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Alienation and Reunion of the Characters of the Rāmāyana

1. Introduction

The most striking quality about Indian art, be it sculpture, drama or story-telling, is the way in which the onlooker can become involved for purely aesthetic reasons. The form and texture of a sculpture may be amazingly pleasing even if isolated in a museum, or a dance-drama may seem so true to life and human nature, as well as rhythmic and colourful, that one becomes absorbed quite before one is conscious at all of what it is all about. I myself came to India because I was trained in art, and had become interested in the art of India in particular. To deepen my study I began to do stone carvings myself, using the ancient themes, for example "Ranganathan" (Vishnu asleep on Ananta Seshha) "Varaha and the Bhudevi" (Vishnu rescuing the earth-goddess) and "Hanuman" (the monkey-god who rescued Sita). Stone being such a slow medium, and giving plenty of time for thought, I soon discovered that I was not dealing here with things which were beautiful for beauty's sake alone. For a Hindu it would doubtless be obvious that all the temple images were symbols of a particular religious world view. To one trained in a predominantly Western style of art this religious dimension could come as quite a surprise. However, once this aspect of Indian art is understood and appreciated then whole areas seemed to open up. Ananda Vardhana, the great exponent of the quality called "Dhvani" in art, has used a simile which illustrates this quality which he sees as essential to art. In a dark room there are two objects, a lamp and a water pot. They are quite distinct. Only, however if the lamp is lit, can the water pot be seen and appreciated. One of the various points that he tries to convey in this illustration is that without *dhvani* or that unseen grace which is in art one cannot become aware of certain life experiences, even though the art may not be specifically about these things, yet it may have this illuminating power. So using this method I have tried to explore the particular experience of "Loss and Alienation". This is not only

a personal preoccupation, it has been a feature of much twentieth century art. In particular the work of Edward Munch, a Norwegian painter may be mentioned. He said that he wanted to paint "the life of the soul." He wanted to show what people were really experiencing. He also did not want art for art's sake. There is a compelling truthfulness about his work, however one is left feeling rather forlorn, or perhaps faithless might be a better word. By bringing these experiences to the *Rāmāyaṇa* story as I have tried to do in the following essay the aim is to see how the characters there react to loneliness and alienation, according to the world view of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

2. The *Rāmāyaṇa* in Outline

For those unfamiliar with the *Valmiki Rāmāyaṇa* on which these reflections are based, a brief outline of the major events in the story are given below.

The epic is prefaced with the scene witnessed by Valmiki, the sage. In the forest he saw two *krauncha* birds performing a dance together. A hunter came and killed one of them. Seeing the sorrow of the remaining bird, Valmiki was moved to poetry and from this mood arose the *Rāmāyaṇa* story.

In ancient India there was a famous city called Ayodhya. The king was Daśaratha. He had several wives. The first, Kaushalya gave birth to Rama (who was therefore the eldest son) the second, Kaikeyi had Bharata and the third, Sumitra had Lakshman. When the king was old he planned to make Rama his successor and from early on this was clearly his intention. Just before the coronation of Rama, Queen Kaikeyi was persuaded by an old servant to prevent this, so that her son Bharata could become king. She prevailed on Daśaratha to give her two boons, owing to her since many years. He agreed, and according to one of the boons, Daśaratha had to exile Rama to the forest.

Rama, his wife Sita, and his brother Lakshman, therefore, left Ayodhya. In the forest they meet with many adventures. The most traumatic was when Sita saw a remarkably enchanting deer. She forced Rama and then Lakshman to pursue it, although both suspected its magic qualities. It turned out to be a demon in disguise. While Rama and Lakshman were away Ravana, the demon king of Lanka came and abducted Sita to his kingdom. Rama and Lakshman were distraught.

They roamed the forest, trying to discover the whereabouts of Sita. They met the monkeys' kings Sugriva and Hanuman. Sugriva had also lost his wife. Rama and Lakshman helped to relieve her. The monkeys then helped to rescue Sita. Hanuman was sent first as an envoy to discover her and reassure her of Rama's determination to overcome Ravana. With the help of the monkeys a bridge was made over the sea to Lanka. A fierce battle ensued in which Ravana was defeated.

