

Title: From Dharma to Desire: The Death of Sita and the Feminization of the Ramayana
Narrative

Abstract:

There is a certain intimacy in the act of retelling. Especially when it turns its gaze toward a figure historically seen only in relation to someone else. This paper examines *Siya ke Ram* (Star Plus, 2015) as a televisual reimagining of the Ramayana that centers Sita not as mythic accessory, but as narrative subject. Through close readings of three pivotal instances in the show — Sita's childhood, her trial by fire, and her final return to the Earth — this paper explores how *Siya ke Ram* departs from earlier televisual mythologies, offering a more emotionally grounded and politically resonant portrayal of Sita.

Framed within media studies methodologies, particularly the analysis of *mise-en-scène*, the paper traces how mythology is not only retold, but also aesthetically re-performed. In contrast to Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* (1987) — which visually echoed calendar-art iconography, and Imagine TV's *Ramayan* (2008), which enveloped its characters in a luminous aura of spiritual sanctity — *Siya ke Ram* adopts a more human, intimate aesthetic. Everyday textures, personal gestures, and emotional vulnerability render divinity less distant and more lived. In this shift, Sita is no longer the Other in Ram's heroic saga; instead, Ram himself is seen through the lens of Sita's pain, love, and silence.

The paper references Valmiki's Ramayana as the foundational text in which Sita is shaped as a moral and divine archetype, culminating in Ram's triumphant return, where Sita's suffering becomes the condition of his legitimacy. Earlier television adaptations borrowed heavily from this framework, visually reinforcing moral absolutism. *Siya ke Ram*, by contrast,

performs a rupture. Through its use of mise-en-scène, domestic interiors, and intimate dialogues, it reimagines divinity as felt, embodied, and gendered.

This paper argues that *Siya ke Ram* not only retells the myth, but proposes a new reading of Sita, one where her death becomes an act of embodied agency. Her return to Earth is not surrender but a rejection of her own body as a site of validation, and in turn, a rejection of Ram's materialist dharma. By repurposing the image of Sita across the mediascape, the show shifts her from sacred object to subject of refusal, mourning becomes resistance, and disappearance becomes political. In this framing, the death of Sita is not the end of the epic, but the beginning of a critical reimagining of its ethics.

Introduction:

सुनो अवध के वासियो, कथा अयोध्या धाम की

जन्म लिए रघुवर जहाँ, उन्हीं सीया के राम की।

(Suno Avadh ke vasiyo, katha Ayodhya dham ki

Janm liye Raghuvar jahan, unhi Siya ke Ram ki.)

(“Listen, O residents of Avadh, to the tale of Ayodhya’s sacred land, where was born Raghuvar, none other than Siya’s Ram.” *(Siya ke Ram, ep. 280, “Luv, Kush Question Ram”)*).

These lines sung by Luv and Kush, the twin sons of Sita, set the tone for the show Siya ke Ram. A reminder that the story of Ram has always been mediated through voices, retellings, and performance. It is also telling that here Ram is introduced as Siya ke Ram, defined not merely by his lineage but through Sita.

The Ramayana is not simply a text but a living tradition in India. It is recited in temples and village squares, staged as Ramlila, retold in every regional language, painted, sung, and broadcast on television. Its cultural significance exceeds literature, operating as a moral compass, a source of ethical imagination, and, crucially, a tool of political mobilization. In contemporary India, the figure of Ram has been heavily politicized, absorbed into nationalist discourses where his divinity legitimizes power, exclusion, and violence (Wariavwalla)¹. To critique or even to question Ram is often read as a rejection of cultural identity itself.

¹ To know more about the contemporary political mobilization of Ram—ranging from Gandhi’s benevolent philosopher-king to Golwalkar’s Hindu nationalist deity, and the transformations of Ram into a symbol for both freedom and the Ram Janmabhoomi movement — see Wariavwalla’s analysis of Ram as a figure simultaneously divine, political, and mobilized for nationalist purposes

This politicization is tied to the way Ram's divinity has been constructed in the tradition: from Valmiki's narration of his sixteen virtues, to later theological elaborations that link him with Vishnu, to the mainstream televisual adaptations that present him as god incarnate.

Understanding how Ram is made divine, whether god by birth or god by construction, becomes essential before turning to Sita. For only by deconstructing the idealized masculine image of Ram can we understand the stakes of a feminized narrative, one where Sita's voice and Sita's death become central to reimagining the epic.

It is not unusual today to approach the Ramayana from Sita's perspective. Scholars and creative retellers have already laid the groundwork—critiquing Ram's world-building, Sita's victimhood, and the construction of dharma as patriarchal mandate (Sen; Sharma; Gokhale). This work does not seek to provide an exhaustive catalogue of textual or scriptural references across the long history of the Ramayana, nor is it a purely deconstructive project attempting to dismantle or overwrite the tradition. Rather, it is an attempt to merge and interpret the textuality and visual language of a selected adaptation—*Siya ke Ram* (Star Plus, 2015)—to better imagine the personhood of Sita.

The Ramayana, traditionally attributed to the sage Valmiki, is one of India's foundational epics, composed between the 5th and 1st centuries BCE. It narrates the life of Prince Ram of Ayodhya, an incarnation of the god Vishnu, whose adherence to *dharma* (moral duty) guides his journey through exile, war, and kingship. Accompanied by his devoted wife Sita and loyal brother Lakshman, Ram's story culminates in his victory over the demon-king Ravana, who abducts Sita to Lanka. While the epic ends in Ram's triumphant return, its emotional and ethical center remains Sita, whose trials test not only her purity but also the moral coherence of *dharma* itself.

Construction of Ram's Divinity: God or God Created?

The *Valmiki Ramayana*, written by sage Valmiki, the earliest and most authoritative version of the epic, narrates the life of Prince Ram. Within this text, Ram is exalted as *maryādā puruṣottama*, the ideal man who embodies moral order, while Sita exists as his reflection — virtuous, devoted, and defined through her suffering. This idealization transforms both figures into moral archetypes rather than human subjects. As the scholar Anusuya Roy notes, later homogenization of diverse retellings into a singular “canonical” *Ramayana* has led to the loss of cultural plurality and erased alternative imaginations of Sita's agency (Roy 2016).

