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Educating Sītā: Anasūyā's Advice Compared in Three *Rāmāyaṇas*

Sītā, the ideal consort of Rāma, naturally figures large in studies of normative behaviour for Hindu women. Feminist scholars often express their desperation at the pedagogic use her story and character are put to. Apart from the issue of what instructional purpose Sītā serves, we could also ask how did Sītā come to be the way she was? How was the ideal woman herself conditioned to show the traits that are so exemplary? Who were Sītā's role models? Were they equally demure, or were some of them role models that feminists might have approved of more?

There are only a few occasions in the *Rāmāyaṇa* that deal with "educating Sītā". In contrast to some other regional retellings, the hegemonic versions of North India do not pay any attention at all to Sītā's childhood and early youth. She appears in Rāma's life "ready-made", so to speak. However, she is shown to receive instruction on some occasions later in her married life. Though such occasions can hardly be regarded as formative, the instruction they present is affirmed by Sītā herself as consonant with what she was taught before. Moreover, these episodes are interesting in that Sītā serves as a foil for "Everywoman". The messages, ostensibly sent to Sītā, are aimed, sometimes explicitly, at a broader audience, namely that of the women present in the public. A close analysis of different versions of the instruction can tell us something about how messages sent to women differ (or do not differ) over time.

I will compare three versions that could be called hegemonic in North India, that is, Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* (VR), Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas* (RCM), and Sāgar's TV *Rāmāyaṇa* (TVR). The first, the authoritative Sanskrit version attributed to the sage Vālmīki, is too well-known to need much introduction. There is no avoiding this text, often regarded as the Ur-version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and obviously we need to include it in our comparison. For the sake of convenience, I will refer to Vālmīki as if he were the author, in the same sense as Tulsīdās and Sāgar can be said to be authors of their *Rāmāyaṇas*, but obviously the text is a composite one. There are also many recensions of the text, and I have chosen in this paper to refer mainly to the

vulgate edition of the Gorakhpur-based Gītā Press. My reason for doing so is that I seek to concentrate on the messages that women receive today, rather than what the authentic version may have been. The Gītā Press edition, likely, is the most influential version because of its widespread popularity and availability.¹ Its version of the instruction Sītā received gives us an idea of what is now believed that women in ancient India were taught.

The second text used in this comparison is the old Hindī (Avadhī) medieval version by Tulsīdās. This text dates from the last quarter of the sixteenth century and was created in the cities of Banāras and Ayodhyā, but is growing in influence over the whole of India, even today. Again, I choose to refer to the vulgate edition by the Gītā Press, for the same reasons as stated above.² Finally I include in the comparison a contemporary version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the immensely popular TV *Rāmāyaṇa*, directed by Rāmānand Sāgar (Rāmchandra Chopra). This was first aired on the official channel Dūrdarśan from 25 January 1987 till 31 July 1988. As is well-known, the series became a major hit and had incredibly high viewer rates at the time it was first broadcast. Its continued popularity is obvious from the fact that its video version is still a bestseller item.³

One would expect that the message sent to women differs quite drastically over time, and that the TV *Rāmāyaṇa* represents the most modernized version, making some allowances for modern sensibilities, maybe even for feminist preoccupations. I propose to test this hypothesis by a close comparative analysis of one episode. Since Sāgar explicitly acknowledges the Vālmīki and Tulsī *Rāmāyaṇas* as his main sources (in the credits at the beginning of each episode), an analysis of the three texts can show where modern messages sent to women are different from the ancient ones.

The so-called TV *Rāmāyaṇa*, arguably one of the most influential versions, portrays instruction to Sītā on the occasion of her wedding, when her mother,

¹ All references to this text, preceded by VR for Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, are to book, chapter and verse numbers following that edition. Occasionally, when I refer to the critical edition, I will explicitly indicate this. The translations I provide below are intended to be functional and literal. I have much benefited and occasionally taken over phrases from the Gītā Press translation and from the one edited by R. Goldman: Sh. Pollock (trans.), *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India*, vol. 2, Princeton Library of Asian Translations, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1986.

² All references to this text, preceded by RCM for *Rāmcaritmānas*, are to book and *caupāī* number (or *chand* if stated as such, or, if unstated to the *dohā*), following that edition. Again, the translations I provide are meant to be functional. I have benefited from the Hindī paraphrase published with the Gītā Press edition, and occasionally also from existing translations, in particular Ch. Vaudeville (trans.), *Le Rāmāyaṇa de Tulsī-Dās, texte hindi traduit et commenté*, Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres", Paris 1977.

³ All references to this version, preceded by TVR, are to the episode number and to the page in the extremely helpful (though sometimes incomplete) transcription of the text by Girish Bakshi, as edited by T. Mizokami, *Ramayana: A TV serial by Ramanand Sagar*, Osaka University of Foreign Studies, Osaka 1992. I have not seen a translation of the text.

Sunayanā, gives her advice about how to behave at her in-laws. Interestingly, the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, has no such scene at all, and the popular medieval devotional version of Tulsī hardly dwells on the mother's advice, being more interested in the emotional farewell.⁴ Instead, I selected for analysis in this paper another episode of instruction, namely the advice by the forest-hermit Atri's wife, Anasūyā. This incident occurs in all three versions, and is told in an interestingly different way.

