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“RAMA, MUST I REMIND YOU OF YOUR DIVINITY?” LOCATING A SEXUALIZED, FEMINIST, AND QUEER DHARMA IN THE *RAMAYANA*

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Seven years ago, during his son's wedding feast in India, my uncle advised the new bride that she should not begin eating before her husband did. He continued that her dharmic (ethical) duty as a wife was to be like Sita, the idolized female protagonist of the ancient Hindu epic, the *Ramayana* (circa 300 BC); Sita famously worshipped her husband as a god, devoting herself completely to his needs. My uncle's reference to a character from the *Ramayana* on as momentous an occasion as a wedding was not surprising; the *Ramayana* pervades the cultural consciousness of India and much of Asia and its popularity has not waned over the centuries. It is taught in most schools and, as a result, there is hardly a child or adult not conversant with the epic. It has also resurfaced repeatedly in films, the visual arts, comic books, mass-produced calendars, and television serials. Its appeal became especially evident between 1987 and 1989 when, at 9:30 a.m., the Indian nation would come to a standstill as people everywhere gathered to watch Ramanand Sagar's state-sponsored television serial, *Ramayan*, based on the *Ramayana*.¹ Churches rescheduled services and trains waited at stations while commuters and officials alike stopped to watch *Ramayan*, regarding the viewing as an act of worship. When viewers discovered that the serial would not cover the final book of the *Ramayana*, workers all over the country went on strike until the government sponsored Sagar to finish it.² My uncle's reference to Sita in his instructions to his new daughter-in-law was also not surprising because, as the Indian academic Madhu Kishwar has shown, the epic, and particularly Sita's conjugal experiences and actions, wields significant influence in the consciousness of most Hindu women [234–49]. I argue, however, that contemporary retellings of the *Ramayana*, including Sagar's television serial, have desexualized the epic so that it reflects extremely

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¹ Sagar's *Ramayan* was a composite of many different *Ramayanas* including Valmiki's. Hess asserts that Sagar's *Ramayan* cuts and pastes parts of different *Ramayanas* to put forward his own message. In Sagar's rendering of the *agnipariksha* scene, for example, "his message seems to incorporate the ideologies of a conglomeration of modern speakers: nineteenth-century British moral legislators, Hindu reformists, and Hindu revivalists, and, in one or two lines, bits that might be associated with feminists and other political activists of the present time" [Hess 12].

² Sanitation workers in Jalandhar, in the northern state of Punjab, went on strike because the serial was due to end without depicting the events of the seventh, and final, book of the *Ramayana*. The strike spread among sanitation workers in many major cities in North India, compelling the government to sponsor the desired episodes in order to prevent a major health hazard.

conservative attitudes towards marriage, sex, and sexuality—attitudes that have been harnessed by nationalist and patriarchal discourses to limit women’s ways of being in the world. My act of sexing, feministing, and queering the *Ramayana* disavows the notion of an inherently inflexible and intolerant Hinduism, divorces the epic from its history of nationalist appropriation, and highlights its feminist messages and the ways it sanctions alternative sexualities.

1

First, after a brief summary of the epic and a clarification of methodology, I trace the genealogy of its interpretations to Hindu nationalist ideology. I then argue that the Sanskrit Valmiki *Ramayana*, upon which most retellings of the epic are selectively based, is a highly sexualized text that enables feminist and queer interpretations.³ A sexualized lens enables feminist interpretations by highlighting women as key players in the enactment of their own sexualities—as sexual subjects rather than objects—and by emphasizing justice for both men and women through an exploration of the treatment of Sita by her husband. It facilitates a queer reading because it enables the text to be read as sanctioning not just heterosexual conjugality, but a wide range of sexual experience. Such a queer reading highlights the text’s deviations from fixed gender and sexual identities, deviations that become a political move against heteronormativity while refusing to engage in essentialist identity politics.⁴ Furthermore, this sexualized lens enables a view of sexual

³ *I have chosen Valmiki’s version because it is the earliest, most widely known, and most accessible. This is not to make the Valmiki Ramayana an ur-text. As the essays in Richman’s edited collection, Many Rāmāyaṇas, show, throughout Indian history many authors and performers have produced diverse tellings of the story. Ramanujan writes of at least 25 versions in Sanskrit and 300 in different regional languages and genres [24]. His essay, along with the others in the collection, demonstrates the multivocal nature of the Ramayana by highlighting its variations according to historical, political, literary, and religious contexts. For example, Rao focuses on a Telugu women’s Ramayana tradition that challenges male dominance; Seely has highlighted those Ramayanans in which Ravana is identified with heroic figures instead of villainous ones.*

⁴ *Many historians are wary of discussing sexual relations in ancient India or in other non-Western, non-contemporaneous contexts; these often end up producing an ahistorical grafting of modern conceptions of sexuality onto very different ways of being. Contemporary notions of homosexuality have their origins in nineteenth-century Europe and may not be an applicable or particularly illuminating conceptual vehicle for explaining same-sex relations in radically different cultural and historical contexts. Same-sex desire in India, for example, has not traditionally implied anything about the sexual “orientation” of the actor, because the notions of orientation such as homosexuality or heterosexuality simply did not exist. However, Ruth Vanita counters that, by this standard, historians could not even use terms such as “family,” “marriage,” “slave,” “woman,” or “man” when discussing past societies since those English words are well known to have widely different meanings from those they have today: “If one were serious about using the languages of the past to describe the past, the only honest strategy would be to write about historical texts entirely in their own language” [4]. This would seriously hamper original, insightful work as well as ignore the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic pollination colonization has produced. I use modern words like “homosexuality” in this interpretation also because ideological groups such as the Hindu nationalist BJP have categorized same-sex desire as “homosexual” in order to dismiss it as “non-Indian” thus fixing the word and the practices it connotes with monolithic, totalizing meanings. Since refuting such ideas is central to this project, using the same terms reviled for being culturally inauthentic is worthwhile for its own sake; it is an important step in promoting a plurality of meanings in the democratic project of making space for women’s sexual and feminist histories. Thus while I acknowledge “homosexuality” as a modern identity or mode of being, using the term in the context of the Ramayana may suggest ground for gay rights advocates to claim that homosexuality has its Indian histories and is not (merely) a Western form of sexuality. I call this reading, as a*

love (*kama*), in all its diversity, as a vital step towards achieving *moksha*, or spiritual salvation, thereby reworking the idea of the kind of dharma (a Hindu religious term denoting a system of morality/ethics/righteousness) that leads to *moksha*.

Although the *Ramayana* has been retold countless times with regional variations throughout India and all over the world, it almost always focuses on the life of Rama, a human manifestation of the divine Vishnu, and his wife Sita. While certain events happen differently in different retellings, in the Valmiki version, the story goes like this: Rama is born the eldest son and heir to the throne of Ayodhya's King Dasharatha. Rama's stepmother Kaikeyi, who wishes to see her own son Bharata ascend to the throne instead of Rama, asks Dasharatha to fulfill a pending boon he had granted to her years before for saving his life, requesting that Rama be exiled to the forest. She was encouraged to make this demand by Manthara, her maidservant. Rama, the obedient son, immediately relinquishes the throne and leaves with his faithful wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana. In the forest Sita is abducted by the demon king of Lanka, Ravana, and held by other *rakshasis*, or demons, in Lanka. Rama asks for help rescuing Sita from King Sugriva, the son of Surya, the sun god, and also from Hanuman, the monkey king, who goes to Lanka to find Sita on Rama's behalf. After a great battle between Rama and Ravana in which Rama kills Ravana, Sita is rescued, beaming with happiness to be reunited with her husband. However, Rama receives her with coldness, saying that she can no longer be his wife after having dwelt with Ravana. Sita insists on her innocence in vain and finally orders her funeral pyre to be built, since she would rather die by fire than live without Rama. Rama sees her enter the flames to undergo the *agnipariksha*, or trial by fire, which is supposedly a test of her purity. Sita passes the trial, emerging unscathed in the arms of Agni, the fire deity. She is now welcomed by Rama, whose behavior she tenderly forgives, but not before the gods reveal Rama's divine nature to him by way of admonishing him for his treatment of Sita. The conquest won, Ravana defeated, and Sita restored, Rama returns to govern Ayodhya with Sita by his side. Their happiness, however, is short lived. After overhearing some idle gossip about Sita and Ravana from one of his subjects, Rama banishes the pregnant Sita to the forest. She is taken in by the sage Valmiki, also the narrator of the epic, and gives birth to Rama's twin sons Lava and Kusha in his ashram. Eventually, Lava and Kusha find themselves in Rama's court, where they begin narrating the story of the *Ramayana*—Rama's own life—to him. Rama finally recognizes his sons and calls for Sita, saying that he will take her back after she once again proves her purity in public. Sita appeals to the goddess of Earth to take her and she disappears beneath the earth, leaving Rama repenting.

In the literary readings that follow, I use P. Lal's translation of Valmiki's text and supplement it with Robert Goldman's translations in the appendix. I chose these translations of the epic because they take seriously the *kavya* tradition of which the *Ramayana* is a part.⁵ A *kavya* is a Sanskrit literary style characterized by the employment of figurative

whole, a "queering" because it simultaneously attempts to recognize as well as muddy the difference between a same-sex caress and a homosexual relationship. "Queer" intentionally disrupts fixed gender roles and makes it difficult to situate sexual identity. This is precisely what makes it a political move against heteronormativity and a disruption of essentialist identity politics.

