



S.L. BHYRAPPA'S UTTARAKAANDA – A WOMAN'S READING

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There are many versions of the Ramayana in the Indian tradition. The influence of the Ramayana on Indian cultural and religious life is profound. We can identify its deep and complex impact on Indian values and beliefs. For this reason, Ramayana-based works have been composed in various Indian languages. Ramayana narratives have adapted to the contexts of religion, region, era, and environment. Beyond just being scripture, they have taken on unique traits in folk traditions—giving rise to folk poems and stories. Thus, the Ramayana has not remained merely a religious epic but has become a local cultural medium and a vehicle of thought. This is why we find the Ramayana in diverse literary forms.

There are hundreds of Ramayana narratives in Indian tradition—Buddhist, Jain, Vedic, and folk versions. From the first poet Valmiki to modern writers, countless poets have written works inspired by the Ramayana. When we examine Kannada literature, Kumaravyasa's line, "Tinukidanu Phaniraya Ramayanada kavigala bharadali" (Phaniraya was drowned in the burden of Ramayana poets) reflects the prevalence and popularity of Ramayana stories.

The Ramayana narrative has branched into multiple traditions and has taken varied forms across several countries. It has inspired countless poets and become a key subject for literary creativity. In this regard, no poet or writer working on the Ramayana can entirely detach from its traditional framework.

Apart from the Buddhist, Jain, and folk traditions, S.L. Bhyrappa's recent novel *Uttarakaanda* is based on the Vedic Ramayana tradition, particularly Valmiki's version. In this essay, I wish to share some perspectives on this novel.

Bhyrappa's Uttarakaanda seems to resonate not just with Bhavabhuti's *Uttaramacharita*, H.V. Savitramma's *Seetha-Rama-Ravana and Vimukti*, S.V. Prabhavati's *Seetha*, but also with insights from the Tulu poet Mandara Keshava Bhatta's *Mandara Ramayana*. The work feels like old wine in a new bottle. Just as S.V. Ranganna once said about Mudanna's poetry—"a golden frame for a common picture"—this too is a narrative already explored by poets for hundreds of years. However, writers like Kuvempu, Mandara, Savitramma, and Prabhavati have explored it differently, emphasizing humanistic and relational nuances, offering profound insights into human existence.

In this sense, *Uttarakaanda* brings the Ramayana story into a modern, progressive, and reflective framework, aligning it with democratic ideals. This makes it a welcome contribution. Yet, one must not ignore the deeply philosophical and scientific narratives that have already enriched Kannada literature, such as *Uttaramacharita*.

Reading Bhyrappa's earlier novels like *Datu*, *Vamshavriksha*, and *Grihabhanga* made me admire his progressive thinking, narrative skill, and his sensitive treatment of human relationships. However, his recent works, particularly *Kavalu*, portrayed women in ways that made me question whether I wanted to continue reading him. But *Uttarakaanda* has changed that view. This novel rekindled my respect for Bhyrappa, especially due to its intricate, modern perspective on human life.

Here are a few distinctive aspects I noticed during my reading of *Uttarakaanda*:

Key Themes Identified in *Uttarakaanda*:

1. Unique portrayal of feminine sensibility (particularly through Seetha's character).
2. The existential quest and the depiction of human vs. demonic tendencies; the interpretation of 'birth'.
3. Reflections on values and morals.
4. Interpretations of 'dreams', 'curse', and 'sin'.

1. Feminine Sensibility (Through Seetha's Character)

The way Seetha questions Ravana and the patriarchal setup reflects modern feminine awareness. Her character is caught between two contradictions. On one hand, she is shown as an independent, courageous woman with a strong personal identity. Yet, at the end, she is pushed into the role of a 'Mahasati' (great chaste woman) who chooses widowhood and a form of ritual suicide. This feels contradictory to the earlier progressive tone of her character.

While Bhyrappa attempts to present women's oppression as unjust, his depiction of Seetha in the end seems to rebid her to traditional confines. The narrative holds a pervasive, melancholic tone, suggesting that 'Dharma' and 'power' within society systematically destroy a woman's life. Through Seetha, Bhyrappa expresses a deep emotional concern for women, which is relevant and necessary today.

2. Ethical Dilemmas and Gender Morality

The controversial portrayal of Ahalya raises questions about morality. When King Janaka defends his inaction regarding Ahalya's seduction, saying she desired pleasure and accepted gold, it reinforces patriarchal notions that commodify women. This is a strong reminder of male dominance and toxic masculinity.

In a dream, Seetha feels guilty for desiring ornaments and reflects: "Dreams are distortions, and distortions are illusions"—an idea derived from Vedic teachings. Yet, this explanation lacks scientific or psychological depth.

3. Seetha's Origin and Identity

There is an important conversation between Rama and Dasharatha about Seetha's birth. Rama argues that her nurture, values, and upbringing are more important than her unknown origin, whereas Dasharatha insists on the importance of lineage. This resembles Pampa's interpretation of Karna's birth in Pampa Bharata. However, from a woman-centered perspective, this dialogue remains unsatisfying.

Seetha's own frustration is evident when she asks Rama whether he would have rejected her had she been ugly. Rama's response, that he followed Dharma and didn't even consider her looks, leaves Seetha cold. She realizes that for him, Dharma trumps emotion.

4. Patriarchy and Social Hypocrisy

When Seetha is abandoned, she reflects bitterly on Rama's action. She expresses deep anger, calling him drunk on Dharma and likening his action to punishing her for another's sin. This depiction powerfully criticizes how Dharma and patriarchy ruin a woman's life.

Similar sentiments are voiced by Kausalya, who rages against Dasharatha after being ignored for Kaikeyi's sake. Also, the reactions of the women in the palace and even demonesses (rakshasis) are portrayed similarly—highlighting a universal theme of female suffering across social classes.

5. Questions of Purity, Love, and Rape

Seetha's introspection about bodily purity is striking. She asks: why should a woman feel ruined if her body is violated, when the soul remains untouched? Why is rape a sin on the victim, and not just the perpetrator? She questions gender bias in sexual violence and reflects on the difference between male and female experiences.

6. Ravana vs. Rama – Love and Dharma

Seetha reflects that Ravana lacks Dharma and sees her as an object, whereas Rama, despite his flaws, follows Dharma and restraint. Her final conclusion—that killing Ravana is not just protection but a righteous act—is powerful.

7. Subtlety in Relationships

Through characters like Vibhishana and Indrajit, Bhyrappa explores sexual psychology, incestuous hints, and even legal implications similar to modern-day child sexual abuse laws (POCSO). The suggestion that female children are often abused more by insiders than outsiders is thought-provoking. Indrajit's crude suggestion to rape Seetha for psychological warfare is sharply contrasted by Vibhishana's satirical and morally grounded response.

8. Final Insights: Return to Earth and Self-Realization

In the end, Seetha's return to the Earth and her reflections on love being self-centered echo the teachings of Sage Yajnavalkya to Maitreyi: that love is ultimately selfish, sought for personal happiness. This philosophical close leaves a deep impression.