The incident of the meeting between Sītā and Anasūyā is found in VR in the last chapters of *Ayodhyā-kāṇḍa* (in the Vulgate, 2:117–9, in the critical edition 2:109–11),⁵ whereas in RCM, the incident more appropriately comes at the beginning of the *Aranya-kāṇḍa* (3:3.2–7.1).⁶ In TVR it is portrayed in the twenty-seventh episode (TVR 27, 359–64). Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa had left Ayodhyā and camped at Citrakūṭ, where brother Bharata with a palace delegation had come to implore them to return. Rāma decides to continue his exile, and so the threesome sets out on their further journey, stopping first at the āśrama of Atri to pay their respects to the legendary sage, or ṛṣi. While Rāma converses with the hermit Atri, Sītā has a tête à tête with his wife, Anasūyā.

This episode is particularly interesting for several reasons. First, it offers a rare glimpse of how the perfect Hindu woman herself is being instructed. Second, even more than educating Sītā, the instruction is aimed at Hindu women in the audience. Third, the character of Anasūyā, as a strong female ascetic figure, holds an interest in itself. Though married to Atri, she is portrayed as an accomplished ascetic in her own right. In some versions, even her own husband recognizes her feats and publicly praises her for them. Her character seems to illustrate that in ancient Hinduism both women and men could be successful in asceticism. Thus, feminists potentially could approve of Anasūyā as a positive role model for Sītā and with her the women audience of the story. Finally, the meeting with Sītā could be construed as an occasion of female bonding. The older woman makes it a point to support Sītā's choice of following her husband in exile. Potentially, at least, this may be a rare epic case of women's solidarity. Yet, as we shall see, the passage is firmly embedded within patriarchal values.

In Vālmīki's version, most of this episode concentrates on the meeting of the women. Tulsīdās, on the other hand, gives much more airtime to the men's conversation than to the women. To some extent, Sāgar follows Tulsī

⁴ See: H. Pauwels, "Only You": The Wedding of Rāma and Sītā, Past and Present, in: M. Bose (ed.), *The Rāmāyaṇa Revisited*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (forthcoming).

⁵ The incident is considered to be a late interpolation; J. Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, Brill, Leiden 1998, pp. 384–385.

⁶ Note though that Ch. Vaudeville (*Étude sur les sources et la composition du Rāmāyaṇa de Tulsī-Dās*, Adrien Maisonneuve, Paris 1955, p. 182) speculates that the episode may well conclude the Rāmacarita as announced in the prologue of RCM, and this would follow exactly Vālmīki's division, but that the work has been redacted differently to accommodate the framestory of Śiva and Pārvatī.

in that he too shows the men's deliberations at some length (TVR 27, 360–1 and 363). Before we explore the women's matters it is instructive to look at the interaction of the men.

Vālmīki states that Rāma greeted the sage respectfully and that Atri received him as if he were his son (*putravat*, 5). Vālmīki is still involved in the adventures of a royal Rāma and sees the warm reception the hero receives from the sage as a moment of respite and consolation in the difficult times of exile. Tulsīdās elaborates on the reception with much emotion, and uses the occasion to have Atri sing a Sanskrit hymn of praise to Rāma (3: 4.1–12 *chand*).⁷ This fits into Tulsīdās's agenda of promoting *bhakti* or devotion to the divine Rāma. He does not miss an occasion to sing the praise of his god-of-choice (*iṣṭadevatā*) and intersperses the action of this epic happily with such outbursts of devotion, put in the mouth of one of the characters.

Sāgar has an interesting combination of these two approaches. His Rāma does not come over as a mighty god when he petitions humbly for *darśana* of Atri. The sage receives him warmly indeed, and even interrupts his theology lesson to personally welcome Rāma. However, Sāgar's Atri does not go as far as Tulsī's sage does. He does not sing a hymn in praise of Rāma, but the occupants of the *āśrama* throw flowers, while in the background resound verses from *Yajurveda* in praise of Vedic gods (TVR 27, 359). The implication is the same, stressing the divinity of Rāma, but the tone is significantly different. Sāgar's Atri is pleased with the visit, but he does not surrender to Rāma as Tulsī's sage does. Rather, he addresses Rāma with the familiar second person pronoun *tum*, whereas Rāma consistently uses the respectful address *āp* for the sage and his wife. Rāma is also shown touching the sage's feet. In short, in Sāgar's version, the prince and the sage both know their place. While Rāma may be the highest God, and the sage is aware of his ultimate identity, in the realm they operate, the political sphere, he is squarely subjugated to the spiritual authority of the sage. I have shown elsewhere too how Sāgar stresses obedience to gurus, to the point that all agency seems to be transferred from the political rulers to holy men (Pauwels, forthcoming). This fits remarkably well with the current political climate in which *sādhus* are starting to play a major role in the political arena. I do not mean to suggest that Sāgar was a spokesman for the Hindu right, but rather want to sketch the broader ideological background against which the message sent to women operates. Let us now turn to the instruction of Sītā, and how it is firmly embedded in a patriarchal frame.

⁷ Vaudeville (op. cit., pp. 180 and 181) speculates that this hymn may have been borrowed from a sectarian Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*. There is no parallel in *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, one of Tulsī's favourite sources.

