



Sleep, Counsel, Surrender: The Unheard Heroines of Valmiki's Epic

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Abstract: The Ramayana is commonly remembered through its most visible episodes: Rama's exile, Sita's abduction, Hanuman's journey, and the defeat of Ravana. Yet the epic also contains a quieter ethical register embodied by women whose actions rarely receive sustained attention. Urmila, Tara, Mandodari, and Sulochana appear at different points in the narrative, but each responds to crisis through a mode of restraint: Urmila through sleep, Tara through counsel, Mandodari through persistent appeal, and Sulochana through ritual. Their interventions do not overturn the central course of events, nor does the narrative consistently praise them. Nevertheless, their actions expose the moral costs of masculine ambition and violence. This article reads these figures together across the Aranya, Kishkindha, Yuddha, and Uttara Kandas. It argues that their apparently separate acts form a sequence of ethical practices: enabling action, anticipating disaster, resisting destructive choice, and containing violence after death. Their agency is limited by patriarchal structures, yet it is not therefore insignificant. Through withdrawal, speech, persuasion, and ritual performance, these women maintain relationships, warn against catastrophe, and preserve social and moral order. The article proposes that the Ramayana should not be read solely as a triumphal narrative of heroic action. It is also a layered ethical negotiation in which restraint, care, and unrecognized female labor make masculine dharma possible

Keywords: Valmiki Ramayana; Urmila; Tara; Mandodari; Sulochana; feminine dharma; women in epic literature; ethical restraint; gender and mythology; ritual and grief.

1. Introduction

In classrooms across India, the Ramayana is usually introduced through a familiar sequence of celebrated events: Rama's exile, Sita's abduction, Hanuman's leap to Lanka, and Rama's victory over Ravana. When Urmila, Tara, Mandodari, or Sulochana is mentioned, however, the response is often one of uncertainty. Urmila is remembered primarily as Lakshmana's wife, Tara as Vali's widow, Mandodari as Ravana's virtuous queen, and Sulochana as a marginal figure associated with Indrajit's death. Their limited visibility is not only a consequence of popular

retellings. It also reflects a critical tradition that has generally privileged Rama's obedience, Lakshmana's loyalty, Sita's suffering, and Ravana's arrogance.

A closer reading of Valmiki's epic complicates this hierarchy. The four women considered here intervene at moments when masculine action is either being initiated, intensified, or completed. Urmila's relationship to

Lakshmana's vigil is associated in later Ramayana traditions with the transfer of sleep, although this episode is not narrated in the same form in the received Valmiki text. Tara warns Vali against confronting Sugriva and Rama, but her counsel is rejected. Mandodari repeatedly urges Ravana to return Sita and avert Lanka's destruction. Sulochana, in later and regional narrative traditions, turns from revenge toward the ritual treatment of the dead. These episodes differ in textual status and narrative setting, but together they disclose a recurring ethical pattern.

The present article therefore examines four forms of restrained agency: withdrawal, counsel, ethical persistence, and ritual containment. None of these women commands an army or determines the political outcome. Their influence

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operates through more limited means—bodily discipline, speech, marital appeal, and funerary practice. Their failure to prevent catastrophe should not be mistaken for irrelevance. On the contrary, the failure of their interventions exposes the consequences of ignoring knowledge, moderation, and ritual obligation.

The argument developed here is that these women constitute a counter-plot within the epic. The principal narrative moves through exile, alliance, war, and victory; the counter-plot moves through vigilance, warning, persuasion, and mourning. The first sequence celebrates action, while the second reveals the ethical labor required to regulate its consequences.

