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## Multiple Facets of the 'Ramayana': Readings, Re-readings and Adaptations of the Epic through Ages

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Indians often believe that the thoughts they have, the ideas they formulate, the beliefs they uphold, the ideals they cherish are all traceable to the 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata' the twin epics which have become a part of their collective unconscious. Moreover both these epics become a perennial source of interest and inspiration to not only Indians but to a worldwide reading public. The present study aims to analyze the various re-tellings of the monumental epic, the 'Ramayana' and their role in preserving the longevity of the epic. It is quite interesting to note that the 'Ramayana' has been translated and trans-created in almost all the Indian languages and have also transcended the geographical borders of this sub-continent and became popular in foreign lands. These retellings of the epic have resulted in redefining the very concept of the term 'hero' which has a deep impact in the literary scenario of contemporary times.

*The Ramayana*, the monumental creation has shaped, nurtured and influenced the society, culture and value-systems for ages. The epic was born out of archetypal myths and have become a part of the collective unconscious of the people. It has now become the invaluable heirloom of India's cultural heritage and tradition. Literature being a product of a society and its cultural system has made use of both 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata' to create a platform for every concept, discourse and ethics which an average Indian wanted to declare to the whole world. It is no wonder that in these two epics, India discovers her civilization, her national ethos and multifaceted culture. Indians often believe that the thoughts they have the ideas they formulate, the beliefs they uphold the ideals they cherish are all traceable to the 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata'. Moreover both these epics become a perennial source of interest and inspiration to not only Indians but to a worldwide reading public. It is quite interesting to note that the 'Ramayana' has been translated and trans-created in almost all the Indian languages and have also transcended the geographical borders of this sub-continent and became popular in foreign lands. When they reached the foreign soil, it incorporated the peculiarities of their own culture and had intrinsically interwoven them into the framework of Indian text. All this was made possible because this epic is rich in motifs which have a universal appeal and this makes it a topic of discussion and debate even in the twenty first century.

The advent of the modernist and the postmodernist critical perspectives has only accelerated and renewed the interest in these epics. In the literary field we now encounter a horde of epic retellings in almost all the genres and they make use of a line of theoretical perspectives like subversion, redaction, feminist, psycho-analytical and subaltern criticism to provide a fresh and contemporary significance to the epic.

*The Ramayana* (1500BC) composed by Valmiki is aptly called as the Adikavya. It centers on the deeds of Sri Rama, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu and in a true bildungsroman tradition narrates the incidents that take place in his life. The Epic was translated, retold and recreated a number of times, both in India as well as in foreign languages. In Southeast Asia , there is a variety of versions of the *Ramayana* of which the most famous ones are found in Tibet,

Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Java and Indonesia. The re-tellings of *Ramayana*, most of which presents Rama as lacking in heroic qualities have aroused wide spread enthusiasm of readers, scholars and critics alike all across the globe. This kind of subversive redactions has resulted in the presentation of this epic from a three dimensional view point, which gave rise to many interesting approaches to the study of epics. The re-tellings and re-workings were able to fill in the gaps left open-ended in the original version of the *Ramayana*. An analysis of these divergent modes of narrative subversions provides the readers with a comprehensive account regarding the spectrum of concepts discussed under the façade of an essentially spiritualist structure.

Ramesh Menon's *The Ramayana: A Modern Retelling of the Great Indian epic*, Jonah Blank's *Arrow of the Blue Skinned God*, Romilla Thappar's *The Ramayana Syndrome*, Stanley Wolpert's *Nine Hours to Rama*, Hema Ramakrishnan's *Sanctuary*, Garton Ray's *Resurrecting Ravana*, Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *The Slaying of Meghanada*, Ashok. K Banker's Ramayana series comprising of six books titled – *Prince of Ayodhya*, *King of Ayodhya*, *Bridge of Rama*, *Armies of Hanuman*, *Demons of Chitrakut* and *Siege of Mithila*, Dr. V.B. Kolte's *Mahatma Ravan*, K.S Sankaye's *Gentleman and Bully*, Chadan Mishra's *Ravan*, Puzhavar Kuzhanthai's *Raavanakaavyam* are some of the most famous retellings of '*Ramayana*' in different genres of literature like prose, fiction, poetry and drama. Infact the list is endless with writers coming up with new recreations of this epic almost every year. These works which drew upon inspiration from the original version had successfully adapted the epics to a multitude of fragments of stories each different from one another. These provided an alternate reading of the '*Ramayana*' which was considered for a long period as a canonical text which was above human interpretations. They also had a great role in enabling the epic to reach the common man as most of these works are written in vernacular languages instead of Sanskrit, the scholarly language in which the original work was written. The television serial titled *Ramayana* which was created by Ramanadsagar and his associates for Doordharsan had a remarkable impact for popularizing the story of the epic to the common people. Thus, the impact of these deconstructed versions of the *Ramayana* had enchanted the readers and will continue to cast their spell in the future also.