The *Bāla Kāṇḍa* of Valmiki's *Ramayana* begins not with Ram himself, but with a dialogue between Valmiki and Narada. Valmiki asks: Who is the most virtuous man on earth? (1.1.5). Narada replies with an outline of Ram's qualities—sixteen in number, ranging from truthfulness and restraint to heroism and compassion—mapping him onto the full moon's sixteen phases, a cosmic metaphor of completeness. Ram is thus inaugurated not as a historical king, but as the ideal human, already sculpted as the hero of the epic. As the very title *Rāmāyaṇa* suggests—*rāmasya ayanam*, the path of Ram—the narrative privileges not even Ram's own subjectivity but the journey he embodies: the path of dharma (Valmiki; Griffith 25).

Singh and Khan argue that Valmiki's Ram is explicitly the incarnation of Vishnu, his journey imbued with divine symbolism rather than human complexity. Yadav likewise positions the *Ramayana* as both *śruti* and *smṛti*², a sacred and moral compass that consecrated Ram as *maryādā puruṣottama*—the ideal man, king, son, husband, and warrior. This portrayal profoundly shaped Hindu ethical imagination, making Ram an indispensable cultural construct (Yadav

²*Sruti* (“that which is heard”) refers to the most authoritative body of Hindu sacred literature, believed to be divinely revealed, primarily the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*.

Smṛiti (“that which is remembered”) refers to later texts composed by human authors, including epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and law books such as the *Manusmṛiti*. *Smṛiti* texts interpret, elaborate, or codify the principles found in *Śruti*.

266-267). Because of its hegemonic position, Valmiki's Ramayana has reduced the visibility of local and oral versions, where Ram and Sita emerge in more layered, sometimes even defiant ways.

Yet, this divinity is not intrinsic. It is constructed. As González-Reimann observes, the Ram of Valmiki oscillates between human and divine, his divinity retroactively imposed through associations with Vishnu, a theological move also employed in the Mahābhārata and Purāṇas³ to stabilize Brahmanical patriarchy and kingship (González-Reimann 207-208). In fact, Ram's contemporaries within the epic do not know him as Vishnu incarnate; his authority is derived from caste, lineage, and Raghuvaṃśa privilege. His "godliness" functions less as an organic attribute than as an ideological mandate — Ram had to be an absolute to explain why Hanuman⁴ chanted his name, why Ayodhya wept for him, why Bharat⁵ renounced the throne, and why none dared to question his actions.

This constructed divinity has served a patriarchal and Brahmanical order, presenting Ram as the eternal legitimizer of dharma. But as Nabaneeta Dev Sen has shown, when women retell the epic, the image shifts. In Chandrabati's sixteenth-century Ramayana, and in countless women's folk songs, Ram appears not as the flawless king but as harsh, uncaring, even weak-willed. While mainstream canons elevate Sita as Lakshmi incarnate, women's oral

³Purāṇas are a genre of ancient Hindu texts, containing mythic histories of gods, sages, and kings. They narrate cosmology, genealogies, rituals, and moral teachings, and played a major role in popularizing devotional traditions such as Vaishnavism and Shaivism.

⁴Hanuman is a popular deity in the Hindu pantheon, worshipped for masculine strength and abstinence. In the epic Ramayana, Hanuman is one of the prominent characters, and the most ardent devotee of Ram, playing a huge role in Ram's victory against Ravan. For more information, read <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanuman>

⁵In the epic, Bharata is one of the three brothers of Ram (including Lakshman and Shatrughan), and the son of King Dashratha and his third wife Kaikeyi (who demands her husband to banish Ram and make her son the next King of Ayodhya). Bharata rejects the throne gained via this intrigue and instead maintains Ram's sovereignty, ruling Ayodhya as regent and placing Ram's sandals on the throne as a symbol of rightful authority, even disobeying his own mother's demands. He is typically seen as a model of filial piety, dharma observance, and fraternal devotion (bhakti). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bharata_\(Ramayana\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bharata_(Ramayana))

traditions allow a different Sita to flourish: a woman whose suffering and resilience give voice to female experience. Here, Ram becomes human only through Sita's voice.

It is telling, then, that mainstream televisual retellings—whether Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* (1987), Imagine TV's *Ramayan* (2008), or even *Siya ke Ram* (2015)—remain bound to the canon. They present Ram as god and Sita as goddess, unwilling to sever divinity from narrative for fear of undermining audience faith. Yet paradoxically, it is through Sita's gaze, even in these canonical forms, that Ram becomes legible as a person. Sita, traditionally constructed as Ram's Other, emerges instead as the one who demystifies him. Her story provides Ram with a personhood outside divine abstraction: Ram weeps, falters, and is wounded only when refracted through Sita. In this sense, the feminization of the narrative through Sita's subjectivity does not merely reinterpret the Ramayana — it makes Ram human.

The Birth of Sita

The first episode begins with a contrast to the grandeur of the epic. Fertility is shown withering. *Siya ke Ram* (2015) begins not with gods reclining on serpent beds or with the grandeur of Ayodhya's court, but with a famine. A stark contrast emerges when placed beside *Ramayan* (Imagine TV, 2008), whose opening sequence revels in solar grandeur. The episode begins with a blazing sun—an explicit emblem of the Suryavanshi dynasty—radiating glory over Ayodhya's gleaming palace. Wealth, armory, and ritual abundance flow through the halls as Ayodhyāpati Dashrath returns in triumph, greeted by his three queens draped in identical gold and velvet. Their shimmering sameness erases individuality, staging royal womanhood as ornamental rather than personal. Yet beneath this opulence lies desperation: despite their riches, the royal couple laments their lack of an heir.

The framing thus situates Ram's birth not in scarcity, as in *Siya ke Ram*, but in a crisis of lineage within overwhelming material prosperity. Where the 2008 series foregrounds dynastic anxiety against a backdrop of excess, *Siya ke Ram* reverses the logic—beginning instead with famine, bareness, and the fragility of survival. This divergence reconfigures Sita's birth as an answer not to royal desire but to ecological and communal precarity, shifting the epic's emotional center away from masculine lineage and toward feminine materiality.

