Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture
Vol 1, No. 2, July 2016

STAGING GENDER IN *RAMLILA* OF RAMNAGAR

ANITA SINGH

Abstract: Interrogation of gendered representations proves particularly salient in Ramlila, (literally "Rama's play") which is a performance of the Ramayana epic in a series of scenes that include song, narration, recital and dialogue. This paper will look at gender in performance and gender as performance in the context of Ramlila. The most recent emphasis in feminist literary theory has been upon the concept of "performativity" to analyze the processes of the formation of gender identity. This essay is informed by a series of issues raised by the current gender theories in understanding the largely conservative and preservation-oriented practice of the Varanasi/ Ramnagar Ramlila.

Keywords: Ramlila Ramnagar, gender performance, personal communication, gender identity, Ramayana performance, gendered representation, narration recital, oral tradition, gender discourse, male/female characters, diversity narrative

Introduction

Ramlila (literally 'Rama's play') is a popular living traditional performance based on the epic *Ramayana*. The *Ramayana* embodies the social, cultural, historical imperatives, which set standards for an idyllic and accepted behavior template. It exists partly as a cultural legacy, a window to another time and place, a conscious conservation of pre-Independence traditions and inheres a politics of culture, issues concerning power, authority, authenticity, tradition, nationality and identity – questions that are currently at the heart of anthropological inquiry (Sax, 1990, 129-153). The *Ramayana* (despite the definite article) is not a 'single book but a story and a tradition of storytelling' (Lutgendorf, "The Oral Tradition and the Many *Ramayanas"*) its many retellings reflect the sheer variety of versions spurning its canonical status. Although the primary tale of the tribulations of Rama and Sita remain quite the same in most tellings, bards and storytellers have inserted their own perception in their rendering of the tale. Anyone studying contemporary Indian society, politics and religion has a basic knowledge of the *Ramayana*, its place in popular

imagination and the ideological alteration it has undergone at the hands of the nationalists during the freedom movement and by the resurgence of right wing politics in recent years.

The paper proposes to look at Ramlila, a non-mimetic, symbolic and strictly codified form (Kapur, 2006, 5) both as a signifying and a phenomenological medium. It will seek to involve the spectators' response, the director's approach and the performers' outlook. Interrogation of gendered representations proves particularly salient in Ramlila. This paper will look at gender *in* performance and gender *as* performance in the context of Ramlila. Implicitly, it will analyze the formation of gender within the enactments on the Ramlila stage. In current theorisation of gender, body is taken to be a historical idea and not a natural fact and gender is thought of in terms of learned performances (de Beauvoiur, 1974; Merleau – Ponty, 1962; Butler, 1990). Butler makes this argument about the idea of gender: "to be a woman is to compel the body to conform to a historical idea of women, to induce the body to become a cultural sign" (Butler, 1990, 272). So I will engage with the notion of performativity or the being performed by gender discourses, and how the performance of gender roles variously conforms to or challenges this pressure towards the norm.

Some questions that form the crux of my research revolve around:

- What does it mean to be a woman for the audience, *Vyasa* (director) and the actors?
- How do the characters and the audience respond to role-playing?
- How do the actors learn the gestures, the movement, and the body language of the female roles they are portraying? What role models do they look up to while learning to perform these roles?
- How does such sacred role-playing affect their everyday life?
- Do cross-gender performance impact on the adolescent actors' lives?
- What are the views of the spectators and actors about other female/ male characters in Ramlila?

The interpretation of such practices has become increasingly indicative not just as an attempt at cultural revival, but also as a basis of proliferation of cultural and gender stereotypes. For the vast number of people in north India, Ramlila also serves as a sort of 'sentimental education' (Kapur, 2006, 5). Feminist scholars (Richman, 1991; Vanita, 2005; McLain, 2001; Kishwar, 1997; Sen, 1998; Imhasly-Gandhy, 2001; Kumar, 1984; Dimmitt, 1982) question how certain ideologies are promoted, represented and endorsed by the text and are indeed appalled by *Ramayana's* overt masculinity.

Rama's Play in Rama's Town

The *Ramayana* and its performance practice Ramlila has been popular for almost two epochs and can be seen as elements in the continuing formation of cultures across the vast ethnically, culturally, linguistically, politically, religiously and geographically diverse continent of South Asia. As a "participatory environmental theatre (Site-specific theatre)" (Schechner and Hess, 1977, 51-82), it is a performance of the epic *Ramayana* (Rama's journey), in a succession of scenes that include song, narration, recital and dialogue.