Having won Sita back again Rama felt unable to accept her back at once. She was then tested in the fire and *Agni*, the god of the fire, prevented her from being burnt, thus proving to everyone her spiritual strength. Rama and Sita then returned as king and queen to Ayodhya.

3. The Poetic Inspiration and Intent

In the epic *Rāmāyana* there is constant repetition of the experience of loss. Each character reacts according to his or her own constitution. By following through this theme perhaps it might be possible to have some idea about how to deal with a present experience of alienation, perhaps from tradition, or from nature (as a result of the heavy exploitation of nature by man) or due to an imbalance between the active and passive functions in the psyche. Whatever the cause of alienation, the resulting feeling may perhaps be said to be of loneliness, or anger and frustration, even bitterness caused through meaninglessness. Throughout the poem the feelings towards the situations encountered, especially by Rama and Sita, are described in detail and give great insight into two "ideal" characters who are in a state of alienation, but who never actually lose faith, even though they are forced to suffer for it and experience all sorts of emotions.

The very first thing which moved the poet to write the poem was the sight of two Krauncha birds in the forest. They were part of nature and together formed a wholeness. Their beauty as they danced together in an attitude of love moved him immeasurably, especially seeing the smooth white plumage amidst the trees. Suddenly, a hunter came and shot the male bird with his arrow and the female bird was distraught. Her loved one was no more. The poet was overcome by sorrow and from his *shoka* came forth *shloka* as he cursed the hunter in a rhythmic metre. The bird seemed cut off from nature and what had been a harmonious whole, the two of them in their natural environment the forest.

However the Rishi (poet or seer) did not leave things there, with only a curse. He was so surprised by the rhythmic way in which the *shloka* had come out that he asked Brahma the meaning. Brahma came and told him that it was the beginning of a long poem, the story of Rama and Sita which he must relate. And so the poem starts. It is very long and could be experienced from many different angles, but here I intend to look at the experience of loss—firstly, when Rama loses the throne and kingdom, and thus Dasaratha loses his son, as does Kaushalya, and together Sita, Lakshmana and Rama lose their home. And, secondly, I want to think of the most traumatic alienation, the separation of Rama and Sita.

4. The Play of Fate and Fidelity to Dharma: From the Throne of Glory to the thorns of the Forest

What is most striking about Rama's loss of everything that he had experienced of life, which was to have given him position and power, is his total indifference to material things. He says: "I am not interested in wealth or in living in the world—know me to be equal to the Rishis".

One might have thought that he would have felt angry or bitter, or showed some sign of disappointment, but no, his duty to his father's wishes, even if the father was so weak and decrepit, was far more important. Perhaps this could be compared with the call of vocation, which might in fact arise out of a decadent society (symbolized in the lustful Dasaratha). A vocation also makes demands from outside, hence the father as a symbol of this seems possible. Often a "spiritual" vocation, if the call is obeyed does need a degree of indifference to the recognition that a worldly position of power affords. Although Rama is indifferent to power, he is very sensitive to people and shows much concern for his mother Kaushalya.

One might have thought that he would regret the loss of his secure and comfortable life. At the moment of parting this does not cross his mind for the wishes of Dasaratha are all-important and the possibility for him to keep his word to Kaikeyi. It is only when he loses Sita that, time and again, he feels it as the final blow (the loss of Sita) on top of losing the throne and the kingdom. But as he leaves there is a tremendous sense of detachment and recognition of its being the work of fate.

Happiness, sadness, birth and destruction—if we do not understand, it is because of fate. Even great Rishis who are held by *tapas* come under desires. All of a sudden something falls on one's head and something started with great efforts is stopped, and that is fate.¹

The strength of the poem is that all the more human reactions to the situation which Rama did not have are experienced by the other characters; so Kaushalya thinks very much about how Rama will survive in the forest living on fruits and roots. Dasaratha is also distressed and says: "How shall I see the sad plight of the talented Rama who deserves comforts and is unworthy of suffering?"²

Then Lakshmaṇa really does experience uncontrollable anger against Kaikeyi. He wants to fight for the throne, and says to Rama: "The valiant who are of strong mind never seek shelter in fate." The people of Ayodhya all want Rama to be king and even as he goes to tell Sita what has happened because of Kaikeyi's wish, they are all praising him and yet he is quite unmoved. He has one idea in his head which is, how to do the command of his father so that his father may not fall away from Dharma by going against his word and this is enough to outweigh all the feelings of attachment and anger.

