

Hidden Gems of the Kathasagara: A Study of Sidelined Women Characters in the Indian Epics and Puranas

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Abstract

The epics, puranas and mythological tales of India are rich in women characters that can stand in par with the female protagonists of these stories. The only drawback of these characters is that they are less understood and less studied by the reading public. They are cast aside as minor or unimportant characters whereas they prove themselves as possessing qualities of boldness, self-confidence, sacrifice and intelligence often left unobserved or unacknowledged. This study offers a handful of such characters that we can really be proud of-the real gems among women.

Keywords: Epics, Puranas, Unacknowledged, Sidelined *Kathasagara- Sanskrit Word for The Sea of Stories.

The Indian epics and puranas often tell the stories of heroes like Rama, Arjuna or Bhima. The narration is mostly male centred and the female characters often play a much subservient role in these narratives. When we start discussing about the heroines in these stories, the first names which come to our mind are Sita or Draupadi. Seldom do we realize that there are a host of female characters who are left disguised or not brought to the limelight unlike the usual epic heroines. This article aims to focus on such unseen, unknown and less discussed heroines from our epics and puranas.

The Ramayana is the story of Rama and Sita. Likewise it is also the story of Ravana and his wife Mandodari. She is a faithful wife, who stays with Ravana, even after realizing his passion for Sita. There is a story from her childhood which proves that she had a strong sense of righteousness. When two of her brothers were fighting, she reprimands them saying that when there is some trouble from outside, they have to rely on one another and so, it is foolish to fight with each other! It is she who advises Ravana to return Sita and to avoid a conflict with Rama. She was sure that her husband's infidelity would certainly result in his doom. She dissuades Ravana from killing Sita, angered as he is, due to Sita's insulting words. She reminds him that he will lose his divine powers like his ability to travel in the sky, if he touches such a chaste woman like Sita. There is a version in Kashmiri Ramayana that Mandodari had a motherly affection towards Sita and that her breasts overflowed with milk due to this motherly feeling. However the same Mandodari is seen cursing Sita that her happiness in reuniting with Rama will be short-lived and that she will soon plunge into deep anguish- a curse that comes out from a recently widowed woman. Hence we can see Mandodari as a strong yet ordinary woman, loyal to her husband, trying to bring some sense to his love sick heart, affectionate towards Sita, yet losing all

magnanimity when Rama kills her husband. She suffers as a result of the battle between Rama and Ravana, ultimately losing her husband and sons in the war.

Yet another memorable character from The Ramayana, is Urmila, Lakshmana's wife. She is all set to accompany Lakshmana to the forest just like Sita when Lakshmana dissuades her by saying that he has to serve his brother and sister in law and that will always remain his priority. He insists that she stays back in Ayodhya and take care of his parents. Had Urmila been an adamant wife, she would have made it to the forest. However she chose to remain behind and suffered the pangs of being separated from her husband for a period of fourteen long years. It is said that the Goddess of sleep Nidra approached Lakshman at the forest as he was standing in guard of Rama and Sita. He requested Nidra not to come near him for the next fourteen years as he was in charge of his brother's safety, day in and day out. However he directs Nidra to approach Urmila who willingly accepts her husband's share of sleep. This is how she goes to sleep for the next fourteen years, another great sacrifice for her husband!

Surpanakha, Ravana's sister is blamed to have initiated the enmity between Rama and Ravana. She is always seen in a negative light for approaching Rama and Lakshmana with a request to marry her, to have instigated Ravana against Rama and Lakshmana and instilling in Ravana a lustful desire for Sita by describing her as a remarkably beautiful lady. She is picturized as a cruel demoness, the name Surpanakha means the one with sharp nails! Little does the reader know the real motive behind Surpanakha's approach to Rama, knowing which, one will never blame her as the reason for Rama-Ravana battle.

Surpanakha was married to Vidyutjihva much against the wish of Ravana. Once Ravana finds Vidyutjihva plotting against him and gets him killed, turning his own sister a widow. A distraught Surpanakha plans revenge against her brother and knew that no ordinary mortal could kill Ravana. And this is how she approaches Rama and Lakshmana, infuriating Lakshmana, who cuts off her nose in a fit of anger. Thus seen in this light, Surpanakha turns out to be a clever woman who avenged her husband's death, causing the death of Ravana by the hands of Rama.

Trijata was the daughter of Vibhishana, Ravana's brother. Sita was abducted by Ravana and was made to stay at Asoka vana. Ravana had instructed the Rakshasis watching over Sita to threaten her and persuade her to marry him. They tortured her and spoke disrespectfully to Sita. A very depressed Sita finds refuge in the care of Trijata who proves to be a motherly figure to her. She asks the Rakshasis to apologize to Sita and she soon turns out to be Sita's confidant. Trijata thus stands out as a noble character, who understood Sita's plight and stood with her like a good friend.

We always associate Krishna with his foster mother Yashoda, and all his childhood exploits revolve around Yashoda. We seldom think about Krishna's biological mother, Devaki, who turns out to be a victim of her cousin Kamsa's patriarchal tyranny. After her marriage to Vasudeva, Kamsa accompanies the newly-weds to Mathura when suddenly he hears a heavenly prophecy that the eighth child of Devaki would turn out to be his slayer. The wicked Kamsa sends the couple to the prison where Devaki gives birth to six babies, all of whom were smashed to death by the cruel Kamsa. Little do we know about a mother's anguish to watch her babies being killed in front of her by her own cousin. Krishna is born and is secretly transferred to Yashoda's house. Poor Devaki is happy that her child is alive but does not get an opportunity to breastfeed him or bring him up as her son.

