic elements and framing of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* bear many similarities to those of the sacrifices Jamison discusses, with Sītā playing the part of the Sacrificer' Wife. I will begin with an examination of the roles of women in *śrauta* ritual as put forth by Jamison. The Sacrificer's Wife, Jamison argues, is central to the rite despite her limited activity. As we will see, she provides both a physical and temporal frame for the ritual. I will continue with a look at the Wife's role in dispensing hospitality and then turn to the ways in which these themes play out in the epics. I will go on to address Sītā's appearances within the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, rejecting Goldman's assertion that they represent ruptures to an otherwise masculine narrative, while agreeing that these appearances correspond to "crucial transitions" in the text, providing a frame in which the events of the narrative may unfold (2009: 140), just as the Sacrificer's Wife provides a feminine frame for the ritual. I will further maintain, in agreement with Goldman, that Sītā's repudiation is, rather than unforeseen, the obvious conclusion to the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, a position confirmed by examining the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* in the context of the larger *Rāmāyaṇa*, and consistent with Vālmīki's presentation of a *dharma* of the limit situation

(Hiltebeitel 2009: 200).

Framing the Ritual

Stephanie Jamison, in *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife*, deals extensively with hospitality relations in ancient India, most particularly with respect to the anxiety these relations often must have provoked. And though the relationships in question are usually between men, the mediating individual is commonly a woman. Women dole out hospitality and, through marriage, are the means by which men form alliances. But this position of women as mediators is not limited to the secular sphere. Women also act as mediators between men and gods through their action in ritual, and it is to the exploration of this role that Jamison dedicates herself in *Sacrificed Wife*.

"Though the wife's activities are comparatively few, they are almost always extremely interesting. She acts independently of her husband; she is not merely his double or shadow in ritual performance. Furthermore, though she is inactive for much of most rituals, when she does act it is often at crucial turning points in the ritual or especially symbolic moments. Indeed, the few incidents in Vedic ritual that have become famous outside the field are ones involving the wife."
(Jamison 1996: 38)

Śrauta, or solemn ritual, is an elaborate collection of rites.

"Every *śrauta* ritual demands the participation of member of several different priestly groups: the representatives of the four Vedas and their assistants, and the more elaborate rites require what seems like a small army of actors from kings to, as we will see, prostitutes." (Jamison 1996: 29)

The Sacrificer employs these priests and actors. He pays for the necessary "gifts" and incurs the benefit of the sacrifice. The Sacrificer, though, does not sacrifice; this is the responsibility of the many priests he has engaged. One of the requirements for being Sacrificer is that he must be married, and the "participation of his wife is required at all the solemn rituals" (Jamison 1996: 30). According to the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* "the wife is the back half of the ritual" (Jamison 1996: 30) and the *Āpastambha Dharma Sūtra* states that once a couple has established the fires that will unite them as Sacrificers the wife may not be repudiated (Jamison 1996: 31).

The wife's presence is of such importance in *śrauta* ritual that considerable attention has been given to discussion of what should be done in the event of her temporary absence. The wife must be excluded if she is menstruating or has recently given birth. The *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* states,

"Half of the ritual is destroyed if on the Vow-taking day his wife is 'untouchable'."
(Jamison 1996: 32)

Several possibilities are given in the event of the necessary absence of the Sacrificer's Wife. Both the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* and the *Kāthaka Saṃhitā* agree,

"Having excluded her, he should worship. Thus he worships with a whole worship." (Jamison 1996: 32)

But Jamison argues that the logical contradiction (that half of the ritual is destroyed, but that it is simultaneously whole) renders this solution insufficient. The *Āpastambha*

Śrauta Sūtra attempts to improve upon the above by having the Sacrificer's Wife leave behind a "token of her presence" (Jamison 1996: 33). The *Kātyāyana Śrauta Sūtra* and the *Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra* further add that she should sit on sand during her menstrual period, and after three days she may resume her ritual functions subsequent to having been purified by water mixed with cow's urine.

There is further debate regarding what should be done during the absence of the Wife. The *Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra* suggests that her son or a student perform her actions, while the Sacrificer utters her mantras. But Saliki argues "that the Wife-yolking mantras are 'revealed,' and if she is not available, he should not go over them" (Jamison 1996: 34). In the case of the Wife's death, "the legal literature requires the widow(er)ed husband to remarry, in order to be able to continue his ritual life" (Jamison 1996: 35). That so much attention is given to the question of what should be done in her absence serves to reinforce the import of the Sacrificer's Wife to the success of the rite.

Further, though the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra* V. 155 states "There is no ritual for women (separate from their husbands)," there is some indication that women did in some circumstances act independently within ritual (Jamison 1996: 36). Many *grhya sūtras* allow women to offer the daily domestic sacrifice. Women (like men) are forbidden from acting independently in *śrauta* rites, even the simple Agnihotra, but "at least one *śrauta* sutra has devised a *grhya* copy of *śrauta* rites for the widow to follow - an apparent acknowledgment of her previous importance in the joint ritual life of the married couple" (Jamison 1996: 37) According to the *Mānava Dharma Sūtra*, the widow of a Sacrificer even, upon his death, receives a portion of the domestic fires that they jointly tended.

She continues to tend the fire and perform grhya rites. In addition to the daily oblations, she also performs offerings of ghee at the new and full moons, and the change of the seasons.

"The important point here is that there are clear śrauta analogues to the grhya rites allowed to the widow of a śrauta sacrificer. She lives, as it were, a shadow śrauta ritual life." (Jamison 1996: 37)

Śrauta ritual is physically defined by three sacred fires. These are the Āhavanīya ('Offering Fire') in the east of the ritual ground, the Gārhapatya ('Householder's Fire') in the west, and the Dakṣiṇāgni ('Southern Fire'). The Āhavanīya and Gārhapatya are "aligned on the central axis of the ritual ground, with the vedi or sunken 'altar' between them," and the Dakṣiṇāgni is somewhat south of this axis, "toward the western end" (Jamison 1996: 39). The Sacrificer's Wife remains for the most part in the *patnīloka* ('wife's world'), southwest of the Gārhapatya, Householder's Fire. Many of her actions take place at the Householder's Fire and "it is a general rule that offerings in the Gārhapatya are made on behalf of the wife" (Jamison 1996: 40).

Most of the activity in a *śrauta* ritual takes place to the east at the Āhavanīya (Offering Fire), and her seat by the Gārhapatya clearly relates the Sacrificer's Wife to the domestic and mundane spheres. However, though the bulk of the offering takes place at the Āhavanīya, it is the Gārhapatya that serves as the "home base" of the sacrifice (Jamison 1996: 41). The Sacrificer begins there, proceeds to the east, then returns to the Gārhapatya to conclude the rite. Furthermore, when commencing a new ritual the other two fires are drawn from the Householder's Fire.

"So, though not geographically central, the Householder's Fire and the Wife

anchor the Sacrificer and the priests to the human world and provide a means of reentry at the end of the ritual." (Jamison 1996: 41)

In the *śrauta* rites the Sacrificer's Wife often emerges to mediate between the human and divine realms.

The Sacrificer's Wife and Householder's Fire provide a temporal frame as well as a physical frame to the ritual. Again, while the majority of the proceedings occur at the Āhavanīya in the east, the ritual begins at the Gārhapatya with the yoking of the wife, establishing her ritual equality with her husband and also likening her to a bride at a symbolic wedding (Jamison 1996: 47), and ends there with her unyoking. And this temporal frame, Jamison argues, "stabilizes the ritual, locates it within the ongoing life of the community, and provides a safe transition into and out of the sacral realms" (Jamison 1996: 41).

The framing of the ritual with respect to the wife is reinforced further by an offering known as the Patnīsaṃyājas. When the wife is yoked at the beginning of the ritual she appeals to a number of divinities to invite her to take part. This entreaty includes the wives of the gods. For instance, in the *Kāthaka Saṃhitā*,

"O Agni, household lord, invite me here; o wives of the gods, invite me here."
(Jamison 1996: 50)

At the end of the sacrifice these divinities receive a set of oblations at the Householder's Fire. These 'joint offerings' are known as the Patnīsaṃyājas. These offerings are the first activity of the Sacrificer and priest upon their return from the Āhavanīya Fire in the east of the ritual ground. While the priest makes the oblation to the divine wives, the human wife 'takes hold from behind' of the Adhvaryu priest, establishing a "linkage between the

divine wives and their human counterpart" (Jamison 1996: 51) For, as Jamison notes, "this oblation functions as a link between these two realms, the male and the female, and between the human and the divine" (1996: 50).

