



TRANSLATION OF MAITHILISHARAN GUPT'S *SAKET*

Senior Thesis

An English translation of Cantos 1 through 5 of Maithilisharan Gupta's epic poem *Saket*, along with translator's preface, contextual and literary analyses, and extensive footnotes. Submitted in 2018 to Asian & Middle Eastern Studies for Graduation with Distinction.

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ना मैं कवी न ज्ञानधारी
ना इस काज का इष्ट कारी।
फिर भी हुआ दिल का लग्न
भाषा भाव से हो कर मग्न।
ऐसा काम है राघव का
जो काम मधुर करें मानव का।
गुरु पितु मातु वंदन के बाद
करता हूँ प्रस्तुत अनुवाद।

I am no poet nor carrier of knowledge,
Nor am I the best suited for this task.
Still, I had this desire from the heart,
Overcome by the language and emotions.
Such is the work of Rama,
To make sweet the work of man.
After revering teacher, father, and mother,
I present this translation.

Abstract

Maithilisharan Gupta's *Saket*, written in 1932, is an epic Hindi poem presenting the story of the Ramayana from a humanized and highly emotional perspective. As the work of a National Poet written during a time in which nationalist sentiments were rising in India, this poem necessarily reflects the author's views towards his country and its future. Additionally, Gupta has imbued the poem with his personal devotion as well as his insightful understanding of the emotional profiles of characters whose perspectives have gone unamplified in past retellings. This translation is prefaced with some analysis of the effects of these unique approaches to and interactions with the Ramayana epic. However, as a primarily creative work, this translation aims to articulate the *bhaava* or sentiments found in Gupta's words and the feelings generated when reading this poem. Additionally, particularly salient literary features and cultural references have been highlighted to aid the reader in understanding some of the subtleties of Gupta's poem.

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The story of Rama is simultaneously well known and enigmatic. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that all Hindus have heard the tale in one form or another. To add on to this sum of over a billion Hindus, versions of the Ramayana (literally, "Rama's journey") have been presented in Jain and Buddhist traditions to name a few. A. K. Ramanujam's essay¹ "Three Hundred Ramayanas" which highlights this diversity of tellings of one story is perhaps misleadingly titled; Ramanujam quotes a scholar from 1950 who had identified 300 tellings of the Ramayana but mentions the narration of this story in various art forms, languages, and cultures which leave no doubt that 300 is a gross underestimation.

Though generally maintaining the same plot through the various narratives, each retelling is understandably colored by the attitudes of the era in which it is told and the beliefs of the artist who does the telling. In that light, Mathilisharan Gupta's *Saket* is a unique Ramayana imbued with the hallmarks of early 20th century Hindi literature and Gupta's strong religious and political beliefs. More significantly though, it is a uniquely personal and humanized retelling, depicting the emotions of this world in characters often seen as otherworldly. The present English translation is necessarily a reflection of my religious beliefs and interactions with the Ramayana in various media as well as a reflection of my understanding and experiencing of those emotions. It is my personal addition to the trove of Ramayanas already produced, no more than a drop in an ocean which I am blessed and privileged to have waded in.

¹ (Ramanujan, 2011)

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Bhaava

The job of a translator is inherently one of choices and the first choice I had to make was what exactly I wanted to translate. In one sense, a literal translation of a work is most faithful to the original. But in the case of *Saket*, a literal translation would best serve to convey the plot which in this case is a very well known one. It is my view that any modifications that Gupt has made to the plot pale in significance to the emotional weight and profile he has endowed the poem with. It is that emotional weight which I wish to translate. A functional example would be a translation of the word *bhaava*. Literally, it could best be translated as “sentiment” or “feeling” with connotations of “value” owing to it also being defined as “price.” But what it means in the context of poetry or literature is more expansive in its reach. If there is a certain state of emotion, complete with chills and goosebumps, tears and sighs, frenzy and quickened breath, which overcomes the writer as they pen their words only to be re-experienced by an attuned reader as they process those same words, that is *bhaava*. If there is an unbroken connection between a writer, their words, and the reader, it is formed through *bhaava*. It is one thing to imbue words with meaning towards the end of telling a story; in that situation, you are imparting knowledge or facts. It is another to imbue a story with *bhaava*; you must take the whole of your emotional experience and convey it unattenuated across time and space across the untrustworthy medium of words. Through my work, I have been awestruck by Gupt's ability to do so within the confines of rhyme and meter. I have also been intimidated by the fact that I am attempting to continue that unbroken connection to my readers. But I feel confident in

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assuming that Gupt never hoped to simply tell a story. He aimed to make you feel, and this translation, not of Gupt's words but of Gupt's *bhaava*, hopes to do the same.

Rasa

Though the concept of *rasa* in Indian aesthetics is primarily associated with the performing arts such as dance, it applies to all art forms and poetry is particularly touched by it. A technical (and therefore somewhat impersonal) definition for *rasa* provided by Britannica is that it is "a kind of contemplative abstraction in which the inwardness of human feelings suffuses the surrounding world of embodied forms."² Taking its basis from the idea that there are universal human emotions, this theory contends that art can suggest, create, and dispense an overwhelming and pervading mood, flavored by one or more of these emotions, that can be seen and felt by the audience. Certainly, this concept is similar to that of *bhaava* in its reference to emotions and its abstract nature and thus, translating it poses a similar level of difficulty. In an epic poem such as *Saket*, a certain scene or dialogue can be dominated by a certain *rasa* or a certain character can reliably speak and act in a manner imbued with a certain *rasa*. An informative example would be of Lakshman who throughout many depictions of the Ramayana, including our poem here, is the very embodiment of *veera rasa* or heroism. Even in scenes where no battle is to be fought and no arms are to be lifted, Lakshman's energy and bold rhetoric leaves one with the image of a broad-shouldered warrior whose every word and every step echoes with the fearless power

² ("rasa | Indian aesthetic theory," n.d.)

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of an unbroken lineage of *kshatriyas* (the ruling/warrior class). Thus, care must be taken when translating his words and actions to preserve this *rasa*.

Ramayana

The Ramayana is an epic of epic proportions. That is to say, it contains all of the archetypal plot points of an epic. There is a hero and a villain. There are acts of fate and acts of man, often in conflict. There is a unique sidekick and a damsel in distress. But in the Ramayana, all of these roles are elevated by some level of divinity or mysticism. As one explanatory example, take the protagonist Rama. The hero is perfect by design. Valmiki's Ramayana opens with the author asking a divine sage about a human who encapsulates fourteen noble qualities, a human who would be worth writing an epic about. There is only one answer: Rama. Hints of his divinity pervade the narrative until it is confirmed in the concluding episodes of Valmiki's original tale. Future tellings of the Ramayana begin on the premise of Rama as god and indeed, much of the reason this epic has survived centuries is that it is inextricably tied to Hindu religious practice.

The general plotline is as follows. The king Dasharath of Ayodhya is heirless. Advised and aided by divine sages, the king performs a sacrificial rite in order to obtain sons. The rite bears fruit and in due time, his three wives give birth. Queen Kaushalya's son Rama is the eldest followed by Bharat, son to Kaikeyi, and the twins Lakshman and Shatrughan, born to queen Sumitra. Some years later the sage Vishvamitra arrives at the king's court. He complains that demons have been harassing him as he performed his religious duties and that he would need the brothers Rama and Lakshman to protect him from these demons. The king obliges and the

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young brothers accompany the sage. After defeating the demons, the brothers follow the sage to the kingdom of Mithila where King Janaka is holding a ceremony to give away his daughter Sita in marriage. Rama performs a heroic feat, stringing the great bow of Shiva, and is awarded Sita's hand in marriage. Sita's sisters and cousins are subsequently wedded to Rama's brothers; Mandavi to Bharat, Urmila to Lakshman, and Shrutakirti to Shatrughan.

After the four princes return to Ayodhya, some time passes and the aging king realizes the coronation of an heir has become necessary. While Bharat and Shatrughan are away visiting Kaikeyi's parents, the king decides that Rama, the eldest, will receive the kingdom and plans the coronation with haste. Though initially delighted, Kaikeyi is turned against the king by her maidservant Manthara who convinces Kaikeyi that Bharat is being cheated out of the kingdom. Kaikeyi, who had procured two boons from Dasharath early in their marriage, asks for the boons on the eve of the coronation. One is for Bharat to receive the kingdom and the other is for Rama to be exiled to the forest for fourteen years. The king is devastated but bound by his word. The even-keeled Rama accepts the exile and after some discussion, agrees to let Lakshman and Sita accompany him to the forest. Following their departure, the grief stricken king dies and Bharat and Shatrughan are called back to Ayodhya. Bharat, unquestionably devoted to Rama, is aghast at his mother's doings and embarks to the forest to convince Rama to return. He is unsuccessful as Rama desires to fulfill his father's promise. With Rama's blessings, Bharat rules in his stead.

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The trio ventures further into the forest where Sita is abducted by the demon Ravana. Rama comes upon the anthropomorphic monkey Hanuman who introduces him to Sugriva, a monkey king who had been exiled by his elder brother Vali. Rama defeats Vali, enthroning Sugriva, and securing his aid in finding Sita. A contingent of monkeys led by Hanuman and Angad (the monkey prince) travels south and Hanuman crosses the ocean to Lanka where he finds Sita imprisoned by Ravana. There he reassures Sita, challenges Ravana, and burns his city to the ground before returning to Rama with this news on Sita's whereabouts. Rama then leads the monkey army to Lanka, building a bridge of stones across the ocean, and defeats Ravana along with his family and army. Upon recovering Sita, Rama commands her to prove her purity in a trial-by-fire. She walks through the fire unscathed and, as the fourteen-year exile had come to an end, the three return to Ayodhya where Rama is finally coronated as king. Along with the conclusion of the war, it is revealed that Rama is an incarnation of Vishnu, one of the primary forms of God in Hinduism.

Some time later, Rama hears that his subjects speak ill of him for taking back Sita who had spent so much time in another man's kingdom. Rama, who believes that a dutiful king must secure the respect of his subjects, exiles the then-pregnant Sita to the forest where she gives birth to two sons, Lava and Kusha. The boys learn the story of Rama from the sage Valmiki and sing the entire tale in Rama's court. Touched, Rama asks the children about their lineage and is shocked to find that they are indeed his sons. He agrees to take Sita back if she should prove her purity to the entire kingdom by another trial-by-fire. Instead, Sita takes refuge in the goddess of the Earth who is Sita's actual mother. The ground opens up and Sita is taken by the

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goddess, leaving Rama enraged and sorrowful. At this point, the gods intervene and tell Rama that the time has come for his incarnation to end and Rama returns to his divine abode.

This summary, provided to ease the reader into the translation, is both cursory and controversial. While this generally follows the narrative found in Valmiki's Ramayana, which is considered to be the first or original Ramayana, many have said that claims of Rama's divinity or the episodes following Rama's coronation are later interpolations. Additionally, this summary leaves out a whole host of characters and events which add to the fantastic fabric of this narrative and add to the incredible image of Rama. What is worth mentioning is that various Ramayanas have focused on different aspects of the tale, perhaps emphasizing a certain character's story, or leaving out plot lines which depict certain characters in negative lights. Thus, consideration of Gupt's *Saket* naturally highlights the creative liberties and decisions that Gupt took in styling his narrative. In other words, what makes *Saket* a unique Ramayana.

The most prominently unique feature of this poem is its increased focus on the character of Urmila, Lakshman's wife. In nearly all other Ramayanas, she is merely a name added to the tale. Her role is entirely replaceable and indeed, many of those who have heard the story of Rama may not even know her name. Why Gupt chooses to highlight her and the way in which he does so are points of interest for me in this translation. Does it imply a level of feminist reappraisal of a story which can be interpreted as reinforcing stereotypical gender roles? Is it simply a highly unexpected and bold creative step which allowed Gupt to showcase his genius in taking a well-known story and amplifying an unheard perspective? I have no intention of affirming or denying

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any of these possibilities as I believe making such decisions suffocates the freedom of the reader to interpret for themselves. I will simply explore these avenues with an open and curious mind.

Context

Written in 1932, *Saket* predates Indian independence by 15 years. By this time, the country was in the throes of the independence movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. Kusa Satyendra's³ characterization of Gupt as a poet who articulated Gandhi's views makes it imperative to understand *Saket* in the light of this political context. Gandhi constantly alluded to the concept of "*Ram Rajya*" or Rama's Reign as his dream for an independent India. In his words, *Ram Rajya* entailed "sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority."⁴ That this concept permeates *Saket* is inarguable. The very title hints at this meaning. Literally, *Saket* is another name for Ayodhya but one with more sanctified connotations. In certain devout circles, it refers to a more eternal abode of Rama, in his full-fledged divine form. The fact that Gupt chose a reference to the kingdom of Ayodhya, and that too such an exalted term with cosmological weight, indicates that this poem was written with the view of such an ideal place at least partially in mind. Given Gupt's status as a *Rashtrakavi* (National Poet)⁵, a "patron of the Indian National Congress,"⁶ and an ideological compatriot of Gandhi, it seems that this view of an ideal place aligned with a view for an independent India. Thus, the espousal of a "pure moral

³ (Satyendra, 2000)

⁴ (Veeravalli, 2016)

⁵ (Satyendra, 2000)

⁶ (Lutchman, 2000)

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authority" by Rama in *Saket* and descriptions of Rama's rule are of particular interest when considering the political context of this poem.

The Nationalist Poet

To appreciate Gupta's nationalism and creations, one must understand on what basis he was accorded the status of National Poet. Twenty years prior to the publication of *Saket*, Gupta published his magnum opus *Bharat Bharati*, a poetic portrayal of India past, present, and future. The poem is an ode to the past glory of his country, a morose observation of what he saw as the country's current decayed state, and a view of a bright and honorable future. It is an exhortation to the people of the nation, who represent the fallen descendants of the noble early inhabitants of India, to rise from what he warns could be an "everlasting sleep" of mediocrity. He is fundamentally optimistic about the ability of the people to rise to this challenge as he believes no worldly goal cannot be achieved with sufficient dedication and diligence. In order to motivate the arousal of such dedication, Gupta wrote the poem *Bharat Bharati*. Gupta's patriotism can clearly be seen through the praise of India's past as well as his hopes for its future. But it is perhaps his willingness to shine a light upon the contemporary shortcomings of the nation and its people that is the most bold act of patriotism. Indeed when introducing his poem, Gupta acknowledges the possibility for such a critical view to be seen as unnecessarily harsh or insulting. However, he claims he is "bound" to do so because of the stagnant, apathetic, and unfortunate state of the country around him. That he felt bound to arouse the nation speaks to his personal patriotism. That the work was received in the manner

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he intended speaks to the effective nature of his literary patriotism. Amaresh Dutta⁷ in his encyclopedia of Indian literature claims that this epic poem “aroused in every Indian a sense of pride” while Sudhir Chandra⁸ claims “no other single literary work...aroused the Hindi world” in the manner that *Bharat Bharati* did. Thus, Gupt practiced an active patriotism, one that could have the effect of not just reaching his fellow Indians but moving them to a state of motivation required to renew the nation.

Spiritual Nationalism

While *Bharat Bharati* was an explicitly nationalist poem, *Saket* is primarily a personal devotional one. Gupt dedicates the piece to his departed father and likens it to the offerings of *Shraadh* or offerings made to the ancestors on the anniversaries of their death.

Gupt's devotion to Rama is unquestionable and it is unsurprising that a poet with his devotion and skill would attempt a retelling of the Ramayana. However, there is a level to which the story of Rama is seen as a tale of India's history (as opposed to mythology) and much as Gupt looks back at Aryan India in *Bharat Bharati*, *Saket* can be seen as a look back at India (or more accurately, *Bhaarat*) under Rama. Indeed in the first canto of *Saket*, Gupt proclaims the land of India to be blessed as Rama had taken birth there. The conflation of Gupt's India with the land of Rama is in and of itself a controversial matter, as illustrated by modern day conflicts over

⁷ (Datta, 1988)

⁸ (Burger & Pozza, 2010)

Ayodhya⁹ or the Ram Setu/Adam's bridge¹⁰. The conflation of India's past with the story of Rama would be similarly controversial. While Gupt makes no explicit claims of the historicity of his poem, the repeated use of the term *arya* or *aryajan* in reference to Rama, his clan, and his values could be seen as a reference to the Aryan inhabitants of early India which Gupt praises in *Bharat Bharati*.

Linguistic Nationalism

The linguistic profile of *Saket* can best be described as Sanskritized *Khari Boli*. *Khari Boli* represents a dialect of Northern India which technically precedes Hindi.¹¹ A simplified understanding would be that *Khari Boli* formed the basis for *Hindustani* which forked into either Urdu, a more Persianized form of *Hindustani*, and Hindi, a more Sanskritized form of *Hindustani*. Gupt's mentor, Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi¹², championed the use of *Khari Boli*, and rather forcefully encouraged Gupt to do the same. It was argued that *Khari Boli* was more of a vernacular and thus more accessible than *Braj Bhasha*, the regional Hindi dialect that dominated preceding eras of poetry. Indeed, language choice was a highly consequential decision in the years heralding the rise of a potential national identity. Gupt recognized this relation between language and national identity in the forward-looking chapters of *Bharat Bharati* where he suggests the need for Hindi as a national language to promote unity¹³. If Gupt's language choice is a reflection of this understanding, then Gupt shows a desire to bring

⁹ ("Q&A," 2012)

¹⁰ ("Adam's Bridge | shoals, India," n.d.)

¹¹ ("India | Facts, Culture, History, Economy, & Geography - People," n.d.)

¹² (Gopal, 1972)

¹³ (Kumar, 2014)

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Rama's story to even more people much like Tulsidas' *Ramcharitamanas* eschewed *Sanskrit*, the language of the elites and the Brahmins, for *Avadhi*, a regional vernacular similar to *Braj Bhasha*. In a sense, Gupt continues that trend of increasing accessibility to the Ramayana by choosing a more ubiquitous language. However, Gupt's insistence on the inclusion of *Sanskrit* words and phrases also roots *Saket* in the classical history of India which Gupt deems praiseworthy. In short, Gupt's language choice for *Saket* frames the poem as both belonging to the ancient Indian literary tradition and being an extremely modern and forward looking work.

Rooted in Tradition

Saket's status as belonging to a tradition beginning in antiquity is supported by various literary elements including allusions, metaphors, and imagery. I have attempted to highlight some of these specific devices in the text. However, a general overview of this concept of connecting to the past is worthwhile.

Poetic Interaction with Predecessors

In Gupt's introduction to *Saket*, he provides quotations from previous tellings of the Ramayana including Valmiki's Ramayana, Tulsidas's *Ramcharitamanas*, and the *Bhagavat Puran*. He also indicates that his father had relayed some of Tulsidas's verses to him. Furthermore, Gupt begins Cantos 4 and 6 with invocations and supplications to Valmiki and Tulsidas respectively.

Interestingly, this acknowledgement is hardly a one-way street. In the *Ramcharitamanas*, Tulsidas offers his respect to the past poets, his contemporaries, and the poets still to come:

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"Je prakrita kabi parama sayane, bhasha jinha hari carita bakhane

Bhae je ahahi je hoihahi age, pranavau sabahi kapata saba tyage"

"To those poets who have narrated the doings of the Lord in vernaculars, of the past, present, and future, I bow to them guilelessly."

That this reverence is reciprocated by Gupt shows that an interaction through poetry can transcend the constraints of time. As discussed above, a goal of poetry is to transmit *bhaava* across time. Is Gupt's acknowledgment of the ability of previous Ramayana's to do exactly that not an expression of hope that his poem will too boast that ability? Thus the couching of *Saket* within this tradition, and Gupt's own acknowledgement of his renowned predecessors is hardly an optional flourish. It seems more likely that Gupt is expressing an understanding of the power of poetry in telling this story and laying his claim to a place within that tradition. This bold claim is made in a deferential and humble way as the references to the poetic giants of the past are made in the form of supplication. Here is Gupt both bowing to Tulsidas and Valmiki while acknowledging his right to be mentioned in the same light as them.

Gupt's interaction with Valmiki has an additional layer due to the fact that Valmiki is not only an author of the Ramayana but a character within it. In the 5th canto of *Saket* where Rama meets Valmiki in the forest, Valmiki delivers a line that can be seen as the encapsulation of the devotee poet's creed:

"Ram, tumhara charit svayam hi kaavya hai,

Koi kavi ban jaaye, sahaj sambhaavya hai."

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“Rama, your story itself is a poem,
To become a poet then is but natural.”

This line is also presented at the very beginning of Gupt's introduction to *Saket*. This is Gupt's philosophy and has multiple implications. First, it implies that a poet is made by the poem. Secondly, and more crucially for our purposes, Gupt validates his status as a poet through the words of Valmiki, the so-called first poet, and through deference to his sacred subject matter. It is again a means of self-legitimation through humility and connection to tradition. Note that the practical validation achieved through these shows of reverence in no way reduces the genuineness of Gupt's devotion or respect towards his predecessors.

Poetic Devices

A literary element that explicitly allows an author to acknowledge the past is allusion and Gupt uses this element freely. Examples include references to characters from various *Puranas* (Hindu religious stories) such as Bhargava, Jadabharata, and Bhagirath. While these allusions clearly continue rooting *Saket* in a tradition of religious storytelling, they also make demands of the audience. A particularly poignant example comes in Canto 3 when Lakshman proclaims him and his brother to be “equal to Bhargava” in their devotion to their father. The implication is menacing as Bhargava, on his father's command, slayed his own mother. Instead of spelling out such a drastic threat, Gupt simply allows for the allusion to imply it to the reader. However, the reader is required to be at least familiar with, if not well-versed in, the Hindu tales referenced. This significance accorded to various traditional stories is another way for Gupt to highlight the

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strength of India's literary past, much like his *Bharat Bharati* does in a broader and more apparent sense.

