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3

The Sita Myth and Hindu Fundamentalism: Masculine Signs of Feminine Beauty

Usha Zacharias

This chapter considers feminine beauty both as an interpellative sign and as a sign of dissolution[1] with regard to the masculine moral order defined within contemporary Hindu fundamentalist[2] politics in India. Feminine beauty is erotic insofar as the experience of beauty is sensual. Even with the *Kamasutra*, the 3rd–4th-century A.D. Indian text on the erotic, it is clear that *kama*[3]—"the consciousness of pleasure" arising from "the enjoyment of appropriate objects by the five senses . . . assisted by the mind together with the soul"—is culturally and materially constructed and morally/religiously regulated[4] (*Kamasutra* 1.2).

In this context, I attempt to selectively analyze some aspects of the 1987–88 television version of the *Ramayana*[5] epic, produced and directed by Ramanand Sagar, focusing on its heroine Sita as the interpellative, moral paradigm of Hindu womanhood. Sita's chaste beauty and the *kama* or erotic desire she invokes are central to the widely popular myth of the *Ramayana.* The erotic is bound up with *dharma*, righteous conduct, and Hindu religio-cultural morality.

The *Ramayan* on television was not purely mythology; as Rajagopal contends, it was also a narrative that implodes tradition and modernity—a "parable of the modern national security state," which India is today (1993, 3). As several writers point out, it is impossible to dissociate the *Ramayan* telecast from the phenomenal growth of Hindu nationalism in India in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Thapar 1989; Surendran 1989; Bhattacharji 1990; Krishnan 1990; Rajagopal 1993). While there is no necessarily causal link between the telecast and the rise of Hindu fundamentalism, the television *Ramayan* has a strong intertextual link with Hindu politics, a "dialogic interrelation" on a semantic plane (Bakhtin 1986, 105–

17). Politicians of various shades relied on intertextual connections with the epic telecasts in the 1989 national election campaign. The late Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi promised the electorate *Ram rajya* (the kingdom of Ram or the ideal state); several leaders traveled in ornate *raths* (chariots) for election campaigning, and Hindu symbolism was widely prevalent in political discourse (Surendran 1989).

More significantly, Ram, the hero of the *Ramayana*, was presented similarily to what Eco calls a "cultural unit" for "the defense or destruction" of which "men are ready to go to their death" (1976, 66). (Surprisingly, so were women, as will be discussed later.) Ram becomes the powerful metasignifier of fundamentalist politics. The rhetoric of fundamentalism creates a mythic glorious history (symbolized in Ram's hypothetical temple) supposedly destroyed by the Muslims (by building a mosque at the sacral site), which has to be recovered by the assertion of an aggressive Hindu masculinity (Bhattacharya 1990). The need to overcome Hindu male effeminacy in order to assert an aggressive masculinity is central to militant Hindu rhetoric (Bhattacharya 1990; Pandey 1991). Building a temple for Ram at the alleged *Ramjanmabhumi* (Ram's birthplace) in Ayodhya, the town named after his mythical birthplace, precisely at the same site where the sixteenth-century Muslim mosque Babri Masjid stands becomes the national Hindu mission. This reached its logical culmination in the Hindu militants' December 1992 frenzied demolition of the Babri Masjid and the subsequent bloodbath in India (Gupta & Thapa 1992).

The *Ramayan* telecast constitutes part of the conditions of signification of the politics of religious nationalism. I contend that it does so not only in its reassertion of Hindu symbolism, but also in its very narrative, which metaphorically enacts the mythical structure of lost glory and the heroic mission of recovering the past for the future, which in turn constitutes the imaginary consciousness of fundamentalist politics. Ravan, overpowered by *kama* or erotic desire for beautiful Sita, carries her away from Ram, her rightful husband. Ram, a true Kshatriya (the militant warrior caste), fights a battle to avenge this violation. He kills Ravan and regains Sita, thus establishing his manhood and ascending the throne to rule the ideal state. In this sense, the television *Ramayan* enacts the narrative of threatened Hindu masculinity coming into its own in the battle for lost (feminine) territory, interchangeable with the nation, which is the narrative posited within fundamentalist rhetoric. What is involved, therefore, in the serial is not so much the past as the present and the future. The familiar myth of the *Ramayana* not only evokes a normatively glorious past and an intertextual political present, but also carries both over into the construction of the future—specifically, the fundamentalist proposition of the Hindu state.

This chapter focuses on Sita as the womanhood of Hindu political fundamentalism and feminine beauty (or eroticism) in this particular political

context as both interpellative[6] and dissolutionary. I make the semiotic distinction drawing on Mickunas's differentiation between the signs of submersion and the signs of transcendence (1986).

