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Women as Moral Architects in the Ramayana: Power, Sacrifice, and Resistance

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Abstract:

Women in the Ramayana as moral architects whose choices shape the epic's ethical, political, and emotional worlds. Moving beyond interpretations that portray female characters mainly as passive victims or symbols of obedience, the study analyses Sita, Kaikeyi, Kausalya, Mandodari, Tara, Shabari, Ahalya, and Surpanakha as figures of power, sacrifice, judgement, and resistance. Their actions influence kingship, family duty, exile, war, loyalty, and the interpretation of dharma. That sacrifice in the epic does not always indicate submission; it may also function as conscious agency, moral protest, or strategic intervention. Women support dharma when it protects justice and responsibility, yet they also expose its contradictions when custom produces suffering or inequality. Through a women-centred reading, the Ramayana emerges as a contested moral narrative rather than a fixed patriarchal code. Such an approach contributes to contemporary gender studies by recovering female voice, ethical authority, and interpretive complexity.

Keywords: Women; Dharma; Agency; Sacrifice; Resistance



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1. Introduction

The Ramayana is often remembered as the story of Rama's exile, Sita's abduction, and the struggle against Ravana. Yet its moral world is not created by kings and warriors alone. Women repeatedly shape the meaning of duty, loyalty, justice, sacrifice, and dignity. Their choices move the narrative forward, while their suffering reveals the human cost of social ideals. Reading them as "moral architects" therefore draws attention to the ethical structures they preserve, challenge, and sometimes refuse. Traditionally attributed to Valmiki, the Ramayana developed as a major Sanskrit epic and later circulated through regional, religious, oral, literary, and performance traditions. Different tellings retain the central narrative while reimagining characters and moral conflicts according to changing cultural concerns (Macdonell, 1900; Ramanujan, 1991; Richman, 2001). Thus, there is no single, unchanging interpretation of its women. Women in epic literature often stand where private emotion meets public duty. Marriage, motherhood, kinship, honour, and political succession are negotiated through their decisions and experiences. Women-centred readings demonstrate that female characters are not merely companions to male heroes; they interpret events, sustain families, advise rulers, and expose injustice beneath heroic ideals (Dev Sen, 1997; Luthra, 2014). Sita's image remains active—and contested—in contemporary discussions of gender and equality (Duran, 2025).

The term "moral architects" refers to women who shape the ethical design of the narrative through counsel, endurance, protest, compassion, sacrifice, or refusal. Their authority is moral because it influences how readers judge right and wrong, even when they possess no throne, army, or legal office. Such women create standards against which rulers, families, and social customs can be evaluated (Sutherland, 1989). The moral world of the Ramayana, with particular attention to Sita. It distinguishes formal power from moral authority and studies sacrifice not only as submission but also as a possible language of courage and resistance. The discussion draws on scholarship published between 1900 and 2025 and recognises that the representation of women differs across the many textual and cultural traditions of the Ramayana.

2. Women and the Moral World of the Ramayana

The women of the Ramayana do not occupy one uniform moral position. Some protect inherited duties, some complicate

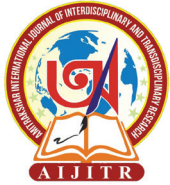
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them, and others expose their injustice. Together, they show that dharma is not merely a fixed collection of rules. It is tested within human relationships, political decisions, experiences of grief, and conflicts between social reputation and personal truth.

2.1 Women as Protectors of Dharma

Women protect dharma by preserving relationships and reminding powerful men of ethical limits. Kausalya represents maternal care and emotional restraint during the crisis of exile. Tara offers politically intelligent counsel, while Mandodari recognises the destructive consequences of Ravana's desire and advises him to return Sita. Their interventions show that moral insight may come from those excluded from final political decisions. Sita also protects dharma by insisting that duty must include fidelity, truth, and mutual responsibility rather than male command alone (Sutherland Goldman, 2018).