Similarly in *Bāla Kāṇḍa* (Sarga 5), the epic first turns to Ayodhya, exalting the Ikshvaku dynasty through images of fertility and abundance:

“With fertile length of fair champaign / And flocks and herds and wealth of grain”
(*Vālmīki*, trans. Griffith, canto V).

This celebration of Ayodhya's prosperity situates Ram's birth within plenitude and continuity, unlike the famine-stricken Mithila of *Siya ke Ram*.

In desperation, Janak seeks the sage Ashtavakra, who offers no divine boon, no ritual sacrifice—only a command: *plough the land yourself*. Stripped to the waist, exposed to the sun's wrath, Janak becomes a farmer rather than a king. The entire city gathers to watch his cracked soil yield nothing—until suddenly, his plough jolts against something hidden. From the earth itself he unearths a child. Sita. She who carries the marks of the furrow, the imprint of land tilled into life. The moment Janak raises her in his arms, rain pours down, crops return, and Mithila is replenished. Fertility, wealth, and joy are restored—not by lineage, not by masculine heirs, but by the earth-born girl.

This birth immediately sets Sita apart from Ram. Ram, son of Kausalya, is born into gold and plenty, a desired heir of the Raghu clan, his legitimacy tied to lineage, blood, and the

protection of dharma by the sword. Sita, in contrast, is tied not to ancestry but to the land. She does not inherit wealth, rather she brings it. She does not embody power by birthright, rather her birth is shown healing the land of its infertility in every way. In her very first appearance, she destabilizes the economy of the epic, as she belongs to no genealogy, no bloodline, and yet she restores life itself.

The writer Namita Gokhale, in *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology*, captures this paradox of recognition. “I thought I saw her, sitting on a rock, perhaps an apparition from a Raja Ravi Varma painting. A young woman in distress—was it myself that I saw there? For all of us Indian women carry some of her within us: her strength and her vulnerability” (Gokhale). The name “Sita,” derived from the Sanskrit *sītā*, meaning furrow, marks her as the daughter of the earth, cut from soil itself⁶. She is both wound and renewal, absence and abundance.

But the question Gokhale asks continues to haunt: When and why did Sita become a figure of weakness rather than strength? For this is the woman who, as legend insists, could lift Shiva’s bow with one arm, while not even a hundred men could move it even an inch. Yet in cultural idiom, “Sita” has come to mean not strength but victimhood. She is remembered less as the girl of the plough than as the silent wife who endured trial by fire (Gokhale, “Sita: A Personal Journey”).

In foregrounding Sita’s emergence from the earth rather than from a royal womb, *Siya ke Ram* challenges the epic’s long-standing investment in patrilineal legitimacy and Brahmanical order. The earth-birth reframes Sita not as a figure whose meaning derives from Ram, but as a subject whose authority arises from materiality itself (soil, scarcity, and survival). This shift marks the show’s first major ideological intervention: it dislodges divinity from lineage and relocates value in embodied experience. In doing so, it opens a narrative space where Sita

⁶ Read more [In Search Of Sita: Revisiting Mythology](#)

becomes the interpretive center of the epic rather than its moral accessory, and where femininity which was once tied to domesticity and obedience, becomes a site of cosmological and political meaning.

Childhood: Knowledge Cooks in a Pot

The first image of a young Sita in *Siya ke Ram* is not one of ritual prayer or goddess-worship, but of play, as she is shown performing with her sisters Urmila, Mandavi, and Shrutakirti, while her parents watch with joy. She runs barefoot, hides in the mud, fashions dolls, and talks to animals. Her world is alive with soil, fauna, and song. The queen Sunaina's kitchen, the first space of Sita's education, is rendered as an embodied archive. As the mythologist and author Devdutt Pattanaik reminds us in the chapter "Sunaina's Kitchen", the knowledge embedded in food preparation carried with it anatomy and culinary science: which foods heat the body, which soothe, which disturb, which balance (Pattanaik, "Sunaina's Kitchen"). The smells, spices, and sounds of the kitchen become part of a child's sensory training. Yet, as the series emphasizes, this is not a site of restriction. Knowledge in Mithila is everywhere, including, within the kitchen, in the forests, in the fields. With King Janak, Sita shares a love of the soil, walks through forests, and learns to see herself as part of the landscape. Pattanaik further notes that the Janak kings of Mithila were historically associated with agriculture, a connection that grounds Sita's education in her environment rather than in scriptures alone.

The mise-en-scène of Mithila reinforces this intimacy, showing, earthen pots, terracotta textures, Madhubani art on walls and drapes⁷, stone-work accessories, fresh flowers in every

⁷ Madhubani art is a popular folk style practiced in the Mithila region of India and Nepal ([Madhubani art. Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madhubani_art))

corridor, the landscape of mountains and forests visible from open halls. Unlike Ayodhya, whose iconography in the show is golden, ornamental, and tied to the solar lineage, Mithila is elemental, symbolising the earth rather than sun. Sita's learning, then, begins not in an institution but in her physical environment, layered onto her personhood rather than reduced to her destiny as Ram's wife. This subtle distinction separates *Siya ke Ram* from earlier adaptations (1987, 2008), where Sita as a child is shown primarily worshipping Vishnu, yearning to fulfill her predestined role as Lakshmi to Ram's Narayan⁸.

By contrast, the education of Ram and his brothers is formal, institutional, and segregated. Sent away to the gurukul of Sage Vashishta, they are trained in weaponry, administration, and the discipline of brahmacharya, separated from their mothers at an early age. Their education is coded in collectivity and in adherence to the duties expected of princes. In Sita's case, Sunaina remains her first teacher. She sends Sita on errands to gather herbs and tests her observations. Embodied, domestic, sensory learning, interwoven with women's bodies, forms the foundation of Sita's epistemology.

