



Sita Locked Out

A Telugu Women's Song of Sita

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She is born of Earth and raised by Janaka.

She serves her in-laws with devotion. Her loving husband calls her, but she does not come.

Flowers in his hair, perfume on his body, her husband is in a joyous mood. Looking for her, he waits and waits.

He is impatient at the time she takes. "Why doesn't she come, what is taking her so long?"

The solar hero¹ is upset with her.

He closes the door and bolts it.

"You and your chores, Daughter of Earth!

You have grown too proud," he says shaking his head.

Deluded, he lies down on his bed.

Sita comes rushing.

She quickly presses her mother-in-law Kaushalya's feet,

gives betel leaves to her father-in-law,

Fans Kaika and Sumitra² too, and makes the bed for Kaushalya.

Then she takes her bath with turmeric, wears a sari with golden flowers,

combs her hair and ties it into a bun.

She puts on her jewels –

a tamarind leaf of gold in her part; a drop of pearls crowning her forehead;

a spread of gems around her bun;

earrings worth a thousand,

a gold chain worth two thousand,

a nose ring worth three thousand,

a choker worth some four thousand,

and a pendent worth ten thousand;

a belt of gold with bells on it, bracelets with sapphires inlaid, and a necklace of precious stones. She brushes kohl along her lashes and looks at herself in the life-size mirror.

Pleased with herself, the woman smiles. She eats her dinner –

five different courses, sweets and all – then washes her hands.

She covers herself in a golden shawl, takes water to drink in a jug of gold;

betel leaves, areca nuts, perfumes, sandal paste, jasmine water,

fruits and snacks on a platter of gold. She wears jasmine and jaji flowers in her hair

and arrives in joy to meet her husband.

"Lord, my hero, I brought you flowers. You never bend before any rival.

You are the one that humiliated the other Rama that challenged you.

You are my lord, my Kakutsa³.

Can I bear your anger? You closed the door.

My feet are aching, my hands are tired. Open the ivory door, my lord,

it is beginning to rain. I am getting wet.

Open that golden bolt, my handsome.

It is raining hard, my sari is soaked.

My emerald young man, open the door.

It is the fourth wake, lord of my life.

I will give you my necklace of precious gems.

Let me lie at your feet, to get a little sleep."

Rama says,

"If you lose sleep, what do I care!

The lamp standing here keeps me company.

If you stand out there, what do I care! Flowers and bukka scents keep me company.

If you stand out there, what do I care!

Sandal and musk keep me company. If you stand out there, what do I care!

The mattress and pillows keep me company."

Upset at Rama's words, Sita quickly runs to her mother-in-law's house. When she hears it all, Kaushalya comes to Rama's door.

"You are the son of king Dasharatha,

married into the house of the great Janaka.

Earth gives her daughter to you.

Have you lost your sense?

What did Sita do?

Tell me my little boy,

if something is wrong."

"Mother, if you pamper your daughter-in-law,

will she ever care for me?"

says the hero of the house, as he opens the door with a big smile.

"Mother, my father-in-law is waiting.

You go to him, he is all alone," says Sita to Kaushalya

and Kaushalya leaves.

*When Sita goes shyly to her husband,
the lamp laughs with joy.*

*Fragrance of betel leaves all over the
bed.*

*Fragrance of betel nuts all over the
bed.*

Fragrance of flowers all over the bed.

Fragrance of musk all over the bed.

Fragrance of bukka all over the bed.

Who knows how angry Sita is?

Rama turns to the other side.

*“Just how long it takes for butter to
melt when it is near fire,*

*is how long a woman’s anger lasts,”
says Sita and moves swiftly to Rama,
to make love to him.*

*Rama enjoys the games of pleasure,
and lives in glory and honour.*

*Women who sing this song on earth or
listen to it will live in riches.*

A Haunting Title

The title of a song that my mother sang intrigued me. *Sita Gadiya*, which I translate as “Sita Locked Out”, has haunted me ever since I heard the song as a young boy. Literally *gadiya* in Telugu is a bolt or a crossbar that locks a door from the inside. The song describes what happens when Rama bolts the door from inside their room and locks Sita out. If it is indeed Rama who bolts the *gadiya*, the phrase should read *Ramuni gadiya*, not *Sita gadiya*. Significantly, the composer defines the *gadiya* as the one that Sita caused to be opened, rather than the one that Rama bolted, and even deviates from the conventions of Telugu grammar to make the striking title, quietly foreshadowing the unusual events that the song sings of.