1. Prelude to the Meeting: Praising a Woman's Power

First, in most versions it is not on Sītā's initiative, nor that of Anasūyā, that they discourse together. Rather, Atri asks his wife to receive Sītā (*pratigrhīṣva vaidehīm*, VR 2: 117.8; *Devi! Sītā ko apne kakṣ meṃ le jāo*, TVR 27, 360). In VR, Atri praises his wife and recommends to Rāma that Sītā should approach her, at which Rāma instructs Sītā to do so. Only then, Sītā introduces herself and greets the hermitess, inquiring about her health (VR 2: 117.19–20). In RC, Tulsīdās has done away with all these pleasantries, including the introductory praise by Atri of his wife. Here the meeting is portrayed more as occurring on the initiative of the women. Sītā humbly makes her obeisance to Anasūyā, and the hermitess, overcome with joy, invites her to sit near her (RCM 3: 5.1). Interestingly, Sāgar here chooses to follow the Vālmiki scenario. The only difference is that in TVR Atri does not praise his wife, but instead Rāma summarizes for Sītā's benefit Anasūyā's accomplishments.

Even when Atri praises his wife's powers in VR, this is slanted in a certain way. He portrays her as a kind of famine relief worker: in times of severe drought Anasūyā brought the people fruit and roots to eat and brought the Gaṅgā down for water (VR 2: 117.9–10). He praises her sustained *tapas* in one breath with the power of her *vratas* (VR 2: 117.11), the latter is interpreted commonly as women's rites, and by association, Anasūyā's *tapas* is domesticated too. Finally, Atri mentions Anasūyā's miracle of reducing ten nights to one "to save the gods" (VR 2: 117.12). The audience, aware of the full story, will remember that Anasūyā performed this miracle to prevent her friend from becoming a widow.⁸ Thus, Atri's "recommendation" stresses indeed his wife's ascetic feats, but a closer look betrays that these feats are all within a woman's proper *dharma* of being a caretaker. Finally, at the end of his speech, he stresses that she is "free of anger" (*akrodhanām*, VR 2: 117.13), implying another reason why his wife makes such a nice role model and Sītā should seek her company.

Vālmiki's Rāma picks up on this last hint when he encourages Sītā to meet with Anasūyā. Though he echoes the respect Atri accords his wife, he also stresses that her name is "Anasūyā", which means "without grumbling". This is not lost on the commentators, who comment on the propriety of the name.⁹ In the Vālmiki text itself, the idea is stressed again a little bit later, at the beginning

⁸ Cf. S. Citrāv, *Bhāratvarṣīya Prācīn Caritra Koś*, Bhāratīya Caritrakoś Maṇḍal, Poona 1964, p. 21; hereafter BPCK. The story is told in the *Garuḍa-*, *Mārkāṇḍeya*, *Skanda-*, and *Padma-purāṇas* (for exact references, see *ibid.*, p. 636). Anasūyā's friend was a Brahmin *pativratā* who was on her way to take her disabled husband to a prostitute (*sic*), when she accidentally hit in the dark ṛṣi Māṇḍavya who was practising *tapas*. Māṇḍavya cursed her to become a widow as soon as the sun would rise. However, through the power she had accumulated by her selfless devotion to her husband, she was able to prevent the sun from rising for ten days, which caused huge side effects and worried the gods. Anasūyā saved the situation by collapsing the ten nights into one.

⁹ Cf. Pollock, *op. cit.*, p. 524, note ad 2: 109.16.

of the next *sarga*, where Sītā herself is said to act “without grumbling” (*anasūya*, VR 2:118.1).

The description of Anasūyā that immediately follows Atri’s glowing recommendation portrays her as an old woman, trembling constantly, which makes it difficult to match her appearance with her alleged ascetic control of her body. The narrator also uses the epithets typical for married women (*mahābhāgām anasūyām pativratām*, VR 2:117.19, as he had done earlier in VR 2:117.8–9). Thus, while praising Anasūyā’s ascetic feats, the author at the same time undermines her independent status by reducing her to the proportions of a nice old woman, devoted to her husband.

In TVR, as stated above, it is Rāma who recounts Anasūyā’s feats, but he too uses terms with a connotation of marriage. While using the term “female ascetic”, or *tapasvinī*, only once, he twice describes her as a “woman with great *sat*”, or *mahāsatī* (TVR 27, 360). The term *sat* is connected with women’s power, not as gathered through asceticism, but through chaste conduct and impeccable devotion to the husband. The use of the term *mahāsatī* is an innovation of Sāgar’s, which has interesting implications. It leads to another attitude towards the hermitess, which Rāma expresses in so many words. Far from setting Anasūyā up as a role model for Sītā, she is to be regarded with an attitude of deferential adoration. Sītā is encouraged to have her *darśana*, from which in itself she will benefit (*ek satī ke darśan se to puṇya miltā hī hai parantu mahāsatī ke darśan se to lokparlok donom samvar jāte haiṃ*, TVR 27, 360). Here, Sāgar steers what might be a potentially transformative encounter for Sītā, into safe channels. He has Rāma stress that the glorious ascetic woman is to be adored, and, we could add, not to be emulated. To top it all off, Anasūyā feels the need to specify that whatever feats she may have accomplished, are thanks only to her devotion to her husband (*yah sab kuch keval pativratānom kī ek-niṣṭh sevā kā hī phal hai*), and that she does not know anything else (*aur kuch maiṃ nahīṃ jāntī*, TVR 27, 360). Thus Sāgar has gone a step further than Vālmīki in transferring the locus of Anasūyā’s power safely into her marital devotion.