The series dramatizes a pivotal moment when King Janak organizes a scholarly debate to select a tutor for the four daughters. Among the invited sages are Ashtavakra, Yajnavalkya, and Gargi. When Gargi enters, Sunaina flinches, whispering that Gargi "asks too many questions." Young Sita immediately challenges her: is it wrong to question? (*Siya Ke Ram*, season 1, episode 6) This exchange recalls Devdutt Pattanaik's reminder that the dialogues on wisdom and the Veda eventually came to be called the Upanishads⁹ — conversations that thrived precisely

⁸ Sītā is traditionally understood as an incarnation of Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth, prosperity, and auspiciousness. Lakṣmī embodies fertility, abundance, and the generative power that sustains both household and kingdom. Because of this association, Sītā is frequently portrayed as life-giving. Her birth from the furrow (sītā) symbolically ties her to the fecundity of the earth, making her a divine forebringer of nourishment whose blessings enable crops to flourish and communities to thrive.

⁹ The Upanishads are a collection of Sanskrit philosophical texts composed between roughly 800 and 300 BCE. They are considered part of the śruti (that which is heard) tradition in Hinduism and explore metaphysical concepts

because of questioning. In the debate, Yajnavalkya triumphs, but Sita runs to Gargi, requesting to be her disciple. Gargi smiles and asks what she wishes to learn. Sita replies: *“How to question with courage.”* (Siya ke Ram, e. 6, *“Gautam to tutor Sita”*)

This moment inserts Sita into a genealogy of women philosophers otherwise sidelined in the Ram-centric universe. Gargi’s historical debates with Yajnavalkya in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad reveal her as a Brahma-vicharini (seeker of Brahman, the supreme truth), not merely a celibate woman.¹⁰ As Swami notes, figures like Gargi and Sulabha embody an alternative intellectual subjectivity for women, one that refuses the codified life-cycle prescribed by Brahmanical patriarchy.

The distinction here is striking. Ram’s education represents institutional legitimacy sanctioned by caste, ritual, and scriptural authority. Sita’s education, on the other hand, emerges from embodiment, questioning, and heterodox traditions that unsettle the gendered segregation of learning. In the Vedic system¹¹ education was restricted to upper-caste sons, especially Brahmins and Kshatriyas, while women and lower castes were systematically excluded (Kumari). The gurukulam¹² ensured ideological closure through ritual purity and caste segregation. The life stage of being a student, i.e., the brahmacharya itself was gendered. Hindu

such as ātman (the self), brahman (ultimate reality), and the pursuit of knowledge. The term itself derives from the Sanskrit for “sitting down near,” referring to the student seated beside the teacher to receive esoteric instruction.

¹⁰ Swami distinguishes Gargi and Sulabha as Brahma-vicharinis rather than mere brahmacharinis.

¹¹ The Vedic education system operated within the framework of the four varṇas — Brāhmaṇa, Kshatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra — each associated with particular social duties. While Brāhmaṇas sons were traditionally trained in Vedic learning, ritual knowledge, and philosophy, Kshatriyas sons received education in governance, warfare, and statecraft; Vaiśyas sons in agriculture, trade, and economic management; and Śūdras in either rarely service-oriented and artisanal skills or completely excluded from it. Access to Vedic study was thus structured through this hierarchical order as well as gendered, shaping who could learn, what they could learn, and under what conditions. For a general overview, see Kumari, P. “Education System in Vedic Period.” Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research, vol. 4, no. 9, 2017, pp. 620–623. <https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR1709090.pdf>.

¹² A gurukulam (from guru “teacher” and kulam “family” or “house”) was the traditional residential school system of ancient India. Students (śiṣya) lived with their teacher, who provided not only instruction in scriptures, philosophy, and martial arts but also training in household and community duties. Education in the gurukulam was largely restricted to upper-caste boys, particularly Brahmins and Kshatriyas, and often excluded women. For a general overview, see Kumari, P. “Education System in Vedic Period.” Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research, vol. 4, no. 9, 2017, pp. 620–623. <https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR1709090.pdf>.

celibacy depended on the ritual containment of semen, with women often deemed incapable of celibacy and instead thought to gain purity only through marriage and sex (Khandelwal 158).

Against this backdrop, Sita's apprenticeship under Gargi unsettles the gendering of knowledge.

In the series, then, Sita is not simply a goddess-in-waiting. She becomes a child whose education embodies an epistemology that contrasts with Ram's, constructing an education grounded in touch, smell, soil, and question, against one institutionalized, codified, and sanctioned. In positioning Sita's education within the domestic and the sensory, *Siya ke Ram* reframes epistemology itself as gendered terrain. What the gurukul teaches through exclusion and hierarchy, Sita's Mithila unlearns through intimacy and care. The kitchen, the forest, and the field become heterodox classrooms that displace the authority of scripture with the authority of lived experience. This is not simply a visual contrast but an ideological one where Sita's apprenticeship under Gargi therefore recovers a forgotten lineage of women's intellectual agency.

They Dance on Her Body While She Sleeps: Marriage and Trial by Fire (Part I)

One of the striking childhood scenes in *Siya ke Ram* depicts the young Sita encountering Parashuram¹³, the fierce sage and devotee of Shiva, known for his wrath against corrupt rulers. Misunderstanding his arrival as a threat to her father Janak, Sita runs to the chamber where Shiva's bow is enshrined. The bow is known to be so heavy that none had been able to move it for generations. In a moment of panic and determination, she lifts the bow with effortless strength, even pointing it toward Parashuram. The *mise-en-scène* dramatizes the cosmic shock: the earth trembles, the sky thunders, and Shiva himself smiles from his abode. Recognizing the

¹³ Paraśurāma is a prominent sage in Hindu traditions and is popularly regarded as one of the ten avatāras of Viṣṇu, preceding Rāma. Born a Brahmin to the sage Jamadagni, he is renowned for his martial prowess and is said to have annihilated the Kshatriya clans twenty-one times for their repeated abuse of power, thereby "clearing the earth" of oppressive rulers. His fierce temperament and reputation for wrath made him particularly feared by kings. This background explains the dramatic tension and initial misunderstanding during his encounter with Sītā and Janaka in the Rāmāyaṇa, when his arrival is interpreted as potentially threatening or retributive.

child before him as divine, Parashuram instructs Janak that this bow should one day determine Sita's groom—for only a man capable of stringing it would be worthy of her.

This incident foreshadows the famous swayamvar¹⁴. Yet what begins as a gesture of equality quickly devolves into spectacle. Kings and princes from across the subcontinent arrive to compete, Ravana among them. Each attempt to lift the bow becomes less about Sita's choice and more about masculine display, her body transformed into a trophy for the victor. The marriage of Sita thus becomes less her union than a contest of male glory, situating her not as subject but as prize.