The *Dusshera* (literally *Dus* means ten and *hara* means annihilated, destruction of ten facets of evil) festival that takes place during the month of *Ashvin* (around September or October) celebrates the victory of Rama over Ravana, and Ramlila, a dramatic folk play is enacted during this festival. During the Dusshera festival, there are many thousands of Ramlila productions enacted throughout northern India. The most popular Ramlila's are those of Ramnagar, Varanasi, Ayodhya, Vrindavan, Sattna, Almora, and Madhubani.

The performance tradition of Ramlila that forms my case study spans specific geographic region, that is, Ramnagar (literally Rama-town) a small semi- urban expanse across the Ganges river from the city of Varanasi (also referred to as Kashi) in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Ramnagar has been the base of the king of Benares since 1752 even though the Princely State of Benares was dissolved into the Union of India in 1949. However, the king continued to rule, not in political fact but by virtue of his sustained sponsorship of Ramlila. The *Kashi Naresh* (King of Kashi) Udit Narayan Singh started the theatrical-religious cycle of Ramlila in 1830. Ramlila of northern India is based on the sixteenth century Hindi version of the epic *Ramcharitmanas* (Lake of the Deeds of Rama) composed by Tulsidas.

At Ramnagar, the Ramlila is an unsophisticated, semi rural theatre on a grand scale. The world of Ramlila is a sacred world of ritual drama, religious devotion, mask, festive fair, political action, pilgrimage and transformed geography. "Its non naturalistic form acknowledges that theatre is created by actors and spectators" (Kapur, 1988, 7). It is sponsored by the King during the Dussehra festival and is performed every evening for thirty-one days. It features the king of Benares as patron, director and player. Audience strength almost reaches 25,000 on most days of the performance; highly popular episodes are the *nakkatiya* (hacking the nose of Surpanakha) and the final day of Ravana's defeat and Rama's victory. What makes this unique is that various locations in Ramnagar (Ashok

vatika, Panchavati, Kishkinda, Janakpuri or Lanka) are named after the places from the epic itself, and the action takes place in multiple stages spread over several square kilometers. The audience and the players physically move to different locations and the very act of movement is a kind of pilgrimage, worship-in-action, counted as *punya* (the earning of merit) that will earn *phal* (reward). Kashi Naresh arrives seated on an elephant and inaugurates the play in the presence of the vyasa and other Ramlila functionaries. He is welcomed with resonating cries of '*HarharMahadev*! ('Glory of the Lord's name') since he is understood to be a manifestation of Shiva, the Hindu god, considered to be the destroyer or transformer. Young Rama's entry follows closely, and he arrives on an elder's shoulder. The initial ritual of paying obeisance to Ram, Sita, Hanuman is impersonated by the King of Ramnagar, and it is followed by the actual performance which is three layered:

1. The recital of *Ramcharitmanas*: Within fifty feet off the stage, often on the same ground, the crowd is seated, the *ramayanis,* a group of twelve men of varying ages, chant verses each night from the entire *Manas*, seated in a ring close to the Maharaja. The chanting of the *Manas* punctuates the acting out of the story. The audience also carries a copy of the *Ramcharitmanas*, and follows it along with its recital by the ramayanis.

2. *Samvad* (Dialogue): In a makeshift stage, amateur actors in ornate costumes play out their assigned roles. In the past, the performers mimed the action. However, now the dialogue is spoken or rather shouted with great vigour by the actors. It is necessary to shout because Ramlila uses no microphones. Ishwari Prasad Narayan Singh (1835-1889) a king in the mid-19th century, appointed an assemblage of poets and scholars to write dialogues in spoken Hindi for Ramlila. Each episode is a confluence of lila and *mela* (fair & festivity) 'Lila ground is a place for worship and the mela is a place to socialise' (Bonnemaison and Source, 1990, 2-23)

3. *Jhanki* (Tableaux): Literally, 'a view, a glance.' Norvin Hein defined jhanki as a specific form of traditional religious drama, "a tableau of living deities exhibited for worship, the "actors" in which are always, as in the Ramnagar Ramlila, Brahman boy(s) under the age of puberty" (1972, 13-17). A jhanki performance does not enact any narrative. "The situation presented is always the same: Sita and Rama enthroned, holding, as it were, their durbar" (Hein, 1972, 13-17).

