

Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role-Models in the Sanskrit Epics



Sally J. Sutherland

Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 109, No. 1 (Jan. - Mar., 1989), 63-79.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0003-0279%28198901%2F03%29109%3A1%3C63%3ASADABA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-U>

Journal of the American Oriental Society is currently published by American Oriental Society.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/aos.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

SĪTĀ AND DRAUPADĪ: AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR AND FEMALE ROLE-MODELS IN THE SANSKRIT EPICS

SALLY J. SUTHERLAND

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

A study of the literary characters of the heroines of the two great Sanskrit epics reveals two significantly different responses to social pressure and stress, and accounts for the very different reception of the heroines by modern Indian audiences.

INTRODUCTION

A RECENT SURVEY TAKEN OF one thousand young Indian men and women in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh revealed that from a list of twenty-four goddesses, literary heroines, and famous women of history, an overwhelming percentage chose for their ideal female role model Sītā, the heroine of *Rāmāyaṇa*.¹ That a fictional character would still, after more than two thousand years, exert such a fascination on the lives of men and women in the Indian sub-continent is an extraordinary occurrence and one that deserves some attention.

This idealization of Sītā is particularly interesting in light of the fact that the Indian epic tradition knows other great heroines—Draupadī, Sāvitrī, Śakuntalā—women who undergo similar or equally trying ordeals in devotion to their lords as does Sītā. And yet, it is Sītā who appears to be set apart from the others and idealized by the Indian populace.

Any degree of familiarity with India's two great epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, reveals a basic and critical distinction between Draupadī, heroine of the former, and Sītā, heroine of the latter. After her abduction by the ten-headed demon Rāvaṇa, Sītā, reunited with her lord Rāma, is subjected to cruel rejection and must prove her fidelity to him by entering the fire. Even after her successful fire-trial, she faces abuse and abandonment at the hands of her husband Rāma, who cares more for his subjects' opinions than for his wife. She maintains throughout most of her ordeal a submissive acquiescence to the

whims of her often cruel husband. Finally, rather than rejoin him, she abandons her life and is swallowed up by the Earth, her mother, an act which virtually brings the epic to a close. Draupadī, on the other hand, is often aggressive and outspoken. In one episode, discussed below, she throws her would-be assailant, Kīcika, the brother-in-law of King Virāṭa, to the ground and then proceeds violently to castigate one of her husbands, Bhīmasena, for his failure to protect her virtue.

As the survey mentioned above and the great weight of the tradition show, it is the conduct and character of Sītā, not Draupadī, that is regarded as normative in Hindu society.² The idealization of Sītā as woman and wife has, as will be demonstrated below, little basis in light of the story of Rāma and Sītā as told in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*. The character there is not the all-perfect wife whom the Indian tradition holds so close to its heart. Rather, and more poignantly, she and Draupadī are given subtle and complex roles by the epic redactors that, to a large extent, depict psychological concerns of basic familial conflict and basic attitudes of a patriarchal and male dominated society towards women.

This paper will examine and analyze some of the major episodes of both epics in which Sītā and Draupadī are featured, in an attempt to understand how both characters are carefully crafted by the epic redactors and integrally tied to the larger issues of the epics. It will also attempt to determine why Sītā has been singled out as the ideal wife and woman.

¹ P. Pratap, "The Development of Ego Ideal in Indian Children" (Ph.D. thesis, Benares: Benares Hindu University). Cited in S. Kakar, *The Inner World* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978).

² See Manisha Roy, *Bengali Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 33. It is interesting but not unexpected that the young men, too, identify with Sītā. See Goldman, "Father, Sons, and Gurus: Oedipal Conflict in the Sanskrit Epics," *JIP* 1978.

DRAUPADĪ

Draupadī, like Sītā, makes her first appearance in the epic at an assembly at which the heroes (or hero) have demonstrated their physical prowess. The contest and the wedding delineates the character of the hero more than that of the heroine. Yet in order to understand the future development of the epic and Draupadī's role in it, we need briefly to examine the scene. We are first told of Draupadī's wedding contest at *Mahābhārata* 1.153, when the Pāṇḍavas, disguised as brahmins hiding from their cousin Duryodhana, are living in a brahmin's house at Ekacakrā. One day a brahmin visits them and tells them of the pending "self-choice"³ of Drupada's daughter. Questioned by the Pāṇḍavas about the unusual birth of both Draupadī and her brother, the brahmin proceeds to tell the history of Drupada's family and that king's enmity with the sage Droṇa.⁴ Upon hearing this story and the events surrounding the birth of Draupadī and her brother from the sacrificial fire, the Pāṇḍava brothers and their mother Kuntī decide to go to the court of Drupada and to participate in his daughter's "self-choice."

The events that follow, the contest, the winning of the princess, and her polyandrous marriage to the brothers are well known⁵ and need not be further elaborated here. Despite, in this passage, the entrance of our heroine into the epic, we are left woefully ignorant of her character or personality. Instead, the focus of the passage is on the physical; we are given a

³ *MBh.* 1.153.7. However, Sītā and Draupadī both were given to heroes who won them through feats of strength. Their marriages still are traditionally termed *svayaṃvaras* though technically they are not. The *svayaṃvara*, "self-choice," most frequently in the *Dharmaśāstras* is considered a type of *gandharva* marriage or a marriage by mutual consent without parental approval or benefit of clergy. However, the *svayaṃvaras* of Sītā and Draupadī are rather marriages approved by parents and officiated over by brahmins. Such heroines as Sāvitrī who sent about in a chariot to find a suitable husband for herself and Damayantī who more or less chose her own husband (or at least he chose her) have true *svayaṃvaras*. See Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. II, part I (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1974): 523–24.

⁴ *MBh.* 1.154ff. Draupadī and her brother Dhṛṣṭadyumna were born from their father's sacrificial fire: she to "reduce the warrior class to destruction," and he to slay Droṇa, preceptor of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas.

⁵ *MBh.* 1.176–90.

stereotyped description of Draupadī at her birth from the sacrificial fire at 1.155.10.⁶

Moreover, the princess from Pāñcāla rose up from the middle of the sacrificial fire. She was beautiful and enchanting; she had a lovely body and a waist the shape of the sacrificial altar. She was dark, had eyes like lotus leaves, and dark, wavy hair. She was a goddess who had taken on a human form. Her scent, like that of a blue lotus, perfumed the air for the distance of a mile.⁷ She possessed the most beautiful figure; none was her equal on earth.⁸

At 1.176.29–30, Draupadī appears in the arena for her "self-choice," but her appearance is marked by little that is original in description. Immediately after her marriage, we learn that she is fond of her new "brahmin" husbands: she is depicted as patiently serving them and dutifully sleeping at their feet.

More important is the description of the brothers, especially their contrasting characteristics. In this episode we are made clearly aware of Yudhiṣṭhira as a conscientious and law-abiding man, of Bhīma's and Arjuna's great prowess and of their common and intense love for the princess. These factors are vital to the development of the character of Draupadī.

Our next encounter with Draupadī is also crucial. The episode is set during the famous, yet fateful, dicing match between Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana.⁹ Although the impact of the dicing episode is somewhat dissipated at its conclusion, and the Pāṇḍavas are set free, rather than remaining slaves of their cousins, the events not only set in motion the action of the remainder of the epic, but establish important information for the audience about the characters of

⁶ And yet, from the outset of the *Mahābhārata* we know more of the physical appearance of Draupadī than the majority of Indian epic heroines. We know virtually nothing about Sītā's physical appearance. See below.

⁷ Rather loosely for *krośāt pravāyati*.

⁸ *MBh.* 1.155.41–43. The birth of Draupadī can easily be compared to that of Sītā. It is clear that the two episodes are somehow related: either one is borrowed from the other, or they are multiforms. For Sītā's birth see *Rām.* 1.71–72 and below. Once again at *MBh.* 1.175.10, we are given a brief, somewhat repetitive, description of Draupadī: "He (Dhṛṣṭadyumna) has a sister, Draupadī. She has a beautiful body and a slender waist. Her scent, like that of a blue lotus, perfumed the air for the distance of a mile."

