Dialogue : A Journal Devoted to Literary Appreciation
Vol XXI, No. 1 June 2025

Trauma in Ancient Indian Literature: A Case Study of Sita in the *Ramayana*

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Publication Info

Article history :
Received : 29-02-2025
Accepted : 02-04-2025
DOI : 10.30949/dajdtla.v21i1.4

Key words:
Trauma, Sita, Draupadi, Lakshmi, Ramayana, Mahabharata

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines trauma in ancient Indian literature through a comparative analysis of Sita in Valmiki's *Ramayana* (c. 500 BCE–100 CE), Draupadi in the Mahabharata (c. 400 BCE–400 CE), and Lakshmi in Puranic texts like *the Vishnu Purana.* Sita's gendered trauma—exile, abduction, public shaming, and abandonment—reflects patriarchal norms of the Second Urbanization, framed by dharma and resolved through cosmic transcendence. Draupadi's public trauma, marked by disrobing, exile, and war's devastation, challenges dharma, driving collective justice in a morally complex society. Lakshmi, as a divine figure, experiences symbolic cosmic disruptions, not human suffering, highlighting her role in restoring prosperity. Applying trauma studies, the paper reveals universal patterns (silence, repetition) and culturally specific responses (karma, dharma), with Sita's prolonged, internalized suffering contrasting Draupadi's assertive agency and Lakshmi's divine autonomy. These narratives bridge ancient wisdom and modern inquiry, illuminating gendered suffering and resilience.

Trauma studies, an interdisciplinary field in modern scholarship, investigates how individuals and societies articulate and navigate overwhelming experiences. Applying this framework to ancient Indian literature necessitates a nuanced approach, situating texts within their historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts. While trauma as a distinct concept was not explicitly articulated in ancient India, narratives of suffering, loss, and resilience in texts like *The Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vedas,* Buddhist and Jain canons, and *Sangam* poetry offer rich insights into its representation. This paper examines trauma in ancient Indian literature through a historical lens, analyzing key texts, thematic patterns, and socio-cultural frameworks, with a particular focus on Sita's experiences in *The Ramayana* as a case study of gendered trauma and resilience.

Historical Context and Analytical Framework

Ancient Indian literature, spanning several millennia, comprises a diverse array of texts, including sacred scriptures (e.g., *Vedas, Upanishads*), epics (e.g., *Ramayana, Mahabharata*), *Puranas*, and classical works in Sanskrit, Pali, and Tamil, such as Sangam literature and Kālidāsa's dramatic compositions. These texts emerged within varied socio-political milieus, from the tribal societies of the Vedic era (c. 1500–500 BCE) to the complex polities of the Mauryan and Gupta empires (c. 321 BCE–550 CE). A trauma studies approach to these works examines representations of psychological, physical, and collective suffering—arising from events such as war, exile, loss, or ethical conflicts—and explores how individuals and communities respond to and process these adversities.

In contrast to contemporary trauma theory, which is grounded in psychological paradigms (e.g., Freud, Caruth) and focuses on individual or collective post-traumatic stress, ancient Indian texts conceptualize suffering through philosophical frameworks such as karma, *dharma*, and *moksha*. Rather than pathologizing trauma, these narratives embed it within cosmic and ethical discourses, positioning suffering as a transformative force for spiritual development, moral reflection, or societal critique.

Texts and Themes of Trauma: an Overview of Literature

1. ***The Mahabharata*** **(c. 400 BCE–400 CE) Historical Context:** Composed during a period of political fragmentation and consolidation, *The Mahabharata* reflects the transition from Vedic tribal structures to classical Hindu society. The Kurukshetra war, a central narrative, may parallel historical conflicts such as post-Vedic tribal warfare or the expansive campaigns of the Mauryan period.

Themes of Trauma: *The Mahabharata* intricately portrays individual and collective trauma. Draupadi's public humiliation in the disrobing episode (Sabha Parva) exemplifies gendered trauma, marked by violation and loss of agency. Her subsequent pursuit of justice through rage and strategic alliances underscores resilience within a patriarchal framework. Arjuna's existential crisis in the *Bhagavad Gita* (Chapter 1) reveals psychological trauma, as he faces moral paralysis over fratricidal warfare, resolved through Krishna's philosophical discourse on dharma (duty) and detachment. Collectively, the Kurukshetra war devastates entire clans, leaving survivors like Yudhishthira burdened by guilt and loss. The *Stri Parva* (Book of Women) poignantly captures societal trauma, with women's lamentations over fallen warriors symbolizing a broader cultural wound.