2.2 Female Influence on Family and Society

The epic repeatedly turns domestic decisions into public events. Kaikeyi's demand for Rama's exile begins within the royal household, yet it transforms royal succession and the future of Ayodhya. Sita's abduction becomes the cause of war, while later public suspicion about her chastity shapes royal policy. These episodes reveal that the boundary between household and state is fragile. Women may lack institutional control, but their treatment becomes a measure of the moral condition of the family and kingdom (Chakravarti, 1983; Hess, 1999).

2.3 Gender, Duty, and Moral Responsibility

Duty is deeply gendered in the Ramayana. Male characters are judged through kingship, warfare, promises, and public honour, whereas women are often judged through chastity, obedience, endurance, and marital loyalty. Sita is expected not only to remain faithful but repeatedly to make that faithfulness visible. This unequal burden turns female virtue into a public performance and permits society to demand proof from the person who has already suffered. Feminist scholarship therefore separates Sita's moral strength from patriarchal uses of her image as an unquestioning and submissive wife (Kishwar, 1997; Luthra, 2014).

2.4 Difference Between Formal and Moral Power

Formal power is attached to political office, law, weapons, and the ability to command others. Moral power rests on credibility, ethical clarity, emotional influence, and the capacity to expose wrongdoing. Kaikeyi briefly exercises formal influence through the royal boons granted to her, but the consequences damage her moral standing. Sita possesses little institutional authority, yet her words, suffering, and final refusal judge the conduct of kings and society. The women of the epic thus demonstrate that a person may be politically powerless while remaining ethically decisive (Madina, 2023; Sutherland, 1989).

3. Sita: Sacrifice, Strength, and Moral Authority

Sita is frequently described as the ideal wife, but this description becomes misleading when it reduces her to silence or passivity. Her moral authority develops through choices made under intense pressure. She follows Rama into exile, confronts captivity without surrender, answers humiliation with ethical clarity, and finally refuses endless public testing. Her strength does not rest on physical conquest; it lies in preserving an independent moral self when political and patriarchal powers attempt to define her.

3.1 Sita's Decision to Accompany Rama

When Rama prepares to enter the forest, Sita chooses to accompany him. Her decision expresses marital commitment, but it is also an assertion of participation. She refuses the protected life of the palace while her husband bears hardship elsewhere and argues that their destinies and duties are shared. Her sacrifice is therefore active: she knowingly exchanges comfort for uncertainty. By insisting on accompanying Rama, she also challenges his attempt to decide her future without her consent. Sita does not simply follow an order; she claims the right to determine what loyalty and marital responsibility mean in her own life (Doniger, 2014; Sutherland, 1989).

3.2 Courage During Captivity in Lanka

Sita's captivity tests her psychological and spiritual endurance. Isolated, threatened, and continually pressured by Ravana, she refuses to let confinement determine her identity. She holds on to memory, hope, loyalty, and self-respect without accepting his promises of wealth, comfort, or royal status. Such endurance should not be mistaken for helplessness. Where physical escape is unavailable, survival without surrender becomes a disciplined form of resistance. Her vulnerable position makes her constancy more—not less—morally significant. She preserves an inner freedom that Ravana's external power cannot reach (Hess, 1999; Kishwar, 1997).

3.3 Resistance to Ravana's Authority



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Sita resists Ravana through speech, rejection, and moral judgment. He possesses military and royal power, but he cannot obtain her consent. She refuses to treat power as legitimacy and repeatedly identifies his conduct as dishonourable. Ravana can control the physical space around her, but he cannot control her evaluation of him. Her resistance reveals the weakness of coercive authority: domination may confine the body, but it cannot manufacture moral obedience. Sita therefore reverses the apparent power relationship. Although she is the captive, she becomes the ethical judge, while Ravana, despite being a king, appears morally powerless (Luthra, 2014; Sutherland Goldman, 2018).

