

## Ashtanāyikas in Ramayana

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### Abstract

*This study aims to explore the female characters of Ramayana in the perspective of Ashtanāyika. Indian tradition defines Ramayana as 'Mahākāvya', a category which is akin to the western types of drama and narrative thinking. Its style is decorative, elaborated with similes and metaphors, and along with other features of classical Sanskrit poetry. In Indian epics; karma, dharma, and kāla determine what the hero can do. Curses and boons become a means to elevate the story to mythic heights. Ramayana of Valmiki displays almost all the epic features. The variety of characters, the description of events, the simplicity in words, the values taught in each episode, have indeed added to the popularity of the story. The religious significance which it has acquired has made it into a sacred book. Characters of different emotions and sentiments take the story of Ramayana to great heights. The epic quality of Ramayana is its adaptability to many art forms. The emotional story of Ramayana revolves around the characters expressing different sentiments and values. Rasa is the basis of art. The main aim of any art is to evoke rasa in the mind of the onlooker. Through movements, the artist, the dancer creates the rasa and conveys it to the audience in order to create the right mood. The study of the woman characters lead Ramayana story from one stage to another. The difficulties, sorrows, compassion, love and sacrifices along with the mental states or avasthās of nāyikas with reference to their nāyakas are to be seen and interpreted from the perspective of women characters. The important female characters of Ramayana play a pivotal role to the plot and trigger the discussion on the variables of the emotive elements. The emotional changes they underwent with their nāyakas can be better understood when seen from the perspective of ashtanāyikas as mentioned by Bharata in his classic text the Natyashastra.*

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**Keywords:** Ramayana, Rasas, Nāyakas, Nāyikas, Ashtanāyikas, Natyashastra,

## 1. Introduction

Ramayana has been a constant source of spiritual, cultural and artistic inspiration for these thousands of years, not only to the people of India but also to the people of South East Asian Countries. It has enriched the national literature and has also provided themes for every form of art, drama, music, painting and sculpture. Its heroic characters have helped to mold the Hindu character; and they have inspired millions of people with deep, tender love, respect and devotion.

One of the views is that Valmiki wrote Ramayana during the lifetime of Rama. In Valmiki's work, Rama is portrayed as a man of great stature and unique qualities but not as an incarnation of God. The curse given by Valmiki to the hunter on killing one of the love intoxicated birds, gave rise to a *śloka* which was highly appreciated by Brahma. From sorrow sprang a verse and in this meter and rhythm, the story was told. Brahma gave him the vision to see all that happened, along with the characters, thoughts and looks. Valmiki composed Ramayana in that meter and told it to his disciples. The tale of the lord and his consort born as mortals, experiencing human sorrow was sung by the Rishi in words of unique beauty. Thus was born the holy Ramayana by Valmiki.

Ramayana gives a multidimensional picture of an ideal life. Everyone is brought face to face with a series of difficult, mysterious and tragic situations, and shown how Rama and the other prime characters react to the circumstances, upholding the highest values of spiritual life laid down in the scriptures. Ramayana has been regarded as '*ādikāvya*' and the poet Valmiki, '*ādikavi*'. The content of Ramayana was seen as a Sanskrit *kāvya* literature which was soon adapted to chanting and reciting. The common people have been heavily influenced by it. The names of the characters have become so popular in the societies of India that a new born is given a name from the text.

## 2. Objective

The objective of the present paper is:

To explore the classification of the eight *nāyikas* with reference to the women characters of Ramayana and to analyse the portrayal of *ashtanāyika* characteristics with reference to female characters in Ramayana like Sita, Urmila, Mandodari, Shoorpanaka, Kaikeyi and such others who provide a wide scope for research.

## 3. Research Questions

A preliminary and brief study of the above aspects lead to some doubts in the reader and these can be formulated broadly into the following questions.