Cultural Framing: Trauma in *The Mahabharata* is processed through the lenses of *dharma* and *karma*, where suffering is both a personal ordeal and a cosmic phenomenon. Characters navigate their pain through sacrifice, penance, or renunciation, seeking moral and spiritual resolution. The epic's emphasis on war's aftermath likely reflects historical realities of prolonged conflicts in ancient India, with its focus on dharma addressing the ethical disarray of war-torn societies.

2. ***The Ramayana*** **(c. 500 BCE–100 CE) Historical Context:** Attributed to Valmiki, the Ramayana emerged during the rise of urban centers and monarchical systems, encapsulating ideals of righteous kingship and social order. Its geographical scope, spanning North India to Sri Lanka, may reflect early trade networks or conquests, situating the narrative within a dynamic socio-political landscape.

Themes of Trauma: *The Ramayana* foregrounds gendered and political trauma through Sita's experiences. Her abduction by Ravana, captivity, and the subsequent trial by fire (*Agni Pariksha*) in the Yuddha Kanda highlight gendered trauma, characterized by humiliation, isolation, and societal scrutiny. Sita's stoic endurance and eventual retreat to the forest underscore unresolved pain, offering a subtle critique of patriarchal norms. Rama's exile and separation from Sita embody personal and political trauma, compounded by his duty-bound stoicism. His victory over Ravana, while triumphant, carries moral complexity due to Ravana's nuanced characterization. Collectively, Rama's exile disrupts Ayodhya's social order, with citizens' mourning reflecting communal anxiety over leadership crises.

Cultural Framing: Suffering in the Ramayana is framed as a test of dharma, with Sita and Rama embodying idealized virtues of patience and duty. However, Sita's abandonment in the

Uttara Kanda highlights unresolved tensions in gendered expectations, potentially mirroring historical debates on women's roles in early urban societies. The narrative's focus on exile and return may echo historical migrations or displacements in the post-Vedic period, with trauma narratives reinforcing social cohesion through shared ethical ideals.

3. **Vedic Literature (c. 1500–500 BCE) Historical Context:** *The Vedas (Rig-Veda, Samaveda, Yajurveda,* and *Atharvaveda*) were composed by Indo-Aryan tribes in northwest India during a period characterized by pastoralism, tribal conflicts, and nascent state formation. This era reflects the socio-cultural dynamics of a semi-nomadic society transitioning toward settled communities, marked by interactions with indigenous groups and environmental challenges.

Themes of Trauma: Vedic hymns, particularly in the *Rig-Veda*, depict collective trauma arising from inter-tribal warfare, as seen in references to battles against the Dasas and Dasyus (e.g., *Rig-Veda* 1.32, hymns to Indra). These narratives evoke the anxieties of conflict and displacement, reflecting the precariousness of tribal life. Additionally, hymns express collective fears of natural calamities, such as floods or droughts, through ritual invocations seeking divine protection. Individual trauma, though less prominent, emerges in texts like the "Gambler's Lament" (*Rig-Veda* 10.34), which portrays personal despair and social ostracism resulting from gambling losses, offering a rare glimpse into subjective suffering.

Cultural Framing: In Vedic literature, trauma is conceptualized as a disruption of cosmic order (*rita*) or a consequence of divine displeasure, rather than a psychological condition. Suffering is addressed through ritual practices, such as *yajna* (sacrificial offerings), aimed at appeasing deities and restoring cosmic harmony. This externalization of distress underscores a worldview where human agency is subordinate to divine and cosmic forces. The Vedas' emphasis on ritual solutions reflects a society grappling with the uncertainties of migration, conflict, and environmental instability, using religious frameworks to mitigate collective and individual anxieties.

4. **Buddhist and Jain Texts (c. 500 BCE–500 CE) Historical Context:** Emerging during the Second Urbanization of ancient India (c. 500 BCE–500 CE), Buddhist texts (e.g., Pali Canon, including the *Sutta Pitaka* and *Jataka tales*) and Jain texts (e.g., *Agamas*) reflect responses to profound social, economic, and political transformations. This period, marked by the rise of urban centers and centralized polities like Magadha, saw challenges to Vedic ritualism, increasing caste rigidity, and social stratification. These texts articulate alternative ethical and spiritual frameworks, addressing the uncertainties of a rapidly urbanizing and socially complex society.

Themes of Trauma: Buddhist narratives, particularly the Buddha's life story in texts like the *Jataka tales* and the *Nidana Katha*, depict personal trauma through his encounters with the realities of old age, sickness, and death, which catalyze his renunciation and quest for enlightenment. The Four Noble Truths conceptualize life itself as *dukkha* (suffering), framing existence as an inherent form of universal trauma. In Jain texts, trauma is deliberately embraced through ascetic practices (*tapas*), where self-inflicted physical and psychological suffering serves as a means to purify karma and attain liberation, as seen in narratives of ascetics enduring extreme austerities. Collective trauma is evident in accounts of societal disruptions, such as wars or famines, with Buddhist and Jain monastic communities positioned as sanctuaries offering spiritual and social refuge.

