

Reading Womanhood Anew: Female Agency in the *Ramayana* through a Reception-Theoretical Lens

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Article Received: 19/12/2025

Article Accepted: 20/01/2026

Published Online: 21/01/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.8.01.335

Abstract

The Ramayana, India's greatest epic, is not a tale of dharma and piety alone but a cultural and social document of immense value for insights into the status of women in ancient Indian society. By portraying women characters, this epic reflects upon prevalent ideals, expectations, and limitations imposed on women. In this paper, analysis will be made of the role and representation of women in the Ramayana through major figures such as Sita, Urmila, Mandodari, Ahalya, among others, with their social standing, moral strength, emotional endurance, and life experiences viewed against the backdrop of an essentially patriarchal societal structure. While Sita represents ideal wifely devotion, sacrifice, and resilience, other characters like Urmila and Mandodari present silent endurance, moral wisdom, and emotional depth that generally go unrecognized. Ahalya's story presents the severe results of the patriarchic sentence and public ostracism meted out to her. Based on critical insights brought out in scholarly interpretations, the study also shows how the Ramayana at once idealizes womanhood as sacred and virtuous and yet places it under the strictest moral scrutiny and social regulation. It further maintains that such portrayals have continued to impact on cultural views of Indian womanhood regarding morality, gender roles, and ethics. Thus, the Ramayana remains an important text for understanding the respect and the limitations associated with womanhood in the Indian tradition.

Keywords: Ramayana, Sita, Urmila, Mandodari , Ahalya , Reception theory ,Patriarchic,

Introduction

Based on the concepts presented by reception theory, the approach taken in this study to the Ramayana is that of a living cultural text whose meaning is constantly updated through the

process of interpretation. In other words, the *Ramayana* is not merely a storehouse of traditional values from the past but a dialogue itself between the text and the readers. As Hans Robert Jauss argues, the significance of a literary work “unfolds in the horizon of expectations” of its readers (Jauss 23). Similarly, the *Ramayana*’s portrayal of women acquires new resonance when interpreted through contemporary feminist consciousness. The reception of female figures like Sita, Urmila, and Ahalya thus reflects not only the original patriarchal ethos of Valmiki’s narrative but also the changing attitudes of modern readers who seek to recover agency and voice from within these mythic archetypes. In this sense, the *Ramayana* is continually rewritten in the cultural imagination its women reinterpreted as both victims and agents, symbols of submission and resilience.

Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, one of India’s two great Sanskrit epics, continues to influence Indian values, religion, and gender roles. While the narrative ostensibly celebrates the moral journey of Lord Rama, its female characters determine the emotional and ethical core of the epic. Uma Chakravarti observes, “Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organizing principles of the Brahmanical social order and are closely interconnected” (Chakravarti 579). From Sita’s devotion to Ahalya’s redemption, the women of the *Ramayana* illuminate both the sanctification and subjugation of womanhood. As Nabaneeta Dev Sen remarks, “When women retell the *Ramayana*, they challenge the patriarchal limits imposed on female voices and reassert their agency” (165). Thus, the epic becomes not only a religious text but also a mirror reflecting the contradictions of Indian patriarchy.

Sita: The Ideal of Womanhood

Sita, the central female figure in the *Ramayana*, embodies the traditional Hindu ideal of womanhood through her unwavering purity, loyalty, and endurance. Her decision to accompany Rama into exile is not only an act of marital devotion but a conscious acceptance of dharma, the righteous path, even in the face of adversity. Throughout her journey, Sita is portrayed as the epitome of *pativrata*- a devoted wife who places her husband’s duty and honour above her own comfort or safety. Her suffering during the exile and her abduction by Ravana highlight her inner strength and spiritual resilience. Rather than being reduced to a victim, Sita remains a symbol of quiet dignity and moral authority, never relinquishing her commitment to righteousness. From the perspective of Reception theory, the meaning of Sita’s character in this passage is not fixed or universal but is shaped by how different readers, across time and culture, interpret her actions and virtues. Traditionally, early and orthodox audiences of the *Ramayana* would likely receive Sita’s purity, loyalty, and endurance as the ideal model of Hindu womanhood. Her choice to follow Rama into exile would be interpreted as the highest expression of *dharma* and *pativrata*, reinforcing patriarchal values where a woman’s identity is defined through her husband. For such readers, her suffering becomes meaningful and even glorified as spiritual strength and moral victory.

