

Exploring Co-wives' Relationship in Select Re-tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores co-wives' relationships depicted in re-tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and their convergence and divergence from their ur-text. Vālamīki *Rāmāyaṇa* being the source text; provided the plot of the story, which is widely accepted and culturally reproduced by many authors; resulted in numerous re-tellings. Leading to numerous portrayals of characters and their relationships, one of such relationships is the co-wives' relationship which significantly differs in different re-tellings. Three primary texts selected here for this exploration are: Vālamīki' *Rāmāyaṇa* (VR), Tulsidās' *Rāmācharitmānasa* (TR), and Lāl Dās' *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* (RMR). This paper aims to highlight depiction of co-wives' relationships in two different cultural re-tellings; i.e. *Rāmācharitmānasa* composed in Awadhi and *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* which is composed in Maithilī. However, adapted from the same text they choose to portray this relationship differently. While the former one is well known and widely celebrated; the latter one is not even heard of by many. As A.K Ramanujan stated in his *The Collected Essays*, "Obviously, these hundreds of tellings differ from one another." (134) which makes it important to take consideration of exploring not only celebrated text but also other less known re-tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Keywords: Co-wives, power dynamics, re-tellings, voice

Introduction

"Perhaps no work of world literature, secular in origin, has ever produced so profound an influence on the life and thought of a people as the *Rāmāyaṇa*." (qtd. in Kamban, XI), which makes it a widely accepted and recreated work of literature not only in India rather in the world. Not only *Rāmāyaṇa* is manifested in literary works but also in visual and performance art as well. There are a number of adaptations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* all over the world, especially in Southeast Asia. As Tulsidās said, रामकथा के मिति जग नाही। असि प्रतीति तिन्ह के मन माहीं।। नाना भाँति राम अवतारा। रामायन सत कोटि अपारा।। 1.32.3

Translation: The story of Rāma has no limit in the world. The one who have faith, have this understanding in their minds that there are countless incarnations of Rāma and countless *Rāmāyaṇas*.

Adapted from ādi kavi Vālmīki, every adaptation offers some degree of variations along the storyline. Among all the adaptations in regional languages, one of the most fascinating adaptations is composed in the Maithili language is *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* (RMR) by Lāl Dās in the 20th century. It has unique perspectives and narrative nuances. One such striking element is the treatment of the relationship between the co-wives; Kaushalyā and Kaikayī, which stands in stark contrast to the utopian and often glossed-over depictions found in other adaptations especially in *Rāmācharitmānasa*.

Lāl Dās, the renowned writer of Mithilā who authored *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* has also composed several other works like *Chaṇḍī Charit*, *Virudavali*, *Jānkī Rāmāyaṇa*. In *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa*, he

has masterfully woven a narrative that gives voice to the experiences and struggles of Kaushalyā, challenging the dominant representations that have traditionally overshadowed her feelings. In this regard, Dās' work offers a refreshingly insightful exploration, as it sheds light on the suppression of feelings and expression faced by her character within the larger framework of the epic, providing a much-needed counter narrative to the idealized visions often presented. Extant research has explored how modern and postmodern retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have sought to revisit and revise the narratives of subaltern characters, such as Māṇḍavi, Urmilā, Sūrpaṅkhā and Mandodari who were often neglected or marginalized in the original text. However, exploration of other characters of the epic is also needed, like the three queens of Dashratha. Lāl Dās' *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* stands out for his treatment of female characters and is a significant contribution as it challenges the utopian portrayal of co-wives' relationships by presenting nuanced psychological turmoils.

The *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa*' depiction of Kaushalyā' character is a prime example of this subversion. Whereas earlier versions of the epic have

Access this article online	
Quick Response Code:	Website: https://josd.info
	DOI: To be assigned.

tended to emphasize her idealized and placid persona,

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Dās' work delves deeper into the emotional landscapes and power dynamics within the royal household, particularly the complex relationships between the co-wives. Kaushalyā, traditionally portrayed as a dutiful and submissive queen, is imbued with a newfound agency and voice, as the narrative explores her struggles against the discrimination and manipulative plot of Kaikayī. This challenges the normalization of oppression and the unconscious suppression of her voices that have long permeated the *Rāmcharitmānasa*' canonical narratives. Indeed, Lāl Dās' *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* aligns with the broader trend observed in existing research, which highlights how postmodern retellings of mythological narratives have sought to amplify the voices and experiences of her character. (Parinitha 170)

The Complexities of Co-Wives' Relationships

In the *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa*, Lāl Dās gave voice to Kaushalyā' pain, suffering and also expressed the same. This led readers to explore the complexities of the relationship between her and Kaikayī, alleviating the nuances and power dynamics that often get overlooked in the broader *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative. Unlike the utopian depictions found in many other versions, where the co-wives are presented as harmonious and supportive of one another, Dās' work presents a more realistic portrayal, highlighting the tensions, jealousies, and manipulations that can arise within such a dynamic.