3.4 Agni Pariksha and Public Morality

The Agni Pariksha, or fire ordeal, is among the most troubling moments in the Ramayana tradition. After surviving abduction and captivity, Sita must answer suspicions concerning her purity. Her body becomes the site on which male honour and public confidence are restored. The episode reveals a painful contradiction: society praises Sita's virtue but does not trust her testimony. Her entry into the fire may demonstrate her integrity, yet it also exposes a moral system that asks an injured woman to remove the community's doubt. The central ethical question is therefore not only whether Sita is pure, but whether Rama and society act justly in demanding such proof (Chakravarti, 1983; Hess, 1999). Many later responses continue to admire Sita while questioning or rejecting the treatment she receives from Rama (Kishwar, 1997).

3.5 Sita's Final Rejection of Social Judgment

Sita's final return to the earth marks her movement from endurance to refusal. When she is once again asked to establish her purity before a public audience, she rejects an endless cycle of suspicion and proof. By calling upon the earth to receive her, she withdraws from a social order that has failed to honour truth, marriage, motherhood, and justice. The act is tragic, but it is not passive. It denies the royal court and the public the right to continue judging her. Feminist readings therefore understand the ending as Sita's recovery of agency, in which she chooses dignity over conditional acceptance (Hess, 1999; Madina, 2023). Her departure becomes a moral verdict: no royal reputation, political duty, or public expectation can be placed above human dignity.

4. Kaikeyi: Political Power and Moral Complexity

Kaikeyi is one of the Ramayana's most morally complex women because she cannot be reduced either to a cruel stepmother or to an innocent victim of manipulation. Her choices arise from affection, fear, dynastic politics, and the limited authority available to a royal woman. A balanced interpretation therefore treats her as an ethically responsible political actor whose power is genuine, although its consequences are disastrous (Luthra, 2014; Vālmiki, 1986).

4.1 Kaikeyi as Warrior and Royal Consort

Before the crisis surrounding Rama's coronation, Kaikeyi is remembered as a courageous woman who is deeply valued by Dasharatha. She accompanies the king into battle, removes him from danger after he is wounded, and saves his life. In gratitude, Dasharatha offers her two boons, which she chooses to reserve rather than use immediately. This earlier image complicates her later reputation. Kaikeyi enters the epic not as a naturally malicious woman but as a warrior-consort who has earned the king's gratitude and secured a legitimate claim upon his royal word (Vālmiki, 1986).

4.2 The Influence of Manthara

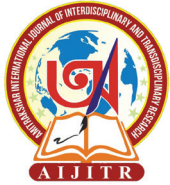
Kaikeyi initially receives the news of Rama's proposed coronation with happiness. Manthara changes the political and emotional meaning of the event by warning her that Rama's accession may weaken Bharata's position and eventually marginalize Kaikeyi herself. Her arguments transform affection into suspicion and maternal concern into political fear. Nevertheless, Kaikeyi should not be regarded simply as Manthara's puppet. Manthara supplies the strategy, but Kaikeyi accepts it, enters the chamber of anger, and consciously pressures Dasharatha. The episode demonstrates how political persuasion can awaken hidden insecurities within a competitive royal household (Ramanujan, 1991; Vālmiki, 1986).

4.3 Use of the Two Royal Boons

Kaikeyi demands that Bharata be crowned as king and that Rama be exiled for fourteen years. The first boon attempts to secure the succession, while the second removes the rival heir long enough for Bharata's authority to become established among the people. Her demands reveal a sophisticated understanding of kingship, public loyalty, succession, and the binding force of a monarch's promise. However, legal entitlement does not make her decision morally just. Kaikeyi uses a promise earned through bravery to impose suffering upon Rama, Kausalya, Dasharatha, Bharata, and the wider kingdom. Her decision exposes the important moral difference between possessing a right and exercising that right responsibly (Bose, 2004; Vālmiki, 1986).

