

like pregnancy, childbirth (Mandodari's description), maternal feelings... the woman's desolation and desperation at being neglected, worship of local goddesses... and the performance of religious rituals. Chandrabati even uses *bratakatha*-style formulaic language when describing Sita's ritualistic performances...

As narrators, Sita and Chandrabati differ in that one is a character, the other is an outsider... Sita is an ideal representation of the dominant ideology but Chandrabati is a **dissenter**. She openly questions, challenges and punctures the ideology of her time in her personal intrusions, and also in her selection of episodes, depth of detail and silences. But, she does not criticize Sita for acting according to the dominant ideology.

... In Indian epics the epic battle is between good and evil, and in a patriarchal system (which produces the epic) both are represented by male characters. In *Chandrabati Ramayana* also, there is this war of good and evil – but both are represented by women, Laksmi and Alaksmi, Sita and Kukuya.

Chandrabati Ramayana is what we call a silenced text – a poor literary



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three heads –

- i) Text
- ii) Narrative techniques
- iii) Insights

Once we have completed our analysis, you will be able to understand the importance of woman-speak and how a woman approaches and interprets her life and its problems differently. We have with us a text that deals with and narrates Sita's entire life span – her *Baromasi* (a Hindi term which literally translates into *barah mahina*, i.e. twelve months – which represents a life cycle, each season representing a stage of life) – telling us about her happiness, sorrows and her eventual tragic death. You will find it interesting to see that war, and public appearance and affairs, which matter enormously in a male-centric society are treated very casually here. Even the people who are addressed and the way they are spoken to is remarkably different from the regular forms of social intercourse one finds in Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

Valmiki's *Ramayana* begins with *janmalila* – an entire section devoted to Rama's birth. Chandrabati departs from this tradition to begin her epic by devoting its first six sections to describing Sita's birth. Sita is born as an incarnation of Goddess Laxmi to fulfil a divine prophecy. She comes into this world to bring Ravana's end. She, not Rama, thus becomes the protagonist. In Valmiki, Sita is found abandoned in the fields by Raja Janak. However, in Chandrabati, Sita is Mandodari's offspring and has no father. *Chandrabati Ramayana* paints for us a Ravana who is dissolute, tyrannical, and over-ambitious because of Brahma's boon.

Activity 4

How does Sita replace Valmiki's Rama in *Chandrabati Ramayana*?

Ravana murders sages and collects their blood in a box as poison with which to end the immortality of the gods. He abducts beautiful women and spends time with them, completely neglecting his wife, Mandodari. Out of extreme sorrow, Mandodari drinks this potent potion to end her life and miseries. But in a dramatic twist, instead of dying, she gives birth to Sita in the form of an egg. Sita is thus conceived out of the blood of ascetics who had been brutally murdered and the agony of a much neglected and suffering Mandodari. When Mandodari gets to know that Ravana is out to destroy the egg, she puts it into a golden casket and makes Ravana throw it out of her castle window into the ocean. The egg floats across the Bay of Bengal. Ravana's threatening an innocent life seals his damnation. What happens to the egg? Does it get broken? No. It is found by Madhab Jalia, a poor and honest fisherman. His religious wife, Sata performs holy rites and receives the egg worshipfully, which pleases Goddess Lakshmi, who blesses the couple with wealth and prosperity. Lakshmi visits Sata in a dream and asks her to deliver the egg to King Janak's wife. Sata goes to the Queen and gives her the egg, requesting the Queen to name the child, Sita, as her namesake. Her wish is granted and the new born is named Sita – a derivative of Sata. Her conception and birth are as befitting a traditional male hero. Chandrabati's Sita's miraculous and divinely ordained birth without a male authoritative figure makes her one of the earliest radical feminists.

Activity 5

What is the importance of the character Madhab Jalia in *Chandrabati Ramayana*?

Chandrabati devotes only two comparatively shorter, later sections to the birth of Rama, his three brothers and one sister, the evil Kukuya who has the Bengali (and Sanskrit) term for evil (ku) pronounced twice in her name. The heroic code is subtly defied and re-written in *Chandrabati Ramayana*. Traditionally, epics are regulated by a heroic code which demands that the central character should be a man who is virtuous and masculine, and has martial prowess. He should uphold the dominant patriarchal social code of conduct. Chandrabati speaks up in her own person to denounce patriarchal ideology: Sita takes the centre stage with a supernatural birth generally reserved for heroes.

