Kumidini's *Ramayana*

A Woman's View of Raghukul Politics

❍ **Paula Richman**

Raganayaki Thatham made Tamil readers think in new ways about *Puranic* stories. Unfortunately, much of her work has been nearly forgotten today in Tamil Nadu and her writing has been virtually unknown outside of Tamilnadu. In her account of selected incidents from the *Ramayana*, certain characters take on a remarkable colour and life. Her telling of the story of Sita and Rama foregrounds the domestic lives of women, while simultaneously highlighting a Gandhian ideology of simplicity and non-attachment. Her telling deserves our attention not only to see the particular genius of the author but also to appreciate yet another facet of a *Ramayana*, a story that, like a crystal, has many facets.

Ranganayaki Thatham was born in 1905 into a distinguished and learned Brahmin family in Srirangam.[1] After studying in school for three years, she received home tutoring along with her three younger sisters in Sanskrit, English, Hindi, and French. Her parents arranged her marriage with her cousin, a member of the Thathachariya family of Srirangam, when Ranganayaki was ten years old. At thirteen, when she moved to her husband's joint-family home, she immediately began helping with the cooking and housekeeping for a large and orthodox joint family, which left her little time to continue her studies in a formal way. Nonetheless, she continued to read avidly in her free moments, supplied by her father with novels and by her husband with books he borrowed from the library at the college he attended.

Raganayaki and her husband soon became admirers of Mohandas Gandhi and, in 1922, she began to wear *khadi* (homespun cloth) exclusively, a practice that she continued throughout her life. Her commitment to Gandhian self-sufficiency manifested itself in other ways as well.[2] She experimented with a cooking stove that allowed air in on all four sides in order to reduce the amount of fuel used. She designed a skirt and top that looked like a traditional Brahmin nine-yard sari but required far less cloth and published a pamphlet about it called "Nine Yards Made Easy." She also developed a recipe to make eggless cakes that were both economical and nutritious, invented an ice cream made from local plantains. She also helped to found an influential social service organization in the area, and engaged in constant useful activity such as crocheting and knitting — in addition

Kumudini after receiving the Bharati Award

to raising four children and helping to care for her grandchildren and the children of other kin.

Although she began to lose her hearing soon after the birth of her third son and her deafness increased over time, she still knew everything that took place in the household and developed a reputation as a superb storyteller.

Her narrative talents, energy, and interests also led Ranganayaki to a secret career as a writer. Early in her writing career, she became fascinated with the work of Rabindranath Tagore and translated one of his works into Tamil, working from a Hindi translation of the Bengali original. In fact, the pen-name, Kumudini, under which she wrote to preserve her anonymity, was drawn from a character in a Tagore novel.[3] During the 1930s, she published many short stories and columns for two Tamil magazines, as well as a host of occasional pieces for other newsletters and magazines. Since she wrote her stories in the early hours of the morning before anyone else in the family had awakened, her conservative mother-in-law remained unaware of her increasing success as a writer. With Kumudini's father acting as an informal contact between her and the literary world, she published an impressive number of short stories and essays.

Among the little-known and most creative of Kumudini's written work from the 1930s are a set of stories based on the lives of female characters in the epics and *puranas* that appeared in *Ananda Vigadan*, one of the most successful and long-running Tamil periodicals. One of these stories is an epistolary account of Sita's experiences as she adapts to the circumstances of joint family life, after marrying Rama and moving into his parents' household in the royal palace in Ayodhya.[4] Although the story begins in a disarmingly simple way, as it progresses Kumudini reveals the strengths of "domestic virtues," but also critiques them, ultimately pointing to the need to transcend the petty and superficial nature of much that falls under the category of domestic life.

Trifling Matters

Sita's story was reprinted a decade later in a collection of Kumudini's short stories that bears a suggestive and multivocal title: *Cillaraic Cankatikal, Limitet. Cillarai's* range of meanings are linked to the idea of something paltry or insignificant. If things lie scattered

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here and there in small quantities, such as a set of little wooden toys belonging to a child, people refer to them as *cillarai.* If you purchase something in a shop and the total bill amounts to five rupees and four paisa, that four paisa would be considered *cillarai,* a term equivalent to the English "small change." In Tamil Nadu people often call a store that sells "notions" (small things from barettes to rubber bands) a *cillarai* store; peasants with small agricultural holdings are said to own *cillarai* lands; one makes fun of people who say foolish things by identifying them as having a mind *(putti)* that is *cillarai*. This wide semantic range occurs because Tamil speakers use the adjective *cillarai* to describe a variety of objects or activities, when they are understood to be trifling, petty, or inconsequential.

