Must We Imagine Sītā Happy?

**Bhushita Vasistha*

Abstract: This paper examines the phenomenon of "elite outcasts" within utopian frameworks through a comparative analysis of Sītā, Oscar Wilde, and Leon Trotsky—figures who occupied the nucleus of power before their eventual banishment. Unlike subaltern dissenters, these outcasts speak the vocabulary of the regime. However, unlike Wilde and Trotsky, Sītā's intellectual heritage has been undermined due to the tacit prejudice of the society that refuses to take the ideas produced from the sphere of reproductive labor seriously. Building on this critique, the paper reclaims Sītā from her conventional role as a passive wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. Instead, the paper situates her as a critical thinker, who articulates complex understanding of labour, justice and retribution. Within the deterministic-fatalistic framework of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sītā emerges as a free-thinking agent, who destabilizes the preconceived by introducing the subversive. The paper parallels Sītā's journey with Albert Camus' Sisyphus (*Myth of Sisyphus*), and places her in dialogue with Wilde and Trotsky, illuminating how elite dissenters, even in defeat, embody the radical freedom: of living without a master, and enjoying the rare category of happiness reserved for who place their faith in themselves.

Keywords: *Reproductive Labor, Restorative Justice, Elite Outcasts, Sītā, Myth of Sisyphus, Rāmāyaṇa*

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to bring Albert Camus' *the Myth of Sisyphus* into dialogue with *the Rāmāyaṇa* (7th C.)—the oldest Hindu epic—searching the relationship between, Agency, Free Will, and Purposeful Suffering. Rāma, the eponymous hero, who gives the book its title, is considered as one of the ten Hindu incarnations or *daśāvatāra,* who incarnate on the earthly plane to maintain cosmic order and righteousness. Not surprisingly therefore, this cosmic order is highly deterministic and fatalistic. However, within the framework of this predetermined world order,

emerges the character of Sītā, who is prophesied to marry a heroic king and become a "very fortunate"[i] woman. However, she ends up as a "long-suffering figure"[ii], who spends most of her life in either exile, abduction or abandonment, and eventually chooses to self-exit rather than reunite with her husband.

Most interpretations of Sītā cast her as a non-agentic, passive victim of patriarchy. The construal of the feminine as the locus of passivity is an archaic assumption that, unfortunately, persists into the present. As Tara Knight (2017, p. xi) observes, the germ of this gender duality can be found well-documented in Freud's writings. In his 1933 lecture "Femininity," Freud rejects the notion that femininity is *inherently* passive, noting that the female body undergoes numerous active processes—such as pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. Yet, Freud simultaneously re-inscribes passivity at the symbolic level, arguing that the vitality exhibited by young girls does not develop into intellectual or political activity in adulthood.

The White Collar Sītā, The Blue Collar Sītā

Sītā's story is remarkable because it inverses the trope of fairy tales. Unlike, say, for example, Cinderella, who rises from the obscure ranks to become a princess and the object of male desire, Sītā moves in the opposite direction: she begins as a princess, fully embedded in the fabric of patriarchy, and evolves into a radical outcast. This is probably why, despite being the very first female literary protagonist in the Southeast Asian epic tradition, her appeal surpasses any other mythical heroines written since in the psyche of the Indian Everyman[iii]. Interestingly, enough, Sītā's personality is paradoxical enough to provide impetus to the followers of both normative patriarchy and radical feminists.

To understand this paradox, it will be helpful to recall an episode from *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*[iv] (Chapter 4, Brāhmaṇa 5), which distinguishes between two archetypes of women: the *brāhmavādinī*, or truth-seeking renunciant (as in Maitreyī), and the *strīprājñā*, the wise householder (as in Kātyāyanī). Feminist discourse has often viewed these as binary. Yet one folklore reimagines the tale of *brāhmavādinī* and *strīprājñā* through the lens of Sītā coalescing both binaries into a composite personality that Sītā embodied (Pattanaik, p 65).

