

Deconstructing Her: A Study of Four Female Characters in Christian and Hindu Texts

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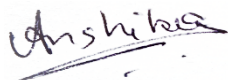
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List Of Abbreviations

Hebrew Bible - HB

JANT - Jewish Annotated New Testament

John- Jn

Luke- Lk

Mark- Mk

Matthew- Mt

NKJV- New King James Version

NRSV - New Revised Standard Version

RSV - Revised Standard Version

Deconstructing Her: A Study of Four Female Characters in Christian and Hindu Texts

Anshika Sharma

Centuries of male dominance have led to alterations and misinterpretations of religious texts, leading to ambiguity regarding the women in these narratives. This research engages with key texts of Hinduism and Christianity using literary analysis of the construction, presentation, and reception of the primary female characters: Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene in the Christian New Testament; Sītā from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and Draupadī from the *Mahābhārata*. This study examines the passages where these women are mentioned, and goes on to attempt a character reconstruction and challenge their popular stereotypical reception. The research is divided into four chapters beginning with Mary of Nazareth where her presence in the New Testament is traced through the Gospels. Passages emphasizing Mary's unwavering faith in God, her bravery, and her attempts to understand the divine events around her, are highlighted in order to demonstrate that she was more than a passive, obedient mother. Next, the four Gospels are examined to reconstruct Mary Magdalene's loyalty towards Jesus and his cause. Further, the passages that have been wrongly attributed to her are highlighted to get to the roots of the misconception that Mary was a woman engaged in prostitution. The study then moves to the Puranic Hindu texts and first examines Sītā by exploring her divinity, rage, intelligence, and bravery, a portrayal that contrasts to the modern reception of her character. Finally, popular myths about Draupadī are challenged as the study outlines her divine origins, her multiple public humiliations, her justified anger, and her spirited debates with the men around her. The study concludes with a contribution to feminist exploration and comparative theology of sacred texts through a comparative theological analysis of the four women in these texts.

Introduction

This thesis engages with key texts of Hinduism and Christianity as an attempt at comparative theology through textual analysis. The thesis will examine the construction, presentation, and reception of four primary female characters: Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene in the Christian New Testament; Sītā from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and Draupadī from the *Mahābhārata*.

Chapter One will focus on Mary of Nazareth. I still remember the main entrance to my Catholic school that had a white marble statue of Mary of Nazareth which made me, a Hindu, think Mary was, perhaps, the most powerful goddess in the Christian tradition. Years later when my Catholic friend told me that Mary was not considered a goddess, I realized that Christianity and Hinduism might disagree on the idea of divinity. This chapter will engage with the explicit and implicit references to Mary in the gospels. It will focus on important themes around Mary like the question of the virginal conception, her role in the contested nature of Jesus' family, her symbolism, and her possible status as a prophetess with reference to the Magnificat.

Chapter Two will focus on Mary Magdalene. My curiosity about the New Testament soon moved my conversations with my friend towards Mary Magdalene. Once again, my friend briefly explained how Mary came to be viewed as a woman who engaged in prostitution. This chapter will explore Mary's presence in Jesus' ministry, her presence in the Easter narratives of all four gospels, the possible meaning of Mary being possessed by 'demons', and the erroneous claim that Mary was a woman engaged in prostitution.

Chapter Three will focus on Sītā, the heroine of the Sanskrit epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Valmiki. My interest in the *Rāmāyaṇa* first arose through Yugo Sako's 1992 Japanese animated film, *Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama*. The film showed Rāma's adventures in the forest as he goes to war to rescue his abducted wife, Sītā. The rise of the Hindu right has reduced Sītā to a stereotypical female character, and this chapter attempts to present a new reading of her by exploring Sītā's intelligence, bravery, her relationship with Rāma, and her status as a goddess.

Chapter Four will focus on Draupadī, the heroine of the *Mahābhārata*. My introduction to the *Mahābhārata* was through B. R. Chopra's television series 'The Mahābhārata' (1988-90) which became a discussion point between my grandmother and I. I remember how my grandmother would often explain the complicated plot, and dive deep into the various sub-plots

the show had omitted. The chapter will highlight a few selected incidents from Draupadī's life: her birth, her marriage, her debating skills, her rage, her sorrow, and her status as a goddess.

Perhaps the biggest difference between the New Testament and the Sanskrit epics, is simply their length. The four gospels in the New Revised Standard Version, roughly make up one hundred pages of the New Testament. The *Rāmāyaṇa*, however, consists of 24,000 verses and is divided into seven books. To understand the length of the text better, we can take Robert Goldman's and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman's translation of the fifth book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Sundarakāṇḍa (which has been used for this thesis) as an example. The Sundarakāṇḍa is the shortest book of the epic and their translation is roughly two hundred pages, and that is after excluding their analysis of the text.¹ Moving on, the *Mahābhārata* is the longest epic of the world and it consists of 90,000 verses and is divided into eighteen books. The *Mahābhārata* is roughly three times the size of the Greek epics, *Homer* and *Illiad*, and even the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In fact, the story of Rāma and Sītā, is briefly summarized in 728 verses in a chapter titled *Rāmopākhyāna*, which is a part of the third book of the *Mahābhārata*. Moreover, Mary of Nazareth's and Mary Magdalene's limited inclusion in the gospels makes the task of comparing them to the Hindu figures quite challenging. Mary of Nazareth is directly included in the gospels sixteen times and Mary Magdalene is included twelve times. Meanwhile, Sītā and Draupadī are mentioned multiple times in their narratives, perhaps due to the length of the texts.

The second major difference between the New Testament and the Sanskrit epics is in relation to exegetical and theological scholarship. The Christian figures have years of scholarly exegesis available about them, while the Hindu figures have limited scholarly interpretations available. Although there is no clear answer, multiple factors including the lack of Theology as a discipline in India, the rise of the Hindu right, the fear of angering those in political power, and an oversight by Western scholars (till recent times) are perhaps responsible for the present lack of scholarly works that focus on Sītā and Draupadī. Additionally, since various adaptations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* exist, it is difficult to find works that focus on the versions chosen for this thesis specifically.

Despite the differences and difficulties stated above, in its conclusion, this thesis will make a modest contribution to the field of comparative theology by providing a comparative analysis

¹ *The Rāmāyaṇa of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India (Vol V) Sundarakaṇḍa*, trans. by Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

of the four women. The conclusion will also suggest how interreligious dialogue can prove to be helpful for domestic peace, global feminism, and international political ties.

Chapter One

Mary of Nazareth

1.1 Introduction

The Gospels are a key source in interpreting Jesus' teachings and understanding the roots of Christianity. A surface level reading of the texts is enough to suggest that Mary is not at the centre of the gospels. However, her lack of presence in the gospels also raises important questions about the figure of Mary. This chapter will explore the gospels with a focus on Mary of Nazareth in an attempt to present a brief character reconstruction towards the end. While the focus of the chapter is the analysis of Mary in the gospels, Mary's presence in the Qur'an will also be mentioned. The chapter will focus on the gospel narratives involving Mary alongside an analysis of major pericopes surrounding her—the idea of virginal conception, Mary's status as a possible prophetess in the work of Luke, her symbolism, and the possibility of her being a leading disciple in John's narrative.

1.2. The Synoptic Gospels

1.2.1 Mark

This section examines Mary in the Gospel of Mark. Composed between 66–74 CE the Gospel of Mark remains anonymous but an ancient tradition attributes it to John Mark (Acts 15.37) who supposedly composed it in Rome as a summary of Peter's preaching. The language of the narrative is simple, spoken Greek and it describes God's acts of salvation through Jesus.² The following subsection will explore Mary's place in Jesus' idea of reformed kinship.

1.2.1.1 Outside Her Son's Family

This subsection will explore the only Markan narrative that directly involves Mary. After appointing the Twelve, crowds gather around Jesus as he is preaching but 'when his family heard it, they went out to restrain him for people were saying he has "gone out of his mind"'

² Daniel J. Harrington, 'The Gospel According to Mark' in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (London: Chapman, 1993), pp. 596–629 (p. 596).

(Mk 3.21).³ Amidst this chaos, Jesus' 'mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him' (Mk 3.31). The crowd inform Jesus of his family's arrival and he asks 'who are my mother and my brothers? And looking at those who sat around him he said 'here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God, is my brother and sister and mother' (Mk 3.33–35).

Jesus' words clearly suggest that he wanted to move away from biological kinship ties. Adela Yarbro Collins suggests that Jesus' disciples perhaps considered themselves to be a 'metaphorical family', and claims that this passage places Mary outside of Jesus' family.⁴ Joanna Dewey states that the new family Jesus is advocating for is 'nonhierarchical, nonauthoritarian, egalitarian' where women are to be viewed as individuals.⁵ However, Mary, much like the women around her, is oppressed by the patriarchal society she lives in and Elizabeth Johnson suggests that at this stage, Mary is 'a foil for authentic discipleship'.⁶ Further, Johnson asserts that Mary knew that by preaching openly, Jesus 'opened the door to disaster for himself and his kin'. She argues that this looming danger is what makes Mary organize the whole family to try and stop Jesus.⁷

Mary only appears once in the Markan narrative and the clear objective of this scene is to introduce the idea of a new type of family with God at its head.⁸ The first glimpse of Mary portrays a confused mother who perhaps disagrees with her son's proposed reforms and

³ All quotations from the New Testament are from the NRSV unless stated otherwise. George Aichele examines the original Greek reading of the text and highlights that *ἐκεῖνοις παρὰ αὐτῷ* means 'those [from] beside him' tried to stop him but later versions turned it into 'his family'. This changes the dynamics of the whole scene because according to the Greek phrase, it was not Jesus' family that tried to stop him. George Aichele, 'Jesus' Uncanny 'Family Scene'', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 74 (1999), 29–48 (pp. 32–33).

⁴ Adela Yarbro Collins, ed. by Harold W. Attridge, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), pp. 237–38.

⁵ Joanna Dewey, 'The Gospel of Mark', in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary Vol II*, ed. Elisabeth Schullser Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), pp. 470–509 (p. 471).

⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 218.

⁷ Johnson, p. 220.

⁸ Even though Mark incorporates Mary into his narrative only once, she does receive an indirect mention later in Mk 6.1–6 where Jesus is identified as 'the carpenter, the son of Mary' (Mk 6.3) in Nazareth. C.S. Mann and Collins both agree that the identification of Jesus as the son of Mary was meant as an insult. Collins claims it was common to address a man as the son of his father even if the father was dead and that Jesus' identification through Mary suggests that it was being implied that his father was unknown and Jesus was illegitimate. Additionally, Collins notes the earliest surviving Mishnah (fragmentary) of Mark that reads, *τοῦ τέκτονος υἱὸς καὶ* which translates to '[Is not this the] son of the carpenter and [of Mary]'. Collins suggests that early scribes altered the text and made Joseph the carpenter instead as it served to squash the illegitimacy rumours around Jesus. On the contrary, James F. McGrath further explores the charge of Jesus' illegitimacy, and claims that Jesus' identification through Mary was not necessarily an insult unless it was used as an official designation. McGrath suggests that the identification through Mary could simply suggest that she was alive and present while Joseph was not. Collins, pp. 290–334; C.S. Mann, *Mark: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1986) p. 290; James F. McGrath, 'Was Jesus Illegitimate? The Evidence of His Social Interactions' in *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 5 (2007), 81–100 (pp. 88–90).

therefore, tries to stop him from endangering his life only to be openly rejected by him for a higher purpose that she may be unaware of.

1.2.2 Matthew

This section examines Mary in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew is believed to have been a converted rabbi, and an early Christian teacher and church leader. The Matthean narrative was supposedly composed between 80–90 CE and it is believed that the author drew on Mark and Q as a source. The dominant Matthean theme is the portrayal of Jesus as Christ and the approaching Kingdom of God.⁹ Four themes will be explored in the following subsections: the Matthean genealogy; Mary's forced dislocation; the idea of Mary's virginal conception; and Mary's place in Jesus' re-defined family.

1.2.2.1 The Fifth Woman

This subsection will explore the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew, and take a closer look at Mary and the connection between the four women. It will also note Matthew's subtle hints towards Joseph not being the biological father of Jesus. The Matthean genealogy traces Jesus' ancestry through both Joseph and Mary as it reads 'Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah' (Mt1.16).¹⁰ Raymond E. Brown and Richard Bauckham agree, that Matthew had no intention of naming Joseph as Jesus' biological father, because unlike other men who are introduced in the pattern of 'A was the father of B', Joseph is added as the husband of Mary rather than as the father of Jesus.¹¹ Another uncharacteristic aspect of the genealogy is the inclusion of four other women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Alexander Jones and Brown suggest that since the four women were foreigners, they were mentioned to prepare the readers for a connection between God's plan

⁹ Benedict T. Viviano, 'The Gospel According to Matthew', in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (London: Chapman, 1993), pp. 630–674 (p. 630).

¹⁰ Raymond E. Brown notes how some minor manuscripts as well as the Greek textual tradition, Old Latin, and Old Syriac versions, do not refer to Joseph as Mary's husband and instead call him her betrothed. Hence, the variant manuscript tradition reads: *ω μνηστευθεισα παρθενος η ετεκεν Ιησου Χριστον* which translates to, 'him to whom was betrothed a virgin, she who bore Jesus the Christ'. Brown suggests that different translations exist because the reading of Joseph as Mary's husband creates problems for the Matthean idea of Mary's virginal conception. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (London: Cassell & Collier, 1977), pp. 61–64.

¹¹ Brown, *Birth*, p. 61; Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), p. 21.

and the Gentiles.¹² Furthermore, Brown suggests that a possible common factor between the five women is that in post-biblical Jewish piety, their unions were perceived as the work of the Holy Spirit as God overcame human obstacles like widowhood or virginity to carry forward the Davidic line.¹³

Johnson offers a feminist analysis and suggests that Mary's inclusion with the four women could be due to something irregular about their sexual activity. She adds that this irregularity, places the women in a difficult situation, which forces them to take action and ultimately, they become divine allies.¹⁴ Johnson asserts that the irregularity in Mary's sexual activity is the possibility of her rape because it would make sense that 'the spirit of God would be with a woman who suffered such violence, able to bring good from an inestimably painful situation'.¹⁵ In agreement with Johnson, McGrath claims that since Nazareth was close to Sephoris where Roman soldiers were stationed, rape was not just a theoretical but a 'historical possibility'.¹⁶ Elaine Wainwright interprets the narrative further and claims that each woman finds herself 'in a situation that renders her dangerous to the patriarchal system, an anomaly, because she is not properly related to man either in marriage or as daughter' and adds that God intervenes to bring their situation back under the patriarchal norms.¹⁷

The scholarly claim that Mary was possibly raped, drastically alters the image of Mary being delighted by the news of her pregnancy. While the idea of Jesus being created adds a divine element to him, it steals an important possible aspect from Mary's life. Additionally, while the five women shared difficult experiences, it is imperative to note that the women partnered with God, overcame their difficulties, and came to be revered Jewish foremothers.

¹² Alexander Jones, *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), p. 45; Brown, p. 73.

¹³ Brown, *Birth*, pp.71–74.

¹⁴ Johnson, p. 224.

¹⁵ Johnson, p. 230.

¹⁶ McGrath, p. 81.

¹⁷ Elaine Wainwright, 'The Gospel of Matthew', in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary Vol II*, ed. Elisabeth Schullser Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), pp. 635–77, p. 642. Contrary to the feminist argument for Mary's sexual assault, scholar Peter Schäfer argues for the possibility of Mary having had an affair and notes the story of Ben Stada in the Babylonian Talmud. The story hints that the mother, Miriam, had an affair and therefore her son is called 'son of Stada' when referring to the husband and 'son of Pandera' when referring to the lover. While Schäfer notes that the text does not directly name Jesus, he also refers to Celsus' second century work, *Alethēs Logos*, wherein the philosopher tells a similar story as the Babylonian Talmud but names Jesus explicitly as the result of Mary's affair with a Roman soldier named Pandera. Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 15–23. The Jewish counternarrative used by Schäfer for his argument adds a possibly controversial element to Mary's life. Additionally, the counternarrative questions the idea of Jesus belonging to the house of David as his biological father is said to be Roman.

1.2.2.2 In Search of a Home

This subsection will examine Jesus' conception through the Holy Spirit and the forced displacement Mary faces after giving birth. The Matthean narrative introduces Mary's pregnancy as somewhat scandalous as the text reads that when 'Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit' (Mt 1.18). While Joseph is debating the idea of quietly divorcing Mary, he is informed that the child is God's blessing and that Joseph should accept Mary and the unborn child. After Mary gives birth, Joseph is warned by an angel in a dream to 'get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him' (Mt. 2.13). After Herod's death, an angel appears to Joseph again and asks him to 'take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel' (Mt. 2.20). However, Joseph is afraid of Herod's son, Archelaus, and finally the family settles down in Nazareth.¹⁸

Brown states that Jesus' conception through the Holy Spirit is to be understood as creative and not sexual because not only does the text never imply the Holy Spirit was male but in fact, the Holy Spirit is perceived to be feminine in Hebrew (the *Shekhinah*) and neuter in Greek.¹⁹ In agreement with Brown, Ulrich Luz states that the text never suggests that the Holy Spirit was Jesus' father.²⁰ On a different note, Johnson agrees that Mary's conception had no male participant and adds that in Mary's collaboration with the Holy Spirit 'the end of the patriarchal order is announced'.²¹

Mary's life is changed forever as she finds herself pregnant outside of marriage, one possibility being physical abuse, and risks being publicly disowned by her betrothed. There is a brief moment of relief as Joseph accepts her, but she is soon forced to flee Bethlehem after giving birth and she never returns due to the potential threat to her and her son's life. Mary's life was marked by danger, threats by people in powerful positions, and displacement and the popular picture of utopia surrounding the birth narrative must be reassessed.

¹⁸ Even though the Matthean narrative places Joseph at the centre of events, he finds no mention in the Qur'an. In the Qur'an, Mary moves to a secluded spot to give birth and receives assistance in the form of water and food from God (Qur'an 19.22–25).

¹⁹ Brown, *Birth*, pp. 123–124.

²⁰ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, trans. by James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), p. 99.

²¹ Johnson, p. 239.

1.2.2.3 Creating the Virgin

The virginal conception is viewed as the fulfilment of God's promise to David in Isaiah, 'therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel' (Isaiah 7.14). This subsection will examine the different understandings of this prophecy that perhaps influenced the Matthean narrative and led to the creation of the Virgin Mary.

Brown raises a key point and claims that the Masoretic Text of the HB uses the Hebrew word 'almāh or 'young girl' which was rendered παρθενοῦς or 'virgin' in the Septuagint.²² Further, Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler note the future tense of Isaiah and suggest that it clarifies that it was not to be a miraculous conception, but a biological one via intercourse. Levine and Brettler also note that while in Isaiah the parents were asked to name the child, Matthew changes it to 'they will call his name' (Mt. 1.23) which alludes to Jesus being given a name by his followers. They conclude that early Jews were familiar with the narrative of miraculous births with God's aid, but Matthean use of Isaiah to legitimise the claim was possibly surprising due to significant differences between the texts.²³ Moreover, Brown claims that Greco-Roman and other pagan religions formed an influence for a virginal conception story and adds that while Isaiah 7.14 was not prophesizing a virgin birth, early Greek speaking Jews interpreted it as such.²⁴ Brown further suggests that perhaps the strongest reason that the idea of Jesus' virginal conception developed was the public knowledge of Jesus' birth before Mary's marriage, and his identification through Mary which could indicate Mary's widowhood, Jesus' illegitimacy, or that his father was unknown.²⁵

The idea of virgin birth soon merged with the idea of Mary's perpetual virginity. The view that Mary had a virgin birth and abstained from sex for the rest of her life emerged emphatically. However, Sally Cunneen notes that the birth narrative does not bear any asexual connotations because the New Testament has no evidence of Mary being physically intact during childbirth or not having any sexual relations after Jesus was born.²⁶ Cunneen mentions a Coptic document included among the proverbs of the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) that claims that Mary retained her virginity even after giving birth and states that for fourth-century spiritual leaders, Mary

²² Brown, *Birth*, p. 145.

²³ Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Bible With and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020), pp. 210–11.

²⁴ Brown, *Birth*, pp. 522–23.

²⁵ Brown, *Birth*, p. 530 and p. 540.

²⁶ Sally Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol* (New York: Ballantine, 1996), p. 35.

was a symbol of asceticism and that the church fathers made ‘androcentric assumptions’ and ‘decreased the value of Mary’s humanity’.²⁷ Similarly, Marina Warner notes that the shift from virgin birth to perpetual virginity, and from religious sign to moral doctrine, ‘transformed a mother Goddess like the Virgin Mary into an effective instrument of asceticism and female subjection.’²⁸

Evidently, the charge of illegitimacy was too scandalous and dangerous for the image of Jesus. This is perhaps why early Christian thinkers began to move from the gospel statements to a more intensely focused emphasis on a young virgin conceiving a son through the creative power of God.

1.2.2.4 A New Family

This subsection will briefly explore Mary’s portrayal as Jesus re-defines kinship. The text states that Jesus’ ‘mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him’ (Mt 12.46) and when Jesus is informed of his family’s presence he asks ‘who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ (Mt 12.48). Then, Jesus gestures with his hands to the disciples and says ‘here are my mother and my brothers!’ (Mt.12.49) and describes his true family as ‘whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’ (Mt.12.50). Luz refers to Mt.12.50 and highlights that it is clear that to be a disciple one will have to follow God’s word and that Jesus’ disciples were a community where the members were like a brother, sister and mother to one another.²⁹

Even though Mary’s silence in this narrative makes it difficult to bridge the gap between the event and her emotions, the Matthean narrative hints that Jesus’ different idea of a family did not necessarily suggest that Mary had no space in it. Additionally, unlike Mark, Mary does not try to stop Jesus which could indicate that while she was confused by Jesus’ proposed ideas and possibly afraid of the attention he was bringing on himself, she might not be opposed to his message about the Reign of God.

²⁷ Cunneen, p. 109.

²⁸ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), p. 49.

²⁹ Ulrich Luz, trans. by James E. Crouch, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), p. 226.

1.2.3 LUKE

This section examines Mary in the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel was composed between 80–85 CE, and several ancient witnesses like Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian and Jerome claim that Luke was a Syrian from Antioch. The Gospel is set in a hostile environment where people are doubting if God will ever listen to them, and Luke presents Jesus as the answer and the Lucan Jesus lays the foundation of a reconstituted Israel.³⁰ Seven themes will be explored in the following subsections: the Annunciation to Mary; her meeting with Elizabeth; the Magnificat; the birth of Jesus; Simeon's prophecy; boy Jesus at the Temple; and Mary's place in Jesus' re-defined kinship.

1.2.3.1 God's Partner

This section will examine the Annunciation to Mary and also explore the possibility of her being a prophetess. Mary is visited by an angel, who says 'greetings, favoured one. The Lord is with you' (Lk 1.28). However, Mary was 'much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be' (Lk 1.29). The angel then tells Mary that she shall conceive a son who 'will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David' (Lk 1.32). Mary then asks the angel 'how can this be, since I do not know a man?' (N.K.J.V., Lk 1.34).³¹ The angel then informs Mary that 'the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you' (Lk 1.35). The Annunciation ends with Mary's clear consent to the angel 'here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word' (Lk 1.38).

John T. Carroll observes that while Joseph's lineage is clearly mentioned, Mary's origins are not and suggests that this indicates that Mary was from a humble background.³² Further, Joel

³⁰ Robert J. Karris, 'The Gospel According to Luke', in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (London: Chapman, 1993), pp. 675–721 (p. 675).

³¹ The NRSV reads, 'how can this be since I am a virgin?'. The RSV reads, 'how can this be since I have no husband?'. Qur'an 19.20 reads, 'how can I have a son when no man has touched me? I have not been unchaste'. *The Qur'an*, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). All quotations from the Qur'an are from this translation.

³² John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster, 2012), p. 38.

While the gospels are silent on Mary's origins, the *Protoevangelium of James* narrates the birth of Mary to Anna and Joachim. Composed in Greek in the second-century CE and re-discovered in the sixteenth century, the pre-gospel revolves around Mary's miraculous birth as her mother Anna, prays to God for a child and agrees to give up the child to God's service if made pregnant. God listens to Anna's prayers, and she gives birth to Mary. Along with the apocryphal narrative, the third chapter of the Qur'an also mentions the story of Mary's birth to Imran and

B. Green claims that Mary is not introduced in a manner that would suggest she was ‘worthy or deserving of divine favour’ and adds that this is possibly why Mary was confused by the event.³³ There is a scholarly consensus in suggesting that Mary’s question regarding her future pregnancy, was perhaps inserted as a literary device so that Luke could offer an explanation of how Jesus’ conception occurred and stress her virginity once again.³⁴ Additionally, Joseph A. Fitzmyer suggests the possibility that Mary was aware of Isaiah 7.14 and knew that the mother of the Messiah would be a virgin, and since Mary was engaged she could not understand how she could bear the child.³⁵ Darrell L. Bock suggests that Mary was possibly confused because the angel was talking about her conceiving immediately as Mary is said to be *κεχαριτωμένη* or in ‘a favoured state’ and she is told that *ὁ κύριος μετὰ σοῦ* or ‘the Lord is with you’.³⁶

Brown comments on God’s role in Jesus’ conception. Brown begins by noting that during Jesus’ baptism in Lk 3.21–22, the Holy Spirit descends on him and during Jesus’ transfiguration, we encounter the word ‘overshadow’ again (Lk 9.34). Therefore, Brown claims that the words ‘come upon’ and *επισκιάσει* or ‘shall overshadow’ carry no sexual undertones and God’s part in Jesus’ conception is meant to be strictly creative.³⁷ Additionally, Jewish scholarship has analysed the presence of ‘Holy Spirit’ by comparing it to the Hebrew *shekhinah*. Edward Kessler notes the possible influence of the Hebrew *shekhinah* which became ‘Holy Spirit’ in Greek, and states that *shekhinah* referred to God’s presence and is meant to be viewed as feminine. Kessler adds that in later writings, *shekhinah* was identified as a dwelling place for God and as God’s bride, and he suggests that this understanding could have influenced early Christian writers who portray Mary as a dwelling place for God.³⁸ On the contrary, Arthur Green notes that in early Jewish writings the *shekhinah* was not portrayed as feminine but was a way of representing God. Green elaborates that the *shekhinah* came to be viewed as feminine later in Kabbalistic writings as a response to the rise in Marian piety in the twelfth century. Green further parallels Mary with the *shekhinah* and suggests that like the Kabbalistic *shekhinah*, Mary acts as a medium when she bears her son for humanity. Green

his wife. The existence of this pre-gospel narrative and its inclusion in the Qur’an indicates an early interest in the figure of Mary and the possible need to fill in the gaps left by the gospel narratives.

³³ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 86.

³⁴ Brown, p. 307; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (New York: Doubleday, 1981) p. 348; Carroll, p. 42.

³⁵ Fitzmyer, pp. 348–50.

³⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* (Ada: Baker, 1996) p. 120.

³⁷ Brown, p. 315.

³⁸ Edward Kessler, ‘Mary–The Jewish Mother’, *Irish Theological Quarterly Vol*, 76, (2011), 211–223 (pp. 215–16).

concludes that the *shekhinah* was viewed as a suffering figure who suffered along with the people and claims that this suffering parallels Mary's grief after Jesus' death.³⁹

Cunneen and Warner offer a feminist analysis and agree that Mary's question in this text comes from a place of self-doubt and not lack of faith.⁴⁰ Additionally, Cunneen claims that like Noah, Joseph, Abraham, and Esther before her, Mary is told that she has 'found favour' with God and is now placed in a whole line of Israel's heroes and heroines who were also God's partners.⁴¹ Natalie Webb offers a different insight and claims that Mary's fear during the Annunciation has been downplayed in modern interpretations. Webb notes that the Greek verb *ταράσσω* is used earlier in Lk 1.2 to suggest that Zechariah is terrified but when the intensified version of the same verb, *διατάρασσω*, is used for Mary, it is simply translated in English as her being 'perplexed'. Webb concludes that this translation is misleading and it is because Mary is 'terrified through and through' that she immediately begins to reason and question.⁴² Moreover, Webb notes that according to the HB 'slave of the Lord' was a prophetic designation, and states that 'the fear that any newly commissioned prophet experienced was magnified for Mary by her place as a young woman in a patriarchal society'.⁴³ N. Clayton Croy and Alice E. Connor expand on the idea of Mary being a prophet and suggest that the Lucan annunciation fits both the 'hero-commissioning' and the 'prophetic call' story patterns of the HB. They go on to assert that Luke perhaps intended for this passage to have multiple meanings, and 'while its primary purpose is to announce a birth, the Lukan annunciation may also intend to depict Mary as a bearer of prophetic revelation.'⁴⁴

With the Annunciation narrative, Mary can be placed next to the men of Davidic lineage who were earlier commissioned for heroic purposes in a similar manner. Mary's cooperation with the divine plan makes her a faithful, active partner of God who now risks a scandalous pregnancy, and the possibility of being a single mother. While her bravery is commendable, ignoring the possible fear Mary felt does not do her justice because it is in her fear that Mary becomes human, and, arguably, even more courageous.

³⁹ Arthur Green, 'Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on the Kabbalistic Symbol in its Historical Context', *Association for Jewish Studies*, 26, (2002), 1–52 (pp. 17–21).

⁴⁰ Cunneen, p. 37; Warner, p. 8.

⁴¹ Cunneen, pp. 37–38.

⁴² Natalie Webb, 'Overcoming Fear with Mary of Nazareth: Women's Experience Alongside Luke 1:26–56', *Review and Expositor*, 115 (2018), 96–103, p. 97.

⁴³ Webb, p.98.

⁴⁴ N. Clayton Croy and Alice E. Connor, 'Mantic Mary? The Virgin Mother as Prophet in Luke 1.26–56 and the Early Church', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 34 (2012), 254–76 (pp. 255–61).

1.2.3.2 Mary's Haste

This subsection will briefly explore the possible reason behind Mary's haste to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who is also miraculously pregnant. On seeing Mary, Elizabeth says 'blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb' (Lk 1.42). Bock argues that Elizabeth is not suggesting that Mary was more blessed than other women, and adds that the phrase has HB parallels in Judges 5.24 (*tebōak*) and Judith 13.18 (*eulogētē*) where a woman is bearing the child for the nation. Further, Bock speculates why Mary might have made her journey in such a hurry and suggests that it was because Mary had to see God's miracle for herself and not because she wanted to hide her pregnancy because, if that were the case, Mary would not return after three months.⁴⁵ On the contrary, Jane Schaberg suggests that Mary's haste could be the result of her anxiety which could be a clue towards 'a situation of violence and/or fear in connection with Mary's pregnancy'.⁴⁶

The reality of being the part of a divine plan sets in as Mary now realises that her life might take a dangerous turn. It is in knowing that Elizabeth is with her in this new stage of life that Mary perhaps seeks solace and hence, she rushes to meet the only person who could possibly understand her situation.

1.2.3.3 Of the People

Mary's response to Elizabeth, is the Magnificat which the text attributes to Mary, although its authorship is debated.⁴⁷ This subsection will explore the Magnificat and Mary's status as a possible prophetess with reference to the canticle. Mary begins her praise for God in the Magnificat on a personal note by saying 'my soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour' (Lk 1.46–47). Mary then moves on to describe what God has done for her, 'for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed' (Lk 1.48). Mary continues her praise for God and says that 'the Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name (Lk 1.49). Mary then

⁴⁵ Bock, p. 133–34.

⁴⁶ Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*, 3rd edn (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006), p. 87.