4.4 Ambition, Motherhood, and Political Agency

Kaikeyi's ambition is inseparable from her identity as Bharata's mother. In a royal court where a queen's security and influence are closely connected to her son's position, Bharata's succession may appear to promise both maternal



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protection and political survival. Nevertheless, Bharata's rejection of the throne exposes the central weakness of her reasoning: she acts in her son's name without understanding his moral character or seeking his consent. Her agency is therefore powerful but tragically misdirected. Describing Kaikeyi only as an ambitious villain ignores the gendered pressures surrounding royal motherhood, while excusing her completely would erase her ethical accountability (Luthra, 2014; Richman, 1991).

4.5 Kaikeyi's Role in Shaping the Epic Narrative

Kaikeyi transforms what might have been a straightforward coronation narrative into a story of exile, moral testing, war, sacrifice, and eventual return. Her decision sends Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana into the forest, contributes to Dasharatha's death, tests Bharata's capacity for renunciation, and creates the circumstances that eventually lead to the conflict with Ravana. She is therefore central rather than peripheral to the epic's moral architecture. Through her catastrophic exercise of political power, the major characters are compelled to reveal what duty, loyalty, sacrifice, brotherhood, and legitimate kingship mean when placed under extreme pressure (Ramanujan, 1991; Vālmīki, 1986).

5. Kausalya and Sumitra: Maternal Wisdom and Sacrifice

Kausalya and Sumitra represent complementary forms of maternal strength. Kausalya gives voice to the pain of a mother whose son is unjustly exiled, while Sumitra converts her personal loss into ethical guidance. Neither woman controls the political crisis, yet both help preserve the moral stability of the royal household through restraint, counsel, emotional endurance, and sacrifice (Bose, 2004; Vālmīki, 1986).

5.1 Kausalya's Grief and Moral Restraint

Kausalya's grief is direct, intense, and deeply human. She struggles to imagine Rama exchanging royal comfort for the hardships of forest life and initially wishes to accompany him. Her sorrow also contains an element of protest because the exile violates both maternal love and the expected justice of royal succession. Nevertheless, she does not use her suffering to command Rama to rebel against his father. Recognizing his determination to honour Dasharatha's promise, she ultimately blesses him and bears the separation. Her restraint is not emotional weakness; it is a disciplined refusal to force her son to choose between his love for his mother and his commitment to duty (Vālmīki, 1986).

5.2 Her Commitment to Royal Duty

Kausalya remains in Ayodhya after Rama reminds her of her responsibilities toward Dasharatha and the royal household. This decision requires her to remain beside the husband whose promise has enabled her son's exile. Her commitment is therefore morally costly rather than passive. She endures her grief inside the palace and helps prevent the already damaged royal family from collapsing further. Kausalya's conduct demonstrates how royal duty frequently depends upon emotional labour performed by women without public recognition or political reward (Luthra, 2014; Vālmīki, 1986).

5.3 Sumitra's Guidance to Lakshmana

Sumitra's farewell to Lakshmana is one of the clearest examples of maternal ethical leadership in the Ayodhyakanda. She advises him to regard Rama as his father, Sita as his mother, and the forest as Ayodhya. Rather than holding her son back, she gives his decision a moral purpose: Lakshmana must protect and serve Rama and Sita without resentment, pride, or distraction. Through her guidance, exile is transformed from geographical displacement into a meaningful field of duty. Sumitra sacrifices her own desire for her son's companionship so that he may serve what she understands to be a greater moral cause (Vālmīki, 1986).

5.4 Motherhood as Ethical Leadership

For both queens, motherhood extends beyond possessing or controlling a beloved son. Kausalya permits Rama to follow the duty he has chosen, while Sumitra prepares Lakshmana to support and protect that duty. Their maternal authority operates through moral formation rather than royal command. They demonstrate that ethical motherhood may involve guiding, releasing, and strengthening children rather than keeping them emotionally dependent. Their wisdom shapes the behaviour of the princes even when the queens remain excluded from formal political decision-making (Luthra, 2014; Richman, 1991).