⁹ See especially *MBh.* 2.58.3–37, 43; 2.59.1; and 2.60.7–9.

the epic and their interrelationships. Most importantly for our discussion, we find Draupadī now to be a carefully and fully developed character. When introduced, she was a stereotyped figure whose qualities could be those of any heroine of the Indian literary tradition. Now in the Kaurava Sabhā we are made aware of her as an individual:

Dressed in only one garment, which had its ends (tied) low,¹⁰ and menstruating, she entered the assembly. The woman from Pāncāla went before her father-in-law (Dhṛtarāstra).¹¹

Draupadī begs not to be brought before the assembly in her condition. Angered, she looks over to her husbands who sit in front of the gathered nobles and watch her humiliation:

The loss of the kingdom, wealth, or the most valuable jewels, did not cause the pain that was caused by the infuriated glare of that tormented Kṛṣṇā.¹²

¹⁰ *adhonīvī*: the *nīvī* is more accurately the ends of a woman's garments which are properly tied in front; here the implication is that she was not in a proper state of dress to appear before anyone. Her appearance suggests that she was menstruating and the apparel she was wearing is appropriate to that condition. It is important to remember that according to the Indian tradition, a menstruating woman pollutes all with whom she comes in contact.

rajasvalā is the technical term for a menstruating woman. Kāne (*History of Dharmaśāstra*, II.2:802–6) discusses the prescriptions laid down for the behavior of and towards a woman during this time; for example, *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* II.5.1 states: "One should not address a woman who has unclean clothes (i.e., who is in her course) nor should one sit with her, one should not eat her food for she keeps emitting the colour of brāhmaṇa murder. . . ." and continues: ". . . she should not bathe during the three days, should not bathe with oil in those days, should not arrange her hair with a comb, should not apply collyrium to her eyes, should not brush her teeth, should not pare her nails, should not spin yarn, should not make ropes . . ." etc. (Both quotes have been taken from Kane, *op. cit.*, II.2: 803). See also G. Morris Carstairs, *The Twice Born: A Study of a Community of High-Caste Hindus*, 72–73, where he discusses the effect of the "periodic seclusion" of the mother on the child.

¹¹ *MBh.* 2.60.15.

¹² *MBh.* 2.60.36. *ārtayā* . . . *krṣṇ(ayā)*: of (lit. by) that tormented Kṛṣṇā; the construction is awkward and several

Yudhiṣṭhira, in his frenzied desire to win back the kingdom, has staked her as his last possession. In his anxiety, he describes her as a handsome and perfect wife, that her value might be worth his opponent's stake:

She is not too short, nor is she too large; nor is she too dark nor is her complexion red.¹³ She has eyes reddened from passion. I will stake her—whose eyes and fragrance are like autumnal lotuses. Attached to modesty, she is, in beauty, equal to Śrī, the goddess of beauty. Were a man to desire a woman, she would be like this one, on account of her kindness; she would be like this one, on account of her beautiful figure; she would be like this one, on account of her perfect character. She is the last to sleep and first to awaken. She knows everything, down to the jobs both completed and not yet done by the cowherds and shepherds. Like the jasmine flower, the *mallikā*, is she; with her perspiring face she appears similar to a lotus. She has red eyes, long hair, a waist as slender as the sacrificial altar, and a body with no excessive hair.¹⁴

This characterization is far more complete than that of the wedding ceremony but is, nevertheless, idealized, as is made clear by Draupadī's actions in the episode. Yudhiṣṭhira, of course, loses the wager. The question whether Draupadī has been legitimately won

variants are provided; all, however, appear to be emendations. Cf. *yathā trapā(kopa-)*, "humiliation and rage. . ." Here I am reading the verse a bit freely by taking the prior member of the compound to construe outside of the compound (technically called *asamarthadoṣa*).

Bhīṣma, uncle of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, well-known for his understanding of the law, refuses to answer Draupadī's question whether Yudhiṣṭhira who had already lost himself had any right to stake her. At this point in the narrative, Bhīma berates his elder brother Yudhiṣṭhira for having subjected Kṛṣṇā to such harassment and embarrassment (*MBh.* 2.61.1–6). Such scolding of an elder brother by a younger in considered by the Indian tradition to be a serious infraction of the rules of social conduct. The implications of this infraction, in reference to this particular episode, have been discussed in detail elsewhere. See Goldman, *op. cit.*, 325–92 and G. Morris Carstairs, *op. cit.*, 69–70.

¹³ *rohiṇī*: here I am reading *rohiṇī* as *rohiṇikā*, 'a woman with a red face'. Cn glosses *nātiraktā*, 'not too red'. Variant readings (T1 and K3) include *rogiṇī* (T1 -*ṇi*) '(not) sickly'.

¹⁴ *MBh.* 2.58.32–36.

is debated by the kings. Karṇa,¹⁵ insisting that she has been, orders Duḥśāsana to strip her garment from her body:

Then, king, Duḥśāsana forcibly took hold of Draupadī's garment and began to take it off. But, lord of men, just as Draupadī's garment was being pulled off, other garments, one following the other, of the same type appeared! All those kings, observing that miracle on earth, let forth a loud, terrifying sound of "hala halā." And there Bhīma—striking his hands together in a rage—swore in a loud voice in the midst of the kings, his lips trembling: "Keep in mind these words of mine, you Kṣatriyas who inhabit the earth, what I say has never before been said, and none will say it again. If I do not carry out my vow, lords of the earth, then let me not obtain the worlds of all our grandfathers—if I, in battle, do not violently split open the chest and drink the blood of this low-born sinner, this most despicable among the Bhāratas!"¹⁶

The passage is famous and serves to bring to light Bhīma's inherent uxorious, if somewhat rash nature, especially when called upon to defend Draupadī. Moreover, it serves as a background that allows Draupadī to defend herself. Completely degraded in front of all the kings, her grim situation has only been ameliorated through supernatural intervention. The intolerable nature of her position combined with the magical element in the passage creates a situation in which her anger can be considered justifiable in the audience's minds.

In heated words revealing an anything but placid and ideal woman, Draupadī addresses the kings, demanding to know how they, who are supposedly learned in the ways of proper conduct, could allow her to be so humiliated:

How is it that the wife of Pāṇḍus, the sister of Pārśata [Dhṛṣṭadyumna], the friend of Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa, could be brought before the assembly of kings? Tell me whether or not I, King Dharma's wife, born of equal station, am a slave. Then I will do as commanded, Kauravas!¹⁷

¹⁵ Karṇa is the illicit son of Kuntī by Sūrya, the Sun god. Even though he is related to the Pāṇḍavas, he is an ally of the Kurus.

¹⁶ *Mbh.* 2.61.40–46.

¹⁷ *Mbh.* 2.62.10–11. Bhīma demands that Yudhiṣṭhira himself answer the question, and the assembly becomes quiet in anticipation of his answer. Yudhiṣṭhira remains silent but

Finally Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who has observed evil omens portending the downfall of the Kauravas, gives Draupadī a boon, as she is the most distinguished of his daughters-in-law and devoted to dharma.¹⁸

The staking of Draupadī is meant to bring final and utter ruin to the Pāṇḍavas. And as she is displayed in front of the assembly, the brothers are humbled. From the outset Draupadī has realized that her husbands will take no stand in her defense. Her embarrassment at being dragged before a public assembly quickly turns into rage—a rage directed not only against her husbands but against all those gathered at the dicing match. For her presence is more than just a

the debate continues. To further taunt him and his brothers, Duryodhana exposes his left thigh to Draupadī (*MBh.* 2.63.10–12). The expression "his left thigh," *savyam ūrum* seems to be a euphemism that refers to Duryodhana's genitalia. Convention forbids explicit mention of the genitals and this is considered an acceptable substitute. The symbolism is suggestive: one sits on one's father's, brothers', etc., right thigh, but on one's husband's left. Van Buitenen (*The Mahābhārata*, vol. 2 [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975]: 817), disagrees and considers the expression to be nonsexual, but his argument is unconvincing, for why, if the left side were not associated with sexuality, would reference to it be made only in connection with females that are considered sexual partners?

Once again Bhīma swears that he will take revenge on the offender, this time Duryodhana. He pronounces an oath that he will break the thigh of Duryodhana in battle with his club (*MBh.* 2.63.14). Duryodhana finally agrees to admit that Draupadī is not a slave, if the younger Pāṇḍavas will admit that Yudhiṣṭhira is not their master. See Goldman, *op. cit.*, 325–92, for some implications of this action. Arjuna replies that Yudhiṣṭhira was their master when he staked them, must decide if he could stake Draupadī.

¹⁸ *MBh.* 2.63.27. Draupadī chooses that Yudhiṣṭhira be freed (*MBh.* 2.63.28–30). What is of particular interest here is that she chooses his freedom not for her sake, or for her husband's, but for her sons', so they may not have a father who is a slave. [See Kane, *op. cit.*, II.1: 561 for the importance placed on sons.] The old king grants Draupadī a second wish. With it she chooses the freedom of her remaining husbands, Arjuna, Bhīma, Nakula, and Sahadeva. Dhṛtarāṣṭra grants Draupadī a third wish, but she refuses, considering herself unworthy of a third one. Granted their freedom, the Pāṇḍavas with all their wealth return to their city of Indraprastha. Following this is a sequel to the dicing match (*MBh.* 2.66–70.35). Here once again Yudhiṣṭhira is challenged; this time the stake is twelve years in the forest in hiding and one in the open. Yudhiṣṭhira loses and the Pāṇḍavas are exiled for thirteen years.

final and utter humiliation of the Pāṇḍava princes. More poignantly, it proves to be a humiliation for *all* the men present. The episode is ironic, though. During the scene we are made aware that the beautiful Draupadī is possessed also of quick wit and a clever tongue. Her ability at debate is soon demonstrated, and at the conclusion of the episode, we realize that her wit has saved her husbands from impending slavery. The Western reader may feel a sense of sympathy and compassion for the luckless Yudhiṣṭhira who tries desperately to carry out the letter of the law, and take a small bit of pride in Bhīma for his emotional, though ineffective, outbursts in her defense, but our sympathy reaches out most strongly towards her, this hapless woman, who must look to her own resources to save not only herself, but her husbands, and finally her sons.¹⁹

Draupadī's resentment at having been so insulted by her husbands' relatives does not die easily. Her desire for revenge is strong, and she rarely is able to pass up an opportunity to complain to her husbands, particularly Yudhiṣṭhira, about her ill-treatment and her ill-luck at having such a lot for husbands. To some extent, one can attribute the final war to Draupadī's continual harping on the insult she received in the assembly and her husbands' failure to avenge it.