Similarly, the imagery and metaphors used by Gupt in describing the wondrous characters and landscapes in his poem are familiar to a reader of Hindi literature. Specifically, in describing female characters, Gupt falls back upon the wealth of comparisons used by ages of poets to portray feminine beauty. Examples include lotus-like limbs, eyes rivalling those of wagtails, and lips and teeth approximating red pomegranate seeds and white jasmines. It would be easy to dismiss them as clichés. However, the skill of a poet like Gupt allows him to utilize traditional tropes in unexpected and unique ways. An example can be seen in the first canto where Gupt describes a scene in which the beautiful Urmila encounters a singing parrot which seems to adopt a bashful silence in her presence. A veteran reader of Indian poetry expects this scene to lead into a comparison of Urmila to a parrot (and indeed, such a comparison arrives shortly after). However, Gupt brings Lakshman into the scene who explains that the parrot is left perplexed at the sight of Urmila's lips which the parrot takes to be pomegranate seeds. This particular metaphor is introduced deceptively, not through the voice of the narrator but through the perspective of the parrot. In short, Gupt has taken a traditional tool and presented it untraditionally, leaving the reader with a refreshed reaction to what would otherwise be a tired metaphor. This unique play on common metaphors is supplemented by the subversion of expectations in regards to traditional symbols. An example is found at the end of Canto 2 where the lamps of the palace, typically an indication of light cutting through darkness, are presented as the embers of a funeral pyre. Even the moonlight is described grimly as the white clothing of

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a corpse. This leads into a description of sunrise which is unsettling, even though just one canto before Gupt had provided a positively glowing description of the sunrise, setting the scene for beauty and auspiciousness. It is as though Gupt showcases his dexterity by using the same images, of light and sunrise, to create two antithetical moods. Tradition is therefore not rigid for Gupt but can be experimented with.

Departures from Tradition

While Gupt's use of literary devices plays a role in setting his work apart, its claim to originality within the compendium of Ramayanas told over time is based primarily on the highlighted events and characters. Based on the portion translated, the following observations can be made about *Saket's* unique focus. Firstly, the narrative eschews the ornamented depiction of supernatural events such as Rama's birth, the salvation of Ahalya, or the breaking of Shiva's bow and instead focuses on the human elements of the story. The narrative actually begins on the eve of Rama's planned coronation, skipping the childhood and marriage of Rama and the brothers entirely. In context of other Ramayanas, this beginning, and indeed the bulk of Gupt's narrative, takes place in *Ayodhya Kand* or the Ayodhya episode. This is entirely appropriate given the title of the poem. Secondly, the poem does not present events as much as it presents emotions. The bulk of the following translation chronicles the emotional reactions of Dasharath, Kaushalya, Sumitra, Lakshman, Sita, and Urmila to the same event, namely Rama's exile. Making space for these human emotional responses in a tale which has widely been regarded as the story of an impeccable and supernatural human is revolutionary. The fact that it is not only so-called "main characters" that are afforded the opportunity to bare their hearts

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shows Gupt's insight into the human dynamics of the Ramayan. To my knowledge, Gupt's depiction of Sumitra's fierce defense of the *kshatriya* code or Urmila's wordless sacrifice of her marital bliss is not based on any past Ramayan. Yet these portrayals seem completely plausible and relatable. At no point would the reader feel that the emotions expressed by the characters are purely creations of Gupt's fancy. Instead, they would imagine that if Valmiki or Tulsidas or any other renowned writer of the Ramayan had turned their spotlight onto these characters, the same words and sentiments would have been uncovered.

Perhaps the most important decision Gupt had to make was in regards to his portrayal of Rama. Gupt was an avowed devotee of Rama and to deny or shroud his divinity would likely border on sacrilegious in his eyes. Yet in keeping with his emotionally evocative poem, it became necessary for Gupt to humanize Rama somewhat. Thus, we see a Rama who is supremely tranquil at the news of his exile but waxes poetically about his birthplace. The same Rama who is unbothered at Kaikeyi's usurpation of his right firmly proclaims his displeasure with any insults directed towards Bharat. Gupt's Rama is unattached but not unemotional. He shows no affection for tangible wealth such as the kingdom, but the affection he does show, towards his brothers or subjects or birthplace, is doubtlessly tangible. What Gupt accomplishes is the depiction of Rama as a man worthy of worship, not because of his divine origin but because of his excellent display of human nobleness. Indeed as he closes the introduction to his poem, Gupt offers this cryptic note:

"Ram tum maanav ho? Ishvar nahi ho kya?..."

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Tab main nirishvar hoon, ishvar kshamaa kare."

Rama, are you a human? Are you not God?

Then I have no God, may God forgive me.

To Gupt, the distinction of man and God in the case of Rama is a somewhat semantic one. If one claims that Rama is not God, then Gupt would still persist in his devotion, even at the cost of being called godless. It is this supreme faith in the worthiness, the nobility, and the perfection of Rama that allows Gupt to so freely portray him as human without feeling that he has misrepresented his beloved deity.

Personal Significance

Ultimately, the significance of a poem is derived not from its social or literary context but from the effect it has on its reader. To this end, I would like to comment on the personal experience of engaging with this text.

I can hardly recall a point in my life when I didn't know the story of the Ramayana. That is to say, I was likely exposed to this story before I began developing and storing long term memory. This exposure initially took the form of stories from my parents, TV serials and animated movies depicting the Ramayana, and picture books. As I grew, I learned more of the story through the written word. I read the *Ramcharitamanas*, understanding parts of the Avadhi text and supplementing it with an English translation. I read portions of *Valmiki's Ramayan* and retellings of the story in other Sanskrit texts like the Bhagavat Purana and the Narayaneeyam. I

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ventured into some cursory overviews of Kamban's *Ramavataram* and Bhavabhuti's *Uttararamacharita*. At Duke, I had the privilege of taking Dr. Leela Prasad's class on the Epics of India in which we read Arshia Sattar's translation of Valmiki's Ramayana and explored a broad swath of perspectives and interpretations of the story, produced over centuries. In short, I have interacted with this story from a religious, personal, or academic perspective for the entirety of my life.

My approach to *Saket* was thus shaped primarily by personal curiosity. What was special or different about this telling? What could this poem convey or accomplish that its predecessors couldn't? How would this poem make me feel? It was a particularly poignant coincidence that Gupt seemed to be focused on how the characters felt, as if his analyses of their emotions in context of the events of the Ramayana paralleled my exploration of my emotions in response to various tellings of the same story. This approach precluded me from reading this poem objectively or academically.

I make no apologies for that. In fact, I believe my experience reading this poem was just as Gupt would have expected. He was writing at a time and a place where knowledge of this story was commonplace. He clearly wrote in a way that encouraged the human readers to empathize with the human characters. In fact, that resonance rooted in the shared humanity of the author, the characters, and the reader is what makes this poem so effective. As opposed to the necessarily devotional bent of earlier Ramayanas or the saliently reformist bent of later ones, this retelling harbors no agenda and does not fall prey to didacticism. Its meaning will stretch

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only to the extent of the reader's engagement. Obviously, the poem would then be most effective in the eyes of an engaged, active reader who recalls their memories of this story along with their memories of feelings like love and loss, of concepts like trust and betrayal, and of human necessities like faith and relationships. It is this activity, this intentionality of feeling, that brings the concept of *bhaava* to fruition.

As I translated, I allowed myself to be active and reflective. I allowed myself to be swayed by the *bhaava* dominating each episode and translated generally unencumbered by the restrictions of rhyme and meter. On a second read-through of my translation, I mainly resolved unwieldy translations and unnecessarily long or short lines which interrupted the flow of the reading. But I took care to preserve diction and details which reflected the raw emotional content of the moment in which I experienced Gupta's words. My hope is that emotional content resonates with any readers of this translation, continuing the process that began with Gupta's first reading of the Rama story, through his penning of *Saket*, leading to my reading and translating of it. What this attests to is that human emotion is a truly universal language, which holds up across millennia. I thus submit this translation, not on the strength of my command of the English or Hindi language, nor on my understanding of the Ramayana or the context surrounding this poem. I submit this translation relying on the power of that universal humanity, the peaks of which were represented by Rama, and the components of which are represented in all of us.

Canto 1

Introduction:

Gupt begins his story in a boldly unique way, establishing his originality even as he makes his contribution to the existing body of literature retelling the Rama story. He addresses the birth of Rama succinctly, tying it into both complex spiritual concepts and basic moralistic concepts like the need for good to defeat evil. His turn to describing the city of Saket comes just after he proclaims the land of *Bhaarat* (India) blessed for being host to Rama and his brothers. This sets the tone for a poem that is as much about a glorious land as it is about a glorious hero.

An effusive illustration of the city and landscape is followed by a lively description of the break of day, fit to be recognized within the genre of *prabhaatiya* or hymns of dawn heard in the city of Saket. The first description of a character is also unique as Gupt shines his spotlight on Urmila, the wife of Lakshman and sister of Sita. She is met by Lakshman who extols her beauty and virtues, relying heavily upon metaphors and bordering upon an excess of sweetness. The couple banter lovingly and ultimately Lakshman broaches the topic of Rama's coronation, presenting it as a gift for Urmila's eyes. In response, Urmila displays a painting she had created envisioning the upcoming coronation. The banter continues as Urmila begins to sketch a portrait of her husband before him. As the festivities of the city begin, the canto comes to an end, with no indication of upcoming turmoil.

Canto 1

It is worth mentioning that this entire narrative is one of Gupt's creation. The focus on the extremely human emotion of love between the godly characters of this poem introduces a balanced dichotomy between human and supernatural that will pervade the work. The interactions and relationships between characters ground an otherwise fantastic tale in reality.

On two particular occasions during this canto, I feel that the author speaks through the character of Lakshman. First, after lavishing praise upon the beauty of his wife, Lakshman concedes that no likeness can be drawn of Urmila. This comes in response to the painting Urmila has created in which, presumably, she is also depicted. Lakshman argues that neither her depiction of herself nor his platitudes comparing her to various flora and fauna do true justice to her form. She is *anupama* or one for whom there is no likeness. I see this as a preemptive admission by the author that the characters, landscapes, and events which he will attempt to describe are similarly incomparable. Indeed his use of *ananvaya*, a form of simile in which something is compared to itself, early in this canto to describe Urmila reinforces the difficulty of the task he will undertake. Nevertheless, he will construct many a flowery metaphor in the course of his poem. Thus, the author both expresses the challenges in accurately describing the exceedingly beautiful and fantastic while reaffirming his dedication to attempt to do so anyways.

Secondly, in the context of Urmila's painting which depicts an event that is yet to occur (and is pointed out to be divergent from reality), Lakshman makes the following claim about art:

Canto 1

“That which is happening here will happen,
If we speak only of that, then what have we said?
But that which should happen, when and where,
Art expresses that, here and now.”

Through Lakshman’s words, Gupt extols the value of originality and imagination in the creation of art. He particularly points at the limited utility of describing the occurrences of reality or actuality; after all, retelling what has already been told or narrating what can easily be seen is at best a supplement. The creation of a world which tells a narrative as it should occur, free from the limitations of reality, is in Gupt’s mind the true purpose of art. Thus, Gupt creates a Rama story which is unique, imaginative, and daring in its divergence from the retellings of the past. Additionally, its glorious depictions of Saket, a proxy for his vision of India’s future, express what *should* happen in his country. This vision, expressed by political and spiritual leaders in various ways, is best expressed in art according to Gupt’s philosophy. And so, Gupt provides us with his artistic philosophy as a guide for how to read his creative work.

Canto 1

Oh compassionate goddess *Saraswati*,
Lay your gracious hands here upon me,
Liberate your servant's *veena*-like body,
And to my string-like pores, grant new melody.

My overseer, seated upon the swan of my heart
Accompanied by the peacock of my voice.
Adorn yourself and come, to Ayodhya,
Mother, make me blessed and fulfilled today.¹

The Earth today, greater even than heaven,
As the sun of fortune climbs the eastern mountains.
Nirgun has become *sagun*, tangible, personified²,
The lord of all and entirety has incarnated.
Why has the lord engaged in this play?
Becoming man, imbibing humanity's essence?
Indeed, this is pure affection for devotees,
And this lord of the world is a host of playfulness.
To show the path in this material world,
To rid the burden that weighs on the Earth,
To bring to fruition the vision of men,
Why should he not create his universes?
The rule of demons is the snowy winter,
But the spring of Rama's rule nears!
Take the lives of sinners, their end has come!
He with no beginning, no end, has appeared on Earth.

Rama and Sita, the enduring sky and Earth.
Lakshman and Urmila, valor and wealth,
Bharat the doer and Mandavi his deeds,
And fame-like Shrutakirti, Shatrughan's beloved.
Like four manifestations of *Brahman*³

¹ Saraswati is the Hindu goddess of knowledge, literacy, and arts and as a result, she is a prime object of worship for poets. Gupt begins his poem by invoking her and likening himself to a *veena*, an Indian stringed instrument that Saraswati traditionally carries. He likens his heart to a swan, Saraswati's traditional mount, and references the peacock that is often seen accompanying her in depictions of the goddess as a metaphor for his voice. Thus, Gupt exhorts the goddess to permeate him and his poem, sounding through him and gracing his work.

² The concepts of *nirgun* and *sagun* are quite complex spiritual matters which, in short, refer to the dual nature of God in the Hindu understanding. God is both *nirgun* or attribute-less, an abstract power beyond comprehension and description by the means of mind and language, and *sagun* or with attributes, an entity with a definite form, qualities, and narratives. In the case of Rama, the abstract *nirguna* divine power takes on the *sagun* human form of Rama, forming the basis of the Ramayana and thus Gupt's poem.

³ The aforementioned *nirgun* abstract power of divinity can roughly be referred to as *Brahman* as well.

Canto 1

And four befitting forms of *Maya*.⁴
Blessed are Dasharath and Janaka, eminently pious,
Blessed is the land of *Bhaarat*, land of the divine.

Take a look, the city of Saket is here,
Extending into the sky to meet heaven.
Comets fly, their tails like dress trains,
Golden vases, draw even the eyes of the immortals.
Various large houses appear beautifully,
Roofs and canopies lifted, walls stand illustrated.
Signs of the beautiful tales of the people,
Mark the walls where they lie.
Vast, beautiful, and clean houses stand,
Adorned with banners hanging like rainbows.
Divine couples look upon and laud the buildings,
Indeed they desire to descend and rest there.
Large and covered with fruits and flowers,
Are long balconies, upon which various vines climb.
The city's maidens, having collecting heaps of flora,
Shower flowers upon the king from here.
Windows embroidered with flowers and leaves,
As if nature itself had shaped this arrangement.
Sometimes the flashes of lightning are seen inside,
Sometimes the necklace-like moon shines.
On the floor of these balconies,
Play ever-free doves, the very symbols of love.
Aided in their preening by peacocks.
As if Ayodhya is written in this image.

For the eyes, it remains eternally lavish,
To the nose, fragrance flows forever,
In the ears, the words heard pour nectar,
By the tongue, the tastes prove uncountable.

With mesmerizing images of clouds,
Like Amaravati, the city of his friend Indra,
The king's palace touches the sky.
The construction of Kosala is exemplary.

Sculpted birds top the finials of the forts,

⁴ *Maya* is thought of as the illusory power of God which allows the creation of a material world which appears so permanent and meaningful, though it is ultimately transient. It is also often thought of as the feminine manifestation of divine power and is thus an inseparable counterpart to *Brahman*.

Canto 1

Colorful as they are beautiful.
The speed of the wind gives them song,
And the melody of a flute.
At every turn, various sacrificial pillars and stakes,
Emblematic of blessed times and seasons.⁵
Of Indra's and the *Raghavas'* friendship,
Here and there stand monuments and obelisks,
Along with altars which stand as witnesses,
And descriptions of historical tales,
All of which dispel the pride of demons.⁶

Only heaven is appropriately comparable to here,
But what is the heavenly stream to the Sarayu?
The former liberates only those who have died,
But the latter liberates those who are yet alive!⁷
The unguents and perfumes of the people
Give color to the river when washed.
Striking ripples and waves can be seen,
And thousands of rainbows form and reform.
Indeed the city of Saaket is well refined
And the Sarayu is replete with purest essence.
A flowing stream of palpable piety
As if telling a tale soothing to the ear.
Upon the shore, beautiful temples,
Charming the hearts of the sentimental.
Flower groves and gardens grow nearby,
The very soil laughing as it blossoms.

Ayodhya is Earth's own Amaravati,
And the renowned hero Dasharath its Indra,
His palace is the colossal Vaijayant,

⁵ The presence of many locations dedicated to ritual sacrifices in Ayodhya indicates an abundance of sacrificial material such as *ghee*, wood, plants, and fruits. Thus, the amount of sacrifice correlates to bountiful harvests and auspicious years.

⁶ Rama's clan is also known as the *Raghavas* after Raghu, one of the earliest kings of the lineage. Many of the descendants of Raghu, including Muchukund and Dasharath, are said to have aided Indra, the chief demigod and ruler of heaven, in his wars against demons. Thus, Gupt describes the pervasive presence of monuments and obelisks which serve as monuments to this friendship between Indra and the rulers of the Raghu clan in the streets of Ayodhya.

⁷ The "heavenly stream" refers to the *Ganga* in its celestial form present in heaven. It is believed to provide liberation to the souls of the dead. However, Gupt claims that the Sarayu river of Ayodhya is greater still as it liberates even the living.

Canto 1

The luxurious groves its Nandan gardens.⁸

Like the various blooming flowers of a single tree,
The people of the city are all mutually united.
All are healthy, educated, cordial, and diligent,
Enjoying externally but ascetic at heart.⁹
The difficulties of disease do not exist for the body,
Nor do the concerns of anxiety for the mind.
No worries of thieves exist for wealth,
And all the joys of life are attained here.
Not a single courtyard exists here
Where a child is not playing sweetly.
Tell me of even one fortuneless house here
That does not have its own horse or cowshed.
All's houses are replete with grain and wealth,
And decorated like abodes of art, beautifully.
The residents are all worthy, with ever new graces,
Why would they not be given otherworldly joy?
All is ever embellished, be it home or elsewhere,
A veritably fantastic emporium of worldly wealth.
The paths are moist and dewy, yet unbroken,
Home is the personal stage, outside for public roles.

Misfortune remains away forever,
And fears wander alone in emptiness.
Policies and traditions alike and united,
King and subject share complete affection.
Four rewards in the form of sons were gained,
Now there is nothing left for the king to obtain.
May there be one more fulfilled boon;
May Rama's coronation occur soon.

Though the sun had yet to arrive
Still the night had made its departure.
For its limbs had been colored yellow,
And its elegant jewelry loosened.
Where there is not one but many kingdoms,

⁸ *Amaraavati* literally means the city of immortals and refers to the Indra's kingdom in heaven where the demigods reside. His palace is known as *Vaijayant* and his royal gardens are known as *Nandan*. Thus, *Gupt* references these various attributes of heaven as being equivalent to *Ayodhya*. (Dowson, 1888)

⁹ The dichotomy between being *bhogi* and *yogi* (to use the words of *Gupt*) is not a contradictory one. *Gupt* implies that the people of *Ayodhya* enjoy the rewards of the material world while remaining unattached at heart and thus maintain the status of externally enjoying but internally ascetic.

Canto 1

The state's strength crumbles there.
There were many stars, but dark receded when?
Upon hearing of the sun's arrival, only then.¹⁰
The legs of sleep itself began to tremble,
And the eyes of the *kumuda*¹¹ closed suddenly.
Well adorned and dressed, *Usha*¹² arrived,
And a smile spread over her lotus-like face.
The chirp-chirp chirping of the birds arose,
The plentiful sounds of the animate world arose.
The colors of dreams began to fade,
And the eyes of all beings began to open.
The luster of flaming lamps began to dim,
Confined only in one enclosure now.
But the sun is coming, what a thought this is?
Apt abashment in the presence of preceptors.¹³
That which has been cooled by flakes of snow,
And has been given new strength by fragrances,
Maddened by love, that wind began to blow,
Circulating pollen throughout its entirety!
With Its loving lap voluminously verdant,
The earth has snatched away the stars.
Seeing the gems of its treasury thus stolen,
The sky displays colors of anger!
In every corner, hymns of dawn begin,
The languor of idleness was washed away.
Who calls this the melody of *Bhairava*?,
Those that imbibe life from their ears!¹⁴
The foggy shades which could be seen,
Have now all dissipated and dispersed.

¹⁰ Gupt creates an extended metaphor of the coming of dawn by personifying night and describing it as covered in jewelry (the stars). As the sun arrives, the yellowish tint begins to cover the body of night. Gupt then switches metaphors and compares the dim lighting of sky with many stars to the fractious nature of a weak state with many kingdoms. Only when the sun arises does light truly pervade. In this sense, the sun is the one true king, a metaphor that is strengthened by the praise that Gupt has already heaped upon Dasharath, the king of the solar dynasty.

¹¹ The *kumuda* is a type of water lily that is often referenced in Hindi literature. It is said blossom at night and close its petals at the onset of day and thus Gupt references it closing its "eyes" as the day arrives.

¹² *Usha* is a Hindu goddess of dawn and the name can be used to refer to dawn itself.

¹³ Gupt implies that the flaming lamps which provide light through the night begin to shrink and humble themselves in anticipation of the sun which represents their preceptor or guru. Indeed, the lamps are but minor lights, disciples of the supreme source of light (the sun).

¹⁴ In the Indian musical tradition, *raagas* or melodies correspond to times of day or seasons. One such *raaga* known as *Bhairava* corresponds to dawn and early morning. Thus, Gupt references the melody in reference to the morning hymns.

Canto 1

Aruna and horses joined with the sun's chariot,¹⁵
Varnishing the homes of the people (with rays).
The life of the living itself awoke from rest,
The sight of which would strike death dumb.
Both curds and commandments were stirred,
Joy-filled and satiated were body and mind.¹⁶
The doors of the East have swung open!
What tide has surged in the sky's ocean!
Of the East's wealth, is this but a portion?
Or the marital emblem¹⁷ of colorful fortune!

Dressed in crimson and steeped in ecstasy,
Who is this damsel standing in the palace?
Surely not the very *Usha* in apparent form?
Illuminated with radiant rays of brightness.
A living statue of fresh molten gold,
Forged by *Brahma's* own hands.
Like a golden vine, slim, lotus-like, soft,
Blessed is this art of the constructor of eras.¹⁸
On seeing her large eyes, one comes to know,
Round sapphires are rooted within diamonds.
Lips seemingly made from rubies,
And her teeth made from pearls.
Of what then is made up her heart?
It is heart alone of which her heart is made.
Filled with love, a simple and tender heart,
With what means can one find a compeer?¹⁹
Each limb sculpted upon the sculpting stone

¹⁵ *Aruna* is the charioteer of Surya or the deified personification of the Sun in Hindu tradition. The chariot is led by seven horses. Alternatively, *aruna* refers to an orange-reddish color that describes the view of the morning sun and Gupt could be attributing that color to the horses drawing the sun's chariot.