The role of Sītā in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* appears in many ways homologous to the role of the Sacrificer's Wife in *śrauta* rites, providing a frame for the narrative that likens the events of the book to a sacrifice. Just as the wife of the Sacrificer is physically marginalized in her 'wife's world,' so to is Sītā physically marginalized in the *asoka* grove throughout most of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*. Yet, as in the case of the Sacrificer's Wife, though Sītā's actions are limited, they are integral to the development of the narrative. Both within *śrauta* ritual and within the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* there is an unmistakable ambivalence toward the female. Her active sexuality injects the eroticism necessary to achieve the desired effects. In the case of ritual the sought-after result is sons. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* Sītā's sexuality fuels Rāma's passion, a fervor that enables him to slay Rāvaṇa. At the same time,

"A ritual must have a wife, but it doesn't want too much of one. The powers that she contributes, which make her presence a requirement, also make her dangerous to have around." (Jamison 1996: 255)

Both in the ritual realm and the literary sphere, as we will see in our discussion of *māyāsītā*, doubles and substitutions are employed, both in order to protect our female protagonists from the dangers of contact with the nonhuman realm, and to protect their men from the powerful effects of this contact. In the case of Sītā, the double serves both to safeguard her from the hardships of captivity in Laṅkā, and to protect Rāma from the stain of a wife who dwelled for so long in the house of another man.

Just as the Sacrificer's Wife mediates between the sacred and the profane, the appearance of Sītā in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* frequently marks a shift in perspective from the human world of Rāma to the magical nonhuman realm of the *rākṣasas*. Jamison notes that, while she is not at the geographical center of the rite, the Sacrificer's Wife and the Householder's Fire secure the Sacrificer to the human realm and enable him to reenter the mundane sphere at the close of the ritual. Sītā similarly provides a means of reentry at the conclusion of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*. Their reunion marks the completion of Rāma's undertaking; his harsh words resulting in the *agni parīkṣa* signal the end of his sexual preoccupation with Sītā and a shift to focusing on his kingly duties.

Sexuality and Hospitality in the Soma Sacrifice

Perhaps the most significant interceding role of the Sacrificer's Wife, both in the ritual realm and the mundane sphere, is as a dispenser of hospitality. Hospitality and host/guest relations lie at the core of ritual action. Let us examine the manner in which these relations play out in "the most elaborate of the nonroyal rituals," the Soma Sacrifice, where hospitality is particularly emphasized (Jamison 1996: 115). During the Soma Sacrifice the plant soma is made into an intoxicating drink, also soma, which is then "ceremonially received as king and god and then as ceremonially sacrificed" (Jamison 1996: 115). There are several variants of the Soma Sacrifice, the ritual paradigm of which is the Agniṣtoma. As with other *śrauta* rites, the Agniṣtoma begins with the consecration of the Sacrificer and his Wife. The two purchase and venerate the plant/king and transport it to the place where it will be pressed. Then it is consecrated and offered up.

When King Soma is received as a guest the dry pile of soma is treated as a renowned visitor. He enters on a cart and is taken down and offered a seat and

refreshments. The Sacrificer's Wife, atypically, participates in the oblation. After the seating of the guest, Soma, an Iṣṭi is performed. The Iṣṭi is a simple ritual at which a vegetal offering is made; it may be performed on its own or as part of a larger rite. The wife takes part in the Iṣṭi and, according to the *Mānava Śrauta Sūtra* "she holds out her hand, and the Adhvaryu uses her hand to strew the grains for the offering cake" (Jamison 1996: 116). This is encountered also in the *Āpastambha Śrauta Sūtra* and the *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā*. The role of the Sacrificer's Wife here "is, in many ways, just a ritual enactment of a wife's household duty...the wife is often a dispenser of hospitality, and for this most eminent of visitors her absence from the guest reception would be insulting" (Jamison 1996: 116).

But before the King Soma can receive the hospitality of the Sacrificer and his Wife the soma plant must be purchased. The price of the soma is a cow. The cow and her purchase is part of the ritual and she must be prepared for the transaction. The wife and the cow "participate in two nearly simultaneous exchanges" (Jamison 1996: 119). First, the wife and cow exchange glances, then the wife receives sand from the cow's footprint. Both glances and footprints, Jamison notes, "are symbolically charged in this culture" (Jamison 1996: 119). The reciprocal glances are considered as physical contact and footprints are also quite significant as representatives of their respective makers. In this case the sand is taken after the cow has been made to take seven steps, steps which symbolically mark the cow as a bride, wedded to the Sacrificer. The exchange of glances between the cow and wife marks an interchange of their roles, reminiscent of the doubling mentioned earlier that will later be discussed at length. The wife "becomes" a

cow and vice versa. Once the symbolic change has taken place the Sacrificer sets out to exchange the cow/'wife' for the soma plant that will be a king, guest, drink, and, finally, sacrificial victim. The wife here acts as a mediator. She "mediates between the Sacrificer and his guest and the Sacrificer and his victim" (Jamison 1996: 121)

The correlation between the Sacrificer's Wife and Sītā here is unmistakable. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* Rāvaṇa, like Soma in the Agniṣtoma, acts as both the guest and victim. In the *Rāmāyaṇa III - The Forest*, prior to abducting Sītā, Rāvaṇa arrives at the *āśrama* in the guise of an ascetic:

"But seeing he had come in the garb of a brahman, Maithilī honored him with all the acts of hospitality due a guest. First she brought forward a cushion and offered water for his feet, and then she called him when food was ready, for he looked kindly enough. When Maithilī observed he had come in the garb of a twice-born - a brahman with a begging bowl and saffron robe; when she saw these accoutrements, it was impossible to refuse him, and so she extended him an invitation befitting a brahman." (Pollock 2006: 264)

At this point he determines to abduct her and the *ṛsis'* divine scheme for Rāma is put into motion, a plan that will ultimately lead to the vanquishing of Rāvaṇa, our guest turned victim. As Goldman and Goldman point out in their introduction to the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*,

"For what, after all, is the 'point' of the Rāma story, especially in its many influential Vaiṣṇava versions, if not to narrate the edifying tale of the earthly incarnation of the Lord, who, at the behest of the gods, compassionately consents to take on the role of a vulnerable and suffering mortal to save the world from the depredations of the evil and powerful Rāvaṇa and his minions to restore a golden age of righteousness to a universe on the point of rupture? As the framing of the narrative in the *Bālakāṇḍa* makes abundantly clear, if the *Rāmakathā* is about one thing, it is the history of God's descent to destroy the very avatar of evil in the

world in keeping with the principle so famously stated by Rāma's successor incarnation Kṛṣṇa at *Bhagavadgītā* 4.7-8." (Goldman, Goldman, and van Nooten 2009: 4)

While I would not argue that Rāvaṇa and Soma are entirely analogous, the similarity here seems noteworthy. The primary difference between them is that Rāvaṇa acts as both guest turned victim and guest turned host. For Sītā does (albeit unwillingly) pass a lengthy stay in the *aśoka* grove. But the death of Rāvaṇa at the close of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* serves the same function as the death of the sacrificial victim in Vedic ritual: the restoration of cosmic order (*ṛta*), the renewal of the earth, and the assurance of prosperity and fecundity.

Returning to the ritual realm, the sand from the footprint of the cow is placed in a pot and given to the Sacrificer's Wife. It will have many uses throughout the ritual and is eventually used to anoint the axles of the two Soma carts. According to the *Āpastambha Śrauta Sūtra*,

"Then the wife anoints these two (carts) with a third of the footprint mixed with butter. (Saying) 'Let a hero be born to us,' (she anoints) twice the right lynchpin with her right hand, palm upwards, eastwards [i.e. making the hand movements only toward the east]. She does not turn her hand back." (Jamison 1996: 124)

The *Kāthaka Saṃhitā* and the *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* view this as a sexual pairing used to inject fertility into the rite. The *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* adds that "The wife is a friend/ally. (The action) is for friendship/alliance" (Jamison 1996: 124).

Prior to this point in the ritual the actions have taken place on a ritual ground identical with that used in an ordinary Iṣṭi. But around the point at which the Sacrificer's Wife anoints the carts with sand the ritual ground is set to expand. A Māhāvedi ('Great Altar') is constructed to the east with a new Āhavanīya fire created from the original

Āhavanīya. The old Āhavanīya becomes the new Gārhapatya. Within this Great Altar a shed is constructed to house the Soma carts. The Wife anoints the linchpins/axle just prior to the procession of the Soma carts eastward to the Māhāvedi (thus the Wife's anointing toward the east).

"I would suggest that the new vedi to the east needs the symbolic presence of the wife, just as the more restricted ritual ground did, and this is supplied when the 'pioneering expedition' of the two carts sets off to take possession of it. This womanly presence is supplied doubly: the human wife performs the anointing, and she does so with substance from the bovine wife." (Jamison 1996: 125)

The journey also parallels that of a bride to her new home. And in the *Śāṅkhāyana Grhya Sūtra* the bridal procession, too, is preceded by the anointing of the chariot axles by the wife. In the Soma sacrifice the wife is acting as a bride, with soma, the rider of the chariot, as her groom. The soma, representing semen, will eventually be mixed with cow's milk in a sexual pairing intended to bring fertility. The cow's milk is here represented by the footprint of the Soma-cow. Thus, when the wife anoints the Soma-cart with the footprint of the Soma-cow, she is "setting the stage" for the sexual union to come and its consequent fecundity (Jamison 1996: 126).