An important example of her self-pitying behavior and obsession for revenge occurs at *MBh.* 3.13.42–113. Here the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī, exiled to the forest for thirteen years, meet with Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva and his followers. Draupadī, whose indignation at her treatment has only intensified, complains bitterly to the Vṛṣṇi hero:

Madhusūdana, out of affection I will tell you, who are the lord of creatures divine and mortal, my troubles. Kṛṣṇa, why was a woman like me, wife of the Pārthas, your friend, O lord!, and sister of Dhṛṣṭadyumna, dragged into the assembly? Menstruating, tormented and trembling, with blood flowing, and wearing but one garment, I was dragged into the assembly of the Kurus. In the assembly, in the middle of the kings, those evil-minded descendants of Dhṛtarāṣṭra looked upon me, still menstruating, and laughed. While the Pāṇḍavas, Pāñcālas, and Vṛṣṇis were still alive, those Kauravas,²⁰ Madhusūdana, desired to enjoy me like a

serving wench. Kṛṣṇa, am I not according to law the daughter-in-law of both Bhīṣma and Dhṛtarāṣṭra? I was forced to become a slave. I blame only these strong Pāṇḍavas, men held to be the best in battle, who watched their lawful and illustrious wife being tormented. A curse on Bhīmasena's strength, a curse on the archer²¹ Pārtha's; both of them stood by while vile men insulted me, Janārdana.²²

She continues, at length, to despair about her ill treatment at the hands of the Kurus and to revile her husbands, who having done so much for others, had done nothing to avenge her. Finally she says:

I have no husbands, no sons, no brothers, no father, no relatives, not even you, Madhusūdana. As if free from all grief, you all stood by while vile men insulted me.²³

Kṛṣṇa takes it upon himself to assure the indignant Draupadī that the Kauravas will be punished for her ill-treatment and the *adhyāya* comes an end.

Again this passage presents Draupadī as an articulate and forceful woman. She has complained before, not infrequently bitterly, to Yudhiṣṭhira of her treatment. But here in front of a large gathering of kings, headed by Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa, she publicly reviles her husbands and kinsmen and swears at them for exposing her to such humiliating treatment. And, finally it is not her husbands, but Kṛṣṇa who swears revenge on her behalf.

In what seems to be a direct contradiction to this outspoken and aggressive behavior, Draupadī visualizes herself as the model of the complacent wife. In a revealing passage in the *Āraṇyakaparvan* (222), Satyabhāmā, wife of Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa, asks her how she keeps her husbands so devoted to her:

Draupadī, how do you behave with these respected Pāṇḍavas, young heroes similar to the world guardians? How do they remain under your influence and why do they never become angry, beautiful woman? You, of lovely countenance, always have control (influence) over all those Pāṇḍavas, who have their eyes (glances) fixed on your face; tell me this truthfully! Was it a religious vow, austerities, ablutions, *mantras*, or magical herbs, the power of secret spells, or the power of roots, or repetition of sacred words, or

¹⁹ In this context one should not overlook the similar epic character of Śakuntalā *MBh.* 1.62–69.

²⁰ The word Kaurava does not occur in the text, but the referent is obvious and has been supplied for clarification.

²¹ *dhanuṣmatām*: Here I am following the variant reading of S on verse 59 and reading the singular form *dhanuṣmataḥ*.

²² *MBh.* 3.13.53–59.

²³ *MBh.* 3.13.112–13ab.

offerings or drugs? Tell me, lady of Pāncāla, the lucky secret that brings you [matrimonial] good fortune.²⁴

Draupadī, of course, denies employment of any such devices to retain the devotion of her husbands, but rather attributes their love to her exemplary behavior. She then explains, in great detail, how she keeps her husbands satisfied. The passage expresses idealized standards for how a woman is to conduct herself in marriage. But at the same time there appears a subtle irony: for, as Draupadī praises her own abilities at pleasing her husbands, abilities which include the running of a large household, compatibility with one's co-wives and in-laws, particularly one's mother-in-law, and control of finances, she also remarks on her emotional equanimity:

I avoid excessive mirth [arrogance] or excessive vexation and anger and am always, Satyā, engaged in serving my husbands.²⁵

In part, the passage is reminiscent of that found at 2.58.32–36 where Yudhiṣṭhira proclaims the physical and emotional qualities of the wife he is ready to gamble away, which pictured Draupadī as the ideal wife and woman. Many of the same attributes are repeated here, but they finally have little, if any, resemblance to Draupadī's actual relation with her husbands or her emotional state throughout the epic story, where she is depicted not only as having suffered great insult, but faithfully following her husbands into exile and enduring the hardships of the forest. It is from these scenes, and not from her life in the palace, that we learn of the real character of Draupadī. In fact, these idealized attributes can be seen as an ironic foil against which the actual figure is depicted.²⁶

Her character is further developed by the epic poet in two other important episodes. Both involve, like the dicing match, sexual assaults on the princess. The first is found at *Āraṇyakaparvan* 248–56. Here, Draupadī, left by the Pāṇḍavas at the ashram of the sage

²⁴ *Mbh.* 3.222.4–7ab.

²⁵ *Mbh.* 3.222.28a–d.

²⁶ The passage presents other ironical statements. Draupadī praises her own attitude towards Kuntī, and yet, it seems, implies that her relationship with her mother-in-law is not the ideal one stressed, and that her exemplary behavior has called for great sacrifices on her part (222.36–39). Furthermore, she subtly chides her husbands once again for their lack of understanding of household matters and their inability to control the treasury (222.51–54).

Tṛṇabindu in the Kāmyaka forest, is espied by Jayadratha, the king of the Sindhus. He falls madly in love with the beautiful princess, and sends a messenger to discover who she is. Upon the messenger's return the lovesick king confesses:

I tell you honestly, great armed man, having seen her, all other women look like female monkeys!²⁷

The messenger informs Jayadratha that she is Draupadī, wife of the Pāṇḍavas, and advises him to leave well enough alone.²⁸ But the lovesick king refuses the good counsel and goes to the hermitage of Tṛṇabindu to meet her.²⁹ He propositions her; Draupadī, alone and insulted, is enraged at such a suggestion and in the expectation of her husbands' imminent return, reviles the king and swears revenge.³⁰ But Jayadratha does not think that the strength of the Pāṇḍavas is as great as she has suggested and

. . . grabbed her where her upper garment was. She pushed him away. His body repulsed by her, that evil man fell to the ground like a tree with its roots cut. But the princess Kṛṣṇā, though prostrating herself in front of (the priest) Dhaumya, was immediately seized again, repeatedly let forth sobs, and was dragged up into the chariot.³¹

The princess' serving woman is left behind and informs the Pāṇḍavas on their return of her abduction. The brothers set out in pursuit of Jayadratha and Draupadī. A battle ensues in which the Pāṇḍavas soundly defeat the forces of Jayadratha,³² who, seeing the devastation, releases Draupadī and flees from the scene.³³ After his flight, the Pāṇḍavas decide that there is no need to continue the battle and Yudhiṣṭhira, ever cautious, says:

Great armed hero [Arjuna], this descendant of Sindhu, even though wicked, should not be killed. . . .³⁴

²⁷ *Mbh.* 3.251.3.

²⁸ Cf. *Rām.* 3, App. I, no. 10, ll. 103–6, where Rāvaṇa is advised to leave well enough alone, and not attempt to abduct the princess Sītā.

²⁹ *Mbh.* 3.251.7.

³⁰ *Mbh.* 3.252.1–9, 13–21.

³¹ *Mbh.* 3.252.23–24. Dhaumya was the priest at Tṛṇabindu's ashram; earlier in the episode, Kṛṣṇā had called out to him for help.

³² *Mbh.* 3.255.1–31.

³³ *Mbh.* 3.255.33.

³⁴ *Mbh.* 3.255.43ab.

But hearing that Jayadratha was not to be punished,

. . . the clever and faithful Draupadī, her senses agitated, became enraged and humiliated, and she spoke to her two husbands, Bhīma and Arjuna, “If you want to do me a kindness, kill that lowest of humans, that outcast of the Saindhavas, that evil, wretched defiler of his family!”³⁵

The two brothers set out in search of Jayadratha. They find him in the forest, and Bhīma makes ready to kill him but is prevented from doing so by Arjuna. Bhīma makes the frightened Jayadratha swear that he will admit to being the Pāṇḍavas’ slave, ties him up, and returns with him to the Pāṇḍava camp. There he shows the entire court his prize. But Yudhiṣṭhira, ever mindful of dharma, insists that Jayadratha be granted his freedom.³⁶

The pattern seen in the episode of the dicing match repeats itself here. Draupadī once again must defend herself against a sexual assault as her husbands are unavailable to protect her. Again, too, we see illustrated the passive nature of Yudhiṣṭhira, always preaching moderation, set against the more violent natures of both Arjuna and Bhīma. Additionally we see Draupadī’s wish for vengeance—immediate death in this case—thwarted by the actions of Yudhiṣṭhira. However, there are several significant differences in this passage. Draupadī, although she initially resorts to her clever wit to defend herself, finally defends physically her person. Furthermore, the Pāṇḍavas, immediately upon hearing of the abduction, set out to defend her. Finally, the Pāṇḍavas do take action, although not in the form that she would like, to avenge the insult to her.