Cultural Framing: In both traditions, trauma is existential, rooted in attachment (Buddhism) or karmic bondage (Jainism), rather than merely situational or psychological. Buddhist

teachings emphasize mindfulness and the Eightfold Path as mechanisms to transcend dukkha through detachment and insight into impermanence. Jainism advocates non-violence (*ahimsa*) and rigorous asceticism to overcome karmic suffering, prioritizing self-discipline over narrative resolution. These frameworks reflect a historical disillusionment with Vedic ritualism and rigid social hierarchies, offering alternative paradigms for processing individual and collective suffering in an urbanizing, stratified society.

5. **Sangam Literature (c. 300 BCE–300 CE) Historical Context:** The Tamil Sangam texts, including *Purananuru* and *Akananuru*, emerged in South India during the early historic period, within a warrior-agrarian society characterized by vibrant trade networks, notably with the Roman world. This era reflects a dynamic cultural landscape shaped by martial traditions, agricultural prosperity, and increasing commercial interactions, particularly in the Tamilakam region.

Themes of Trauma: The war poems of Purananuru vividly portray the trauma of conflict, capturing the anguish of widows' laments, the plight of orphaned children, and the deaths of warriors, which collectively underscore themes of loss and impermanence. In contrast, the love poems of Akananuru delve into emotional trauma, exploring experiences of separation, unrequited love, or betrayal, with women's voices foregrounding gendered dimensions of suffering. These narratives illuminate both individual and collective dimensions of trauma within a society marked by frequent warfare and social upheaval.

Cultural Framing: In Sangam literature, trauma is articulated through evocative poetic imagery, where natural elements—such as barren landscapes or turbulent seas—mirror inner emotional turmoil. While heroic death is often glorified, reflecting the martial ethos of the period, the pervasive motif of mourning highlights the human cost of conflict. These texts reflect a society navigating the tensions of warfare and trade-driven prosperity, employing poetry as a medium to process collective grief and personal sorrow, thereby fostering cultural resilience.

Applying Trauma Studies to Ancient Indian Literature

Modern trauma theory, such as Cathy Caruth's concept of "unclaimed experience," provides a lens to analyze how ancient Indian texts depict suffering as inexpressible or deferred, as seen in Sita's silence following her exile in *The Ramayana*. However, Western frameworks require adaptation to align with Indian philosophical constructs like *karma* and *dharma*, which situate trauma within a cyclical, cosmic existence rather than as a singular, disruptive event. The scarcity of archaeological or textual evidence complicates efforts to verify historical traumas, such as specific wars or natural disasters, and literary depictions often stylize suffering for didactic or moral purposes. Furthermore, ancient Indian literature frequently prioritizes collective over individual trauma, reflecting the community-oriented ethos of these societies. Gendered trauma, evident in the experiences of figures like Draupadi and Sita, underscores patriarchal structures, yet the agency displayed by characters like Draupadi, through her defiance in *The Mahabharata*, challenges simplistic victimhood narratives. Trauma in ancient Indian literature mirrors historical realities, including tribal conflicts (Vedic period), dynastic wars (epics), social upheavals (Buddhist and Jain texts), and martial cultures (Sangam poetry). These texts functioned as cultural mechanisms for processing suffering, offering resolutions through philosophical inquiry (e.g., *karma, moksha*), ritual practices (e.g., *Vedic yajna*), or poetic expression (e.g., Sangam imagery). They also illuminate enduring tensions—between

duty and despair, individual and collective experiences, and human and cosmic perspectives—that profoundly shaped ancient Indian thought. Ancient Indian literature thus provides a fertile ground for trauma studies, revealing how societies articulated and navigated suffering through narrative, philosophy, and ritual. *By analyzing* texts such as *The Mahabharata*, *Ramayana, Vedas, Buddhist* and *Jain canons*, and *Sangam* poetry within their historical and cultural contexts, we uncover both universal patterns and culturally specific responses to trauma, fostering a dialogue between ancient wisdom and contemporary scholarly inquiry.

Sita's trauma in *The Ramayana*

Sita's trauma in Valmiki's *Ramayana* (c. 500 BCE–100 CE) offers a compelling case study of gendered suffering, resilience, and societal expectations within ancient Indian literature. As the central female figure, Sita endures a series of traumatic experiences—exile, abduction, public scrutiny, and abandonment—each shaped by the patriarchal and dharmic frameworks of the epic's socio-historical context. This analysis explores Sita's trauma through its narrative depiction, cultural framing, and historical significance, drawing on *The Ramayana* to illuminate how ancient Indian society articulated and navigated suffering, particularly for women, while situating her experiences within a trauma studies framework adapted to the text's philosophical milieu.