⁴⁷ The authorship of the Magnificat has been debated extensively with some views suggesting Mary was the author while others claiming that Luke adopted it from a Gentile-Christian composer and attributed it to Mary. Brown suggests that the Magnificat was composed in a non-Lucan circle but since the pious tone fit Luke's portrayal of Mary, he merged it into his narrative and attributed it to her. Brown, *Birth*, pp. 346–49.

launches into a more general praise of God and says ‘he has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts’ (Lk 1.51). Mary also talks about a reversal of social positions made possible by God for he ‘has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly’ (Lk 1.52) and adds how God ‘has helped his servant Israel’ (Lk 1.54).

Mary refers to herself as a lowly servant and this has been misinterpreted as infertility due to certain HB parallels in Genesis 16.11 and I Samuel 1.11. Bock points out that *ταπεινωσις* or ‘low status’ refers to one’s social position as can be seen in Genesis 29.32 and Deuteronomy 26.7. Bock observes the later use of the word *ταπεινός* in the Magnificat and states that the word was used in a social sense and had nothing to do with infertility.⁴⁸ Moreover, Bock notes that Israel is referred to as the chosen representative of God and claims that the phrase suggests that Mary also expected a type of political deliverance from Jesus.⁴⁹ Brown and Fitzmyer agree that the hymn has been attributed to Mary because she is the spokesperson for the *’ānāwīm* and the first representative of early Christianity.⁵⁰ Brown further suggests that this attribution embodies Mary as the collective voice of the *’ānāwīm*.⁵¹

Recent feminist scholarship interprets the attribution of the Magnificat to Mary differently. Schaberg claims that Luke deliberately attributed the canticle to Mary to show that ‘she had been violated and made pregnant, but God vindicated her, protecting her and her child’.⁵² Schaberg further notes that among all the commissioning narratives in the HB, it is only in the case of Mary that the composer includes her verbal consent to be a part of God’s plan because Luke’s presentation is ‘his attempt to further defuse the illegitimacy tradition by making Mary one whose pregnancy is God-empowered’ and adds that Luke is not interested in ‘the discipleship of Mary in itself; rather, the use of this motif is one of several strategies to defend her honor’.⁵³ Additionally, Webb notes that in the LXX the Greek word *ταπεινώω* suggests rape. Webb suggests that to the people around Mary, her pregnancy might have seemed a result of sexual abuse and that is why Mary refers to herself as ‘lowly’. Webb further claims that the Magnificat prophesies a time when women can live without fear of sexual subjugation, and

⁴⁸ Bock, p. 156.

⁴⁹ Bock, pp. 158–59.

⁵⁰ Brown, *Birth*, p. 357; Fitzmyer, p. 367. The word *’ānāwīm* is the plural of the Hebrew word *’ānāw* and Brown states that the word was used for the poor, sick, and downtrodden who could only rely on God.

Brown, *Birth*, pp. 363–64.

⁵¹ Brown, *Birth*, pp. 363–64.

⁵² Schaberg, p. 91.

⁵³ Schaberg, pp. 120–29.

claims that with Mary acknowledging her humility ‘she is able to unleash a prophetic critique and condemnation of those who wield power’.⁵⁴

Croy and Connor strengthen their argument of Mary being a prophetess by examining the Magnificat. They claim that Mary refers to herself as God’s slave which not only reflects her devotion, but is a sign of powerful submission of oneself to God as seen in previous Christian figures who were recognised as prophets. Mary is called δούλη or ‘slave/servant’ of God twice in the Lukan birth narrative (Lk 1.38, Lk 1.48) and Croy and Connor highlight how in Revelations 10.7, προφήται and δούλοι are closely placed and in Revelations 11.18, the servants of God comprise the prophets. Additionally, they claim that if the Benedictus, attributed to Zechariah, is seen as a prophecy and the structure parallels that of the Magnificat, then Mary should also be viewed as a prophetess. They further suggest that Luke stresses Mary’s virginal conception because virginity was linked with purity and the closer one was to a deity, the greater the need for their virginity, and in case of women, perhaps a need for them to have an untainted womb.⁵⁵

The Magnificat unveils an important aspect in the mosaic of Mary as she is transformed into a prophetess who symbolises hope, liberation, and upcoming political justice for the poor as she bravely critiques those who hold powerful positions. Additionally, while the composer’s choice to attribute the hymn to Mary turns her into a model believer, it also poses the important question of the need for this attribution. While the exact answer to this question cannot be found, Mary having faced abuse which resulted in her pregnancy is a possibility that cannot be ignored.

1.2.3.4 Birthing the Saviour

This subsection will explore the birth of Jesus as Mary seemingly struggles with the idea of her son being the Saviour. Emperor Augustus orders a census and Joseph goes to Bethlehem to be ‘registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged’ (Lk 2.5) and while in Bethlehem, Mary gives birth ‘to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth’ (Lk 2.7).⁵⁶ The news of Jesus’ birth reaches the local shepherds through an angel who says ‘to you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour who is the Messiah’ (Lk 2.11). The shepherds rush to see Jesus and inform

⁵⁴ Webb, p. 101.

⁵⁵ Croy and Connor, pp. 260–65.

⁵⁶ The Qur’an describes Mary’s pain during childbirth, ‘when the pains of childbirth drove her to cling to the trunk of a palm tree, she exclaimed, ‘I wish I had been dead and forgotten long before all this!’ (19.23).

Mary and Joseph about the angel's words but while everyone around her is rejoicing aloud, Mary 'treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart' (Lk 2.19).

Bock claims that the mention of Mary as Joseph's betrothed reminds the reader that the marriage is not yet consummated and once again points to a virgin birth.⁵⁷ Further, Fitzmyer suggests that since Luke has attempted to portray Mary as the first disciple, her confusion at this stage is understandable because the idea of Jesus being the Saviour who is the Messiah arose after his death.⁵⁸ Noting Mary's act of pondering over the events silently, Johnson suggests that Mary was trying to interpret her life and 'hoping to discern how the divine spirit is moving in their midst'.⁵⁹

Mary's reaction to Jesus' birth is in contrast to the reaction of the shepherds who appear to immediately believe that Jesus is the Messiah. However, Mary's decision to go over the events silently and not openly accept Jesus as the saviour does not suggest she had little faith. Instead, it can be understood as her initiative to discern the mysterious way in which the divine plan might unfold.

1.2.3.5 Suffering Foretold

This subsection will explore the narrative of Mary, Joseph, and a newly born Jesus at the Temple. Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the Temple for Mary's purification 'according to the law of Moses' (Lk 2.22) and offer 'a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord' (Lk 2.24). At the Temple, Joseph and Mary meet Simeon who takes Jesus in his arms and tells Mary 'this child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too' (Lk 2.34–35).

Green highlights how Luke presents Jesus' family as 'unquestionably pious': they circumcise Jesus on the eighth day after his birth (Genesis 17.9-14; Leviticus 12.3); name the child what the angel asked them to; purify Mary after she gives birth (Leviticus 12); bring Jesus to Jerusalem (Exodus 13.2); offer a sacrifice for Mary's purification (Leviticus 12.8).⁶⁰ Kessler stresses on the importance of remembering Mary was Jewish and adds that forgetting Mary's 'deeply Jewish roots' of piety is a distortion of her image. Kessler further claims that Mary

⁵⁷ Bock, pp. 205–06.

⁵⁸ Fitzmyer, pp. 397–98.

⁵⁹ Johnson, p. 278.

⁶⁰ Green, p. 140.

lived at a time when Christianity was considered a sect of Judaism, and that Mary never repudiated her religion.⁶¹ Additionally, Johnson asserts that the Church ignores Mary's married status and places more importance on her virginity, and adds that it is liberating to read Luke who gives Mary her marriage back when he portrays Mary and Joseph as a pious couple trying to raise a child together.⁶²

Simeon's prophecy has garnered much scholarly attention over the years.⁶³ Green claims that since Jesus will face resistance during his mission, the severe opposition will impact Mary's soul.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, Brown suggests that a possible meaning could be that Mary will be tested like everyone and a sword will pass through her soul when she realises that Jesus' divine mission surpasses all earthly attachments.⁶⁵ Fitzmyer agrees with Brown's possible interpretation, but suggests that this prophecy could also allude to the pain Mary will experience on seeing Jesus crucified.⁶⁶

For centuries, efforts of establishing Mary as the model Christian have overlooked her Jewishness. However, the Lukan birth narrative portrays Mary as a pious Jew, an aspect that can prove essential in understanding Mary and strengthening Jewish-Christian relations. Additionally, even though Mary faces a possible grim future, Mary's faith in God does not shake and she never questions the divine plan that she consented to be a part of.

1.2.3.6 In Search of Her Son

This subsection will examine the narrative of Joseph and Mary leaving the Temple without Jesus. Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the Temple for the Passover feast and mistakenly leave without him. On realising that Jesus is not with them, the couple head back. At the Temple, the

⁶¹ Kessler, p. 214.

⁶² Johnson, p. 282.

⁶³ Fitzmyer, Brown and Bock give a similar list of inaccurate interpretations of a sword piercing Mary's soul:

- i. An ancient interpretation dating back to Origen in *Homilies on Luke*, claims that Mary doubted Jesus in his early ministry and hence, the sword that pierces her is of doubt.
- ii. Epiphanius in *Heresies* argued that the 'sword' was a symbol of Mary's martyrdom but there is no evidence of Mary being a martyr.
- iii. The image was predicting people's rejection of Mary much like the rejection of Jesus.
- iv. Since Jesus was considered illegitimate, Mary will have to face slander from people.
- v. Mary witnessed Jerusalem's fall and the defeat of her own people and this would be like a sword through her soul.
- vi. The sword symbolises Jesus' undertaking the ministry with such intent that it results in his death.
- vii. The reference here is to Israel and not just Mary.

Fitzmyer, pp. 397–98; Brown, pp. 462–63; Bock, pp. 248–50.

⁶⁴ Green, p. 149.

⁶⁵ Brown, pp. 463–64.

⁶⁶ Fitzmyer, pp. 429–30.

couple witness Jesus listening and asking questions, and note how everyone is amazed at his understanding and his answers. Later, Mary asks Jesus, ‘child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety’ (Lk 2.48). Jesus responds with a question ‘why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’ (Lk 2.49). After this, Jesus returns with his parents to Nazareth and Mary ‘treasured all these things in her heart’ (Lk 2.51). Fitzmyer claims that this scene is a prime example of a sword piercing Mary’s soul because Jesus’ obedience to his heavenly Father takes precedence over his earthly family.⁶⁷

Luke’s infancy narrative ends with a rare glimpse of Mary’s maternal side as she anxiously searches for Jesus. Additionally, while Joseph’s later absence from the text could hint at Mary’s widowhood, his presence in this narrative clarifies that Mary had some help in raising Jesus at least for a few years of her life. In addition to this, Jesus’ question to Mary about her knowledge of his whereabouts might appear harsh, but it could also be a significant hint that Jesus was aware of his miraculous conception and was perhaps reminding his mother of the divine plan she consented to be a part of.

1.2.3.7 A Place in Her Son’s Family

This subsection will examine the Lukan narrative of Jesus re-defining kinship. In the Lukan narrative Jesus’ ‘mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd’ (Lk 8.19). Jesus is informed by those around him that his family is trying to reach him and Jesus defines his true family as ‘those who hear the word of God and do it’ (Lk 8.21). Fitzmyer observes that while Jesus’ family may not receive preference in the Kingdom of God, they were clearly faithful to God.⁶⁸ Carroll states that in ancient Jewish societies, familial ties determined one’s identity, role, and allegiance and, when Jesus includes his disciples in his family, he redefines family structure.⁶⁹ Turid Karlsen Seim claims that in the Lukan narrative, Jesus is not rejecting Mary, but the biological ties he has with her, and notes that he leaves space for her to enter this re-defined family by following God’s word.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Fitzmyer, p. 438 and p. 443.

⁶⁸ Fitzmyer, pp. 722–25.

⁶⁹ Carroll, p. 189. Later in the narrative, when a woman blesses the womb Jesus came from, Jesus responds by saying ‘blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it’ (Lk 11.28) and this once again echoes Jesus’ idea of reformed kinship.

⁷⁰ Turid Karlsen Seim, ‘The Gospel of Luke’ in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary Vol II*, ed. by Elisabeth Schullser Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), pp. 728–62 (p. 732).

The inclusion of this scene in three gospels suggests a historical possibility of this event having occurred. Mary's silence in all three renderings leaves one to speculate whether she was trying to reach Jesus out of fear for his safety, or she possibly disagreed with his ideas at this stage. Additionally, Mary's portrayal in the three narratives could suggest a type of public discord between Mary and Jesus at this stage, which was perhaps witnessed by many and considered important enough to be included in three gospels.

1.2.4. John

This section examines Mary in the Gospel of John. Scholarly consensus suggests the author was not John the apostle and the Gospel is considered anonymous. The text is dated between 80–110 CE and scholars suggest that the author used more than one source to form his narrative.⁷¹ Two themes will be explored in the following subsections: the wedding at Cana, and Mary's presence near Jesus' Cross.

1.2.4.1 The Catalyst

This subsection will explore Mary's role in Jesus' first public miracle and her status as a symbol of faith. Mary, Jesus, and a few disciples are at a wedding in Cana where Mary informs Jesus that 'they have no wine' (Jn 2.3) and Jesus responds by saying 'woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' (Jn 2.4). After Jesus' refusal, Mary simply turns to the servants and asks them to 'do whatever he tells you' (Jn 2.5). After this, Jesus orders the servants to fill the jars with water which miraculously turn into wine.

Ernst Haenchen suggests that Mary's tone in this narrative implies she was expecting a miracle.⁷² Further, Brown observes that in the Johannine narrative Mary is only addressed as 'the mother of Jesus' because this was an honourable way of addressing a woman who had been fortunate enough to bear a son. Additionally, Brown claims that Jesus' rebuke, and his addressing his mother as 'woman', is not impolite and instead it is Jesus's normal way of addressing women in this narrative. Brown adds that the assumption of Mary being the catalyst behind Jesus' first miracle must be dropped because in the Johannine thought only God controls

⁷¹ Delbert Burkett, *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity* (Cambridge: MPG, 2002), p. 231.

⁷² Ernst Haenchen, trans. Robert W. Funk, *John 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Joh Chapters 1–6*, trans. by Robert W. Funk, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), p. 172.

the ‘hour’.⁷³ Talking about the symbolism of Mary in this scene, Brown suggests it was perhaps influenced by Revelations 12 where a mysterious woman is a key figure in bringing salvation.⁷⁴ F.M. Braun further expands on Mary’s symbolism in this narrative and suggests that the Gospel clearly puts Mary in the foreground of the miracle and adds that it was a revelation of the fact that Jesus was now the Son of God. Additionally, Braun notes that the author does not mention that Mary believed after the miracle (which he does for the disciples in Jn 2.11) and states that this proves Mary was always a believer.⁷⁵

Feminist exegesis of the Wedding narrative understands Mary’s role differently. Adele Reinhartz states that in this narrative Mary ‘emerges as a figure of prophetic knowledge and authority’ because of her knowledge of Jesus’ capabilities and her faith in him.⁷⁶ Reinhartz adds that by telling the servants to follow Jesus’ orders, Mary becomes a model of discipleship as she clarifies that complete faith in Jesus is required in order to witness his miracles.⁷⁷ Further, Warner observes Mary’s act of raising awareness about the lack of wine and claims that Mary’s ‘intervention illustrates her pity, compassion, and thoughtfulness; but more importantly, its prompt effect—the inauguration of Christ’s messianic mission by a spectacular miracle.’⁷⁸ Additionally, Warner claims that being addressed as ‘woman’ places Mary ‘onto an eternal plane, where she becomes universal motherhood itself, and a type of the mothering Church’.⁷⁹ Cunneen expands on Warner’s argument and suggests that Jesus’ cold and impersonal address of his mother as ‘woman’, is better understood when we put it against the backdrop of Jesus’ rejection of his biological family in the Synoptic Gospels, adding that Jesus calls Mary, ‘woman’ because that is how he would address any female disciple. Cunneen further states that Mary’s confident way of instructing the servants to follow Jesus’ commands is perhaps an indication that Mary has accepted her role as a disciple.⁸⁰ Along similar lines, Reinhartz argues that Mary was perhaps a wise female elder who was leading the Johannine community, and if she was addressed as ‘mother’ in the narrative it might displace her from the position as a leader who ‘teaches the importance of obedience and thereby facilitates the sort of events that will

⁷³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 98–99.

⁷⁴ Brown, *John*, p. 107.

⁷⁵ F.M Braun, *Mother of God’s People*, trans. by John Clarke (New York: Alba House, 1967), pp. 69–71.

⁷⁶ Adele Reinhartz, ‘Women in the Johannine Community: An Exercise in Historical Imagination’ in *A Feminist Companion to John Vol II* ed. by Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003), pp. 14–33 (p.19).

⁷⁷ Reinhartz, p.19.

⁷⁸ Warner, p. 16.

⁷⁹ Warner, pp. 17–18.

⁸⁰ Cunneen, pp. 46–47.

strengthen the faith of those who participate in and witness them'.⁸¹ On a different note, Cornelis Benemma claims that Mary perhaps took the opportunity to remind Jesus of his familial obligations and enhance her family's honour by providing more wine to the guests. Benemma further suggests that Mary's order to the servants to follow Jesus' instructions perhaps indicates that she accepted and understood Jesus' corrective response in Jn 2.4.⁸² Susanna Asikainen suggests that the view of Mary's words having less importance than Jesus' divine mission is problematic. Asikainen states that Mary does not speak at the wrong time but rather pushes Jesus to do God's will.⁸³ Both Asikainen and Benemma assert that Mary was the catalyst behind Jesus' first miracle and the subsequent start of his ministry.⁸⁴

Jesus' response to his mother's request seems harsh but it also echoes the Lukan narrative of a young Jesus at the Temple. Similar to Luke, when Jesus talks about his hour with Mary, it is possible that Jesus is urging her to remember the divine plan and perhaps encouraging her to remain patient while divine events unfold. Additionally, while the focus of this scene is Jesus' first miracle, it is imperative to remember that Mary, who has been portrayed as the spokesperson of the poor in the Lukan narrative, perhaps speaks up about the lack of wine not just to inform Jesus but also as a representative of the *'ānāwīm*. Mary is not just symbolic of faith in God, but she is also a symbol of change and discipleship as she becomes the catalyst for Jesus' first miracle.

1.2.4.2 With Her Son Till the End

This subsection will examine Mary's presence near Jesus' Cross.⁸⁵ In the Johannine narrative, Jesus spends his final moments being surrounded by the people who loved him 'standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene' (Jn 19.25). Mary and Jesus' Beloved Disciple are standing next to each other and Jesus says to Mary 'woman, here is your son' (Jn 19.26) and then he turns to the disciple and

⁸¹ Reinhartz, p. 20.

⁸² Cornelis Bennema, 'Character Reconstruction in the New Testament (2): The Practice', *The Expository Times*, 127 (2016), 419–29 (p. 426).

⁸³ Susanna Asikainen, 'Women Out of Place: The Women Who Challenged Jesus', *Neotestamentica*, 52 (2018), 179–94 (p. 186).

⁸⁴ Asikainen, p. 186; Benemma, p. 427.

⁸⁵ Mary receives an indirect mention in Jn 6.42 when Jesus is identified as 'the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?' (Jn 6.42). Jesus is identified as the son of his father and not through his mother. Haenchen suggests that this might be because for the author, Jesus was human and so were his parents and adds that Jesus' birth from a virgin was not the base of faith. Haenchen, p. 292

says, 'here is your mother' (Jn 19.27). The Beloved Disciple follows Jesus' instruction and 'from that hour the disciple took her into his own home' (Jn 19.27).

Joan Cecelia Campbell analyses the scene historically and states that crucified individuals were usually disowned by their families, and therefore, Mary's presence at the cross proves she supported Jesus' idea of the Reign of God.⁸⁶ Braun compares the Cana Wedding with the Crucifixion scene and suggests that Mary perhaps had to submit to the mission completely, indicating that between the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the end, Mary underwent spiritual changes and she now understood the meaning of Jesus' hour.⁸⁷ Benemma interprets Jesus addressing Mary as 'woman' once again (like in Jn 2.5) as symbolic of him giving up his earthly ties before his death, and argues that Jesus fulfils his 'filial obligations' by instituting 'a new earthly family consisting of his mother and his dearest disciple'.⁸⁸ PHEME Perkins claims that when Jesus entrusts Mary into the care of the Beloved Disciple, he places Mary into the Johannine community of believers.⁸⁹ Andrew Mbuvi analyses the Johannine version of Jesus' final moments and argues for Mary's widowhood. Mbuvi begins by noting that Joseph is scarcely mentioned in the New Testament and that apart from Luke, no public encounter includes Joseph as part of Jesus' family. Mbuvi adds that if Joseph was alive, or present at the wedding in Cana, then Mary would not have to be the one to ask Jesus to arrange for wine because as the patriarch of the family, Joseph would have arranged for it. Mbuvi further suggests that Jesus entrusts Mary into the care of the Beloved Disciple, something Jesus would not have to do if Joseph were still alive.⁹⁰

With Jesus' crucifixion, Mary becomes a symbol of both unparalleled grief and strength as she stands near his cross and witnesses her son's final moments. Not only is Mary brave enough to watch her son die, but she openly challenges political authorities by showing her support for her son's mission as she stands near his cross.

⁸⁶ Joan Cecelia Campbell, *Kinship Relations in the Gospel of John*, (Washington: The Catholic Bible Association of America, 2007), pp. 143–44.

⁸⁷ Braun, pp. 98–113.

⁸⁸ Benemma, p. 427.

⁸⁹ PHEME Perkins, 'Mary in the Gospels: A Question of Focus' in *Theology Today*, 56 (1999), 297–306 (p. 305).

⁹⁰ Andrew Mbuvi, 'Jesus and His Mother: An Analysis of their Public Relationship as a Paradigm for African Women (Widows) Who Must Circumvent Traditional Authority in Order to Thrive in Society' in *Mother Goose, Mother Jones, Mommy Dearest: Biblical Mothers and their Children*, ed. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan & Tina Pippin (Austin: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), pp. 129–41 (pp. 129–39).

1.2.5 Acts

This section will briefly examine Acts 1.14 which is the final time we encounter Mary in the New Testament. According to Jn 19.27, Mary starts to live with the Beloved Disciple and Acts 1.14 clarifies that Mary is now a part of Jesus' community of disciples: 'all these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers'. Mary's presence amongst Jesus' disciples suggests that she found a community after Jesus' death. Additionally, while Acts 1.14 hints at Mary's importance in the early church, it also suggests that it was in being close to Jesus' purpose that Mary felt close to her son.

1.3. Conclusion

A careful reading of the New Testament can help recreate Mary's life to some extent. Evidently, questions about her status in the early church and her death remain unanswered and even though Mary is scarcely mentioned in the individual gospel narratives, by analysing the narratives together, a character reconstruction of Mary can be presented.

Undoubtedly, the Markan narrative gives Mary a miniscule role and she is portrayed as a confused woman who does not understand her son's higher purpose. The Markan narrative places Mary only in one scene where Jesus rejects his biological family. Mary appears to have misunderstood Jesus' divine identity, and the composer places her 'outside' of Jesus' mission. However, it is important to remember Mary's socio-cultural reality at this stage. Mary was a poor peasant woman whose son was attracting unwarranted attention both towards himself, and his family. There is no possible way to suggest that Mary opposed Jesus' ideas of change and his message of the Reign of God (in fact, the other gospels create an image that hint otherwise) and it is possible that Mary tries to stop Jesus out of fear. Mary is afraid her son might face persecution by the Roman authorities which is a rational fear that comes true at the end. Additionally, Joseph's absence from this narrative, combined with Jesus' identification through his mother later, hints at Mary's widowhood or Jesus' illegitimacy. The Markan Mary is perhaps a single mother who is nervous for her family's safety and so she publicly tries to stop her son.

In the Matthean narrative, Mary stops being one-dimensional as the author inserts passages that portray different possible aspects of her historical image. The Matthean narrative begins by placing Mary alongside revered Jewish women, who have been in challenging situations and

then been a part of God's divine plans to help humankind. Feminist analysis suggests that all five women were in extraordinary situations where they posed a threat to patriarchal norms, and this idea perhaps reaches its peak with Mary and the charge of illegitimacy of Jesus' birth. While the historical possibility of Mary being sexually abused remains controversial, it also cannot be ignored because rape was a prevalent part of Mary's world. Along with possible abuse, Mary faces threat and displacement immediately after giving birth and is forced to leave Bethlehem as she first lives in Egypt and finally settles in Nazareth. Matthean Mary resonates with the colonial experience of many as she faces possible sexual exploitation from colonisers and threats from the powerful amongst her own people.

In Luke, we get a more rounded view of Mary: from Mary's rational question regarding her conception of a child; her verbal consent and her position as God's partner; her politically charged praise for God; followed by her habit of going over things on her own to try and grasp the meaning of events better. The Annunciation narrative, wherein Mary gives her consent to being a part of God's plan does not only show her faith, but it places Mary in the league of salvific figures from the Davidic lineage. After giving her consent, Mary rushes to see her cousin, Elizabeth, and her haste has become a topic of scholarly debate. While it is difficult to ascertain why Mary left her home in a rushed manner, fear could be a big possible driving factor. Mary is a young, engaged girl who is asked to bear a child before her marriage for the sake of humanity. While an empathetic and passionate Mary agrees to the divine plan, it is possible that the fear and reality of the situation sets in once the angel leaves and Mary is left alone. Mary knows that Elizabeth is the only person who would believe her and possibly comfort her and in that moment of fear, Mary wishes to be taken care of as she spends three months with Elizabeth. Similarly, it is possible that Mary visits her older cousin, because she assumes Elizabeth might require assistance as she was expecting a child too. Despite her fear, the Lukan Mary believes in God as she praises him emotionally in the Magnificat and speaks about reversals in social status and political deliverance for Israel. Historically, Mary was a poor Jewish woman who lived in Israel while it was under Roman occupancy. Mary is perhaps tired of being oppressed by the rich and powerful and so, she agrees to enter a partnership with God and in the Magnificat she expresses her hopes and dreams of a just world. By becoming politically active, and prophesying a future that is based on equality, Mary becomes the voice of the poor.

The Johannine Mary carries on this idea of faithful believer of God, and acts as a catalyst behind Jesus' first miracle at Cana. While Jesus' rebuke to Mary garners attention, Mary's

assertiveness and sense of authority in this narrative is also clearly portrayed. Mary informs Jesus about the lack of wine because she expects him to publicly do what she personally knows he is capable of. Mary is a part of the divine plan and as God's partner on earth, she is also tasked with urging Jesus to take the first step. Mary believed in Jesus before anyone else and she now shows everyone at the Wedding how to completely trust that Jesus will act. For Marian studies, the importance of this scene perhaps lies in the subtle way it establishes that Mary was not just an ideal disciple, but also a possible teacher of how to be an ideal disciple. At the end the Johannine text places Mary near the Cross and is the only gospel narrative to do so. Mary witnesses her son's gruesome death, a death given for fidelity to the radical message of the Kingdom of God, something Mary herself might have wished for. While during Jesus' public rejection of biological ties in all gospels, Mary appears to be opposing his radical views, at the Cross, Mary accepts a new son as she realises that the Johannine community of believers is now her family. From being left outside her son's community to being portrayed as a strong woman who witnesses her son's death, and moves into the home of a disciple, Mary's character appears to grow within the biblical tradition itself.

The gospel narratives lead one to speculate upon Mary's home life after marriage. Jesus' identification through his mother in all four gospels has led some scholars to suggest that Joseph had died before Jesus began his mission. The lack of any information on Joseph, except his Davidic lineage and his role in the Matthean birth narrative (and his total absence from the Qur'an) could further attest to his death. While the probability of Mary being a widow during the period of Jesus' adult life is quite strong, Matthean and Lukan narratives provide a glimpse into Mary's married life. The Matthean Joseph appears to be a kind man who thinks about Mary's safety as he tries to come to terms with her pregnancy. Joseph thinks about divorcing her quietly only to later become a brave husband who risks his life to protect his wife and unborn son as they escape to Egypt. Later, Luke shows Mary and Joseph performing their duties as a new couple and new parents and while one can never be sure about the intricacies of their marriage, Joseph is portrayed as a dependable husband with whom Mary finds stability for at least the first twelve years of Jesus' life. Apart from Joseph, the four Gospels also mention Jesus' brothers, James, Joses, Judas, and Simon (named in Mk 6.3) and there is a possibility that they were not the sons of Mary, but Joseph's sons from his previous marriage or Jesus' coreligionists. In the Markan narrative, these brothers help Mary in trying to stop Jesus as he re-defines familial structures, and in John the brothers are portrayed as non-believers (Jn 7.5) as they address Jesus in a challenging tone and ask him to perform his deeds publicly. The

possibility of a family rift between the sons of Joseph's previous marriage and Jesus appears when Jesus entrusts Mary into the care of the Beloved Disciple leading one to infer that Mary had no one to look after her except Jesus.

As a woman of colour, the conclusion to this chapter would be remiss without my clearly stating that Mary, as a woman of first century Palestine, was a woman of colour. As a Hindu, my perception of Mary was formed by paintings and statues in my school church that portrayed Mary having blonde hair, white skin, blue eyes, as she happily cradles her baby. After examining the New Testament, it can be established that Mary was a young Jewish woman; the God-bearer; an ally of God; a refugee; a possible survivor of abuse; a brave spokeswoman of the poor; a supporter of political change; and a grieving mother.

Table

1.4 A Summary Table of Mary Of Nazareth in the Gospels

Mark	Matthew	Luke	John
3.31–35: Mary attempts to stop Jesus from preaching to the crowd.	1.16: Mary is mentioned in Jesus' genealogy.	1.26–38: Mary's Annunciation followed by her consent to be a part of the divine plan.	2.1–12: Mary becomes a catalyst for Jesus' first miracle.
	1.18: Mary is made pregnant.	1.39–45: Mary and Elizabeth meet.	19.25–27: Mary at the Cross.
	2.13–15: Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt with a new-born Jesus.	1.46–56: The Magnificat.	
	2.19–23: Mary settles down in Nazareth after Herod's death.	2.1–7: Mary gives birth to Jesus.	
	12.46–50: Jesus re-defines kinship.	2.19: The shepherds call Jesus their saviour and Mary reassesses the situation.	
		2.34–35: Simeon's prophecy about Mary's future.	
		2.41–51: Mary searches for a young Jesus at the Temple.	
		8.19–21: Jesus re-defines kinship.	

Chapter Two

Mary Magdalene

2.2.1 Introduction

The New Testament, Gnostic texts, various legends about her being a woman engaged in prostitution, modern books, and cinema have rendered Mary Magdalene an ambiguous figure as they all portray a different Mary. However, years of scholarly exegesis have established that Mary Magdalene was not a woman engaged in prostitution, and feminist interpretation of the New Testament carefully traces the origin of this wrong claim. This chapter will explore the New Testament narratives involving Mary with the aid of scholarly works, and present a character reconstruction at the end. This chapter will focus on Mary's presence during Jesus' crucifixion and burial; the possible meaning of her having 'demons'; her initiative to visit Jesus' tomb; the narratives of Mary receiving the Resurrected Jesus; her status as primary witness and Apostle to the Apostles. At this stage, it is essential to clearly assert that branding Mary a prostitute is not problematic because women engaged in prostitution do not deserve respect. Instead, this claim needs to be refuted in the case of Mary simply because it is baseless. In order to completely recover Mary, it is important to separate her from this wrongful assertion. Therefore, the latter section of the chapter will explore the passages that were wrongly attributed to Mary, in an attempt to trace the origin of the incorrect claim of Mary being a woman engaged in prostitution.

2.2.2. The Gospels

Mary is included by name in all four gospels and they explicitly state that she was one of the first people to either know about the risen Jesus, or see the resurrected Jesus. Since the gospels were oral sources it is surprising that all four of them consistently place Mary at Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and empty tomb. While Mary is placed in a similar narrative in all four texts there are certain differences in the narratives and the following sections will explore the gospels individually and examine Mary's role in the texts.

