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Silent Echoes, Loud Impact: The Role of Shabari, Kevat and the Vanara Warriors in *Ramcharitmanas*

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Abstract:

The *Ramcharitmanas*, written by Tulsidas constitutes a significant literary and spiritual work that intricately interlaces the narratives of both divine and human characters, including those figures who exist on the periphery of the epic. Although Rama's journey constitutes the primary narrative, the inclusion of peripheral characters such as Shabari, Kevat, and the Vanara warriors imparts significant depth to the epic. These figures frequently disregarded in conventional discourse, contest inflexible social hierarchies, offering different perspectives on devotion, service and spiritual egalitarianism. Shabari, an older woman of tribal origin, epitomizes unwavering devotion and the transformative potential of Bhakti, transcending the constraints of caste and gender norms. Kevat, the modest boatman, symbolizes the journey of spiritual transcendence, highlighting the virtues of altruistic service and unwavering faith. The Vanara warriors, although regarded as subservient allies acquire a crucial role in the epic war against Ravana exhibiting bravery, loyalty and reliance. Through their interactions with

Rama, these characters enhance the narrative's diversity and challenge established societal structures, providing valuable insights into the inclusive and egalitarian principles embedded within the epic. This research paper takes a critical look at the roles of these minor characters in the *Ramcharitmanas*, arguing that their presence is necessary to understand the epic's social and cultural meaning. This research paper also shows how Tulsidas creates a vision of devotion beyond social differences by focusing on their contributions.

Keywords: Ramcharitmanas, Subalternity, Devotional Stratification, Marginalized Depictions, Bhakti-Caste Nexus, Dissenting Narratives.

Introduction

Tulsidas (1511-1623 AD) is one of the most prominent poets in the history of literature and his work the *Ramcharitmanas* is an important composition in the epic tradition of the Ramayana. The story, when examined without its marginal characters, would not only feel incomplete but also undeniably lose much of the richness and depth that the presence of these minor and diverse characters contributes to the narrative, ultimately working together in harmony to create a cohesive and profound whole. The same narrative of Ram and his epic, multifaceted journey serves as a perfect example that highlights the critical importance of marginal characters, particularly through the captivating and fascinating figures such as Shabari, Kevat and the valiant Vanara warriors, who are all beautifully depicted in Tulsidas's renowned and revered epic. This research paper aims to explore and discuss the significance of these marginal characters in detail and with depth. A structured society, as we see vividly reflected in the timeless tale, thrives on intricate hierarchies and defines one's place within it, based on a complex combination of birthright and the various actions taken throughout one's life journey. Marginal characters provide a vital and necessary glimpse into these social dynamics while shining a light on how societal norms are established, upheld and also

challenged. Thus, knowing the lives, actions and reactions of these minor characters is important for understanding the deeper meanings of the *Ramcharitmanas* and fully appreciating their impact on literature and culture.

Literature Review

Although the core figures like Rama, Sita and Ravana, have received significant scholarly attention, the secondary characters such as Shabari, Kevat and the Vanara warriors are often neglected. These characters, though minor in the narrative hierarchy play a pivotal role in enriching the epic's social, cultural and spiritual dimensions. Recent scholarship has begun to shed light on their significance, offering fresh perspectives on the epic's inclusive and egalitarian ethos. Philip Lutgendorf, in his seminal work 'The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas', emphasizes the transformative power of devotion (Bhakti) as exemplified by characters like Shabari and Kevat. Lutgendorf argues that "these figures challenge rigid social hierarchies, offering alternative models of spirituality that transcend caste and gender norms" (45). Similarly, John Stratton Hawley, in 'A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement', "highlights the role of peripheral characters in democratizing access to divine grace, underscoring the epic's message of spiritual egalitarianism" (78).

The Vanara warriors, often relegated to the margins of scholarly discourse, have also garnered attention for their bravery, loyalty and indispensable role in Rama's quest. In "The Vanara Sena: Uncovering the Truth Behind the Myth", this article explores the identity of the Vanara, suggesting they were likely forest-dwelling tribes who embodied qualities such as agility, bravery and loyalty (Chaurasia). Furthermore, "Being Ram: The Relevance of the Ramayana Today", published in The Daily Pioneer, explores how the Ramayana, and by extension the *Ramcharitmanas*, continues to influence modern audiences (Mahadevan). It highlights the epic's themes of righteousness and duty, which remain pertinent in contemporary

society. Despite these contributions, there remains a gap in the literature regarding a comprehensive analysis of how peripheral characters collectively enrich the epic's social and cultural meaning. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining the roles of Shabari, Kevat and the Vanara warriors, arguing that their presence is essential for understanding the epic's inclusive vision of devotion and equality.

Shabari: The Devotee

Shabari does not easily fit into the paradigm of the typical sadhu in the performance of her sadhana. Shabari's sadhana in detail illustrates that she spends the most of her time in active service to her guru by maintaining the ashram premises. In the words of Shabari from Maharishi Valmiki's Ramayan, "I long to approach those ascetics of purified mind to whom this hermitage belongs and whose servant I have been" (925). Further exploration of Shabari's background reveals that she is an unmarried princess. Though she engages in wide reading and intellectual discourse, Shabari is pure in both thought and action, holding the idea of a universal deity collectively embodied by Rama and Sita from the moment she hears of them. It is only under her guru's instruction to go forth into the world that Shabari begins her preparation and enters into an intense focus on spiritual study. By the time Shabari reaches the point of Mahan Sadhana, she is old and Gray. Shabari is therefore not only a highly educated and cultured individual but has lived a life of intense spiritual seeking.

