

Gender Roles and Recreation of Women Characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Assamese Poetry

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Abstract

The Rāmāyaṇa is considered to belong to the category of epic, though it originally comes under a class of literature known as kāvya (poetry). The Rāmāyaṇa produced by the sage Valmiki forms an important part of the Indian literature. Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa includes several leading women characters such as, Sitā, Suparnakhā, Urvashi etc. The Rāmāyaṇa upholds the idea of "husband worshipping" in which the husbands is considered the entire world for a woman. Woman is considered as an embodiment of self- sacrifice, femininity and virtues.

The untold dark sides of the Rāmāyaṇa have always been sources interest for the creative agents of literature. The Assamese poets have also tried to unveil the sorrows and agonies of the tormented women characters of the great epic. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the reconstruction of the two major women characters of the Rāmāyaṇa, Sitā and Urmilā in the poems of Karabi Deka Hazarika and RatnakantaBorkakoti respectively.

Keywords: *Gender role; Rāmāyaṇa; Recreation of Rāmāyaṇa; Modern Assamese Poetry.*

1.INTRODUCTION

Gender Role stands for the behaviors and attitudes acceptable, appropriate, or desirable for people of their sex. Noticing the history or mythologies reveal the practice of definite roles by respective genders. The *Rāmāyaṇa* which is considered as one of the ancient epics forms an important part of the Indian literature. It has several leading female characters such as, Sitā, Urmilā, Suparnakhā, Mandudari etc., each of whom plays important role in the story line. The *Rāmāyaṇa* presents the 'husband worshipping' woman for whom her husband is her entire world. In a patriarchal society, after the marriage a girl has to abandon all her rights over her natal family. ^[1] The female characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* were presented as epitomes of femininity and womanhood who are virtuous, self-sacrificing and obedient at the same time. Their desire to achieve what they lack, revolt against the male domination and power to demolish culture as well as traditional values of the male dominated society have always been causes of attraction for the creative agents of literature. The Assamese writers also have recreated the *Rāmāyaṇa* characters in an aim to unveil the sorrows and anguish of the characters. The characters of Sita, Urmila and Mandudari have specially drawn the attraction of the Assamese writers.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* consists of many leading women characters who are considered as epitome of femininity and womanhood. The present paper is an attempt to analyse how the Assamese poets RatnakantaBorkakoti and Karabi Deka Hazarika are recreating and deconstructing the gender role of the two leading women characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sita and Urmila respectively.

In this paper attempt has been made to analyse the characters of Sita and Urmila as presented in Assamese poetry. I have adopted descriptive and analytical method to achieve the objective. The data have been collected both from primary and secondary sources. The

primary source includes The *Rāmāyaṇa*, poetical works of the selected poets and histories of literature. The secondary source consists of the references, research articles, theses, dissertations and other research works related to the research topic.

The study mainly attempts to analyse the gender role of women in the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* and how the prevailing gender role has been recreated and deconstructed in Assamese modern poetry. For this study I have selected two Assamese poems where attempts have been made to recreate characters of Sita and Urmila of *Rāmāyaṇa*. The poems selected for this study are RatnakantaBorkakoti's "Urmilā" and Karabi Deka Hazarika's "Sitā".

2. WHAT IS GENDER ROLE?

Gender Role is a social role encompassing a range of behaviours and attitudes that are generally considered acceptable, appropriate, or desirable for people based on their actual or perceived sex.^[2] In the Indian society there is a clear and distinct gender role, where men should be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, while women should be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life. According to Oxford dictionary gender role is "the role or behavior learned by a person as appropriate to their gender, determined by the prevailing cultural norms."^[3]

3. GENDER ROLE OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE *RĀMĀYAṆA*

Indian cultural tradition is mostly dominated by the masculine cultural tradition over the centuries. The mythological epic *Rāmāyaṇa* is not an exception from this. The feminine characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have played their roles according to the social and cultural norms of the time. Balmiki was seemed conscious of the feminine norms which are revealed through the characterisation of the women characters. The major women characters who play important roles in the story of *Rāmāyaṇa* are Kausalya, Sumitra, Kaikeye, Sita, Urmilā, Suparnakha, Mandudari etc.

In the *Rāmāyaṇa* Sita is presented as an embodiment of feminine identity who has virtue, sacrifice and obedience at the same time. After Sita was rescued and brought back to Ayodhya, numerous rumours arose questioning her chastity. In the common version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the rumours became the cause of Rama's unsettling. Though he believes in Sita's chastity, still being a king he was also bound to put to rest the anxiety of his subjects. Consequently Rama subjected Sita to go through the fire test. Although Sita passed her test but later on she was sent to live in the hermitage of Saint Balmiki where she gave birth to two sons.