2.2.2.1 Mark

This section examines Mary in the Gospel of Mark. The composer does not make any mention of Mary until the end of the gospel where she witnesses Jesus' crucifixion and burial. Three themes will be explored in the following subsections: Mary's presence at Jesus' crucifixion and burial, Mary's discovery of the empty tomb, and Mary's portrayal in the later added ending of Mark.

2.2.1.1 Follower and Provider

This subsection will explore Mary's inclusion among a group of women who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion and burial. As Jesus is crucified, a crowd gathers around him and within this crowd 'were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee' (Mk 15. 40–41). After Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimathea buries his body and 'Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid' (Mk 15.47). Eugene M. Boring suggests that the author seems 'hesitant to clearly designate the women as "disciples", and in 16.7 the women and the disciples seem to be distinguished'.⁹¹ On the contrary, Adriana Valerio notes that the Greek word for disciple, *mathetes*, is a translation of the Hebrew word *talmid*, which did not exist in the feminine and adds that 'we must hypothesize that every time the evangelists use it in a generic way, they may be including women implicitly'.⁹² Francis J. Moloney claims that the presence of the women suggests that they were loyal and 'genuine disciples of Jesus'.⁹³ Additionally, Joanna Dewey notes that since the description of the women as 'following' or 'serving' is similar to Mark's definition of discipleship earlier in the narrative (8.34; 9.35; 10.43) these women were also among Jesus' disciples.⁹⁴

Mary is thus presented as a follower and provider in Jesus' ministry and was a part of a group of women who possibly had the same role as her. While the exact meaning of 'provider' remains uncertain, it is clear that Mary travelled with Jesus and her presence indicates her belief in Jesus' teachings and her loyalty to him.

⁹¹ Eugene M. Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (Detroit: Presbyterian, 2006), p. 436.

⁹² Adriana Valerio, trans. Wendy Wheatley, *Mary Magdalene: Women, the Church, and the Great Deception* (New York: Europa Editions, 2021), p. 14.

⁹³ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2002), p. 332.

⁹⁴ 'The Gospel of Mark' by Joanna Dewey in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary Voll II*, ed. by Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), pp. 470–510 (p. 506).

2.2.1.2 Mary's Silence

This subsection will explore Mary's reaction to the empty tomb and the abrupt original ending of Mark. After Jesus' burial and post Sabbath, 'Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him' (Mk 16.1). Upon entering the tomb they see a mysterious figure who instructs them to tell the 'disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you; there you will see him, just as he told you' (Mk 16.7). However, the women 'fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.' (Mk 16.8).

Scholars have attempted to explain the fear of the women after their encounter with the divine figure. Boring claims that since the women had gone to the tomb 'to anoint a corpse, not proclaim a resurrection' their fear was not uncharacteristic.⁹⁵ Adela Yarbro Collins points out that the reaction of the women is a 'typical reaction ascribed to human beings' when they encounter heavenly figures.⁹⁶ Additionally, Collins cites Mk 4.38 and Mk 4.41 where a display of divine power has caused fear, and remarks that the fear of the women is based on the angelic figure's appearance, news of Jesus' resurrection, and the responsibility of informing the other disciples which is overwhelming as it goes 'beyond, or even contradicts, ordinary expectations and experience'.⁹⁷ On a similar note, Moloney claims that the seemingly abrupt ending with ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ (for they were afraid) 'drives home, with considerable force, the women's sharing in one of the fundamental aspects of the disciples' failure to follow Jesus to the cross: fear'.⁹⁸ Similarly, Dewey notes that in the Markan narrative the disciples fail to understand Jesus' divinity multiple times (4.35–41; 6.30–44; 6.45–52; 8.1–10; 9.2–8), and claims that the silence of the women continues the 'earlier theme of the male disciples' inability to trust the power of God'.⁹⁹

With this narrative, Mary now joins the male disciples in flight (Mk 15.50–52) and fear (Mk 4.41; Mk 6.50; Mk 9.32; Mk 10.32). The women flee in terror after their divine encounter and this passage portrays Mary in a slightly negative light. However, it is important to note that Mary is not afraid to openly stand by Jesus during his crucifixion and burial. Her fear comes

⁹⁵ Boring, p. 443.

⁹⁶ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), p. 795.

⁹⁷ Collins, pp. 799–800.

⁹⁸ Moloney, p. 349.

⁹⁹ Dewey, p. 507.

in when she sees mysterious divine figures who inform her of Jesus' resurrection, and it is this overwhelming divine mystery that possibly leaves Mary confused and terrified.

2.2.1.3 The First Witness

The original ending of Mark possibly became inadequate in comparison with other gospels and a later ending was added as an attempt to give the narrative a better conclusion. This subsection will explore the later ending where we catch the first glimpse of the familiar Mary Magdalene. The shorter ending of Mark informs the reader that the women complete the task they were given as 'all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter' (Mk 16.8). In the longer ending, after Jesus 'rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons' (Mk 16.9). Mary informs the other disciples who do not believe her. Later, the Eleven see a resurrected Jesus who commissions them at the end of the Markan narrative in 16.14. Collins claims that the scribe who added the later ending 'evidently did not understand that the silence of the women is a way of emphasizing the overwhelming mystery of the resurrection of Jesus and the terror inspired by the presence of an angel in the tomb announcing that event'.¹⁰⁰

It could be the familiarity with the other gospels or the fact that Mary's importance could not be ignored which made the later scribes add that Mary was the first to see the resurrected Jesus. While the additional ending indicates that Mary was chosen to be the first witness, and could allude to her having held high status in the early church, it simultaneously shows that perhaps Mary's identifying mark was her status as a former demoniac. Additionally, Mary's testimony is not believed which could further hint that her position in the early church faced opposition.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Collins, p. 803.

¹⁰¹ While the gospels do not portray Mary as a leader, the gnostic text *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* shows her taking on the role of a spiritual teacher after Jesus' death and could imply that Mary was an important leading figure in the early Church. Written possibly in the first half of the second century, the text shows a post-resurrection Jesus' appearance to his disciples. After Jesus finishes his speech and departs, the disciples are distressed and afraid for their lives. Karen King observes how at this moment Mary takes on Jesus' role as the 'source of spiritual comfort'. Further, Susan Haskins suggests that Mary appears to be 'in charge of the disciples'. Peter recognizes Mary's authority and asks her to repeat the teachings Jesus gave to her and Mary recalls Jesus' words. Unfortunately, Mary's teachings and her claim of having seen Jesus are questioned by Andrew and Peter. Sarah Parkhouse claims that by calling Mary's vision into question they are 'implicitly questioning her sanity'. Karen King, 'The Gospel of Mary Magdalene' in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary Vol II*, ed. by, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), pp. 601–34, (p. 610); Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 38; Sarah Parkhouse, 'The Fetishization of Female Exempla: Mary, Thecla, Perpetua, and Felicitas', *New Testament Studies*, 63 (2017), 567–87 (p. 572).

2.2.2 Matthew

This section examines Mary in the Gospel of Matthew. Two themes will be examined in the following subsections: Mary's presence at Jesus' crucifixion and burial, and Mary's meeting with a resurrected Jesus.

2.2.2.1 A Distant Observer

This subsection will examine Mary's presence at the Cross and at Jesus' burial in the Matthean narrative. The female followers are introduced at the very end of the narrative and the text reads that 'many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee' (Mt 27.55–56). Later, when Jesus is buried 'Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb' (Mt 27.61).

R.T. France comments that διακονέω could have multiple meanings in English like 'to serve' (20.28), 'take care of' (4.11), 'wait on' (8.15) and 'look after' (25.44), and asserts that in this passage 'the sense of practical domestic service seems most prominent'.¹⁰² Elaine Wainwright suggests that the passage hints at the women's presence in Jesus' ministry for a long time and this gives credibility to their witness and adds that following Jesus was 'constitutive of discipleship'.¹⁰³ On the contrary, Kathleen E. Corley notes that in Mark 2.14 Jesus is accused of acquainting with sinners which she claims is suggesting women engaged in prostitution. Corley suggests that this accusation, together with the idea that the women 'served' Jesus, and that slaves could travel with their masters, could imply that Mary belonged to a lower class and that she was possibly a runaway slave or a hired servant.¹⁰⁴

Much like the Markan narrative, the Matthean narrative also introduces Mary as a faithful disciple of Jesus who followed him from Galilee and witnessed his final moments. Mary is included in the narrative as a woman who served Jesus and it is difficult to gauge whether Mary

¹⁰² R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 1085.

¹⁰³ Elaine Wainwright, 'The Gospel of Matthew' in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary Vol II*, ed. by, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), pp. 635–78 (p. 664).

¹⁰⁴ Kathleen E. Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus: Feminist Myths of Christian Origins* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2002), p. 27. Corley's suggestion questions the belief that Mary joined Jesus' community willingly because she was attracted to his views. Additionally, Corley argues that since slavery became a common practice in ancient Jewish society, it would not be uncommon for Jesus to travel with hired female servants. Corley further suggests that it is unlikely that Mary supported Jesus' movement financially because while women could work, they did not earn enough money to support themselves or a group. Corley, p. 37.

was serving Jesus willingly as she sought refuge as a runaway slave, or whether she was hired by Jesus himself. However, regardless of her status as a slave or free woman, the narrative does not suggest that Mary was a woman engaged in prostitution.

2.2.2.2 Mary's Joyful Meeting

This subsection will explore Mary's divine encounter with an angel and then Jesus himself. After Sabbath 'Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb' (Mt 28.1). An angel in white clothes informs the women that Jesus 'is not here; for he has been raised, as he said' (Mt 28.6). The angel further instructs the women to inform the disciples that Jesus has risen and will meet them in Galilee and the women 'left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples' (Mt 28.8). In an unexpected turn of events, Jesus himself meets the women and says "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me' (Mt 28.9–10).

Daniel J. Harrington claims that 'the strange silence attributed to the women by Mark 16.8 is now turned into a joyful proclamation' by the Matthean narrative.¹⁰⁵ Wainwright notes that the women are not only commissioned to talk of the resurrection but 'they are intermediaries who make possible the absent disciples' reconciliation with Jesus'.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, Barbara Reid comments that Jesus' repetition of the angel's words is significant because it shows that the women were 'commissioned directly by Jesus, giving them credentials as prime witnesses and apostles'.¹⁰⁷ Commenting on women being the first witnesses, France claims that these verses were perhaps not fictional because women were not considered credible witnesses and 'the singling out of women for this honor detracts from the prestige of the male disciples'.¹⁰⁸ Further, Wainwright claims that this passage proves the women were not just Jesus' followers and terms them 'the foremothers of the gospel proclamation.'¹⁰⁹

While Mary is not alone in the narrative, she is a witness to the resurrection and she receives her mission from Jesus himself. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the women are told that Jesus has risen 'like he said', and it appears that the women are being reminded of something

¹⁰⁵ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991) p. 411.

¹⁰⁶ Wainwright, p. 665.

¹⁰⁷ Barbara Reid, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2005), p. 144.

¹⁰⁸ France, p. 1098.

¹⁰⁹ Wainwright, p. 665.

Jesus said to them earlier which hints at the long duration of time they have spent in listening and understanding Jesus' words.

2.2.3 Luke

This section examines Mary in the Gospel of Luke. Three themes will be explored in the following subsections: the charge of Mary being possessed by demons, her presence at Jesus' crucifixion and burial, and her meeting with divine figures in Jesus' empty tomb.

2.2.3.1 The Demoniac

This subsection will explore the presence of women in Jesus' ministry and the charge of demon possession on Mary. It will also highlight a few scholarly attempts that have been made to explain the possible meaning of Mary having demons. Luke writes that 'the twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources' (Lk 8.2–3). John T. Carroll suggests that the passage paints a clear picture of Jesus' travelling companions which includes 'a group of women who have benefited from Jesus' acts of healing'.¹¹⁰ Bart D. Ehrman claims that since women in ancient societies were placed under male authority, Jesus' idea that nobody marries or re-marries in the Kingdom of God (Mk 12.25) was perhaps appealing to some women and hence, they decided to follow him.¹¹¹ Similarly, Joel B. Green accredits the presence of women in large numbers to the inclusion of single women (Lk 7.11–17; Lk 7.36–50) in Jesus' ministry. Green further claims that those who were demonised or ill were often ostracized by the society and hence it is possible that after these women were healed by Jesus they decided to travel with him, and soon became incorporated into this new community that was building around Jesus. Moreover, Green remarks that Mary is the first woman named among the female followers 'undoubtedly because of her importance in the resurrection account'.¹¹² Additionally, Mary R. Thompson states that it is significant that Mary is named before Joanna, who certainly had a better social standing than Mary. Thompson adds that this could indicate that Mary also had some wealth to herself

¹¹⁰ John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), p. 181.

¹¹¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 197.

¹¹² Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 318–320.

and that her importance in the early church was greater than the other women.¹¹³ Turid Karlson Seim suggests that Mary perhaps held ‘great prestige in many early communities and an authority comparable only to Peter’s on the male side’.¹¹⁴

Additionally, the Lukan narrative clearly suggests that the women had a clear role as financial aids to Jesus, and Susan Haskins claims that it is significant because it ‘presupposes their financial independence, and possibly their maturity’.¹¹⁵ Further, Seim points out that it would have been impossible for married women to leave their families and suggests that the women were either the wives of the male disciples, widows, or divorced women. Seim also offers a historical perspective and claims that Roman law allowed women to inherit, own, and manage property, and further adds that some women (like Priscilla in Acts 18.3) chose to work even if their work was concerned with domestic duties like food, clothes, and comfort. Moreover, Seim claims that women were also active as midwives or doctors and were active participants in small trade, and such women supported their families and perhaps ‘were also able to lay by some reserves for themselves’.¹¹⁶

The presence of women in Jesus’ ministry is often linked with the idea that Jesus was a saviour for women who were terribly oppressed by the ancient Jewish customs. However, recent Jewish scholarship has attempted to present a more nuanced image of early Jewish communities. Ross S. Kraemer claims that while the absence of Mary’s family from the narrative could indicate that she had no family or that she was abandoned by her relatives, Jesus’ disciples were written about in a way that showed that they were not tied down by familial ties so that Jesus’ teachings about a re-defined family structure could become authorized.¹¹⁷ Additionally, Amy-Jill Levine claims that while early Judaism was certainly not utopian and all accepting, it was also not a community that would cast out women or children. Further, Levine suggests that the idea of early Judaism being extremely misogynistic is harmful to Jewish-Christian relations. Levine adds that women were not attracted to Jesus’ movement because they felt oppressed by Judaism, but perhaps they were attracted to the lack of ‘focus on celibacy (Mt 19.12), non-privileging of child-bearing (Lk 11.27–28), and alternative family structures (Mt 12.50; Mk

¹¹³ Mary R. Thompson, *Mary of Magdala: What the DaVinci Code Misses* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2006), pp. 53–54.

¹¹⁴ Turid Karlson Seim, ‘The Gospel of Luke’ in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary Vol II*, ed. by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), pp. 728–62 (p. 735).

¹¹⁵ Haskins, p. 12.

¹¹⁶ Seim, pp. 735–41.

¹¹⁷ Ross S. Kraemer, ‘Jewish Family Life in the First Century CE’ in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* ed. by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 540–543 (p. 540)

3.35)'.¹¹⁸ On a similar note, Corley claims that the presence of female followers could reflect 'the growing participation of women within other male dominated groups' and further claims that these women were possibly 'the more socially progressive women of their culture'.¹¹⁹ Additionally, Corley states that Luke specifies the role of the women as financial aids to Jesus' ministry because it helps to portray the early church as a socially acceptable movement, and asserts that women being financial aids 'is unlikely to be historical'.¹²⁰

Apart from the debate surrounding the presence of women and Mary's exact role in the ministry, the charge of Mary being possessed by demons has rendered varied exegesis over the years. Both Justo L. Gonzalez and Green state Luke's Gospel does not suggest that the seven demons removed from Mary had anything to do with sexual impurity.¹²¹ Haskins notes how none of the early commentators thought Mary's 'condition might have been psychological' and not 'moral or sexual' and, to strengthen the argument, Haskins cites examples of men being possessed by demons in Luke 8.26–39 and Matthew 8.28–34; 15.21–28 and points out that no sexual sins are implied in their cases.¹²²

Jane Schaberg and Melanie Johnson-DuBaufre assert that Mary's demon possession was not based on historical memory but was an early attempt to undermine her authority, and suggest that Mary's demons could be interpreted as her rage as she attempted to defy patriarchy.¹²³ Commenting on the idea that Mary's demons were sexual sins, Cynthia Bourgeault points out that while Luke never claims Mary engaged in prostitution or that she was a sinner, the mere mention of Mary ever having had demons 'plants the first seed of doubt—the vaguest inuendo of something “off” in her character'.¹²⁴ Additionally, Jane Schaberg claims that for early church fathers and commentators 'what kind of demons would a woman have? Sexual, of course. And seven, indicating intensity, totality, voracious lust'.¹²⁵ Carla Ricci suggests that Mary's seven demons could indicate that her disease was now both mental and physical and suggests that

¹¹⁸ Amy-Jill Levine, 'Bearing False Witness: Common Errors Made About Early Judaism' in *JANT*. ed. by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 501–04 (pp. 502–03)

¹¹⁹ Corley, p. 143.

¹²⁰ Corley, p. 31.

¹²¹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Luke)* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), p. 103; Green, p. 320.

¹²² Haskins, p. 14.

¹²³ Jane Schaberg and Melanie Johnson-DuBaufre, *Mary Magdalene Understood* (New York: Continuum, 2006), pp. 43–44.

¹²⁴ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 14.

¹²⁵ Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York: Continuum, 2002), p.77.

Mary possibly felt so suffocated by patriarchy that it ‘finally upset the balance of her mind’.¹²⁶ Corley puts forth a different argument and claims that possession by demons or spirits was ‘associated with creativity and prophetic powers’ and therefore, the charge against Mary being possessed by demons places her next to Jesus, who is accused of being possessed by Beelzebul in Mk 3.22. Corley states that this makes Mary ‘a prophet who was later demoted by an early Christian tradition’.¹²⁷

Robert M. Price suggests that Mary’s demons perhaps came to be associated with immorality due to the reputation of the town of Magdala and an attempt by early scribes who deliberately changed ‘Magdala’ to *m’gaddla* which meant ‘hair-curler’ which was a euphemism used for a woman engaged in prostitution.¹²⁸ On the contrary, recent scholarship has refuted the claim that Mary was from the town of Magdala. Scholars Adriana Valerio, Elizabeth Schrader, and Joan E. Taylor suggest that since the meaning of the Hebrew word *migdal* is ‘tower/fortress’ the texts were not suggesting that Mary was from Magdala, rather the texts were stating that she was a leader in the early church. Further, Valerio claims that in the Greek versions of the four gospels, Mary is introduced as ‘the Magdalene Maria’ or Μαρία ἡ καλουμένη Μαγδαληνή which translates to ‘Mary called Magdalene’ (Lk 8.2), and this suggests that *migdal* was a quality or a given name, and not Mary’s place of origin. Schrader and Taylor note that even early commentators like Origen interpreted *migdala* to mean ‘magnification’, meanwhile Jerome interpreted it to mean ‘tower’. Further, they observe that in the gospels, if one was introduced using their place of origin it was written differently like ‘Jesus the Nazarene’ (Lk 18.37) or ‘Simon, a certain Cyrenian’ (Lk 23.26).¹²⁹

The Lukan narrative portrays Mary as a financially stable and independent woman who was possibly seeking companionship and guidance. Additionally, the charge of demon possession, which has always been viewed in a sexual light when it comes to Mary, does not necessarily equate to sexual activity. Jesus’ act of ‘removing’ the demons or the demons having ‘come out’ of Mary could very well be symbolic of Jesus’ forgiveness (just how he forgives the sinful woman in Luke 7.48 and the adulterous woman in John 8.11) and the start of Mary’s new life within Jesus’ reformed kinship.

¹²⁶ Carla Ricci, *Mary Magdalene and Many Others: Women Who Followed Jesus* trans. by Paul Burns (Boston: Fortress, 1994), pp. 136–37.

¹²⁷ Corley, p. 34.

¹²⁸ Robert M. Price, *Mary Magdalene: Gnostic Apostle?*
<http://www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/art_mary_magdalene.htm>

¹²⁹ Valerio, p. 9; Elizabeth Schrader & Joan E. Taylor, ‘The Meaning of “Magdalene”: A Review of Literary Evidence’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 140 (2021), 751–773 (pp. 753–56)

2.2.3.2 Among Jerusalem's Daughters

In the Lukan Passion narrative, Mary is not included by name and this subsection will briefly explore Mary's presence in the passages. As Jesus is being carried away the women following him 'were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed'" (Lk 23.27–29). After they witness Jesus' burial from a distance (Lk 23.49), the women are mentioned once again as an anonymous group, 'the women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid' (Lk 23.55). Green tries to explain Jesus' solemn address to the women and suggests that Jesus wants the women to stop crying over his death because he wants them to 'weep in the light of their failure to align themselves with Jesus'.¹³⁰ Similarly, Darrell L. Bock claims that Jesus' death, 'does not mean his fall, but it spells doom for the nation' and adds that Jesus urges the women to not cry because their emotions are misplaced.¹³¹

Luke introduces and names the women once and the next two times and they are placed together as the women who followed Jesus from Galilee. Since Mary followed Jesus from Galilee, we know she is included in Jesus' address to the θυγατέρες Ἰερουσαλήμ (Daughters of Jerusalem) and this clearly establishes her loyalty to Jesus. Despite the scholarly assessment that the emotions of the women are misplaced, the Daughters of Jerusalem are the only people identified as publicly mourning the fate of Jesus. The narrative is significant because it shows Mary's grief which is rarely stressed as she weeps and beats her breasts and witnesses her teacher's final moments.

2.2.3.3 Mary Remembers

This subsection will explore Mary's presence at Jesus' empty tomb and briefly examine Mary's Jewish identity. After the Sabbath, the women go to anoint Jesus' body but discover that Jesus' body is missing and 'suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them' (Lk 24.4). The divine beings ask the women to 'remember, how he told you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again' (Lk 24.6–7). The divine beings ask the women to think back to Jesus' words and 'then

¹³⁰ Green, p. 815.

¹³¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9.51–24.53* (Ada: Baker Academic, 1996), pp. 1843–45.

they remembered his words' (Lk 24.8). The women are finally named as they spread the word to the disciples, 'Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them' (Lk 24.10–11).

Gonzalez claims that the women waiting for the Sabbath to be over is 'the ultimate tragic irony' because Jesus tried to teach his disciples to place compassion above 'blind obedience to the law'.¹³² On the contrary, Levine notes that since Jesus was Jewish he would have not advocated for Sabbath breaking and points out that Jesus only challenges how the Sabbath should be kept in Lk 6.6–11; Mk 3.1–6; Mt 12.9–14.¹³³ Seim notes that the divine beings urge the women to remember and the text explicitly reads that the women remembered. Seim states that this means the women heard the word of God and kept it indicating that 'the women from Galilee fulfilled the criterion to be members of Jesus' disciples'.¹³⁴ Seim further notes that after they are informed about the resurrection there is no fear or anxiety and hence, 'the narrative itself guarantees to the reader that the women are trustworthy and credible witnesses'.¹³⁵ Further, Green suggests that the women's discipleship is now confirmed as they are 'summoned simply to authentic understanding' and are urged to remember Jesus' words.¹³⁶

The women's story is dubbed *λῆρος* or 'idle talk' and Bock suggests that the women are not believed because it 'looks like an absurd effort to challenge reality'.¹³⁷ Gonzalez observes the intentional contrast between the faithful women and the non-believing disciples, and reminds the readers that it was the women who brought 'the message of the resurrection to the eleven, and not vice-versa' as the later course of Church history would have one believe.¹³⁸ Additionally, Seim states that it was the men who chose to not believe the women's account and goes on to suggest that it was the reaction of the men that later created questions about the women's statement.¹³⁹ Carolyn Osiek provides a historical perspective and claims that women's testimonies were not disregarded and that women could testify about a situation where no men were present. While women were discouraged from initiating public testimonies,

¹³² Gonzalez, p. 271.

¹³³ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), p. 30.

¹³⁴ Seim, pp. 749–50.

¹³⁵ Seim, pp. 749–750.

¹³⁶ Green, p. 838.

¹³⁷ Bock, p. 1898.

¹³⁸ Gonzalez, p. 273.

¹³⁹ Seim, p. 752.

Osiek points out that in the Lukan narrative the women's testimony is given privately to the disciples and is therefore credible.¹⁴⁰

Mary's Jewishness is a big part of her identity and to expect her to go against her customs is an injustice to understanding her. While Mary does wait for Sabbath to be over, her return to Jesus' tomb proves her loyalty is stronger than the male disciples. Perhaps the 'ultimate tragic irony' is not that Mary waited for Sabbath to be over, but the fact that her return to the tomb, and her resolve to stand by Jesus is often glossed over while the male disciples were constantly valorised by the early Church Fathers.

2.2.4 John

This section examines Mary in the Gospel of John. Four themes will be explored in the following subsections: Mary's presence near Jesus' Cross, her decision to visit Jesus' tomb alone, her meeting with a resurrected Jesus, and her status as Apostle to the Apostles.

2.2.4.1 Near the Cross

This subsection will explore Mary's portrayal as she witnesses Jesus' crucifixion. In Jesus' final moments 'standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene' (Jn 19.25). Frederick Dale Bruner asserts that the women and the Beloved Disciple comprised the earliest church and contrasts the four soldiers who divide Jesus' clothes among themselves in Jn 19.23–25 with the four faithful women by Jesus' side, suggesting that it represents 'the world and the church in short snapshots'.¹⁴¹ Thompson states that Mary was included in this scene either because of her importance in the early church or perhaps 'there was a historical recollection that Mary had been present at the actual crucifixion'.¹⁴²

The inclusion of Mary Magdalene in the list not only reflects her important status amongst Jesus' disciples but also hints at her close relationship with Jesus as we can see from *The Gospel of Phillip*. Written in the latter half of the third century, in the gnostic text *The Gospel of Phillip*, Mary's position as Jesus' favoured one becomes more established using sexual imagery. The

¹⁴⁰ Carolyn Osiek, 'The Women at the Tomb: What Are They Doing There?', *Catholic Theological Union*, 53 (1997), 103–118, (pp. 111–12).

¹⁴¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 1107.

¹⁴² Thompson, p. 67.

text reads, ‘and the companion of the...Mary Magdalene. [loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her...’. Katherine Ludwig Jansen, Haskins, and Ehrman agree that even though Jesus is said to have kissed Mary there is nothing sexually intimate about the act. Haskins states that it was perhaps ‘symbolic of the love of Christ for the Church-in the person of Mary Magdalen’. Additionally, Jansen suggests that these kisses contained grace and Ehrman claims that the kissing symbolised the revelation of truth to Mary by Jesus.¹⁴³ The popular image of Mary being Jesus’ lover perhaps arose from this text but the scholarly interpretation and the gospel narratives contain enough evidence to suggest that Jesus was Mary’s guide or teacher and Mary was his faithful disciple.

2.2.4.2 The Empty Tomb

This subsection will explore Mary’s visit to Jesus’ tomb and how she becomes gripped by fear when she discovers that it is empty. In the Johannine narrative ‘early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb’(Jn 20.1). After Mary sees that the stone has been removed she goes ‘to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved’ (Jn 20.2). Mary informs the two disciples that ‘they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him’ (Jn 20.2). Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple rush to the tomb and for the next few verses, Mary is out of the narrative as the two men see for themselves that Jesus’ body is no longer in the tomb. While the text reads that the men believed when they saw the empty tomb, the very next verse reads ‘as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead’ (Jn 20.9).

Jo-Ann A. Brant states that Mary comes to the tomb while it is still dark and this ‘captures Mary’s desolation’ and adds that Mary ‘abandons propriety and safety’ to be near Jesus.¹⁴⁴ Bruner suggests that Mary is shown as being alone because the composer wants to show that the church has been reduced to one faithful woman.¹⁴⁵ Kyndall Renfro suggests that even though it appears that the Beloved Disciple has understood the events, v.9 clearly states that

¹⁴³ Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 26. *The Gospel of Phillip* quotation is from this work; Haskins, p. 41; Ehrman, p. 216.

¹⁴⁴ Jo-Ann A. Brant, *John* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 266.

¹⁴⁵ Bruner, p. 1140.

neither of the male disciples understood what was happening, and adds that the ‘role of first-believer quite obviously belongs to Mary’.¹⁴⁶

The Johannine Mary visits the tomb alone and hastily runs to the male disciples for help when she sees that the stone at the entrance has been removed. While Mary’s decision to run and get help has been perceived as a sign of her weakness or irrationality, it appears to be a practical move on her part to ask for help in a situation that she assumed could be dangerous.

2.2.4.3 ‘Rabbouni!’

This subsection will explore Jesus’ appearance to Mary. The two disciples Mary turned to for help have left but ‘Mary stood outside the tomb weeping’ (Jn 20.11). A distressed Mary finally looks inside the tomb and sees two angels who ask her why she is crying. After Mary finishes telling the angels the reason for her tears, she turns around and sees Jesus whom she fails to recognise. Jesus asks her ‘woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?’ (Jn 20.15). Despite this direct address, Mary does not recognise Jesus and assuming he is the gardener, asks that Jesus’ body be given to her: ‘if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away’ (Jn 20.15). Finally, Jesus addresses Mary by her name and Mary identifies him immediately and says ‘Rabbouni!’ (Jn 20.16). On seeing Jesus, Mary holds on to him and Jesus responds by saying ‘do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’ (Jn 20.17).¹⁴⁷

Bruner suggests that the author was not trying to depict Mary’s weeping as a shameful act and points to Jesus weeping in Jn 11.35 at Lazarus’ death, adding that Mary ‘represents the emotion of the whole world in the presence of the overwhelming cruelty of death’.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, Haenchen suggests that Mary does not recognize the risen Jesus at first because the motif ‘is designed to show that the risen Jesus is not accessible like he once was’.¹⁴⁹ Renfro highlights

¹⁴⁶ Kyndall Renfro, ‘Faithful Disciple, Feminine Witness: Mary Magdalene Revisited’, *Review and Expositor: A Baptist Theological Journal*, 113 (2013), 131–36, (p. 132).

¹⁴⁷ Earlier translations like the NKJV and RSV read ‘do not cling to me’ and the word ‘cling’ brings with it a sense of desperation from Mary’s side and irritation from Jesus’ side. Additionally, Jesus’ invitation to Thomas to touch him in John 20.27 suggests that Jesus had no problem with being touched but had a problem with who was touching him. On the contrary, the later and more grammatically accurate translation of ‘hold on’ in the NRSV suggests a typical reaction from a grieving woman who has her deceased loved one back and it shows a patient and gentle spiritual guide in Jesus who is advising her to not hold on to him.

¹⁴⁸ Bruner, p. 1150.