The sound of chanting, drums, and cymbals mark the performance. Bright colored masks and huge, glossily painted papier-mâché effigies depicting the frozen iconic moments from the *manas* enliven the performances. Invocations of *Har Har Mahadev* and *Raja*

Ramchandra ki Jai (victory to Lord Rama) rends the air at the completion of each lila, and *arati* (Hindu religious ritual of worship). On most days, Ramlila starts at five in the evening and carries on until ten at night. The staging is symbolic and simple. The costumes are elaborately woven silks in glittering gold and bright shades. The actors are decked with spangled ornaments. Ramlila uses archaic methods of lighting up the performance, and sound amplifications; electricity and microphone are not put to use. This adherence to an earlier technology — kerosene lanterns and flares providing the lighting — is a major aspect of the production. Not only the techniques, but also the underlying socio-religious structures of Ramlila are extremely conservative. The preservation of the style, thematic content, character role-playing, caste hierarchy, gender restrictions, archaic staging techniques, all attest to the fact that there is a tenacious desire to fix and freeze the performance practice at a time when we are discussing the proliferation and the textual explosion of the *Ramayana* and questioning its canonical authority in the Indian sub-continent (Lutgendorf, 1991; Richman, 1991).

Archetypal Story as Quest Narrative and the National Imaginary

The Ramlila is an enactment of an epic story, of a righteous prince who weds a devoted princess, but through foul play is unfairly exiled to the forest. While living in the forest the dutiful princess is abducted by the devious designs of a demon. The prince then embarks on a mission to recover his wife, assisted by monkeys. He ultimately emerges triumphant, decapitating the demon and rescuing his wife. He reclaims his rightful throne at the end of his exile. Central to the plot typology of this mythical textual mechanics is the concept of quest-based model discussed by Vladimir Propp, Roland Barthes, A. J. Griemas, and Yuri Lotman who argued for the possibility of an underlying structural grammar of narratives. The object position of the female subject in such a model has been critiqued by (Rubin, 1975; Mulvey, 1975; de Lauretis, 1984; Silverman, 1983) the feminist intervention in the field of narration. Teresa de Lauretis engages with formalist and structuralist approaches to show how narrative strategies are engendered and how the male initiates the quest whereas the female can only be the object of the quest, and not a subject or an initiator (1984, 118-119). Nabneeta Sen in “Lady Sings the Blues” (1998, 108) shows how epic poets across the world are men, singing the glory of other men, armed men, to be precise. In the context of Ramlila, Rama becomes the active principle of culture and in the morphology of the narrative, Sita becomes an element of plot- space, a topos, a matrix and matter.

This archetypal story of Rama as part of the cultural subconscious of India serves as a mainstay to assert the principles of a culture flouted as ancient and spiritual. It is a source of inspiration, moral orientation, and an aspect of their fashioning of identity. It functions as an idiom for articulating national self-identity, its ideals for a wholesome nation, in short a *ram rajya* (Rama's kingdom or Divine Rule).

Ram as *Maryada Purushottama*: Conceptualising Indian Masculinity

The process of colonisation can be seen as a process of feminisation wherein the Orient (non-western colonies in South Asia and the Middle East) was crafted as the weak, irrational, non-martial 'other' in juxtaposition to a rational, strong, martial European 'self' (Said, 1978, 207). Several nationalist identity movements throughout the world have seen the reconstruction of gender discourse upholding new models of manhood, assigning women's roles as a common response (see Gerami, 2003; Lewis, 2007; Jeffords, 1989). Indian masculinity was redefined in a bid to challenge British colonial rule and its cultural influence (see, for example, Banerjee, 2003; Sinha, 1995; Hansen, 1996).

Nationalist sentiments during independence used Ramlila as a tool for assertion of sovereignty and identity. Since the early nineteenth century, the Ramlila has been deployed as a project for self-definition by the kings of Benares. Crammed between a declining Mughal rule and a nascent British authority, funding Ramlila was the way for the kings of Benares to prop up their religious and cultural clout at a time when they were attenuated in both military command and economic self-sufficiency. Performance of Ramlila presented a model of *ram rajya* and leadership standards; the concept of *maryada purushottama* (interpreted as one who follows rules ideally or Lord of Self-Control or the Perfect Man or Lord of Virtue). Rama's exile and forest journey are transformative: they are the means to his defeat of Ravana, and the consequent transformation of a demon-ravaged world into ram rajya, the righteous rule of King Rama. Without him, its center will not hold (Schechner, 1993, 169). After defeating his enemies, Rama must return to Ayodhya because he embodies both *dharma* (path of righteousness) and kingdom; he is the paradigmatic Hindu King of Kings, the noble ruler of divine origin and the source of strength and steadiness within the kingdom.

