

The patriarchal nature of ancient Indian society lead to very different expectations for the behavior of women than that of men. The epic tale, *The Ramayana*, echoes these notions of sex-appropriate behaviors by presenting its female characters with attributes that are in stark contrast to the characteristics of their male counterparts. The virtuous women of the story possess exaggerated feminine qualities, while the immoral women's actions more closely resemble the behavior of the men. In either case, the women are subordinate and are considered possessions rather than partners. A woman is valued mainly for her beauty and the pleasure she can provide to her husband. The intended purpose of these distinctions in *The Ramayana* was to further cement the patriarchal structure of ancient Indian society by reinforcing the ideal of strong men and weak women.

The epic of *The Ramayana* is a morality tale that serves to instruct its audience on how to behave virtuously and also to provide various insights of immoral behavior that should be avoided. Whereas a man's worth is established in his intelligence and strength, the value of a woman is found in her beauty and her ability or willingness to please her man. Without her husband to admire her beauty and enjoy her attentions, a woman's existence is essentially meaningless. The female model of virtue in the epic, Sita, repeatedly desires suicide each time she is faced with the loss of her husband, either through his apparent death or indifference to her. She asks him, "What would be the meaning of my existence? I could as well be dead. It will be living death for me without you. I am alive only when I am with you..." (56). At the end of the story when Rama dismisses Sita for probable infidelity, she is only able to prove her faithfulness by trying to jump into a fire.

In the story, the women are subordinate to all men, even the evil ones. The pious women are portrayed as child-like and naive, lacking the intelligence ^{to} make decisions or to protect

themselves. Sita is coddled and entertained, but not respected, being herself little more than an object of amusement. When Rama takes off after the golden deer so that, "Sita will have a plaything," he later rebukes himself for his foolishness, "to have so blindly obeyed his wife" (88-89). This lack of intellect also causes the good women to be too passive and immobile to offer any assistance in their own protection. Sita is too naive to avoid Ravana and even invites him into her house, and then she can do nothing to prevent her kidnapping. Ahalya's punishment illustrates this passive immobility when she is turned to shapeless granite, forced to wait until Rama passes by and kicks dust upon her. Unable to protect herself from Indra's deception, she is denied the two womanly purposes of beauty and ability to please her man. Upon her return to her former shapely beauty, she immediately resumes service to her husband.

The example of the virtuous women in the story contrasts sharply with that of the wicked women, leaving the characteristics of the immoral woman more closely resembling the masculine than the feminine. The corrupt women are more independent and forward than their dutiful counterparts. They are most notably lacking one or both of the most important purposes for a woman, beauty and willingness to please, while the noble female is endowed with exaggerated forms of these two feminine characteristics. Sita is described as so beautiful that her "radiance seemed to precede her actual arrival" (69). A woman in the epic ^{who} ~~which~~ was lacking one or both of these two features was undoubtedly an evil woman. Kooni was a hideously deformed hunchback, Kaikeyi brought her husband displeasure by asking him to honor his promise, and Soorpanaka was only able to assume the appearance of beauty through black magic. Her true appearance was repugnant.

Very good point illustrating, perhaps, that ♀ who aspire to be more like men, and ∴ require repression -

Her own normal appearance being that of a demon with wild, matted hair, flame-coloured fang-like teeth, enormous stature, and a belly swollen with the meat and blood of animals she had gorged on in her never-ending gluttony (70).

In the case of both good and evil, however, all of the women in *The Ramayana* are dependent upon men to provide them with everything. For this reason they are the possessions of their caregivers and subject to their indulgences. Conquest of one man by another entitles the victor to the loser's possessions. This includes his wife. Vali "resumed his authority as a ruler...but also forcibly acquired Sugreeva's wife and made her his own. And now Sugreeva has neither a home nor a wife" (101). Soorpanaka urges her brother, "Take her. She is yours...Go forth, snatch her, because she is yours, created for you and waiting for you" (84).

Kaikeyi proves to the audience the futility of a woman attempting to forcibly control her status and welfare. For all her entitlement to claim the fulfillment of Dasaratha's promises to herself and to her father, she is divorced. Even Soorpanaka was provided with her domain by her brother, and although she was, "free to live here as she pleased," she was not alone, being assisted by a number of male demons (70).

The sex-appropriate ideals that are prominent throughout *The Ramayana* were a reflection of the patriarchal values that structured ancient Indian society. By placing the characteristics of the virtuous woman in stark contrast with the behaviors of men and immoral women, the epic attempts to justify the superiority of men and the subordination of women. This design also imparts upon the audience that the worth of a woman is measured by her beauty and the pleasure she can provide to her husband, and that her value is found through him rather than through herself. By advocating separate expectations for the behavior of men and women, *The Ramayana* successfully served to reinforce ancient India's patriarchal structure.

Very nice paper -
Well written
w/ good insights

right