¹⁴⁹ Ernst Haenchen, *John 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 7–21* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), p. 209.

that Mary's inability to recognize Jesus is not her lack of faith but the fact that 'she has been given no testimony that he is alive in which to believe'.¹⁵⁰ On a slightly different note, Brant comments on Mary's tone in Jn 20.15 which is 'more of an accusation and a demand than a polite request' and adds that Mary's demand that Jesus' body be given over to her transforms her into a mourning woman who becomes a guardian of the dead.¹⁵¹ Brant further notes that Mary remains 'strangely unperturbed' even after seeing the angels, and claims that Mary was 'so bent on her mission to attend to Jesus' body that she seems oblivious to the fact that she is talking to heavenly creatures'.¹⁵²

Richard Bauckham, Dorothy A. Lee, and Bruner observe that Jesus calling out Mary's name proves that she was his faithful disciple because in John 10.3 Jesus says 'he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out'.¹⁵³ Bauckham and Lee add that Jesus' appearance to Mary is the start of the fulfilment of Jesus' promise to show himself 'not to the world, but to the disciples only'.¹⁵⁴ Renfro suggests that Jesus wanted to reserve his message for the 'most faithful recipient possible, and the most faithful disciple in this case was Mary Magdalene, a woman'.¹⁵⁵ Further, Lee highlights the importance of Jesus' message to Mary as Jesus addresses God as not only his Father, but the Father of his disciples and this new relationship is revealed to Mary first.¹⁵⁶

After trying to guess the nature of Jesus and Mary's relationship from the previous gospels, in John's narrative it becomes clear that Jesus was Mary's mentor, or spiritual guide and Mary was his faithful student. Interestingly, when both male disciples look inside the tomb earlier, they see nothing which could indicate that the angels and Jesus are waiting for Mary because she was the chosen one. Mary receives the mission from Jesus himself and she becomes the bearer of a hopeful message to the distressed disciples. This further strengthens the argument for Mary having some authority and an important position in the early church.

¹⁵⁰ Renfro, p. 132.

¹⁵¹ Brant, p. 269.

¹⁵² Brant, pp. 268–69.

¹⁵³ Dorothy A. Lee, 'Partnership in Easter Faith: The Role of Mary Magdalene and Thomas in John 20', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 17 (1995), 37–49 (p. 47); Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, (Grand Rapids: T&T Clark, 2002), p. 284; Bruner, p. 1152.

¹⁵⁴ Bauckham, p. 284; Lee, p. 48.

¹⁵⁵ Renfro, p. 133.

¹⁵⁶ Lee, p. 45.

2.2.4.4 Apostle to the Apostles

This subsection will explore the narrative of Mary informing the disciples about what she had witnessed. After her conversation with Jesus ‘Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”’; and she told them that he had said these things to her’ (20.18). Bruner highlights how the Johannine Mary does not run away from the tomb and neither is she depicted as being afraid after seeing a resurrected Jesus.¹⁵⁷ Thompson observes how an encounter with Jesus changes Mary’s attitude as she is no longer afraid or confused and is instead ‘making a direct statement that she has seen the Lord’.¹⁵⁸ Thompson cites the example of the Samaritan woman in 4.29 and Martha in 11.27, and suggests that Mary’s, ‘role as primary messenger of resurrection fits the pattern of women who proclaim the realities of who Jesus is in this gospel’.¹⁵⁹

After witnessing Jesus’ resurrection and receiving her mission directly from him, Mary now shares Jesus’ words with the other disciples as she now becomes the primary witness and the Apostle to the Apostles. Further, the use of the word ‘announced’ in v.18, instead of ‘informed’, or ‘told’, gives a sense of the authority that Mary possibly held. Mary was not an ‘errand girl’ as the other gospels might lead us to believe, and the narrative itself suggests the possibility that Mary was chosen to receive the resurrected Jesus and his message. After John’s Gospel, Mary is not named or mentioned in the rest of the New Testament narrative. A verse in Acts possibly alludes to her as it reads, ‘all these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers’ (Acts 1.14). Since the composer of Luke-Acts is the same, the mention of ‘certain women’ could include Mary Magdalene because in Luke the women are mostly an unnamed collective. In 1Corinthians 15.3–8, when Paul enlists all who saw a resurrected Jesus, the author states that Cephas is the first one to see Jesus and after him it is the other disciples. Paul’s omission of Mary from the list marks the beginning of Mary being side lined in a narrative that she should be defining.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Bruner, pp. 1154–55.

¹⁵⁸ Thompson, p. 85.

¹⁵⁹ Thompson, p. 88.

¹⁶⁰ The gnostic text the *Gospel of Thomas*, composed between 60 CE and 140 CE, is a collection of one hundred and fourteen sayings of Jesus. In the text, Peter complains to Jesus that Mary should leave because women are not worthy. Similarly, the third century gnostic work titled *Pistis Sophia* (or Faith Wisdom) shows a resurrected Jesus revealing to his disciples the contents of his visions after spending three days in heaven. After a point, the narrative moves to a question-answer form, and Mary asks thirty nine of the forty-six questions and Jesus himself seems impressed by Mary’s grasp over his teachings. However, Mary’s interpretation of the teachings does not go unchallenged as Peter complains to Jesus that Mary does not let anyone else speak. Mary is clearly threatened by Peter as she confesses that she is afraid ‘because he threatens me and hates our gender’. Jesus defends Mary and

2.2.3. Making Mary Magdalene

This section examines the erroneous claim of Mary being a woman who engaged in prostitution. Except her past as a demoniac, which did not necessarily mean sexual sins, nothing ties Mary with the narrative that emerged around her. Two themes will be examined in the following subsections: the merging of Mary with anonymous women of the gospels, and the assumption of Mary's 'demons' meaning sexual sins.

2.2.3.1 The Repentant Magdalene

All four gospels include a scene where Jesus is anointed by a woman and this subsection will examine how this woman came to be confused with Mary Magdalene. The woman who anoints Jesus remains anonymous in Mk 14.3–8, Mt 26.6–13, Luke 7.36–47, but John names her as Mary of Bethany in Jn 12.1–8. Mark's and Matthew's version of the event are quite similar, 'a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head' (Mk 14.3). The Markan and Matthean narratives do not give any information about the woman except that she anoints Jesus. Luke, however, adds that the woman who anointed Jesus was a sinner: 'a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment' (Lk 7.37). The woman's next action is quite intimate as she 'began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment' (Lk 7.38). The reaction of the Pharisee implies that the woman's sin was sexual, 'if this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner' (Lk 7.39). In John's version of this narrative, Jesus is in the home of Lazarus when 'Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair' (Jn 12.3).

Bourgeault points out that from the Lukan narrative 'the lineaments of the future Mary Magdalene are already peering'¹⁶¹ Haskins notes that the Greek word, πόρνη, which can be understood as 'prostitute', is not used here and adds that despite this, the Pharisee's thought of the woman being "a certain type" implies sexual misconduct and hints that she was perhaps

says 'any of those filled with the spirit of light will come forward to interpret what I say: no one will be able to oppose them'. The Gnostic Mary possibly had a public rivalry with Peter, and it is likely that Mary held a leadership position amongst the disciples while Jesus was alive. However, after Jesus' death the male disciples left no space for Mary in the narrative or perhaps even within the early Church. Ehrman, pp. 209–212. The *Pistis Sophia* quotation is from Ehrman's work.

¹⁶¹ Bourgeault, p. 20.

engaged in prostitution. Haskins further claims that the woman wipes Jesus' feet with her hair and that it was 'another sign of her fallen status, as only prostitutes wore their hair thus in public'.¹⁶² In the beginning of Luke's next chapter (Lk 8.1) we are introduced to Mary Magdalene, and Haskins believes that this merged the two women into one. The unnamed sinner from the previous section was now named as Mary Magdalene who was one of Jesus' followers. Haskins points out that because of Luke's narrative 'the most pervasive image we have of Mary Magdalen is one of weeping woman with long loose hair, holding an ointment jar'.¹⁶³ Haskins notes the Johannine narrative and claims that not only does Mary anoint Jesus' feet, but she wipes them dry with her hair much like the sinner from Lk 7.36. Additionally, the image of the room filling up with fragrance 'when applied to Mary Magdalen in later allegorical commentaries, contributed to the aura of femininity and eroticism which was to envelop her'.¹⁶⁴

All these women were merged into one in 591 by Pope Gregory I when he claimed that 'she whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices?'¹⁶⁵ Haskins states that with these words Mary officially became the redeemed woman with a past of sexual sins and 'Christianity's model of repentance, a manageable, controllable figure, and effective weapon and instrument of propaganda against her own sex'.¹⁶⁶ Additionally, Ehrman states that the merging of Mary of Bethany with Mary Magdalene seems quite far-fetched especially when 'the identifying mark for both of them is given precisely to differentiate them'.¹⁶⁷

The merging of Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene is quite bizarre as many questions arise. If Mary had a living male relative, would she not be identified in a traditional fashion? For example something like 'Mary the sister of Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead'. Additionally, when Luke introduced Mary as a follower of Jesus he intentionally does not tie her up with any male relatives because perhaps he wanted to portray her as an independent woman (or maybe she had no alive family members) who could spend her wealth in the manner of her choosing and not as the repentant Magdalene.

¹⁶² Haskins, pp. 16–18.

¹⁶³ Haskins, p. 19.

¹⁶⁴ Haskins, p. 23.

¹⁶⁵ Gregory the Great, *Homily XXXIII*, as quoted by Haskins, p. 96.

¹⁶⁶ Haskins, p. 96–97.

¹⁶⁷ Ehrman, p. 189.

2.2.3.2 The Sinful Magdalene

This subsection will explore how Mary came to be viewed as a sinner. Along with the anointing women, Mary has also been confused with the Samaritan woman with five husbands in Jn 4.7 and the adulterous woman in Jn 8.3. The story of the Samaritan woman has no similarities with Mary, but Haskins suggests that the two became one on the basis of the Samaritan woman's 'own admitted sexual sins'.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, Haskins adds that the adulterous woman's association with Mary 'centres on the fallenness of the mythical Magdalen and their sistership in sexual crime.'¹⁶⁹ Commenting on the need for creating a fallen woman narrative around Mary, Ehrman suggests that these texts were written by men who envisioned 'women not enticing men with the dangers of sex but falling at their feet in humble submission and penitence'.¹⁷⁰ Additionally, Schaberg asserts that Mary became a sex worker for multiple reasons including sexism, misogyny and 'the struggle to create and maintain a male hierarchy with its male models and precedents'.¹⁷¹

Mary became a woman engaged in prostitution not just because of patriarchy but also to show Jesus in a positive light. The idea that Jesus was forgiving, accepting, and that his message was for the lowly, oppressed women who were burdened by Jewish customs has now been challenged by Jewish feminist scholars. However, the idea was made popular by early church fathers, and perhaps for this reason the story of Mary being accepted by Jesus despite her past as a woman engaged in prostitution gained popularity.

2.4. Conclusion

After researching Mary of Magdalene it became clear that there has not just been an attempt to misrepresent her, but there has been an effort to replace Mary with a completely different woman who fits the patriarchal mould better. The official stance regarding Mary's sinful past did not change till 1969 when changes were made to the Roman Calendar and it was in 1978 that Mary's sinful image was removed from the Roman Breviary.¹⁷² Even though years of misinformation and patriarchal bias have led to the real Mary Magdalene being lost, a close study of the gospels can reveal a more complex and interesting figure.

¹⁶⁸ Haskins, p. 28.

¹⁶⁹ Haskins, p. 29.

¹⁷⁰ Ehrman, p. 192.

¹⁷¹ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 81.

¹⁷² Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 99.

Mary's introduction in the Markan narrative is as a provider to Jesus' ministry among other women who possibly played the same role. The narrative specifies that Mary was among the women who followed Jesus which can be interpreted as Mary perhaps being in control of her life, resources, and decisions. However, the later added ending which is perhaps influenced by other gospel works, talks about her being a former demoniac whom Jesus cured, and immediately a contrasting image of Mary comes to mind. Even though Jesus appears first to Mary in the Markan narrative, he does not talk to her and the mere mention of her demons immediately diminishes her status as a credible witness as sexual sins become associated with her. Mary's experience of having had a divine encounter and being the first to know that Jesus has been resurrected, is disregarded by the male disciples who are later greeted by Jesus and commissioned. In a way, the Markan narrative grants Mary some power and authority, only to quickly place the male disciples above her. In the Matthean narrative, Mary's role is once again that of a follower and provider, and she is once again grouped with women who silently witness Jesus' crucifixion and burial. However, the narrative gives Mary a greater role as she decides to visit the tomb along with a female companion and is later met by Jesus himself. Mary is not only the first witness, but Jesus also gives Mary the important task of informing the male disciples that he will meet them in Galilee. Mary is not simply delivering a message. Instead, she is bridging the gap between a deceased teacher and his distressed disciples by giving hope to the latter that their spiritual guide has not abandoned them.

The Lukan narrative introduces Mary as a former demoniac from whom Jesus removed seven demons, a description that forever changed Mary's reception and understanding. However, a simple reading of the Gospel is enough to suggest that Mary's demons were not sexual and in fact, one cannot gauge what is exactly meant by the term 'demons'. Mary is once again the follower and provider who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion and burial. However, in the Lukan empty tomb narrative, Mary does not see a resurrected Jesus but instead is urged by angels to remember his words. The angel reminds Mary that Jesus had spoken about his resurrection earlier and the narrative explicitly states that Mary remembers which showcases Mary's ability to understand and hold on to Jesus' words. Mary and the other female disciples joyously share their important experience with the male disciples who do not believe them. The disbelief of the male disciples indicates not just their possible reluctance in believing a group of women, but also their lack of understanding Jesus' teachings, something Mary appears to have a good grasp on. Even though Mary is always mentioned as part of a group of female followers, her

possible high social status, her faith, loyalty, and her ability to hold on to Jesus' words can be determined.

The Johannine narrative retains an important position as Mary is portrayed as an individual in this narrative. Mary is not a distant observer to Jesus' crucifixion but is mentioned as standing near the cross along with Mary of Nazareth and the Beloved Disciple. Mary's inclusion in this intimate setting has led to romanticized interpretations about her relationship with Jesus, a relationship that has so far clearly been of a disciple and teacher. However, if Mary's presence at the cross raises questions about the nature of her relationship with Jesus, why are the same questions not applied to the presence of the Beloved Disciple too? Additionally, in every gospel narrative Mary has proven her loyalty towards Jesus by witnessing his crucifixion and hence, Mary has earned the right to stand near the cross. Mary's unwavering loyalty and closeness to Jesus is evident from her decision to visit the tomb alone while it is still dark. For her consistent loyalty, Mary is rewarded as Jesus greets her and calls her by her name.

The four gospels include Mary as a witness to Jesus' crucifixion and burial but they do not talk about Mary's bravery and the possible grief she felt during this event. Jesus' ministry garnered enough attention and was perhaps viewed as a social disturbance, or threat, by the authorities. Mary's decision to follow Jesus, provide for him, and openly show her support by being present in his final moments most likely made her a potential ally of Jesus in the eyes of the law. The fact that the male disciples abandoned Jesus due to fear is enough to suggest that the political threats from people in power were a real possibility for Jesus and his early disciples. Despite this, Mary does not only stand by Jesus but she publicly weeps for him and beats her breasts (Lk 23.27). Another hint of Mary's grief is in the Johannine narrative when Mary weeps outside Jesus' empty tomb. At first glance, Mary's tears appear as a sign of weakness which is often attributed to the female expression of grief. However, Mary's tears can be interpreted as tears of rage. If we inspect the passage closely, we can gauge Mary's demanding tone as she asks for Jesus' body. Until Mary realises that she is talking to Jesus, she remains firm in her resolve to find his body and bring it with her. Mary is not weeping because she does not know what to do, but she is distressed because she feels that those in power snatched away her right to mourn. Mary weeps not just for herself but perhaps also for other women like her who lost their loved ones to political oppression. Mary's grief does not make her a hysterical woman, but instead it transforms her into a symbol of silent resolve as she demands Jesus' body.

Mary's unwavering loyalty to Jesus also raises the small but pertinent question of why. Why did Mary decide to follow Jesus? Why did she financially aid and serve him? While the actual

answer cannot be found at this stage, Mary was possibly drawn to Jesus' message of social reformation and the upcoming Reign of God. Mary was possibly outcast because she had some type of disease, or she was a political rebel who wanted to break free from patriarchal authority and maybe even political oppression from Rome. It is possible that Jesus' idea of reformed kinship wherein God was the head and kinship ties did not determine one's social status, was appealing to Mary. Jesus' ideas of forgiveness and his spiritual guidance encouraged Mary to travel with him and listen to his message which she found liberating. However, at this stage it is important to reiterate that Mary was Jewish. Jesus' ministry was clearly aimed at bringing the Reign of God and the liberative values therein, but to suggest that Jesus was saving the oppressed Jewish people from their own traditions is a wrong claim. Mary's fight was not against Judaism or Jewish people (as we can see from her being respectful of the Sabbath in all four gospels), but her fight was possibly against patriarchy and all other forms of oppression. Mary's presence at Jesus' crucifixion and burial does not only signify her closeness to Jesus, but it also reiterates her possible hatred for patriarchy and the political subjugation she was forced to live under. Mary's presence is a simple act of rebellion on her part; an act that the male disciples are unable to perform and one that Mary performs either along with other women or alone. Along with the consistent mention of Mary's presence at the Cross and burial is the fact that she was not alone. The female disciples stand with Jesus till the end and this could hint at the close bond the women shared with each other. Within Jesus' ministry, Mary perhaps found both companionship and purpose.

For centuries, Mary was not credited as the first apostle or even as a credible witness to Jesus' resurrection. The idea of Mary being a demoniac sinner which later merged into Mary being a woman engaged in prostitution, was enough to deny Mary her rightful title. However, the recent claim that Mary was not from the town of Magdala but was perhaps a towering figure of strength in the early church, is monumental in establishing Mary's authority. Additionally, this claim can find a basis in the gnostic texts where Mary is portrayed as a leader, a close companion of Jesus, and as a loyal disciple who understands her teacher's words and interprets them for everyone. The Mary Magdalene that emerges for me is a woman with some financial means who, in an act of rebellion decides to follow a teacher whose teachings were slightly controversial for the time. Mary follows and serves Jesus and, in the process, she listens carefully, learns, interprets, and remembers his words even after his death. Her unwavering faith and loyalty is later rewarded as she becomes the first one to learn about Jesus' resurrection and is chosen to be the one to deliver the news about the risen Jesus to the apostles. Mary

Magdalene cannot be reduced to caricatures that are not grounded authentically in the New Testament. She is a loyal disciple of Jesus; possible early church leader; advocate of social reform; first witness to the Resurrection; and the Apostle to the Apostles.

Table

2.5. Summary Table of Mary Magdalene in the New Gospels

Mark	Matthew	Luke	John
15.40–47: Mary observes Jesus' crucifixion and burial.	27.55–61: Mary and other women look on from a distance at Jesus' crucifixion and burial.	8.1–3: Mary is introduced as a former demoniac and it is suggested that she financially aided Jesus' ministry.	19.25: Mary near Jesus' cross.
16.1–8: Mary visits Jesus' tomb with other women to anoint him but finds the tomb empty. The women leave the tomb after hearing the angel's message because they are afraid.	28.1–10: Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary' visit Jesus' tomb and see the risen Jesus.	23.27–31: A crucified Jesus addresses the women who followed him and prophesies about a dark future.	20.1–10: Mary goes to the tomb alone and turns to the male disciples for help when she sees the stone has been removed.
16.9–15: Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene.		23.49–56: The same group of women observe Jesus' death and burial.	20.11–18: Jesus appears to Mary and she announces his message to all the disciples.
		24.1–12: Mary and the other women, find the empty tomb and receive the message from the angels.	

Chapter Three

Sītā

3.1 Introduction

Written in the fifth century CE, the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Valmiki is a long and complex story but the core narrative follows the story of legendary warrior prince Rāma, of the Kingdom of Kosala, who is considered the *avatāra* of Viṣṇu on earth.¹⁷³ Rāma's father, king Daśaratha, is about to name Rāma as his successor. However, he is persuaded by Rāma's stepmother Kaikeyī to name her son, Bharata, as his successor instead, and to exile Rāma to the forest of Daṇḍaka for a period of fourteen years. Rāma is accompanied into exile by his wife Sītā, and his younger brother Lakṣmaṇa. In the forest, Sītā is abducted by the *rākṣasa* (demon) Rāvaṇa and taken to his kingdom of Laṅkā. A devastated Rāma goes to the monkey kingdom of Kiṣkindhā, and aided by a monkey army and his faithful companion Hanumān, goes to war against Laṅkā. Rāma defeats Rāvaṇa, rescues Sītā, and returns to Ayodhyā, the capital of Kosala, where he is finally crowned king and he reigns over his happy subjects.

The rise of the Hindu right, their ideology of Hindutva, and the use of Rāma as a political symbol have severely affected the reception and understanding of Sītā who has become a benchmark of submission and unattainable purity for the modern Hindu woman.¹⁷⁴ Admittedly, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is about *ksatriya* (warrior) men and there is hardly any place for any woman in

¹⁷³ The Sanskrit word *avatāra* is best understood to mean 'descent'. Vaishnava mythology centres around the idea of Viṣṇu descending on earth to fight evil and restore peace. Hindus believe that Viṣṇu has descended to earth ten times so far as: *Matsya* (fish); *Ekasṛṅga* (unicorn); *Kurma* (tortoise); *Varaha* (boar); *Narasimha* (man-lion); *Vamana* (dwarf); *Parasurāma* (Rāma with a battle-axe); *Rāma*; *Kṛṣṇa*; *Balarāma* (Kṛṣṇa's brother). The eleventh *avatāra*, Kalki, is yet to come and it is believed that Viṣṇu will then rid the world of all evil. *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Puranas*, ed. by Cornelia Dimmitt and J.A.B. van Buitenen (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), pp. 67–68.

¹⁷⁴ The most contentious example of the politicization of the Rāma narrative is the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992. Constructed in modern day Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh), upon the orders of Mughal Emperor Babur by Mir Baqi in 1528, the Babri mosque has been an issue of dispute between Hindus and Muslims for centuries. In 1859 the belief that the mosque is built on the land where Rāma was born, gained momentum and the British authorities intervened and decided that Hindus can worship in the outer court. By 1984, the 'Rama's Birthplace' movement became popular and the Bhartiya Janata Party's (BJP) L.K. Advani became the face of the movement. On 6th December 1992, a crowd gathered to hear L.K. Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi (from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad) speak and the same crowd later destroyed the mosque. Twenty-three other local mosques were attacked, and riots broke out in the entire country. BJP won the election in 2014 and Narendra Modi was elected as the Prime Minister of the country. The temple issue was once again brought to light as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, vowed to build the temple on the same ground as the mosque. Finally, on 9th November 2019, Hindus were given the land on which the Babri Masjid stood for centuries and the Supreme Court ordered that the Sunni Waqf Board be given five acres of land to build a mosque elsewhere. Salman Khurshid, *Sunrise Over Ayodhya: Nationhood in Our Times* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2021), pp. 14–44.

the narrative.¹⁷⁵ However, the poet pays special attention to Sītā who is presented as a multi-faceted character and not as a one-dimensional wife of patriarchal reception. This chapter will engage with the text by focusing on its heroine, and Sītā's life will be chronologically traced from the first book to the last. This chapter will focus on a number of key episodes that reveal a fuller picture of Sītā: her birth; her rage; her ability to stand up for herself; her divinity; her relationship with her husband; and her knowledge and understanding of *dharma* in order to present a new reading of Sītā.¹⁷⁶

3.2 The *Rāmāyaṇa* of Valmiki

Even though multiple versions of the epic exist, this chapter will refer to the one attributed to Valmiki since it is the earliest complete version of the story.¹⁷⁷ Even though the text survives in the form of various complete or incomplete manuscripts with the oldest one belonging to the eleventh century CE, scholarly consensus dates the text to the fifth century CE. While the historicity of Valmiki cannot be attested, John and Mary Brockington suggest that the poet was perhaps someone with limited knowledge of what was outside the kingdom of Kosala around which the story is geographically based.¹⁷⁸ Additionally, Robert Goldman claims that the first and the last books of the poem, the *Bālakāṇḍa* and the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, were added later and that 'the poem in its present form cannot be the work of a single author, or even the product of a single time period'.¹⁷⁹ Sheldon Pollock offers a historical perspective and suggests that 'fundamental and enduring changes came about in the Indian way of life' and adds that a well-defined hierarchical social structure, and the importance of a king in maintaining social,

¹⁷⁵ The Hindu caste system has four castes with the *brahmins* (priests) right on top, followed by *ksatriyas* (warriors), *vaishyas* (traders, businessowners) and *shudhras* (serving class). Along with the four castes were the *Dalits* or 'untouchables' who were considered so impure, that they found no place within the four varnas. People from this community faced (and still do) inhumane discrimination and were employed as either manual scavengers, or they were responsible for disposing off dead animals and unidentified humans.

¹⁷⁶ Klaus K. Klostermaier correctly defines *dharma* as sustaining or upholding societal laws and adds that '*dharma* is right conduct not in a general moral sense but specified for each caste and for each situation in life'. Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 3rd edn (New York: State University of New York, 2007), p. 32.

¹⁷⁷ The *Rāmāyaṇa* story has been popular for centuries with different adaptations of it like Bhavabhuti's eighth century play, *Mahāvīracarita* and his *Uttarāmacarita*; Kambana's twelfth-century Tamil work, *Iramavatram*; and Tulsidas' sixteenth-century Awadhi *Rāmcāritmānas* being quite popular still. Internationally too the work remains popular with different versions existing in China, Thailand, Nepal, Indonesia and many other countries in South and Southeast Asia.

¹⁷⁸ John Brockington and Mary Brockington, *Rāma the Steadfast: An Early Form of the Rāmāyaṇa* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 9.

¹⁷⁹ *The Rāmāyaṇa of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India (Vol I: Bālakāṇḍa)*, trans. by Robert P. Goldman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) Goldman, *Bālakāṇḍa* pp. 14–15

political and cultural welfare is why the poem has a royal household at the centre of its narrative.¹⁸⁰

In the Sanskrit literary canon, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is categorized as *kāvya* (poetry) and is a part of *śrauta* (listening) rituals and was transmitted orally for centuries before it was written. Sanskrit epic poetry, like that of the Greeks and Romans, is characterised by an adherence to a metrical structure. In the case of the Sanskrit epics, the main unit of sense is the *śloka* (verse). The *śloka* typically consists of two half lines of sixteen syllables each. Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* consists of twenty-four thousand verses that are divided into multiple *sargas* (chapters) and compiled into seven *kāṇḍas* (books)—Bālakāṇḍa, Ayodhyākāṇḍa, Araṇyakāṇḍa, Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa, Sundarakāṇḍa, Yuddhakāṇḍa, and Uttarakāṇḍa.¹⁸¹

3.2.1 Book One: Bālakāṇḍa (The Book of Childhood)

This section examines Sītā in Book One of *Rāmāyaṇa*: Bālakāṇḍa (The Book of Childhood). The book presents a framing narrative for the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Rāma's youthful exploits take up most of its pages. The following subsection will examine Sītā's birth, which is the only time she is mentioned in the first book.

3.2.1.1 Finding Sītā

This subsection briefly examines Sītā's birth. Book one contains Sītā's birth story as her father, king Janaka, recalls 'one time, as I was ploughing a field, a girl sprang up behind my plow. I found her as I was clearing the field, and she is thus known by the name Sītā, furrow' (1.65.14).¹⁸² Cornelia Dimmitt and John and Mary Brockington agree that Sītā is the fertility goddess whose name is found in Vedic literature. However, while Dimmitt claims that 'this theme was evidently borrowed intentionally by Vālmīki', the latter believe that, 'there is nothing in the earliest levels of the text to suggest that this is more than a coincidence'.¹⁸³ Sītā was born through a divine miracle and this clarifies her status as a goddess and places her

¹⁸⁰ *Rāmāyaṇa Book Two: Ayodhya* trans. by Sheldon Pollock, ed. by Richard Gombrich (New York: Princeton University Press, 2005) pp. 18–19.

¹⁸¹ All references to the text will be made in the form of *kanda.sarga.shloka* (1.1.1)

¹⁸² Goldman, *Balakāṇḍa*. All Balakāṇḍa quotations are from this translation.

¹⁸³ Cornelia Dimmitt, 'Sītā: Fertility Goddess and Sakti', *Anima* 7, (1980), 19–30 (p. 20); John and Mary Brockington, p. 19.

beside Rāma who is also divine. Additionally, Sītā was born from the earth and as we shall examine later, the text consistently gives importance to her relationship with nature.

3.2.2 Book Two: Ayodhyākāṇḍa (The Book of Ayodhyā)

This section examines Sītā in Book Two of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: the Ayodhyākāṇḍa (the Book of Ayodhyā). Ayodhyākāṇḍa begins with the aging king Daśaratha's decision to place Rāma on the throne so he can retire. Kaikeyī, Daśaratha's favourite wife, in an opportunistic move, reminds the king that he owes her two boons from the time she saved his life in battle. Kaikeyī demands that Rāma be banished into the Daṇḍaka forest for fourteen years and her son, Bharata, be crowned king instead. Eager to fulfil a given promise, Daśaratha agrees and informs Rāma about his banishment. Two themes will be explored in the subsections that follow: Sītā's reaction to Rāma's banishment, and the praise Sītā receives for being the ideal wife.

3.2.2.1 A Dharmic Clash

This subsection will explore Sītā's reaction as Rāma informs her about his decision to leave for the forest without her. Rāma enters Sītā's chambers and informs her that he is leaving for Daṇḍaka forest alone and begins to deliver multiple instructions on how she should respect his parents, undertake vows and fasts, and always respect Bharata, who will now be crowned king in Rāma's stead (2.23.25). On hearing Rāma's decision to leave for the forest without her, a furious Sītā reminds him that a wife must share in her husband's fate and says that it was her duty to accompany him (2.24.5). Sītā then asks Rāma 'you have the power to protect any other person in the forest. Why then not me?' (2.24.10) and excitedly describes their future lives in the forest and how she longs to see ponds and blooming lotuses (2.24.15).¹⁸⁴

Despite her pleas and arguments, Rāma remains firm and advises her to stay back 'and do your duty, and not what your heart desires' (2.25.1). In a low, faint voice Sītā says 'I would die here and now if parted from you. A woman whose husband has left her cannot go on living' (2.26.1–5). Sītā proceeds to tell Rāma about a prophecy made when she was a child that she would one day live in the forest, and claims she has wanted to live in the forest ever since. She strengthens

¹⁸⁴ *Rāmāyaṇa Book Two: Ayodhya* trans. by Sheldon Pollock, ed. by Richard Gombrich (New York: Princeton University Press, 2005) pp. 18–19. All Ayodhyākāṇḍa quotations are from this translation.

her argument by reminding Rāma that ‘I have begged you many times before to let us go and live together in the forest’ (2.26.12). Sītā then cites a holy scripture that *brahmins* (priests) recite according to which, when ‘a woman’s father gives her to a man, she remains his even in death’ (2.26.15) and boldly asks Rāma to explain his decision to enter the forest alone. Next, still unable to change her rigid husband’s mind, a desperate Sītā threatens to commit suicide: ‘if you refuse to take me to the forest despite the sorrow that I feel, I shall have no recourse but to end my life by poison, fire or water’ (2.26.19). Finally, Sītā’s misery gives way to harshness as she attacks Rāma’s masculinity: ‘what could my father, Vaideha, the lord of Mithila, have had in mind when he took you for a son-in-law Rāma, a woman with the body of a man?’ (2.27.5). A defeated Rāma gives an unexpected response ‘without knowing your true feelings, my lovely, I could not consent to your living in the wilderness, though I am perfectly capable of protecting you’ (2.27.25).

Goldman claims that Sītā’s attack on Rāma’s manliness dislocates ‘the gendering of character that is so central to the poet’s social vision’.¹⁸⁵ Arshia Sattar suggests that by the end of their conversation Sītā is addressing Rāma as his wife as she calls on their personal relationship and finally leaves ‘all arguments based on the traditional dharma of a wife and fate behind as she taunts Rāma’.¹⁸⁶ Commenting on Rāma’s unusual response, Sattar suggests that Rāma would never outright admit to needing Sītā’s company and adds that this response was ‘not unexpected from Rāma, who is increasingly associated with righteousness and dharma in this story’.¹⁸⁷ Sally J. Sutherland notes the unclarity of the passage on whether Sītā was willingly giving up everything to be with her husband or if she had a real concern regarding her safety. Additionally, Sutherland observes how Sītā castigates Rāma for abandoning her and ‘expresses her fear and anger at being abandoned by Rāma, by projecting guilt onto Rāma—that is to say, by threatening to kill herself’.¹⁸⁸ On the contrary, G.R.K. Murty claims it is evident that Sītā decides to leave with Rāma because she understands her duties as a wife and that it is this ‘knowledge of what matters to her the most that obviously inspires her to boldly articulate her requirements in such an entreating style’.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ Robert P. Goldman, ‘Resisting Rāma: Dharmic Debates on Gender and Hierarchy and the Work of the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa’ in *The Rāmāyaṇa Revisited*, ed. by Mandakranta Bose (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp 19–46 (p. 31).