There is yet another important episode in which we see Draupadī suffer a sexual assault. This occurs during the *Virāṭaparvan* of the epic. During the last year of their exile, the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī go to the court of Virāṭa and assuming various disguises dwell there for a year. Yudhiṣṭhira poses as a brahman who is skilled in dicing, Arjuna as a eunuch who will teach singing and dancing, Bhīma as a cook, Nakula as a groom and Sahadeva as a cowherd. Yudhiṣṭhira, concerned about Draupadī, wonders:

But, our beloved wife, who is dearer to us than our own lives, must be protected like a mother and worshipped like an elder sister. What kind of work can Kṛṣṇā, the daughter of Drupada, do? She knows nothing . . . (not even) how to do the work of women. Our illustrious princess is young and delicate. How is it possible that our devoted wife, this noble lady, work? She is a beautiful young woman, who, from the time she was born, has known only these . . . garlands, perfumes, ornaments, and various costumes.³⁷

Draupadī solves the problem by saying that she will assume the guise of a hairdresser for the wife of Virāṭa and convinces her husbands that Queen Sudeṣṇā will protect her. The Pāṇḍava brothers and Draupadī then take up residence at the court of Virāṭa. While there Kīcaka, brother of Queen Sudeṣṇā, spies Draupadī and is smitten by her beauty. Kīcaka propositions her, but she quickly rejects him. Kīcaka, even more infatuated by the luckless princess, enlists the queen’s aid to help him win her. Sudeṣṇā, despite the protestations of Draupadī, sends her to Kīcaka’s chamber with some liquor. Draupadī, upset at being sent into what she correctly perceives is a compromising situation, prays to Sūrya, the sun god:

As I have never claimed another man but the Pāṇḍavas, by this truth, let me not fall under Kīcaka’s power when I arrive there.³⁸

Answering her prayer, Sūrya sends an invisible *rākṣasa* to protect her. Kīcaka attempts to seduce her, but she runs for protection to where Yudhiṣṭhira is. Kīcaka grabs her by the hair and while Yudhiṣṭhira looks on, throws her to the ground and kicks her.³⁹ The *rākṣasa*

³⁷ *MBh.* 4.3.12–15. 3.14cd (*pativratā* . . .) is marked as doubtful in the critical edition. The southern manuscripts read instead *katham vatsyati kalyāṇī virāṭanagare satī*.

The choice of professions adopted by the Pāṇḍava brothers is, obviously, not without meaning. The irony of Yudhiṣṭhira’s choice is blatant. Also, it is interesting to note that Yudhiṣṭhira claims that Draupadī is incapable of doing the “work of women.” This is certainly not the impression that we have been given of her talents in the passages discussed above at 2.58.32–36, where Yudhiṣṭhira claims that she “knows everything, down to the jobs both completed and not yet done by the cowherds and shepherds,” and at 3.222.7–28, where Draupadī tells Satyabhāmā of her own abilities at running a large household and other womanly duties.

³⁸ *MBh.* 4.14.18. Compare this with Sītā’s oath below.

³⁹ *MBh.* 4.15.7.

³⁵ *MBh.* 3.255.44–45. *bhīmam* in *pāda* b of 44 is doubtful. S reads *sādhvī* ‘faithful wife’, which is preferable here. Otherwise, the construction, *bhīmam* and *bhīmārjunau*, is awkward.

³⁶ *MBh.* 3.261.

sent by Sūrya pushes Kīcaka senseless to the floor. Bhīma becomes enraged seeing Draupadī so treated, but is prevented by Yudhiṣṭhira from taking any action.⁴⁰ Draupadī, in the midst of the assembly of kings once again laments her horrible misfortune and reviles her husbands, while still maintaining her disguise:

How do (my) strong and illustrious (husbands), like eunuchs, endure me—their dear and faithful wife—being assaulted by the son of a *sūta*? Where is the anger, virility, and courage of those who do not wish to defend a wife being assaulted by a wicked man?⁴¹

She appeals to Virāṭa, but as he did not see the encounter, he refuses to defend her and sends her back to Sudeṣṇā. But before leaving, she utters in a rage to the gathered crowd:

I am the virtuous wife of men who are all too lenient in this respect. Among those whose leader is a gambler . . . here, anyone might abuse (kick) them.⁴²

Upon her return to her chambers, Draupadī plans revenge:

“What shall I do? Where will I go? How may I achieve my goal?” Having reflected in this manner, she thought of Bhīma. “No one but Bhīma will carry out today that which is dear to my heart.”⁴³

She approaches Bhīma in the middle of the night and tells him her woes, especially of the insult suffered in front of the assembly at the hands of Kīcaka. She complains bitterly about her situation:

On account of that gambler, I am a cleaning woman for Sudeṣṇā . . . wandering around the king’s palace in the guise of a Sairandhri woman!⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *MBh.* 4.15.12: “Now, King Dharma rubbed (pressed) his big toe against (Bhīma’s) big toe that he might, king, restrain Bhīma for fear of discovery.” Compare this passage with 2.61, where Bhīma swears to avenge Draupadī’s insult, and Arjuna tries to pacify him. Note too that in the Kaurava Sabhā passage, Yudhiṣṭhira never says a word in defense of Draupadī or her other husbands.

⁴¹ *MBh.* 4.15.21–22.

⁴² *MBh.* 4.15.35.

⁴³ *MBh.* 4.16.3cd–4.

⁴⁴ *MBh.* 4.19.1.

Draupadī berates Yudhiṣṭhira at length and urges Bhīma to take action on her behalf. And finally, incited, he swears to defend her. He devises a plan: Draupadī is to arrange an assignation with the love-sick prince, but Bhīma, disguised as a woman, will meet Kīcaka in her place. The plan is carried out, and in an unusual and amusing, if somewhat grisly, confrontation, Bhīma meets and finally kills Kīcaka.⁴⁵

The *Virāṭaparvan* has much that is interesting for the study of the epic: the disguise of the heroes, the transsexual roles of both Bhīma and Arjuna, the apparent lateness of the book, and the like.⁴⁶ But, most important for the purposes of this discussion, we see yet another example of the victimization of the unhappy Draupadī. The episode repeats patterns seen in the previous episode: the sexual assault on Draupadī, an assault during which her husbands, specifically Yudhiṣṭhira, refuse to intercede on her behalf; the conflict between Yudhiṣṭhira, the restrained elder and passive brother, and Bhīma, the younger aggressive defender of Draupadī’s virtue; and Draupadī’s reviling of her husbands in front of the gathered assembly, as well as in private, to goad them into action in her defense.

We see Draupadī’s anger at her humiliation now clearly focus on Yudhiṣṭhira. The humiliation, brought to a state of crisis by the assault on her by Kīcaka, is dramatically emphasized by the fact that she must live as a mere serving wench. Her ability to serve unselfishly her husbands, so lovingly described in her conversation with Satyabhāmā,⁴⁷ has been sadly undermined by her unhappy experience in the court of Virāṭa. In castigating the men at Virāṭa’s court and in her bitter complaint to Bhīma about Yudhiṣṭhira, we again see Draupadī both unhappy and aggressive in her bitterness:

⁴⁵ *MBh.* 4.21.47–62. The sequel to this episode presents yet another sexual assault on the hapless Draupadī: Bhīma returns to the kitchen, but Kīcaka’s relatives, discovering his death, captured and bound Draupadī so that they might burn “his whore” with his body. Draupadī screams for help, Bhīma hears her piteous cries and comes to her aid. Rescuing her from Kīcaka’s relatives, he destroys them all (*MBh.* 4.21.62–67; 22).

⁴⁶ See E. W. Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India* (New York: Scribner’s, 1901), 382ff., and van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978): 18–21, who quotes Hopkins at length.

⁴⁷ *MBh.* 3.222.

How can you, Pārtha [Bhīma], slayer of enemies, think me happy, overcome by hundreds of troubles on account of Yudhiṣṭhira?⁴⁸

In short then, the dicing match, the lament to Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa, the conversation with Satyabhāmā, the abduction by Jayadratha, and the episode in Virāṭa's court, all depict Draupadī as an aggressive and dynamic character. In these episodes she is effectively contrasted with her cautious and ineffectual husband Yudhiṣṭhira and his subservient, although less passive, younger brothers Bhīmasena and Arjuna. The multivalence of her character is rendered more dramatic through the epic poet's repeated juxtaposition of her emotional outbursts against stereotyped descriptions of her as an ideal woman/queen.

