

Original Paper

Defeating Patriarchy on Its Own Terms: The Paradox of Female Chastity in Krittivasa's *Ramayana*

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Abstract

This essay attempts to analyze the role of women in the Bengali Ramayana of Krittivasa, a regional version of the original Sanskrit epic composed by Valmiki. It does so from the perspective of the strict code of female chastity enshrined in a patriarchal society and enforced upon its women by their male guardians within and beyond the home. While on the one hand, it is an instrument of female subjugation, this essay makes an attempt to analyze how the strict observance of this code by the women in the epic, makes it a weapon of female empowerment across the different strata of society through which the text operates. The powerful spiritual energy generated in the process by these women can threaten even the most powerful of patriarchs including the epic hero Rama himself.

Keywords

female chastity, patriarchy, empowerment

1. Introduction: Categorizing the Text

The *Ramayana* has its regional and folk versions in several Indian languages. Each regional poet adds his own contemporary thrust and bias according to the local customs and traditions prevalent there, making it a unique masterpiece. A. K. Ramanujan in his essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas", says that to some extent all *Ramayanas* after Valmiki play on the knowledge of previous tellings; he calls them "meta-Ramayanas" (Ramanujan, 1999, p. 143). These may be categorized under *itihasa sahitya* ("itihasa" is history) because they pre-suppose a knowledge of the history of telling the story of Rama through the ages beginning with the "first text" narrated by the Adi-Kavi Valmiki. Regarding the *Ramayana* of the Bengali poet Krittivasa Ojha, while literary historian Asit Kumar Bandopadhyay places this text under the genre of *anuvada sahitya* (translation literature) despite acknowledging its distinct regional flavor, Ramanujan, citing the examples of Kamban and Krittivasa, says: "We may call

such a text *indexical*: the text is embedded in a locale, a context, refers to it, even signifies it, and would not make much sense without it. Here, one may say, the ‘Ramayana’ is not merely a set of individual texts, but a genre with a variety of instances” (Ramanujan, n.d., p. 157). This paper is a study of the version of the epic composed by this Bengali poet Krittivasa in the fifteenth century and an attempt to analyze the role of women in the text.

Returning to Bandopadhyay’s classification of Krittivasa’s text, let me first point out that though the text contains the same number of *kandas* and verses as Valmiki’s epic, it is not composed in epic form, but in that of the *panchali* or ballad which belongs to the popular tradition of folk narratives in Bengal. These folk narratives though mostly composed by Brahmin poets like Krittivasa, were recited by rural women, thus lending them an alternative dimension. However, in categorizing this *Ramayana* under the genre of translation literature, Bandopadhyay is in essence pre-supposing the centrality of Valmiki’s “adi-kavya” or first text. Such a perspective reiterates what Robert P. Goldman speaks of in his essay “Resisting Rama: Dharmic Debates on Gender and Hierarchy and the Work of the Valmiki Ramayana”: “One assumption underlying many of these studies is that Valmiki’s monumental epic speaks monovalently for the brahmanical elites of ancient and medieval India, making little room available for discourses that run counter to the hegemonic and comprehensive regimes of patriarchal dominance and the *varnasrama dharma* (the duties of members of each *varna* in the four stages of life)” (Goldman, 2004, p. 26).

2. Analysis of Existing Critical Opinion

As earlier stated, the present paper is an attempt to analyze the role played by women in Krittivasa’s text. It is important to state that like most major epics in world literature, the *Ramayana* too is essentially the product of a patriarchal society where women play marginal roles as victims subjugated to the value-system that patriarchy imposes upon them for the furthering of the heroic order and the achievement of the hero’s designated purpose in the epic. In her essay entitled “Lady Sings the Blues: When Women re-tell the *Ramyana*”, celebrated Ramayana scholar Nabaneeta DevSen, states that the ideals of the epic world do not have much to share with women nor do the women get to enjoy the heroic values: there is little they can do there other than get abducted or rescued, pawned, molested or humiliated in some way or other. Joseph Campbell says in *Occidental Mythology*, that female figures of epic, drama and romance are reduced to the status of mere objects; or when functioning as subjects initiating action of their own, have been depicted as incarnate demons or as mere allies of the masculine will (Campbell, 2001, p. 158). Both these propositions will be used during the course of this essay to highlight its argument. While looking at the text from various aspects included under the broader discourse of gender, the challenges I discovered are numerous. Some of these are briefly enumerated here, to be analyzed later. While patriarchy is indeed the dominant discourse of the epic, that of social hierarchy works both vertically and laterally. Thus on the one hand, there is the caste hierarchy so deeply embedded in Hindu society, dominated mainly by the infallible Brahmin and his

