
Empowering the Silenced: Bhavabhuti's *Uttar Ramcharitam* and Women Empowerment

***Prof Minu Kashyap¹**(English) Head, Dept of Humanities, Sri Lal Bahadur Shastri National Sanskrit University

***Dr Himani Sharma²**

Assistant Professor, Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri National Sanskrit University, New Delhi

Abstract

The present research paper explores *Uttar Ramcharitam* by Bhavabhuti as a profound and nuanced literary expression of women empowerment in the Indian epic tradition. While *Valmiki's Ramayana* immortalized Sita's abandonment, Bhavabhuti—writing in the 8th century—gives Sita a voice, dignity, and agency. By placing Sita at the center of his dramatic narrative and surrounding her with spiritually enlightened and intellectually empowered female characters, Bhavabhuti reclaims the narrative for womanhood. This paper critically examines the dialogues, characters, and metaphors used in *Uttar Ramcharitam* to argue that it functions not only as a literary masterpiece but also as a radical text of social justice for women.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Bhavabhuti, Uttar Ramcharitam, Sita, Indian Epic Tradition

Introduction

The concept of women empowerment refers to the endowment of women with the authority, autonomy, and self-determination necessary to make independent life choices and influence both societal and familial systems. In the Indian context, where dharma and familial values are deeply embedded, women's empowerment must be viewed beyond the economic and political sphere, encompassing emotional, intellectual, and spiritual liberation as well. Within this framework, Bhavabhūti's *Uttar Rāmacaritam* stands as a remarkable classical text that reimagines the narrative of Sītā from an empowered lens.

It is noteworthy to mention that Bhavabhūti's portrayal of Sītā is not that of a submissive and helpless consort but of a woman who embodies truth, dignity, and moral resilience. Her silence is not weakness but a conscious spiritual stance. In Act VII, she declares: "नायं जनः पथ्यत एव वक्तव्यो ममान्तरो वेत्ति स मे प्रियः।" (Nāyaṁ janāḥ pathyata eva vaktavyo mamāntaro veti sa me priyaḥ) — "The public need not be told everything; he who knows my heart is dear to me" (Bhavabhuti, Act VII).

This assertion of emotional autonomy reflects her evolved self. Bhavabhūti reclaims Sītā's narrative through intertextual allusions to Vedic ideals, where women were respected as

intellectual and spiritual equals as it is mentioned in the *Rgveda* (10.85.26): "साम्रा ज्योतिर्भवति योषा पुष्करिणीव सवत्।" — "A woman becomes radiant like light, flowing like a lotus-filled river" (Griffith 254).

Additionally, classical texts like Gārgi and Maitreyi dialogues in the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (4.5, 2.4) underscore women's capability in philosophical inquiry and spiritual attainment (Nikhilananda 42–45). Therefore, it is observed that through *Uttar Rāmacaritam*, Bhavabhūti aligns Sītā with this Vedic lineage of empowered women. Her grace, silence, and dignity become tools of resistance, reclaiming space in a predominantly patriarchal epic narrative. The present research intends to highlight Indian Vedic thought which transcends time and offers a profound discourse on women's empowerment rooted in dharma, śraddhā, and inner strength.

The Historical Context of Women in Indian Literature

The representation of women in Indian literature serves as a mirror to the socio-cultural dynamics of its respective eras. In the Vedic and early post-Vedic periods, women held esteemed positions as intellectual and spiritual equals. Vedic hymns mention learned women like Gārgī Vāchaknavī and Maitreyī, who engaged in philosophical debates with male sages. In the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (4.5.6), Gārgī boldly questions Yājñavalkya about the nature of reality: "कस्मिन्नु खल्वाकाश ओतश्च प्रोतश्चेति?" — "In what indeed is the space woven and interwoven?" (Nikhilananda 43). Such dialogues demonstrate the intellectual stature and autonomy accorded to women in early Indian thought.

Women were also revered in divine form. The *Rgveda* extols Devī as Śakti, the dynamic energy behind creation. In *Rgveda* 10.125.3, the goddess speaks: "अहं राष्ट्री संगमनी वसूनां..." "I am the sovereign queen, the gatherer of treasures..." (Griffith 403). This divine self-expression symbolizes empowered femininity and cosmic agency.

However, with the emergence of Dharmaśāstra literature—particularly the *Manusmṛiti*—women's autonomy waned. The oft-cited verse, "पिता रक्षति कौमारे, भर्ता रक्षति यौवने, पुत्रः रक्षति वार्धके" (Manu 9.3), reduces a woman's life to male guardianship, denying her independence at every stage (Sharma 117).

This ideological shift profoundly influenced epics like the *Rāmāyaṇa*, where Sītā is glorified not for her voice but for her suffering and silence. Her trials—Agni Parīkṣā, exile, and maternal separation—are portrayed as virtues of ideal womanhood, yet her inner world remains muted (Narayan 85).