At the same time, the series carefully frames Sita's awareness of her political position as princess of Mithila. As Basu notes, the swayamvar is as much about Janak's prestige and Mithila's diplomatic honor as it is about Sita's personal desire. One scene highlights this political consciousness: when Ravana's messenger desecrates a poor woman's field to clear space for the Pushpak Vimana, the old woman appeals to Sita. Accompanied by her sister Urmila, Sita confronts the envoy. While Urmila erupts in anger, Sita insists on restraint, reminding her sister that Mithila cannot afford the consequences of insulting a political guest. Instead, she calmly but firmly negotiates with Ravana's envoy, pointing out his violation of land and people.

This episode marks a crucial turning point. Sita is aware of her obligations, her body as spectacle, and the politics her marriage entails. The tension between Ram and Ravana is staged on her very body before the war ever begins. Both men, in different ways, perform their masculine egos through their claim over her. Yet Siya ke Ram insists that Sita is not passive in this exchange. She loves Ram, but her love is not blind, as she demands etiquette and respect,

¹⁴ The term swayamvar derives from the Sanskrit svayam ("oneself") and vara ("groom" or "chosen man"), referring to a ceremony in which a woman publicly chooses her husband from among assembled suitors. While often framed as an expression of female choice, swayamvars in Indian epics typically function as royal or political spectacles, seen in the marriages of Sita, Draupadi, and Sati — where the woman's agency is constrained by competitive displays of masculine prowess and dynastic interests.

even from him, placing her father's grace and Mithila's dignity above personal desire. In these early moments, Sita is already constructed as a figure who understands her political and embodied subjectivity. This is a consciousness that later informs her trial by fire, and ultimately, her refusal in death.

(Part II)

The trial by fire continues the same tension staged during the swayamvar. Ram and Ravan's rivalry, except here Ravan is already dead. After victory in war, Ram and Sita meet for the first time in Ashok Vatika. The mise-en-scène heightens expectation. Ram sends Lakshman to Sita, asking her "permission" to see him, which is a gesture that bewilders both Lakshman and Sita. She urges him to return quickly with Ram. When they finally stand before each other, the screen first slips into a dreamlike reunion: hands clasping, tears flowing, golden petals falling. It symbolises a divine moment of conjugal harmony. But this vision dissolves abruptly into reality. Ram stands stern, while Sita blushes, unaware. He addresses her not as wife, but as "Devi"¹⁵ — a respectful address reserved for a woman who is a stranger or unrelated by blood.

This formality strikes Sita like a blow. Ram categorically declares that she is no longer tied to him, that she is free to go wherever she chooses, but she cannot return with him to Ayodhya. The gathered assembly (monkeys, allies, and women of Lanka) witnessed the rejection, stunned. One of Ravan's widowed wives demands whether Ram's reason is suspicion of Sita's chastity. Ram denies this. Sugriva, bewildered, protests: "Why then disgrace the woman for whom you waged war?" (*Siya Ke Ram*, season 1, episode 261) Ram answers that Sugriva

¹⁵In classical and vernacular usage, "Devi" literally means "goddess," but in many Sanskrit and North Indian contexts it also functions as a formal mode of address for a woman with whom one has no intimate or familial relationship. When Ram uses "Devi" for Sita here, the term signals distance which is a deliberate rhetorical move that frames her as socially unrelated and therefore outside the protections of conjugal identity.

may be right, but what he does is *dharmochit*¹⁶ — right according to dharma. His language reveals the trap: his behavior is not guided by affection, but by obligation to the code of lineage, kingship, and masculine dharma.

At this point, *Siya ke Ram* stages a subtle critique through Surpanakha's entrance. Dressed in black, veiled to cover her mutilated face (a reminder of when Lakshman cut off her nose at Ram's command), she confronts Sita. With a smirk, she insists: "This society, built by kings, is patriarchal. Everyone is trapped here. Your husband disgraced me, and now disgraces you. He is enslaved to the same order that once used me as spectacle. He cannot bring you back to Ayodhya, especially not without proof." (*Siya Ke Ram*, S1.E261) Surpanakha's words put forth that the demand for proof of chastity is not personal but systemic, embedded in patriarchal society that both she and Sita are a part of.

Here the show juxtaposes two forms of female love and embodiment. As Gokhale observes, Sita's love is domesticated and conjugal, while Surpanakha's is untamed and threatening. The mutilation of Surpanakha's body becomes necessary to neutralize dangerous sexuality, while Sita's domesticated body is exalted only when it is subjected to patriarchal scrutiny (Gokhale 103). Both women, then, are trapped. Sita as the revered wife, Surpanakha as the demonized "other woman."

Yet Sita responds differently. She silences Surpanakha and turns to Ram. Patiently, she declares that she understands his obligation, that the man before her is not her husband but the descendant of the Ikshvaku clan, bound to uphold dharma as his ancestor Harishchandra once

¹⁶ The term *dharmochit* combines *dharma* ("moral law," "duty," or "righteous conduct") and *uchit* ("appropriate," "proper").

sacrificed his family to keep a promise. Sita here articulates her awareness: Ram is not acting as a husband but as a king, reduced to a symbol of duty.

This gendered split resonates with Åhäll's analysis of traditional narratives where men are associated with war and women with peace, men with life-taking and women with life-giving (Åhäll; Elshtain; Skjelsbæk, 220). Sita's body becomes coded as nurturing, providing emotional and domestic labor not just for Ram but for Lakshman, Hanuman, and the entire monkey army. She forms bonds with women too, like the Rakshasis in Lanka, Rishipatnis in exile, the women of Mithila and Lanka, Gargi in her childhood. But these solidarities do not demand the same transactional labor. Her relations sustain her personhood, not her symbolism. Ram, in contrast, is trapped within kinship codes, reduced to an embodiment of dharma's social machinery.

