

From Courtyard to Canon: De-Domesticating Sītā in Nineteenth-Century Maithili Rāmāyaṇas

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Introduction: Tradition as Urgency

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, Maithili found itself in an increasingly constrained position within the cultural geography of colonial north India. Hindi’s emergence as the dominant vernacular of the north, underwritten by British administrative preference, missionary and nationalist print infrastructures, and a reform movement that positioned it as the ‘natural’ language of the Hindu heartland, put sustained pressure on the literary legitimacy of regional languages whose claims to distinct identity could not easily be disentangled from the very Sanskrit heritage that Hindi nationalists were also claiming.¹

The situation was compounded by the partial appropriation of Mithila’s most celebrated poet, Vidyāpati (c. 1360–1450 CE), by Bengali Vaiṣṇava traditions and by Hindi literary historians who found it convenient to claim his work for their own canon.² Against this background, a large-scale vernacular *Rāmāyaṇa* carried significance well beyond literary ambition. By the second half of the nineteenth century, it was the recognised marker of a fully constituted and canonised literary tradition for a modern Indian language of note. Tulsīdās’s *Rāmcaritmānas* (c. late 16th century) had established this for Avadhi, and Kṛttivāsa Ojhā’s Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* (c. 15th century) for Bengali, while Bhanubhakta Āchārya’s Nepali *Rāmāyaṇa* (composed 1820s–1880s, published 1887) was doing the same work for Nepali literary culture at the precise moment Candā Jhā began writing; it is, to this author’s knowledge, the only direct parallel case in the same colonial period

¹ The most thorough account of the Hindi public sphere in this period remains Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002). For the language politics of the north Bihar region specifically, see Paul Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 51–116.

² On the appropriation of Vidyāpati’s tradition across linguistic communities, see Christopher L. Diamond, ‘Head for the Hills: Lateral Vernacular Adaptations and the Maithili Padas of Vidyāpati Ṭhākura (c. 15th–19th cents.)’ (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 2019).

with the same lack of precedent or set of contemporary productive pressures.³ This is the process Sheldon Pollock famously theorises as vernacularisation vis-à-vis literarisation, i.e., the elevation of a regional language into a literary medium by endowing it with the prestige genres of the cosmopolitan order.

In the case of Maithili, we have competing regimes of prestige at work in the region. Maithili emerged as a cosmopolitan, intra-regional language of prestige from the advent of Vidyapati's idiom and its adoption as a cosmopolitan, transregional language of prestige in the courts of the Newari-speaking Mallas of Kathmandu and among the Bengali, Odia, and Assamese Vaiṣṇava devotees further east. In contrast with some of the other 'regional' areas in North India, Sanskrit retained a more central, functional position in Maithil elite society into the present. Its own cosmopolitanism worked to counteract the independent emergence of a modern Maithili until a much later period, by which time Hindi and Bengali predominated in the discourse of nationalist and literary activists in the colonial period. The modern avatar of vernacularism that had elsewhere taken root, arrived late and under duress. what Pollock locates in a confident premodern 'vernacular millennium' returns in colonial Mithilā as its defensive inversion, a project undertaken not from expanding cultural power but because Maithili's claim to a literary future had ceased to be secure.⁴

The two poets who answered this need, Candā Jhā (1831–1907) and Lāladāsa (1856–1920), composed under something close to urgency, legible in their formal choices: the window for establishing Maithili's canonical legitimacy was closing, and a Maithili Rāmāyaṇa needed to exist before it closed. Both adopt the *caupāī-dohā* metrical frame of the *Mānas*, at once homage to a dominant tradition and a bid to surpass it, while developing a dense repertoire of specifically Maithil musical metres (e.g., *barvā*, *tirahuti*, *haripad*, *haṃsī chanda*) that assert cultural distinctiveness within a shared formal vocabulary. Both draw on the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* as their primary theological authority, importing not only its Advaita-Vaiṣṇava framework but also the *chāyā-Sītā* device (the shadow-Sītā abducted while the real Sītā remains untouched with Agni) that pre-empts the Uttarakāṇḍa's scandal. And both, crucially, make Sītā rather than Rāma the engine of their regional argument.

³ [FEEDBACK INVITED: The structural parallel between the Maithili poets and Bhanubhakta — two vernacular Rāmāyaṇas produced under analogous pressures of language legitimisation, within a generation of each other, in neighbouring literary traditions — seems to this author a significant comparative case, but the scholarship on Bhanubhakta's role in Nepali literary canon-formation and its relationship to concurrent Maithili literary politics is not known to me. Workshop participants with expertise in Nepali literary history or modern South Asian vernacular canon-formation are warmly invited to respond.]