THE *RAMAYANA* METAPHOR

Socialist feminists express two differing views on womanhood within Hindu fundamentalism—one of the woman as passive victim caught in a masculine battle, exemplified by Sita (Chhachhi 1989); and the other of the woman as militantly empowered, resembling the warrior goddess Durga (Sarkar 1991).

Chhachhi (1989) argues that fundamentalism chooses the ideal of Sita as the epitome of female virtue: the chaste, suffering wife who worships her husband. The family's honor resides in the woman, and manliness is proved through the possession or violation of women. Many riots are set off by "alleged acts of harassment of women of one community by men of the other community. Threats to or the loss of their women . . . is seen as a direct threat to their manhood" (Chhachhi 1989, 575). The myth of uncontrollable Muslim lust (Chakravarti 1986; Chhachhi 1989; Sarkar 1991) is contrasted with the weakness of "docile, emasculated" Hindus (Chhachhi 1989).

Actual violation of women or the possibility of violation recurs in the imagery of communal tension: "They captured beautiful Hindu women, forcibly converted them and used them as temporary partners of life" (Chandra in Chhachhi 1989, 575) or "the harijans do not really want reservations, they want our women" (Jhabvala in Chhachhi 1989, 575). Speeches by local political leaders exhort men to take revenge for the "violation of our mothers and sisters" and "prove that men of that particular community are still men" (Chhachhi 1989, 575).

The *Ramayana* narrative is a striking metaphor for this political imagery, with its central narrative pattern of the lustful, demoniac Ravan abducting the beautiful Sita, thereby forcing her divine, rightful husband, Ram, into an epic battle to win back his wife. The *Ramayan*, in the context of contemporary India, thus becomes uniquely expressive of the religio-nationalist sexual equation, with its theme of the masculine battle for the recovery of the lost (feminine) territory/nation.

However, this version of the *Ramayana* would appear to leave no room for the dramatic foregrounding of women in Hindu fundamentalist politics since the mid-1980s. Fundamentalist politics, curiously enough, enables the "self-constitution of women as active political subjects" (Sarkar 1991, 2057). Women in the movement, Sarkar observes, are notable not only because they are increasing in number, but also because they are exploding the myth of passivity—they are vocal and participative, and often violently so. While the majority of leaders are male, the voices of women leaders Sadhvi Rittambara and Uma Bharti are the ones heard most frequently over loudspeakers on street corners, rousing people with unprecedented effect.[7]

Sarkar also points out that the *Ramjanmabhumi* struggle to recover Ram's holy birthplace inverts the earlier symbolization of the "fetishized sacred object" as feminine—"the cow, the abducted Hindu woman, the motherland" (Sarkar 1991, 2057). In the struggle to found/build a temple for Ram at his birthplace (the alleged *Ramjanmabhumi* occupied by the controversial mosque, Babri Masjid), "Sita's sex is coming to the rescue of Ram," to save his honor (Sarkar 1991, 2058). The appeal of Ram, Sarkar points out, is at three levels: as the chubby infant of Hindu imagery; as the vulnerable man who loses his kingdom, his father, and Sita; and as the warrior Ram who "arouses a response to an aggressive male sexuality" (Sarkar 1991, 2058). As child and man, then, she argues, Ram invites human sympathy, while being particularly appealing to the powerful mother in the woman, so that the icon of the fundamentalist movement is the warrior goddess Durga.

We could construct, then, from Chhachhi's and Sarkar's accounts, two different narratives, both embedded within the political context. In one, the male asserts his virility to possess or to save the female. Here it appears that feminine beauty, with its erotic power, endangers the masculine moral order and signifies dissolution by threatening the masculine moral order of monogamy and racial/religious purity. In the other, the powerful female gathers her partly maternal strength to save a vulnerable male. This necessitates an interpellative asceticism in the woman, a rejection of her own erotic self—an ideology within which the dissolutionary power of beauty is transcended. My contention is that the two images are not dichotomous, but dialectical, and that both are politically necessary to the proposed Hindu patriarchical state. In the television *Ramayan*, Sita does not fit neatly into the traditional passive, suffering image with which she is frequently associated. Neither is she an embodiment of the militant Durga. Instead, she breaks out of the active/passive dichotomy to enact a more complex field of relations, which I will now explore.