Sita's position in the parting from Ayodhya is similar, in that she shows no attachment to riches or position. She has one immensely strong attachment and that is to Rama; and because of that her going to the forest and the ascetic life, about which she is fully warned by Rama, causes her little anxiety. In fact she says to Rama:

"No more exertion will be caused to me in following at your heels on the paths in the forest, than in strolling in a garden or in sleep"³

To her the quality of life is dependent only on sharing it with Rama. Like him she also sees it as her fate to go to the forest, because there was an astrological prediction of a hermitess when she was a child that she should go there when she grew up.

1. *The Rāmāyaṇa, Book II, Ayodhyā Khaṇḍa, Canto XXII.* 1. (hereafter *A. Khanda*). All quotations from *The Rāmāyaṇa* have been taken from the Gita Press translation edited by Sri C.L. Goswami, First Edition, 1969, published by Motilal Jalan at Gita Press, Gorakpur.

2. *Ibid.*, XV. 11.

3. *Ibid.*, XXIX. 14.

So in the first stage of loss the people who feel it most are the people left behind in Ayodhya. In fact they all come following Rama, Sita and Lakshmana as they leave for the forest. Apart from Dasaratha, who is really inconsolable and dies of grief, Rama does in fact find a way of persuading Kaushalya and Bharata to survive their grief—Kaushalya by reminding her of her wifely duties, and Bharata by promising his return and by repeating again and again the importance of a father's command and its context within *dharma* as a whole.

5. The Snares of the Wicked: The enchanting Deer

The initial entry into the forest seems enjoyable and together they sport, so that one is reminded of the harmony of the Krauncha birds as they danced in the forest. They have various adventures which all lead up eventually to the plot of Ravana to take his revenge on Rama who insulted his Rakshasi sister. By threats and force he persuades Maricha to distract Rama and Lakshmana, so as to leave Sita vulnerable and alone. Thus Maricha transforms himself into the most beautiful deer, shining with jewels.

Sita is determined to have it, either alive or dead. Rama and Lakshmana, specially the latter, suspect some trick but Sita will not be dissuaded when she hears the cry for help of Rama, and she uses every means to force Lakshmana to go, even insinuating that his wish to stay by her must be some plot of his to take advantage of her while her husband is away. So she is left alone, and the inevitable occurs, Ravana uses the opportunity to approach her and abduct her.

In terms of the theme of alienation, one possible interpretation of this would seem to be like when the religion and the spirit become divided. Perhaps, though it is very simplistic and only to give an idea it is like when in Christianity the church becomes bewitched with morality or social service as a sort of means of salvation and expression of religious experience, or in Hinduism perhaps an exaggeration could be found in endless rituals and rules of purity which are no longer connected with the spiritual experiences of people. Having been totally absorbed in these things, when eventually the people return from chasing their particular magic deer they are shocked to discover the spirit (symbolized by Sita) having been left so vulnerable and unprotected by any religious value, that it has been taken away—and hence the awful

feeling of emptiness, say in endless rituals which are not related to the spirit. It may be added however, that this situation of loss of meaning, which was what Rama experienced when he returned to find Sita missing, was in fact encouraged by the spirit (Sita). It was Sita who forced them to chase the deer. So, perhaps, this division between the spirit and the religion is actually needed to discover a deeper and different union between the two "And the Church must be forever building, and always decaying and always being restored".⁴