⁴ Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), esp. Part 2, 'The Vernacular Millennium'. The application of Pollock's model to a defensive, colonial-era vernacularisation is my own extension; Pollock's account concerns the confident vernacularisations of the premodern Deccan and north India.

This last choice reaches beyond the texts, into the social field of women's cultural production in Mithilā. Sītā is not simply available to these poets; she is already present in Maithil life as the centre of an elaborate tradition of women's ritual song genres (e.g., the *samadāuni*, *gālī*, *parichaṇī*, *chumāon*, *kohalābār*, etc.) that accompany the major transitions of the female life cycle, above all marriage and departure from the natal home.⁵ To construct a regional argument through Sītā is therefore to enter a particular relationship with this corpus. The poets invoke it, cite it, and harness its affective authority, while simultaneously incorporating it into a male-authored, Sanskrit-prestige, *mahākāvya* register from which women's voices are structurally excluded. This dynamic, which I call the 'de-domestication' of Sītā, is the centre of this paper. That a regional argument should be routed through a female figure and women's expressive forms is not incidental but structurally foundational: it is the operation Partha Chatterjee and Tanika Sarkar locate at the heart of colonial cultural nationalism, in which a community lodges the 'inner domain' of its identity in the feminine and the domestic and makes woman bear the cultural essence it cannot afford to surrender.⁶ The Maithil poets enact a regional variant of this manoeuvre, though not through the iconography of the chaste wife alone but through the appropriation of an entire genre system of women's performance.

The paper proceeds in three sections. The first examines how the poets domesticate Rāma within Maithil kinship and sacred geography through the figure of the son-in-law (*jamāya*). The second traces what I call the *naihar* arc: the threading of Mithilā-as-natal-home across the full narrative span of both texts. The third examines Lālādāsa's Śākta-Vaiṣṇava theological synthesis and the two poets' contrasting management of the Vālmīki Uttarakāṇḍa. A conclusion returns to what it costs to make a cultural argument through a woman's displacement.

I. Domesticating Rāma: The *Jamāya* of Mithilā

The Maithili poets' primary strategy for relocating the Rāmāyaṇa's sacred centre is meticulous: the inscription of specifically Maithil ritual practice into the epic narrative, at sufficient ethnographic density that Rāma's arrival in Janakpur becomes a territorial encounter whose terms are set by the host culture rather than by the divine visitor. In Candā Jhā's *Mithilā*

⁵ On Maithil women's oral narrative traditions more generally, see Coralynn V. Davis, *Maithil Women's Tales: Storytelling on the Nepal–India Border* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), especially chapters 1 and 2 on the social contexts of women's oral performance. For the broader pattern of women's song genres in north India and the relationship between natal-home (*naihar*) and marital-home (*sasurāl*) as the constitutive axis of women's expressive culture, see Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold, *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), and Smita Tewari Jassal, *Unearthing Gender: Folksongs of North India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). The latter is particularly valuable for the Bhojpuri-adjacent region and its account of how the *naihar/sasurāl* opposition structures women's emotional and social geography.

⁶ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), esp. chaps. 6–7 on the inner/outer domains and the nationalist resolution of the 'women's question'; and Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa, Rāma responds to the landscape of Mithilā as a man recognising a place whose claims on him, he had not previously understood:

kī divya bhūmi Mithilā hama āvi gelā

‘What a divine land, this Mithilā — I have arrived here.’⁷

The passage that follows accumulates landscape praise that is simultaneously governance assessment: tanks filled like ambrosia, forests resonant with parrots, agricultural fields that bespeak just kingship, scholars renowned (*sakala-vidyā-udadhi Mithilā vidita bhari saṃsāra*, ‘Mithilā, ocean of all knowledge, renowned throughout the world’).⁸ Rāma’s role is entirely receptive: he is evaluated by a standard that precedes him.