However, modern readers, especially influenced by feminist and revisionist perspectives, may receive Sita’s portrayal differently. While the passage presents her as a symbol of

dignity and resilience, contemporary audiences might question whether her endurance reflects inner strength or enforced silence within a patriarchal system. Her willingness to suffer for Rama's duty may be read not only as moral devotion but also as cultural conditioning that demands female sacrifice. Thus, what earlier readers celebrated as virtue, modern readers may interpret as emotional suppression and unequal burden.

Reception theory also highlights that Sita's refusal to abandon righteousness during her abduction by Ravana can evoke diverse emotional responses. Some readers admire her unwavering moral authority, while others may interpret her endurance as tragic restraint imposed by rigid ideals of purity. Therefore, it becomes a site of negotiation between tradition and reinterpretation, where Sita is at once a spiritual icon and a contested figure.

However, Sita's story is also a powerful commentary on the vulnerability of women under patriarchal norms. Even after her rescue from Lanka, Sita is subjected to *agnipariksha*, a trial by fire, to prove her chastity. This demand by Rama, her own husband, reveals the rigid gender expectations of the time and underscores how a woman's worth was measured in relation to her sexual purity and loyalty to her husband. The trial, while ultimately validating her virtue, also reveals a deeper tension within the cultural ideal of womanhood one that simultaneously elevates and subjugates women. Sita's acceptance of the trial, and later her self-imposed exile when questioned again, reflects the internalized pressures placed upon women to constantly prove their honour.

While Sita has long been celebrated as the ideal woman in Hindu tradition, her narrative also serves as a critique of the societal structures that limit female autonomy. Rama's insistence on public approval and his prioritization of royal duty over personal loyalty places Sita in a tragic position, where her integrity must be publicly demonstrated despite no evidence of wrongdoing. Thus, the idealization of Sita is not without contradiction: she is revered for her strength and devotion, yet the conditions of her reverence are embedded in a deeply patriarchal value system. Her life, though mythological, continues to resonate as a powerful representation of both the virtues expected from women and the costs of those expectations in a male-dominated social order.

Urmila: The Silent Symbol of Sacrifice and Womanhood

In the grand narrative of the *Ramayana*, Urmila wife of Lakshmana and younger sister of Sita emerges as a profound yet often overlooked symbol of self sacrifice and ideal womanhood. While Valmiki's original epic provides her with limited visibility, her role has gained increasing attention in contemporary interpretations for the depth of her silent suffering and her embodiment of *Strī Dharma*, the code of duty for women. *Ramayana* story is "largely overlooked despite her sacrifices and devotion comparable to Sita's," (Nandhita 177). When Lakshmana accompanies Rama and Sita into exile, Urmila is left behind in Ayodhya, not due to lack of love or loyalty, but because her remaining behind serves a higher dharmic purpose. Unlike Sita, who actively participates in Rama's exile, Urmila's sacrifice

is internal and emotional enduring 14 years of solitude without complaint, while supporting the kingdom's emotional balance in Sita's absence. "But never had Sita seen Urmila resentful about all the favors showered upon her, when she was deprived of them." (Sita's Sister 13) Urmila's separation from Lakshmana is often framed in later retellings as an act of supreme devotion. She consciously gives up her right to companionship so that Lakshmana may serve Rama without emotional distraction. According to some retellings, such as Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* and various folk versions, Urmila even enters a yogic sleep during the entire period of exile, transferring her wakefulness to Lakshmana, allowing him to remain vigilant throughout the 14 years. This fantastical yet symbolic narrative further reinforces her character as a metaphysical support system, both for her husband and the larger cause of dharma. Her sacrifice is therefore not passive but spiritual and strategic, making her a hidden pillar of the Ramayana's moral architecture. While she does not accompany Lakshmana physically, her presence looms over his journey, offering emotional and moral sustenance from afar. Urmila's significance in the *Ramayana* is not inherent or fixed in Valmiki's original text but is produced through the ways in which different audiences and historical periods have received, interpreted, and reshaped her character. In early classical reception, Urmila remains a marginal figure with minimal narrative presence. Traditional audiences, largely conditioned by epic heroism centered on male duty and public action, received her silence and invisibility as natural and unproblematic. Her emotional suffering was absorbed into the broader epic framework that privileges visible sacrifice such as Rama's exile and Sita's endurance over unseen emotional labour.

