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Applying Feminist Approach to *Sundara – Kanda of Sri Ramacaritamanasa* by Goswami Tulsidasa

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Abstract

Aim: *The aim of the paper is to find out the contribution and a critical version of female characters in Sundarkanda the fifth chapter (Pancham-Sopana) of Sri Ramacaritamanasa by Goswami Tulsidasa. One of the lines is very popular now a day, “Dhola, Gawara Sudra Pasu Nari, Sakala Tarana Ke Adhikari.” This is the version of the people who are defending the Poet Goswami Tulsidasa, on the other side a sect of people criticized him for the interpretation of the word tarna as oppressive and humiliating.*

Methodology and Approach : *The present paper deals with the critical analysis of the sundara- kanda the fifth chapter of Sri Ramacaritamansa of Goswami Tulsidasa looking the text through Feminist lens and analyzing how the poet portrays the narrative of male domination by depicting the favorable economic, social, political, and psychological atmosphere for them and on the other hand the presentation of women's pathetic condition; in particular, the subversive and subjugated depiction of female characters.*

Outcome: *This paper will present the Women characters and their role as depicted by the poet Tulsidasa. In general, he is criticized for not giving the proper place to Women characters in the Epic but the paper will show the significant and dominating role of Female characters in the Sundarkanda.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *A feminist examination of the Sundarkanda uncovers a multifaceted tapestry of female perspectives, each navigating power, ethics, and autonomy inside a profoundly patriarchal framework, despite its ostensibly heroic and devotional exterior. The paper suggest that Ramacaritamansa is not only the depiction of lord Rama but also has a proper place and representation of Women Characters.*

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Sundar Kanda of Sri Ramacaritamansa by Goswami Tulsidasa mostly concentrates on Hanuman's voyage to Lanka and his encounter with Sita and Ravana. An examination of the Sundar Kanda of Sri Ramcaritamanasa from a feminist perspective can be conducted by scrutinizing the depiction of female characters, their agency, and the inherent gender dynamics. It can emphasize Sita's fortitude, independence, and the demands placed on woman by society. Despite being held captive, Sita remains steadfast in her devotion and refuses to submit to Ravana's coercion. Her unwavering strength can be seen as an assertion of autonomy. Hanuman's reverence for Sita and his role in reassuring her can be examined through a feminist lens—does he act as a savior, or does his presence reinforce the idea that women need male intervention? In this paper a broader feminist analysis has been done through Sita's portrayal with other female characters like Sursa, Lankini, Trijata and Mondadori, each of whom challenges or conforms to patriarchal expectations in different ways. Traditional readings often depict these female characters as passive figures whereas Feminist perspectives emphasize their resilience, autonomy, and moral strength, portraying them as active agent rather than victims.

Sursa, the celestial being (Ahin kai Mata) who tests Hanuman during his journey in Sundar Kanda, can be analyzed from a feminist perspective by examining her agency, power, and role in the narrative. Unlike many female characters in Ramcharitmanas, Sursa is not defined by her relationships with men. She is a powerful entity who challenges Hanuman, demonstrating autonomy and control over her domain. Unlike Sita, whose trials often revolve around virtue and obedience, Sursa's challenge to Hanuman not about submission but about proving his capability. intellectual and physical prowess. Sursa is not a passive character; she actively engages in Hanuman's journey, testing his wisdom and adaptability. Her role can be seen as a representation of female strength and intelligence, contrasting with traditional depictions of women as either nurturing or subservient. Sursa's portrayal encourages the critics to re-examine female agency in classical literature, inspiring discussions on women's roles beyond traditional binaries of virtue and vice.

Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* argues that women are often defined in relation to men, rather than as independent beings. Sursa has also been deputed by Gods to judge the power of Hanumana as Goswami Tulsidasa has written – “Mohi suranha jehi lagi pathava, budhi bala maramu tora main pava.” Here too she is following the orders of Male Gods. But Beauvoir states that men are associated with transcendence (action, creation) while women are often relegated to immanence (passivity, domesticity). Sursa defies this by actively testing Hanuman, demonstrating intellectual and physical prowess, rather than being a passive figure. Beauvoir critiques the idea that women are inherently nurturing or submissive. Sursa’s role as a tester rather than a caretaker challenges this stereotype, showing that women can embody strength and wisdom. Tulsidasa narrates the power of Sursa, “Jojana Bhari tehi badanu barhava, Tasu duna kapi rupa dikhava. Soraha Jojana Mukha tehi thayau, turata pawansutabattisa bhayau.” Sursa’s role as a tester of Hanuman’s abilities aligns with Showalter’s argument that women’s narratives should be explored beyond victimhood or subservience. She is neither a villain nor a passive figure, but an active force shaping the hero’s journey.