In the Agniṣṭoma the Sacrificer's Wife also has "ritual dominion" over the Foot-washing water, *pannejanī* (Jamison 1996: 127). In the ritual realm the term, uncommonly, may refer to the water with which the sacrificial animal is bathed by the Sacrificer's Wife. More commonly it refers to water used in the Soma Sacrifice that, though it never washes anyone's feet, is linked to hospitality. On the evening before the Pressing Day a pot is filled with water called Overnight waters that will be used in the next day's pressing. The

Māhāvedi and its neighboring hut are cleared of everyone, save the Adhvaryu, the Sacrificer and his Wife, and the waters are "paraded around the margins of the ritual ground" (Jamison 1996: 127). That only the sacrificing couple and their priest is present emphasizes the focus on the domestic. The next morning more vessels are filled with water, including the vessel for the *pannejanī*. The Wife herself ladles the Foot-washing Water, saying, according to the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā*, as she does so, "I ladle you (as) Foot-washing waters for the Vasus, the Rudras and the Ādityas, for the All Gods" (Jamison, 128). The waters then remain in the Wife's care throughout the Pressing Day. She carries them to a shed (*sadas*) in the Māhāvedi where they remain until they are needed at the Third Pressing. The first two soma pressings proceed with little involvement on the part of the Wife. At the Third Pressing the leftover soma is mixed with milk or sour curds. The notion of "leftover" here is linked to fertility, the Ādityas having been conceived after Aditi consumed the remnant of an oblation. The symbolism of the milk is both erotic and maternal and dates back to the *Ṛg Veda*. The leftover soma is pressed using the Overnight water, "another leftover" (Jamison 1996: 131). The *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* emphasizes the cooperation of the Sacrificer and his wife and the fertility they seek through the rite:

"O gods, pay attention to this wonder: what desirable thing the household couple attains with the āśir.

A male child is born. He finds wealth. Moreover everyone in the household prospers unharmed." (Jamison 1996: 131)

Compare to the passage from a *Ṛg Vedic* hymn entitled "Praise of the Sacrificer and his wife":

"Which household pair [man and wife] being of the same mind press (soma), and rinse (it), and (mix it) with the prescribed āśir-mixture, o gods, they two reach (the rewards) reserved for the very punctual. United they two achieve the barhis. They two do not grow weary in (the pursuit of) booty."
(Jamison 1996: 132)

Jamison identifies the Third Pressing as a series of exchanges, carried out via mixtures. The mixtures bring together inert materials that combine to create "some sort of explosive force" that achieves the aim of the ritual (Jamison 1996: 132). The elements of the ritual represent male and female, their union, the 'explosive force', is sexual and it results in fertility. In addition to the mixing of the āśir and soma at the Third Pressing, it is also the only one of the three pressings at which the wife is present, and this presence itself announces a 'mixture' of the female into the male realm of the soma pressing.

"By adding the (female) milk from the human realm to the (male) soma to be offered to the gods, the soma oblation has been fertilized, as it were, made procreative for the divine realm, and mixture, exchange has been set up between the human and the divine." (Jamison 1996: 133)

The Sacrificer's Wife, interestingly, never consumes soma, as its power may be dangerous to her, to the ritual, or, though the strength and virility that soma imparts, to men. Because of this a series of substitutions, again recalling the shadows and doubles found in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, takes place to introduce the virile power of soma without the possibility of danger. The Neṣṭar priest and his assistant, the Agnīd, through abstract simulations of sex enable the human wife to symbolically 'drink' soma (Jamison 1996: 138).

After the wife 'drinks' soma via the priests we see what becomes of the aforementioned Foot-washing water. The wife is led by the Neṣṭar into a shed where she

pours the water along her exposed thigh. According to the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā*,

"She pours out water. Thus she lets semen flow. She pours it out along her thigh. For along the thigh semen flows. Having made her thigh naked, she pours it out. When the thigh is naked, then a couple has sex. Then semen flows. Then offspring are born." (Jamison 1996: 139)

But why is the Foot-washing water used for this purpose? These waters, collected by the wife for the feet of the gods, identify her as the core of hospitality and the mediator between the visiting gods and human hosts at the the Soma Sacrifice. Just as she extended her hospitality unto the gods, "she receives their force in return, in the form of the mediating water that was her instrument of transfer" (Jamison 1996: 143) For hospitality is closely linked to sexuality and fertility in ancient India and women often exemplify this association. Sītā, acting as the 'divine' Rāvaṇa's hostess, similarly is the recipient of his sexual attention, although the overtures here are unwanted.

Earlier it was mentioned that the Foot-washing waters turn up twice in *śrauta* ritual. Most commonly they appear in the Soma Sacrifice. But the relation between hospitality and sexuality and the role of the Sacrificer's Wife as mediator can also be seen in the other place that the Foot-washing waters are put to use, namely the preparation of the victim for sacrifice (Jamison 1996: 146). The killing itself is a very inauspicious affair and the Sacrificer and other main participants not only physically withdraw from the scene, they turn away from the spectacle. But once the deed is done it is the wife, along with the Adhvaryu, that comes forth to bathe the sacrificial victim with the *pannejanī*. The cleansing of the animal is, according to Jamison, a warped offering of hospitality. Just as Soma was received as a guest and then sacrificed, here the same elements are

present, only in reversed order (Jamison 1996: 148). In addition to guest reception, the washing and its corresponding mantras symbolically revive the animal using the fertile powers of the wife. According to the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*,

"Now, as to why the wife touches (the victim). The wife is a woman. It is from woman that offspring are born here. In this way he [priest] causes him [victim] to be born from this woman. Therefore the wife touches (him)." (Jamison 1996: 149)

Here she mediates between human and divine realms and between the living and the dead. Through her access to "dangerous forces" released in the sacrifice she can direct the power of the ritual to her husband without exposing him to its hazards (Jamison 1996: 149). But the role of the Sacrificer's Wife in the ritual realm as a dispenser of hospitality and a mediator exists as a reflection of her role in the mundane world.

Epic Representations of Sexuality and Hospitality

According to Alf Hildebeitel,

"There are two interrelated practices or discourses where *dharma* and *bhakti* coincide that, to my mind go to the heart (if not the bones) of what they are about in each epic, hospitality and friendships. With hospitality, if we simply ask who hosts Kṛṣṇa and Rāma in these epics, who they host in turn, how do they go about it, what are the issues involved, what is the tone or mood created, we get into revealing and, I would argue, indispensable material." (Rudmann 2008: 4)

Let us now turn to an examination of how the role of the wife in dispensing hospitality in the ritual realm plays out in the Indian epics. In the above discussions of women, sexuality and hospitality in *śrauta* ritual, the hospitality and sexuality considered were symbolic. These hospitality relations, and the anxiety they often induced, are depicted literally in the epic literature. Jamison examines two epic accounts of hospitality. The first of these is the story of Oghavatī told in the *Mahābhārata*, and the second is the tale of Ahalyā from the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s *Bālakāṇḍa*.

In the *Mahābhārata* episode Agni's son, Sudarśana, takes a vow of hospitality, with which he instructs his wife to comply:

"It is wrong for you not to do everything possible for a guest.

By whatever way you might satisfy a guest,

even by the gift of yourself, you should not hesitate to do it.

This vow exists always in my heart,

for, o well-hipped one, there is nothing higher than a guest for householders.

O fair-thighed one, if my speech is an authority for you, o lovely one,

without confusion you should hold this statement in your heart always.

When I am away, just as when I am present, o lovely and faultless one,

no guest is to be scorned by you, if I am your authority." (Jamison 1996: 153)

Sudarśana then leaves to collect firewood and a traveling Brahman arrives at the hermitage seeking hospitality. Oghavatī offers the usual guest gifts, and then asks if she can do anything else for the Brahman. He responds that it is the "gift" of herself that he seeks (Jamison 1996: 154). Reluctant, but remembering her husband's vow, she assents. Sudarśana returns home and, finding Oghavatī away, calls for her. She is still occupied with the Brahman and so, humiliated, does not respond. Sudarśana becomes quite angry that she does not reply, at which point the Brahman comes forward to explain the situation. The Brahman, it turns out, is Dharma, and the incident is, in fact, a test of Sudarśana, who passes, stating:

"Let your sexual pleasure be my greatest enjoyment, o first of seers.

For the first law of the householder is to honor a guest who has come.

'My breath, my wife, and what other goods I possess

are to be given by me to guests' - such is my established vow." (Jamison 1996: 155)

Sudarśana and Oghavatī are praised and Dharma promises the duo substantial rewards.

Here, as in so many other episodes, "the wife acts as mediator for her husband in a risky or unpleasant situation, and he receives the benefits of her action" (Jamison 1996: 155)

The contact with the divine is here, as in the ritual realm, mediated by the wife and sexual in nature. Thus husband in the tale is tested with a demonstration of virtue, epitomized in his "*willingness to sacrifice his wife* - as a token of his devotion to the hospitality relations that obtain between him and other males" (Jamison 1996: 156)

Turning to the account of Gautama and Ahalyā, we encounter the same thematic components utilized differently. When Indra arrives at the hermitage in the guise of Gautama Ahalyā is, by some accounts, not taken in. She recognizes him as the god but consents to have sex with him anyway. Gautama returns and curses the two. Ahalyā lives invisible until Rāma arrives and she gives him a proper guest reception:

"When Rāma, the unconquerable son of Daśaratha,
will come to this dreadful forest, then you will become purified.