The term *cankati* can mean (1) some piece of news or affair of note; (2) a particular matter or fact; or (3) a set of connections or relations. (4) In musical discourse, the term refers to a short flourish introduced into a melody. All four senses of *cankati* aptly apply to Kumudini's book. Her stories of women's daily lives concern bits of news, small matters to which they need pay attention, and connections created by living with many kin in a joint family. These stories also provide a little flourish in an otherwise familiar melody, the song of daily life.[5]

To the end of her book's title, Kumudini appends the term *Limitet*, the Tamil transliteration of "Limited." When it appears at the end of the name of a company, such as Chettiyar and Sons, Ltd., "limited" indicates that each partner's liability in the company is limited to the amount of investment contributed. In Kumudini's pun, she suggests the matters that fill her stories are limited in their liability and reach; that is, they are trifling, rather than comprehensive, grand, or momentous.

Yet the seeming humility in the choice of the book's title belies the fact that the stories within its covers contain much substance and depth. Among the several sections which deal with apparently trivial things yet are concerned with matters of significant marital and political import is "Mail *(tabal)* from the inner palace *(antapuram)*." Here Kumudini imagines that selected female characters depicted in ancient religious texts could depend upon regular postal service and corresponded on a periodic basis with their relatives.

Letters to Mithilas's Queen

The epistolary story of Sita contains four letters that she supposedly wrote to the Chief Queen of Mithila, between her arrival in Ayodhya after marriage and her

departure for the forest. The epistles reflect the challenges Sita faces in adapting to the demands of a new household, playing the roles of obedient daughter-in-law, loyal wife, and respectful sister-in-law. All the letters concern events in the women's quarters of the palace, reporting even on events of dynastic succession and governmental policy in terms of how they affect women living in the inner palace.

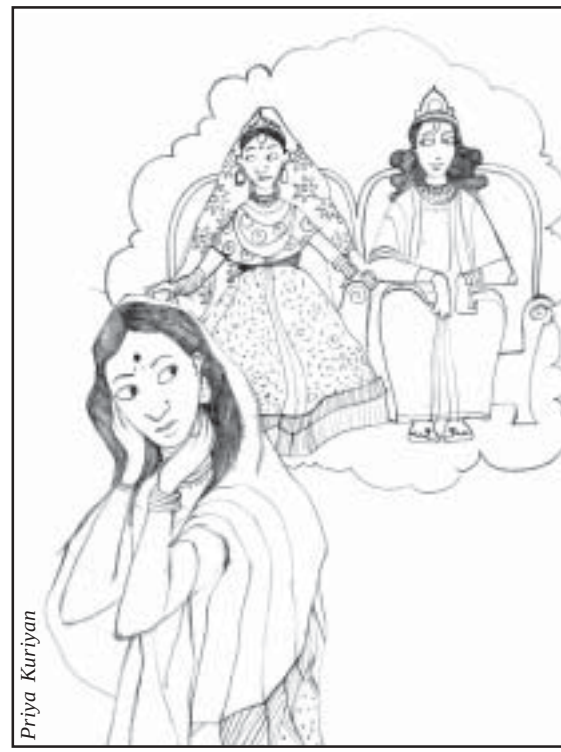
The letters are extraordinarily brief. In the equivalent of four printed pages — with large spaces between each line — Kumudini presents the major events of the *Ayodhyakanda*, the section of the *Ramayana* that deals with the events that transpire after Rama marries Sita. The first and longest letter (one and a half pages) tells of her new life in Rama's home. The second, tersely constructed in just eight sentences, relates to the upcoming holiday of Deepavali. The third briefly relates the consequences of Dasaratha's desire to crown Rama. The fourth, almost telegraphic in its compactness, tells of her imminent departure for the forest with her husband.

Domestic Perspective

Yet, these four short pieces of mail reveal a fresh perspective on Sita's life because they present the *Ramayana* narrative from a domestic perspective. Sita's letters present the personal affairs of the Dasaratha household from an insider's perspective. Vicariously entering into the conflicts of another household through reading is one of the most enthralling human pastimes, namely conversing about the personal affairs of others, or, put less politely, gossiping. Gossip also provides an opportunity to emphasize the necessity for appropriate behaviour, by defining unsuitable behaviour within the family as dangerous.

