

The Ramayana and its Retellings: Deconstructing the Myth

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1. In what can be seen as the climax of the long-running Hindutva project promised by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, the ground-breaking ceremony of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya took place on 5 August 2020. A highly controversial move, especially given the background of the collapsing Indian economy and the larger spectre of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Ram Mandir and the Ramayana have a longer history of being used as political and ideological tools for the Hindutva narrative. For instance, the immensely popular 1987 Hindi television serial, Ramanand Sagar's Ramayana, was telecast again after the announcement of the Coronavirus lockdown in India. In the late 1980s, many scholars and intellectuals had raised concerns about this televised version becoming the dominant narrative, and thus eclipsing other, diverse, contradictory tellings of the myth.^[1] With eerie accuracy, historian Romila Thapar questioned the long-term political and ideological motives at work. Thapar argued that such representations were part of the state's nationalistic project to create a homogenised, uniform culture which was easy to control and identify with.^[2] Thus, Rama and his mythology have increasingly come to be the face of a militant form of Hinduism.
2. The Ramayana is political, and always has been. Paula Richman gives three major reasons for this. First, it lays out an aspirational polity of 'Ramraj,' where the king practices absolute justice, and maintains order, prosperity and stability of the kingdom. Second, Rama is depicted as a *purushottam* (ideal man) and is an ideal for not only a king and citizen, but also for class, caste and gender hierarchies. Last, the vision of 'Ramraj' is utopian, and as with all utopias, encourages people to replicate it in real life—a project that mobilises state, societal and electoral institutions to do so.^[3] This article will closely examine and deconstruct the second dimension (Rama is depicted as a *purushottam* (ideal man) and is an ideal for not only a king and citizen, but also for class, caste and gender hierarchies), primarily looking at gender, caste and their intersections.
3. The story of this Ayodhya's prince, however, is not monolithic, nor perfect, no matter how much the so-called 'Ram bhakts'^[4] would like it to be. On the contrary, there is a continuous discourse and a long and prolific literary as well as oral tradition of retelling alternative versions of the Ramayana. The dominant Valmiki Ramayana is merely one amongst the numerous Ramayanas that exist across languages, cultures, geographies and religions—in both classical and folk narratives. Another interesting point to note is the complete erasure of the figure of Sita in the warped, nationalistic narrative which is being peddled. She is only brought up, if ever, as an example of the *pativrata*, the ideal wife. Along with this, questions of purity and chastity become important here, as are the ways they contribute and are constitutive of the edifice of Brahmanical patriarchy.
4. In the following article, I analyse how these questions are brought up and dealt with in different interpretations of the Ramayana, using two alternative modern retellings of the Ramayana. The first text is Tamil writer Ambai's famous short story, 'Forest,'^[5] which is a part of her collection of short stories *In a Forest, A Deer*.^[6] This story is not singular, but two stories intertwined with each other—one of Chenthiru, a contemporary woman who decides to leave her husband and her life in the

city to find herself in a forest, and one of Sita, who decides to write her *Sitayanam* after her banishment to the forest. Ambai traces parallels between the two women, and how they finally free themselves from the shackles in which men trap them. My second primary text is the novel *The Liberation of Sita* by Telugu feminist poet and writer Volga.^[7] Volga narrates the tale from the perspective of Sita as she looks back at her life. Volga focuses on other minor female characters in the Ramayana such as Ahalya, Surpanakha, Renuka and Urmila, and how these women help Sita arrive at self-realisation and help her to 'liberate' herself from Rama.