omnipotent spiritual energy and the Kshatriya, invincible through his claims to monopoly over weaponry. The hierarchical discourse also extends across the god-human-demon categorization and the human-animal (monkey) one. These in turn have their own individual hierarchical structures, contributing to the multiplicity of levels on which the epic operates while patriarchy and its sternly entrenched value-system control all. The question whether Rama as the ideal man and the Visnu avatar, can and should be challenged for some of his actions, as has been done in both Ramayana studies and the multiple media in which the Rama story has been told, is an issue discussed at length by many critics. Paula Richman in her introductory article in “Questioning Ramayanas” refers to A. K. Ramanujan’s argument quoted at the beginning of this essay: “The ‘Many-Ramayanas’ model assumes that each telling of Rama’s story is valid in its own right. . . . Ramanujan’s model emphasizes the many different tellings of Rama’s story—oral and written, read and performed, recited and depicted in visual forms—without representing each one primarily in terms of its relationship to Valmiki’s telling (Richman, 2001, p. 4). My attempt in this essay will be to look at Krittivasa’s text from the subaltern’s perspective, not necessarily by subverting the dominant discourse but by trying to show how the patriarchal value system operating at all the levels discussed above, has ironically empowered with its own weapons of control the very women it has sought to subjugate. In so doing I will however, draw upon Valmiki too to highlight the alternative perspective offered by Krittivasa.

3. Method

3.1 Women as Cause of Epic Action

The focus of Krittivasa does indeed remain the epic war between the ideal man and the demon king, ironically rendered invincible by the boon of the very gods whom he defeats and dethrones. But whereas Valmiki in his classical version of the epic attributes the war mostly to divine decree and pre-ordinance, it will be the purpose of the first part of this paper to show how Krittivasa highlights the role of three women who were instrumental in their own way in precipitating this archetypal conflict. The first of these as in most versions of the epic is of course Kaikeyi, Rama’s stepmother who together with her evil female mentor Manthara, deprives Rama of his rightful claim to the throne and sends him to forest exile and thus brings about his encounter with the demons following the abduction of his wife Sita. Then there is Surpanakha, Ravana’s widowed sister, who lusts after Rama and Lakshmana in the forest, is mutilated by them and incites her brother to war to seek revenge, thus bringing about the ultimate downfall of the demon dynasty in Lanka. As Krittivasa says:

Bidhatar maya bolo ke bujhite pare

Surpanakha kandilo Ravan bodhibare (Krittivasa, 1957, p. 139)

(Who can understand the ways of the divine

Surpanakha’s tears brought about the death of Ravana)

And finally there is the matchless Sita herself (also called Janaki), who follows her husband into exile like the dutiful and self-sacrificing wife patriarchy expects her to be, leading to her abduction by

Ravana, which is the immediate provocation for the war and the annihilation of the demons at the hands of Rama and his monkey brigade:

Ayu shesh hoilo dhori Janakir chool... (Krittivasa, p. 240)

(Ravana's days were numbered as he dragged Janaki by her hair)

Ravana must die says the poet, not only because he has defied and dethroned the gods or dared to wage war against Rama a Visnu-incarnation, but because he has attempted the violation of a *pativrata's* chastity and dragged her by the hair as seen in the quote. Krittivasa thus holds these women directly or indirectly responsible for an event which has been pre-ordained by divine decree. An example may be found in a verse containing Hanuman's words about Sita in the Ashoka grove in Lanka:

Iha laagi maron edai kopi joto

Iha laagi Surpanakha naak kaan hoto

Iha lagi chaturdash sahasra raksha more (Krittivasa, p. 213)

(For her the monkeys escaped death

For her Surpanakha's nose and ears were cut off

For her fourteen thousand demons will die...)