THE SPLIT FEMININE

Sita, originally the "Corn Mother of the vedas," is born of the earth (Bhattacharyya 1977, 22). She is found by King Janaka in a furrow as he ploughs the earth for a sacrifice (*Ramayana* 1.66). Her name itself means "furrow," an indication of the agricultural myth that relates to the personification of the furrow (*sita*) as a goddess (Singaravelu 1982, 235). The earthly dimension is cast off with her adoption by King Janaka and with her marriage to Ram—she becomes a princess. Sita is identified with Lakshmi (*Ramayana* 1.1), the radiant goddess of wealth, victory, fame, luck, riches, virtue and cleanliness (Olson 1983; Kinsley 1986). Lakshmi is also the model, devoted, dutiful wife, completely subservient to her divine lord, Vishnu. The dark counterpart of Lakshmi is Alakshmi, who symbolizes the opposing qualities: poverty, hunger and ill-fortune (Olson 1983).

Though initially an independent fertility goddess, Lakshmi changes into a tame symbol of wifely devotion and material prosperity (Olson 1983), with the shift from matristic to patriarchical semiosis described by Gimbutas (1991). Lakshmi, symbolically abstracted from her darker self, Alakshmi, and deified, now constitutes the morally and socially appropriate feminine. Like several other goddesses, Lakshmi becomes a legitimizing force for the male gods through divine marriage to Vishnu (Kosambi 1965). In contemporary wall calendars, she is often seated at her divine husband Vishnu's feet, and she embodies the auspicious half of the binary code within the feminine.

Sita and Ram are the earthly manifestation of the divine Vishnu-Lakshmi couple. Sita's status as princess and her identification with Lakshmi serve to obliterate her identity as the daughter of the earth. With Sita, the fertility goddess is purified of her "signs of submersion" (Mickunas 1986, 2–16), a semiotic process perhaps traceable back to the splitting of goddesses along the binary codes of the divine and the demoniac (Wadley 1977; Olson 1983; Ganesh 1990).

The epics, particularly the less morally ambivalent *Ramayana*, also have a normative role: They set the ideals for moral conduct—Sita as the ideal woman and Ram as the ideal, semidivine man (Bhattacharji 1980; Chakravarti 1983; Krishnan 1990). In the epic, Ram symbolizes "masculine heroism, valor and honor" and Sita, "feminine self-sacrifice, virtue, fidelity and chastity" (Chakravarti 1983, 71). The same ideals are reasserted in militant Hindu writing on the teleserial (Gupta 1987; Bhatia 1987). On television, Ram and Sita, the ideal couple with their combination of royal status, semidivinity and all too human tragedy, are already established deities. Eroticism, as far as the semidivine couple is concerned, is contained and channeled within a regulated monogamous marriage and the interpellative ideology of the *pativrata*—*pativrata* being the ideal wife who is dedicated to the service of her husband. Television episodes are punctuated with deifying songs to both Ram and Sita, with Sita often referred to as "mother Sita" (despite the fact that the serial does not cover the period of her motherhood), signifying her exalted sexual status as well as the auspicious half of the split feminine she embodies.

BHAKTI AND THE EROTIC

Watching the *Ramayan* was a national Sunday ritual in the religious and performative sense, as Lutgendorf points out (1990). Narrative strategies created the mood of *bhakti*, reverence and devotion (Rajagopal 1993). The television set itself was "garlanded, decorated with sandalwood paste and vermillion, and conch shells are blown. Grandparents admonish youngsters to bathe before the show and housewives put off serving meals" (Melwani in Lutgendorf 1990, 137). Business was suspended, and ritualized public viewings were common.

The television *Ramayan* simulated the folk performances of the epic to some extent, where the actor cannot escape the magnetic field of the divine. The space in which the television epic was enacted was, therefore, the magical space of complete presence and lack of distance in which the distinctions of signifier, signified and subject do not hold (Mickunas 1992). The television Sita *is* the Sita of all or any of the *Ramayanas*, the Sita created in the orality that calls her into existence. In this context, beauty is not a subjective/objective category. Insofar as the deity and the actress are identified, insofar as the narrative demands it, Sita has to be beautiful, and, therefore, she is beautiful. It is one of her virtues. In the magical space of the epic, physicality is insignificant, much like the short, dark Hitler evoking the image of the tall, blond Aryan (Mickunas 1992).

