"SITA PUTS OUT THE FIRE": SOME DEPICTIONS OF THE TESTING OF SITA'S VIRTUE IN INDONESIAN, MALAY, AND THAI LITERATURE

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Abstract

The *Ramayana* has been known in many forms throughout South and Southeast Asia for almost two thousand years. This paper deals with one incident in the epic: Sita's trial by fire as proof of her chastity and loyalty to her husband Rama immediately following the defeat of Sita's captor, the ten-headed monster Ravana, and her residence in the monster's palace for four years. The story is told somewhat differently in the classical Malay *Hikayt Seri Rama* and the Thai *Ramakien*—partly for religious reasons but retaining a patriarchal emphasis. There are also modern retellings of this incident in Indonesian and Thai. These sympathetically describe Sita's response to Rama's harsh demands and might be considered "anti-Sita" works in as far as they contradict the traditional representations of Sita as a virtuous and obedient wife in favor of contemporary understandings of human freedom and autonomy, especially as these relate to women.

Keywords

anti-Ramayana, meta-Ramayana

About the author

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*datanglah wahai dewi panggung
mengarang dan merangkaikan peristiwa.
sekarang aku seri rama,
sekarang aku hanuman
dan di waktu antara semar sinis*

Muhammad Haji Salleh, "dalang iii"

come to me you muses of the stage
 compose and thread the events,
 now I am rama
 now I am hanuman
 and in between the cynical semar

(trans. Muhammad Haji Salleh)

Muhammad Haji Salleh has shown himself to be a dedicated scholar of Malay Literature, keen to explore its many dimensions and proud to promote its qualities within the Malay World (including Indonesia), Southeast Asia, and indeed throughout the world. In this paper, I wish to honor my friend and colleague through the discussion of one event in the *Ramayana*, a work to which he has given little attention in his writing although, as he informs me, he has often included it in his classes. I would like to show how this episode—Sita's ordeal by fire as an indication of her purity as Rama's wife despite her long captivity by the demon king Ravana—has been handled in several Malay, Indonesian, and Thai texts, both classical and modern.

THE TRIAL BY FIRE IN VALMIKI'S RAMAYANA

There are many *Ramayanas* both in India and abroad, and "each reflects the social location and ideology of those who have appropriated it" (Richman, *Many Ramayanas* 4). The oldest surviving text, if not the only source for the *Ramayana* tale, is attributed to an author known as Valmiki. His is a long poem of 24,000 verses or 48,000 lines, composed in Sanskrit sometime around the beginning of the Common Era—between 200 BC and 200 AD are commonly accepted dates (Hawley and Wulff 377). Cadet provides a convenient overview of the complete text as we have it today: "In summary, [the *Ramayana*] tells of the divine origin and mortal existence of the hero king of Ayodhia, Rama. It falls into three sections, of which the first deals mainly with the court intrigue leading to Rama's renunciation of the throne and exile; the second with the abduction of his wife Sita, the defeat of the demons of Lanka island, and Sita's recovery; and the third with Rama's repudiation of his wife and her assumption into the underworld" (30-31).

Sita has often been seen as a model Hindu wife who willingly follows her husband into exile, leads an ascetic life without complaint, and courageously and chastely endures her captivity at the hands of the evil king Ravana (Dimmitt 210). As Desai has written,

The story of Sita's sufferings, her faithfulness, her second banishment in the desolate forest, and despite this, her tremendous courage and the lofty sense of honor and

grace with which she faces her husband and the court at the end, are stories fed with religious zeal to every little girl in all Hindu homes. There is no character in the literature of the Hindus, or perhaps of all mankind, loftier than Sita—the embodiment of womanly love, truth, and devotion. (16)

These qualities are clearly expressed in the part immediately following Rama's defeat of Ravana. The story is far from over and Rama cannot simply take his wife home as though nothing has happened between her and Ravana during the past four years. In fact, Rama's actions after Sita is finally freed are (at least on the surface) uncharacteristically cruel and egotistical. His first words focus not on her but on his own achievements:

O Illustrious Princess, I have won thee and mine enemy has been defeated on the battlefield; I have accomplished all that fortitude could do; my wrath is appeased; the insult and the one who offered it have been obliterated by me. (*Ramayana* 334-35)

A reason is given for this self-centered behavior: Valmiki tells us that Rama is also "apprehensive of public opinion" and "torn within himself." In the presence of his army and the demons, Rama harshly declares that the battle "was not undertaken wholly for [her] sake" but as a way of avenging the insult to himself and his dynasty. Because of the suspicions about Sita's conduct, however, Rama insists he must refuse to take her back; Sita is free to go wherever, and to whomever, she pleases.