Lankini, the guardian deity of Lanka in *Sundar Kanda*, unlike many female characters in *Ramcharitmanas*, is not defined by relationships with men. She holds a position of power, guarding Lanka, which challenges traditional gender roles. Lankini is not a passive figure; she actively confronts Hanuman, demonstrating physical and authoritative power. Her role can be seen as a representation of female guardianship and resilience. “Nama Lankini Ek Nischari, so kaha calesi mohi nimdari.” Despite her strength, Lankini is ultimately defeated by Hanuman, which can be interpreted as the suppression of female power within patriarchal narratives. Her downfall may symbolize the transition from female rule to male dominance. Lankini’s portrayal contrasts with characters like Sita and Surpanakha. While Sita embodies virtue and endurance, and Surpanakha represents desire and rejection, Lankini stands as a force of defense and authority, making her unique in the epic.

Helen Cixous’ feminist theory, particularly her concept of *écriture féminine*, provides an intriguing lens to analyze Lankini’s character in *Sundar Kanda*. Cixous critiques the dominance of male-centered storytelling, where

women are often silenced or marginalized. Lankini, however, is a powerful guardian of Lanka, representing female authority and resistance within a male-dominated epic. Cixous rejects the idea that women must conform to fixed roles of virtue or submission. Lankini, unlike Sita, is not confined to ideals of purity or devotion—she is a warrior, a protector, and an enforcer, challenging traditional gender expectations. Despite her strength, Lankini is ultimately defeated by Hanuman, which can be interpreted as the suppression of female authority within patriarchal narratives. Cixous' theory would view this as an example of how women's voices and power are erased in male-centric storytelling.

Judith Butler posits that gender is not a stable trait but an ongoing performance—a set of acts that continually construct what we come to recognize as “masculine” or “feminine.” In the case of Lankini, her very role as the guardian of Lanka is a performance of authority traditionally attributed to male figures in epic narratives. Her assertive, confrontational stance against Hanuman challenges the expected passivity or subservience assigned to female archetypes in classical literature. In Butler's terms, Lankini enacts a defiant form of female subjectivity that disrupts the usual gender binary, even if temporarily. Lankini's embodiment of female power resists the conventional portrayal of women in the epic, yet her subsequent defeat by Hanuman symbolizes the narrative's reassertion of a patriarchal order. This outcome reveals the tension of non-hegemonic performances—the very acts that can unveil subversive potential are often co-opted or diminished by dominant discourses. Lankini's portrayal, therefore, becomes an example of how alternative forms of subjectivity are allowed a transient expression but are ultimately reined in by the established symbolic order.

Trijata's character, often cast in the background as a subordinate demoness in traditional telling of the Sundara Kanda, has been reinterpreted by feminist critics as a nuanced figure emblematic of female solidarity, resilience, and alternative wisdom. Traditional narratives place Trijata within a binary of good versus evil, aligning her with demonic forces. Feminist readings, however, recognize that her role is more ambivalent. Rather than simply embodying evil, she becomes a counterpoint to the male-dominated valorization of heroism. Her empathy for Sita and her prophetic assurance—which foretells Rama's victory—challenge the simplistic moral divisions. This subversion invites readers to see

female characters as possessing complex, multidimensional natures that defy easy categorization. While Sita is trapped in the dominant narrative of abjection and victimhood, Trijata stands out as a figure who provides emotional succor and alternative insight. Her supportive relationship with Sita marks an instance of female solidarity in a setting otherwise dominated by male actions and authority. In this light, Trijata's compassion and intuitive understanding serve not as relics of subservience but as evidence of a potent, transformative feminine resource that operates outside patriarchal validation. By offering solace to Sita in a hostile environment, Trijata implicitly critiques the structures that render Sita voiceless and objectified. Her presence suggests that subversive acts of caring and empathy are themselves forms of resistance against the overarching patriarchal order that seeks to control and define women's roles. This reading invites a re-evaluation of how "other" female figures, often relegated to minor roles or demonized, actually perform critical functions in undermining rigid gender hierarchies.