Sita's deified status in the *bhakti* or devotional mode necessitates the subduing of her erotic expressivity and the redefining of the very nature of her beauty, quite unlike, for instance, Valmiki's *Ramayana*.[8] In Valmiki's text, Sita's beauty is the beauty of a woman whose bodily presence is outward, as is evident from Ravan's description when he first sees Sita:

> On seeing the Princess of Videha [Sita] . . . whose eyes resembled lotus petals, the titan [Ravana] struck by Kama's [Eros's] arrow, joyfully accosted her. Praising her beauty, unequalled in the three worlds . . . he said, "O Thou, possessed of the brilliance of gold and silver . . . clad in a yellow silken sari . . . art thou Lakshmi bereft of her lotus . . . ? How even, sharp and white are thy teeth, how large thy slightly reddened eyes with their dark pupils, how well-proportioned and rounded are thy thighs and how charming thy legs, resembling the tapering trunk of an elephant! . . . How round and plump are thy cheeks like the polished fruit of the Tala trees . . . how enchanting thy bosom, decorated with pearls! . . . O Lady of sweet smiles, lovely teeth and expressive eyes, as a river sweeps away its banks with its swift current so dost thou steal away my heart, O Graceful One! Slender is thy waist, glossy thine hair, thy breasts touching each other enhance thy loveliness . . . I have never seen any [one] on earth so perfect. (*Ramayana* 3.46)

After Ravan, under the spell of Kama (the god of desire and eroticism), abducts Sita, Ram looks in vain for his beloved, and imagines her heavy thighs resemble those of the creature most tied to the earth—the elephant. In her absence, Sita's beauty to Ram *is* nature in all the fullness of its

presence, as evinced in Ram's lament to the trees of the forest. Sita, he tells the forest, is as fair as the "young green shoots"; her breasts resemble the fruit of the tala tree, her eyes those of a gazelle, her countenance that of the moon and her skin the winter jasmine (*Ramayana* 3.66). Sita's body here is the earth-bound, "blossoming, fruitful body of the goddess of the life-force," part of the north Indian ideal of feminine beauty in the fertility goddess tradition (Zimmer 1964, 116). In its rich, sensual abundance, Sita's body overflows into the earth; it metaphorically dissolves back into an essentially feminine, fruitful nature. In keeping with her identity as the daughter of the earth, Sita's body is inseparable from nature; she is vitally a part of its lush sensuality.

I called up the image not to insist on its re-creation, but to make the semiotic displacement apparent. This is the body that is missing in the moral idiom of Hindu womanhood created on national television. Sita has to be divorced from the materiality of earth/body to be merged with the ideality of masculine morality. This is the mode of *bhakti*, in which the spiritual must transcend the erotic (Sangari 1990). Sita appears in the forest clad not in the yellow robes of Valmiki's description, but in the saffron robes synonymous with contemporary Hindu fundamentalist parties and worn by women leaders in these parties. Sita, sari draped around her head in a sign of sexual reticence and moral propriety where upper-class Hindu women are concerned, appears without a body, so to speak, completely shrouded in a light saffron sari. Her face is the primary vehicle of expressivity. The expression on Sita's face is the same as that on Ram's, a beatific piety well in keeping with a mechanical interpretation of *bhakti*. This is the expression they maintain even while looking at each other, so that the erotic is constantly sublimated into the pious.

With the negation of bodily expressivity, together with overcoded *bhakti* and spurious spirituality, the room left for the erotic is the surreptitious (including rape or abduction). On television, Ravan occupies the classic position of the unseen male voyeur before directly addressing Sita. Ravan draws on the "unconscious," and therefore virginal, erogeneity of Sita to empower his own sexuality. Sita herself is seen gathering flowers, since erotic expression and virginal assertion of the gesturally limited feminine are possible only through the medium of caressing flowers, trees, rain and grass.

WOMAN AS MAGICAL PROPERTY

The only erotic desire Sita expresses in the *Ramayan* is her desire to possess the alluring *maya mrg* (magical animal)—the golden-skinned, silver-speckled deer. Sita is fascinated by the jewel-like beauty of the animal, which she glimpses while she, Ram and his loyal brother Lakshman are living in exile in the forest. The deer is a supernatural ploy, wrought in

Ravan's plot to isolate Sita by the demon Maricha's magic (*maya*)—*maya* being the perceived, possibly deceptive, appearance of the sensual world. Sita's desire is expressed as a desire for others and not for herself: She says the deer, alive, would please her mothers-in-law, and, dead, it could serve as skin for Ram to sit on. Driven by Sita's wish and enraptured himself by the deer, Ram sets off after the illusory animal, being lured farther and farther from their forest dwelling by the cunning Maricha. Having led him sufficiently astray, the deer falls to Ram's arrow, turns into its real form of Maricha and falsely cries out for help in Ram's voice.