The repeated use of the phrase *iha laagi* (for her/because of her), though used in the passive voice, establishes Sita as the indirect cause of the action of the whole epic. Rather paradoxically it may be fitting to quote Campbell here to underscore the Valmiki-Krittivasa hiatus. Campbell further states: "Throughout the literature, images appear that obviously in some earlier, pre-patriarchal context, must have pointed to initiations received by the male from the female side; but their accent is always so displaced that they appear in first glance—though not, indeed, on second—to support the patriarchal notion of virtue, arete, which they actually, in some measure, refute" (Campbell, p. 158).

This partial shift of causality from the male to the female in Krittivasa has a strong foundation in the goddess cults of the *Sakta* tradition of Bengal reflected in its culture, religion and religious literature. This is seen both in the mainstream and the folk traditions; from the *Mangal Kavyas* promoting goddess cults from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries to the *Ramayana* of Candravati focused entirely on Sita's story and even the work songs of the village women in Bengal, the last two devaluing the heroism of the hero by projecting the feminine perspective.

Questioning the notion of Rama as an ideal man and king, an infallible Visnu-avatar or of his rule as utopian, alternative *Ramayanas*, particularly folk ones and women's *Rama-kathas* have projected the story from the victim's point of view; the victim of patriarchal dominance or caste rejection or of both. Nabaneeta DevSen cites the examples of Candravati in Bengal and Atukori Molla, the lower caste Telugu woman, who she says were the first women to re-tell the *Ramayana* in their vernaculars. While Molla a woman belonging to the lower caste, stormed the traditional Brahminical domain by composing a classical epic, Candravati's sixteenth century text focused on the suffering of women, telling the story from Sita's point of view and by including other victims like Mandodari, Ravana's wife, universalized the theme of victimization of women. Mandakranta Bose, in the introduction to her

translation of Candravati's text, calls this part of a trend that had entered into the *Ramayanas* of eastern India after Krittivasa. She says that this signals "the beginning of a tradition of looking at the epic from below, from the viewpoint of the victim rather than that of the victor" (Bose, 2013, p. 4).

Bengali literature in fact, has a rich tradition of powerful women characters. It holds as its positive female archetypes such characters as Behula (*Manasa Mangal Kavya*), Savitri (*Mahabharata*) and Sita. All three are ideal prototypes of the patriarchal code of *satitwa* (female chastity/sexual purity) required of the *pativrata* or the chastity and selfless devotion expected of a Hindu wife. The first two however are more pro-active in fulfilling the wifely duty required of them. When their husbands succumb to untimely deaths, they react not by dying alongside their dead husbands as social custom requires, but by challenging the gods responsible for those deaths. In embarking on a lone journey to bring her husband back to life and placating an assembly of gods through dance, Behula defies patriarchal codes, just as Savitri does in outwitting Yama, the god of death in a battle of wits. Patriarchy puts dangerous labels on such independent, self-willed women, even chaste ones. The question of how far Sita goes in challenging the patriarchal judgment will be dealt with during the course of this paper. The word *sita* comes from a Sanskrit word meaning "furrow", indicating the finding of the infant Sita by King Janaka when the Earth was being ploughed, since she is the daughter of Earth in her present incarnation. Joseph Campbell's association of the plough with the phallus (Campbell, p. 158) introduces the theme of violation of female chastity into her birth circumstances. Moreover Sita, as both Krittivasa and Valmiki tell us, was Vedavati from a previous avatar, who immolated herself on being violated by Ravana, after cursing him with dynastic annihilation. This was to be brought about through her in her next incarnation as Visnu's consort. The paradox of the character of Sita therefore lies in the fact that though violation of chastity (also, in the image of the Earth and the plough) underlies her very origin, Hindu mythology enshrines her as the epitome of chastity and a positive stereotype. Moreover, in the Candravati text as well as in the *Adbhuta Ramayana* attributed to Valmiki, Sita is the daughter of Ravana and Mandodari, floated in a box in the sea after Vibhisana's prediction of demon-destruction through her. This introduces the theme of incest in the story of her abduction by Ravana.