⁵ I have chosen to carry out my close readings using P. Lal's condensed translation of Valmiki's text, along with the more widely known six-volume scholarly translation of Valmiki's entire epic produced by Robert Goldman and others, because, in addition to being just as accurate and true to the Sanskrit as the latter, Lal, in his own words, has "treated the epic as an oral-culture experience, and tried to use an idiom that has a spoken, immediate impact" [xxxi] when read out loud. This is particularly important for a project that tries to make the *Ramayana* available to all women including those who are illiterate. I therefore use Lal's translation as my primary text for the close readings that follow, placing the corresponding translations from Goldman in the appendix, and draw-

language, hyperbole, and a great range of sophisticated meters. This elaborate poetics is used to incite emotion and to give the reader or listener an exciting sensual involvement in the events of the epic by aestheticizing the body in erotic terms.⁶ As I will attempt to highlight in my interpretation of the *Ramayana*, erotic love, including same-sex as well as premarital and extramarital forms of love, is indeed the initiator of the main plot developments. However, I argue that rather than presenting certain kinds of love as opposed to dharma, as conservative interpretations of the epic suggest, Valmiki uses premarital, extramarital, and queer love to complicate the notion of dharma itself, thereby inviting readers to consider morality as encompassing flexible sexualized, feminist, and queer identities.

This essay's sexualized, yet dharmic reading, then, attempts to make the epic more amenable to the empowering of women's own experience of their sexualities while destabilizing fixed gender and sexual roles. In doing so, it hopes to challenge more hegemonic readings that have negatively affected those against whom the epic has been appropriated, following a long tradition that offers subversive interpretations of the story from different groups and different locations in Indian society. As the prominent *Ramayana* scholar Paula Richman has shown, the *Ramayana* tradition is one of multiplicity that implicitly allows questioning within its boundaries [*Many Rāmāyaṇas* 3–21]. Thus, in positing hegemonic versions of the epic and turning it into a weapon against groups who do not conform to their own narrow worldview, powerful groups in Indian society actually deny the *Ramayana* part of its core nature. The most prominent example of this phenomenon, as the historian Romila Thapar has pointed out, is the right-wing Hindu nationalist movement, Hindutva, which has used its own narrow retelling of the *Ramayana* against both women and religious minorities to further its political goals.⁷ Hindutva is a movement of affiliated social and political organizations collectively called the Sangh Parivar, which includes the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (the main ideological component of the Right) [Kapur 143] and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (the exponents of the Right's religious doctrine), forming "a network of activists capable of spreading more or less informally to the point where it could penetrate the whole of society" [Jaffrelot 88]. Although this was not a movement that initially targeted state control, its objective was essentially political: a culturally homogenous nation dominated by a self-defined Hinduism. These political goals culminated with the election of the political arm of the Sangh Parivar, the BJP, to the Government of India in 1998, which it led until 2004. Along with the Indian National Congress, currently in power, the BJP remains one of the two leading parties in Indian politics, making its ideology all the more dangerous.

ing attention to the Goldman translations when they differ significantly from Lal's. The translator of volume four of the "Goldman" translation is Rosalind Lefebber, who will be identified in passages from that volume. Unless otherwise indicated, all page numbers identifying passages of the Ramayana refer to the Lal translation. I thank Lawrence McCrea, Sanskritist at Cornell University, for comparing passages from Valmiki's Sanskrit to the Lal translation, helping me to confirm its accuracy, and thereby enabling my use of the Lal text.

⁶ *Attuned to these literary features, Lal points out the importance of sensual love in the epic. In his introduction he asks, "What is Valmiki trying to get across to his listeners and readers?" After considering the various messages of the story he recounts a conversation between Mahatma Gandhi and C. Rajagopalachari. Lal quotes Rajagopalachari: "Dasharatha's troubles began with love. . . . The love of Rama and Sita is the theme and substance. . . . In love that is not opposed to dharma, we find a manifestation of God. . . . The Ramayana has, for its twin theme, love that is opposed to dharma also." Lal concurs that "this view seems to me to get to the heart of Valmiki's kavya" [xiv].*

⁷ *In an essay on the journey of Rama-katha (narration of the story of Rama) in South Asia, Thapar protests the simplification of the rich and open-ended semantics of the Ramayana by conservative Hindu nationalists ["Historical Perspective" 141–63].*



Near Miss 2, 2009
pencil, banknote, and banknote fragment on paper
22 x 30 1/4 inches
Courtesy Jarla Partilager

Together, the proponents of Hindutva aim to revive a mythological “golden age” of Hinduism based on cultural “purity.” In doing so, they propagate a certain reading of Indian history in which the “glorious” Hindu age of antiquity was followed by the dark ages, or *kalyuga*, due to a series of foreign invasions. In this *kalyuga*, docile, disorganized, and unarmed Hindus were conquered and subjugated by aggressive, well-armed marauders such as the Muslim Mughals and the British. The conquerors, the story goes, looted, impoverished, and ruined a prosperous Indian civilization, previously unparalleled in its artistic and scientific achievements [Sharma 4]. Hindutva’s attempts at recovering this “golden age” involve going back to an unadulterated “Hindu” cultural heritage by mobilizing epics such as the *Ramayana* to determine who constitutes a true Indian citizen and woman. To a large extent, this policy has worked; Hindu nationalists subscribing to elements of Hindutva ideology have used symbolism from the *Ramayana* to rally Hindus against Muslims, constructing Muslims as the enemy (Ravana) and as outsiders to the Indian state. In 1992, Hindutva rhetoric claimed that the Babri mosque in Ayodhya (Rama’s hometown) stood on Rama’s original birthplace, a contention that led to its destruction by Hindu fundamentalists backed by the BJP. Their wish to erect a Hindu temple there has caused recurring mob violence between Hindus and Muslims over the following decades.

More important for the concerns of this essay, however, is the fact that women and their marital duties have also been the targets of the cultural work done through the text. Sita has emerged either as Shamita Das Dasgupta’s characterization: “a pawn in the power games—honor, nation, marriage, female chastity, fidelity, heterosexuality, abduction, revenge, rejection, class, military intervention and bravery—that men play” [qtd. in Murphy and Sippy 22] or as a figure of agency. In the latter interpretation evident in Kishwar’s exploration of the Sita ideal in the consciousness of contemporary Indian women, Sita is a figure of strength and forbearance; she undergoes Rama’s abuses and then ultimately refuses to be tested by him, asking Mother Earth to swallow her and attest to her purity of conscience, all without even once forsaking her devotion to him [Kishwar 240]. She thus emerges as an emblem of sexual and cultural purity for women and, although agential, represents the fixing of legitimate sexuality to the heterosexual conjugal relationship. My interpretation differs from these readings, contending that far from being a story that pins Sita to the singular figure of a mistreated but still devoted wife, the text questions the status of marriage as a self-evident and timeless institution, continually displacing judgment as to which kinds of sexual relationships are dharmic, or moral. Ultimately the epic can be read as providing an ideological framework within which valuable ways of being human can take shape outside the dogmatic frameworks of heterosexual marriage. The married, unmarried, heterosexual, or queer may all be embraced by the gods in the *Ramayana*. To better understand the *Ramayana*’s potential to lend itself to such a reading, it helps to grasp how the more conservative interpretations have arisen. I therefore trace the genealogy of these interpretations, illuminating the nationalist background that has produced them and against which my reading reacts.

Current Hindu nationalist discourses about womanhood and conjugality, such as those of Hindutva, owe a lot to the nineteenth-century context in which they were first formulated. In reaction to British ideology, which used the supposedly wretched condition of India’s women to affirm the need for colonialism to emancipate them [Mill 309–10], Indian activists such as Rammohan Roy placed women at the center of their own ideological struggle for independence. As the historian Partha Chatterjee has argued, nationalists were divided between those who regarded the Indian woman as a repository of Hindu “tradition,” untouched by empire and a pure symbol of the domestic sphere, and those who insisted that the anti-colonial struggle required the addressing of the woman’s question through social reform to modernize Indian society. What was common to both groups, however, was the setting up of binaries within nationalist discourse that defined the inner/outer and spiritual/material worlds as respectively feminine/masculine. Indian

women were therefore represented as the soul of the inner, spiritual, and Hindu world of the home [Chatterjee 233–53]. At the heart of this burden of representing an authentic national identity lay the figure of the perfect wife. Often identified as a Sita figure, she was to be educated in Western-style conjugality while simultaneously being a *pativrata*, a woman who embraced devotion to her husband as the ultimate dharma. A domesticated, heterosexual, conjugal, and, by extension, religious femininity, then, has long been at the heart of nation building in South Asia.

As Janaki Nair points out, the result was the sidelining of the popular female cultural worlds that did not fit this frame of femininity and had long been the location of a robust critique of patriarchy, as well as expressions of female desire [149]. For example, upper caste women's eroticism in song was attacked by the Bengali *bhadralok*, the upper caste middle class, who wished to minimize contact between the women in their families and such subversive sub-cultures [Banerjee, "Marginalization" 127–79]. Chatterjee thus suggests that "the new patriarchy which nationalist discourse set up as a hegemonic construct culturally distinguished itself not only from the West but also from the masses of its own people" [251]. In post-independence India this process continues as these discourses concerning sexuality and gender are revitalized repeatedly in different contexts: in Hindutva ideology against Muslims, who are seen as introducing same-sex desire and other supposedly licentious behavior into India, against Hindu women who resist roles of domesticated "pativratahood," and against those who try to escape the heterosexual matrix of relations that is legitimized as the only valid form of sexuality.

These anti-colonial nationalist discourses have been so pervasive that they have even taken over the ways in which Hindu religious epics such as the *Ramayana* are now being read. In line with nationalist patriarchy's configuration of men's role in the public sphere and in opposition to colonial discourse's idea of the weak, effeminate Bengali male, Rama is seen as the *sat-purusa*: the ideal man. Similarly pre- and post-independence nationalism's Sita is a model conjugal, *pativrata* wife, fulfilling her wifely duties while accepting her husband's privileging of his "national" duties (i.e. heeding the idle gossip of his "citizens" about Sita and banishing her). Thus, according to Pandurang Vajjnath Athavale, a noted Hindu social reformer, "It was not Rama who abandoned Sita; in reality it was the king who abandoned his queen. In the effective performance of his duty, he had to choose between a family and the nation. . . . Rama sacrificed his personal happiness for the national interests" [162]. Ironically, then, although women and their conjugal familial role lie at the symbolic heart of nationalist ideology, they also must be sacrificed in line with whatever the current "national interest" dictates. In nationalist ideology, Sita is also seen as rightly confined to the domestic sphere; after all, in some versions of the epic other than Valmiki's, Sita is abducted only after she crosses the *lakshman-rekha*, the line that marks the protected sphere of her abode, and steps out into the public sphere.