Sita's reply to the rejection is, as always, eloquent and reasonable. He ought to have known her better than he apparently does; she has never betrayed him, and, as his wife, she never would. Had he really been so determined to refuse to accept her back, he should have told Hanuman this and she would have committed suicide when the leader of the monkey hordes visited her earlier in her captivity. Weeping, she turns to Laksamana, Rama's brother, and demands that he prepare a fire for her:

"Raise a pyre for me, O Saumitri, this is the only remedy for my misery! These unjust reproaches have destroyed me, I cannot go on living! Publicly renounced by my husband, who is insensible to my virtue, there is only one redress for me, to undergo the ordeal by fire!" (337)

Rama silently consents to her request. Sita circumambulates her husband, the fire, then flings herself into the flames like "a Sacrificial offering" (338).

The gods suddenly arrive as witnesses. At this point, the story turns to an examination of Rama rather than Sita. Brahma reminds Rama of his true nature, which he has apparently forgotten; he is not a man but "the great and effulgent Narayana" (and all of the other divine natures), and the purpose of his assuming human form was to slay Ravana (340). On hearing these words, Vibhabasu, a god of fire who has been protecting Sita, stands up and restores her to her husband, affirming her virtue and faithfulness. As he accepts her, Rama explains again that "On account of the people, it was imperative that Sita should pass through this trial by fire"; now no one can accuse him of having acted purely out of "selfish lust" (341). The couple are reunited and Rama "experienced the felicity he had merited" (342).

Told and retold endlessly for over two thousand years, the stories are known and loved throughout the length and breadth of South and Southeast Asia. They provide "the grammar of human relationships, as it emerges from the royal houses of Ayodhya, Kishkinda, and Lanka" (Raghavan v)—a grammar that offers detailed expectations about proper behavior in a gendered and hierarchical society within a sacred cosmos (Richman, *Ramayana Stories* 9).

TWO CLASSICAL RETELLINGS: THE HIKAYAT SERI RAMA AND THE RAMAKIEN

The *Ramayana* spread extensively throughout Southeast Asia, both in Valmiki's and various regional versions, from early in the Common Era. Desai has argued that it entered along two paths: one by sea, from Gujarat and South India to Java, Sumatra, and Malaya; the other by land, from Bengal into Burma, Thailand, and Laos. Vietnam and Cambodia derived their versions partly from Java and partly from the sea route from India (5). It was transmitted both by Hindus and Buddhists, and an early story of one of the previous lives of the Buddha, the "Dasaratha-Jataka," may possibly be earlier than Valmiki's *Ramayana* (Cowell 78-82). Gombrich, however, dismisses the tale as "a later distortion" and "a spoof" (434-35).

There is no need here to describe the many inscriptions and archaeological remains that provide clear evidence of the widespread importance of the Rama Saga in Southeast Asia (see Coedes). Let me just mention two items. The first is the Val Kantel inscription of Cambodia from the late seventh century that mentions the frequent recitation of the *Ramayana* and the legends from the Puranas. The other is the complete retelling of the story in the sculptured balustrades of the Candi Siwa and Candi Brahma temples of the complex known by reference to the nearby village of Prambanan, dating from the ninth century AD (Saran and Khanna 32-87). However, no written *Ramayana* texts from the first millennium appear to have survived in Southeast Asia, apart from the Javanese *Kakawin Ramayana*. This "exemplary" poem, both in form and content, was composed sometime before 930 AD, and drew to a significant extent on a seventh century AD Southern Indian

source, the *Ravana Vadha* (*The Death of Ravana*) (Hookyaas 5). A convenient summary of the plot can be found in Zoetmulder (217-26).

The versions considered "classical" today derive from the latter half of the second millennium. The *Hikayat Seri Rama* (*The Chronicle of Sri Rama*) is one of a number of Malay retellings of the Rama Saga and it exists in various versions, including a manuscript acquired by the Anglican Archbishop William Laud in 1633 and now kept in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. The Malay text, written in Arabic script, contains a number of Islamic elements including transformations of the names of the Hindu gods and stories of Muslim prophets, including the Prophet Adam. Winstedt conjectures that the text was finalized in the kingdom of Malacca, "which was still conservative enough to like the old tales of the Hindu period, provided that they were presented in a form which Muslim pundits could condone" (39).

The leading Thai version, the *Ramakien* (*Rama's Story*), is even more recent: it was composed by King Rama Jakri I and a group of translator-poets in 1785 during the construction of Bangkok, following the loss of earlier editions to Burmese attacks on the capital Ayudhia in 1767. The book covers almost 3,000 pages and includes some 50,286 verses (Chamlong Sarapadnuke 247). It is available in English in various abridged translations; I will make use of the summary by Olsson, which is based on a previous German translation and not drawn directly from the source text.