That evaluation is conducted through specifically Maithil institutional procedures. The *Siddhānta* (Mithilā’s system of Brahmin genealogical verification, without which no socially valid marriage can proceed) is performed upon Rāma and announced with civic satisfaction: *śubha siddhānta nagara bhela khyāta / harṣeṃ paḍya na prthivī lāta*, ‘the auspicious Siddhānta became celebrated throughout the city; in their joy, people’s feet could not touch the earth.’⁹ There follows the *parichaṇī*, the ritual inspection of the groom by the women of the bride’s household: *janī kara parichaṇī gabait gīti / vidhi kara vidhikari tirahuti rīti* (‘women performed the *parichaṇī*, singing/performing it according to the custom of Tirhut’).¹⁰ The word *tirahuti* is doing specific work: where the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* presents the Janakpur wedding as a generic Sanskrit occasion and the *Mānas* abstracts it into a devotional universal, Candā Jhā insists on the locality and particularity of these rites. Having been genealogically verified and ritually inspected, Rāma has passed Mithilā’s terms for the *jamāya*, bound by honour and reciprocal obligation to the wife’s natal household.

Lāladāsa’s *Rameśvaracarita* conducts the same territorial logic through equivalent landscape praise¹¹ but reaches its theological climax in Śiva’s speech to Janaka:

aḥaṃka tapasthā kahala na jāya / te Nārāyaṇa bhelāha jamāya

śuddha jāni Mithilā vaikuṇṭha / brahma-aṃśame rahala akuṇṭha

mahāpralaya jāvata nahi hayata / Lakṣmī-Hari Mithilahime rahata

⁷ Candā Jhā, *Mithilā Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa* (Lucknow: Bhuvana Vāṇī Ṭraṣṭa, 1987), Bālakāṇḍa, l. 821. Line references to the Maithili texts throughout are to my working transcriptions of the cited editions, pending conversion to the printed editions’ verse and page numbering.

⁸ Candā Jhā, *Mithilā Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa* (BVT 1987), Bālakāṇḍa, ll. 825–39. The metre of this sequence awaits confirmation against the printed edition: the working transcription labels the preceding line *vasantatilakā* (l. 820) and carries a further, partly illegible label at l. 824.

⁹ Candā Jhā, *Mithilā Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa* (BVT 1987), Bālakāṇḍa, l. 1403.

¹⁰ Candā Jhā, *Mithilā Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa* (BVT 1987), Bālakāṇḍa, l. 1407.

¹¹ Lāladāsa, *Rameśvaracarita Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa*, ed. Rāmadeva Jhā (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1999), Bālakāṇḍa, l. 4847 (printed p. 73).

‘Your asceticism cannot be described, therefore Nārāyaṇa became your son-in-law. Knowing Mithilā pure, Vaikuṇṭha itself, he remained there unimpeded in his portion of Brahman. Until the great dissolution, Lakṣmī and Hari will dwell in Mithilā itself.’¹²

The term *jamāya* is here applied to the supreme deity. By naming Nārāyaṇa with the kinship term that defines a man’s social obligation to his wife’s family, Śiva domesticates the divine within Maithil social grammar. The territorial assertion is maximal: Ayodhyā is not mentioned, Mithilā is identified with Vaikuṇṭha, and the divine presence is not a visit but permanent residence until the dissolution (*pralaya*). The *jamāya* does not take the bride away from her *naihar*; he takes up residence within its order.

II. The *Naihar* Arc: Mithilā as Lost Home

The *samadāuni*, the women’s bridal farewell song performed at a Maithil daughter’s departure from her natal home, is the emotional hinge on which both narratives turn after the wedding. Here the poets’ regional argument converges most visibly, and most ambivalently, with the existing repertoire of women’s ritual song. Candā Jhā does not reproduce a *samadāuni*. He names the genre, names its performers, and then asks: *samadāuni gāyinī-gaṇa gāvaba / kakarā nayana nora nahi āva*, ‘the *samadāuni*: the company of women singers will sing, whose eye will not fill with tears?’¹³ The gesture is citational rather than incorporative: the genre is invoked as an emotional guarantee, but the women singers remain outside the poem, their voices attributed rather than given. The affective authority of the *samadāuni* is imported into the *mahākāvya* without the *samadāuni* itself; the male poet takes possession of that authority without occupying the form’s constitutive social position, which belongs to the women of the bride’s family. This is de-domestication in its most economical form.