In Book II, we find that Sita has returned from her exile and subsequent abduction by Ravana, and is in her married home. In a flashback sequence, she recalls her entire life from her childhood to her life during her exile accompanied by her

husband, and her loneliness in Lanka. It is very interesting that the thrust of this book is not on Rama's heroic exploits but Sita's emotions. Rama's achievements – the breaking of Haradhan and the entire epic battle are mentioned briefly while the epic actions are referred to through dream sequences. Sita, however, has much to say about her relationship with Rama. Sita's pregnancy and her abandonment, her giving birth to their children, her and death or entry into Mother Earth to end her experience of injustice are described in detail. We have descriptions of exclusively feminine experiences like Sita's yearning to chew burnt clay during her pregnancy.

Activity 6

How does shifting the focus from Rama to Sita in *Chandrabati Ramayana* alter the storyline?

Apparently, the original edition of *Chandrabati* ends here. However, we have a second edition which is in all probability an interpolation by male writers. We have the entry of Lakshmana, a representative patriarchal figure in Book III. He praises Rama's heroism on which *Chandrabati Ramayana* had remained silent so far. The text gets a patriarchal slant. Male characters take centre stage: we have the heroism of Lava, Kush and Hanuman; the ascetics Vashistha and Valmiki appear in their full Brahminical splendour.

1.5 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Chandrabati Ramayana has a narrative sequence in which the speakers change from book to book, as does the mode of address to its audience and readers. The narrator of Book I is Chandrabati while the narrator of Book II is Sita herself. These two books are women-centric – they are written by women and articulated by women to an audience comprising women. The form of address is overwhelmingly, 'shuno skhijana' (listen girlfriends). Sita's confidantes are her close women friends with whom she shares her experiences. Typical women-centric ways, like *bratakatha*-style language, i.e. narratives of fasting are used here.

In later editions and in Book III, patriarchal authoritative voices take over. In all probability, the poem had become a property of the bards of East Bengal long ago and was sung to a mixed audience. The modes of address change: 'shuno skhijana' is replaced by 'shuno sabhajana' (listen, members of the court) and 'shunu sarbajana'. The tone shifts from intimate and emotional to public and celebratory.

It is interesting to note that Chandrabati remains critical of the dominant male ideology. At times she directly addresses the characters and shows her annoyance at their behaviour which brings sorrow into Sita's life. However, Chandrabati does not criticize her heroine, Sita for acting in accordance to the very same dominant ideology; Sita is celebrated because she follows this ideology unquestioningly.

1.6 INSIGHTS

Chandrabati Ramayana is undeniably an exciting text which helps readers to relate to the pain of women, and understand that every text has an authoritative

voice against which many dissenting voices rise. These dissenting voices create alternative text(s) which help maintain an ongoing discourse on ethics and value-systems. In a society which is patriarchal, it is the man and his supporters who call the shots. Here, literary works do not provide any space for woman-speak. It does not surprise us that it was only as recently as the sixteenth century that a woman-oriented *Ramayana* was written.

Chandrabati Ramayana is beyond doubt about Sita – her life, her problems and her personal experiences. Rama is a character in the margins. *Chandrabati Ramayana* is a 'Sitayana' – telling us about the journey of Sita's life; to call it *Ramayana* is misleading. This *Ramayana* is a heroic epic with a difference. Traditionally, heroism translates into masculine valour and a fight between the forces of good and evil which are generally violent, even virulent. However, here evil and good are represented by inner conflict, as ethical and moral forces. There are no visible weapons, and signs of traditional warfare are absent.