2. Anasūyā’s Advice: The Husband is a Woman’s Best Friend

In VR, Anasūyā starts by congratulating Sītā on her initiative in joining her husband in exile (VR 2:117.22) and assuring her that she will reap great rewards (*lokā mahodayāḥ*) for following him even in adversity (VR 2:117.23). This is not to be interpreted as women encouraging each other in their free initiative. Rather, Anasūyā firmly places Sītā’s decision in a patriarchal context. She does so by quoting an adage to the effect that, no matter what his faults, whether of bad character, lecherous, or poor, the husband is the highest god for women of noble nature (*duśśīlāḥ kāmavṛtto vā dhanair vā parivarjitāḥ, strīṇām āryasva-*

bhāvānām paramam daivatam patiḥ, VR 2:117.24). This verse has a close parallel in *Manusmṛti*.¹⁰ She confirms that she herself endorses the proverb: “I find, upon careful consideration, that the husband is a woman’s best friend” (*nāto viśiṣṭam paśyāmi bāndhavam vimṛśanty aham*, VR 2:117.25). “He is always capable [of bestowing happiness] (*yogyam*) just like the inalienable rewards of asceticism” (*tapahkṛtam ivāvyayam*, VR 2:117.25). Implicitly, service to the husband is seen as equivalent to asceticism. She continues by comparing Sītā positively with those “bad women” (*asatstriyāḥ*) who boss their husbands (*bhartṛnāthāś caranti yāḥ*, VR 2:117.26), but there is a vague threat when she says that such bad women, who fall prey to what should not be done (*akārya*), reap infamy and loss of morality (*prāpnuvanty ayaśaś caiva dharmabhramśam ca*, VR 2:117.27). However, she ends on a very positive tone, asserting that women like Sītā will reside in heaven “like those who have gained merit” (*punṇyakṛtas tathā*, VR 2:117.28). The ambiguity of the gender of the latter, might make it an egalitarian statement, pointing out that both women and men can gain merit and reach heaven.

Tulsī’s Anasūyā does not waste any time complimenting Sītā. We get the sense that she is a woman with a strong sense of mission, because she launches immediately into a sermon on women’s duty, or *nārīdharmā*. Tulsī says, though, that this is only a pretext (*byāja*, 3:5.2), and later on it will become clear that he means to say that Sītā did not need instruction, but that it was for the sake of all womankind that Anasūyā revealed women’s duties. Tulsī’s Anasūyā’s sermon comes over indeed as remarkably misplaced if addressed to Sītā. She starts all right, elaborating on VR’s Anasūyā’s *bon mot* that “a husband is a woman’s best friend” by specifying that “mothers, fathers, and brothers are beneficial only up to a limit, the husband bestows boundlessly...” (*mātu pitā bhrātā hitakārī, mitaprada saba sunu rājakumārī; amita dāni bhartā...*, 3:5.3). However, after that, she dwells much more on the negative side. In one breath she continues “A woman who does not serve him [the husband] is vile” (*adhama so nārī jo seva na teḥī*, 3:5.3). She too throws in a proverb, though a different one, that says that women (as well as patience, morality, and friends) show their true colours in times of adversity (3:5.4). Then she lists all possible “adversities” in husbands that may occur (“old, ill, decrepit, poor, blind, deaf, ill-tempered, wretched”; *brddha rogabasa jara dhanahīnā, amdha badhira krodhī ati dīnā*, 3:5.4), none of which could possibly ever apply to Rāma and this all sounds particularly out of context after Atri’s hymn of praise of the latter. Anasūyā

¹⁰ Cf. *Manusmṛti* 5.154, translated in: W. Doniger, *The Laws of Manu*, Penguin Books, London 1991, p. 115. Manu reads “bad” (*gunair vā parivarjitah* for *dhanair vā parivarjitah*, see Pollock, op. cit., p. 524 ad 2:109.24), which obviously would not be appropriate here. Likely, the redaction of *Manusmṛti* took place later than that of this part of VR, so we cannot speak of a “quote from Manu”. I am grateful to Prof. Brockington for alerting me to the relative chronology of the two passages.

further says that women who insult (*kiem apamānā*) such husbands will be tormented in hell (*nāri pāva jamapura dukha nānā*, 3:5.5), a threat that Sītā would hardly need, unless one would want to see here a foreshadowing of the abduction by Rāvaṇa. She continues that women have only one dharma to observe, one vow and one rule to keep, namely humble love for their husbands in deed (lit. body), word, and thought (*kāyaṃ bacana mana pati pada premā*, 3:5.5). Tulsī's Anasūyā continues with a classification of types of women according to the scriptures: the highest type (*uttama*) does not even dream of any man (3:6.6), the middle kind (*madhyama*) regards other men as their kinsmen, the vile type (*nikṛṣṭa*) sticks to their family because of dharma (3:6.7), the lowest type (*adhama*) does the same, but out of fear or because she does not get the chance. Apparently, the woman who actually commits adultery falls outside these classes (just as the outcaste falls outside the four-*varṇa* system), and she will burn in a terrible hell for eons (3:6.8). Again, Anasūyā's sermon seems utterly misplaced if addressed to Sītā, when she points out the stupidity of adultery and risking so many unhappy rebirths for just a moment of happiness (3:6.9), and threatens with the plight of the child-widow in the next life (*vidhavā hoi pāi tarunāi*, 3:6.10). Anasūyā's reasoning is that, after all, a woman can reach the highest good (*parama gati*) so effortlessly by simply remaining committed to her husband, or observing *patibrata-dharma* (3:6.9). She echoes patriarchal discourse: "A woman is born impure, but by serving her husband she attains the auspicious state. The four Vedas sing her praise, and even today Tulsī is Viṣṇu's beloved." (*sahaja apāvani nāri, pati sevata subha gati lahai; jasu gāvata śruti cāri, ajahum tulasikā harihi priya*, 3:5a). The reference to Viṣṇu is ironical, given that the woman she is addressing is no other than the incarnation of Viṣṇu's wife.¹¹ And only here, when she next addresses Sītā by name, finally, Anasūyā seems to come to her senses and quit her misdirected preaching. As if foretelling the future, she says that women will become devoted to their husbands in Sītā's name (*sunu sītā tava nāma, sumiri nāri patibrata karahim*). Finally, Anasūyā acknowledges that Sītā of course is devoted to her husband, and she saves her face, so to speak, by claiming that her whole speech had just been for the benefit of mankind (*kahium kathā saṃsāra hita*, 3:5b).

