

**Abstract for the 14th World Sanskrit Conference,
Kyoto, September 09**

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Sîtâ, Samjñâ, Mâdhavî. Wives who refuse to be sacrificed?

In the present paper, I propose to compare and contrast three narratives found in the epics: the story of Sîtâ's ordeal in book 6 of the Râmâyana, followed by her repudiation and her subsequent disappearance into the Earth in book 7; the story of Samjñâ, as it is narrated in Harivamsa 1.8, and the story of Mâdhavî which is told in Mahâbhârata 5.104-21.

While it is obvious that there are significant differences between these stories at various levels (some, like Sîtâ's, belong to the central epic narrative, while the other two belong to "peripheral" stories; some heroines are human (Mâdhavî perhaps Sîtâ), while others (Samjñâ, perhaps Sîtâ), are divine), it is however also clear that they share an intriguing number of common traits, which would seem to point to a similarity of design and purpose:

- their main characters are women
- these three women leave the "world", including their husbands and children
- in some cases, they leave a "double" behind
- they are all daughters of important fathers (real or surrogate ones) who intervene in the story
- the *asvamedha* (horse-sacrifice) plays an important role in these narratives, either as a real enacted sacrifice, or in the form of horse-sacrificial symbolism. Often, the woman is found in the role of the intended victim
- the three narratives stage a tension between moments of *pravrtti* (being married, having children, living in the world) and *nivrtti* (living in the forest, doing penance)
- after the heroine's disappearance, the kingdom / earth / world is distributed among their children

In this paper, I propose to examine these three narratives in relation to the above-listed characteristics, and then try to establish in what manner they may relate to the overall epic plan.