

Motherhood: Versions and Subversions in Anand Neelakantan's Valmiki's Women

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Abstract

Motherhood as an institution does not operate in a universal form. However, it has various forms, such as biological motherhood, foster motherhood, adoptive motherhood, and step motherhood, which operate in extensively different manners. The present paper unveils how Kaushalya as a biological mother, Kaikeyi as a stepmother, Vershini as an adoptive mother, and Manthara as a foster mother are projected in Anand Neelakantan's Valmiki's Women: Five Tales from the Ramayana both in line with and against the ethnic norms of motherhood defined by the society. Why and how biological mothers fail to give primary care and necessary attention to their children, whereas foster and stepmothers meet the basic requirements of others' children are addressed in this study. This paper attempts to show how women from different socio-cultural classes and women from the same class but from diverse ethnicities perceive and engage in motherhood. It also rivets on how the forms of motherhood work and subvert their essence of duty. It examines the complexities in the motherhood practice of prioritizing one offspring over the other out of helplessness or being in search of power or fulfilment of some intended desires.

Keywords: caregiving, sacrifice, indifference, silence, self-gain

Motherhood is associated with women who become mothers. It involves everything from pregnancy and childbirth to child-rearing responsibilities. As mentioned earlier, there are various forms of motherhood. At first, a biological mother is the one who conceives the foetus in her womb and gives birth after completing the necessary number of months. Secondly, a stepmother is the one who becomes a mother to her husband's children from his other wives. She tries to substitute a biological mother after certain mishaps. Thirdly, the adoptive is someone who accepts a child through the process of adoption. Finally, a foster mother is assigned by a state or authority to care for a child for a particular period and is paid to nurture. These are the versions of motherhood and mothering practices attached to motherhood. There is no strict demarcation of motherhood. They may overlap in their natural expression; for instance, the stepmother may act as the biological mother, and the adoptive mother may behave

like the stepmother. But when motherhood practices demonstrate and subvert culturally defined values of mothering, they turn out to be a subversion of motherhood.

The paper explores such versions and subversions of motherhood in the novel *Valmiki's Women: Five Tales from the Ramayana* by Anand Neelakantan. The novel has five chapters under the titles Bhoomija (Sita), Shanta, Manthara, Tataka, and Meenakshi (Shoorpanaka). The plot covers the story of the major female characters in the Ramayana. The story encircles the episodes: the transformation of Valmiki to compose poems, the childhood and abandonment of the princess of Ayodhya Shanta, the attitudes of Kaushalya, Kaikeyi and Dasharatha's towards their daughter, the childhood and marriage of Kaikeyi, Manthara's life as a foster mother, Tataka's life in the forest, and Meenakshi's friendship with Sita.

The motherly characters, Kaushalya, Kaikeyi, Manthara, Vershini, and Shanta, are manifested throughout the novel. Being a princess of Ayodhya, Shanta never feels comfortable at the palace and perceives herself as an outsider. Shanta is devoid of her parents' care and love. Her biological mother, Kaushalya, does not invest time in rearing Shanta, but in praying to be blessed with a son. For instance, at the time of Shanta's adoption, Kaushalya remains silent and indifferent. When Kaikeyi insists that Shanta should disagree and deny adoption, Kaushalya meanwhile forbids Kaikeyi to barge into the decision made by Shanta's father to give her off in adoption. She says, "Shanta is my daughter, and it is her father's decision to send her off. I suggest you do not interfere, Kaikeyi" (Neelakantan 32). Until now, Kaushalya is deliberately ignorant of having a daughter and never shows affection towards her. She establishes her identity and ownership now as the mother, but Kaikeyi, who expresses her concerns and fights for Shanta, is made an outsider and stopped from saving the poor girl.

It is impossible to find a speck of grief in Kaushalya for giving up on her child. She is filled with the excitement of being blessed with a son. She says, "Thank you, daughter. Perhaps the gods will be kind this time and bless us with a son" (Neelakantan 32). Interestingly, Shanta's biological mother stays unaffected and nonchalant. Shanta cries in shock, hugging her mother because of the abandonment, but Kaushalya dislodges herself from Shanta's embrace and walks off the chamber chanting mantras. This is how her mother also aligns with her father's unjust decision imposed on Shanta. It shows that Kaushalya is a submissive wife. She does not exercise her freedom of choice and gives in to her husband's actions. She does not think or make decisions on her own. Her determination to abide by her husband's orders on this matter are regulated by the practices and beliefs of her maternal home. In addition, she has to respect and commit herself unquestionably to following the convention of Ayodhya, which entitles the

male child only to be the heir. So, her choice of self-determination is governed by cultural norms.