What did Sāgar choose to take from these two quite different speeches? He definitely prefers Vālmīki's. First, he starts out with having Anasūyā recite Sanskrit verse (TVR 27, 361). This is one of the few quotes from VR in Sāgar's text. Anasūyā quotes first VR 2:117.23, where women who hold their husband dear in adversity are promised great rewards. Then she moves on to VR 2:117.24 with the proverbial saying that no matter what his flaws, for a noble woman the husband is like a god. As we have seen, this was a variation on an

¹¹ Anasūyā is more aware of this in the critical edition, which has several more verses than the vulgate edition (see Vaudeville, op. cit., pp. 180–181).

adage found also in *Manusmṛti*. As a good *kathāvācak*, Anasūyā then paraphrases these verses in Hindī. Sāgar takes up Vālmīki's hint that asceticism is equal to service to the husband by having Anasūyā restate that, whatever powers (*śakti*) Rāma praised her for, she obtained them by steadfast service to the husband in thought, word, and deed (*uske lie mainne aur kuch nahīm kiyā, keval man, vacan aur karm se apne pati kī ekniṣṭh sevā kī hai*, TVR 27, 361). Here, Sāgar seems inspired by Tulsī's Anasūyā saying that women only need to love their husband's feet in deed (body), word, and thought (*kāyam bacana mana pati pada premā*, 3:5.5). Echoing both Tulsī (3:5a) and Vālmīki (VR 2:117.28), Sāgar's Anasūyā puts a positive spin on this, stressing that even the gods bow for a woman who has to do no more than regard her husband as her god (*nārī keval itnā hī kar le to bare-bare devtā uske samakṣ jhuk jāte haiṃ*, TVR 27, 361). In contrast to Tulsī, Sāgar's Anasūyā carefully avoids references to the hell of the adulteress. She merely states that the gods test women in their devotion to their husband (*devtā kaī prakār se nārī kī parīkṣā karte haiṃ*, TVR 27, 361). If a woman, however, manages to remain firm (*aḍig*), not only the gods, but the creator himself become subservient to her (*uskī ājñā ke adhīn*, TVR 27, 361). Sāgar's audience no doubt was reminded here of the example of Ahalyā, they saw only a few weeks earlier (TVR 5), and needed no further graphic descriptions of the punishment of the adulteress. Sāgar's Anasūyā then returns to the Vālmīki scenario. She adds the weight of personal experience to the saying that a husband is a woman's best friend (VR 2:117.25), and compliments Sītā on her courageous choice to leave the palace and follow her husband into exile (VR 2:117.22). Only at the end of her speech does Sāgar turn to Tulsī's text, and has Anasūyā paraphrase the proverb about women showing their true colours in adversity (RCM 3:5.4). To stress this text, the original from Tulsīdās is then also sung (TVR 27, 361–2). Anasūyā says that only a woman who sticks with her husband in times of distress is worth her salt, that is, is a true "[better] half", or *arddhāṅginī* (TVR 27, 362).

In contrast with what he does elsewhere, in this episode, Sāgar takes his cue mostly from Vālmīki. But he works his Vālmīki backwards. Whereas Vālmīki's Anasūyā had started by praising Sītā, which had prompted the theory on women's behaviour in support of Sītā's choice, Sāgar's hermitess first brings out the theory, and then compliments Sītā on her espousing it. It is interesting that in both cases, the hermitess feels the need to confirm the theory from her own experience. It is as if she addresses the potential objection that *Manusmṛti* was after all composed by males. In TVR, she ends her speech very powerfully by giving the definition of a true wife as being the one who stands by her husband in adversity. The repeated quote of Tulsīdās's epic here lends extra stress to the statement.