The above-mentioned episodes appear to be but multiforms of one another, wherein the patriarchal concerns of the epic are played out and which, in part, use the sexual victimization of Draupadī to do so.⁴⁹ In the assembly of the Kauravas Yudhiṣṭhira's inability to act is based upon the fear of transgressing a society's dictates that have made him subordinate not only to Bhīma and Dhṛtarāṣṭra but to his cousin Duryodhana. His brothers, caught in the same dilemma, must follow their elder brother's wishes.⁵⁰ Yudhiṣṭhira is caught in a "net of dharma": as a kṣatriya he is required to gamble, and even understanding that he has no hope of winning, he must continue.⁵¹ As a man who has lost his authority over all but his brothers and his wife, he has no ability to defend Draupadī. As such, she must suffer humiliation, and is a victim of her husbands who themselves are victims of society's constraints—constraints in which the prohibition on the manifestation of affect in the presence of one's elders or superiors is more powerful than one's duty to protect one's wife.⁵² That

this is what is at issue is to a large extent demonstrated by the Jayadratha episode where Draupadī is abducted and is again a victim of circumstances beyond her control. But here the figure who perpetrates the assault—Jayadratha—is not an authority figure for Yudhiṣṭhira. The Pāṇḍavas, in particular Bhīma with the help of Arjuna, quickly and completely revenge the assault on their beloved wife.⁵³ Even Yudhiṣṭhira, although he moderates the punishment to be carried out against Jayadratha,⁵⁴ physically participates in the search for and destruction of Jayadratha's army.⁵⁵

The issue of Draupadī's victimization arises once more in the Kīcaka episode. However, the situation is somewhat more complicated. Here again, she is a victim of a sexual assault. As in the *Sabhāparvan*, Yudhiṣṭhira cannot or will not take action on her behalf. Yudhiṣṭhira himself fails to act, under the pretext of maintaining the Pāṇḍavas' disguises; once again Bhīma is the voice and, in this case, the actual instrument of revenge. The Kīcaka episode appears to be modelled after the events of the *Sabhāparvan*. Yet the outcomes of the scene in the assembly of the Kauravas and the assembly of Virāṭa are markedly different. Yudhiṣṭhira still feels the constraints of the fear set in motion by the terms of the exile and the dicing match. These constraints lead him to believe that fulfilling his promise made at the second dicing game, even in this distant court, is more important than defending Draupadī's honor. And as in the *Sabhāparvan*, it is Bhīma who must come to Draupadī's defense. But here the manifestation of rage is immediate, and Kīcaka is killed on the spot. However, Bhīma not only maintains his disguise and thus, at least technically, does not contravene any injunctions arising out of fear of transgressing an elder's wishes, but his act of revenge on Draupadī's behalf is carried out without the knowledge of Yudhiṣṭhira, circumventing the possibility of Yudhiṣṭhira's usual prohibition.

⁴⁸ *MBh.* 4.18.34.

⁴⁹ Compare Goldman, *op. cit.*, 325–92.

⁵⁰ But note that Bhīma in keeping with his character at least verbalizes his anguish at not being able to help his beloved Draupadī (2.61).

⁵¹ *MBh.* 2.52.10ff.

⁵² This restriction on husband's feelings with regard to and in the presence of elders is still a powerful force in Indian society [G. Morris Carstairs, *op. cit.*, 657–68]. The reason is that a man, so long as he remains under his father's roof, must keep up the fiction of denying that he leads an active sexual life of his own; not to do so is disrespectful. Consequently a man and his wife can never talk to each other

naturally, in his parents' presence; nor is it proper for either of them to show affection for their children in front of their elders. The restriction is seen not only within the familial structure but across class lines as well [M. Roy, *op. cit.*, 96–100]. This is particularly emphasized in the dicing episode where even though repeatedly asked to state his opinion about Draupadī's status he refuses to utter even a word (2.61; 62).

⁵³ This act of revenge is carried out by Bhīma and Arjuna. Yudhiṣṭhira remains ever the procrastinator.

⁵⁴ *MBh.* 3.255.45.

⁵⁵ *MBh.* 3.254.

A clear pattern in her relationship with her husbands emerges from these episodes: when there arises a situation where one must choose between the authority of an elder and the defense of one's wife, Draupadī is sacrificed (e.g., the Kaurava court); where this is not an issue she is defended (e.g., Jayadratha). However, never is Yudhiṣṭhira her physical defender but rather the rash and emotional Bhīma. The *Virāṭaparvan* episode serves as a sort of mediation between the other two in that it marks a situation where the injunctions are in force but obfuscated by the conditions under which the Pāṇḍavas are in residence at the Matsya court.

Furthermore, it is no accident that Bhīma, and Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa, rather than Yudhiṣṭhira or Arjuna, vow and carry out revenge for her insult in the assembly of the Kurus and elsewhere; for Bhīma alone among her husbands is continually depicted in the epic as not in control of his emotions and therefore unable to carry out completely the injunctions of a social world that requires deference to the elder. And, on the other hand, Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa does not participate as a family member in the complex struggle between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas and is free from many societal constraints because of his special role in the epic. Thus he can more suitably take action to defend Draupadī.

Now, it may be argued that Draupadī's insult in the Kaurava *sabhā* is, in part, finally avenged through the great battle at Kurukṣetra. But the purpose of the battle is not just the avenging of Draupadī. The battle more importantly turns on the political question of sovereignty as well as the "higher order" question of dharma.

The character of Draupadī plays an important part in the Pāṇḍava brothers' relationships. The tension caused among the brothers by the repeated attacks on Draupadī is enhanced by the fact that the insults are overtly sexual and thus raise questions about their masculinity. Yudhiṣṭhira represses his anxieties on this score most successfully and is traditionally perceived as an ideal son, sacrificing his wife for the sake of his elders. Bhīma, on the other hand, is the least successful at repression and once beyond the immediate influence of his elder brother does not hesitate to defend his beloved wife. Bhīma, however, is not idealized in the tradition for his devotion to dharma. Arjuna, the brother who originally won her and is therefore, perhaps, Draupadī's rightful "husband," seems to have integrated the two extremes: he is neither too overpowered by passion to disregard the

injunctions of his position, nor is he totally free from the passion arising from his devotion to her.⁵⁶

Draupadī's aggressive and outspoken manner serves to fuel the tension that is created among the brothers by this conflict of interest—duty toward one's wife versus duty toward one's elders. The theme of victimization surrounds these three central episodes, and it is their differing resolutions that demonstrate to the audience patterns of acceptable behavior. The aggressive behavior of Draupadī can be seen as a powerful defense mechanism, a means by which she can express feelings of rejection and depression that have developed out of her frustrations at the inability or unwillingness of her husbands to act in her defense.⁵⁷ That her aggressive behavior is directed especially towards Yudhiṣṭhira is significant since he, the eldest, is not only the figure of authority, but the one most concerned with maintaining the strictures of the society that demand such subservience—as witnessed by his identification in the epic as King Dharma. Virtually all the heroines of the epic tradition have at the core of their characterization one common element: they are victims of their husbands' foibles. The character of Draupadī has a special appeal, I feel, for coupled with her actual victimization is a strong realization of her victimization. She is allowed to respond to it in the only manner she knows: aggressive and outspoken attacks on her husbands. On the other hand, it is this same aggressive behavior and outspokenness of

⁵⁶ This is particularly apparent in the Jayadratha episode. Also note the Mahāprasthāna passage where we are told that Draupadī's sin has been that she favored Arjuna over her other husbands (*MBh.* 17.2.6).

⁵⁷ Frustration leading to depression and feelings of rejection are commonly experienced by young women in India, when first married. Brought up with marriage as her goal, a young woman often has fantasies about her future husband and romantic life. All too often, however, she is disappointed and frustrated by her husband, whom she rarely sees and with whom she has little meaningful contact. The wife has left her family and has to depend totally on her husband for emotional support. On the other hand, the husband has never left his home and is still nurtured by the love of his mother and sisters. He has therefore less need for the love his young wife offers him. This frustration is intensified even more by the manner in which her husband treats her in the family situation and her isolation within her husband's family. Not uncommonly a wife's main intercourse with her husband will take the form of nagging about household matters [*Roy, op. cit.*, especially pp. 97 and 126–32].

Draupadī—coupled with the inability of her husbands to protect her—that prevents her, unlike other heroines of the Sanskrit tradition,⁵⁸ from becoming idealized as “the perfect wife,” the wife who endures the most severe trials without complaint.