Hearing the cry, Sita forcefully provokes a reluctant Lakshman, accusing him of lack of manhood, into leaving her and going to Ram's help. She refuses to listen to Lakshman's plea that Ram had commanded him to stay with her at any cost and to his assurance that Ram was divine and no one could harm him. Before unwillingly leaving Sita alone in their forest dwelling, Lakshman draws the *lakshmanarekha*[9] or the line of Lakshman, warning Sita that she should, on no account, step outside the line. Inside the line—called *maryada ka seema,* the line of rectitude and propriety—Sita would be safe, protected. With the male guardians out of the picture, Ravan arrives in the guise of a weary mendicant seeking alms. Lulled into security by his disguise and fearful of his threats to cause her husband's death if she does not bring food to him, Sita hesitantly steps outside the line. Once outside the line, Sita is unprotected, powerless, thereby creating the opportunity for Ravan to abduct her.

Metaphorically, the *lakshmanarekha* indicates the peculiar, magical property relationship—both moral and material—the man has over the woman in religious patriarchy. The ownership of the woman that the husband enjoys becomes magical by virtue of the masculine religious order. That the *lakshmanarekha* is a metaphor for the masculine edict, moral and material, on the woman's body is obvious from the words used—*maryada ka seema,* the line of propriety and rectitude, the crossing of which, however well intentioned, is dangerous for the woman. Once outside the line, the woman is prey to the lurking danger of *kama* and thereby in danger of falling irretrievably into social disrepute and moral chaos.

The permanence of her fall on violation of the line is borne out by Ravan's words when he reminds a frightened Sita, now outside the line, that once a woman steps outside the line of *maryada,* she cannot seek refuge within it again; she is at his mercy. There is no redemption, since the line is ruled by a magical law—once violated, it no longer has its protective power with all the fatal irrevocability of fairy tales. (Unfortunately, the line is all too real for women, even in contemporary India.) In the television version of the epic, Sita's violation of the line is what finally enables Ravan to carry her off. Feminine sexuality is safe only within the magical, moral stasis of territorialization of the *lakshmanarekha.* The *lakshmanarekha* defines the feminine as magical territory, in the contemporary context, a moral/economic property defined by and relational to the male. The line circumscribes not only the woman's body, but also the space surrounding her, which is now defined as a space relational to and drawn by the male, a space she may violate only on pain of eternal condemnation.

The violation of the *lakshmanarekha* is implicit in the drawing of the line; the existence of the line opens up the possibility of its violation. This violation or the possibility of violation is in turn a slur on Sita's virtue. Ravan's desire for Sita's beauty and his attempted violation of Sita comprise a power struggle between males, which for Sita results in a never-ending trial of her virtue. With the *lakshmanarekha,* feminine beauty becomes the erotic stage for male battles of *dharma/adharma.* The male earns his masculinity through protecting or violating the feminine, the key theme of the fundamentalist narrative, as pointed out earlier.

The *lakshmanarekha* indicates that Sita's beauty is its dissolutionary power; it upsets a masculine order, pulling it into a depth in which it mistrusts itself. It is to guard against this power that the line has to be drawn; to protect not the female, but the masculine, which can prove itself only through the moral validation of the line. The violation of the line is a crime for which Sita can never atone, whatever the suffering she undergoes, because the danger in violating the line is not for the female alone, but also for the masculine order. Sita proves that within the monastic walls of purification and transcendence, feminine beauty signifies dissolution (Mickunas 1986). Feminine beauty is the dissolutionary pull of *kama,*[10] which patriarchical morality transcends (Mickunas 1986). If one collapses the characters, as is done in metaphysical readings, the *Ramayana* battle is over *dharma,* righteous conduct, so that a particular moral order is preserved/projected (Bhattacharji 1980). *Kama,* undifferentiated eroticism, remains regulatable within this order.

In the context of the threat masculinity faces, any woman is beautiful because within the magical property relationship of religious patriarchy, she symbolizes masculinity in all its vulnerability. Beauty is invested in Sita as a political property marker, which magically gains importance with its violation/possession. This is borne out by the earlier cited communal metaphor—that beautiful women are raped during communal hostilities or stand in danger of violation. Here feminine beauty could be termed a circular signifier—Sita is abducted because she is beautiful, and it is because she is abducted that she is beautiful. The temple for Ram has to be built at precisely the same site as the Babri Masjid for no other reason than that is where the Babri Masjid stands. This is the internal logic of fundamentalism.