Kaushalyā, the elder queen, is depicted as a multifaceted character who is dutiful, understanding, and submissive, whereas Kaikayī, the younger and more politically ambitious queen, seeks to undermine her position and assert her own dominance. The narrative explores Kaushalyā' struggles as she attempts to maintain her dignity and agency in the face of Kaikayī' plot, which ultimately lead to the vanvāsa of Rāma, the rightful heir to the throne. As per S. Pollock, "the treatment of Kaushalyā is similar, and the many hints about her personal tragedy scattered throughout the book (*Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*) make the absence of some final resolution more conspicuous." (49) This unfinalizability of her tragedy needs some exploration and re-reading of re-tellings to reach somewhere with clarity on her situation.

This nuanced exploration of the co-wives' relationship challenges the normative and often romanticized depictions of Kaushalyā in the *Rāmcharitmānasa*, providing a more authentic and empowered representation of her experiences. In the *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* treatment of Kaushalyā' character reflects a broader trend in modern and postmodern retellings of mythological narratives, where marginalized voices and experiences are being amplified and revisited, offering a multifaceted and diverse understanding of these enduring stories that have long been shaped by dominant narratives. In polygamous

relationships, it is very evident that there is jealousy and fear of the younger wife in the elder wife, as their husband will not share equal love among them. (Nadra 316) Usually it is seen that the younger wife is the husband's favorite and thus, the elder wife faces discrimination. This issue is more or less implicitly presented to the readers in most of the adaption on *Rāmāyaṇa*, as there are more elaborate details given in the *Kamba Rāmāyaṇa* of Kaikayī, "As if she were a coral creeper or the lovely lotus of the milky ocean, Kaikeyi lay on a resplendent bed, decked with jewels from the four seas, eyes bright and shining." (52) While the description of Kaushalyā remains scarce and mostly confined to her dutiful nature. Kaushalyā was not mentioned as vividly as Kaikayī, the younger queen. This is an indication of biased treatment given to Kaushalyā both by her husband and the authors. In society, there is a tendency to sympathize more with the younger wife and find justification in her deeds and demands while ignoring the plight of the elder wife, there is social pressure to accept and pretend to be happy with co-wives even though the situation is inverse. As found in *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, after the vanvāsa of Rāma; Kaushalyā is grieving and complaining Dashratha for his unmindful deed and how his passion for Kaikeyī resulted in separation of a mother to his only son and daughter-in-law.

भर्ता तु खलु नारीणां गुणवान्निर्गुणोऽपि वा ।

धर्मं विमृशमानानां प्रत्यक्षं देवि देवतम् ॥ 2.56.5

He asked her to calm down stating, "as a woman who has regard for the righteousness should hold her husband, whether he is virtuous or not to be deity incarnate." (Pollock 202) Despite realising his fault he is teaching Kaushalyā her patni-dharma.

Lāl Dās' *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa*, however, breaks the pattern by centring the narrative around Kaushalyā' perspective, allowing readers to engage with her emotional unrest and the challenges she faced. He not only gave her space to express her fear and anxiety, he also challenged the utopian representation of co-wives' relationships found in the mainstream *Rāmcharitmānasa* version of the epic. He provided a counter-narrative that underscores the complexities, power dynamics and emotional turmoil embedded within these relationships. Some chopāi and dohā from the *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* are specifically dealing with Kaushalyā's perspective toward Kaikayī are given in order to highlight their relationship and her anxiety. All the selected 'choupāi' and 'dohā' are taken from Āyodhyā Kāṇḍa only.

केकयि रानी वश नृपकां जानि । कती संशय छल होयत हानि ॥

से सब छुटल भेल विश्वास । कयलनि नृप निज नीति-प्रकाश ॥ (Dās 110)

Translation: I knew that queen Kaikayī had the king under her control. Due to this doubt, insecurities were

leading me to despair. Though all doubts are cleared and now I am assured that the king has made the right decision.