5.5 Silent Sacrifice Within the Royal Household

Their sacrifice remains comparatively quiet because the epic's visible action follows the men into the forest. Yet the palace also becomes a place of emotional exile. Kausalya lives with bereavement and uncertainty, while Sumitra loses Lakshmana's companionship and assumes the responsibility of consoling others. Their endurance sustains Ayodhya during a crisis they did not create. Domestic patience, caregiving, and emotional restraint consequently emerge as essential but largely invisible forms of moral labour within the royal household (Dev Sen, 1998; Vālmīki, 1986).



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6. Urmila: The Invisible Sacrifice

Urmila's importance lies partly in how little the dominant epic narrative says about her. As Lakshmana's wife and Sita's sister, she stands close to the central action, yet she remains in Ayodhya when Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana depart. Her absence from the forest does not mean freedom from suffering. Instead, Urmila represents the private cost that heroic narratives often place upon women whose endurance remains outside public memory and formal recognition (Dev Sen, 1998; Rao, 1991).

6.1 Urmila's Separation from Lakshmana

Lakshmana chooses fourteen years of exile in service to Rama and Sita, while Urmila remains behind in Ayodhya. Unlike Sita, Urmila is not given a sustained canonical scene in which her wishes, objections, or consent influence the narrative. She therefore experiences two forms of loss: the loss of her husband's companionship and the loss of narrative space in which to explain what that separation means to her. Her position demonstrates how one person's celebrated performance of duty may become another person's unacknowledged sacrifice (Sarada Devi & Shaik, 2020; Vālmīki, 1986).

6.2 Emotional Suffering and Silent Endurance

Urmila's silence should not be interpreted as an absence of emotion. Fourteen years of separation suggest loneliness, uncertainty, interrupted marital life, and responsibility within a grieving palace. Because the earlier narrative does not describe her inner world fully, readers should avoid inventing one authoritative psychology for her. Nevertheless, the silence itself remains meaningful. Male service becomes visible heroism, while the woman who absorbs its emotional and domestic consequences remains unseen. Urmila's neglected suffering thus exposes the unequal distribution of recognition within heroic storytelling (Dev Sen, 1998; Luthra, 2014).

6.3 Neglect of Urmila in Traditional Narratives

Women-centred scholarship demonstrates that oral songs and alternative Ramayana traditions frequently recover experiences minimized in elite literary versions. Urmila's neglect is therefore more than a forgotten narrative detail; it raises the question of whose labour, suffering, and moral choices are considered worthy of narration. In women's retellings, household life, separation, marriage, loneliness, and emotional survival become central ethical concerns rather than secondary matters existing outside the heroic plot (Dev Sen, 2000; Rao, 1991).

6.4 Domestic Sacrifice as Moral Strength

Urmila's sacrifice takes place within the domestic sphere, but it is not insignificant. Remaining in Ayodhya may be interpreted as sustaining family continuity, sharing the queens' grief, and accepting responsibilities left behind by those who depart. Her strength lies in living through prolonged absence without public honour or heroic celebration. Such endurance challenges the belief that moral greatness must always appear through warfare, travel, physical hardship, or visible renunciation. Urmila suggests that waiting, caring, and maintaining a damaged household can also demand courage (Luthra, 2014; Saranya & Rajan, 2025).

6.5 Modern Reinterpretations of Urmila

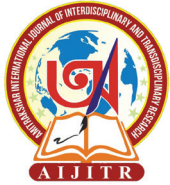
Modern writers have transformed Urmila into a speaking subject rather than presenting her merely as Sita's sister or Lakshmana's wife. Maithili Sharan Gupt's Saket brings her emotional suffering closer to the centre of the Rama narrative, while Kavita Kané's Sita's Sister imagines her as intelligent, questioning, resilient, and politically aware. These retellings do not replace Vālmīki's account; instead, they expose its narrative silences and invite readers to understand waiting, caregiving, intellectual independence, and emotional survival as meaningful forms of agency and resistance (Gupt, 2017; Kané, 2014; Sarada Devi & Shaik, 2020; Saranya & Rajan, 2025).