The story of Sita's trial by fire in the *Hikayat Seri Rama* is brief but clearly recognizable. Following Rama's victory, Sita immediately runs to bow before her husband. His words are cold: "*Hai Sita Dewi, jangan engkau menjamah tubohku takut engkau sudah diambil oleh Maharaja Rawana*" ("Oh Sita Dewi, do not touch my body; I am fearful that you have been taken by Maharaja Ravana") (254). Her self-defense is eloquent: she has not been touched by Ravana and has, in fact, always stayed a good distance from him. She had refused to return with Hanuman when he visited her earlier, so as not to touch him either. But now, she insists, if her Lord will not accept her word, then she will fulfill whatever imprecation he cares to put upon her. Rama's response is direct: "*Hai Sita Dewi, jikalau demikian katamu masuklah engkau ke dalam api maka aku percaya akan dikau*" ("Oh Sita Dewi, if that is what you say, enter the fire and I will believe you") (254). Bowing, she responds: "*Yang mana titah tuanku sahaya junjung dan yang diperhamba kerjakan*" ("Whatever my lord commands, I will uphold and his servant will do") (254). Hanuman is ordered to make a pyre of various types of fragrant wood, incenses, and oil, and to erect a jewel-studded bower on the top. When the fire is lit, Sita stands and bows to Rama. Not only is she untouched by the flames, even the fringes of her throne are unscathed. Rama rushes into the fire and carries her out into Ravana's palace where he bathes her with rose water, saffron, and musk. They assume the two thrones and receive the homage of kings, warriors, the various ranks of the nobility, and the people, before setting out for Ayodhia.

Despite the apparent similarity, almost every incident bears a different nuance from Valmiki's version. Rama is not motivated by any fear of public calumny. Sita's explanation of why she did not follow Hanuman exonerates her for forcing Rama to continue the war. The fire is lit by Hanuman and not by Laksamana. The ordeal is watched only by Rama. Agni is not present (as one would expect in a Muslim retelling). Rama cuts short her ordeal by rescuing Sita himself. He bathes her and at once sets her beside him. Nor is it much like the twelfth century Tamil *Iramavataram* on which the *Hikayat* is most likely to have been based (Shulman). The Islamization of the story has rendered it significantly different from the Hindu texts.

The *Ramakien* was, of course, constructed in a Theravada Buddhist environment, although not rigidly so. In Thailand, the *Ramakien* is not considered a sacred text but an aesthetic heroic work (Desai 18); Rama is not worshipped; the characters are "fallible, a mixture of good and evil"; Ravana sacrifices his family, his kingdom, and even his own life for the love of a woman, and his end is sad, not a matter for rejoicing (Ramanujan 37-39).

The outlines of the story, at this point as elsewhere, are familiar. Once the war is over, Sita ("Nang Sida") is filled with gratitude as she is taken by Vibhisana ("Pipek") to meet her husband, but also afraid and anxious. Pipek assures her that her virtue is renowned throughout the world, and "Gold, even though it is in the mud, is still gold. The same applies to you, so don't worry! The good are protected by their own goodness" (310).

Sida meets Rama ("Pra Ram") together with a crowd of the relatives of Ravana ("Totsakan"), but hangs back "for she was afraid that Pra Ram would not talk to her and would shame her." Her fears are well justified:

When the King saw the beauty who commanded his heart, he wanted to embrace her lovingly. But then he thought of the great scandal this might cause in the Three Worlds, for Totsakan was like a Krut. Sida would have been like a small snake in his claws. She might have remained faithful but no one could prove this. He knew that he had to prove her innocence before he could accept her again as his wife. (310)

Rama begins more affectionately than in the Valmiki *Ramayana* by asserting that "I have fought and suffered without regard for myself, thinking only of winning you back." He praises her beauty ("your face ... is as beautiful as the full moon"), and insists that he has suffered while she has been with the demon. Then he slyly asks to see some of the precious gifts Totsakan has given her (310).

Sida is crushed by "these ironic words," which strike her "like a hundred thousand thunderbolts!" The text, in translation, ruefully comments: "Even being kidnapped by Totsakan was not this bad." She is so ashamed that "she wished she were dead." Her own ironic thought is:

"To be a woman is very difficult ... because we are always blamed for everything." (This is implicit in Kampan's text, too; see Shulman 99-101.) In response to Pra Ram's unfair blaming of her, Sida bows ("made a wai"), defends herself, and acknowledging that there is still doubt—"Only the angels, the god of the river, and the god of fire are my witnesses"—asks her husband to call all the "angels" (the "gods") to witness, saying: "I will walk on fire to prove myself" (311).

Pra Ram immediately summons the gods and goddesses who, led by Pra Indra, come to witness the ordeal. They are not interested in his potential divinity. The pyre having been gathered and lit by "the Son of the Sun" (Sugriva), Sida again bows to her husband, affirms her innocence and her love for her him as she vows, "if I have observed the law which binds me to my husband, may the coals be cool for my feet" (312). She further bows to "the holy fire and the holy mother Earth," following which:

She then walked slowly through the fire. The truth of her heart made lotus blossoms spring up in the fire. The moist cool blossoms lay under her feet. Thus protected, she crossed the fire safely and emerged unharmed. (312)

The ordeal over, the gods give Sida their blessing. Rama ("Pra Narai," Narayana, Vishnu) receives her "with a happy heart" and leads her to his throne to be seated by his side. (There is no promiscuous bathing in the Thai text!)