The broader literature on women’s oral traditions in north India clarifies the stakes. Raheja and Gold’s foundational study demonstrates that women’s ritual song genres, particularly those associated with marriage and the movement between *naihar* and *sasurāl*, constitute an expressive field autonomous from, and sometimes resistant to, the patriarchal frameworks within which women live.¹⁴ Jassal’s work on Bhojpuri women’s songs extends the point: the *naihar/sasurāl* opposition structures the social geography of women’s expressive culture, the natal home the locus of knowledge, safety, and selfhood, the marital home where these are tested and sometimes lost.¹⁵

¹² Lāladāsa, *Rameśvaracarita* (SA 1999), Bālakāṇḍa, ll. 7347–49 (printed p. 104). The reading and rendering of the second line (l. 7348) are provisional pending verification against the printed edition.

¹³ Candā Jhā, *Mithilā Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa* (BVT 1987), Bālakāṇḍa, ll. 1547–49.

¹⁴ Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold, *Listen to the Heron’s Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. xix–xxvii (introduction) and chapters 2–3.

¹⁵ Smita Tewari Jassal, *Unearthing Gender: Folksongs of North India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), especially chapter 3, ‘Biyah/Biraha: Emotions in a Rite of Passage.’ Jassal notes that in the Bhojpuri-speaking region adjacent to Maithili-speaking Mithilā, the wedding song cycle is the central occasion on which women’s

When Candā Jhā cites the *samadāuni*, he draws on this affective structure without carrying the genre's social autonomy across. What moves is the affect, what stays behind is the women.

Feedback Invited/Area for Development: The *samadāuni* and related Maithili women's bridal genres, *gālī*, *parichaṇī*, *chumāon*, *kohalābār*, are described in these texts with evident familiarity and affection, but always from the outside and always in a citational register. This paper's author is not a specialist in Maithili ethnomusicology or women's oral culture. Workshop participants with expertise in these genres, their social contexts, and the dynamics of their relationship to male literary production are invited to assess whether the account offered here is adequate to the complexity of that relationship, and whether there is scholarship on Maithili bridal song specifically that should be engaged.

The word *naihar* is then threaded through both texts, surfacing at each major moment of Sītā's displacement. In Candā Jhā's *Āraṇyakāṇḍa*, during the abduction, Sītā calls out in the keening *gīta* metre:

janaka janaka mithilā-mahi naihar jñānabhūmi satama loka sujana me

‘Janaka! Janaka! Mithilā-earth, my natal home, land of knowledge, highest world among good people.’¹⁶

Mithilā appears here not as the place Sītā has come from but as the place she is being taken from a second time: the natal home that the *samadāuni* named as the site of loss is named again, in a moment of more violent loss, as the ground of identity that cannot be abducted along with the body. In the *Sundarakāṇḍa*, at the furthest remove from Mithilā, the same naming recurs in a single *dohā* that articulates Sītā's entire relational world:

janaka janaka janano avani, raghunandana prāṇeśa

devar Lakṣmaṇa hamara chathi, naihar Mithilā deśa

‘Janaka! Janaka! O mother earth, Rāma my life's lord, Lakṣmaṇa is my brother-in-law, and Mithilā is my natal land.’¹⁷

Father, (earth)mother, husband, brother-in-law, natal home: the complete web of Sītā's social identity assembled in four *pāda*, with *naihar Mithilā deśa* as the final and most encompassing

collective knowledge about the social asymmetries of marriage is articulated, rehearsed, and transmitted across generations.

¹⁶ Candā Jhā, *Mithilā Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa* (BVT 1987), *Āraṇyakāṇḍa*, Adhyāya 6, l. 4465.

¹⁷ Candā Jhā, *Mithilā Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa* (BVT 1987), *Sundarakāṇḍa*, Adhyāya 2, ll. 6456–57.

term. A further *dohā* in the same *adhyāya* makes the argument through genealogy and sacred geography simultaneously:

śiva-dhanu tola Mithilā jāya / janaka delā kanyā se nyāya,

‘He lifted Śiva’s bow and went to Mithilā; Janaka gave his daughter in right order (*nyāya*).’¹⁸

The word *nyāya* is carefully chosen not merely customary procedure but rightness, the proper order of things. Rāma’s claim on Sītā is mediated by Mithilā’s prior claim on both.