The joint family into which Sita marries furnishes lots of juicy domestic conflict, starring Kaikeyi's devious maidservant's plotting to raise her fortunes and those of her mistress; foolish old Dasaratha so smitten with the charms of his newest wife that he causes his own ruin; and Kaikeyi as a mother so ambitious for her own son that she destroys family unity. The first of Sita's letters holds the reader's attention at least partly because the royal household turns out to be such a hornet's nest of intrigue. Consider, for example, the depth of unspoken jealousy between Dasaratha's eldest and youngest co-wives. Eldest wife Kausalya, mother of Rama and mother-in-law to Sita, finds it belittling to compete for kingly attention with the king's youngest wife, Kaikeyi, mother of Bharata and mother-in-law to Mandavi. Sita's letter recounts to her mother how Kausalya loses out to her younger and more attractive opponent:

> My Revered Father-in-Law spends all his time in the palace of the Mother-in-Law of Mandavi, Kaikeyi Devi. My Mother-in-Law is terribly angry. To keep her anger from showing, she busies herself with performing *pujas* and feeding Brahmins. So I must arise at the break of day, have my bath, and help her. I work all day long. I don't get even the slightest bit of rest.



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While Sita's mother-in-law Kausalya envies Kaikeyi, she knows that it is unbecoming for a dignified senior queen to express envy. To distract herself from her unhappy situation and win moral prestige, she performs elaborate rituals thought to bring good fortune to her family. Thus, even if she has lost the king's affections, she gains the upper hand in public estimation, because she rises above her own feelings and attains ritual merit beneficial to the welfare of her husband and sons.[6] Watching these high-born women wrestle with the complications of joint family life, one can also learn from Kausalya's strategy to maintain her high status among peers.

Kumudini juxtaposes Sita's account of the king's lack of self-control with Sita's utterly proper management of deferential language. Note how the new bride refers respectfully to her in-laws in elaborately circumlocutory ways. In the household into which she has just married, she ranks fairly low on the status hierarchy. A recently arrived daughter-in-law demonstrates her good upbringing by carefully observing the rituals of address and comportment, always deferring to her

mother-in-law, father-in-law, and other elders. Some of the humour in Kumudini's account comes from the gap between Sita's highly respectful language and those to whom she applies it. The man she calls "Revered Father-in-Law" is the infatuated King Dasaratha, who is so enamoured with Kaikeyi that he ignores the needs of his kingdom.

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Well-bred Sita performs her duty not only in word but in deeds, by conscientiously assisting her mother-in-law with elaborate *pujas*. It is one thing for an elderly mother-in-law to undertake such rituals voluntarily, after her sons have married and brought daughters-in-law into the household to perform most of the domestic chores. It is another thing for a new bride from a kingly family, in which she was pampered and adored, to rise at the break of dawn, help her mother-in-law carry out numerous ablutions, and cook special food for Brahmins. Indeed, after all this work, she must still perform her usual daily chores in the joint household, which begin before the day's first meal and do not cease until after she has cleaned up the last dirty vessel when everyone has eaten their final meal at night. Sita does not explicitly criticize either mother-in-law or father-in-law. Sita merely conveys to her mother that she is exhausted. The message, however, comes through clearly: she would love to return home and receive some tender loving care from her parents.

In Tamil Nadu, in many *jatis* one customarily visits one's natal family on holidays such as Pongal and Deepavali. Since Kumudini imagines that Sita lives as her readers live, Deepavali provides a perfect occasion for Sita to return home and relax. Since Rama's brother Bharata has gone to visit their uncle, however, Rama decides that Sita and Rama cannot leave the palace until their return. So Sita sadly informs her mother she will not be home for the holidays:

> The messenger conveyed your request that all of us come to Mithila for Deepavali. If you knew everything that is happening here, you would understand how difficult it would be for us to come as you have requested . . . As soon as we returned from the wedding, Bharata's uncle came and fetched his nephew for a visit. . . . After they return, even if we all received permission and set out for Mithila, it seems doubtful that we could arrive there in time for Deepavali. After thinking it all over, your Son-in-Law has resolved that it is best to spend Deepavali here in Ayodhya. A letter about this will arrive soon for Father from my Revered Father-in-Law.