Telugu women sing melodious songs based on the Ramayana and on other mythological themes.⁴ For more than 200 years, literary scholars treated these compositions as simply women’s songs not worthy of a second look.⁵

Once we delve further into this particular piece, we discover its nuances, ripe with the subtleties of diction and the ironies of meaning that

we expect from a well-written poem. On the surface, the song looks not only simple, but also defective. The meter does not run smoothly, and some of the words appear to be wrongly placed or repeated unnecessarily. One may easily assume that this defect is due to the composer’s lack of linguistic sophistication, an all too common assumption of learned critics. But a careful reading proves otherwise.

Written to be Sung

Let us study the meter first. The meter is quantitative. Telugu metrical texts label this *matra chandassu*, in which a short syllable counts for one *matra* and a long syllable counts for two. Each line has sixteen *matras* that are broken into two halves of eight *matras* each. However, the syllables in the printed text above do not conform uniformly to this number, thereby appearing to represent an off-meter. However, while singing, the

lengths of the syllables are manipulated by one’s voice inflections. In fact, oftentimes if the written meter exercises every syllabic rule, the singer feels suffocated in her ability to apply musical style and innovation to the poem. Editor Sripada Gopala Krishnamurti (1955) makes note of this feature in his introduction, but apparently the publishers did not indicate musical notations on the printed page. Thus, one must view the meter’s purpose in the context of a song, rather than that of a written text.⁶

Structurally, the text itself is organised succinctly, without padding or uninteresting repetitions. The language is layered exquisitely and the diction is subtle and nuanced. The first printed line begins with the customary auspicious syllable “*sri*”, to ward off bad luck. However, the word that begins the song, “*Srirama*”, is syntactically unconnected to the rest



of the lines. “*Srirama*” hangs awkwardly, without any connection or continuity with subsequent verses, as if it is uttered merely to fulfill the requirement of the first syllable and to pay respect to Rama’s name.⁷ This feature is a common façade; many women’s songs in this genre pay homage to Rama initially but, as the song unfolds, they are very critical of Rama and give Sita and other women in the narrative far more agency and initiative than the Valmiki text allows.⁸

Sita as a Housewife

Sita Locked Out is built around several strategically orchestrated moves. The first two lines demonstrate Sita’s devotion to her mother-in-law and father-in-law and her uncanny attentiveness to her elders’ needs; for a good daughter-in-law gives priority to her parents-in-laws’ needs over those of her husband. Next, Sita is confronted with a problem. Rama calls her to bed but she does not show up. All dressed up and eager to have his wife in bed with him, Rama is angry at the attention she gives to her chores around the house and at the way she neglects him, so he bolts the door. Determined to teach her a lesson, he pretends to be asleep. The song maintains he misunderstands her intentions. However, the ambiguous word used to indicate this misunderstanding is “*bhrama*”, which possesses a range of meanings from a simple misunderstanding to total delusion. Sita is then described as rushing to complete her chores so she can join him without delay. She quickly attends to her parents-in-law. A description of her duties subscribes merely two lines, which concludes this short section. Thus far the song describes a dutiful, obedient and devoted daughter-in-law, who prioritises service to her parents-in-law above her own pleasures, but who is also looking forward to being with her husband for a night of pleasure.

Sita indulges in a leisurely dinner of five courses and sweets and also takes the time to admire herself in a life-size mirror. Clearly she is in no rush to go to her husband. She is in charge and will go to meet him in her own time.

Sita as a Lover

In the next stanzas, one learns of another layer of Sita’s personality. She takes her time to bathe, comb her hair and dress herself with all her finery. This section of the song takes its time describing each ornament in detail, even detailing how much each item costs. Sita indulges in a leisurely dinner of five courses and sweets and also takes the time to admire herself in a life-size mirror. Clearly she is in no rush to go to her husband. She is in charge and will go to meet him in her own time. The song’s pace switches from the fast-paced narrative that precedes and follows this section to one that is relaxed, comfortable and ornate. The words chosen and the space absorbed, 24 lines in a song of 102 lines, indicate, in no uncertain terms, that Sita is in full control of the situation.

The next weapon in Sita’s hand is her mother-in-law...The song imagines a different alignment in family politics, with the mother supporting the daughter-in-law as opposed to her own son.

When she finally goes to Rama, Sita calls out and says she has brought him flowers and, in a calculating manner, boosts Rama’s male ego by recalling that he never bent his head to another warrior. When Parasurama, an equally powerful warrior, challenged him, Rama deflated his pride. Reference to Rama’s past heroic deeds uplifts his sense of his manhood and evokes the atmosphere for the lover’s role that Sita wants him to play soon. Elite *Aamkarasastra* texts in Sanskrit instruct poets to combine *vira*, the heroic mood, with *sringara*, the erotic, to enhance the latter. The composer(s) of this song utilised the heroic suggestion not only to enhance the aesthetics of the poem, but also to assure its listeners of the success of the heroine in achieving her sexual goal.