Even opponents of conservative attitudes towards domesticity and sexuality such as Deepa Mehta still inevitably accept and read the *Ramayana* according to the discourses of this nationalist Hinduism, reviling the epic as oppressive. *Fire*, Mehta's film celebrating a same-sex relationship between two sisters-in-law within a traditional Hindu home, makes the *Ramayana* the foreboding backdrop to its love-making scenes, assuming not only that same-sex desire is alien to the *Ramayana* but also, following nationalist thinking, that it was introduced by "outsiders." Thus same-sex desire is supposedly the legacy of Islamic culture in the subcontinent and so the two sisters-in-law can only find refuge in non-Hindu spaces such as a mosque. It is also attributed to Western influences; the character ironically named Sita remarks to her lover: "There is no word in our language to describe what we are or how we feel for each other." Of course, the belief that same-sex desire is not authentically Hindu is ignorant of the ways in which "authentic" Hinduism is itself a vast corpus of texts, beliefs, and practices which, as King has shown, has been vastly altered after its refraction through the lens of colonialism [96–142].

Indeed, appropriations like *Fire* and Sagar's television serial have consistently labeled various expressions of sexuality "un-Hindu," thus leaching sexuality as a whole from the *Ramayana* except within the context of heterosexual marriage. For example, while Valmiki's narrative describes Rama's exile from his kingdom as resulting from a same-sex attraction between his stepmother and her servant woman Manthara, Sagar's serial depicts the opposite of attraction, completely filtering out erotic desire from the episode. In Sagar's version, Kaikeyi sees Manthara as a "miserable wretch" and responds to her litany against Rama by criticizing her looks: "Your looks are ill favored, it's true, but you should at least speak well." A background song swells up to explain why Kaikeyi is eventually swayed by Manthara's argument: "Sometimes, when in a selfish heart someone lights such a fire of envy, dharma and justice, bounden duty, right and wrong, all is lost, all is destroyed" [Vol. 3, Ep. 13]. In this version of events, Kaikeyi's actions are undharmic because she puts her own selfish desires before her conjugal duty towards her husband and extended family. The elision of same-sex desire from the episode unambiguously consigns it to the very bottom of the hierarchy of dharma; it is so undharmic, it is unmentionable.

In contrast, the reading that follows suggests an alternative to the lens provided by discourses of heterosexual conjugality and proposes a version of the Hindu epic more in touch with the diverse needs of women who encounter it. I contend that these various sexualities can be read as the wheel upon which Valmiki's *Ramayana* turns; each important development in the plot is either preceded or intricately linked to a sexual incident or description. Furthermore, following *kavya* conventions, the description of the characters, particularly Sita, are overtly sexual. I define "sexual" by drawing on Valmiki's references to *kama*. As I expound later, these references include those instances where the female and queer body is aestheticized in erotic terms, functioning as both an object of visual pleasure for the reader who is implicated in the text's enactment of bodily desire and satisfaction, and, importantly for a feminist reading, where the body is also constructed as the subject of desire, depicting how female protagonists themselves command and experience erotic pleasure.

However, I am not simply arguing that the *Ramayana* can be read as a sexualized text. I also suggest that the *Ramayana* is a text in which the various alternative and feminist sexualities are in line with dharma. What, then, do we mean by dharma? The *Ramayana*, I argue, is very much concerned with dharma as a *purush-artha*, or "human goal," especially in relation to the other three *purush-arthas*, *kama* (sexual or sensual desire), *artha* (the pursuit of profit, material and immaterial), and *moksha* (spiritual salvation).⁸ Valmiki consistently presents Rama as a righteous individual, highlighting his dharma.

Rama
was always first to welcome visitors
always spoke sweetly
was humble about his prowess
Rama
never spoke an untruth
honoured the learned
loved his subjects
and was loved by them
Rama

⁸ The *purush-arthas*—dharma, artha, kama, and moksha—are difficult to trace to a single source; they are a recurring theme in much of classical Indian literature, particularly in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.

*honoured Brahmins
was always compassionate
wise in dharma
concerned about the needy.* [33; A1]⁹

Indeed, the entire community and even Rama's guru, Vasistha, are guided by Rama in righteousness; he tells his mother not to forsake her wifely dharma despite his father's behavior, he tells his brother Lakshman not to prioritize violence over dharma when Lakshman threatens revolt at Rama's exile, and he advises Bharata not to violate his dharma as a son when Bharata condemns his mother Kaikeyi for causing Rama's exile. Valmiki, then, makes it explicit that Rama's first and foremost concern is with righteousness, or dharma, over the other *purush-arthas*; he tells his stepmother: "Devi, I do not hanker for worldly benefits. Like the *rishis*, I seek dharma" [51]. What dharma is Rama referring to here? As Arti Dhand points out, some part of Rama's dharma is "clearly consistent with a traditional scheme of social ethics that directs one's conduct with one's kin and society," a conduct that is personal, social, and political and depends on one's caste, and familial roles [364]. However, Dhand notes that dharma is also profoundly ethical, in that it is concerned with core moral principles. It is, above all, about "never speaking an untruth, being compassionate, wise, and concerned about the needy" to refer to the language in Lal's translation. Valmiki highlights the demands of conscience by depicting Rama as acting according to his own moral compass, and as "secure in the conviction that the imperatives he is honoring must take precedence, since they are fundamental" [Pollock 64]. Thus, Rama rejects his *ksatriya*, or caste-ordained dharma, as reprehensible, and dissuades his brother from privileging it: "Nothing is higher in this world than dharma: and truth is the root of dharma. Take shelter in dharma. Be a good Kshatriya. Give up mindless violence" [52]. In so doing, he subsumes his caste-specific dharma (of the *kshatriya*, or warrior) under a larger, superior dharma [Pollock 69].

As I argue, this larger dharma coexists with the other *purush-arthas* to the extent that a dharmic life depends on being able to practice *kama* and *artha* towards the end of achieving *moksha*.¹⁰ In his introductory paean to Rama, Valmiki combines the *purush-arthas* into a coherent category by telling us that Rama was virtuous because he "knew Dharma and Artha and Kama." Later on in the epic, Rama chides Vali, one of his enemies, for not knowing all three *purush-arthas* with the words: "You are foolish. / What do you know of / Dharma, Artha and Kama / That you arrogate this right / To criticise me as you do?" [142–43]. However, Valmiki also indicates that a simplistic familiarity with each of the *purush-arthas* is not enough; a truly dharmic person will be able to balance the often conflicting demands of each of the human goals with the others. Thus when Dashratha exiles Rama at the behest of Kaikeyi, Lakshmana criticizes his father for being "Kama-atma," or entirely consumed by *kama*, to the detriment of his dharma. Indeed, Valmiki depicts Dashratha's succumbing to Kaikeyi's demand as a decision made because he is a slave to his lust for Kaikeyi. This is emphasized both by Dasharatha: "What will people think of me! What will they say!— 'There goes Dasharatha, who lusted for his wife so much that he sent his dearly beloved son into exile'" [44–45], and by the narrator: Dasharatha "was filled with sexual desire, and he noticed Kaikeyi was not in her bed. He

⁹ Parenthetical page numbers from the Lal translation will be followed by the letter "A" and a number to identify the corresponding passages from the translation by Goldman et al. in the appendix.

¹⁰ As in the Mahabharata, the Ramayana's sister epic, the relationship between the *purush-arthas* is a central concern of Valmiki's. In an important passage of the Mahabharata (12.161 of the "Santiparva"), the Pandava brothers debate which *purush-artha* is the most important. In the Mahabharata's signature fashion of leaving ethical questions unresolved and central themes open ended, the Pandavas all disagree and the discussion is inconclusive [Vyasa 587].

longed to make love to her. He called for her, but there was no answer. She had never before been absent when he wanted her” [42]. He was “pierced by the arrows of the god of love and a slave of passion” [43]. Clearly, the balancing of *kama* with *dharma* is a central theme of Valmiki’s epic.

What exactly, then, is *kama*? The “Kama Sutra,” which is devoted to *kama* as a *purush-artha*, refers to both *kama* as desire in a more general sense [Vatsyayana sutra 1.2.11] and, more specifically, as sexual desire [Vatsyayana sutra 1.2.12.] As Krishna notes, “The first [sutra] defines *kāma* as the fitting relationship between each sense and its object which, when in perfect harmony, gives pleasure to the self conjoined with the mind. The second emphasizes the pre-eminence of the sense of touch and the supervening pleasure derived from it” [113]. My “sexual” reading draws on both definitions; by “sexual,” then, I mean those instances where the body is aestheticized in erotic terms, functioning as both an object of visual pleasure for the reader who is implicated in the text’s enactment of bodily desire and satisfaction to “give pleasure to the self conjoined with the mind,” and also where the body is constructed as the subject of desire by depicting how characters themselves experience erotic pleasure through a highlighting of “the sense of touch.”¹¹

Valmiki makes it clear that the dharmic spiritual practice of *kama* can determine one’s attainment of *moksha*, the fourth *purush-artha*. As the ultimate goal of all Hindus, *moksha* is arguably the most important *purush-artha*. It is achieved through *tapasya*, or righteous spiritual practice, until the individual reaches a state of enlightenment in which he or she becomes one with the divinity of the universe outside the self, as well as able to recognize the divine within. Two Hindu philosophical traditions define the parameters of this union, that of non-duality, or *advaita*, which argues that the divine (*brahman*) resides and must be found within the self, and that of *dvaita*, which describes a god outside the self whom one must worship and achieve union with.¹² As my reading of the *Ramayana* suggests, however, this strong division between the *dvaita* and *advaita* traditions may be a recent product of colonialism;¹³ in many vernacular traditions, both strands of thought existed as extensions of each other, with the embodied *bhakti*, or unwavering devotion

¹¹ The theme of *kama* and its relationship to *dharma* recurs constantly in the *Ramayana* as well as in the *Mahabharata*; in a section of the *Mahabharata*, the “Kama Gita,” Vasudeva refers to *kama* as sexual desire and declares the stupidity of those who try to destroy *kama*, which is so much a part of *dharma* that it is *sanatana*, or eternal and *avadhya*, or indestructible. As Krishna points out, these are terms that gesture towards *dharma* by reminding us of the characteristics of, or the divine, itself [111]. The “Kama Gita” appears in the *Asvamedhikaparva* of the *Mahabharata*, slokas 11–17 in Canto 13 of the 14th parva.