The show highlights this distinction through a striking scene during the war itself: when Ram realizes it is Dashrath's death anniversary, he requires a Brahmin to perform the rites. Ironically, it is Ravan (his enemy) who is requested¹⁷. The moment disrupts the battle narrative. Dressed as a Brahmin, Ravan is welcomed by Hanuman, and Ram expresses genuine gratitude, honoring him as an exemplary Brahmin. Here, Ram is not an individual but an obedient son, a king performing his role. His body, like his choices, is subordinated to duty. Sita, however, is shown forming relationships outside these codes, enabling her to sustain her "self" rather than her symbolic role.

After Surpanakha's scathing critique, Siya ke Ram turns to Sita's decisive voice. To everyone's shock, she declares she will undertake the trial by fire. Ram, Lakshman, and Hanuman all plead with her to stop, but Sita insists that it is her choice. If Ram has declared her free, then she alone has the right to decide her fate. One woman of Lanka, horrified, cries out to

¹⁷ Even though Ravan is regarded as the Rakshasa king, his father is the sage Vishrava, hence making Ravan a descendant of Brahmin lineage. His grandfather was the sage Pulastya who belonged to the group of Saptarshi (seven great sages).

her: “Do not do this. Otherwise society will force every woman to walk into fire.” (*Siya Ke Ram*, S1.E261) Sita replies calmly that her act is not helplessness, but a willing choice.

She steps into the flames while the camera lingers on the grief of the assembly. Ram is shown collapsing in anguish until the fire clears. Agnidev himself emerges, carrying Sita, her body untouched. He proclaims her the purest of all, returning her to Ram’s embrace.

The logic of this scene traces back to Valmiki’s Yuddha Kāṇḍa. There, Ram publicly disowns Sita after victory, telling her: “This endeavor in the shape of war... was not undertaken for your sake. It was done to wipe off the insult to my lineage” (6.115.15–16). He accuses her of being “disagreeable” like light to diseased eyes, and commands her to go where she will (6.115.17). Only after Sita prays to Agni and emerges unscathed does Ram accept her again, praising her as Lakshmi herself (6.117). The textual pattern is clear: Ram’s fidelity is to his clan and dharma, not to his wife.

In the 2008 *Ramayan* television series, the public encounter between Ram and Sita takes on a different mood. Ram himself is shown openly suspicious of Sita, having overheard the gossip of monkeys questioning her chastity. Like in Valmiki’s Ramayana, Ram declares that he has fulfilled his dharma, removed the dishonor cast upon him by Ravana’s abduction of Sita, and in doing so has proved his masculinity. His words enrage and devastate Sita. She challenges him: how dare he honor his vows to his father and ancestors while forgetting the vows of marriage he made to her? How dare he doubt her? She insists that Ram resides in her soul, but when the soul itself slanders the body, she asks, what worth is there in keeping such a body alive?

This dramatization brings into focus the duality often inscribed in patriarchal narratives: the man aligned with the soul, capable of intellect and transcendence; the woman aligned with the body, imagined as a vessel of desire to be regulated and scrutinized. In this logic, the female

body is always already inscribed with meaning by the male gaze, and Sita herself internalizes this hierarchy. Even in her outrage at Ram's suspicion, she simultaneously attempts to absorb his blemish, to cleanse his honor through her own trial, in order to remain within the society granted to her by her husband. The scene underscores that Sita's fidelity is a necessary condition for her belonging in a social order defined and sustained by Ram's dharma.

Siya ke Ram sharpens this tension. As Namita Gokhale observes, the difficulty of fidelity lies in its invisibility. Fidelity in thought cannot be witnessed, only imagined. Mythic narratives therefore elevate women like Sita to the position of goddesses, whose chastity is proved through ordeal, untouched even by fire (Gokhale 119). Sita's body thus becomes the site where male honor is validated. First in her swayamvar, where her hand proves Ram's worth, and again here, where her fidelity proves his.

The wedding and the trial together stage what Shah, drawing on Michel Foucault, calls the binarization of "pleasure and punishment"—the ways in which women's bodies are disciplined simultaneously through celebration and subjection (Shah; Foucault, 31). Sita's swayamvar appears at first as an act of pleasure, the joyous public spectacle of marriage, yet her body in that very moment is transformed into a trophy for masculine display, her desirability serving as political currency. By contrast, the trial by fire becomes a spectacle of punishment: her body subjected to scrutiny and discipline in full public view, her fidelity marked and re-marked by patriarchal validation.

The politics of the body extends to the collective. As Basu notes, Ram's encounters with women often serve to showcase his virtues (saving Ahalya by his touch, slaying Tadaka, punishing Surpanakha, defeating Ravana to restore Sita) (Basu 84). Woman becomes the foil, her unrighteousness or vulnerability the stage upon which Ram's grace appears. In this system, the

woman is presumed incapable of upholding dharma unless under surveillance, her chastity validated only in public gaze. Sita's trial thus becomes a self-justifying spectacle: a proof demanded not only by Ram but by the patriarchal order itself.

Basu also speculates on what may have been Sita's own thoughts behind agreeing to the trial by fire. He suggests that Sita's decision might not have been only a reaction to Ram's rejection but also a form of self-judgment, shaped by her internalization of social parameters. Perhaps, Basu writes, she felt a residual guilt at having lived in the house of a foreign man who desired her, or she wished for a ritual cleansing to remove the coercive pollution of Ravana's gaze. Yet, crucially, this interior battle is never treated with the same sympathy or gravity as Ram's moral dilemmas.

This insight layers the politics of Sita's body in ways that canonical texts and earlier televisual retellings often ignore as compared to *Siya ke Ram*. While Ram's obedience to dharma is framed as noble sacrifice, Sita's trial becomes her own burden, her body rendered both as object of external scrutiny and as subject of internalized guilt.

This demand is deeply rooted in what Khandelwal calls the gendering of chastity: in ritual practice, a *kanyā* (unmarried girl) is worshipped for her presexual chastity; after marriage, she transforms into the one who worships, her worth tied to her postsexual fidelity to her husband (Khandelwal 211). Sita's ordeal dramatizes this logic: to belong, she must prove both the body's purity and the mind's fidelity, even when neither can truly be witnessed.

According to Shah, Brahmanical cosmology envisions the body of the *puruṣa*—the cosmic man—not as an individualized form but as a transcendental entity, revered for its ritual and world-generating functions (32). When contextualized within the *Ramayana*, Ram embodies

this figure: the divine male, supreme incarnation of Vishnu, the *maryādā puruṣottama* or ideal man, whose actions are taken to be the timeless truth. His body, by definition, cannot be tainted.