6. Alienation and the Loss of Meaning: Rama without Sita

Anyway how does Rama react when he comes back and finds Sita gone? At first he thinks she is playing and he asks the trees, flowers and plants where she might be and calls to her to stop teasing him. In terms of alienation, when religion first goes through this trauma of not having a meaning the primary reaction is to look close by, perhaps a return to older liturgies or a reinterpretation of meanings. However when Rama still does not find her, suddenly, his mood turns to anger. He says he will destroy the whole world with his magic weapons. Perhaps this represents the next stage of alienated man's reaction to the lack of meaning and charm in his life: fire off atomic bombs at the world and destroy it. But it is Lakshmana who brings Rama round and calms him down. As they go through the forest desperately searching, they see the remains of a chariot. He asks him to discover the particular cause of Sita's abduction and to direct his anger against that: "You ought not to annihilate the world for the offence of one individual. I shall surely try to ascertain whose is this chariot of war, and by whom and for what purpose it was broken with its yoke and external appendages".⁵ When Rama discovers Sita has really gone he acts like a madman, rushing hither and thither, wailing. It is Lakshmana who like a good friend to a man who has so many problems that he is quite unable to act, helps him to sort out which is the fundamental problem. They are directed by some deer to go in a southerly direction. The deer show by gesture "everything which words could express." This is like, for example, a sculpture which does not speak in words but which conveys much and can indicate a certain direction in a spiritual search.

4. T.S. Eliot, "The Rock".

5. *The Rāmāyaṇa, Book III, Araṇya Khaṇḍa, Canto LXV. 6* (hereafter *Ar. Khaṇḍa*).

7. The Spiritual Search of Life's Meaning : On the Path of Rediscovering Sita

This direction brings them to the scene of the struggle between Ravana and Jatayu. The vulture Jatayu tells them of Ravana, but he is dying from the wounds inflicted by him. Here Rama again breaks into a fit of grief : "My sovereignty is lost, exile to the forest has been forced on me, Sita too has disappeared and the bird (Jatayu, my ally in the forest) has all but died, such is my misfortune which can consume fire itself".⁶ He says that if he fell in the sea it would dry up from his flames of bad luck and grief. Jatayu does however tell them that it is Ravana who has taken Sita, and after cremating him according to the prescribed rites they proceed on their journey looking for Sita and for help against Ravana. At least now the direction of Rama's anger is guided. He cannot blame everything. Nevertheless, after the loss of Sita, Rama really feels things going from bad to worse and repeatedly he descends into a terrible experience of grief. Although it turns out eventually that Rama was a part of God, yet he deeply experiences feelings of joy and grief. His values are never shaken but in his attempts to keep to them he is often in tears and distraught.

The most poignant episode expressing this sense of loss and grief is at lake Pampa.

This fire of grief which has its source in the pangs of love and has been augmented by the charms of spring will forthwith consume one without delay as it were. This longing of my heart to meet her will reach its climax (even) as I am unable to perceive that beloved one and look on the charming trees.⁷

Rama's emotional experience is really heart-rending, and many more passages could be quoted to illustrate. Lakshmana's advice to Rama is also very significant—he stresses the need for exertion :

For the object of pursuit cannot be attained without exertion by those whose endeavour has been foiled and purpose thwarted. Strenuous effort alone, is powerful, O worthy sir! There is no might

6. *Ibid.*, LXVII. 24.

7. *The Rāmāyaṇa, Book IV, Kishkinda Khaṇḍa, Canto I.* 28 (hereafter *Kish. Khaṇḍa*).

greater than exertion. Indeed nothing whatsoever is difficult to attain in (all) the worlds for a man given to endeavour.⁸

The experience of Rama and Lakshmana at lake Pampa seems to be the most poignant description of that terrible melancholy caused by alienation. There is nothing more melancholy than the beauty of a Scottish landscape, especially if connected with the idealism of childhood memories, and the feeling that there is so little connection between the people who live there and nature or tradition, thus no meaning or charm. May not this feeling be compared to Rama's about his separation from Sita? "Surely there is no purpose in my surviving, O Lakshmana, unable as I am to see that lady (Sita) with lovely looks, eyes having fine eyelashes and gentle speech." (*Kish. Khanda* I.V. 28).

The awful meaninglessness experienced by Rama appears to be a similar situation, for Sita is absolutely a part of him and his sense of all delight on earth. Or in India, such a feeling might be aroused by seeing a beautiful temple built in ancient times and simultaneously to see people who are unable to find food or water and thus experiencing a terrible gap between what things once were and what they are now. One could think of many other examples, and even these two are very subjective and somewhat tentative ideas. But Lakshman's advice to tackle the problem with much energy seems very relevant. One of the reasons that this feeling of meaninglessness arises in the industrialized and exploited landscape and life style of the West is that no direct exertion is made in relation to nature. In a consumer society, which encourages a ready-made attitude to so many things, to exert oneself and use one's body, hands and mind to the full in making or doing anything is no longer thought necessary. But perhaps the rediscovery of the meaning depends upon making great efforts and doing work by hand and mind together. And even in the second case of the situation in India, exertion seems to be all-important in doing something to educate and help those apparently weaker sections of society which may otherwise be open to further exploitation.

