

SĪTĀ VIBHŪṢITĀ: THE JEWELS FOR HER JOURNEY

The portrayal of Draupadī in the *Mahābhārata* is punctuated by consistent reference to two symbols: her garments and her hair. This was appreciated by the playwright Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa who, in one of the earliest known dramatic «recreations» of the epic story (his *Veṅṅi-saṃhāra*, probably from the early eighth century A.D.) employs six times the compound *keśāmbārākarsaṇa* (or a variant) — «the pulling of the garments and the hair» — to evoke the pivotal scene where Draupadī, wearing a single garment bloodstained from her menstrual flow, is dragged by her dishevelled hair into the gambling hall and the attempt is made to disrobe her. I have analyzed these scenes and symbols elsewhere¹, calling attention especially to the themes of purity and impurity, auspiciousness and inauspiciousness², and the manner in which Draupadī in her various roles and aspects evokes different Hindu goddesses. Thus, although she is the incarnation of Śrī and a personification of sovereignty, prosperity³, and auspiciousness, she takes on the character of such destructive and inauspicious figures as Mr̥tyu, Kālarātri, and seemingly Kālī, whose dishevelled hair is related symbolically to the *pralaya*, the «unbraiding» of the three *guṇas* at the end of the universe.

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1. See ALF HILTEBEITEL, *Draupadī's Garments*, IJ, 22 (1980), 97-112; *id.*, *Draupadī's Hair*, *Puruṣārtha* 5 (1981), pp. 179-214.

2. These two axes — purity-impurity and auspiciousness-inauspiciousness — formed the theme of the eleventh annual workshop of the Conference on Religion in South India at George Washington University, May 16-18, 1980, for which the better part of this study was prepared as part of a presentation. I wish to thank Frédérique Marglin for stimulating my research into these two related matters.

3. See ALF HILTEBEITEL, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), pp. 62-8, 96-9, 166-91.

To appreciate such a portrayal of Draupadī, it has been necessary to look beyond the *Mahābhārata* text itself to various aspects of Hindu culture where these two symbols of garments and hair are similarly treated. But one need not look too far afield to find a figure whose portrayal sheds as much light on Draupadī's as Draupadī's sheds on hers: Sītā, the heroine of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. This essay will study the contrasting depictions of these two heroines through the use of these two symbols, plus a third: jewels.

In Draupadī's case, jewels play a much less evident role than in Sītā's, but one that is certainly not negligible. On the morning after the night raid, in which Aśvatthāman and the two other remaining Kaurava warriors have terminated the hostilities at Kurukṣetra by brutally killing Draupadī's sleeping sons and brothers, Draupadī vows to sit in the pose of *prāya* (« going forth unto death ») until she receives the « natural born jewel » (*maṇiṃ sarajam*; *Mbh.* 10.11.20; 16.21)⁴ from Aśvatthāman's head. Only when she can place it on her head, she says, will she continue to live. The nature of this jewel is never made clear, other than that it is « divine » (*divya*; 16.25), and it is curious that it is never mentioned in the accounts of Aśvatthāman's birth. One wonders, however, whether Draupadī intends to wear it as a *cūdāmaṇi*, a « crest jewel », about which more will be said. In any case, Draupadī's husbands do succeed in humiliating Aśvatthāman and bringing the jewel to her. But rather surprisingly, when she accepts the jewel she asks that it be placed on Yudhiṣṭhira's head rather than her own. There it shines resplendently like the moon atop a mountain (15.33), probably a reference to its being placed atop his diadem. The passage thus seems to hint at a post-war crowning ritual that might involve the rebraiding of Draupadī's hair, which she seems already in the epic to have worn dishevelled since the episode at the dice match⁵. But no such scene is described, and the jewel is deferred to Yudhiṣṭhira. Quite possibly the poets are suggesting that Draupadī — henceforth barren, her sons and brothers slain — must continue to renounce her auspicious aspect.

In treating the contrasting figure of Sītā, this essay will draw primarily from the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*. It should be noted, however, that the *Rāmopākhyāna* of the *Mahābhārata* employs these same symbols that we are considering, but occasionally with very different twists. Irrespective of questions of temporal priority, it is perhaps best to regard the *Rāmopākhyāna* simply as the *Mahābhārata* poets' version of the Rāma tale. In a certain sense, it belongs to the *Mahābhārata*. Indeed, Mārkaṇḍeya tells about Sītā in the *Rāmopākhyāna* to emphasize *similarities* between her tribulations and Draupadī's (*Mbh.* 3.257.5-8; 276.9-10). Not surprisingly, therefore, his Sītā is more like Draupadī

4. *Mahābhārata* citations are from the Poona Critical Edition.

