The Queen's Unheard Voice: Mandodari's Counsel and Patriarchal Marginalization in the Ramayana

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Abstract- This paper undertakes a feminist-philosophical re-reading of Queen Mandodari in the *Ramayana*, foregrounding her counsel as a silenced yet ethically profound voice within the epic narrative. While the *Ramayana* has traditionally been interpreted as a tale of divine justice and dharmic order, Mandodari's interventions reveal an alternative moral discourse—one that critiques unchecked ambition, patriarchal arrogance, and the tragic consequences of ignoring wisdom. Her repeated warnings to Ravana, urging restraint and adherence to dharma, embody a conscience that is systematically marginalized within the masculine power structures of Lanka.

Through textual analysis and comparative hermeneutics, this study situates Mandodari alongside other epic women such as Sita, Draupadi, and Gandhari, highlighting a continuum of feminine ethical consciousness across Indian epics. Drawing upon feminist hermeneutics and Vedantic ethics, the paper argues that Mandodari's voice represents a dharmic ideal of balance—an insistence on justice, foresight, and ethical governance that challenges patriarchal silencing. Her character thus becomes emblematic of the suppressed intellect within epic traditions, offering a counter-narrative to the dominant valorization of conquest and masculine ego.

By reclaiming Mandodari's counsel, the paper contributes to broader debates on gender, ethics, and narrative authority in Hindu studies. It demonstrates that the *Ramayana* is not merely a text of divine retribution but also a site of moral plurality, where silenced voices articulate alternative visions of justice and governance. In contemporary contexts, Mandodari's wisdom resonates with the urgent need for women's intellectual inclusion in leadership and ethical decision-making. Her portrayal underscores the tragic cost of ignoring conscience, while simultaneously offering a timeless paradigm for reimagining dharma as inclusive, dialogical, and ethically grounded.

Index-Terms- Mandodari, Ramayana, Patriarchy, gender ethics, decision making

I. INTRODUCTION

The Ramayana, one of the foundational epics of Indian civilization, has long been interpreted as a narrative of dharma, heroism, and moral order. Yet beneath its grand themes lies a complex tapestry of silenced voices, particularly those of women whose wisdom and counsel remain marginalized. While figures such as Sita and Draupadi have received considerable scholarly attention, Mandodari—the queen of Lanka and consort of Ravana—has often been relegated to the periphery of epic discourse. Her role, though brief, is marked by profound ethical foresight and political prudence, qualities that are consistently disregarded within the patriarchal structures of the epic.

Mandodari's repeated counsel to Ravana, urging restraint, diplomacy, and adherence to dharma, exemplifies the paradox of acknowledged yet unheard female wisdom. This silence is not incidental but symptomatic of a broader cultural pattern wherein women's voices are subordinated to male authority. Feminist literary criticism provides a critical framework to interrogate this marginalization, situating Mandodari's counsel as a site of resistance and ethical clarity.

This paper seeks to foreground Mandodari's unheard voice, analyzing her counsel through textual and comparative readings of epic traditions. By engaging feminist hermeneutics and theoretical perspectives such as Gayatri Spivak's notion of subaltern silence, the study reinterprets Mandodari's role as emblematic of systemic gendered exclusions. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to reclaim silenced voices in Indian epics, underscoring their relevance to contemporary discourses on gender, ethics, and empowerment.

II. OBJECTIVES

- Foreground Mandodari's counsel: To analyze Mandodari's repeated advice to Ravana in the Ramayana, emphasizing her ethical foresight, political insight, and moral clarity.
- Interrogate patriarchal silencing: To examine how Mandodari's wisdom is systematically marginalized within epic traditions, reflecting broader structures of patriarchal dismissal.
- Apply feminist hermeneutics: To reinterpret Mandodari's role through feminist literary criticism, situating her voice as a site of resistance and ethical clarity.
- Compare epic women's counsel: To draw parallels between Mandodari, Draupadi, and Gandhari, highlighting recurring motifs of ignored female wisdom across Indian epics.
- Identify research gaps: To highlight areas for further exploration, including regional retellings, interdisciplinary approaches, and reception studies of Mandodari's voice.

Scope

The scope of this study is defined by its focus on Mandodari's counsel in the Ramayana and its reinterpretation through feminist literary criticism. While the Ramayana encompasses vast narrative and philosophical dimensions, this paper concentrates specifically on episodes where Mandodari advises Ravana, analyzing her voice as a site of ethical foresight, political insight, and moral clarity.

