

# PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

## CELESTIAL NYMPHS AS SEXUAL OBJECTS: A STUDY OF THE INDIAN EPIC RAMAYANA

Purobi Sen<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Deepa Sarabhai<sup>2\*</sup>

**Purobi Sen-**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Languages (English), Manipal University Jaipur, Jaipur-Ajmer Highway,  
Dehmi Kalan 303007, Jaipur (Raj.) India.  
[purobisen31@gmail.com](mailto:purobisen31@gmail.com) (Purobi Sen), +91-9352185026

**Dr. Deepa Sarabhai-**

<sup>2</sup>Department of Languages (English), Manipal University Jaipur, Jaipur-Ajmer Highway,  
Dehmi Kalan 303007, Jaipur (Raj.) India.

[sarabhaimainpuri@gmail.com](mailto:sarabhaimainpuri@gmail.com) ( Dr.Deepa Sarabhai), +91-8852968363

\*Corresponding Author

**Purobi Sen, Dr. Deepa Sarabhai -- Celestial Nymphs As Sexual Objects: A Study Of  
The Indian Epic Ramayana -- Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology  
17(6), ISSN 1567-214x**

**KEYWORDS: Apsaras, Curse, Desire, Lust, Nymphs, Objectification, Ramayana,  
Sexual exploitation.**

### ABSTRACT

Ramayana is not all about the central and the chief characters, it is simultaneously also about the minor, off-centre, silenced role players. Celestial Nymphs or popularly known as Apsaras in Indian Mythology are one such part of this Magnum Opus Indian Epic "Ramayana". Objectification is the 'act of dehumanization' or 'treating someone as an object or mere thing'. Apsaras are relentlessly used as objects of beauty, seduction and sexual exploitation at the hands of men. They are sexually subdued by men in order to divert other men from their objectives or simply for pleasure. Apsaras and the current era women are mistreated and objectified at various levels and into multiple categories by the patriarchy. Apsaras are the epitome of beauty along with epitome of women objectification as they work for Indra as his 'agents' whose only agenda is to use her beauty and sexual appeal as 'Honey Traps' to misguide Indra's competitors. This paper examines the significance and various nature of objectionable treatment of Apsaras in the epic along with the outcome for the same. Celestial Nymphs have seized less attention as compared to other women characters but they are the one who have been maltreated the most.

## INTRODUCTION

Apsaras are defined as,

“In the Epic poems more is said about them (Apsaras)—the Rāmāyana attributing their origin to the churning of the ocean, and with this the Purāṇic account of their origin agrees. It is said that when they rose from the waters neither gods nor asuras would wed them, so they became the common property of both classes. They are sometimes called "the wives of the gods," and "daughters of pleasure." (Wilkins, 1882).

So Apsaras or Celestial Nymphs are known initially as water nymphs because of their origin and later celestial nymphs or maidens because they resided in the heaven in the court of Indra. They can be divided into ‘daivika’ means divine and ‘laukika’ means worldly. They are beautiful, charming, seductive, graceful and elegant dancers in the court of Indra. Indra being the king of Gods having his abode in Heaven is surrounded by such ravishing nymphs all the time. It can rightly be said that heaven is heaven for Indra because of these nymphs existing over there, and showering him with their beauty and favours. They are blessed with fountain of youth, beauty as well as virginity. According to Indian Mythology they have supernatural powers and can change their form at their will.

Apsaras are forever young and are the ultimate example of male fantasy. They are usually considered to be married to Gandharvas who are the court musician of Indra.

Though Apsaras marital status is always under clouds but even if one believes them to be wives of anyone their norms or values of marriage are very flexible. Mythologists have said, “Their roles changed from celestials in Indra’s court to wives of the gandharvas (celestial musicians) to the reward for warrior-heroes in Indra’s heaven” (Williams, 2003).