5. See HILTEBEITEL, *Draupadī's Hair*.

than Vālmīki's⁶. It is thus Vālmīki whose Sītā is Draupadī's significant counterpart, just as it is his *Rāmāyaṇa* which must be studied thoroughly in its relation to the *Mahābhārata*, each text as a whole. This essay is but a small effort in that direction.

When Sītā prepares to go into the forest with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, her depiction is much the reverse of Draupadī's at the time of her forest-entry. Whereas Draupadī wears dishevelled hair and a blood-stained garment into a symbolic realm of death (see *Mbh.* 2.71.21), where her dishevelment in particular carries the connotation of widowhood (as the epic indicates, the Pāṇḍavas are symbolically dead to her), Sītā embarks for the forest with all the finery of a *sumāṅgalī*, an « auspicious » married woman. While Draupadī dons bark and other ascetic attire without fanfare (3.226.20; 227.10), such ascetic garb is shown to be utterly inappropriate for Sītā. After Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa remove their courtly garments and don the bark which Kaikeyī insolently hands them, Sītā, still dressed in silk (*kauseyavāsīnī*; *Rām.* 2.33.9⁷), has to ask Rāma how the forest ascetics put on their bark attire. And after seeing her fumble about vainly trying to put hers on, Rāma helps her fix the bark *over* her silk (33.12)! It is thus no more than a facade. Further, just before their departure, Daśaratha sees to it that she has enough jewels and garments to last her through her fourteen years of banishment; thus he orders Sumantra: « Bring quickly for Vaidehī very costly garments and choice jewels (*vāsāṃsi ca mahārḥaṇi bhūṣaṇāni varāni ca*), enough for the count of those years » (34.15). And upon Sumantra's quick return, « The well-born (or beautiful) Vaidehī, about to set forth into the forest, adorned her well-born (or beautiful) limbs with those beautiful adornments. Thus beautifully adorned, Vaidehī illuminated the palace as the sun's splendor at the time of its radiant rising illumines the sky » (*sā sujātā sujātāni vaidehī prasthitā vanam / bhūṣayāmāsa gātrāni tairvicitairvibhūṣaṇaiḥ // vyarājayata vaidehī veśma tatsuvibhūṣitā / udvato 'mśumataḥ kāle khaṃ prabheva vivasvataḥ*; 34.17-18). Rather than a disrobing, we thus have here what might be called a robing to excess. And this trend is developed further when, during the early part of their forest wanderings, Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa pass through the hermitage of Atri. There the latter's wife Anusūyā bestows upon Sītā more garments and jewels for her to wear in the forest, as well as a garland and perfume, none of which will ever fade or be tarnished (2.110.17-20; 111.11.13). Sītā's flowers garlands, and jewels are the first thing Rāma will see when he begins to look for her after Rāvaṇa abducts her (3.60.16-17 and 24). Indeed, concerning flowers, when she is abducted they fall from her head (*uttamāṅgacyutā*; 3.50.24), and it is suggested by the commentators Govindarāja and Nageśa Bhaṭṭa that

6. The same rule applies to Bṛhadāśva's Damayantī in the *Mahābhārata's Nalopākhyāna*; like Draupadī, Damayantī assumes the disguise of a Sairandhrī (hair-dresser-chambermaid).

7. *Rāmāyaṇa* citations are from the Baroda Critical Edition.

Rāma would gather them for Sītā to fix in her hair (3.60.17 and notes; 3.50.24 and notes). This would be a further indication that during their period together in the forest she is in every way a *sumāṅgalī*, identified by these auspicious symbols down to the last and smallest detail. Thus, for instance, when Bharata seeks out Rāma in the forest to return the kingdom to him, he knows where Sītā has been by the particles of gold (*kanakabindavaḥ*) and threads of silk (*kauśeyatantavaḥ*) which Sītā has left behind on the ground (2.82.13-14).

