



Research Paper

Thematic Resemblances between ‘Sitayana and Ramayana’

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Sitayana is closely related to Valmiki’s great epic. In fact, the **Ramayana** is the chief source of **Sitayana**. The author too accepts as much in his Introduction where he says that “the source of all, the sap-of-all is doubtless Valmiki’s **Ramayana**.”¹ Indeed, the poet’s inspirational phrase “Sitayahcharitam mahat”² comes from Valmiki’s epic. Valmiki shows in his epic abundant adoration for Sita who spent her last twelve years in his hermitage in her second and final exile. The author’s own overflowing reverence for her no doubt was inspired by Valmiki’s vivid portrayal of Sita. Dr. Iyengar’s story naturally follows the main line in Valmiki and still the divergences are considerable. In fact, Dr. Iyengar approaches the Sita theme with a modern outlook. How far has he succeeded in this aim? On what grounds is **Sitayana** a totally different composition from Valmiki’s great work? By slanting his work towards Sita, could he do justice to the character of her hero? Really, the task before the author was formidable. While the world’s first poet had presented both Rama and Sita with a grandeur and sublimity that has seldom been surpassed, was there any further scope for yet another depiction of the heroine of the **Ramayana**?

All these potent questions need to be answered to do justice to Dr. Iyengar’s work. To address them, the two epics have to be studied in conjunction and we need proceed step by step, without any hurry.

The first Book of **Sitayana** is ‘Mithila’. So, the divergence starts at the very opening. The Book is set in Mithila where the heroine is to be born and brought up. The **Ramayana**, on the other hand, opens with the Bala Kanda at Sage Valmiki’s hermitage.

The first canto of **Sitayana** is titled ‘Narada and Janaka’ which presents the famed, peripatetic, generous Brahmarshi in serious converse with Janaka. Here Narada advises the king to perform a sacrifice that would call down Divinity, this time in the melting form of a female for the salvation of mankind.

In ‘Janaka’, the second Canto, we find the king of Mithila self-absorbed, pondering deeply over Narada’s suggestion. Here, he tries to recollect all the Maithil kings right from Nimi down to himself. This was a unique line of self-realised kings whose recollection fills Janaka with peace.

The third Canto is ‘Janaka and Yajnavalkya’. Yajnavalkya is enlightened Mithila’s own Rishi and revered Guru of the king whose wisdom lights the **Brihadaranyakopanishad**, a jewel among the Upanishads. Janaka once holds a great conference of Rishis among whom Yajnavalkya shines as the resplendent sun. In **Valmiki Ramayana**, Yajnavalkya is seldom mentioned. But here, we find the king approaching the sage who has his hermitage in the vicinity of Janakpur.

‘Sita’s Birth And Fostering’, the next Canto, also is the poet’s own innovation. For, in the **Ramayana**, Sita’s birth is referred to by Janaka when he informs Vishwamitra: “One day, I was ploughing to sanctify the ground for yajna.

As in Valmiki, here, too, King Janaka was ploughing the ground, the site for his yajna, when he saw in the furrow a wonderful child. Because she had sprung from the furrow which is called in Sanskrit Sita, “the enraptured Janaka cried ‘Sita!’ and bent down in gratitude.”³

‘The Girlhood of Sita’, Canto 5, shows further expansion of Sita’s consciousness. As mentioned above, in all these six Cantos describing birth and fostering of Sita, the poet does not have Valmiki’s prop as his **Ramayana** does not detail Sita’s nativity and upbringing.

In ‘Initiation’, Canto 7, Sita comes in still deeper contact with the female sages around Mithila, particularly Gargi Vachaknavi of the Upanishadic fame, and between them grows a mature understanding. Gargi with her sharp intellect had seen something special in her.

In ‘The Dome of Holiness’, Sita’s soulful training proceeds still further. She now goes to another great Ashrama in the lower Himalayas in the company of Gargi. Surrounded by cottages small and big stood the Dome of Holiness, an architectural wonder. Sita here met Devi Manasi, the throned priestess of the place. Sita found her to be “a Power, a Radiance, something ageless, sexless, a beyonding of human suppositions.”⁴ Taken

to the innermost quiet corner, Sita was asked to meditate, and “she saw in a single burst of revelation the worldless stupendous Truth.”⁵ Devi Manasi told her to lean on her soul in moments of trouble.