According to the folklore, that merges narratives from the *Upaniṣads* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the sage Yājñavalkya was granted herds of cattle by King Videha, father of Sītā, in recognition of his intellectual prowess. Upon returning home, Yājñavalkya summoned his wives, Maitreyī and

Kātyāyanī, to divide the cattle between themselves. Sītā, who is said to have grown up amidst the Vedāntic scholars, accompanied Yājñavalkya and was present during the exchange. Maitreyī declined the cattle, expressing instead her desire for knowledge that could lead to liberation. Kātyāyanī, by contrast, reflected that even the wise require sustenance, and argued that food - the gross - ultimately sustains consciousness - the subtle. To perceive a duality between the two, she suggested, is itself ignorance. Unlike Maitreyī, who chose to accompany her husband into the forest for the life of austerity, Kātyāyanī stayed back to grow crops, rear the cattle and perform the sacred duty of the householder that nurtured the body, the material, so the subtle may prosper.

Sītā, as the daughter of the great learned Videha, was familiar with Maitreyī's perspective. But Kātyāyanī's perspective helped her understand the role her mother Sunaina, the chef to the entourage of visiting scholars, played in preserving the tradition of knowledge. She came to recognize that the sophisticated philosophical discussions within the palace rested upon the unseen labour of farmers who cultivated food and women who transformed it into nourishment. From this realization, she discerned that there was no intrinsic hierarchy between the pursuit of ultimate knowledge and the performance of domestic duties, as both were interdependent aspects of a single continuum.

Sītā's life and thought may be read as a reconciliation of the two archetypes symbolized by Maitreyī and Kātyāyanī. While Maitreyī represents the pursuit of liberation through renunciation and Kātyāyanī embodies the wisdom of household labour, Sītā internalized both the orientations. She recognized that philosophical reflection and spiritual discourse are inseparable from the agricultural and domestic labour that sustains them, thereby collapsing the hierarchy between the subtle and the gross. Although Sītā's life has been perceived mostly as a *strīprājñā*, being a devoted wife and a mother, she has spent most part of her life in forest, like a *brāhmavādinī,* in solitude and self-contemplation. Her life directly challenges the Freudian model that treated women's biological functions and her philosophical and intellectual pursuits as oil and water. The *brāhmavādin* way, adopted by most contemporary liberals as the way forward for women liberation subconsciously, holds bias against reproductive labour as a lesser vocation, which could be argued is, eventually, patriarchy in disguise. Sītā's intellectual life has been undervalued because of this bias that undervalues the wisdom from the sphere of reproductive labour.

Sītā: The Outcast in the Utopia

In his seminal essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Oscar Wilde postulated that the utopias, imaginary as they might be, are indispensable vestiges to understand history. By studying these aspirational spaces in each given period, we can trace the evolutionary outlines of justice, morality and ethics.[v] But Wilde thought, as soon as the utopias are realized, they lose their aspirational value. Therefore, the utopias—like Schrödinger's cat—have a dubious life. The moment they come alive is exactly the moment they die. However, *Rāmarājya*, one of the earliest utopias[vi], has defied the Wildean theory. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Rāmarājya* refers to the utopian golden age of King Rāma's reign, marked by justice, prosperity, harmony, and moral order. But unlike Plato's Republic, or Thomas Moore's Utopia, *Rāmarājya is* not just an imaginary space. It is a mythic-historical space for many Hindus or the state of perfection that "once was" and therefore could possibly be.