This idyll is drastically changed when Sītā is abducted by Rāvaṇa. This, of course, occurs while Rāma has been lured away due to Sītā's fascination for a jewelled, multicolored deer! But it should be noted that the symbols of auspiciousness remain relatively constant, though of diminishing quantity. When Rāvaṇa seizes her, it is by the hair — as with Draupadī — and by the thigh (3.47.16; cf. 50.8: a second time by the hair alone). There is of course no seizure of garments, no disrobing, and she is not menstruating. When she is taken off, her saree is described variously, usually as made of yellow silk (*pītakauśeyavāsini*; 44.12; 50.13-16), though once as red (*raktāmbara*; 47.9). Some of her jewels fall to the ground « flashing like fire », or « with a blaze of light like the Ganges falling from heaven » (50.25-31). But she also uses them to mark the path of her capture, letting some of them drop, along with her « auspicious » (*śubha*) yellow or « goldsheened » upper garment (*uttarīya*; see 5.13.43: *pītaṃ kanakapaṭṭābham... śubham*; 3.52.2: *kauśeyam kanakaprabham*; 3.50.16, etc.), which she drops on Mount Ṛṣyamūka where she sees Sugrīva, Hanumān, and their monkey companions in banishment from the monkey city of Kiṣkindhā. Rāma will of course recognize this *uttariya* and the « auspicious » (*śubha*) jewels when they are shown to him by Sugrīva at Ṛṣyamūka. Thus his quest for Sītā will be able to continue (4.6.9).

While she is held captive in Lankā, Rāvaṇa several times offers her new robes and jewels to make up for those she has lost (3.53.28; 5.18.9-11). These, of course, she refuses. Finally, when Hanumān locates her there, her pitiful condition is indicated most specifically by the diminution of these auspicious assets. Hanumān sees her essentially « unadorned » (*analamkṛtām*; 5.13.37), though he observes some jewelry darkened from long use (*śyāmāni cirayuktatvāt*; 41) still remaining, which Rāma had said would identify her. She is thus, as he puts it most poignantly and ornately, « deprived of the finest jewels, bejewelled solely by her devotion to her husband » (*bhūṣaṇair uttamair hīnām bhartṛvāsalyabhūṣitām*; 5.15.21). And the robe she wears, though still retaining the yellow-gold color of the one she had dropped (13.43), is « exceedingly soiled » (*kliṣṭavattaram*; 13.45; cf. 13.20).

Most significantly, however, Hanumān's visit to Sītā is the occasion for the exchange of jewels that lets Sītā know that Rāma knows of her whereabouts, and Rāma know that Sītā has been found. Hanumān gives

Sītā Rāma's signet ring (5.34.2). Most interesting, however, is the jewel which Sītā gives to Hanumān to take to Rāma. It is apparently alluded to in a scene just before Hanumān descends from the *śimśapā* tree to introduce himself to Sītā. Watching her from above, the monkey emissary sees her at her moment of deepest despair. « Burning with grief, reflecting in various ways, Sītā then, having seized the fillet that tied her braid, said: " Having swiftly hung myself with this fillet for my braid, I will go to the presence of Yama " » (*śokābhītaptā bahudhā vicintya / sītātha veṇyudgrathanam grhitvā // udbadhya veṇyudgrathanena śīghram / ahaṃ gamiṣyāmi yamasya mūlam*; 5.26.17). But suddenly, as she takes hold of a branch of the *śimśapā*, her thoughts turn to Rāma and a rash of auspicious omens overwhelms her, removing her despair (26.18-20 and 27). This braid fillet or cord (*veṇyudgrathanam*) is connected with the jewel which Sītā will hand over to Hanumān for Rāma. This « auspicious » and « divine » (*śubha, śrīman, divya*) jewel is Sītā's *cūḍāmaṇi* (5.36.52; 63.31). It was given to Sītā by her father Janaka when she was Rāma's bride (*vadhūkāle*; 5.64.4), and it had been given to Janaka by Indra once when the god was pleased during a *yajna* (64.5). Discarding all her other jewels, Sītā has kept it « very well protected » (*suparirakṣita*; 38.7) or « carefully protected » (*yatnarakṣita*; 63.21) in her saree (in its waistfold?), from which she « releases » it (*vastragatam muktivā*, 36.52; *muktivā vastrād*, 65.30) to give to Hanumān. It is apparently a pearl, for it is « born from the waters » (*vārisambhava*, 63.22; *jalasambhūta*, 64.5). Now, despite Hari Prasad Shastri, whose translation has Sītā wear this *cūḍāmaṇi* on her forehead (where indeed one might think a « crest jewel » would be)⁸, Sītā's most treasured ornament is worn at the point where she clasps her hair in back, or better on top, in what would seem to conform for a woman to the *cūḍā* of a man: the single lock at the crown of the head left after the ceremony of tonsure (*cūḍākarana, cūḍākarman*). Thus when Rāma sees the jewel brought back by Hanumān, he recalls how Sītā wore it as a bride « fastened to her head in such a way that it shone » (*baddham adhikam mūrdhni śobhate*; 64.4). And as Hanumān says with greater precision, recalling the moment of the jewel's transfer: « Having examined each direction, releasing it from her garment, Sītā gave me this excellent jewel fit for being fastened (or, for the fillet) around her braid » (*sābhivīkṣya diśaḥ sarvā veṇyudgrathanamuttamam / muktivā vastrāddadau mahyaṃ maṇimetam mahābala*; 65.30). The « crest jewel » is thus *veṇyudgrathanam*, fit for tying around the *veṇī*, the same term used nominally for the « fillet for her braid » with which she has just considered hanging herself.