Virginia Woolf was deeply interested in the inner worlds that women inhabit—a realm of dreams, thoughts, and subtle defiance. Trijata, traditionally seen as a minor demoness with a prophetic vision, can be reimagined as embodying a deep, if marginalized, inner life. Her dreams and quiet assurances to Sita become acts of creative resistance, suggesting that even those at the periphery of the grand narrative possess a profound inner voice. This internal richness challenges the simplistic moral binaries of epic storytelling and aligns with Woolf's belief that women possess a unique and transformative inner world. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf argues for the importance of women having both literal and figurative space to express themselves. Trijata's position within the hostile environment of Lanka—where male-dominated forces dictate power—can be interpreted as a metaphor for the cramped spaces women have historically been forced to occupy. Yet, within these confines, Trijata carves out a niche of subtle influence and imaginative resistance. Her ability to offer comfort and a vision of hope to Sita represents a reclaiming of narrative space, offering an alternative storyline that values quiet endurance and foreknowledge over overt confrontation. For Woolf, the act of storytelling itself was a form of revolution—a way for women to articulate experiences that mainstream discourse ignored. Trijata's empathetic connection with Sita, her ability to communicate hope amidst despair,

mirrors the kind of solidarity and shared wisdom Woolf admired. In offering Sita solace, Trijata becomes a vessel of collective memory and resistance, echoing Woolf's call for women to find, nurture, and share their own narratives. This solidarity is not noisy or overtly confrontational but is instead subtle, persistent, and transformative.

The interpretation of Sita in Sundara kanda begins with the above line which means Sita had her eyes fixed on her feet, while her Mind was absorbed in the thought of Sri Rama's Lotus Feet. Sita is portrayed in the Sundara Kanda as both a symbol of enduring fortitude and a victim of a patriarchal crisis. This intricacy challenges readers of today to consider the limitations imposed by conventional narratives and to investigate how Sita's story provides context for the larger fights for female autonomy and respect. Her story has been reframed by feminist readings to claim that there is a profound, transformative potential for resistance and self-affirmation even within mythic institutions that appear to restrict women's roles.

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection describes how subjects define themselves by expelling what is perceived as unclean or disruptive to the established order. In the confrontation, Ravana represents a disruptive, excessive force that challenges normative boundaries. His language and overt demands can be seen as attempts to impose a phallogocentric symbolic order upon Sita. Goswami Tulsidasa writes in Sundara kanda of Sri Ramacaritamanasa, "Bahu Bidhi Khalu Sitahi samujhava, sama dana bhaya bheda dekhava." (It means the wretch tried to prevail upon her in many ways- through friendly advice, allurements, threats, and estrangement). In resisting his advances, Sita enacts a process of "othering"—rejecting not only the physical threat but also the underlying abject quality that threatens to dissolve her subjectivity. She says in Ramacaritamanasa, "Sunu dasamukha khadyota Prakasa, Kabahu ki nalini karal bikasa." (Listen, O ten headed monster, can a lotus flower ever bloom in the glow of a fire fly?) Through her discourse, she delineates her identity by firmly rejecting the monstrous or abject elements embodied by Ravana. In this discussion, Ravana's arguments are embedded in the symbolic order, using language as a means to assert dominance and control over Sita. Conversely, Sita's responses, though measured and subversive, hint at an engagement with the semiotic: a form of expression that

challenges the imposed symbolic norms. Her ability to articulate her inner resistance—even when her speech is constrained by the epic’s conventions—constitutes a reclaiming of subjectivity that resists easy categorization within male-defined language. Kristeva insists that the formation of subjectivity is a dynamic and often painful process, marked by the tension between internal drives and external social forces. In the discussion, Sita is not merely a passive character awaiting rescue; rather, her rebuttals and insistence on personal integrity become acts of self-creation. Her language refuses to be subsumed under Ravana’s objectifying discourse. By asserting her own narrative—even in the face of coercive pressures—Sita reclaims her agency and constructs a multifaceted identity that subverts the dominant image of women as mere objects of desire or honor.