Another such episode of mutation is found in the marginalization of Urmila. Urmila is one of the less focused women characters of the epic. She was introduced as the wife of Lakshmana and the younger sister of Sita. When king Dasaratha sent Rama to exile for fourteen years, Lakshmana also followed him. Urmila requested her husband to allow her to accompany him but she was rejected saying that her presence would hinder him to offer his servitude to his brother. Further, she was asked to be there at Ayodhya to take care of her in-laws in absence of her husband. Urmila is an epitome of self sacrificing woman. She sacrificed her desires and aspirations for the sake of her husband and family. She even took to bear the sleeps of her husband in these fourteen years of exile.

4. WOMEN CHARACTERS OF *RĀMĀYAṆA* IN MODERN ASSAMESE POETRY

Assamese literature, a significant branch of the greater Indian literature is enriched with several epic elements. From the folk literature to the modern Assamese literature the presence of epical elements is very much evident. Both the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* serve as the major sources of epical elements for the Assamese poets. The ancient, medieval

and modern Assamese poets have tried their hands to bring out some issues buried in these two epics. The earliest written literature in Assamese was traced in fourteenth century. Sankardeva, the prominent literary figure of the fourteenth century translated a part of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. He had also penned down the ‘Ram Vijay’ (Victory of Rama) and many more verse on the praise of Rama, the central character of the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*. Durgabar, another writer who was not under the influence of the Vaisnavite Movement wrote ‘Giti*Rāmāyaṇa*’ (Lyrical *Rāmāyaṇa*). Rama Swaraswati, a contemporary of Sankardeva also translated a few verse lines from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The coming of the British after the treaty of Yandaboo into Assam, vast changes were occurred in social, political, economic as well as in literary field. In the Orunodoi period Bholanath Das wrote ‘Sita Haran’ (Abduction of Sita) on basis of tales from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Two other significant poems ‘Ramayan’ and ‘Urmila’ having epical elements were written during *Jonākī* period. In the poetry of HiteswarBorbarua several references of epical characters from the *Rāmāyaṇa* are found present. His two poems ‘Jakh’ and ‘Urmila’ from *Malach*(1918) are based on the tales from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In a few other poems of Raghunath Choudhary’s *Dahikatara* references of Rāmāyani characters are traced.

RatnakantaBorkakoti has started a new trend in Assamese literature through his poetry. In the fourth decade of the twentieth century, modernism entered into Assamese literature. Therefore, in Borkakoti’s poetry one can easily trace the mundane form of love rather than the romantic. He has also tried his hand in focusing the unfocused characters from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. His poem ‘Urmila’ is a poem centered on the character of Urmila from the *Rāmāyaṇa* where Borkakoti tries to express the hidden pains and agonies of this less focused woman character. Borkakoti was much influenced by the article “Upekhiyta” of Rabindranath Tagore. ^[4]Borkakoti’s Urmila, an unfocused, neglected woman is presented here as an epitome of self-sacrifice. The daughter of king Janak, Urmila went to Ayodhya after her marriage with Lakshmana. But, her dream of a happy marital life was not fulfilled since Lakshmana wished to accompany Rama in his exile of fourteen years. Lakshmana did not have time to think once of his wife. The poet asks:

Jidinatapaswibese
Dui raj bhrata,
BaajholSita hate
Andhariayodhya,
Hidina Urmila tumi
Rajhamya tale
Kidarelunthitahola
Kunebadekhile?

According to the gender role of Indian tradition a woman’s duty is to follow her husband obediently. Following the same ideology Urmila too dreamt of a blissful marital life with Lakshmana only to be shattered it down after a few days of marriage. In spite of being in a relationship Lakshmana preferred to go with his brother which led to fourteen years of separation between him and his wife. In a patriarchal society for man love is considered as a duty only, but for a woman it becomes everything of her life. The newly wedded bride Urmila had to sacrifice her love and aspirations to satisfy the ideal love of her husband for his brother Rama. As mentioned in the poem:

Kune jane hidinar
Abala Urmila,
Sulimeliakalai
Kidarebyakula;

The poet expresses how a life without husband becomes unbearable for Urmila. The poet imagines whether those moments of love been revived again after the return of Lakshmana. For the poet the pains of Urmila are severe even then the fire test and benediction of Sita. The poet imagines that the pains of Urmila might have forbid the sage Balmiki too to express them with his colourful verse. With his poem Urmila, Ratnakanta Borkakoti portrays the character of a woman suffering from the pain of separation from her husband. Besides, Borkakoti portrays the role of a woman in ancient India where she was bound to obey the words of her husband. In doing so, the poet consciously not only brings out the less focussed character of Urmila, but also tries to relate his feelings with the character.