Vālmīki insists that *The Rāmāyaṇa* is more than fiction—he labels it as *itihāsa*[vii], - Sanskrit synonym for history. *The Rāmāyaṇa* narrates the life and trials of Rāma, the prince of Ayodhyā and incarnation of the god Viṣṇu. Banished to the forest for fourteen years due to palace intrigue, Rāma is accompanied by his wife, Sītā, and brother, Lakṣmaṇa. During their exile, Sītā is abducted by Rāvaṇa, the demon king of Laṅkā, prompting Rāma to forge alliances with monkeys and bears, and including the mighty Hanumān, to wage a monumental battle and rescue her. After her return, Rāma doubts Sītā's chastity and compels her to undergo the trial by fire (*Agni Parīkṣā*), which she passes unscathed, proving her purity. Despite this, Rāma eventually abandons Sītā due to societal pressure. Twelve years after abandoning his pregnant wife, Rāma learns of his two sons, Lava and Kuśa, who were born and raised in the forest. Unlike his father, who had four wives, Rāma remains a monogamous man, refusing to marry anyone else even in Sītā's absence. When he comes to know of his sons, *and* his wife, he requests Sītā to become his queen again. However, to placate the public, he asks Sītā to go through another trial by fire. Sītā agrees to undertake the trial under one condition—if she is proven chaste, she requests Mādhavī, the mother Earth, to receive her. Eventually, Sītā is proven innocent but instead of joining her husband, a bejeweled throne appears from inside the earth and she sits on it and exits the story[viii].

Of course, Vālmīki's "history" is different from what we today understand as history.[ix] Unlike the modern concept of history, Sanskrit literature does not use the term *itihāsa* to denote the factual documentations of genealogy or consecutive events. Metaphorically, *itihāsa* can be understood as the fractal unit of time, which replicates itself time and again. It is important to

notice here that modern history is a linear and unidirectional phenomenon, however, the Vedic and Puranic cosmology imagines time as a cyclical occurrence, thus, *itihāsa* is the thematic fractal that recurs eternally. By the virtue of its cyclical nature, *itihāsa* serves a dual purpose—(i) to describe what happened in the past, and (ii) to prepare the audience/readers for what will happen again. *Rāmarājya*, therefore, is not just the millennia-long utopia that unfolded during Rāma's reign but also the blueprint for the future. It is the DNA that reproduces social, political, religious, spiritual and judicial outlines for the times to come.

Not surprisingly, the leaders from Gandhi to Modi, have sought to legitimize their ideas by recalling *Rāmarājya*. In 1929 edition of his weekly *Young India* column, Gandhi wrote:

> By RĀMARAJYA I do not mean Hindu Raj. I mean by Rāmarajya Divine Raj, the Kingdom of God. For me Rāma and Rahim are one and the same deity. I acknowledge no other God but the one God of truth and righteousness. Whether Rāma of my imagination ever lived or not on this earth, the ancient ideal of Rāmarajya is undoubtedly one of true democracy in which the meanest citizen could be sure of swift justice without an elaborate and costly procedure. Even the dog is described by the poet to have received justice under Rāmarajya. (Goldman, p, 42).

Indeed, the term *Rāmarājya* has transcended its primary scope and become a metonym for utopia. However, in this ideal state, where even the dog is said to have received justice, there are several characters in *The Rāmāyaṇa*, who destabilize the tall claims of *Rāmarājya* and expose its logical bankruptcy. The first character is Vālin, the monkey king, who is unethically murdered by Rāma and the second one, of course, is Sītā, his wife. Then there is Śambūka, the "low-caste" Śūdra, who is decapitated ruthlessly by Rāma because he was trying to transgress his caste-roles by performing austerities to acquire higher knowledge.

Society reproduces its material conditions of existence through what Althusser terms the *ideological state apparatuses*—the religious, judicial, and philosophical discourses that naturalize and legitimize the status quo (Althusser, 143). Once codified in the form of systems of reward and retribution, these apparatuses enable social regulation to function with a degree of automatism: infractions no longer require individualized scrutiny, since discipline is internalized and self-reproducing. It is exactly this lineage that enabled Rāma to kill more than fourteen thousand Rākṣasas (demons) in Daṇḍaka forest during their exile, without feeling any pang of guilt nor the

need to question his personal ethics nor morality in the face of the massacre. Rāma's identification with the *ideological state apparatuses* is so total that never once he expresses the doubt Sītā vocalizes time and again.

