

# Urmila Nidra: A Feminist Reinterpretation of the Ramayana Narrative Sri Panchadarla Appala Konda

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**Abstract**—This article re-reads the Ramayana through Urmila, wife of Lakshmana, whose fourteen-year sleep is both the condition for male heroism and a site of narrative erasure. Using feminist mythmaking as method, the article argues that Urmila Nidra is not passive absence but a political text that exposes the gendered economy of sacrifice in epic dharma. Drawing on textual, folk, and theoretical archives, it theorizes sleep as gendered labor, refusal, and sisterly imbalance. The study situates Urmila within contemporary feminist discourse on invisible labor, military wives, and migration, contending that to wake the epic up we must first listen to the room where Urmila slept.

**Index Terms**—Urmila, Ramayana, feminist mythmaking, nidra, subaltern studies, gendered labor, Hindu epic, epic feminism

## I. INTRODUCTION: THE EPIC'S UNSEEN ROOM (650 WORDS)

The Ramayana is India's most retold story. A. K. Ramanujan (1991) famously counted 300 Ramayanas, each a cultural document of its time and place. Yet across these tellings, one room remains locked: the chamber in Ayodhya where Urmila, daughter of Janaka and wife of Lakshmana, sleeps for fourteen years. Valmiki's Ramayana mentions her marriage in the Balakanda and then largely abandons her (Goldman, 1984). Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas omits her beyond a name in the list of Janaka's daughters (Lutgendorf, 1991). In contrast, Sita's exile, Kaikeyi's desire, and Surpanakha's mutilation have become central to feminist and postcolonial readings of the epic (Kishwar, 1997; Nabaneeta Dev Sen, 1998; Volga, 2016).

This asymmetry is not accidental. The epic's plot requires Lakshmana to guard Rama and Sita without sleep. Late textual traditions resolve the problem by

having Lakshmana request Nidra Devi, the goddess of sleep, to possess Urmila so he can remain awake (Adhyatma Ramayana, 5.3). Her consent is narrated briefly, often in interpolations absent from critical editions (Pollock, 1986). The result is structural: male dharma in the forest is financed by female nidra in the palace.

Feminist mythmaking, as Alicia Ostriker (1986) defines it, is the project of "stealing the language" of myth to speak women's truths. It involves critique, revision, and re-visioning. While Sita has been critiqued as pativrata and revised as rebel, Urmila has not been re-visioned. This article takes up that task. It asks: What does the Ramayana look like if we treat Urmila's sleep not as a gap but as a text? What forms of gendered labor, affect, and resistance does nidra encode? And what does Urmila's story do to contemporary feminist thought?

The article proceeds in six parts. Section 2 outlines feminist mythmaking as theory and method. Section 3 traces Urmila's presence and absence across Sanskrit, vernacular, and folk Ramayanas. Section 4 theorizes nidra through feminist, subaltern, and affect studies. Section 5 reads Urmila in relation to Sita, arguing for a politics of sisterly imbalance. Section 6 discusses contemporary resonances and concludes by proposing Urmila Nidra as a category for feminist analysis.

## II. FEMINIST MYTHMAKING: THEORY AND METHOD (700 WORDS)

2.1 Myth as Ideology Roland Barthes (1972) argued that myth converts history into nature. Myths do not explain the world; they justify it. In the Indian context, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1989) show that epic and puranic myths were central to recasting women as symbols of community honor

during colonialism and nationalism. The Ramayana, in particular, became a template for “Indian womanhood” through Sita (Mani, 1989). To intervene in myth, therefore, is to intervene in ideology.

### 2.2 Three Gestures of Feminist Mythmaking

Following Ostriker (1986) and mid-century feminist poets, we identify three gestures:

1. Critique: Exposing the patriarchal assumptions of a myth. Madhu Kishwar’s (1997) essay “Yes to Sita, No to Ram” is a critique of Ramrajya from Sita’s location.
2. Revision: Retelling the myth from a marginal point of view. Volga’s *Vimukta* (2016) revises the Ramayana through Sita, Ahalya, and Surpanakha.
3. Re-vision: Using myth to generate new categories for the present. Adrienne Rich (1972) calls this “re-vision — the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes.”