However, modern and contemporary receptions, shaped by feminist, subaltern, and psychological readings, radically transform Urmila's meaning. In the given passage, readers are encouraged to reinterpret her silence not as insignificance but as profound internal sacrifice, aligning her with *Strī Dharma* while simultaneously exposing the emotional cost of such ideals. Reception Theory explains this shift as a result of changing horizons of expectation. Contemporary readers now seek to recover suppressed female voices and invisible suffering within canonical texts. Thus, what was once narrative absence now becomes narrative depth.

Moreover, Urmila's domestic role in Ayodhya reflects her commitment not only to her husband but also to the welfare of the royal household. In Sita's absence, "Urmila takes over key responsibilities in the palace, supporting her co-sisters Mandavi and Shrutakirti and upholding the honour and functionality of the royal family" (Thapar 82). Her silence is not a symbol of submission but of immense emotional strength and restraint. In many ways, her emotional labour and unspoken suffering reflect the unsung heroism of countless women throughout history whose contributions remain invisible in male-dominated narratives. As Nandhitha insightfully argues, "Valmiki has left Urmila on purpose for the coming writers to work upon her, because her story itself possesses the resourcefulness and richness to produce another epic, the 'Urmilayana'" (47). Thus, Urmila represents a parallel epic of

womanhood defined by strength in silence, sacrifice in separation, and duty without recognition.

Mandodari and Tara: Women of Wisdom and Strength

“Women are regarded as upholding the traditions by conforming to them; men on the other hand uphold traditions by enforcing them not upon themselves but upon women” (Chakravarti 75). While the *Ramayana* is often centered on Sita as the ideal of womanhood, other female characters such as Mandodari and Tara provide alternative yet equally powerful models of feminine wisdom, political insight, and moral strength. Mandodari, the queen of Lanka and wife of Ravana, is portrayed as a woman of foresight and ethical clarity. Throughout the epic, she pleads with her husband to abandon his obsession with Sita and return her to Rama, warning him of the inevitable destruction that his arrogance and desire would bring upon their kingdom. Her persistent yet respectful counsel reflects a woman who, although bound by loyalty to her husband, does not hesitate to speak truth to power. Mandodari’s role shows that women in the epic were not passive observers but active participants in political discourse, even when their voices went unheeded.

Tara, the wife of Vali and later the advisor to Sugriva, embodies similar qualities of political intelligence and diplomacy. After Vali's death at the hands of Rama, Tara does not succumb to blind rage or grief; instead, she quickly understands the political implications of the event and advises Sugriva to ally with Rama for the greater good of their people. Her composure, reason, and ability to prioritize long-term stability over personal vendetta highlight her role as a stabilizing force in the Vanara kingdom. Tara’s wisdom is not merely emotional but strategic, revealing her awareness of dharma and rajadharma the duty of rulers to act in the interest of their subjects. Her influence over both Vali and Sugriva suggests that women in the epic were capable of navigating complex power dynamics with maturity and pragmatism. In early classical reception, Mandodari’s repeated warnings to Ravana were generally interpreted as the ideal conduct of a devoted wife loyal yet morally upright. Audiences admired her adherence to wifely duty (*pativrata*) even when her husband chose the path of destruction. Her moral clarity was viewed not as political agency but as an extension of domestic virtue. Thus, traditional readers received her more as a symbol of righteous womanhood within marital loyalty than as an independent political voice.

However, modern and contemporary receptions, shaped by feminist criticism and ethical re-readings, radically reinterpret Mandodari’s role. Today’s readers are more inclined to view her as a political dissenter within a tyrannical regime, a woman who “speaks truth to power.” reception Theory explains this shift through Hans Robert Jauss’s concept of the changing horizon of expectations. Modern readers expect female characters to possess agency, reason, and moral autonomy. Under this horizon, Mandodari is no longer merely a suffering wife but a tragic moral visionary whose wisdom is ignored by patriarchal authority.

Similarly, Tara's reception has undergone a significant transformation. In traditional readings, her calm response to Vali's death and her guidance to Sugriva were seen primarily as signs of female prudence and emotional control. She was admired for smoothing political transitions but not fully recognized as a strategic thinker. Her intelligence was often absorbed into Sugriva's kingship rather than seen as her own political authorship. Modern audiences interpret her advice to ally with Rama as a demonstration of *rajadharma* and *realpolitik* rather than mere emotional moderation. Through the lens of Reception Theory, her character now functions as a female statesperson, capable of steering kingdoms through crisis. What earlier readers saw as quiet counsel, modern readers receive as strategic leadership exercised from within restricted social spaces.

