

# RAVANA'S FAILURES OF CONQUEST: GENDERED SPACES IN THE RAMAYANA

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Building off of the methodology of Sally Sutherland Goldman's essay, "Gendered Narratives: Gender, Space, and Narrative Structures in Vālmiki's *Bālakāṇḍa*," I will argue that Ravana's masculine failings are demarcated by how women treat him in spaces he is supposed to assume political dominance. Goldman argues that "the physical space and narrative location in which the various episodes of the book occur are marked by considerations of gender," and should thus be considered organizing principles.<sup>1</sup> Using space and setting to interpret why Ravana is fated to fail, we can further understand how the Valmiki *Ramayana* perceives kingship and manhood in relation to dominance over space. The kingdom itself is marked by gendered considerations of how people can move between different spaces. Ravana exemplifies how space and gender interact, illustrating through his lack of dominance over the spaces of his court and the Asoka Grove why he is fated to yield to Rama. It is not only a matter of whether Ravana can defend his land against invasion, but more so a question of whether he can exert command over his land.

Framing the story as an infiltration of heterosexual desire in the forest, Goldman asserts that the death of the male kraunca bird "symbolically lets loose upon the epic story, as it were, an uncontrolled—therefore dangerous—sexual female. The female kraunca is a harbinger of the sexual threat to be loosed upon the males of the Isvaku lineage by various females, particularly Sita."<sup>2</sup> The sexual threat is more expansive than Goldman suggests here. Sita and Surpanakha—who is quite literally interrupted in the midst of her sexual desires—also pose a sexual threat to Ravana's power as well. Surpanakha and Sita, losing their ideal male lover in Rama, use either their unfulfilled desire or grief to force Ravana through his own narrative. He is overcome by the women's need to see their story

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<sup>1</sup> Sally S. Goldman, "Gendered Narratives: Gender, Space, and Narrative Structures in Vālmiki's *Bālakāṇḍa*," in *The Rāmāyaṇa Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 48.

<sup>2</sup> Goldman, "Gendered Narratives," 51.

resolve and he moves toward his death because women push him—and his power—out of his own space. Because of Surpanakha, he invades Rama's land, signified in Sita's body as the daughter of the Earth. Comparatively, in the Asoka Grove, Sita successfully silences and threatens him in his kingdom, showing the limits of his power even over the land he owns. Literally and metaphorically, he is excised from his own space and does not know it. His kingdom and the Asoka Grove are appropriated and remade by women. The space marks his faux masculinity and ignorance.

The first example of Ravana's deficiency appears after Surpanakha's mutilation when she returns to Lanka to convince Ravana to avenge her insult. She "spoke harshly to Ravana [...] in front of all his ministers. 'Intoxicated with lust, indulging all your desires, living entirely by your whims and totally without any restraint, you have no idea of the danger you are in! You should know this but you don't!'"<sup>3</sup> In his own court, Ravana allows Surpanakha to criticize him and drive him to avenge her insult. Meanwhile, she convinces him that disrupting Rama and Sita is in his favor. She acts like one of his ministers in urging Ravana to act before Rama. Surpanakha presents herself as more aware and knowledgeable than Ravana here and he is easily convinced, unable or unwilling to determine the truth or righteous path for himself. His danger is twofold—first, he is fated to be killed at the hands of Rama and he is entirely unaware of his role within the story, and secondly, he fails to realize the transgression Surpanakha will lead him to commit. His submission to his sister's plan reaffirms his fate. In comparison to Rama's debates throughout the *Ramayana*, Ravana here is undiscerning and unwise. He makes no counter and offers no input, revealing himself to be a false king. In this episode, he acts as the puppet for a woman's revenge. Ravana should know how to act as a king and a man, but he does not, and so he proves malleable to Surpanakha's scheme. His first action to cement his fate at the hands of Rama is committed under the false pretenses that Surpanakha has set before him. She accuses him of ignorance within his court and thus illustrates the court space as mired in gendered conflict, where women invade as a threat to kingly, male power. Valmiki ties space and knowledge together, contemplating how these principles fail to control female pain and emotion while under Ravana's gaze.