Textual Boundaries: The analysis is limited to canonical versions of the Ramayana and selected modern retellings that foreground Mandodari's role. Regional variations and folk traditions are acknowledged but not examined in detail.

Comparative Focus: The study extends to comparative readings of Draupadi and Gandhari, whose counsel similarly suffers dismissal, thereby situating Mandodari within a broader epic pattern of silenced female wisdom.

Theoretical Framework: The scope includes feminist hermeneutics, subaltern theory (Spivak), and feminist philosophy (Mohanty, Rich) as interpretive lenses. It does not attempt a philological or purely historical analysis of the Ramayana.

Contemporary Relevance: The study highlights the implications of Mandodari's unheard voice for present-day discourses on gender, ethics, and empowerment, but does not extend into sociological fieldwork or empirical surveys.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive framework grounded in feminist hermeneutics and comparative literary analysis. The methodology is organized into the following components:

Textual Hermeneutics
Close reading of the Ramayana, focusing on episodes where Mandodari counsels Ravana. Her words are analyzed for ethical foresight, political insight, and moral clarity, situating her voice within the epic's moral universe.

Comparative Epic Analysis
Mandodari's counsel is compared with Draupadi's and Gandhari's advice in the Mahabharata, highlighting recurring motifs of silenced female wisdom across Indian epics.

Feminist Hermeneutics
The study applies feminist literary criticism, particularly Gayatri Spivak's concept of *subaltern silence*, to interpret Mandodari's unheard counsel as emblematic of systemic patriarchal exclusion.

Interdisciplinary Theoretical Integration
Insights from feminist philosophy (Mohanty, Rich) and cultural studies are incorporated to contextualize Mandodari's voice within broader discourses of gender, ethics, and empowerment.

Conceptual Visualization
A diagrammatic model synthesizes Mandodari's wisdom into three dimensions—ethical foresight, political insight, and moral clarity—illustrating the paradox of acknowledged yet silenced female agency

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with the Ramayana has traditionally emphasized themes of dharma, kingship, and heroism, often centering male protagonists while relegating female figures to

secondary roles. Within this framework, Mandodari has received comparatively little attention, despite her repeated counsel to Ravana that reflects ethical foresight and political prudence.

Recent feminist reinterpretations have begun to reclaim marginalized epic women. Tripathi (2024) explores Mandodari alongside Ahalya and Tara in Koral Dasgupta's retellings, situating her as a figure of silenced wisdom. Similarly, Subbulakshmi & Ajith (2023) analyze Anandani's *Mandodari: Queen of Lanka*, foregrounding her agency in modern literary reimaginings. These studies highlight the growing recognition of Mandodari's role but remain limited to creative retellings rather than canonical epic analysis.

Broader feminist readings of the Ramayana, such as Tiwari (2022), emphasize systemic patriarchal silencing of women's voices, situating Mandodari within a recurring pattern of ignored counsel. Comparative works on Draupadi and Gandhari further underscore this motif of dismissed female wisdom across epics.

Theoretical frameworks enrich these readings. Spivak (1988) introduces the concept of subaltern silence, directly applicable to Mandodari's unheard counsel. Mohanty (2003) and Rich (1979) advocate for feminist re-visioning of texts, providing methodological grounding for reclaiming Mandodari's voice. Creative retellings such as Dasgupta (2020) and Volga (2016) further demonstrate the potential of feminist reinterpretation in amplifying silenced epic women.

Despite these contributions, a significant gap remains in systematic textual analysis of Mandodari's counsel within the canonical Ramayana, framed through feminist hermeneutics. This study addresses that gap by situating Mandodari's wisdom within both epic narrative and feminist theory, thereby contributing to the reclamation of silenced voices in Indian literature. This study addresses that gap by situating Mandodari's wisdom within both epic narrative and feminist theory, thereby contributing to the reclamation of silenced voices in Indian literature

V. DISCUSSION & RESULT

Mandodari's Ethical Foresight

Mandodari's counsel repeatedly emphasizes adherence to dharma, urging Ravana to return Sita and avoid destructive conflict. Her ethical foresight demonstrates an acute awareness of moral responsibility, positioning her as a voice of righteousness within the epic. Yet, her appeals are dismissed, underscoring the patriarchal silencing of female wisdom.