By the *Guestly offering* to him, o badly behaved one, you will assume your own
body in my presence, freed from lust and delusion, yoked with joy." (Jamison
1996: 156)

In the case of Ahalyā, sex with guests was not condoned by her husband. And it is not until proper host-guest relations are established that Ahalyā is purified. Indeed, she disappears until this can be accomplished (Jamison 1996: 156). And, of course, the improper guest conduct to which Rāvana subjects Sītā provides sufficient insult to launch a war that is the centerpiece of the text.

Framing the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*

In her essay "Sītā's War," Sally Sutherland Goldman approaches the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* as a series of masculine struggles, "both physical and verbal" that reflect "ethical, familial, ethnic and political" dilemmas (2009: 139). Sītā, whether real or illusory, is the subject of one *sarga* and appears in merely five episodes in the immense *Yuddhakāṇḍa*. But Goldman maintains that "these episodes rupture the main narrative of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* marking crucial transitions and provide a feminine frame within which the masculine functions" (2009: 140). I would contend that rather than viewing Sītā's appearances in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* as a series of ruptures in an otherwise masculine text, we may view her role within the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* as similar to that of the Sacrificer's Wife in *śrauta* ritual. Just as the wife is half the ritual, Sītā is integral to the events of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*. Though her active participation is limited her part is nonetheless important. Furthermore, Hildebeitel notes,

"the composition he [Vālmīki] imparted to Kuśa and Lava to sing to Rāma is called the *sītāyāścaritaṃ mahat* (1.4.6b) - that is, if I may translate it in the same vein, literally 'The Great Course of Sītā.'" (2009: 173)

But while rejecting the idea that Sītā's appearances constitute a rupture to an otherwise masculine narrative, I agree that these episodes do provide a feminine frame, just as the Sacrificer's Wife provides a frame for the ritual.

As the brothers Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa proceed toward the ocean alongside the monkey forces and contemplate its crossing little mention is made of Sītā. But upon reaching the shores of the sea a conversation between Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa yields the first noteworthy allusion to our heroine in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*. Goldman argues that the placement of this passage after the firm establishment of the narrative's masculine concerns and the foregrounding of male affinities is significant (2009: 141). I believe the insertion of Rāma's lament at this point is not the result of an effort to emphasize masculine interests. Up to this point Rāma has rallied armies in preparation for battle, but they now have the incredible task of building a causeway before Rāma can even access Laṅkā in order to fight Rāvaṇa. The vast ocean ahead of him surely augments his sufferings as Rāma is reminded of how far he has to go to achieve his aim of defeating Rāvaṇa and winning back Sītā. As they pause by the shore it seems natural that our hero would be given to rumination. Also, the shift in focus to Sītā marks Rāma's entry into the 'divine' world of the *rākṣasas*, just as the Sacrificer begins with his wife at the Gārhapatya before setting off eastward on his journey into the divine realm.

Rāma bewails his separation from his beloved Sītā in what Goldman describes as "a beautifully constructed early example of *vipralambhaśṛṅgārarasa*," leaving "little doubt that Rāma has a deep, all consuming attachment to Sītā." (2009: 142) Rāma contemplates suicide in his despair:

"8. Night and day my body is consumed by the fire of love, whose fuel is my separation from her and whose towering flames are my constant brooding on her.

9. I shall plunge into the ocean without you, Saumitri, and rest there. For it would be hard for the flame of desire to burn me were I to sleep in its waters."

(Goldman, Goldman and van Nooten 2009: 134)

The episode serves as a particularly stark reminder to Rāma of the potentially destabilizing nature of his feelings for Sītā (Goldman 2009: 143) and harkens back to Daśaratha's ultimately ruinous love for Kaikeyī. Rāma concludes with a reference to how he will slay Rāvaṇa, transitioning to the next *sarga*, which takes place in Laikā at Rāvaṇa's court. This manifestation of the feminine leads the reader into the world of the *rākṣasas*, as it does in the earlier *Sundarakāṇḍa*, but Rāma's thoughts, rather than allowing a "frame for Sītā to emerge in the *kāṇḍa*" as Goldman posits, provide a temporal frame for the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* and a "transition into and out of the sacral realms" (Jamison 1996: 41). This passage also, according to Goldman, reveals "Rāma's emotional obsession with Sītā, an obsession that will find resolution in the closing *sargas* of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* in a manner that the audience least expects, given the tenor of this passage" (Goldman 2009: 145). However, I would be hesitant to term Rāma's sentiments obsessive, an affinity for one's wife seems natural enough to me. Nonetheless, I do believe that these feelings are something that for Rāma must be overcome. Hildebeitel contends, and I am inclined to agree, that,

"Vālmīki - it would almost seem - seizes on the Rāma story to present *dharma* as a much more rigorous and uncompromising affair: monogamy as the model; a *dharma* of the limit situation (*maryādā*)." (2009: 200)

This is further evidenced, as we will later see, by Valmiki's insertion into the narrative of the Seven Seers and Agastya, the "highest authorities on *dharma*" (Hiltebeitel 2009: 200). As such, Rāma's affection for Sītā must be curbed in order for him to foreground his kingly *dharma*.

The next seventeen *sargas* are devoted to the goings on in Rāvaṇa's court and include the defection of Vibhīṣaṇa and his arrival at the encampment of Rāma and the monkeys. Following Vibhīṣaṇa's defection we hear of the building of the causeway and the formidable ocean crossing. Rāvaṇa then sends the spies Śuka, Sāraṇa, and Śārdūla to report on the actions and progress of the simian army, whereupon the scene again shifts to the court of Rāvaṇa, who becomes increasingly agitated at his ministers' counsel (Goldman 2009: 145).

Here Sītā makes her first real appearance in the narrative. In his ruffled state Rāvaṇa makes his way to the *aśoka* grove in a last-ditch effort to persuade Sītā to join with him. Rāvaṇa engages a fellow *rākṣasa* named Vidyujjihva who is accomplished in the use of *māyā*, or illusion, to create an illusory facsimile of Rama's severed head and bow. He orders Vidyujjihva:

"Night-roaming *rākṣasa*, you must come to me bearing Rāghava's head along with his great bow and arrows - all fashioned through the great power of illusion."
(Goldman, Goldman, and van Nooten 2009: 174)

He then presents them to Sītā in order to delude her into believing that her husband, alongside Lakṣmaṇa and the whole of the monkey forces, has been slain in a night attack.

"12. Approaching Sītā and calling out to her in feigned delight, he arrogantly addressed these words to the daughter of Janaka.

13. 'I have just now slain in battle your husband, Rāghava, the slayer of Khara, about whom you are wont to speak so boastfully.

14. I have completely undermined your grounds for refusing me and have crushed your pride. As a result of your catastrophic loss, Sītā, you will have to become my wife.'" (Goldman, Goldman, and van Nooten 2009: 174)

Goldman notes the phallic imagery of the head and bow, marking " Rāvaṇa as the possessor of the phallus, as it were, and by extension the possessor of the desired object Sītā. But, of course, such possession is merely illusory" (2009: 147).

In addition to being the second presentation of the feminine in the *kāṇḍa*, this episode also marks the first time *māyā* is employed in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*. *Māyā*, according to Goldman, "is intimately, but not exclusively, connected to the scenes in the *kāṇḍa* where Sītā, real or imagined, is present." (2009: 147) The notion of *māyā* is present in texts as far back as the *Ṛg Veda* and is used to cover both the philosophical concept as well as the magical illusion (Goldman 2009: 147). The term is, by and large, one associated with divinities. In the *Ṛg Veda*, *māyā* is associated both with the *deva* Indra and the demon Vṛtra. But in such works as the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, Goldman notes, *māyā* is used to describe a philosophical concept. Outside of the *Gītā*, the term *māyā* is most often used in the sense of a trick played by the gods, chiefly Kṛṣṇa. This stands in contrast to its use in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, where "*māyā* is seemingly exclusively possessed, mastered, and employed by *rākṣasas* and apparently only used in the sense of its older (Vedic) meaning of magical trick or illusion" (Goldman 2009: 148). The word *māyā* is feminine and is an epithet of Lakṣmī and Durga, as well as the name of Buddha's mother. But while its introduction into the *kāṇḍa* occurs at the

same time that Sītā makes her first real appearance, I believe that the concurrent appearances of *māyā* and Sita in the text are due to Sita's role as mediator between the human and divine realms and her consequent susceptibility to the dangers inherent to contact with the non-human.