7. Mandodari and Tara: Wisdom in Times of Crisis

Mandodari and Tara belong to different kingdoms, yet both become moral centres when masculine pride pushes their societies towards disaster. Neither woman commands an army or possesses unrestricted political authority. Nevertheless, each understands danger more clearly than the celebrated warriors around her. Their influence arises from foresight, emotional intelligence, diplomatic ability, and concern for collective welfare. They demonstrate that leadership does not always require a throne; it may also emerge through responsible counsel offered during moments of crisis (Luthra, 2014; Tripathi, 2025).

7.1 Mandodari's Warning to Ravana

Across the wider Ramayana tradition, Mandodari warns Ravana that keeping Sita in Lanka will bring humiliation, war, and destruction. She urges him to control his desire, abandon his hostility towards Rama, and restore Sita honourably. Her opposition is courageous because it occurs within her marriage to an absolute ruler who is unaccustomed to



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contradiction. Mandodari remains emotionally loyal to Ravana, but she refuses to treat loyalty as approval of injustice. In Vālmīki's Yuddhakāṇḍa, her lament after Ravana's death confirms that she understands his abduction of Sita as the wrongful act that caused his downfall (Vālmīki, 2009; Tripathi, 2025).

7.2 Her Criticism of Injustice and Arrogance

Mandodari's criticism exposes the moral blindness created by unchecked pride. Ravana possesses education, royal status, military strength, and supernatural power, but these qualities cannot protect a ruler who abandons justice. Mandodari recognizes that Ravana's refusal to return Sita is not merely a domestic mistake; it is a political crime that endangers the people of Lanka. After his death, she grieves sincerely while acknowledging that his arrogance and mistreatment of Sita produced the catastrophe. Her love does not prevent her from naming injustice or holding a powerful man morally accountable (Shah, 2017; Vālmīki, 2009).

7.3 Tara's Political Intelligence

Tara's intelligence is practical, analytical, and distinctly political. When Sugriva returns to challenge Vali shortly after suffering a decisive defeat, Tara realizes that his renewed confidence must come from a powerful alliance. She correctly identifies Rama as the hidden source of Sugriva's strength and anticipates the fatal consequences of Vali's impulsive decision. Her reasoning combines close observation, intelligence gathering, diplomatic judgment, and concern for dynastic stability. Tara therefore appears not simply as an anxious wife but as a strategist capable of interpreting changing political relationships more accurately than the king himself (Tripathi, 2025; Vālmīki, 1994).

7.4 Tara's Advice to Vali and Sugriva

Tara advises Vali to avoid unnecessary combat, reconcile with Sugriva, and convert a dangerous family conflict into a political settlement. Vali rejects her warning because masculine honour prevents him from withdrawing from a challenge. After his death, however, Tara helps prevent further disorder and supports the transition of authority. Later, when Lakshmana approaches Sugriva in anger because he has delayed the search for Sita, Tara intervenes diplomatically and prevents the confrontation from becoming violent. She advises both brothers according to the needs of peace, stability, and responsible kingship rather than personal preference (Vālmīki, 1994; Shah, 2017).

7.5 Women as Voices of Peace and Reason

Mandodari and Tara reveal that peace is not the same as weakness or submission. Peace requires the courage to confront rulers, predict consequences, protect innocent lives, and defend justice before destruction becomes unavoidable. Their tragedy lies not in a lack of knowledge but in the unwillingness of powerful men to listen. As moral architects, they show that responsible advice is itself a form of leadership. Their stories also expose the political cost of excluding women's reasoning from decision-making structures (Luthra, 2014; Tripathi, 2025).