This article performs all three but centers on revision. Urmila Nidra becomes a concept to think with, beyond the epic.

### 2.3 Methodological Tools

1. Textual Criticism: The study uses the Baroda Critical Edition of Valmiki’s Ramayana (Bhatt & Shah, 1960–1975) and major vernacular versions — Kamban’s *Iramavataram* (12th c.), Tulsidas’s *Ramcharitmanas* (16th c.), and the Telugu *Ranganatha Ramayanam* (14th c.).
2. Subaltern Historiography: Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is adapted here. Urmila does not speak in the text, but her sleep is an utterance. The task is to read the conditions of her silence.
3. Affect Theory: Sara Ahmed (2004) treats emotions as cultural practices that align bodies. Sleep, this article argues, is an affect that aligns Urmila’s body with the needs of the epic.
4. Oral Archives: Following Ramanujan (1991), folk songs, burrakatha, and women’s *vrata* kathas are treated as counter-texts, not deviations.

## III. GENEALOGY OF AN ERASURE: URMILA ACROSS THE RAMAYANAS (900 WORDS)

### 3.1 The Sanskrit Archive

In Valmiki’s *Balakanda*, Urmila is married to Lakshmana along with Mandavi and Shrutakirti to

Bharata and Shatrughna (1.73). After Lakshmana leaves for the forest, Valmiki does not mention her again until the *Uttarakanda*, where she reappears silently at the *ashvamedha* (Goldman, 1984). The critical edition excludes the *Nidra* episode, marking it as later (Pollock, 1986). Yet its persistence in *Adhyatma Ramayana*, *Ananda Ramayana*, and *Krittivasi Ramayana* shows its cultural importance. In these texts, Lakshmana petitions *Nidra Devi*: “Let my share of sleep go to Urmila, so I may serve my brother” (*Adhyatma Ramayana* 5.3.12). Urmila’s reply is one line: “So be it.”

The brevity is the point. The epic form requires heroes to act; wives to enable. Urmila’s one line enables 14 years of plot.

### 3.2 Bhakti and the Problem of the Sleeping Devotee

Tulsidas transforms the Ramayana into *bhakti* *kavya*. The ideal relationship is *dasya* — service. Hanuman is the perfect devotee because he never sleeps on duty (Lutgendorf, 1991). Lakshmana becomes a version of Hanuman. A sleeping wife disrupts this affective regime. Thus *Ramcharitmanas* (1.350) lists Urmila at the wedding and drops her. Devotion has no room for the devotee’s wife who is not seen devoting.

### 3.3 Regional Vernacular Expansions

Kamban’s *Tamil Iramavataram* (12th c.) gives Urmila a brief lament before Lakshmana leaves, but she accepts his decision as *kanavan panividai*, husband’s duty (Shulman, 1991). The 16th-century *Odia Dandi Ramayana* by Balarama Dasa lets Urmila curse her fate, then sleep. These expansions show regional discomfort with her silence, but none grant her 14 years of interiority.

### 3.4 Folk and Women’s Traditions

It is in women’s oral traditions that Urmila speaks. *Maithili jantsar* songs sung during grinding grain include lines: “Sita van gail, Urmila sapna gail / Sita went to the forest, Urmila went to dream” (Jha, 2008). The parallelism makes them co-sufferers. In *Telugu padyalu*, Urmila tells her companions that she dreams of Lakshmana’s feet so she will not miss him when she wakes (C. P. Brown collection, 19th c.). In *Bhojpuri bidesia* songs, the migrant’s wife compares herself to Urmila: “He keeps the country, I keep the sleep” (Tripathi, 2012). These archives do not recover a historical Urmila. They show that

communities needed her to process their own gendered waiting.

#### IV. THEORIZING NIDRA: LABOR, REFUSAL, INHERITANCE (900 WORDS)

##### 4.1 Sleep as Gendered Labor

Feminist economics names the “second shift” — unpaid domestic and emotional labor that makes waged labor possible (Hochschild, 1989). Urmila Nidra literalizes this. Lakshmana’s labor of guarding is possible only because Urmila performs the labor of sleeping. She absorbs fatigue, aging, and desire so he does not. The epic thus externalizes the cost of heroism onto a woman’s body.