8. Hari Prasad Shastri, trans., *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, 3 vols. (London: Shanti Sadan, 1962-70), vol. 2, p. 500.

Sītā's trials, however, are not over with the transfer of this jewel. As she tells Hanumān (38.10), and as Hanumān tells Rāma (63.21), once she has given up this *cūḍāmaṇi* she will live but a month. It is thus the last vestige and symbol of her auspiciousness, and more particularly of her status as a *sumāṅgalī*. It is also the link between the two other most prominent symbols of this status: it is hidden in her « exceedingly soiled » but still auspicious yellow saree; and it is the jewel which she fastens at the top of her *veṇī*, her braid. Yet the term « braid » is misleading. During the period that she is held captive by Rāvaṇa, Sītā does not actually « braid » her hair in the conventional sense. Ordinarily a *sumāṅgalī* braids her hair in the three plait style known as the *triveṇī*, or the five-plaited *pañcaveṇī*. But Sītā wears hers in an *ekaveṇī* (5.18.8; 55.7; 57.12, etc.)⁹, which one might translate as a single-plait braid. Actually, the *ekaveṇī* is a single mass of hair tied or clasped once in the back of the head and from there left free to flow. It is thus more of a pony tail than a braid. But it is the style of hair stipulated for the *virahinī*, the woman separated from her husband, as Sītā is during this period from Rāma. The most important implication of these facts is that the *ekaveṇī* is worn in anticipation of the husband's return, « whereupon the woman would untie the single mass and rearrange the hair properly with appropriate decorations »¹⁰. One may thus suppose that Sītā has kept this jewel hidden in her saree in the hope that when she reunites with Rāma, she will refix it to her hair-band.

In handing the *cūḍāmaṇi* over to Hanumān with the warning that she will live but a month more without it, Sītā thus indicates that her status as a *sumāṅgalī* has nearly reached its end. Both she and Draupadī thus tell their husbands they will soon die should they not receive certain jewels. Thereby they each spur their husbands to acts of revenge, Draupadī by vowing and Sītā by predicting her demise should the revenge not be exacted. No longer retaining in her saree the jewel with which she hopes to refasten her *veṇī*, Sītā foresees the moment when her hair will be completely loose, no longer that of a *virahinī* awaiting her lord's return but a woman facing death, and essentially a widow. Indeed, she anticipates such a moment symbolically when she considers unfastening her *ekaveṇī* and hanging herself with the cord. She thus holds in reserve the image of the dishevelled heroine, the woman like Draupadī. But it is an image which she never actually takes on.

It is thus significant that in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sītā must remain an auspicious woman throughout, or at least through the periods

9. See HILTEBEITEL, *Draupadī's Hair*, nn. 21-23; other heroines of Sanskrit literature who wear an *ekaveṇī* are Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā and the yakṣa's wife in his *Meghadūta*.

10. A. B. Gajendragadkar, trans. and ed., *The Veṇīsaṃhāra of Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa* (1933; 3rd. ed. Bombay: New and Second Hand Bookstall, n.d.), Part 3, p. 3.

of forest banishment and captivity¹¹. Here Vālmīki's Sītā is decidedly different from the *Rāmopākhyāna*'s. In the latter text, when Rāma first sees Sītā after he has defeated Rāvaṇa, she is « drawn with grief, all her limbs covered with dirt, her hair matted, wearing a black robe » (*śokakarśitām malopacitasarvāṅgīṃ jaṭilāṃ kṛṣṇavāsasam*; *Mbh.* 3.275.9). For the *Mahābhārata* poets, she is thus like Draupadī¹². Here, it is upon seeing Sītā in this defiled condition that Rāma repudiates her, thinking she had been touched by Rāvaṇa (10-11). On the contrary, in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* when she appears before Rāma at the end of her period of captivity it is, as Rāma demands, only after she has washed her hair and put on her auspicious finery (*Rām.* 6.102.7-13). And he repudiates her only to « test » her. It is as if her auspiciousness is more important to Vālmīki than her purity which, despite the attestation by Agni, is eventually questioned by the populace of Ayodhyā. This is decidedly different from Draupadī, who assumes both inauspicious and impure aspects by choice (in her « vows » and disguises), but whose essential purity — once it has been attested to by the miraculous restoration of her sarees — can never be seriously questioned again¹³.