Lāladāsa conducts a parallel argument in the *Rameśvaracarita*, through the theological rather than the kinship register. In the *Āraṇyakāṇḍa*, a hymn to Sītā opens *Lakṣmī janakaka kanyā rūpa*, ‘Lakṣmī in the form of Janaka’s daughter’, and identifies her as *janike śakti Sītā avatāra / jagame karadhi caritra anūpa*, ‘Sītā is the avatar of that Śakti, performing her incomparable deeds in the world.’¹⁹ The patronymic and the cosmic identification are named together in every *kāṇḍa*. In the *Sundarakāṇḍa*, Hanumān’s hymn to Sītā in Laṅkā is composed in the *haripad*, a specifically Maithili musical metre, and opens:

jaya jaya janakasute jagtāriṇi jaya jānaki jagadambe

janaka-vaṃśa-nandinī jagavandanī akhila bhuvana avalambe

‘Victory, victory, daughter of Janaka, saviour of the world — victory Jānakī, world-mother; Delight of Janaka’s lineage, worshipped by the world, support of all the worlds.’²⁰

The metre does double work; culturally appropriate to devotional song, the *haripad* is simultaneously the musical register of Mithilā’s own performance culture. Hanumān’s hymn of cosmic praise for the goddess who is *mūla prakṛti* (primordial nature) is sung in Laṅkā in a form that belongs to Mithilā. The cosmological and the regional are, for Lāladāsa, a single claim. The performance-text interface that Orsini and Schofield identify as constitutive of north Indian literary circulation is operative here in a specifically gendered register. The song form carries with it the social world of Maithil domestic performance.²¹ Incorporating the *haripad*, Lāladāsa repeats the structure of Candā Jhā’s *samadāuni* citation. The affective authority of a Maithil performance register enters the classical epic while the social position of the women who performed in it does not.

¹⁸ Candā Jhā, *Mithilā Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa* (BVT 1987), *Sundarakāṇḍa*, *Adhyāya* 2, l. 6467.

¹⁹ Lāladāsa, *Rameśvaracarita* (SA 1999), *Āraṇyakāṇḍa*, ll. 12528, 12542–43 (printed p. 168).

²⁰ Lāladāsa, *Rameśvaracarita* (SA 1999), *Sundarakāṇḍa*, ll. 21041–42 (printed p. 277).

²¹ Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield (eds.), *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), especially the editors’ introduction, pp. 1–41. On the dynamics of oral-literate interaction in north Indian literary traditions more broadly, see Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 1–30.

III. Śākta Synthesis and the Management of the Uttarakāṇḍa

In the *Rameśvaracarita* and the *Jānakī Rāmāyaṇa*, Lāladāsa takes the *Maithilīkaraṇa* argument to its theological limit. The *Rameśvaracarita* opens with a programmatic statement of the Śākta-Vaiṣṇava position:

śaktimāna jaga śaktika yoga / śakti-vimukha śava sana sabha loga
mūla prakṛti Lakṣmī janīkaṃ, Sītā rūpa pradhāna

‘The world is empowered by its union with Śakti; those turned away from Śakti are like corpses, all of them. Lakṣmī, whose nature is primordial matter (mūla prakṛti), is foremost as Sītā.’²²

The pun in the second line, *śava* (corpse) against *Śiva* (the god), is a standard Śākta formulation: Śiva without Śakti is dead matter. Lāladāsa makes it the governing theorem of the entire poem. The *bhūmikā* of the Sahitya Akademi edition decodes the title accordingly: *Rameśvara* means not ‘lord Rāma’ but ‘the lord of Rāmā (Lakṣmī/Sītā)’, the one whose lordship is constituted by his relationship to her.²³

The *Jānakī Rāmāyaṇa*, also called the *Trikuṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa* for its three-kāṇḍa structure (Sītā, Lakṣmī, Rādhā), takes this further. Its second *bhāga* frames Sītā’s story as a cosmic secret withheld even from the gods.²⁴ The cosmogonic statement in the third *bhāga* distributes the roles between Rāma and Sītā with philosophical precision:

jaga sō pūrva Sītā Bhagavatī / utpanna bhelī teja ādi pati
 [...]
 Sītā kāraṇa sṛṣṭi udāra / Rāma brahma sṛṣṭika ādhāra
Sītā puni mājā svarūpa / Rāma śaktimāna pati anūpa

‘Before the world, the blessed Sītā was born, the primordial lord of radiance. [...] Sītā is the cause (kāraṇa) of the generous creation; Rāma is Brahman, the foundation (ādhāra) of creation. Sītā moreover is the very form of Mājā; Rāma is the empowered (śaktimāna) husband, incomparable.’²⁵

Rāma is *ādhāra* (support, foundation), structurally static, while Sītā is *kāraṇa* (cause) and *mājā svarūpa*, the active, generative power through which Brahman produces the world. A

²² Lāladāsa, *Rameśvaracarita* (SA 1999), Bālakāṇḍa, ll. 1191–93 (printed p. 26).