Composed during India's Second Urbanization (c. 500 BCE–100 CE), a period marked by the rise of monarchies, urban centers, and codified social norms, *The Ramayana* reflects the socio-political dynamics of early urban India. Set in the mythical *Treta Yuga*, the epic idealizes *dharma* (duty) and righteous kingship, positioning Sita as the archetype of the virtuous wife (*pativrata*). Yet her suffering highlights tensions in a society increasingly defining women's roles through patriarchal lenses, where chastity and obedience were tied to family and state honour. Unlike modern trauma theory, which psychologizes suffering as individual pathology, *The Ramayana* embeds Sita's pain within narratives of cosmic order and moral duty, reflecting a worldview where suffering serves as a test of virtue and a pathway to spiritual resolution.

Sita's trauma unfolds across key episodes, each compounding her psychological, emotional, and social distress. Her voluntary exile with Rama in the *Ayodhya Kanda* (Book 2) marks an initial rupture, as she relinquishes her royal status for the uncertainties of forest life. This displacement, while a testament to her devotion, exposes her to vulnerability, foreshadowing further trauma. Her stoic resolve masks the emotional toll of leaving Ayodhya, with fleeting moments of fear in the forest hinting at her underlying distress. The abduction by Ravana in the *Aranya Kanda* (Book 3) intensifies her suffering, as she is forcibly taken to Lanka and subjected to isolation, threats, and the implicit fear of violation in the Ashoka grove. Her defiance of Ravana's advances (*Sundara Kanda*, Book 5) underscores her resilience, yet her despair—evident in suicidal thoughts under the Shimshapa tree—reveals the psychological weight of prolonged captivity. The *Agni Pariksha* in the *Yuddha Kanda* (Book 6), where Rama demands Sita prove her chastity through a trial by fire, constitutes a public humiliation, compounding her trauma with social shaming and betrayal by her husband, who prioritizes kingly duty over her dignity. Finally, in the *Uttara Kanda* (Book 7), Sita's abandonment while pregnant, driven by public gossip despite Rama's knowledge of her innocence, represents a profound betrayal. Her life in Valmiki's hermitage, raising her sons Lava and Kusha, and her ultimate return to the Earth after a final test of purity reflect both resilience and exhaustion, with her departure interpretable as an act of agency or a rejection of a society that perpetually

questions her virtue.

In *The Ramayana*, Sita's suffering is framed through the cultural lenses of dharma and the *pativrata* ideal, which valorize wifely devotion and self-sacrifice. Her endurance aligns with these expectations, yet her defiance of Ravana and her final withdrawal from Ayodhya subtly challenge patriarchal norms, suggesting agency within constraints. Unlike modern trauma theory, which emphasizes unrepresentable pain (e.g., Cathy Caruth's "unclaimed experience"), *The Ramayana* integrates Sita's trauma into a cosmic narrative, where suffering is tied to karma and divine destiny. Her divine origin as the daughter of Bhumi (Earth) and her return to her mother frame her pain as part of a larger cosmic cycle, prioritizing spiritual transcendence over individual healing. Sita's repeated scrutiny over her chastity reflects patriarchal anxieties about female autonomy, a theme resonant with other ancient Indian texts like *The Mahabharata*, where Draupadi's humiliation similarly underscores gendered suffering. However, Sita's resilience—evident in her survival of captivity, single-handed upbringing of her sons, and final act of agency—complicates simplistic victimhood narratives, highlighting her strength within a restrictive social framework.

Sita's trauma mirrors historical realities of *The Ramayana's* era, particularly the Second Urbanization's codification of gender norms, as seen in texts like *The Manusmriti*, which linked women's chastity to social order. Her experiences of exile and abduction resonate with historical patterns of displacement due to warfare, trade migrations, or environmental shifts, which disproportionately affected women. Rama's prioritization of public perception over Sita's dignity reflects the pressures on rulers to maintain social cohesion, possibly echoing dilemmas faced by historical monarchs during the rise of centralized polities like the Mauryan Empire. *The Ramayana's* focus on Sita's suffering thus serves as both a narrative of idealized femininity and a critique of the societal structures that perpetuate her pain. From a trauma studies perspective, Sita's experiences reveal convergences with and divergences from modern frameworks. Her silence in later episodes, particularly post-abandonment, aligns with Caruth's notion of trauma as an unarticulated wound, where pain resists narrative integration. The repeated tests of her chastity (*Agni Pariksha* and the final trial) mirror trauma's compulsive re-enactment, as societal demands force Sita to relive her suffering. However, unlike Western trauma narratives that seek closure or psychological healing, the Ramayana sublimates Sita's pain into her divine role, emphasizing cosmic resolution over individual recovery. This cultural divergence underscores the need to adapt trauma theory to account for Indian philosophical constructs like karma and dharma, which frame suffering as an integral part of existence rather than an aberration requiring resolution. Sita's trauma in *The Ramayana*—encompassing exile, abduction, public shaming, and abandonment—illuminates the complex interplay of gender, duty, and suffering in ancient Indian literature. Her narrative reflects the historical realities of patriarchal norms and social upheaval in early urban India while critiquing the constraints imposed on women. Through a trauma studies lens, Sita's story reveals universal patterns, such as silence and repetition, alongside culturally specific responses rooted in *dharma* and cosmic destiny. Her resilience and subtle defiance make her a powerful figure for exploring trauma in ancient contexts, bridging ancient Indian wisdom with contemporary scholarly inquiry into the nature of suffering and survival.