If we talk about the function of Apsaras in heaven it was mainly entertaining gods and demi gods by performing dance on the music played by the Gandharvas in the court of Indra. And the second role of them was to hamper the austerities of various ascetics who seemed to Indra as a threat or competition. The apsaras were sent as a temptation to the ascetics acting as impediments and the apsaras would seduce them and as a result ascetic would get distracted and their austerities of hundreds of years would get hampered. As defined by Pattanaik “Nymph: damsel who lives in rivers, entertains gods, and seduces sages.” (Pattanaik, 2011)

So, Indra would basically use the nymphs as a sexual object to come out of his insecurities. Roy (2014) in his research article has drawn a comparison and contrast between Apsaras and Vesyas which means prostitutes. Apsaras are used by Gods and semi gods and thus respected but Vesyas earn their living by offering their bodies as a sexual object and thus considered tainted.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Punam and Sharma (2017) in their research paper have discussed the treatment of women in the ancient era and compared the situation of women in the present times. Women in the Vedic period were given an equal position, respect and rights but post Vedic period, women’s position

has been on a decline. Along with the development of the society the development in the state of women in the society is not evident instead the state and treatment of women is getting deteriorated. Karthika (2015) in her research paper has tried to point out how women in the ancient as well as in the modern period has been looked at as objects of pleasure and how the psychology of the society works. She has analysed the oppression of women in the works of M. Sajida's Matsyagandhi and Snehalatha Reddy's Sita. She analyses the myths of female subjectivity. Nussbaum (1995) is one such research paper which has become a base for the study of 'Objectification' for years. The researcher discusses in detail the meaning of objectification and the types or categories in which it can be divided. The act of dehumanization of women as sexual objects has been examined. Samji and Vasquez (2019) have pointed out hostility towards women and sexual objectification and myths based on sexual aggression. Szymanski, Moffitt and Carr (2011) have done an in-depth research on study on sexual objectification of women. They have discussed how a woman is all about her beauty and her sexual functioning and what kind of a psychological effect it has over a woman. The study aims at creating an awareness about 'Objectification theory' and forms of sexual objectification. Steer and Tiggemann (2008) stated in their paper that with time how a woman self-objectifies herself as result of the conditioning of the society. They have analysed the objectification theory and how it applies on the women's sexual functioning. Loughnan and Pacilli (2014) pointed out meaning of objectification and who is objectified and who objectifies though generally it is women who is sexually more objectified than men. And also, the consequence of objectification.

## OBJECTIVE AND METHOD

### Objective

To analyse and explore the multiple Celestial Nymphs presented in Ramayana in an objectified manner. To evaluate the oppression, sexual exploitation and ill treatment of these apsaras at the hands of men in the epic. To study their objectification through the objectification theory and categorising them into different modes of objectification.

### Method

Methodology used is qualitative which deals with theoretical data and gives priority to human understanding and sentiments like in most literary research. In this study primary texts have been analysed through sociological approach which is descriptive and textual.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

As per the definition of Apsaras one can smell the objectification of apsaras very evidently. When no one was ready to accept them as wives which is necessary for a woman to have social security which protects her, she was taken as "common property" for all the classes. Which clearly means that she was objectified for favours and pleasures. They are treated as mistresses for the gods and demi gods own benefits. On the other hand,

apsaras were accepted to make relationships on earth with other many men for some hidden motives but they were not allowed to stay on earth or in some cases even fall in love. They were like 'Agents' of Indra who were sent on earth with some task at hand disguised as a seductress but their intentions were far deeper. They loved and left. Wilkins (1882) expressed that Indra's only way of defeating his competition for the throne of heaven was to send the beautiful nymphs who used their beauty to seduce them and render their motives futile. Langton (2009) claims that women are denied any sort of sovereignty, women who are seen as objects and not considered as humans.

### Meaning and Categories of Objectification

Objectification is an action of degrading someone to the status of mere object or thing and an act of dehumanization. *Objectification Theory* as given by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) states the generalisation of women as attractive bodies and their subjugation based on their physical selves. Objectification is an umbrella term which holds many sub categories. According to Nussbaum (1995) an American Philosopher if a human being is treated as anything like this then he or she is being objectified. The categories being

Instrumentality – treating a person as tool for another purpose

Denial of autonomy- treating a person as lacking of any autonomy or rights or power.