Germaine Greer often critiques how women are burdened with upholding moral virtue in patriarchal societies. Sita’s obsessive concern with chastity and honor—even in the face of trauma—mirrors this burden. Her suffering becomes a spectacle that justifies male action (Rama’s war), but her own voice remains constrained by the very ideals that oppress her. Greer would likely challenge the glorification of this suffering as noble. Greer is deeply skeptical of the “ideal woman” myth—silent, suffering, and self-sacrificing. Sita, in many retellings, embodies this ideal. But in *Sundarkanda*, her quiet resistance—refusing Ravana, enduring captivity, and choosing how she will be rescued—can also be read as subversive. A Greerian analysis might explore this tension: is Sita resisting, or is she performing the role patriarchy has scripted for her?

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” She argued that women are constructed as the “Other” in a male-defined world—defined not by what they are, but by what they lack in relation to men. From this lens, Sita’s identity is shaped entirely in relation to Rama: as wife, as possession, as symbol of his honour.

Gyatri Chakroborty Spivak’s groundbreaking essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* critiques how marginalized voices—especially colonized women—are often spoken about but rarely heard on their own terms. She warns that even well-meaning attempts to “rescue” the subaltern can erase their agency. Sita, in this context, is the subaltern. She is the moral center of the epic, yet her voice is

mediated—by Valmiki, by Rama, by Hanuman. Spivak would likely caution us against romanticizing Sita’s suffering. Instead, she’d urge us to ask: What structures silence her? Who benefits from her pain? And how can we truly hear her voice, unfiltered by patriarchal or colonial lenses?

The conversation between Mandodari and Ravana in the Sundarkanda—though brief and often overshadowed by the central Rama–Sita narrative—offers a compelling moment for feminist analysis. Mandodari, Ravana’s chief queen, emerges as a voice of reason, morality, and emotional intelligence in contrast to Ravana’s unchecked ambition and patriarchal arrogance. From a feminist lens, Mandodari represents the archetype of the wise woman whose counsel is ignored in a male-dominated world. She pleads with Ravana to return Sita and avoid destruction, not out of fear, but from a deep understanding of dharma and justice. Her voice, however, is dismissed—highlighting how women’s wisdom is often devalued in patriarchal systems. Mandodari bears the emotional weight of Ravana’s choices. She is not complicit in his actions, yet she suffers their consequences. This aligns with feminist critiques of how women are often made to carry the emotional and moral burdens of men’s decisions—expected to counsel, console, and endure, without real power to change outcomes.

Despite being queen of Lanka, Mandodari has no real agency. Her position is symbolic, not political. Feminist theorists like Gayatri Spivak might view her as a “subaltern” figure—visible yet voiceless, present yet powerless. Her warnings are prophetic, but they are not heeded, reinforcing how patriarchal authority often silences even the most rational female voices. Contemporary feminist retellings, such as Manini J. Anandani’s *Mandodari: Queen of Lanka*, attempt to reclaim Mandodari’s narrative. These works explore her inner world, her pain, and her strength, portraying her not as a passive consort but as a woman of depth and conviction who resists the moral decay around her. Mandodari’s conversation with Ravana is a poignant example of how patriarchy not only silences women but also dooms itself by ignoring them. Her voice—rational, ethical, and compassionate—is the one that could have saved Lanka, had it been heard.

A feminist analysis of the Sundarkanda reveals that beneath its heroic and devotional surface lies a complex web of female voices—each negotiating power,

morality, and agency within a deeply patriarchal cosmos. Far from being passive figures, Sursa, Lankini, Trijata, Sita and Mandodari embody diverse expressions of feminine strength, resistance, and wisdom. Sursa, the divine sea-serpent, challenges Hanuman not to obstruct him but to test his wit and resolve. She is autonomous, commanding, and unbound by patriarchal expectations. Lankini, the guardian of Lanka, undergoes a moral transformation after her encounter with Hanuman. Her transformation—from enforcer of Ravana's rule to a supporter of dharma—can be read as a metaphor for the awakening of feminine conscience. Trijata, a rakshasi who dreams of Sita's vindication, subverts her demonic identity to become a voice of empathy and solidarity. Sita, often idealized as the epitome of virtue, emerges here as a woman of moral clarity and quiet defiance. Mandodari, the queen whose rational counsel is ignored, represents the silenced conscience of Lanka. Together, these women form a counter-narrative to the dominant heroic arc. They are not merely symbols or side characters—they are agents of wisdom, resistance, and transformation. A feminist lens reveals that Sundarkanda is not just a tale of masculine valor, but also a story of women who endure, advise, challenge, and transcend.

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