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Mother Knows Best?

Kausalyā, mother of Rāma, in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is perhaps an insignificant person in the overall story. However, there is a complexity to her that makes her a very interesting addition. Studying her sheds more light on Rāma and his decisions. Kausalyā is someone who strives to be appreciated and liked, but more than anything, she wants what is best for her son and his safety.

There is a selfishness to Kausalyā's personality that she sometimes forgets to shut out. Kausalyā says, “Without you, Rāma, the fire of separation will soon burn me to death” (p. 696). The fire, and the smoke that comes with it, will act as the distance between Kausalyā and Rāma if he decides to enter the forest. The smoke will blind Kausalyā, and she will not be able to keep watch over her son. If Rāma leaves, the separation, similar to the smoke, will make Kausalyā weep. Her emotions will suffocate her, and she will be beside herself without Rāma at her side. Kausalyā thinks only of how Rāma's departure will affect her. She wants him to stay in Ayodhyā so that her grief will not crumble her to ash. Fire is red hot, it is uncontrollable, and it sometimes cannot be contained. This can all be related to the flushed heat on the cheeks of someone with uncontrollable embarrassment. Kausalyā is so ashamed that Rāma is not going to be the next heir to the throne that she fears the humiliation from the other wives will kill her. Ayodhyā 19-20, an earlier part of the story, gives more insight into Kausalyā's selfish nature. After finding out that Rāma will not be the crown prince, she explains that her unhappiness is

worse than if she would have been barren. She is worried that she will be humiliated and taunted by the other wives of the king, and she would rather die than stay in Ayodhyā without Rāma. If he leaves, the embarrassment will kill her. Nevertheless, he stands his ground and insists on going to the forest, so “[q]uickly gathering the articles necessary, she performed a sacred rite to propitiate the deities and thus to ensure the health, safety, happy sojourn and quick return of Rāma” (p. 696). Realizing the gods are not necessarily favorable to her anymore after her “woe is me” comments in Ayodhyā 19-20, Kausalyā needs them back on her side for Rāma’s sake. Not only is she asking the gods to be propitious to Rāma during his journey, but she is also asking them to be propitious to her after all of her selfish remarks. Calling on all of the gods instead of just a select few gives Kausalyā the best chance to win some of them over. In turn, this action gives Rāma the best chance to have at least some gods on his side during his time in the forest. Fourteen years is not necessarily a short period of time. When Kausalyā asks the deities for the “quick return of Rāma”, she is not begging for him to come back any sooner. She is trying to make sure that those fourteen years will go by quickly for herself. In asking for the quick return of her son, she is also asking for a quick end to the worry, embarrassment, and humiliation that she will feel. There is not a doubt in Kausalyā’s mind that she will be able to propitiate the gods. She has to believe that they will protect Rāma because the alternative is not a possibility she wants to have in her mind. If something bad happens to Rāma, Kausalyā will blame herself for not fighting hard enough for him to stay. Her selfish nature tells her that she needs to keep that blame off of her shoulders and that she needs to protect Rāma the best she can in order to mitigate her embarrassment over his departure.

Because of her protective nature, Kausalyā struggles with feeling that she will not be able to shield Rāma from danger in the forest. To alleviate some of her stress, she puts all of her faith

in the gods and the earth. ““May the sages, the oceans, the continents, the Vedas and the heavens be propitious to you”” (p. 697). By telling the sages to be favorable to her son, Kausalyā wishes wisdom upon Rāma. She hopes that wisdom will help protect her son from danger or difficult decisions he might face in the forest. Wisdom will help him to think clearly, it will help him to lead Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā, and it will help him to respect the forest around him. There are dangerous animals and demons in the forest, and having wisdom will help Rāma to avoid them. Although it might not seem that Rāma will need to be favored by oceans he has never swam in or continents he has never set foot on, Kausalyā is showing how desperate she is for him to be safe and protected. She is telling the entire world to be favorable to him and to take care of him because she will not be able to. She is showing that a mother’s ability to protect her children extends to the ends of the planet, up to the heavens, and through time to the oldest texts in the Hindu religion. Kausalyā also specifies different kinds of blessedness that she wants Rāma to find in the forest. She says, ““May the same blessedness be with you that Indra enjoyed on the destruction of his enemy Vṛtra, that Vinatā bestowed upon her son Garuḍa, that Aditi pronounced upon her son Indra when he was fighting the demons, and that Viṣṇu enjoyed while he measured the heaven and earth”” (p. 697). Should Rāma have to fight an enemy in the forest, Kausalyā wants him to share the same blessedness that Indra, the king of the gods, felt when he destroyed his enemy. There is a sense of invincibility that comes with defeating an enemy. The invincibility acts as a shield of confidence for at least a little while. This is something that Kausalyā herself does not have, and so she calls on Indra to help Rāma out. She also wishes self-assurance on Rāma through Indra. She wants him to feel that he can accomplish anything and that nothing can get in his way. Along with self-assurance comes power. There is no doubt that Indra felt powerful as he stood over his enemy’s body, and Kausalyā wants Rāma to feel this