It is just after the experience of spring at lake Pampa that they meet Hanuman and Sugriva, who are certainly the epitome of resourcefulness and exertion and they are intrinsic to the rescue of Sita. All

8. *Kish. Khanda, Canto* I. 120, 121.

Rama's education, intelligence and talents are in fact useless by themselves. Sugriva is so different from Rama, and yet they feel very close to one another because of their shared experience of loss—for Sugriva has also lost his most precious wife, and kingdom, and is also in a state of exile from it, like Rama. The alliance with Sugriva proves to be really creative even though at times exasperating for Rama,—like, for instance, when Sugriva has regained his wife and during the rainy season he is celebrating while Rama remains at a distance in a cave, his vow of exile preventing him from entering a city.

This quality of exertion connected with a search for wholeness and spiritual meaning is so often overlooked. One imagines that to be part of the church or any other religious organization in itself constitutes some sort of a goal but the only useful or creative association is a common search. Yet another interpretation might be to see the original marriage of Rama and Sita as the conventional relationship of the spirit and its social religious form. When the spirit was alienated from it (loss of Sita) it was necessary to search with people from totally different backgrounds, perhaps even different religions represented by the Vanaras. Although the problem of Rama and Sugriva is the same and what they want is also similar, that is the return of their respective wives, yet temperamentally they are so different. Sugriva has all the restless energy and appetites of a monkey. Although he is basically firm in keeping his word yet he is susceptible to all sorts of moods. When he first sees Rama and Lakshman he suffers fear, mistaking them to be an army sent by Vali. Later, when his wife is with him once again, he is quite carried away with his enjoyment of her and with drinking and merriment. However in spite of these differences, there is a common search and many other assets which compliment each other. For example, without Rama's magic arrows and strength Vali would not have been defeated, but without Sugriva's knowledge of geography, learnt when fleeing from Vali, Lanka, Ravana's Kingdom could never have been located.

8. The Feminine Experience of Alienation: Sita's Search in Patient Waiting

To come to Sita's experience of alienation, the finest distinguishing factor is her total immersion in Rama: Of course, Rama is also tremendously emotional about her but he always takes into account the outside world. For example, among all the other things that he thinks about

when he finds Sita missing is, how to tell his father. He thinks how Dasaratha will reapproach him for not keeping his promise by returning before time without Sita :

How, having plighted your word (to remain in exile for fourteen years) when charged by me (to do so) have you sought my presence here without completing the stipulated period (of fourteen years)? Fie on you, who are licentious and ignoble as well as a liar.⁹

Rama is constantly preoccupied with his duty, *dharma* and so on, whereas Sita's energy is all directed, like a true *bhakta*, towards Rama. Sita's is an inner strength. It is not because of what society will say that she retains her faith and purity, not because she will be praised but because she must, out of love for Rama. Sita seems to me to represent faith. Over and over again there are passages to show her lack of attachment to any material values. Her life has meaning and joy in relation to Rama, be he a king or an ascetic without any possessions roaming the forest. Over and over again, Ravana tempts her with power and wealth. After a lavish description of Ravana's riches "Pillars of ivory, gold, crystal and silver, and studded with diamonds and cats-eye jewels". . . . Ravana says to her: "The entire administration of this state of mine as well as my life, O large-eyed lady, stands consecrated to you".¹⁰ However, she constantly reviles him, enumerating the virtues of Rama, and never succumbs to any of his flatteries. She says he can chop her up, if he wishes, for her body alone is meaningless. It is her devotion to Rama that is all.

The fact that Sita is characterized as one who prefers to wait and resist rather than do anything, may seem anathema to the modern idea of femininity. However I would see Sita as representing the spiritual, emotional side of the soul. It is interesting that she married Rama at the age of seven, an age which is of great importance to a child of either sex. At this age there seems to be a need for the spiritual aspirations to find something greater than the child to be attached to. For this reason in the Catholic faith children have their first communion and in Zoroastrianism the Navjote is performed and the sacred thread put on Hindu boys. It seems necessary, therefore, to see Sita not as the archetypal female, but rather as that side of the soul which lives by faith and which is able to wait. Western society has almost reached

9. *Ar. Khanḍa, Canto LXI.* 6.