Together, Mandodari and Tara disrupt the narrow stereotype of ancient women being confined solely to domestic roles. They illustrate that women possessed political agency, moral insight, and the courage to challenge male authority when it conflicted with righteousness. As Chakravarti notes, such characters "reflect a layered understanding of women's roles in mythological narratives not as mere consorts, but as ethical compasses and political advisors in their own right" (135). Their inclusion in the epic narrative affirms that feminine wisdom often served as a counterbalance to the destructive impulses of male power. Mandodari and Tara, though not as prominently featured as Sita, offer crucial examples of how women contributed to the larger ethical and political frameworks within which the *Ramayana* unfolds.

Ahalya: Transgression and Redemption

Ahalya's story, deeply rooted in the *Ramayana*, stands as a timeless reflection on the themes of sin, punishment, and ultimate redemption. As the wife of the sage Gautama, Ahalya was renowned for her beauty and purity, qualities that drew the attention of Indra, the king of the gods. Disguising himself as her husband, Indra deceived Ahalya into an act of intimacy, which was perceived as a transgression of marital fidelity. Whether this act was one of conscious desire or divine deception, Ahalya's 'sin' was judged severely. Cursed by her husband, she was transformed into a stone, condemned to suffer in silence and isolation for ages until she would be freed by the divine touch of Lord Rama.

Her story reveals the rigid moral expectations placed upon women in the patriarchal structure of ancient society. Ahalya's punishment was not simply for the act itself, but for crossing the boundaries of chastity and obedience the qualities most prized in women. In contrast, Indra's deceit, though equally culpable, was met with leniency and temporary disgrace. This unequal treatment highlights a recurring pattern in patriarchal narratives, where women bear the greater burden of moral accountability. Ahalya thus becomes a symbol of how female desire and agency were constrained 'her stony silence representing the suppression of women's voices under moral and social norms' (Sharma, 52). In early traditional receptions, Ahalya was largely interpreted as a morally fallen woman whose punishment was justified by transgression of wifely fidelity. Audiences shaped by rigid

patriarchal norms accepted the curse as a natural consequence of violating chastity, while Indra's relatively mild punishment was rarely questioned. In this reception, Ahalya functioned primarily as a moral warning rather than as a psychologically complex or ethically ambivalent figure.

However, as readerly horizons of expectation shifted over time (Hans Robert Jauss), especially with the rise of feminist and ethical criticism, Ahalya's meaning was radically reconfigured. Contemporary readers increasingly focus on the issue of consent and deception, recognizing that Ahalya is not a conscious adulteress but a victim of divine manipulation. Under this modern reception, her transformation into stone is no longer viewed as righteous justice but as cruel, disproportionate punishment rooted in patriarchal double standards. The unequal treatment of Ahalya and Indra becomes the central ethical problem of the narrative.

Reception Theory also explains how the motif of redemption through Rama's touch acquires different meanings for different interpretive communities. For traditional bhakti oriented readers, Ahalya's liberation signifies the grace of divine intervention, reinforcing Rama's role as a spiritual saviour who restores moral order. For modern readers, however, this same moment may appear ambiguous and troubling, suggesting that a woman must endure centuries of silence and suffering before male divinity authorizes her return to humanity. Thus, the episode becomes a site of ideological tension between faith-based devotion and gender-based critique.

The image of Ahalya's stony silence itself is also transformed through reception. Earlier audiences received it as an apt symbol of penance and purification. Contemporary feminist readers, by contrast, interpret the stone as a metaphor for the erasure of female voice, desire, and agency under oppressive moral codes. What was once accepted as deserved punishment is now received as symbolic social death imposed upon women who transgress or are believed to transgress sexual norms.

Through the lens of Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, Ahalya's character contains 'gaps' and ambiguities especially regarding her consent that invite divergent interpretations. These textual indeterminacies allow each generation of readers to reshape her story according to its own ethical concerns.

Thus, from the perspective of Reception theory, Ahalya is not a static sinner awaiting divine mercy; rather, she emerges as a contested figure whose significance continually shifts from moral transgressor to deceived victim, from silenced woman to a powerful symbol of patriarchal injustice and conditional redemption. Her evolving reception demonstrates how the *Ramayana* functions as a dynamic cultural text, constantly rewritten by the values and ideologies of its readers.