power instead of suffering the fate of Indra's enemy. Kausalyā is desperate for any kind of protection she can give Rāma because she recognizes how much Ayodhyā and the love of its people mean to him, and she respects him for that. Rāma's love for the citizens of Ayodhyā is one thing that influences his decision to leave the city. He understands that it is not his time to rule yet, and because he wants what is best for his people, he does not hesitate in deciding to go into exile for fourteen years. Kausalyā respects Rāma's values because he is showing that he thinks of other people and not just himself. The decision to leave is not a decision that only affects Rāma, and Kausalyā appreciates that he is demonstrating maturity and intelligence.

Kausalyā has such an incredible amount of respect for Rāma that she almost views him as a peer instead of as her son. This respect is evident when she gives up the fight to keep him in Ayodhyā. "Seeing that Rāma was inflexible in his resolve, Kausalyā regained her composure and blessed him" (p. 696). Rāma is extremely determined to go to the forest, and nothing his mother says will change his mind. He is unwavering, and Kausalyā can see that his facial expression and body language do not change after she begs him not to leave her. Instead of demanding that he stay, Kausalyā honors her son's decision and focuses her attention on making sure he returns to her safely. Rāma's stubbornness is not worth losing time over for Kausalyā. She knows that she would be fighting a losing battle. Her son is about to go into a forest for fourteen years, and yet she continues on and blesses him as if it were her idea for him to leave in the first place. This respect is shown again at the end of Kausalyā and Rāma's exchange. "As Rāma bent low to touch her feet, Kausalyā fondly embraced him and kissed his forehead, and then respectfully went round him before giving him leave to go" (p. 697). Even though she does not agree with his decision to leave, she will respect it. The kiss on his forehead is her stamp of approval, as well as a goodbye, knowing that she has done all she can do to ensure his safety and protection. The kiss

is not only a goodbye as Rāma leaves for the forest, but it is also a goodbye to the child Kausalyā once knew. Rāma is going to return fourteen years later as a much different man, and Kausalyā knows this. As much as she wants to hold on to him and never let him go, she is realizing that he is capable of making his own decisions. The affection of the kiss drives Rāma forward as he can now rest easy knowing he has his mother's respect and approval. The end of their exchange is very interesting because it is more formal than a traditional mother and son farewell. Kausalyā goes around her son respectfully before letting him leave. After the motherly affection she just presented him with, she is now back to respecting him as a citizen of Ayodhyā respects him: as if she were his subject. She is aware of the power he holds. Thus, she does this one last gesture to make sure that he is not angered by anything she said. By going around him, Kausalyā gets out of Rāma's way to ensure he can leave the room peacefully. At this point, there is less selfishness in Kausalyā than resignation in realizing that everything is completely out of her control.

Kausalyā has a need to feel accepted among the king's wives. This need goes so far as to make her want to follow Rāma into the forest so that she does not die of humiliation. She wants to be accepted, and if she is not, she will feel absolute embarrassment. Her need to be accepted even extends to her son. She is careful to ensure that he is not angered by her. Instead of letting the selfishness completely consume her, she turns to the gods to ask them to protect her son. She puts her son in their hands to alleviate some of the stress she feels. Above everything else, Kausalyā is incredibly respectful towards her son after he makes a decision that she does not initially approve of. She ends up having to face the embarrassment it will bring, but she willingly faces it. This sacrifice is proof of the great amount of respect Kausalyā has for her son. There is no question of "mother knows best" here. She might have put her faith in the hands of the gods, but without knowing it, she has put her faith in the hands of Rāma, too.