10. *Ibid., LV.* 8.

a point where this idea of waiting faithfulness, however much suffering it may cause, has been discarded for speedier, more active answers to life's problems. But it seems to me to be essential to be able to wait; and without this purity of Sita who was always there, the valour of Rama would never have been revealed. Rama's final intuition about his being a part of God is only after Sita has proved herself in the fire, and then Rama has accepted her. Throughout *The Rāmāyaṇa* one never gets the feeling that the spiritual experience of Rama or Sita was one more important than the other. They were different, but absolutely essential to one another.

Even if Sita were to be taken as a feminine model she was certainly not susceptible to the stereotyped feminine weaknesses such as egocentricity and the desire to be flattered, specially physically. Ravana tries to tell her that youth is fleeting but she sees nothing in that. "Let it go," she says, "rather than act against every instinct of her soul." Earlier on, the Sage Agastya has praised Sita remarking, "Ever since the dawn of time, it has been the nature of women to love a man only so long as he is in prosperity and give him up when he is in adversity. . . This wife of yours (Sita), is entirely free from these blemishes."¹¹

Sita never becomes bitter because Rama does not come. She blames her fate, and at the extremity when she feels she would like to kill herself by the fillet which fastens her hair she recriminates herself saying that, "I a stupid woman despatched the two sons of my father-in-law."¹² But even this she began by saying "It was surely the Time-Spirit who, having assumed the form of a deer, beguiled me, a woman of scanty fortune."¹³ Perhaps this is the reason that stultifying bitterness is not her experience because she sees her experience as fate and her misfortune. Had she been of a less faithful nature she might have felt that the fault was altogether hers. The sense of fate does not remove the terrible sense of despair but she does not blame herself : she only feels hopeless saying :

Only in vain has this virtue been practised by me and this exclusive devotion (of mine) to my husband has also proved futile in that I

11. *Ibid.*, XIII. 7, 5.

12. *The Rāmāyaṇa, Sundara Khaṇḍa, Canto XXVIII.* 10 (hereafter *Sund Khaṇḍa*).

13. *Ibid.*

do not behold you and separated from you, have grown pale and emaciated and lost all hope of being reunited with you.¹⁴

As happens repeatedly in *The Rāmāyaṇa*, when the character comes close to giving up from despair, some change occurs. In Sita's case, certain good omens prevent her from killing herself, and then Hanuman appears and gives her news of Rama. This mood of extreme melancholy also drove Rama when alone at lake Pampa to give up, but then the encouragement of Lakshmana and the meeting with Sugriva brought him through and in fact constituted the essence of his salvation. To return to Sita's ability not to feel bitterness: at the end when Rama has rescued her, Hanuman wants to punish the Rakshasis who have so cruelly tormented her. He says to her: "If you permit me, I for my part would surely make short work of all these notorious ogresses, by whom you have been intimidated in the past."¹⁵

But Sita knows that she will see Rama and therefore she is able to feel no sense of vindictiveness against them, and also again she sees the situation as a part of fate and therefore she says: "Who will be angry, O prince of monkeys, with obedient maid-servants who are dependent on a king because of their being in his service, and (as such) act according to others' command?"¹⁶

And she follows this by quoting an old maxim, "A superior man does not take into account the sin of those who have committed an offence (against him). . . compassion should be shown by a noble soul towards sinners as well as for the good, nay, even for those deserving death. . ."¹⁷ Finally, she sends a message to Rama: "I long to see my husband who is fond of his devotees."¹⁸ Therefore the reasons why Sita does not become bitter are primarily, because of her faith in Rama and her recognition of fate.

9. The Triumph of Truth: Sita tested in fire

When Rama and Sita finally meet the situation is by no means simple because their relationship is not a purely subjective experience,

14. *Ibid.*, XXVIII. 13.

15. *The Rāmāyaṇa*, Book VI, *Yuddha Khanda*, Canto XIII. 30 (hereafter *Yud. Khanda*).

16. *Ibid.*, CXIII. 34.

17. *Ibid.*, CXIII. 44.