This nationalist discourse included the invocation of motherhood as a privileged form of femininity as seen in the use of the term "motherland" (Roy, 1995, 10-28). Sita was invoked as a role model, ideal wife and mother. "Mobilisation of women in the nationalist movement was made repeatedly along these lines: unless the Sita principle of *Shakti*

(female principle of divine energy) imprisoned in women is released, the great act of sacrifice will not be complete" (Sarkar, 1989, 238). Images of Rama and Sita were mobilised for political ends as symbols in traditional gender discourses that emphasise masculine valor, vigor and power in the service of protecting the pure, passive femininity (Mostov, 2000, 89- 110) for ushering in an idealistic society. They became a sign of moral superiority and civilisational achievement. The valorisation of Rama during pre-independence period with nationalist rhetoric of nation capable of self-rule and its resurgence in 1990s with a core craving to convert India as a Hindu state, espoused Ram rajya as an ideal. Clearly, Ramlila can no longer be seen merely as a performance practice, religious, spiritual or literary project in India; it is political.

Svarups: Gender, Language and Role-playing in Ramlila

All the characters in the Ramlila performance are represented by local artistes who are chosen through auditions held in the king's palace at Ramnagar. Certain roles are passed down in families and are usually played by the same actors year after year.

Local actors play a variety of characters. Historically, all of the Ramlila actors had been Brahmin men and boys, the highest Indian caste. The only characters who do not belong to the upper caste are the small boys who play the monkey, the demon armies and the female playing Surpnakha's role.

Gender is manifested in the ways that the characters 'speak and move' (Butler, 2004, 10). In Ramlila, there is a longstanding convention of only males performing all the parts, including that of Sita and other female roles. In the year 2012, when I visited the month long Ramlila performances at Ramnagar, the role of Rama was played by Pranav Tripathi, a class seven student from nearby semi urban town of Chakia in the district of Chandauli and Rama's brothers, Bharata, Lakshmana and Shatrughna were played by Atul Dubey, a class eight student, from Ghazipur, Suryansh Dubey, class nine student from Ghazipur and Atul Kumar Pathak, a class four student from Mirzapur respectively. Nand Kishore vyas from Gujarat performed the role of Sita. It was believed that these boys between the ages of eight and thirteen whose voices had not yet changed and with no facial hair were the only ones fit to embody Rama, his brothers, Bharata, Lakshmana and Shatrughna and Sita. Raghunath vyas at Dharmshala, a fort near Kali Mandir, trained these five boys where they underwent a disciplined schedule. For a month, while they are rehearsing the play, the children are referred to by the mythical names of the characters they are impersonating. Interestingly, the boy performing Sita willingly accepts his newly bestowed upon gender

identity and is referred to as Sita during the month long training. Child actors who enact the part of the chief characters are called *svarup* (forms, likenesses), living gods with a status similar to the stone deities of gods in the Hindu temples. During the annual Ramlila cycle the boys and men who play the roles of Ram, Sita and Hanuman are worshipped as manifestations of deities. The actors are transposed as the divine incarnate for the audience. The audience enters into an imaginative reality and gains a direct access to the divine world. The children who play Ram and his brothers act out scenes from the story with stylised movements and speech patterns. The boys who enact the five most sacred roles of Rama, Sita and Rama's three brothers are treated as gods for a month, and people literally worship them by touching their feet, singing hymns in their praise, or simply, 'taking *darshan'* (looking at images of god is thought to be auspicious) of these 'divine' beings. The devotees function not merely as spectators but they bow down and pay obeisance to the actors and by doing so the spectators turn into actors themselves. When the Ramlila is over, the svarups become boys again.

Series of connotations like script, costume, makeup, props and set are available to mark femaleness and maleness in Ramlila. Language (Hindi in the case of Ramlila performers) may be considered as an ongoing means by which gender differences are circumscribed and perpetuated. Different dialects are prescribed for the male and female voices. It has been argued for some time that some consistent differences exist between male and female language use in speech (for example, Trudgill, 1972; Holmes, 1990; Labov, 1990; Eckert, 1997). Female role players use an invented repertoire of language that endorses the hegemonic ideology of civil notion of the norms by referring to husbands with superior titles as *prannath* (Lord of life, husband), *swami* (master) or maharaja and referring to her own female self as *dasi* (servant). The Ramlila at Ramnagar attests the traditional understanding of gender specific linguistic expressions compliant to that soft, gracious and so called 'feminine' comportment conforming to the androcentric biases in language (Cixous, 1976; Wittig, 1985, 1992; Irigaray, 1997; Kristeva, 1984).