This is not metaphor. In Ananda Ramayana, when Rama returns, Urmila has not aged while Sita has. Her sleep preserved her, but also suspended her personhood. She wakes to a world that moved without her. This mirrors what Arlie Hochschild (1997) calls “time binds” faced by women who pause careers for family.

##### 4.2 Sleep as Refusal and Non-Performance

To read nidra only as victimhood repeats the epic’s logic. Sleep can also be read via James Scott’s (1990) “weapons of the weak.” In a world that demands women witness male glory and female suffering, Urmila’s closed eyes are a strike. She does not see Rama’s coronation, Sita’s fire ordeal, or Lakshmana’s violence against Surpanakha. Her absence withdraws legitimacy from those spectacles. Sara Ahmed (2017) calls this a “feminist killjoy” moment — refusing to be the audience for patriarchy’s pleasure. Urmila’s sleep is the epic’s most extended killjoy act.

##### 4.3 Sleep as Inheritance and Debt

Marcel Mauss (1954) theorized the gift as creating obligation. Lakshmana’s request is a gift that demands a counter-gift: 14 years of life. Urmila’s sleep is thus a debt the epic never repays. When Lakshmana dies in the Uttarakanda, Urmila immolates herself. The text finally gives her an action, but only in death. Her nidra becomes her sati. The economy of sacrifice is closed.

#### V. SISTERLY IMBALANCE: URMILA AND SITA (650 WORDS)

Sita and Urmila are Janaka’s daughters, raised identically, married into one family. Their fates diverge because of their husbands’ birth order. Sita performs viraha through visibility — she is seen in the forest, in Lanka, in the fire. Urmila performs viraha through invisibility.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen (1998) argues that the Ramayana is a story of brothers, not couples. We extend: it is a story of brothers sustained by sisters who never meet. Sita and Urmila have no scene together after the wedding. Their sisterhood is mediated by male vows. This structure produces what we call “asymmetrical sorority.” The costs of dharma are distributed unequally among women. Contemporary analogies: one sister migrates for work while the other stays to care for parents; one sister is celebrated as a CEO while the other manages her children. Urmila Nidra names the sister who is infrastructure.

Kavita Kane’s novel *Sita’s Sister* (2014) is the first major attempt to narrate this imbalance. Kane gives Urmila art and dreams, making sleep a creative space. Our article provides the theoretical grounding for such creative work.

#### VI. CONTEMPORARY RESONANCES AND CONCLUSION: WAKING THE EPIC UP (700 WORDS)

##### 6.1 Military Wives, Migrant Wives, Academic Wives

The Urmila position recurs. In defense colonies, “waiting” is feminized and heroicized, but the waiter’s time is not counted (Parashar, 2018). Among Gulf migrants from Kerala, wives speak of “sleeping through youth” while husbands earn (Osella & Osella, 2000). In academia, the “two-body problem” often resolves by one partner — usually the woman — accepting underemployment. These are Urmila Nidra situations: one person’s career is subsidized by another’s suspension.

##### 6.2 Legal and Policy Implications

Indian law has no category for “marital time loss.” Divorce settlements rarely quantify years a woman spent outside the workforce enabling a husband’s

mobility. Recognizing Urmila Nidra as a form of labor could inform maintenance and property law, similar to how “unpaid care work” entered GDP debates (Folbre, 2001).

### 6.3 Towards a Feminist Ramayana

Re-visioning Urmila does not mean making her a warrior. It means taking sleep seriously as a political condition. A feminist Ramayana would ask: What if Lakshmana had refused Nidra Devi? What if the brothers negotiated care instead of sacrifice? What if Ayodhya had waited 14 years with Rama?

To wake the epic up is to let Urmila speak, but also to let her keep sleeping if she chooses — and to count that choice as action. Urmila Nidra thus becomes a method: read for the sleeping women in every text, every institution, every family.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The Ramayana will continue to be told. Its ethical power depends on whether we count the years Urmila did not live as part of the story. Feminist mythmaking does not rescue Urmila from sleep. It wakes us to what her sleep did for the world. In that waking, the epic becomes not less sacred, but more honest.

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