3.2 Concept of "Satitwa/Female Chastity" and Application in the Epic

While *satitwa* and *pativrata* in patriarchal Hindu society are ethical codes forcibly imposed upon women, it will be my purpose in the next part of this paper to show how strict following of these codes empowers a woman not only against violation or rape by the demonic, but against dishonor and injustice by the heroic as well, thus defeating the archetypes of patriarchy on their own grounds. Chastity, which might be termed the *arete* of these women, is therefore a double-edged weapon. Thus while a Kshatriya warrior is empowered by his weaponry won from the gods through severe penance, a woman is empowered by the sheer spiritual energy gained through strict observance of these ethical codes which arms her with the power to annihilate its violators through a curse as powerful as that wielded by the Brahmin ascetic. Valmiki speaks of "*rakshitam sven tejasa*" on several occasions and Krittivasa says of Sita's abduction by Ravana:

Shaap dilo Sita taar moner akule

Ei hetu taar swabongshe shonghaar (Krittivasa, p. 240)

(Sita cursed him in her anguish

This brought about his dynastic destruction)

A single blade of grass magically empowered by Sita protects her against sexual assault by the all-powerful demon-king in Lanka, a demon who had defeated the gods themselves. Of this, Valmiki says,

trinamantaratah kritwa pratyuvaacha shuchismita (Valmiki, 1998, p. 179)

Throughout Krittivasa's text, Sita invokes the power of her inviolate chastity again and again, a power ratified by the sanction of gods and sages. When her husband repeatedly exposes her to the humiliating ordeal of the public test of her chastity after her ten month captivity in the demon kingdom of Lanka, both the fire god Agni and the sage Valmiki warn him of the disastrous consequences of his action. If provoked, her wrath and her curse can incinerate kingdoms and dynasties, even righteous ones like Rama's own. In the last chapter of the epic, the Uttara-kanda, after the pregnant Sita has been banished by King Rama to forest exile in the hermitage of Valmiki to placate his skeptic subjects, she extends the power emanating from her irreproachable *satitwa* to her twin sons in battle against their enemies. Unknown to her and to them, this is a battle for supremacy against their own father King Rama, as part of the *aswamedha yagna* (horse sacrifice) he is conducting. When Sita utters the dread pronouncement that if she has indeed practiced *satitwa* in its truest essence, her blessing will bring about the defeat and death of her sons' enemies in war, she is unknowingly uttering the death warrant of her husband and his brothers. As they fall dead, she realizes the enormity of her error, though the dead warriors are later revived by Valmiki's salvific powers. Thus a *sati*'s curse has power even over the godly. And this is a power extended to other categories of women as well, moving across the hierarchies mentioned earlier in this essay which are equally bound by the same ethical codes. Thus the monkey king Bali's queen Tara and the demon king Ravana's chief consort Mandodari are empowered by the same spiritual energy that unsullied practice of virtue and chastity fortify them with. Rama himself is vulnerable to their curses. Tara warns him that even a Visnu-avatar is not immune to a *pativrata*'s curse. Her words after her monkey warrior-husband are unjustly killed by Rama are:

Ami jodi sati hoi bharat bhitoro

Kandibe Sitar hetu ke khondite pare (Krittivasa, p. 169)

(If I am a sati within bharat

You will grieve for Sita, who can prevent this)

Mandodari's curse after the epic war destroys the demon dynasty in Lanka is similar. Both doom Rama to eternal separation from the Sita he has fought and killed to rescue.

Sita's inviolate chastity which Rama repeatedly exposes to the public test, including the fire ordeal, is certified by gods and sages and by the spirit of Rama's own father, who declares her a *shuddha* thus making her the very epitome of purity. Dasharatha's spirit in fact seeks funereal rituals (*pinda-daan*),

from her using available forest resources like the water of the Phalgu river and the sand of its banks as seen in the text. The poet adds that the touch of her feet purify Mother Earth herself, whose daughter she is. As the pregnant Sita is banished to the forest by King Rama to placate his subjects, Kritivasa says that darkness envelops the earth, the tree drops its fruit, leading to a reversal of the fertility symbol. Her virtue is therefore chastening and chastising—chastening for the women who will listen to her tale hereafter and chastising for those who attempt to violate a woman’s chastity, thus lending a salvific dimension to the myth. In the last part of the epic, the Uttara-kanda, when Rama once again exposes her to a test of her chastity before the assembled court, Sita, in an act of protest against the insult and humiliation to which she has been repeatedly exposed, re-enters the womb of the Earth, which parts to admit her. Rama’s desperate act is that of pulling her by the hair to prevent her descent.