Kaushalyā after hearing the news of the coronation of Rāma was filled with happiness and joy. These lines were added by the author to reveal Kaushalyā's innermost thoughts and concerns about Kaikayī's manipulations, king's biases toward Kaushalyā and her growing apprehensions regarding the threats to her son Rāma's coronation. This '*chopāi*' provides a window into Kaushalyā's psyche and the complex power dynamics at play within the royal household, which are often overlooked in the more idealized interpretations of the epic. Underlined emotions of Kaushalyā here are fear, doubt, insecurity, loss of trust, and despair which challenge the notion of a harmonious relationship among the co-wives. However, everyone was well aware of the king's affection towards Kaikayī, which led Kaushalyā to doubt that her son Rāma would be crowned.

केकयि सौतिनी हमर विपक्ष। करयित अछि रिपुता प्रत्यक्ष॥ (Dās 118)

Translation: Kaikayī, my co-wife, is my adversary. She openly bears enmity towards me.

In this verse, Kaushalyā directly acknowledges the malicious relationship between herself and Kaikayī, shedding light on the underlying tensions and power dynamics at play. Such a bold and unambiguous articulation of Kaushalyā's perspective on her co-wife challenges the more muted and passive representations of her character in other versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. These lines were spoken when she came to know that Kaikayī asked the king to make her son Bharata the king and send Rāma to the forest for seven and seven years. This depiction of Kaushalyā's anguish and her confrontation with the reality of her strained relationship with Kaikayī presents a more nuanced and empowered portrayal of the elder queen, who is either silenced or burdened with duties in other adaptations.

सरल सुभाउ राम महतारी । बोली बचन धीर धरि भारी ॥

तात जाउ बलि किन्हेहु नीका । पितु आयसु सब धरमक टिका ॥ 2.54.4

Translation: The revered mother of Rāma, with her simple nature, speaks to Rāma with patience. Son, you decided well to endure your father's words to go to the forest. Following your father's command is the highest dharma.

In this verse from *Rāmācharitmānasa*, Kaushalyā is portrayed as a patient, dutiful, and dignified mother who counsels Rāma to obediently follow his father's wishes, even though they lead to his unjust *vanvās*, which is in contrast with the overt emotional outbursts and confrontational attitude exhibited earlier in *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa*. This is how other adaptations usually depict Kaushalyā, as a perfect, selfless, and dutiful devoted queen who upholds her

lineage's honor and dharma above her own personal desires.

In contrast to *Rāmācharitmānasa*, where Kaushalyā remains dutiful and accepting of her fate, in Lāl Dās's *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa*, she is shown to be vocal and assertive in expressing her concerns and frustrations.

से बाधिनि वृते एहि ठाम। ककरा बलें रहब एहि गाम॥ (Dās 137)

Translation: This cruel queen (Kaikayī) is residing here in the palace. By whose strength I will reside here?

This strong outburst by Kaushalyā displays her anger and resentment towards Kaikayī, whom she directly refers to as a "*bāghin/cruel*." The metaphor she used here is very potent as it underscores her perception of Kaikayī as a dangerous predator who separates calf from the cow, undermining the supposedly harmonious relationship among the co-wives. It is usually seen that co-wives use negative metaphors to connote each other in their daily lives, as a way of expressing the underlying emotional turmoils. It is noticed that very often "animalistic imagery" is used for co-wives among themselves. (Jankowiak 86)

राघवे नरशर्दूले विषमुप्त्वा व्दिजिह्वत् ।

विचरिष्यति कैकेयी निर्मुक्तेव हि पन्नगी॥ 2.68.2

Translation: "Now that Kaikayī like a forked tongued viper has spit her venom *Rāghava*, the tiger among men, she will behave like a snake that has shed its skin." (Pollock 163)

While Lāl Dās denoted Kaikayī as *baghini*, Vālmīki denoted her as a snake. In sarga 38, doha 2.

विवास्य रामं सुभगा लब्धकामा समाहिता ।

त्रासयिष्यति मां भूयो दुष्टाहिरिव वेश्मनि॥ 2.68.3

Translation: "Now that she has had her way and exiled Rāma, the charming creature will apply herself to the further terrorising me like a vicious serpent in the house." (Pollock 163)

She is referring to her co-wife as a venomous snake who has shed its skin, which means she will be more venomous and aggressive from now onwards. As per Herpetologists, shedding skin is a traumatic process and results in aggressiveness in the snake. Vālmīki used this simile to direct Kaikayī to act with naked cruelty.