SĪTĀ

Now let us turn to Sītā, heroine of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Partly due to the differing nature of the two epics and partly due to the structure of the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself, Sītā’s participation in this shorter poem is far more limited than is Draupadī’s in the *Mahābhārata*. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, though Sītā is introduced somewhat late in the *Bālakāṇḍa*, we first hear of her father, Janaka, sometime before that.⁵⁹ The two princes, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, having slain the *rākṣasas* who were interfering with Viśvāmitra’s sacrifice, are informed by that great sage that they will now journey to Mithilā to witness Janaka’s sacrifice.⁶⁰ At the same time, Viśvāmitra tells them of a wonderful bow in Janaka’s possession.⁶¹ The journey is completed, and when the two princes are introduced to Janaka, they again hear of the bow’s history.⁶² It is in this retelling that we are first introduced to Sītā.⁶³ Janaka tells his guest that his daughter’s “bride-price” is “great strength.”⁶⁴ He has set the following condition for the winning of his daughter: the successful suitor must string the bow of Śiva.⁶⁵ No king has been able to do this, though many have tried.⁶⁶ The kings, angry, laid siege to Janaka’s city, Mithilā. After a year, Janaka, nearly defeated,

propitiated the gods and was sent help. The besieging kings fled in fear. After relating this story, Janaka says:

If Rāma can string this bow, sage, I will give to this descendant of Daśaratha my daughter, Sītā, who was not born from a womb.⁶⁷

Rāma easily lifts, strings, and breaks the great bow, and wins Sītā.⁶⁸ Daśaratha is sent for and a marriage is arranged. Marriages are also arranged for Rāma’s other brothers, Bharata, Lakṣmaṇa, and Śatrughna.⁶⁹

At the conclusion of the marriage ceremony, we know nothing of the physical attributes of the princess of Videha. It is only during the final *sarga* of the *Bālakāṇḍa* that Sītā is described, and then only in vague terms of physical beauty. At 1.76.17 she is said to be as lovely as a goddess, and is compared to Śrī, goddess of beauty. She is said, at 1.76.15, to possess virtue and beauty. Of her personality, we know only that she is in love with her husband, for, at 1.76.14–16, she is said to be devoted to Rāma.⁷⁰

We next encounter Sītā in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*. Rāma, having learned that he is to be exiled for fourteen years, goes to tell his wife. She, hearing of her husband’s change in fortune and his resolution that she remain in Ayodhyā, begs Rāma to be allowed to accompany him. We still are given little physical description of Sītā; she is depicted as young and tender, and, of course, lovely. We learn again that she is devoted to her husband and is desperate to share in his fortunes. In fact, she is so set on accompanying her husband into exile that she says to him:

If you do not want to take me, suffering so, to the forest with you, then I will commit suicide—by means of poison, fire, or water.⁷¹

During this same scene, Sītā continues to beg Rāma to be allowed to accompany him to the forest. She compares her devotion to that of Sāvitrī (2.27.6) and in a famous passage, tells him that the various hardships of the forest would be but joys for her, and in her joy at being with Rāma, she would forget her

⁵⁸ Note that in this way it is Śakuntalā who most closely resembles Draupadī.

⁵⁹ *Rām.* 1.30.6.

⁶⁰ *Rām.* 1.30.6, 11.

⁶¹ *Rām.* 1.30.7–10.

⁶² *Rām.* 1.65.7–27. This history is slightly modified from that given at 1.30. We are again told the bow’s history at 1.65.8–13, 1.74.1–21, and 2.110. Also see notes to the translation, pp. 345, 384–85, and 393–94 (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, vol. 1 [Introduction and translation by Robert P. Goldman; annotation by Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984]).

⁶³ *Rām.* 1.65.14. Note that although this verse is accepted by the crit. ed., the MSS evidence goes against its being a verse that properly belongs to the reconstructed *Bālakāṇḍa*.

⁶⁴ *Rām.* 1.65.15.

⁶⁵ *Rām.* 1.65.19, 27.

⁶⁶ *Rām.* 1.65.19.

⁶⁷ *Rām.* 1.65.27.

⁶⁸ *Rām.* 1.66.16–17.

⁶⁹ *Rām.* 1.70.2–22; 71.5–6.

⁷⁰ *Rām.* 1.76.14–16.

⁷¹ *Rām.* 2.26.19.

mother and father.⁷² Once again, Sītā lets Rāma know the extent of her determination:

Now, if you will not take me, determined, to the forest, then I will this very day drink poison—so I will not fall under the influence of my enemies!⁷³

After this, Sītā, overwhelmed at the idea of being abandoned by her loving husband, or at being left in the palace with no protection (or both), reviles her husband:

What could my father Vaideha, the lord of Mithilā, have had in mind when he took you for a son-in-law, Rāma, a woman with the body of a man? How the people lie in their ignorance! Rāma's "great power" is not at all like the power of the blazing sun that brings the day.⁷⁴

She breaks into sobs in Rāma's arms. Rāma finally relents, and Sītā accompanies her lord to the forest.

The passage offers the first insights into Sītā's character, primarily through her reaction to Rāma's impending departure without her. What strikes the audience is her willingness to abandon all to follow her husband to the grim and harsh forest. This determination is represented by the tradition as the first of her many great sacrifices in devotion to her lord. But what is remarkable about the passage is that it is not at all clear if this devotion is purely self-sacrificing, for Sītā has an obvious and real concern for her own welfare if abandoned by her husband.⁷⁵

Of even more interest, however, are the means by which she persuades Rāma to let her go with him. She castigates him for not realizing her devotion to him and for thinking of abandoning her to others. She expresses her fear and anger at being abandoned by Rāma by projecting guilt onto Rāma—that is to say, by threatening to kill herself if he should go without her. And, moreover, in her desperation, she becomes abusive and resorts to insolence and name-calling!

The next important scene in which Sītā participates, is at the end of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* (110) where, in a

situation similar to that of Draupadī's conversation with Satyabhāmā, she has a discourse with Anasūyā, the wife of the sage Atri.⁷⁶ Here, however, Anasūyā describes the virtues of a good and faithful wife, and in response to Anasūyā's request, Sītā describes her *svayaṃvara* and wedding. The episode is of much interest in terms of text-historical material, and scholars have used it in this connection to attempt to prove various notions of the historicity of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. However, it offers little new information regarding Sītā's appearance⁷⁷ or her personality. We do find, in Anasūyā's description, an idealized statement about proper wives, and the horrible results that come to

⁷⁶ Vālmīki's episode occurs at the closing portions of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, whereas Tulsī Dās recounts the same scene in the opening moments of the *Aranyakāṇḍa*. Vālmīki introduces us to Anasūyā, the wife of the sage Atri: she is a virtuous woman who has practiced austerities for ten thousand years, and "Once when the world was utterly ravaged by drought for ten years, it was Anasūyā who created roots and fruits and caused the Jāhnavī to flow." (*Rām.* 2.109.9–10; *op. cit.*, 317). However, Tulsī tells us in his episode virtually nothing about Anasūyā herself. Both versions have Anasūyā give Sītā advice on proper behavior with respect to one's husband. Vālmīki has Anasūyā tell Sītā how a wife should act towards her husband and the benefits thereof. "A woman who holds her husband dear—whether he is in the city or the forest, whether he is good or evil—gains worlds that bring great blessings. (23) . . . But bad women have no sure understanding of virtue and vice. Their hearts are the slaves of desire, and they lord it over their husbands." (26) However, Vālmīki has Sītā provide a response, just and proper, concerning her lord, Rāma, summed up in verse 9 of *sarga* 110: "No other ascetic act is required of a woman than obedience to her husband." On the other hand, Tulsī has Anasūyā talk exclusively about the proper behavior of a wife while Sītā sits quietly: "Though a husband be old, diseased, stupid or poor, blind, deaf, bad-tempered or in great distress, yet if his wife treats him with disrespect, she will suffer all the tortures of hell" (W. Douglas Hill, *The Holy Lakes of the Acts of Rāma* [Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1952], 298). The passages are parallel, but Tulsī is far more dogmatic and insistent upon inculcating in his audience the "norm" for a virtuous wife.

⁷⁷ In the *MBh.*, as we have seen above, there are frequent and detailed descriptions of Draupadī's physical beauty, but they are for the most part not unique and could apply to any Sanskrit heroine. It is their repetition that is unusual. Both women are renowned for their beauty. In all likelihood the concern with Draupadī's beauty has to do with the gambling scene where a detailed description of the "object" to be staked is not out of place.

⁷² Here the reference is to Daśaratha and Kausalyā.

⁷³ *Rām.* 2.27.18.

⁷⁴ *Rām.* 2.27.3–4. See *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India*, 2:139–40 (Translated and annotated by Sheldon Pollock; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), and the notes 74 and 88 of the translation.

⁷⁵ Kausalyā too has this same fear, that once her son has left, and Kaikeyī becomes chief queen, she will suffer many indignities in the harem.

those who fail in their duty. This advice is vaguely reminiscent of that found at *Mahābhārata* 3.222.⁷⁸ Here we see Sītā's subservient and passive nature described, and the listener is reminded that this is the prescribed behavior not only for a perfect wife, but for all women and for those whose positions in society are subservient in general. Her deference to Anasūyā, her grateful acceptance of advice from an elder, her speaking only after having been addressed—all these create in the mind of the audience a feeling that Sītā is not only a devoted, loving, and self-sacrificing woman, but a deferential and unassuming one as well, despite her earlier behavior.