That Sita employs the elaborate euphemism of referring to her husband in terms of his relationship to Sita's mother as "your Son-in-Law" shows her deference to husband and elders, in her natal as well as marital home. Furthermore, it is her husband who decides if she may visit her parental home and Rama's father who conveys the choice to Sita's father. Travel outside the inner palace is the affair of men, and Sita quietly acquiesces to their decisions.

Matters of Anxiety

If Kumudini has hitherto portrayed Sita as carefully conforming to the proper behavior and comportment expected of a new bride, the tone of the story now starts to shift. Indirectly Kumudini starts to suggest that some of the pressures upon a new bride are excessive and that Sita's concern with proper appearance should not be overdone. Furthermore, we watch Sita find ways to take some control over her life. Indeed, Deepavali offers her a chance to help resolve one of her major problems at present, her low social prestige.

Cosmopolitan Ayodhya bustles with the commercial activity of a major city on the north Indian trade route, where merchants arrive regularly with luxurious bundles of cloth, elegant women's wear, and the latest fashions. In contrast, Mithila, northwest of Ayodhya (in today's northern Bihar near the Indian border with Nepal), is far from the beaten track, and favours clothing styles that have remained fairly conservative. Sita arrived at her husband's home with a trousseau full of beautiful saris that her mother had painstakingly got woven by fine artisans in Mithila, but all of those saris are adorned with broad borders. Current fashion in Ayodhya calls for narrow-bordered saris:

> Here in Ayodhya, everyone wears extremely sophisticated clothing. They say the cloth comes from foreign merchants. The cloth is very finely woven and the borders are elegantly thin. My husband's elder sister Shanta wears one in a sky-blue color. I want one like it. All the saris that you presented to me at the time of my wedding have

very wide borders. I am ashamed to wear them now. Everyone makes fun of me. Don't send that kind. Give my greetings to Venerable Father.

Kumudini portrays Sita as experiencing a major problem for new brides, sartorial peer pressure. She tries to mobilize aid from her mother in order to improve her social standing.

This excerpt from Sita's letter suggests both how vulnerable a new daughter-in-law remains to criticism, but also how she can count on her natal family to improve her position in Rama's family. Because other women have disparaged her old-fashioned clothes, she feels embarrassed for herself and her family name. Since on Deepavali it is customary to bestow new clothes on one's children, Sita's mother will send gifts to Ayodhya for the holiday even if her daughter is unable to visit. So Sita specifies exactly what she wants to receive, after carefully observing what Shanta, Rama's elder sister, wears.[7] Shanta, wife to Rsyasringa and a daughter in the Ayodhya household and therefore of higher status than Sita, receives the special treatment in the Ayodhya palace that Sita can find only in her Mithila home. Shanta has been wearing a gorgeous sari in the sky-blue colour at the height of current fashion, so Sita asks for one like it.

Feminine Strategies for Status

Sita enlists her mother's aid not only because she wants to appear in fashion. She also must help her parents develop a reputation for generosity and good taste in their gifts to their daughter and their son-in-law's family at holiday time. So Sita carefully informs her parents of her in-laws' expectations by sending precise information about the recent precedents in gift-giving:

For Deepavali here, they have made for our Brother-in-Law

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Rshyasringa a new kind of bangle. It is excellent. Make and send one just like it for your elder Son-in-Law. Perhaps I will find and send a craftsman who knows this type of work with the servant who brought your message to me. No one must know that I have written to you about this matter.

Sita wants Rama to receive a piece of jewelry precisely as costly, attractive, and au courant as the gift that Dasaratha has bestowed upon Rsyasringa, Shanta's husband. Since the artisans in provincial Mithila do not know how to produce the new-fangled man's bangle, Sita proposes to send an artisan from Ayodhya to oversee secretly the crafting of the bangle.

It is crucial to Sita's position that her mother not mention that her daughter has suggested such a plan; Sita would not want to give the impression that her in-laws put pressure on her to obtain expensive post-wedding gifts as a kind of continued dowry. Furthermore, only crude in-laws would ask outright for a particular gift, so there should be no suggestion that Sita is relaying any explicit request from her in-laws. Instead, it should look as if the royalty of Mithila just happened to pick the perfect gift for Prince Rama.