हाय सौतिनी हमारि, कयल महा अविचार ।

नयनहि राखक योग्य जे, देलक कारागार ॥(Dās 135)

Translation: Alas, my co-wife has committed a grave injustice. She has imprisoned the one who is the apple of everyone's eyes.

This powerful lament by Kaushalyā expresses her deep anguish and outrage at Kaikayī's actions, which have led to the unjust exile of Rāma, whom she lovingly describes as the "apple of everyone's eye." The metaphor used here, '*kārāgār*' (prison), is highly evocative, as it

underscores the intensity of Kaushalyā's feelings, portraying Rāma's vanvās as a form of imprisonment inflicted by her co-wife. Such an emotional and confrontational expression of Kaushalyā' perspective is rarely found in the *Rāmcharitmānasa*, where the emphasis is more on presenting an idealized image of the relationships within them.

The analysis of these selected verses from Lāl Dās' *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* reveals a more subtle and empowered portrayal of Kaushalyā, where she openly acknowledges the adverse relationship with her co-wife Kaikayī and vocalizes her anguish and outrage at the latter's manipulations that have led to Rāma's tyrannical vanvāsa.

जौं केवल पितु आयसु ताता । तौ जनि जाहु जानि बरि माता ॥

जौं पितु मातु कहेउ बन जाना । तौ कानन सत अवध समाना ॥ 2.55.1

Translation: O dear son, if it is only your father's command, then do not go, keeping your mother over father. If both your father and mother have said that you should go to the forest, then the forest is equal to millions of Āyodhyā.

These verses from Tulsīdās's *Rāmācharitmānas*, in contrast, depict Kaushalyā as a dutiful and dedicated mother who prioritizes her son's obedience to his father's command over her own personal desires, even though it leads to his painful separation. The emphasis is on presenting Kaushalyā as the embodiment of selfless maternal love and devotion to the patriarchal order, rather than dwelling on the complex emotional and psychological unrest.

Subverting the Idealized Depictions

In the *Rāmcharitmānasa*, Kaushalyā is portrayed as a woman who was always dutiful and understanding. She was always presented as a queen or 'rāja mātā' first then a wife and a mother. Her emotions are always subsumed by her duty, hence not given the authority to express her underlined emotions, her fears and her anxiety. Tulsī Kaushalyā is duty-bound and hence does not express her pain of separation unlike Lāl Dās'. The moment she came to know about his exile she was sad but not devastated by the news. In *Rāmācharitmānas*, Kaushalyā gave him a blessing and some lessons for survival in forests.

पितु बनदेव मातु बनदेवी । खग मृग चरन सरोरुह सेवी ॥

अंतहूँ उचित नृपहि बनबासू । बय बिलोकि हियँ होइ हरांसू ॥ 2.55.2

Translation: In the forest, 'bandev' will be your father and 'bandevi' will be your mother. Animals will serve your feet. However, it is good for the king to go to the forest in their last days. But due to your tender age, I am worried about you.

This shows her concern but not the outright devastation of losing her son, which we see in the *Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa*. However, in *Rāmācharitmānasa* most of the

chopāi dedicated to Kaushalyā are similar in tone, suggesting not her devastated situation but rather dealing rationally with the situation. However adapted from Vālmīki, Tulsī' portrayal of co-wives' relationship is in contrast. As Vālmīki' portrayal and Lāl Dās are complementary. Both of them depicted and highlighted the anxiety of Kaushalyā as his son was sent to the vanvāsa. Some of the excerpts from Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* are discussed below:

आसां राम सपत्नीनां वस्तुं मध्ये न मे क्षमम् ।

नय मामपि काकुत्स्थ वनं वन्यां मृगीं यथा ।

यदि ते गमने बुद्धिः कृता पितुरपेक्षया ॥ 2.21.16

Translation: "Rāma, I cannot bear to stay among my co-wives. Take me, too, Kākutstha, to the wilderness like a wild deer if, out of regard for your father, your heart is set on going." (Pollock 185)

Here we can see Vālmīki' Kaushalyā explicitly asking her son to take her along in vanvāsa as she doesn't want to live with her co-wife Kaikayī. Indicating her subconscious anxiety of losing her son and leaving with Kaikeyī