*The Horns of the Horse*, written by C. Subrahmaniya Bharathi is a whimsically idiosyncratic treatment of the story of Sita and Ram. The translation of this story in English by Paula Richman appropriates the narrative format of an animal fable and slyly satirizes religious conventions, and reverses standard expectations about gender. In *The Horns of the Horse*, Sita's abductor is not Ravan but Ram, who tries in vain to seize the kingdom of Koshala from his father. Thus the author subverts the myth of Rama as the epic hero who crosses the ocean to salvage his wife. The work offers a female point of view to the story by focusing the attention to Sita and even to the so called rakshasis she meets in the kingdom of Ravana. In this highly imaginative work we find Sita seeking help from Queen Shurpanakha and the benevolent queen, quite unlike the one we encounter in the original version by Valmiki, sends the young woman to Lanka to seek refuge from the persistent courtings of Ram. This creative venture stands apart as a scathing criticism of Rama's role as an abductor and Lakshmana's role as an accomplice in the evil ways of Rama. In this work we also find a comic reversal of Lakshmana's mutilation of Shurpanakha as we see Shurpanakha chopping off Lakshmana's nose and toes. Thus this work is a feminist rewriting of the story of the Ramayana by presenting a powerful paradigm of female character through Ravana's sister, a character marginalized in the original version. In this subversive work we find Ravana emerging as the victor in the battle, who defeats Ram's army but saves Ram, out of respect for his youth and noble birth.

*Rama Retold*, another version of Ramayana by the Indo-Irish author Aubrey Menon , retells the epic in a way that shocks the readers who had grown up eulogizing the epic stature of Rama. This book was a blatant refusal of the heroic nature of Rama as presented in Valmiki's Ramayana. This retelling is made even more interesting through the conscious wiping out of all supernatural elements mentioned in the original version. Thus in *Rama Retold*, we do not find any heroic monkeys, nor do we see any evil demons. Since the work wounded the religious sentiments of the majority of believers this book had to face the same as that of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* ,in other words, it was banned in India.

Deconstruction of the Ramayana was undertaken by eminent writers, but the most enlightening venture was *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala*, a novel accomplishment from the part of C.N.Srikantan Nair and Sarah Joseph. Sarah Joseph's *Ramayana Stories* consisting of stories titled *Black Holes*, *Asoka*, *The Mother Clan*, *What is not in the Story*, *Jathiguptan* and *Janakiguptan* are all feminist critiques which look at Rama from a woman's point of view. All these stories are closely modeled on different episodes in the original version of the Ramayana in which the writer challenges the questions of justice, war , peace and above all the transient relationship that dwells on the borders of love and power, which forms the central motif behind the Ramayana.

In the play *KanchanaSita*,written by C.N.Srikantan Nair and translated by VasanthiShankaranarayanan the author presents Rama as a bourgeois, a ruthless king who has no qualms of exploiting his position as the king to meet his selfish motives. This is again a strong deviation from the story line we find in the original version where Rama is pictured as the embodiment of virtue. The play subverts the heroic status attributed to Rama and he is dethroned in the fictional world created by the dramatist only to provide a special status to Ravana, who is reinstated to the forefront through a process of altering the binary opposition which had hitherto coloured the vision of the readers.

Most of these stories which are inspired from the original epic tend to bring in a new hero in the place of Lord Rama. In many recreated classics we find Ravana as the hero , in a few novels we find Sita assuming the central role and so on. In illustrated children's versions too we can notice a tendency for writers to approach the epic from a different perspective. The modern day tendency to redefine the concept of 'hero' has also resulted in a role-reversal which has far reaching consequences in the literary world.

The term hero is a problematic term in literature as well as in political science. The Cambridge dictionary defines hero as a person who is admired for having done something very brave or having achieved something great or the main character in a book, film or plays especially one who is admired for their good qualities. Heroism in many cases is transient but occasionally we have heroes who turn themselves to be icons. Every nation will have a series of national heroes and these heroes represent certain qualities which have got a lasting influence on the mass psyche. In India worshipping humans and Gods have only a nominal difference and now worshipping money and wealth is the order of the day.