In this episode Sītā is also given voice for the first time in the *kāṇḍa* to lament:

"Alas! great-armed hero, I am undone! For I have pledged myself to one who followed the code of the warrior. I have now been made a widow and so must share this, your final state." (Goldman, Goldman, and van Nooten 2009: 177)

Sītā's lament goes on for some time in a manner typical of those occasions on which women are given voice in the epics. She blames herself for Rāma's misfortune, calling herself "the dark night of universal destruction" (Goldman, Goldman, and van Nooten 2009: 178) and speculates as to how her mother-in-law will "die of a broken heart" (Goldman, Goldman, and van Nooten 2009: 179). But, "of course, Sītā's grief arises from her delusion" (Goldman 2009: 149). Rāvaṇa then withdraws to ready himself for battle and as he leaves the illusory head and bow also disappear.

Sītā's delusion, however, remains and the following *sargas* are devoted to the attempts of Saramā, a friendly *rākṣasī*, to dispel Sītā's misconception. Like Trijaṭā in the *Sundarakāṇḍa*, Saramā "provides comfort and foretells Rāvaṇa's defeat." (Goldman 2009: 149) Sītā, "no longer 'deluded'" and "again given voice" then "blames her delusion on the *rākṣasa*" saying,

"For cruel and wicked Rāvaṇa, who makes his enemies cry out, is a master of illusion. He robbed me of my senses, as does wine the moment you drink it. (6.25.8)" (Goldman 2009: 151)

Sītā then enlists the aid of Saramā to spy on Rāvaṇa. She reports back with the happenings at Rāvaṇa's court and notes that he is "befuddled by his impending doom" (Goldman 2009: 152). A transformation has taken place. We begin with Rāvaṇa using *māyā* to delude Sītā, but Sītā's delusion is eventually dispelled and it is Rāvaṇa who is described as "befuddled" by the conclusion of the episode (Goldman 2009: 152).

At this point we have reached the onset of battle, the accounts of which are narrated with painstaking and gory detail. In due course, Rāvaṇa's son Indrajit takes his place on the field of battle to combat Aṅgada. Indrajit uses *māyā* to render himself invisible and sets upon the brothers Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. He strikes them down with a net of arrows and believing himself to have slain them, "victoriously returns to the city of Laṅkā" (Goldman 2009: 153). The monkeys, thinking the brothers dead, despair and are then comforted by Vibhīṣaṇa. The passage echoes Sītā's earlier susceptibility to *māyā* and the power of a benevolent *rākṣasa* to dispel illusion and again marks *rākṣasas* as the possessors of *māyā*. But the susceptibility of Sītā to delusion, as this episode highlights, is a human (or, rather, non-divine, as the monkeys are also afflicted) frailty, not a feminine one.

In *sarga* 37 Sītā again emerges in the narrative. Rāvaṇa, "in great delight," at his son's perceived victory, "summoned the *rākṣasa* women who were guarding Sītā" and said:

"7. You are to tell Vaidehī that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa have been slain by Indrajit. Then take her in the flying palace Puṣpaka and show her the two of them, slain on the battlefield.

8. That husband of hers, relying on whom she stubbornly spurned me, has been

destroyed, along with his brother, in the vanguard of battle.

9. Now Sītā Maithilī, free from anxiety, longing, and hope, and adorned with all manner of jewelry, will surely come to me." (Goldman, Goldman, and van Nooten 2009: 218)

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa lie unconscious under the sway of Indrajit's *māyā* and Sītā has again been deluded into thinking them dead. Here again Sītā speaks and is then reassured by a *rākṣasī*, this time Trijaṭā. But this time the *māyā* that afflicts Sītā is not so easily dispelled and the passage concludes with "the ladies returning to the *śokavana* and Sītā sinking again into 'profound despair.' (6.38.37)" (Goldman 2009: 157) Goldman surmises that "the *sarga* again marks a transition, functioning as a harbinger of Rāma's own emotional struggles" (2009: 157).

We soon return to the battlefield, where Rāma awakes to find Lakṣmaṇa unconscious beside him, and, believing him to have succumbed to Indrajit's arrows, grieves over his loss in a manner similar to that found in *sarga* 5 when he laments his separation from Sītā:

"5. What do I care for Sītā or even for my life itself now that I see my brother lying defeated in battle?

6. Were I to search the world, I could find another woman like Sītā, but never a brother, a companion, or a warrior to equal Lakṣmaṇa.

7. If Lakṣmaṇa, the increaser of Sumitrā's joy, has indeed returned to the elements, then I shall abandon my life right before the eyes of the monkeys." (Goldman, Goldman, and van Nooten 2009: 223)

Here, according to Goldman, Vālmīki "reveals the object of Rāma's affection is not his wife, but rather his brother" (2009: 157). I would disagree with this evaluation of Rāma's

statement. Instead I believe Rāma's words are a hyperbolic expression of intense grief at the perceived loss of his brother. Vālmīki here is emphasizing the close relationship between Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, just as the earlier incident by the sea highlighted Rāma's love for Sītā. Ultimately both Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa will be banished due to Rāma's strict adherence to *dharma* (Hiltebeitel 2009: 201) and these passages serve to make Rāma's sacrifice of his wife and brother all the more poignant in light of his strong feelings for them.

Ultimately Garuḍa appears to liberate the brothers and the battle continues with both sides sustaining heavy losses. Rāvaṇa again sends Indrajit to the battlefield. The death toll mounts and Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are once more rendered senseless in the fray. Hanumān famously revives them after uprooting a mountain of healing herbs. Again the feminine enters the narrative, this time in the form of another of Indrajit's illusions.

"3. Surrounded by *rākṣasas*, the immensely powerful Indrajit Paulastya, that thorn in the side of the gods, marched forth through the western gate.

4. But then, perceiving that the two heroic brothers, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, were prepared for battle, Indrajit displayed his power of magical illusion.

5. Placing an illusory Sītā on his chariot in the midst of his vast host, he made as if to kill her...

14. But when Rāvaṇi spied the monkey host, he was beside himself with rage. Unsheathing his sword, he seized Sītā by the head.

15. Then, right before their eyes, Rāvaṇi struck that woman, whom he had conjured up in his chariot through his power of magical illusion, as she cried out, 'Rāma! Rāma!'" (Goldman, Goldman, and van Nooten 2009: 352-353)

The monkeys, deluded by Indrajit's *māyā*, fall into deep despair. Hanumān informs Rāma

of Sītā's purported demise, upon which he faints. Vibhīṣaṇa revives our hero and dispels the *māyā* of Indrajit. Vibhīṣaṇa consoles him, saying:

“9. Lord of men, I think that what Hanumān told you in his despair is as preposterous as would be the drying up of the ocean.

10. For I know full well the plans that the evil-minded Rāvaṇa has for Sītā, great-armed warrior. He would never countenance her murder.

11. Desiring what is best for him, I begged him over and over again, 'You must give up Vaidehī!' But he would not heed that advice.

12. But no one can so much as get a glimpse of her, whether through conciliation, sowing dissension, bribery, or any other means, much less through violence."

(Goldman, Goldman, and van Nooten 2009: 361-362)

Just as in the episode in which Sītā is presented with Rāma's illusory severed head, here a *rākṣasa* is responsible for banishing the *māyā* (Goldman 2009: 161). Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are now able to disrupt a sacrifice undertaken by Indrajit. Unable to complete the rite, Indrajit loses his magical powers and the brothers defeat him.

Sītā makes her last appearance as a captive of Rāvaṇa when the demon king learns of his son's defeat and, blaming Sītā, determines to slay her:

"37. As they were conversing together, Rāvaṇa, beside himself with rage, went storming toward Vaidehī, who was in the *aśoka* grove.

38. Although his friends, concerned for his welfare, tried to restrain him, he rushed on in his towering rage, like the angry planet racing toward Rohiṇī in the heavens." (Goldman, Goldman, and van Nooten 2009: 389)

Sītā, seeing Rāvaṇa rush at her, sword drawn, begins to speculate as to what has taken place:

"41. From the way he is racing toward me, suffused with rage, it is clear that this evil-minded wretch is going to kill me, as if I had no one to protect me, although, in fact, I do.

42. For no matter how many times he pressed me, saying, 'Be my wife, enjoy yourself!' I rejected him, devoted as I am to my husband.

43. It is clear that because I rejected him as a suitor, he has given up all hope of winning me. Overwhelmed with anger and mad passion, he is now on the point of murdering me.

44. Or perhaps just now, on my account, the ignoble creature has slain in battle the brothers Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, tigers among men." (Goldman, Goldman, and van Nooten 2009: 389)

This is the first time in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* that Sītā speaks and is not either a product of *māyā* or under its spell. *Māyā*, "although mentioned, is not employed, having apparently lost all of its power with the demise of Indrajit" (Goldman 2009:162). Sītā's liberation from the effects of *māyā* "prefigures Rāma's own newfound release from delusion that allows him to finally meet and defeat Rāvaṇa in battle" (Goldman 2009: 162). The *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, says Goldman, has throughout portrayed Rāma and Sītā as obsessed with one another. The two were caught up in the world of illusion, but when the delusion departs, Rāma understands the "potentially destructive nature of his longing" and is finally able to overcome it (Goldman 2009: 163). Goldman argues that Sītā is "the very source of his delusion" and that Rāma can now "reprioritize his relationship with Lakṣmaṇa and the masculine world" (2009: 163), but, again, in light of his ultimate banishment of Lakṣmaṇa I find this conclusion less than compelling.