Kumudini's sympathetic account reveals the stresses a new wife can experience in attempts to negotiate between the expectations of her new in-laws and her parents. She must insure that her parents do not bestow any gifts that would evoke disdain from her marital family. In envisioning Sita's situation, Kumudini incorporates a critique of some contemporary social behaviour that created extreme anxiety for new brides.

A Gandhian Sita

Kumudini's ideologicalcommitments become more explicit in Sita's second letter, which alludes to the superiority of *swadeshi* cloth over foreign cloth. The author, who shocked certain members of her family by refusing to wear anything but *khadi* even at orthodox family weddings shapes her plot to provide a cautionary lesson about the dangers of craving new material possessions simply because others acquire them. Kumudini fashions this second letter to imply that desire for exotic objects arises from ignorance: desire depends on the false notion that new items are necessarily more valuable than familiar ones. Thus Kumudini depicts Sita's rapid disillusionment with the foreign-made sari:

After I wrote the letter to you, I saw my husband's elder sister, Shanta. People are saying that the sky-blue shade is not permanent. It comes out in the wash. Therefore, I do not want cloth of that colour. Send only a vermillion-coloured sari of the type that you intended at first.

This brief comment recounts Sita's loss of interest in her sister-in-law's sari as soon as she discovers the impermanence of its foreign dye.

Kumudini believed in buying only *swadeshi* items, those that are "made in one's own country" throughout her life, as did many participants in Gandhian resistance to colonialism. In this letter Kumudini deftly transforms a seemingly trivial story of sartorial choices into a political lesson about the flaws of craving foreign *(yavana)* goods over familiar locally-made items that one has always used.[8] Buying Indian-made items, rather than those imported from Britain, functioned both economically and symbolically to indicate Indian freedom from dependence upon England. The enthralling new non-colorfast dye acts as an emblem of consumer desires for colonial goods that, according to Gandhian economic theory, undermined the economic wellbeing of the subcontinent. Shanta may own such a sari, but it is not colourfast. Kumudini refers to what the sari lacks: *stiramaka,* the firmness of mind that a highly disciplined person gains from cultivating detachment from material possessions.

Image Conscious Sita

Kumudini's critique of material desires develops even more fully in Sita's third letter, which shows her in a total panic over that familiar question, "What should I wear?"[9] When Sita learns that Dasaratha has suddenly decided to retire and crown Rama his successor as king, she must immediately begin to prepare for the coronation. Only to her mother dare she confess her worry: she needs to wear the proper thing at the coronation but is uncertain about what that might be:

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I must wear a sari with your blessings on the [coronation] platform. What kind are you going to send? Would the new jasmine color be right? For wearing on the platform, it must be right. Can saris made with the spotted deer border be woven quickly?[10] Or if I were to wear the kind we discussed earlier, would that be available [quickly enough]? . . . I don't know what to do. Since I keep thinking and thinking about these saris, my mind has become confused. I am not able to come to a decision. Send help.

Your beloved, Sita

P.S. Or, combining the Deepavali sari and the coronation sari, send me a truly grand sari.

For the coronation ceremony, Sita will be on view before the entire kingdom. She worries that she does not possess the finery appropriate for this once-in-a-lifetime ritual that will elevate her from a relatively low-status new bride to queen of Ayodhya. Elaborate adornment plays a crucial role in royal ritual because the grandeur of the participants symbolizes the wellbeing of the land. The queen must be dressed in auspicious clothing and ornaments, since she now represents Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, for the whole kingdom. Sita therefore requests a very fine and elegant sari with her mother's blessings so that everyone will think that Sita looks the part she has suddenly called upon to play. She has become so anxious about wearing the correct thing that her desire for attractive material possessions has driven her to the point of distraction. Kumudini here ridicules the excessive attention to external appearance, showing how pressures about expensive adornments undermine Sita's equanimity of mind.

Transcending Matters

Sita's fourth and last letter, one with an entirely different tone from the three preceding it, indicates how Sita has banished anxious thoughts and regained her peace of mind. In this hurried epistle, she writes tersely to her mother:

I do not want you to send a sari. Everything is over. We are going to live in the forest. . . The only thing for me to wear is bark-cloth. If you consider how much it rains in the forest, you will realize that nothing else is appropriate. Therefore, if you can arrange it, send bark-cloth clothing. . . . We are going to Chitrakuta. No one must know this. Hurry.