18. *Ibid.*, CXIII. 49.

the meeting of two individuals. Rather they are part of a whole represented by the kingdom of Ayodhya and the position of Rama and Sita in that Kingdom. Although Sita's instinct is simply to be with her husband, Rama finds himself in a very confused state. Hearing that Sita, who had lived long in the abode of an ogre had arrived, Sri Rama, the destroyer of enemies, was filled with indignation and joy and felt miserable (too).¹⁹

He is keenly aware of what the people of Ayodhya will feel. He is also aware of himself as a man who has been insulted and who must punish Ravana who was wronged him. So his first reaction is that he has done this duty in retrieving Sita and in spite of his love for her, which he has spoken of throughout his sufferings, he is now faced again by the people of Ayodhya whose king he is. He sees himself as a figurehead and suddenly realizes that he cannot take back a woman who has lived in the palace of another. "My manliness has been witnessed, today my exertion has become fruitful, today I have fulfilled my vow and today I am the master of myself once more."²⁰ And he follows this with saying, "How can I accept again, you Sita who were squeezed into the arms of Ravana and regarded by him with an evil (lustful) eye?"²¹ Rama's reaction seems incredibly hard-hearted, when Sita's devotion and eagerness to meet him is taken into consideration. But Rama is acting as a man and a king. His conflict is evident but he abides by what he sees as his duty and he rejects Sita, and says: "Therefore go wherever you like, O Janaka's daughter".²² Like all human beings Rama needs evidence of the spiritual. It is because of his rejection and cruelty towards Sita, that she then steps into the fire in order to prove her absolute purity, and it is in this crisis that he has an intuition of his spiritual nature. "How do you ignore Sita falling into the fire?" say the gods.

How do you not recognize yourself to be the foremost of the hosts of gods? . . . You are the Vasu Rtadharmā, who was formerly a lord of creation and the first creator of all the three worlds, their self-constituted Ruler. . . You seem to ignore Sita as a common man would do.²³

19. *Ibid.*, CXIV. 17.

20. *Ibid.*, CXV. 4.

21. *Ibid.*, CXV. 20.

22. *Ibid.*, CXV. 18.

23. *Ibid.*, CXVII. 6-9.

Rama answers : "I account myself a human being, Rama by name, sprung from the loins of Dasaratha".²⁴ He is in fact very upset to see Sita enter the fire and his eyes are blinded with tears and he is at last ready to listen to the gods and to accept his spiritual nature. They announce his position among the gods, that he is in fact Vishnu the preserver. "You are Lord Narayana himself, the glorious god who wields the discus".²⁵ "Sita is (no other than) goddess Lakshmi (the divine consort of Lord Vishnu) while you are the same as Lord Vishnu."²⁶ Dramatically this rejection and final acceptance of Sita has a strong impact and two important points are conveyed. First of all, the people of Ayodhya have a witness in the fire god's protection and proof of Sita's absolute purity, and, secondly, Rama has acknowledged his spiritual nature and his place in the cosmos. The defeat of Ravana was not the only point of all Rama's exertions. There was also the display of Sita's devotion. She speaks of how her heart was always with Rama : "I was helpless when I came in contact with the person of Ravana ; I did not act out of my own free will on that occasion. . . that which is under my control, namely, my heart (ever) abides in you."²⁷

And this is confirmed by the god of fire. Having saved her from being burnt, he tells Rama : "With her mind set on you, the princess of Mithila never thought of that ogre, even while being tempted in various ways and threatened (by him)."²⁸

10. From the Pangs of Alienation to the Joy of Reunion

So the main things which emerge when Rama and Sita finally meet is a far deeper recognition of who each of them is. Not only does Rama realize that he is Vishnu, Sita also proves the meaning of her unusual birth from a furrow. Although Rama and Sita appear to have suffered like human beings and Rama has actually tried to reject Sita like a man only could, he is forced by the proof of Sita's indestructibility in the fire to realize that they are both spiritual beings. Had they been so represented at the beginning of the poem, the reader would not have entered into their feelings with such passion. He or she is

24. *Ibid.*, CXVII. 11.

25. *Ibid.*, CXVII. 13.

26. *Ibid.*, CXVII. 13.

27. *Ibid.*, CXVI. 8-9.