In contrast, Bhavabhūti's *Uttar Rāmacaritam* offers a radical re-reading. Here, Sītā emerges not as a passive symbol of virtue but a woman of dignity, moral clarity, and agency. In Act VI, her silence is deliberate and powerful: "स्त्रीणां भूषणं मौनम्" — "Silence is the ornament of women"

(Bhavabhūti, Act VI), yet Bhavabhūti uses this silence to emphasize depth, not submission. Sītā becomes a figure of justice, emotional strength, and spiritual sovereignty, reclaiming her identity beyond traditional patriarchal confines (Chaudhuri 122).

Feminine Representation in Uttar Rāmacaritam

Bhavabhūti's *Uttar Rāmacaritam* begins where Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* ends, yet it offers a deeply transformative perspective on Sītā's exile. Instead of portraying her merely as a passive sufferer, Bhavabhūti elevates her as a symbol of moral strength, wisdom, and inner empowerment, thus subverting the dominant patriarchal narrative.

In Act I, Durmukha, Rama's courtier, informs him of public discontent concerning Sītā's return after her captivity in Lanka. Though Rama is personally convinced of her purity—having witnessed her Agni Parīkṣā—he succumbs to his duty as a king (rājadharmā) over his role as a husband (patī-dharmā). This is where Bhavabhūti introduces a critical ethical conflict, one that humanizes Rama while simultaneously placing Sītā on a pedestal of spiritual supremacy.

When Rama resolves to exile her, he doesn't send her away in disgrace but rather entrusts her to the Earth goddess, recognizing her divine origin. He declares: "पृथिवि महाभागे पालयैनां यथासुखम्। धर्मज्ञे देवकल्पायां न ते दुःखं भविष्यति॥" (Act I) — "O noble Earth, protect her well and give her peace. She, who knows dharma and is divine in form, shall not suffer under your care" (Bhavabhūti, Act I).

This plea to Mother Earth, who is both Sītā's mother and a divine entity, is significant. It validates Sītā's purity and undermines the authority of the gossiping public, suggesting that the earthly realm's judgment pales before the cosmic truth of dharma (Parasher-Sen 350).

Rather than diminishing Sītā's status, exile becomes the ground on which her empowerment is forged. Away from the palace, she finds refuge in Vālmīki's āśrama, a space of spiritual knowledge and detachment. Here, Sītā transforms from a queen into a spiritually autonomous woman, raising her sons with dignity and transmitting moral and royal values (Bhavabhūti).

The narrative arc carefully avoids vilifying Rama; instead, it focuses on Sītā's inner resilience. Her final act in the play—her return to Mother Earth—becomes not a surrender, but a voluntary withdrawal from a world that failed to honor her. Her dignity remains intact, and her silence speaks volumes, echoing the sentiment: "स्त्रीणां भूषणं मौनम्" — "Silence is the ornament of women" (Bhavabhūti, Act VI).

Bhavabhūti thus reconfigures the epic, turning Sītā's abandonment into an act of transcendence, portraying her not as a victim of fate but as a beacon of feminine strength and self-realization, reaffirming her spiritual and moral superiority in classical Indian literature (Narasimhan 156).

In Act II of *Uttar Rāmacaritam*, Atreyi emerges as a powerful symbol of female intellectual agency. Introduced as a disciple of Vālmīki, she arrives at Rishi Agastya's āśrama with a firm and dignified intent: "वाल्मीकिनिकटात् आगता अहं भगवन्तम् अगस्त्यम् वेदान्तमार्गं शिक्षितुम्।"— "I have come from the presence of Vālmīki to learn the path of Vedānta from the revered Agastya" (Bhavabhūti, Act II).

This declaration is pivotal. Atreyi's pursuit of Vedāntic wisdom, typically reserved for male ascetics, challenges gendered boundaries in spiritual learning. Her character echoes the Vedic tradition of women like Gārgī and Maitreyī, who participated in deep metaphysical debates (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.5.6) (Nikhilananda 43).

Atreyi's presence in the play bridges epic narrative and philosophical reflection, introducing a space where spiritual knowledge is democratized. She is not portrayed as secondary or peripheral but as a serious seeker of truth, reinforcing the idea that intellectual empowerment is a form of women's liberation in Bhavabhūti's dramatic universe (Chaudhuri 128).

In Act III of *Uttar Rāmacaritam*, Bhavabhūti masterfully personifies nature—rivers and forests—as active agents embodying feminine compassion and moral consciousness. The rivers Tamasā and Murala, and the forest goddess Vasantī, are not passive settings but participants in the emotional and ethical landscape. Bhavabhūti writes: "सुरसरिते, पालयैनं... शीतलसिक्तपद्मगन्धैरुपस्पृश." — "Good Godāvarī, look after him... soothe him with cool spray and the fragrance of lotuses" (Bhavabhūti, Act III).