- Are the *ashtanāyikas* depicted in the epic Ramayana? If so, are the female characters portrayed from the perspectives of *ashtanāyika*?
- What is the significance of these female characters with reference to the context of the story of Ramayana?

The present study aims at making a detailed study to investigate and answer these questions, with examples from the epic.

#### **4. Ramayana and Dance**

Ramayana is filled with noble thoughts, noble sentiments, noble characters, not one of whom is spared the experience of pain. Ramayana is full of sufferings of the different characters. Ramayana is often considered as a sad story, at the same time like a Greek tragedy; it is the very meeting of expressive art. The *rasa* or sentiment behind a character is better understood by the onlooker with the help of arts as they convey the message more effectively. Ramayana is an epic, a story, with lots of episodes in it, which perhaps can be more effectively conveyed through the performing arts like dance, drama and music.

Dance is an art form that blends the lyrical and narrative manners, conveying them through mime and gesture expressed within the musical pattern of footwork. Dance enhances the beauty of the narrative aspect of Ramayana. Dance revolves around the sentiments and emotions. *Abhinaya* is a medium of expression. The lyrics are given meaning and expression suitable for the spectators to understand it. The movement of the whole body with gestures of limbs, hands, eyes, eyebrows, etc., forms an important element of dance. Ramayana is an emotional story which gives ample scope for expressing the emotions through dance. The character classification gives a wide scope for a dancer to bring out the emotive elements. The word *nāyika* first appeared in Nātyashāstra of Bharata. According to Bharata of Natyashastra, the *nāyika* is a female leading character in a drama who leads her audience to a desired emotional state of association with the story. The *nāyika* brightens the principal character of the story through manifold performance. The term *nāyika* need not be applicable only to the main female character but may refer to any female character in the story. It is the male character who determines the heroine's emotions which find expression as certain mental states. Essential laying expectation, hope and separation derived out of love are the basis for the classification of *nāyikas*. Bharata refers to woman as the root cause of all happiness or sorrow and recommends that treatment given to her should be graceful. He classifies the *nāyikas* based different factors. The classification has been made based on social status, sentiments, age, temperament, behavioural actions and modesty.

The eight-fold classification made by Bharata called "*Ashtanāyika*" refers not to types of heroines but to the situations in which a woman may be placed in relation to her lover. The

eight *nāyikas* are mainly divided into two classes as *sambhoga* where heroine is united with her lover and other *vipralamba* where the heroine is not united with her lover. The eight *nāyikas* are as follows:

*Vāsakasajja*, *Virahotkantitha*, *svādhinapatika*, *Kalahantarita*, *Khanditha*, *Vipralabdha*, *Proshithabhartrka* and *Abhisārika*.

*Vāsakasajja* is a *nāyika* dressed up carefully to receive the lover, *Virahotkantitha*, a *nāyika* who is distressed due to separation, *Svādhinapatika*, a *nāyika* who has total control over her husband, *Kalahantarita*, a *nāyika* who is temporarily separated due to quarrel, *Khanditha*, a *nayika* who is offended by her lover, *Vipralabdha*, a *nāyika* who is rejected by her lover, *Proshithabhartrka*, a *nāyika* whose husband is away on a sojourn and *Abhisārika*, a *nāyika* who approaches the lover on her own.

## 5. Women Characters in Ramayana

Characterization of the characters in Ramayana has been done differently by different writers. The basic story being that of Valmiki, it has been undoubtedly the most authentic primary source to all the writers. The characters have a different outlook a different behavior towards the situations faced. All the emotions can be seen in the lead female characters while they try to attain their personal targets. A woman is the strength on which the concepts of society and culture rest. It is observed that women play an important role in epics and these epics also depict women characters in varied dimensions. Characters portray emotions with reference to the situations attached to it and the sentiments of Indian culture are enriched in Ramayana. The characters are brought from all sections of society. Each woman character is responsible in one way or the other for the upliftment of the men characters and even for their victory or failure. In spite of all the sufferings and hardships, the women remain stable and uphold the ideals of life. Characters like Sita, Kausalya, Sumitra, Sabari and Mandodari have ideal values embodied in them and they stand for their righteousness, competence, firmness and faith.