In ‘Destiny Unfolding’, we find Sita playing with her friends the ball-game. The ball having gone under an eight-wheeled box of monstrous proportions, Sita raised the box a little with her left hand and took out the ball. Just then came in Janaka who saw it in sheer amazement. For the box contained the great Bow of Shiva which was gifted by Mahadeva to King Devarata and had lain there for generations. When Janaka found Sita lifting the colossal box, he resolved to make the stringing of the great Bow her bride-price. The incident of Sita lifting the box containing the Bow does not occur either in Valmiki or Tulsi.

It is notable that this depiction of Sita closely tallies with what the **Mahabharata** says about Savitri: “Seeing her, all people thought that she was no ordinary mortal, but a goddess. Her eyes had the beauty of bluish lotuses. She seemed to be burning in her radiance. Deterred by her effulgence, no king or prince could propose for her hand.”⁶ So, Sita, like Savitri, filled her suitors “with the awe of the unattainable.”⁷ Besides her self-effulgence, there was the Bow which proved too heavy for the daring few who came to lift it. So, at last, Janaka decided to initiate a Yajna to attract the young man who could win his Earth-born daughter by stringing the Bow.

Sita also learnt of the arrival of the two handsome princes with Sage Vishwamitra. She along with her sisters also had a glimpse of the two princes, and Sita was filled with gleeful amazement that the elder one was the person whom she had seen in her vision. And, at last, Rama, who was shown the Bow, strung it and broke it in the process.

The poet also presents what we may call Sage Vishwamitra’s “stream of consciousness”. In fact, he became the instrument to bring about the union of Rama and Sita. He too is no ordinary mortal, but, as Satananda, King Janaka’s chief priest, informs us, is the man who by his strong will and formidable penance changed his destiny to become from a Kshatriya a Brahmarshi—the unbelievable leap from a gross state to a transcendental one. So, the Book of Mithila, one of the seven Books of **Sitayana**, concludes. As we have seen, ‘Mithila’ is almost completely the poet’s own creation. Here, he has borrowed nothing from Valmiki or Tulsi. Neither Valmiki nor Tulsi has any book (Kanda) of Mithila in his epic.

The theme of ‘Mithila’ is the growth of Sita—her childhood and adolescent years. The poet performs this tough task creditably. His treatment is frankly imaginative. But nowhere does he cross the limit to appear unrealistic.

While ‘Mithila’ is largely the poet’s own creation, ‘Ayodhya’, the next book, generally follows Valmiki, though here, too, he extends the main theme by bringing in Ahalya’s woes which he thinks resulted from male obduracy and lust. While the four brides along with their grooms and others were proceeding towards Ayodhya, Sita had a chance encounter with Ahalya because of the confusion caused by a cyclonic wind. At last they reach Ayodhya where the four sisters are warmly received.

Sita later visited in the company of Rama Sage Vasishta’s sashrama where she also had a meeting with Arundhati, famous for her steadfast love for her husband. Sita called her “exemplar of the feminine sublime” and referred to Maitreyi and her meeting with Ahalya. She sought her blessings to cope with the thorns of life. But the future had always baffled Arundhati herself. So, the best course for a mortal was to pray for Grace to move safely on the mountain-path of righteousness. But Arundhati also reminded Sita that she was no ordinary mortal. When she met Rama who was with Vashishta, he informed her that he had learnt from him, besides statecraft, the seven steps of Ascent towards the Truth. He proposed that Sita and he must rid themselves from the taint of attachment.

This was thus a fateful meeting for both Rama and Sita which does not take place in Valmiki

In the opening Canto of ‘Ayodhya Kanda’, Valmiki also details the very many qualities of Rama which impel Dasaratha to decide to crown him Vicegerent. In fact, at least 28 slokas are used to describe his merits. But Sita does not get any mention here. Happily Dr. Iyengar presents here the glory of both Rama and Sita. We also find her accompanying her husband on his tours of the city and reading at a glance the wants and discontents of the masses and communicating the same to Rama through her very look. Sita’s Ministry of Love is thus described which does justice to her potent presence in the great saga of the **Ramayana**.