Gendered Trauma and Resilience: A Comparative Analysis of Sita in *The Ramayana* and Draupadi in *The Mahabharata*

Draupadi's trauma in the Mahabharata (c. 400 BCE–400 CE), like Sita's in *The Ramayana* (c.

500 BCE–100 CE), is profoundly gendered but unfolds in a more public, collective, and confrontational manner, reflecting the distinct socio-cultural contexts of their respective epics. Draupadi's suffering begins with the disrobing episode in the *Sabha Parva*, where, after Yudhishthira loses her in a dice game, she is dragged to the Kaurava court and publicly humiliated as Duryodhana attempts to strip her. This physical, social, and symbolic violation, exacerbated by the silence of her husbands and elders, strips her of dignity and agency, though Krishna's divine intervention mitigates the assault. The trauma fuels her rage and quest for vengeance, marking her as a catalyst for the epic's central conflict. Her 13-year exile (*Vana Parva* and *Virata Parva*) compounds her vulnerability, as she endures forest hardships and later faces sexual harassment by Kichaka while disguised as a maid in Virata's court, highlighting the intersection of gender and powerlessness. As the sole surviving female protagonist in the Kurukshetra war's aftermath (*Stri Parva*), Draupadi grapples with the deaths of her sons, brothers, and kin, her public mourning reflecting both personal and collective loss. Unlike Sita's private, stoic endurance in *The Ramayana*, Draupadi's trauma is marked by public violation and vocal defiance, with her strategic alliances and outspokenness contrasting Sita's restraint.

Comparing their traumas reveals distinct patterns. Sita's suffering is primarily private, centered on chastity and betrayal by her husband and society, as seen in her abduction by Ravana (*Aranya Kanda*), trial by fire (*Yuddha Kanda*), and abandonment (*Uttara Kanda*). These events emphasize isolation and societal scrutiny, with repeated tests of her purity aligning with modern trauma theory's concept of compulsive re-enactment, where pain is relived through external demands. Draupadi's trauma, however, is public and multifaceted, encompassing the dramatic disrobing, exile, harassment, and war's collective devastation, intersecting with her roles as queen and co-wife in a polyandrous marriage. *The Ramayana* depicts Sita's trauma with restraint, her minimal dialogue and silence in later episodes (e.g., post-abandonment) aligning with Cathy Caruth's "unclaimed experience," where trauma resists articulation, and her return to the Earth suggests cosmic closure over personal healing. In contrast, *The Mahabharata* vividly portrays Draupadi's trauma, with explicit descriptions of her humiliation and vocal responses, such as her courtroom arguments challenging *dharma*, integrating her suffering into the epic's exploration of moral ambiguity without a singular resolution.

Their resilience and agency further differentiate them. Sita's resilience is quiet yet profound—rejecting Ravana, surviving captivity, and raising her sons alone—though her final return to the Earth is ambiguous, interpretable as agency (rejecting a judgmental society) or exhaustion from repeated trauma. Her agency operates within the *pativrata* ideal, subtly subverting it through her departure. Draupadi's resilience is assertive, seen in her defiance of the Kauravas, her role in rallying the Pandavas, and her survival of multiple violations, directly challenging patriarchal norms by questioning her husbands' inaction, though she remains constrained by her roles. Culturally, Sita's trauma is framed through *dharma* and the *pativrata* ideal, her pain sublimated into a cosmic narrative tied to her divine origin as Bhumi's daughter, reflecting *The Ramayana's* focus on idealized social order.