अपीदानीं न कैकेयी सौभाग्यमदमोहिता ।

कौसल्यां च सुमित्रां च संप्रबाधेत मत्कृते ॥ 2.47.15

Translation: "Is it not possible that even now, in the flush of her good fortune, Kaikayī may be persecuting Kausalyā and Sumitrā because of me." (Pollock 185)

While she is afraid of her co-wife, Rāma in the vanvāsa expresses his anxiety to his younger brother about his mothers. Not only Kaushalyā is afraid of her co-wife's behaviour but also her son Rāma feels the same. Indicating Kaikayī' power she holds in the palace and she holds over the king.

In *Kamba Rāmāyaṇa*, there are a few dialogues of Kaushalyā, "Bewildered, she blanched. Feeling as though her womb had been wrung, she screamed. Were those words a lie, that the land was yours to rule, a poison to kill me? Great is the king's kindness! she sneered." (Āyodhyā Kāṇdam 59) In *Kamba Rāmāyaṇa* she did not either expressed resistance or assurance as in *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* or in *Rāmācharitmānasa* respectively, there are very few verses uttered by her.

Deconstructing the Conventional Tropes

The *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa*, as a work of literary and cultural significance, not only challenges the idealized depictions of co-wives' relationships but also actively deconstructs the conventional tropes that have long dominated the representation of Kaushalyā and kaikayī relationships. While the *Rāmācharitmānasa* as a celebrated text has often propagated and normalized certain gender hierarchies and power dynamics, where female characters are relegated to passive roles or serve

as mere plot devices, Lāl Dās' work presents a bold and empowered alternative, where Kaushalyā is "able to affirm her individuality, self-esteem and an urge to make a self-identity" (Dhakal 12). By giving voice to Kaushalyā' struggles and her navigation of her helplessness, and despair. The *Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* disrupts the utopian narratives that have historically diminished the agency and experiences of her character. Lāl Dās unlike Tulsīdās made Kaushalyā a mother and a wife with longing for both, her son, and husband. Where Tulsīdās portrayed her as more reasoned and less emotional, Lāl Dās gave her authority to express her anxieties and fears to the readers. Through his *Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa*, Lāl Dās offers a compelling counterpoint to the often one-dimensional and idealized representations of co-wives' relationships found in other adaptations of the epic. Several more dohā and chopāi from the *Rameshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Rāmcharitmanasa*, is discussed below to highlight the distinct treatment of the Kaushalyā character in these diverse textual adaptations.

हम नहि विपिन जाय सुत देब । अघ अपयश जगमे लेब ॥ (Dās 114)

Translation: I will not allow my son to go to the forest. I am ready to take the blame and disgrace of the world.

In this verse, Kaushalyā bluntly expresses her determination to not let Rāma go to the forest, even though she is aware that it will bring her disgrace and blame. Such an outright refusal to accept the vanvās, in the face of patriarchal demands, is unprecedented in the mainstream *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. Kaushalyā' emotional outburst, where she directly confronts Dasharatha and Kaikayī, and her unwillingness to accept the exile of Rāma, challenges the stereotypical depiction of the ideal, self-sacrificing mother. Unlike in *Rāmcharitmanasa*, where she accepted his exile without any disagreement as such, she once or twice only inquired and asked him not to go, but there was no resistance from her side.

लेथु राज धन नृप निज फेरि । केकयि घरमे लगबथु ढेरि ॥ (Dās 114)

Translation: Let the king take back all his wealth and kingdom, and give it to Kaikayī.

These lines further demonstrate Kaushalyā' bold defiance, as she suggests that the king should give up his entire kingdom and wealth to Kaikayī, rather than sending Rāma to the forest. As she cannot live without her son, at any cost she is not going to lose her son and let him go to the forest. She doesn't care about the kingdom or wealth, but only Rāma' presence. This verse is also suggestive of her underlying feeling of bias and injustice that she is being subjected to by Kaikayī and the king, as well as her husband's affection towards Kaikayī. Colson in her work observed that "if one wife succeeds in her aim, it is only at the expense of the other." (63)

अहाँ बिनु सांसारमे सुत हमर जीवन छार ।

रहब कोन विधि सौतिनीक लग धाम कारागार ॥ (Dās 114)

Translation: Without my son, my life in this world is worthless. How will I live with my co-wife in her household? It is like living in a prison.