The *Ramakien* version of Sita's ordeal again varies at different points from the other texts we have so far considered. In major terms, Ram's belief in, and love for, Sita is never put in doubt. She explicitly laments her fate as a woman and one can only expect that the audience, many of whom would surely have been women (unlike that for the *Hikayat Seri Rama*, which strikes us as a very masculine text), would have agreed with her. Sita herself suggests the ordeal by fire. The fire is lit by Sugriva, the monkey king to whom Hanuman is a minister, and watched by all of the gods. Sida walks through the fire and lotuses spring up under her feet. (In the *Kakawin Ramayana*, the whole fire "changes into a golden lotus," Zoetmulder 226). Rama himself comes down to receive Sita as she emerges from the flames. This is an ordeal motivated by romantic love and it is, as far as possible, softened in the telling.

SOME MODERN INDONESIAN AND THAI RETELLINGS

Goldman has argued that the fundamental issue of the Valmiki *Ramayana* is the public reputation, honor, and status of noble men as indicated by their rigid control of proper female sexual behavior (32-33). This would also be an appropriate description of the *Hikayat Seri Rama*

and the *Ramakien*. We now turn to a few of those works from modern Southeast Asia that suggest a different personality and potential set of actions from the traditional "Sita," and a different set of non-patriarchal moral assumptions. Ramanujan speaks of "meta-Ramayanas" that "play on the knowledge of previous tellings" (33); Rao qualifies some of these as "anti-Ramayanas" (219). Following Rao, I will describe these recent meta-narratives as being largely "anti-Sita" works because they contradict the conventional representations of Sita as a virtuous and submissive wife. It must also be said that I recognize that the authors of these works might equally argue that their works should rather be considered "pro-Sita" because they represent a different, more active Sita endowed with power over her own body, choices, and actions. Both of these sets of assumptions are shaped by "modern" individualist ideologies of human freedom and autonomy, particularly as they are now seen to apply to women. (In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, in fact, Sita does engage in aggressive argument with her male protectors prior to each of the major turning points of the plot: the forest exile, the hunting of the golden deer, the fire ordeal, and her final banishment; these are tentatively explored by Sutherland. However, Sita inevitably submits to the will of her husband until the final separation). With one exception, my focus will continue to rest on Sita's trial by fire.

The one exception is the poem "Benih" ("Seed"), written in 1981 by the major Indonesian poet and scholar, Sapardi Djoko Damono (born in Solo in 1940). It deals neither with Sita's kidnapping nor her ordeal by fire, but with her further banishment after the couple's return to rule Ayodhya as the consequence of Rama's lingering sensitivity about his reputation and Sita's possible betrayal of him. The incident is sparked by a trivial act of gossip and, at the time of her exile, Sita is already pregnant. Sapardi writes:

Benih

"Cintaku padamu, Adinda," kata Rama, "adalah laut yang pernah bertahun memisahkan kita, adalah langit yang senantiasa memayungi kita, adalah kawanan kera yang di gua Kiskenda. Tetapi..., " Sita yang hamil itu tetap diam sejak semula, "kau telah tinggal dalam sangkar raja itu bertahun lamanya, kau telah tidur di ranjangnya, kau bukan lagi rahasia baginya."

Sita yang hamil itu tetap diam, pesona. "Tetapi Raksasa itu ayahandamu sendiri, benih yang menjadikanmu, apakah ia juga yang membenahimu, apakah...." Sita yang hamil itu tetap diam, mencoba menafsirkan kehendak para dewa.

Seed

"My love for you, my darling," said Rama, "is as broad as the sea which divided us for years, as high as the sky which sheltered us, as plentiful as the monkeys in

Kiskanda Cave, But...." Pregnant, Sita listened in silence, "... you lived in that cruel king's palace year after year, you slept in his bed, he knew all your secrets."

Pregnant, Sita listened in silence, dazed. "But the Giant was your father, the seed that created you, the seed which may have impregnated you, perhaps...." Pregnant, Sita listened in silence, as she tried to understand the will of the gods. (Trans. Harry Aveling.)

This is an ambiguously anti-Sita poem. The idea that Ravana is Sita's father occurs in some versions of the *Ramayana*, including the *Ramakien* (68-69). Sapardi does not actually say that Sita has had sexual relations with Ravana but neither does he deny it. Both he and Sita are silent on the matter. Sapardi's concerns are with the broader issue: "*kehendak para dewa*," the will of the gods. Her pregnancy is, presumably, part of "the will of the gods," but what, we may ask, is the purpose of that pregnancy in the wider scheme of things? If the child is Rama's, presumably its purpose is for good. If it is Ravana's, created with her consent, its purpose may well be negative. Like Sita, we the readers are caught up in the mystery, and we too do not understand the answer to the question.