¹⁸⁶ Arshia Sattar, *Maryada: Searching for Dharma in the Rāmāyaṇa* (Noida: Harper Collins, 2020), p. 23.

¹⁸⁷ Sattar, *Maryada*, p. 23.

¹⁸⁸ Sally J. Sutherland, ‘Sītā and Draupadī: Aggressive Behaviour and Female Role-Models in the Sanskrit Epics’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 109, (1989), 63–79 (p. 74).

¹⁸⁹ G.R.K. Murty, ‘Sītā in Vālmīki Ramayana: A Feminist Archetype!’, *The IUP Journal of English Studies Vol VIII*, 4, (2013), 67–80 (p. 69).

The first time Sītā speaks in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is when she questions her husband’s decision regarding her future. Sītā’s attack on Rāma’s masculinity appears to be a calculated move. By declaring Rāma an incompetent man and husband, Sītā possibly engenders insecurity within Rāma, which leads to his decision of taking Sītā into the forest with him. Additionally, a noteworthy element of the conversation between the couple is their different ideas of *dharma*. While Rāma felt that Sītā should follow the *dharma* of an ideal daughter-in-law and stay in the palace to serve his family, Sītā believed she should be an ideal wife instead. Further, while one cannot argue with certainty if Sītā’s immediate decision to follow Rāma was for her personal happiness, the text does hint at it each time Sītā describes the forest in an almost dreamy tone. As a *ksatriya* woman married to the crown prince, she could never imagine abandoning her duties but Rāma’s banishment could bring Sītā close to a life away from the palace and court responsibilities.

3.2.2.2 The Ideal Wife

This subsection will briefly explore two separate occasions in Ayodhyākāṇḍa where Sītā talks about being the ideal wife. Just before Sītā leaves for the forest, Rāma’s mother, Kausalya, embraces Sītā and says ‘you must not feel disdain for my son in his banishment. He is your deity, whether he be rich or poor’ (2.34.20). Sītā reassures Kausalya and says ‘I am a high-born woman who has learned right from wrong. My lady, how could I be disdainful? A husband is a woman’s deity’ (2.34.25). The next conversation on *patni dharma* (the duty of a wife) takes place under very different circumstances. Rāma, his brother Lakṣmaṇa, and Sītā have now reached the Daṇḍaka forest, and the trio decide to visit the hermitage of the great sage Atri. Atri’s wife, Anāsūya is delighted to see Sītā and showers her with praise for being a good wife:

How fortunate you should abandon your kinfolk, your pride and wealth, proud Sītā, to follow Rāma when he was banished to the forest...To a woman of noble nature her husband is the supreme deity, however bad his character, however licentious or indigent he might be...women like you...come to reside in heaven just the same as men who have gained great merit (2.109.20–25).

Sītā patiently listens to Anāsūya’s words and curtly replies that she already knows the duties of an ideal wife and adds that ‘no other ascetic act is required of a woman than obedience to her husband’ (2.110.10). While a conversation between two women is uncharacteristic in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the topic of their conversation is not unexpected as it is a conversation between two women on their wifely duties. Sutherland notes how this conversation creates ‘in the mind of the audience a feeling that Sītā is not only a devoted, loving, and self-sacrificing woman, but a deferential and unassuming one as well’.¹⁹⁰

A simple reading of the text is enough to clarify that the narrative often offers social guidelines to those reading it and uses Sītā to establish the characteristics of a good wife. Undoubtedly, it is at the end of Ayodhyākāṇḍa that we first see a glimpse of the silent and obedient aspects of Sītā. It is surprising to see the contrast between the enraged and assertive Sītā and the meek and silent one. However, it is important to remember that they are both the result of the type of *dharma* Sītā feels is important for her in a particular moment.

3.2.3 Book Three: Aranyakāṇḍa (The Forest Book)

This section examines Sītā in Book Three of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: the Aranyakāṇḍa (the Forest Book). The palace now becomes a distant memory as Sītā, Rāma, and Lakṣmaṇa are now in the Daṇḍaka forest surrounded by mythical monsters and real animals. Sītā and Rāma’s relationship blooms as they enjoy the tranquillity of the forest. However, a sharp twist comes when the demon Rāvaṇa tricks Sītā and succeeds in abducting her and takes her to his kingdom of Laṅkā. Three themes will be explored in the three subsections that follow: Sītā’s view of *dharma*, her rage towards Lakṣmaṇa, and her divine origin.

3.2.3.1 The Teacher of Dharma

This subsection will explore Sītā’s attempt to guide Rāma away from unnecessary violence. Rāma is approached by tormented sages who beg him to rescue them from the torture of the *rakṣasas*. Rāma agrees to fight on their behalf, but right before he leaves Sītā says:

¹⁹⁰ Sutherland, ‘Aggressive Behaviour’, p. 75.

Acquiring great righteousness requires the greatest care, and only he who avoids deliberate misdeeds can gain it in this world. As for deliberate misdeeds, there are just three. Telling lies is bad enough, but the other two, sexual intercourse with another man's wife and unprovoked violence, are even worse (3.8.2–3)¹⁹¹

Sītā confidently claims that Rāma's decision to kill the *rakṣasas*, who have not personally harmed him in any way, would be counted as a *dharmic* misconduct. To strengthen her argument, Sītā narrates the story of a seer who became so obsessed with a divine weapon given to him by god Indra, that his thoughts grew increasingly violent and he ended up in hell (3.8.13–19). Sītā then boldly states 'I disapprove of your killing creatures that have done no wrong' (3.8.21) and then tries to convince Rāma to give up violence altogether and says to him that nothing would make her more happy than 'should you renounce the kingship altogether and become a contended sage' (3.8.25). Sattar suggests that this speech by Sītā is the only time she speaks 'as a human being and not as a wife, daughter, or a mother'.¹⁹² Further, Murty claims that Sītā's ability to explain 'the complex intricacies of dharma' and to 'reach out to her husband with ease' clarifies that she was a good wife who knew her *dharmā* well.¹⁹³

Aranyakāṇḍa hints that Sītā wanted herself and her husband to embrace peace, as she advocates against unnecessary violence and urges her husband to renounce his kingship. Interestingly, while her husband struggles to adjust to life in the forest, Sītā now appears as a mature woman who is strong enough to bear the burden of her husband's *dharmic* dilemma.

3.2.3.2 Sītā's Rage

This subsection will explore Sītā's exploding rage at Rāma's younger brother, Lakṣmaṇa. When Rāvaṇa sees Sītā in the forest, he is immediately overpowered by lust and forms a plan with the trickster devil, Mārīca to kidnap her. Mārīca takes the form of an alluring golden deer and Sītā requests Rāma to capture it for her. Once Rāma leaves, Mārīca imitates his voice and shouts for help and a worried Sītā asks Lakṣmaṇa to go and help Rāma. However, Lakṣmaṇa refuses her request since he has been instructed by Rāma not to leave Sītā alone, and his refusal pushes Sītā into a blind rage. Sītā accuses Lakṣmaṇa of being Rāma's enemy and says 'you

¹⁹¹ *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India (Vol 3) Aranyakāṇḍa* trans. by Sheldon I. Pollock, ed. Robert P. Goldman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). All Aranyakāṇḍa quotations are from this translation.

¹⁹² Arshia Sattar, *Lost Loves: Exploring Rama's Anguish* (Noida: Penguin, 2011), p. 55.

¹⁹³ Murty, p. 70.

hope Rāma perishes, Lakṣmaṇa, isn't that so? I think you would be happy should some disaster befall your brother' (3.43.5–8). An enraged Sītā further accuses Lakṣmaṇa of plotting against Rāma with Bharata, Kaikeyī's son, and adds that Lakṣmaṇa intends to marry her and hence, he wants Rāma dead. Sītā concludes her angry tirade against Lakṣmaṇa by threatening to kill herself 'I would not hesitate to take my life before your very eyes, Saumitri, for I could not live upon this earth one moment without Rāma' (3.43.22).¹⁹⁴ A shocked Lakṣmaṇa responds to Sītā's rage with his own as he declares his lack of confidence in womankind, but his harsh response makes Sītā hysterical and through her tears, she once again threatens to commit suicide till finally, Lakṣmaṇa decides to go help Rāma.

Sutherland observes how this passage portrays a Sītā that is different from her idealized descriptions and adds that Sītā gets Lakṣmaṇa to do her bidding by generating 'guilt in Lakṣmaṇa—by implying that his reluctance to act on her behalf was based on his secret motives—as well as threatening him with the burden of guilt for her own suicide'.¹⁹⁵ Further, Murty observes the impact of Sītā's words to Lakṣmaṇa and concludes that 'Sītā is not thinking of the meaning of the words she has spoken, rather she is more concerned about their effect in making Lakṣmaṇa obey her order'.¹⁹⁶

Sītā can be prone to anger as her harsh words to Rāma in the palace when he refuses to take her to the forest are almost unforgettable. By now, Sītā has argued with both brothers and won. It is possible that the reason why she does not patiently argue with Lakṣmaṇa, is because she feels that arguing with him could cause delay and possibly endanger her husband more. It is imperative to note that Sītā begins her conversation with a hint of fear and it is Lakṣmaṇa's refusal that drives her towards anger. Furthermore, Sītā's tactics appear quite similar as she begins by making polite requests, moves to harsh words, includes personal attacks, and ends her address with threats of suicide.

3.2.3.3 Nature's Child

This subsection will examine Sītā's abduction by Rāvaṇa which results in all of nature reacting violently. After Lakṣmaṇa leaves to search for Rāma, Sītā is left alone in their hut and Rāvaṇa tricks her into thinking he is a sage begging for alms. When Rāvaṇa comes near Sītā to take

¹⁹⁴ Lakṣmaṇa's mother is Sumitra and therefore, he is often called Saumitri or 'the son of Sumitra'.

¹⁹⁵ Sutherland, 'Aggressive Behaviour', p. 75.

¹⁹⁶ Murty, p. 72.

food from her, he uses their physical proximity to his advantage and ‘with his left hand he seized lotus-eyed Sītā by her hair and with his right hand by her thighs’ (3.47.16). When Rāvaṇa is fleeing to his kingdom of Laṅkā with Sītā in his flying chariot, Sītā cries out to the trees, mountains, the river Godāvārī and the animals in it to tell Rāma about the events and concludes her appeal for help by saying:

All creatures that live in this place I appeal to you for help, all you flocks of birds and herds of beasts: Tell my husband that the woman he loves more than life itself is being carried off, that Sītā has been carried away, helpless, by Rāvaṇa (3.47.33–34).

As a result of Sītā’s screams, the vulture Jaṭāyus tries to attack Rāvaṇa but ends up losing his life and nature shows its anger as ‘a blinding darkness enveloped the world, the whole world from end to end’ (3.50.9). Dimmitt observes the bond between Sītā and nature and claims that ‘Sītā is intimately related to both trees and plants and to the forest animals, they protect and help her in the forest, which she finds a congenial, not a terrifying place to live’.¹⁹⁷ Further, Dimmitt suggests that Sītā is not simply the mistress of plants but also the mistress of animals ‘who echo her mood and come actively to her aid’ and Jaṭāyus’s death seems to make this point stronger.¹⁹⁸

Sītā’s divine bond with nature furthers the possibility that she wished to live in the forest for her own peace and happiness. It is important to note, that Rāma too begins his search for Sītā, by frantically questioning all of nature around him which could hint at his knowledge of Sītā’s divine roots (3.58.11–22).

3.2.4 Book Four: Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa (The Book of Kiṣkindhā)

After Sītā’s abduction, the plot becomes increasingly centred on Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa and their efforts to bring Sītā back. The fourth book makes no mention of Sītā as it follows Rāma into the monkey kingdom of Kiṣkindhā. There, Rāma agrees to help Sugriva kill the monkey king Valin in exchange for Sugriva’s help in rescuing Sītā. Once Rāma helps Sugriva get the throne, Sugriva sends his army in search of Sītā. At the end of this book Hanumān, who becomes Rāma’s closest friend, decides to leap over the ocean in search of Sītā.

¹⁹⁷ Dimmitt, p. 22.

¹⁹⁸ Dimmitt, p. 24.

3.2.5 Book Five: Sundarakāṇḍa (The Book of Beauty)

This section examines Sītā in Book Five of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: The Sundarakāṇḍa (the Book of Beauty). This book satisfies the curiosity that arises after Sītā's abduction and provides detailed descriptions of her mental and physical state. Three themes will be explored in the subsections that follow: Sītā's conversation with Rāvaṇa, her doubts about her relationship with Rāma, and her courage as she battles daily mental torture in a strange land.

3.2.5.1 Facing the Enemy

This subsection will explore Sītā's conversation with Rāvaṇa after he brings her into his kingdom of Laṅkā. On reaching Laṅkā, Hanumān spots Sītā who was 'dejected, her face covered with tears. She was emaciated through fasting. She was depressed, giving over to sorrow. Brooding constantly, she was consumed with her grief' (5.13.22).¹⁹⁹ A broken-spirited Sītā is then approached by Rāvaṇa who tries to ease her mind by saying he would never touch her without her permission (5.18.6) and repeatedly talks about his strong desire for her and the riches and comforts he has to offer (5.18.7–10).²⁰⁰ Sītā sternly advises Rāvaṇa to fix his thoughts on his wife and adds: 'you are no more worthy of having me than is a sinner of acquiring spiritual perfection' (5.19.3–4). Sītā continues to address her captor bravely as she reminds him that 'as the virtuous wife of another man, I am not a suitable wife for you' (5.19.6). Sītā then warns Rāvaṇa that 'even prosperous cities can be brought to ruin if their monarch's mind is uncontrolled and he is addicted to vicious conduct' (5.19.10). Sītā's address to Rāvaṇa ends with her branding him a 'vile creature' (5.19.26) who carried her off when her husband was not there to protect her. An enraged Rāvaṇa then clarifies that his lust is the reason that Sītā is still alive and that if in two months she still refuses sexual intercourse with him, he will have her slaughtered for his breakfast (5.20.8–9).

¹⁹⁹ *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India (Vol V) Sundarakāṇḍa*, trans. by Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). All Sundarakāṇḍa quotations are from this translation.

²⁰⁰ The last book of the text, the Uttarakāṇḍa, tells the story of Rāvaṇa raping Rambha. Nalakubara (Rambha's husband) then curses Rāvaṇa that if he ever attempts to approach a woman without her consent his 'head will shatter into seven fragments' (7.7.26). Despite the explanation by the text, in Sanghadasa's Jain version of the story, Rāvaṇa does not touch Sītā because she is his daughter.

Commenting on Sītā’s articulate address to Rāvaṇa, Murty notes that Sītā’s words are a mix of threat and advice so that Rāvaṇa can ‘see what *dharma* commands’.²⁰¹ Additionally, Goldman brands Sītā’s situation as ironic and states that Sītā, who follows her husband into the forest as a *dharmic* wife ‘has now, by virtue of following that duty, become separated from him’.²⁰² Goldman further suggests that it is important for the *Rāmāyaṇa* to portray Sītā as a devoted wife even in difficult circumstances and that is why she admonishes Rāvaṇa ‘for his unrighteousness, speaks to him contemptuously, and warns him of the doom that awaits him at the hands of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa’.²⁰³

The Sundarakāṇḍa drastically changes Sītā’s character trajectory as she now becomes a survivor of trauma and mental abuse. Additionally, the book captures Sītā’s bravery as she manages to engage Rāvaṇa in an intelligent and spirited conversation, teaches him about *dharmic* conduct, and warns him about the future which in turn leaves him exasperated and furious.

3.2.5.2 Sītā Doubts

This subsection will explore Sītā’s anguish by highlighting three instances that show her human side. The first example of Sītā’s humanity can be seen when the *rakṣasa* women guarding Sītā try to persuade her to choose Rāvaṇa. The constant pressure by these women and Rāvaṇa’s continuous threats, lead Sītā to contemplate suicide: ‘surely suicide could not be reckoned as a crime in my case, since this creature—so hateful to my sight—is going to kill me anyway’ (5.26.5). Next, the physical distance between Sītā and her husband results in her doubting Rāma’s intentions and she speculates: ‘why has Rāma, so firm in his valor, not come to rescue his beloved wife, who has been carried off by a rakṣasa?’ (5.24.17). Not only does Sītā doubt if Rāma will ever come to rescue her, but she also slowly begins to doubt their relationship as she says ‘perhaps he has no use for me as a wife’ (5.24.40). Sītā’s mental anxiety reaches its peak as she wonders if Rāma has become a complete ascetic and given up his weapons (5.24.44) or if Rāvaṇa has already killed him (5.24.45). The third aspect of Sītā’s humanity is her fear of death. When Hanumān finally comes out of his hiding spot and meets Sītā, he offers to place her on his back and fly her back to Rāma. Sītā then plays out multiple scenarios of her own death which could be from falling off Hanumān’s back due to his high speed into the

²⁰¹ Murty, p.73.

²⁰² Goldman, *Sundarakāṇḍa*, p. 57.

²⁰³ Goldman, *Sundarakāṇḍa*, pp. 58–59

ocean where whales will eat her, or getting spotted by Rāvaṇa and being killed by his army (5.36. 45–57). Sītā adds that in case the *rakṣasas* spare her life, they could hide her in a place where Rāma will never be able to find her (5.36.58). Sītā concludes her list of reasons of not returning with Hanumān, by once again being a devoted wife as she says ‘I cherish my devotion to my husband above all else, monkey. Therefore, best of monkeys, I would never willingly touch another’s body even with my foot’ (5.36.62).

Goldman observes that Sītā oscillates between being distraught and defiant because she struggles ‘to cleave to the code of *pativratya* and the *dharma* of the civilised world’ alone in a strange land.²⁰⁴ Goldman states that Sītā’s list of practical objections to Hanumān’s offer is quite realistic and the aim ‘is to humanize her so that it might become easier, rather than more difficult, for people to identify with her’ and concludes that Sītā’s doubts make her multidimensional.²⁰⁵

Perhaps the purpose of the Sundarakāṇḍa is not only to develop Sītā’s character, but to reiterate that she remains a dutiful wife even in the absence of her husband. In fact, Sītā is such a dutiful wife that even though she can reduce Rāvaṇa to ashes through the power of her austerities, she does not do so because Rāma has not ordered her to act (5.20.20). Perhaps by sacrificing the chance to save herself and become known as the slayer of Rāvaṇa, Sītā becomes the ideal wife.

3.2.6 Book Six: Yuddhakāṇḍa (The Book of War)

This section examines Sītā in Book Six of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: Yuddhakāṇḍa (The Book of War). At the end of Sundarakāṇḍa, Hanumān informs Sītā that Rāma, and the monkey army are on their way to fight Rāvaṇa and his *rakṣasa* army. The Book of War, gives the audiences the long-awaited combat and provides details of the battle between Rāma and Rāvaṇa, as the monkey army fights the *rakṣasas* who are experts at illusion and cheating. Interestingly, even though the book focusses on the war the poet has not forgotten about the heroine. As Rāma engages in a glorious battle, Sītā continues to face mental torture at the hands of Rāvaṇa who tricks her into thinking Rāma is dead on multiple occasions (6.22; 6.23.8; 6.37.7; 6.52). Rāvaṇa even attempts to trick Rāma into thinking Sītā is dead (6.68) so that Rāma gives up the war. However, all these tricks fail and ultimately, Rāma emerges victorious and Sītā is informed

²⁰⁴ Goldman, *Sundarakāṇḍa*, p. 58. *Pativratya* is a Sanskrit word used for a wife who is completely devoted to her husband.

²⁰⁵ Goldman, *Sundarakāṇḍa*, p. 61.

that her husband awaits. Two themes will be explored in the subsections that follow: the reunion of Rāma and Sītā, and Sītā's divinity.

3.2.6.1 A Changed Rāma

This subsection will examine Sītā and Rāma's reunion which takes an unexpected turn. Instead of seeing Sītā privately, Rāma orders that Sītā be brought out in front of his monkey army. When Sītā appears in this assembly, Rāma boasts about having defeated Rāvaṇa, heaps praises on his army chiefs and finally addresses Sītā with a lack of basic empathy:

How could I, who boast of my noble lineage possibly take you back—just risen from Rāvaṇa's lap and gazed upon by his lustful eye? I have recovered my reputation, and that is the purpose for which I won you back. I do not love you anymore. Go hence wherever you like (6.103.20–21).²⁰⁶

Edward C. Dimock suggests that Rāma's concern over Sītā's chastity is a part of his 'own dharma, and Rāma's own loyalty to his dharma secures the dharma of his kingdom'.²⁰⁷ Dimock adds that Rāma's rejection of Sītā is what makes her 'the idealized prototype of the wife who must share in her husband's misfortunes, but cannot always share in his fortunes'.²⁰⁸ Additionally, Goldman claims that 'Sītā's abduction and imprisonment at the hands of the notoriously libidinous Rāvaṇa is ample justification for treating her as sexually defiled and putting her aside'.²⁰⁹ Moreover, Sattar suggests that Rāma's decision of rejecting Sītā in front of everyone is a 'masterfully orchestrated public event' so that he cannot be accused of being an unfit king who is 'so in love with his wife that he was willing to face scandal for her sake'.²¹⁰ Sutherland suggests that Rāma's harsh behaviour towards Sītā could also be a result of his father who 'fell under the influence of Kaikeyi and ordered his son exiled'.²¹¹ Additionally, Sattar notes that Sītā's abduction forces Rāma to return to his warrior honour and the

²⁰⁶ *The Rāmāyaṇa of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India (Vol VI) Yuddhakāṇḍa*, trans. by Robert p. Goldman, Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, and Barend A. van Nooten (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). All Yuddhakāṇḍa quotations are from this translation.

²⁰⁷ Edward C. Dimock, *The Literatures of India: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 71.

²⁰⁸ Dimock, p. 71

²⁰⁹ Goldman, 'Resisting Rāma', p. 38.

²¹⁰ Sattar, *Lost Loves*, p. 8

²¹¹ Sutherland, 'Aggressive Behaviour' p. 77.

‘combination of Rāma returning to his kshatriya dharma and simultaneously distancing himself emotionally from Sītā is what causes the biggest rupture in their relationship’.²¹²

Emotions cloud Rāma’s judgement as he publicly raises questions on Sītā’s character, and then disowns her. The Rāma in Yuddhakāṇḍa is different from the loving and caring husband of Ayodhyakāṇḍa, and the hysterical lover searching for his wife in Aranyakāṇḍa. Rāma’s fear of being equated with his father, his anxiety regarding Sītā’s stay in Rāvaṇa’s palace, and his return to *ksatriya dharma*, all lead to his brutal public rejection of Sītā.

3.2.6.2 Facing Rāma

This section will examine Sītā’s reaction to Rāma rejecting her publicly. On hearing Rāma’s stinging words, an upset Sītā bursts into tears but quickly regains her composure and asks ‘how can you, heroic prince, speak to me with such cutting and improper words, painful to the ears, as some vulgar man might speak to his vulgar wife?’ (6.104.5). Sītā boldly accuses Rāma of giving in to his anger and reminds him that she is a divine being (6.104.15) and adds that Rāma has turned his back on the woman he married when she was a young girl (6.104.16). A furious Sītā then orders Lakṣmaṇa to build a pyre for her as she ‘cannot bear to live tainted by these false allegations’ (6.104.18). Once Sītā decides to prove her chastity by ending her life, gods come down from heaven to remind Rāma of his divine origins and say ‘Sītā is Lakṣmī; you are the god Viṣṇu’ and admonish Rāma for harbouring human emotions and doubting his wife (6.105.25). As Sītā enters the fire, Agni, the god of fire, returns her unscathed to Rāma and says ‘she is of pure conduct and high moral character and has never betrayed you by word, thought, imagination, or glance’ (6.106.5).²¹³

Sutherland observes that throughout the epic, Sītā suffers because she is a faithful wife and adds that Sītā is an innocent victim who ‘has suffered numerous horrors for no other reason than that she is Rāma’s wife’.²¹⁴ Wendy Doniger suggests that Sītā walks through fire either as a way to threaten her husband that she will leave him or as a way for her to live a dignified life free of any accusations.²¹⁵ Muktilakhi Mangharam states that Rāma forgets his divinity and

²¹² Sattar, *Lost Loves*, p. 94.

²¹³ Not only is Sītā’s *agnipareeksha* (trial by fire) deeply unsettling to read in modern times, but it was perhaps not well received in earlier times too. An example of this is the popular sixteenth-century work of Tulsidas, *Rāmacaritamānas*, in which Rāma creates a shadow Sītā who walks through fire only to please the doubtful people and not because Rāma did not trust his wife.

²¹⁴ Sutherland, ‘Aggressive Behaviour’ p. 77.

²¹⁵ Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2015), 2nd edn, p. 226.

hence is unable to attain *mokṣa* (liberation) because of his behaviour towards Sītā and suggests that just how Sītā owes *bhakti* (devotion) to Rāma, Rāma owes his devotion to Sītā. Mangharam adds that Rāma’s silence during Sītā’s trial by fire ‘can be regarded not just as a betrayal of female sexual energy but as an *undharmic* disruption of *bhakti* devotion he owes Sītā’²¹⁶. Mangharam concludes that Sītā is the moral centre of the epic and that her trial by fire is in contrast to ‘Rāma’s pompous descriptions of himself as a “mere mortal” who has nevertheless achieved victory’.²¹⁷

Sītā’s so far alluded to divinity is now clearly established as she is called an *avatāra* of Lakṣmī, walks through fire, and receives support from all gods in heaven. After spending time under captivity, Sītā is immediately forced into another hardship by her doubtful husband and this marks the beginning of their changing relationship. Sītā, who passed her time in captivity clinging to memories of a gentle and loving partner, is now faced with a man who claims to not love her anymore. Interestingly, the closer Sītā gets to her divine reality, the further Rāma gets from his divine origins.

3.2.7 Book Seven: Uttarakāṇḍa (The Book of Answers)

This section examines Sītā in Book Seven of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: Uttarakāṇḍa (The Book of Answers). Believed to be later addition to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Uttarakāṇḍa is the final book of the epic and is a long epilogue to the story of Sītā and Rāma.²¹⁸ In a way, the book answers all the questions the audience might have about Rāma’s reign and his relationship with Sītā after they return to Ayodhyā. Ayodhyā seems to be at peace with Sītā and Rāma enjoying each other’s company and performing their royal duties with dignity. Soon, Sītā becomes pregnant and just as the ‘happy ever after’ is near, the narrative takes an unexpected turn. Four themes will be explored in the subsections that follow: a story from Sītā’s previous life, Rāma’s insecurity, and the end of Sītā’s earthly life.

3.2.7.1 Into the Past

²¹⁶ Muktilakhi Mangharam, ‘“Rama, Must I Remind You of Your Divinity?” Locating a Sexualized, Feminist, and Queer Dharma in the Rāmāyaṇa’ in *Diacritics*, 39, (2009) 75–104, (p. 90).

²¹⁷ Mangharam, p. 91.

²¹⁸ *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India (Vol VII) Uttarakāṇḍa*, trans. by Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017) p. 74. All Uttarakāṇḍa quotations are from this translation.

This subsection will briefly explore a story about Sītā's previous life in the *Uttarakāṇḍa*. Sages from all over the kingdom come to meet Rāma who invites them into his palace. Rāma begins to ask the sages about the origins of the enemies he has just slain in battle. The sages then describe the various exploits of Rāvaṇa including the story where he sexually harasses a young maiden. The woman is engaged in austerities and upon Rāvaṇa's incessant questioning, she introduces herself as the daughter of the sage Kuśadhvaja and adds that she was 'born from that great being who was ever engaged in vedic recitation. As an incarnation of vedic speech, I am known by the name Vedavatī' (7.17.8). After refusing Rāvaṇa's lustful advances, Vedavatī tells him she is unmarried because her father intended Viṣṇu as his son-in-law and explains that she is engaged in austerities to fulfil her father's desire. Despite this explanation, Rāvaṇa attempts to rape Vedavatī and seizes her by her hair but an insulted Vedavatī lights a pyre to end her life and before she goes in she says 'may I be born as the virtuous daughter of a righteous man and not from a human womb' (7.17.27).

Vedavatī's life as the incarnation of *vedic* speech and her clash with Rāvaṇa is perhaps what gives Sītā the in-depth knowledge of *dharma*, and the courage to stand up to Rāvaṇa and survive his captivity. The other characters of the epic are either completely divine with no past lives or completely human with no divine aspects. However, the mention of Sītā's past life and the earlier mention of her being an *avatāra* of Lakṣmī makes her unique in comparison to the other characters as her past life appears to have an effect on her current life.

3.2.7.2 The People's Question

This subsection will examine Rāma's problematic decision regarding Sītā. As peace and prosperity prevail in Ayodhyā with the return of the prodigal son and rightful heir to the throne, Rāma asks his minister Bhadra what his subjects think of him and his reign. A hesitant Bhadra informs Rāma that his subjects are asking:

what sort of pleasure could be produced in his heart through the enjoyment of Sītā, since earlier Rāvaṇa, clutching her to his side, had forcibly carried her off to Laṅkā?...Now we shall have to put up with this from our own wives as well. For people always follow what the king does (7.42.17–19).

A devastated Rāma summons Lakṣmaṇa and orders him to mount his chariot and abandon Sītā ‘at the border of the realm’ (7.44.15).²¹⁹ Before Lakṣmaṇa can respond, Rāma asks him to unquestioningly obey his order and to not attempt to change his mind (7.44.18–20).

Doniger states that Rāma’s decision to banish Sītā shows that he only cared for her ‘as a political asset and an unassailably chaste wife’ and when he felt that his political image would get damaged due to the allegations against his wife, he decided to banish her.²²⁰ Further, Doniger claims that Rāma’s decision of banishing Sītā is meant to be in stark opposition of his father who put his desire for Kaikeyi before his duties as king.²²¹ Goldman claims that even though Rāma’s behaviour is a type of continuation of his doubtful self at the end of Yuddhakāṇḍa, this time he is harsher as he makes this quick and rash decision to ‘protect his precious reputation from accusations of corruption’.²²² Sattar suggests that Rāma’s decision of not facing Sītā could either be a sign of his extreme grief or it could be a way of instructing the readers that if there is a slight chance that a married woman has committed adultery then she ‘must be punished, even if the woman is the wife of the king or, as it should be in this case, the wife of a god acting as a man on earth’.²²³

With this controversial decision it becomes clear that for Rāma his role as king, and the image of his lineage is of utmost importance. By abandoning Sītā, Rāma once again publicly announces that he is unlike his father when it comes to political decision making.

3.2.7.3 Return to the Forest

This subsection will examine Sītā’s reaction as she is informed of Rāma’s decision to abandon her. On reaching the forest at the border of Ayodhyā, an anxious Sītā orders Lakṣmaṇa to be honest with her to which he responds ‘although you were shown to be innocent in my presence, you have been abandoned by the lord of men, who is fearful of the criticism of the people’ (7.46.13). Sītā faints on hearing Lakṣmaṇa’s words and on regaining consciousness she blames her fate for this tragedy ‘surely, Lakṣmaṇa, this body of mine, which is now seen to be a

²¹⁹ Different versions of the story attempt to justify Rāma’s problematic decision and try to lessen the blame on him. The ninth-century work, *Chhalitarama* states that the gossip was spread by two spies from a rival kingdom and the *Uttaramacarita* of Bhavabhūti names the spy Durmukh or ‘Bad Mouth’. Such attempts remind the reader that Rāma is meant to be completely human and is therefore, incapable of handling his jealousy. On a different note, Tulsidas’ *Rāmacaritamānas* ends with the return of Rāma and Sītā to Ayodhyā and the king never abandons his queen.