¹⁶ Gupt uses the terms *vilodan* and *manthan*, both of which refer to churning or stirring, in very different manners within one line. The term *dadhi-vilodan* literally refers to the churning of curds, possibly to produce yogurt or related food. The term *shastra-manthan* uses more of the symbolic meaning of "stirring" to imply engagement with *shastra* (scripture and/or teaching) yielding knowledge. Thus, this dual churning satisfies both mind and body.

¹⁷ I have chosen to interpret *suhaag* as "marital emblem" as I believe the image of sunrise recalls the bright red *kumkum* powder atop the head of a married woman. In this metaphor, destiny or fortune itself is the bride, adorned by the bright red rising sun.

¹⁸ Brahma is the Hindu deity credited with the creation of the universe. By referring to him as the *kalpa-shilpi*, Gupt credits him with creating the very eras (*kalpa*) and heightens the significance of the character being described in this passage.

¹⁹ Gupt's statement that Urmila's heart is made up of her heart is similar to a common technique in Sanskrit literature known as *ananvaya*. This is a type of simile in which one thing is compared to itself, implying that there is no suitable comparison for it. Gupt explicitly states that this is the case as well.

Canto 1

To perfection, and life breath then added.
Her youthfulness glimmers,
As her fair beauty meets with her reddish glow.
Pendulous pendants trace a round halo,
Tresses like a cloud curtain over a radiant forehead.
Wherever this beauty looks, at any moment,
A flash of radiance like a bolt of lightning.
In her hands are a sturdiness of virtues,
Otherwise, would not her wrists dangle?²⁰
The meaning of her jewel-studded bangles,
To accent the radiance of her pure gold limbs.
Behind her is a vast mirror,
In which a reflection of her silhouette rises.
Residing in this temple, who is this goddess?
Which exquisite creator's creation is her grace?
A flower of heaven which has bloomed on Earth,
Her name, appropriately, is Urmila!²¹
Waves of virtue and fragrance arrive,
Bringing divinity into the ocean of material existence.

Atop the royal gates, even still,
A flute plays delightful melodies.
A parrot imitates and replicates its tunes,
Its beautiful form perched in a birdcage.
Urmila cast her glance upon the parrot,
Or was a world of two wagtails made there?
The parrot fell silent, amazed, astounded,
It remained looking on, set in place!
Lovingly, the damsel spoke then:
"Sweet-voiced one, speak! Why do you stay mute?"
From the background, Lakshman arrived then,
And said "Ah let me tell you why now.
From your pearl-like nose, the radiance of your lips,
And the mistaken sight of pomegranate seeds,²²
Seeing all this, the parrot has suddenly fallen silent
And wonders, who is this other parrot?"²³

²⁰ Urmila holds a plethora of virtues which Gupt implies gives some weight or sturdiness to her hand. This figurative weight allows her to hold up the bangles on her wrist which would dangle if not thus counterbalanced.

²¹ The root word "*urmi*" means waves (seemingly used in a metaphorical manner). Thus, Gupt deems her name apt by comparing her presence to waves of virtue and fragrance.

²² The bright red lips and brilliant white teeth of a beautiful woman are very often compared to the bright red and white contrast of pomegranate seeds in Hindi literature. Thus, Lakshman indicates that the parrot has mistaken Urmila's lips and teeth for pomegranate seeds.

Canto 1

Saying these words playfully with a laugh,
Lakshman, enchanted by the sweetness of her heart,
Like a giddy royal swan nearing a lotus,
He went from walking to standing still.
Large, mesmerizing mural-covered walls,
Stood still as onlookers as well.
As if ebullience and affection had met,
With heartfelt smiles sparkling in their eyes.
With her laugh raining nectar,
Like joy flowing within sentimentality,
Urmila said, "Dear, you've awoken?
Since when did your eyes, hosts of dreams, fall on me?"
"With your chants and touch oh enchantress!
Since my awakening become favorable to you!"²⁴
Many nights had passed in conversation,
Both speaking about being the first to arise.²⁵
"But where is waking better than dreams?"
"In love, there is nothing unpleasant!"
"You praise this unique delight of love,
But shouldn't I have some merits?"
"Oh beloved, blessed are your merits,
The form of an enchantress, lovely beauty.
Blessed am I just to be near these merits,
But, again I am but your servant."
"And why do you make this pretense of servitude?
To call me a maidservant too?
Nay, be a god, and be mine forever,
And keep me as a goddess, nothing else."
Saying this Urmila became silent for a bit,
Then Lakshman said, "indeed, that is right,
You remain forever the goddess of my heart,
And I your loving devotee."
Then he said, "Will you grant me a boon?
Oh proud one, will you favor me too?"
Said Urmila, "what *dharma* is this?"

²⁴ Lakshman seems to imply that after waking up, Urmila chanted her morning prayers and touched her husband's feet as would be customary. This in turn caused Lakshman to awaken as well. Urmila would be quite aware that he would be awakened by her chanting and touch and her question (of when he awoke) is likely in jest. Thus Lakshman replies to her feigned ignorance playfully, telling her he woke up when she decided it was favorable to her.

²⁵ To me, this is a tongue-in-cheek euphemism for whatever conversation was actually being had. One can be certain that conversations running deep into the night were not about waking up before the other. Gupt subtly and respectfully paints a picture of the romantic banter between Lakshman and Urmila through the use of such subtle humor and wordplay.

Canto 1

Duty can only be done by giving up desires.”

“But my desires, small and large,

All are fallen at your lotus feet.

Accept them or give them up, as you please,

They are yours alone, oh dear to the dependent!”

“You are a carrier of arrows, tipped with poison,

Of course you will drag me through thorns,

I am headstrong but weak²⁶, do what you may,

Not by grasping my feet, but hair!”²⁷

“Cruel one, do not make me grasp a snake,

One which poisons just by sight!

The leaves here are filled with nectar,

Which can turn the driest heart green.

You ‘headstrong but weak?’ All the strength and heroism

and steadiness and steadfastness of the universe,

All sacrificed for but a single sidelong glance of yours,

For which all creation dies and all creation lives.

The crevices, cliffs, caves, and coves of the Earth,

The emptiness of the sky, the eddies of the waters,

Dearest! In which combination of these,

Can the living view a likeness of heaven?²⁸

Graciously leaving your beloved birthplace,

Vying with the grace of the wish-granting gem,

Walking like a growing dreamy creeper,

Distributing divine fruits as you bloom.”

“Yet all it is that I seek is an abode,

Desiring a singular vase like you.

One who can hold my internal joy and sorrow,

And lighten the weight of this world for me.

And yet you---oh what is this parrot trying to say,

²⁶ Gupt specifically uses the term *abala* for its dual meaning in this line. While *abala* colloquially refers to a woman, the literal meaning is “weak” (*bala* means powerful which is negated by the *a* at the beginning). This lends itself to a pun later where Lakshman refutes her supposed weakness by highlighting her womanly beauty which he frames as power.

²⁷ I offer my interpretation of this rather quaint dialogue. It seems Lakshman is teasing Urmila with his feigned servility. Urmila in turn likens this teasing to being pulled through a thorny path. However, she is not one to simply follow with her feet. If Lakshman is to tease her, she will not follow suit willingly. Instead, she must be dragged into this more (playfully) pointed banter. Thus the oblique reference to being grasped by the hair. Lakshman counters by mentioning nectar-filled leaves (presumably on the same branch as the thorns) which can turn a dry heart (like a drying plant) green, implying that his playful banter has the effect of warming her hesitant heart.

²⁸ Lakshman draws an analogy between the beings of the Earth attempting to visualize heaven through their limited means (comparisons to Earthly features) and the idea that beings are dying to catch a glimpse of Urmila’s beauty, just like one must die before seeing heaven.

Canto 1

Oh speak, what is it that you want?"

"Frolicker of Mithila's royal gardens,
An exquisite damsel, beautiful thrush!"
Seeing his course successful, Lakshman laughed,
Catching Urmila's wagtail-like eyes.
"For her, you'll have to break the bow."
"Dear, the lord has broken it already!
Fine-bodied one, why break that which is broken?
The parrot's duty is to break pomegranate seeds
--Those which vie with your teeth--,
Whether it is born in Ayodhya or Mithila."
With a playful turn and show of her neck,
Urmila directed herself to her beloved and said,
"And have you ever done anything more,
Or just studied and been taught about parrots till now?"
"I've only learned all this since obtaining you!"
Lakshman said this with mirth.
"I'll see about that!" said Urmila,
Thus, this playful nectar flowed in various ways.
Husband lost sometimes, and sometimes the wife,
And that would bring them even more joy!
The love of lovers is the substance of songs,
Such that even in each loss, there is victory!

"Tomorrow dear, is my noble brother's coronation,
And everyone's delight is at an overflowing excess.
The ordination of Rama's reign is happening,
And a new sacred era is arriving!
He will now take on a new blessed garb
And the work of the *kshatriya*'s will come to fruition.
Soon, our eyes will be satiated!
Soon, our good deeds will come to bear!"

"Yes indeed, but tell me to give you something,
Do not tell me to take this boon for eyes for free!
Let me show you the coronation now,
Let me bring that vision in front of you now!"

"What, have you made a painting?"
With joy, Lakshman said eagerly,
"Bring it here, show me, where is it?"
Not 'something' but a 'great many things' I will give."
Urmila, becoming the very emblem of love,

Canto 1

Pulled to there a gem-studded golden stool,
seated her beloved atop it,
And brought a tapestry before him.
The painting was an image and imaginative too,
Leaving Lakshman stricken like a still-image.²⁹
Seeing the praiseworthy painting, replete with sentiment,
His ears became eager, expecting to hear words!
The paintbrush had its standard forever set,
Open to a host of colors, vast as the sky.
In the form of a painting, for the bird-like eyes,
A charming illusion mean to ensnare.
Lakshman was left with no sense of himself,
And for considerable time looked upon the painting.
In the end he said, with a great amount of love,
“Oh beloved, live long and live well!
Across from the fort, where vision is unobstructed,
There an assembly pavilion has been constructed.
The frills are embellished with pearls,
As in a plaited, bejeweled braid.
Long pillars made of emerald,
flags emblazoned with our clan head, the sun.
The joy of Earth fills even the sky,
Green at heart, it rains flowers.
Trumpeting children jump with glee,
Indeed they are in the mood to dance!
At the doors, cymbals of victory sound,
And even the sentries stand elated.
From the housetops hang bunches of silk,
Compared to which even the royal whisk is nothing.
Seats are made of lotus clumps,
And ceremonial carpets of tigerskin.
In the middle is a bejeweled royal throne,
Upon which, umbrella and canopy are set.
The noble couple are seated beautifully,
Along with *tulsi* and *shaaligraam*.³⁰
All are present with their retinue,
As Vashishta pours the waters for the coronation.

²⁹ I have attempted to recreate Gupt's use of pun here while also remaining true to the meaning. Gupt's phrase "*chitra bhee thaa chitra aur vichitra bhee, raha gaye chitrastha-se saumitra bhee*" plays on the phoneme "*chitra*" which translates to image or picture. *Vichitra* means unique and strange (which I've stretched to mean "imaginative" as a play on the term "image"). Finally, *chitrastha-se* means image-like, used as a description of particularly still figure or scene.

³⁰ *Tulsi* or holy basil is a plant that is considered sacred in Hinduism. It is offered in almost all prayers. *Shaaligraam* is a black stone that is said to represent Vishnu and is equally sacred.

Canto 1

Rama and Sita stoop ever so slightly,
As if they have lifted the burden of the world!
A stream of gems showers upon them,
And the entire assembly is drowning in its radiance.
The home and halls of the gods, a reflection of this,
In the great mirror of the sky!
Chiefs, citizens, and ministers are all elated,
To see how the ruling heroes of men stand.
The royal trappings in their hands,
From various states in various unique garbs.
But when would all the friendly kings have arrived,
If even Bharat could not be called back in time?
Ah this is a creation of your sentiments,
The completion of an incomplete event.
That which is happening here will happen,
If we speak only of that, then what have we said?
But that which should happen, when and where,
Art expresses that, here and now.
Those who take only the meaning of art,
They selfishly make art useless.
Between you and your art, art and you,
Their must be some mutuality, beloved.
Such art in your blossoming leaf-like fingers?
Seeing this, how could I not lose my senses?
Should I not roam like an elephant in heat?
Give your lotus-hands and let me kiss them!"

Extending her hand, which unfolded like a flower,
Urmila smiled and said,
"As a giddy elephant, do not lose your discernment,
And destroy this delicate flower of a hand."

Hearing these words, Lakshman became abashed,
And immersed in the ocean of love.
Clasping the hand of his beloved in his suddenly,
And, after kissing it again and again, he said,
"Not a single likeness measures up to you,
And though your image is fine, it falls short of you.
I will remain aware of this from now on,
'Incomparable one' I will call you from now on!
But, oh matchless one, where is my image?"

"Dear, what role do you have here?"

Canto 1

“Dearest, what obligation shall I shoulder?
Lakshman is but a soldier of Rama.”

“But Urmila is the sister of Sita!
Wow, what a fortuitous reversal of roles this is!
So be it. If you have some gift to give me,
Then a painting of yours is also ready.”
“And if I don’t?” her beloved said.
“Then I will give the painting to myself.”
Thus challenged, Urmila readied herself,
And set herself to the task at that moment.
Like a flaming light, she rose before Lakshman,
And her pen began to run across the canvas.
Showing a new production with her materials,
As a lotus blossoms in the spotless water.
As the purest flowers blossom together,
So too the hands of the artist began to stir.
Beads of sweat emerged like the dew on flowers,
The entirety of her skill displayed, unhurried.
Her zeal did not halt as she formed his chin,
She added colors but ahead her pen faltered.
A yellow line flowed out like a wave,
Reaching the pot of the coronation.
Lakshman laughed overcome with sentiment,
And Urmila could say was, “hey!”

“See how the color has fallen into the pot,
And why not, after you had attempted to depict my chin.”

With a sliver of embarrassment, Urmila laughed,
A laugh which was like a string of pearls.
“I’ve been had today!” she said,
“What could I do, my mind was not in my grasp.
What was it you’d give me if you lost?
I’ll give you just that, though it may fall short!”
Immediately, Lakshman gave his hand,
And said, “Just one embrace dear!”
Streamlike the lover’s beloved suddenly flowed away,
Giving but a quick glance from the corner of her eye.
But the lover wrapped her in his arms,
Obtaining what was his own once again.

Aeons would have passed in seconds like that,
But for the joyful hullabaloo that was heard.

Canto 1

At the doors, singing of the clan's praise began,
And suddenly the very air began to clamor.
The bards and minstrels began reciting the clan's fame,
Composing new poems and prose as they went.
Horns, lutes, and flutes began to sound,
Enlightened bards sang the scales up and down,
The couple startled as the sky began to shake,
And the skittish Urmila jumped!
Then Lakshman said, "and now I leave,
But remember this lest I get my reprise!
To see the fame and growth of his clan, rising up
The god of our clan has arrived speedily!
The day has come, now give me leave,
Again we have an interlude, when will we meet?"

Urmila began to say something, but halted,
And instead grasped her lap and drooped.
Like devotion itself, she grasped the Earth,
And lost herself in her beloved's affection for the lord.

Her crescent-moon like forehead was kissing the Earth;
Like mesh, her hair remained between her loving eyes.
Like a parasol atop her head rested her lord's hand.
And nature itself found itself secure and satisfied.

After this? Solemn farewell.
Coupled by glances, unblinking.
But where there is love of the mind,
There can be no parting pain.

Canto 2

Introduction:

This canto begins to set into motion Rama's exile, a crucial turning point for the narrative. The initial dialogue is between Queen Kaikeyi, Bharat's mother, and her maidservant Manthara.

While Kaikeyi is overjoyed at the imminent coronation of Rama, Manthara sees it as a plot to subjugate Bharat and Kaikeyi, especially since Bharat is currently away from Saket. Various retellings of the Ramayan have referred to this episode as Manthara "poisoning the mind of Kaikeyi." Gupt's retelling perhaps lends itself to a different metaphor as here, Manthara plants the potent seeds of doubt in Kaikeyi's mind. This doubt grows into certainty that her son is being wronged by this arrangement. Kaikeyi is overcome with anger and awaits the arrival of the king.

Meanwhile, in speaking to their wives, both Rama and Lakshman express their deep regrets at Bharat's absence. Similarly, Gupt presents a conversation between Dasharath and Vashishta, the clan's preceptor. Here Dasharath also expresses his sorrow at Bharat's absence but provides his reasoning for arranging for such an immediate coronation. Dasharath had previously mistakenly killed an ascetic boy while hunting. The news of their son's death shocked his parents and hastened their own death. As they died however, they cursed Dasharath to die a death just as they did, suffering from the pangs of separation from their son. Dasharath shows concern that his present separation from Bharat might be the cause of his death and with the possibility of death impending, he saw the need to ensure proper royal succession by

Canto 2

coronating Rama. Following this conversation, Dasharath goes to Kaikeyi's abode and is dismayed to see her upset. He attempts to cajole her into happiness, mistaking her attitude as a part of a lovers' quarrel. Her anger remains unabated and she replies in short, fierce terms to remind the king of two boons he had promised her. The king gallantly proclaims his dedication to the truth and gives her his word that her desire will be fulfilled.

Kaikeyi then asks for her two boons. The first is that Bharat should be coronated prince of Ayodhya. The second is that Rama should be exiled to the forest for fourteen years. The king is devastated as he is bound by his word to oblige. The canto ends with a bleak scene as the king grapples with the disastrous turn of events.

What Gupt does particularly well is allow for the human aspects of his characters to shine. The motives of Dasharath and Kaikeyi are presented to us with minimal judgment. While other retellings of the story attribute the turn of events solely to predestined fate or paint Kaikeyi as the unrepenting villain, Gupt's depiction of Kaikeyi's inner monologue allows us to possibly sympathize with her position. This monologue is moved forward by a single phrase repeated amidst a rapidly changing whirlwind of emotions:

"Doubting his son, that too a Bharat-like son,

The king does not even ask him to return!"

Canto 2

The phrase is first uttered by Manthara and forms the crux of her exhortation to Kaikeyi. While arguments in regards to Kaikeyi's status amongst her co-wives are also made, the most powerful seed of doubt which threatens Kaikeyi's sanity is the possibility that the king doesn't trust her son Bharat. In Kaikeyi's eyes then, the calculations of ruling politics and traditions of succession become irrelevant as all of this is seen as part of plot formed on the basis of the disparagement and dispossession of her son. As the phrase echoes in her mind, she turns to God asking how this doubt could be cast on her son. At this point, Manthara's suggestion has taken on a level of certainty in Kaikeyi's mind and her actions from then on are motivated primarily by primal and misdirected maternal instinct.

The canto is also defined by the contrasts in speaking style between Manthara, the maidservant, and Dasharath, the king. Manthara's words are not primarily statements but leading questions, implying the presence of a plot against Bharat and hinting at upcoming calamity for Kaikeyi but leaving it upon Kaikeyi to reach for the most extreme conclusions. She switches from chastising Kaikeyi for her naivete to plying servility, all of which leaves Kaikeyi in a state of emotional confusion. In contrast, the king is bold and certain, making promises, proclaiming his association with the gods, and speaking in platitudes about the crucial nature of truth and honesty. It is not at all surprising that such a drastic difference in tone exists between king and servant. It is however surprising that Kaikeyi seems far more affected by the deceptive tone of Manthara than by the genuine tone of the king. The difference in Kaikeyi's receptiveness to the contrasting entreaties made to her defines her actions and thus the entirety of the story to come.

Canto 2

Oh pen, for what do you delay now?
Say "Hail *Bhaarat*, Hail the mother of the world!"
Of that dawn which emerged thus bright,
Witness now that very day's night.

Blessed is that earthly abode of righteousness
That heaven-like *Saket*
Why should the signs of joy not increase
Tomorrow *Ram* shall be coronated!
Housing the virtues of the ten *Digpaals*¹
Blessed is that *Dasharath*, ruler of the Earth.
Fresh streams of joy flow from the three queens
Equalling the flow of the three holy streams²
There is no equivocation in the sweet-scented glee
Permeating as in a mango grove³

But heed! The grove did not give fruit
As *Manthara*'s eyes have become pests.
Seeing this state of her's, *Kaikeyi* said
With surprise, "Oh! How can you be upset today
When tomorrow our darling boy shall be crowned prince?"
Unhesitant, *Manthara* replied "Have you not realized?"
Hearing this the queen laughed and rose
An exquisite glowing flame
"I have of course realized, *Bharat* is at his uncle's
And alas his unsullied vision will not be fulfilled
Unable as he is to see this universe of joy."
Beating her cruel forehead as if she would split it
The maidservant said immediately
"The time of naivete is over!"
Kaikeyi did not understand
and said, "what is this outburst,
Why do you speak such words askew

¹ In the Hindu worldview, the *Digpaals* are guardians of the 10 directions.

² The *Triveni* refers to three sacred rivers in India, namely the *Ganga*, the *Yamuna*, and the *Saraswati*. Their convergence is foremost among pilgrimage sites for devout Hindus.

³ I believe there is a pun with the word *mod* as it can mean both joy/glee/delight and fragrance. The specific choice of a mango grove as the comparison here suggests the equating of permeating joy with the scent of a mango grove.

Canto 2

Is not Ram after all my son too?"

"And what of young Bharat?"
the ill-meaning maidservant fired back.

The queen replied "but between the two
What difference is there?"

"Difference? The sun shall show you in the morning
when one shall become the royal mother
and the other but an onlooker at the coronation."

Reeling in her anger, Kaikeyi said
"Who do you fault? People of past and present,
Will they not call me the mother of Rama?"

Then said the maidservant abandoning patience
"May my mouth light ablaze! What is it to me?
Who after all am I? Why do I not remain silent then?
But, seeing this attack on my master's well-being
Some words simply leave my mouth
Innocent as you are, you see everyone as innocent
Otherwise how would this scheme have been hatched?
Would Kaushalya have handled these matters so easily?"

The queen asked, "What scheme?
Oh your words are so elusive,
And I become so lost!
Tell me simply the whole story!"

Beating her head again Manthara said
"Is there still something wrong with your state?
Even simplicity is of no worth
if one cannot distinguish benefit or harm.
Having sent Bharat away from home
The king gives Rama the kingdom!
Doubting his son, that too a Bharat-like son,
The king does not even ask him to return!"

Enraged, Kaikeyi replied
"Be gone! Go far away oh witless one!
Be gone from my view, say no more!
Do not add poison to sweet juice!
Dragging mud into this house!"