Sītā next plays a prominent role in the *Araṇya-kāṇḍa*. The first of two events in which she figures, which must be considered a harbinger of the later, is the abduction of Sītā by the demon Virāḍha. Immediately Rāma and his brother slay the aggressor, freeing Sītā. Again we learn little about Sītā. Rāma refers to her as *śubhācārā* 'virtuous wife', and *atyantasukhasamvṛddhā* 'reared in luxury'. But the episode is more concerned with Rāma's and Lakṣmaṇa's prowess and their destruction of the demon, than with Sītā's response to the assault.⁷⁹

In the second episode, we see Sītā again abducted—this time by Rāvaṇa. In this famous scene, we learn much more about her. Rāvaṇa has decided to abduct her for revenge. He has devised a plan: Mārīca is to take the shape of a golden deer and prance about in front of the ashram. Sītā upon seeing the deer will want it and send Rāma after it. Rāma will go, leaving Lakṣmaṇa behind, and then through a trick of voice, Mārīca will call out for Lakṣmaṇa's help, and Lakṣmaṇa too will be lured off. This happens, leaving Sītā alone, and Rāvaṇa abducts her. Two elements are of utmost importance to our understanding of Sītā in this episode.

First there is Sītā's unusually demanding behavior; initially we see her insist that Rāma capture the deer alive. Lakṣmaṇa realizes that the deer is, in fact, Mārīca, and Rāma decides to kill the animal and take its skin. Sītā's strong will is again her most striking trait. When she begged Rāma to accompany him to the forest Sītā used virtually all of her persuasive talents on her husband, although her exact motives were difficult to determine, and now again her de-

manding nature emerges. Even though the stated motive—her mothers-in-law would enjoy possessing the deer—clouds the issue of her own interests, the action appears to be largely self-centered.

Second there is Sītā's aggressive and cruel behavior towards her brother-in-law, a heretofore unseen part of her character. She convinces Lakṣmaṇa to leave her and go to Rāma's defense. Her outburst, again under the pretext of concern for her husband's safety, is revealing. She accuses Lakṣmaṇa of being a spy for Bharata or having designs on her:

You are a very wicked person, and alone followed Rāma, all alone, to the forest, concealing your (real) motives for the sake of (getting) me or spying for Bharata.⁸⁰

Once again, to gain her ends, she swears that without Rāma she cannot live, and that if Lakṣmaṇa does not go and save Rāma she will kill herself:

Without doubt, right in front of you Saumitri, I will kill myself: even for a moment I cannot live on this earth without Rāma.⁸¹

Lakṣmaṇa, confused as to what action to take and hurt at Sītā's unjust accusation, complains about the nature of women, but finally leaves Sītā in search of Rāma.

In this passage we see Sītā act in a fashion that, in part, belies the idealized descriptions of her. Again, under the guise of concern for her husband, she shows her determination and selfish nature. The manner in which she gains her ends is the same as that depicted in the scene with Rāma: she generates guilt in Lakṣmaṇa—by implying that his reluctance to act on her behalf was based on his secret motives—as well as threatening him with the burden of guilt for her own suicide. Here, however, she plays upon another culturally generated anxiety, i.e., that he, one who should and does represent a son to her, would want her for his own wife.

The next scene is the actual abduction. Sītā, alone and worried about Rāma, is approached by Rāvaṇa in disguise. Thinking him a brahman and fearing a curse, Sītā initially treats him respectfully.⁸² Rāvaṇa reveals himself and propositions her. Repulsed at the thought. Sītā castigates his impudence. Rāvaṇa, mad

⁷⁸ It is interesting to note that the description of Anasūyā is far more complete. We are told that she was bent and trembled from old age, her hair was white and so forth [*Rām.* 2.110.18–19].

⁷⁹ Compare this with Draupadī's abduction by Jayadratha above.

⁸⁰ *Rām.* 3.43.22.

⁸¹ *Rām.* 3.43.24.

⁸² *Rām.* 3.45.

with infatuation and desiring revenge,⁸³ abducts Sītā, and as he carries her away in his magical chariot she cries out “Rāma, Rāma.”

Like Draupadī, when abducted by Jayadratha, Sītā is abducted as soon as she is left defenseless. Draupadī only spoke to Jayadratha because social conventions required that a visitor be treated with respect. Sītā acknowledges Rāvaṇa only because she knows that social proprieties require respectful treatment of a brahman. She is also afraid that he will curse her. The respect that Sītā feels she owes the brahman, again an authority figure, is clearly based on fear.⁸⁴ Although Sītā attempts to defend herself verbally against the aggressor Rāvaṇa, she is neither as vehement nor as physical as Draupadī.

Sītā is taken by Rāvaṇa to the *aśoka* grove where she is confined. She refuses his advances and is given one year to yield or die. Rāvaṇa makes various threats as do the demonic women who guard her. Sītā bravely counters these threats, preaching the virtues of a true wife, and reviling the demon. As the year passes, and the taunts and threats become more intense, Sītā gives way to despair. She wonders why Rāma, the husband to whom she is so devoted, has deserted her and not come to her rescue, and how she has survived without her beloved lord. Sītā’s lamenting is turned inward. She blames herself for her condition. Rāma is famous, intelligent, and so on; that such as he should have no pity is a sign of her loss of good fortune.⁸⁵ That she can survive even under such circumstances torments her,⁸⁶ and she wonders what sin she committed in a

former life would lead her to her present condition.⁸⁷ She refers to herself as *mūḍhā*,⁸⁸ foolish or infatuated, when she urged Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to chase the golden deer. Interestingly, after having threatened suicide repeatedly to Rāma, and in the power of Rāvaṇa having contemplated it again, the actual threat of being killed and eaten by Rāvaṇa is the focus of Sītā’s fear. Sītā’s confinement, the threats, lamentations and the like, are told at length in the *Sundarakāṇḍa*.⁸⁹ Despite her devotion to her husband, Sītā feels she must suffer these insults—insults which, for some reason unknown to her—she must have deserved.

The character of Sītā is a complex figure, like Draupadī’s. Sītā’s actions belie much of her idealized description. Vālmīki takes great pains to convince us of Sītā’s worth, devotion, and love, all of which are developed into a self-sacrificing, submissive, and pious creation. This carefully drawn figure is set against the more realistic Sītā, one whose actions—such as her greed for the golden deer and her castigation of Lakṣmaṇa—are far from ideal. For Sītā, these are the actions that lead to her abduction and confinement in the palace of Rāvaṇa. This same technique of juxtaposing the ideal against the real was used with Draupadī.

After many adventures, the story culminates in the battle between Rāma and Rāvaṇa. Sītā is rescued. Rāma summons his princess, but instead of being overjoyed at seeing her once again, is overcome by shame. His wife has lived in the house of another man, and her virtue has been called into question. Rāma, at their first meeting, cruelly says to her:

What illustrious man of good family would take back a woman who had lived in another’s house even though he longs to? How can one who has pretensions towards a great family take you back, when you have sat upon Rāvaṇa’s lap and have been looked upon by his lustful eyes? The reason I won you back was to restore my fame. I have no attachment to you. Leave here as you wish! This is what I have decided: choose Lakṣmaṇa or Bharata as you please, choose Sugrīva, the lord of the monkeys, or the *rākṣasa* king Vibhīṣaṇa. Make up your own mind as you like, Sītā.⁹⁰

Crushed by his words, Sītā undertakes an ordeal by fire, so that she might prove her faithfulness to her

⁸³ I have skipped over the episode where Rāvaṇa’s sister Śūrpaṅakhā approaches Rāma and is mutilated for her overt sexual advances. Here too there is much of interest, especially with respect to the epic’s rendering of the “sexual female,” a demoness outside the human realm, who serves as a foil for the repressed and dutiful Sītā (3.16–18). The episode is crucial in the development of the epic and for the understanding of attitudes expressed towards women in the Indian tradition; however, it is not directly relevant to Sītā’s treatment by her husband and her emotional responses.

⁸⁴ Yudhiṣṭhira is obviously constrained to a large extent by a similar fear. The curse of brahmins is a pervasive theme in the literature. See E. W. Hopkins, “The Oath in the Hindu Epic,” *JOS* 52 (1932): 316–33.

⁸⁵ *Rām.* 5.24.12. “Famous, wise, able, and filled with pity is my Rāghava. That such a good man should have no pity, I fear, is a token of my loss of good fortune.” See too *Rām.* 5.23.18, 24.42, and 26.10.

⁸⁶ *Rām.* 5.23.14, etc.

⁸⁷ *Rām.* 5.23.18.

⁸⁸ *Rām.* 5.26.10.

⁸⁹ *Rām.* 5.23, 24, 26.