²³ Rāmadeva Jhā, ‘Bhūmikā’, in *Rameśvaracarita Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa*, ed. Rāmadeva Jhā (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1999), pp. 7–8.

²⁴ Lāladāsa, *Jānakī Rāmāyaṇa* (Paṭnā: Maithilī Akādemī, 1980), ‘Atha Kathārambhah’, bhāg 2 (Kavita Kosh digital text; verify page against printed edn).

²⁵ Lāladāsa, *Jānakī Rāmāyaṇa* (MA 1980), ‘Atha Kathārambhah’, bhāg 3 (Kavita Kosh digital text).

foundation supports, while a cause produces. The synthesis places Lāladāsa within a recognisable eastern Indian theological current. The *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, his named primary source, already provides the pre-text, i.e., that of Rāma worshipping Durgā before the Laṅkā campaign, and the *chāyā-Sītā* device that renders the fire-ordeal theologically moot. The Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* attributed to Kṛttivāsa Ojhā, the foundational vernacular telling of the eastern tradition, develops the Śākta dimension considerably, most notably in the *akālabodhana* episode, Rāma's out-of-season waking of Durgā for the Laṅkā campaign. Whether Lāladāsa had direct knowledge of Kṛttivāsa cannot be established from available sources and warrants investigation.²⁶

In the Puṣkara-kāṇḍa, the poem's governing theorem is made narrative. Rāma is defeated by the demon Sahasrānana and rendered unconscious. Sītā, watching from the chariot, takes on the form of Kālikā:

dekhala kālīka rūpa bhayāna [...] kātala tanika sahaso muṇḍa

mūla prakṛti eī Janakakumāri [...] binu śaktika sabha jaga nirjīva

'The terrible form of Kālikā was seen [...] she cut off his thousand heads. This daughter of Janaka is mūla prakṛti [...] without Śakti, all the world is lifeless.'²⁷

The echo of the opening couplet is deliberate. '*Binu śaktika sabha jaga nirjīva*' mirrors the opening '*śakti-vimukha śava sana sabha loga*'. Rāma, separated from Sītā and rendered inert, has proven the theorem by enacting it. Brahmā confirms the cosmic logic:

janakasutā ī vaiṣṇavī śakti / sṛṣṭi racala hama hinake bhakti,

'This daughter of Janaka is Vaiṣṇavī Śakti; I created the world through devotion to her.'²⁸

The Maithil patronymic and the cosmic identification remain inseparable to the last line of the poem.

Against this theological elevation, the Vālmīki *Uttarakāṇḍa* presents a severe structural problem. In Vālmīki's version, Rāma banishes the pregnant Sītā over public scandal (*loka-apavāda*) about her year in Laṅkā, and she is eventually swallowed by the earth. Velcheru Narayana Rao has shown that women's oral Rāmāyaṇa traditions in Telugu foreground this

²⁶ [DEVELOP: investigate the direct or indirect relationship between Lāladāsa's Śākta theology and the Kṛttivāsa tradition. Also the possible Mithilā-specific Śākta devotional context of the Darbhanga Raj: the *bhūmikā* describes Mahārāja Rameśvarasiṃha, under whose patronage the *Rameśvaracarita* was composed, as a 'rigorous Tantric practitioner' (*tantra-mārga*) and Śākta Vaiṣṇava. The relationship between the Raj's religious practice and Lāladāsa's theological innovations has not been examined in available secondary literature and seems potentially very significant.]

²⁷ Lāladāsa, *Rameśvaracarita* (SA 1999), Puṣkara-kāṇḍa, printed p. 437 (working transcription ll. 32046–71). The quoted pādas belong to the Sahasrānana episode on this page; whether they are contiguous cannot be established from the working transcription and awaits the printed edition.

²⁸ Lāladāsa, *Rameśvaracarita* (SA 1999), Puṣkara-kāṇḍa, l. 31834 (printed p. 434).

episode precisely because the point where the official tradition's treatment of Sītā is most vulnerable to critique from a female social perspective.²⁹ For the Maithili poets, by contrast, the second banishment is a structural liability. Their argument depends on Sītā's unimpeachable dignity and a narrative in which she is publicly dishonoured on spurious grounds undermines the claim that Mithilā, the place that produced her, is the sacred centre of the tradition.