This verse powerfully conveys Kaushalyā' anguish and sense of utter despair at the prospect of losing her son. Additionally, it also expresses her deep nervousness at the thought of having to live with Kaikayī as her co-wife, which she likens to imprisonment. This imagery is often used by women from pre-modern patriarchal societies to express their feelings of subordination, discomfort, and lack of autonomy within the domestic sphere, especially in the face of co-wife rivalries and hierarchies.

सुत अभिषेक प्रतिज्ञा हानि । नृप तथापि मिथ्या भेल वानि ॥

सत्यसन्ध रघुकुल प्रख्यात । अँहि मिथ्यावादी विख्यात ॥ (Dās 134)

Translation: The promise of the coronation of my son Rāma was broken. Although the king was known to be true to his words, he lied. The distinguished Rāghava family is now known for keeping their word. But the king has now become a famous liar.

Here, Kaushalyā is directly confronting the hypocrisy and dishonesty of Dasharatha, who had earlier promised the kingdom to Rāma but later withdrew his words in the name of his promised boon to Kaikayī. By highlighting the contrast between the Raghu clan's reputation for truthfulness and the king's current lie, Kaushalyā is not only expressing her anguish but also questioning the moral ambiguity of the king.

अँहँ कैकयिक डरें डिराय। व्याकुल सुरपुर गेलहुँ पड़ाय ॥ (Dās 137)

Translation: Kaushalyā addressing the king, you who are afraid of Kaikayī, hurried towards heaven.

This particular verse from the *Rameshwarcharita Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* powerfully captures Kaushalyā' direct confrontation with Dasharatha, accusing him of being afraid of Kaikayī and giving his life. These lines were spoken by Kaushalyā, after Rāma left for the forest, and the king was unable to bear his departure, fainting again and again. She holds that the king is no more, afraid of Kaikayī, he left her alone and went to heaven. She not only mourns her son's vanvās but at the same time fears her husband's demise.

ओ सब खन करते उत्पात। सहब कोना कैकेयिक लात ॥ (Dās 138)

Translation: She is going to create chaos all over the palace. How will I be able to bear her.?

In this verse, Kaushalyā is mourning for his husband while expressing her fearful state of mind about Kaikayī' possible misdeeds and oppressive behavior. Like any woman, Kaushalyā is addressing her fear and distrust of Kaikayī, voicing her concern for her own well-being and dignity in the face of the impending crisis. Unlike Tulsīdās' Kaushalyā, who is depicted as unquestioningly accepting and quiet.

तेहि दुष्टकाँ नहि किछु भीति । गबयित अछि आनन्दे गीति ॥ (Dās 138)

Translation: She [Kaikayī] has no fear of anyone. She is singing in joy.

In this verse, Kaushalyā is referring to Kaikayī, who is shown singing and celebrating joyfully, having successfully sent Rāma to the forest. Although the king is no more, these words were uttered by Kaushalyā while mourning the loss of her husband and Kaikayī's heartlessness and lack of the pain of losing her husband. Instead, she is happy for his son to be coronated and become the king.

बहुरि बच्छ कहि लालु कहि रघुपति रघुबर तात ।

कबहिं बोलाइ लगाइ हियँ हरषि निरखिउँ गात ॥ 2.68

Translation: Oh son! again when will I (Kaushalyā) call you with these names -Lāl, Raghupati, Raghuvāra, my dear! When will I see you and embrace you with joy?

This verse from *Rāmācharitmanasa* expresses Kaushalyā's deep longing and anguish at the prospect of separation from Rāma. The repetition of the affectionate names she uses for him, such as 'Lāl', 'Raghupati', and 'Raghuvāra', further intensifies the emotional poignancy of her words. Though these words express her affection and her longing for him, but not intense resistance like in the *Rameshwarcharita Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* as we have seen above.

"O heartless Kaikeyi! Your wild ploy to obtain a kingdom by a boon unbreakable has borne fruit." (Kamban 72) These lines appeared in *Kamba Rāmāyaṇa* after the King's demise. When Kaushalyā is addressing Kaikayī, how her ambition of making his son king and sending Rāma to the forest resulted in the king's death. As there are very few verses of Kaushalyā in the *Kamba Rāmāyaṇa*, a clear and distinct analysis of her character is difficult.