Gender is not only produced by particular bodies but is also located within particular activities such as speech, mannerisms and behavioral practices. It is through the 'stylised repetition' of these gendered practices (e.g., body gestures, mannerisms, linguistic practices) that gender is performed (Butler, 1990, 2004). Furthermore, as Lyons explains, "Through engagement in these behaviours or practices, gender becomes accountable and assessed by others, and aspects of gendered identity become legitimated" (2009, 395). By addressing male characters as *prannath* (Lord of life, husband), *swami* (master) or

maharaja, and referring to one's female self as *dasi* (servant), language becomes gender embodied and gender becomes a linguistic performance.

Goddess and Demonised Female Form

Codified within the *Ramayana* performance is the goddess and demonised female form. The bad woman is seen as the rule breaker, disobedient, immoral and hence is appropriately punished for her misdemeanor. Rules of behavior for women are unambiguously etched. We have archetypes for the woman as Sita – a deferential daughter, virtuous wife, self-sacrificing mother, and antithetically, we have the bad woman as Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana in *Ramayana*, as dangerous and the sexually insatiable who threatens to destabilise patriarchal social order of sexuality and sexual normativity with her seductive power. 'Nakkatiya', which falls on the day of Dusshera, reenacts the particular incident of hacking Surpanakha's nose to tell the masses how goodness (Rama) prevails over evil (Surpanakha). The story goes that Surpanakha was smitten by the looks of Rama and Lakshmana and she makes advances towards them. Rama spurned her advances and following his order, Lakshmana hacked off Surpanakha's nose, ears and breasts. The anger and disgust of Rama for Surpanakha appears more intense than for Ravana who kidnapped his wife. The punishment he devised for Ravana for abducting his wife was to slaughter him at the battlefield, and not mutilating his sexual organs. As Kathleen M. Erndl asserts, "Disfigurement of the woman is the most common punishment for crimes of a sexual nature . . . Interestingly, such incidents are often presented in a humorous light" (1991, 65-85). One can see a lot of fun and frolic when this scene is enacted. When finally the nose is chopped off, it is accompanied with clapping and applause.

Interesting information that I gathered at Ramanagar was that no one wants to perform the role of Surpanakha, not even the young boys, because she is characterised as the eternal fallen woman in the epic. Therefore, a nautch (dance or dancing for the pleasure of men) girl of Ramnagar, the only female performer in the troupe, plays her role and contradictorily, is the highest paid performer. A dancing girl performing Surpanakha gets paid 500 rupees for her performance each day, whereas others, including Rama and Sita, get a meager eight rupees per diem. Seen from modern day lens Surpanakha may have rightly exercised her choice but the epic and the Ramlila represents her as fallen woman/bad woman consumed by lust. I could summarily deduce that in the small town of Ramnagar who would want to play her part except the dancing girl who is always already carrying the cross and dwells outside the periphery of the self- styled moral society that privileges domesticity, virtuosity, chastity and modesty in women. In this envisaged ideal

society, sexual desire should exist only between a lawfully wedded man and his lawfully wedded spouse. The dancing women fall beyond the pale of the normative familial and social frameworks of traditional Indian society and hence is considered as a morally dubious character, therefore being fit for the purpose of performing Surpanakha. Mythical characters are like goblets into which society pours its ideas – Sita has turned out to be an emblem of womanhood, the perfect role model as spouse and mother. Through her constant and protracted separation from her husband, her image is desexualised and sanitised like the Virgin Mary, belonging to a superior and chaste order.

In several performances across the world, men enacted the female characters as in the case of Ramlila at Ramnagar. Needless to say, the most effeminate and beautiful boy is hand picked to enact the role of Sita. 'Women can't play Sita's role', explained Raghunath, one of the organisers of the performance (2012). According to Raghunath, 'Nor can a married man enact the roles of Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Bharata, so young boys enact the roles of epical characters as they are innocent and retain elements of God-like qualities in their innocence; it is their innocence that makes them more malleable for the roles' (2012). When I asked the young boy if he felt uncomfortable to perform the role of Sita, he was very candid about his experience, "it was funny to wear women's clothes and be Sita initially. But I was awed by the role [and] I had heard so much about her since childhood. Staying in this ashram has been a learning experience; all my friends here call me Sita. So slowly, I feel that the character has entered me. Here I learnt how courageous and pious Sita was", said the actor (vyas, N. K., 2012). He described the scene at length when Sita resolves to follow Rama to the forest foregoing the comforts of the kingdom, "It is this decision, this faithfulness, and this devotion to her husband that people love to see – this scene is very popular, imagine one can embrace sufferings and trials so happily, such a person is hard to find, we learnt all this, heard stories about the characters, this helped us to play the roles better" (vyas, N. K., 2012), recounted the Sita impersonate.