In the ninth Canto of *Araṇya Kāṇḍa*, Sītā first warns Rāmā against being inebriated by his power:

तृतीयम्   यद्   इदम्   रौद्रम्   परप्राणअभिहिंसनम् |
निर्वैरम् क्रियते मोहात् तत् च ते समुपस्थितम् ||

Of three kinds of impulses engendered by delusion, it seems the third, and the most dangerous impulse—the impulse to hurt others without any provocation, has taken hold of you. (3.9.9)

Then Sītā goes on to recount the story of a yesteryear hermit, who led a serene and solitary life in a beautiful forest. One day Indra, the king of gods, became envious of the serenity the renunciate enjoyed and decided to disturb his peace. So, he presented himself as a travelling warrior in the hermitage. The ascetic received the guest with great delight. At the end of their meeting, Indra, disguised as a warrior, left his beautiful sword as a gift. The hermit accepted the gift and thereafter carried it everywhere he went, to safeguard it. Over the period, just as fuel aggravates the fire, the proximity of the weapon aggravated cruelty in the heart of the hermit. Simply because he had a weapon at his disposal, his propensity to turn his anger into violence actualized and he ended up killing many. And this is how Indra kindled cruelty in the heart of a hermit. Citing the story, Sītā warns Rāmā against his violent tendencies that spring from his material condition—a prince, who is allowed to carry the weapon of destruction and use them at his disposal without external supervision.

Most of the characters who die at the hands of Rāma are not given the opportunity to question him, or appeal to any justice. Vālin is a brilliant exception, whose story we will soon discuss at length. However, of all victims of Rāmarājya, ideologically, Sītā is the most vocal critic. But if Sītā was as eloquent when it came to defending the wrongfully massacred demons, why did she not defend herself when Rāma subjected her to the humiliating trial to prove her chastity? To proceed toward that question, first of all, we need to understand Rāmā's dialogue with Vālin. Vālin

was a monkey king, who was unfairly murdered by Rāmā at the behest of Sugrīva, his brother. In return, Sugrīva promised to help Rāmā to find the whereabouts of his abducted wife Sītā. Rāmā hunted Vālin in the feral manner, striking him from behind, which was against the rule of warfare.

In one of the most poignant chapters in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Vālin questions Rāmā's ethics:

राम   राघव   कुले   जातो   धर्मवान्   इति   विश्रुतः   ।

अभव्यो भव्यरूपेण किमर्थं परिधावसि ॥

I had heard—born in the clan of rāghava— Rāmā was the custodian of righteousness. Yet, beneath the guise of great renown, you conceal a merciless wrongdoer. (4. 17. 28)

In response Rāmā belittles Vālin as a stupid monkey, who is unworthy of intellectual exchange and therefore Rāmā does not feel obligated to defend himself. Instead, Rāma grounds his authority in lineage and sovereignty:

इक्ष्वाकूणामियम्   भूमिः   सशैलवनकानना   ।

मृगपक्षिमनुष्याणां निग्रहानुग्रहेष्वपि ॥

This earth, with its mountains, woods, and forests, along with the authority to punish or protect animals, birds, and humans alike, belongs to the Ikṣvāku lineage (the lineage Rāmā belonged to). (4. 18. 6)

Since Rāmā does not have ethical basis to defend himself, he recalls the dictums of Manusmṛti, which claims that the wrongdoers, are fortunate to die at the hands of a king, for the kings are born with divine mandate and have ability to grant better afterlives to their adversaries.