THE MILITANT *PATIVRATA*

The essential argument with which the abducted television Sita confronts Ravan is the power of the *pativrata.* This emerges in Ravan's declaration of love to Sita, once he has brought her by force to his kingdom, Lanka. Ravan's words arouse a passion of negation in Sita that is never expressed in her relations with Ram, her godly husband. Ironically, the righteous denial of sexuality seems far more forceful than the affirmation. In response to Ravan, who says that Sita's beauty has made him a slave to her, she says that in touching her body once while forcibly carrying her off, he has violated a *pativrata*, and, therefore, the future holds only doom for him. When Ravan offers her the material inducement of a life of luxury in his kingdom, she scornfully rejects it, saying that a *pativrata* will not forget her *dharma*, or righteous conduct. Sita has been true to her husband in mind, speech and action—a real *pativrata*—and, therefore, Ravan cannot violate her.

The *pativrata* worships her husband as god and renders dedicated service to him (Chakravarti 1986). Chastity and fidelity to a single male are essential to the *pativrata*. The Sita ideal has, over time, crystallized the *pativrata* concept into a model for Indian womanhood (Chakravarti 1986). The true *pativrata* channels her sexual desire and "surrenders body, heart and mind to the husband" (Sangari 1990, 1543). In Sita, this sacrifice is so deeply inscribed that it is her primary expression of herself: Her first instinct is to deny her own instincts and to affirm the male's. The devotion of the wife to the husband is ascetic, since it requires sacrifice or subordination of the woman's own primary instincts or interests. Being a *pativrata*, therefore, is asceticism for the woman because it entails a renunciatory exercise of the will. Like male asceticism, it carries its own ascetic powers. In its total compliance to, or rather enactment of, the male order, *pativrata*hood *is* masculine asceticism and masculine morality.

Indeed, Sita gains her moral power by excessive enactment of the masculine order, so that she is, in a way, *more masculine than the masculine*. The masculine Ravan is defeated by Sita's complete submission to the masculine order itself, with the excess of masculine asceticism that Sita can generate in comparison to him. The *pativrata* ideology redeems masculinity. This is evident when Sita affirms the power of her asceticism over her beauty and her sensuality, is not prone to the adoration of her beauty and asserts the doom of *kama* or unbridled lust, which Ravan embodies. In fact, in order to be beautiful, one has to be a *pativrata*—"women who are not obedient *pativratas* will be unable to win their husband's love, are dogs and pigs and unworthy of being called beautiful" (Sangari 1990, 1543). Beauty is here a moral category. The female demon who guards Sita and Ravan's wife are both shown to be moved and led to revere Sita for her demonstration of her power as *pativrata*. The *pativrata* ideology makes Sita the political, interpellative womanhood of Hindu fundamentalism.

The affirmation of masculine morality is sometimes violent enough that Sita herself appears empowered by the assertion, as in her forceful countering of Ravan's advances and in her taunting of Lakshman's lack of manhood in order to compel him to go in search of Ram against his brother's own command. On both counts, Sita's assertion is based on loyalty to her husband. In the articulate Sita, we see the violent and hysterically assertive side of fascist morality with its curiously ascetic sexuality. The righteous womanhood gains its strength from rigorous refusal of *kama*, the realm of eroticism, while affirming masculine morality within a hysterical sexuality of negation. Although not directly evoked in the epic or in the teleserial, the assertive feminine (as redefined in neo-Hinduism)—invoking her power as embodiment of masculine morality—alludes to a reworked myth of *shakti*.

Shakti is the female energy, which is at once terrible and beautiful, divine and demoniac, of the *Devi-Mahatmyam* (1.78–81). The powerful goddess of the *Devi-Mahatmyam* is created by the gods to save themselves when the demons have usurped their place. In her warlike manifestations, the Lakshmi/Ambika/Durga of the *Devi-Mahatmyam* wears the masculine symbols of the sword, spear, club, bow and arrows and executes the masculine mission of slaying the buffalo demon, thereby saving the gods from the overpowering demoniac threat.[11] There is an erotic element between the goddess and the demons, and in one version, the goddess even takes on a surpassingly beautiful form to lure the demons before killing them and thus restoring heaven to the male gods. It is no wonder that Durga, the militant goddess, appears as the "destroyer of demoniac forces" in right-wing Hindu writing (see, for example, Chatterjee 1987).

Without stretching the parallel too far, one could point out the similarity in the lustful Ravan, who is lured by Sita's beauty into a battle that ends in his death. Feminine beauty in both cases could be an illusory lure, an instrument of the gods, promising eroticism, while actually ensuring the triumph of *dharma*. While Sita does not physically take to arms, her very presence as ideal of purity and her staunch assertion of her status as *pativrata* create and demand the masculine retribution that ends in the victory of *dharma*. This is the ascetic power that Ravan is warned of when he is told that Sita would be like "hot coal" in his hands.