Canto 2

Oh the lowly remain but low.
How could you see our family matters as so mean?"
Her brows raised, hair trembling over her forehead,
She appeared as punishment personified.
As Manthara looked on with fear,
Kaikeyi's eyes were sharp, unmoving, unmovable
Her forehead was flushed red.
The maidservant could not in that direction gaze
Lest the queen's harsh rage light her ablaze!

But stubborn as she was
She remained, standing there meekly
In the end she spoke, accented with intent
"Oh forgive this my offense.
Servant or slave, in presence of master
They are always at fault!
Give me whatever punishment you will
But what did I say after all?
Whatever I came to know
I told you as was my duty.
Nothing was fabricated by me
Master will remain master, and servant servant
Bury your head in the ground if you will
Leaving it as it were, with ignorance its fill."
Bowling to her, the maidservant left
Leaving Kaikeyi to be.

The maidservant left, but her words
They had left a shock.
"Doubting his son, that too a Bharat-like son,
The king does not even ask him to return!"
As if the wind even in that manner
Began to call out in the void,
"Doubting his son, that too a Bharat-like son,
The king does not even ask him to return!"
The queen's ears were ringing
With those arrow-like sounds,
"Doubting his son, that too a Bharat-like son,
The king does not even ask him to return!"
Having been frozen like a statue,
She could no longer stand there.
She went immediately to the bedroom
With the gait of an agitated flowing stream
As if unable to bear the weight of her body,

Canto 2

She fell supine and began to think and said,
“Oh God! What have these ears heard today!
Why does my peace of mind rebel thus?
Who has come and lit this fire?
Where was this serpent of doubt?
Oh lord, Kaikeyi’s only wealth and treasure
Look into my mind
There is not an an inkling of selfishness!
Only you, the lord of life, dwell there.
You were always there oh supremely generous one
Why then has this sudden perversion occurred?
Doubting his son, that too a Bharat-like son,
The king does not even ask him to return?⁴
Was there not my maternal affection?
Oh, wasn’t that path also open?
Why lord was I not sent to my brother’s house
Along with my son.
The eldest holds the right to the kingdom
And more so, Rama has the utmost of virtues.
And yet, how does my darling son
In his aura of calm become so repugnant?
After all, Bharat is your younger brother Rama!
Is he not exceedingly selfless?
Oh blessing of this clan,
Who else knows Bharat as well as you do?
Bharat oh Bharat, storehouse of virtue
If being born from my womb
You have become worthy of doubt
Oh may my body be damned.⁵
Oh Earth, be gone to the underworld
Do not cast me further in doubt.
If there was any trust on this Earth at all
That trust would first be placed in Bharat.

Oh world-renowned trust
Who betrayed you?
Did Bharat? He is your very embodiment!
Did Rama? He is the very brilliance of your essence!

⁴ It is important to note the change in the expression of this repeated phrase at this iteration. Previously, these words had echoed for Kaikeyi to hear. However, here she seems to be questioning God as to the validity of this doubt. She has begun to adopt this doubt into her own psyche.

⁵ It seems that the literal meaning of *dagdha ho gaatra* would be “cramp” but I do not feel there is any connotation to that in English that would be appropriate.

Canto 2

Did the Gods? They are forever compassionate.
Did fate? Yes, twisted fate is the culprit!

Oh lord, what is invisible to you?
Will today bring calamity to the clan of the Sun?⁶
But how can this invisible thread
Bind the *Raghavas*?
Only the downtrodden remain bound by fate
The powerful ones make fate submissive.
Oh invisible fate, how then did you ensnare my sister?
Knowing her to be a woman, your trap
You threw upon that simple one.
But what simplicity is this
That becomes a dart and pierces?
Doubting his son, that too a Bharat-like son,
The king does not even ask him to return!
Sister Kaushalya, tell the truth!
Was Bharat ever (only) my son?
Was Rama ever (only) your son?
Oh! And yet still this outcome?

But come what may
This injustice I will not bear
I shall undo this
Even if the universe be turned on its head!
Kaikeyi is not so ignorant
As to overlook this rebuking of her son.
Let all say I am with greed obsessed
But son, you will not be dispossessed.”

Bharat’s mother had become restless
Her body flamed with indignation.
This enflamed jealousy towards her co-wife
Did naught but increase the flow of poison.
The even-minded Kaikeyi’s anger
Began to exterminate her intelligence.
She could no longer remain calm.
She arose, storm-like, crazed,
Her hair fallen to her heels,
The goddess now in *Durga’s* form.
Whatsoever her hand fell upon then,
She left utterly destroyed.

⁶ Rama’s lineage is known as the *Suryavamsh* or *Suryakul* which means, clan of the Sun.

Canto 2

Destroying and tossing aside all her ornaments
Full of tears, and free of her necklaces.
As an enraged elephant destroys a flower
She began roaming, losing herself
Ripping and tearing apart beautiful portraits
They too had become enemies!
As her breaths came, they told of
Her heart's ever growing jealousy
These artifacts, receiving blows of destruction
Cried out in angst,
"Be it whoever's fault, at whomever you are irate,
At least after this, please be content and abate!"

At that very moment, Kaushalya elsewhere,
Bedecked with ornaments and garments alike,
Was imparting to her daughter-in-law
Beautiful lessons, fit for a princess.
Here, Kaikeyi was imagining them
As impure, the very opposite.
Hatred is blinding, showing only faults
As the light does not fall upon the virtues.
To clearly be the royal mother,
Making that her goal,
She rises, laughing again and again;
Is it laughter or the edge of a sword?
Kaikeyi rose trembling
Chomping at the bit, baring her lips
Stomping her feet upon the ground,
She began to manifest her antipathy.
In the end, with the entirety of her frame
She fell upon that very ground.
Now and then she fumed loudly
Like a wounded snake hissing!

As the festivities were being undone here
Urmila was elsewhere with her lord.
Here too, the talk was of Bharat,
She bantered, then listened quietly.
Lakshman explained to her
"All of us regret this matter,
But the time was so short.
Such a plan was not made beforehand
But our father is now taken by eagerness and haste.

Canto 2

Now that impeccable idol of man⁷
Shall serve to balance Bharat's affection."

At this time, what was Rama doing?
His heart was heartily battling his heart.
Steadier even than the high Himalaya mountains
Deeper even than the seas⁸
Present here was that unsurpassable privilege (of kingdom)
But Rama could see the burden it carried.
Seeing his father's retreat to the forest as imminent⁹
He found himself saddened.
Oh! That fatherly love he had experienced
And that childly nature he had displayed,
Seeing those gone all at once,
He felt faint throughout his body.
The daughter of Videha said, "Oh lord!
Till now, the four brothers have been together,
Together you partook in all joys
And that arrangement remains appropriate.
But separating you, the king of Koshala
Gives you the kingdom today.
Does this privilege please you?"

"Oh beloved, is the kingdom a privilege or a burden?
For the eldest, indeed it is a great punishment!
To ensure that the citizen's trust remain unbroken.
But be forever free of worry
There is no destitution here, only harmony.
Bharat's wise counsel shall remain
As shall the ever-mindful Lakshman's strength.
For your younger brother-in-law's state,
This Rama is after all solely responsible."

"Lord, this royal appointment is auspicious
But the victory is of my younger brothers-in-law.

⁷ Perhaps the implication here is that Rama who encompasses all that is good in human emotions will serve to provide the emotion/affection missing from the coronation due to Bharat's absence.

⁸ This couplet seems to draw directly from Vaalmiki's initial characterization of Rama from the first chapter of his epic Ramayana, where Rama is described as "*samudra iva gaambhiryē, dhairyena himavaanivaa*" or "deep as the ocean, steadfast as the mountain Himavaan." To highlight the level to which Rama is affected by Bharat's absence, the author reminds us of Vaalmiki's perfect, epic Rama that is seemingly contradicted by the very mortal state of internal conflict that Rama is depicted in by the author here.

⁹ It was expected that a king, upon giving his kingdom to his heir, would retire to the forest for penance and Rama refers here to that expected next step for his father.

Canto 2

Whom you lovingly made minister and commander-in-chief,¹⁰
Upon whom the entire royal house is dependent.”

The angry Kaikeyi’s state
Was of yet known to none.
Who knows what happens
Every moment on this Earth?
What was the king doing at this moment?
Oh pen, do tell of his state now.
The king was seated with the clan’s preceptor.
And talk of Bharat alone had arisen.
Said the preceptor, “Doubtlessly,
It is regretful that Bharat is not at home.
But at this time it is appropriate
That the king be without worry.”
The king said, “yes, my mind was uneasy
At the thought of my own future.
This is why I was exceedingly impatient.
Here today, gone tomorrow, such is this body.
Having killed the ascetic boy,
I had received a terrible curse¹¹ that:
‘You too will suffer separation from your son
As your fatal wound.’
May this separation from Bharat be untroubling.
Though regretful, it is ideal, for
If this moment, I pass into that eternal silence
I shall see that departure as unsullied by stress.”¹²
Imparting fortitude to the king, Vashishta said,
“This unease of yours is not appropriate.
All the comings and goings of this world
Are at the beck and call of the Lord.”
“Fine.” Saying only this,

¹⁰ Sita has interpreted Rama’s recognition of Bharat’s counsel and Lakshman’s strength as indications of their future positions as minister and commander-in-chief, respectively. In her eyes, these important and respected positions mean that as king, Rama will lovingly ensure that the bulk of the benefit go to his younger brothers.

¹¹ Dasharath here references an incident from his past. During a hunting expedition, Dasharath mistook the sound of Shravan-kumar, an ascetic child, collecting water from a river for that of an animal at a watering hole and fired an arrow in the direction of the sound. Upon realizing his mistake, Dasharath confessed his grave mistake to the parents of the now dead Shravan-kumar. They in turn cursed him to die due to separation from his child, just as they did shortly after Shravan-kumar’s untimely death.

¹² It seems that Dasharath’s primary concern is that given his advanced age, his current separation from his son, and his fatal curse, he could die at any time unexpectedly causing a succession crisis unless a crown prince is installed. Having made arrangements for his successor on the throne though, he can now die at peace knowing that the kingdom and the lineage will be safe and secure.

Canto 2

The king became calm and resplendent.
At that time, the day was coming to an end
And the wind too was calm.
The preceptor, a venerable God in his own right,
Having his feet and hands washed reverently,¹³
Went to where it was he was to go.
And here, the king too went inside.

Oh *Aruna*, bring on the dusk
To see a wondrous game.
Wearing the moon as a diadem,
Night arrived swiftly.
The king lovingly looked on
At Kaikeyi's peaceful residence.
But Manthara had gone there
And turned it into a volcano.
The king entered
And seeing that scene,
He was left still, inanimate.
A flood of fear and shock overtook him.
Lying there disheveled and perturbed,
like a lioness whose hunt had gone unfulfilled.
Alone with her anger,
Would she be pacified even at the cost of the king's life?
Even that would be amenable.
"Oh!" was all that escaped the king's mouth.
Who knows what disaster will be wrought
By the broken stars this night?
Fallen there like terrible lightning,
With her rich disheveled hair,
A black snake, who would dare disturb?
The emperor suddenly began to tremble,
What could he do, with his composure on edge?
For the first time, he sat on the ground,
As if to toy with a snake.
With humility, the king said,
"Beloved, why this anger today?
I do not understand at all!
Yes, wealth and honor, all this you have.

¹³ This references a customary ritual showing respect to a guest, especially one of high stature. The king is expected to wash the feet of his guest and provide water for handwashing and drinking both at the arrival and departure of such a guest. This is also associated with the traditional sixteen-step format of Hindu prayer in which God is imagined as a guest and treated with these same courtesies.

Canto 2

But even I am in your grasp!
This play of yours, makes no sense to me
Why, if today everyone is delighted
And dressed so cheerfully,
Are you so taken by sadness?
That which was sweet and fresh has gone sour.
The time of our lovers-quarrels is no longer.
Though we may be impassioned today,
We have gone from being lovers to being elders.
The regret I feel on Bharat's absence,
May indeed seem doubtful to you
as his absence may seem beneficial to me.
But love must keep your faith firm in me!
If some illness has befallen you
I shall call the doctor and have him devise a cure.
Even nectar of immortality is not beyond my reach,
For I am privy to the assembly of the immortals.¹⁴
If someone has slighted you,
Causing this anger,
Tell me their name
Surely fate is against them!
Tell me the name,
Of whatever it is most favorable to you.
Till wherever the sun shines,
Know all that to be rightfully yours!
If someone is to receive something from me,
I will give them twice that today!
My treasury, a storehouse filled with gems
Can it be at all exhausted in any way?
If there is something you would like to ask for
Ask freely, without anger, without shame!
Already you have two boons from me
Then why this show?
Do you not remember that battle
When I was victorious but wounded?
Who had protected me then?¹⁵
Then why do you bring on this discomfort?"

¹⁴ In his time as king, Dasharath had aided the immortal gods in their battles against the demons. It is likely that Dasharath is referencing this collegiality with the immortals when he insinuates that he could provide nectar for Kaikeyi if she so desired.

¹⁵ In one of Dasharath's aforementioned military expeditions, Kaikeyi was his charioteer and was crucial to ensuring his safety during a particular scenario in which his life was in danger. It was as a result of this service that Dasharath had promised her two boons.

Canto 2

Upon hearing this truly lovely dialogue,
Kaikeyi remembered (the tale of the battle).
Nevertheless, her eyes did not soften
And she began to speak admonishingly.
“Oh forget all this dishonest affection
I know the ways of kings.
In actuality what have you given me,
Two boons, in words only?”

The king said “do not assail me with words,
Shall I tear open my heart to reveal what is inside?
After all, when did you ask for your boons?
Beloved, why then do you torment me thus?
Still, ask for something now,
What should I give you, nay gift you?”
The noble lady spoke accordingly:
“Oh king, you won’t give even those two boons!”
Drawing in a deep breath, the king said,
“How can I gain your confidence?”
Oh lotus-eyed one, test me and see,
And listen too oh Gods, eternal witnesses!
Truth alone holds together this universe,
Truth alone is the essence of all righteousness.
Not just this kingdom, but my family, my life,
For truth I would stake it all!

Deceiving the guileless king in this manner,
Like a snake emitting venom,
The mother of that gem-like son Bharat
Began to ask fearlessly:
“Lord, give me this first boon
And coronate my son Bharat!
Second, hear well and do not be distressed,
For fourteen years, exile Rama to the forest!

Hearing these cruel and terrible words,
The king was left dumbfounded.
As if struck suddenly by a bolt of thunder,
As if he had departed his body.
Seeing him struck witless thus,
As if piercing his chest with nails,
She spoke again, her brows quivering:
“You have become silent, say yes or no!”

Canto 2

Still the king could say nothing,
Like a statue he remained, unmoving.
His gaze, tender but harsh,
He cast upon her!
“Is this in accordance with the truth oh king?
Say whatever it is you have to say,
So I can die here, ending my own life!”
Somehow, the king then spoke,
“Why die? Reap your reward!
It is I who will die, condemned,
And you will receive three boons!”
Looking upon himself
The king began to wallow in anguish.
“Oh god, is this a dream or reality?
Is this the affection of men and women?
Oh god, never give a boon to anyone,
End this practice of giving your word.
Even charity can be misused in this manner,
Who can one trust?
The one that I had taken as a bejeweled necklace
And placed in the foremost place in my heart,
In the end, with venom in her fangs,
Alas she has appeared as a snake!
It was not only the kingdom that you craved,
But you harbored so much hatred for Rama?
Was he not inherently your son?
Was Bharat my only son?
Exile to the forest, a son like Rama?
Is this the truth, or some farce?
If true, then it is truly a calamity.
If farce, then it has struck like death’s noose.
Echoing in the confines of the palace
The words persisted, unceasing.
Then, turning his face, the king said,
“Rama oh Rama, son of mine, light of this race!”
Overcome with emotions,
He saw the world as enveloped in darkness.
The drowning moon’s white light
Befittingly clothed the king like a corpse¹⁶.
The palace had become like a cemetery,
With Kaikeyi taking the role of death.
The lamps in the room shone and burned

¹⁶ It is customary for a corpse to be clothed in all white prior to cremation in the Hindu cultural tradition.

Canto 2

Like the flames of his funeral pyre.
“Alas, what shall happen tomorrow” he said trembling,
With his face buried in his knees,
As if hiding himself today
From the coming tomorrow.
As the words declaring Rama’s exile turned in his mind,
Taking his death to be certain,
As if in the middle of life and death,
He remained as it were, half-alive and half-dead.

In this manner, the night passed.
At the break of dawn, the day cast.
The copper-hued sun arose, bright
And came to see this terrible sight.

Canto 3

Introduction:

In this canto, Rama and Lakshman learn that Rama is to be exiled and Bharat is to be coronated as per Kaikeyi's scheme. The news is revealed indirectly as Dasharath castigates Kaikeyi in the presence of the brothers, asking how a son like Rama can be exiled to the forest. Rama is undisturbed by this revelation and indeed expresses his eagerness to travel to the woods and his joy at the fact that his brother Bharat will be receiving the kingdom. Lakshman however reacts far more explosively, threatening to kill Kaikeyi and Bharat and install Rama on the throne regardless of the king's promise. Rama exhorts his brother to give up his anger and accept, as he has, that this is the doing of fate.

At this point, Lakshman accepts Rama's exile but emphasizes that he will accompany his brother. The brothers lightly argue whether this would be appropriate but ultimately Rama acknowledges Lakshman's deep affection for him and accedes to his request. At the same time, Rama attempts to console his father. The two brothers then leave to tell their mothers of these events and meet Sumantra, the king's chief minister, on the way. They inform him of Kaikeyi's doings, leaving him in sorrow. The canto ends with the minister proceeding towards the king and the brothers towards their mothers.

This canto introduces us to the noble and potentially divine nature of Rama. Gupt implies early on that Rama is already aware of an impending turn of events which will keep him from receiving the kingdom. Rama hints as much when he tells his brother that he has received a

Canto 3

kingdom in seeing Lakshman. Even more dramatic is Rama's equanimity in hearing of his exile, especially when surrounded by his father's great sorrow and his brother's extreme rage.

Indeed, this equanimity is a value which Gupt sees as supremely admirable. Though fate may ordain joys and sorrow, a truly noble human, like Rama, would not be shaken by these temporary emotions. Perhaps Gupt felt that such a message of even-headedness would be well suited for a country under the reign of a foreign power, especially with the impending rise in tensions from the drive for independence.

Directly contrasting with this is Lakshman's desire to fight back. He embodies the red-blooded energy of the *kshatriyas* or warrior clan. The idea of allowing fate to decide events is anathema to Lakshman. He represents one of the conflicts inherent in Hindu spirituality. On one hand, one's fate is predestined. On the other hand, this predestination is based on one's past *karma* or actions. There is an ambiguity present about how much one can influence and impact the events surrounding one's self.

But perhaps the conflict is not over whether one can influence an outcome but whether one should be so attached to the outcome to the point that they'd wish to influence it. For Rama, the kingdom is insignificant, worth no more than a blade of grass. To wage war for a kingdom would be folly. This too is a crucial aspect of Hindu spiritual thought. All material wealth vanishes in time and is thus not worthy of such passionate attachment. From giving up this attachment, the noble and admirable equanimity of Rama can be attained.

Canto 3

Where the rain-clouds of the coronation were gathering,
And all were taking delight, like peacocks.¹
But instead, the result saw a rain of stones
And all who had gathered remained as they were.
What will be done and when, only Rama knows
Of his fantastic doings, only he knows!
But where is the fantasy? Come and see
Become true yourself by singing this story.

Taking leave of his beloved, the valorous Lakshman
Immediately came to the presence of Rama.
Rama brought him close, pressed him to his heart
And said “indeed I have received a kingdom here!”
Hearing this, Lakshman became hesitant
And his gaze dropped immediately.
Bound by fear, he could not say anything,
And attempted to understand what would be his fate.
Then the joy-filled Rama said,
“Come, let us pay our obeisances to our father.”
With Lakshmana behind him, and Rama ahead,
Indeed the fortune of the earth arose as they walked!
As if within the courtyards of Ayodhya
The divine healers² had appeared!
Treading softly on the Earth like lotus petals,
The two went to their stepmother’s palace.

At that moment, regaining consciousness, their father
Said, “Oh Rama, oh son, oh virtuous one!”
Hearing his name uttered so longingly,
Rama was struck and advanced there quickly.
Along with his brother, he became anxious
And stood across from his father.
The king’s condition was dire and dreadful
And Kaikeyi, like ill fate, stood nearby.
Like an unnatural cloud, she was looming
As if the moment of the great deluge was approaching.
The king remained silent as if in a dream,
And then suddenly howled out, “Oh Rama!”
Then Rama said, “Oh father! What is it?”

¹ The image of peacocks dancing joyfully in the rain is a common trope in Hindi and Indian literature.

² *Sura-vaidhya* literally translates to the demigod healers and is likely a reference to the *Ashwini Kumaras* who are twin gods known for their healing powers as well as their beauty. The author here is highlighting the beauty of the duo of Rama and Lakshman by comparing them to these twin gods.

Canto 3

Standing here is your Rama! What is the matter?"
Why have you become silent again? Speak,
Rise, command me, open your eyes!"
Hearing these words, the king's mind jolted
But along with this, his heart palpitated.
He opened his eyes, the lids of which had swollen,
And remained looking on, saying nothing!
Seeing this state of their father,
Like a boat trapped in a whirlpool,
They both looked at the ground
And with great difficulty, they restrained themselves.
Rama then extended his gaze
And looked towards his stepmother Kaikeyi.
He said, "Mother, what is this? Let me hear
So I can remove this thorn that torments my lotus-like father!"
"Listen oh Rama! The thorn is me!
What else should I say? Thus, I say naught."
With this, Kaikeyi fell silent once again,
And Rama remained unspeaking, fielding this blow.
Then Lakshman said, "Mother! Why have you fallen silent?
Thorn-like, why do you pierce his heart such?
Do not the cause of our father's sorrow, know us to be
Devoted to our father, equal to Bhaargava!"³

That moment, the king found some strength
Through the committed devotion of his sons.
Extending his arms restlessly,
He rose, but his feet stumbled.
Wearing silence and wailing as a gemmed necklace,
He was comforted by Rama and Lakshman.
As if he had given up the support of truth
And coronated Rama anyways!⁴
The king brought them to his heart and said,
"Trust has wronged me!"
Kaikeyi looked on, her brows furled
In anger, increasingly resembling two scabbards.
Grasping Rama's face and turning it towards her,

³ Here Lakshman references the story of Bhaargava or Parashurama who, upon his father's orders, beheaded his own mother. Somewhat menacingly, Lakshman warns that the devotion he and Rama have towards their father rivals that of the famed Bhaargava.