King Dasaratha, a loving father who had always adored his eldest because of his great qualities, decided to crown his darling son as Vicegerent.

But there is at least one person in Ayodhya, the hunchback Manthara, who vows to overturn Dasaratha’s plan. She easily succeeds in her evil scheme. She rouses Kaikeyi against her husband’s plan and also recalls to her the two boons she had in trust. She does it in such a masterly way as to show her to be in possession of a razor-sharp brain that could cut through any tangles whatsoever, thus making her one of the memorable creations of Valmiki. Dr. Iyengar’s presentation of Manthara, the main propeller of Rama’s breath-taking tale, does full justice to her complex character.

So, the day that promised to be one of glory turned to be one of profound gloom the like of which the capital city of the Raghus had never experienced since Ikshwaku, sprung from the Sun-God, had founded it. The

king, bound by his pledge, could only plead with Kaikeyi who refused to relent. Dasaratha is another marvellous creation of Valmiki. Here is a man who goes to his beautiful spouse, whom he loves more than his other wives, in an erotic mood, but whose eroticism vanishes the moment Kaikeyi tells him to banish Rama! Oh, his hitherto sensual temper takes a U-turn literally. Valmiki describes his confrontation with Kaikeyi over Rama's banishment in great detail. But Dr. Iyengar skips over it and presents Dasaratha, wretched and forlorn, on the next morn when Rama goes to meet him on Kaikeyi's call.

But 'twas the ghost of his father he saw.⁸

He fails to understand why his father looks so sad and why he was keeping silent. Then Kaikeyi, assertive and haughty, tells him everything—about her two boons through which she wanted Bharata's crowning and his banishment. But the cruel information failed to shake Rama who declared:

... "I'll do what he wants;
this is the truth and the whole truth."⁹

Rama's poise at this critical juncture of his career is truly superhuman which is how Valmiki had already presented him.

Rama finally yields and concedes her wish. Then Rama also had to accept Lakshmana's plea for following him to forest. After taking leave of despairing King Dasaratha, tearful Kausalya, Guru Vasistha and other elders, the trio board a chariot ordered by the king and start their journey of banishment. The people of Ayodhya run after the chariot because they too dearly love Rama. Rama pleads with the people that they should return, but in vain. Ram finally gets rid of the populace when he leaves them sleeping on the bank of the Tamasa river at the dead of night.

They duly reach Chitrakoot where they settle to their forest-life. In Valmiki, we have a vivid picture of the natural bounties of Chitrakoot, and in **Sitayana** also, it is a quiet, happy life for the hermits in the lush lap of nature.

The next Canto is titled 'Bharata' which shows the three fully enjoying the sylvan beauty of Chitrakoot which shows how deeply Rama and Sita and Lakshman loved Nature:

For Rama, the mountain was Ayodhya,
the river was Sarayu,
the dwellers essaying co-existence
were the happy citizens!¹⁰

And in the fresh joy of the woodland, he could almost forget the kingdom of Kosala. But, one day, Bharata comes to offer the crown to him. It was indeed a touching reunion. But when Rama learned of his father's demise, he swooned. When he recovered, both the brothers followed by Sita went to the Mandakini river and offered libations to the departed father.

Thus, the poet skips the demise of Dasaratha, arrival of Bharata at Ayodhya from his maternal place, his harsh reprimand to his mother, etc.

In the Canto 'Rama on Raja Dharma', we find Rama answering in details Bharata's plea for return. The Canto is the poet's own creation and might have been suggested by Valmiki. Rama takes the stand that they should not establish a wrong precedent for others to follow and one should stoutly guard against the temptation to use Dharma to one's convenience.

Rama's resolve is final. So, Bharata with his entourage has to start on the return journey with the sandals of Rama which would rule over Ayodhya "as Agent of the true king"¹¹. For the sandals would symbolize Rama's kingship.

So, almost all in this episode comes from Valmiki. Still in 'Sita and Srutakirti', Canto 22, we have a whole new situation—Sita and Srutakirti in converse. Neither Valmiki nor Tulsi presents the four sisters in communion. But, here, the younger sister informs Sita of the developments at Ayodhya after their departure. Srutakirti, in fact, recounts all that happened at Ayodhya in the interregnum. Thus, we find that the author is ever eager to use his imagination to strike a new note, whenever possible.