Here, the river becomes a nurturing presence, aligning with the maternal aspect of nature (Prakṛti) as healer and reconciler. Most striking is Vasantī's bold rebuke of Rāma: "कथमिव त्वया क्रूरं हृदयं कृतम्?" — "How could your heart become so cruel?" (Bhavabhūti, Act III).

This rare feminine voice of moral interrogation stands out in classical literature, where divine kings are rarely questioned. Vasantī's confrontation asserts that emotional injustice must be challenged, even when committed by the upholder of dharma. This episode transforms nature into a feminist moral force, validating Sītā's suffering and demanding empathy and accountability (Parasher-Sen 355).

In Act V of *Uttar Rāmacaritam*, Vālmīki transcends his role as a poet to become a catalyst of justice and truth. He raises Lava and Kuśa in the hermitage, nurturing not just Rama's heirs but also Sītā's legacy and voice. Through a divine play within the play, staged by celestial beings, the truth of Sītā's suffering is presented directly to Rama (Bhavabhūti).

Significantly, Sītā's voice initiates the scene—no longer silent or passive, she pleads: "मा स्म मां त्याक्षीः लक्ष्मण!" — "Do not abandon me, Lakṣmaṇa!" (Bhavabhūti, Act V). Her

symbolic immersion in the Gaṅgā represents both despair and transcendence. As she rises with Bhagirathi (Gaṅgā) and Pṛthvī (Mother Earth)—symbols of marital and maternal roots—she carries Lava and Kuśa, confronting Rama with both truth and lineage.

Their rebuke: "एषा तव भार्या, एषौ तव पुत्रौ—किं वदसि?"—"She is your wife, they are your sons—why are you still silent?" (Bhavabhuti, Act V).

This forces Rama to face his moral failure. Here, women and feminine forces become arbiters of dharma, compelling empathy, accountability, and justice (Chaudhuri 135).

In *Uttar Rāmacaritam*, the divine feminine is powerfully embodied through the personifications of Pṛthvī (Earth), Bhāgirathī (Ganga), and Vasantī (the forest goddess). These natural forces transcend their nurturing roles to become judges, creators, and redeemers, elevating the narrative into a metaphysical realm. Bhavabhūti presents them as embodiments of Śakti—the cosmic feminine energy that governs creation, preservation, and justice (Sharma 195).

Pṛthvī, as Sītā's mother, receives her back into the earth, symbolizing both return and renewal: "मम पुत्री पृथिव्यां स्वर्गे च सदा वसतु।" — "May my daughter reside eternally in Earth and Heaven" (Bhavabhuti, Act VII).

Bhāgirathī's waters cleanse and nurture, signifying purity and spiritual rebirth. Vasantī's bold moral questioning of Rama underlines the feminine as law-giver and conscience: "कथमसि त्वं क्रूर हृदयं?"—"How can your heart be so cruel?" (Bhavabhuti, Act III).

Their collective intervention restores dharma and reunites the fragmented family, leaving Rama a silent witness to their sovereign power. This silence emphasizes that true authority and justice lie within the divine feminine, whose strength transcends patriarchal power (Narasimhan 161).

Conclusion: Bhavabhuti's Feminist Legacy

The present study establishes that *Uttar Rāmacaritam* transcends its role as a mere literary sequel to become a profound counter-narrative, a form of protest, and a restoration of justice and dignity. Through the empowering voice granted to Sītā, the text offers a fresh paradigm rooted in compassion, moral integrity, and the assertion of those traditionally silenced. Unlike earlier portrayals where Sītā is often depicted as a silent sufferer, this work presents her as an active agent—questioning, pleading, and ultimately reclaiming her sense of self-worth and honor.

The unity of female characters, both mortal and divine, within the narrative reaffirms a powerful message: no societal norm, religious doctrine, or political authority can surpass the intrinsic value and truth of a woman's identity. This redefinition challenges entrenched patriarchal structures and offers an enduring discourse on feminine strength and autonomy.

In contemporary conversations surrounding gender and empowerment, the insights drawn from this text resonate deeply, highlighting that voices advocating for justice, balance, and recognition of feminine power have long existed, even in ancient traditions. The vision articulated here is not one of antagonism but of reconciliation—bridging divisions between truth and love, justice and humanity.

It is an attempt to reimagine the feminine not only as divine consorts but as vital forces shaping moral and spiritual order. It portrays women as creators and sustainers of life, guardians of truth, and carriers of ethical and cosmic law, making a timeless contribution to the discourse on empowerment and social justice.

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