One of the renowned contemporary Assamese poets Karabi Deka Hazarika is recreating the leading Ramayani woman character Sita in her poem entitled 'Sita'. In the poem the poet has portrayed the extra-ordinary qualities of a woman. Sita not only appears in the poem as an epitome of sacrifice but also as a woman with self respect who has the courage to question the social norms. After she was rescued from Ravana, Sita had to go through the fire test to satisfy Rama as well as the subjects of Ayodhya. But even after proving her chastity Sita was not excused, she was sent to live in the ashrama of sage Valmiki. Sita in the Rāmāyaṇa is presented as woman who knows very well the barriers of gender ascribed by the patriarchal society. Karabi Deka Hazarika through her poem laments that the ancient orthodox and gender biased society is remained unchanged in this present age. There is hardly any difference between the age old ancient society and the contemporary one. Women are still subjugated, humiliated and forced to maintain the norms prescribed by the patriarchal society. Therefore, the poet prefers forest to live then human society:

*Prithiviekeiase
Heiekeiandharatetiya
Raj- prasadat
Hajar pradipjwale
Etiyaase tat chayare
Pradhanya*

Such men who in the name of fulfilling *dharma* or duty dominate women are not less in number. In Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa, Rama is the ideal king, not the ideal husband. On the other hand, Sita is presented as the ideal, self-sacrificing and long suffering wife. The behaviours of Rama made Sita to stand against her own husband. The poet says:

*Premmisa
Bhuaparichay
Nijokebanchanamathuurekal
Karubarpriyotamahuwa
Karubar duchokurtaralnilat
Hapunarjundekhapuwa.*

Rama's journey to the forest was turned as the cause of all miseries of Sita's life. The consequence of this benediction was the abduction of Sita by Ravana and the fire test to prove her chastity. Rama and Ravana both are representatives of the patriarchal society. Both of them had pride on their positions, to maintain which they subjected Sita to domination.

At Ashoka Vatika (Ashoka garden) Sita had to go through a continuous physical as well as mental conflict. According to the poet, the whole world now has turned into an

Ashoka vatika where woman is harassed at every other minute. She further says, men are turning into demons while Ramas (husbands) are busy in enjoying the materialistic pleasures of the world. On the other hand, women have been suffering the physical and mental humiliation of the patriarchy and bearing them silently since time immemorial.

The poet is quite optimistic about the capability of woman to stand against male oppression in present day world. Hazarika has pointed out how the modern women are reversing the traditional gender role. Here the poet has universalised Sita by identifying her with every other woman. For the poet, Sita is no longer a husband worshipping, self-sacrificing ideal wife, rather she turns into a 'new woman' by denying the patriarchal domination. The poet has beautifully idealised the empowered Sita towards the later part of her poem:

*Lajgol
Bhoigol
Gol arubiswakharkathinbandhun
Sitaajialkariya
Bandhuhina, hangihina
Hubikhalhankharatakaleithiodia
Diptaagnisikha.*

5. CONCLUSION

The key findings of the analysis of gender role and recreating the women characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* by the Assamese poets RatnakantaBorkakoti and Karabi Deka Hazarika can be summarised in some points. They are:

(i) The Assamese modern poets through their poetry try to express the feelings of the women characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* by unveiling their sufferings in a patriarchal society.

(ii) The Assamese modern poet questions the strict gender role followed in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In their poetry they challenge this strict order by giving voice to the unvoiced women characters.

(iii) The characters of Sita and Urmila are universalised by identifying them with every other woman who is subjugated in patriarchal society.

(iv) As a romantic poet, RatnakantaBorkakoti's poem is melancholic where the poet laments on the fate and sufferings of Urmila. On the other hand, Karabi Deka Hazarika is optimistic when discussing the fate of present day woman. For her modern woman no longer bears the suffering, rather she stands up to protest against it.

(v) Karabi Deka Hazarika through her poem 'Sita' advocates the role of 'new woman' in the present day world to stand against patriarchy.

END NOTE

- [1] Munmi Hazarika, "Gender roles and representation of feminine identity in Ramayana: A critical study" *International Journal of English language, Literature and Humanities*, 2:5(Sept. 2014), p. 295
- [2] Sandra Alters, Wendy Schiff (2009). *Essential Concepts for Healthy Living*. Jones & Bartlett Publishers. p. 43.
- [3] "Gender Role", https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/gender_role
- [4] Rabindranath Tagore, "KabyerUpekhiya" *Rabindra Rachanawali*, Vol.5, Vishwa Bharti Edn., p.550

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