'Aranya' is the third book of **Sitayana**. Rama found that it was not well to continue in Chitrakoot anymore because of the painful memory of the just-concluded sojourn of Bharata and party. Again, he found the ascetics living under his protection now preparing to leave the place to go elsewhere. When queried, they said that Khara who resided at Janasthan had been trying to harass them with greater determination after the arrival of Rama. So, they advised him also to leave with his wife and brother for a safer place. Rama was not at all afraid of the Rakshasas, but decided to move into thicker jungles because of the apprehension that Chitrakoot being easily accessible, people from Ayodhya might frequent it. So, we next find him going farther south, and, on the way, visiting the Ashrama of Sage Atri and Anasuya, his famed spouse.

Killing the monster Viradha and visiting Sage Sarbhanga who terminated his mundane sojourn then and there, they reached the Ashrama of Sutikshna who had been eagerly awaiting their arrival, and they spent a night there. On the way to Sutikshna's Ashrama, Rama, at the intercession of the harassed Rishis, had vowed that he would rid the Dandaka of the Rakshasa menace.

But Sita objects to Rama's resolve to finish the entire Rakshasa brood, and she speaks out her mind boldly:

I feel dazed and careworn with anxiety
when you two carry your bows
and arrows, ready for instant action
against the Rakshasa hordes.¹²

Valmiki's Sita too remonstrates in a similar manner: "You have come to the forest with your brother, both of you equipped with your bows and arrows. It is just possible that, seeing the Rakshas roving in these forests, you may use your arrows."¹³ But Rama assures Sita that he would kill only the evil ones.

This episode provides a vital clue to Rama-Sita relationship and particularly to the sublime character of the latter. Sita follows Rama as his very shadow and still she is not a mere shadow, but has her own distinct personality. Her kind heart recoils in agony at Rama's vow to finish Rakshasas, and she advises him against it, showing herself to be a true friend, philosopher and guide of her husband. It goes to the credit of Rama that Sita's words do not offend him at all, and he pleads his case to her very gently. As we have seen, Rama takes a very reasonable stand, and Sita's misgivings must have disappeared. Visiting several Mandalas—clusters of Ashramas, Rama finally reaches the Ashrama of the great sage Agastya and his equally famous spouse Lopamudra.

Rama's visit to Agastyashrama is described in some detail by Valmiki. For Agastya represents the Rishi Culture in the South, and Rama purposely meets him to get his blessings and also weapons for the imminent fight against the Rakshasas. But Valmiki does not even mention his great spouse Lopamudra. Dr. Iyengar does well to make Sita meet her as she had met Anasuya. We do not know why Valmiki made this omission. For the **Ramayana** is not wholly a male-dominated epic, but unfolds a vibrant feminine world where we meet such great women as Kausalya, Sumitra, Anasuya, Tara, Mandodari, Trijata, and Sita herself.

The visit becomes remarkable because of Sita's heart-to-heart intercourse with Lopamudra. Lopamudra is one of the greatest Pativratas of our Puranas who ranks with Anasuya, etc. Dr. Iyengar wisely introduces this episode to state the wholly feminine point of view.

Lopamudra was daughter of the king of Vidarbha. Very beautiful and wise, she was chosen by the great Sage Agastya to be his wife. In fact, she had attained the ultimate spiritual elevation even before her marriage with Agastya. So, from being a princess who had been brought up in pomp and plenty, she now became a hermitress—the vast change that might have unhinged any young woman, but not Lopamudra whose single-minded devotion to Agastya soon placed her on a very high pedestal. The names of Agastya and Lopamudra are to be found in the **Rigveda** also. Lopamudra is the Rishi and AgastyaDevata, of Sukta 179, Mandal I of the **Rigveda**.