5. The rationale behind picking the texts that I have has multiple dimensions. First, they are contemporary retellings, and thus are easily available and accessible in terms of both logistics and understanding. Second, the very fact that there are contemporary retellings of a classical Sanskrit myth from the fourth century BCE, goes to show the substantial hold that the Ramayana has had and continues to have on popular imaginings and narratives. The Ramayana is thus told, retold, subverted, politicised and deconstructed across centuries, right up to the present. Finally, all the texts I have chosen are feminist re-imaginings and as such a critical engagement with the canon is essential in its analysis and deconstruction.
6. The academic literature that I use to argue my case can be classified into two broad thematic categories—the historical tradition of alternative retellings of the Ramayana, and the constitutive elements of Brahmanical patriarchy such as honour, purity, chastity and so on and how such structures are used to control women and their sexuality. These thematic categories subsume multiple sub-themes, which are not mutually exclusive.

Alternative retellings

7. A.K. Ramanujan, in his ground-breaking essay 'Three hundred Ramayanas: Five examples and three thoughts on translation,'^[8] explores different versions of the Ramayana—oral and literary, folk and classical, mediaeval and modern, that have existed over centuries, borders, languages and media. In classical Sanskrit itself, there are more than twenty-five versions. There are also some meta-Ramayanas that acknowledge the existence of numerous other Ramayanas^[9] and play with this knowledge.^[10] Even if the Valmiki Ramayana is taken to be the canon, and the same structure of events are followed, the style, narration, tone and texture, result in varying import and treatment of events and characters.^[11] For instance, Valmiki's Rama is ultimately only a man—an ideal man with god-like qualities—but a man nevertheless, with all the implications of mortality. On the other hand, twelfth-century Tamil poet Kampan's Rama is clearly a divine being, whose morality and judgement are beyond reproach.^[12] And these different interpretations influence the subsequent Ramayanas that have been written. The focus and the values transmitted through the epic also change with the shift in religion. Jain retellings of the Ramayana carry vastly different morals compared to Hindu versions.^[13] Folk and tribal narratives, which are mostly oral, present radically different versions altogether which are often subversive. The media in which the myth is told is also diverse, from the Ram Lila traditions in Northern India, to folk shadow puppet plays in Kerala.^[14] The focus also shifts to Sita more than Rama—the battle scenes are mentioned in passing while Sita's banishment is regaled in detail. In one Kannada folk narrative, Sita is the daughter of Ravana, who he sneezes out through his nose.^[15] Such narratives touch upon themes of the story beyond which the canon ever conceived. Ramanujan argues that what is so radical are the differences between the different narratives that 'one conception is quite abhorrent to those who hold another' and that they are only similar in name, if that.^[16] He further adds,

Valmiki is said to have captured only a fragment of it [the Ramayana]. In this sense, no text is original, yet no telling is mere retelling – and the story has no closure, although it may be enclosed in a text. In India and in Southeast

Asia, no one ever reads the Ramayana or the Mahabharata for the first time. The stories are there, 'always already'[17]