" Return Sita to Rama. There is no shame in choosing the righteousness. Your arrogance will bring ruin upon yourself, your sons and this kingdom."

Result: Mandodari articulates dharmic principles with clarity.

Discussion: Her ignored counsel exemplifies Spivak's notion of the *subaltern voice*, acknowledged yet unheard.

Political Insight and Pragmatism

Mandodari warns Ravana of the political consequences of his actions, including the inevitability of war and the downfall of Lanka. Her pragmatic counsel reflects a sophisticated understanding of statecraft and diplomacy.

"Listen to wise Counsel"

Result: Mandodari demonstrates political acumen equal to or surpassing male advisors.

Discussion: The dismissal of her insight reveals the systemic exclusion of women from political authority in epic narratives.

Moral Clarity and Emotional Appeal
Mandodari appeals to Ravana's conscience, invoking compassion and ethical restraint. Her moral clarity highlights the human cost of hubris and violence.

" Rama is not an Ordinary Man"

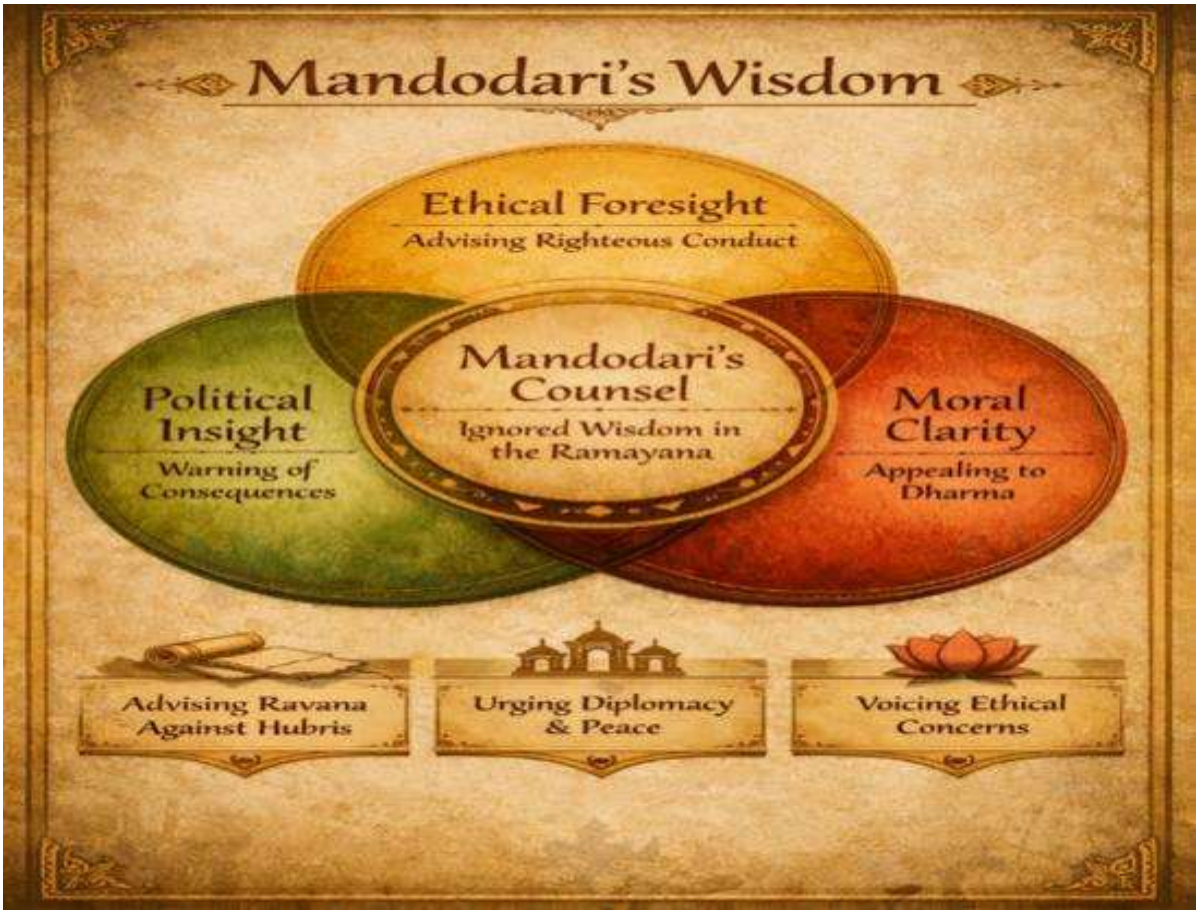
Result: Mandodari embodies the ethical conscience of the epic.