⁴ There are two ways of reading this. Perhaps the love with which Rama is comforting his father is enough to make him give up his dedication to the truth and coronate Rama despite his promise. Additionally, it is possible that Gupt is comparing the image of the tears of the weeping king pouring down onto his son to the *raajya-abhishek* or ceremonial bathing of the newly coronated king.

Canto 3

The king gathered his bearings and said,
“What have you embarked upon doing today?
Oh unfortunate one! Look! What will anyone say?
He will stay for fourteen years in the forest?
Oh fie on your power! You are destroying the future!
You are destroying the bond of Bharat and Rama!
This will be no kingdom for Bharat!
He will be the offering to flame of the citizenry’s rage!
I will die, and then you will repent,
This will be the only fruit you reap!”
With this outburst, the king was overwhelmed
And the floodgates of the river of sorrow burst!
Again, he began repeating Rama’s name
And Rama too understood all that had happened.
His stepmother became a frightening storm
And though dark as a rain cloud,⁵ Rama remained calm.
Seeing his father like the Earth parched by drought,
His pure words flowed forth like rainwater.
“Oh, if this is the matter, then why the unease?
What difference is there between Bharat and me?
Dear Bharat will fulfill his duty here,
And I will fulfill my duty in the forest!
Father! This much distress over this matter?
And to excoriate my mother this much?
No other shall wield the authority of the kingdom,
Indeed our greatness will be on display!
In all ways, the people will be satisfied!
Here the fears of the citizens
And there the troubles of the sages
Both shall be destroyed!
I myself was meant to leave and roam
And rid the Earth of its fear for the sake of *dharma*!⁶
Maintain your courage, your appearance,
Will I not maintain your command?
This is ideal for me, do not be worried,
I will even fall in fire if you so tell me!
You are my father! My most venerated!

⁵ Here, the author plays on the phrase *ghanshyaam* which literally translates to “dark as a raincloud” and is a name for Rama or Krishna based on their dark-bluish hue. Rama’s stormcloud-like appearance is highlighted in contrast with his calmness. His calmness in turn contrasts with the tempestuous behavior of his stepmother.

⁶ As prelude to the birth of Rama, the Earth, in the form of a cow, had come to the refuge of Lord Vishnu, fearing for the fate of *Dharma* or righteousness on Earth as it had come under assault by the tyranny of Ravana. This formed the purpose of Rama’s birth and it is this predestined purpose which Rama refers to now.

Canto 3

All my duties have become joyful now!
I have just taken leave of everyone,
Why should I tarry and delay the auspicious ceremony?
The Lord then became silent, expecting an order,
And the bound king became exceedingly disturbed!
“Oh Rama, why did you become my son?
Is this the role of a father?
Oh writer of my fate!”
And he could say no more.
He fainted, he could bear the burden no longer.
Indeed, the Earth sank as if in sorrow below him.
Yet, feeling no pity remained that woman of sin.

All the while, Lakshman watched as if in a dream.
Unmoving, as if he was just an image of himself.
Taking all of this to be some sort of fiction,
He said, “Mother, is all this correct?”
Then Kaikeyi said, “what can I say?
Were I to say anything, Renuka’s fate would be mine!⁷
Here I stand, be the killer of your mother!
If Bharat was here, then I would explain.”
Like a lit flame, Lakshman burned,
His lips trembled, clouds of the impending doomsday.
“Oh! You still feign motherliness!
To whom do you warn of Bharat?
I would kill Bharat and you too!
I would not let you rest even in hell!
I would not leave alone a single enemy,
I would not spare a brother or a sister.
Quickly, call all your supporters
Whose futile dreams you see.
They will all see Lakshman’s strength today!
Oh schemer, see now the fruit of your scheme!
Would Bharat host any sympathy for this?
Will a member of the clan of the sun fall in sin?
Oh, such a righteous son was born to you,
Like a lotus emerging from mud.
Oh what would he do if he were here today?
Verily, he would die of shame!
Taking you to be a snake who devours her young

⁷ Again, this is a reference to the story of Bhaargava who beheaded his mother Renuka upon his father’s command.

Canto 3

He would live only at night, hiding his face.
But who is he to take the kingdom?
And who is the king to give the kingdom?
It lies in the hands of the citizens of the town!
And only the oldest of us obtains the crown!”

Hearing these words, Kaikeyi said nothing,
Leaving the knot tied on her poisonous lips.
She was helpless and bore his words,
As if she had cut off her tongue, she remained silent.
Looking at his younger brother
And stopping him, the lord spoke,
“Stop Lakshman! What are you saying?
Contain this flow of emotions flooding forth!”
“Stop?” said Lakshman, “Remain silent?
Remain silent and bear this injustice?
Impossible, that can never happen!
Only as our clan’s traditions deems shall happen!
Come, sit upon the throne in the palace
And let that happen which the assembly agrees upon.
Let her, who has created all this trouble, come too,
And if they say, I will return all this land to her!
Lakshman is standing beside you,
Let all your enemies come and die here.
Even the immortals are not undefeatable for me,
What task is difficult for me, let me hear!
Naught will have to be done by you,
I will advance forth myself!
Give me your command and see for yourself,
Harbor no doubt in your mind my lord!
Here I stand, your servant Lakshman,
Let the entire world stand before me!
The valorous do not lose their rights
And only rightful orders should be heeded.
Standing there, a mother become snake,
Inhuman and unfortunate.
I shall break her venomous fangs even now,
Do not stop me, only then will I be calm.
And he who has become a slave to this monster,
through whom she is exiling you,
He is our father...otherwise what shall I say?
Why do you stay silent, lord tell me pray?”

The Lord said, “Enough! Be silent!

Canto 3

You speak such wayward words!
At whom do you rage thus, tell me?
Listen to what I say, do not be restless.
Knowing me to be departing for the forest today,
Do not blemish your mind, blinded by affection.
If our father had exiled you,
Would you torment him thus?
This father of ours, who dies for righteousness,
Who is fulfilling his duty though it is undesirable,
Being sons of that standard of our clan,
Will we rule at the cost of our righteousness?
You know my nature well,
Opposed to such stubbornness. And yet you protest?
The words of elders should not be debated.
Like a crown jewel, they should be borne graciously.
He cannot give up his word and live,
And yet his love for us does not allow him to say so.
Oh Lakshman, do you insult such a godly father?
Have you come here drunk upon something today?
To be free from our debt to our father is difficult.
And this kingdom is to me no more than a blade of grass.
Control your emotions, do not display this stubbornness!
Know this entire universe to be your kingdom!
Know this to be the desire of fate,
And as fate desires for one, only that can happen.
I have been given a great honor today, come
Bid me farewell, with love from the heart.”
Extending his dark tree like arms,
Left and right towards his younger brother
As if clasping in his arms the entire universe
Basking in the shadow of forgiveness, absorbed
Melting away all of Lakshman’s anger,
Instead, bursting forth was a sudden stream of tears.
Before he could fall to Rama’s feet,
The Lord had caught him in his arms.
The inseparable brothers, like sun and moon, met
Appearing like the new moon’s shade in all four directions
The aged king then began to cry like a child,
Taking his sons to be lost to him forever.

Here, the younger brother, long-armed,
Said to his elder as he grasped his feet,
“That which you see most fit shall be done,
may a new Ayodhya be made of the forest, my lord.

Canto 3

Fate may have its strength, be that as it may
But should not man have his strength, to make his own way?
What has happened, of that I know nothing,
All I understand is what you take to have happened.
But bid farewell? Farewell from whom, bid to whom?
I had no expectation of this lord!
If you wish to kill me, do so!
Take my very life if you will!
Lord, keep me as your servant eternally,
Do not relegate me to staying here at home.
Is this Ayodhya or its cemetery?
Shall I stay here and attend to ghosts?"
"Oh what is this?" said the lord, "what is this?
You take farewell to be separation?
Does this lack of composure suit you?
Listen, can that which is forever in the mind ever be far?
Your father and mother are here,
Brothers Bharat and Shatrughan are here!
Oh younger brother, it is appropriate that you stay here,
What is here cannot be found even in heaven!
I will have no discomfort in the forest,
I will live constantly with the saints and sages.
Look at your father, maintain your duty,
Oh he has fainted again, comfort him!"
The two tended to their father
Who was only aware of his impending death.
Kaikeyi was standing still but her mind fluttered,
"Is what Rama said the truth or deception?"

Gathering his bearings, the king somehow spoke,
To the restless Lakshman, he spoke
"Say again child! That which you had said first,
that outburst brought me happiness.
Oh I am no father of yours in reality!
(Is this how a father should shower affection?)
Yet you are a true son, oh fierce one!
Remove all my sorrows Lakshman!
With your valor, imprison me!
With steadfastness, perform the coronation!
You are selfless, maintain our values!
You will incur no blame, maintain the traditions of our clan!
Bharat is deserving of the kingdom in his own right,
But Rama is dearer to him than the kingdom!
Why should Bharat be deprived thus?

Canto 3

Forget this wayward woman's greed.
Listen oh Rama! You too maintain your duty,
Rescue your father from the jaws of death!
Do not heed my command today,
Does my distress not hold more sway?"

Hearing the words of the king, Bharat's mother became afraid.
What if Ram and Lakshman acceded?
Oh how can the fallen know the ways of the high-minded?
The fallen see only their own ways in others.

The lord said, "Father! Alas! This much delusion?
Think, what a betrayal it will be!
I, your son, and the command, yours.
If I were not to heed it, what would the world say?
All they will see is deceit! And
Surely this will be unjust for our mother!
The values of our race will crumble,
We will become wanderers of a dishonorable path.
Where, oh where is all that composure from when
You had sent me with the sage Kaushika.⁸
May Lakshman's childishness be forever forgotten,
May our clan be freshly filled with glory!
Mother too, forgive Lakshman!
Do not maintain this image of him in your mind!
And you brother, despair no more!
Oh, our father has lost consciousness again.
As long as I remain here,
Our father's attachment will continue to grow.
Thus I shall depart from here promptly,
Comfort our father as I take leave of our loved ones."
With grace, he gave over his crown
And the lord left, taking the dust from his father's feet.
His younger brother followed in his very tread,
Leaving all behind and choosing to serve instead.

The lord said "Brother please listen!
Look at our father, don't be stubborn!"
Then Lakshman said, his palms together reverently

⁸ When Rama and Lakshman were quite young, the sage Kaushik (also known as Vishvamitra) approached Dasharath and asked to take the two princes with him to the forest in order to protect his sacrificial rites and defeat demons who were troubling him. Though the idea of giving up his young sons was initially off-putting, Dasharath acquiesced and offered his sons to the sage's service respectfully.

Canto 3

“When has this servant ever stayed here, leaving you?
Shall I remain here and watch you depart for the forest?
Oh do not fault me, your own, like this!
You alone are my mother, my father, my brother,
My fate is forever written by you alone!
If you say stay, stay I will,
I would bear even the pains of hell!
If the soul was perishable, it would not bear this,
But will the body be able to remain, burning in separation?
In art, play, sport, hunting, theater,
Courtly dialogue, judging and justice,
Whom you have kept by your side?
From him today you have been snatched away!
Oh, will all grind to a halt here without me?
Nay, even the weight of my body I can’t bear (without you).
You alone are my all, inside and out.
Are the forest’s fruits and leaves not suitable for me?
If you do not take me along today,
if you leave, shunning me lord,
I will not stop you and indeed if I live, I shall remain here.
Having drank nectar for so long, I will drink poison too.”
Saying thus, Rama’s brother choked with tears,
A lotus frozen by the morning frost.
The twin suns of the sun dynasty stood face-to-face,
And the Gods knew not whether to delight or despair.
Seeing his younger brother desolate and tearful,
Would not the compassionate one be stirred?
“Oh, do not cut me thus Lakshman, come
eternally remain my other half.
Today remains as today were
And my kingdom is not lost even in the forest!
Brother, none is more beloved to me than you
My kindhearted companion, advisor and servant, this all you are!”
For Lakshman, it was as if his life had been preserved
And for Kaikeyi, it was as if she had found refuge.
No one was to remain or retain against their will,
Indeed this is gratification for all.
The two brothers left from there then
But what words were these, from where did they come:
“Leaving me here in the mouth of death thus
son why have you left, turning your face from me?”
Said the lord, “Brother, what do I do?
How can I rid this sorrow of our father?
His patience and forbearance has been destroyed,

Canto 3

This separation should not torment him such.”
Increasing his stride bit by bit,
He took one deep breath and exhaled.
His breath left him not for his benefit,
But with it, the trap which bound him there released.
The two otherworldly ones continued on, calmly,
As if they had just rested.
Of that lake-like royal courtyard, they were the royal swans
Of the sun’s dynasty, they were the very ornaments.
Bowing their heads first then gazing upon them,
The servants looked on as they walked.
Though they had left after all this had happened,
Still they looked rejuvenated.

As they wandered into their mother’s palace,
“Live long, be blessed” such was heard.
Taking it to be Sumantra’s⁹ arrival, the brothers halted.
“Oh uncle!” they bowed humbly.
The great minister replied “Brothers! Where were you?”
Rama told him where they had been and said
“Our father is becoming quite restless,
please meet him quickly, he is losing his composure.”
Hearing this, the minister was quite disturbed,
All he could muster was “why?”
To simply inquire about the inauspicious is difficult,
The fear is unclear, what has and has not transpired here?
Though he lacked composure, he asked “what has happened?
Have misfortunes touched us even now?
Even in my mind, I was concerned
Why does the king still lie in slumber today?
Should I call the healer or see for myself?
What to tell his attendants, proceeding to royal assembly?
Be well, for these obstacles are hidden thus.
But why have you returned and come here?”
Said Lakshman, “hear us sire,
Contemplate what is appropriate in your heart.
Our step-mother has sent us to the forest,
Taking the kingdom to be inherently Bharat’s.”
As a traveler suddenly shrinks back upon
Seeing a great snake in his path,
So too the minister was left dumbfounded,
Stopped breathless and exhausted.

⁹ Sumantra is Dasharath’s chief minister.

Canto 3

Gathering himself, finally he spoke thus,
“Ah, a hailstorm on my fields alone,
from where did this wind of ill-mindedness blow
Which has tossed into turmoil this ship at its shore?
Bharat, being a true son to a father like Dasharath,
Will not take the kingdom, nay he will refuse it!
Without knowing Bharat’s mind,
It is futile to leave for the forest thus.
Who knows what fate finds acceptable?
Stay, shall I see what the matter is?
I will not halt you on your path of righteousness,
However, let me understand this matter to its core.”
With no expectation of a reply, Sumantra halted his tears
And proceeded to the king with haste, churning all the while inside.
“Oh!” saying only this, Rama was left watching him,
and Lakshman, darling of the world, was left watching Rama.

Then valorous Rama went to meet his mother,
His breath heavy like thunder.
Behind him followed his brother
Like *Ashwin* is *Bhaadra’s* follower.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Bhaadra* (*Bhaadrapad*) and *Ashwin* are the 6th and 7th months of the Hindu calendar respectively.

Canto 4

Introduction:

This canto leads us into Rama's actual departure for the forest. It begins with a description of Kaushalya, Rama's mother, and Sita, Rama's wife, as they perform their daily prayers. The brilliant and effusive description of the two marks a strong contrast with the dark turn of events which the past two cantos described. This change is made even more striking due to Gupt's change in meter as the lines of this canto are shorter, and the pace quicker.

Rama and Lakshman arrive and break the news of Rama's exile and Bharat's impending coronation. Kaushalya takes this to be a joke at first but as she sees Lakshman crying, she realizes this dire announcement is unshakably real. Her reaction is that of a mother. Not only does she lament the loss of her son to the forest, but she places no blame on Kaikeyi for wanting the advancement of Bharat. She simply wishes to beg Kaikeyi to allow Rama to stay in Ayodhya. As Kaushalya proposes this idea, Sumitra, Lakshman's mother, storms in. She echoes the blustery attitude and rhetoric of her son and exhorts Lakshman to fight back. Lakshman again proclaims his willingness to do so and Rama again opts for tranquility and non-confrontation.

As all in the room come to accept that Rama's exile is imminent, Urmila and Lakshman engage in a wordless exchange in which it becomes clear that Lakshman shall accompany Rama to the forest and Urmila shall stay behind in Ayodhya. Sumantra, the king's chief minister, arrives and again attempts to convince Rama to stay, citing the king's true desire and the will of the people.

Canto 4

Rama reiterates his joy on Bharat's behalf and firmly states his intention to depart for the forest, requesting the bark cloth appropriate for a forest-dwelling ascetic.

As Sita reaches for bark cloth, displaying her intention to accompany Rama to the forest, both Kaushalya and Rama object and present a litany of challenges and dangers present in the forest. Sita is undeterred, highlighting how she and Rama are one and how the fears of the forest are not fearsome at all. Rama relents and Kaushalya offers her heartfelt benediction as Rama and Sita prepare to depart.

What shines through in this canto is the level of diversity afforded to the tone, rhetoric, actions, and emotions to the various female characters depicted. Kaushalya's lamentation is desperate but not hysterical. As highlighted above, she is able to understand Kaikeyi's motivation in asking for Bharat's coronation. Not only does this highlight Kaushalya's empathy, but it is in keeping with Gupt's active attempts to avoid painting Kaikeyi with a traditionally negative brush. Gupt's depiction of Sumantra is even more revolutionary as she storms into the scene, fierce and determined. She boldly claims her status as a *kshatraani* or warrior queen. She claims that the same codes of conduct that dictate the proud and royal men of the warrior clan are applicable to women as well. Thus, Sumitra is loath to join Kaushalya's proposed alms-seeking from Kaikeyi. Instead, she exhorts Rama and Lakshman to take what is rightfully theirs. This is a far cry from a depiction of women as passive characters, accepting what has been ordained by fate or promised by the king.

Canto 4

The depictions of Urmila and Sita are equally compelling. Kaushalya's and Rama's objections to having Sita leave for the forest are based primarily on a view of the forest as being too harsh for a woman to endure. She responds by proclaiming her inner strength which allows her to see the terrors of the forest as beautiful and unthreatening. While Rama hints at the ways in which the forest will be beneficial to him, Sita spells out such a situation. If Rama approaches the prospect of the forest with a tranquil and accepting outlook, Sita approaches it with unbound optimism. Perhaps her boldest claim is that Rama cannot fulfill his duty to his father and to Kaikeyi alone; he is but her other half and would be only half present in the forest without Sita.

Whereas Sita's reaction is articulated, Urmila's is muted. She puts her fate in the hand of Lakshman who, in turn, is primarily concerned with Rama's wellbeing. Lakshman believes that if Urmila were to accompany them, it would unnecessary burden Rama. That Urmila perceives this wordlessly is a credit to her intellect. That she accepts it is a credit to her strength.

While Urmila's fate is described in a minimalistic fashion, there is a level of beauty and strength in that minimalism. Both Sita and Lakshman state their cases for accompanying Rama in affectionate but passionate terms. The reactions of Dasharath, Kaushalya, and Sumitra to this turn of events are equally passionate. But Urmila's reaction is one of understanding and accepting. Even as her heart stirs towards the end of this canto, she has the wherewithal to soothe it, firmly persuading it to remain unattached. This detachment and unimpassioned sacrifice, rivalling that of the divine hero Rama, is thus presented beautifully by Gupt. We are not told or instructed to admire Urmila. But a close reading of the text binds us to do so.

Canto 4

Sun to the flowergrove of compassion
First of the poets, gem-store of virtues¹
Father of poetry, grant me this wish
With *bhaava* make me filled and lavish.²

With a beautiful desire in heart,
Travelling an exquisite royal path,
To see the forest of penance,
Indeed this is ideal for man.³

Blissfully, having taken her daily bath
Adorned with yellow cloth,
Immersed in piety,
Engrossed in worship,
Embodying affection was
The tender Kaushalya,
Overcome with joy,
With Sita standing by.
The studded hem of her veil,
Lightning, from the cloudlike fabric,
A halo from her moonlike face,
The unsurpassable extent of charm.
Ah! A storehouse of fragrance!
Ah! A face, flawless, lotus-like!
Ah! Lips, like exquisite leaves!
Ah! Teeth, white like jasmynes!
Locks like a playing snake,
Eyelids like flitting honeybees,
Glimpses of her forehead,
Like dew drops of beauty.
Her arms, round and fair,
Traced the path of her two eyes.
Fortune and marital bliss,
As if bound to her waist.
She was auspicious like Lakshmi,
And in her speech, Saraswati.
“Mother! What should I bring?”

¹ Gupt employs a truly beautiful pun on the term *ratnaakar* which literally translates to gem-store or jewel-mine but is also the former name of Vaalmiki, the mythical first poet of Sanskrit literature who is the author of the original Ramayana and the subject of this invocation.

² See explanation of *bhaava* in translator’s preface.

³ Gupt extols the virtues of *sanyaasa* or renunciation here. *Sanyaasa* is considered to be the final stage of a pious person’s life when a householder gives up material wealth and retires to the forest for penance.

Canto 4

She asked time and again.
When and what Kaushalya needed,
Then and that Sita gave.
Now the *Aarati*,⁴ then the incense,
Sita would provide all these.
Her affection, displayed thus,
Truly suited and equaled her.
Today, filled with unmeasurable delight
Were the hearts of both!
Both were adorned so!
Like *Maina* and *Uma*!⁵
As if this was no longer Earth,
There was no sadness or pain!
Indeed, the wind here gives life,
What place is sacred like this?
Like the shore of lake, with nectar rife,
How otherworldly this place is!

At this time, the lord with his brother,
Arrived there, unbothered.
As he offered his obeisance,
His mother blessed him.
Smiling, Sita hesitated
Her eyes in a sidelong glance,
She veiled herself bashfully.
And colored herself in joy.
“Dear, bring a little *akshat* and *haldi*
And apply the *tilak*!”⁶ said Kaushalya.
“Live long my son! Come,
Take *prasaad*!”⁷ from the prayers.”

Lakshman thought then,
“Will she let him leave for the forest?
If the lord will leave even her,
Then what wealth will he take along?
Oh Kaikeyi, why did you not die?
Why did you not fear the world?”
Lakshman took in a deep breath

⁴ The *aarati* is a ceremonial presentation of lamps waved in front of the deity during a Hindu prayer.