Draupadi's trauma, framed through *dharma* and *karma* in *The Mahabharata's* morally complex context, questions the righteousness of *dharma* itself, with her suffering catalyzing the Kurukshetra war and aligning with collective justice. Historically, Sita's trauma mirrors the Second Urbanization's codification of gender norms, as seen in texts like *The Manusmriti*, where female chastity was tied to social stability, and her exile and abduction resonate with historical displacements due to trade or conflicts. Rama's prioritization of public opinion

reflects monarchs' pressures in emerging urban polities. Draupadi's trauma reflects a society grappling with political fragmentation and moral chaos, possibly echoing post-Vedic tribal conflicts or Mauryan-era consolidation, with her public humiliation and polyandrous marriage highlighting debates on social hierarchies and kinship. Through a trauma studies lens, both figures exhibit universal trauma patterns—Sita's silence and Draupadi's vocal pain as "unclaimed experiences," and their repeated violations as reenactments—but their resolutions diverge. Sita's trauma is resolved through cosmic transcendence, while Draupadi's fuels collective action, necessitating adaptation of modern trauma theory to account for Indian philosophical frameworks like dharma and karma. Thus, Sita and Draupadi's traumas illuminate the interplay of gender, duty, and resilience in ancient Indian literature, bridging universal and culturally specific responses to suffering.

Applying modern trauma theory to Sita and Draupadi's experiences reveals both convergences and divergences. Both figures exhibit hallmarks of trauma: Sita's later reticence reflects silence, while Draupadi's recurring violations—such as the disrobing in the *Sabha Parva* and harassment by Kichaka—parallel Sita's repeated chastity tests, aligning with trauma's pattern of compulsive re-enactment. Their unrepresentable pain, evident in Sita's internalized grief post-abandonment and Draupadi's courtroom humiliation, resonates with Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as an "unclaimed experience" that resists articulation. However, divergences arise in their narrative resolutions. Sita's trauma in *The Ramayana* is sublimated into cosmic transcendence, with her return to the Earth aligning with the epic's emphasis on *dharma* and divine destiny, reflecting a society consolidating patriarchal norms. In contrast, Draupadi's trauma in *The Mahabharata* fuels collective action and moral inquiry, catalyzing the Kurukshetra war and questioning dharma's righteousness, mirroring a society grappling with ethical complexity. Modern trauma theory's focus on individual healing contrasts with both epics' prioritization of societal and cosmic frameworks, necessitating adaptation to account for Indian philosophical constructs like *karma* and *dharma*. Sita and Draupadi's traumas, though rooted in gendered suffering, differ in scope, expression, and resolution. Sita's private, stoic endurance reflects *The Ramayana's* patriarchal ideals of wifely devotion, with her pain integrated into a cosmic narrative, while Draupadi's public, confrontational suffering challenges *dharma*, driving collective justice in a morally ambiguous context. Through a trauma studies lens, their narratives reveal universal patterns—silence and repetition—alongside culturally specific responses rooted in *dharma* and *karma*, illuminating how ancient Indian literature processed gendered suffering within patriarchal and cosmic frameworks. Their stories bridge ancient wisdom with modern inquiry, highlighting the enduring interplay of gender, trauma, and resilience.

Sita and Lakshmi: A Comparative Analysis of Human and Divine Trauma in Ancient Indian Literature

Sita in Valmiki's *Ramayana* (c. 500 BCE–100 CE) and Lakshmi in Puranic texts like the *Vishnu Purana* and *Sri Sukta* (c. 1500 BCE–500 CE) present contrasting experiences of trauma, linked by Sita's identity as Lakshmi's incarnation yet distinct in their nature, context, and resolution. Sita's trauma is human and gendered, unfolding through exile, abduction by Ravana, the *Agni Pariksha*, and abandonment, rooted in patriarchal scrutiny of her chastity and role as a *pativrata*. Her suffering—marked by isolation, public humiliation, and betrayal by Rama—is prolonged and internalized, with her silence in later episodes aligning with Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as an "unclaimed experience." Her resilience is stoic, seen in her defiance of Ravana and raising her sons alone, yet her final return to the Earth, while possibly an act of

agency, suggests exhaustion from repeated societal judgment. This trauma reflects the Second Urbanization's codification of gender norms, where female chastity was tied to social order, and resonates with historical vulnerabilities of women amid trade and warfare. In contrast, Lakshmi's trauma is divine and cosmic, evident in her departure from the world during periods of *adharma*, as seen in *the Vishnu Purana* when she abandons realms overtaken by greed or demonic rule, or during the *Samudra Manthan* in the *Bhagavata Purana*, where she navigates conflict between gods and demons. Her suffering is not personal but existential, tied to her role as prosperity's source, with her temporary loss of influence resolved through autonomous re-emergence and alignment with Vishnu to restore cosmic harmony. This reflects the Gupta period's Vaishnava emphasis on prosperity and divine partnership, symbolizing societal concerns about moral renewal.