राजभिः   धृतदण्डाश्च   कृत्वा   पापानि   मानवाः   ।

निर्मलाः स्वर्गमायान्ति सन्तः सुकृतिनो यथा ॥

Men, sinner though they might be, when punished by kings with the rod of justice, become purified and attain heaven—just like the virtuous who have performed meritorious deeds. (4.18.31)

From one perspective, Rāma appears as a despot; yet more critically, he emerges as a figure whose selfhood is entirely subsumed by his political role. Here Marx's analysis of spiritual degradation of the oppressor becomes illuminating: oppressive structures do not merely debase the peasantry and the subaltern classes, but also diminish the humanity of the lords themselves, who become embodiments of inherited office rather than autonomous individuals.[x] Rāma, identifying so fully with the divine mandate of kingship, forfeits personal ethical reasoning. He embodies what Marx diagnoses in *The Holy Family* as the internecine degradation—the reduction of both ruler and ruled to functions of a hierarchical order that impoverishes the humanity of all participants. In this sense, *Rāmarājya* reveals itself not as the flowering of ethical kingship but as the foreclosure of ethical individuality under the protection of ideological apparatuses.

In contrast to Rāmā's fatalistic views, Sītā's concerns are more humane. In the thirteenth canto of *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, these concerns become most pronounced, establishing Sītā as a thinker. At this point, Rāmā has slayed the ten-headed demon Rāvaṇa, who had abducted Sītā and kept her a captive. Hanuman reaches Sītā to deliver the good news and offers to physically punish the demonesses, who tortured Sītā during her ten-month-long captivity at Āśoka Grove. However, Sītā responds:

राजसंश्रयवश्यानां कुर्वतीनां पराज्ञया ।
विधेयानां च दासीनां कः कुप्येद्वानरोत्तम ॥

O Hanuman, these demonesses were in servitude. They obeyed the dictums of the king who provided them livelihood. How can I seek revenge from those who did not have enough agency to be morally responsible? (6.13.38)

With this text, Sītā, for the first time, points out the relationship between free will and moral responsibility in the *Rāmayana*. Agency is the capacity to perform actions where the self is the source of act and free will is the condition that allows the agent to make choices.[xi] If a person's

livelihood depends upon being a cog in the machinery of cruelty, can such participant afford to be kind? With this Sītā echoes the question Hannah Arendt posed in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.[xii] Arendt famously argued that Adolf Eichmann's evil (the Nazi officer, who was implicated for being a complicit in the Holocaust, although he maintained he was innocent since he was just "following orders") was not demonic but banal, consisting in the mechanical execution of orders without reflective judgment. Here the *Rāmāyaṇa* opens a space for thinking the tragedy of what Arendt called "thoughtlessness"—the failure to judge when obedience overrides conscience. The ideological ends that dovetail the utopian promise of *Rāmarājya* seem shakier once Sītā articulates these ideas about agency and reparation. She further says:

> पापानां वा शुभानां वा वधार्हाणां प्लवङ्गम ।
> कार्यं कारुण्यमार्येण न कश्चिन्नापराध्यति ॥
>
> लोकहिंसाविहाराणां रक्षसां कामरूपिणम् ।
> कुर्वतामपि पापानि नैव कार्यमशोभनम् ॥

> Either they be virtuous or wicked or may they be even the reprobates deserving of death, a civilized person should always treat everyone with kindness, knowing that there is none among us, who is faultless. (6.13.45)

> Our response to people should not be dictated by their behavior. Even if people are inclined to violence and injustice, we should continue to respond with kindness. (6.13.46)

This is an extraordinary moment. As Stanley Milgram noted in *Obedience to Authority*, even those people who may loathe stealing, killing and assaulting may find themselves performing these acts with relative ease when commanded by authority. (Milgram, 5) When people know that the authority provides immunity to their acts, history shows that the ordinary people have committed unthinkable crimes. Contextually, had Rāma not been a prince and had the massacre of demons not legitimized by scriptures, would he have remained as nonchalant about his moral responsibility?

However, Sītā demonstrates an exceptional instance of autonomous moral reasoning. Even in the position of a victim, she sees the structural fault lines that transform rational beings into instruments of authority. Rather than seeking retribution against those whose agency has been compromised, she exercises her own agency to transcend the immediacy of personal anguish, sustaining her role as a deliberate and ethical actor. She offers philosophic counterpoints to the blind spots within *Rāmarājya's* legitimizing framework, opening the possibility of what modern jurisprudence calls restorative justice against the punitive justice system of the regime.