Another character, Kaikeyi, is depicted as a warrior and pragmatic woman. She is Shanta's stepmother and supports her in learning horse riding and sword-wielding, which is against Dasharatha's wish. She was born and raised in a sociocultural environment with no strict gender biases. Due to this upbringing, she can express her discontent and question the resolution brought by the king. She expands her reach from the palace chamber to the royal assembly develops her interest in polity, royal court, and order, and actively participates in the administration. Once, after being married to Dasharatha, she breaks the conventions attached to a queen. She rides horses outside the palace premises like a king. She does not cover her face in public places, which is unusual in Ayodhya society. Kaikeyi cares for Shanta and demands the court for her consecration regardless of gender. Kaikeyi argues with Vashishta in this matter. Shanta is backed only by Kaikeyi. When Dasharatha announces that Shanta will be given away for adoption; Kaikeyi not only opposes but also encourages Shanta to reject her father's decision, whereas the biological mother is quiet and inoffensive towards her stepdaughter. Kaikeyi forces her again to reject the adoption and rumbles her words in the chamber by proclaiming that she is the clan's heir and the throne is hers. She pleads to Shanta, "Tell your father that you do not want to be adopted. You are heir to Ikshvaku *Vamsa*. The throne belongs to you!" (Neelakantan 31). Such a declaration by Kaikeyi implies two distinct motives: whether she defies the discursive practices of Ayodhya or has some personal intention to become a de facto of the Ayodhya kingdom apart from the wellness of her stepdaughter.

Kaikeyi is determined that Shanta's life should not be sacrificed to save the Anga kingdom when the warriors can fight Indra for rain. She brings a sharp retort, saying, "Are there no brave warriors who can fight Indra, the god of rain, and ask him to shower his blessings on Anga? You want to depend on a girl to do that?" (Neelakantan 32). She questions the warriors' inability and the little girl's victimisation. Kaikeyi refuses to meet Dasharatha unless he himself comes to see her after marrying Sumitra. But she breaks her vow when her stepdaughter Shanta's life is at risk. She unhesitatingly attacks Dasharatha with her interpositions and speaks for Shanta and her rights on the Ayodhya throne. She splashes her anger in the following words: "Don't you value the life of your daughter? Why are you so obsessed with a son? You have married thrice and you have sixteen thousand women in your harem, yet you haven't got a son. Why can't you accept that your daughter could be the next ruler of Ayodhya?" (Neelakantan 120).

Kaikeyi fearlessly resists the unscrupulous stand of the king. In her opinion, Dasharatha is committing a mistake. Therefore, she sharply argues with the king and criticises him for his unethical steps. A question arises here- whether her worry is about the Ayodhya kingdom, which is turning heirless while aspiring for a prince because the king would not get a male heir even after marrying thrice, or she aspires to become a sole authority on behalf of Shanta through her diplomacy and practicality. Due to this ambiguity, Kaikeyi's intentions are concealed. To some extent, her support for Shanta may be ephemeral since she does not have a child. She might not have been the backbone for Shanta if she had her biological child.

Kaikeyi sensitively strengthens Shanta in her determination to move forward and accomplish her mission when she has a tough time at Vibhantaka's ashram to seduce Rishyasringa. She gets reminded of her words, "Shanta, you may have your faults, but what I like about you is that you never give up... You are going to rule Ayodhya one day. You cannot act like a wimp" (Neelakantan 43-44). Surprisingly, her stepmother's words motivate her in the worst and most disheartening situations. Kaikeyi always fills Shanta with the high spirit of ruling the kingdom. When she returns to Ayodhya with Rishyasringa to perform yajna for the royal family, Kaikeyi sends her a message of her love and bark dress through Manthara. She knows that a hermit woman can accept the bark dress. The letter reads "You have chosen well, Daughter. May you always be happy. Ayodhya does not deserve you... You remember the birch tree we had planted together... I used its barks and stitched a dress for you... I wanted to do it with my own hands for my daughter. I hope you like it. With it, I send you, my blessings." (Neelakantan 58)