3.3 Female Chastity VS. Female Sexuality in the Epic

It is important to notice however that male control over female sexuality is totally for the purpose of procreation and dynastic propagation, establishing its own definitions of chastity and wantonness. Recalling Campbell’s words earlier quoted, patriarchy uses gender stereotyping in its assessment of -and judgment over- its women. Uncontrolled female sexuality is a danger to the stability of the kingdom, the dynasty and ultimately the cosmos itself, as repeatedly underscored in the epic. In this context, it may be relevant to quote Karen Jo Torjeson who, while talking of the women surrounding Jesus, says, “The whore is an important symbol whose negative stereotype functions to underscore the values associated with female chastity” (Corley, 2002, p. 95).

Patriarchy’s definition of a whore is associated with the loosening of male control over female sexuality and ultimately of a woman’s exertion of her independence and will power. Rama’s stepmother Kaikeyi is projected almost universally as the negative stereotype because of her strong hold over her husband King Dasaratha which leads to the banishment of Rama and his father’s death of grief. From another perspective she is a pro-active woman who initially saves the life of her husband on two occasions by her powers as a medicine woman. While Valmiki underplays this aspect of her potential, Kritivasa elaborates upon her superiority over the other queens in the palace, leading to Rama’s chastisement of his own mother for her passivity in her role as chief consort. However Dasaratha’s obsession with Kaikeyi (an old man’s for a beautiful young wife), brings sorrow and suffering to his subjects. Whereas a *pativrata*’s role is therapeutic as shown in the saintly Anusuya’s ability to divert the course of the Ganges to mitigate the effects of a ten-year period of drought through her spiritual energy, a woman’s unleashed sexuality brings death and disaster in its wake. Kaikeyi plays upon the politics of the inner chambers to secure succession rights for her son Bharat, denying the laws of primogeniture. Thus in the patriarchal value system enshrined in the epic, Kaikeyi must be rejected as a *chandal-hridaya* (a woman with the lowly heart of a “chandal” or the lowest caste), a *bhujangini* (a female serpent) who holds her husband in her deadly embrace. Thus in the same epic, another female character Ahalya the sage’s wife, must be turned to stone for her sexual intercourse with the god Indra who came to her in the guise of her husband. Thus the widowed demon Surpanakha must be facially

mutilated by Lakshman because she covets Rama and his brother in the forest, defying patriarchy's prescriptions of total sexual abstinence for a widow.

3.4 The Subaltern's Perspective

However Krittivasa's text by taking into account the alternative viewpoint, or what may be called the subaltern's perspective, offers the women in the epic a voice. This throws up certain important questions crucial to the argument of the epic. Why does Rama rescue Sita from her demon abductor only to reject her immediately after? Is it for love of her and a desire to punish those guilty of violating feminine honor? Is it self-justification for what has obviously been a failure on his part as a famed Kshatriya warrior to protect his own wife? Or is it simply to fulfill what has been divinely pre-ordained for the destruction of the demon dynasty and the establishment of *Rama-rajya* (the rule of the ideal king)? Finally, what is the subaltern's perspective of the Kshatriya code of honor and justice, the punishment for its violation and the means adopted thereof? These are questions raised by the women in Krittivasa's epic which challenge the andocentric value system. The last part of this paper will attempt to analyze the alternative viewpoint.

Questioning the basic tenets of a patrilinear system, Queen Kausalya, Rama's mother asks him whose command is absolute for him, that of his father the king as social law dictates, or of his mother who bore him in her womb and nursed him at her breast (Valmiki, p. 265)? Does the king his father still retain the ability to command his unquestioning obedience even in his senility, servile as he is to his obsessive passion for Kaikeyi? Goldman says of this, "Mother Kausalya thrusts herself into the debate. She urges Rama not to abandon her and to ignore the unrighteous (*adharmya*) orders of Kaikeyi. She then seeks to wrest the dharmic high ground from Rama by urging a version of filial piety gendered differently from the one that is motivating her son" (Goldman, p. 25). While these questions are also raised by Valmiki, Krittivasa carries the alternative viewpoint further in the poignant challenge issued by Kaikeyi herself to Rama after his return from exile. She says that if indeed demon destruction through his confrontation with Ravana in the forest was pre-ordained, why, as an omnipotent Visnu-avatar, should Rama have chosen her as the agent provocateur for the fulfillment of this divine decree, thus exposing her to eternal infamy and shame?