3. Sītā's Response: My Mother Has Told Me

If, as Tulsī stressed, it is the case that Anasūyā's sermon is really directed to all womankind, and not to Sītā, there is of course no need for Sītā to respond. Indeed, in Tulsīdās's RCM, Sītā does not say a word in response. She is described as overjoyed, and simply bows respectfully (*sunī jānakīm parama sukhu pāvā, sādara tāsū carana siru nāvā*, 3:6.1). Vālmīki, on the other hand, had not stated explicitly that Anasūyā was instructing Sītā for the sake of the audience rather than for her own good. So in his version the need is felt to address the issue that Sītā in fact did not need such instruction. First, Vālmīki says that Sītā did not mind having had to sit through Anasūyā's sermon. He says she did not grumble (*anasūya*), using a wordplay on the meaning of the elder lady's name. Rather, Sītā applauded the speech (*sā tv evam uktā vaidehī tv anasūyānasūyayā, pratipūjya vaco*, VR 2:118.1). Her reply itself starts out by saying that she is not surprised at Anasūyā's words. She affirms that her experience too is that the husband is a woman's lord (*viditam tu mamāpy etad yathā nāryāḥ patir guruḥ*, VR 2:118.2). Tactfully she answers Anasūyā's reference to the hypothetical case of the bad husband, saying that, given that a woman indeed should honour the flawed husband (VR 2:118.3), how much more then should she, Sītā, honour hers, Rāma, who is praised for being virtuous (*guṇaślāghyā*), compassionate (*sānukrośa*), self-disciplined (*jiten-driya*), constant in affection (*sthirānurāga*), moral (*dharmātmā*), and loving like a father or mother (*mātrvatpitrvatpriya*, VR 2:118.4). She elaborates on how Rāma regards all the women of his father's harem as mothers (VR 2:118.5–6). Mainly, she answers here Anasūyā's hypothetical case of the immoral (*duśśīla*) and lecherous husband (*kāmaṇṛtto*), leaving out the embarrassing case of the poor man. It is interesting that Sītā is mostly concerned about clearing her husband from the perceived slight that he might have flaws, rather than herself from the implied possibility she might "go bad". Finally, Sītā feels the need to point out that she has heard similar sermons, from her mother-in-law on the occasion of her departure to the forest (VR 2:118.7 — a reference to 2:39.20–32) and from her mother on the occasion of her wedding (VR 2:118.8 — not actually in VR), but she tactfully says that Anasūyā's sermon brings this all fresh to her memory (VR 2:118.9). She makes explicit Anasūyā's implication about the link between asceticism and obedience to the husband by saying "no other *tapas* is required from a noble woman who obeys her husband" (*patiśuśrūṣaṇān nāryās tapo nānyad vidhīyate*, VR 2:118.9). She illustrates this with the example of paradigmatic women from mythology: Sāvitrī (VR 2:118.10)¹² and Rohiṇī (VR 2:118.11), using again the epithet "obedient to the husband", twice in the same line (*patiśuśrūṣa*, VR 2:118.10). The "list" of role models is quite

¹² Some recensions add Arundhatī (Pollock, op. cit., pp. 524–525), but the vulgate and the critical edition refer to Anasūyā herself.

interesting in view of the fact that Sītā herself will become part of such a list of paradigmatic women in a major way. However, VR does not foreshadow any such development explicitly. In the end, Sītā summarizes the whole speech “Women excellent in this way, firm in their vows to their husband are praised in heaven by [the power of] their own meritorious karma” (*evamvidhāśca pravārāḥ striyo bharṭṛdṛḍhavrataḥ, devaloke mahīyante puṇyena svena karmaṇā*, VR 2: 118.12).

Sāgar’s Sītā does not get to say much in response. Her body language during Anasūyā’s speech expresses agreement, as also an endearing shy, gentle affection for her husband. However, in contrast to Tulsī’s Sītā, she does get to say something. Apparently, Sāgar also felt the need to somehow address the issue that Sītā did not need a sermon on women’s duty. He was obviously inspired by Vālmīki’s Sītā’s response, and, like her, his Sītā says that Anasūyā’s words remind her of her mother’s and mother-in-law’s instruction. In fact, Sāgar’s Sītā has more of a reason to refer to her mother’s words, because Sāgar, in contrast to Vālmīki, had indeed shown Sunayanā’s sermon at the end of the wedding ceremonies (TVR 11, 142–3).¹³ Moreover, this had just been refreshed in the viewer’s mind by Sunayanā’s farewell speech in Citrakūṭ to her now-married daughters (Sītā herself is not present at this occasion, TVR 26, 358–9). She explicitly said she would not extend the daughters an invitation to rejoin their parents at home in these times of trouble. Women need to suffer with their husbands, thus Sunayanā, and the doors of their parental home (*maikā*) would only open after the troubled skies in their in-laws (*sasurāl*) had cleared. The stress on the woman’s loyalty towards her *sasurāl* is an innovation of Sāgar’s in comparison to the other versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which we find also elsewhere in his text.¹⁴ Sāgar, then, returns to Tulsī’s script in having Anasūyā foretell how Sītā will become a beacon for women in the future. She says that her divine foresight (*divya dṛṣṭi*) shows her how, merely by remembering Sītā’s name, women will gather the power to religiously keep their vows to their husbands (*ānevāle samay meṃ nāriyāṃ tumhārā nām smaraṇ karne se hī pati-vrat dharm-pālan karne kā bal prāpt kareṃgī*, TVR 27, 362).

4. Gift of Beauty, Gift of Love

Whereas in Tulsī’s version of the story, Anasūyā starts out with bestowing clothes and jewelry on Sītā (3:5.2), in Vālmīki’s version, the dialogue comes first and only then the gift-giving. Sāgar again follows VR. Vālmīki’s Anasūyā is so pleased with Sītā’s appropriate answer, that she asks her how she can use the power of her own *tapas* to please her (VR 2:118.13–5). Sāgar’s Anasūyā too seeks to express in gift-giving her happiness with Sītā. Here,

¹³ For a discussion, see Pauwels, op. cit.