Situating Sītā among the "Elite Outcasts "

Sītā, like Oscar Wilde and Leon Trotsky, represent a special class of outcasts in the utopias. No utopia can exist without the foundational support of subalterns, the oppressed demographics, which agrees to do the dirty job for the regime. However, just as the elite class socially reproduces itself through apparatuses such as education, culture, leisure, hobbies, etc–it also maintains the difference between itself and the subalterns by depriving the latter's access to the same. Therefore, the subalterns do not have the same vocabulary as the ruling class. Their criticism of the regime isn't legible to be recorded in the history that apotheosizes the written words as the source of legitimacy. However, the "elite outcasts", such as Sīta, Wilde and Trotsky represent a special category of the outcasts who were once at the nucleus of the power structure that eventually banished them. Unlike other factions of subalterns, these elite outcasts are fluent in the discursive vocabulary of the regime. And therefore, their voices become more than personal infractions; they represent the ideological antithesis of the regime that can converse with history. Unlike the guerilla insurgents, who need to speak back to the regime in the form of violence, the elite outcasts have vocabulary to articulate and justify their disobedience. They act as rational agents exercising their free will.

The concept of free will is indispensable to any organizational framework—religious or political—because without freewill, there is no accountability.[xiii] But freewill can also be burdensome—and quite frankly, contentious. Unless two people believe in the same philosophical constants, it is difficult to make objective deductions about what is moral and what is not. If self-preservation is the primary impulse, the moral codes that will protect a predator's right to hunt will not cover the prey's right to live. In this sense, any heterogeneous society—indeed, all societies by

definition—cannot simultaneously expect absolute obedience and claim to champion freewill. The *Book of Genesis* illustrates this paradox (Gen. 3:6–7). Adam and Eve may have always possessed free will in theory, yet it was only through their inaugural act of disobedience—the original sin— that they became conscious of their capacity to rebel. Free will is the currency that buys individuation just as obedience buys social order.

Naturally, any text—be it religious or administrative—that tries to govern a society, will try to expunge the impulse for disobedience/rebellion by implanting the fear of retribution and suffering. However, can such oppressive obedience—cultivated mechanically as a proxy to individual judgement, and to placate the higher authority—give humans true joy and contentment? And conversely, the agents, who defy the status quo and choose retribution instead of adjustment to the unjust society must always be categorized as "tragic"? Oscar Wilde defends disobedience as "the man's original virtue" (Wilde, 250), arguing that progress in society has historically emerged through acts of rebellion and refusal to conform. He critiques conventional moral prescriptions, noting, for instance, that to praise thrift among the poor is not virtuous but absurd: it is "like advising a man who is starving to eat less" (Wilde, 250). Wilde's assertion elevates disobedience from a mere personal trait to a social and ethical necessity.

Wilde, once the darling of Victorian aristocratic salons, became the most notorious prisoner of his age precisely because the very society that had celebrated his wit and bestowed recognition upon him was the one, he turned his critique against. Trotsky,[xiv] one of the principal architects of the Russian Revolution, was hunted down and assassinated by the very regime he helped to establish. In each case, the "outcast" status does not signify weakness, but the production of an intellectual and ethical vantage points unavailable to both the factions—those who were either too near, and were too loyal to the system, or those who were too far away and indifferent to it. Among these elite outcasts, Sītā's ideological position remains the least examined, largely because scholarly traditions have sustained a tacit prejudice against the reproductive sphere—treating it as a domain of biological process rather than a site of intellectual or philosophical production.

Does Suffering Diminish When "Tragedy" Is Chosen Rather Than Imposed?

The Western philosophy has tried to map out the correlation between free will and moral agency, but Albert Camus tried to examine a more complex relationship between *agency* and *contentment* by revisiting *The Myth of Sisyphus* through the framework of the above-mentioned question. At a

first glance, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* belong to radically different worlds: a mid-twentieth-century French meditation on absurdity and an ancient Sanskrit epic that structures South Asian ideas of dharma. Yet both confront the question of meaning in the face of relentless suffering.