⁵ *Uma* or *Parvati* is one of the foremost goddesses in the Hindu pantheon. *Maina* is her mother, the wife of the mountain-king.

⁶ This combination of colored powders and rice is applied to the forehead as a mark of auspiciousness.

⁷ Sanctified food offered to the lord and then taken as a blessing by the devotees.

Canto 4

And took shelter in his mother.

Then, the lord Rama spoke
Righteous, thunder-like,
“Mother! Today my wishes are fulfilled,
wishes aligned with the supreme good.
A life-sanctifying residence
In the forest, I have received.
I shall depart presently,
And Bharat shall rule here.”
His mother did not believe--at all!
And thus she felt no fear!
Yet Sita understood all,
For the lord would never lie.
A string of fear tugged her heart,
But Kaushalya did not look there.
Laughing she said, “Oh stop!
Don’t even speak such in jest!
Bharat shall take your right?
And send you to the forest?
That Bharat who is your brother?
Do you mean to scare me?
Lakshman, this brother of yours
He tests my patience!
Hey! Lakshman is crying!
Lord, what is happening?”

Her heart was struck with doubt,
Inauspicious dread arose.
“So these words of yours...are true?
Fate, fate! Such wretched doings!”
Tender-bodied, overcome with tremors,
Or perhaps the earth had shaken.
Sitting, as if she had fallen
Clenched up, as if encircled
Eyes filled, her world empty
Her mind and intellect inverted.
Taking Sita for support
She remained looking on.

The lord said, “Mother, fear not,
Be patient for this short period.
I will return home afterwards,
And in the forest too I will find joy!”

Canto 4

“Then what is this banishment?
What is this punishment in the forest?
For all, you are life’s treasure,
Whose cruelty is this?
Have you done something wrong
For such wrath to be incurred?
I will pray, repentant now,
And ask the lord for forgiveness.
With this only your first offense,
And my humble appeals,
Will not the lord forgive you?
Dear! What happened, tell me!
Or else, if you remain quiet,
Lakshman dear, you tell me!
My heart is hard indeed, fear not,
I have already heard the punishment.”

“Mother! This is nothing!
My brother is not at fault.
He is the remover of all faults!
He is the store of all virtues!
Can sin even touch him?
All virtues are attained by him.
He has given up his kingdom,
Has anyone sacrificed like this?
Yet to keep his father’s word,
Leaving all to lament,
To fulfill his stepmother’s wish,
He takes this path of the forest.”

“Understood, I’ve understood,
This is Kaikeyi’s policy.
I have no qualms about the kingdom,
There is no distinction between Ram and Bharat.
Kaikeyi shall receive the kingdom,
And give it to Bharat.
Blessed is her love for her son,
Stubborn indeed is her heart.
I have no desire for the kingdom,
I burn not over that matter.
But my Rama should not go to the forest!
Let him stay somewhere here.
I shall fall at her feet

Canto 4

And only after saying this shall I stir,
'The tree of Bharat's rule shall not shake,
But I ask for Rama as my alms!'"

"No! No! This will never be!
Leave this talk of supplication!"
Just as Rama's mother had paused,
A new voice rang out!
All looked on surprised
As Sumitra appeared there.
Her daughter-in-law Urmila alongside,
Her words punctuated with sobs.
Seeing Sumitra's arrival,
The lord and his brother bowed.
Sumitra said, "Live long,
Drink the nectar of good fame!"
Like a lioness, that *Kshatriya* woman
Roared as she said,
"Begging alms from your equals?
Such a desire should be banished!
So long as blood flows in your chest,
Noble sentiments should remain strong!
Having received teachings apt for our clan,
Why shall we beg for alms?
It is forbidden to gain through alms!
But indeed, one can earn through arms!
I shall not take someone else's share,
And I shall not sacrifice my own!
The valorous do not give up what is theirs
Nor do they take what belongs to others.
I am the mother of the valorous!
Begging for alms and death are one to me.
Rama! Will you remain calm?
Will you bear this injustice?
I shall not bear it! Lakshman, will you?
Why are you calm in this moment?"

"Mother, what shall I do, tell me.
What is there that I can't do!
If my brother had allowed it,
The traitors would be long dead!
If even now he commands,
I shall surely foil their plans."

Canto 4

Lakshman looked at the lord,
But there was no change there.
Instead he said, "Halt brother,
And hear me mother!
If I do not leave for the forest today,
Upon whom shall you lay hands?
Upon our revered father or mother?
Or upon a Bharat-like brother?
And for what? To earn a kingdom,
Insignificant like a blade of grass?
Mother's desire and my father's word,
Shall I ruin both, a cancer to them?
Shall I give up this honor,
And sell righteousness to earn wealth?
Mother! What should I do, you alone tell me,
Do not be so restless thus!
Only the earned can be sacrificed,
And in this I do not lose my right!
Your Rama is not powerless!
And fate is not displeased with me.
But such anger is of no use.
Dharma is utmost, not wealth or abode!
Who has done what injustice,
To warrant such outbursts of anger?
Mother desired for her son to ascend,
The king desired to stay true to his word,
Should I be angry with mother Kaikeyi?
Or should I neglect my duty as a son?
Then who should I fear?
I can even turn my rage on you!
Brother Bharat is not unworthy,
And the kingdom is not only mine to enjoy,
And yet Bharat is mine after all,
And all this is a dream!
I have been given great importance,
To engage in such sacrifice.
Mother! Give me some grace,
That Bharat flourishes, this boon grant me."

That gem of the Raghu clan fell silent,
Bright like the blazing sun.
Where did that cloud of rage go?
A new luster shone through.
As the hearts of all melted,

Canto 4

And the light shone through all pores.
Round and large like pearls,
Drip drip-- tears dropped.

Sita thought in her mind,
"The forest will now host heaven,
I shall uphold righteousness,
I shall too live in the forest.
With a slight wink of the eyes,
From her strange wonderful eyes,
She glanced towards the lord,
Appearing most heartfelt and loving.
To accompany him!
Sita the most virtuous
arrived upon this wish,
As all her pores arose!

Lakshman's eyes did not rise,
His eyelids remained clamped.
Yet the idea in his mind remained,
The image of Urmila did not stir.
Standing there in his heart,
She asked again and again,
"What should I do? Come or stay?
Ah! What else shall I say today?"

Oh what a tender face,
Like a dewy lotus facing the sun.
Lakshman thought to himself,
"How to tell her to stay or to come?
If she were to come along,
Then she will add to our concerns
And my lord will be burdened!
He may even leave me behind!
No no, I won't speak of this,
Stay stay, oh beloved, stay!
This too, for my sake, bear!
What else shall I say, tell me!"
Lakshman thus became bereaved,
And Urmila overcome with love.
She understood everything,
And, overcome thus, she accepted.
Upon Sita's shoulders, (Urmila's)
Tears showered drop by drop

Canto 4

Adorned thus with misty pearls,
Sita said to her softly,
“Sister, this is a time for composure,”
Urmila said “Now all I have is the lord”
Sita said. “Yes sister,
But the lord is everywhere, home or away.”

What was Kaushalya doing?
Bit by bit, she gathered herself.
She could not cut the lord’s words,
No such tactic occurred to her.
Sumitra had first been crazed,
But slowly she became calm.
Standing, not stirring at all
Kaushalya spoke:
“Go then son to the forest!
Earn the wealth of righteousness!
With which honor you leave,
Return with that same pride!
May your father’s word be kept,
And your mother’s goal achieved.
At home, may peace pervade,
In this clan, may radiance shine.
Had I any good deeds,
Would this calamity occur?
Still, if I have any, may they protect you
May the Gods always be propitious to you!
What else should I say to you,
Even in the forest, grow like a tree!
Even so, I have this to say,
Stay amongst the sages!
He who I had held in my lap!
Who brings light to my heart!
Oh Sumitra, he leaves to go
Where ferocious beasts roam!
Is this an act of honor?
Or do I give him away forever?
Sacrifice is his wealth alone,
But my heart is a mother’s!
Ah! How should I keep patience!
Will I die of worry?
Even if I were to die like this,
I would not find any solace!”

Canto 4

Then Sumitra said this,
“Sister, do not be restless thus!
Hope will keep us alive!
This exile will end in reunion!”
Then she said to Rama,
Who was there only shortly now,
“Dear Rama! So be it!
Whatever fruit there may be for this!
With your heart so uplifted,
To where the Himalayas can not reach,
You took birth as a human
And blessed this Earth’s soil!
I too say, go! Take Lakshman too
And make him yours.
Bear all with composure,
Remain lion-like in your ways!
Lakshman! Most fortunate are you,
Delighting in your elder brother!
May he be your heart, though your body in the forest!
May he be your wealth, though your person in the forest!”
Lakshman’s pores arose in joy,
His heart too arose the same.
Having received his mother’s order too,
But whose heart stirred here?

Said Urmila, “Oh heart,
Be not an obstacle in your beloved’s path.
Today, self-interest is filled with sacrifice!
May your passion be disattached.
Do not be filled with restlessness,
Nor trampled sorrow’s weightiness.
When such nectar of brotherly-love pours forth,
A heavenly stream does form on this Earth!”

Present was that lifelong love,
Sita, who was still quiet.
What could she say, overcome with love?
Where there is sunlight, the shadow must go!

At that time, overcome with grief,
Sumantra the minister arrived there.
He too was like family,
Attached to them unlike any other.
As the lord advanced towards him,

Canto 4

Tears overflowed followed by words:
“Rama! Ah what shall I say now?
All was in order and then it was ruined!
Seeing your impending exile,
And the rule of Kaikeyi’s son,
Which the citizens want no part of,
Perhaps the flags of revolt arise?
The king’s condition is known to you,
As is Kaikeyi’s wicked mind.
In such strange and dire conditions,
Still you have prepared for the forest?
Do you not recognize your father’s desire?
Do you not value the citizens’ wishes?”

The lord said, “It is not that!
Oh sire, what is unknown to you?
Are desires greater or *Dharma*?
In which lies the greater auspicious duty?
What rebelliousness rests in the people?
It is simply their attachment to me!
What have I done for any of them,
That Bharat would not be able to do?
To me, their castigation of Bharat
Would strike like poison-tipped arrows.
An insult to him is mine too,
And the people will see this love.
Oh he is my brother,
And Kaikeyi too is my mother!”

Now Sumantra could say nothing at all,
But neither could he remain calm!
He stood there, mouth agape,
Then, slowly, slowly he spoke:
“I know not whether to cry
Or be enveloped in bliss,
Ram! Be blessed!
May we be gifted with inner strength.
You are not foreign to this Earth!
Nor are you distinct from us!
But inside, you are utterly unique!
In this clan of birds, a majestic *koel*!
Your inner-self is otherworldly,
Where day always shines!
The immortals descend to Earth,

Canto 4

To see this display of humanity by you!
If indeed you are to stay in the forest,
The king had this to say:
“Sumantra, take the chariot,
Deliver my sons there and return,
When Bharat returns then,
If I have survived till then,
I will grant him the kingdom,
And myself retire to the forest”

Everyone took a deep breath,
As if to comfort themselves.
The lord said “then tarry not!
Have the chariot prepared.
All that is left is to wear the bark cloth,
To become a true dweller of the forest.
May all that is *raajasik* here remain,
In the woods, a *saatvik* garb I shall maintain.”⁸

Sobbing, Sumantra departed,
And fresh bark cloth was brought.
First, two soft palms extended,
Or thousand-petalled lotuses and stalk?
Quietly Sita, as those around her cried
Washing their faces with tears.
“*Bahu! Bahu!*”⁹ Kaushalya shrieked!
Both her eyes filled to the brim.
“Avert your hands, this is bark!
And your palms of utmost softness!
If it were to even touch them,
Your hands would certainly peel!
Kosala’s daughter-in-law, darling of Videha!¹⁰
Leaving me, where do you go?

⁸ Hindu philosophy sees the world and all in it as being made up of three *gunas* or categories of attributes: *saatvik*, *raajasik*, and *taamasik*. They roughly correlate to peaceful, active, and dormant respectively although this is a highly simplistic view. In this context, the excess of *rajoguna* or *raajasik* attributes that are associated with Rama’s princely duties are seen as being inappropriate for life in the forest. There, he will maintain a more *saatvik* lifestyle, as if befitting a renunciant or a forest-dwelling sage. Rama’s giving up of his princely garb for the humble bark cloth of a forest-dweller represents this shifting of *gunas*.

⁹ *Bahu* is an affectionate term for a daughter-in-law.

¹⁰ *Kosala* is another means of referring to Ayodhya although it specifically refers to the kingdom of which Ayodhya is the capital. *Videha* refers to the kingdom of Mithila, of which Sita was the princess before her marriage to Rama. Kaushalya’s implication in referring to Sita as the daughter and darling of these kingdoms is to contrast her royal upbringing and status with the unforgiving and harsh environment of the forest which she intends to dwell in.

Canto 4

Thorns line the paths of the forest,
But you are a tender lotus of the lake!
Ah fate! To whom are you so cruel?
Stop, stop, Rama! Stop her!
What, will she dwell in the forest?
Heat, rain, and snow, will she bear?
Oh leave this tale of myriad sorrows,
And all the torments of the forest--
When the tempest arrives, in its sway,
This courage, it shall blow away!"

But as Sita's thought had already arrived,
There could be no room for doubt.
Still, the lord being instructed thus
Explained to his lifelong companion.
Of the hardships of the woods he told,
The threats and terrors, he laid bare,
Even hearing this, one's mouth runs dry
And aches and pains would jolt the body.
"To bear the heat, rain, and snow
To live amongst the bears and lions,
Is not the lot of a woman, nay
Hardly are humans found in the forest.
Food and drink, all is lost there,
Sleep at night, even this is rare,
For a forest dweller! But 'tis not all
To wash your face, your tears must fall."

This was but in vain, as Sita spoke,
Not stirred in the least by fear,
"Lord! Naught will be achieved with this,
For whose benefit do you speak thus?
Do not take me as separate from you,
Do not destroy our oneness thus!
Sorrow for you is mine to bear too
Joy for you is mine to share too.
Having joined you in happiness,
Shall I turn my back now in distress?
Who will even look upon such a person?
Even their death will be in silence."¹¹

¹¹ The implication seems to be that if one were to partake in joys with someone but leave them in a time of sorrow, society would treat this person as an outcast, to the point where even their death would be greeted with silence instead of mourning.

Canto 4

That pride with which, oh lord,
You do depart to the forest,
A share of that pride is mine too!
Do not forsake me thus today!
Your mother's goal and father's word--
without this other half of yours--
Can only half of you fulfill?
If you will, then the whole of you will!
I will benefit all, in the forest too
In the desert and the thick woods too!
All rules and rituals I will follow,
And wish for auspiciousness for all.
The love of mother and daughter-in-law,
My steadfast sister Urmila ,
She shall fulfill that love here,
Could I do so even as she does?
Is the forest fear and fear alone?
For me it is triumph and renown!
If one has true inner strength,
The jungle too has a propitious bent!
Where there are thorns, there are flowers too
As are trees giving shade.
There are fountains and *durva*¹² too,
And sweet roots, leaves, and fruits.
As if pastries lie around aplenty,
The fruits do seem so sweet!
Daughter-in-law's may fear fasting,
But do they not still fast ritually?¹³
Free is the sky, the winds free too,
The forest is the lord's open abode.
Abundantly flowing streams are there,
As if filled with the compassion itself,
Straw huts shaded with vines,
The motherly shade of the trees,
Enough to move the birds and beasts,
All will come together in harmony!
Lakshman with his bow in hand,
Shall provide for all our needs.
Day and night he will accompany us,

¹² This specific type of grass is often offered in Hindu prayer rituals, particularly for Lord Ganesha, who is believed to remove all obstacles.

¹³ It is common in Hindu tradition for a wife to fast for their husband's wellbeing. Sita indicates that though this fasting may be difficult, a devoted wife fasts anyways. Given that, Sita argues that going without food at times in the forest would be in line with what she is expected to do as a devoted wife.

Canto 4

He will protect me easily!
The sweet-tongued *koels* will sing,
And thunder shall play the drums,
The proud peacocks shall dance,
And I shall be queen of the forest!
Where the ferocious creatures roam,
Do the sages not reside there too?
That peace and calm is absent here,
The delusions of the world, lacking there.
My laps will be flower-filled
Surrounded by the sounds of streams
Minds filled with the absence of sorrows.
The forest will be filled with the seeds of joy.
Or else, if the forest has no such things,
It will have you, who will not be here.
It is this great thought of mine,
The husband alone is the wife's salvation.
Lord! Do not show me anymore fear,
For I have defeated *Yama*, god of death!
For a *Sati* to be at her husband's side,
In dire straits is no burning bride.¹⁴

Sita could speak no more,
Her voice, choked with emotion.
Captivated Urmila looked on,
Saying "Ah!" she fell with a thud.

Lakshman covered his eyes,
As all offered teardrops from theirs.
Sumitra exclaimed, "Dear daughter!
You lie on the ground today!"
"Sister, sister!" saying so frantically,
Sita began to fan her sister.
"Ah the fate that is mine today,
that is not to be yours!"
The mother's stood statue-like,
And the lord, ever righteous, perplexed.
Before that second, eons stood minute,
Then he spoke thus to Lakshman:

¹⁴ The term *Sati* initially referred to a wife who is supremely dedicated and devoted to her husband. Over time, this dedication came to include joining the husband's funeral pyre which led to this practice being eponymously named. Sita seems to be implying that for her to accompany Rama to the forest is no great feat for *sati's* like her have been known to accompany their husbands even into the cremation fire.

Canto 4

“Brother, taking my path,
Accompanying me needlessly,
Think even now just this,
How much you destroy by doing so?
With this stubbornness, dear brother,
Do not make me a cruel one!”
“Ah! Noble one, halt, stop!
Not this, speak not like this!
Seeing trouble, do we fear?
Or do we laugh in its face?
Where there is a sinless struggle,
There, a pure soul can be obtained!”

“Lakshman, you are truly ascetic,
Even in the forest, I remain a householder.
Dwellers of the forest, detached
Only you two are truly such!”
Then Sumitra said thus:
“Why question this resolve now?
As we are, so we will remain,
Though we may cry, we will bear!”

Taking her fainted daughter’s head,
Placing it in her lap, trembling,
Innocent mother Kaushalya,
Spoke, echoing out loudly!
“Oh Gods! Look down and see!
Do not avert your eyes!
Go dear son, so I’ve said
What has befallen, I’ve withstood!

If I manage to live—and I will continuously strive to live more
--for these fourteen years, then surely I will not die thereafter.
To see you three freely, for that I will maintain my patience,
And count my fortune to be filled with the wealth of the three worlds.

Fulfilled be your cause!
Achieved be your goal!
Rama! May your name be known!
Augmented be your righteousness!
Success be your very nature!
All be yours! And you, mine!”

Canto 4

Departure--towards the woods,
Or towards the hearts of men?
Oh, do not turn towards wealth,
Rama, go towards the people.

Canto 5

Introduction:

This canto begins with Rama expressing his regard for his preceptor Vashishta. Seeing him dressed in the garb of a sage, the sagely preceptor likens Rama to his own son. Rama then boards the chariot which will take him to the forest, only to see that the people of the city have surrounded it, refusing to let him leave. They express their anger with Kaikeyi and throw themselves in the path of the chariot. Rama calms the people with a high-minded speech who then give way. As the chariot departs, Rama then addresses the city of Saket with an effusive expression of affection. The trio spends their first night on the banks of the *Tamasaa* river.

The following day, Guha, the king of the Nishada tribe and a friend of Rama, greets the trio. He too is disheartened to hear of Rama's exile and is consoled by Lakshman. The next morning, Guha ferries the trio across the Ganga. After elegizing the sacred river, the three continue on to *Prayaag* where they meet the sage Bharadvaaj who advises them to take up residence in Chitrakut. Along the way, the flora and fauna of the forest are described beautifully and subjected to various fanciful metaphors by the travelers. After meeting the sage Valmiki, the trio arrives at Chitrakut where Lakshman builds a hut. Seeing their arrival, the local forest-dwellers arrive and welcome them magnanimously. Through the words of these forest-dwellers, Gupt presents a rustic but regal coronation of Rama as the metaphorical king of the forest and with this coronation, the canto comes to an end.

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As Rama departs for the forest, various opportunities arise for Gupt to showcase his command of spiritual knowledge as well as his ability to speak allegorically through the characters. He uses the occasions of long monologues or addresses by either Rama or Lakshman as mediums for these messages. Three examples are highlighted here.

First is Rama's address to the people of Ayodhya. It is notable for its allusions which allow Gupt to link his 20th century poem to the greater pantheon of Hindu scriptural literature. By referencing the story of the *Puranic Bharata* or *Jadabharata*, Gupt steepens Rama's speech and sacrifice in the heights of detachment as praised in the scriptures. *Jadabharata* was, in his first chronicled life, a knowledgeable and devoted king who had retired to the forest following his rule as is customary for a spiritual seeker. However, *Jadabharata's* spirituality was derailed as he grew extremely attached to an orphaned deer in the forest. Towards the end of his life, his attention and focus shifted from spirituality to the material deer and he died with the thought of the deer on his mind. As a result, he was reborn as a deer (as opposed to attaining salvation or uniting with the lord). Rama's steadfast lack of attachment to the kingdom thus embodies the required qualities of a true spiritual aspirant.

In a later life, *Jadabharata* was a renunciant who found himself carrying the palanquin of a king. Lost in his thoughts of the lord, his steps were uneven which led the king to chide him for his inadequacy. *Jadabharata* responded with a spiritual lecture par excellence which revealed his knowledge and nobility. Rama thus alludes to *Jadabharata* in order to indicate to the citizens that his brother Bharata, who has been derided by the people of Ayodhya, is an extremely

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knowledgeable and noble individual who would serve as a more than adequate king in his stead.

Additionally, by referencing the exploits of his forefathers, Rama links the glory of his city to the glory of its people and its former rulers. If Saket is taken to be a representation of Gupt's motherland of India, then Rama's speech is Gupt's sermon to the people of India, calling on them to act with nobility and spiritual strength worthy of the country's past and current leaders. Of note is the fact that Rama's speech begins with the phrase "rise, oh citizens, rise" which hearkens to Swami Vivekananda's famed call to the Indian people to "Arise! Awake!" both for the purpose of spiritual advancement and national freedom.¹ The fact that Rama references his lineage's connection to summoning the Ganga river, a symbol of India's beauty with spiritual connotations, further reinforces Gupt's spiritual nationalist message delivered through Rama's voice.