THE MASCULINE BURDEN

The television *Ramayan*, while deifying Sita and making her the spokeswoman for Hindu womanhood, excludes her earthly trials after the victorious Ram ascends the throne of Ayodhya. The serial, following the Tulsidas version, stopped with the killing of Ravan, but public pressure forced the telecast of the sequel to the epic, the *Uttararamayan* (Lutgendorf 1990). The sequel's omission of both Ram's controversial killing of a Shudra ascetic in order to save a Brahmin child (*Ramayana* 7.76) and his decision to abandon a pregnant Sita (*Ramayana* 7.45) was not accidental.

The political Ram had to be portrayed without the poetic ambiguity of the epic in good/evil, black/white dichotomy (Krishnan 1990). Court cases and demonstrations for and against (Krishnan 1990; Lutgendorf 1990) resulted in questions of what would be the "proper" version of the controversial aspects to present on government-owned, government-censored television. The textual sacrifice made was Sita's suffering at Ram's hands—Ram's rejection of Sita after he wins her back from Ravan and his suspicion regarding her chastity because she had spent a year in Lanka as Ravan's captive. In most versions, this public scandal leads Ram to decide, *without Sita's knowledge,* to abandon her in the forest during her pregnancy (Bhattacharji 1990).

However, in a new twist for the benefit of contemporary Hindu morality, the television serial depicts *Sita herself* arguing with and finally convincing Ram to abandon her in the forest, since he should not be tainted with scandal, a variation absent from all existing versions of the *Ramayana* narrative (Bhattacharji 1990). Sita forcefully reminds Ram that she had spent a year in the kingdom of Ravan, who was notorious for his lasciviousness. She argues, as a true *pativrata* would, that she has to guard the reputation of her husband. Ram must, therefore, banish her in order to satisfy his subjects and to save the reputation of his glorious family (Bhattacharji 1990).

Once again, we see a Sita who is not passive or docile, but passionately articulate—on this occasion, to save Ram's honor and the ideological self-consciousness of the *Ram rajya* (the kingdom of Ram) through her self-sacrifice. Sita becomes the vocal citizen of the projected Hindu state, protecting a Ram vulnerable in his lack of masculinity. Indeed, Ram's strength as a political symbol as far as the serial goes lies in his feeble masculinity, in the fact that he is never phallic. Once again, the feminine of Hindu fundamentalism has to redeem masculinity in its lack by professing a masculinity more masculine than the masculine, as pointed out earlier.

CONCLUSION

Thapar points out that Hinduism, unlike Christianity, is not a linear, homogeneous religion. The currently propagated "syndicated Hinduism," she contends, is an attempt to "restructure the indigenous religions as a monolithic, uniform religion" (Thapar 1985, 14–15). The government-approved television *Ramayan* is part of the attempt to redefine Hinduism as an ideology for modernization (Thapar 1990), an ideology that is the ideology of the modern Indian state (Rajagopal 1993).

The television *Ramayan*'s critical significance for Hindu politics also lies, as noted earlier, in the fact that it enacts the narrative of the revival of threatened Hindu masculinity. The political narrative thus provides room

for both the lack of masculinity and its fulfillment. In its movement to conquer its own femininity, this "masculinity" contains both the feminine and the phallic. In the process, a complementary discursive space is created for Hindu womanhood, a womanhood that has to be fought for and protected/violated within the morality of the *lakshmanarekha* and one that is directly or indirectly, through the ideology of the militant *pativrata*, empowered to save the fe/male symbol of Ram. When both these levels are combined, the male/female subject distinction collapses for all political purposes.

On one level, feminine eroticism (beauty) is the dissolutionary power of *kama,* constituting a standing threat to the masculine moral order and indicating a vulnerable masculinity. It evokes the magical property relationship of possession/violation in religious patriarchy, where beauty is implicated in circular signification. On another plane, the dissolutionary power of beauty is transcended by perceiving it as illusory or by disguising it in morality. Masculinity is redeemed by the feminine herself, who generates an excess of masculinity with the interpellative ideology of the *pativrata* and accompanying asceticism. There is no real contradiction here—in both narratives, it is the masculine that is threatened, and it is the masculine that has to be saved. In the fundamentalist semiosis, both Sita and Durga are one, dialectical aspects of the womanhood essential for the masculine order. This womanhood may violate the rules only to resurrect the threatened masculinity of the metaphoric Ram and the sacral site of Ayodhya.