Now we enter a more difficult stage in the narrative. Rama bars the entry door. The song does not suggest that Sita is surprised or unprepared for this gesture. Instead, she very skillfully enacts her scheme of talking Lord Rama into opening the door. She pleads with him that she is no match for his anger, that her feet and hands are aching, that it is raining and she is getting soaked. (Clearly the claim of rain is a lie, since there is no mention of it after the door is opened.) She praises him, cajoles him and even tries to bribe him. Trying to bribe a husband with the gift of a gold ornament is fascinating indeed, as this manoeuvre is commonly utilised by men in most societies. Sita takes a rather aggressive role in this negotiation.

Rama, in the act of locking Sita out, locks himself inside. The next few lines imply that while Rama protests he is not alone and that he does not need Sita, he is actually desperately lonely. Rama has the lamp stand, the sandal paste, the musk, the mattress and even the pillows to keep him company. The list is pathetic. If Rama thinks he is humiliating Sita

by equating her with these inanimate items, he has not succeeded.

The next weapon in Sita's hand is her mother-in-law. Sita knows that Rama will not disobey his mother. She quickly brings Kaushalya who scolds Rama roundly. The words that Kaushalya uses to admonish Rama express both the mother's power as well as her affection. Only a mother can simultaneously scold her son with words such as "buddhi ledatara?" (have you lost your sense?) and then show affection in the next sentence by addressing him as *nanuganna tandri* (my little boy). Rama opens the door with a big smile, intended, of course, to show his mother that he is not really angry. He complains sheepishly, however, that if she keeps pampering her daughter-in-law, he, as a husband, will lose control of her. In effect he is asking his mother not to support Sita and to join him in his efforts to discipline her – a reversal from the usual story we hear in traditional joint families, where the mother asks her son to join her and not take sides with his wife. The song imagines a different alignment in family politics, with the mother supporting the daughter-in-law as opposed to her own son.

When Rama opens the door, Sita adopts a delicate strategy to send her mother-in-law on her way. Dasharatha, Sita's father-in-law, is alone, she says, and Kaushalya, his wife, should go to him. It is significant that Dasharatha is referred to here as *ma mama*, my father-in-law, stressing Sita's affection toward him. These carefully chosen words hint at the active sexual life of her in-laws, and that Dasharatha prefers Kaushalya to his other wives – a hint that both enhances Kaushalya's self-image and is something only an truly affectionate daughter-in-law could talk of in a joint family. These words



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actually carry a suggested meaning, distinct from the surface one, whereby they obliquely mean: your son wants to be alone with me, leave me free to attend to him, and leave us alone.

Sita as a Spouse

Now Sita is with her husband. In five lines, the song describes the fragrances of various items, coming from the bed. These lines appear intriguingly unconnected to the preceding text, especially the line: "Who knows how angry Sita is?" One may attribute this discontinuity to the author's sloppiness and indifference toward the smooth flow of the text of the song. However, a closer examination indicates that the gap in the text is deliberate. The fragrances listed match the items Sita brought in with her on the golden platter. The only additional fragrance is from *bukka*, a substance used to perfume clothes,

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apparently coming from Sita's sari as well as Rama's clothes. Sita must have placed the platter somewhere near the bed without offering it lovingly to Rama. Clearly Sita is not pleased by the treatment meted out to her by her loving husband. Furthermore, Rama is still angry, despite his smile for his mother. We can imagine him returning to his sullen mood as soon as his mother has left and he is alone with Sita in the bedroom – turning to the other side on the bed but wondering how angry she really is.

Rama, then, is left to choose his next move, as Sita succeeds in making him feel it was his decision to lock her out. While she shows him that she is in no mood to offer him the items she has brought, she does not give him any easy hint to gauge how angry she is. The fragrances are maddening, as is the closeness of his wife's body. Still, Rama is not sure if he could turn toward Sita to make the first move, as if nothing has happened. Since he is too proud to admit that what he has done is wrong, he faces the other side of the bed, away from Sita.

Once again, Sita knows what to do next. She confesses that a woman's anger does not last any longer than butter near fire. This

comment gives her an excuse to turn to Rama and make love to him. Rama's anger is gone like fog in the sunlight. He turns to her happily, playing along in the games of love (*keli-vilasamulu*). One wonders who is the butter and who is the fire. Interestingly enough, Sita's statement reverses the well-known analogy stated in many religious texts, which compares woman to fire and man to a pot of butter in order to underscore the sexual vulnerability of man.