2. Textual and Critical Context

The four episodes do not possess identical textual histories. Tara's political counsel is clearly represented in the Kishkindha Kanda of the Valmiki Ramayana, where she recognizes the danger posed by Rama and Lakshmana and urges Vali to reconcile with Sugriva. The textual placement of this speech is commonly identified with Kishkindha Kanda, sarga 15 in several editions, although sarga numbering varies across recensions and translations. Tara specifically recommends friendship with Rama, an end to hostility toward Sugriva, and the protection of familial unity. Her counsel is therefore both political and ethical. □

The association between Urmila and Lakshmana's transferred sleep is more prominent in later Ramayana traditions than in the received Valmiki narrative. Modern retellings frequently present Lakshmana as transferring his sleep to Urmila so that he may remain awake during the exile. Some scholarship likewise emphasizes that Valmiki's text gives Urmila very little narrative space, while later traditions expand her role through the motif of the fourteen-year sleep. □ Any academic discussion should therefore distinguish between Valmiki's text and subsequent interpretive traditions rather than attributing every popular episode directly to Valmiki.

Mandodari's warnings are firmly connected with the Yuddha Kanda, where she responds to Ravana's conduct, the death of warriors, and the impending destruction of Lanka. Her speeches combine grief, political judgment, and moral criticism. Sulochana's extended treatment as Indrajit's widow, however, belongs largely to later literary and regional traditions rather than to the core Valmiki narrative in the form described by the present article. This distinction is essential because it allows the study to compare not only passages within one text, but also the ways in which later traditions elaborate possibilities that remain compressed or absent in Valmiki.

Earlier scholarship has often approached these women separately. Urmila has been discussed through the categories of sacrifice, domesticity, and feminine endurance. Tara has attracted attention as an unusually perceptive political speaker. Mandodari is frequently interpreted as Ravana's moral opposite or as the voice of conscience within Lanka.

Sulochana, by contrast, is often absent from standard summaries and translations. What remains insufficiently explored is the structural relationship among their forms of agency.

This article addresses that gap by proposing the concept of ethical buffering. The term refers to the work performed by figures who absorb, interpret, or regulate conflict without possessing the authority to end it directly. In the cases examined here, ethical buffering is gendered because these women act within restricted social roles. Their power is not primarily coercive. It is exercised through care, warning, persuasion, and ritual responsibility.

3. Urmila and the Ethics of Sleep

Urmila occupies a peculiar position in the Ramayana tradition. She is central to Lakshmana's domestic life but marginal to the visible action of the forest narrative. Lakshmana accompanies Rama and Sita into exile, while Urmila remains in Ayodhya. This spatial separation creates a form of narrative silence: Lakshmana's service is celebrated publicly, whereas Urmila's experience of separation remains largely unspoken.

Later traditions address this silence through the story of transferred sleep. In these accounts, Lakshmana asks the goddess of sleep to remove his need for rest so that he can remain constantly awake in Rama's service. Urmila accepts the sleep that Lakshmana relinquishes. The story gives symbolic form to an unequal distribution of labor. Lakshmana's sleeplessness becomes visible as heroic discipline; Urmila's sleep becomes invisible as the condition that makes his vigil possible. □

The episode can be read in two ways. On one level, it confirms conventional ideals of wifely devotion: Urmila supports her husband's duty by accepting a prolonged absence from ordinary consciousness and public life. On another level, it offers an image of bodily agency. Sleep is not merely passivity; it becomes a medium through which Urmila participates in the exile. Her body absorbs the fatigue that Lakshmana must not experience. She therefore performs a form of relational asceticism, one that is not undertaken in the forest or before an audience but within the domestic sphere.

This interpretation must remain attentive to its limitations. Urmila does not claim an independent political role, and her sacrifice is represented through service to male duty. Her agency is consequently structured by patriarchy. Yet the very need to narrate the transfer of sleep suggests that Lakshmana's celebrated vigilance cannot be understood as entirely individual. It depends upon another person's unrecognized bodily labor.

Urmila's significance lies in this paradox. She acts by withdrawing from visibility. Her absence sustains another person's presence. The story thus questions the assumption that heroic action originates in the hero alone. Behind the uninterrupted vigil stands a domestic arrangement in which exhaustion has been displaced rather than eliminated.