NOTES

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1. The central idea for this chapter is derived from the distinction between the signs of submersion and the signs of transcendence drawn by Mickunas (1986).

2. I use "fundamentalism" to indicate the inflexible political assertion of religious identity. It is practically interchangeable with "communalism," the word commonly used in India to designate the same phenomenon. Since fundamentalism has emerged in and through Hindu religious nationalism, I use the terms as correlatives.

3. I use the word *kama* frequently, since there is no real English equivalent. Zimmer (1967) gives a good account of the philosophical dimensions of the word.

4. In the *Kamasutra,* the erotic is not composed of two bodies alone: it also includes the socioeconomic-caste context, emotions, surroundings, skills (ranging from the mathematical to the verbal) and objects, natural and humanmade. It seems obvious that the sensual here is not limited to so-called physical experience, but also encompasses consciousness as a whole.

5. I use *Ramayan* when referring to the television serial, in keeping with its

title, and *Ramayana* for the ancient myth itself with all its different variations. These terms are not mutually exclusive, since the television serial is part of the *Ramayana* tradition. I use "Ram" and "Ravan," rather than "Rama" and "Ravana," for the sake of consistency.

6. Althusser (1971) defines interpellation or "hailing" as the way subjects are constituted/recognized/identified within the dominant ideology in the name of an Absolute Subject. Within the religious ideology of Christianity, the Absolute Subject would be God, who interpellates or hails individuals so that they recognize themselves in Him and feel that they are recognized by Him. Interpellation is the process that ensures our complicity with the ideology of our own "free" will.

7. I am here basically concerned with imagery and symbols. The feminine presence does not imply that the Hindu political parties are different from any other male-dominated parties in terms of power structure.

8. I use Valmiki's *Ramayana* not as the "original" or "real" text, but as a useful context or vantage point from which to view the television serial. Taking India's cultural plurality as well as multiple versions and performances of the *Ramayana* extant in culturally diverse parts of India into account, neither the "original" myths nor the television version can be said to necessarily have any kind of performative priority (Lutgendorf 1990). However, in India, television is a government-owned, government-censored medium with a built-in normative sense of national morality and the consciousness of statehood. Therefore, the question arises as to why one version seems more legitimate and politically apt for national television than the others.

9. The *lakshmanarekha* incident is absent in Valmiki's version. It is introduced by Tulsidas, as Bhattacharji points out (1990).

10. *Kama*, on one level, could be the central theme of the *Ramayana*. Ram's father, Dasaratha, yields to his weakness for his youngest queen and gives in to her demand to banish Ram; Lakshman and Ram reject Ravan's sister, Shurpanakha, who desires them; and Sita herself is abducted by Ravan in the metaphoric forest of demoniac threats and moral wilderness. *Kama* thus appears to constitute the most important causal link in the narrative up to Ram's victory over Ravan.

11. Interestingly, in one version of the *Ramayana*, the *Adbhutha Ramayana*, when Ram is helpless on the battlefield, Sita appears as Kali, the goddess of time/death, and single-handedly vanquishes Ravan (Thapar 1990).

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4

Changing Perceptions of Feminine Beauty in Islamic Society

Amira Sonbol

Is there a connection between ideals of feminine beauty and particular roles played by women in Islamic society? Do connections between such ideals and patriarchical attitudes correlate with the socioeconomic structures of the particular era? Finally, how useful are such microstructural studies for understanding social relations and hence Islamic history? These questions are central to this chapter, which deals with a subject that, on examination, proved to be quite new for Middle East studies, notwithstanding its popularity in the West. The connection between sociocultural perceptions of beauty and other gender issues, such as marriage and sexuality, has yet to become a focus for Middle East historians. Hence, this chapter raises many questions and attempts to lay a framework for further research.

Generally speaking, studies drawing connections between ideals of beauty and social hierarchization reflect contemporary feminist ideology's attempt to make women aware of the "relationship between female liberation and female beauty" (Wolf 1991, 9) and hence to encourage them to work toward their liberation. In this political feminist discourse, the "enslavement" of women is a function of family, while standards of beauty are "determined by politics" and are established by patriarchical society as a "belief system that keeps male dominance intact" (Wolf 1991, 12). Nawal Sa'dawi has been the most vocal Arab feminist, espousing the view that Middle Eastern women are the chattel of husbands or male family members. Leila Ahmed projects the modern feminist paradigm to the past, tying the appropriation of women as property to the establishment of the nuclear family: Whereas in pre-Islamic Arabia (*jahiliya*) women had lived relatively unfettered under conditions that included both polygamy and