Ori mari debotar bancha puraili

Amar mathai diye kalanker dali (Krittivasa, p. 418)

(You defeated the enemies to appease the gods, heaping the burden of infamy and shame upon me)
Rama, says the poet, has no satisfactory answer. Moreover both Valmiki and Krittivasa use Sita's arguments to her husband to debate upon the dangerous potential of the Kshatriya's obsession with weaponry and warfare. While Valmiki warns of the danger of lapsing into the third *adharmya* of cruelty and the taking of innocent life, in the words of Krittivasa's Sita:

"Haate astra thakile loker jaan nashe" (Krittivasa, p. 131)

(A weapon in hand causes the loss of life)

Lamenting the loss of innocent forest life, Sita says that constant proximity to powerful weapons makes cruelty and taking of life an accepted social norm. While the Kshatriya may call this the collateral damage in the cause of the greater good of the establishment of the rule of dharmic law, the subaltern's perspective questions the Kshatriya code of honor itself. Incidentally, in taking the decision to follow her husband to the forest and thereby exposing herself to innumerable dangers, Sita is throwing herself on her husband's ability to protect her according to the Kshatriya's code of honor. In following the demands patriarchy makes on the ideal wife of substituting the comfort and safety of the palace for the dangers of forest life, she expects in return the guarantee of safe keeping that patriarchy should afford to the weaker sex:

Nijo nari rakhite je kore bhoy mone
Balo tare beer bale kon dheer jane (Krittivasa, p. 98)
 (The one who fears to protect his own wife
 Tell me, who can call him valiant?)

Her words are a challenge to the code of honor for the Kshatriya male and Rama's later inability to do so reflects his failure to live up to the designated role and duty enshrined in the same. Goldman points out the contradiction in Valmiki's text in Rama's admonition to his mother when she wishes to follow him into exile that a wife's principal duty is to her husband, whereas to his wife's similar request, he says that she must remain in Ayodhya to fulfill her obligations to her in-laws (Goldman, p. 30).

Finally, Sita in her desperate protest against the repeated public tests of her chastity by her husband, questions his violation of the basic tenets of the patriarchal code of honor for its women. Upper class women were forcibly confined within the inner chambers of the palace by men determined to seclude them from the public domain. Rama as the archetype of the ideal man and the scion of the famed Ikshaku dynasty, by exposing his virtuous wife again and again to the male gaze, was dishonoring these established codes of honor. Sita's words accuse him of the same,

Kulobodhu jato nari shei thake ghare
Shabhate poriksha dite aashi bare bare (Krittivasa, p. 527)
 (The women and wives of the royal family must remain within the inner chamber
 I come again and again to the court to be tested)

Through this she strikes not only at the very foundations of female chastity as enshrined in the patriarchal code, but at the accepted notions of Rama's status as the ideal man and king within the epic. The final challenge to Rama's deified manhood in this version of an epic where women receive more than their share of distinction, is found in the famed lotus test to which the Goddess Durga exposes him. In Krittivasa's epic, androcentric and gynocentric forms of worship are pitched against each other, when as a Visnu-avatar, Rama finds himself unable to defeat his arch enemy Ravana as the latter rides into battle on a chariot mounted by Uma Haimavati, one of the original goddess manifestations. Rama has to appease the goddess in "unseasonal worship" (*akaal bodhan*) with a votive offering of a hundred and eight blue lotuses. His chanting of goddess hymns salutes the goddess in all her ten *mahavidya*