8. It is important to consider the internal, contextual politics of these pluralistic tellings in the Ramayana tradition. Ramanujan argues that the Ramayana has become a 'second language for a whole cultural area,' and this can be seen in the patterns that can be delineated across different tellings. While some versions are used to uphold and reinforce dominant caste, class and gender hierarchies, other versions are used to challenge them.[18] As an example, Richman draws attention to E. V. Ramasami's interpretation of the Ramayana. Ramasami heavily critiqued Valmiki's Ramayana and saw it as a thinly veiled historical account of North Indians (led by Rama) oppressing South Indians (led by Ravana.) Thus, through a rejection of the conventional tellings of the myth, he used the text as a political tool to construct a Dravidian identity and give supportive grounds to the Tamil separatist movement.[19]
9. There have also been versions of the Ramayana written by women which offer completely different perspectives. Most famous of these narratives include that of Chandrabati in Bengali, and Molla and Ranganayakamma in Telugu.[20] Molla, a woman and a Shudra,[21] wrote a perfect classical Ramayana, which was not allowed to be read in the Royal Court. Chandrabati's Ramayana told the story of Sita and heavily criticised Rama. In this narrative, Rama comes across as harsh, weak-willed and uncaring—a far cry from the *purushottam* he is supposed to be. Apart from these literary texts, the tale of Sita exists in folk songs sung across India. Here, Sita comes to embody every woman and her suffering. These songs relate to different moments of a woman's life, and Sita is the name of the woman who attains puberty, gets married, gets pregnant, is abandoned and gives birth.[22] Velcheru Rao traces a long tradition of women in Andhra Pradesh using the Ramayana in oral folk songs to subvert authority. Interestingly, there is also a distinction between the songs sung by upper caste and Dalit women, in terms of theme, type, and form.[23] Brahmin women's songs focus on events that relate closely with women's experiences—weddings, pregnancy, childbirth, the love of a husband, being dutiful wives and daughters-in-law, and the abandonment and treatment of Sita in the latter part of the myth.[24]
10. While these songs do go against the canon in terms of shifting the focus on 'male' themes and giving more agency to women, the women in these songs never openly defy established authority and propriety—they reinforce behaviours and dictums of Brahmanical patriarchy.[25] Songs by non-Brahmin women, on the other hand, are altogether different. While they too focus on women's experiences, the emphasis on family, rituals, and norms of modesty and propriety are absent. Also, the antagonist, Ravana, rather than Rama is depicted as a wise and heroic king. These songs express discontent with dominant upper-castes who oppress them, rather than the men in their family—and their intersecting identities as women and as lower-caste come into play.[26] Similarly, Awadhi and Bhojpuri women also use songs in the Ramayana tradition as powerful instruments of expression against discrimination—both gender and caste-based. While the former theme is common among upper and lower caste women, the latter is found only in the songs by lower-caste women.[27] It is interesting to note that in popular imaginings, Sita is seen as a figure women identify with, she is the ideal wife, while Rama is rejected as an ideal husband.[28]

Brahmanical patriarchy and its constitutive elements

11. The context in which the Ramayana canons are written has its foundation in the socio-cultural, political and historical location of the Rigvedic and post-Vedic periods. This society was characterised by the subordination of upper-caste women and the need for effective sexual control of such women not only for patrilineal succession but also caste purity.[29] The purity of women was integral to Brahmanical patriarchy, as the purity of the caste was founded on it. The sexuality

of women, more than that of men, was the subject of social concern. A fundamental principle of Hindu social organisation is to construct a closed structure to preserve land, women and 'ritual quality' within it. The three are structurally linked and it is impossible to maintain all three without stringently organising female sexuality. The honour and respectability of men are hence protected and preserved through their women. Women's sexuality came to be seen as a threat and essentialist claims about the same were propagated through religious texts, stories, myths and customs.[30] The Ramayana too, associates most women with being essentially weak and sinful.[31] One such instance that brings this to the fore is the question of Surpanakha, Ravana's sister, who arguably starts the chain of events that leads to the abduction of Sita and shapes the rest of the narrative. Surpanakha, the proud demoness who falls in love with Rama and expresses her desire to him freely, is pitted in opposition to Sita—the docile, dutiful wife. For her actions, Surpanakha is punished harshly by Lakshmana, who cuts off her nose and ears.[32] The canon versions of the myth use this incident to reinforce and justify mutilation of women as punishment for freely exhibiting desire and sexuality. The Sita/Surpanakha binary is directly related to the good/evil binary by means of women's chastity and sexuality.[33]