Yudhistira ANM Massardi (born in Subang, Java, 1954) is a poet and a journalist but best known for his parody of *Mahabharata* shadow-play stories set in a contemporary youthful Jakarta, the trilogy *Arjuna Mencari Cinta* (*Arjuna's Search for Love*, 1977-1981). His story "Wawancara dengan Rahwana" ("An Interview with Ravana") is drawn from the collection of short stories published in 1982 under the same title. The interview is conducted in the underworld after Hanuman has disposed of the physical body of the demon-king by throwing him headfirst into the earth. The interviewer is Sanjaya, a prince in the *Mahabharata*, who narrates the battle to the blind king Dhritarashtra. Sanjaya is mockingly described as "*wartawan perang pertama di dunia*" ("the first war correspondent in the world," Yudhistira 65). The major topic of the conversation between Sanjaya and Ravana is absolute power, that of Ravana and of all of those who will follow him hereafter. Such power requires "*kesengsaraan dan penderitaan para kawula*," the pain and suffering of the slaves (67). Pain and suffering are "*bagian terpenting dari kekuasaan mutlak. Tanpa ada kesengsaraan, tidaklah ada artinya sebuah kekuasaan. Tanpa penderitaan orang banyak bahkan tak mungkin sebuah kekuasaan hadir dan kukuh*" ("the most important part of absolute power. Without suffering, power means nothing. Indeed, without the suffering of the masses, no power can arise and establish itself") (67). Sanjaya describes Ravana as "*betul-betul sadis*" ("truly sadistic") (68), and he readily agrees, "*Seorang penguasa yang baik harus sadis. Dari kekuasaan yang ada dalam genggamannya adalah sadisme. Karena itu dibutuhkan banyak kurban. Sebagai tumbal. Juga sebagai syarat bagi kelanggengan kekuasaan itu*" ("A true ruler must be a sadist. Sadism comes from the power I hold in my hand. Because of that I

need a lot of victims. To ward off disaster. And to ensure the perpetuity of power" (68). Given a choice between heaven and hell, Ravana immediately chooses hell because it will be more exciting than heaven, and "*di tempat itu, anda bisa bertemu dengan semua penguasa dunia yang menghamba pada keserakahaan*" ("there you can meet all the world's power-holders who became slaves to their own greed") (68).

This is clearly a set of *adharmic* teachings on the rule of an unjust king, even if Sanjaya persists in his usage of the extremely polite second person pronoun "*anda*" throughout the whole interview. Teri Shaffer Yamada, editor of a volume in which a complete English translation appears, suggests that the tale is "a political satire of New Order Indonesia" representing "the political corruption and arrogance of Suharto's regime" in a comical guise in order "to slip past the government censor" (70).

Sita might just be included as one of Ravana's unnamed victims but, in fact, Sanjaya's last question mentions her by name:

S: "*Pertanyaan terakhir, Apa pendapat anda tentang Dewi Sinta, isteri Sri Rama yang pernah anda culik itu?*"

R: "O, very good! Very Good!"

S: "*Terima kasih.*"

S: "A last question. What was your opinion of Rama's wife, Dewi Sita, whom you kidnapped?"

R: "*Oh, very good! Very good!*"

S: "Thank you."

Ravana's comments—which Patricia Henry in her translation intensifies to "Oh, excellent! Excellent!" (Yamada 74)—are those of a connoisseur, and it is completely unlikely that Sita could have maintained her chastity at his hands. That Sita might have been raped by Ravana adds a darker shade to some versions of the *Ramayana* and to Rama's moral dilemma in general.

The next text is more subtle. Leila S. Chudori was born in Jakarta and studied at Trent University, Ontario, Canada from 1982 to 1988. Her short story "Air Suci Sita" ("The Purification of Sita"), written in 1987, moves on several levels. The surface narrative concerns an unnamed young Asian woman studying in Canada who is waiting for her fiancé to visit her from overseas. The woman has had a close male friend with whom she has consistently refused to sleep and who "*sama sekali tak berhasil menyentuhnya*" ("completely has been unable to touch her") (25). In a parallel narrative, the woman witnesses in her mind, and feels on her body, a potentially unfolding interaction between "*Sang Raja agung titisan Wisnu*" ("the great and holy king who was

an incarnation of Vishnu") (23, 28) and his wife who remains unnamed at the end of the story, although identified by her action: "*siap terjun ke lautan api penyucian diri*" ("ready to plunge into a sea of purifying fire") (28). Linking the two narratives is the burning heat of the Peterborough Summer, which tortures her like the flames of an intense fire, Sita's fire.

The woman suffers as she imagines her fiancé relentlessly questioning her about whether she had remained faithful to him or not, professing his own virtue but suspicious of the time she has "*bersemayam di wilayah asing tempat durjana bersinggasana*" ("resided in this foreign region where evil sits enthroned") (23). The "evil region" is no mythological landscape but "*lingkungan Barat, di mana hubungan persetubuhan dilakukan begitu muda dan permisif, semudah engkau membeli kangkung di pasar*" ("the West, where sexual relations are very easy and permissive, as easy as buying spinach in the market") (25). And she fully expects that he will justify those "*pertanyaan-pertanyaan yang lebih merupakan tuduhan*" ("questions which will be more like accusations") (25-26) by reference to his status as a man of honor: "*demi formalitas dan pandangan sacral masyarakat terhadapku*" ("for the sake of formality and the sacred regard that society has for me") (25).