forms and as the Creatrix, the Preserver and the Destroyer of the universe, thus introducing *Sakta* elements into a *Vaisnava* text, as pointed out by Jnanendranath Bhattacharya (Bhattacharya, 2004, p. 180). This exposes Rama to a severe test of his faith when the goddess willfully conceals one of the lotuses to be offered. In despair, Rama offers to put out his own blue eye (traditionally compared to the blue lotus in all versions of the epic) as a substitute. This indicates a ritualistic humbling of the archetypal male through symbolic disfigurement before the divine feminine and finds no mention in Valmiki. In some versions of the epic however, Sita becomes synonymous with *Sakti*. Sashi Bhusan Dasgupta points out that in the Oriya *Vi-Lanka Ramayana* of Sorola Das, Ravana in Vi-Lanka takes on first a hundred-headed, and then a thousand-headed form which leave both Rama and Lakshman powerless to defeat him. It is Sita, who takes on the form of Mahakali and slays him. In Sarga 17 of the *Adbhuta Ramayana* believed to have been composed by Valmiki, when Rama becomes unconscious in battle against the thousand-headed Ravana, Sita appears in her Mahakali form and severs the heads while her goddess-clones wreck havoc on the battlefield, causing the earth to shake and sink into the netherworld. Rama has to appease Sita as the embodiment of *Sakti* for her to re-gain her original beauty of form. In Krittivasa, there is the episode of Mahi-Ravana, Ravana's son who as a Devi-worshipper kidnaps Rama and Lakshman intending to offer them as sacrifice to her but they are rescued by Hanuman. Also in this text appears a unique instance of a woman warrior, the demon Mahi-Ravana's wife taking up arms against her husband's killers with her pregnancy heavy upon her and giving birth in the thick of battle.

4. Conclusion

By offering the subaltern a voice within an epic tradition that is essentially a glorification of male valor and prowess and a reinstatement of a patriarchal value system, the Medieval Bengali poet Krittivasa therefore corresponds to the tradition of valorization of the feminine in the literature of Bengal through the ages also seen in the *Mangal Kavyas*, in the *Ramayana* of Candravati and in the depiction of Radha as a social rebel in Vaisnava poetry. As in the numerous regional and folk variants of the epic, Krittivasa too describes in detail the rituals associated with a woman's life (as in the *baromasya* form of narration in many oral narratives). These include those associated with puberty, marriage and pregnancy, the issues of a woman's passage from the loving care of the post-natal home to the uncertain domain of the marital, the many alliances and conflicts that build up within the politics of the inner chambers of the palace, all of which reflect the position of women in the society of Bengal of his day. In the process, these women are seen to question and challenge the prevalent social and cultural practices and the peripheries they define, and their voices echo beyond the inner chambers of the home to which they are confined.

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Notes

Note 1. Krittivasa Ojha was born sometime between 1386 and 1398. His patron was believed to be Raja Ganesh of Bengal, critics have tried to locate the period of composition through this reference. The first printed version of his *Ramayana* was from Srirampur Mission Press through Dr William Carey's efforts in 1802.

Note 2. Pativrata is a woman who follows the Hindu ethical code of absolute obedience and loyalty to the husband.

Note 3. Saktas are the followers of Sakti, the goddess in her many manifestations of Durga, Kali, etc., the consort of Siva.

Note 4. In the Kannada folk *Ramayana*, "sita" indicates a "sneeze" because she was born of Ravana's sneeze when he became pregnant after eating the pulp of the mango promised to Mandodari for conceiving a child.

Note 5. The "aswamedha yagna" or the horse sacrifice was a device to establish the supremacy of a king, where the sacrificial horse was led through kingdoms accompanied by the king's army and

generals. If anyone wished to challenge this supremacy, they captured the horse and a war followed. Eventually, when the horse returned to the kingdom at the end of a year, it was ritually sacrificed. But ironically, the chief queen was symbolically mated with the horse before it was killed, a further statement on the demands of patriarchy on a woman's chastity.

Note 6. The word used by Valmiki is "dharmacharineem", Valmiki (p. 549).

Note 7. Manu's dictum states, "pitridarshaguna maata gauravernatarichy pate"—a mother is ten times superior to one's father in respectability, quoted in Valmiki (p. 265).

Note 8. The first two *adharmas* as listed by Valmiki are false speech and copulation with another's wife, both of which Rama is incapable of.

Note 9. Vaisnavas are the followers of Visnu.