⁹⁰ *Rām.* 6.103.19–23.

lord. She calls upon Agni, the god of fire, to testify to her purity, and casts herself into the fire. But Agni, recognizing her purity, refuses to consume her. The gods then descend from heaven to testify to her purity and faithfulness. Rāma, commenting that he knew all along that she was pure and only wanted the citizens to be satisfied, takes her back. Reunited once again, they return to Ayodhyā where Rāma takes up his rightful position as king.⁹¹

The two live happily for some time; however, Sītā's ordeal is not over. Doubts as to Sītā's fidelity are circulating among the common people. Unable to endure the rumors, Rāma orders Lakṣmaṇa to take the pregnant Sītā to the desolate forest and abandon her, which he dutifully does.⁹²

One of the main questions raised by these events is Rāmā's obsessive interest in and deference to the opinions of his subjects. Why should Rāma, king of Ayodhyā, care? Rāma's concern stems at least in part, it would seem, from the tragic events of the *Ayodhyā-kānda*, where his father, Daśaratha, fell under the influence of Kaikeyī and ordered his son exiled. On his journey to the forest, Rāma hears the rumors of the common people about his father.⁹³ This seems to have had a profound effect upon the prince, who is determined not to repeat his father's mistakes. Furthermore, Rāma himself suffered from his father's subjugation to a woman and abhors the thought that he himself might repeat his father's sins. A monarch's concerns, ideally, are first and foremost those of his subjects.⁹⁴ Rāma appears as the perfect, idealized son, brother, and monarch, always willing to put duty before pleasure⁹⁵—a characteristic illustrated and emphasized throughout the epic.

Like Draupadī, Sītā is an apparently innocent victim of fate. She has suffered numerous horrors for no other reason than that she is Rāma's wife. Faithful to her lord, she has little choice but to follow him into exile. Deprived of the privileges of royalty, Sītā lives in the forest, suffering the hardships of an ascetic life. As a result of a plot to take revenge upon her lord, she becomes the victim of a brutal and humiliating abduction, which brings shame and dishonor to her and her family. It is, after all, Rāma who through his flirtatious jest with the demoness Śūrpaṅkhā had

provoked the *rākṣasas'* overlord; it is Sītā who must suffer the consequences. Throughout the epic, we see her as a faithful and loyal wife, who suffers precisely because of these virtues. The events of the *Uttarakāṇḍa* serve only to reinforce our sense of her haplessness.

Yet there is another dimension to Sītā's character in Vālmīki's epic. Even though she blames herself for her fate, she is a victim, and as a direct result of that very victimization, she suffers rejection. The irony of having suffered through such a devastating ordeal only to be repudiated by the man to whom she is devoted is overwhelming. Nevertheless, her faithfulness and devotion never fluctuate. Her devotion is rewarded as she successfully completes the fire-ordeal in the presence of the deities. Her virtue is again tested, this time more poignantly, when she is abandoned on the banks of the Ganges. Rāma rejects her so completely that he himself cannot even carry out the deed.

Rāma throughout the epic is a man totally devoted to duty, despite personal hardship, and Sītā is a woman totally devoted to her lord and master, despite his capriciousness. These characterizations are the basis for the prescriptive and somewhat dogmatic nature of the epic and lie at the heart of the epic's function as an instrument for the inculcation of morality and duty in the Indian tradition. It is with this conceptualization of the expected behavior of the *Rāmāyaṇa's* heroine that we can now turn to the final event of the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, the *Aśvamedha* sacrifice.⁹⁶

As the epic story draws to a conclusion, Rāma undertakes this Sacrifice traditionally sanctioned to confirm a monarch's hegemony.⁹⁷ During the sacrifice, Rāma's two sons, Lava and Kuśa, recite the Rāma story as composed by Vālmīki. At the end of the recitation, Rāma is so moved by the story of his own adventures and of the suffering of his beloved wife, Sītā, that he decides to take her back, despite the rumors and slanderous talk of his subjects. He gives orders to have her brought before him and to have her once more attest to her fidelity. Sad and forlorn, Sītā appears before the citizens and vows that she has always been faithful to her lord Rāma. She takes an oath:

Since I have never thought of any man but Rāma, let the Goddess Mādhavī [the Earth] split open before me.⁹⁸

⁹¹ *Rām.* 6.102–6.

⁹² *Rām.* 7.41–47, 58.

⁹³ *Rām.* 2.43.3–7.

⁹⁴ See *Rām.* 2.94; compare *MBh.* 2.5 and 15.9, where the duties of monarchs are outlined.

⁹⁵ In sharp contrast, it might be noted, to his own father.

⁹⁶ *Rām.* 7.82–83.

⁹⁷ Notes to the translation, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1:292.

⁹⁸ *Rām.* 7.88.10.

As Sītā speaks, the Earth, her mother, gives her refuge.⁹⁹ Sītā, twice rejected by her lord, and once abandoned, though pledging her faithfulness to Rāma, now prefers death to life with him. The roles have been reversed, and it is Rāma who must suffer the pain of abandonment.

After suffering countless insults and rejections, Sītā finally takes revenge on Rāma in the most aggressive manner she knows. In carrying out her characteristic and oft repeated threat of self-immolation, she brings to a culmination her passive-aggressive response to Rāma.

For virtually the first time in the entire epic, the actions of Sītā at the Aśvamedha sacrifice are seemingly not predictable. This unanticipated repudiation of Rāma is used as a narrative device by the poet to intimate that the central relationship between the hero and the heroine is about to change. The recitation by Lava and Kuśa itself anticipates the closure of the epic. We have as an audience completed the cycle, and are awaiting the next and, presumably final, events. The juxtaposition of the end of the recitation and the unanticipated reappearance of Sītā is a cleverly and carefully fashioned structural device providing us, the audience, with the security of knowing that the story is about to conclude, and yet awakening in us the realization that there has been no final reconciliation between the hero and the heroine. The reunion of Rāma and Sītā appears to be imminent, but, in fact, is never to occur. Such a denouement would only re-establish the pattern of victimization and rejection. The relationship between Rāma and Sītā demands resolution. And that resolution must in some way satisfy the audience. That the epic has survived for so long in its present form is testimony, in part, to the fact that the relationship is felt to be resolved, and in a manner that is understandable and acceptable to its vast audience.

Sītā's refusal to return to Rāma is surprising, but by no means unsuccessful as a literary device. The great irony of her words and their clever formulation, which at the same time both prove her faithfulness and repudiate her lord, are at the center of the episode. Sītā's action can be seen as a sort of counter-aggression against Rāma: she would rather die than live with him. Tradition allows her death to be shrouded in divine mystery—the Earth, her mother, comes to receive her and she returns to the afterworld in her

earthly body—but, nevertheless, Sītā has abandoned her life, she no longer wishes to live, or rather subject herself to any further earthly relation with Rāma. She commits a type of ritual suicide. The act of suicide can be interpreted as the ultimate counter-aggression of the powerless. It has been demonstrated that the intended effect of suicide is frequently to hurt the love object¹⁰⁰ in order to prevent further anger or, as in this case, rejection by that love object.

Idealized traditional Indian values refuse to allow a wife, or for that matter, any subservient person, to admit disaffection or disloyalty. However, such a denial by no means negates the existence of such feelings. One socially acceptable manner of expressing such disaffection, it has been seen,¹⁰¹ is found in masochistic actions, actions turned against the self as a form of revenge against the aggressor. An extreme case of this type of masochism is seen in the self-denial of the ascetic, a self-denial that frequently leads to death. However, asceticism is not seen as a realistic option in many cases, and other means of venting such feelings of aggression are substituted—the most extreme case being suicide.

Despite the fact that Rāma is a husband, and Sītā a wife, the relationship can be generalized. No longer need we see Sītā as merely a wife: she has become, instead, a representative of the ubiquitous child–younger sibling–servant role; nor is Rāma merely a husband: he serves rather as a god-like figure, the authoritative father–guru. This relationship between master and servant, guru and disciple, father and son is, as has been eloquently demonstrated, manifested repeatedly in both of the Sanskrit epics. The epic texts seem to concentrate upon this type of male-dominated relationship.¹⁰² In this instance we see the relationship played out with heterosexual identifications. Thus Sītā's repudiation of Rāma comes to represent to the vast majority of the audience, not merely a wife refusing a husband, but an expression of a socially acceptable and highly sublimated act of counter-aggression against a figure of authority.

CONCLUSION

We can thus see our two heroines Draupadī and Sītā in a new light. Throughout their respective epics both are victims of fate and their actions are motivated by means of aggressive and counter-aggressive

⁹⁹ *Rām.* 7.88.12–14. See 1.65.16–18 and note *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1:385. Sītā was born from the Earth while her father, Janaka, was plowing the ground for a sacrifice. The name means 'furrow'.

¹⁰⁰ See J. L. (J. Moussaieff) Masson, "The Psychology of the Ascetic," *JAS* 35 (1976): 611–25, especially p. 623.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 623.

¹⁰² Goldman, *op. cit.*

actions. However the manner in which they demonstrate that aggression is markedly different. Draupadī's is directed outwards—toward her husbands, especially Yudhiṣṭhira. But the tradition is uncomfortable with such undisguised aggression, especially associated with a woman.¹⁰³ Sītā, on the other hand, expresses her

anger at her love object inwardly, and this manner of handling aggression, i.e., through masochistic actions, appears to be more societally normative in ancient and modern India for both men and women. Thus it is no surprise that the young women and men in P. Pratap's survey chose Sītā—for she represents to them not only the ideal wife, but her actions represent, perhaps more than the actions of any other popular hero of India, the culturally accepted means through which anger and aggressive impulses can be expressed.

¹⁰³ And, in fact, the only woman in the *Rāmāyaṇa* who could be said to exhibit similar emotions, Kaikeyī, is considered an "anti-heroine."