The definitions of the Lanka court and the Asoka Grove are symbolically important when thinking about how they compare to the forest, which is poised as the strange, wild standard to which a kingdom is opposed. Through the episodes of Tataka and the story of the Ganges, the *Balakanda* has presented the forest as a domain partially inhabited by untamed women—women who are unaccompanied or who Rama should have "no hesitation about killing" in order to "do what is best for the four castes."<sup>4</sup> The forest is violent and against the grain of social order. As Surpanakha's mutilation occurs in this space, the forest serves simultaneously as a place where women experience freedom and are punished for exercising it. The narrative pairs the disruption of the social order and female sexuality as threats to empire-making. In the *Balakanda*, Vishwamitra wants Rama to go into

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<sup>3</sup> Valmiki, *Valmiki's Ramayana*, trans. Arshia Sattar (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 165.

<sup>4</sup> Valmiki, *Valmiki's Ramayana*, 66.

the forest and proactively remove the threat of disruption before it can reach Ayodhya. Men and kings move through space to create definition and borders between civilization and the unconquered. But, in Surpanakha, when women move freely, they degrade these well-established barriers.

Between the moment of her mutilation and Ravana's abduction of Sita, Surpanakha moves from the forest to the outskirts of the *raksasas*'s kingdom to the center of power in Lanka. She brings the crimes of the forest into the kingdom, uncivilizing the court. By first telling her brother Khara and inciting a battle between him and Rama, she originates an invasion of the forest—undermining spatial, ethical, and gender borders. Though Rama and Lakshmana are the first to act against Surpanakha, they do so completely entrenched in the forest, where justice and honor are not intended to be dictated by courtly or dharmic principles. By involving her brother's armies, Surpanakha transgresses these legal and ethical lines. It was inappropriate to seek justice within the kingdom for something that occurred in the forest. Once Khara sends his army, it is as though he and his sister have initiated an imperial battle between the *raksasas* and Rama for legal control over the forest. From here, Rama is set on an imperial conquest after his symbolic property, Sita, is stolen. Women, then, are at the narrative center of empire disputes.

Surpanakha moves even further by entering Ravana's court itself. When she demands action, she does not mention her mutilation as the primary offense, but instead, the resulting battle she convinced Khara to ignite: “You don't even know that your people have been massacred in Janasthna [...] and the Dandaka forest [has] been cleansed[...].”<sup>5</sup> Now she has made her unfulfilled desire a problem of empire and undermines Ravana's sense of control. Repeating the same sentiment discussed earlier, she says, “How could you not know about this catastrophe which occurred within your own kingdom?”<sup>6</sup> Surpanakha has confused the boundaries of Ravana's kingdom in front of him. She convinces Ravana that his kingdom is being invaded, and thus, anticipating his response, makes him an unwitting invader. While women are undoubtedly centered here as liabilities to the security of the kingdom in their unruly desire, whether sexual or for revenge, Ravana, pertinently, is so unaware of the truth that he cannot unravel Surpanakha's manipulations.

Securing his own fate, Ravana only amplifies the narratively misguided desires of Surpanakha. After hearing her argument, he “dismissed his ministers and began to think about what he should do [...] he decided to go ahead with Surpanakha's plan.”<sup>7</sup> The plan is not posed as his own. Ravana has not learned to be a player rather than a pawn in political machinations, as Rama learns through his episode with Vali and Sugriva. The detail that he “dismissed his ministers” also reflects his inadequate kingship. Ravana has not appointed Surpanakha and yet follows through with her ideas, rather than confer with his court. Understanding this story as the downfall of Ravana, he necessitates his own demise because

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<sup>5</sup> Vālmīki, *Valmiki's Ramayana*, 222.

<sup>6</sup> Vālmīki, *Valmiki's Ramayana*, 222.

<sup>7</sup> Vālmīki, *Valmiki's Ramayana*, 224.

he mistreats his ministers and women: his ministers by ignoring them and women by allowing them to exert control within his court. Ravana misunderstands the social designations of his own kingdom, placing himself at the bottom of the gender hierarchy. He cannot exert control with his court and he is now attempting to exert control in the forest. The space of the court is drained of masculine political presence.