¹² According to *advaita*, this concept of the god outside oneself is the unfortunate result of *maya*, which describes the limited, purely physical and mental reality in which our everyday consciousness has become entangled. *Maya* survives by preventing the individual from becoming one with or attuned to *Brahman*.

¹³ As King and Nandy have pointed out, the nineteenth-century nationalist reform of Hinduism was heavily influenced by Occidental religious discourse and devoted to representing Indian spirituality to the West as rational. This resulted in what King has called the modern construction of Hinduism, “first by locating the core of Indian religiosity in certain Sanskrit texts (the textualization of Indian religion), and second by an implicit (and sometimes explicit) tendency to define Indian religion in terms of a normative paradigm of religion based upon contemporary Western understandings of the Judaeo-Christian traditions” [101]. The result was that, in response to Enlightenment narratives of secularism and rationality, late nineteenth-century Hindu reformers such as Swami Vivekananda labeled the *dvaita* tradition as irrational and superstitious. Instead, they promoted *advaita* as a rational, scientific religiosity for an upper caste, educated Indian audience. See King 105 and Nandy 24–25. See also my article, “Radical Religious Poetry in Colonial Orissa,” which, through an analysis of the devotional poetry of subaltern ascetic, *Bhīma Bhoi*, argues that for some subaltern, vernacular religiosity, the *dvaita* and *advaita* traditions were extensions of one another.

and worship, of a divine being outside the self providing a spiritual practice leading to the discovery of the divinity within.¹⁴ I argue that Valmiki portrays Rama as the “divinity outside the self” to whom Sita owes *bhakti* in order to recognize her own divinity within and achieve *moksha*. Similarly, Rama owes *bhakti* to Sita, the divinity outside himself, to be able to recognize the divinity within him. In other words, Sita and Rama’s dharmic devotion, both sexual and non-sexual, towards each other determines their attainment of *moksha*, and subsequently their divine status; dharmic behavior within their marital relationship functions here as a metaphor for divinity. And, significantly for my reading, *moksha* is the only *purush-artha* of which Rama does not have prior knowledge. This elision suggests that Rama must earn *moksha* through righteous behavior and devotion towards Sita. Indeed, I contend that the entire epic can be read as an allegory for Rama and Sita’s journey towards *moksha*, a journey that depends on a dharmic relationship with *kama* and with each other.

Such a recognition of dharma as inextricably tied to *kama* and, ultimately, to *moksha*, reworks the notion of dharma by demonstrating how even the supposedly divine, such as Rama, have a conjugal duty to fulfill that involves overcoming human weaknesses to discover the divinity within themselves. Indeed, Valmiki’s epic concerns itself with asking what *moksha* looks like for gods and goddesses and, in the process of answering, it reveals Rama and Sita to be at once human and divine. This is a process that encourages the human readers of the epic to aspire to the dharmic level of the divine while bringing the divine down to the relatable dharmic level of humans.

In what follows, I examine the *Ramayana* through a sexualized yet dharmic lens before elaborating on how these lenses enable sections of the epic to be “feminist,” or read as empowering women’s experiences of their sexualities and conjugal roles, and “queered,” or read as providing evidence for an acceptance of diverse sexual relationships, sexual identities, and gender roles.

2

Sexing Valmiki’s Ramayana

Reading the sexual events of the epic as connected to the goal of *moksha* has implications for the way the body is used and conceptualized; the sexual union is not just symbolic but necessary spiritual practice for understanding and becoming one with Brahman, or the essential divine truth of the universe. In Valmiki’s *Ramayana* the characters do not seek to repress sexuality, but to perfect it; experiencing and enacting erotic desire through sexual union is one way that *moksha* is achieved.¹⁵ Thus sexual encounters in the *Ramayana* provide the narrative thrust; the incident that is directly responsible for inspiring the *Ramayana* is the unfair slaying of a bird in the act of lovemaking and the resultant agony of the bird’s mate [Lal 3]. This incident may be allegorically read as a disruption of the dharmic path to *moksha* which is corrected through Valmiki’s description of Rama’s sexual separation from, and eventual union with, Sita.

¹⁴ This type of embodied sexual worship of the divine is also represented in the devotional poetry of Meerabai (1498–1547), a Rajput princess who spoke of Krishna, another avatar of Vishnu, as her lover, lord, and master. Her worship is one of complete surrender, colored with sexual metaphors describing a path to *moksha*. Her longing for a sexual union with Krishna that functions as a metaphor for spiritual union is predominant in her poetry, with sighs of longing to be “colored with the color of dusk” (the symbolic color of Krishna).

¹⁵ This is very different from current upper-caste sexual codes that emphasize meditation, moral restraint, and brahmacharya, meaning celibacy, as the dharmic way to *moksha*.

Valmiki therefore depicts Sita as accompanying Rama during his banishment to the forest because of the dharmic sexuality they owe each other. In just one of the many passages where Valmiki characterizes her as instructing Rama on his dharma, Sita insists that it is his righteous conjugal duty to take her with him. Valmiki describes this mutual marital dharma through a visual focus on the sensuality of Sita's body.

*Come with me to the forest, lovely wife
With thighs as shapely as an elephant's trunk.
I will abide by dharma
And you will abide with me. [57; A2]*

For Rama and Sita to do their dharma, Sita needs to "abide" with Rama, suggested by Rama's *kavya*-esque description of Sita's thighs "as shapely as an elephant's trunk," or, in Goldman's translation, as "smooth-limbed" and "fair-hipped." (See appendix.) The erotic and loving caress of Sita's "shapely" thighs, then, becomes necessary for Rama to be able to fulfill his dharma and achieve *moksha*. Similarly, when Sita is kidnapped, Rama's impetus to rescue her by asking for Sugriva's help also comes from his urge to make love to her. This dharma, then, is explicitly about worshipping and harnessing the potency of the body's sexual energy:

*Recalling lotus-eyed Sita, Rama sadly said to Lakshmana:
"The sky is sword-bright.
The river flows gently,
A breeze whispers to the lotuses.
Caressed by moonlight,
Evening sandhya sheds her veil
In an orgasm of joy.
Night is a young girl
With a full-moon face
Wrapped in a moonlight-mantle.
The rivers are lovely ladies
With silver fish-ornaments
Undulating slowly by
After a night of love-making.
Go to Kishkindha, Lakshmana,
Tell the voluptuary Sugriva
I am offended by his behaviour,
Tell him to honour
The promise he made me,
Or be ready to face
My fatal arrows." [148-49; A3]*

Rama's words highlight the importance of sexual union here by subsuming the whole of the natural universe within its metaphoric boundaries. All nature appears as the ornamentation of a love-making scene, significant because according to Hindu mythology, the natural world, the earth, the stars, the moon, the animals and, indeed, the whole universe were caused by the sexual union of the god Shiva with the goddess Shakti. Thus the language connects the natural universe and sexual fulfillment as one: the "rivers are lovely ladies . . . after a night of love-making" (emphasis added). The sexual experience becomes a metaphor for becoming one with the divinity of the natural universe and achieving *moksha*. The "sword" brightness of the sky functions as a phallic symbol, the flowing rivers are lovely ladies' aroused wetness, and the fish are the silver ornaments

which adorn a woman and enhance her sexual beauty. Dusk gives way to night through an orgasm. This erotic sensual overload ends with “a night of love-making” after which the verse immediately shifts dramatically in tone and content with Rama taking steps to bring Sita back. There is no break between the lines and no separate verse to complement the shift in syntax, a literary device which suggests that one is the natural corollary of the other; Sita needs to be rescued because Rama misses their loving sexual relationship. Valmiki, then, repeatedly foregrounds the fulfillment of sexual desire as a necessary step towards the union of Rama and Sita that will lead to *moksha*.

3

Feminizing Valmiki's Ramayana

I suggest that such a sexualized lens, while portraying desire as the precursor to *moksha*, also enables feminist interpretations by highlighting women as key players in the enactment of their own sexualities, as sexual subjects rather than objects, and by emphasizing justice for both men and women through an exploration of the treatment of Sita by her husband. Indeed, I argue that Valmiki elaborates a specific code of sexuality, one that recognizes the importance of female sexual energy, here represented by Sita. This is one element which makes a feminist reading, or one that empowers Sita as a sexual subject, highly compelling; if Rama's dharma is to copulate with Sita, it is also to satisfy her erotic needs. Thus, even the auspicious signals that tell Sita that Rama will win his battle with Ravana and come to rescue her manifest on her body in the form of sexual arousal.

The large left eye of lovely-haired Sita with its dark pupil began to twitch, as a lotus when brushed by a flickering fish. Her symmetrical, well-fleshed left arm, which, scented with black aloe and sandal-paste, had served as a pillow for her husband, began to throb gently.

Of her thighs, which touched each other, the left one, as graceful as the tapering trunk of an elephant, palpitated involuntarily, as if Rama were standing in person in front of her.