Discussion: Her silenced appeals reflect patriarchal prioritization of masculine valor over feminine moral reasoning.

Comparative Epic Patterns
Similar patterns emerge in the counsel of Draupadi and Gandhari, whose wisdom is likewise ignored. This comparative lens situates Mandodari within a broader epic tradition of silenced female voices.

Result: A recurring motif of marginalized counsel across epics.

Discussion: Feminist hermeneutics reveal these silences as deliberate narrative strategies reinforcing male dominance.



The Mandodari's Wisdom Diagram synthesizes these findings, visually representing her ethical foresight, political insight, and moral clarity. The central overlap—*Ignored Wisdom in the Ramayana*—captures the paradox of acknowledged yet silenced female agency

VI. FINDINGS

Mandodari as Ethical Voice
Mandodari's counsel consistently reflects dharmic principles, positioning her as the ethical conscience of the Ramayana. Her foresight demonstrates that women's wisdom was acknowledged but deliberately sidelined.

Systemic Patriarchal Silencing
The dismissal of Mandodari's advice exemplifies a broader epic pattern of silencing female counsel, reinforcing patriarchal authority and valorizing masculine aggression over feminine moral clarity.

Political Acumen of Epic Women
Mandodari's pragmatic warnings about Lanka's downfall reveal her political insight, comparable to or surpassing male advisors. Her exclusion from decision-making highlights gendered barriers to authority in epic traditions.

Comparative Epic Patterns
Similar silencing of Draupadi and Gandhari situates Mandodari within a recurring motif across Indian epics, where women's counsel is marginalized despite its wisdom and foresight.

Feminist Reinterpretation
Applying feminist hermeneutics, Mandodari's unheard voice emerges as a site of resistance, challenging patriarchal narrative structures and contributing to contemporary discourses on gender and empowerment.

VII. LIMITATIONS AND RESEARCH GAPS

Textual Boundaries This study primarily engages with canonical versions of the Ramayana and selected modern retellings. Regional variations, folk traditions, and oral narratives that may portray Mandodari differently are not examined in detail, limiting the scope of cultural diversity in interpretation.

Comparative Constraints While Draupadi and Gandhari are included for comparative analysis, other epic women such as Tara, Ahalya, or Kaikeyi are not explored extensively. This narrows the comparative framework and leaves room for broader cross-epic studies.

Theoretical Focus The analysis relies heavily on feminist hermeneutics and subaltern theory. Alternative frameworks—such as psychoanalytic, postcolonial, or performance studies—are not applied, which could yield additional insights into Mandodari's silenced voice.

Absence of Reception Studies The paper does not address how audiences across time and regions have received Mandodari's counsel. Reception studies could illuminate shifts in her portrayal and relevance in contemporary feminist discourse.

Interdisciplinary Gaps The study remains within literary analysis and does not integrate sociological, anthropological, or political perspectives. Future research could explore how Mandodari's silencing resonates with lived experiences of women in patriarchal societies.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Mandodari's counsel in the Ramayana emerges as a profound yet silenced voice of ethical foresight, political insight, and moral clarity. Her repeated warnings to Ravana reveal not only her wisdom but also the systemic dismissal of female agency within patriarchal epic traditions. By foregrounding her unheard voice, this study demonstrates how epic narratives simultaneously acknowledge and marginalize women's contributions, reinforcing structures of male authority.

Through feminist hermeneutics and comparative analysis, Mandodari's role is reinterpreted as emblematic of the *subaltern silence* theorized by Gayatri Spivak. Her counsel, ignored within the epic, resonates as a site of resistance and ethical clarity, challenging the narrative strategies that silence women. Comparative readings with Draupadi and Gandhari further underscore the recurring motif of marginalized female wisdom across Indian epics.

Ultimately, reclaiming Mandodari's voice contributes to feminist re-visioning of classical literature, highlighting the enduring relevance of silenced epic women in contemporary discourses on gender, ethics, and empowerment. Her counsel, though unheard in the Ramayana, continues to echo as a reminder of the necessity to re-read, re-interpret, and amplify women's wisdom in both literature and society.

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