Moving into the *Sundarakanda*, when Ravana has trapped Sita in the Asoka Grove within his palace, his arguments fall short and Sita exposes the same inadequacies he revealed in the earlier episode. Valmiki says, “The virtuous woman turned her back on Ravana and continued. ‘I cannot marry you. I am the chaste and virtuous wife of another man. Respect the conduct of good men and learn to behave like them! [...] Are there no good men here? Do you not listen to their advice?’”<sup>8</sup> As seen in the Surpanakha episode, Ravana is more than willing to dismiss any potentially “good men,” and instead surrounds himself with textually lower members of society, often women. He is presented as a king unwilling to learn and one who abandons his own court to pursue his personal convictions. “Good men” are not simply kind, but also satisfactorily conduct themselves as men. Moreover, as king, he should represent the best men of his kingdom and perform his dharmic rites. His denial of his duty to this behavior represents, to Sita and the audience, the failing of all men and of dharma within Lanka. Ravana’s failings are justification for the destruction of Lanka. He does not understand himself and the kingdom as one entity.

In Kampan’s Tamil telling of Ravana’s advances on Sita within the Asoka Grove, Kampan fosters incongruence between Ravana’s actions and the space, using this dissonance to still represent his errant control because the space and language of the text rebels against his feeling. The Tamil verse begins with the lingering use of a verb that occurs far earlier in the full text: “He came” writes Kampan “sighing/fierce sighs.”<sup>9</sup> His movement presides over the text as if to represent that what follows is encapsulated in this act of arriving. As opposed to translating as “the demon king came *and* sighed/fierce sighs,” by invoking the use of parataxis, Shulman’s translation revels in Ravana’s limitations in controlling his own actions. Without a conjunction or link, these actions are not separated in a way that would exhibit an attempt to process his emotion. Instead, the scorching of the garden is unceremoniously attached to his arrival, as though the destruction explodes from his every step. In this first verse, Ravana is ill at ease in the Asoka Grove and his physicality is disruptive. Ravana’s body rejects temperance and knightly poise because he is so overcome by sexual desire for a married woman. Embodying the emotional reasons these actions are paired together, the grove may be seen as the missing link between his arrival and his destruction that the text itself leaves uncertain. The space of

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<sup>8</sup> Valmiki, *Valmiki’s Ramayana*, 347.

<sup>9</sup> David Shulman, “Ravana visits Sita at Night in the Ashoka Grove, from Kampan’s Tamil Rāmāyaṇa: Translator’s Note and Text,” in *Sensitive Reading*, ed. Yigal Bronner and Charles Hallisey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 165.

the grove draws out his undesirable sentiments, becoming victim to Ravana's incongruent desires and inability to regulate his actions. Both the text and the grove are treated as space—the objects of Ravana's advancement—but still the untethered nature of Kampan's language expresses Ravana's insufficient *kshatriya* masculinity.

Beyond the manipulation of the text, Kampan still emphasizes Ravana's ignorance, as well. His act of searching his own garden heightens his frantic energy. Kampan writes:

“Although he knew exactly where the goddess  
was sitting, his mind was scattered and,  
[...] he was looking for her  
in every nook and cranny.”<sup>10</sup>

Ravana is a useless vessel for knowledge in this condition. He knows where Sita is within this space, but cannot use this knowledge because of his inappropriate yearning. In such a way, this scene mirrors the cultural knowledge of ethics and morals that surrounds Ravana and his disregard for that knowledge in favor of acting disastrously. Although he must be aware of how a proper king should act, his emotions overwhelm him and he lacks awareness of the space of the Asoka Grove. His desires have made him insensible and degraded his intellectual capability. “He came,” but now he arrives into a space that is unrecognizable in his passions. This verb, without an explicit link to the rest of the passage, is continually reframed as the reader learns of Ravana's capacity to dominate space.