12. The general nature of the oppression of women and the process of establishing control over their sexuality assumed a particularly severe form in India through religious traditions, which have shaped Hindu practices. These practices include ideology, economic dependency on the male head of the family, class privileges bestowed on those who conform, dependent women of upper classes and, finally, the use of force when required.[34] What makes this oppression particularly insidious is the co-option of women through the ideology of *stridharma*[35] or *pativrata*, which is the specific *dharma* (duty) of the Hindu wife. A *pativrata* woman accepted and even aspired to chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest expression of her selfhood. Wifely fidelity is the highest duty of women, reinforced through custom and ritual, and through constructions of notions of womanhood which epitomise wifely fidelity as in the case of Sita, Savitri, Anasuya, Arundhati and a host of similar figures in Indian mythology.[36]
13. Shalini Shah in her essay 'On gender, wives, and "Pativratās"', [37] further explores the ideal of the *pativrata*. She argues that what *pativrata* symbolised so well was really women's 'service role.' This *dharma* was conceived of not as self-affirming, but rather as a self-denying, passive faith, based solely on unquestioned devotion to the husband. Moreover, it was a service that brooked no dissatisfaction or doubt. Interlinked with the notion of *pativrata* is a woman's chastity. Women's sexual subordination to male authority was thus ensured by creating a division of women between conformist and deviant, that is, those who were not attached to one man but were free for all men. This notion of respectable women, with emphasis on chastity, was taken to a ridiculous extent when *pativrata* was described as one who, apart from her husband, does not even glance at the sun, moon and trees since they have masculine names. If chastity was so important, then it is only logical that social norms would also provide for the test of chastity. The fire ordeal was such a test for a *pativrata*, which is exemplified in the Ramayana by Sita's *agnipariksha*[38] (trial by fire). Also, the ideal *pativrata* is granted supernatural powers as a result of her impeccable *dharma* and penance.

Modern retellings

14. Modern retellings of the myth are simply part of the long tradition of interpreting and reinterpreting the Ramayana across the subcontinent. In some instances, this myth has travelled with diasporic populations and has found homes outside the subcontinent and taken on different meanings in these contexts. Richman's study of a Ramlila mounted in Greater London by the South Asian and African Caribbean diasporic community in Southall, which tackled themes of racism, socio-

economic contexts and local and national politics, is an example of this.^[39] Another example is Nina Paley's 2008 movie, *Sita Sings the Blues*. Told in the form of an animated musical romantic comedy, and liberally peppered with 1920's jazz numbers, the movie mocks the monolith status that the Ramayana has obtained in the Hindu mythos by cleverly bringing out the inaccuracies and the misogyny, and by questioning the notions of the 'ideal man' and the 'ideal woman.'^[40]

15. My primary analysis consists of two such contemporary additions to the long tradition of alternative retellings of the Ramayana—Ambai's 'Forest' and Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*. Both are feminist retellings, and comment on and subvert the themes and teachings of the canon. The first subversion is the shift of focus from Rama to Sita and her story and the way power is gendered through the assignment of certain roles to characters is interrogated. The institution of marriage is portrayed as oppressive, the structures of Brahmanical patriarchy are mocked and attacked, and the need for an independent identity for Sita is called for. The portrayal of Rama as the ideal man, or *purushottam*, is questioned, as is the notion of the ideal wife, the *pativrata*. I now examine each text in turn.

Ambai's 'Forest'

16. Written by famed women's studies scholar, C.S. Lakshmi, under her pseudonym, Ambai, 'Forest' focuses entirely on Sita. The story begins after her banishment to the forest by Rama when her chastity was again under suspicion. The entire tale of the Ramayana is only referred to in passing, as a mere prequel to Sita's solitary exile. Though it is a non-linear narrative with a constant back and forth storyline first in terms of switching between Chenthiru, the contemporary woman, and Sita, and second due to the usage of memories and flashbacks, the emphasis is on Sita. It is Sita's *ayanam* (*ayanam* is a Sanskrit word with multiple meanings, depending on the context. Literally, it can be translated to 'movement of the sun' or 'shelter'. In this case, however, the meaning is such as to refer to Sita's *ayanam* (life-story) as opposed to Ram-*ayanam*). There is also a reference to the multitude of Ramayanas that exist, and the consequent alternative narratives, apart from the canon. This is directly addressed by Sita in the following exchange:

'Isn't the Ramayana that I wrote sufficient?' he [Valmiki] asked.

'No. In the ages to come, there will be many Ramayanas. Many Ramas. Many Sitas.'

He picked up the palm leaves in his hand and asked, 'Is this not the same Sita I wrote about?'

'You were a poet of the king's court. You created history. But I experienced it. I absorbed into myself all manner of experiences. My language is different.'