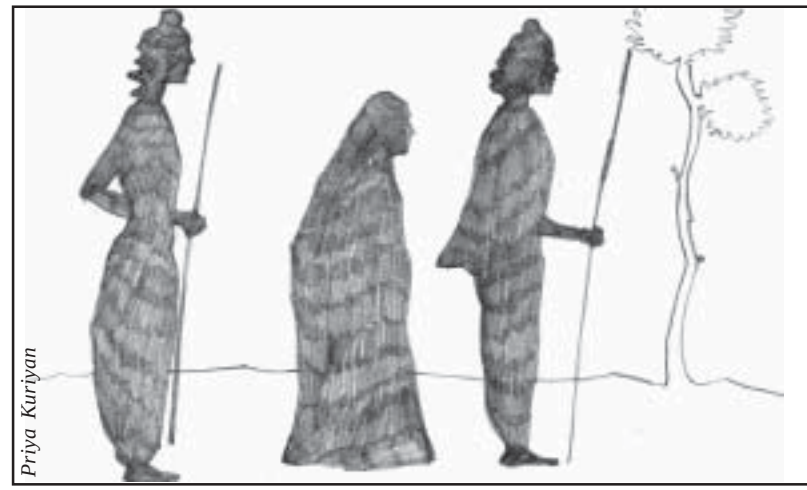
Without explaining all the events that had led to her departure for the forest, Sita merely tells her mother, with a passing reference to the woods of Chitrakuta, that the time for saris is over for her. Anyone even vaguely familiar with the *Ramayana* narrative would of course know the context: Kaikeyi forced the king to halt the planned coronation of Rama, banish him to the forest, and install her son on the throne instead. In that

situation, Sita could easily have remained in the luxury of the palace until Rama's eventual return but she insisted on accompanying him, even when he pointed out the harsh conditions that she would encounter.

In keeping with the pattern established in the story, Kumudini has Sita ask her mother — one last time — to send appropriate sartorial furnishings for an imminent event. Yet the request indicates that Sita has achieved a major conceptual breakthrough. Instead of worrying about what other people will think about what she is wearing, she considers the practical function of clothing. As Sita sets out for a life of wandering through the rough and rainy lands beyond the bounds of settled life, she hardly needs a large wardrobe. An outfit of bark cloth will protect her body from thorny branches, keep her dry in the rain, represent her as modest and disciplined, and help her negotiate yet another transition in her married life.

By donning bark-cloth, Sita will represent herself in the raiment of renouncers. Since there are no annual fashions in bark-cloth styles, Sita no longer need worry about dressing au courant. Kumudini also gently hints at the similarities between bark-cloth and *khadi*, a cloth that may be rough but is also simple and suited to a strenuous, rather than luxurious, life. Sita's decision to accompany her husband to the forest provides her with the opportunity to emerge from absorption in what turns out to have been, ultimately, trifling matters.

This brief last letter, a response to one of the most prominent and lengthily described events in literary *Ramayanas*,[11] brings together various themes introduced in Sita's earlier correspondence: the heightening tension between Dasaratha's co-wives, the power of the male head of the household to make decisions about where others in the family will go, the need for clothing that suits the demands of the situation, and the certainty that when one's life becomes overwhelming one can count on one's mother to send a gift.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Moral of the Story

Like many Indian didactic tales, Kumudini's piece includes a concise final comment. In it she links these short letters to the larger questions of what — in ultimate terms — is meaningful and what is mere trifle. Sita voices this distinction in her final postscript:

> P.S. From now on, I don't have to think about the color of saris. Great peace has been established in my mind. I have realized how excellent it would be if every woman went to live in the forest. The worries of life would be reduced by half.

Kumudini leaves us with an explicit moral for this story. People should not devote excessive attention to clothing or make it the source of stress for new brides. Desire for material possessions clouds the mind and distracts one from attention to more significant things such as finding peace of mind and achieving equanimity in life. Sita had to learn this the hard way, by embarking on a harsh journey to the forest, but readers might be able to learn from her example.