When I asked why a girl might not play Sita, I was told by the Hanuman impersonate that "any female onstage would be considered by villagers to be sexually compromised. They also said that any girl who portrayed Sita would never find a husband because the action in Ramlila is considered real, including the wedding rites for Sita and Rama. Thus, no one will marry a girl who has already been married" (Pandey, 2012). When asked why the boy playing Sita does not face the same problem, my informant laughed: "He is a boy. He can't be married to another boy" (Pandey, 2012), conforming to the heteronormativity holding high among rural village settings of India. The contradiction — that what is true for a girl-

as-god is not true for a boy-as-god — did not seem an issue. As for Rama, no problem: a king can have more than one wife.

For the brothers Ram Narayan Pandey and Sant Narayan Pandey the *Ramayana* and its performance practice of Ramlila was an enactment of *Dharma shastra* (textbook of religious duties) for the literate and illiterate folks of Ramnagar (2012). I debated with them why Rama conducted himself like a common man who mistrusts his virtuous wife and demands her to prove her chastity; their slipshod and compromising response can scarcely serve the requirements of today's socio-political issues vis-à-vis religion and women's subservience. Why it was Sita and not Rama who was subjected to trial by fire? Why wasn't Rama required to prove his chastity? Why was it that Sita had to be exiled even after she proved her innocence? Answers that advocated Sita's Dharma, Rama's strength, pointed out the fact that Rama was never happy after he was separated from Sita, and that he had installed a replica of Sita in gold for rituals that required the presence of his wife. Countless clarifications were offered to me to justify Sita's trial by fire and endorsing Rama's love for his wife. The question that they failed to address was that if Rama was attentive to *raj dharma* (kingly duties) what about his *dharma* to his wife? Can he be exonerated from the guilt of committing lapse in meeting his dharma as a husband? And the ultimate justification for all of Rama's actions and misdemeanors was surely because of the fact that 'he was her *pati parmeshwar* (husband as god) and god after all' (vyas, LaxmiNarayan, 2012). Such deep-seated patriarchal values and female subjectivity still dictates the gender roles in Ramlila. Female viewers 'adopt and accept the male gaze and succumb to the conventional, societal expectation' (Williams, 1984, 83-99. They were disempowered by the lack of subject position to the discourses of theatre and functioned as a drag mirror held up to life in the male hands (Dolan, 1992, 3-13), ventriloquising patriarchal ideals of a good woman.

Ramlila as Metanarrative

The folk performance practice at Ramnagar is permeated with asymmetrical gender relations. This popular performance practice ends with *Uttara-Kanda* with Rama having killed Ravana and the establishment of Ram rajya amidst loud shouts of triumph celebrating the occasion; the narrative has carefully elided the story of Sita. Her story and trials do not culminate with the triumph of Rama over Ravana and his ascendency of the throne at Ayodhaya, she undergoes her chastity test and ultimately leads a secluded life in the forest giving birth to her two sons and finally enters the womb of the earth, her mother's abode. The performance inheres an effective social absence of women as subjects and the

unstated shared understanding to perform, produce, and support separate and binary gender norms as cultural narratives.

This folk version tends to contemporise the action at various points - "when authors contemporise the story, their characters speak in the colloquial dialect and slang of the time, and they act in ways that the audience would find familiar" (Lutgendorf, 1991, 213)- thereby being easily accessible to a huge audience and the values expressed therein are perpetuated and permeated among the spectators. Thapar's assessment of the television serialised *Ramayana* show as possessing "a dangerous and unprecedented authority" (1989, 71-75) can be extended to understand Ramlila as well. This month long performance of Ramlila year after year, has become the popular version that seeps into the collective unconscious of a community privileging paradigms and sets of values for a moral society. Rama myth has been exploited by the patriarchal Brahmanical system to construct an ideal Hindu male. Sita too has been built up as an ideal Hindu female to help serve the system (Sen, 1998). The epic story functions as a legitimation of the existing power relations, customs and cultural values. Overall, the traits sought in every Indian man/woman are foregrounded in the epical characters. We can clearly see the politics behind gender idealisation. Sita sets the concept of the ideal wife, her beauty, decorum of a wife, daughter-in-law, her virtue, anxiety for her husband, her chastity occupies the maximum space. Rama is seen as an *avatar,* beyond every question.