28. *Ibid.*, CXVIII. 9.

drawn to identify with all the shades of feeling because they are so human. Suddenly, at the end, we are amazed to discover that we have been absorbed in a story which is not merely human. But it is not only the listeners who are surprised by this dimension. Rama and Sita had certainly considered themselves spiritually bound to one another in marriage, to *dharma* and owe obedience to Dasaratha and so on, but the relation to the archetype Vishnu and Lakshmi they can only comprehend after the long ordeal of separation, suspicion and the test by fire.

The other important quality at the end of the ordeal is the acknowledgement of the monkeys. There is a picture of harmonious friendship between Rama's family and the monkeys. When they have all gone to Ayodhya there is a rather touching scene where: "Taking Sugriva by the hand . . . Bharatha . . . penetrated deep into the palace."²⁹

Rama placed the entire palace at Sugriva's disposal. Then there is the bestowal by Sita of the pearl necklace, given to her by Rama, on to Hanuman. The mutual interaction between such totally different characters without any sign of antagonism or threat on either side is very interesting. Differently interpreted it might have turned into a case of exploitation of the monkeys by the city dwellers. But in this case both parties were linked by feeling when Hanuman describes to Bharata the story of Rama as he tells of the meeting between Rama and Sugriva: "A meeting of hearts through affinity took place between them."³⁰

Their differences of "background" and temperament were no obstacle to a shared feeling of loss and need for recovery and wholeness. The other point which is notable to a modern reader, used to the development of characters, is that Rama and Hanuman interact but their relationship seems lateral, not a vertical one of superior and inferior. They do not bend themselves to one another's outlook. Perhaps, momentarily, Hanuman speaks in Sanskrit to impress them when he first meets them, but basically each sticks to his own *dharma*. Sugriva carries on with his wild naive monkey ways - letting Rama wait in the cave during the rainy season while he celebrates the return of his wife and kingdom. The strong contrast of outlook and character is not an obstacle to this identity of heart. Of course, eventually, Rama returns

29. *Ibid.*, CXXVIII. 46.

30. *Ibid.*, CXXVI. 35.

to his kingdom and they to theirs but the point of the relationship is to achieve individual wholeness that is for Sugriva to retrieve his wife and kingdom and for Rama his. In the modern desire for absolute equality differences are often interpreted as disadvantages whereas here that is not at all the preoccupation-alienation and restitution is important for each individual according to the temperament and circumstance of each. In the attaining of this relationship and interaction, the contribution of different resources may be essential, as it certainly was for Rama and Sugriva but neither felt threatened by it. To see the positive aspect of differences in a situation which can fossilize into an exploitative one or blossom into one of mutual help.

The experience of loss and alienation in the *Rāmāyana* is not by any means a simple theme and each character reacts to it in a different way. Not one of them however becomes bitter against another. The place of duty, truth and fate is clear and accounts for the reasons involved which land the people into situations of loneliness and misery. There is very little self-recrimination. This means reunion is also not as simple as the re-meeting of two people separated by circumstances; because the characters are part, first of all, of human society and, secondly, a part of the archetypal community of the gods, their relationship is not purely personal. There is nevertheless this element in it, and it is often the intense lyricism of two separated lovers that attracts us to the poetry but beyond this are their roles as King and Queen of Ayodhya or as son and daughter-in-law of Dasaratha. Therefore Sita has to be tested in the fire, and only out of this test comes the clarity for Rama of his real being, that he is Vishnu. So that the ultimate paradox of alienation seems to be that the Preserver, Vishnu only realizes himself in the face of loss. Preservation is not a fossilizing process of stagnant sameness but disintegration or separation as experienced by Rama and Sita, a series of searching and trials which, if faith is still there in spite of circumstances, and repeatedly Sita's unwavering belief in Rama and his in her is emphasized, then the periods of loneliness, exile and so on lead to a new wholeness and insight. In his understanding of himself as a man, the son of Dasaratha, Rama cannot accept Sita back sullied as he fears she may have been by Ravana. But when he understands himself as Vishnu he is ready to acknowledge her purity and sees the god of fire vouches for it. To be in a state of alienation or loss may not be the end of the world if one retains some sense of faith in that from which one is divided and sees it in a wider context than the purely subjective.