The two poets manage the problem differently, each consistently with his broader argument. Candā Jhā includes the second banishment and the earth-entry but reframes both. The narrative mechanism follows Vālmīki. Slandorous gossip reaches Rāma, and he privately instructs Lakṣmaṇa to take the pregnant Sītā to Vālmīki's *āśrama*. Lakṣmaṇa's lament, however, is composed in a marked Tirhuti musical mode, the *haṃsī chanda*, *tirahuti deś*, and addresses Sītā as '*hā vaidehī hā vaidehī*', her Maithil patronymic as the vocative of grief.³⁰ The metre is itself a territorial statement. The sorrow of her second departure is sung in the musical register of the region she came from. Sītā's recognition of her impossible position is articulated through the *naihar* frame:

naihar jaṃ Mithilā cali jāyava, kahata bāpa ko māya re,

'if I go home to Mithilā, what will my father and mother say?'³¹

She cannot return to her *naihar* because the shame attributed to her (groundlessly, since the *chāyā-Sītā* device has already established that the real Sītā was never in Laṅkā³²) would attach to Janaka's household.

The earth-entry is transformed from scandal into cosmic homecoming. The earth-goddess receives Sītā on the seat of *Śeṣa-nāga* and takes her into the earth calling *putri putri*,³³ 'daughter, daughter': the goddess born from Janaka's furrow returns to the earth from which she came. Rāma collapses in grief, and the *pīrihata gīta* (separation song) gives him a first-person lament:

gulak vacana śuni vana delā, kī manā melā, ramaṇi paraśamaṇi kata gelā,

²⁹ Velcheru Narayana Rao, 'A Rāmāyaṇa of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu', in Paula Richman (ed.), *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 114–136. The contrast between women's oral traditions that foreground the Uttarakāṇḍa and male literary traditions that manage or suppress it is itself significant, and the Maithili case sits clearly on the male-literary side of that contrast.

³⁰ Candā Jhā, *Mithilā Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa* (BVT 1987), Uttarakāṇḍa, Adhyāya 2, ll. 11411–14; the *haṃsī chanda* and *tirahuti deś* labels are the edition's own.

³¹ Candā Jhā, *Mithilā Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa* (BVT 1987), Uttarakāṇḍa, Adhyāya 2, l. 11490. The two working witnesses diverge between *kahata* ('what will father and mother say') and *kahaba* ('what shall I say to father and mother'); the translation follows *kahata*, pending verification against the printed edition.

³² The *chāyā-Sītā* device is confirmed at Laṅkākaṇḍa, l. 9947: *Sītā anala-gatā vaharādhra / māyā-Sītā chāyā jāthu*, 'Sītā has entered the fire; let the shadow-Sītā depart.' The logical consequence, that there is nothing in Laṅkā for public gossip to have witnessed, stands as an implicit refutation of the *loka-apavāda* without being made rhetorically explicit in the Uttarakāṇḍa narrative itself.

³³ Candā Jhā, *Mithilā Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa* (BVT 1987), Uttarakāṇḍa, Adhyāya 4, l. 11901.

*'I listened to the jester's words and sent her to the forest — what was I thinking? Where has the touchstone of a woman gone?'*³⁴

The word *paraśamaṇi* (touchstone) names Sītā as the thing by which Rāma's own worth is assessed. The dishonour lands on him.

Lāladāsa's approach is more radical. The Uttarakāṇḍa of the *Rameśvaracarita* is strikingly brief (the return to Ayodhyā, Bharata's welcome, a closing reflection on Rāvaṇa's moral failures) and contains no second banishment, no Lava-Kuśa, no Aśvamedha, no *loka-apavāda*, no earth-entry. The sole reference to the *apavāda* problem, *strī apavāda parayatha nahi śuni* ('he did not tolerate hearing slander of a woman'), occurs in a praise list of Rāma's virtues, not as a narrative event.³⁵ Lāladāsa converts the most damaging episode in the tradition into a positive attribute and erases the episode itself. For a poet whose opening claim is that those turned away from Śakti are corpses, a narrative in which Rāma abandons Sītā on the strength of malicious gossip would be philosophically incoherent.