The end-covering of the golden, now dust-covered, dress of large-eyed Sita whose teeth were as pretty as pomegranate seeds, slipped a little from her shoulders. [184–85; A4]

This passage is significant because, as mentioned, the most important features of a sexuality in line with *kama* revolve around being not only the object but the subject of sexual desire, a process which involves the experiencing of sexual sensations both to enhance pleasure and to dissolve an independent notion of the self into the divine. Sita's agentive embodiment of sexuality in this passage, then, serves literally to foreshadow her sexual union with the divine, but also human, Rama after his defeat of Ravana, a sexual union that serves as a metaphor for, and a step towards, her achievement of *moksha*. To this end, the passage visually links the sensual descriptions of the shape and scent of her arm to an intimate bedroom scene where her arm served as a pillow for her husband, or, in Goldman's translation, was “caressed” by him. Her “palpitating” or “throbbing” thighs and the revealing shift of cloth off her shoulders indicate that Sita is undergoing a sexual awakening. These are described as auspicious because they foreshadow “Rama standing in person in front of her.” The disclosure that the signs of Sita's arousal mean that Rama will win the battle also implies that, by extension, Rama will win to fulfill his dharma

of making love to Sita, uniting the male and female energies to achieve *moksha*. This is not too far-fetched a conclusion; in the following passage, false news of Rama's death is contradicted by Sita's sexual beauty. It is as if Rama cannot be dead as long as Sita's sexuality is unfulfilled and in full bloom:

*I see not one ill sign
Indicative of widowhood. . . .
My hair is black and glossy,
My eyebrows are curved,
My teeth are even,
My legs smooth and round,
My eyes are conch-shaped,
My breasts, hands, feet, thighs,
Are all symmetrical,
My breasts touch each other
And have depressed nipples,
My navel is set deep
In my shapely stomach,
Well-fleshed are my breasts
And ample thighs,
My skin-hair is soft,
My complexion pearl-bright,
I have my ten toes
And two soles touching
The ground when I walk—
Twelve auspicious signs.
And my smile is gentle.
Yet Rama is dead,
A victim of Kala! [216–17; A5]*

The *kavya*-esque passage once again highlights Sita's physical beauty and sexual blooming through images of healthy fullness and fertility, allowing the reader's gaze to voyeuristically caress her "well-fleshed," or "full" breasts and "ample thighs." However Sita is once again also the sexual subject. She owns her sexual arousal, demonstrated by the insistent repetition of "my" and "I have" in relation to her aroused body. Sita's ownership of her own sexuality is also demonstrated by her involvement in a sensual embodiment in which twelve auspicious signs of physicality tell her that Rama lives to satisfy her arousal as part of his dharma; Sita says "I see not one ill sign / Indicative of widowhood." Thus the twelve auspicious signs are all bodily and the description "my smile is gentle," or "that faint smile," in Goldman's translation, a quality you would expect as reflecting more typically dharmic values of temperance, is very obviously an afterthought: "And . . . my smile is gentle." Sita's sexual fulfillment is primary.

If we take this feminist interpretation further, then, we can read Sita's abduction, which results in her sensually aroused yet unsatisfied state, as a sexual failure for Rama. Hanuman calls Sita the woman Rama "failed to protect" [175] and the *kavya* highlights the sexual nature of this failure by portraying Hanuman as the virile force needed to redeem Rama's inadequacy. Significantly, elsewhere in the epic, Valmiki tells us that Hanuman is "Rama's equal in courage and strength!" [154]. That Hanuman is a sexual force is supported by his background as the one fated to kill Ravana by virtue of being begotten by *virya* or power, also connoting the semen of the gods. Hanuman, then, symbolizes the semen of the gods. Thus the plot of the *Ramayana* can be read as turning on "a peculiar alliance of these two types of hybrid beings, god-man and god-monkey" [Lutgendorf

219], who must combine forces in order to accomplish a cosmic design, which, I suggest, is the sexual fusion of male and female energies to achieve oneness with the divine truth. Although current interpretations of the *Ramayana* in line with nationalist ideology tend to emphasize Hanuman's asexual *brahmacharya*, or celibacy, as the source of his enormous physical and spiritual strength, if Valmiki's *Ramayana* is read as a sexual text that is also dharmic, Hanuman becomes the sexual force needed to unite Rama and Sita and make *moksha* possible.

Valmiki therefore portrays Hanuman's help in rescuing Sita in sexual terms. The city of Lanka, which he enters to rescue Sita, is figured as a beautiful lady, Devi Surasa, and described in terms of feminine corporeality.

*Hanuman was in Lanka,
The rakshasa capital,
Whose robe was the sea,
Whose ear-rings were cow-pens,
Whose breasts were the forts,
Lady bewitchingly
Beautiful and radiant
In the moonlit night. [162; A6]*

Lanka is both a city and a "bewitching" lady with earrings and breasts. The metaphor of Lanka's robe being the sea, or, in Goldman's translation, the moats, is sexually suggestive, bringing to mind a garment that undulates as the waves of the ocean, or the water within a moat, revealing and hiding her body in turn. Details of Lanka's earrings and breasts add to the picture of feminine desirability. Furthermore, Valmiki depicts Hanuman's entrance into Lanka as a solicited sexual penetration. The city of Lanka, Devi Surasa, challenges him by ordering him to "enter her mouth" by order of the god Brahma. Hanuman replies:

"I have been sent as Rama's messenger to Sita. I need your co-operation. But if you insist, then I promise to enter your mouth after I have found Sita." . . . Seeing Hanuman continue his flight, she added, "This is a boon granted by Brahma. You must enter my mouth today." Angered, Hanuman said "Open wide your mouth then! You will need an enormous aperture." She opened her jaws thirty miles wide. Hanuman increased his own size correspondingly. She made it fifty miles—and Hanuman swelled accordingly. She became sixty, Hanuman seventy. She eighty, Hanuman ninety. When she opened her mouth a hundred miles, Hanuman shrunk his body to the size of a thumb. Quickly he entered her and as quickly slipped out. Standing clear, he shouted, "Namaste, daughter of Daksha! I bow to you—and I take leave of you. Your boon is fulfilled—I have entered your mouth. Devi Surasa . . . said "Well done, good Hanuman! Go now and accomplish noble Rama's mission. Restore Sita to him." [160; A7]

If Hanuman represents the seed of the gods, he can be seen as a phallus, a force of virility, and his increasing in size would mean that he is increasing in size as a phallic symbol, therefore representing the male force uniting with the Devi or "goddess," the female force in erotic play. Valmiki highlights the sexual nature of the encounter with highly suggestive word choices such as: "Quickly he entered her and as quickly slipped out." Although Goldman's translation is not as sexually explicit, the text still calls attention to Hanuman's noticing Devi's "vital spots." The status of this playful encounter as a step towards Rama and Sita's spiritual quest for *moksha* is emphasized by the mention of the act as "a boon granted by Brahma," the god of creation and therefore the vehicle of the symbolic sexual union that produces the cosmos. Hanuman's sexual union with the Devi, herself

the granddaughter of Brahma, stands in as a temporary substitute for the eventual union of Rama and Sita, the spiritual goal of the epic, because it enables Hanuman to rescue Sita and bring her back to Rama's conjugal caress and closer to *moksha*, the recognition of the "divine" or good within themselves as well as the realization that they are human incarnations of the divine on earth.

Taking our feminist reading further, Rama's *agnipariksha*, or trial by fire, of Sita can be regarded not just as a betrayal of female sexual energy but as an undharmic disruption of the *bhakti* devotion he owes Sita. This in turn delays Rama's realization that he is an incarnation of the divine Vishnu, and, subsequently, his achievement of *moksha*. Descriptions and criticisms of Rama's un-devotional mistreatment of Sita run on, verse after verse; instead of rushing to see her after her rescue, Rama insists on putting Sita through a long series of purification rituals, stipulating that she be bathed, decked out with jewels and perfumes, and even that her hair be washed, before she is presented to him. Then, instead of responding to her presence with tenderness, Rama gives a long, vociferous speech, celebrating his own strength in defeating his enemy even though he, Rama, is a "mere mortal" [245]. He dwells on the achievements of his leading generals Hanuman, Sugriva, and Vibhishana and repeatedly refers to winning Sita back in terms of avenging Ravana's assault on his own honor. To add insult to injury he offers her to any man, including his own brother:

*But understand this well!
 This war, this struggle,
 In which friends helped,
 Was not for your sake. . . .
 I did what I did
 To wipe out the shame
 On my family name.
 And now, with rumours
 Everywhere floating
 Regarding your character,
 Your presence hurts like
 Bright light to sore eyes.
 So go where you will,
 Daughter of Janaka—
 I give you leave.
 I have no more need of you. . . .
 And do you expect
 A man of my lineage
 To accept you again?
 . . . I have no feeling for you. . . .
 Choose Lakshmana or Bharata,
 Whoever you please,
 Or Shatrughna, Sugriva,
 Or the rakshasa Vibhishana. [246–47; A8]*

These events are significant because they reinforce the feminist message that such unfair and cruel treatment of women—behavior that reduces Sita's blooming sexuality to nothing more than a man's honor and "family name," as an object to be enjoyed by other men as they see fit, or as something Rama simply owns and can give away—is neither dharmic nor consistent with achieving the *purush-artha* of *moksha*. Thus, Valmiki highlights that in forsaking his worship of Sita, who is an incarnation of the divine on earth as all humans have the potential to be, Rama has impeded his quest for *moksha*. Valmiki therefore de-

picts Rama as repeatedly referring to himself as “a mere mortal,” words that, even though Rama does not recognize it, serve in spiritual terms as a metaphor for one who has not yet achieved the enlightenment of *moksha*. Instead, Rama continues to proudly and misguidedly assert his “lineage,” the term being one used to classify mortals, not the divine.

Meanwhile, Valmiki contrasts Rama’s undharmic behavior with Sita’s unrelenting, righteous *bhakti* towards Rama. We are told that throughout her kidnapping ordeal, despite being forcefully seduced, imprisoned, terrorized, and almost eaten by Ravana’s *rakshasi* guards, she has bravely stood up to Ravana, concentrating on her love for Rama. Significantly, Valmiki uses the word *bhakti* to describe this love, emphasizing that her relationship with Rama is part of her *tapasya*, or the unwavering devotion to God that will lead her to *moksha*. Indeed, after Ravana has been defeated, Valmiki builds the pathos by detailing Sita’s tortured impatience to see Rama; no matter what Rama does, Sita is unwilling to give up her *bhakti* because she “looked upon her husband as a god” [244]. Even when Rama orders, against custom, that all his soldiers be allowed to look at her, though she has not appeared in front of strange men before, Valmiki stresses the strength of Sita’s *bhakti*: “she who revered her husband as a god” nevertheless approaches him “modestly,” “shrinking into herself from shyness,” and gazing with “delight and love” at Rama [245].