8. Surpanakha and Ahalya: Desire, Punishment, and Social Control

Surpanakha and Ahalya reveal how the Ramayana tradition connects female sexuality with punishment, shame, and social control. Their circumstances are different: Surpanakha openly communicates her desire, whereas Ahalya's encounter with Indra has been variously represented as recognition, deception, consent, curiosity, or coercion. Nevertheless, both women become objects of judgment, and their bodies or social identities carry the consequences of a moral order controlled primarily by men. Their narratives therefore invite questions about consent, proportional punishment, social exclusion, and the unequal treatment of male and female desire (Erndl, 1991; Ghosh, 2025; Söhnren-Thieme, 1996).

8.1 Surpanakha's Expression of Female Desire

Surpanakha approaches Rama and subsequently Lakshmana directly, expressing attraction rather than waiting to be selected by a man. Such directness violates the modesty expected from the socially approved woman. Her behaviour is represented as even more threatening because she is a rakshasi—an outsider to the cultural, social, and aesthetic order associated with Rama's household. Feminist readings therefore interpret her proposal not simply as uncontrolled lust but as an assertion of female choice that challenges conventional gender boundaries (Erndl, 1991; Sharma & Jha, 2023).

8.2 Violence Against the Transgressive Woman

The cutting of Surpanakha's nose and ears transforms romantic rejection into bodily punishment and public humiliation. Her violence towards Sita cannot be ignored, but the mutilation remains disproportionate and turns her disfigured body into a warning. The episode symbolically disciplines a woman who expresses sexuality aggressively, refuses humiliation, and exists outside accepted standards of beauty and femininity. Contemporary reinterpretations ask why masculine aggression is frequently associated with courage while women's anger and desire are represented as signs of monstrosity (Erndl, 1991; Ghosh, 2025; Sharma & Jha, 2023).

8.3 Ahalya's Punishment and Social Isolation



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Ahalya's story places her under Gautama's unquestioned authority. After her encounter with the disguised Indra, she is cursed and removed from ordinary social life. In Vālmīki's account, she experiences prolonged invisibility and isolation; later traditions intensify this condition by describing her as transformed into stone. In either form, punishment silences Ahalya before her intentions, knowledge, or consent are adequately considered. Her restoration through Rama is compassionate, but it also suggests that male authority first condemns her and subsequently authorizes her return to respectability (Söhnen-Thieme, 1996; Vālmīki, 1991).

8.4 Female Sexuality and Patriarchal Morality

Taken together, these narratives reveal a powerful double standard. Male desire—such as Indra's deception, Ravana's abduction of Sita, or the sexual ambitions of kings—is often discussed through questions of power, heroism, destiny, and rivalry. Female sexuality, however, becomes evidence of moral character. Surpanakha is violently disfigured after expressing desire, while Ahalya bears prolonged punishment for an encounter shaped by disguise and unequal authority. Patriarchal morality consequently places responsibility for maintaining sexual order disproportionately upon women (Luthra, 2014; Shah, 2017).

8.5 Reinterpretation of Blame, Guilt, and Justice

Feminist reinterpretations do not need to portray either woman as entirely innocent. Instead, they ask who has the power to define guilt, whose testimony is absent, whether consent was present, and whether the punishment was proportionate. Surpanakha may be understood as a humiliated and racialized outsider rather than merely a lustful villain. Ahalya may be read as a person denied a fair hearing rather than a fallen woman waiting for male purification. Such readings replace rigid moral certainty with empathy, shared accountability, and gender-sensitive ideas of justice (Ghosh, 2025; Luthra, 2014; Sharma & Jha, 2023).