Sisyphus is a mythical Greek figure, who was punished by the gods for his deceits and hubris. His eternal punishment was to roll a huge boulder up a hill, knowing well that as soon as the rock neared the top, it would roll down, condemning him to eternity of futile labor. Sisyphus was aware of the irrevocability of his sentence. It is this consciousness, Camus says, that makes the myth of Sisyphus so tragic. (Camus, 109). Where would be the torture, if Sisyphus had some hope to latch onto, some promise of afterlife?

As the utopian outcast, Sītā "suffers" the same fate. She was married to *maryādā puruṣottama*, the ideal man, the just ruler, the most devoted, monogamous husband in the pantheon of polyamorous Hindu gods.[xv] When injustice comes from such a man, the very embodiment of righteousness, where do you go for justice?

Over the years, the names of Rāma and Sītā, the mythic-historical figures from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, have been conflated by the devotees into a singular compound word *Sītā ram*, granting Sītā the equal status posthumously at least in the religious sphere. However, in the intellectual realm, there has been negligible attempt to understand her as the maverick ideologue, who, like Camus' Sisyphus, chose rebellion over domestication, and therefore, her tragedy was not the loss of agency but the very consequence of it. Though she never "wins" against Rāma or against social suspicion, she articulates ideological differences with the regime and lives her life in accordance with that ideology.

Sītā spends most part of her adult life in the forests, the first fourteen years during the royal exile and later, twelve years after the fire trial. She does not go back to her father Janaka, the sage of a king. Although the fortunetellers had prophesied great fortunes, she lived a life of austerity, hard labour and contemplation. She was not allowed to make most of her life decisions, but whenever an opportunity arose, she made the choices that made her the ideological outcast in the utopia, until the final decision of exit, that took her to the point of no return. Of course, the *Rāmāyaṇa* does not frame Sītā's exit as suicide. Like Sisyphus, she enters the underworld. Who knows what rock Sītā is carrying there but as Camus says, one always finds one's burden again (Camus, 111). Sītā's burden was the burden of an ideologue who resisted state violence and chose

compassion as a non-contingent response to life. In the world steeped in punitive logic, Sītā knew acting upon her moral impulse was to isolate herself. But would Trotsky be happier, if he would have continued to align to Stalinism?

Sītā's suffering is only as tragic as the tragedy of Trotsky, or Sisyphus. They all show the strength to inhabit the universe "without a master" (Camus, 111), without a higher authority, in the light of their own conscience. For them, the struggle towards the height is enough to fulfill their hearts. And if by this token, Camus pronounces Sisyphus "happy", we must imagine Sītā happy too.

Notes

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[i] In *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, after hearing the false news of Rāma's death Sītā recalls the sayings of the fortune-tellers, who predicted great fortune and happiness for her. (Goldman, 588)

[ii] "There can be no doubt that Sītā, the heroine of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is its most poignant and long-suffering figure. As a consequence of her long years of generally uncomplaining hardship, captivity, suffering, and heartbreak, her journey has captivated audiences from the moment of the epic's earliest circulation." (Goldman, 21)

[iii] "A recent survey taken of one thousand young Indian men and women in the north Indian state of uttar pradesh revealed that from a list of twenty-four goddesses, literary heroines, and famous women of history, an overwhelming percentage chose for their ideal female role model Sītā, the heroine of *Rāmāyaṇa*. That a fictional character would still, after more than two thousand years, exert such a fascination on the lives of men and women in the Indian sub-continent is an extraordinary occurrence and one that deserves some attention. (Sutherland, p 63, 1989)

[iv] अथ ह याज्ञवल्क्यस्य द्वे भार्ये बभूवतुः—मैत्रेयी च कात्यायनी च; तयोर्ह मैत्रेयी ब्रह्मवादिनी बभूव, स्त्रीप्रज्ञैव तर्हि कात्यायन्यथ ह याज्ञवल्क्योऽन्यद्वृत्तमुपाकरिष्यन् ॥ १