As the story develops, the woman questions both Rama's and Ravana's relationships with Sita. In her fantasies, Rama emerges as a pompous, self-righteous patriarchal hypocrite. She spontaneously reassesses their mythical relationship, commenting, perhaps with some disbelief, "*Bahkan suami istri pun saling meragukan*" ("Even husbands and wives doubt each other") (23). And she reevaluates the giant: "*Ah, apakah raksasa yang bermuka sepuluh itu selalu jahat? Apakah ia memang sedurjana seperti yang diungkapkan empunya cerita? Bagaimana caranya ketika is mencoba mendekati sang dewi yang diculiknya? Apakah ia begitu kasar atau pernah ia memberikan kelembutan seorang lelaki? Tapi bukankah pada akhirnya telah terbukti sang dewi tetap putih bersih?*" ("Oh, was the ten-faced giant always evil? Was he always as wicked as the storyteller said that he was? What was he like when he tried to approach the goddess whom he had kidnapped? Had he been crude or had he shown a man's gentleness? But in the end wasn't the goddess proven to be still pure and innocent?") (28). The Asian woman begins to fear that her fiancé will kill her platonic "*kekasih*" ("lover") (25). The portrayal of Ravana and, therefore, the Canadian, carry a great deal of affection and, indeed, serve to defend both men.

Her "*sang pangeran*" ("prince") (27), as the woman's neighbor ironically describes him, does come. The fiancé does not discover his woman with her lover, and does not kill the Canadian. He does not even interrogate her about her faithfulness over the past four years. He accepts her devotion and chastity without any hesitation. However, he immediately breaks down and pathetically confesses his own infidelities. His excuses are the common gendered rationalizations: women are "*lebih hebat dalam kemampuannya untuk menahan diri*" ("greater in their ability to exercise self-restraint") (28) than men. On the other hand, "*Kami, ternyata, sebenarnya sering tidak sudi*

mempergunakan rasio untuk menghadapi godaan-godaan semacam itu. Kami begitu dimanjakan oleh apa yang sering dianggap kodrat. Kami diberi permisi seluas-luasnya oleh masarakat untuk lebih mengumbarkan nafsu kami tanpa merasa berkhianat atau berdosa" ("Obviously, we men are often unwilling to use reason when we are faced with such temptations. We have been spoiled by what is often considered to be a man's nature. Society gives us the widest possible permission to unleash our desire without feeling disloyal or sinful") (28). But his own sense of shame only seems to add to his own claims to ultimate virtue, as he continues to babble, "*Tapi, Sayangku, aku adalah si lelaki tolol itu. Aku salah seorang dari sedikit lelaki yang merasa berkhianat, najis, dan sangat kecil di hadapanmu yang murni .Aku sama sekali tak bias memaklumi diriku yang selama empat tahun berpisah denganmu. Aku sama sekali tidak bisa memaafkan diriku dan aku....*" ("But, my darling, I'm one of those stupid men. I'm one of the few men who do feel disloyal, dirty, and very small in the presence of your pure self. I don't know what happened to me during the four years I was separated from you. I will absolutely never be able to forgive myself and I ...") (28). The story ends with the woman's further and final reflections on the story of the testing of Sita by fire. Why, she wonders, had Queen Sita never been given the opportunity to question her husband about whether he had ever been tempted to "*bercengkerama dengan wanita lain?*" ("fool around with other women?") (29). That sort of question, she realizes, was "*tak pernah terlontar. Dan sama sekali tidak wajib ada. Alangkah anehnya*" ("never raised. And had absolutely no right to exist. How strange") (29).

Chudori's "Air Suci Sita" is the first meta-text of the story that we have seen that is plainly told from a woman's point of view. Chudori clearly shows the unequal power relations of the traditional narrative and the unfairness of the double standards that have been imposed upon women as a consequence. Potentially this story also carries a further subversive but unspoken question: has the woman wasted her years in not sleeping with the Canadian man whom she knows loves her and treats her with the utmost respect? Her fiancé has sought emotional consolation during their separation; why shouldn't she have done the same? There is an answer early in the story: she will not sleep with a man who is not her husband (24). But it is an answer from within the rules of the traditional paradigm, one that relates to "*kesetiaan gadis Asia*" ("the faithfulness of Asian women") (24); once those rules are shown to be no longer tenable, other answers are possible.