Fungibility- treating the person as interchangeable with others

Ownership- treating the person as something that can be owned, sold or bought.

Denial of subjectivity- treating someone as if he/she has no feelings, views, or thoughts.

These are some of the key concepts associated with objectification in Nussbaum (1995) *Objectification*. Other than this Langton (2009) in her book *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification* who is an Australian-British professor of philosophy has added some more sub categories to this as

Reduction to body- treatment or existence in the society for their body parts  
Reduction to appearance- treatment of women specifically women on the basis of their appearance

Silencing- treatment of a person as if they are meant to be silent and work on orders of someone else

Another definition of Sexual Objectification is,

“A person is sexually objectified when her sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments” (Bartky, 1990)

Also, Self-Objectification as given by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) is the act of considering oneself as an object of pleasure and using one's own sexuality to impress or exert power and seeing one's own worth on the appearance is Self-Objectification. The one who objectifies and the objectified can be the same person and find pleasure in treating oneself as a sexual object. (Bartky, 1990)

Objectifying someone is a dreadful act which has ever been existing since humans have been existing on earth. But the cases of women being

objectified for innumerable reasons is far greater than men would ever be. Sexualization of women as objects of desire, lust and something like a possession is the prevalent example of women objectification. If we compare the state of Apsaras with the categories of objectification then the whole picture of ill-treatment of women during the ancient times in the patriarchal society would become clear. In Ramayana there are ample of instances of women objectification in the form of apsaras, rakshasi who are female demons or women. As inferred by Punam and Sharma (2017) in their article Ramayana portrays “ideal women” who radiates all the virtues and merits of a good women. But contrary to this the characteristic features of the apsaras and their functionality are opposite to the given framework for an ideal woman

### **Apsara Rambha and Ravana**

Rambha was a beautiful nymph or Apsara in the court of Indra. She was the queen of Apsaras and her beauty, dancing skills were unmatched. She was married to the son of Kubera named Nalakuvara. Once Rambha was on her way to meet her husband and Ravana caught her vision. Rambha being so beautiful usually grasped people’s attention. Ravana was instantly aroused at her sight and made advances towards her with the intention to abuse her. Rambha knew about Ravana as being his father-in-law’s step brother. She greeted him as her father. When Ravana came to know of her as an Apsara he immediately considered her to be available for sexual relations as per the stereotypical reputation of Apsara. He calls her names and shows his disrespect towards her and others like her. He then sexually exploits her and leaves her as a used object. She is devastated and wishes to die. Loughnan and Pacilli suggests, “Sexual harassment, stranger harassment, or sexual violence can be considered cases of sexual objectification with a hostile intent and a blatant expression. Here, women’s personal value is openly reduced to their body, and they are considered and treated as sexual objects” (Loughnan et al., 2014). When Nalakuvara comes to know about this he goes straight to Ravana’s court and accuses him for this crime. But Ravana tries to frame Rambha as the culprit who seduced Ravana just because she was an apsara. He tries to get away with his crime simply by calling her an Apsara which is synonyms to common property and flexible moral values. But her husband believes her and curses his uncle Ravana that if in future if he ever tries to force himself on a woman without her consent then his heads would explode. This anecdote in Ramayana tells us about why Ravana never touched Sita.

Through this story we can see the mindset of men towards women and specially Apsaras who were genuinely considered public or common property because they were treated as tools for distracting men as a seductress. As asserted by Brahma (2016) women in religious and modern culture texts have been showcased as weak, dirty and corrupt. They were thought to be bereft of feelings, consent, needs, etc. Rambha was objectified under the categories of instrumentality, denial of autonomy, ownership, reduction to body, appearance and silencing.