Valmiki stresses the strength of Sita’s *bhakti* to place her, not Rama, firmly at the moral center of the epic. Thus, Valmiki contrasts Rama’s pompous descriptions of himself as a “mere mortal” who has nevertheless achieved victory with Sita’s continuing divinity. Her perfume is “celestial”; when she undergoes the trial by fire, Valmiki calls her “a goddess that fell from heaven,” highlighting that Rama’s immoral actions have forced her to forego her divine status; when Rama asks her to bathe before appearing before him, Valmiki hints that Sita’s purity is the purity of the divine, beyond concepts such as “shame and honor,” and that she transcends the humiliating idea that she could be sullied in the first place. Rama’s insistence that she bathe, however, as well as exposing Sita before the eyes of other men, subjected her to the unenlightened, barbaric codes of “mere mortals.”

Rama’s “fall” means that Sita must remind Rama of his own divinity as well as hers. She who “revered her husband as a god” asks Rama a forceful question that reprimands him for acting in a way that is not consistent with their divinity: “Why do you speak to me, / O my heroic husband, / As any ordinary man / To any ordinary woman?” [247]. In another mournful rejoinder to Rama, she also asserts her own godly status: “I am called Janaki, / Daughter of Janaka, / But I was born of the earth, / I am Sita the Furrow. / Did you ever consider / My exalted birth / Before passing judgment?” [249]. In reminding Rama of her own as well as his divinity even as he proudly asserts that he is a “mere mortal,” Sita asks that Rama behave dharmically towards her. Divinity here clearly functions as a metaphor for dharmic behavior that every human can aspire to through a righteous spiritual practice that leads to *moksha*.

The culmination of Rama and Sita’s dramatic disruption of *moksha* because of Rama’s unethical behavior is brought about by Sita’s walk through the fire. As the episode demonstrates, the trial by fire makes *moksha* with the divine energies so impossible that the gods themselves have to intervene and tell Rama that his unjust actions are preventing it. Indeed, after rebuking Rama for his treatment of Sita, the goddess Agni commands Rama to take her back while testifying to Sita’s pure devotion to him. The gods then emerge to tell Rama that his undharmic refusal to offer Sita the *bhakti* he owes her has not only prevented him from identifying the divine good/truth within himself, it has actually prevented him from realizing that he is an incarnation of the divine Vishnu on earth: “The gods said to Rama, ‘Creator of the universe, lord of all, Self-Born One, how is it that you are unaware of your divinity? You are the chief of the gods!’” [252]. Goldman’s translation of this passage is even more forceful, with the gods admonishing Rama repeatedly for his treatment of Sita:

How can you, the creator of the entire universe, the most ancient one, and foremost among those possessing supreme knowledge, stand by and watch as Sītā falls into the fire, eater of oblations? How can you not realize that you are the foremost among the hosts of the gods? . . . You are the primal creator of the three worlds, the untrammelled lord. [6: 458–59]

Despite these heavenly admonitions and stern reminders of Rama’s “supreme knowledge,” he still does not learn his lesson, and by the end of the epic, his journey towards *moksha* remains incomplete. His final rejection of Sita at the end of the epic is a violation of precisely the kind of sexual justice that the *agnipariksha* episode tried to teach him. If the goal of the epic is *mokshic* union with the divine achieved through dharmic behavior, the final episode indicates that by asking Sita to undergo another trial of purity, Rama has once again become “unaware of his divinity,” the divine truth or dharma within himself. In a parallel to the events of the *agnipariksha*, therefore, and significantly the only other time in the epic that this happens, the gods have to leave their celestial abode to chide Rama for his appalling behavior and remind him, once and for all, who he is:

*Recall who you are,
Remember your nature!
Strong-armed hero,
. . . Must I remind you
That you are Vishnu?
Immaculate Sita
Has happily reached
The world of the nagas
By the strength of tapasya. [288]¹⁶*

Significantly, by the end of the epic, Sita has achieved *moksha* independently of Rama. Valmiki tells us that “the gods acclaimed her” [287] and the Earth Goddess “took Sita in her arms, welcomed her and gracefully placed her on the celestial throne” [286]. Brahma, the Lord of Creation, calls her “immaculate,” and tells Rama that Sita has reached heaven “by the strength of tapasya” [288]. Sita, then, chooses to find an alternative way to *moksha* outside the bounds of her conjugal relationship, uniting with the divine through the Earth Goddess instead. Meanwhile, at this point in the epic, it remains unclear whether Rama ever achieves *moksha*. His undharmic behavior towards Sita means that his divine/human status remains ambiguous. The *Ramayana*, then, is an allegory of the means through which humans and the divine can achieve *moksha* through ethical behavior, thereby discovering the divine truth or deity within themselves. And far from Rama being the ethical center of the epic, as Hindu nationalists would portray him, he serves as a negative foil to the divine goodness of Sita. *Moksha* is revealed as a sensual feminist journey, one that can only be achieved through sexual justice for women as well as men.

4

Queering Valmiki’s Ramayana

In reading the *Ramayana* as a text in touch with the needs of women, it is important not only to emphasize the unrecognized feminist message of the story but also to focus on

¹⁶ Goldman has not yet published the corresponding translation of Book VII of the *Ramayana*, the *Uttarakanda*.

just how inclusive the *Ramayana* can be. Although the text posits a dharmic sexuality, does it simultaneously prescribe and circumscribe what is acceptable sexuality and what is not? According to popular perceptions of the epic, the answer is yes. Mehta's *Fire* incurred such wrath from the BJP and its followers because one of the main protagonists indulging in same-sex desire was named Sita; the film was therefore regarded as perverting "their" Hindu epic. Indeed, the film was rereleased in India after a name change for the protagonist.

I argue that a "queer" interpretation that accepts other sexualities and questions fixed sexual and gender identities is given breathing room within the narrative. It is possible, I suggest, to read the *Ramayana* as accepting diverse sexualities not limited to marital, heterosexual sex and as disrupting fixed sexual identities by demonstrating how the erotic activities of Ravana's wives sometimes show them as simply participating in same-sex desire and at other times identify them with a mode of being or "identity" we would call "homosexuality." It can also be read as questioning fixed gender identities by highlighting how women are metaphorically portrayed as both the masculine fertilizing and as the feminine fertilized entities in the act of lovemaking.

I first examine how Valmiki portrays diverse sexual relationships as dharmic in their own right, not just limiting sexuality within the *Ramayana* to marital heterosexual sex. There are passages that clearly emphasize the strength of the marital bond, such as the one between Sita and Rama:

*Rama offered honey-wine
With his own hands to Sita.
And apsaras sang, and
Irresistibly handsome Rama,
Dharmatma Rama,
Captivated the hearts
Of the dancing apsaras . . .
Rama was like a god
And Sita like a goddess,
And he pleased Sita
Each day with fresh delights.
So the days passed,
Each enjoying the other,
Felicity on felicity. [259]¹⁷*

and this one which takes place within Ravana's palace:

*Some, shining with jewellery,
Bashfully blissful,
Mounted by their husbands
As male birds mount female,
Some, devoted to dharma
And conjugal proprieties,
Gracefully ensconced in the laps of their husbands. . . . [164; A9]*

However, there are also passages that can be interpreted as problematizing such a reading. For example, the reader/listener is presented with a quandary when she encounters a

¹⁷ Goldman has not yet published the corresponding translation of Book VII of the *Ramayana*, the *Uttarakanda*.

passage addressed to Hanuman that describes this noble character's birth as the blessed result of the sexual union between his married mother and another man:

*You are Rama's equal
In courage and strength!
The apsara Anjana,
Dressed in a silk
Red-bordered robe,
Was wandering once
On a lonely hill-top;
The wind-god Maruta
Saw her large breasts,
Her thighs touching each other,
Her slender waist,
And fell in love with her.
He enveloped her
In his long arms.
Faithful Anjana cried,
"Who seeks to ravish
The devoted wife
Of a single husband?"
The wind-god replied,
"Not ravish,
Lovely-hipped lady—
Love.
I have caressed you,
I am in your mind;
You will have a son
Strong and intelligent,
Energetic and noble,
As swift and agile
As me." [154; A10]*

In this passage describing Maruta's relationship with Anjana, Valmiki uses loaded word choices to clarify that this extramarital union is not an unrighteous "ravishing" but a union of body and mind that results from Maruta "falling in love" with a woman who happens to be married. Furthermore, Hanuman is described, in largely positive terms, as one who would not exist if Maruta had not fallen in love with his "blameless" mother, an extramarital union with a woman who, despite the episode, remains "the devoted wife of a single husband." Indeed, Hanuman's status as Rama's "equal in courage and strength" is syntactically tied to the love the wind god bears Anjana by the linking of both ideas without a pause within the same passage. Furthermore, the language deliberately depicts the parallels between Sita's righteous character, the moral center of the epic, and Anjana's. Both have "thighs touching each other," are the "devoted wife of a single husband," and both are pursued by men who lust for them, indeed, love them, but are not their husbands. The word "love," given prominence by occupying a line of its own, indicates that dharma seems to be a slippery concept. As Rama himself says:

*But dharma's so subtle
It's impossible to grasp;
The ultimate discriminator*

*Is one's conscience, which decides
What's good, what's bad. [143; A11]*

If premarital and extramarital love can sometimes be sanctioned by a nebulous concept of dharma, can same-sex attraction too? At first glance, the answer is no; as touched upon earlier, Valmiki depicts the queer desire between Kaikeyi and Manthara, her maid-servant, as the catalyst for one of the story's most momentous undharmic events, Rama's exile. When Manthara finds out that Rama is to be instated as king instead of Kaikeyi's son, Bharata, she provokes Kaikeyi to protest, influencing her through an overpowering and disgraceful *kama*, which Valmiki hints has the danger of sidelining the two more spiritual *purush-arthas*, dharma and *moksha*.¹⁸ Kaikeyi, "like a young girl beguiled" [41], agrees to carry out Manthara's instructions to exile Rama, and launches into praise of Manthara's physical beauty:

*You stoop like a lotus in the wind,
You are charming.
Your breasts are so large and lovely,
Your navel coyly hides under them.
You have graceful hips,
Your face is spotless as the moon.
Your smooth thighs are merry
With a girdle of tinkling bells.
Your feet are long and shapely,
Your thighs touch each other.
When you walk ahead of me, Manthara,
Dressed in silk, you shimmer!
. . . I'll order hunchback girls to massage your feet
Just as you massage mine, Manthara. [41–42; A12]*

The description of Manthara's large and lovely breasts, her lotus-like appearance, her graceful hips and her smooth thighs, evokes vivid, corporeal images linked to fertility and highlights Kaikeyi's praise for Manthara as produced by carnal desire. Given this erotic attraction, Kaikeyi's last line "I'll order hunchback girls to massage your feet / just as you massage mine" invokes a strong tactile sensuality between them.