Despite their connection as incarnation and deity, Sita and Lakshmi's traumas differ significantly. Sita's is human, gendered, and constrained by patriarchal norms, with suffering imposed by external forces (Ravana, Rama, society) and resolved through spiritual transcendence within *The Ramayana's* social order. Lakshmi's is divine, episodic, and tied to cosmic balance, with her agency—seen in her deliberate withdrawal and return—transcending patriarchal limits and emphasizing divine feminine power. Sita's response is internalized, her agency subtle within the *pativrata* ideal, while Lakshmi's is externalized, actively shaping cosmic outcomes. Historically, Sita's trauma mirrors anxieties about female chastity and royal legitimacy in an urbanizing society, while Lakshmi's reflects the integration of prosperity and devotion in a temple-based economy. From a trauma studies perspective, Sita's repeated chastity tests and silence evoke repetition and unrepresentable pain, resolved spiritually, whereas Lakshmi's departure and return transform cosmic disruption into renewal, bypassing personal trauma. Sita's trauma, grounded in prolonged human suffering and societal betrayal, appears more intense than Lakshmi's divine, symbolic distress, which lacks the personal and gendered dimensions of Sita's ordeal. Their narratives illuminate how ancient Indian literature processed suffering—Sita through patriarchal and *dharmic* frameworks, Lakshmi through cosmic and divine roles—bridging universal trauma patterns with culturally specific resolutions, and highlighting the interplay of gender, divinity, and resilience.

To provide a concluding note on the comparative trauma of Sita, Draupadi, and Lakshmi, I must first clarify that Lakshmi, as a divine figure in ancient Indian literature, does not have a narrative of trauma in the same way Sita (*Ramayana*) and Draupadi (*Mahabharata*) do. Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, is primarily depicted in Vedic, Puranic, and epic texts as a divine consort of Vishnu, embodying auspiciousness and divine grace. Unlike Sita and Draupadi, who are human (or semi-divine) characters with detailed narratives of suffering, Lakshmi's role is largely symbolic and divine, with minimal focus on personal or gendered trauma. Thus, I will compare Sita and Draupadi's traumas, note the absence of a comparable trauma narrative for Lakshmi, and evaluate who among Sita and Draupadi suffers most, adapting the analysis to address Lakshmi's distinct context.

Comparative Trauma of Sita, Draupadi, and Lakshmi

Sita in Valmiki's *Ramayana* (c. 500 BCE–100 CE) and Draupadi in *The Mahabharata* (c. 400 BCE–400 CE) endure profound gendered traumas shaped by the patriarchal and dharmic frameworks of their respective epics, reflecting the socio-cultural realities of ancient India. Sita's trauma encompassing exile, abduction by Ravana, the *Agni Pariksha*, and abandonment—centers on private, internalized suffering tied to her role as the ideal wife

(*pativrata*). Her experiences of isolation, public scrutiny of her chastity, and betrayal by Rama highlight a deeply personal ordeal, framed within a cosmic narrative where her pain is sublimated into divine destiny as the daughter of Bhumi. Her resilience is stoic, seen in her defiance of Ravana and her solitary upbringing of her sons, yet her silence in later episodes and final return to the Earth suggest an unarticulated wound, aligning with modern trauma theory's concept of "unclaimed experience" (Caruth). Draupadi's trauma, by contrast, is public and multifaceted, marked by the disrobing in the *Sabha Parva*, exile, sexual harassment by Kichaka, and the collective devastation of the Kurukshetra war, which claims her sons and kin. Her suffering intersects with political and familial dynamics, reflecting her role as a queen and co-wife in a polyandrous marriage. Draupadi's outspoken defiance—challenging dharma in the courtroom and rallying the Pandavas—contrasts with Sita's restraint, and her trauma drives collective justice, embedded in *The Mahabharata's* morally complex exploration of ethical dilemmas.

Lakshmi, however, lacks a comparable trauma narrative in ancient Indian literature. As a goddess in texts like *The Vishnu Purana* and *Sri Sukta* of the *Rigveda* (c. 1500–500 BCE), Lakshmi is an embodiment of divine prosperity and Vishnu's consort, often depicted in celestial or symbolic roles rather than as a human figure enduring personal suffering. Unlike Sita and Draupadi, whose traumas are grounded in human experiences of gendered violation and societal expectations, Lakshmi's narratives focus on her divine attributes—bestowing wealth, ensuring cosmic balance, or accompanying Vishnu's *avatars* (e.g., as Sita in the *Ramayana*). While some Puranic stories, such as her temporary departure from Indra in the *Vishnu Purana* due to his arrogance, suggest a symbolic "loss" of prosperity, this is not framed as personal trauma but as a cosmic consequence. Lakshmi's divine status insulates her from the human vulnerabilities that define Sita and Draupadi's suffering, making her inclusion in a trauma comparison challenging. Her role is more abstract, lacking the visceral, gendered, or psychological dimensions of trauma seen in the epics.