Advised by Agastya, Rama goes on to live at Panchavati, a sylvan retreat on the bank of the Godawari. Here, they make the acquaintance of the Vulture King Jatayu, their father's friend, who offered to look after the exiled three. His long discourse on his own origins is totally in the manner of Valmiki. Lakshmana then raised a little nice hermitage with much labour and expertise. Valmiki is really wonderful as he takes notice of not only the brothers' valour but also of rather a common thing like hermitage-building by Lakshmana whom Rama thereupon embraces in gratitude: "Therefore, in an ecstatic mood, he embraced Lakshmana tightly and said with great love: Lakshmana, you have performed this difficult task for which I am very happy with you. I cannot reward you adequately; so I have given you my close embrace."¹⁴ And, in **Sitayana** also, "in a surge of gratitude, Rama embraced his peerless brother."¹⁵

The three started living peacefully at that verdant spot when one day, Surpanakha, Ravana's sister whom he had himself widowed by killing her husband, came, infatuated by Rama's handsome mien. But Rama spurned her advances, and so did Lakshmana. Thinking Sita to be the cause of their indifference towards her, she rushed at her, but was wounded by Lakshmana in the nose and ears. Now, she was fury itself and went to Khar, Ravana's generalissimo at Janasthan. He came to kill Rama who in his turn killed the entire Raksha horde. It was a remarkable feat of archery, seldom seen before, that amazed even the celestials. For Rama had confronted and killed the numerous Rakshasa horde, fourteen thousand in number, single-handedly while Lakshmana guarded Sita who had been sent into a cave. So, the die had been cast and Rama-Ravana clash became inevitable. Valmiki describes the encounter at Janasthan in great detail: from Surpanakha's appearance before Rama to Khar's end, there are in all twentyfive Cantos in the **Ramayana** while Dr. Iyengar describes the whole episode in a single Canto **Panchavati**. Still the whole thing comes vividly to us which does credit to the poet's skilful marshalling of the plot.

Ravana comes to learn of the whole thing through Akampan, the sole Rakshasa survivor, and Surpanakha, and he decides to abduct Sita to punish Rama. To facilitate this, he goes to Maricha who lives by the seaside and happens to be master of maya. Maricha is the same whom Rama had hit with his arrow to hurl him across the vast landmass to where he was. So, he tries to dissuade Ravana from his perilous venture, but in vain. In Valmiki, we find Ravana going back on Maricha's remonstrance and returning after Surpanakha's

admonitions. But, here, Ravana's single try suffices and Maricha enters Rama's Ashrama as a golden deer that soon catches Sita's sight. She implores Rama to bring the deer dead or alive. Rama, a loving husband, could not refuse this request of Sita and went after the deer telling Lakshmana to keep watch over her. Rama at last killed the Rakshasa who assuming his original form cried in Rama's voice: "Ah Sita! Ah Lakshmana!" This piteous call so unhinged Sita that she even accused Lakshmana of treachery. He was so shocked that he at last left her to go to his brother. Now was the chance that Ravana had desired for, and he entered the Ashrama in the guise of an ascetic. He first tried to convince Sita that it was not wise for a ravishing beauty like her to live that forest-life. Of course, he told her that he was Ravana, king of Lanka. These evil words threw Sita into a rage. Ravana therefore abducted her by force.

Ravana's encounter with Sita and her abduction is described by Valmiki in four Cantos while Dr. Iyengar presents it in just one. Still his account does full justice to the original in Valmiki which it follows faithfully. The poet does not yet forget to strike a note of his own as in the following comment on the horrendous incident.

Ravana is hurrying towards Lanka with Sita, but he does not go unchallenged. For here is the vulture-king Jatayu ready to confront him. The encounter is unequal because of the extreme old age of Jatayu who nevertheless inflicts grievous hurt on Ravana before being downed.

The Jatayu-episode is one of the most touching accounts in the whole range of literature which throws ample light on the marvellous character of Rama. Here is a bird, and that too a vulture, who heroically imperils himself to fight against the most powerful person of the time, the scourge of even the celestials, for the sake of the honour of Rama's spouse. It shows Rama's wonderful capacity of inspiring love in one and all.

How disconsolate Rama was when he found that Sita was no more in the Ashrama! For a moment it seemed that he had lost his balance. But Lakshmana consoled him in wise words and they started their search of Sita. On the way, they found Jatayu, grievously wounded and in death-pangs. Rama, in gratitude and reverence, embraced the dying Jatayu who told him how Sita had been carried away by Ravana. His life was ebbing fast and he breathed his last. The brothers performed his last rites with due ceremony, for he had been a second father to them.