¹⁴ Ibid.

however, the cause is her foresight of Sītā's role for future generations of women (TVR 27, 362). In both versions, Sītā humbly replies that she has already received her blessing in the form of the sermon (VR 2: 118.16; TVR 27, 362). Vālmīkī's Anasūyā is even more endeared at such a sweet answer and decides to give her garlands, clothes, jewelry, and cosmetics¹⁵ that have special power (VR 2: 118.17–20). She argues cleverly that they are just right for Sītā (*anurūpa*, VR 2: 118.19) and adds that by wearing these never-expiring or -fading gifts, she will eternally adorn her husband just like Śrī adorns Viṣṇu (*śobhayiṣyasi bhartāraṃ yathā śrīr viṣṇum avyayam*, VR 2: 118.20). What woman could refuse such a gift? Sītā accepts everything as an unsurpassed gift of love (*prītidāna*, VR 2: 118.21). The epic poet uses for Anasūyā an epithet that means: "the one whose wealth consists of tapas" (*tapodhanā*, VR 2: 118.22), which seems particularly apt in context, given that she acquired all these costly cosmetics and attirements by her ascetic power alone. A trifle ironic, maybe?

Sāgar's Anasūyā presents the same never-expiring gifts (minus the garlands)¹⁶ as a token of memory of their meeting (*milan kī smṛti*). She says explicitly that wearing these gifts will make Rāma happy, and adds that a married woman should always look good in front of her husband (*suhāgin strī ko apne pati ke sāmne sadā sundar hī dikhnā cāhie*, TVR 27, 362). "Then the husband's heart is pleased and the woman receives his special affection" (*isse pati kā man prasanna hotā hai aur strī ko uskā viśeṣ sneh miltā hai*, TVR 27, 362). An unusual saying from the mouth of an ascetic indeed.

Not only does the paragon of asceticism, Anasūyā, choose to bestow make-up on Sītā. The feminist's expectations of Anasūyā are further disappointed in that, once the business of the meeting is concluded, Vālmīkī's Anasūyā succumbs to another craving typically attributed to the rather unemancipated woman, namely an interest in celebrity gossip. Anasūyā next seeks to be entertained by Sītā (VR 2: 118.23), whom she encourages to tell the story of her wedding, which she had already heard rumours about (VR 2: 118.24), seeking an exclusive first-hand reportage with full details (*vistareṇa*, VR 2: 118.25). Sītā then proceeds to tell a short version of her wedding, which is interesting in its own right, and which I have dealt with elsewhere.¹⁷ Tulsī has left out the passage, and Sāgar too, apparently, felt it was not necessary to repeat the story of the wedding.

In VR and TVR, before Sītā leaves, Anasūyā asks her to don the clothes and ornaments she had given her, so that she can delight in seeing Sītā this way (VR 2: 119.11, TVR 27, 362–3), a request that Sītā obligingly fulfils (VR 2: 119.12, TVR 27, 363). However, we do not get to indulge in Anasūyā's happiness on

¹⁵ Possibly to be read as just one cream; see: Pollock, op. cit., p. 525.

¹⁶ The creams are said, very much as in commercials, to make her look always like a young woman.

¹⁷ See: Pauwels, op. cit.

seeing her gifts thus adorning Sītā, but rather, in the next lines or scene, we learn of Rāma's happy reaction on seeing his wife so prettily adorned (VR 2: 119.13). In VR, Sītā explains that all these adornments, clothes, and garlands¹⁸ are Anasūyā's gift of love (VR 2: 119.14). The term *prītidāna* is repeated twice, which suggests maybe a defensiveness about the appropriateness of the princess in exile thus indulging in her toilet.¹⁹ And the men are said mainly to rejoice in the honour paid to Sītā (*maithilyāḥ satkriyāṃ dṛṣtvā*, VR 2: 119.15), rather than her beauty per se. S ā g a r's Sītā too acts a little bit defensively. She says that Anasūyā did not want to listen to her protests (TVR 27, 363), and Anasūyā supports this with a beautiful line, no doubt much enjoyed by the audience, that a mother cannot very well let her daughter leave the home empty-handed (TVR 27, 364). Such would be inauspicious (*apaśakun*). In S ā g a r's version, then, the "gift of love" has become the "gift of the mother's love". For the benefit of the audience, Sītā again repeats that the instruction on women's duty (*nārī dharma kā upadeś*) is the greatest and most sacred adornment she has received. Here, S ā g a r has gone beyond V ā l m ī k i, apparently addressing an implicit suspicion that the women in his audience would attach too much value to the gift of jewelery, rather than the gift of advice. S ā g a r has Sītā's mother, Sunayanā make, a similar comment on the occasion of Sītā's wedding, where she says that the gift a mother gives her daughter in the form of "mother's instruction" is worth more than the father's dowry.²⁰

Conclusion

What started out as praise of a female ascetic, has turned into a celebration of conjugal love, and of the variety where the female is firmly subordinated. Thwarting feminist hopes in her strong character, Anasūyā teaches unapologetically that women should obey their husbands no matter what. She even confirms the value of cosmetics for women. For the ironically inclined, Anasūyā is the mother of Indian "cosmetic marketing" and society gossip columns. Overall, the episode in all versions is utterly disappointing for feminists.