Dorothea Rosa Herliany (born 1964, Magelang, Central Java) defiantly asserts that other answer. Her poem "Elegi Sinta" ("Sita's Elegy") was inspired by a visit to the temple complex at Prambanan. It is a vigorous condemnation of Rama's fears and concerns, and an intransigent assertion of Sita's rights over her own body, including the right to sexual satisfaction on the terms of her own choosing. It begins with an emphatic rejection of the fire ordeal:

Elegi Sinta

*Aku sinta yang urung membakar diri,
demi darah suci
bagi lelaki paling pengecut bernama rama.
lalu aku basuh tubuhku, dengan darah hitam
agar hangat gelora cintaku.
tumbuh di padang pendakian yang paling hina.*

*kuburu rahwana
dan kuminta ia menyetubuhi nafasku
menuju kehampaan langit.
kubiarkan terbang, agar tangan yang
takut dan kalah itu tak mampu menggapaku*

*siapa bilang cintaku putih? mungkin abu,
atau bahkan segelap hidupku,
tapi dengarlah ringkikku yang indah
menggosongkan segala yang keramat dan abadi*

*kuraih hidupku, tetapi tidak dalam api
– rumah bagi para pendosa
tapi dalam kesunyian yang sia-sia dan papa
agar sejarahku terpisah dari para penakut
dan pendusta. rama ...*

Sita's Elegy

i am Sita, the one who refused
to burn herself in the fire
as proof to Rama, her cowardly husband,
of her innocence.
afterwards i washed my body with thick blood
so that my passion would shine,
grow in a field of vile ascent.

i hunted Ravana
and told him to fuck me
high in the open sky
i let him fly there so that the cowardly hands
of a defeated man could not reach me

who said love is white? Grey, perhaps,
or as black as my life.
hear my gentle moans
destroying everything holy and eternal.

i want to live, not in the fire –
that home for sinners,
but in useless, shameful silence
so that my history will be separate
from the lives of weak men, liars. Rama ...
(Trans. Harry Aveling)

This is an extreme, highly sexualized anti-Sita painted in brilliant colors. It delights in Ravana's powerful physical strength and pours scorn on Rama's gentility. Sita's satisfaction is the one desired outcome. A very different set of hues are to be found in the humorously domestic Thai short stories collected as *Married to the Demon King: Sri Daoruang and Her Demon Folk* (Kepner). Sri Daoruang (Wanna Thappananon's pen-name, meaning "the splendid marigold") was born in 1943 in Bang Krathum, a small town in Phitsanulok province, Central Thailand. At eleven she was taken out of school and sent to Bangkok where over the years she worked in a series of factory jobs, as a household maid, a market-stall vendor, and a restaurant cashier. In 1973 she met the writer and political activist Suchat Sawatsri; he encouraged her to write and they were married on October 14, 1974. They have one son, Mon, who was born with multiple heart defects. Sri Daoruang published her first short story in 1975 and she has written several short novels and over a hundred short stories since then (Kepner 1-15). Taking a strongly female point of view, many of her early stories dealt in a sharply realist manner with working class political themes; others, after her marriage, with pregnancy, miscarriage, stillbirth, and childhood illness (Harrison).

According to Kepner, among Sri Daoruang's works from the 1980s are a series of seven stories on characters named Sida, Totsakan, and Hanuman. Kepner translates six of these stories. The courtly environment has been taken away: the three live together in a suburb in northern Bangkok. Totsakan and Sida are married to each other; Hanuman is their child. The beginning of

their relationship is told in the first story, "Thotsakan and Sida"; it is in fact "a beginning taken from somewhere in the middle of a legend, the legend of Thotsakan and Sida, and some other folks, a legend which appears to be unfinished" (43). The central theme of the story is an argument between Thotsakan and Sida on how to supplement their meager income. Before the argument is explained, there is a flashback to the time of their courtship. The young Thotsakan is described in physical terms as: "a strapping lad, dark complected, with strong features ... If one looked carefully one could see that Thotsakan's gaze projected one sort of nature from the left eye, and another sort of nature from the right eye; he looked to be all temper and ferocity on the one side—and softness, kindness, and understanding on the other" (32). Sida, on the other hand, is characterized by her work: before marriage she had been "a fatherless orphan, a seamstress in the largest dressmaking establishment in the market and younger than himself by one cycle" (32). Together they have both come from poor backgrounds, have no revealing birthmarks (such as those that characterize the hidden identities of heroes and heroines in Thai romantic novels), and bring only "their loving hearts" as their dowry for the marriage (33). The marriage is successful. They have one child, Hanuman. They are praised by their neighbors for their "honesty, endurance, hard work, thrift, and high principles" (33).