Describing Sita's move towards Rama, the song uses an intriguing verb: "*kalisenu*", literally meaning "met". This is a euphemism in Telugu for having sex, but is usually used for a man making love to a woman, or, in the plural, for man and woman making love together. It is never used in the singular with a woman as the subject. It indicates emphatically that in this situation Sita is the one who takes the initiative, a very bold usage, considering the conventions of shyness which women in most societies are expected to observe.

Priorities Reflected

The poem concludes that Rama lives a life of power and luxury (*vaibhoga padavulu*). This information takes the listener out of the bedroom and into Rama's public life, telling listeners that a husband who lives happily with his wife has a successful career too. As a customary benefit (*phalasruti*) to singers and listeners, who happen to all be women in this case, the song offers a life of riches. It is very interesting that women place such a heavy emphasis on wealth and not, as one would expect, on love. The song's description of the ornaments' price tags, the expensive clothing, and the sumptuous and luxurious dinner Sita enjoys indicates women's priorities as expressed by upper-caste Telugu women.

To sum up, *Sita Locked Out* represents the concerns of women in pre-modern, Andhra, upper-caste families. Here, a woman's main personal security was the gold she owned in the form of jewellery. Considered as bride's wealth, *stridhanam*, this property is sacred and cannot be appropriated by the husband's family. This ensures a woman far better security than the love of her husband who, after all, could take another wife at any time.

Another profound, underlying theme of the song is how the women of the household stand by each other. Contrary to the stereotypical image of rivalry between a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law and the ill treatment the former is supposed to be subjected to at the latter's hands, this song portrays a very affectionate and gently supportive relationship between them. Normally we hear of the mother-in-law pleading for the support and collusion of her son in disciplining the daughter-in-law, because she, as mother, has higher claims to her son's loyalty. The song depicts a reversal of the situation, whereby a mother-in-law supports her daughter-in-law against her son. This song depicts the world of women who possess an unspoken understanding of one another's feelings, and together they know how to handle their men.

Endnotes

During the last century women's songs received scholarly attention as a result of the efforts of savants such as Nandiraju Chelapathi Rao, who published them in 1899, and Mangu Jaganandha Rao, who published *Nuru Hindu Strila Patalu* (One Hundred Hindu Women's Songs) in 1905. In 1955, Sripada Gopala Krishnamurthy wrote an introduction to a collection of songs entitled *Strila Ramayanpu Patalu* (Women's Ramayana Songs), published by Andhra Sarasvata Parishattu, Hyderabad, making a passionate plea to treat them as poetry. These translations are an attempt to present one of the songs from that book. This is a continuation of the

study of women's Ramayana songs that I began with my "A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu" in Paula Richman, *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 114-136, in which I made a reference to this song.

My thanks are due to Professor K. Malayavasini, and Ms. Bhavaraju Lalitha Devi, who discussed these songs with me and clarified the meaning of several words related to items of women's ornaments.

¹ Rama is born in the Solar dynasty, one of the two dynasties of *kshatriyas* in Hindu mythology.

² Kaika (also Kaikeyi) and Sumitra are the other wives of Dasharatha and therefore are mothers-in-law for Sita.

³ Name of Rama's family.

⁴ The songs published as well as the ones I collected are sung only among upper-caste families of Andhra.

⁵ There is no definite evidence to date these songs. But Sripada Gopalakrishnamurthy cites a line from Tyagaraja's song which refers to a game of *vamanaguntalu* Rama plays with Sita. The game is described in one of the women's songs, *Sita Vamanaguntalu*, and Gopalakrishnamurthy persuasively argues that Tyagaraja (1767-1847) refers to the women's song when he mentions the game in his song. This indicates that at least some of the songs that women have been singing for some generations now date at least as early as the late eighteenth-early nineteenth centuries.

⁶ The meter here is 8+8. To illustrate this with an example are two lines that begin the song:

*sri ra ma bhu sa ti ki – ce de yai bu tti
ku rmi to ja na ku ni – ku tu rai pe ri gi*
Each line has eight plus eight matras and the first syllables of each half (*sri* and *ce*, and *ku* and *ku* respectively) are phonetically harmonious. This feature of the harmony of first syllables is called *yati* in scholarly metrical literature, and is strictly adhered to by all poets. Here, the composer/author follows the convention when it flows naturally, but does not mind when such a harmony does not work smoothly.

⁸ See my "A Ramayana of Their Own," in Paula Richman, *ibid*.

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