‖ atha ha yājñavalkyasya dve bhārye babhūvatuḥ—maitreyī ca kātyāyanī ca; tayorha maitreyī brahmavādinī babhūva, strīprajñaiva tarhi kātyāyani; atha ha yājñavalkyo'nyadvṛttamupākariṣyan ‖ 1 ‖

[v] "The map of the world that does not feature utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out one country, the humanity is always landing at. And when humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias." (Wilde, 261)

[vi] According to Robert P Goldman, Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* is generally dated by scholars to a period between the 7th and 4th centuries BCE for its earliest core, with layers of expansion continuing up to perhaps the 3rd century CE. Linguistic analysis, thematic content, and references to social

institutions help place the core composition in the late Vedic period, but the work's long oral transmission and later editorial shaping complicate precise dating. (Goldman, 23)

vii "Vālmīki's work purports to be a poetic history of events that took place on the Indian subcontinent and on the adjacent island of Lankā (popularly believed to be the modern nation of Sri Lanka). Indeed, along with its reputation as a great literary composition, and like its sister epic, the *Mahābhārata*, it is regarded by numerous Indian commentators, as well as by the Indian literary critical tradition and many pious Hindus today, as belonging to the genre of *itihāsa*, "historical narrative."" (Goldman, 4)

viii There is no indication that this is suicide. In Sanskrit Dramaturgy death isn't visually represented on stage.

ix "Unlike modern historians, scientists, and followers of the Judeo-Christian- Islamic religions, who proceed from an unquestioned premise that time is linear, running from the Creation (or "Big Bang") to the End of Days (or "Big Crunch"), the three major surviving indigenous religious systems of ancient India, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, teach, each according to its own unique system, that universal time is cyclical and has neither an absolute beginning nor a final end…Thus, for the Hindu tradition, historical events such as those narrated in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* took place and continue to take place in specific *yugas*, as these periods recur with the returning cycles of the *mahāyugas*." (Goldman, 37)

x "The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement, it recognizes estrangement as its own power and has in it the semblance of a human existence." (Marx, 49)
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xi "Having free will is often understood in terms of one's being able to choose otherwise or in terms of a person being the proper source of her choice. The Sanskrit term that perhaps best approximates "free will" is *svātantrya*, "independence," which suggests the capacity for self-determined action." (Dasti and Bryant, 3)

xii "[Adolf Eichmann] added that he had read Kant's Critique of Practical Reason. He then proceeded to explain that from the moment he was charged with carrying out the Final Solution he had ceased to live according to Kantian principles, that he had known it, and that he had consoled himself with the thought that he no longer "was master of his own deeds," that he was unable "to change anything." What he failed to point out in court was that in this "period of crimes legalized by the state," as he himself now called it, he had not simply dismissed the Kantian formula as no longer applicable, he had distorted it to read: Act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or of the law of the land." (Arendt, 66)

xiii "Will is a capacity to choose certain courses of action. Having free will is often understood in terms of one's being able to choose otherwise or in terms of a person being the proper source of her choice…One key reason that philosophers have typically been interested in free will is that it is often considered a necessary condition for moral responsibility: only those beings that exercise free will can be morally responsible for their actions." (Bryant and Dasti, 3)

xiv "In a country where the sole employer is the state, this means death by slow starvation. The old principle: who does not work shall not eat, has been replaced with a new one: who does not obey shall not eat." (Trotsky, 283)

xv "[…] In this way, the epic hero Rāma serves as the model for the ideal son, the ideal husband, the ideal warrior, and the ideal king. Thus, not only is he a god come to earth, but he is the ideal man." (Goldman, 5)

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**Bhushita Vasistha is a Fulbright Scholar and emerging fiction writer from Nepal with a strong background in literature, journalism, and strategic communications.