4. Tara and the Failure of Counsel

Tara's intervention before Vali's confrontation with Sugriva is one of the most substantial political speeches delivered by a woman in the Ramayana. When Vali hears Sugriva's challenge, Tara does not respond with simple fear or emotional pleading. She interprets the political situation. She identifies Rama and Lakshmana as formidable allies, recognizes that Sugriva would not challenge Vali without support, and recommends reconciliation rather than combat. □

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Her counsel is carefully structured. Tara asks Vali to control his anger, end his hostility toward Sugriva, and cultivate friendship with Rama. She also suggests that Sugriva be treated with honour and restored to a position within the political order. Her proposal is therefore not an appeal to surrender in the narrow sense. It is a strategy for preserving kinship, sovereignty, and public stability.

Vali acknowledges Tara's wisdom but does not follow it. In several translations, he praises her affection and intelligence before proceeding toward confrontation. This response is significant because Tara is not silenced or portrayed as incapable of reasoning. She is heard, recognized, and then overruled. The tragedy arises not from the absence of knowledge but from the refusal to act upon it. □

Tara's speech therefore exposes the relationship between masculine honour and political blindness. Vali interprets retreat as weakness, while Tara understands restraint as prudence. Her position does not deny courage; it redefines courage as the ability to avoid an unnecessary conflict. By ignoring her, Vali converts a preventable political crisis into a fatal encounter.

Her role also complicates the conventional representation of women as emotional participants in epic conflict. Tara's grief after Vali's death is important, but it should not eclipse the analytical authority of her earlier speech. She is not wise only because she mourns. She is wise because she correctly evaluates the political circumstances before the battle occurs.

Tara consequently represents the stage of foresight. If Urmila enables action indirectly, Tara questions whether action should occur at all. Her counsel stands at the threshold between anger and violence, but masculine authority chooses violence. The resulting catastrophe becomes an indictment of power that recognizes wisdom without obeying it.

5. Mandodari and Ethical Persistence

Mandodari's role in the Yuddha Kanda is defined by persistence. She repeatedly confronts Ravana with the consequences of his conduct and urges him to return Sita. Her arguments appeal to several overlapping principles: the preservation of lineage, the protection of Lanka, the obligations of kingship, and the recognition of Rama's strength. She does not merely condemn Ravana; she attempts to persuade him to reverse his course.

Her speeches are especially important because they show that Ravana's wrongdoing is not caused by ignorance. He is surrounded by people who understand the danger of his actions. Mandodari recognizes the political and moral consequences of retaining Sita, yet Ravana continues to act according to desire and pride. The epic thus presents evil as a conscious refusal of right knowledge.

Mandodari's dissent remains framed by the language of marriage. She speaks as a wife concerned for her husband, household, and kingdom. This framing can appear restrictive, but it also gives her access to a space from which she can challenge Ravana without claiming formal sovereignty. Her criticism emerges from within the relationship that binds her to him. Loyalty does not require agreement; in Mandodari's case, loyalty becomes the reason for opposition.

Her ethical persistence differs from Tara's counsel in one important respect. Tara attempts to prevent a particular confrontation; Mandodari continues to plead after Ravana has already chosen a destructive course. Her speech therefore belongs to a later stage of crisis. She cannot restore the earlier political balance, but she can continue to name the moral truth that Ravana refuses to acknowledge.

This persistence is not politically successful. Ravana does not return Sita, and Lanka moves toward destruction. Yet the failure of Mandodari's pleas does not erase their significance. Her words establish that alternatives remained available. They also preserve a moral vocabulary within a court increasingly organized around aggression and revenge.

Mandodari may therefore be understood as an ethical witness. She does not possess the authority to compel Ravana, but she refuses to normalize his decision. Her grief becomes a record of the difference between power and legitimacy. Ravana can command armies, but he cannot transform wrongdoing into righteousness simply by maintaining authority.

6. Sulochana and Ritual Containment

Sulochana's prominence varies considerably across Ramayana traditions. The expanded account of her mourning for Indrajit and her performance of funerary duties belongs primarily to later and regional narratives rather than to the received Valmiki text in the detailed form often reproduced in popular retellings. This textual distinction does not diminish the episode's interpretive value; instead, it demonstrates how later traditions develop ethical possibilities that the central epic leaves largely unexplored.