In contrast, Kaushalya and Sumitra endow Shanta with luxurious materials like silk sarees and gold ornaments, which an ascetic life is devoid of. She does not find any excitement or true love attached to those gifts. But Kaikeyi enwraps her warmth in the letter and the bark dress, which she can accept as a hermit's wife. So, her gifts restore an emotional bond between them. In Ayodhya, Kaikeyi is the only person elated with Shanta's sacrifices and achievements to fulfil her father's wish. Later, she cannot stop loving all her sons, especially Ram. She does not make any difference. But her unconditional endearment to Ram may be in the absence of her own son, Bharat. So, who would Kaikeyi have preferred, Shanta or Ram, if Shanta had not been adopted?

Manthara, the foster mother and family servant of Kaikeyi, is another woman in the royal family who comes to Ayodhya after Dasharatha marries Kaikeyi. She is portrayed as mother figure for Kaikeyi and her twin, Yudhajit, following the banishment of their biological mother. She embraces her motherhood without giving birth to a child. She seems to be the

constant force behind the progressive attitudes of Kaikeyi, and she fills her with an exuberant spirit to compete with her twin brother. Manthara's greater tenderness towards Kaikeyi may hide some purpose because she hails from a slum area where gender biases are hardly found, and anyone can fight for their right. The fear of being banished and insecurity that intermittently occurs in her mind while residing in the royal family. Later, Kaikeyi reflects the same approach towards Shanta. The cajoling love between Manthara and Kaikeyi would beat any biological mother-daughter relationship. Manthara sacrifices her personal and familial life for Kaikeyi's happiness. If she had agreed to the woos of Bhairava, she would have had a husband, son, and a family of her own. But she chooses to be a motherly figure to Kaikeyi.

Edin and Kafelas opine in their book *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage* (2005) that poor women and single mothers choose to have children because of their positive outlook towards having babies. Though they have fewer privileges, they do not consider motherhood a burden but look at it as a means of happiness and achievement (Kawash 2011). In the same manner, Manthara looks at it as a blessing. She has a child without marriage. This gives her a lot of freedom and completeness in being a mother.

Manthara wishes that Kaikeyi would remain a child, as all mothers want. She does not want to give her away to her husband. She longs for her all the time. Manthara denies all the proposals for Kaikeyi in search of the best for her as a motherly instinct. There are also other reasons for her denial. She has many questions: What will happen to her once Kaikeyi is married off? Will Kaikeyi take her to the in-laws' home? Will the royal family allow her to stay in the palace when Kaikeyi goes away? She is sceptical of these possibilities, for she has everything because of Kaikeyi, and once Kaikeyi leaves the kingdom, her life will be uncertain, and there will be a threat to her position in the palace.

Manthara is unhappy with Kaikeyi's choice to marry Dasharatha. Being a mother, she cautions Kaikeyi about her decision. Manthara assumes that Dasharatha does not respect women when she perceives that he is yearning for a son. So, she wants to save her daughter by the web of love. But Kaikeyi overreacts and sends Manthara away. Still, Manthara worries about her daughter and waits for her to open the door. In the book *Marginalised Mothers* (2006), Val Gillies presents the same idea of how working-class women bring meaning to their lives through their children. They place themselves strongly fighting against injustice and powerlessness, and withstanding and defeating odd situations (Kawash 2011).

Manthara thrives on the battlefield for her daughter's safety. Worriedly, she accompanies Kaikeyi to the battlefield. Even on the battlefield, she aspires for Kaikeyi to accept Bhairava's proposal. She gets reminded of her promise to her daughter that she would always be with her. So, she puts her wishes aside to keep her words true to her daughter. Though Kaikeyi is the warrior, Manthara cries out about her injuries on the battlefield. Manthara devotes herself to Kaikeyi's marriage preparation without pondering her own situation after the wedding. However, Kaikeyi takes Manthara to Ayodhya. Manthara's sole duty is to protect her daughter and to take care of her interests in Ayodhya. Kaikeyi showers her frustration about Dasharatha's negligence toward Manthara. The poor foster mother bears all her worst behaviours without any complaints. Her loyalty might be because of her identity attached to Kaikeyi and the satisfaction she gets from her mothering role. In the book *Embodying Motherhood*, Anu Aneja, and Shubhangi Vaidya opine the same, "Motherhood has often been reduced to a contractual agreement that women consent to under circumstances of economic or social compulsions; yet, there has also been an ongoing recognition of deep, visceral satisfactions to be derived from mothering." (xv-xvi) Manthara grows silent when Kaikeyi makes fun of her deformity. The little girl who was calling Manthara ma... now reminds her that she is just a servant for the sake of Ram.