'And where will this story be launched?'

'In the forest. In the minds of forest-dwellers.'^[41]

17. The above excerpt also brings out the question of language and women's lived experiences. It opens the possibility of an alternative account that is distinct from the one espoused in the canon. Sita's *ayanam* is quite different from that of Rama. Another theme brought out by the excerpt is its location in the Ramayanan discourse—it very clearly places itself in the non-canon subversive folk tribal narratives, which inverts the civilisation/wilderness binary. Sita does not intend her story to find its place amongst the classical texts, she wants it to reside 'in the minds of forest-dwellers.'^[42] The folk tribal element of this story is reinforced in several ways throughout the text. Most obviously, it is evoked in the name of the story itself. The titular 'Forest' is not a place of dread and discomfort; the place of punishment it is supposed to be. Rather, it is a refuge.
18. The portrayal of characters in the text is also unique from the canon. First, Sita is not the passive, servile, ever-submissive *pativrata*. Sita's oft-ignored strength is emphasised. She is the one who lifts Shiva's bow with one hand as a baby, and thus he has to find one who is stronger than her to marry. Rama is definitely not the ideal man, and Sita repeatedly questions his motives and his

treatment of her. When he rejects her after rescuing her, she critiques him:

He who was so aware of the pride of his lineage, did he forget that she too belonged to a proud clan? Had she not made it necessary for him to wage a battle, because she was so aware of his pride? Otherwise, would she not have sat in the shoulders of Hanuman, who thought of her as a mother, and left Lanka when she could?[43]

19. The text thus brings out the inconsistencies and the injustices in the canon. Rama waged a war not to rescue Sita, but to protect his honour. This notion has its underpinnings in the structure of Brahmanical patriarchy discussed above. Women have to be controlled and protected, for in them is vested the honour of men, the family and the nation. Finally, the story also weaves a parallel between the story of Sita and the story of Chenthiru, a contemporary woman from Mumbai who has left her husband to find herself in the forest. This theme ties into the tendency of women, either in their folk songs or their stories, to identify with Sita and her character, and Sita's story becomes the story of the suffering and liberation of every woman.

Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*

20. Originally written in Telegu by feminist writer and poet, Volga, *Vimukta*, *The Liberation of Sita* is a short novel. As in 'Forest,' the novel begins after the banishment of Sita. Each chapter focuses on a female character from the Ramayana (Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka, Urmila) and how they have broken out of the roles written for them, and thus aid Sita in attaining her own liberation.[44] What Volga attempts through these stories is a compelling exercise in 'revisionist myth-making.' This revision is not only the simple act of looking back, but rather an active re-making of the past and a re-invention of tradition.[45] Volga thus does not merely use the re-visioning strategy to subvert patriarchal structures embedded in mythical texts but also as a means to create a vision of a liberated life for women. Instead of yet another man, it is other female characters who help Sita on her path. Thus, a community of women is created by representing myths from alternate points of view and by establishing a notion of a universal 'sisterhood.'
21. The novel uses the women of the myth as a device to systematically deconstruct and eventually, discard the inherent ideology of Brahmanical patriarchy. Surpanakha in her story, 'The reunion,' tackles the question of beauty and fulfillment that does not adhere to the male gaze. Rather than conforming to the 'good woman'/'loose woman' binary that dominant narratives use as a tool to justify control of women's sexuality, Volga turns the story on its head and frames Sita and Surpanakha as just two women who had to face violence from men in different forms. 'The music of the earth' is a retelling of the Ahalya story. In Volga's story, Ahalya meets Sita and talks about how the core issue is not of female fidelity or the lack of it, but of man's power to put it to test. Sita brushes this aside and only understands the implication of this argument when she is forced to go through the *agnipariksha*, and yet again when her chastity is under suspicion and she is banished. In the next story, 'The sand pot,' Renuka[46] further pushes Sita to question other aspects of her *pativratā* dharma or marriage and motherhood. She likens a woman's *pativratam* to a sand pot—fragile to the extreme. A fleeting desirous glance at a *gandharva* makes her an adulteress in her husband's eyes—a husband who then orders her own son to behead her. It is, therefore, futile for a woman to anchor her identity in her marital status or her motherhood. The next chapter, 'The liberated,' presents the story of Urmila, Lakshmana's wife, who was left behind and undertakes a fourteen-year-long self-imposed penance. After being abandoned by her husband, Urmila withdraws into a self-imposed exile out of rage and spite. Eventually, however, this rage turns into a quest for the truth and she ultimately achieves inner peace. Later, when Sita contemplates going back to the royal household with her sons, it is Urmila who gives Sita the final push to decide to liberate herself from Rama. Sita's liberation from Rama is her real emancipation.