²²⁰ Doniger, p. 225.

²²¹ Doniger, p. 225.

²²² Goldman, *Uttarakāṇḍa* p. 83.

²²³ Arshia Sattar, *Uttara: The Book of Answers* (Gurgaon: Penguin, 2016), p. 242.

veritable incarnation of suffering, must have been created by the creator for suffering alone' (7.47.3). Sītā then dwells on her past life sins (7.47.4) and worries about having to survive in the forest alone (7.47.5–8). Sītā even goes to the extent of saying that the reason she is not choosing to end her life is because she is pregnant and the future of her husband's reign depends on her (7.47.8). Despite receiving this devastating news, Sītā manages to regain her composure swiftly and she sends Lakṣmaṇa back with a message for her husband 'I do not grieve for my own body, bull among men. But, your majesty, you must act righteously toward the people in such a way that you avoid their criticism' (7.47.11–12).

Sattar claims that Sītā's message to Rāma is not the words of a dutiful wife but 'Sītā's resigned acceptance of the fact that Rāma is now irrevocably and forever the king, a public person with a public life and public demands'.²²⁴ Additionally, Sattar suggests that through her message 'Sītā conclusively renounces her love for Rāma'.²²⁵ On the contrary, Goldman claims that Sītā does not resist Rāma's command because she can find 'no grounds to criticize her husband in the way that she had at the time of her ordeal by fire'.²²⁶

In this narrative, Sītā feels waves of emotions that range from anxiety, self-blame, and worry, to a resilient acceptance of her fate. Even though the text does not specify the reason behind Sītā's quick acceptance of her fate, a close look at her character throughout the epic might answer the question. Sītā, who has faithfully followed Rāma is perhaps exhausted at trying to make her marriage work. Rāma is unable to offer Sītā the loyalty she offers him and it is possible that an emotionally overworked Sītā, is aware that her husband will always be a king first. Perhaps Sītā now sees no point in fighting for her honour or her marriage.

3.2.7.4 Rejecting Rāma

This subsection will explore the final meeting between Sītā and Rāma which takes place years after he abandons her. Additionally, the supposed composer, Valmiki, is a part of the final book as an abandoned Sītā now resides in his hermitage. After Lakṣmaṇa's departure, Sītā 'bowed down under the burden of her suffering, the virtuous and glorious woman, not seeing anyone to protect her, now wretched and given over to her suffering, wept loudly in the woods' (7.47.18). On hearing Sītā's cries, sage Valmiki's sons bring him to Sītā, and he takes her into

²²⁴ Sattar, *Lost Loves*, p. 96.

²²⁵ Sattar, *Lost Loves*, p. 96.

²²⁶ Goldman, *Uttarakāṇḍa*, p. 85.

his care. While living in the hermitage, Sītā gives birth to two sons, Kusa and Lava (7.58). Years go by and Vālmiki introduces the two boys to the deeds of Rāma without telling them that he is their father. Soon, the two boys are invited to Rāma’s palace to sing about Rāma’s deeds. Rāma recognizes the boys as his sons and sends them back to the hermitage with a message for Vālmiki:

If Sītā be of untainted conduct or if she has expiated her sin, then let her, with the permission of the great sage, demonstrate her purity here... Tomorrow morning, for the sake of clearing my name as well, let Janaka’s daughter, Maithili, take a solemn oath here in the midst of the assembly (7.86.4–6).²²⁷

Vālmiki brings Sītā with him and clarifies that she will prove her purity not because she is guilty but because Rāma is ‘fearful of the malicious rumours among the people’ (7.87.20). Once again, all the great gods who witnessed Sītā’s trial by fire, assemble in the skies above as Sītā comes in with her face and eyes lowered and hands cupped in reverence and says:

As I have never even thought of any other man other than Raghava, so may Madhavi, the goddess of the earth, open wide for me...From the surface of the earth there arose an unsurpassed, heavenly throne...Then Dharani, the goddess of the earth, who was on that throne, took Maithili in her arms and, greeting her with words of welcome, seated her upon it (7.88.10–13).

Sattar claims the Uttarakāṇḍa is meant to determine the way women are perceived not only in the text, but also in the society the epic was written in and as a result ‘no matter how many times and in how many ways Sītā is proven innocent, she cannot stay with her husband, the *maryadapurushottama*, the ideal man (and god), once a whiff of scandal had touched her’.²²⁸ Sutherland observes that the crowd present in the Uttarakāṇḍa is very different from the crowd in Yuddhakāṇḍa as Sītā’s purity test is now being conducted for humans (7.87.7).²²⁹ Additionally, Sattar states that Sītā is ‘not asking to be proven innocent so that she can stay

²²⁷ Sītā is from the kingdom of Mithila and is often called Maithili or ‘the one from Mithila’.

²²⁸ Sattar, *Uttara*, p. 247.

²²⁹ Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, ‘Gendered Narratives: Gender, Space and Narrative Structures in Vālmiki’s *Balakāṇḍa*’ in *The Rāmāyaṇa Revisited* ed. by Mandakranta Bose (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 47–86 (p. 52).

with Rama, rather, she asks that the consequence of her chastity be that she be taken away'.²³⁰ Pratap Kumar suggests that Sītā's decision of returning to her mother defies Rāma's attitude of placing his subjects before his wife and adds that the 'ignominy of her stay with Rāvaṇa was perhaps more tolerable than the shock she sent across the kingdom by her own death'.²³¹ Further, Sutherland asserts that Sītā who is now 'twice rejected by her lord, and once abandoned, though pledging her faithfulness to Rāma, now prefers death to life with him'.²³² Similarly, Goldman observes how Sītā vows 'her eternal fidelity and devotion to Rāma with great dignity while implicitly declining his offer to take her back once again'.²³³

It is surprising that Rāma publicly accepts his sons (7.88.4) but he still cannot accept Sītā. After repeatedly proving her innocence, Sītā now decides to call on her divine powers and reject Rāma. Interestingly, Rāma himself admits that Sītā has proven her chastity publicly before and even asks for Valmiki's forgiveness, but he does not feel the need to ask for his wife's forgiveness. Even though Sītā's return to earth marks the end of her task of bringing destruction to Rāvaṇa, she is certainly pushed to make this decision due to Rāma's constant doubts. Rāma vows that he will never remarry and orders that a golden statue be made of his wife and for every auspicious ceremony, the golden statue of Sītā was placed right beside Rāma (7.89.4). Sadly, it is only after her death that Sītā receives her rightful place beside Rāma.

3.3. Conclusion

From the narratives examined above it is clear that Sītā is not just the quiet, submissive, wife of Rāma. In this section, a few points will be reiterated and expanded upon to gain a better understanding of Sītā and present a new possible reading of Valmiki's heroine.

To begin with, perhaps the most consistent presence in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is not of a person but of an idea: the idea of *dharma*. Beginning with Daśaratha's decision to choose his *dharma* as a good husband to Rāma's decision of choosing his *ksatriya dharma* at the end, the characters remain confused about their righteous duties throughout the epic. However, while all the characters struggle with their duties and often end up making controversial decisions, Sītā manages to carry out her *dharma* with grace and without any confusion. Since the beginning

²³⁰ Sattar, *Lost Loves*, p. 97.

²³¹ Pratap Kumar, 'Sītā in the Last Episode of the Rāmāyaṇa: Contrasting Paradigms from Bhavabhūti and Valmiki', *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 5, (1992), 57–66 (p. 63).

²³² Sutherland, 'Aggressive Behaviour', p. 78.

²³³ Goldman, *Uttarakāṇḍa*, p. 21.

of the text, Sītā knows what type of *dharma* she intends to follow. In Ayodhyayakāṇḍa, when Rāma tries to persuade her to stay back, Sītā debates with him because she is confident that she understands her duties better than her husband. Sītā's also uses of her knowledge of *dharma* as a debate tactic against Rāma (when she cautions him against unnecessary violence) and later against Rāvaṇa (when she warns him to not covet another man's wife). This clarifies that Sītā understands *dharma* as a concept, and that she does not shy away from educating others about it. An example of this is in Sundarakāṇḍa. When Hanumān says that he wishes to kill the *rakṣasi* women who were guarding her, Sītā tells him not to do so. Sītā then educates Hanumān that the *dharma* of servants is to follow their king and that the *rakṣasi* women had no choice but to follow Rāvaṇa's orders (5.101). Additionally, Sītā's clarity on *dharma* possibly enables her to be in command of her own destiny as she makes two monumental decisions regarding her life. The first is her trial by fire which even makes the gods uncomfortable and they are forced to descend from heaven and intervene. Sītā uses her trial by fire to not only prove her chastity, but to remind everyone of her divine roots and prove Rāma wrong in front of the monkey army and the gods. The next big decision Sītā makes is to end her earthly life. While Rāma abandons Sītā quietly with the help of Lakṣmaṇa, Sītā rejects him publicly, leaving him lonely and devastated. In both these instances Sītā uses the crowd that was initially making her nervous to her benefit, as she proves her devotion to her husband and Rāma is publicly reduced to being a jealous and irrational partner.

Sītā was a *kṣatriya* princess who possibly found the *kṣatriya* code of conduct too violent as she desperately tries to get away from it. At first, she succeeds as she enjoys her life in the Daṇḍaka forest with Rāma. But just when Rāma is beginning to embrace peace, Sītā is abducted and Rāma returns to his *kṣatriya* duties with perhaps an even greater force than before. At the end, when Sītā quietly accepts her fate she is possibly rejecting both Rāma and the *kṣatriya* lifestyle. At this stage, it would be important to mention that Sītā's death has been valorised over centuries and is perceived as her final victory by most modern day Hindus and scholars alike. However, it is imperative to understand that Sītā was pushed to make this decision due to the repeated allegations of her husband. There is no glorious aspect to a woman choosing to end her existence because of her husband's doubts regarding her fidelity. Sītā's love for non-violence is perhaps a fundamental difference between her and Rāma. Sītā wants a peace-loving husband, who will renounce his kingship and embrace a simple life in the forest, a wish that remains unfulfilled as Rāma rejects her twice owing to his regal duties. At the end, the only

possible way Sītā sees herself finding peace is by returning to her mother while leaving her own sons motherless.

While Sītā's submissive qualities have been overly glorified, Sītā's rage receives little attention in contemporary interpretation. Sītā engages in a heated argument with Rāma and Lakṣmana and in both instances, she employs the same tactics while debating with these men. Sītā starts out peacefully by giving her opinion on a matter, followed by what *dharma* should be followed under the given circumstances. It is only after the brothers refuse to listen to her that Sītā becomes furious, and launches into personal attacks against them and threatens to commit suicide. In both instances, Sītā wins the argument and this could indicate that Sītā was a brilliant tactician. Along with her rage, Sītā's bravery under Rāvaṇa's captivity also receives little attention in contemporary Hinduism. While Rāma spends his time gathering an army to fight Rāvaṇa, it is Sītā who must fight him alone to protect her body and her life. Sundarakāṇḍa makes Sītā increasingly relatable as the continuous threat of rape and death make her mind plunge into darkness and she engages in self-blame, doubts her relationship with her husband, and even contemplates suicide. However, one incident from the Yuddhakāṇḍa shows that despite continuous torture and mental anguish, Sītā uses her presence of mind to try and stay one step ahead of Rāvaṇa. In 6.25.7–13, Sītā asks one of her *raṅṅasi* wardresses, Saramā, to spy on Rāvaṇa and report back to her with his military strategy. Overall, the Sītā of Sundarakāṇḍa is brave, intelligent, anxious, and a traumatized survivor of mental and physical abuse.

In contemporary Hinduism, Sītā's divinity has been swept under the rug and an immovable statue of Rāma has been placed over it. However, throughout the epic Rāma does not remember his divine roots. On the contrary, through three separate instances the epic reminds its readers that Sītā is a powerful deity and it is possible that the poet intended for her to be the main divine presence in the epic. This argument can be supported by looking at the beginning of the text when Viṣṇu decides to be born as Rāma. In Bālakāṇḍa, Rāvaṇa asks the god Brahma for powers that would make him immortal against all living beings but in his arrogance he never adds humans to this list. Therefore, to kill Rāvaṇa, Rāma must forget his divinity and be completely human (1.15.5–6). Next, in order to be completely human, Rāma is born from a womb unlike Sītā who is found in the earth. Further, Yuddhakāṇḍa tells the story of the god Śiva, who promises the other gods that a woman will be born to destroy the *raṅṅasas*. The citizens of Laṅkā are seemingly aware of this story as they claim 'employed by that gods, this destroyer of the *raṅṅasas*, Sītā, will devour us along with Rāvaṇa' (6.82.36). Moreover, Sītā's acts of

walking through fire to prove her chastity, and submerging herself in the earth at the end, make her the most powerful being in the epic as she performs two public miracles not just in front of humans, but also in front of gods. Hence, Sītā is the goddess Lakṣmī, the consort of Viṣṇu, the bearer of good luck and fortune, who enters the mortal realm along with her husband to fulfil the objective of the gods and save humans from demons.

From Mohandas Gandhi who placed Sītā on a high pedestal during India's struggle for Independence, to the pressure on modern day Hindu women to be like Sītā, Sītā remains an overused but little understood figure.²³⁴ Valmiki's Sītā is not a submissive woman and instead she is an *avatāra* of Lakṣmī ; earth's daughter; friend of animals and plants; knower of *dharma*; an articulate debater; a smart tactician; a peace loving woman who craves a simple life; and a woman with unimaginable strength as she stands her ground against her captor, and publicly chides her husband for doubting her.

²³⁴ Mohandas Gandhi spearheaded India's struggle for independence. Debali Mookerjea Leonard observes that in Gandhi's speeches and writings 'Sita of the epic acquired a new nationalist virtue'. Mookerjea further highlights Gandhi's speech to a women's group in 1929 where he urged the women 'to become pure in body and mind like Sita'. Debali Mookerjea Leonard, 'To Be Pure Or Not To Be: Gandhi, Women, and the Partition of India', *Feminist Review* (94), 2010, 38–54 (pp. 45–46)

Table

3.4. A Summary Table of Sītā's Appearances in the *Rāmāyaṇa*

Book 1 Bālakāṇḍa	Book 2 Ayodhyākāṇḍa	Book 3 Arāṇyakāṇḍa	Book 4 Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa	Book 5 Sundarakāṇḍa	Book 6 Yuddhakāṇḍa	Book 7 Uttarakāṇḍa
1.65: Sītā's birth	2.24–27: Sītā and Rāma's heated debate about Sītā's decision to accompany him into the forest	3.8: Sītā teaches Rāma about <i>dharma</i>	No mention of Sītā in this <i>kāṇḍa</i>	5.13.22: Detailed description of Sītā's physical state	6.22; 6.37.7; 6.52: Rāvaṇa tricks Sītā into thinking Rāma is dead	7.17: The story of Vedavatī
1.72: Sītā and Rāma's wedding	2.34: Sītā and Kausalyā discuss the duties of a good wife	3.43: Sītā's rage against Lakṣmaṇa		5.18–20: Rāvaṇa and Sītā's conversation	6.103: Rāma rejects Sītā	7.41: Sītā becomes pregnant
	2.110: Sītā's conversation with Anāsūya	3.47: Sītā's abduction by Rāvaṇa		5.22–26: Sītā faces harassment at the hands of her wardresses and contemplates suicide	6.104–106: Sītā walks through fire in order to prove her chastity	7.44–48: Rāma orders Lakṣmaṇa to abandon Sītā in the forest. Sītā accepts her fate and lives with the sage Vālmiki
				5.34–35: Sītā's anxiety.		7.88: Sītā submerges herself in the earth

Chapter Four

Draupadī

4.1 Introduction

The core narrative of the *Mahābhārata* revolves around a dynastic struggle for the Hāstinapura throne between two groups of cousins, the Kaurvas and Pāṇḍavas who belong to the Kuru lineage. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is born blind and is deemed unfit to be the king of Hāstinapura due to his physical disability. His younger brother Pāṇḍu is crowned king in his stead. Soon, Dhṛtarāṣṭra marries Gāndhārī and Pāṇḍu marries Kuntī and Mādrī. Through a divine method Gāndhārī gives birth to one hundred sons. Meanwhile, Kuntī uses a divine spell and gives birth to Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma and Arjuna, and Mādrī, with whom Kuntī shares the spell, begets the twins Nakula and Sahadeva. These five sons of Pāṇḍu are known as Pāṇḍavas, and the hundred sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra are called the Kauravas. King Pāṇḍu suddenly passes away and his untimely death brings with it the complex question of who should be the rightful heir to the throne of Hāstinapura. Should it be one of the children of the elder brother who was not considered suitable for the throne? Or should it be one of the children of the younger brother who was crowned king? The rest of the *Mahābhārata* is about answering the question of kingship and the narrative covers a wide range of topics including hereditary kingship, the art of war, ideal *kṣatriya* (warrior) behaviour in times of an emergency, and the spiritual ideas of *mokṣa*, (liberation), *artha* (meaning), *kama* (desire), and *dharma* (duty).

This chapter aims to present a reading of this Puranic epic which focuses on its heroine, Draupadī, who becomes the wife of the Pāṇḍavas. The length of the text makes it impossible to highlight all the narratives involving Draupadī and therefore, this chapter will examine a selection of key episodes in Draupadī's life: her birth; her marriage; her multiple public humiliations; her relationship with Yudhiṣṭhira; her knowledge of *dharma*; her rage; her *pativrata* (devoted wife) attitude; and her grief at the loss of her loved ones.

4.2. The *Mahābhārata*

The *Mahābhārata*, like the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is a part of the *śrauta* (listening) tradition and was passed on orally for centuries before it was written down. The text was composed over a span of a millennium with the earliest attested written version dated to 400 BCE and the possible

final version in 400 CE. The smallest unit of the *Mahābhārata* is the *śloka* (verse). The earliest attested version consisted of eight thousand *ślokas* and was called *Jaya* after which a twenty four-thousand *śloka* version called *Bharata* began circulating. In its present form, the text contains ninety-thousand *ślokas* (approximately two million words) and after 400 CE, no additions were made to the story.²³⁵ Despite no further additions to the main framework of the *Mahābhārata*, later scribes and folk traditions have certainly taken liberty with the text and made changes to the story which will be mentioned in this chapter as they are encountered. While the length of the text, the time for its composition, sub-plots, main characters, and various minor characters leave no doubt that there were multiple authors involved in the process, the text is popularly attributed to Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vedavyāsaḥ, an immortal sage who features in the epic repeatedly. The text begins with a snake sacrifice being conducted by Janamejaya, the great grandson of Arjuna who is one of the Pāṇḍavas, listening to Vaiśampāyana, a student of Vedavyāsaḥ who has learnt the *Mahābhārata* from the composer himself narrate the story. Later, Ugraśrvas is asked to recount the tale he heard at the snake sacrifice by a group of sages who have assembled for another sacrifice and the narration changes hands between Vaiśampāyana and Ugraśrvas throughout the narrative.

The ninety-thousand *ślokas* are grouped into *adhyāyas* (chapters) and several chapters combine to make a *parva* (book). The text was originally divided into one hundred *parvas* and was later divided into eighteen *parvas* for an easier understanding. This research will use the eighteen *parva* classification and all quotations will be in the format of: (*adhyāya.parva*; page number). The eighteen *parva* classification divides the text into: Adi Parva; Sabha Parva; Aranyaka Parva; Virata Parva; Udyoga Parva; Bhishma Parva; Drona Parva; Karna Parva; Shalya Parva; Souptika Parva; Stri Parva; Shanti Parva; Anushasana Parva; Ashvamedhika Parva; Ashramvasika Parva; Mousala Parva; Mahaprasthanika Parva; Svaragrohana Parva.

4.2.1 Book One: Adi Parva (The Book of the Beginning)

This section examines Draupadī in Book One of the *Mahābhārata*: Adi Parva (The Book of the Beginning). The book is primarily focussed on the birth of the Pāṇḍavas and their youthful exploits. Five themes will be explored in the subsections that follow: Draupadī's birth; her marriage to the Pāṇḍava brothers; the question of *dharma* Draupadī's marital arrangement

²³⁵ *The Mahābhārata: The Book of the Beginning*, trans. by J.A.B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p.xxv.

brings; the rules of marriage the Pāṇḍava brothers establish; and Draupadī's reaction to having a co-wife.

4.2.1.1 From the Fire

This subsection will explore Draupadī's birth and the important celestial announcement regarding her destiny. Drupada, king of Pāñcāla refuses to continue his friendship with the *brahmin* Drona due to caste differences and an infuriated Drona assembles his students and demands Drupada's kingdom as his teaching fee. Drona's students are none other than the five Pāṇḍava brothers who defeat Drupada in battle. Later, Drona agrees to divide half the kingdom with Drupada and while Drupada accepts his fate, he begins to plot his revenge. Drupada asks the *brahmins* Yāja and Upayāja to perform a fire sacrifice so he can have a son who will help him regain his kingdom. At the sacrifice a young man emerges from the flames and from the same flames arose Draupadī who 'was dark. Her eyes were like the petals of lotuses. Her hair was dark blue and curled. She was truly a goddess born in human form' (1.155; p. 190).²³⁶ As Draupadī steps out of the fire, a disembodied voice announces that 'this beauty of the dark complexion will bring about the destruction of the Kṣatriyas. In time, this one with the beautiful waist will perform the objective of the gods' (1.155; p. 190).

Jessica Ford observes that even though Draupadī is 'an unintended product of the ritual' her role in the destruction of the warrior caste is not meant to be passive and instead she is to lead the warriors to destruction.²³⁷ Interestingly, Draupadī is not born from a womb but emerges from the fire as a young woman with a divine task, and the power to cause destruction. This places Draupadī in the category of male divine saviours before her in Sanskrit epics.

4.2.1.2 A Wife to All

This subsection will explore the narrative of Draupadī's unexpected marital setup. Vyāsaḥ tells the Pāṇḍava brothers a story about Draupadī's previous incarnation. Draupadī asked the god Śiva for a husband five times as a result of which, Śiva said she shall have five husbands in her next life (1.157; p. 191). Vyāsaḥ encourages the Pāṇḍavas to go to the kingdom of Pāñcāla and

²³⁶ *The Great Mahabharata (Vol I-X)*, trans. by Bibek Debroy (New Delhi: Penguin, 2012–2015). All *Mahābhārata* quotations are from this work since this work is more recent. Since Debroy has not given verse numbers, page numbers from the digital edition of the work will be given beside the book and chapter number.

²³⁷ Jessica Ford, 'The Element of a Good Marriage: Fire, Draupadī and Marital Relationships', *Religious Study and Theology*, 3 (2014) 47–64 (p. 51).

win Draupadī's hand in marriage. Drupada sets up an archery contest for the suitors and gets a difficult to use bow constructed and announces that 'he who can string this bow and, after stringing, shoot the target above with these arrows, will obtain my daughter' (1.176; p. 205). On the sixteenth day, after all the warriors fail to bend the bow, Arjuna succeeds in completing the task and Draupadī puts a garland of white flowers around Arjuna's neck (1.176; p. 206). After the ceremony, Arjuna refuses to marry Draupadī before his elder brother gets married and suggests that Yudhiṣṭhira marry Draupadī followed by Bhīma, then Arjuna himself, then Nakula, and Sahdeva. Suddenly, Yudhiṣṭhira remembers Vyāsaḥ's story about Draupadī's past life and 'fearing that conflict might arise between the brothers, the king said, "This fortunate Droupadi will be a wife to all of us"' (1.82; p. 210).

Even though the text attempts to justify Draupadī's polyandrous marriage through Śiva's boon, Draupadī's eerie silence renders the passage controversial as questions of consent and oppression arise. Additionally, Draupadī's sexuality is subtly vilified as Yudhiṣṭhira fears that her beauty might cause a rift between the brothers.

4.2.1.3 Dharma or Adharma?

The polyandrous arrangement raises the question of *dharma* and this subsection will explore the doubts that arise in Drupada's mind. Drupada is stunned by Yudhiṣṭhira's decision that Draupadī will become their common wife and tells Yudhiṣṭhira that 'we have never heard that one woman can have many men' (1.187; p. 214). Yudhiṣṭhira responds by speaking about the complexity of *dharma* and goes on to declare that he has never done anything *adharmic* (against righteous duties) and narrates the tale of Jaṭilā, who consorted with seven sages in an effort to convince Drupada but the king remains sceptical. At this moment, Vyāsaḥ arrives and speaks with Drupada privately and narrates the tale of Śiva's curse on Indra. Indra, the king of the gods, is arrogant about his divinity and immortality and in his arrogance he insults Śiva. As a result, Śiva puts a curse on Indra and the other arrogant gods, Dharma, the twin Ashvins, and Vayu, that they are to be banished from the heavenly kingdom, and forced to enter the mortal realm as humans. Vyāsaḥ then reveals that these five gods were born as the five Pāṇḍavas and adds that Śiva also 'ordained that the woman, the most beautiful in the worlds, who was none other than Shri herself, would be their wife in the world of men' (1.189; p. 216).²³⁸ Vyāsaḥ's intervention proves helpful and Drupada gives his consent to the final rituals of marriage.

²³⁸ Shri is the goddess Lakṣmī.

Saptorshi Das states that ‘Draupadī was neither the perpetrator of this social transgression nor did she enter into a polyandrous contract of her own accord’.²³⁹ While Draupadī’s continuous silence seems unsettling, this passage clearly establishes her divinity as she is the powerful goddess of fortune and good luck, Lakṣmī. Additionally, while the male gods are cursed to enter the mortal realm, it appears that Lakṣmī was sent to guide the five gods and ensure they did not stray from their path.

4.2.1.4 How to Share a Wife

This subsection will explore the rules of marriage the Pāṇḍava brothers establish with the help of the celestial sage Nārada. Nārada advises Yudhiṣṭhira that since Draupadī is their common wife they should set down some rules to avoid conflict. Nārada then narrates the story of Tilottamā, over whom two brothers, Sunda and Upasunda, killed each other. Taking the story as a lesson and a warning, the brothers decide that ‘if any of them set eyes on Droupadi when she was lying with any of the others, he would retire to the forest and live the life of a *brahmachari* for twelve years’ (1.204; p. 305). The text later reads that Draupadī followed the rules and was ‘extremely happy with the five valorous ones as her husbands’ (1.205; p. 305).

Not only is this the first time that the text hints at Draupadī’s emotions about her marriage, but it also attempts to remove any doubt of Draupadī’s unhappiness. Additionally, once again the text is hinting that a woman and her sexuality could cause a rift between loving families. While Nārada’s tale is not a direct attack on Draupadī, the requirement for rules once again vilifies Draupadī’s sexuality.

4.2.1.5 Trouble in Paradise

This subsection will examine Draupadī’s reaction when Arjuna remarries. A *brahmin* comes into the palace of the Pāṇḍavas who are ruling over the region of Khāṇḍavaprastha, asks for Arjuna’s help to stop an ongoing robbery. At that time, Yudhiṣṭhira was with Draupadī ‘in the room where the great souled Pāṇḍavas kept their weapons’ (1.205; p. 306). Arjuna enters the room to pick up his weapons and upon returning he asks for Yudhiṣṭhira’s permission to leave for the forest to lead the life of a celibate because he had broken their rules of marriage. After

²³⁹ Saptorshi Das, ‘Vyāsaḥ’s Draupadī: A Feminist Representation’, *International Journal of Gender and Women’s Studies*, 2 (2014), 223–31 (p. 225).

twelve years, Arjuna returns with another wife, Subhadra. Arjuna tries to pacify Draupadī who jealously asks him to return to his new wife and adds that a ‘second load always loosens the first tie, however strong’ (1.213; p. 313). A nervous Arjuna instructs Subhadra to dress simply like a cowherd. Subhadra does as instructed and pays her respects to Draupadī by saying ‘I am your maid’ (1.213; p. 313). On hearing Subhadra’s respectful words, Draupadī embraces her and says ‘let your husband not have a rival’ (1.213; p. 313).

Kevin McGrath states that with Subhadra presenting herself as a maid to Draupadī ‘feminine hierarchy is established’ and concludes that the co-wife held an inferior place in a *kṣatriya* household.²⁴⁰ Additionally, Pratap Kumar notes that while Draupadī’s calm response to Subhadra is a hint that she wants no animosity between the two, Draupadī refers to Arjuna as ‘your husband’ instead of their mutual husband and this ‘perhaps hints at her inner insecurity as a wife who has just been surpassed by a new one’.²⁴¹

Draupadī is never consulted during the rule making and Arjuna never seeks her permission before going to the forest but she is the first person to face the emotional consequences of the rule.²⁴² Draupadī finally speaks at the end of the first book and it is possible that her first words are said out of insecurity and jealousy of having been replaced by a younger bride. However, the nervousness that Draupadī’s jealousy brings to Arjuna and Subhadra also hints at her commanding personality.

4.2.2 Book Two: Sabha Parva (The Book of the Assembly Hall)

This section examines Draupadī in Book Two of the *Mahābhārata*: Sabha Parva (The Book of the Assembly Hall). The book focusses on a game of dice between Yudhiṣṭhira and Shakuni in the assembly hall of Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s palace in Hāstinapura. Draupadī, who has fulfilled her role as chief wife and queen by giving birth to five sons (1.213; p. 315) is living in a beautiful palace filled with riches along with her five husbands. Duryodhana, one of Gandhari’s one hundred sons, confesses to his maternal uncle Shakuni that he is jealous of the Pāṇḍavas’ wealth.

²⁴⁰ Kevin McGrath, *Stri: Women in Epic Mahābhārata* (Boston: Ilex, 2004), p. 71.

²⁴¹ Pratap Kumar, ‘Centrality of Draupadī in the Mahābhārata Narrative’, *Indian Literature*, 60 (2013), 165–78 (p. 173).

²⁴² Arjuna’s marriage to Draupadī appears to be duty bound in the epic for two possible reasons. First is that Arjuna enters the contest to win Draupadī’s hand in marriage because the sage Vyāsa suggests so. Later, after winning the contest, it is Arjuna who suggests that Draupadī should be their shared wife. Secondly, the text describes Arjuna losing his senses as he is struck by Subhadra’s beauty. It is these intense feelings that lead him to marry Subhadra. Throughout the narrative, Arjuna is a dutiful husband to Draupadī but his emotional availability is seemingly for Subhadra only.

Shakuni then advises Duryodhana to challenge Yudhiṣṭhira to a game of dice and adds that ‘with my skill in dice, there is no doubt that I will win for you the kingdom and the blazing prosperity’ (2.269; p. 375). Duryodhana goes to Dhṛtarāṣṭra and on seeing his son’s misery, Dhṛtarāṣṭra agrees to invite Yudhiṣṭhira for a gambling match and this game of dice changes Draupadī’s life forever. Five themes will be explored in the subsections that follow: Yudhiṣṭhira betting Draupadī during the game of dice; the physical abuse Draupadī faces; Draupadī’s intelligence; her divinity; and the grim future Draupadī predicts.