सकामा भव कैकेयि भुङ्क्ष्व राज्यमकण्टकम् ।

त्यक्त्वा राजानमेकाग्रा नृशंसे दुष्टचारिणि ॥ 2.60.3

After the demise of their husband, Kaushalyā asked her co-wife, "You should be satisfied, Kaikayī, for now you can enjoy the kingship unchallenged. Wasn't this the one object you had in mind when you forsook the king, you vicious, wicked woman?" (Pollock 212). These lines are taken from Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, highlighting Kaushalyā's inner frustration with her co-wife.

Conclusion

Lāl Dās's Kaushalyā is very vocal and assertive in expressing her anxiety and anguish, as he has given her a distinct voice where she bitterly expresses her anguish, anger and lack of agency in the unfolding of events which have led to Rāma's vanvās. His portrayal of Kaushalyā represents a significant shift from the idealized, dutiful, and self-effacing depiction of the mother figure in the Rāma narrative tradition. The textual analysis of these selected verses from Lāl Dās' *Rameshwarcharita Mithilā*

Rāmāyaṇa suggests that he deliberately gives voice to Kaushalyā's perspective, allowing readers to engage with her emotional turmoil and the expression of her feelings independently. This represents a departure from other *Rāmācharitmanasa* texts where Kaushalyā's role is often presented in a more utopian manner. He not only highlighted her anguish over the loss of her son but also her fear and distrust of the growing influence of her co-wife Kaikayī in the kingdom. Not only did she mourn Rāma's vanvās but also her husband's death.

गतिरेका पतिर्नार्या द्वितीया गतिरात्मजः ।

तृतीया ज्ञातयो राजंश्चतुर्थी नेह विद्यते ॥ 2.55.18

तत्र त्वं चैव मे नास्ति रामश्च वनमाश्रितः ।

न वनं गन्तुमिच्छामि सर्वथा हि हता त्वया ॥ 2.55.19

Vālmīki highlighted her anger, grief and anxiety through these couple of dohā as she remarked, "A woman's first recourse is her husband, Your Majesty, her second is her son, her third her kinsmen. She has no fourth in this world. But you are no recourse for me, and Rāma is off in the forest. You have totally destroyed me." (Pollock 202) This excerpt is synonymous to the 'locus classicus' of *Manusmṛiti* where it is remarked:

बाल्ये पितुर्वशे तिष्ठेत् पाणिग्राहस्य यौवने ॥

पुत्राणां भर्तरि प्रेते न भजेस्त्री स्वतन्त्रताम् ॥ 5.146

In childhood a woman must bow to the will of her father, in adulthood, to the will of man who marries her, and when her husband is dead, to the will of her sons. (*Manusmṛiti* 489)

In *Rameshwarcharita Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa*, Kaushalyā is portrayed as a strong, defiant and vulnerable woman whose voice and emotions are central to the narrative in *Āyodhyā Kāṇḍa*. Questioning her husband's moral ambiguity is something unique to Lāl Dās' *Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* and represents a significant departure from the normative depiction of the character in the Rāma tradition.

This new perspective also aligns with the broader feminist scholarship which has sought to recover the voices and experiences of women characters in epic narratives. Lāl Dās not only let her express her range of feelings but also her rationality, like others. However, the difference between the portrayal of others and Lāl Dās' Kaushalyā stems from the former depicting her as an unquestioning, stoic, and submissive mother and wife, while the latter presents her as a woman who is capable of directly challenging the king's moral transgressions and her co-wife's manipulations. She emerges not only as a strong voice against the injustices and moral ambiguity but also as rational and dutiful.

अछि चिन्तासौं चित अचयन ।

तैं कहलहुँ हम अनुचित बयन ॥ (Dās135)

Translation: Due to my troubled state of mind, I spoke inappropriate words to you.

Kaushalyā, after seeing the king's miserable state, held him and tried to soothe him and apologize for her words. Not only does she question him but also acknowledges her own inappropriate words. Lāl Dās excellently portrayed her with all the shades, and not only confined to the ideal and dutiful queen.

As remarked by Pollock, "It has long been recognised that fate plays a central role in much epic poetry, but considerable variation in the role can be discerned among different traditions." (33) This divergence in the treatment of co-wives' relationships is clearly highlighted by Lāl Dās' *Rāmeshwarcharit Mithilā Rāmāyaṇa* and Tulsī Dās' *Rāmācharitmānasa*.

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