It is to be remembered that one man's hero need not be a national icon. Thus Mahatma Gandhi was assumed to be the national hero, a father figure who had all the good qualities needed to be a leader until Godse proved it to be a fallacy. NathuramVinayak Godse represented the darker side of the Indian psyche when he showered bullets on the man who gave us our hard earned freedom. He united the nation in times of crisis yet there was some who thought him to be a villain.

There is another side to this hero worship where the cold blooded murderer becomes the hero for another set of people. Let's consider the example of Adolf Hitler. He is considered to be the incarnation of evil and to be the wickedest man ever to have walked on this earth by anyone who has an iota of humaneness within them. He was instrumental in wiping out a fraction of the world's population at one point of time and his atrocities are so heart breaking to the conscience of anyone who happens to read about it. Yet it is interesting to note that his autobiography has still got wide acceptance especially among the youth. The vegetarians also consider him to be great because he was also one of their kinds. Again people like CheGuevera, the poster boy of all real as well as pseudo- revolutionaries is now given a sense of popularity which he never enjoyed in his life time as a revolutionary. Many of the youngsters do not even know which country Che lived in yet they will surely buy the shirt which has the picture of the great revolutionary imprinted on it. Here we find a hero worship without rhyme or reason.

The idealization of another person begins at a very young stage in one's life and as life progresses it wanes off until a state of egoism is attained where each man considers himself to be great. For a child especially if it is a boy the first and foremost hero is always his father. When the father's help is demanded even for a simple thing like killing a cockroach the child beams with admiration. There starts a hero worship of the child toward his father which will sustain only for a short while. The child's interest is rekindled through multifarious forms until there arises a time when he starts judging his father judiciously. So heroism is only a temporary matter which will get destroyed soon.

It is also common to notice that people has a deeper sense of hero worship to those who were willing to tread away from the path of the law. Thus famous outlaws like Robinhood and our own Kayamkulamkochunni has always got a heroic status though they do not fall under the conventional category of being a hero. In literature we have thousands of examples of unconventional and rather boring heroes. For example there is nothing heroic about the heroes of Kafka and Camus yet they captured the attention of the world wide reading public because they were heroes or rather protagonist with whom the common man can identify with. In movies also we find this sort of role reversal where is a blurring of the images of heroes and villains. Thus we can see that the revengeful son in *Baazigar* was accepted as much as the chocolate hero of *DilwaleDulhania Le Jayenge* only because the audience was able to accept the fact that no man is completely black or white. The shades of grey which is the characteristic feature of each human being has to be acknowledged while taking into consideration any piece of work whether in terms of literature , art or in movies.

Here it becomes important to note that epics, which form the core of Indian culture has given us a distorted version of the hero image especially by presenting Lord Rama as the national hero and God. In India Lord Rama is a national hero. Every good man in India is invariably compared to Rama. But, the fictional retellings of Ramayana have posed a challenge to this by subverting the heroic image of Rama through a number of books.

In contemporary times we often encounter certain scenes which appear to be directly taken from the epics, especially the *Ramayana*. Even now we see around us the epic parallels of oppression, gender discrimination, subjugation of minorities, violence, sectarianism and all the diverse evils mentioned in these epics and the only possible solution is to understand the full spectrum of the messages embodied in the re-telling to stop all forms of evil around us. Hence, instead of marginalizing and labelling people as minorities, instead of attacking and plundering religious places, instead of waging wars in the name of superiority of races and

culture, instead of promoting partisan ideals, man should engage himself in a contemplative study of the essential goodness of man and the need for transcending all the barriers created by man to achieve supreme happiness and eternal bliss. In fact a blurring of national, racial, religious, political, cultural and economic boundaries should take place from the spring board of these re-telling and recreations of epics.

A comprehensive analysis of these redactorial re-tellings would reveal to us the need for accepting and forgiving one another without paying attention to the oppositions that distorts our vision regarding many issues. These works makes it clear that there is no fixed centre to the original epics and therefore no one can be termed as the 'Other'. The Epics, do not have a so called expiry date, also, it does not have a set of fixed meaning or interpretation. As history repeats itself we encounter the same experiences again and again, and the lessons imbibed from the past experiences serves the purpose of present solutions seems to be the underlying impact of these epics and its recreations. It makes human beings who are inquisitive by nature to embark on an eternal quest to unveil the true significance of existence. This quest is an everlasting one, as there is always a past in the present and a present in the past.

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