Manthara's intention behind provoking Kaikeyi to demand Bharata's consecration is debatable. Does she want Dasharatha to be true to his promise that Kaikeyi's son will be the next heir? Is it because she regards herself as a foster grandmother to Bharata? Is it because of her enmity with Ram for his mischievous activities? Or is she insecure about Ram becoming king and throwing her out of the Kingdom of Ayodhya? So, she thinks that she will be safe when Bharata becomes the heir.

After the death of Dasharatha, Manthara mourns for her widow daughter. But Kaikeyi puts all the blame on Manthara for her situation. She suggests that Kaikeyi should demand Bharatha's coronation but never speaks about Ram's exile. Val Gillies also puts the same idea in the book *Marginalised Mothers* (2006), which states that women in poverty and the working class are often degraded for their poor mothering roles and blamed for the shortcomings in their children's lives (Kawash 2011). Consequently, what Manthara gets from Kaikeyi is rejection even after serving her for thirty-five years like a slave. She is chided even though she does not make a mistake. At this point, motherhood in her dies. Even after this rejection, Manthara being in the dungeon keeps her hope alive that Kaikeyi will come and repent for her mistakes. Her motherly instinct makes her practice and rehearse what she has to speak once her daughter

turns up. In that worse situation, Manthara still keeps worrying about Kaikeyi, Kaushalya, and Sita and the way the rules and traditions of Ayodhya treat women.

Like the biological and the stepmother, Shanta's adoptive mother, Vershini, also influences her life in the royal family. After the adoption, she reveals what Shanta has to do. Being a woman and an adoptive mother, she asks Shanta to seduce Rishyasringa for the benefit of the kingdom. She does not worry about what happens to Shanta. No one is bothered whether she is ready to do the task or could accept that. Everyone uses Shanta for their gains, whether it is a biological or adoptive mother. Motherhood has harmed and put the child in danger instead of protecting, loving, and caring for it. In the book *"Bad" Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (1998), Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky says, "Bad" mothers expose the dark underside of an essentialist view of motherhood: if mother love and self-sacrifice are the natural expressions of maternity, then anger, violence, and even the mildest acts involving choosing one's own needs over those of the child are not only wrong but unnatural, even monstrous" (Kawash 2011).

Everyone is contingent on the gains that follow the marriage of Shanta and Rishyasringa. She is sold to beget a son. Vershini gives Shanta a compensatory hope that Rishyasringa may love and marry her. In turn, Shanta asks if the marriage will set everything right. For what, Vershini remains silent and does not answer. A few questions strike at this point: Would Vershini have been indifferent if she had her biological daughter in Shanta's place? Does she take the act of seduction so lightly because it is someone else's daughter?

Finally, Shanta turns out to be a motherly figure to the Anga Kingdom. The citizens of Anga Kingdom looks up to Shanta and addresses her as a mother. She cannot understand what their intention is. She does not know that she was brought there for sacrifice. She accepts the request of the people and sacrifices herself. In turn, as a benefit of the sacrifice, the royal family of Ayodhya is also blessed with male children. Women are constrained by the social pressure to meet the expectations of cultural ideals, attaching self-sacrifice and self-abnegation with gender (*Motherhood* 74). Shanta makes this sacrifice to fulfil the wishes of her biological parents. Since she has sacrificed her life for the birth of her brothers, she looks at them as her children. She worries about her brother Ram, Lakshman, and his wife Sita as a mother when they are in exile. She prays for their safety more as a mother than that of a sister. She does not become a mother by giving birth, adopting a child, or fostering a baby, but by sacrificing her life. Her character cannot be categorised under any form of motherhood.

The paper argues that the affection, love, and bond between mother and child are not dependent on which form of motherhood the one is. The close bond can be found in any form. The formation of motherhood plays an important role in mothering practices. Cultural, social, moral, and ethical nuances during the formation of a girl into a mother affect herself, the child, and the people around her. The characters exhibit their ingrained perception of the role of mother. Hence, their perceptions differ, and so do their actions and practices.

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