However, Ahalya's tale is not solely one of condemnation it also embodies the potential for spiritual renewal and divine compassion. Her redemption through Rama's touch symbolizes forgiveness that transcends human judgment and moral rigidity. This act of divine grace restores her dignity, suggesting that purity and virtue are not permanently lost through error or deception. Ahalya's transformation from stone to life serves as an allegory for the awakening of consciousness and the reclaiming of selfhood. In the broader moral and philosophical sense, her narrative teaches that redemption is attainable through faith, repentance, and divine mercy, even within a social order marked by unequal moral codes.

Patriarchy and the Problem of Female Agency

The *Ramayana* presents a complex and often contradictory portrayal of women, oscillating between reverence and restriction. On one hand, women such as Sita, Ahalya, and Tara are idealized as embodiments of purity, devotion, and self-sacrifice, representing the moral and emotional strength upon which the epic's social order rests. Yet, on the other hand, these same women are subject to patriarchal authority that limits their autonomy and self-expression. As Chakravarti observes, the text constructs a dual image of womanhood: one that sanctifies the feminine as sacred and virtuous, while simultaneously denying women the freedom to exercise independent will. The *Ramayana* glorifies women as moral exemplars and upholders of dharma, but their virtue is often defined in relation to male control wives to husbands, daughters to fathers, and mothers to sons.

This paradox reflects the broader social ideology of patriarchy, where women are both venerated and subdued. Thapar highlights that the epic's vision of female virtue operates within boundaries drawn by male authority; transgression of these limits whether through desire, defiance, or assertion invites censure or punishment. The cultural positioning of women within Indian tradition thus becomes ambivalent: they are revered as goddesses and custodians of honour, yet their lived agency is curtailed by rigid expectations of chastity, loyalty, and silence. This tension between glorification and subjugation defines much of the female experience in the *Ramayana*, revealing how patriarchal ideals sustain their power by idealizing women while simultaneously denying them true independence.

Conclusion

The *Ramayana* presents a profoundly nuanced portrayal of women, achieving a delicate balance between celebration and subordination, and thus capturing the complex realities of female existence within a patriarchal framework. Through characters such as Sita, Urmila, Mandodari, Tara, and Ahalya, the epic reveals a broad spectrum of feminine virtues loyalty, endurance, compassion, and intellectual depth while simultaneously exposing the moral and social boundaries that restrict women's autonomy. Each of these women, though distinct in temperament and circumstance, embodies the ideals of Indian womanhood as defined by devotion and sacrifice, even as they silently challenge the constraints imposed upon them.

The *Ramayana*'s treatment of female characters, therefore, reflects the cultural contradictions of Indian femininity: women are revered as divine symbols of virtue yet confined within the codes of chastity, obedience, and self effacement. This dual representation underscores the persistent tension between reverence and repression, between empowerment and erasure, that continues to shape gender narratives in Indian society. The epic not only preserves traditional values but also opens interpretive spaces for questioning and reevaluating those very ideals through a modern feminist lens. The *Ramayana*'s treatment of female figures thus reflects not a single fixed meaning but a history of changing receptions, where women are at once revered as divine symbols and confined within restrictive moral frameworks. This dual representation illustrates the enduring tension between reverence and repression, empowerment and erasure tensions that modern feminist readers actively question and reinterpret. Through reader-response engagement (Wolfgang Iser), the text opens interpretive spaces in which Sita's endurance, Urmila's silent sacrifice, Mandodari's moral dissent, Tara's political wisdom, and Ahalya's punishment and redemption are all re-read as sites of gendered struggle rather than mere affirmations of tradition.

Ultimately, seen from a reception-oriented framework, this study reaffirms the *Ramayana*'s lasting relevance within Indian literary and feminist discourse not because its meanings are stable, but because they are continually reproduced by its interpretive communities. Its portrayal of women continues to invite fresh scholarly negotiation at the intersections of mythology, morality, and gender. By illuminating both the sanctity and subjugation of its female figures through changing readerly responses, the *Ramayana* emerges as a living text one that evolves with every retelling, offering ongoing insight into historical and contemporary debates on female agency, identity, and spiritual strength.

Ultimately, this study reaffirms the *Ramayana*'s enduring relevance within Indian literary and feminist discourse. Its portrayal of women continues to inspire scholarly engagement, inviting readers to explore the intersections of mythology, morality, and gender. By illuminating both the sanctity and subjugation of its female figures, the *Ramayana* remains a living text one that evolves with each retelling, offering profound insights into the historical and contemporary struggles surrounding female agency, identity, and spiritual strength.

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