S ā g a r's version is remarkably conservative. For this episode he seems to have been mainly inspired by V ā l m ī k i, rather than T u l s ī d ā s. He turns Anasūyā into a Mahāsati, who is not to be emulated, but lovingly adored. Her *darśana* seems more important than her example. The hermitess herself explicitly ascribes all her accomplishments to her devotion to her husband. The instruction imparted to Sītā is the same as in VR and RCM, namely that the husband is the woman's god, no matter what his flaws may be. It is interesting

¹⁸ Sītā does not seem to tell her husband about the cosmetics she received from Anasūyā, the compound used is *vasanābharaṇasrajām*.

¹⁹ See also: Pollock, op. cit., p. 525 ad 2: 110.20.

²⁰ For a discussion of this issue, see: Pauwels, op. cit.

that the adage quoted in support is sanctioned by Brahminical patriarchal society in *Manusmṛti*. The saying that the husband is a woman's best friend may seem modern at first, but it is already found in VR. It has a different connotation from what a Western audience might expect, in that the husband is not portrayed as a partner or confidant but rather as potential bestower of permanent happiness, and thus contrasted with the parental kin, which can bestow only temporary happiness. Stating that a woman's highest good lies with the husband and not her parental family seems a positive way of stating that she should not run away from him to her parents in time of difficulties. This is also an undercurrent in Sītā's answer.

What is new in S ā g a r's Anasūyā's speech is that she does not dwell on the case of the disobedient women. She avoids all threats, such as were most apparent in Tulsīdās's sermon. Instead, she stresses the powers that a woman can acquire by serving her husband, but again, this is also in the older sources. The message S ā g a r's audience receives, then, is in essence the same as the old messages. However, it is presented in a more upbeat fashion. Somehow he manages to sound nearly empowering to women. We could call it a glamourizing of female subordination. Rather than threatening hell, S ā g a r promises heaven, but obedient the women must be.

In terms of Sītā's answer, S ā g a r's version again is close to V ā l m ī k i. Sītā says Anasūyā's words ring true to her and agree with what she has been advised before. While she does not elaborate on the contents of such previous instruction, her reference to her mother's advice brings to mind the immediately preceding episode when Sunayanā had stressed a woman's loyalty to her *sasurāl*. A woman's parental home, or *maikā*, should not be a place of refuge in times of trouble. This stress on loyalty to the in-laws (rather than to the husband per se) is much stronger in TVR than elsewhere. The reason may be that S ā g a r has a quintessentially modern situation in mind, yet his response to that situation is not progressive at all. Finally, whereas V ā l m ī k i's Sītā was still so unselfconscious that she could give a list of great loyal women of Hindu mythology, the later versions instead hint at the fact that Sītā herself becomes the greatest paradigm of all.

The gift-giving in S ā g a r's script again follows V ā l m ī k i's scenario. The adornments are even more emphatically in function of the male enjoyment. Feminists, eager to lead women out of the role as object of the male gaze, are disappointed. The issue of the gift-giving between the women is interesting in itself. Since Anasūyā instructs Sītā, she could be considered to act as a guru. One would expect, then, that the gift-giving would flow her way, since it is customary for the guru to receive *dakṣiṇā*. One wonders whether the authors were intentionally reversing the flow of material gifts from guru to disciple because of the fact that the actors are both female? One might even raise the suspicion of a kind of bribe, an issue that S ā g a r seems to have felt compelled to address. In his version, more than in V ā l m ī k i's, Sītā explicitly states that she values the

instruction she received more than the jewelry. In addition, the jewelry is, according to the instruction, in function of the overpowering command to cater to the husband's enjoyment. With Sāgar's Sītā, we could conclude that in Sāgar's *Rāmāyaṇa* for a woman, the most valuable diamond is the patriarchal adage.

What have we learnt about how Sītā herself was educated and what role models she encountered? In Vālmīki, Sītā mentions the mythological characters of Sāvitrī and Rohiṇī, both praised for their steadfast worship and obedience to their husbands. Obviously, Sītā's *pativrata* does not come in a vacuum, but she is the culmination of a long tradition of mythological role models. In the "real world", Sītā refers to instruction from her mother and mother-in-law, which — as expected — conforms to wifely obedience of the husband. Once in the forest, out of the sphere of civilization proper, we might have hoped for some alternative role models. However, even the apparently independent ascetic Anasūyā turned out to be firmly anchored within the patriarchal ideal. In her zeal to preach to Sītā, Anasūyā seems to represent a missionary outpost of noble (*ārya*) ideals of womanhood, rather than representing an alternative lifestyle from the margins. In VR, she even quotes something close to one of Manu's adages, and TVR follows suit. Yes, there are female ascetics in the scriptures of Hinduism, but, at least in this case, the origin of their power is squarely located in devotion to the husband. Interestingly, Anasūyā is even more "domesticated" in Sāgar's version than in the older ones.

In all versions, the ascetic female reiterates patriarchal adages, close to quotes from *Manusmṛti*. Significantly, Anasūyā says her own extensive experience confirms the adage. This boils down to stating that the theory was proven by experiment and to lending her experience as a woman to support it. In VR, Sītā too confirms such. This has the effect of compounding the importance of the central lesson for the women in the audience as real lived-through experience. All in all, the message to women is that no further experimentation is needed. The way of tradition is the way to go, sanctified not only by scripture but by "real" women's experiences.

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