Importantly, however, these passages make it clear that Kaikeyi's same-sex attraction to Manthara is a negative sexuality not because it is queer but because it is practiced towards unrighteous ends. Valmiki, therefore, proceeds to stigmatize Kaikeyi's attraction to Manthara. Although, in line with the *kavya* tradition, Valmiki's language is highly erotic in the way it aestheticizes Manthara's body, the syntax also signals that it is a ridiculous attraction because what Kaikeyi is attracted to is the opposite of what conventional ideals of sexual beauty would define as attractive. According to Kaikeyi, Manthara's breasts are "large and lovely" yet they are large in a hideous sense because Manthara's "navel coyly hides beneath them" signaling that they droop enough to cover it. Similarly, although Kaikeyi describes Manthara as a lotus, the language draws attention to the unusual nature of this seemingly lovely description by calling her "a lotus bending in the wind," suggest-

¹⁸ Valmiki also attributes Rama's exile to the otherworldly *purush-artha*, *artha*. Manthara complains: "When Rama becomes regent tomorrow, it is Kaushalya who will be the happy queen, because her husband trusts her. And you—you will be no better than her maid then—and so will all of us. And your son will be Rama's slave" [38]. Here, Rama's ascendance to the throne is portrayed in terms of the material wealth and status it will cost Kaikeyi.

ing that Manthara has a crooked, hunchbacked posture. Valmiki also obviously stigmatizes this particular same-sex attraction by naming Manthara herself after the daughter of an anti-god. Kaikeyi's description of her possessing more magic than Shambara, also an anti-god, further signals the undharmic nature of the attraction.

There are other depictions of same-sex lust such as that of the *rakshasis* or female demons for Sita, but these too are portrayed as immoral, overwhelmingly voracious, and destructive.

Another ferocious rakshasi, brandishing a huge spear, said, "You are young, you have the eyes of a doe, your breasts are bouncing with fear . . . I have an irresistible desire to feast on your liver and spleen, your luscious breasts, your heart, your veins, your head. Oh yes!" . . . Shurpanakha interrupted, . . . "Order wine! Let's have an orgy! Let's have a feast of human flesh and dance in the grove of the goddess Bhadrakali." [183; A13]

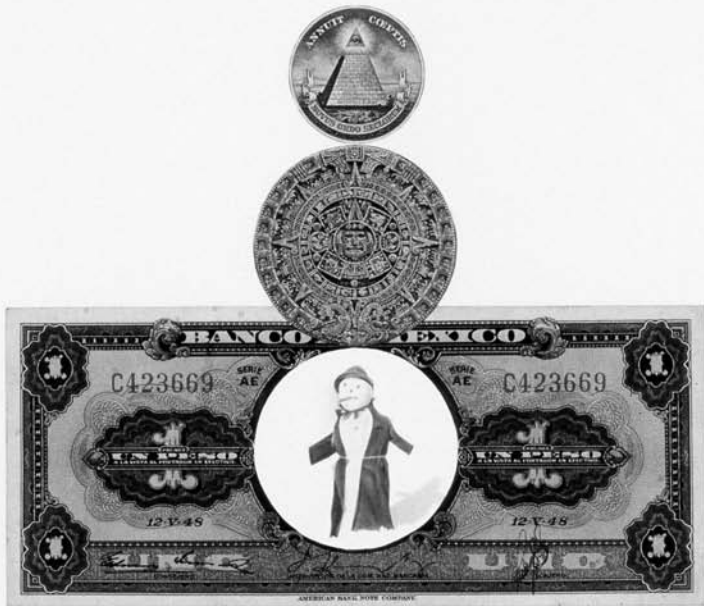
That this desire to devour Sita can be interpreted negatively as a ravishing is clear from Valmiki's disturbing description of the episode as an "orgy," a word that carries connotations of a vicious, unquenchable lust. Thus, as before, it is clear that this sexuality is deviant because it is unjust and violent, not because it involves same-sex desire.

Despite these episodes, can one find a place for a dharmic, same-sex eroticism in the *Ramayana*? I argue yes: the women Hanuman sees in Ravana's palace, for example, embody positive same-sex desire. Hanuman describes their abode thus: "Is this heaven? Am I in Indra's celestial city? Is this the supreme realm of Brahma?" [166]. Given the tantalizingly sensual descriptions, it is not difficult to see why:

*. . . [S]ome, in stupor,
Kissed the lips of co-wives
Again and again,
Thinking they were Ravana's;
And the co-wives, passionately
In love with Ravana,
Returned the kisses, imagining
They were kissing their lord. [168; A14]*

The sexual imagery in this passage is much more calm, soothing, and sensual than in the previous one. The *rakshasis* are "in stupor," kissing each other "again and again." This repetition draws the reader into the *rakshasis*' slow caressing of each other. Unlike the previous passage, this verse is replete with commas and pauses, allowing the reader to voyeuristically enjoy the enactment of love. While this passage does highlight the same-sex interaction as unreal for the way it portrays the women as simply displacing their lust for Ravana onto each other, the following passage, just one of many pages of erotic descriptions of the co-wives, seems to suggest a genuinely homosexual relationship between them:

*Anklets mislaid, tilak
Marks on foreheads erased. . . .
Some reposed on the breasts
Of their co-wives, some
On their laps, some,
In love's intoxication,
On thighs, backs, waists,
And buttocks; some relaxed*



Now Man, 2009

pencil on paper with banknote and banknote fragments

22 1/2 x 30 inches

Courtesy Jarla Partilager

*With arms interclasped—
A bevy of slender-waisted
Beauties companionably sleeping.* [167–68; A15]

This time there is no account of a displaced attraction; the wives are “companionably sleeping” “embracing each other” “in love’s intoxication.” Furthermore, their *tilaks*, or marks of marriage, have been erased from their foreheads during their night of passion, symbolically signifying that their relationship, although sexual, exists outside the bounds of heterosexual marriage. Such an explicit rejection of a fixed heterosexual mode of being can be read as queer because it makes it difficult to situate sexual identity; the wives are sometimes just partaking in same-sex desire, and sometimes acting within the parameters of a “homosexual” mode of identity that rejects heterosexual conjugality entirely.

While suggesting homoerotic relationships, the passages can also be read as suggesting sexual self-sufficiency in a move that disrupts fixed gender roles.

*Embracing each other they slept
Like a garland of flowers
Covered by dark-hair
And dark-nipple amorous bees,
Like a cluster of creepers
Caressed by a spring breeze,
Like a row of trees with
Slender-boughs locked and
Black-bee-tresses interlinked.* [168–69; A16]

In a radical destabilization of gender identities, the passage portrays the women as both the fertilized feminine/Shakti “garland of flowers” and the masculine/Shiva fertilizing “amorous bees.” And since they are androgynous, they do not need a supreme male, in this case Ravana, to carry out any reproductive or erotic function. The women, then, are making love not only to each other but also to themselves; they are complete within themselves. And this kind of union is enough to carry out a *mokshic* union with the external divinity of the natural universe; the women’s homoeroticism causes them to become one with the overwhelming fertility of nature; their physical proximity is denoted by descriptive words like “cluster,” “locked,” and “interlinked” that encompass the natural world of “slender boughs,” “creepers” and “black bees,” to which they are attached.

While readers may argue that Valmiki’s epic can only take such liberties because these are *rakshasa* (demon) women and therefore undharmic, not all *rakshasas* are represented as evil. In fact, these women are portrayed as the very epitome of virtuousness to the extent that Hanuman even mistakes one of them, Mandodari, for Sita and continues emphasizing them as “high born,” refined, and intelligent.

*Influenced by Kama,
Daughters of royal sages,
Brahmins, Daityas, Gandharvas
Had become wives of Ravana.
Some he had abducted
After defeating their relatives;
Others married him
Out of infatuation.
None was abducted
Without her consent,*

*None abducted who
Belonged to another,
Or who loved another,
None was low-born,
None unbeautiful,
None crude or unintelligent . . . [169; A17]*

They are described in vocabulary consistent with the narrative description of the righteous Sita. Just like Sita, they are “fragrant like lotuses” and have “lotus faces.” And in a description remarkably reminiscent of Rama’s longing for Sita, the language once again subsumes the whole of the natural universe within the metaphoric boundaries of their sex:

*Loosened pearl necklaces,
Gleaming like moonlight,
Were swans sleeping
In the space between their breasts;
Cat’s-eye necklaces reposed
Like dark-grey kadamba birds;
And gold pendants
Were slumbering *chakravakas* . . .
The women were rivers,
Their thighs the banks
Where swans and waterfowl
Play amorous games.
Asleep, they were streams,
Their girdle-bells ripples,
Their faces lotuses,
Their desires crocodiles,
Their femininity the banks. [167–68; A18]*

The lingering nature of such descriptions, the arousing effect they have on the reader/listener, as well as their similarities to Sita’s own valorized and worshipped sexuality, highlight the acceptable nature of such behavior. What makes the point about a dharmic “homosexuality” most strongly, however, is the comparison of this enactment of same-sex desire, and/or “homosexuality,” with the heterosexual conjugal bond through the metaphorization of the women’s pendants as slumbering *chakravakas*. Given that *chakravakas* are a species of goose famed in India for their marital fidelity, these sexualities are legitimized as just as valuable and dharmic as that of the *chakravakas*.