The present paper focuses on the relationship of *nāyaka* and *nāyika* in the story. Valmiki was a sage, hence has not highlighted romantic sentiment to focus on the *śringāra rasa*. Though we can see glimpses of it, more importance was given to the sentiment of *karuna*. The very basis of the epic stands on pathos. In order to understand the female characters of the epic and relate them to the concept of *ashtanāyikas* it is important to know the relationships of *nāyikas* with their *nāyakas*. It is evident from many literary sources that a *nāyika* need not have to be the heroine of the plot, but can be any lady who takes the story ahead with an important role to play. Based on their relations with the *nāyakas* we can analyse the salient features they share as an *ashtanāyika*. The concept of *ashtanāyika* as such

has not been portrayed in the epic, however, here an attempt is made to explore the characters and compare their similarities with that of *ashtanāyikas*. The women characters chosen for the study are as follows: Sita, Kausalya, Kaikeyi, Urmila, Mandodari, Ahalya.

Of the eight *nāyikas* Sita portrays the characteristics of *Virahotkantitha nāyika*. A *virahotkantitha nāyika* is one who waits for her beloved eagerly for the union with the pain of separation. *Vipralamba śringāra* is being projected while Sita is in the captive. The *viraha* or separation experienced by Sita in Lanka gives ample evidence to prove her character as a *Virahotkantitha nāyika*. Kausalya can be classified under *Vipralabdha nāyika*, one who is deceived of her beloved. The fact that Dasharatha deceived her for long years can be seen when Dasharatha is grief stricken at the departure of his sons and daughter-in-law. We can consider that Kaikeyi portrays the characters of a *Swādhinapatika nāyika* (a *nāyika* who has control over her beloved and gets things done with her charm and beauty). She can also be considered as portraying the character of a *khandita nāyika* (one who is upset for her beloved being favorable to another woman). When we go through the character of Urmila, we can find similarities with the character of *Proshitabhartrka nāyika* (one who is waiting for her beloved eagerly who has gone on a sojourn). She can also be considered as *Virahotkantitha nāyika* as she is undergoing the pangs of separation from her beloved.

When we go through the character of Mandodari we can categorise her as *Vipralabdha nāyika* (one who is deceived by her beloved). Though she is the chief queen of the demons she is not given the pleasures of a queen, she is never disheartened with Ravana's character. Ahalya can be compared to the characteristics of *vipralabdha nāyika*. She is considered as one of the *panchakanyas* who is of the *uttama* kind. She can be portrayed as *virahotkantitha nāyika* as she waits for her beloved in separation. These women characters portray the *ashtanāyikas* based on the situations aptly.

## 6. Conclusion

Each woman character has a unique characteristic which makes a person think about her in a different way. Every woman in Ramayana has a significant role to play in the context of the entire story. The characteristics of these women, by themselves have a wide scope for study. They give us an overall picture of the situations which were prevalent during the time. As we study the characters in detail, we observe them from different perspectives. This study has attempted to explore these women characters, the emotions they have gone through in various situations and explored them from the perspective of *ashtanāyikas*.

The situations experienced by the characters give ample scope to portray them in a specific *nāyaka* or *nāyikabheda*. According to *Nātyashāstra*, the hero and heroine become the *nāyaka* and *nāyika* of the plot. The characterization is planned based on the rules laid down

by Bharata, in drama and dance. The psychological changes the *nāyikas* undergo with or without their beloved are used as evidences to portray the female characters under *ashtanāyika bheda*. The women characters studied as a part of the research have been examined in detail keeping in mind the concept of *ashtanāyika*. The present study on women characters of Ramayana helps one to know and understand the emotions and sentiments behind such less emphasized characters and allows viewing them from a different perspective.

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