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The opening and concluding chapters of The Other Rāmāyaṇa Women: Regional Rejection and Response both begin with the plaintive statement, ‘The Rāmāyaṇa is not about “secondary women”’ (pp. 1, 155). The authors of these chapters further amend this to note that the epic is not about women, period. Nevertheless, this concise volume offers a much-needed examination of the many women—other than Sītā—in the Rāma saga who ‘constantly intrude upon the story as agents, witnesses and casualties’ (p. 156). The Other Rāmāyaṇa Women’s editors and contributors seek to make an intervention and contribution to the wealth of rigorous scholarship that scrutinizes the epic, its many tellings and reception, and its heroes and villains by engaging the epic through the specific lens of gender.

The volume includes ten chapters, the first and last of which functionally serve as an introduction and conclusion, respectively. In Chapter 1, ‘Re-creation, Refashioning, Rejection, Response …: How the Narrative Developed’, John Brockington provides a foundation upon which the rest of the volume builds. Specifically, he contextualizes the Rāmāyaṇa tradition from Vālmīki to its retellings and engagement in the Purāṇas, classical secular Sanskrit literature, and, later, instructional, religious and theological texts, and highlights women-focused developments throughout. Chapters 2–4 then focus on alternate renditions of the story. Eva De Clercq and Mary Brockington both examine Jain Rāmāyaṇas and argue that many Jain authors ‘explicitly refute[d] the authoritative Rāma tellings’ (p. 21) and sought to infuse the narrative tradition with Jain values (p. 31). Women characters were a primary means through which this was accomplished. De
Clercq, for example, focuses on Śūrpaṇakhā, who receives the most attention throughout the whole volume, and interrogates why her mutilation is left out in Jain tellings. Brockington queries the ways in which previously minor women characters—‘lustful wives’ (such as Rambhā, Añjanā, Ahalyā, Tārā and Vedavatī) and ‘devoted mothers’ (Kaikeyī, Kausalyā, Sumitrā and Mandodarī)—were ‘not chosen at random’ but contributed to the efforts of Jain authors to address inadequacies or tensions in the depiction of the main male characters (p. 42). Chapter 4 departs from the Jains and looks northward to Tibetan Rāmāyaṇas, whichUlrike Roesler contextualizes as part of a larger Central Asian tradition. Because Sītā is the only female in the largely secular Tibetan retellings to receive much attention, she figures prominently in this chapter, in contrast to the rest of the volume. Even so, Roesler demonstrates that there is less emphasis placed on any ‘emotional struggle’ between Rāma and Sītā in the Tibetan tradition than on the heroic epic story between Rāma and Rāvaṇa (pp. 64–65).

Chapters 5 and 6 shift the focus to consider the Rāmāyaṇa through sculpture and painting as a means of mediating between verbal and visual retellings of the story. In ‘Afflicted Mothers and Abused Women: The Words behind the Pictures’, Brockington, Brockington and Rachel Loizeau-Pajaniradja present a survey of secondary women in visual vernacular tellings of the Rāma story that complements the outline of the Rāmāyaṇa’s textual history presented in Chapter 1. They discuss the preponderance of the story’s forest episodes in these visual retellings, noting that this necessarily excludes many secondary women characters. They also reflect on the popularity of Śūrpaṇakhā and Mandodarī, who are regularly depicted visually. In ‘Women in Crisis’, Anna Dallapiccola focuses specifically on South Indian pictorial versions of the Rāmāyaṇa narrative. Following a brief historical overview, she observes that the most popular scenes to be visually depicted are those from the Bālakāṇḍa and Yuddhakāṇḍa. This translates into the greatest visibility for Mantharā and Śūrpaṇakhā but Dallapiccola also includes Ayomukhi in her discussion.

The final group of chapters interrogates three texts that ‘reveal more about personal response to and transformation of the narrative’ (p. 2). In ‘Designing Women: Felicitous Malice in a Bengali Rāmāyaṇa’ (Chapter 7), Bose explores the retelling of the Rāma tale by the sixteenth-century woman poet Candrāvatī, whose Rāma ballad is a ‘requiem for women, an anti-Rāmāyaṇa in its disregard of the masculine prowess basic to mainstream Rāmāyaṇas’ (p. 107). Specifically, Bose focuses on the story of Kukuyā, a sister the poet Candrāvatī invents for Rāma. ‘If Rāma is heartless and unjust’, Bose argues, Kukuyā is ‘malice personified’ (p. 112), but Bose seeks to contextualize this malice vis-à-vis both Rāma and the other women in Candrāvatī’s retelling. In ‘Can Sages and Women Dance Side by Side?’ (Chapter 8), Imre Bangha explores the transmission of famed Rāmcaritmānas author Tulsidās’s Kavitāvalī, one of his most popular minor works, which presents selected scenes from the Rāma tale. Bangha argues that the text’s most meaningful variations pivot on issues
of gender—the presence or prominence of female characters and women as subjects and objects, for example. Examining the transmission of a text like *Kavitāvalī* can therefore ‘provide often invisible nuances of gender attitudes in the subcontinent’ (p. 135). In Chapter 9, Mary Brockington explores women’s role as re-creators of the tradition, both as narrators and as audience members, through examination of a grandmother’s folk narration of the Rāma tale from Bhopal. She puts this folk telling in conversation with the tales told by two other female narrators, namely, Candrāvatī (Chapter 7) and Atukuri Mollā, ‘another neglected female poet’ discussed briefly in Chapter 5, to consider not only the marked differences in the content of these women’s tellings but the ways in which their tellings served to ‘direct and shape their own lives, or those of their audience’ (p. 151).

Finally, in ‘Tales of the Dispossessed’, Bose reviews the many themes introduced in earlier chapters and brings them together in a satisfying concluding chapter that reminds us of the joy and complexity of there being many Rāmāyaṇas and the attendant need to avoid generalizations—and hence also reminds us of the need for volumes like this one that focus on specific iterations of the Rāma tale. There is also a four-part appendix that lists (1) significant retellings of the Rāma story mentioned in the volume, (2) the Jain versions, (3) vernacular retellings according to language, and (4) variant names that differ significantly from those used in the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa.

This short volume is very clearly conceptualized and written. The short chapters are easily digestible and excel in their internal references to one another, which make plain the ways in which they are interconnected and developed in conversation together. Each chapter commences with a straightforward thesis and well-articulated road map that make the chapter easy to follow. While these attributes would recommend this volume as accessible for undergraduates, the content itself assumes prior knowledge of the Rāmāyaṇa. Contributors are often deeply immersed in the details relevant to their particular telling of the Rāma tale, which is a treat for scholars similarly interested in engaging with such specificity but makes the volume less accessible for those less familiar with the tradition(s). Indeed, regional variation sometimes overtakes the focus on gender as the primary thread connecting the chapters. Although it is the subject of the ‘other Rāmāyaṇa women’ that ostensibly binds the contributions of this volume together, this reader was struck by the degree to which most of the secondary women characters remain, well, secondary at best. This served to highlight, first, how important Sītā really is, both as a protagonist and as a singular female character in most tellings of the narrative, and, second, the importance of regional variation among the many Rāmāyaṇas. Overall, this volume contributes a valuable perspective and array of textual analysis of an otherwise largely overlooked or dismissed set of female characters whose presence in Rāma tellings is worth examining because they yield insights concerning what constitutes the ‘other’ and concerning that against which the ‘other’ is adjudicated.