Conclusion: De-Domestication and Its Costs

What moves through these texts is ultimately Mithilā (and Maithili) itself. Its claim to be the legitimate centre of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, its kinship structures, its ritual procedures, its musical forms, its Śākta-Vaiṣṇava theology. The vehicle is Sītā, and what is required of her is that she be simultaneously elevated and evacuated. She is elevated to cosmic primacy as *mūla prakṛti* and *parāśakti* and evacuated of the social particularity that would return her to the courtyard where the *samadāuni* singers are still waiting. Measured against the counter-tradition that A. K. Rāmānujān and Velcheru Narayana Rao describe, the women's tellings that seize upon the very *Uttarakāṇḍa* these poets manage or suppress and read Sītā's second exile as the tradition's indictment rather than its embarrassment. The cost of the Maithil achievement comes into focus. Her dignity is purchased through silence, and the silence falls on the women whose forms made the achievement possible.³⁶

The de-domestication of Sītā is not a simple appropriation. The poets do not merely take a domestic figure and make her cosmic. They take a figure who is already the centre of an elaborate, socially embedded tradition of women's cultural practice and relocate that tradition within a male-authored classical genre, where its affective power can be mobilised for a regional argument while the social conditions of its production (the women's household, the ritual occasion, generational

³⁴ Candā Jhā, *Mithilā Bhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa* (BVT 1987), Uttarakāṇḍa, Adhyāya 4, ll. 11928–32 (*pirahata gīta* label at l. 11928). The working transcription reads *khalaka vacana* ('the words of the wicked') rather than *gulak vacana*; that reading, and with it the rendering 'jester', awaits verification against the printed edition and its Hindi gloss.

³⁵ Lāladāsa, *Rameśvaracarita* (SA 1999), Uttarakāṇḍa, l. 29838 (printed p. 404).

³⁶ A. K. Rāmānujān, 'Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation', in Paula Richman (ed.), *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 22–49; see also Velcheru Narayana Rao, 'A Rāmāyaṇa of Their Own', cited above.

transmission) are kept at a citational distance. This matches the tension Davis identifies in Maithil women's storytelling between the cultural authority attributed to women's oral tradition and the marginalisation of the women who produce and transmit it.³⁷

FEEDBACK INVITED: This paper has focused on what the poets do to and through Sītā. The question of what women in Mithila, performing the samadāuni, the parichaṇī, the kohalābār, and the many other genres invoked but not reproduced in these texts, made of these songs/poems, and whether those poems entered the same social circuits as the women's forms, they cite, is one this paper cannot answer. The connection between the male mahākāvya tradition and the visual tradition of Madhubani painting, primarily women's art, centring Sītā's story and particularly the Janakpur sequences, is a parallel question. Whether the literary and visual traditions are in dialogue, and if so on whose terms, is a gap this author would particularly value workshop expertise to address.

This is not a reproach to Candā Jhā and Lāladāsa as individual actors. Within the constraints of their moment, they did something consequential. They and their audiences asserted the centrality of a marginalised regional language as the terms of literary legitimacy were being redrawn against it, refusing the nationally dominant masculine Rāma who would have evacuated Mithilā of its most distinctive cultural resource, and, in Lāladāsa's case, producing a Śākta cosmology that placed female productive power at the ontological origin of the world. The limits of what they could imagine doing with that cosmology are the limits of their historical and social formation; a longer version of this argument, engaging the reception histories of these texts and the parallel history of women's cultural production in Mithila, might illuminate them.

³⁷ Coralynn V. Davis, *Maithil Women's Tales: Storytelling on the Nepal–India Border* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), especially the conclusion, pp. 195–212, which addresses the paradox of a cultural tradition attributed prestige precisely at the moment its oral transmission is most endangered.

Note on Further Directions and Areas for Development:

- **The Nepali parallel.** The structural comparison between the Maithili poets and Bhanubhakta Āchārya, two vernacular Rāmāyaṇa projects composed under analogous pressures of language legitimisation, within a generation of each other, in neighbouring literary traditions, has not to this author's knowledge been examined. Scholarship on Bhanubhakta's reception and canon-forming role should be located, and evidence of awareness between the traditions assessed.
- **Lāladāsa's Śākta context.** The Darbhanga Raj's Tantric religious practice and its relationship to Lāladāsa's Śākta-Vaiṣṇava theological innovations have not been examined in available secondary literature and may be significant for understanding the *Rameśvaracarita*'s devotional-political context.
- **Women's reception and the visual tradition.** The Madhubani painting tradition of Mithilā, primarily women's art centring Sītā's story and particularly the Janakpur wedding sequences, flourished in the same period and region as these literary texts. Research should ask whether the male poets' selective citation of women's oral genres has a structural parallel in the literary texts' relationship to the visual tradition.

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