22. The final chapter, 'The shackled,' is Rama's inner monologue. Sita has gone back to the Earth, and he is back in Ayodhya with his sons. As always, he is 'shackled' to his *dharma* and his throne. Held captive by the prison of patriarchy and *Arya dharma*,^[47] he has no personal freedom. The only time Rama could just be himself was his period of exile in the forest, which to him was more of a boon since it freed him from the rigid frames of royal power. After that, at every stage, he is forced to treat Sita in a certain way and keep asking her to prove her purity because of his *dharma* as husband and king. Rama's self-awareness about his duties and the decisions he's forced to take, such as ordering Sita's trial by fire, can be seen as more of a test of Rama than of her.^[48] Except, as a king and an upholder of *dharma*, he was no longer seen as someone capable of familial attachment, affection, or even love. Thus, Volga's depiction of Rama is not shallow, wherein he is just a bad husband who treats Sita cruelly. Rama is portrayed as one systematically and ideologically compelled by his *dharma*. He is merely a puppet of the Brahmanical patriarchy of the time. Finally, the burden of protecting the *Arya dharma* robbed him of all the happiness in his life. David Shulman, in his close reading of Valmiki's and Kampan's versions, takes a similar stance.^[49] Volga goes a step ahead and subverts the narrative by depicting Sita as free, and Rama as trapped and in need of rescue. Sita had liberated herself, but there was no liberation for Rama.

Conclusion

23. Over the course of this paper, I have critiqued the notion of the Ramayana myth as a singular or a rigid entity, and by extension, the fragile underpinnings of the Hindutva project. As I have repeatedly shown using both academic and literary sources, Rama and the Ramayana have many interpretations and retellings, often in conflict with each other. The monolith of the canonical Ramayana is one which is deeply contextualised within the Brahmanical patriarchy of the time and has been used as an ideological instrument to further the same. The various discourses in the tradition of alternative retellings of the Ramayana have always opposed and subverted this popular narrative one way or another. The recent slew of alternate retellings and reinterpretations in different media, such as the versions I have chosen, are merely the most recent ones in this subversive discourse. These non-canonical retellings vehemently oppose the 'ideals' espoused by the dominant narrative and open up the possibility of a more inclusive and feminist understanding of the text. The counter to the machismo in the cult of the Hindutva's Rama can be found in Sita. Even in the canon, Sita ultimately paves her own identity, independent from that of a man, and goes back to the Earth in the end. Sita becomes a symbol for every woman, or for everyone who has suffered loss and abandonment. However, her strength and her virtue do not lie in her mute acceptance of her suffering as the canon would have us believe, but rather in Sita's ability to rise above the suffering. As poet Volga writes, when asked, 'Who will save us?' Sita and her stories give us the strength to answer, 'We ourselves.'^[50]

Notes

[1] Paula Richman, 'Introduction: The diversity of the Ramayana tradition,' in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 3–21, p. 6, doi: [10.1525/9780520911758](https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520911758).

[2] Romila Thapar, 'The Ramayana syndrome,' *Seminar*, 353 (1989). The essay was also published in Thapar, 'The Ramayana syndrome,' in *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities Through History*, New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2014, pp. 216–25.