They next killed and liberated Kabanda who advised them to proceed further towards the Rishyamuk hill where Sugriva lived who would be his natural ally. On the way, the brothers visited Sabari who had been awaiting their arrival. The devotion of Sabari has ever cast its spell on the readers of the **Ramayana** and the author presents her with great vividness. Sabari happened to be a tribal woman and still her deep devotion and marvellous austerities raised her to the highest heavens. Of course, this is Dr. Iyengar's own wise comment.

The next Kanda or book of the **Ramayana** is 'Kishkindha'; but, in **Sitayana**, the fourth Book is titled 'Ashoka'. For the story here directly shifts to the AshokaVatika in Lanka where Sita is kept by Ravana. In Valmiki, the tale next proceeds to Kishkindha, land of the monkeys with whose help Rama invades Lanka. Valmiki also describes at length Hanuman's first meeting with the two brothers and their friendship with Sugriva. But these are described in **Sitayana** by Hanuman to Sita in the AshokaVatika. This change shows the poet's deep erudition. For **Sitayana** must, for obvious reasons, always keep Sita in focus, and 'Ashoka' does it adequately.

At Lanka, Ravana tries to tempt Sita by showing her his opulence. But all this goes in vain and he sends Sita to the Ashoka Grove. The Ashoka Grove is full of the beauty and warmth of Nature which has a soothing effect on Sita's pained soul. Still she does not forget Rama even for a moment.

"Ruminations and Lacerations", Canto 39, is Dr. Iyengar's own rendition of Sita's possible musings at Lanka. Sita had already spent ten months in Ravana's captivity and she wondered how she could survive. And still she resolved to dare the devilish Ravana.

The next Canto 'Ravana and Sita' compacts at least three Cantos of the **Ramayana** into one. Sita was ever lost in the thoughts of her Lord. But, one day, early in the morning, Ravana came with his wives to tempt her. At his approach, Sita felt utterly terrified and shook like a plaintain caught in a fierce wind. Valmiki too uses the same image.

In both the **Ramayana** and **Sitayana**, Ravana tempts Sita with his wealth and magnificence and even tries to further terrorise her, but in vain. At last Ravana is persuaded by Mandodari and Dhanyamalini, two of his spouses, to let Sita alone.

Canto 37 introduces a very important character—Trijata. In Valmiki also, Trijata is a Lankan woman who sympathises with Sita and is always at hand to console her. But while in the **Ramayana**, she is an old woman unrelated to Vibhishana, in **Sitayana**, she is introduced as his daughter.

Trijata has been presented, in **Sitayana**, as a prophetess which she is also in Valmiki. Sita being in a state of utter desolation, it is she who cheers her with her vision of victorious Rama. And Trijata is proved more than correct, for Hanuman was already in Lanka and AshokaVatika.

Dr. Iyengar too devotes at least four Cantos to Hanuman's brave, but no less wise, deeds. The deft manner in which he wins Sita's confidence shows his profound wisdom. In 'Sita and Hanuman', we find that Sita is at first shocked to see him, thinking her to be yet another snare of Ravana. But the noble mien and words of Hanuman convince her of his credentials. And then onwards, she confides in him as a mother does in her son. Dr. Iyengar here does well to literally follow Valmiki whose account is truly incomparable. This is how Hanuman describes to Sita Rama's miserable plight due to separation from her. This wholly tallies with what we find in the **Ramayana**.

Hanuman next destroys the AshokaVatika, killing its guards and also Ravana's son Akshaya Kumar. Even Meghnad, conqueror of the king of gods, could not at first overcome him and so had to use the Brahma-shaft. Bound with strong cords, he is finally brought before Ravana. All this is Valmiki, but, here, all is reported to Sita by Trijata. Another Rakshasi soon informs Sita that the Vanara's tail had been set on fire. In Valmiki, Sita prays to Agni Devata for Hanuman's protection in four slokas.¹⁶ Dr. Iyengar, closely following him, does it in three stanzas:

If I've loved Rama, if I'm chaste and pure,
Fire! Be cool to Hanuman!¹⁷

And fire becomes cool for Hanuman like sandal-paste:

Indeed, the fire was like friendly sandal
or ice-bag tied to the tail.¹⁸

So, he burnt down Lanka in no time. He again met Sita and leaped over the ocean to come to the host of monkeys waiting for his return. They finally come to Rama who is beside himself with joy to learn about the success of the "Search Sita" mission. Rama embracing Hanuman is one of the most moving events in the **Ramayana** of Valmiki where Rama tells Hanuman that he has nothing to give him except his warm embrace.¹⁹

Sitayana again takes us to Sita in Lanka to whom is reported Ravana's insult to Vibhishana who with his ministers goes to join Rama. Rama has in the meantime marched to the sea-shore on the other side where Vibhishanaseeks his protection. While, in Valmiki, the whole thing is spread over at least 16 cantos, in **Sitayana**, all this is presented in the form of Anala's report to Sita. The prophetic Trijata fills in the gaps by visualizing all about her father's meeting with Rama who receives him warmly. The construction of the dam to reach Lanka is reported to Ravana by Suka and Sarana. And at last the war begins.

Valmiki devotes more than a hundred cantos to the description of the great tussle between Rama and Ravana. Though Dr. Iyengar follows Valmiki in describing the main events of the conflict, he wisely does not give so much space to it: he does it in just eleven Cantos. In Canto 49, he presents two Rakshasa women—Mandodari and Sulochana. Mandodari, the chief spouse of Ravana, is presented rather minutely by Valmiki, too, as a paragon not only of beauty, but also nobility. But Sulochana is not mentioned even once in either Valmiki or Tulsi.

'Ravana's Dream' also is the author's own innovation. In this Canto, we find Ravana narrating to Mandodari and Sulochana the nightmare that he has just gone through in which all his guilty acts came up to crush his heart and soul, and he finally found himself in a desert of hate where he saw a self-absorbed lone figure who, Sulochana tells him, must have been suffering Sita.

Both Mandodari and Sulochana advise Ravana to try for peace, but he tells them that "the wages of sin is death", and so his rout is inevitable. Ravana finally meets his end at Rama's hand. And the whole thing is reported to Sita by Trijata, the prophetess.

The next book is 'Rajya', though, in the **Ramayana**, it is 'Uttarkandam'. While in the **Ramayana**, the lament of Mandodari and Sita's Fire-Baptism occur in the 'Lankakanda', here, they do in 'Rajya'. Both these follow Valmiki closely. Why the author makes this alteration is inscrutable. For it would have been proper to follow the order of Valmiki. Notably, 'Rama Rajya' happens to be the ninth out of the eleven Cantos in this Book. The most innovative is the last—'Sita's Stream of Consciousness'.

Sita and others have just heard from Sage Agastya the full account of Ravana's terrible life—of his countless atrocities, and it sets her thinking:

Was Ravana one or many? Was he
a primordial pestilence,
a symbol of the evil of the world,
a self-sustaining Darkness?²⁰

Agastya had also recounted Hanuman's story and sheer contrast between Ravana and Hanuman was striking enough to make Sita think:

Ravana and Hanuman, paragons
of power both, and clashing
opposites: yet between them, thought Sita,
such an abysmal divide!²¹

Finally, **Sitayana** moves on to its conclusion in 'Ashrama', the last Book. It is the climactic end of the saga of Sita. In the initial Canto, we find Rama and Sita in conjugal bliss while 'Ram Raj' becomes a synonym for the fairest rule that ever existed. Rama and Sita were very happy after the suffering and pain of those long years of exile, and, to add to their weal, Sita was also pregnant!

'Twas a moment of supreme fulfillment
for Maithili as well as
Raghava, and she felt profoundly moved
by his desire to please her.²²

And Sita told her lord that she wanted to revisit the forest hermitages.

How ironical her desire proved to be! For when Rama learnt that the people of Ayodhya were critical of his relationship with Sita who had lived in Lanka for about a year, he sent her into her second exile. This time, Lakshmana, on the order of his elder brother, accompanied her to the other bank of the Ganga on the pretext of taking her to visit the forest hermitages. When she learnt of it, it was quite a shock to Sita, and still she never blamed Rama and accepted it as the inevitable working of her fate.