The closely related second speech is Rama's emotional address to the city of Saket itself. Here, Rama attributes a host of positive qualities to the city that has raised him. In keeping with the theme of the first speech, the qualities of the citizens and city are intertwined. In this speech, Gupt's nationalistic voice is even clearer but with a more emotional, affectionate tone. Rama's address to Saket strongly echoes Gupt's experience with nationalistic writing and falls within the genre of *desh-bhakti* or devotion to one's country. The linking of Rama's divine nature to

¹ (Bhuyan, 2003)

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Saket emphasizes the fact that Gupt sees his country (as Rama sees Saket) as being a deity worthy of worship.

Also of note is Rama's reference to his own divinity as an incarnation of Vishnu. One of the major differences between various retellings of the Rama story is whether Rama is depicted as a man or as a god. Valmiki's *Ramayana* depicts Rama as a man for the majority of the tale, allowing for the story to be about the incredible potential of a man who is true to *dharma*. On the other hand, Tulsidas's *Ramcharitamanas* is based on Rama's unquestionable divinity which allows for the text to be a devotional masterpiece. As Gupt attempts to balance both of these narrative purposes, illustrating the capacities of man as well as displaying his own devotion to Rama, he must also balance the depiction of Rama. While others allude to Rama's divinity, he himself does not acknowledge it until this point in the narrative and even here, he does so indirectly via metaphor.

Finally, there is Lakshman's discussion with Guha regarding the illusory nature of joy and sorrow. Specifically, the mention of *maya*, the force of delusion which leads humans to see the purportedly illusory material world as real, brings another aspect of Hindu spirituality into the poem. Here, Rama and Lakshman's equanimity is linked to understanding that gains and losses within the material world are impermanent and thus linking positive and negative emotions to them is folly. The ability to realize this can be achieved once one is "awake" as Lakshman is, both physically and metaphorically. This awakening is found in uniting the soul with Rama (again, fully representing divinity here) and by uniting joy in the material world to devotion.

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Having addressed the more ascetic qualities of spirituality such as detachment and sacrifice, Gupt now shows his ability to express an understanding and appreciation of the path of *bhakti* or devotion to the lord.

It is crucial that this discussion occurs between Lakshman, the noble prince of high caste and clan, and Guha, a tribal king who himself acknowledges his low social status. This marks the beginning of the spreading of *dharma* to the dwellers of the forest, which is one of the stated missions of Rama's exile. It is also reflective of caste dynamics in Hindu society. Specifically, we recall that Lakshman has been characterized as emotional and angry following Kaikeyi's manipulation of the king in preceding cantos. The shift towards an image of Lakshman as unbothered by the ups and downs of the material world is somewhat drastic and betrays a level of irony. Is it fair of him to instruct Guha in this manner? Is the mission of spreading *dharma* to the forest dwellers inherently a hypocritical one, based on preconceived notions of who has already recognized and implemented *dharma* and who hasn't?

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Goddesses of the forest, what celebration is this today,
Which you express so proud and gay?
I know, I know, today Rama is arriving in the forest
For that reason, you are adorned in joy, blessed!

Adorned with items suitable for an ascetic,
And a banner emblazoned with an image of the sun,
Seeing the royal chariot directly before him,
Rama again bowed to his *guru*.
From the tip of his toe, where the lord's head touched,²
To the topmost tuft of his hair³, goosebumps at every pore!
Vashishta said, "today I am replete with elation!
Having worn this bark, from student you have become son!"
The lord said, "This alone is ideal for your Rama,
For to my father, this is indeed a calamity.
You know of all, past, present, future; from your words
Some signs of the future are known to me too.
Whatever may be, today my subjects and family are restless,
And all that weighs on them is now yours to bear.
That my mother may see me again, to ensure she bears this,
Sire this is my first ask of you as your son."
Seeing this sentiment of that supremely steadfast one,
The eyes of the great Vashishta filled (with tears).
And he said, "Son, I too desire now--,
But no! For all's well-being lies in this:
The work of the gods to be done! For values to rise!
It would be unsuitable for me to be so perturbed!⁴
Rama, protector of the sages! Take up residence in the forest,
Destroy all obstacles and threats towards their practices!
With your purpose now attainable, relieve the Earth of its burden!
Reform the forest-dwellers, and make their ways like the nobles!"⁵

² A properly reverential bow to a *Guru* or one of that stature would indeed see the student (in this case Rama) touch his head to the very feet of their *Guru*.

³ Brahmins such as Vashishta are required to maintain a small braid or tuft of hair on their head known as the *shikha*.

⁴ The wise Vashishta seems to be moved by emotion, finding himself nearly expressing his desire for Rama to stay. However, he is well aware that the wellbeing of the Gods and of *dharma* is dependent on Rama leaving for the forest where he will carry out his life's purpose. Thus, this interrupted and slightly self-admonishing tone reflects how the selflessness of Rama's actions can touch and overwhelm even the most learned practitioners of self-control and detachment.

⁵ Vashishta summarily covers the main divine objectives of Rama's birth. The demons led by Ravana in the age of Rama have overthrown the Gods in heaven and oppose the practice of religious rites by the sages. The Earth is metaphorically weighed down by the burden of these atrocities. By providing protection to the sages of the forest and destroying the demons, Rama relieves this burden and allows for religiosity to be reestablished. The idea of

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“As you command!” saying so, Rama advanced forth,
Alighting his chariot like the rising sun over the mountains.
Sitting in the chariot, leaving behind the sobbing masses,
Along with Sita and Lakshman, Rama left for the forest.
On the path watered by the tears of his subjects,
The chariot moved hesitantly amongst the great crowd.
On its golden pinnacle, a banner with the rising sun,
Why did that standard of the north⁶ stand there?
As if saying, with its expressive swaying,
This moving temple of Saket’s god has departed!

Those who were ashamed to hear of Kaikeyi’s doing,
Were withered like the marrow of a febrile invalid.
Seeing Sita, the brides of the city were saved.
Then an emotional outburst poured forth!
On both sides, the city’s people thronged,
And maidens showered flowers along with tears.
Proclaiming praise to Rama, praise to *dharma*!
They proclaimed curses too at Kaikeyi’s doing.
“Where our Rama goes, so will we!
In the forest we will reside, a new city!
And may Bharat rule over the ants here!”
Thus the crowd of citizens raised this great uproar!

“Having stolen my lord’s kingdom, that cruel Kaikeyi,
Will she also steal the affection of the people?”
To communicate this thought to Sita,
Lakshman turned his eyes in that direction.
Sita was filled with an air of bittersweet emotion,
The virtues of her beloved enthralled her every pore!
Kaikeyi’s selfishness on one hand, Rama’s sacrifice on the other
There was supreme grief, and yet rapturous delight.
As they were during the time of the promised coronation,
Rama’s feelings remained just as soft and even.
Be it the summer or monsoons, the ocean remains the same,
Of this dignity, the Earth is forever a witness.
Replete with the highest *bhaava* of truth and righteousness,
Placating the crowd themselves as they went,
Eager to reach the forest, somehow they advanced

making the dwellers of the forest like the nobles represents a metaphorical spreading of moral and religious values which are exemplified by Rama to those who are unaware of them or actively opposed to them.

⁶ Relative to where Rama will be journeying, and indeed to India’s geography as a whole, Ayodhya is a northern location.

Canto 5

Lifted by their intentions, ascending the chariot.⁷

Resting their voices, the citizens turned back,
But were struck at that moment by the pangs of separation.
Again they went there, and turned back again.
Extending and receding like the waves of the ocean.
Addressing the people of the city with love,
Rama, smiling, spoke in a manner befitting the moment.
“Will you bid us farewell like this, crying as you do?
What? Will we not be returning here anymore?
Return home! When the time is right, so too will we.
Your love and sentiments, we shall carry with us!
Only they are escorted away in such sorrow
Whom will never be seen again in this world.”⁸

The crowd spoke up, “Oh sir! Do not say this!
Oh, when did we ever bid you farewell?
Rama! For king we have chosen you alone!
Do not leave like this, leaving our voices unheard.
Go, if it is so possible, trampling us in your wake!”
So saying, a great many lied down in their path.
The horses stood frozen, with their legs lifted
Understanding themselves opposed by this show of love.
(In the crowd) some lifted their chests, arms, and shoulders
Like shells propelled from the agitated waves of the sea.
He, whose voice in depth is akin to the great ocean,
That glorious Rama spoke, endowed with sorrow.
“Rise oh citizens, rise, give up this attachment.
Why do you make these mutinous entreaties?
Who is more beloved to me than you? Be not weak,
If you say, I will give up all that is mine.
Know our bond to be an eternal one,
As long as the sun rises in this world!
You are not subjects but my subconscious self,
Our joys and sorrows are but one now!
I shall never turn my back upon my *dharma*,
And that is why you all love me so.

⁷ There is a pun here on the term *manoratha* and *ratha*. *Ratha* refers to a chariot whereas *manoratha* refers to a deeply held intention or a goal; literally it indicates the idea of the mind ascending a chariot towards its goal. The implication seems to be that Rama’s closely held goals and purpose motivate him to reach the chariot through the upset masses who beg him to stay.

⁸ Rama playfully scolds the citizenry who bid the trio farewell in a state of sorrow by reminding them that such a tearful farewell should be reserved for when a corpse is transported to the cemetery in the final journey.

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But seeing this impending separation,
Do not act wrongly, blocking my path of *dharma*.
Insistent ones, if today you were in my place
Would you not do the same as I am doing?
Dharma is followed easily, not so receiving opportunities,
Yet this sudden opportunity arose for me to act righteously.
I do not leave for the forest upset with my home,
Nor do I leave out of fear, weakness, or lack of love.
You alone tell me, shall my father's words go false?
Shall I fight relentlessly for such an impure thing?⁹
Imagine if I were to wrest away the kingdom today,
As easily as one plucks a rose amidst thorns.
But can one, not chosen by the king, my father
Can he possibly be the one for the people?
Would my father give this kingdom to someone
Whom he does not see fit to rule it?
And if Bharat was not fit, then as the people desire
He too would not abide by this plan.
But I know well the thoughts and ways of Bharat,
To me, he is no less realized than the great *Jadabharat*.¹⁰
Hear me, you will forget me having gained him,
You chose me as your king, now choose the one I say.
And as much faith as I have in him,
I feel he will be even more beloved to you.
You will not find me to be far from you,
I give you my word, and I ask you give me way.
The great king Sagar, now in heaven, did indeed
Sacrifice, for your sakes, his own son.¹¹
If Bharat is not a worthy protector for you,
Then this Rama will give him up as a brother!
Do not forget, you are an exalted citizenry
Whose king remained steadfast in the works of the Gods.
He left his happiness and abode to war with the demons,
Thus maintain composure, that same valor is in your Rama!
With that strength friends, do bid us farewell,

⁹ Rama is likely referring to the kingdom as this impure object which is worth no effort to gain on his part.

¹⁰ The story of *Jada Bharata* is found in various *Puranas* or famed Hindu texts such as the *Bhagavata Purana*. In short, *Jada Bharata* is a supremely self-realized and unattached brahmin, whose knowledge of the temporary and delusionary nature of material existence allows him to be unaffected by any of the sorrows of the world. He is the epitome of knowledge and detachment and Rama highlights his brother's noble nature by comparing him to this famed eponymous character.

¹¹ Here Rama references King Sagar, a former ruler of his clan. Sagar had a son named Asamanja who would torture the children of Ayodhya by tossing them into the nearby river and to protect his citizens, Sagar exiled his son.

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And wish that the thorns of the forest are sweet as saffron.
Will that I may destroy sins and spread virtues,
Imbue nobility, and dispel the weight of terror.
Or, allow me to leave, as the noble Bhagirath did,
To free my father of his debts with love.¹²
In the face of hundreds of challenges, I shall keep my word,
And establish something beautiful, rivalling the Ganga, on Earth.
Rise up, do not be obstacles in the path of *dharmā*,
Allow me to take up the path of auspiciousness.
Give me the energy so that I may advance,
Leaving my footprints on that path as I do.”

As upon seeing the abandoned toys of a stubborn child,
A mother does with care place collect and place them,
So too did the words of the lord affect the fallen,
Mesmerizing them as they stood and gave way.
Bowing their heads and lifting them again to see,
Where could the citizens find such a sight again?
Like a gust of wind on the cleared path, the swift chariot flew,
And the path itself seemed to proceed towards oblivion.
The steady wheels of the chariot turned freely,
As the views on both sides flew by rapidly.
Where the bounds of the city of Saket ended,
The full province with its fields and parks and streams,
The steady horses halted, neighing as they kissed the dust,
The lord turned towards the north, towards his city.
His love for his birthplace could no longer be contained,
With overflowing emotions, he said with bowed head:
“Oh land of my birth, accept my prayers and give me leave,
And lend us your honor, pride, and respect.

Like your glorious columns, palaces, and temples,
May our heads forever remain high in glory.
Though we leave, we shall return in time,
And when we do, we shall find you even more alluring.
Though the birds may fly far and away in the sky,

¹² Bhagirath is another king of Rama’s clan and is one of Rama’s most famous ancestors. He was the great-great-grandson of the aforementioned King Sagar. Sagar’s 60,000 sons had been cursed by a sage and the only way to absolve them of their sins and allow them passage into heaven was to have their ashes washed by the heavenly Ganga river. Bhagirath’s grandfather and father, Anshuman and Dilip respectively, took it upon themselves to provide for the salvation of their ancestors. They failed in their attempts and thus this debt owed to their ancestors was passed on to Bhagirath. Bhagirath then conducted severe penance to fulfill the goal of his predecessors and brought the river Ganga to the Earth from the heavens. Thus, Rama references Bhagirath’s noble intention to free his elders from their debts as he sets off to do the same.

Canto 5

Still like a kite they are bound to their home grove.
The virtues of yours which we've imbued--
Compassion, love, humility, the very nature of goodness,
All those which we can carry and use as we go--
In these small forms, you are somehow with us!
Your pure air is in our every breath,
Your waters in our psyche, your flames in our sighs,
In our detachment your atmosphere is contained,
And in our steadfastness, the soil of your earth.
Falling and rising again, laughing and prattling in play,
Having sported always in the lap of your courtyards--
This path of mine has become easy to traverse,
And the traps of attachment and greed could not ensnare me.
Oh foremost of cities, you are the east and we the sun,¹³
You are the teacher of all humanly *dharma*.
May those you have given rise to forever be remembered,
And may they continuously find new fame and glory.
Of sentiments, beautiful like art, you are a gallery,
For songs of great character, you an operatic gem.
Of the actions of the noble, you are a book of lessons,
With unshakeable *dharma* emblazoned on every page.
Though we may walk, wander and travel wherever,
True love and affectionate care can only be found here.
Though I may become grand in the accounts of men,
In your abode oh motherland, I am but a child.
Here alone my navel is linked, like a child to mother,
The entirety of creation, this enormous universe, found here alone.¹⁴
To your milky abode, I am verily Vishnu.¹⁵
Though separate, we are one and thus I am victorious.
Our arms and weapons are like your waters,
In which enemies are subdued and submerged.
And yet, your persona is ever of calm and peace,

¹³ This metaphor is particularly apt given that Rama is a member of the solar dynasty and indeed, the city of Saket gives rise to all the kings of this dynasty.

¹⁴ Gupt uses a very specific metaphor here to capture the full enormity and sanctity of Saket in Rama's eyes. Gupt's phrase "*naabhi-kunj kaa naal*" would literally translate to the umbilical connection of a child to their mother. However, Rama is considered to be an incarnation of Vishnu, one of the three main forms of God in the Hindu pantheon. According to the creation stories in Hindu cosmology, a lotus emerging from Vishnu's navel houses Brahma, the creator of the universe. Gupt seems to be referencing this grand cosmic arrangement in describing Saket is both linked to Rama's navel and housing the entirety of creation. This is further reinforced by the use of the phrase "*vidhi-vidhaan*" which literally could translate the "construction of Providence" but given that *vidhi* is often used to refer to Brahma in spiritual texts, likely references the cosmic creation of Brahma.

¹⁵ Again, Gupt references spiritual cosmology by comparing Saket to *kshirasaagar* (literally, "milk ocean") which is said to be the eternal abode of Vishnu.

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Just as the hearts of your enemies forever express loss.
You are my beloved cradle, host of flowergroves,
Ocean of life, filled with the gems of my sentiments.¹⁶
I am your lotus, rising and floating somewhere,
I am your cloud, growing and pouring somewhere.
You are of pure disposition, exquisitely built, host of autumnal wealth,
Replete with art and life, a veritable dreamland.
Oh Saket, surpassing heaven, you are Rama's abode,
Protect yourself and stay true to your name of Ayodhya.¹⁷
Even as I forsake the kingdom and depart you,
Even if I return here, or even if I do not,
Ayodhya will forever remain the land of Rama,
And Rama will forever remain of Ayodhya."

A gust of wind then blew towards them,
Carrying a flower, which Rama accepted on his head.
The pure fragrance of the earth filled his heart,
As the longing chirps of birds filled his ears.
For a moment the three stood frozen, statue-like,
Then with deep sighs, they climbed aboard the chariot.
They embarked, sitting silently and spiritless,
And the horses too advanced, dreary and sluggish.
Sobered, they reached the banks of the *Tamasaa*
And there they spent the first night of their journey.
Though restless with the thought of their grieving citizens,
Their trust in Bharat was comforting, bringing them sleep.
Lakshman remained alert, keeping watch for the night,
For him, sleep, like Urmila, was left at home.
Enrapt in the matters of the lord, along with Sumantra.
When did the night pass? Though alert, they were unaware.

Seeing in the next day's path the wealth of kingdom,
The way to ensure the *dharma* and prosperity of their subjects,
Passing the *Gomati* river, pure as the milk of the cow,
Steady and calm, they reached the shore of the Ganga.
This too was like an enormous necklace of pearls,
From heaven's neck, it had fallen to adorn the Earth.
Unable to bear the worldly heat, she froze

¹⁶ A popular Puranic story in Hinduism is of the churning of the ocean in which the gods and demons stirred the ocean, causing it to release various mystical gifts such as gems, divine creatures, and ultimately the nectar of immortality. Gupt seems to be referencing this story by calling Saket a gem-filled ocean.

¹⁷ "Ayodhya" literally translates to "that which cannot be conquered" and thus Rama seems to implore his city to stay protected from enemies.

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But even from snow, her waters flow¹⁸.

“The lord has come.” Hearing this news,
King Guha¹⁹, along with his retinue, arrived to receive him.
Seeing his friend, Rama extended his courtesies,
And advanced, lovingly lifting him up²⁰ and taking him in.
“Stay stay, is it appropriate for you to lift me up such?
Whom do you honor and give such respect to?
I am but a servant, have I wronged somewhere?
Take this abode to be your home for the hunt.
Forsaking all for your sweet smile, the root of joy,
I shall uproot all the flowers of this blue forest.²¹
Has anyone received such a guest so unexpectedly?
Why should I not then call this my great fortune?
Finding myself lost in the joy of this meeting,
My own lowness seems to have forgotten me.
I see you as bringing worth to a worthless one like me,
In my home, I see not my home, but you alone!
Come, cast the dust of your feet on my blemishes,
Look not at your home, but on me and redeem me.
Though my hospitality is not fit, my affection is unstirring,
Though I may lack capacity, I have devotion.
Although for the spirit of the hunt,
Your soft feet may fall here again,
But what of mother Sita, would she ever return here?
That goddess like Sita who has come here today.
Noble woman, I have not forgotten that ecstasy,
Nor the royal feast from the city of Mithila.²²
Though I was filled, I was left with one craving
That I may fill you all, if only with one blade of grass.

¹⁸ While “*bhav-taap*” literally translates to “worldly heat,” the connotation is of the pains of existence in the material, human world. Being of divine origin, the Ganga is not meant to bear such pain and to figuratively cool and calm herself, she originates from the frozen peaks of the Himalayas. Thus, though the origins of the Ganges are from ice and snow, her waters still flow through the land.

¹⁹ Guha is a king or chief of the *Nishada* tribe and a friend of Rama. As a forest-dwelling tribe member, Guha would be considered to be much lower in status than Rama and his speech will often reflect his awareness of his social position.

²⁰ It is implied that Guha has fallen at Rama’s feet to show his respect.

²¹ Perhaps in his hyperbolic style of speaking, Guha means to say that the blue flowers of his forest can’t dare to rival the beauty of the blue-hued Rama and thus, he ought to uproot them.

²² Guha seems to imply that he had been a guest at Rama and Sita’s wedding in Mithila and is referencing that visit. He wishes to repay that feast though he does not have much (likening his capacity to a blade of grass). Yet, he cleverly claims that the simple food he can provide would be a much appreciated change from the luxurious sweets the royal trio might be used to.

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Still the dry and simple fare can be favorable.
After all, who would favor sweets forever?
Eternal be your marital bliss, eternal your life
Forever drink the nectar of respect from the high clans.”
Smiling and inspiring smiles, Guha bent his head,
And the lord immediately brought him into his arms.
Shying away this time, he looked at Rama
Bluish-green like algae encircling a lake.
“Oh! Bark cloth? Where was my vision
That it was not able to see this sport.
Pray tell, why have you worn this outfit today?
Where have the royal garments and jewels gone?
Dressed like sages do you plan to deceive the deer?
Still they are restless and will not come near you.
In whatever guise, blessed indeed is your form,
Hail to this unornamented beauty of yours!”

“With words alone you have satisfied us friend,
Do not take on any further burden for us.
If we could break our vows meant for the forest,
Then we would not turn down our sister’s invitation.²³
To rid the fears and obstacles of the ascetics with love,
We have taken on this forest exile for but a few days.
The righteous Bharat shall oversee the needs of the kingdom,
Making the many citizens and dwellers blessed indeed.”

“Then this servant of yours shall come along,
And a wonderfully joyful time we shall have.
The forest is filled with countless miracles of nature,
Which will leave you looking on, wide-eyed in awe!”

“By making all the arrangements for travel and rest,
Do not take all the opportunity from this Rama.
Friend, let others as well take part!
Simply ferry us past the river by boat tomorrow.”

The auspicious *Dhruva*²⁴ looked upon the people from the sky,
As the lord gave honor and respect to King Guha.
But after hearing the sorrowful vow of Rama,
Guha’s flower-like heart wilted.