The six stories deal with interesting events in their daily lives: Sida's decision to resume work as a seamstress in order to supplement the family income ("Thotsakan and Sida"); Thotsakan's struggles to protect his library from destructive vermin ("Thotsakan Puts Down the *Chingchoks*"); his well-meant but clumsy attempts to help Sida with her garden ("Thotsakan to the Garden"); his protection of the birds on their estate from a group of marauding boys ("Thotsakan: Sick of War"); and their experiences with a neighbor, Phaya Kon (one of Thotsakan's demon retainers in the *Ramakien* 101), who is possessed by a tiger spirit ("Phaya Khon Possessed"). *Ai Khaek* Ramalak, Buddy Ramalak the Indian, appears in only two of the stories. In the first story, "Thotsakan and Sida," this occurs in a single sentence: "Once he had established a household with Sida, Thotsakan had forsaken his bachelor ways absolutely; but then, as the legend tells us, Sida was utterly lovely, so lovely that *Ai Khaek* 'Ramalak' had spent a fortune and even gone to battle, not once but many times, because of her" (32). The reference is apparently ironic because the next sentence continues: "These days, however, Thotsakan and Sida shared their lives without obstacles any kind to hinder them" (32). Later in the same story it is clarified that *Ai Khaek* Ramalak is an Indian merchant who sells household goods such as color televisions and gas stoves in the market (37). In the last story, "Phaya Khon Possessed," Thotsakan's reporting that Ram the Indian has "sold something on credit and bought five cows" (97) is used as the trigger for the description of a long rambling dialogue between the couple in which Sida half-listens "to her husband talk about his dreams while pursuing a completely different conversation" (97).

It is the fifth story, "Sida Puts Out the Fire," which gives this paper its title and is most central to our concerns. The "fire" is Sida's own jealousy provoked by her surreptitiously reading in his "little black notebook" that Thotsakan may be having an affair with a woman called "Montho." Nang Monto (Skt. Mandodari) appears in various places in the *Ramakien*. She is the toad who saves a group of ascetics from poisoning and is transformed into a beautiful *apsara* as a reward (*Ramakien* 33-34); a maid to Pra Uma, the wife of Pra Isuan (Skt. Siva 34); a wife of Thotsakan (40); mother of Ongkot (Skt. Angada) by Palee (Skt. Bali 43-44) and of Sida herself (68); and, after the war, as the "Queen to the Left" of Pipek (Skt. Bibishana 313).

That Monto is already Thotsakan's principal wife in the *Ramakien* carries its own profound irony for Sri Daoruan's story. The irony is compounded by her contemporary representation:

Sida was sure that this woman he had found must be beautiful – in the way women who worked out in the world were beautiful. In fact, she was probably – oh no! She was probably an intellectual!

Compared to Monto, Sida feels herself to be nothing:

And what was she, Sida, by comparison? A plain old upcountry factory worker, that's what! The kind of woman who washes her face and combs her hair once a day, a woman whose clothes have never known the heat of an iron. (86)

At about nine o'clock, Thotsakan returns home, freshly bathed and bearing gifts for his wife and son. He admits only to having gone to a massage parlor with his men friends. (Kepner provides a footnote to reassure the reader that this is not considered a serious matter in Thai society, 91, n.10). Sida refuses to believe him, stating that she has read his notebook, and another argument follows. As part of the argument, Sida suggests—like Leila Chudori's heroine—that she has the "same 'rights'" as her husband, adding "but some of us choose not to exercise them" (90).

The possible breakdown of the proper social order is at hand but the story ends in a very Buddhist manner. In the "Dasaratha Jataka," Rama-pandita is able to accept his exile and loss of the throne through an understanding of the Buddhist teaching that grief is futile when all is impermanent and must, sooner or later, pass away (Cowell 81). Similarly, Sida also conquers her feelings of jealousy:

Since that unhappy day, Sida has felt quite proud of the way she conducted herself in the matter, and of the way in which she was able, finally, to gain control of her feelings. For in the end, she did. The "Nang Monto fire" has been extinguished—for

the most part, although she is not altogether sure how she feels about some things.
(92-93)

The fire that Daoruang's Sita conquers is not a literal fire but an internalized personal struggle. This modern working class housewife passes the test through ascetic self-renunciation. She is liberated not through her sexuality—this is possible but would be destructive—but through her deliberate control over her body and emotions. "Sita Puts Out the Fire" is both the most extreme meta-narrative in its determinedly everyday qualities and the most traditional in its spirituality.

WHEN DOES SITA CEASE TO BE SITA?

Rao has asked, "When does Sita cease to be Sita?" meaning, "How many changes in the narrative does a Sita character comfortably accept and at what point does a change trigger another character that is no longer Sita?" (219). We have seen how both the classical and the modern versions of the Ramayana deal in different and distinctive ways with "the grammar" of the relationships between Rama, Sita, and Ravana, particularly as that story describes Sita's trial by fire. The "original" story says one thing; the meta-narratives say something else, and sometimes "even the exact opposite" (Ramanujan 45). They remain intertextually linked to their multiple sources and continue to be shaped by the cultural context of their narration—now a very different context. As long as she has Rama and Ravana, and the fire of her own emotions and body, Sita will always be Sita, no matter how the story is told. "*Ini hikayat yang terlalu indah-indah termasyur diperkatakan orang diatas angin dan dibawah angin...*," the *Hikayat Seri Rama* begins, ready to tell the tale again, "This is a famous and beautiful chronicle, told above and below the equator." The "grammar of human relationships" as told in the *Ramayana* continues to generate new and surprising texts for the delight and instruction of their audiences.

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