Ramlila based on the *Ramayana* text can be seen as a metanarrative, which functions as institutional and ideological forms of knowledge. This metanarrative's (or 'grand narratives', typically characterised by some form of 'transcendent and universal truth') totalising nature of reality and experience acts as a shaping medium, a legitimation of the norms of the society and what Lyotard called the 'emancipation narrative' (1979). In a postmodernist environment, gender identity and sexuality cannot be ordered into hierarchies and binaries as the Ramlila stage demonstrates but must be understood as a constant becoming or a 'thousand tiny sexes'. (Grosz, 1994, 199)

REFERENCES

Banerjee, S. (2003) "Gender and Nationalism: The Masculinisation of Hinduism and Female Political Participation in India", *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 167 – 179.

Bonnemaison, Sarah and Christine Macy Source. (1990) "The Ramlila in Ramnagar". *Design Quarterly*, No. 147, Celebrations: Urban Spaces Transformed, 2-23.

Butler, J. (1990) "Performing Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", In: *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theater*, (ed.) Sue-Elle Case, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.

Butler, J. (2004) *Undoing Gender*, New York: Routledge.

Cixous, H. (1976) "The Laugh of the Medusa". *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer), 875-893.

de Beauvoir, S. (1974) *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley, New York: Vintage.

de Lauretis, T. (1984) *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Dimmitt, C. (1982) "Sita: Fertility Goddess and *Sakti"*, in *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*, (ed.) John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Berkeley: Berkeley Religious Studies Series), 210-23.

Dolan, J. (1992) "Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles?" In: *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*. (ed.) Laurence Senelick. Hanover, New Hampshire: UP of New England, 3-13.

Eckert, P. (1997) Gender and Sociolinguistic Variation. In: *Readings in Language and Gender*, (ed.) J. Coates Blackwell, Oxford.

Erndl, K. M. (1991) "The Mutilation of Surpanakha". In: *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia.* (ed.) Paula Richman Berkeley: University of California Press, 67-85. http://ark.cdlib.org/ ark:/13030/ft3j49n8h7/[Accessed 16 June 2015].

Gerami, S. (2003) "Mullahs, Martyrs, and Men: Conceptualising Masculinity in the Islamic Republic of Iran", *Men and Masculinities*, January 2003 vol. 5 no. 3, 257-274.

Grosz, E. (1994) "A Thousand Tiny Sexes: Feminism and Rhizomatics". *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy,* (eds.) Constantin V. Boundas and Dorothea Olkowski, New York: Routledge.

Hansen, T. B. (1996) "Recuperating Masculinity: Hindu Nationalism, Violence and the Exorcism of the Muslim 'Other'", *Critique of Anthropology*, 16(2), 137-72.

Hein, N. (1972) *The Miracle Plays of Mathura,* New York and London: Yale UP.

Holmes, J. (1990) "Hedges and Boosters in Women's and Men's Speech", *Language & Communication* 10 (3).

Imhasly-Gandhy, R. (2001) *The Psychology of Love - Wisdom of Indian Mythology,* New Delhi: Roli Books.

Irigaray, L. (1997) "The Sex Which is Not One," *Feminisms*. (eds.) Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 363-369.