4.2.2.1 The Dicey Game

This subsection will examine the unprecedented turn the game of dice takes. Yudhiṣṭhira accepts Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s invitation to a game of dice and the brothers along with Draupadī, reach Hāstinapura. Before the game begins, Duryodhana cleverly bows out and appoints Shakuni to play in his stead. The game begins with Yudhiṣṭhira betting expensive jewellery, jars filled with gold coins, chariots, horses, one-thousand slave girls, and then one-thousand slave men. After betting and losing his kingdom, Yudhiṣṭhira bets Nakula, then Sahadeva, followed by Arjuna, Bhīma, and finally, Yudhiṣṭhira bets himself and loses. Shakuni then suggests that Yudhiṣṭhira should bet Draupadī and attempt to win himself back and shockingly Yudhiṣṭhira agrees and says

She retires to bed last and she is the first one to wake up. She looks after the cowherds and the shepherds. She knows everything about what should be done and what should not be done. When covered with sweat, her face looks like a lotus or jasmine. Her waist is shaped like an altar. Her hair is long. Her eyes are copper red. She does not have too much of body hair. O king! O Soubala! I will make the beautiful Droupadi of Panchala, slender of waist, my stake (2.283; p. 388).

Unsurprisingly, Shakuni rolls the dice and wins Draupadī as well. Stephanie Jamison terms Yudhiṣṭhira’s staking of Draupadī as the most shocking ‘treatment of woman as chattel in all of Indian literature’.²⁴³ McGrath notes the detailed description of Draupadī that Yudhiṣṭhira

²⁴³ Stephanie Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer’s Wife: Women, Ritual and Hospitality in Ancient India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 236. Even though Draupadī is certainly ill-treated in this narrative, Jamison’s view appears to be ignorant of the caste system. Lower caste women were often sold and bought as slaves as we

provides and claims that ‘these are not the usual formulae of feminine praise, but intensely personal points of admiration and affection’.²⁴⁴ On the contrary, Sally J. Sutherland suggests that Yudhiṣṭhira describes Draupadī as the perfect wife so that ‘her value might be worth the opponent’s stake’.²⁴⁵

When read in isolation, Yudhiṣṭhira’s description of Draupadī might hint at his love for her. But upon reading the entire gambling narrative, it becomes more likely that Draupadī was simply one of Yudhiṣṭhira’s prized possessions and not too different from his carriages and horses.

4.2.2.2 Draupadī’s Question

This subsection will explore Draupadī’s pertinent question that stumps the entire assembly. Duryodhana sends Pratikmani, a messenger, into Draupadī’s chambers to bring her into the assembly hall. Pratikmani narrates the events to Draupadī who instantly orders him to return to the assembly hall and ask Yudhiṣṭhira ‘whether he first lost himself or me’ (2.285; p. 389). When Pratikmani returns without Draupadī, an impatient Duryodhana hands over the task to his brother, Duhshasana who brings Draupadī into the assembly hall. Draupadī enters the hall and attempts to run towards the women present in the assembly but Duhshasana grabs her by her hair and begins to drag her towards the middle of the assembly.²⁴⁶ Draupadī whispers to Duhshasana to not take her towards the male elders in the assembly because ‘it is the period of my menses now. O evil minded one! I am only clad in a single garment.’ (2.285; p. 390). Despite Draupadī’s whispered plea, Duhshasana shows no remorse and says ‘whether you are clad in a single garment or in no garments at all, you have been won at the game and are now a slave.’ (2.285; p. 390). An enraged Draupadī then turns to the assembly and publicly chides king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Drona (the revered teacher of the Pāṇḍavas) and Bhīṣma (the grandfather of the Pāṇḍavas) and adds that ‘the foremost among the elders of the Kuru lineage have chosen

can see from Yudhiṣṭhira’s staking of one thousand female slaves earlier. Terming the treatment meted out to Draupadī as possibly the worst in all of Indian literature, ignores Dalit women forced into labour or even prostitution.

²⁴⁴ McGrath, p. 122.

²⁴⁵ Sally J. Sutherland, ‘Sītā and Draupadī: Aggressive Behaviour and Female Role-Models in the Sanskrit Epics’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 109, (1989), 63–79 (p. 65).

²⁴⁶ In folk stories, after Duhshasana grabs Draupadī’s hair she vows to not tie it up until she washes her hair with the blood of her enemies. Alf Hiltelbeitel notes how this theme later became consistently popular in South India as it is found in the Tamil rendition of the Mahābhārata by Villiputtur Alvar (1400 CE), the Kannada version by Kumar Vyāsaḥ (15th century), and the Malayalam version by Ezhuthachan (16th century).

Alf Hiltelbeitel, *When The Goddess Was a Woman: Mahabharata Ethnographies (Vol 2)*, ed. by Vishwa Alduri and Joydeep Bagchi (Leiden: Brill, 2011) p. 3.

to ignore this terrible transgression of dharma' (2.285; p.390). Bhisma responds that he is unclear if Draupadī has been won because 'one without property cannot stake the property of others. But women are always the property of their husbands' (2.285; p. 390).

Jamison suggests that the reason Draupadī asks who was staked first is because she already knows that Yudhiṣṭhira has lost any claim on her since he staked himself first.²⁴⁷ Further, Mary Brockington notes Draupadī's menstrual condition and suggests that it had nothing to do with increasing the audience's sympathies towards her and adds that menstruating women were considered polluted by men and therefore, Draupadī's refusal to go into the assembly is 'the act, not of a defiant harridan, but of a pious woman anxious to protect her male relatives'.²⁴⁸

The narrative of Draupadī's public humiliation highlights the different emotions she feels as she enters the assembly hall afraid, and goes on to attempt to reason with the man abusing her. Later, the silence of her protectors drives Draupadī towards rage as she angrily chides the men in the assembly for their inaction and challenges their intellect with her poignant question. Additionally, Draupadī's menstrual condition appears odd at first but when taken into consideration against the backdrop of the entire *Mahābhārata*, it is yet another example of how women should behave respectfully towards men regardless of their personal pain and circumstances.

4.2.2.3 The Miracle Worker

This subsection will examine how Draupadī reminds the assembly of her divine roots. Duryodhana's trusted advisor and friend, Karna blatantly insults Draupadī by commenting on her polyandrous marriage 'she submits to many and it is therefore certain that she is a courtesan' (2.286; p. 391). After Karna brands Draupadī a courtesan, he orders that the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī strip off their upper garments and Duhshasana tries to forcibly remove Draupadī's upper garment. However, to everyone's astonishment 'as Droupadi's garment was being tugged away, another similar garment appeared every time. At this, a terrible uproar arose. All the assembled kings witnessed the most extraordinary sight in the worlds and

²⁴⁷ Jamison, p. 236.

²⁴⁸ Mary Brockington, 'Husband or King? Yudhiṣṭhira's Dilemma in the Mahābhārata' *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 44, (2001), 253–63 (p. 259).

approved (2.286; p. 392).²⁴⁹ After continuously attempting to disrobe Draupadī, an exhausted Duhshasana finally gives up and sits down next to the pile of garments on the assembly floor.

M.K. Dhavalikar notes that Draupadī's disrobing was an attempt to tell the assembly that she was now a slave because in ancient India, female slaves were not allowed to wear upper garments.²⁵⁰ McGrath suggests that Draupadī's public molestation is not just a scene of 'humiliation but of debasement; *dharma* has been completely abandoned in the interests of domination and rivalry'.²⁵¹ Alf Hiltelbeitel claims that Draupadī's miraculous clothing happens because *dharma* was on Draupadī's side adds that 'virtue clothes its own and is inexhaustible in doing so'.²⁵²

Even though Draupadī's humiliation is uncomfortable to read, it remains imperative as we witness her boldly addressing a predominantly male assembly and showing her divine roots and saving her honour. By saving herself, Draupadī becomes one of the few women in the Puranic narratives who have the ability to perform miracles. Additionally, since her polyandrous marriage brings doubt on her honour, the miraculous clothing of Draupadī can be interpreted as a way for the text to suggest that her marriage was *dharmic*.

4.2.2.4 Draupadī the Saviour

This subsection will examine how Draupadī saves her husbands from enslavement. Following the miraculous turn of events, a scared Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks Draupadī to choose 'whatever boon you desire' (2.288; p. 395). Draupadī uses this opportunity to regain Yudhiṣṭhira's freedom and clarifies that she does not want Prativindhya, her son with Yudhiṣṭhira, to be raised as the son of a slave. Dhṛtarāṣṭra agrees and offers her another wish through which Draupadī regains the freedom of her other four husbands. Dhṛtarāṣṭra accepts and generously offers her a third chance to ask for something but Draupadī refuses because 'the *vaishya* has one boon and a *kṣatriya* and his wife can have two' (2.288; p. 395).

²⁴⁹ In contemporary Hinduism, perhaps the greatest miracle attributed to Kṛṣṇa is his inexhaustible supply of garments to Draupadī. However, Hiltelbeitel claims that an examination of the Northern and Southern variants of the story prove that Draupadī's prayer to Kṛṣṇa is a later interpolation. Hiltelbeitel further suggests that Kṛṣṇa's intervention became standardized in the Northern recension first and was later added to the Southern versions in the form of a prayer song.

Alf Hiltelbeitel, 'Draupadī's Garments' in *When The Goddess Was a Woman: Mahabharata Ethnographies (Vol 2)*, ed. by Vishwa Alduri and Joydeep Bagchi (Leiden: Brill, 2011) pp. 33–52 (pp. 37–39).

²⁵⁰ M.K. Dhavalikar, 'Draupadī's Garment', *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, 72/73-1/4, (1991), 523–526 (p. 524).

²⁵¹ McGrath, p. 124.

²⁵² Hiltelbeitel, *Goddess Was a Woman*, p. 40

McGrath observes Draupadī's calm and respectful attitude while negotiating with Dhṛtarāṣṭra noting that given 'the state of her humiliation, it is remarkable that she can maintain her dignity and sense of decorum'.²⁵³ Additionally, Brian Black states that Draupadī's ability to switch tactics according to the situation challenges 'many of the dharmic prescriptions for women' as she firmly requests her husbands' freedom and politely declines any more wishes.²⁵⁴ Ford claims that Draupadī's angry words in the assembly hall are in accordance with *dharma* because Dhṛtarāṣṭra supports her at the end and adds that Draupadī's anger is 'legitimized in the epic, a striking and rare example because female anger is rarely legitimized in religious texts'.²⁵⁵ Additionally, while Das suggests that Draupadī refuses the third boon because 'she no longer desired any favours from anyone', Black notes that Draupadī does not use it to ask for her freedom because in 'her own mind at least, she was free'.²⁵⁶

Draupadī's five husbands are of no help to her or themselves and she becomes their saviour. From being dragged into the assembly to regaining her husbands' freedom, Draupadī emerges as a true warrior queen who knows how to address an assembly, and when to change her approach in order to get the desired result.

4.2.2.5 Draupadī Predicts

This subsection will examine Draupadī's prediction of a dark future for the Kauravas. After the events of the assembly hall, Dhṛtarāṣṭra gives the Pāṇḍavas permission to leave and returns all the riches and restores their kingdom that Shakuni won in the game of dice (2.290; p. 396). However, Duryodhana manages to convince Dhṛtarāṣṭra that the Pāṇḍavas would wage war for the Hāstinapura throne. As a final solution to the Pāṇḍava problem, Duryodhana suggests another gambling match wherein the losing party must live in the forest for twelve years and spend a thirteenth year in disguise and if recognized, one will have to spend another twelve years in the forest and once again spend the thirteenth year in disguise. Dhṛtarāṣṭra agrees to go along with Duryodhana's plans and the Pāṇḍavas are requested to return. Once again, Yudhiṣṭhira and Shakuni sit down to play and once again, Yudhiṣṭhira loses. As they are leaving for the forest, Vidura informs Dhṛtarāṣṭra of the grim future Draupadī has predicted:

²⁵³ McGrath, p. 125.

²⁵⁴ Brian Black, 'Draupadī in the Mahābhārata', *Religion Compass*, 7, (2013), 169–78 (p. 174).

²⁵⁵ Ford, p. 54.

²⁵⁶ Das, p. 229; Black, 'Draupadī in the Mahābhārata' p. 172.

the wives of those who have caused my present plight, will find their husbands dead, their sons dead, their relatives dead, and their beloved ones dead. Their bodies will be covered with the blood of their relatives. Their hair will not be braided and they will be in their menses (2.296; p. 402).

On hearing these words, Dhṛtarāṣṭra realises the impending doom that he and his sons face. Interestingly, after Draupadī is harassed in the assembly, Bhīma vows to kill Duryodhana and Arjuna vows to kill Karna. However, for Dhṛtarāṣṭra, it is Draupadī's angry prophecy that makes the war a real future possibility.

4.2.3 Book Three: Aranyaka Parva (The Book of the Forest)

This section examines Draupadī in Book Three of the *Mahābhārata*: Aranyaka Parva (The Book of Forest. The book focusses on the twelve years the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī spend in the forest. Three themes will be explored in the subsections that follow: Draupadī's attempt to cope with abuse; her relationship with her husbands; her views on anger; and her advice on how to be a good wife.

4.2.3.1 The Lone Sufferer

This subsection will explore Draupadī's passionate address to another male-dominated assembly as she publicly talks about her abuse. Kings and military chiefs of various kingdoms hear the news of the Pāṇḍava's having lost their kingdom and decide to visit them in the forest. Kṛṣṇa and Draupadī's brother Dhrishtadyumna, lead a group of kings and military chiefs as they all pledge allegiance to Yudhiṣṭhira. Draupadī addresses Kṛṣṇa by first acknowledging his divinity about which she has heard from Nārada and Asita-Devala, 'you are Vishnu. You are the sacrifice. You are the sacrificer. You are the one for whom the sacrifices are performed'(3.310; p. 422). After her reverent acknowledgement of Kṛṣṇa's divinity, Draupadī asks him 'how could someone like me be dragged to the sabha? I was then in the dharma of women. I was trembling. I was stained in blood. I was clad in a single garment. I was miserable'(3.310; p. 422). After describing the scene of her humiliation, Draupadī chides her husbands publicly and says 'the Pandavas may be extremely strong and supreme in war. But I censure them. They looked on when their famous wife, according to dharma, was molested' (3.310; p. 422). Towards the end of her address, a tearful Draupadī says 'I have no husbands. I have no sons. I do not have a brother or a father. Nor do I have any relatives' (3.310; p. 423).

Draupadī's words receive an immediate response from Kṛṣṇa who says 'the wives of those who have angered you will weep like this' (3.310; p. 423) and to Kṛṣṇa's promise, Dhristadyumna adds angrily a vow to kill Drona. Abhijit Basu notes the response Draupadī receives at the end of her speech and states that Draupadī is 'quite capable of stirring passive men to action'.²⁵⁷ Similarly, McGrath claims that after Draupadī's address to Kṛṣṇa in the assembly she becomes a 'woman of complex and profound vehemence, one thoroughly capable in the drama of public performance'.²⁵⁸

This speech is the first time Draupadī's rage is fully expressed as she not only accuses her husbands of inaction but rebukes her divine friend Kṛṣṇa for being absent. It is important to note that Draupadī's words are not overly dramatic or performative but are regular emotions that she must be allowed to feel after facing public abuse. Additionally, Draupadī's words capture her sorrow as she openly declares that she is alone. This indicates that the events of the assembly hall have possibly turned Draupadī into a traumatised and lonely survivor of abuse.

4.2.3.2 To Rage or Not to Rage?

This subsection will explore Draupadī's conversation with Yudhiṣṭhira about the need for anger as they are discussing the misfortune that has befallen them all. Draupadī tactfully begins her address by telling Yudhiṣṭhira that he was wronged and says that on seeing him leave for the forest, four people were happy 'Duryodhana, Karna, the evil-souled Shakuni, and the cruel and evil brother Duhshasana' (3.325; p. 435). Draupadī tells Yudhiṣṭhira 'you are used to comforts and do not deserve this misery' (3.325; p. 435). Draupadī continues speaking as if she is enraged on Yudhiṣṭhira's behalf and asks Yudhiṣṭhira 'as time passes, are you not suffused with anger?' (3.325; p. 436). Draupadī then attempts to make Yudhiṣṭhira feel guilty and asks how he can bear to see Bhīma and Arjuna live a life of discomfort in the forest. Finally, Draupadī asks 'on seeing me in the forest, how can your anger not increase?' (3.325; p. 436). Draupadī then adopts an accusatory tone and tells Yudhiṣṭhira that 'the sacred texts say that there is no kṣatriya without anger. But in you, today, I see that which is contrary to kṣatriyas' (3.325; p. 436). Draupadī then recounts an ancient tale which is a conversation between Prahlada and his son Bali. Bali asks his father whether seeking revenge is a better option than forgiveness to which Prahlada replies that there needs to be a good balance between the two

²⁵⁷ Abhijit Basu, *Marvels and Mysteries of the Mahābhārata: Probing the Folds of India's Epochal Tragedy*, (Mumbai: Platinum, 2013), p. 48.

²⁵⁸ McGrath, p. 129.

(3.326; p. 437). Draupadī then demands that Yudhiṣṭhira take action because ‘the time has come to show energy, and punishment must be displayed’ (3.326; p. 437).

Yudhiṣṭhira defends himself by claiming that anger is the root of all destruction but Draupadī responds with a scathing answer and says ‘a man never obtains prosperity in this world through dharma, gentleness, forgiveness, uprightness and tenderness’ (3.328; p. 439). Yudhiṣṭhira accuses Draupadī of being an atheist and warns her to ‘not doubt dharma, driven by pride, or in an attempt to debate’ (3.328; p. 439). Yudhiṣṭhira’s allegations receive a prompt response from Draupadī who clarifies that she is not doubting *dharma* and says ‘those who are lazy, rarely attain success’ (3.330; p. 442). Draupadī ends her speech by disclosing the source of her knowledge of *kṣatriya dharma* to be a learned sage whom she overheard as he was teaching her father and her brother. After listening to their debate Bhīma also urges Yudhiṣṭhira to prepare for battle and finally, Yudhiṣṭhira admits that the reason behind his inaction is his fear. As Yudhiṣṭhira admits this, Bhīma falls silent and the debate comes to an awkward halt until Vyāsaḥ appears and urges Yudhiṣṭhira to be calm now but prepare for war in the future.

Angelika Malinar claims that Draupadī views anger differently from her husband and that for her anger is ‘positive because it is a necessary quality of a warrior’.²⁵⁹ Malinar further suggests that Draupadī decides to speak up because she has lost her sense of self and is now struggling to live in the forest after giving up her title of chief queen.²⁶⁰ Additionally, Ford notes that Draupadī’s address to Yudhiṣṭhira is an attempt to ignite rage in him because ‘Draupadī wants Yudhiṣṭhira to desire revenge as much as she does’.²⁶¹ McGrath observes Draupadī’s entire address to Yudhiṣṭhira and claims that she speaks ‘as one well-schooled, learned, and tempered in her sentences’ as if she were speaking in front of a council.²⁶² Similarly, Black suggests that Draupadī’s debating skills make it clear that she ‘knows the dharma, which she has studiously learned from wise teachers and gurus’.²⁶³

Evidently, Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira have different ideas of *kṣatriya dharma* but it is noteworthy that Draupadī begins her address calmly by sympathising with Yudhiṣṭhira. It is when her stubborn husband presents himself as wiser than her and accuses Draupadī of being against *dharma*, that she finally loses her temper.

²⁵⁹ Angelika Malinar, ‘Arguments of a Queen: Draupadī’s Views on Kingship’ in *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata*, ed. by Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), pp. 79–96 (p. 83).

²⁶⁰ Malinar, pp. 84–91.

²⁶¹ Ford, p. 57.

²⁶² McGrath, p. 173.

²⁶³ Black, ‘Draupadī in the Mahābhārata’, p. 175.

4.2.3.3 The Good Wife

This subsection will explore Draupadī's conversation with her friend Satyabhama on how to be a good wife. Kṛṣṇa visits the Pāṇḍavas again but this time he is accompanied by his wife, Satyabhama. A curious Satyabhama wishes to know how Draupadī keeps her husbands in her control and asks her in private 'how do you conduct yourself when you attend to the Pāṇḍavas?' (3.519; p. 737). Satyabhama then admits to being surprised by how eagerly the Pāṇḍavas do Draupadī's bidding and asks 'do you follow vows or is it austerities? Is it ablutions, bathing, mantras, or herbs?' (3.519; p. 737). Draupadī responds by clarifying that she does not use any forbidden methods in her marriage, and admonishes women who use potions to control their husbands (3.519; p. 737). Draupadī proceeds to tell Satyabhama that she keeps her husbands happy by abandoning all desire and anger and by serving her co-wives and adds that her 'mind never turns to other men' (3.519; p. 737). Draupadī elaborates on her duties and tells Satyabhama how she serves her husbands food at the right time, never disrespects her mother-in-law, and that she serves them 'untiringly, day and night, with all my soul always fixed on humility and injunctions' (3.519; p. 738). Draupadī concludes her speech by enlisting her duties as Yudhiṣṭhira's queen and tells Satyabhama that she was responsible for feeding eight thousand *brahmins* every day, making task lists for all the servants in the palace and adds: 'I knew everything about the king's revenue and expenditure. O fortunate one! I alone knew everything about the Pandavas' (3.519; p. 738). Finally, Draupadī advises Satyabhama to always worship Kṛṣṇa, respect her co-wives, only befriend women of noble birth, get rid of servant girls and serve Kṛṣṇa herself, not be too friendly with any man (even her own sons) and concludes by saying 'this is the glorious secret of love, which leads to heaven' (3.520; p. 739). A grateful Satyabhama thanks Draupadī for her advice and soon departs for her kingdom with Kṛṣṇa.

Laurie L. Patton suggests that Draupadī displays a knowledge of equal power between a husband and wife, and adds that Draupadī refuses to use potions and magic because 'that deceit will give power to the woman and incite fear in the man'.²⁶⁴ Patton and McGrath agree that the other example of Draupadī maintaining the power balance in her household is Draupadī's

²⁶⁴ Laurie L. Patton, 'How Do You Conduct Yourself? Gender and the Construction of a Dialogical Self in the Mahabharata' in *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata*, ed. by Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), pp. 118–30 (p. 101).

decision to never over step her boundaries with Kuntī, and her decision to serve her co-wives without jealousy.²⁶⁵ Additionally, Patton suggests that Draupadī's true power is in her 'supervision of household affairs and her singlehanded financial mastery over the treasuries of the palace' and concludes that her speech depicts the 'various voices of Draupadī which alternate between fierceness and meekness, savvy and servitude, authority and submission'²⁶⁶ On the contrary, Sutherland claims that Draupadī's speech is a contradiction to her outspoken behaviour and suggests that the passage is ironic and that Draupadī is meant to be in direct contrast to the idealized wife. Sutherland further suggests that Draupadī intentionally mentions her role as a treasurer and household manager to admonish her husbands 'for their lack of understanding of household matters and their inability to control their treasury'.²⁶⁷

While it is surprising to read Draupadī praise herself as the ideal wife immediately after she berates Yudhiṣṭhira for his inaction, the text has clarified earlier on two separate occasions that Draupadī is a *pativrata* (devoted wife). The first is when Yudhiṣṭhira enlists Draupadī's good wifely conduct when he stakes her and the next is when Kuntī says to Draupadī 'you know very well the dharma for women and you also possess good character' (2.295; p. 401). Perhaps Draupadī never felt it was necessary to choose between being a good wife and being opinionated.

4.2.4 Book Four: Virata Parva (The Book of Virata)

This section will examine Draupadī in Book Four of the *Mahābhārata*: Virata Parva (The Book of Virata). The book follows the thirteenth and final year of the Pāṇḍavas in the forest as they must now hide their identity in order to complete their forest exile. The Pāṇḍavas decide to hide in the Matsya kingdom of king Virata and they choose different names and occupations. Yudhiṣṭhira disguises himself as a dice player named Kanka; Bhīma becomes Ballava and supervises the kitchen; Arjun becomes a eunuch named Brihannada and teaches dance to Virata's daughter; Nakula becomes a horse keeper named Granthika; Sahadeva tends the cows as Tantipala; and Draupadī decides to become a maidservant for queen Sudeshna and changes her name to Sairandhri. Two themes will be explored in the subsections that follow: another instance of physical abuse that Draupadī faces, and her subsequent rage.

²⁶⁵ Patton, p. 104; McGrath, p. 138–39.

²⁶⁶ Patton, p. 104.

²⁶⁷ Sutherland, p. 68.

4.2.4.1 A Fiery Defence

This subsection will explore the second instance of sexual abuse that Draupadī faces. Virata's general Kichaka, is instantly smitten by Draupadī's beauty. Kichaka proposes marriage to Draupadī who resolutely refuses and advises him to not covet another man's wife.²⁶⁸ The rejected Kichaka pleads with queen Sudeshna for help. The queen takes pity on him and says she will order Draupadī to fetch liquor for her from Kichaka's chambers and once alone he can attempt to seduce her. When Draupadī reaches Kichaka's room, he seizes her by the hand but Draupadī pushes him to the floor and runs towards king Virata's assembly hall where an enraged Kichaka 'grasped her by the hair. While the king looked on, he flung her down and kicked her with his foot' (4.611; p. 918). At this instant, the Sun god, Surya, from whom Draupadī had sought protection before entering Kichaka's room, intervenes and Kichaka is pushed away by a powerful gust of wind. A furious Draupadī addresses Virata: 'I am the revered wife of those whose enemies do not dare sleep when they traverse the earth' (4.611; p. 919). In an almost sarcastic tone, Draupadī praises the strength of her husbands and wonders aloud why they are not helping her now and haughtily adds 'those powerful and infinitely energetic ones are suffering like eunuchs, while their beloved and chaste wife is tortured' (4.611; p. 919). Draupadī proceeds to direct her rage towards Virata and accuses him of not being a good king as he 'witnesses an innocent one being tortured, but tolerates it' (4.611; p. 919). Virata's response is disappointing as he simply refuses to have any knowledge of their quarrel and adds that whatever happened, did not happen in front of his eyes and hence, he cannot be a good judge. While everyone in the assembly applauds Draupadī for speaking out against the king, Yudhiṣṭhira, who is disguised as a dice player in Virata's assembly, advises her to return to Sudeshna's chambers.

Draupadī's address to Virata highlights her bravery because she publicly asserts that he is not a good king in his own assembly. Interestingly, even though Draupadī finds no support from either Virata or Yudhiṣṭhira, the other members of the assembly applaud her bravery and support her. Their support could either indicate that Virata's ministers agreed with her allegations of Virata not being a good king, or that Draupadī's anger has been legitimized in the epic once again.

²⁶⁸ Draupadī tells Sudeshna that she is married to five powerful *gandharvas* (demigods).

4.2.4.2 A Plan to Kill

This subsection will explore how Draupadī manipulates Bhīma into committing murder for her sake. An upset Draupadī leaves the assembly hall and rushes to Bhīma’s room and launches into a tirade against Yudhiṣṭhira and blames him for her present misery and says ‘he is now silent like a stupid person, reflecting about his own deeds’ (4.613; p. 920). Draupadī quickly changes her approach and says that her sorrow increases when she sees Arjuna dressed as a woman and adds that she continuously worries over Nakula and Sahadeva. Draupadī also abruptly mentions how all the women in the queen’s chambers gossip about her and Bhīma being lovers. In her final act of frustration, Draupadī once again holds Yudhiṣṭhira responsible for her problems and says that she had to become a maid ‘because of the crafty one addicted to dice’ (4.615; p. 922). Bhīma tries to calm Draupadī by reminding her that their thirteen years in the forest are almost over but an enraged Draupadī says that if Kichaka is still alive tomorrow she will drink poison and end her life (4.616; p. 923). Draupadī’s threat to commit suicide springs Bhīma into action and he decides to dress like Draupadī and lure Kichaka into a dark room. Later, when Kichaka attempts to touch Bhīma he grabs him by the hair and the two men engage in a short wrestling match that ends with Kichaka’s body being reduced to a mound of flesh (4.617; p. 925).

Ford suggests that in this narrative Draupadī uses emotional manipulation to inspire ‘such a fierce anger within her husband that he completely destroys her enemy’.²⁶⁹ McGrath observes that this speech is ‘probably the most private and revealing of all of Draupadī’s speeches, being more informed by despondency than outrage’.²⁷⁰ Additionally, Sutherland claims that it is significant that Draupadī’s rage is directed at Yudhiṣṭhira because he is ‘the figure of authority’ amongst the Pāṇḍavas.²⁷¹ It is fascinating to read how Draupadī’s mind works within the passage as she employs different tactics in her attempt to manipulate Bhīma to do her bidding. She begins by complaining about Yudhiṣṭhira, moves on to explain how hurt she feels when she sees her other husbands being servants. Draupadī then calculatingly adds that everyone gossips about her feelings for Bhīma, hinting that her love for him is so strong that she is unable

²⁶⁹ Ford, p. 58.

²⁷⁰ McGrath, p. 146.

²⁷¹ Sutherland, p. 72.

to disguise it. Possibly, Draupadī does not only complain about Yudhiṣṭhira to Bhīma as a way to release frustration, but to tell Bhīma that she can only rely on him to save her.

4.2.5 Book Five: Udyoga Parva (The Book of Efforts)

This section examines Draupadī in Book Five of the *Mahābhārata*: Udyoga Parva (The Book of Efforts). The book focusses on the diplomatic efforts made to give the Pāṇḍavas a fair share of the kingdom of Hāstinapura without war. The following subsection will explore Draupadī's attempt to stop negotiations with the Kauravas.

4.2.5.1 Advocate of War

This subsection will examine Draupadī's conversation with Kṛṣṇa as she shares her thoughts on war, *dharma*, and revenge. Yudhiṣṭhira wants to make one final attempt to broker peace before war and engages the help of his divine ally, Kṛṣṇa. Before he leaves, Draupadī urges Kṛṣṇa to not be compassionate towards the Kauravas because 'our objectives are incapable of being obtained through conciliation and generosity' (5.743; p. 1051). Draupadī asserts that 'those who know dharma know that while it is a sin to kill someone who should not be killed, it is also a sin not to kill someone who should be killed' (5.743; p. 1051). Draupadī adds that it is a disgrace that a woman like her was humiliated 'while the sons of Pāṇḍu looked on and you were still alive' (5.743; p. 1051). Draupadī finally tells Kṛṣṇa that 'if you are compassionate towards me, you should direct your entire wrath at Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons' (5.743; p. 1051). An emotional Draupadī shows her hair to Kṛṣṇa and says 'this was grasped by Duhshasana. You should remember this at all times' (5.743; p. 1052). The passage ends with Draupadī breaking down and Kṛṣṇa promising her that if Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons do not comply, they will certainly be killed.

Ford states that Draupadī takes a clear stance as she 'speaks up for war' because she does not want her husbands to compromise.²⁷² Further, McGrath notes the consistency in Draupadī's character as she unhesitatingly makes it clear that 'she favours a tough and aggressive policy of war and has no interest in appeasement'.²⁷³ Evidently, Draupadī appears emotionally disturbed in this passage because she has spent thirteen years waiting for a war that Yudhiṣṭhira

²⁷² Ford, p. 59.

²⁷³ McGrath, p. 149.

has decided is not necessary if peace can prevail. However, Draupadī uses her emotions to her advantage as she delivers another passionate speech by combining her debating skills and her knowledge of *dharma* to take a clear stance.

4.2.5.2 The Kurukshetra War

The Pāṇḍavas gather their allies in Upaplavya (a city in the kingdom of Matsya) after Kṛṣṇa fails in his attempt to broker peace between the two parties. The war finally happens in Kurukshetra (modern day Haryana, North India) and the story pushes Draupadī out of focus with a single line ‘Droupadi remained in Upaplavya with the women, surrounded by servant maids and servants’ (5.812; p.1114). The battle goes on for eighteen days and Draupadī is not mentioned again till book ten. However, for a better understanding of the text and to maintain continuity a brief summary of the books is given below.

4.2.6 Bhishma Parva (The Book of Bhishma): This book is named after Bhishma, the commander of the Kaurava army, who is seriously injured on the tenth day of battle.

4.2.7 Drona Parva (The Book of Drona): This book focusses on days eleven to fifteen of the war, when Drona is named the commander of the Kaurava army in Bhishma’s stead.