Chandrabati Ramayana is of great importance as it provides us with an alternative woman-centric point of view to understand, analyse and interpret religion. In this *Ramayana* we meet an anguished and stricken Sita who suffers despite being innocent and blameless. Here, the focus is not on Rama's martial prowess or his kingly attributes but the emotional aspects of Sita's life and her very limited happiness. We are made to feel the helplessness of women who are victimised because their morality is suspect and which has to rely on the judgement of male authority that sentences and punishes. Such mindless harshness destroys a woman's peace of mind and existence forever. Chandrabati paints for us a pregnant and lonely Sita who yearns to be pampered by her husband. Through Chandrabati, we re-visit a vulnerable Sita who tells us that she has always felt lonely and without a real home since she never knew her real parentage. Unlike Valmiki's Sita eclipsed by her husband, Lord Rama, Chandrabati's Sita comes out of the margins and shares the centre stage with her friends.

Activity 7

Can the *Chandrabati Ramayana* be referred to as a *Ramayana*?

1.7 LET US SUM UP

Chandrabati Ramayana is a text that was penned by a woman who was well read and critical of her times. Through her *Ramayana*, she gives us the woman's point of view. This piece of writing was generally neglected and overlooked by critics as trivial since it did not follow the typical patriarchal pattern of narration or writing. It remained a "silenced text" for long and was only rediscovered in the 1920s. What has intrigued the critics by and large is its creative intertextuality. *Chandrabati Ramayana* borrows across various mythologies like those of Krishna, Prahlad and Shakuntala. The concepts of a biological mother, a foster mother, fisherman and a cruel male-relative are not part of the original *Ramayana*. Chandrabati has encouraged fresh perspectives on *Ramayana*. Above all, it is extremely significant that Chandrabati's Sita is named after a fisherwoman, Sata – a deliberate strategy to underscore women and defy their secondary status in society.

Undeniably, *Chandrabati Ramayana* is and will continue to be a text which will continue to engage our intellect and force us to re-assess our moral yardstick.

1.8 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Gender affects our reading and interpretation to a certain extent in the process of identification with the thoughts and feelings of the characters.

Activity 2: It is called as such as it has been largely ignored within a system of patriarchy.

Activity 3: Chandrabati often intrudes into the text and directly addresses the characters herself.

Activity 4: Sita, not Rama, is the central character who brings an end to Ravana's evil rule. She is Lakshmi's incarnation who is destined to defeat Ravana and the first sections of the book are devoted to her.

Activity 5: Madhab Jalia in Chandrabati Ramayana rescues the egg which contains Sita's life after it is thrown into the sea by Mandodari. Sita chooses the name, Sita as a derivative of her own name.

Activity 6: Valmiki's *Ramayana* is built around Rama and his public and political image as a ruler and a brave warrior. In sharp contrast, *Chandrabati Ramayana* is written from Sita's point-of-view with hardly any mention of war and kingship.

Activity 7: The central character of *Chandrabati Ramayana* is Sita, not Rama. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to call it a *Sitayana*, not *Ramayana* since it narrates the life of Sita and expresses her point-of-view.

1.9 GLOSSARY

abducted	: kidnapped
ascetic	: a holy man/sage who has given up worldly pleasures
auspicious	: holy
ballad	: a folk song that tells a story
Baromasi	: covering a period of twelve months
casket	: basket/ case
clan	: a group of closely knit families
dissenter	: a person who disagrees
exploits	: brave acts
gory	: bloody
guise	: a fake appearance
humiliation	: insult
ideology	: a set of beliefs and ideas
intertextuality	: borrowings across texts
janmalila	: story about birth
legend	: famous person or story

mediator	: a person who helps bring in an agreement between two parties
mingle	: mix
recurring	: happening again and again
soothsayer	: a person who tells the future
tactic	: method/ strategy
tyrannizing	: behaving like a cruel and heartless ruler
unabashedly	: frankly
unrequited love	: love which is not returned/ one-sided love

1.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Who was Chandrabati? What is so special about her *Ramayana*?
- 2) Who are the narrators in Book I, Book II and Book III of *Chandrabati Ramayana*? How does it impact our reading of the text?
- 3) What do you understand by 'heroic code'? To what extent is it found in *Chandrabati Ramayana*?
- 4) How is Rama in *Chandrabati Ramayana* different from in Valmiki's *Ramayana*?
- 5) Why is Sita named after Sata in *Chandrabati Ramayana*? Why is this significant?
- 6) Which Book is written from a patriarchal viewpoint? Why?
- 7) Why is the *Chandrabati Ramayana* considered a 'silenced text'?

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