Jeffords, S. (1989) *The Remasculinisation of America: Gender and the Vietnam War,* Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Kapur, A. (1988) "Thinking About Tradition: The *Ramlila* at Ramnagar", *Journal of Arts and Ideas,* no.16, (January - march) 5-32.
Kapur, A. (2006) *Actors, Pilgrims, Kings And Gods: The Ramlila of Ramnagar,* Kolkata: Seagull.
Kishwar, M. (1997) "Yes to Sita, No to Ram: The Continuing Popularity of Sita in India", *Manushi*: *A Journal about Women and Society*, 98 (Jan-Feb).
Kristeva, J. (1984) *Revolution in Poetic Language,* New York: Columbia UP.
Kumar, N. (1984) "Popular Culture in Urban India: The Artisans of Banaras, c. 1884-1984" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago), 261-94.
Labov, W. (1990) "The Intersection of Sex and Social Class in the Course of Linguistic Change", *Language Variation and Change*, 2: 205–54.
Lewis, L. (2007). "Man Talk, Masculinity, and a Changing Social Environment", *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies,* Issue 1, April.
Lutgendorf, P. (1991) *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas,* Berkeley: University of California Press.
."The Oral Tradition and the Many 'Ramayanas'". South Asia
Center, University of Iowa. Available from http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/ moynihan/sac/The_Oral_Tradition_and_the_many_Ramayanas/ [Accessed 28 June 2015].
Lyons, A. C. (2009) "Masculinities, Femininities, Behaviour and Health", *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *3*(4), 394–412.
Lyotard, J-F. (1979), *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
McLain, K. (2001) "Sita and Shurpanakha: Symbols of the Nation in the Amar Chitra Katha", *Manushi*: *A Journal about Women and Society*, 122 (January– February): 32–39.
Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) "The Body in its Sexual Being", *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
Mostov, J. (2000) "Sexing the Nation /Desexing the Body: Politics of National Identity in the Former Yugoslavia", *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, (ed.),T. Mayer, pp. 89–110. London, England: Routledge.
Mulvey, L. (1975) "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen* (16:3) 6-18. Pandey, R. N. (2012) "Personal communication", 27October .11.00
Pattanaik, D. (2006) *Myth=Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology*. Gurgaon: Penguin Books.
Ramanujan, A. K. (1973) *Speaking of Siva*. London: Penguin Books.
Richman, P. (ed.)(1991) *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia.* Berkeley: University of California Press. http://ark.cdlib.org/ ark:/13030/ft3j49n8h7/[Accessed 12 June 2015].

Roy, K. (1995) "Where Women are Worshipped, There the Gods Rejoice: The Mirage of Ancestress of the Hindu Woman", *Women and the Hindu Right: A Collection of Essays*. (ed.) Tanika Sarkar & Urvashi Butalia, Delhi: Kali for Women, 10-28.

Rubin, G. (1975) "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex", *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, (ed.) Rayna R. Reiter, New York: Monthly Review Press, 146-80.

Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism,* New York: Random House.

Sarkar, T. (1989) "Politics and Women in Bengal: The Conditions and Meaning of Participation", *Woman in Colonial India: Essays on Survival, Work, and the State*, (ed.) Krishnamurthy, New Delhi: Oxford UP.

Sax, W. S. (1990) "The Ramnagar Ramlila: Text, Performance, Pilgrimage", *History of Religions*, Vol. 30, No. 2, November 129-153.

Schechner, R and Linda Hess. (1977) "The *Ramlila* of Ramnagar" [India], *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 21, No. 3, Annual Performance Issue, September 51-82.

Schechner, R. (1993) *Ramlila of Ramanagar The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance*, London: Routledge.

Sen, N. D. (1998) "Lady Sings the Blues: When Women Retell the Ramayana", *Manushi: A Journal about Women and Society*, No 108, Sept-Oct. http:// indiatogether.org/manushi/issue108/nabaneeta.htm [Accessed 10 June 2015].

Silverman, K. (1983) *The Subject of Semiotics*, New York: Oxford UP.

Sinha, M. (1995) *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly' Englishman and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Manchester: Manchester UP.

Thapar, R. (1989) "The Ramayana Syndrome", *Seminar*, no 353 (January), 71- 75.

Trudgill, P. (1972) "Sex, Covert Prestige and Linguistic Change in the Urban British English of Norwich". *Language in Society* 1 (2): 175–195.

Vanita, R. (2005) *Gandhi's Tiger and Sita's Smile: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Culture*. New Delhi: Yoda Press.

Vyas, L. N. (2012) Personal Communication. 26 September. 11.30 Vyas, N. K. (2012) Personal Communication. 5 August. 10.00 Vyas, R. (2012) Personal Communication. 28 September. 13.00

Williams, L. (1984) "When the Woman Looks", *Re-Vision*, (eds.) Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams, Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 83-99.

Wittig, M. (1985) *Les Guerilleres*. trans. Le Vay. Boston: Beacon Press. -

-. (1992) *The Straight Mind and other Essays*. USA: Beacon Press.

Contributor:

ANITA SINGH. Is Professor in the Department of English at Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India. Her areas of interest are Gender Studies and Performance Studies. Her recent book is *Gender, Space and Resistance: Women and Theatre in India*. She was at the University of Virginia, USA as a Fulbright visiting Scholar (2013)