4.2.8 Karna Parva (The Book of Karna): This book focusses on days sixteen and seventeen of the war, when Karna is made the commander after Drona’s death.

4.2.9 Shalya Parva (The Book of Shalya): This book focusses on Shalya being appointed commander after Karna’s death.

4.2.10 Book Ten: Souptika Parva (The Book of the Sleepers)

This section examines Draupadī in Book Ten of the *Mahābhārata*: Souptika Parva (The Book of the Sleepers). The book focuses on the murder of Draupadī’s sons and brother. The following subsection will examine the rage Draupadī experiences after losing her relatives.

4.2.10.1 Demand for a Jewel

This subsection will explore Draupadī's demand for revenge after her sons are murdered at night during the war. Yudhiṣṭhira decides to trick Drona, the general of the Kaurava army, into thinking his son, Ashwatthama, is dead. When a devastated Drona puts his weapons down, the Pāṇḍavas seize this opportunity and kill him. However, this act of deceiving Drona comes at a heavy price as later in the text, an enraged Ashwatthama sneaks into the Pāṇḍava camp at night after the war has stopped for the day, and kills Draupadī's five sons and her brother, Dhristadyumna while they are asleep. Nakula brings Draupadī to the battlefield and in between her sobs and violent shaking, Draupadī turns to Bhīma and demands revenge 'I have heard that Drona's son possesses a natural jewel on his head. I wish to see that jewel brought to me, after the wicked one has been slain in an encounter'; she adds that if Ashwatthama is alive tomorrow she 'will resort to *praya*' (10.1294; p. 2312). *Praya* means 'death by starvation', and Draupadī's threat pushes Bhīma into action and on the very next day, he kills Ashwatthama. A solemn and grief struck Draupadī, takes the jewel and offers it to her husband and new king, Yudhiṣṭhira who fastens it onto his forehead.

McGrath suggests that Draupadī's threat to commit *praya* is quite untypical of females in the epic who in duress threaten to 'enter the fire' or use 'the rope' to end their lives. McGrath adds that since Draupadī has been 'uniquely abused', her rage breaks gender rules.²⁷⁴ It is important to note that Draupadī's relatives were not slain in battle, but murdered in the depth of night. This not only distinguishes her suffering from the other characters, but could be the possible reason behind her rage and her immediate demand for Ashwatthama's death.

4.2.11 Book Eleven: Stri Parva (Book of Women)

This section examines Draupadī in Book Eleven of the *Mahābhārata*: Stri Parva (Book of Women). The book focusses on the grief of the women who have lost someone in the war and the funeral rites of those who have died after the war is over. The following subsection will examine Draupadī's grief.

4.2.11.1 Laments of War

This subsection will briefly explore Draupadī's grief after losing her sons. While Kuntī and the Pāṇḍavas are busy in their teary-eyed reunion, Draupadī falls to the floor and asks 'without

²⁷⁴ McGrath, pp. 151–52.

my sons, what use will the kingdom be to me now?’ (11.1316; p. 2348). Kuntī consoles her daughter-in-law and the two women go to Gāndhāri, the mother of the Kuaravas, who comforts Draupadī by reminding her that this misfortune was destined to occur and asks Draupadī to hold her composure for the sake of the future of the Kuru lineage. While the text highlights most of Draupadī’s characteristics we never see her take up the role of a mother. In fact, judging by the time line it is clear that Draupadī does not get to spend enough time with her children. After losing their kingdom, Draupadī leaves for the forest without her sons and upon their return, the war takes place. Draupadī never gets to see her sons grow up and her grief could also be perceived as regret at the lack of time she spent with her sons.

4.2.12 Shanti Parva (The Book of Peace)

This section examines Draupadī in Book Twelve of the *Mahābhārata*: Shanti Parva (The Book of Peace). The book focusses on the Pāṇḍavas, who have won the war, as they usher in an era of peace. The following subsection will examine a heated argument between Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira.

4.2.12.1 Draupadī VS Yudhiṣṭhira

This subsection will focus on an argument between Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira as she once again reminds her husband of his duties as a king. After the war, Yudhiṣṭhira is overwhelmed by the loss of lives and declares that he wishes to give up the kingdom of Hāstinapura and return to the forest. Draupadī enters Yudhiṣṭhira’s assembly hall and begins her address by reprimanding Yudhiṣṭhira for not paying attention to his brothers who are exhausted from war. Draupadī then attacks Yudhiṣṭhira’s knowledge of *dharma* and says the true knower of *dharma* is a person who ‘possesses both forgiveness and anger, who gives and also takes’ (12.1342; p. 2399). Draupadī also reminds Yudhiṣṭhira that he did not win this kingdom through fraudulent means and furiously adds ‘because you are mad, all the Pāṇḍavas will become mad. O lord of men! If these brothers of yours were not mad, they should have bound you up with the non-believers and ruled the earth’ (12.1342; p. 2400).

The war has cost Draupadī her brother and her five sons and she possibly takes Yudhiṣṭhira’s decision to give up the throne as a personal insult. Additionally, a remarkable difference between this speech and the previous ones is that this time Draupadī is invited to give her

opinion because she ‘knew about dharma and could discern the nature of dharma’ (12.1342; p. 2399).

4.2.13 Anushasana Parva (The Book of Instructions): This book focusses on an injured Bhishma’s instructions to Yudhiṣṭhira on how to be a good king.

4.2.14 Ashwamedhika Parva (The Book of the Horse Sacrifice): This book focusses on a horse sacrifice performed by Yudhiṣṭhira.

4.2.15 Ashramavasika Parva (The Book of the Forest Residents): This book focusses on Gāndhāri, Kuntī, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra leaving for the forest to live out the final stages of their lives.

4.2.16 Mousala Parva (The Book of Mace): This book focusses Kṛṣṇa’s clan, the Yadavas, being cursed that they will be destroyed by clubs.

4.2.17 Mahaprasthanika Parva (The Book of the Great Departure)

This section examines Draupadī in Book Seventeen of the *Mahābhārata*: Mahaprasthanika Parva (The Book of the Great Departure). The book focusses on the journey the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī take to the Himalayas. The following subsection will examine Draupadī’s death.

4.2.17.1 In Search of Heaven

This subsection will examine Draupadī’s death as she is the first one to fall from mount Meru. The Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī decide to begin their search for *moksha* and as the brothers are climbing mount Meru, Draupadī ‘deviated from her yoga and fell down on the ground’ to her death (18.1989; p. 3660). None of the brothers turn around to look at the fallen Draupadī except Bhīma who asks Yudhiṣṭhira why she was the first one to fall. An emotionless Yudhiṣṭhira says because Draupadī was partial to Arjuna ‘she has reaped the fruits of that’ (18.1989; p. 3660).²⁷⁵

²⁷⁵ The text has no moments of intimacy between Arjuna and Draupadī and their relationship appears one-sided with Draupadī longing for Arjuna. A clear example of this is in Aranyaka Parva when Arjuna is away in search of divine weapons, and a dejected Draupadī remarks that ‘this forest seems cheerless to me’ without Arjuna (3.376; p. 488).

With this anti-climactic fall, Draupadī is the first one to die. It is surprising that Draupadī is the first one to fall because she favoured Arjuna, but Arjuna is never held accountable for his emotional and physical absence as a partner.

2.18 Svargarohana Parva (The Book of Heavenly Ascent): As Yudhiṣṭhira reaches heaven, he is informed that Draupadī is there too.

3. Conclusion

Draupadī's first appearance(s) in the *Mahābhārata* are of any stock female character who stays silent and serves others happily. However, as the narrative progresses, we see other aspects of Draupadī's personality come to light and this section will elaborate on a few points mentioned earlier.

To begin with, while it is true that Draupadī never speaks during or after her wedding ceremonies, it is possible that the text implies that Draupadī had no objections through two separate stories. First is in *Adi Parva* when, after her marriage, Duryodhana suggests to his close ally, Karna, that they can use Draupadī to cause a rift among the Pāṇḍavas to which Karna replies 'women have a quality that they desire many husbands' (1.194; p. 221). Next, in *Anushasana Parva* Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhisma who feels greater pleasure during sex. In response, Bhisma narrates the story of king Bhangasvana who is cursed by Indra to turn into a woman. Years later, Indra offers to turn the king into a man once again, but Bhangasvana refuses because women enjoy sex more (13.1693; pp. 3224–25). Perhaps the reason why Draupadī does not object to her polyandrous marriage is because she wishes to enjoy sex with multiple partners, and she desired more than one husband. Placing this idea next to Draupadī's ability to debate and protect herself, it can be understood that if she was against the polyandrous arrangement, she will have spoken up.

While it is possible that Draupadī enjoyed her marriage and sex life for some time, it is certain that this changed after the gambling incident. Even though Draupadī loses faith in all five of her husbands, it is Yudhiṣṭhira for whom she develops an instant dislike. In fact, when Draupadī uses her first boon to regain Yudhiṣṭhira's freedom she does so for the sake of their son, Prativindhya, whom she does not wish to be raised as the son of a slave. Later, Draupadī unhesitatingly blames Yudhiṣṭhira for her troubles and insults him in the forest assembly, then

privately in the forest hut, taunts him in Virata's court, and finally chides him for his lack of *kṣatriya* qualities in Yudhiṣṭhira's own assembly hall before he is crowned king. However, regardless of her opinion of Yudhiṣṭhira, Draupadī never abandons the duties of a good wife as she tells Satyabhama herself. While it is difficult to imagine Draupadī as a *pativrata*, her good wifely conduct is praised by Kuntī, Yudhiṣṭhira, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and the sages Dhoumya and Markandeya. It is possible that after the gambling incident, Draupadī's relationship with Yudhiṣṭhira possibly became strictly duty bound wherein she was his chief queen but not an emotional partner. Next, it is possible that Arjuna disappointed Draupadī as much as Yudhiṣṭhira by being absent for most of their married life (first for twelve years to lead a life of celibacy, and later when he goes in search for divine weapons in Aranyaka Parva) and by remarrying. On the contrary, Draupadī certainly held a manipulative sway over Bhīma, whose ability to listen and physical strength she relied upon. Apart from a few glimpses of intimacy she shares with Bhīma (like in 3.454; p. 661 when Draupadī tells him she wishes to see divine flowers bloom on top of a mountain and Bhīma kills the demons on the mountain so Draupadī can enjoy the flowers alone), her rage at Yudhiṣṭhira, and her longing for Arjuna, we do not know much about Draupadī's polyandrous arrangement as Nakula and Sahadeva hardly appear in the text.

Draupadī's ability to speak articulately and without fear is perhaps her strongest personality trait. However, modern reception and some scholars regard Draupadī's emotional speeches either as melodrama or as manipulation. This misconception has reduced Draupadī to a nagging wife who used her fake tears to cause war. At this stage it is important to remember that it is not Draupadī who declares war or takes any kind of pledge but her husbands, Bhīma and Arjuna who declare war as means to justice. After her husbands take this pledge, it becomes Draupadī's duty as a *kṣatriya* wife to not let them deter from their goal. Additionally, every time Draupadī reminds her husbands to fight or urges them to prepare for war it is not just to avenge her insult, but it is also perhaps to encourage them to take back their rightful kingdom. Moreover, it is important to remember that for centuries female emotions have been considered an overly dramatic tool that women employ to get what they want and hence, female emotions are rarely legitimized in any narrative. Draupadī's speeches are coming from a place of pain and loneliness and to suggest that her emotions are not real is a grave injustice to her and to women who face abuse. Draupadī's speeches are a combination of her emotions and her knowledge of *dharma*, and that is precisely what makes Draupadī stand out in comparison to other female characters in the epic.

At the same time, to ignore Draupadī's rage will also be a disservice to understanding her complex nature. However, the familiar Draupadī of contemporary Hinduism only appears in two instances. First is when Draupadī convinces Bhīma to murder Kichaka and next is when Draupadī demands that Ashwatthama be killed. In both instances Draupadī demands that her enemies be killed immediately and threatens to kill herself if her demand is not fulfilled. The rage that Draupadī depicts in these two scenes cannot be found elsewhere in the text and two small passages from such a large narrative are certainly not enough to suggest that Draupadī was always quick to anger. Further, while Draupadī's rage has received unnecessary attention over the years, her grief is seldom dwelt upon. Draupadī becomes a victim of physical abuse twice and in both instances, she is forced to publicly defend herself and she never gets time to comprehend the abuse she faced. After the gambling incident, Yudhiṣṭhira loses the kingdom and Draupadī must leave for the forest immediately and later in Virata's court Yudhiṣṭhira asks her to remain silent for the sake of their cover. It is worth noting, that Draupadī only becomes emotional when she recounts the abuse she faced, and this indicates the psychological effect of a harrowing incident that she is struggling to cope with. Additionally, the loss of her sons pushes Draupadī into a violent grief wherein she demands instant revenge, but the revenge seems hollow as she solemnly takes Ashwatthama's jewel and offers it to Yudhiṣṭhira.

After the misunderstood reception of her emotions, possibly the biggest attempt at re-writing Draupadī has been the attribution of the miracle performed by her in the assembly hall to Kṛṣṇa. Perhaps the most popular image of Draupadī is of her kneeling down in the assembly hall with folded hands as she prays to Kṛṣṇa who makes a miraculous appearance to supply the inexhaustible garment. While Kṛṣṇa, an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, is undoubtedly the main divine presence in the epic, we cannot forget that Draupadī is herself the human *avatāra* of the goddess Lakṣmī. In Dhṛtarāṣṭra's assembly hall the most powerful being is Draupadī herself and she shows her power by performing a public miracle. The attribution to Kṛṣṇa takes Draupadī's divine status, her power, and her ability to perform miracles as it changes the dynamic of the narrative by making Kṛṣṇa her saviour.

For centuries, Draupadī has been viewed in contemporary Hinduism as a manipulative, constantly enraged, vengeful woman who caused a war. However, after exploring these key narratives involving Draupadī from the *Mahābhārata*, Draupadī emerges as a knower of *dharma*; a survivor of abuse; a miracle worker; an opinionated warrior queen; a grieving mother; an articulate debater; and an *avatāra* of the goddess Lakṣmī.

Table

4.4.1 Summary Table of Draupadī in the *Mahābhārata* (I)

Book One Adi Parva	Book Two Sabha Parva	Book Three Aranyaka Parva	Book Four Virata Parva	Book Five Udyoga Parva	Books Six–Nine
1.55: Draupadī's birth	2.283: Yudhiṣṭhira stakes Draupadī.	3.310: Draupadī speaks to Kṛṣṇa in the forest assembly	4.599: Draupadī becomes a <i>sairandhri</i>	5.743: Draupadī tries to stop Kṛṣṇa from brokering peace	The battle happens in Kurukshetra and Draupadī is left behind in Upaplavya. Books six to nine do not mention Draupadī.
1.76–90: Draupadī's <i>svayamvara</i> and polyandrous marriage.	2.285–89: Draupadī's public humiliation, followed by her debate, her miraculous clothing and Dhṛtarāṣṭra's boons.	3.325–37: Draupadī urges Yudhiṣṭhira to act.	4.609–11: Kichaka assaults Draupadī		
1.205: Draupadī happily serves her husbands	2.290–91: Pāṇdavas lose their kingdom and leave for the forest	3.519–20: Draupadī and Satyabhama's conversation on wifely duties.	4.613–17: Draupadī plans to kill Kichaka		
1.213: Arjuna remarries and Draupadī becomes jealous.	2.296: Draupadī predicts a grim future				

1.213: Draupadī gives birth to five sons					
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4.4.2. Summary Table of Draupadī in the *Mahābhārata* (II)

Book Ten Souptika Parva	Book Eleven Stri Parva	Book Twelve Shanti Parva	Books Thirteen to Sixteen	Book Seventeen Mahaprasthanik a Parva	Book Eighteen Swargarohana Parva
10.1294: Murder of Draupadī sons and her demand for revenge	11.1316: After the war, Draupadī grieves along with Kuntī and Gāndhāri	12.1342–44: Draupadī urges Yudhiṣṭhira to not abandon the throne	No mention of Draupadī	17.1989: Draupadī falls to her death.	Draupadī is in heaven.

Conclusion

My reason for choosing to work on these four women has been both personal and professional. Sītā and Draupadī were part of my Hindu upbringing, and Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene are two figures I grew curious about due to attending a Catholic school. Theology is not an academic discipline in almost all schools and colleges in India, and this made my quest to learn about these women quite difficult. The professional reason for choosing these women has been the importance of the New Testament, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the *Mahābhārata* in their respective traditions. The three texts are an important part of worship in the two traditions and, despite being written centuries ago, their importance has not diminished. The continuing importance of these texts, along with the scholarly attention the texts and the male characters in it have received, pushed me to focus on the female characters who have been neglected for centuries. In this conclusion to my research, I will highlight a few similarities in the reception of the four women and note how these texts have portrayed them in a similar manner. My upbringing in a Hindu family had a significant impact on me but my approach towards this research has not been particularly rooted in the Hindu tradition. Therefore, my approach in this thesis has been a mix of both confessional comparative theology, and meta confessional comparative theology. A confessional comparative theologian bases their view in their own tradition and chooses the comparative text either based on their exposure to the other religion, or personal curiosity which has its roots in the religion of the theologian. In meta confessional comparative theology, the answer to ‘religious truth’ is considered more open-ended as it is not limited to the teachings of one religion only.²⁷⁶ Additionally, I will suggest how comparative theology can become an important tool for international peacebuilding and global feminism.

To begin with, all four women were God’s allies in a plan that was disclosed to them which shows their foreknowledge, affirmative consent, and initiative. Mary of Nazareth receives her mission from an angel of God to whom she gives her consent. Mary Magdalene is greeted by Jesus who asks her to spread the good news of his resurrection among his disciples. Similarly, both Sītā and Draupadī are goddesses who partner with gods to save humanity. All four women, whether human or partially divine, aided god’s plan but their role has either been marginalized or interpreted through the lens of patriarchy.

²⁷⁶ Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Hoboken: John Wiley, 2020), pp. 18–27.

Along with some broad similarities, it appears that both Sītā and Mary of Nazareth suffer precisely due to their relationship with great divine men. For Rāma and Jesus to fulfil their divine missions, both Sītā and Mary must make immense sacrifices. While Sītā puts aside her own reservations regarding the violent warrior code and supports her husband, Mary makes the difficult decision of accepting to become pregnant before marriage. Moreover, both Sītā and Mary face public rejection by these divine men. In all four gospels, Jesus' idea of reformed kinship ties undermines his biological ties with Mary. Meanwhile, Rāma goes on to publicly reject Sītā twice. Both Sītā and Mary risk their safety for the greater good but are not acknowledged, much less awarded, for their initiative either by the men in their lives, or by the narrative they belong to. Perhaps another striking similarity between the two women, is their modern-day reception. Both Sītā and Mary are viewed as motherly figures, often understood to be submissive, and have over time morphed into unattainable benchmarks of purity. While Sītā is viewed as the unassailably chaste wife of Rāma, Mary is the god-bearer who abstained from sex for the rest of her life. In legends and in the text, Sītā's purity is so powerful that even fire cannot harm her, just as in apocryphal literature, for example, Mary has a painless birthing experience and does not go through the regular biological process. With both Sītā and Mary, there is an almost exclusive focus on their virginity and purity. Overall, Sītā's and Mary's lives are marred by difficulties and repeated tests of their faith. At the end, Mary witnesses her son being crucified, and an abandoned Sītā ultimately submerges herself into the earth. In a way, Simeon's prophetic sword pierces both Mary and Sītā.

Moving on to the other two figures, the attempt to re-write Draupadī and Mary Magdalene becomes a uniting factor, as the two women become victims of patriarchal interpretation of religious texts. Draupadī's miracle of clothing herself in the assembly hall is wrongly attributed to Kṛṣṇa, just as Mary's rightful title of the First Witness is given to Cephas by Paul. Interestingly, both women performed great feats that are recognized in the narrative but seem to have been lost to androcentric approaches over the years. The legitimization of female power and authority is rare in ancient texts, and it is surprising that despite the importance the women received in their narratives, they were side-lined for centuries. The reason behind this could be the other similarity between these women. In their later reception, Draupadī and Mary both came to be viewed as women engaged in prostitution: Draupadī due to her polyandrous marriage within the text, and Mary due to the patriarchal interpretation of the gospel narratives. Draupadī is never viewed as a good wife and Mary is never the good disciple even though their narratives suggest the exact opposite. For both women, their sexuality became a hindrance to

receiving their rightful titles and being recognized for their acts. Along with the vilification of their sexuality, another similarity between the two women, is their association with hysteria and uncontrollable emotions. Draupadī's and Mary's emotions have been reduced to stereotypical caricatures of women and are often viewed as unnecessary or even extreme. In contemporary Hinduism, Draupadī's rage is largely perceived as a sign of a disrespecting woman who tormented her perfect husbands over nothing. Additionally, Draupadī's grasp over the concept of *dharma* and her ability to question, is often misunderstood as disregard for her elders. Similarly, Mary is the first one to see a resurrected Jesus and her experience was reduced to the visions of an overwhelmed grieving woman by the male disciples. Next, Mary's repeated questions to Jesus in the *Pistis Sophia* have been perceived as her lack of understanding, even though her questions indicate the exact opposite. It is important to note at this stage, that Mary and Draupadī were also misinterpreted by early interpreters and later scholars (until recently) who continued to propagate these androcentric views about the two women, who otherwise symbolise female power in their narratives.

After examining the three texts it becomes evident that all four women are still fighting for their rightful titles. While the risk Mary's unexpected pregnancy brought with it cannot be ignored, to reduce Mary to simply being Jesus' mother snatches away her rightful place as an ally of God and the First Disciple. Similarly, Mary Magdalene's consistent presence in the Easter narratives indicates her loyalty towards Jesus, and her bravery as she publicly mourns him, and visits his tomb alone. Mary is chosen to receive the resurrected Jesus and she deserves her rightful title of Apostle to the Apostles. Moving on to the Hindu texts, both Sītā and Draupadī must be recognized as saviours of humanity and an *avatāra* of the goddess Lakṣmī. Sītā and Draupadī lose out on their divine status to their male counterparts despite the two women performing miracles that nobody else in the text can. In contemporary Hinduism, Viṣṇu is regarded as the saviour who descends on earth for the sake of humanity. However, Viṣṇu's two most popular *avatāras*, that is Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, would not have achieved their goals without the presence of Sītā and Draupadī. Therefore, contemporary Hinduism must open itself to the possibility that it is not just Viṣṇu who is the saviour, but it is also Lakṣmī.

I will now move on to broader ideas behind this research and begin by providing a brief history of Hindu-Christian relations throughout Indian history. My reason for choosing Hindu and Christian texts for this research, has been the somewhat troubled history of Hindu-Christian relations in India due to colonialism. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Protestant missionaries began their mission in India, and it is with this group, that the Hindu community

had most of their dialogue with. The Christian tradition had its first big impact in the state of Bengal (East India), where William Carey (1761-1834) worked with Hindu scholars and translated the Bible into Bengali and some other Indian languages. Later, Alexander Duff (1806-1878) began using education as means of introducing wealthy Indian students to Christianity and Western ideas, which Duff hoped would result in conversion. Anantananda Rambachan briefly records the interaction between a few key Hindu nationalists and missionaries. Rambachan notes that the earliest Hindu-Christian dialogue was spearheaded by Rammohun Roy (1772-1833). In his 1820 work, *The Precepts of Jesus*, Roy collected what he called Jesus' ethical teachings, which he claimed were essential in reforming Hindu society.²⁷⁷ However, Roy did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God, an idea that angered the missionaries who remained firm in their belief of Hinduism lacking salvific truth. On the contrary, Rambachan notes that Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83) the founder of the Arya Samaj, was an open critic of Christianity. Saraswati openly challenged the idea of Jesus being the Son of God and questioned all the miracles attributed to Jesus in the Bible. Saraswati asserted that the absolute truth could only be found in the four Vedas. Hindu-Christian relations became slightly better under Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) who founded the Ramakrishna Mission. Vivekananda's approach towards religion was considered inclusive as he rejected the idea of only one religion having the knowledge of truth. Vivekananda attempted to understand Christianity because he believed that the colonial forces lacked the true Christian spirit while dealing with Indians.

Perhaps the most important name in India's struggle for independence is that of Mohandas Gandhi (1868-1948). When Gandhi travelled to England, he engaged in dialogue with Christians and read the Bible. Gandhi found the New Testament to be a good source of non-violent resistance (especially the Sermon on the Mount), an aspect which he then implemented in India's struggle for independence. Rambachan quotes Gandhi: 'the example of Jesus' suffering is a factor in the composition of my underlying faith in non-violence'.²⁷⁸ Rambachan notes that while Gandhi occasionally said he was not against conversions, he openly expressed his worry that Indians who converted to Christianity were becoming increasingly European as Gandhi wrote 'conversion must not mean denationalization'.²⁷⁹ For Gandhi, the idea of 'self-rule' included one's loyalty to the religion they were born in. However, Hindu-Christian

²⁷⁷ Anantanand Rambachan, 'Hindu-Christian Dialogue' in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. by Catherine Cornille (Chichester: John Wiley, 2013), pp. 325-45 (p. 327).

²⁷⁸ Rambachan, p. 336.

²⁷⁹ Rambachan, p. 340.

relations possibly changed forever after Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1833-1966) enlisted certain attributes that made a good Hindu in his 1924 work *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* Savarkar claimed that anyone born in India (or *Hindustan*, the Land of the Indus) was a Hindu. Next, Savarkar asserted that a good Hindu was always respectful towards their culture and preserved Sanskrit, the language Savarkar claimed is the best for expression. More importantly, Savarkar's work introduced the term 'Hindutva' which is now essentially an ideology of Hindu nationalism.²⁸⁰ Hindus finding their identity in their religion, de-colonization, and a reluctance towards anything Western, is perhaps what paved the way for Hindutva politics in India.

As we have seen above, despite dialogue and respect towards Christianity, Indian thinkers did not necessarily agree with the idea of conversion, a view which carried forward post-Independence. In 1954, the anti-conversion bill was introduced in the Indian parliament, but it failed to gain a majority. Over the years, the bill was brought up in the parliament on multiple occasions till finally in 2015, the Union law ministry stated that it was impossible to pass this law at a national level and handed the matter over to the state governments. Since then, nine states have converted the bill into law (The Freedom of Religion Act 2021): Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Jharkhand. Since the implementation of this law, there have been a spate of attacks on the Christian community in India.²⁸¹ For domestic peace, India must use interreligious dialogue which can help inculcate a feeling of mutual respect, and possibly remove the sentiment of 'the other' which is dominant in contemporary Indian society.

Interreligious dialogue can be interpreted as a part of comparative theology in a broad sense. While comparative theology is based in the traditions of a particular religion, interreligious

²⁸⁰ Arvind Sharma, 'On Hindu, Hindustān, Hinduism, and Hindutva', *Numen*, 49 (2002) 1–36 (pp. 21–22)

²⁸¹ Last year, India witnessed various instances of violence against the Christian community:

- i) On 6th December 2021, a missionary school in Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh) was attacked by Hindu vigilante groups. Members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal, pelted stones at Saint Joseph School while shouting slogans of 'Jai Shri Ram' (Hail Rama). <https://thewire.in/communalism/in-mp-hindutva-groups-pliant-cops-and-a-sympathetic-govt-have-driven-christians-to-a-corner>
- ii) Christmas celebrations were disrupted in a school in Haryana on 24th December 2021 by a Hindu extremist group. The next day, in the same state, the Holy Redeemer Church was vandalized, and a statue of Jesus was torn down. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/27/jesus-statue-smashed-in-spate-of-attacks-on-indias-christian-community>
- iii) In New Delhi, a church was vandalized during the Sunday morning prayers on 28th November 2021. Also, a group of nearly 250 Hindu vigilantes attacked a church on 2nd October 2021 severely injuring the pastor. The daughter of the pastor was molested by the men in the group while the women verbally abused and attacked her. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/2/india-christians-church-hindu-groups-bjp-conversion>

dialogue ‘points to actual conversations, sometimes formal and academic, sometimes simply interpersonal conversations among persons of different religious traditions’.²⁸² Interreligious dialogue can not only prove to be essential in maintaining domestic peace, but it can become a tool for global feminism as well. Female theologians can bring new views in scholarly discussions and enable a better understanding of religious texts. An understanding of religious texts and the customs that have originated from these texts, can become important tools in understanding the current situation of a country. Evidently, feminism has now become a global movement, but it is important to remember that patriarchy is not the same everywhere. Therefore, an understanding of the different models of patriarchy can enable us to adopt a different feminist approach to help tackle it. For instance, India’s patriarchy can be called a *brahmanical* patriarchy, that is, a patriarchy that places the heterosexual, Hindu upper-caste man on top. To tackle Indian patriarchy, Indian feminism must move past the caste system which is rooted in Hinduism. I propose that without understanding the roots of Hinduism, it would be difficult to understand the present condition of India’s women, lower castes, and minority communities. Under such circumstances, conversations between female scholars and interreligious dialogue, could lead to global female solidarity which in turn, could become the base for global feminism.

Along with global feminism, interreligious dialogue can also strengthen international relations. While interreligious dialogue can be an important tool in peacebuilding, it also requires ‘an understanding of how religious traditions and identities contribute to a culture of violence’.²⁸³ The present-day hostilities between India and Pakistan, and India and China have its roots in religious conflicts. The souring Hindu-Muslim relations resulted in the Partition of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947. Since the Partition, India and Pakistan have fought three wars (1965, 1971, 1999) and the state of Kashmir remains an area of conflict till the present. Similarly, after an uprising in China occupied Tibet, the Dalai Lama sought refuge in India in 1959 and continues to live there presently. However, since the Dalai Lama escaped into India, there have been innumerable acts of aggression at the India-China border. Moreover, the rise of anti-Semitic sentiment in America and Europe, poses a big problem for Christian-Jewish relations, which already faces the harrowing past of the Holocaust.²⁸⁴ Similarly, the ongoing

²⁸² Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester: John Wiley, 2010), p.10.

²⁸³ S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana ‘Inter-Religious Dialogue and Peacebuilding’ in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. by Catherine Cornille (Chichester: John Wiley, 2013), pp. 149–67 (p. 152)

²⁸⁴ A recent news article suggests that one in every four American Jews, faced anti-Semitic behaviour in the last one year. <https://www.ajc.org/news/the-state-of-antisemitism-in-america-2021-insights-and-analysis>

Israel-Palestine dispute, which began in 1940s, has its roots in religious conflicts. Mohamed Galal Mostafa, formerly an Egyptian diplomat, claims that certain religious differences between Judaism and Islam, religion-based rumours being propagated via social media, along with worsening socio-economic conditions is now pushing the ‘youth towards fanaticism, and religion inspired politics’.²⁸⁵ In order to solve such layered international problems, it is important to get to the root cause of these conflicts and adopt new approaches. Interreligious dialogue can not only open talks between different groups, but it can help a community understand their own religion better by inspiring introspection.

This thesis has examined four women present in the sacred texts of Christianity and Hinduism: Mary of Nazareth, Mary Magdalene, Sītā, and Draupadī. Without minimizing the differences between the texts and the traditions—the differences of theology, history, geography, language, and culture— this research offers a modest contribution to the fields of comparative theology and interreligious dialogue. Teaching about religion in schools and inculcating a feeling of mutual respect towards other religions from an early stage, is possibly the best solution to the problem of religious violence. Comparative theology and interreligious dialogue can become the future means of understanding our own religious texts, establishing domestic peace, strengthening global feminism, and stabilising international political relations.

²⁸⁵ Mohamed Galal Mostafa, ‘Religion and the Israel-Palestinian Conflict: Cause, Consequence, and Cure’ in *Fikra Forum* (2018) <<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/religion-and-israel-palestinian-conflict-cause-consequence-and-cure>> (para. 4 of 17)

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