The final emergence of the feminine occurs with the couple's much-anticipated

reunion. After Rāvaṇa's defeat Rāma, in line with Valmiki's foregrounding of "*dharma* of the limit situation" (Hiltebeitel 2009: 200) concerns himself with political matters. Rather than an immediate reunion with Sītā, he firsts arranges to have Vibhīṣaṇa enthroned as the king of Laṅkā. After the coronation Rāma sends Hanumān with a message to Sītā. Sītā replies that she wishes to see her lord. Rāma then sends yet another message, this time via the newly enthroned Vibhīṣaṇa, telling Sītā to bathe before being brought to him. The implication here is that Sītā is impure and without having bathed she is unfit to appear before her husband. Sītā protests that she would prefer to appear before him without having bathed, but Vibhīṣaṇa in the end persuades her to submit to Rāma's request. Goldman notes that this is the first indication given that the long-awaited reunion "will be less than ideal" (2009: 164). Indeed, up until this point, from Rāma's daydreaming by the seashore to the *rākṣasī* Saramā comforting Sītā, many have foretold a joyful reunion for the couple. But when the longed-for moment arrives Rāma is torn between "anger, joy and despondency" (Goldman 2009: 164). He asks that everyone present look upon Sītā and then says to her,

"Go, therefore, as you please, daughter of Janaka. You have my permission. Here are the ten directions. I have no further use for you my good woman. (6.103.18).

For what powerful man born in a respectable family - his heart tinged with affection - would take back a woman who had lived in the house of another man? (6.103.18)" (Goldman 2009: 165)

Goldman goes on to point out that, while harsh, these words could not have been wholly unexpected to the reader. The *Yuddhakāṇḍa* traces the struggle of the hero through Sītā's appearances and anticipates such an end to Rāma's close relationship with Sītā. She must

then prove her purity by entering fire before Rāma finally accepts her back.

Educating Rāma

That Sītā's repudiation is the obvious conclusion to the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* is, I believe, further substantiated by examining the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* in the context of the greater *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative. Vālmīki populates the *Rāmāyaṇa* with all manner of unwholesome female characters. Considering that Rāma finds himself confronted with lascivious *rākṣasī* women, adulterous wives, and wicked stepmothers, it should come as no surprise that by the end of the narrative he is reluctant to accept Sītā back. But this negative portrayal of the female is not haphazard. It is one facet of the *ṛṣis*' undertaking to prepare Rāma for the conquest of Rāvāṇa and to educate Rāma as to his kingly *dharma*.

The dharmic and sexual education that enable Rāma to overcome his infatuation with Sītā is addressed by Alf Hiltebeitel in his article "Authorial Paths Through the Two Sanskrit Epics, Via the *Rāmopākhyāna*." Hiltebeitel argues that the stories of Vyāsa and Vālmīki within the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, respectively, "follow paths defined by their heroines" (Hiltebeitel 2009: 172). He maintains that the path theme in the *Rāmāyaṇa* develops in two phases. The first phase is defined by the *ṛṣis*, and the second,

after Sītā's abduction, by animals (Hiltebeitel 2009: 176).

It is the path as demarcated by the *ṛṣis* that will be of primary concern to us here. The *ṛṣis* determining the path in the *Rāmāyaṇa* are a group referred to by E.W. Hopkins as the Seven Seers of the North, with the addition of Agastya (Hiltebeitel 2009:177). These Seven "represent the religious authority of the Veda" (Hiltebeitel 2009: 177). The Seven Seers of the North and Agastya are the *pravaraṛṣis* to whom all Brahmins trace their descent. Vālmīki defines the path of Rāma and Sītā by these eight, "allowing in two cases...for replacements by their descendants" (Hiltebeitel 2009: 181).

Vasiṣṭha and Ṛṣyaśṛṅga are the first of the *ṛṣis* to impact the path of Rāma. Vasiṣṭha is the *purohita* of the Ikṣvākus, and he performs, along with Ṛṣyaśṛṅga, a Kāśyapa, the rites leading to the birth of Rāma and his brothers (Hiltebeitel 2009: 181). But perhaps the most significant of the eight with respect to the emotional development and education of our hero is Viśvāmitra. While Rāma is still quite young Viśvāmitra appears and requests his assistance in handling some belligerent *rākṣasas* who have been disturbing the inhabitants of his *āśrama*. Viśvāmitra is a Kṣatriya who had become a Brahmin and he teaches Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa weapons to use against their *rākṣasa* adversaries. After Rāma has dispensed with the *rākṣasa* menace Viśvāmitra then leads him to Mithilā to win Sītā 's hand in marriage by a demonstration of his strength. According to Hiltebeitel,

"Along the way, Viśvāmitra has facilitated the transition between Rāma's killing of Tātakā and his marriage to Sītā by imparting instruction about the dangers of female sexuality, and this has culminated, just before reaching Mithilā, with their passage through the hermitage of Gautama." (2009: 183)

Gautama, another of the Seven Seers, abandoned his hermitage after returning home to discover his wife had had an affair with Indra. As mentioned earlier, Gautama curses his wife, Ahalyā, to live invisible there until Rāma should come and free her from the curse. With Rāma's purifying presence Gautama returns. The episode clearly anticipates Rāma's own marriage, his separation from his wife and his questioning of her loyalty (Hiltebeitel 2009: 183).

After the wedding of Rāma and Sītā, Rāma encounters Rāma Jāmadagnya, a descendant of Bṛghu, one of the Seven Seers. Rāma Jāmadagnya has slain the earth's Kṣatriyas twenty one times over in retaliation for his father's killing. He has heard that Rāma won Sītā by breaking Śiva's bow and challenges Rāma to string Viṣṇu's bow without breaking it so the two can fight. Rāma strings the bow and destroys the worlds Rāma Jāmadagnya has won through *tapas*.

Rāma returns to Ayodhyā and the events leading up to his forest exile unfold. In the forest Rāma will encounter the three remaining ṛṣis, Bharadvāja, Atri, and Agastya. These three define Rāma's path in a physical sense, ushering him ever closer to the treacherous Daṇḍaka forest. First Bharadvāja points the way to Citrakūṭa. The trio then pass through the hermitage of Atri, who directs them to the supposedly safer forest path frequented by ṛṣis (Hiltebeitel 2009: 186). The last of the *pravaraṛṣis* Rāma encounters is Agastya. He guides them onward to Pañcavaṭī in the uncharted southern territories. It is in these uncharted lands that the path theme will be picked up by animals and demons.

Nearly everything of consequence that happens to Rāma from birth until the abduction of Sītā is orchestrated by the ṛṣis to enable Rāma to fulfill his divine purpose of

defeating Rāvaṇa. As Wendy Doniger aptly phrases it in her article "Sītā and Helen, Ahalyā and Alcmena: A Comparative Study,"

"Sītā was used in what we would nowadays call entrapment, set up precisely so that Rāvaṇa would fall in love with her and steal her, thus giving Rāma an excuse to destroy him." (Doniger 1997: 35)

It is the *ṛsis* who instruct Rāma in the use of weapons, that educate him on the dangers of female sexuality, that arrange his marriage to Sītā, and direct him to the place she will be abducted all so that their divine plan might unfold. The great battle presented in *Yuddhakāṇḍa* and the subsequent repudiation of Sītā are the quintessential test of the education imparted to Rāma by the *ṛsis*. As Hildebeitel notes,

"Vālmīki maps these *ṛsis* onto the story as the main representatives and spokesmen for *all* the *ṛsis*, who are to be the beneficiaries of the divine plan to have Rāma eradicate the *rākṣasa* nuisance that disturbs their forest *āśramas* - a mission for which the abduction of Sītā will be necessary and a cause for the *ṛsis* to rejoice." (2009: 181)

Once the divine plan to rid the world of the demon Rāvaṇa has been accomplished Rāma's profound attachment to Sītā has served his larger purpose. With that aim realized a closeness to her would only distract from his kingly duties.

This negative valuation of the feminine is due in part to the conflicting religious ideals faced by men in ancient India. On the one hand men are confronted with the pressure to produce offspring. Sons ensure man's perpetuation in heaven through the rituals for ancestor (*pitṛ*) worship that they perform.

"On the other hand, the idealization of asceticism so characteristic of later Hinduism is present, in one form or another, from the earliest period, and one of

the most powerful forms of ascetic practice is the control of sexuality, the retention of semen. So males are confronted with a conundrum: they do not want sex but they need its products." (Jamison 1996: 16)

One of the attempts made to reconcile this conflict between the need to procreate and the ideal of chastity is manifested in the *āśrama* system, according to which man progresses through four life stages. As a youth studying the Veda chastity is enjoined. During his time as a householder a man must take a wife and produce sons. In old age he is to retreat to the forest. His wife may accompany him and he continues to tend their household fire. As a renunciant he is to abandon even his wife and live a life of utter austerity. But even as a householder a man's sexuality is strictly regulated. A man must "approach" his wife during her fertile periods, while he is prohibited from doing so at other times of the month (Jamison 1996: 16). Chastity is also required during the performance of rituals, or at least parts of rituals.