Longinus says that a great poet has a profound heart and soul, and how Valmiki, the incomparable author of the **Ramayana**, receives her shows the Greek literary connoisseur perfectly right. For the moment Valmiki is informed by the Ashrama children of the beautiful weeping woman, he rushes to receive Sita as a long-separated father would run to welcome home his daughter:

Welcome, Dasaratha's daughter-in-law,
welcome, Janaka's daughter,
welcome, Rama's chaste and thrice blessed spouse,
welcome to my Ashrama.²³

This is exactly in the manner of Valmiki welcoming Sita!

So, now, a new chapter started in Sita's star-crossed history—alas! the last chapter. Valmiki provides the base on which the author builds marvellously Sita's life in the Ashrama.

The next Canto "Motherhood and Fulfilment" describes the birth of twin sons to Sita, named Lava and Kusa by the Sage. The author aptly suggests the leap of joy in Sita's heart at her motherhood.

'Calm of Mind and Nightmare Visions', the next Canto, again records Sita's stream of consciousness. Here, we find the poet yet again peeping into the heart and mind of Sita, no doubt with the help of Valmiki's hints. It is in this Canto that Hanuman also comes to meet her, and his sorrow for Sita knows no bounds. It is obvious that this Canto is full of Dr. Iyengar's innovative touches, and they excellently fit into the saga of Sita and Rama.

And at last occurs the Acopalypse—the finale to Sita's saga of suffering when she returns to her Mother Earth. Valmiki is perhaps the greatest epic poet of the world and is naturally the finest master of also pathos which informs the whole bulk of the epic. And Sita's 'Vindication and Withdrawal' soaked in pathos is a marvel of Valmiki's poetic art.

Rama is performing a yajna at Naimisharanya, the most sacred spot on earth as per the Hindu scriptures. Valmiki was there with Sita and her two sons. **The Ramayana** sung by the two boys enthralled even Rama who came to know of Sita's presence also. Then he asked for another testimony to Sita's purity. It was a large assembly of Rishis, kings and commanders where Sita came, dressed in ochre like a hermitess, behind Valmiki: her three poignant slokas pronounce adequately her words of self-vindication. Dr. Iyengar too describes it in three stanzas all of which are a call on the Mother to take her back.

And the wonder of wonders happened as "Maithili shares Madhavi's throne as it disappeared under the Earth."²⁴ It was now Rama's turn to pine for his lost spouse:

Ah my Sita—beautiful as Lakshmi—
has vanished of a sudden;
never before have I so reeled under
the shock of pain and defeat.²⁵

He is naturally angry with the Earth. But the wise words of Sages Vasistha and Visvamitra pacify him. But the intense pain in Rama's heart subsides only when he realises in a flash his identity with Sita.

And Trijata, the prophetess of **Sitayana**, Lakshman and Hanuman also have the vision of Sita seated by the side of Rama.

Thus, Dr. Iyengar's epic closely follows Valmiki's **Ramayana** which shows his deep erudition. For to follow a different track would have destroyed the veracity of our greatest national saga. But, as we have seen, he presents the incidents of the **Ramayana** in a manner of his own, exploring and elucidating them with a sensibility that is truly modern. For example, he, again and again, refers to the male tyranny against the omankind. He also again and again probes the mind and heart of the heroine as well as of other characters. He introduces numerous new characters and also adds new significances to some of the characters of the

Ramayana. For example, Trijata is presented as a prophethess and we have such characters as Manasi, Bhargava, etc., who are the poet's own creations.

The most remarkable thing is the author's abounding reverence for his heroine, and here too he is quite close to Valmiki whose "SitayahCharitamMahat" produces on him an electrifying effect:

Sitayahcharitammahat: a reverberant and talismanic phrase!²⁶

It is this profound adoration for Sita that informs the whole epic which lends to each line an unsurpassing devotional ring. **The Ramayana** casts its spell on all its readers because of what we may call its sheer sublimity. We cannot claim the same for **Sitayana**. Still Dr. Iyengar's epic has an ennobling quality and a marvellous vividness which must make it a work with an abiding appeal and value.

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