Draupadi is known as the wife of the Pandavas, but Arjuna had other wives too, of whom Ulupi was prominent. Ulupi was the daughter of the Naga king (King of serpents) and she is known to be a great warrior. Ulupi was a widow, her husband being killed by Garuda. Some years afterwards, she meets

Arjuna in a forest, dressed like an ascetic. She instantly fell for this warrior like man and boldly takes him down to the Naga loka (the land of the serpents) using her powers. Here she conveys her heart's desire to Arjuna who was actually punished by brothers for breaking his vow. He had entered Draupadi's chamber when his brother was with her, unknowingly though, to take his weapons. The clever Ulupi convinces Arjuna that his vow of celibacy is only towards Draupadi and Arjuna marries her. Arjuna's marriage with Ulupi is proof that widow remarriage was possible even during those days. Later, Arjuna was cursed by Bheeshma's brothers for killing him through treachery. Following Ulupi's request, her father approaches Goddess Ganga, mother of Bheeshma to suggest a remedy for the curse. Ganga gives the prophecy that Arjuna will be killed by his own son by another wife. The prophecy came true, Arjuna was slain by Babhravahan, his son by Chitrangada and Ulupi brought him back to life by placing a gem called Nagamani (snake stone, known to have medicinal properties) on his chest. Ulupi is thus a brave character, a warrior, who saves her husband's life and also relieves him from the curse of Bhishma's brothers.

While the Pandavas were living in the forest during vanavasa, Hidimba the Rakshasa happens to see them. Thinking them as a sumptuous meal, he sends his sister Hidimbi to lure Bheema who was keeping a watch over his family. Though Hidimbi approached Bheema to set a trap on him, she falls in love with him. Bhima marries her even though she reveals her true identity and has a child by her, named Ghatotkacha. This boy grows up to be a great warrior and aids the Pandavas during the Kurukshetra war and dies a hero's death. Hidimbi, though legally Bhima's wife, fails to enjoy any privileges of her position. Bhima left her in the forest soon after their marriage and she brought her son up as a single mother. Thus Hidimbi turns out to be someone who never enjoyed any of her privileges as the Pandava queen, and she lost her only son in the Kurukshetra war. There is a temple dedicated to Hidimbi in Manali, Himachal Pradesh.

We always associate Parvathi as the divine consort of Lord Siva. Lesser known is the fact that Sati was Siva's first wife and she was reborn as Parvati. The character of Sati is worth studying as she is portrayed as a bold woman who could take bold decisions against her father's wish. The daughter of Daksha, Sati was fascinated by the image of Siva, the God who had a completely different image compared to the other Gods. She announces her decision that she will marry none other than Siva and her father is taken aback. He tries hard to dissuade her from marrying the ash-laden, serpent ornamented mendicant God. She sticks on to her decision and finally marries Siva. Sati leaves the luxuries of her palace and happily lives with Siva in Kailas.

It so happened that her father was conducting a grand yajna (sacrifice) to be attended by Gods, demons and humans alike. Sati felt sad that she and her husband were not invited. However eager to be present at the sacrifice, she persuades Siva to accompany her to the sacrifice. At the yajna, Daksha humiliates her and mocks at Siva in front of the august gathering. Unable to bear the insult her husband had to suffer in the hands of her father, she kills herself in the fire of her divine powers. A furious Siva kills Daksha and leaves for Kailas to spend the rest of his time in meditation. Sati is reborn as Parvati, the daughter of Himavan and is reunited with her beloved husband Siva after years of severe penance.

Kannagi is the central character of the Tamil epic Silapathigaram. We wonder at this woman's ability to remain a supportive wife despite the infidelity of her husband Kovilan. Kovilan was punished with death penalty as he was accused of stealing the queen's anklet. A furious Kannagi rushes to the court of the King of Madurai and dares to question him regarding her husband's punishment. She proves that her husband was innocent and the fire of her anger burns the city of Madurai into ashes!

Savitri is the bold wife of Satyavan, who was destined to die at a very young age. One day as they were collecting firewood from the forest, Satyavan feels weak and dies with his head on Savitri's lap. She sees the God of death Yama approach him, to take away his soul. Savitri speaks very intelligently and impresses Yama with her words of wisdom. Yama asks her a boon and she prays to Yama that she may have many children by Satyavan. Thus she outwits Yama and brings her husband back to life.

Thus we can see that there are a number of women characters in our epics and puranas who have not come to the limelight unlike the so-called heroines of these stories. Surprisingly these characters exhibit a kind of boldness and strength of character which is often missed by the readers. Urmila seems to have made greater sacrifices than her sister Sita. Surpanakha turns out to be a clever woman avenging her husband's death rather than being responsible for causing Rama Ravana war. Mandodari is a bold wife and Trijata is a magnanimous rakshasi. Devaki is a mother who has suffered much and is often forgotten by the readers. Ulupi turns out to be a more efficient wife than Draupadi, having saved her husband Arjuna's life. Hidimbi is the self-sacrificing mother who lost her only son in the Kurukshetra war and never claimed her rights as Bhima's wife. The world reveres Parvathi as the divine consort of Siva but rarely remembers the bold and dedicated wife Sati. Kannagi reigns supreme in the history of Tamil literature as the bold wife who questions the king of the land for unjustly punishing her husband. Savitri becomes the clever wife who outwits even the God of Death, in order to save her husband's life

Thus there is a whole plethora of minor female characters in our epics and puranas, who could actually surpass the so called heroines of these stories through their boldness, intelligence and presence of mind. This article highlights such great women of our ancient times who got sidelined by the lustre of the usual heroine figures.

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