These strict regulations attempt to make congruent the opposing religious goals of reproduction and abstinence. But, Jamison argues, "there is a conceptual component to the solution as well, which removes sexual responsibility (or some of it) from the male" (Jamison 1996: 16). Ideally, man will actively practice asceticism while passively engaging in the sex necessary to produce sons. Thus the ideal man will never seek out sexual relations, leaving us in need of a sexual aggressor. This leads us to locate "*active sexuality* in the female, who chooses her unwitting partner, pursues, badgers, and seduces him, and enjoys sex all by herself" (Jamison 1996: 16).

Māyā Sītā/Chhāyā Sītā

Situating active sexuality in the female problematizes the presence of Sītā, the supposedly chaste wife, who for so long resides the house of another man, and leads to a "deep ambiguity in the attitude to Sītā herself" (Doniger 1997: 28). The incongruity of a virtuous woman dwelling in such unseemly circumstances has led to countless attempts in later tellers of the Rāma tale to substantiate Sītā's innocence through varied plot devices.

Even Vālmīki offers the tale of the celestial nymph Rambhā to explain why Sītā is not raped while held captive by Rāvaṇa. Rāvaṇa, "full of passion," approached Rambhā one day, but she refused him, citing her husband Nalakūbara (Doniger 1997: 22). Rāvaṇa argued that nymphs and gods are not monogamous and proceeded to force himself on her. Nalakūbara then cursed Rāvaṇa that if he should ever again do "violence to any woman who does not love him, his head will split into seven pieces" (Doniger 1997: 22). In the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* Rāvaṇa, in response to Mahāpārśva's inquiry as to why he had not 'approached' Sītā, presents a similar account involving the nymph Puñjikasthalā. The

passage is excluded from Goldman, Goldman and van Nooten's translation based on the Critical Edition, though a summary is provided in their notes (570), but Shastri includes the episode in his translation.

"While she was going to worship the Grandsire of the World, I came upon the nymph, Puñjikasthalā, flashing through the sky like a flame. I stripped her of her attire in order to deflower her, after which like a faded lotus she reached the abode of Swyambhu. The magnanimous Ordainer of the World, learning of the matter, addressed me in anger, saying: 'O Ravana, from today, if thou dost violence to any other woman, thy head will be split into a hundred pieces, this is certain!'"
(Shastri 1962: 31)

Elsewhere Vālmīki recounts the story of Vedavatī, another woman after whom Rāvaṇa lusts. Vedavatī also rejects Rāvaṇa's advances, citing a desire to marry Viṣṇu. Rāvaṇa takes hold of her hair but Vedavatī escapes and throws herself into the fire.

Other accounts of the Rāma tale, such as those in the *Mahābhārata*, *Harivaṃśa* and *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, omit Sītā's fire ordeal altogether. But by the fifteenth century plot twists develop that remove Sītā from the company of Rāvaṇa entirely. The *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* does so by means of an illusory Sītā (*māyāsītā*).

"Rama, knowing what Ravana intended to do, told Sita, 'Ravana will come to you disguised as an ascetic; put a shadow of yourself outside the hut, and stay inside the hut yourself. Live inside fire, invisible, for a year; when I have killed Ravana, come back to me as you were before.' Sita obeyed; she placed an illusory Sita [*mayasita*] outside and entered the fire." (Doniger 1997: 23)

The real Sītā is never abducted and the fire ordeal at the close of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* is merely a means by which to dispose of the illusory Sītā and retrieve the original. The theme of the illusory Sītā, sometimes termed a shadow (*chhāyā*) Sītā, also presents itself

in *Holy Lake of the Acts of Rama*, written by Tulsi Das in the sixteenth century.

"Hearken, beloved wife, faithful, beautiful and virtuous; I am about to play an engaging game as man; do you then make your abode in fire till I have extirpated the demons.' As soon as Rama had made an end of speaking, Sita laid her lord's feet upon her heart and entered into the fire. She left her image there, of just the same form and modest disposition as her own. Not even Rama's [brother] Laksman knew the secret of what the Blessed Lord had done. [Ravana stole Sita and Rama got her back and a great celebration took place.] Now before this Rama had caused Sita to enter the fire, and now he who witnesses the secrets of all hearts desired to make her manifest again. For this reason, the Lord of all compassion issued a somewhat harsh command, whereat the female demons all began to grieve." (Doniger 1997: 24)

Sītā then undergoes the fire ordeal, now a vehicle for the return of the real Sītā, and her "public shame" is said to burn up in the fire (Doniger 1997: 24). One pitfall of introducing an illusory Sītā is that some of the "power of the narrative" is lost (Doniger 1997: 25). We have already established the necessity of Rāma's ardent feelings for Sītā to the success of his mission. Tulsi Das recognizes this conflict and evades the problem by having Rāma almost immediately forget about the illusory Sītā and grieve in earnest.

The *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* even endows the shadow with personhood, chronicling her fate following the fire ordeal. Fire instructs her to journey to the Pushkara shrine where she will be reborn as the heroine of the *Mahābhārata*, Draupadī. In a modern Tamil work known as the *Sri Venkateca Makatmiyam* Vedavatī, rather than being reborn as Sītā, is reborn as the shadow Sītā. Agni orchestrates the whole affair unbeknownst to Rāma. When Rāma is confronted with the two Sītās he does not know what to do. Sītā suggests that he marry the shadow, but instead he opts to remain

monogamous and defer the marriage until a future incarnation (Doniger 1997: 26).

Ramanand Sagar also uses the *chhāyā* Sita theme in his 1988 *Rāmāyaṇa* television drama. The *agni parīkṣa* scene takes place without any unkind words from Rāma. Rāma appears fretting before the arrival of Sītā. The scene is not public, as in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*; Lakṣmaṇa and Rāma are alone together in a hut when Rāma issues the order to have a pyre built in anticipation of Sītā's coming. Sagar rewrites "the scene radically, making up events and words that are unprecedented in previous *Rāmāyaṇa* texts" (Hess 1999: 11). In most of the variants employing a *chhāyā* Sītā only Rāma knows of the double's existence. In Sagar's rendition Rāma discloses the story of the illusory Sītā just prior to the *agni parīkṣa*. As Rāma explains Lakṣmaṇa frequently interrupts, dissenting:

"L: Brother! I've understood what you mean. You mean that Mother Sītā will be forced to go through a trial by fire to prove her purity.

R: Laksman!

L: [his voice breaking] That *sati* who, cleaving to the dharma of devotion to her husband [pativratadharmā], refused the splendid, luxurious palaces of Ravana, conquerer of the three worlds, and chose to sit under the open sky, enduring cold and heat, suffering from sun and rain?

R: Laksman!

L: A king's daughter, an emperor's daughter-in-law, who wandered barefoot behind her husband in the forest - instead of worshipping her, you put her through a trial? For what fault, brother? For what fault?" (Hess 1999: 12)

Lakṣmaṇa goes on in this fashion for some time, echoing the arguments of modern *Rāmāyaṇa* critics. Finally Rāma responds in a manner unprecedented in any former

account of the *agni parīkṣa*.

"What ever gave you the idea that I am testing Sita, or that I have any doubt about her? Sita, who is never out of my heart even for an instant, whom I am watching every moment with my divine eyes? Can anyone else give me proof of her purity and *sati*-hood? Laksman! If a man doesn't trust a woman in his heart, can he attain full trust from any exterior proofs? And when were Rama and Sita ever two separate beings? They are one. If I test her it means I am testing myself. What I am doing has nothing to do with doubt or testing. You don't know - if Ravana had laid a hand on the real Sita, that hand would have been burned up by that supreme *sati*'s glory." (Hess 1999: 13)

Prior to this point in the series no mention is made of the *chhāyā* Sītā. The episode is recounted here in the form of a flashback in order to maximize its explicatory power (Hess 1999: 13). Here Rāma professes not to doubt his wife but still feels the need to physically remove her from the demon's presence.

Other versions of the Rāma tale omit the illusory Sītā but it remained "the preferred device, however, because of its deep resonance with other aspects of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. For there are many illusory Sītās, shadow Sītās, even in Vālmīki's Sanskrit text" (Doniger 1997: 27). There is the well-known illusory Sītā produced by Indrajit to dishearten Rāma. Rāvaṇa, in a passage omitted from Goldman, Goldman and van Nooten's translation, that reminds us of the befuddling effects of women, even likens the real Sītā to an illusory Sītā.