By contrast, the Dharmashastras — the Brahmanical law codes dominated by the householder ethic of reproduction — constructed the female body primarily as a reproductive body. Because the purity of patrilineage and the maintenance of *varna* status were contingent on women's sexuality, the female body became the controlled body, monitored and disciplined in the name of *dharma* (Shah 36). Sita's fidelity, therefore, was not merely her own matter of virtue but was made to stand for the honor of the Raghu clan itself. Chastity in this system is nothing more than coded sexual control, the guarantee that the patrilineage remains pure. The trial by fire, then, was not only a test of Sita's personal virtue but an enactment of this ideology. Her body, placed in the flames, becomes the site where the cosmic purity of Ram and the political purity of the Raghu clan are both preserved.

Up to this point, as shown in the show, Sita has still imagined belonging (as daughter, wife, queen) as the reward of fulfilling morality. But the trial marks a fissure. She succeeds in passing the test, but the very need for it unsettles her belonging. As Basu notes, women were expected to be coy and to seek protection from their husbands. Sita had been taught these virtues by her mother Sunaina, who often appeared uneasy at her daughter's ahead-of-time thinking. Yet Ram's suspicion, even after her fire ordeal, and his later abandonment of her back in Ayodhya reveal the unstable, self-validating hierarchy of his *dharma*. Sita begins to recognize that her body will always be made to stand as a symbol rather than self.

It is here that the narrative seeds her final refusal. The fire ordeal is not her defeat—it is her transition. From this moment on, her personhood moves toward reconceptualizing belonging, not as something granted by *dharma*, but as something she can revoke. The trajectory from

swayamvar to fire to final death becomes clear: Sita's body, first offered as prize, then as proof, finally becomes refusal.

Sita's Death: Refusal and Return

The night before her death, the show stages a haunting vision. Janak, now an old man, wanders through his palace, only to see an apparition of Sita standing in the same hall where, as a child, she had once lifted Shiva's bow with ease. Dressed in the pale saffron of a sanyāsin¹⁸, she is no longer queen or mother, but a renunciant. Startled, Janak asks if all is well. Sita only smiles gently and thanks him. Not for saving her, not for protecting her, but for shaping her into who she is. "You are the one who made me Sita," (*Siya Ke Ram*, season 1, episode 297) she says. At this moment, the circle completes. The Sita born of earth, raised in Janak's palace, becomes again her own subject, no longer bound by dharma, lineage, or obligation.

After Ram's victory in Lanka and his coronation in Ayodhya, the kingdom enters a brief period of harmony. Sita's pregnancy brings joy, and preparations for the twins' birth fill the palace. Yet this happiness proves fragile. Ram is told of Bhadra, a commoner who refuses to accept his wife after rumors of her chastity circulate. Hearing this, Ram realizes that Ayodhya itself has begun to cast suspicion on Sita's fidelity.

Here, *rajadharma*¹⁹ overpowers conjugal love. After consulting Sage Vashishta (Ram's teacher), Ram decides to abandon Sita. One night, he invites her to accompany Lakshman on a visit to a sage. Trusting her husband, she agrees. Ram then orders Lakshman to drive her deep

¹⁸ A sanyāsin (from Sanskrit sannyāsa, "renunciation") is one who has formally renounced worldly life in pursuit of spiritual liberation (mokṣa). Traditionally, this stage marks the final of the four āśramas (life stages) in Hindu philosophy, following studenthood, householder life, and forest-dwelling. A sanyāsin lives without possessions or social ties, embodying detachment from kinship and duty.

¹⁹ Rājadharmā refers to the ethical and moral duties of a ruler in Hindu political thought. Rooted in Dharmaśāstra, it outlines a king's responsibilities toward justice, protection of subjects, maintenance of social order, and the upholding of dharma across the realm. It embodies an ideal of kingship in which political authority is inseparable from moral accountability.

into the forest and leave her there. Lakshman, torn by grief, obeys. Thus begins the Uttar Ramayan: Sita's exile, her raising of Luv and Kush away from Ayodhya, their later confrontation with Ram, and Sita's eventual death.

If Ram's rajdharma demanded that he prioritize the citizens of Ayodhya above all else, then it is important to ask: who counted as his citizens? A hierarchy is evident, one that excludes as much as it includes. Zimmerman notes that in the world of men, men are citizens while women are cast as monsters—a human woman's natural condition is to be monstrous (Zimmerman 78). This insight unlocks an essential feature of the Ramayana, that the female body exists as denizen, never as citizen, unless validated through the gaze of a man. Sita, despite being queen and mother of Ram's heirs, remains unrecognized as a citizen; her body is always in excess, always awaiting validation.

When Sita is finally summoned back to Ayodhya, the *mise-en-scène* of *Siya ke Ram* frames the scene in stark contrast. The people of Ayodhya arrive draped in colorful silks, a visual of celebration, while the widowed queens of Dasharath wear white. The sisters are reunited, openly dreaming of Sita's new life, imagining that she will finally be together with Ram. Ram himself beams at the sight of his sons. Everyone celebrates. Except Sita.

As Shah notes, Sita is regarded as symbolizing the “deadweight of tradition” by feminist scholars — born of the goddess Earth and, like the Earth itself, imagined as silently bearing the weight of the society and its codes without protest (Shah, *Articulation* 82). Yet such readings overlook that even within this symbolic frame, Sita remained discerning enough to question, critique, and finally refuse.

Siya ke Ram stages this refusal as a spectacle. Dressed in bright red garments and adorned in the finery of royalty, Sita appears as Ayodhya's attempt to reinstate her as queen, a subtle

mise-en-scène of Lakshmi preparing to return to her celestial abode, taking away with her the glow of the kingdom. She halts in the middle of the ashram where she has lived in serenity with her sons. Now she is surrounded—by her husband, in-laws, subjects, and supplicants. Bhadra throws himself at her feet begging forgiveness. The widowed queens weep, ashamed that they ever doubted her. Lakshman confesses his guilt for abandoning her. But Sita remains unmoved. She refuses their repentance, redirecting the shame back to its source: “The biggest mistake,” she declares, “is the society that obliges us never to question — a son who cannot question his parents, a student who cannot question his tutor, a younger brother who cannot question his elder brother.” (*Siya Ke Ram*, S1.E297) Her words directly indict Ram.