[3] Paula Richman, 'Questioning and multiplicity within the Ramayana tradition,' in *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, ed. Paula Richman, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001, pp. 1–24, p. 6.

- [4] Literally, 'devotees of Ram.' However, this title has also come to refer to people who subscribe to the Hindutva ideology.
- [5] Ambai is the name taken up by noted women studies scholar, C.S. Lakshmi, to write fiction. She uses the pen name *Ambai* for publishing Tamil fiction and her real name (Dr. C.S. Lakshmi) for publishing her research work and other articles in newspapers like the *Hindu* and the *Times of India* and in journals like *Economic and Political Weekly*.
- [6] Ambai, 'Forest,' in her *In a Forest, A Deer*, trans. L Holmstrom, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 145–78.
- [7] Volga, *The Liberation of Sita*, trans. T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree, New Delhi: Harper Perennial, 2016.
- [8] A.K. Ramanujan, 'Three hundred Rāmāyanas: Five examples and three thoughts on translation,' in *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 131–60.
- [9] Ramanujan begins his essay with a story wherein Hanuman goes to the Netherworld to retrieve Rama's ring. There, the King of Spirits offers him a platter full of identical rings and asks him to take the one which belongs to his Rama. He says that there are as many Ramas as there are rings on the platter. The implication being that for every such Rama, there is a Ramayana. See Ramanujan, 'Three hundred Rāmāyanas: Five examples and three thoughts on translation,' pp. 131–33.
- [10] In one such later version, when Sita convinces Rama to let her accompany him by saying, 'Countless Ramayanas have been composed before this. Do you know of one where Sita doesn't go with Rama to the forest?' See Ramanujan, 'Three hundred Rāmāyanas: Five examples and three thoughts on translation,' p. 141.
- [11] Ramanujan, 'Three hundred Rāmāyanas: Five examples and three thoughts on translation,' p. 134.
- [12] Ramanujan, 'Three hundred Rāmāyanas: Five examples and three thoughts on translation,' p. 142.
- [13] There is more focus on Ravana than on Rama, and even the ending is different. Here Rama does not kill Ravana, as he does in the Hindu Ramayana. For Rama is an evolved Jain soul who has conquered his passions; this is his Last birth, so he is loath to kill anything. It is left to Laksmana, who goes to hell while Rama finds release (*kaivalya*). See Ramanujan, 'Three hundred Rāmāyanas: Five examples and three thoughts on translation,' p. 144.
- [14] Stuart H. Blackburn, 'Creating conversations: The Rama story as a puppet play in Kerala,' in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 156–74, p. 157, doi: [10.1525/9780520911758-010](https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520911758-010).
- [15] In fact, in Kannada, the word '*sita*' means 'he sneezed.' See Ramanujan, 'Three hundred Rāmāyanas: Five examples and three thoughts on translation,' p. 147.
- [16] Ramanujan, 'Three hundred Rāmāyanas: Five examples and three thoughts on translation,' p. 156.
- [17] Ramanujan, 'Three hundred Rāmāyanas: Five examples and three thoughts on translation,' p. 158.
- [18] Richman, 'Introduction: The diversity of the Ramayana tradition,' p. 14.
- [19] Paula Richman, 'E.V. Ramasami's reading of the Ramayana,' in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 175–201, p. 178, doi: [10.1525/9780520911758-011](https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520911758-011).
- [20] Nabaneeta Dev Sen, 'When women retell the Ramayana,' *Manushi* no. 108 (1998): 18–27, p. 18.
- [21] Shudra is the lowest *varna* category in the Hindu caste system.
- [22] Sen, 'When women retell the Ramayana,' p. 19.
- [23] Velcheru Narayana Rao, 'A Ramayana of their own: Women's oral tradition in Telugu,' in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 114–36: p. 114, doi: [10.1525/9780520911758-008](https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520911758-008).

[24] Rao, 'A Ramayana of their own,' p. 119.