Even more damning of Kampan's Ravana is the placement of verses. As he is searching in “every nook and cranny,” he fails to see Hanuman in the next verse. Hanuman, with his “two / perfect eyes,” hid “calmly as the demon came near.”<sup>11</sup> Ravana is so deeply lost in his passions that not only does he not see Hanuman in his search, Hanuman is assured. It appears contradictory that Ravana could be said to search everywhere but Hanuman's hiding place, but this reinforces the reader's certainty that Ravana is a poor lord over his kingdom. He lacks awareness of its entirety. His presence now makes the Asoka Grove public and incites more criticism of Ravana, who fails to protect his private affairs.

Returning to Valmiki's rendering, Ravana attempts to recoup from Sita's criticisms, drawing on a pathetic argument that only serves to damn him as a misguided king. He complains, “The more a man tries to please a woman, the more he falls into her power! [...] A man cannot act against the wishes of the woman that he desires.”<sup>12</sup> Here Ravana admits to losing control, even in his own space. Within the Asoka Grove, something that he has coveted and made beautiful, he is made powerless because he succumbs to his physical attachments. He diminishes his own abilities in order to justify his anger and lust and the grove is perverted from a realm of sanctuary, where one should acknowledge its sacredness, to something wild and unkempt. Ravana's overdesire is unbecoming of the Asoka Grove.

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<sup>10</sup> Shulman, “Ravana visits Sita,” 165.

<sup>11</sup> Shulman, “Ravana visits Sita,” 166.

<sup>12</sup> Vālmīki, *Valmiki's Ramayana*, 348.

Comparing the Asoka Grove to other spaces, it is presented strangely in the way that it is not uncontrollable, like the forest, but it is still separated from the private, internal palace. As Hanuman searches for Sita, he witnesses the inside of Ravana palace, where, “Everywhere he looked, he saw rare and exotic delicacies, fine wines and half-eaten food[...] broken pots and overturned jugs so that water mixed with the overflowing liquors.”<sup>13</sup> The palace is littered with waste and excess, brimming with vice and corruption. The space and those who inhabit it, Ravana and his wives, revel in their disorder because they believe it is a private space. However, Sita's rebellion in remaining in the grove slightly transforms the cultivated garden into a more public space. So while the Asoka Grove is supposed to highlight a lord's command over the wild landscape, as gardens do, Sita is endangering the borders of Ravana's palace by attempting to remain accessible and public. She succeeds when Hanuman spots her and allows Rama to finally invade Lanka.

While Ravana is in a space that should epitomize his power, Ravana can be used as a medieval model for how men can squander their own power. This framework still places the onus of corruption on women like Surpanakha, but when in the presence of virtuous women, Ravana corrupts his sacred space. Understanding this emasculated Ravana in combination with the Ravana who so easily covets the wives of other men and exerts control over the enslaved women within his palace, we still see a continuity in his neglect of his dharmic and masculine duty. He does not establish a family or lineage in a comparable way to the Iskvalus, despite his many wives and women. His pursuit is not one of generational security. By not asserting control over his lineage, echoed in his conduct in the garden, he opens a space for women to weaponize his emotional failures against him.

Using the principles set out by Goldman, we see that Ravana's failures of spatial and narrative awareness are instigated by women, suggesting that the court setting is a part of a continuum of gendered conflict. Both women accuse Ravana of lacking the knowledge of how to be a good king and usurp some control because he becomes unmoored. Femininity in the court is a threat and a tool if left untempered through labor, as seen through domestic servants and concubines in both Ayodhya and Lanka. *Kshatriya* masculinity is defined by command and cognizance of his space. As expressed by Goldman's analysis of the sexual threat of women within the *Ramayana*, signified by the kraunca bird's lament that crosses temporal boundaries to influence the narrative, women further attempt to control the story of “The Slaying of Ravana” through changing gendered spatial relationships. Ravana's failures to maintain his borders and understand the public gaze on his kingdom allow Surpanakha and Sita to take advantage of the court and the grove, respectively. The kingdom in its entirety is reliant on a strong, masculine ruler to define its borders, lest women and uncontrollable emotion transgress them.

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<sup>13</sup> Vālmiki, *Valmiki's Ramayana*, 339.

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