Differences Between Sita's and Lakshmi's Trauma

Sita's trauma in Valmiki's *Ramayana* (c. 500 BCE–100 CE) contrasts sharply with Lakshmi's context in Puranic texts like the *Vishnu Purana* and *Sri Sukta* (c. 1500 BCE–500 CE), despite their connection as incarnation and deity. Sita, though born from Bhumi, is portrayed as a human figure enduring tangible, gendered suffering—abduction, captivity, public shaming via the *Agni Pariksha*, and abandonment—rooted in patriarchal expectations of chastity and her role as Rama's wife. Her trauma drives the Ramayana's narrative, exploring duty and resilience, with her pain resolved through cosmic transcendence as she returns to the Earth, reflecting the Second Urbanization's codification of gender norms linking female virtue to social order. Lakshmi, as a goddess, operates on a divine plane, her "suffering" limited to symbolic acts like departing the world during adharma (e.g., leaving Indra in the Vishnu Purana or emerging during the Samudra Manthan). These events reflect cosmic rather than personal distress, prioritizing her role in maintaining prosperity and divine harmony over emotional conflict. Unlike Sita's human trauma, Lakshmi's narratives lack a personal or gendered dimension, serving didactic purposes within Vaishnava theology's focus on cosmic order. While Sita's suffering engages with the human anxieties of urbanizing societies, Lakshmi's depictions address broader cosmological concerns, her divine essence overshadowing the human trauma experienced by Sita, even as her incarnation.

Who Suffers Most?

Assessing which of Sita, Draupadi, or Lakshmi endures the most suffering is complex, as Lakshmi's divine status in Puranic texts like *the Vishnu Purana* (c. 1500 BCE–500 CE) precludes human trauma narratives. Her symbolic "losses," such as departing during adharma (e.g., leaving Indra), are narrative devices illustrating cosmic principles, not personal or gendered pain. The comparison thus focuses on Sita in Valmiki's *Ramayana* (c. 500 BCE–100 CE) and Draupadi in *The Mahabharata* (c. 400 BCE–400 CE), whose human traumas hinge on their nature, scope, and resolution. Sita's suffering—encompassing exile, abduction, the *Agni Pariksha*, and abandonment while pregnant—is deeply personal, prolonged, and marked by repeated betrayals by Rama, who prioritizes societal perception over her dignity. Her isolation in Lanka and public shaming amplify her psychological distress, with her silence in later episodes suggesting internalized pain, aligning with Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as an "unclaimed experience." Her return to the Earth, while possibly agentive, reflects exhaustion from relentless scrutiny, and *The Ramayana's* framing of her suffering as a test of *pativrata* virtue offers little personal closure, rendering her trauma enduring. Draupadi's trauma, conversely, is intense and public, with the disrobing in the Sabha Parva reverberating through exile, harassment by Kichaka, and the loss of her sons in the Kurukshetra war. Her suffering spans personal violation and collective devastation, catalyzing the war, yet her outspoken agency—challenging dharma and rallying the Pandavas—secures collective resolution, though her personal losses remain profound. Sita arguably suffers most due to the repetitive, isolating nature of her trauma and lack of personal reconciliation, exacerbated by patriarchal betrayal. Draupadi's agency and the war's resolution mitigate her suffering, though her public humiliation and familial losses are comparably intense. This assessment remains subjective, as prioritizing personal betrayal versus collective loss shifts the evaluation. Both figures' narratives, grounded in the historical contexts of urbanizing India and moral complexity, illuminate gendered suffering through dharmic frameworks, bridging universal trauma patterns with culturally specific resolutions.

Conclusion

Sita and Draupadi's traumas, rooted in gendered suffering within patriarchal frameworks, reflect the historical realities of ancient India—Sita's private endurance mirroring the Second Urbanization's rigid gender norms, and Draupadi's public defiance highlighting *The Mahabharata's* morally complex society. Lakshmi, as a divine figure, lacks a trauma narrative, her role focusing on cosmic balance rather than human suffering, rendering her incomparable in this context. Sita's trauma, marked by prolonged isolation and betrayal, appears more enduring than Draupadi's, whose agency and collective resolution offer some narrative closure. Through a trauma studies lens, their stories reveal universal patterns (silence, repetition) and culturally specific responses (*dharma*, *karma*), illuminating how ancient Indian literature processed gendered suffering. Sita and Draupadi's narratives bridge ancient wisdom with modern inquiry, underscoring the enduring interplay of gender, trauma, and resilience; while Lakshmi's divine transcendence highlights the distinct treatment of human versus divine figures in these texts.

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