In these narratives, Sulochana responds to Indrajit's death by tending to his body and completing the required rites. Her action places ritual obligation before the immediate desire for vengeance. The dead warrior is not treated only as a symbol of military defeat. He must be washed, mourned, and transferred from the status of combatant to that of Ancestor.

This transformation is ethically significant. War attempts to preserve hostility beyond the moment of battle, but funerary ritual interrupts that continuation. By performing the rites, Sulochana refuses to let grief become an automatic justification for retaliation. She acknowledges the violence that has occurred while preventing the dead from becoming merely an instrument for further violence.

Her ritual labor also introduces a gendered dimension to the conclusion of war. Male warriors create and extend the conflict; Sulochana helps establish its human and religious limits. Her authority is not military, yet it addresses the consequences of military action. She handles the body that the battlefield has left behind and restores it to a social and ritual order.

Sulochana therefore represents containment. Urmila's sleep makes vigilance possible before crisis; Tara's counsel attempts to prevent violence; Mandodari resists destructive choice while it unfolds; Sulochana works after death to prevent violence from reproducing itself. Her action does not erase grief. Rather, it gives grief a form that does not require revenge.

7. A Sequence of Restraint

Read together, the four women create a sequence that runs parallel to the epic's more familiar movement from exile to war and victory.

This sequence should not be understood as evidence that all four women occupy an identical social or textual position. Urmila's sleep story is strongly associated with later tradition; Tara's speech is directly represented in the Valmiki narrative; Mandodari's interventions belong to the war narrative; and Sulochana's ritual prominence is developed in subsequent retellings. Their comparison is therefore comparative and thematic rather than a claim that the four episodes form a single authorial sequence.

Nevertheless, the pattern is compelling. Each woman attends to a boundary that masculine action risks crossing. Urmila mediates between fatigue and vigilance. Tara stands between anger and combat. Mandodari stands between authority and ethical legitimacy. Sulochana stands between death and revenge. These boundaries are not merely psychological; they are social, political, and ritual.

The women's agency is also marked by limitation. None commands the final decision. Tara cannot prevent Vali from fighting, Mandodari cannot compel Ravana to return Sita, and Sulochana cannot undo Indrajit's death. Urmila's contribution remains largely hidden and, in the most familiar form of the story, is narrated through her relationship to Lakshmana's service. Their inability to control events might appear to reduce their importance. Instead, it reveals the difference between agency and sovereignty. They possess the capacity to interpret, warn, support, and regulate even when they lack the power to determine outcomes.

This distinction is particularly useful for feminist readings of epic literature. Agency need not always take the form of rebellion, public command, or successful intervention. It can also appear as the refusal to endorse a destructive choice, the insistence on speaking truth to power, or the performance of ritual duties that prevent violence from becoming permanent. Such agency remains structurally constrained, but constraint does not make it meaningless.

8. Conclusion

Urmila, Tara, Mandodari, and Sulochana occupy the margins of the Ramayana's celebrated action, yet their marginality gives them a distinctive ethical force. Urmila's sleep, as developed in later tradition, reveals the hidden labor behind Lakshmana's vigilance. Tara's counsel identifies the political consequences of Vali's anger before the fatal encounter occurs. Mandodari's repeated appeals demonstrate that Ravana's destruction is chosen despite the presence of moral knowledge. Sulochana's rites, in later narratives, transform grief from a motive for retaliation into an obligation toward the dead.

Together, these figures suggest that the epic's moral world is sustained not only by weapons, vows, and victories but also by acts of restraint. Their interventions do not redirect the plot, but they preserve the possibility of judging it.

Through them, the Ramayana becomes more than a narrative of heroic conquest. It becomes a layered negotiation between action and hesitation, power and counsel, violence and ritual repair.

The concept of feminine dharma that emerges here should not be reduced to passive endurance. It is better understood as a form of ethical labor performed within unequal conditions. These women neither stand outside the epic's social order nor fully control it. They work from within its limits, testing those limits through care, warning, dissent, and ritual. Their voices may not stop the bow from being drawn, but they reveal what the bow cannot see: the fatigue that sustains action, the wisdom that violence ignores, the conscience that authority resists, and the mourning that must follow victory.