In a mere four pages of pointed prose, Kumudini has managed to retell a familiar story in a way that makes it vividly contemporary and grippingly realistic. Although Sita is a princess in a grand palace, she too encounters the kinds of problems that many young brides may face as they negotiate the economic pressures of the move from natal to marital household. Kumudini turns the story of Sita and Rama into something decidedly domestic by depicting Sita's everyday chores and interactions in the inner palace: rituals, gossip, clothing dilemmas. Kumudini addresses contemporary political concerns by alluding to the evils of dowry demands, the dangers of in-laws' excessive expectations for gifts, and the need to purchase only goods made in one's own country. Thus, the *Ramayana* becomes a way of thinking not just about dutiful actions in government and ancient times, but also about domestic life and the present.[12]

Note

1. This brief account of Ranganayaki Thatham's life is drawn from a series of interviews with members of her family, including Nandakumar (son), Prema Nandakumar (daughter-in-law), Devaki (daughter), Jagannathan (nephew) conducted in Srirangam in December 1996 and 1998. Translations of Kumudini's short story appeared in the Literary Review, The Hindu April 03, 2005. www.hinduonnet.com/ir/2005/04/03/stories.

2. In these activities, Ranganayaki was following the path of Mohandas Gandhi, which extended in ways not fully realized by most people today. Gandhi took a keen interest in nutrition, cooking, and the reduction of domestic drudgery. During

years spent in his *ashrams*, he undertook a series of experiments with different modes of cooking (including boiling, steaming, and baking) and neglected sources of protein and vitamins (soybeans, orange peel jams), and with sensible home economics. For an overview of these experiments, see Madhu Kishwar, *Gandhi and Women* (New Delhi: Manushi Prakashan, 1986), pp. 38-40.

3. Kumudini also wrote a novel titled *Tivan Makal [The Divan's Daughter]* (Mylapore: Kalaimakal Kariyalayam, 1942).

4. The Sita story first appeared in *Ananta Vigatan* 9:36 (9 September 1934), pp. 65-73. It was later reprinted as "Lady Sita" in the section called "Mail from the Inner Palace" in *Cillaraic Cankatikal, Limitet* (Tricchi: Natesan Books Limited, 1948). Like most books of the time, its title page also lists the printer, Cauveri Colour Press in Kumbakonam. At publication time, the book sold for one rupee.

5. This discussion draws upon the meanings provided in the Tamil Lexicon. *Cankati* appears in vol. 3., p. 1222, *cillarai,* vol. 3, p. 1432.

6. In her essay, "Yes to Sita, No to Ram: The Continuing Hold of Sita on Popular Imagination in India," pp. 285-308 in *Questioning Ramayanas*, edited by Paula Richman (New Delhi: Oxford University Press and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), Madhu Kishwar notes how the wife who feels that her husband is neglecting her or mistreating her can get the moral upper hand by performing pious acts believed to accrue religious merit for her family.

7. Scholars have written about the complex and often contradictory information given about Shanta in various recensions of Valmiki's *Ramayana* and other tellings. In some stories, Shanta was adopted by Lopamudra and in others by Dasaratha. For a discussion of the textual complexities, see Asoke Chatterjee, "The Problem of Santa's Parentage as Affecting the Text of the Ramayana" *Our Heritage*, 2:2 (1954), pp. 353-74, as well as his "Santa's Parentage," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 33 (1957), pp. 146-151. In a number of women's tellings, however, it is simply taken for granted that she is part of Rama's joint family and she plays the role of the traditional elder sister to him. For example, see Velcheru Narayana Rao, "A *Ramayana* of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu," pp. 114-136 in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia, e*dited by Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 118, 129.

8. The word Kumudini uses for "foreign" here is *yavana*. Originally, the word appeared in Sanskrit texts to refer to outsiders who came to India, such as the Greeks or the traders who came to the southeastern coast of India by ship with the monsoon winds. Over time the word's meaning broadened to outsiders in general, so it fits equally well as a veiled description of British colonial merchants referred to as those who provide clothing that is not produced locally.

9. For a history of the urgency of this question in colonial and modern India, see Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India (*Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) pp. 1-21, esp. pp. 15-20.

10. Note the foreshadowing here. Sita wonders whether it might be possible for her mother to get her a sari decorated with the deer pattern. It was her fondness for deer that led her to send Rama after the golden deer, leaving her alone to be abducted by Ravana, king of the demons.

11. For example, in Valmiki's telling, the story takes up more than 830 verses; in Kamban 416 verses are devoted to this section of the story. Of course, what each author emphasizes varies.

12. See A.K. Ramanujan, "Two Realms of Kannada Folklore, in *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India,* edited by Stuart H. Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 64-67, for a discussion of how epic narratives have been localized and contemporized in Kannada folktales. Some of these same patterns appear in Kumudini's short stories. ❑

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