9. Female Resistance and Alternative Forms of Power

Female resistance in the Ramayana rarely appears as direct control over armies, courts, or law. It more often operates through speech, refusal, endurance, withdrawal, memory, and moral judgment. These forms of power are easily overlooked because they do not resemble kingship. Nevertheless, they expose injustice, affect political decisions, and protect women's dignity within restrictive social structures (Luthra, 2014; Shah, 2017; Sutherland, 1989).

9.1 Verbal Resistance Against Male Authority

Women resist by saying what powerful men do not wish to hear. Mandodari challenges Ravana's arrogance, while Tara questions Vali's judgment and attempts to restrain Sugriva's irresponsibility. Their arguments challenge the assumption that obedience is the natural expression of feminine virtue. Even when male rulers ignore them, their words establish an ethical record against unjust authority and prevent wrongdoing from appearing morally uncontested (Shah, 2017; Sutherland, 1989).

9.2 Silence as Endurance and Protest

Silence should not automatically be interpreted as consent. For women without institutional protection, silence may preserve inward judgment, contain painful memories, or refuse to legitimize an unjust demand. Feminist retellings consequently reinterpret the silences of Ahalya and other marginalized women as suppressed testimony rather than emptiness, weakness, or willing submission (Luthra, 2014; Sen, 1998; Tripathi, 2025).

9.3 Refusal, Withdrawal, and Self-Respect

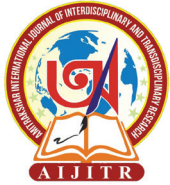
Resistance may also take the form of refusal or withdrawal. A woman may reject persuasion, distance herself from an unequal relationship, or refuse society's definition of her moral worth. Such actions protect self-respect when direct confrontation is impossible. Agency, therefore, does not always require public victory; it may consist of withholding emotional or moral cooperation from an unjust social order (Luthra, 2014; Tripathi, 2025).

9.4 Moral Influence Without Political Position

Mandodari and Tara influence political life without holding unrestricted sovereign authority. Their strength comes from foresight, ethical consistency, diplomatic intelligence, and concern for collective welfare. They demonstrate that leadership may be moral and relational rather than merely administrative. Their advice remains significant because it evaluates political decisions through their consequences for families, kingdoms, and ordinary people (Tripathi, 2025; Vālmīki, 1994, 2009).

9.5 Women's Role in Questioning Patriarchal Dharma

By questioning rulers, punishments, and ideals of obedience, women in the Ramayana show that dharma is not a closed or uncontested rulebook. It must be evaluated through lived suffering and human consequences. Their resistance asks whether an action can truly be righteous when it silences women, excuses masculine violence, or sacrifices justice for



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reputation. They thus become moral architects who compel readers to reconsider the gendered foundations of duty, sacrifice, and social order (Ghosh, 2025; Shah, 2017).

10. Conclusion

The Ramayana's moral vision is not created by male heroes alone. Its ethical tensions become visible through women whose decisions, suffering, counsel, and resistance shape the meaning of duty, justice, loyalty, and honour. Women such as Sita, Kaikeyi, Tara, Mandodari, Kausalya, and Shabari establish the epic's moral framework by testing the conduct of rulers, husbands, families, and communities. Their voices reveal whether dharma protects dignity or merely preserves authority. Sacrifice often becomes a form of agency. Sita's endurance, Kausalya's restraint, and Mandodari's grief are not simply passive responses; they communicate judgement, preserve ethical integrity, and challenge the consequences of masculine power. Female characters both uphold and criticise dharma. They support responsibility, fidelity, compassion, and righteous governance, yet expose injustice when social duty demands silence, abandonment, humiliation, or unequal suffering. For contemporary gender studies, these characters illuminate the complex relationship between patriarchy, voice, obedience, resistance, and moral authority. They show that agency can appear through speech, refusal, endurance, advice, or sacrifice. Women-centred readings are therefore essential because they recover neglected perspectives and prevent the epic from being reduced to a single patriarchal interpretation. Such readings present the Ramayana as an evolving ethical dialogue in which women define, question, and reshape dharma.

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