[25] Rao, 'A Ramayana of their own,' p. 128–29.

[26] Rao, 'A Ramayana of their own,' p. 133–34.

[27] Usha Nilsson, 'Grinding millet but singing of Sita: Power and domination in Awadhi and Bhojpuri women's songs,' in *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, ed. Paula Richman, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001, pp. 137–58, p. 138.

[28] Madhu Kishwar, 'Yes to Sita, No to Ram: The hold of Sita on popular imagination in India,' in *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, ed. Paula Richman, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001, pp. 285–308, p. 285.

[29] Uma Chakravarti, 'Conceptualising Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class and state,' *Economic and Political Weekly* vol. 28, no. 14 (1993): 579–85, p. 579.

[30] According to one text, women have been sinful right from the beginning when the creator first made the five gross elements, the three worlds, and he gave shape to men and women—they are the edge of a razor, poison, snakes and fire all rolled into one. At the time of creation, the original Manu allocated to women the habit of lying, sitting around and an indiscriminate love of ornaments, anger, meanness, treachery and bad conduct. The view that women's innate nature was lascivious, and evil was so pervasive that it features even in Buddhist literature. A Jataka story states that women are a sex composed of wickedness and guile; womankind holds truth for falsehood and falsehood for truth. See Chakravarti, 'Conceptualising Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class and state,' p. 581.

[31] Chakravarti, 'Conceptualising Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class and state,' p. 581.

[32] In some versions, her breasts, feet, hair, and hands are cut off too. See Kathleen M. Erndl, 'The mutilation of Surpanakha,' in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 67–88, p. 81, doi: [10.1525/9780520911758-006](https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520911758-006).

[33] Erndl, 'The mutilation of Surpanakha,' p. 83.

[34] Chakravarti, 'Conceptualising Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class and state,' p. 580.

[35] Literally translated to 'women's duty.'

[36] Chakravarti, 'Conceptualising Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class and state,' p. 583.

[37] Shalini Shah, 'On gender, wives and "Pativrātās",' in *Social Scientist* vol. 40, nos 5/6 (2012): 77–90.

[38] Shah, 'On gender, wives and "Pativrātās",' p. 84.

[39] Paula Richman, 'A diaspora Ramayana in Southall, Greater London,' in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* vol. 67, no. 1 (1999): 33–57, doi: [10.1093/jaarel/67.1.33](https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/67.1.33).

[40] Nina Paley (writer, director, producer and animator), *Sita Sings the Blues*, 9 June 2008, URL: <http://www.sitasingingtheblues.com/>, accessed 27 October 2020.

[41] Ambai, 'Forest,' p. 149.

[42] Ambai, 'Forest,' p. 149.

[43] Ambai, 'Forest,' p. 164.

[44] Mehak Bajpai, 'Review of *The Liberation of Sita: A feminist engagement with Ramayana*,' *Feminism in India*, September 2018, URL: <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/09/25/liberation-sita-feminist-review-volga/>, accessed 10 Aug. 2020.

[45] T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree, 'Forging a vision of liberation,' in Volga's *The Liberation of Sita, The Liberation of*

Sita, trans. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree, New Delhi: Harper Perennial, 2016, pp. 107–12, p. 108.

[46] Renuka is wife of sage Jamadagni. Renuka is beheaded by her own son, Parasurama, at her husband's orders. See Volga, 'The sand pot,' in her *The Liberation of Sita*, trans. T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree, New Delhi: Harper Perennial, 2016, pp. 42–65, p. 46.

[47] Literally, 'the Aryan duty.'

[48] David Shulman, 'Fire and flood: The testing of Sita in Kampan's *Iramavataram*,' in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 89–113, p. 93, doi: [10.1525/9780520911758-007](https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520911758-007).

[49] Shulman, 'Fire and flood,' p. 90.

[50] Volga, 'Sita herself can save us,' in her *The Liberation of Sita*, trans. T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree, New Delhi: Harper Perennial, 2016, pp. 101–06.

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