Rambha was also used as a honey trap which is the case of instrumentality, reduction to female body and fungibility against Vishwamitra to distract

him from his austerities by none other than Indra. But Rambha was cursed for her intentions to turn into a stone by Vishvamitra though the conspiracy was planned by Indra because of his insecurity but the consequence was faced by Rambha shows the unfairness and sneakiness towards the Apsaras. (Debroy,2017)

### **Apsara Suvarchala**

Suvarchala was a very beautiful (obviously), spontaneous and reckless kind of Apsara who sometimes acted in a very childlike manner. Her such reckless behaviour made her end up with a curse by lord Brahma. The curse would turn her into a bird on earth. Though the apsara repented a lot but her curse could not be nullified but only modified. So, if Suvarchala as a bird touched the pudding given by Lord Agni to Dasharatha after the Putrakameshti Yagna only then she could be freed from her curse and can get into her original form of celestial nymph.

Apsaras and curses go hand in hand in Indian Mythology. Almost all the Apsaras have been cursed sometime or the other for their own or someone's else fault.

As soon as Suvarchala get her hands on the pudding she transforms into an apsara and the pudding somehow happens to get connected with other cursed apsara.

### **Anjana or Apsara Punjikasthala**

One of the main characters in Ramayana is none other than Hanuman. He was the son of Anjana and Kesari who belonged to the Vanara clan. Though not many know that Anjana was an Apsara named Punjikasthala in her previous birth. She was cursed by a sage Durvasa for disturbing his austerity. She was cursed to lead her life like an ape. 'She was born as a she-monkey, Anjanâ, as a result of a curse. She was redeemed from the curse and regained her original nature after the birth of Hanuman'.

(Williams, 2003). She would be freed from her curse only if she gives birth to a son. Here we can see the sexual discrimination that exists. The one who cursed was a man, the one who could redeem someone from a curse was a man but maximum times anyone was subjected to a curse were women. So, the pudding which Suvarchala as bird dropped was taken towards Anjana by Vayu Devata. So, he is known as Hanuman's father. After consuming the pudding of Putrakameshti Anjana gave birth to Hanuman.

It can be said for making things fall into place according to the plan of action of Gods the turn of events was planned in such a manner.

### **Apsara Dhanyamali**

This Apsara's reference can be found in Adbhut or Ramcharitramanas. The story is such that when Hanuman was looking for Sanjeevani buti one of the spy Rakshasa of Ravana tries to trick Hanuman. He impersonates himself as a sage and tells Hanuman through his divine power that Lakshman is now free from danger. Hanuman believes him and goes near a pond to drink water. There he is attacked by a crocodile; they have a fight and Hanuman kills the crocodile. From its body rises a nymph who introduces herself as Apsara Dhanyamali. She was cursed by a sage to turn into a crocodile and would only be liberated from the curse by Hanuman. She also informs

about the treachery done to Hanuman by the fake sage who misguided him about Lakshman's health.

### **Dundubi**

The same story repeats itself in the case of all the Apsara's who are cursed by some sage for breaking their penance. And majority of times the conspirator is none other than Indra. Similar was the story of apsara Dundubi who had disturbed the penance of a sage. She was cursed that in her next life she will be born as a hunchback ugly woman. Live her life as a servant and destroy lives of other due to her jealousy. She was born as Manthara who served in the royal court of Dasharatha. She was the one who instigated Kaikeyi into using her wishes against Rama's coronation and establishing Bharat as the King of Ayodhya.

### **CONCLUSION**

Now if we look back at the sub categories of Objectification then the terms such as Instrumentality which means treating the person as tool for some other purpose goes almost for every Apsara discussed above. Rambha becomes the reason for protecting Sita's honour from Ravana. Suvarchala and Punjikasthala becomes a medium for the birth of Hanuman.

Dhanyamali and Dundubi Apsara take the epic further.

Denial of Autonomy and subjectivity and also ownership can be seen in the case of Rambha who is molested by Ravana.

Fungibility can be very prominently seen in the clan of apsara. Each one is more beautiful than the other. If one fails to seduce and distract a sage then someone even more tempting than the other is sent. So here the person is treated as interchangeable with the other just as an object.