“As regards the beloved consort of Rama, the daughter of Janaka, I brought her here from the solitudes of the Dandaka Forest which is frequented by titans. That princess of languid pace does not wish to share my bed, though in the Three Worlds, I see none to compare with her. Slender-waisted, with well developed

hips, her countenance resembling the autumnal moon, she is like an image made of gold created by Maya. Her palms are rosy, her feet are delicate and well set, her nails coppery, and seeing her, I am overcome with desire. Shining like the flame of the sacrificial fire she rivals the brightness of the sun; her face with its arched nose is flawless and fair, her eyes beautiful. On beholding her I am no longer master of myself and become the slave of love. Torn between anger and delight, this passion has proved my undoing, the cause of ruin and the eternal source of pain and suffering. In anticipation of the advent of her lord, Rama, that lovely large-eyed lady has solicited a year's grace of me and I have looked with favour on the request of that one of tender glances but, like unto a spent steed on the highway, I am weary of the pricks of passion." (Shastri 1962: 28)

There is also the illusory Rāvaṇa, who comes in the form of an ascetic and deludes Sītā. Rāvaṇa is able to capture her because she is fooled, just as she was earlier deceived by the *rākṣasa* Mārīca in the form of a deer.

Doniger compares Sītā to Helen of Homer's *Iliad*. The same story of a shadow Helen, in Greek *eidolon*, is employed in the Trojan War saga as in the later renderings of the Rāma tale. But Helen was "the hated whore of ancient Greece," while Sītā was "the chaste wife of ancient India" (Doniger 1997: 34). In variants of both the Rāma story and the account of the Trojan War the authors find it necessary to remove the heroines from "the scene of the sexual crime," and do so by doubling our protagonists, though for different reasons (Doniger 1997: 34).

"For when we look closer, we see that the two traditions tell "the same story" so differently that it is only in the most brutal, basic structures of the plot that they continue to resemble one another. Sita is innocent of any lust, merely the victim of Ravana's lust; Helen is less seduced against than seducing. Sita never does sleep with Ravana, in any ancient South Asian text that I know; Helen certainly does

sleep with Paris in Homer, if not in some later texts. Sita proves her chastity and, in some texts, vanishes forever, leaving Rama miserable (and, one hopes, very sorry that he behaved so badly); Helen acknowledges her promiscuity and lives with Menelaus until, presumably, old age; we meet them in their uneasy domesticity, long after the Trojan War, in the *Odyssey* (4.121). Helen, though the daughter of a god (Zeus), is not a goddess; Sita, though technically parentless (she sprang out of a furrow), becomes a goddess by the time of Tulsi and behaves very much like one even in Valmiki's text. Sita is fooled by Ravana and fooled by the demons who mimic Rama's voice; Helen fools others and successfully mimics the voices of the wives of the Greeks inside the Trojan horse." (Doniger 1997: 34)

The parallel between Sītā and Helen can be made because both women are modeled on an earlier paradigm, the Ṛg Vedic goddess Saranyū. Saranyū created a shadow of herself and left it behind when abandoning her husband, the sun (Doniger 1997: 28). Saranyū can serve as an archetype for both Helen and Sītā, "the Greek whore and the Hindu wife," because she is sexually ambivalent (Doniger 1997: 34). Sītā's sexuality is also ambivalent, particularly in Tamil lore and the *rākṣasī* "Shurpanakha is able to double for Sītā , David Shulman suggests, because both of them are highly sexual women" (Doniger 1997: 35).

Furthermore, if women mediate between the human and divine realms, then the shadow Sītā is mediating for the mediator, in effect. As we have seen, this substitution has its analogues in the ritual realm. In the Soma Sacrifice soma, conceived of as plant/drink/guest/sacrificial victim, is a dangerous divine force that the Sacrificer's Wife both needs contact with for the efficacy of the ritual and whose dangerous powers she also requires protection from. A series of substitutions is devised that functions as the *chhāyā* Sītā does in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, protecting our heroine from danger while

providing the contact necessary as the impetus for Rāma to complete his mission.

The theme of illusory doubles that emerges with respect to Sītā also presents itself in the Ahalyā tale. But in this case it is not the woman that is doubled but "who is, rather, tested by a god who doubles as her husband" (Doniger 1997: 36). The god Indra frequently appears in stories, impersonating husbands in order to delude and seduce their wives. In some of these myths the wife is not taken in by the *māyā* and remains loyal to her husband. In the case of Ahalyā, some renditions assert her innocence while others maintain that, in her desire for Indra, she only pretended to be fooled. In tales where women are doubled the assumption is that the men are fooled, whereas in those tales where the men double themselves the women are often suspected of seeing through the ruse. The law books even make provisions for cases in which another man's wife is mistaken for one's own, but not in the event that a wife mistakes another for her husband (Doniger 1997: 36). In the *Laws of Manu* the onus of responsibility lies on the man in the case of adultery, but in the epics, as we see in the case of Ahalyā, women are often severely punished, even killed, for committing adultery.

"The woman is regarded as naturally responsible on the assumption that all women are seductive, just as all snakes bite; but the man is culturally responsible: knowing that all women are seductive, the male adulterer is at fault when a woman was allowed to do what she is naturally inclined to do." (Doniger 1997: 37)

Here again we have the location of active sexuality in the female, a theme that emerges time and again in the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Conclusion

We began our study with an examination of Jamison's work on women in ritual and a comparison of its themes to the those of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*. The same themes that emerge in ritual with respect to women we discovered also emerge in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*. Sītā serves many of the same structural functions in our narrative that the Sacrificer's Wife does in ritual and in the mundane world. While Sītā is present in only five episodes and is the subject of one other *sarga* in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, her presence provides a frame for the unfolding of the narrative events. Her first appearance serves as an entry point into the nonhuman world of the *rākṣasas* and, in revealing Rāma's emotional attachment to Sītā, frames future manifestations of our heroine in the book. We also established that hospitality and host/guest relations lie at the core of ritual action as well as at the core of our epic, and that women, whether in the ritual realm or the mundane sphere, are, above all, dispensers of hospitality. Furthermore, as is proven at the close of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* with Rāma's harsh words and the *agni parīkṣa*, the ultimate demonstration of virtue for a man is epitomized in his "*willingness to sacrifice his wife* - as a token of his devotion to the hospitality relations that obtain between him and other males" (Jamison 1996: 156).

In Rāma's case it is not for a guest that he 'sacrifices' his wife, but it is because of a guest. But the sacrifice of Sītā goes from figurative, in her repudiation by Rāma, to literal in her entering of fire. Our Sacrificer's Wife becomes the Sacrificed Wife of Jamison's title.

All of this is relevant because, more than two millennia after the poem's composition, Sītā remains the ideal of Indian womanhood. Gandhi appealed to the women of India to look to the figure of Sītā, alongside Draupadī and Damayantī, as a source of inspiration. According to Kishwar, "Sita was used as a symbol of Swadeshi, to convey an anti-imperialist message. Sita wore only 'cloth made in India' or homespun, and thus kept her heart and body pure" (Kishwar 1985: 1691). But even while asserting that "Sītā was no slave of Rama," Gandhi "felt sure that a truly chaste and brave woman would not find it difficult to kill herself at the altar of her chastity" (Kishwar 1985: 1691).

Shortly after the episode of Sagar's television show depicting the *agni parīkṣa* aired,

"Taking his cue from the epic *Ramayan*, an educated man forced his wife to test her chastity by burning camphor in her palm. The man threw his wife out of the house when her palm was burnt." (Hess 1999: 24)

We cannot help but associate modern incidences of bride burning and forced *sati* with an ideal in which women immolate themselves to satisfy their husbands' doubts, or worse yet, those of a gossiping public. Some feminists regard Sītā's self-immolation as an act of defiance against the patriarchy, but on this I must side with Linda Hess:

"If a woman's throwing herself into the fire in response to her husband's false accusations can be interpreted as an act of supreme defiance, then God save women from defiance." (1999: 26)

But as our investigation of shadows and doubles has revealed, there is no monolithic Sītā; not all modern interpretations of Sītā have been used to reinforce patriarchal values. Perhaps the most well-known use of the image of Sītā and the *agni parīkṣa* to contemporary Western audiences is Deepa Mehta's controversial 1998 film *Fire* (Gairola 2002; Hess 1999; John and Niranjana 1999). The film centers around a clandestine sexual relationship between two sisters-in-law, Sita and Radha, living in an extended household. Mehta "appropriate[s] the mythological ideals of Hinduism...by establishing a parallel between the narrative of the film and a scene from the ancient Hindu epic *Ramayana*, in which Sita is asked by her husband to walk through fire to prove her chastity" (Gairola 2002: 316-317). Scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* on television and in performances appear throughout *Fire*. And just like the Sita of the *Ramayana*, Radha faces a trial by fire at the hands of her husband at the end of the film (Gairola 2002: 318). When she tells him that she is leaving him for Sita, Ashok attempts to force himself upon Radha, and in the struggle her *sari* catches fire on the gas stove. But Radha "meets Sita unscathed at the end of the film; like the mythological Sita, Radha is proved to be 'pure' even though she has engaged in 'impure' sexual relations with her female lover" (Gairola 2002: 318). Mehta's film is a testament to the notion that today's India can, in poetry, theater, and television, recreate the feminine ideal.

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