²³ Rama indicates that the show of hospitality and reception is prompted by Guha’s wife. Thus, he attributes Guha’s invitation to her as well and respectfully refers to her as “sister.”

²⁴ Refers to the brightest polar star in Hindu astrology.

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That god-like one, raised in the royal palaces,
Would now sleep on a bed of grass at the foot of trees.
Ah! How does flowering fortune bloom like this?
Thus touched, his tears flooded forth.
“The night trembles and groans and sighs,
as if in the rhythm of crashing waves.
Still, Lakshman roams, keeping watch, awake
Sacrificing even sleep, the little wealth he has left.
Who knows whose curse has brought this about,
How poor policy has cheated away a kingdom.
Losing such a darling, what has Kaikeyi gained?
Kaikeyi! What did you intend? What have you wrought?
This world though is shrouded in a dark canopy,
Held up by the pillars of sorrow and misfortune.
As long as we lie beneath that immovable sky,
We are all helpless, small or great.
The lord has come to the woods, forsaking Saket,
and what is Shringaverapur²⁵ in relation to that city?
But what other present can I present to them?
Tomorrow I will be blessed upon giving them passage.”
Left with clenched fists, that valorous Guha was perplexed.
Then Lakshman said, “be calm my friend.
He, for whom you are distressed and angered,
Is himself satisfied and delighted by these events.
Rule over Shringaverapur with wise policy,
Rama is content with but your love.
Today he has received that fresh wealth of *dharmā*;
For its sake he has given up the kingdom of Kosala.
Time is passing and tomorrow approaches,
Indeed everything seems inverted and opposite.
The flowers are filled with ants, the ground with thorns,
And he who can evade all this is alone victorious.
If we cannot fulfill our duty for duty’s sake,
Then how can we hope to reap the rewards?
For me, misery is worthless. I am blessed!
I am not asleep, I am forever awake, aware.
I have long since crossed the ocean of worldly attachments,
I have long since submitted my soul to the feet of Rama.
Between the lord and man, the barrier of *māyā* stands,
Extremely powerful and difficult to overcome.
Tame her, exhort her, win her over with strategy,
Friend, unite your worldly pleasures with devotion.”

²⁵ This is the region where the trio is currently residing and where Guha rules.

Canto 5

The night passed quietly, like a furtive paramour.
The *brahmins* recited verses, filled with knowledge,
And bathed as they admired the luster of dawn.
The normally silver waves of the Ganga shone gold.
With the milk of the banyan tree, the lord matted his hair,²⁶
And now, Sumantra was left with no hope at all.
“The very essence of heroism has taken on asceticism,
Has our fortune forever gone quiet?”
The lord than instructed him affectionately,
“Having taken a vow, it must be fulfilled properly,
Though matted hair may be shaded by an umbrella,
The joys of the crown are all in the foot of a tree.²⁷
Wise one, what work has fate done that is opposable?
All this is indeed your Rama’s good fortune!
Go and convey my wellbeing to my father,
Reassure all whom you meet, with your words.
You remain our root, while we blossom as flowers,
And when this exile passes, again we will meet.
The days of these exile are minute, not excessive,
For in the ocean of time, even eons are but droplets.”

The lord gave this message, apt for the occasion,
As all conveyed their sentiments towards all (in Saket).
The gracious minister could say nothing to oppose these words,
And compassion, facilitated by enlightenment, poured forth.
Seeing Sumantra’s sorrow, all were robbed of joy,
As the three quickly reached the shore of the Ganga.
The boat looked as if implication and irony,
With the simple phrase “home in the Ganga.”²⁸

The undulant Ganga advanced towards the feet of the lord,

²⁶ The *jataa* is a form of knotting one’s hair into a tight braid that is customary of ascetics. By shaping his hair like this, Rama has committed to the ascetic lifestyle for the next fourteen years which is why Sumantra subsequently gives up hope of convincing Rama to return.

²⁷ Rama seems to say that in the forest, with matted hair, one can travel with shade in the form of an umbrella. But when bound to a kingdom, with the weight of a crown, one can only find shade (or joy) in limited areas such as the small base of a tree. The implication is that removing the weight of the crown and leaving the kingdom for the forest is freeing and allows for more pervasive happiness.

²⁸ Gupt seems to create a metaphor for the three levels of meaning attributed to phrases in Sanskrit literature. The phrase “home in the Ganga” denotes a temporary residence atop the river in the boat. The implication would be that the boat and river are so welcoming as to be home-like for the trio. The irony is that the trio has been exiled from their home and yet find their home in a simple boat. Thus, the boat itself, serving the various purposes of taking the trio away from their initial home to their home for the next fourteen years, has various levels of meaning, just as a literary phrase does.

Canto 5

And the boat, as if intoxicated with joy, swayed along.
Guha washed the dust of Rama's feet, the redeemer of Ahalya,
Which dwells majestically in the hearts and words of poets.²⁹
Washing the lord's feet, the devotee was also cleansed,
And upon drinking the resulting nectar³⁰, he became immortal.
There, the horses lifted their necks and neighed,
Sounding as if their lifebreath was escaping from them.
Running his hands over them, the lord consoled the horses,
As Guha turned his face and dried the tears which had flowed.
Love alone is tender, whereas duty is hard;
Who is divine? Who is magnificent? Who knows?

"Hail Ganga, of joyful waves and sweet sounds,
of pure flawless shore, pious waters, and divine origin.
May this land of *Bhaarat* forever remain wet with your waters,
As you are that one ever-flowing common wealth for all of us.
My good deeds today rewarded by your presence and touch,
What more can this princess of Mithila ask of you?
That I may bear this exile, this alone I ask,
So that I may return and worship you once again."
That glowing Ganga was in ecstasy,
As the reflections of the rays played in her lap.
Sita swayed along with the glimmers of the water,
As three types of wind³¹ kissed her countenance.

Then the lord, a traveler on the most pious path, spoke,
"Dear Ganga, you are the pride and fame of my clan,"
"And today lord, you yourself transcend it"³².

²⁹ Hindus believe the feet of a revered figure, such as a *guru* or God, are extremely sacred (and for this reason, Gupt often mentions character's bowing at Rama's feet). This sanctity extends to the very dust of Rama's feet. In a celebrated episode of the Ramayana, Rama places his foot on a large boulder which transforms into the maiden Ahalya. She was cursed to take the form of a boulder, only to be redeemed by the dust of Rama's feet. As a result of this sanctity, the dust of Rama's feet enjoys an exalted position in devotional poetry. Gupt references its place in the hearts of poets but the specific use of the term *manas* (which literally translates to "heart" or "psyche") may also be a reference to the *Ramacharitamanas* of Tulsidas, which is perhaps the most eminent work in the devotional genre of literature dedicated to Rama.

³⁰ Given the sanctity of the feet, the water that is used to wash them is seen as being sacred as well, on par with the nectar of immortality which yields the word "*charanaamrit*" which Gupt utilizes here. Even today at Hindu temples, the sacred water that is served to devotees following a service is first used to wash the feet of the temple's idols.

³¹ The term "*trividha pavan*" or three types of wind refers to soft, scented, and cooling wind.

³² There is a play on the phrase "*paar karnaa*" here. The literal meaning is "to cross" just as Rama is crossing the river Ganga. However, in spiritual literature, this phrase also has the connotation of allowing one to transcend materialism (which is often represented as an unsurpassable sea). While the Ganga is said to be sacred enough to allow one who dips in it to transcend material sorrows, Sita implies Rama is sacred enough to allow even the Ganga to transcend the grasps of materialism.

Canto 5

Would you not say that, Lakshman?"

"Well I am but a follower, what would I say?!"

Said Guha then "this exile has become but a joke!"

Joy accompanied by mirth thus set in,

Did the boat reach the shore, or the shore reach them?

"As a reminder of this meeting, I leave this small gem."

Sita began to give Guha a gold-studded ring.

With palms together, Guha asked "what grace is this?

Oh goddess, such grace is not meant for a servant.

Forgive me, but do not leave me in this manner,

Give me not gold oh Rama but the dust of your feet!

Upon obtaining which, inanimate was made alive!

Forsaking that, who would choose a stone instead?"

Rama brought him to his bosom, to his heart,

And with all courtesies, that abode of knowledge bid him farewell.

Amazing all on their path with their joy and affection,

The three reached *Prayaag*, the king of pilgrimages.

Somewhere stood farmlands, somewhere shires,

Like islands in oceans of naught, villages small and large.

Somewhere trees lining the paths swayed,

Somewhere birds and deer grazed and wandered.

Shrubs of all sizes scattered all over,

Forming natural abodes for the benefit of rabbits.

Trails and alleys separated off of the route,

Just as one buried in materialism leaves the path of scripture.

Here they saw hills, and there mounds were seen

Ponds, wells, and lakes too were among the sights.

On the sides of the path they met many travelers

Who were quickly caught up in delight at the sight.

(The three) had dust on their feet, sweat on their faces

like pollen on lotuses, and nectar in the moon.

Seeing a great cloud-like shadow ahead,

The pride of Kosala halted for some time there.

"Have you two not tired? Have I alone?"

Sita could not say any words beyond that.

Smiling and laughing, suddenly she broke into tears,

A statue of molten gold, suddenly stirred.

"I have no worries or concerns for myself,

But you should not be troubled, for that I worry."

"Beloved, do not worry for our sakes,

This practice is new for us, have some patience."

Canto 5

There the women of the villages had gathered,
Providing cause for solace and rest for all.³³
Sita met them all with love and affection,
Standing out like a flower amidst the creepers.
“Auspicious one, who are these two heroes?”
“The fair one is my brother-in-law, the darker his elder.”
Sita answered thus simply and succinctly,
And yet they laughed sweetly and freely.

Thus freely taking rest along the path,
And filling the path-dwellers with deep joy,
The next day the three reached *Prayaaga*,
And, doubly festive, reached the sage Bharadvaaj.
The *Triveni* itself was blessed by that trio,
And Lakshman, immersed in nectar as it were, said,
“Look sister, upon the luster of *Prayaag*,
Like a rain-filled cloud shining in autumn”
With a laugh, Sita said affectionately,
“Fair and dark, two bodies but one soul you are!”
And Lakshman replied, “And why not?
Where you are present as *Saraswati* as well.”³⁴
“And where is this *Saraswati*, Lakshman?
Engulfed by admiring the beauty of this confluence!
Clothed in the shadows and the rays of the sun,
It moves gently in the slow wind.”
The lord said, “indeed this is song, poetry, art!
You, your mother’s dear, and there Janaka’s darling!
This splendid strength of expression is alone art,
But here you have such calm realization too.
Live long and continue thus, you two artists,
I find it difficult to fully praise even one!
To come together is the supreme pilgrimage in life,
Which transforms the entire Earth into one family.
One becomes three, where two meet,

³³ There seems to be a pun on the term “*vishraam*” in this line. As *vishraam* literally means rest, Gupt indicates that the short meetings with the village women provide the trio with the opportunity to halt and rest in their journey. However, *vishraam* also implies a level of greater emotional solace which in Hindu texts is often associated with the peace obtained through the grace of God. Thus, the village women have obtained that greater *vishraam* through their encounter with this divine trio.

³⁴ From my understanding, Sita finds the two brothers as analogous to the converging Ganga and Yamuna rivers, which are elsewhere described as clear and blue respectively (corresponding to the fair and dark hues of the brothers). The Saraswati, the third river at this intersection, is not actually visible (either due to having dried up or due to being a mythical artifact).

Canto 5

So the Ganga and Yamuna form a convergence of three,
So too all that is needed is sacrifice and devotion”
Said Bharadwaaj, “and that is found in you,
Wherever you go, indeed that will be a pilgrimage,
But I desire that you stay here, as in your abode.”
The lord said, “Blessed and fulfilled, indeed this servant is,
But is it appropriate for us to live so close to our country?
Advise us of a place in the forest such,
That the flower-like heart of Sita may blossom.
Noble women will not take for themselves what they desire,
Nor will they ask a man to do so, if he has not taken it for them.”
“Do they not verily make a sacrifice of themselves?
How can we understand such pain of the soul?
Sita’s clan is forever detached from concerns of the body,³⁵
And thus, jewel of her clan, she is blissful in this forest.
The Chitrakut hill will be appropriate for you then,
Where there is unstirring joy, peace, and health.”
“As you command,” said Rama, joy-filled from *Prayaag*,
And with zest, they ventured towards Chitrakut.
The sage accompanied them to show them the path,
Where they met the blessed gurgling daughter of the sun.³⁶
The waters so unsullied, appeared blue as the sky,
a color worthy only of the lord³⁷, and equally calm.
The princes were proficient in crafts, accomplished,
Serene, heroic, steadfast, dedicated
So Lakshman broke and brought creepers and wood,
And constructed a boat by putting them together.
Each devoted to this sense of self-sufficiency,
Sita took the lord’s hand and climbed aboard their boat.
Like a blossomed lotus floating atop its leaven pads,
They moved, as that era’s hero supported her like a swan.

After bathing in the Yamuna at the foot of a banyan,
Lakshman, Sita, and Rama continued into the grave forest.
There were found various strange and fantastic artifacts,
Lessons in the uncountable shapes and forms of nature.

³⁵ Gupt employs a popular pun on the term *Vaidehi* which is another name for Sita. The name literally means “daughter of Videha” where Videha refers to both her father and her city. The term *Videha*, in turn, literally means “without body,” and refers to the Sita’s father who is so enlightened that the material pleasures and pains of the body are of no concern to him. Thus, Sita’s ability to withstand the challenges of the forest is a testament to her belonging to a family of enlightened and unmaterialistic self-realized souls.

³⁶ The Yamuna river personified is said to be the daughter of Surya or the divine representation of the Sun.

³⁷ Recall that the Yamuna’s bluish hue was compared to Rama’s by Sita in earlier lines.

Canto 5

“In the forest, the elder brother follows while the younger leads,”
Sita said laughingly, “none should be disturbed by this.”
“Sister, still you have not gone or moved from your place,
In the middle of the middle, center of center, you remain.”
The lord laughed upon hearing this sweet fountain of words,
“Beloved, even in the forest, this civil mood of yours.
If the exile passes thus, with laughter and mirth,
Then indeed we are blessed, and obstacles will mean nothing.”
“Oh! Indeed I was startled at the heart of this forest--
For who has managed to fly by flapping wings of determination.
See where we are and from whence we came!
Though they may board flying crafts³⁸, humans are not birds.
Overhead is the enormous sky, and below lies the abundant Earth,
And still, how people yell themselves voiceless--
Like partridges³⁹, fighting beak-and-nail with each other,
Who knows over what lowly matter they butt heads.
Here, the small and simple paths of the forest are wealthy.
Indeed, these woodlands have for their *maang*⁴⁰ these paths,
Marked with fruits and flowers, the most auspicious Lakshmi.
She sways peacefully, child-like, as the wind fans her.
And ahead of us, peacocks and peahens run,
Clearing the path with their wings, playful and mesmerizing.
And there, a delightful community of monkeys play,
Swinging out their young, and holding their weight.
Lord, having sacrificed all, knowing it to be false,
Here I stand, ascetic-like, a tree without leaves.”⁴¹

“But still on them, creepers and vines climb,
Giving greenery to the tree as they grow.”

“Somewhere, at the foot of a tree, a bed of lotuses,
Where abundant shade lies asleep!
The rays sneak into the fickle petals,

³⁸ Flying crafts do exist in the age of the Ramayan.

³⁹ It seems intentional to specify a bird that nests on the ground when referencing the petty nature of city-dwellers (in contrast to the higher plane of living that Sita observes in the forest).

⁴⁰ The *maang* is the parting-line of a woman’s forehead. Married women will place red vermilion powder or *sindhoor* along this line to indicate their married status. Sita draws a metaphor between the forest paths lined with colorful flora and a married woman’s colorful forehead. The idea of a married woman as a form of *Lakshmi*, representing both auspiciousness and prosperity, is conveyed in the word *saubhaagyavati* which is a Sanskrit benediction for married women.

⁴¹ Sita likens her status after giving up the false materialism of the kingdom to a tree without leaves, as she is adorned in bark and nothing else. Rama seems to liken the troubles of the forest to vines encroaching on this tree and commends Sita’s unbothered nature, akin to a tree growing unbothered by vines.

Canto 5

And in that grove, shakes them, to awaken her.
But she does not wish to rise from there,
With a toss and a turn, she lies there again.
Friend, do not abandon the root of that tree,
Where flowers and thorns take on the same form.
Here the birds spread their wings, in sport,
Strutting their chests, and loosening their limbs.
Look, with their necks crowed in some odd fashion,
The birds look upon us with gusto.
Wherever one finds opportunity, there they bloom,
Just as the bird pecks wherever they find food.
Diligence here and there can make for happiness,
But luck and opportunity remain ever foremost.”

“I concur that all reward is the result of fate,
But fate itself is a result of past actions.”

“Dear, correct, the only distinction is in name,
While the work is Lakshman’s, the reward is Rama’s”

“Lord, today the greatest reward is this Sita’s,
Who did not forsake this joy by remaining home.
Look there, the *kimshuka*⁴² opens its heart and blooms,
Formerly a sapling, it has indeed earned the name of flower.
Oh my! What a large shedded snakeskin lies here!
Feasting on air, see that it doesn’t rise again!”⁴³

“Noble women, even then we would have no fear,
Should it advance to kill, it advances to its death.
And what has fallen here? Do tell sister.”

“Brother, not all is known to me, all I know is,
That there are myriads of things for us to see.
But whatever they are, would they not make for beautiful pens?”

“Indeed, a porcupine has shed its quills and gone,
Just as one’s name remains, but desires disappear.⁴⁴
Cyperus plants and clay soils lie here,

⁴² The *kimshuka* specifically refers to the sapling of a blood-red plant.

⁴³ Gupt seems to depict some of Sita’s nearly comic unfamiliarity with the forest by showing her concern over a discarded snakeskin potentially regenerating into a living snake.

⁴⁴ Lakshman likens the quills left on the ground as the memories of inhabitants of the material world. Though they may be remembered in name, their desires and material wealth are inherently temporary and disappear at death.

Canto 5

Wet with footprints, leading where the boars have gone.
Look, the baby parrots leave their nest,
And file back in at once, in a crowd, like a wall.
The soul of the sapless tree can find no rest,
And yet, until its time, it cannot truly depart.”

“See these twin trees nearby!
One blooms, while the other one remains lifeless.”

“Such is the state of this human world,
Somewhere there is joy, and elsewhere distress.
Uneven trees make up such a grove in the forest,
Some with thorns and some with flowers, thus divided.”

“And the weight of those thorns too, mother Earth bears,
Hosting the beastliness which brings us some fear.
Indeed, the forest has become such a curious matter for me,
Who has come and planted such disparate seeds here?⁴⁵
Oh my, who emits that terrifying sound?”

“Sister, the lions are welcoming us!
If you’d like to see the source of the sound, do tell!”

“I’ll see that later, for now be calm,
The forest is filled with hundreds of honey-filled hives,
Like pots they hang, large and swaying.
What can’t be done, even by the work of the most minute!”

Seeing a honeybee, the lord’s beloved arose.
“Flowers which a garland-maker must water in his free time,
They grow easily on trees here in this forest.
Oh! And these elephant tusks and pearls fallen here,
Found on the ground as if they are ripe fruit.
These gems, for which lives are spent in shops,
They are but stones, exceedingly valueless in this forest.”

Thus they all proceeded to meet Valmiki,
And delighted upon partaking in his nectar of knowledge.
One was a blessed god on Earth for the clan of poets,
And the other a divine leader of man, unique and inimitable.
“Great poet, this Rama, son of Dasharath, is blessed today,

⁴⁵ The reference to seeds is hardly literal and more likely indicates Sita’s amazement at the diversity of nature’s creations.

Canto 5

And along with his retinue, this servant bows to you.”

“Rama, your story itself is a poem,
To become a poet then is but natural.”⁴⁶

With their hearts sweetened, they arrived at Chitrakut,
An impassable fortress for the auspices of the forest.
Where there were sanctums and various tunnels,
Replete with various minerals and stones at each turn.
With countless peaks and ranges, large and elevated,
Garmented in greenery, embroidered with leaves.
The mountain, seeing Rama’s Shiva-like attire, became a bull,
And before this sight, even Shiva’s heart was filled!⁴⁷
“From *kalashas*⁴⁸ of stones, an abundance of water pours forth,
And the snaking gemstones do ritually bathe nature.
Droplets of water, forever joined with radiance,
Offered to this dazzling array of gems.
This bejeweled Chitrakut adorns the face of the forest!
Who would not be thus delighted and amazed?”

Lakshman constructed a hut, temple like,
Made fragrant by the presence of the nearby lake.
Sita’s presence served as the *Vaastu*⁴⁹ rites personified,
Yet the sages performed the required rites dutifully.
The forest-dwellers gathered with filled baskets (of gifts),
And performed with song and dance, accompanied by claps.

“Oh steadfast hero of the Raghus, with our pure tears,
We shall coronate you here in the forest, come lord,
Beneath the moon-emblazoned parasol of the sky,
A true lionskin throne⁵⁰ we will lay for you, sit lord.
Sanctified water and honey⁵¹, here they are abundant,

⁴⁶ Gupt presents us with this line prior to the beginning of his poem as well.

⁴⁷ In two short lines Gupt constructs quite a complex religious metaphor. The ascetic attire of Rama appears like the bare attire of Shiva who is believed to ride upon a bull. Thus, the mountain of Chitrakut, upon which Rama is now residing, sees Rama dressed in a Shiva-like attire and thus is likened to the bull upon which Shiva rides.

⁴⁸ A *kalash* is a sanctified pot used to pour water during a Hindu prayer.

⁴⁹ A certain set of Hindu ritual instructions to be followed at the beginning of the inhabitation of a new residence to ensure prosperity and auspiciousness.

⁵⁰ The word *simhaasan* refers to a royal throne. However, the word can literally be broken into the words *simha* (lion) and *asaan* (seat) and thus the forest-dwellers imply that by seating the lord upon the skin of a lion, they would be presenting him with a true *simhaasan* for this forest coronation.

⁵¹ Certain concoctions of holy water and honey based milk products are consumed at the conclusion of important rituals such as a coronation.

Canto 5

Respect due to a guest, daily you shall receive lord.
Be enthroned in this jungle, take us to be your own,
Rule over us, and make us civil and noble oh lord!”

The worldly *Mandakini*⁵² of the Earth, then began to swell,
Along with drops of the sky, there the celestial Ganga fell.

⁵² The *Mandakini* is a river flowing through Chitrakut.

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