And as far as treatment of an apsara on the basis of reduction to body and appearance is concerned then the whole saga of the apsaras is based upon it. There are enough evidences that attractive people are at a higher risk of getting sexually objectified (Loughnan et al., 2014). The celestial nymphs didn't have a voice of their own or even their actions were commanded by their 'owner', so they were nothing but puppets. Puppets are no better than objects. In certain cases, they can also be seen as 'Agents' who served the purpose of Indra by spying, creating impediments and hampering the task of their master's competitor. Apsaras took the liability of Indra's obnoxious intentions and were unreasonably cursed. Choudhary and Lama (2017) in their research paper have pointed out the biased punishment given to women in comparison to men in mythological texts as women were considered subordinate to men with the Adam and Eve analogy.

But in all and all they were everything except an individual, subjective women who was looked upon with respect as any other celestial or worldly men or even women in that matter.

## REFERENCES

- Bartky, S. L. (1990). *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. Retrieved July 13, 2020, from <https://books.google.co.in/books>
- Brahma, R. (2016). Research Article Myth, History And Identity : A Study of the Major Works of Githa Hariharan. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*, 4(1).
- Choudhary, P. D., & Lama, D. (2017). Conflicting Issues of Identity and Gender Roles : A Study of Select Texts by Devdutt Pattanaik. *International Journal of Multifaceted and Multilingual Studies*, VI, 1–9.
- Debroy, B. (2017a). *The Valmiki Ramayana*. Penguin books.
- Debroy, B. (2017b). *The Valmiki Ramayana*. Penguin books.
- Debroy, B. (2017c). *The Valmiki Ramayana*. Penguin books.
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. A. (1997). Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(2), 173–206. doi:10.1111/147164021997.TB00108
- Karthika, V. K. (2015). Research Article Rereading The Myths Of Female Subjectivity: A Comparative Critiquing Of M. Sajida's " Matsyagandhi" And Snehalatha Reddy's " Sita " ( RJELAL ). *Research Journal of English Language and Literature ( RJELAL )*, 3.
- Langton, R. (2009). *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification*. Retrieved July 14, 2020, from <https://books.google.co.in/books>
- Loughnan, S., & Pacilli, M. G. (2014). Seeing (And Treating) Others As Sexual Objects: Toward a More Complete Mapping Of Sexual Objectification. *Testing, Psychometrics, Methodology in Applied Psychology*, 21(3), 309–325. doi:10.4473/TPM21.3.6
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1995). Objectification. *Philosophy&Public Affairs*, 24(4), 249–291. doi:10.1111/j.1088-4963.1995.tb00032.x
- Pattanaik, D. (2011). Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols, and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent. In *Inner Traditions Rochester, Vermont* (Vol. 53, Issue 9). doi:10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004
- Punam, S., & Sharma, N. (2017). The Role and Position of Women Ancient Society to Modern Society India. *Development and Change in Agrarian Society, May*, 127–141.
- Roy, O. (2014). The Other Women - Heavenly and Earthly: Notes on "Apsaras And Vesyas". *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 75, 186–193. Retrieved July 23, 2020, from <http://jstor.org/stable/44158379>
- Samji, K., & Vasquez, E. A. (2019). The link between myths about sexual aggression and sexual objectification via hostile attitudes toward women. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*. doi:10.1080/13552600.2019.1676924
- Steer, A., & Tiggemann, M. (2008). The Role of Self-Objectification in Women's Sexual Functioning . In *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* (Vol. 27, Issue 3).
- Szymanski, D. M., Moffitt, L. B., & Carr, E. R. (2011). Sexual Objectification of Women: Advances to Theory and Research 1ψ7. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 39(1), 6–38. doi:10.1177/0011000010378402



Wilkins, W. J. (1882). *Hindu Mythology, Vedic and Purānic*. Thacker, Spink & Company.

Williams, G. M. (2003). Handbook of Hindu Mythology. In *Religion*. ABC CLIO.