Though it is clearly important to the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* that Sītā be so consistently and elaborately portrayed as the ideal *sumāṅgalī*, it is unlikely that the interest is simply domestic, decorative, or cosmetic. Like Draupadī, Sītā is depicted in images that represent certain aspects of the Hindu goddess in her iconography, cult, and mythology. Unlike Draupadī, in whom the *Mahābhārata* poets present an image of the goddess in her totality, Sītā is most decisively representative of the auspiciousness of Śrī (with whom she is frequently compared) and of the earth goddess Bhūdevī (from whom she is born and into whom she disappears at death). It is certainly no accident that she thus represents a combination of the two wives of Viṣṇu, of whom Rāma is the epic's primary incarnation. To be sure, Draupadī also personifies Śrī and Bhūdevī in the *Mahābhārata*, but under different aspects. Whereas Sītā remains united with Rāma, the incarnation of Viṣṇu, Draupadī maintains an intriguingly distanced relation with Kṛṣṇa, Viṣṇu's *Mahābhārata* incarnation. She is rather, as representative also of such figures as Mṛtyu, Kālarātri, and Kālī, allied with the destructive role of Śiva¹⁴. Thus whereas Draupadī's ascetic appearance and particularly her dishevelment are, as I have argued elsewhere, images of the *pralaya*, the dissolution of the three worlds of earth, atmosphere, and heaven, Sītā's

11. She wears the brownish-red garment (*kāṣāya*) of the widow or renunciant when she enters the earth at her death (7.88.9).

12. Draupadī wears « a single large black very dirty garment » (*vasaśca paridhāyaikīm kṛṣṇaṃ sumalināṃ mahat*; *Mbh.* 4.8.2) when she disguises herself as a Sairandhri (see n. 6) to enter the city of king Virāṭa.

13. See HILTEBEITEL, *Draupadī's Garments*, pp. 97-101.

14. See HILTEBEITEL, *Draupadī's Hair*, and *id.*, *Śiva, the Goddess, and the Disguises of the Pāṇdavas and Draupadī*, HR, 20 (1980), pp. 147-74.

retention of her *sumangalī* status seems to have an opposed connotation. Indeed, the *cūḍāmaṇi* that she exchanges with Rāma indicates that the tenuous ties between Viṣṇu (Rāma) and the earth (Sītā) are never « dissolved » in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, no matter how separate they may become. In fact, the earth is herself, like Sītā, referred to as *ekaveṇīdharā* (*Hari-vaṃśa* 2.40.43)¹⁵ — the wearer of an *ekaveṇī* — when, under misrule, she is temporarily unprotected by dharmic kings, and thus separated from them. Accordingly, the siege of Lankā is less a *pralaya*-like battle (like the *Mahābhārata* war) than the overthrow of an otherworldly, indeed non-three-worldly kingdom in which Sītā, the heroine who represents the earth's prosperity, is held captive. The details in the *Rāmāyaṇa* that would sustain such an interpretation must be pursued elsewhere, but it is fitting to note here that Sītā is portrayed remarkably like the Sumerian Inanna and the Akkadian Ishtar in the myths of these goddesses' descents into the nether world. Dispossessed of different jewels and finally of their garments at each of the underworld's seven gates, the two goddesses arrive naked in the nether world while on earth all lies infertile. The first jewel which each loses and the last which each regains on her return journey is the crown¹⁶. It is likely that Sītā's jewels relate to similar cosmological conceptions, with a major difference. The *cūḍāmaṇi* pearl — born from the water like the goddess Śrī and the earth herself — is, as a symbol of the earth, not only never relinquished, but transmitted by Hanumān (son of Vāyu, the Wind) to the hands of Lord Rāma.

15. Chitrashala Press Edition, Ramachandra Kinjawadekar, ed.

16. See S. N. Kramer, trans., *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World*, and E. A. Speiser, trans., *Descent of Ishtar to the Nether World*, in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (2nd. ed.,; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), pp. 52-7 and 106-9. Cf. also HILTBETTEL, *Draupadī's Garments*, p. 104.