In full public glare, once again, husband and wife stand facing each other. This time, however, Sita is no longer silent. She holds Ram accountable. Ram weeps, apologizes, even begs to renounce his *rajdharm*a in order to fulfill his *patidharma*, to finally stay by her side. But Sita refuses. She tells him he ceased to be her husband the day he abandoned her in deceit.

Declaring herself utterly free, of social duty, of domestic labor, of kinship obligations, Sita proclaims her final decision, to return to her mother, the Earth. In that moment she reclaims her body not as a symbol of chastity or clan honor but as self. The visual scene spectacularizes the rupture: thunder roars, mountains tremble, winds rise, dust blinds the crowd. The earth cracks open and Sita descends into it, beyond reach. Her last vision is of her father Janak, rushing desperately from Mithila, managing only to glimpse his daughter one final time as she disappears.

Her silence punctures the spectacle. At this moment, Sita chooses self-destruction. She rejects further obligations, no longer willing to perform as wife, queen, or even mother. Throughout the narrative, as we have seen, Sita has been made to “mother” everyone related to

Ram (Lakshman, Hanuman, the monkeys, even his subjects). Now, even her biological children are given back to Ram. In this gesture of un-mothering, she delivers a profound critique of the domestic labor expected of women under Ram's hypocritical dharma. By refusing motherhood itself, she lays bare the one-sidedness of the domestic and emotional obligations imposed on her body.

As Shah observes, ancient Hindu cosmology constructs the male body as the transcendental site of creation itself. In Vedic hymns, particularly the *Puruṣa Sūkta* of the *Ṛgveda*, the cosmic man (*puruṣa*) is both the sacrificial victim and the unitary source of all existence — his fragmented body generating the social and cosmic order. The divine man's corporeality, exemplified in later texts by the *virāṭa* or *viśvarūpa* form of Vishnu and by extension Ram, is thus celebrated for its ritual, world-sustaining functions. His body is metaphysical, cosmogonic, and inherently legitimizing — a divine totality through which dharma itself acquires meaning (Shah, *Engendering* 33–35).

Against this eternal, transcendental ideal stands Sita's body which is not cosmic but material and perishable. Throughout the *Ramayana*, the female body becomes a site of anxiety and regulation. From *Suparṇakhā*'s mutilation, which disciplines uncontrolled female desire, to Sita's ordeal by fire, which tests bodily purity, and finally to her self-burial, which dissolves the body entirely. If the male form is celebrated as the origin of the universe, the female form is persistently made to prove its right to exist within it. *Siya ke Ram* visually reverses this cosmology. At the moment Sita returns to the earth, Ram's transcendence collapses — his monumental crown is shown falling to the ground, his divine composure shatters, and the "ideal man" is reduced to human grief. The scene performs an inversion where Sita's descent into the soil becomes an act of elemental assertion, while Ram's divinity crumbles into mortality.

In this sequence, the series critiques the patriarchal metaphysics that Shah identifies — the hierarchy wherein the male body generates cosmos and the female body merely reproduces within it. Sita's return to the earth reclaims materiality as sacred rather than subordinate. Her death is not the erasure of the body but its elevation: the material asserting primacy over the metaphysical. If Ram's dharma is celestial and disembodied, Sita's final gesture insists that truth, morality, and divinity must also return to earth.

The tension between embodiment and erasure becomes even sharper when read through Sánchez's theorization of appearance and disappearance. Sánchez distinguishes between active appearance — a visibility generated through agency, action, or enunciation — and passive appearance, where visibility is transformed into value and the subject becomes an object circulating within an economy of spectacle (Sánchez 6). In this latter mode, the subject "appears," but only as laborer, consumer, or symbolic resource; visibility becomes a form of disappearance, because the inner processes of becoming—emotion, agency, dissent—are denied recognition (Sánchez 6).

As we saw in earlier sections, Sita's position within both Valmiki's Ramayana and its dominant cultural afterlives exemplifies this paradox of passive visibility. She is unfailingly visible, central to the plot, invoked as pativrata, enshrined as the moral axis through which Ram's dharma is validated. Yet this visibility is instrumental: her body becomes the medium through which lineage is purified, honor restored, and masculine divinity affirmed. She appears, but only as value — never fully as subject. Siya ke Ram reconstructs this economy by converting Sita's disappearance into an act of active appearance. Her final return to the earth, far from negating her presence, reclaims it: she manifests herself not as the object who guarantees Ram's cosmic identity, but as a self who refuses the conditions of her visibility. In choosing self-destruction,

she reverses Sánchez's paradox—her disappearance becomes the only moment in which she appears as a complete agent, no longer circumscribed by passive visibility, no longer a vessel for Ram's transcendence, but a subject who asserts the material and ethical truth of her own becoming.

Conclusion

What Siya ke Ram offers is not the quiet endurance of a goddess consigned to memory, but the articulation of dissent—most vividly in Sita's final retreat into the earth. These moments displace the certainties of the epic, destabilizing the sanctity of dharma by revealing how it feeds on the body of a woman, and what it costs for her to live within its confines. In walking away from her children, refusing her husband's contrition, and withdrawing into the soil, Sita interrupts the myth's masculine rhythm of lineage and conquest with a gesture that belongs to her alone.

Her return to earth is not a coda to Ram's story, nor a divine restoration of balance. It is the wound that the epic cannot heal, the refusal that its patriarchal order cannot absorb. If Ram's path is about dharma preserved, Sita's is about its exposure. Where he embodies continuity, she enacts rupture. Where he represents order, she insists on the uncontainable.

Seen this way, *the Ramayana* itself becomes unsettled: no longer a closed tale of triumph and return, but a text haunted by the woman who exits it on her own terms. Sita's disappearance from the stage of history is also her most radical inscription upon it. Her dissent reverberates not as a moment of loss but as an insistence that myth is never final, never whole, and never free of the voices it tries to silence.

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