As Ramanujan, Rao, and Seely among others have shown, the *Ramayana* exists in hundreds of forms, with each interpretation reflecting the diverse social locations that give rise to it. Hegemonic readings such as Sagar’s nationalist televised version, however, which ironically emphasize an “authentic” version of the epic, have exercised a dangerous and unprecedented authority to fix the story’s meaning in harmful ways. I have addressed this concern by highlighting the *Ramayana*’s sexually inclusive, feminist, and queer messages through a lens which reworks the notion of what is dharmic and what is not. Reading the *Ramayana* as a text of alternative sexualities that is nevertheless dharmic produces a radical analysis which elevates Sita to the moral center of the epic, thus decentering conservative notions of women’s gender roles in society. In the process, the epic also refuses to accept heterosexual, marital sex as the only valid form of sexuality for Indian women. I present Valmiki’s *Ramayana* as an ethical narrative about good sex

and bad sex that turns on a very different moral center from that of the Hindu nationalist right; the *Ramayana* emerges as a sexually inclusive, feminist, and queer epic consistent with the dharmic pursuit of *moksha*.

APPENDIX

[1] All the world knows Rama to be a decent man, for truth and righteousness are his first concern. And he is wise in the ways of righteousness, true to his word, a man of character, and never spiteful.

He is forbearing, conciliatory, kind-spoken, grateful and self disciplined. He is gentle, firm of purpose, ever capable, and unspiteful.

He speaks kindly to all people, and yet he always tells the truth. He shows reverence for aged and deeply learned Brahmins.

And coming back from battle on chariot or elephant, Rama always stops to ask the men of the city after their welfare as if they were his kinsmen. [Goldman 2: 83]

[2] But it is righteousness, my smooth-limbed wife . . . my fair-hipped wife . . . that is the eternal way of righteousness. Follow me, my timid one, be my companion in righteousness. [Goldman 2: 141–42]

[3] Then Rāma spoke to Lakshmana, his mouth becoming dry with grief as he thought again of lotus-eyed Maithilī: . . . Passing before mountains and trees with a deep, pleasing sound, the clouds released their water and are now exhausted, prince. . . . High up, the violent water-bearing storm-winds fragrant with *kuṭaja* and *arjuna* blossoms have passed by and now are still, gentle brother. Clouds, elephants, peacocks, and waterfalls have all at once ceased their sounds, blameless Laksmana. The mountains have been washed spotless by great clouds and their glittering peaks now shine as if bathed by moonbeams. Little by little the autumn rivers reveal their sandbanks, just as young women, bashful in their first sexual encounter, reveal their loins. . . . I am tormented with grief at not seeing Sītā, so for me the four rainy months have passed as if they were a hundred years, gentle brother. . . . Go, dear boy, and tell Sugrīva the nature of my anger. [Lefebvre 4: 119, 121]

[4] That fair-tressed woman's lovely left eye—wide, white, black in the center, and fringed with curling lashes—began to tremble like a dark red lotus.

Her left arm—so lovely, shapely, full, and round—which was fit for the finest aloe and sandal pastes and which had so long been caressed by her peerless beloved, now too began to tremble.

And of her thighs, which pressed so close against each other, the lovely left one—full and resembling an elephant's trunk—began to throb, foretelling that Rāma would soon stand before her.

Then the auspicious and golden but slightly soiled garment of that bright-eyed woman—her limbs lovely and her teeth like the tips of jasmine buds—began to slip from its place. [Goldman 5: 190]

[5] Nor, though I search for them, do I find on my body those inauspicious signs whereby unfortunate women become widows. Indeed, the signs on my body are meaningless. . . .

My hair is fine, even, and dark. My eyebrows do not meet. My legs are smooth and tapering, and my teeth are closely set.

And my temples, eyes, hands, feet, ankles, and thighs are nicely developed. My nails are rounded and glossy. My fingers and toes are well proportioned.

My breasts, their nipples sunken, are full and closely set. My navel is deep with sloping sides. My chest and sides are nicely developed.

My complexion has the radiance of a jewel. My body hair is fine. Since I stand so firmly on my feet—all twelve points making contact—they said I was possessed of auspicious signs.

. . . Those who know the science of the bodily signs of girls said of me, “She has that faint smile.” [Goldman 5: 220]

[6] With its embankments and ramparts for thighs and its wide moats for new garments, with its spears and hundred-slayers for long hair and towers for earrings, the city resembled a woman. [Goldman 5: 116]

[7] Recognizing her as Simhikā . . . the clever monkey grew to enormous size, like a cloud in the rainy season. When she saw the body of the great monkey expanding, she stretched her jaws as wide apart as heaven and hell. The great and clever monkey noted her huge and hideous jaws, the full extent of her body, and her vital spots. But, once inside her open mouth, the powerful monkey instantly contracted his adamant body and flew out. [Goldman 5: 113]

[8] [L]et it be understood that it was not on your account that I undertook the effort of this war, now brought to completion through the valor of my allies.

Instead, I did all this to protect my reputation and in every way to wipe clean the insult and disgrace to my illustrious lineage.

Since, however, your virtue is now in doubt, your presence has become profoundly disagreeable to me as is a bright lamp to a man afflicted with a disease of the eye.

Go, therefore, as you please, daughter of Janaka. You have my permission. Here are the ten directions. I have no further use for you, my good woman. . . .

How could I who boast of my noble lineage possibly take you back . . . ?

I do not love you anymore. [Goldman 6: 455]

[9] Virtuous women slept next to their husbands. . . . And the wise monkey saw other women . . . seated comfortably in the laps of their lovers. They were given over to righteousness, dear to their lords, and devoted to them. They were overwhelmed with passion. [Goldman 5: 122–23]

[10] For you, Hanumān, are equal in valor and strength . . . even to Rama and Lakshmana. . . . The celebrated *apsaras* Puñjikasthālā, foremost amongst *apsarases*, was known as Añjanā, the wife of the monkey Kesarin. . . . [She] was lovely in every limb. Once, in the prime of her youth, she took human form and, wearing a costly silk garment and marvelous garlands and ornaments, she wandered about on the summit of a mountain that looked like a rain cloud. And as the large-eyed woman stood on the mountain top, Māruta, the wind god, gently pulled away her lovely yellow garment with its border of red. Then he saw her firm, rounded thighs, and her full, close-set breasts, and her fine and lovely face. When he saw this glorious woman with her large, wide hips, her slender waist, and her beautiful limbs, the wind god Pavana was infatuated with desire. With his whole body overpowered by love and his heart lost to her, Māruta embraced that blameless woman with his stout arms. But the virtuous woman became agitated and said these words, “Who wishes me to break my vow as a faithful wife?” Hearing Añjanā’s words, Māruta replied, “Woman of lovely hips, I shall not harm you. Do not be afraid, lovely one. Glorious woman, since by embracing you I have united with you through my mind, you shall bear a wise and mighty son.” [Lefebvre 4: 189–90]

[11] Righteousness is subtle, monkey, and extremely difficult to understand even for good people. The self in the heart of all beings knows good and evil. [Lefebber 4: 92]

[12] There are hunchbacks who are misshapen, crooked and hideously ugly—but not you, you are lovely, you are bent no more than a lotus in the breeze. . . . Your chest is arched, raised as high as your shoulders, and down below, your waist, with its lovely navel, seems as if it had grown thin in envy of it. . . . Your girdle belt beautifies your hips and sets them jingling. Your legs are set strong under you, while your feet are long. . . . With your wide buttocks, Manthara, and your garment of white linen, you are as resplendent as a wild goose when you go before me. [Goldman 2: 101]

[13] Then another fierce-looking *rāksasa* woman . . . said these words as she brandished a huge spear: “The moment I saw this woman that Rāvana has brought here, her eyes darting like a doe’s, and her breasts trembling with fear, I conceived a tremendous craving. I conceived a desire to eat her liver, spleen, *utpīda*, her heart with all its veins and arteries, her intestines, and her head.” Then a *rāksasa* woman named Śūrpanakhā said . . . “quickly bring wine. . . . Let us eat human flesh and dance before the goddess Nikumbhilā. [Goldman 5 :178–79]

[14] Some of Rāvana’s women kissed the faces of their rivals again and again under the false impression that their faces were his. [Goldman 5: 133]

[15] Some of them had their *tilakas* smudged. . . . One of them lay on another’s breast and yet another upon her arm. One lay on another’s lap, while yet another lay across the first one’s arms. They all lay there mutually intertwined, resting on each other’s thighs, sides, buttocks, and backs. In the grip of love and intoxication they lay there, their bodies all entangled with one another. [Goldman 5: 132, 133–34]

[16] The multitude of Rāvana’s women resembled a thicket of creepers in full bloom . . . : a thicket swarming with bees, where all the plants seemed woven together into garlands through the motion of the breeze, their clusters of blossoms pressed together, their branches entwined. [Goldman 5: 134]

[17] Not one of his wives had lowly origins; not one was deficient in beauty. Not one was unskilled, and none was lacking in good breeding. Not one was wanting in health, and there was none whom her husband did not desire. [Goldman 5: 134]

[18] The lapis lazuli necklaces that some wore looked like *kādamba* birds, while the gold chains of others resembled *cakravāka* birds. Their buttocks resembling sandbanks, the women looked like rivers crowded with *hamsas* and *kārandavas* and adorned with *cakravākas*. With their masses of tiny bells for lotus buds and their large gold ornaments for full-blown lotuses, with their amorous gestures for crocodiles and their radiant beauty for banks, the sleeping women resembled rivers. [Goldman 5: 133]

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