Character Analysis

Shabari's character is extraordinary due to her unique qualities and emotional depth. Her narrative reveals the power of unwavering faith in Rama's name that persists despite the adverse circumstances. An older woman abandoned in the wilderness trains herself in devotion and waits patiently for Rama's arrival, demonstrating an extraordinary level of resilience, patience and determination. Her single-minded dedication to this task, along with the presence

of values so characteristic of a seeker dedicated to internalized bhakti, paints the portrait of a devoted and yet complex character. The complexities of her social status, as explained by ethical realism and interpretive tradition, further enhance the complexity of her narrative. An ascetic and celibate woman of a healthy body living alone in the wilderness and devoting herself to a solely mental form of bhakti is understood as impaired. A superhuman curse puts her into reverse old age and her staggered aging, rapid defilement and mortality due to prolonged contact and impelled service indicate this is ongoing. This social distance, along with her dialogues and interactions with other characters, particularly Rama, reveals the narrative intricacies of her roles as an observant and caregiver.

Role in the *Ramacharitmanas* Epic

“अधम ते अधम अधम अतिनारी। तिन्ह महुँ मैं मतिमंद अघारी।।

कह रघुपति सुनु भामिनि बाता। मानउँ एक भगति कर नाता।। (34) (1)

Description from Aranya Kand: A woman is the lowest of those who rank as the lowest of the low. Of them, again I am the most dull-headed, O Destroyer of sins. Said Śrī Raghunatha: Listen, O noble lady, to My words: I recognize no other kinship except that of Devotion” (Tulsidas 580). Rama illustrates that worth lies in faith rather than caste or social standing; in the literary heritage of the Ramayana epic, one character rarely examined is Shabari. She is a devotee of the mighty Prince Rama. Her story not only addresses the epic’s most salient themes but also delivers a panoply of lessons and philosophical insight. Her character enhances the theme of acceptance throughout the Ramayana. Shabari’s narrative reveals that skips of a spiritual nature transcend the bounds of custom. The tale underlines that regardless of vocation, a soul of religion attracts the grace of the divine. Shabari’s experience weaves this narrative theme, centralizing a common subtext of sinistral caste interactions between rural and urban communities. “As the divine adjunct in the *Ramcharitmanas*, Rama and the sage Vishwamitra

become transformative through the usage of military equipment in a forest background and must engage with Rama” (Delaye 8). Ultimately, it is the saint Matanga that bridges the historically enfranchised monarch and the isolated tribal, through whom Shabari discovers her salvation.

Kevat: The Boatman

The character of Kevat, has been approached from angles of allegory, devotional surrender and the importance of moving beyond ‘outward indifference’ to a spiritual connection. His interplay with Rama has been heavily emphasized in literature, as Kevat becomes the giver of recognition and the one who succeeds in curing Rama of his other removed mighty curse. His songs of devotion and his eventual cure, achieved when Rama places his holy feet on Kevat’s boat, are instances of intense importance. Kevat’s character works on a multifaceted level. Given, Because of his profession and his socio-cultural landscape, his character is utilized to delve into an uncover of class standing within the world of the *Ramcharitmanas* as well as a broader mythological context. Kevat’s character is then shown to display an intensification of various thematic concerns to poignant effect, among which are the epic’s overall message of humility and respect, the battle of fate and free will and of course, the notion that verily, ‘all have an equally beneficial role to play in the cosmic script’ as Kevat’s single act has far-reaching and epic consequences, further stitching in the grand tapestry of the divine scripture where ultimately a ‘marginal character’ like Kevat is essential.

Character Analysis

Kevat, the Nishad boatman is enshrined in the Ramayana for ferrying Rama to safety after his exile. Kevat’s marginality, like that of the other case studies is defined in a myriad of ways: caste, socio-economic status and place in the poetic world. He is often regarded as a humble Nishad boatman whose integrity, devotion and self-sacrifice are lauded. Narrative

tendencies and key storytelling ingredients elevate this character to a spiritually ascendant status. However conflicting registers portray him as a worldly man frustrated by his worldly requests for liberation. He is consistently presented as possessing an emotional depth, unusual for a marginal character. Reductions and expansions alike depict an internally divided man: Kevat's conscious selflessness, his anger, expressed so infrequently because of his humble mentality and his delight are represented numerous times. In so doing, he becomes a model of a man who can achieve sacred salvation through this lowly act of service. At the same time, introspection is somewhat marginalized, allowing a more searingly honest representation of the conflicted emotions attendant upon such service.

Symbolism and Allegory

As Rama passes his banishment years on the bank of the Ganga River, Kevat carries him as a boatman in his boat. Kevat is a Nishad by caste. Nishad refers to Kevat on a particular occasion, symbolize boatman at other places. 'Nishad' means those who live so close to nature and their livelihood also deals with river, forest, etc. Kevat represents an elementary class of people like present day scooters, cycle-rickshaw Walla and porters on the railway station, bus stand and big and petty-ticket sellers of the bus and public vehicle. Kevat is a symbol for those who are to live on service. There are still many unsung heroes who serve on all traditional occasions and functions of the big and high-heeled people of the towns. In exchange of such service very pitiful wages are paid, Kevat represents them. As boats are used for the transport of the goods and passengers from one shore to the other or one bank to the other. As described in Ayodhya Kand -

“एहिं प्रतिपालउँ सबु परिवारू । नहिं जानउँ कछु अउर कबारू ॥

जौ प्रभु पार अवसि गा चहहू । मोहि पद पदुम पखारन कहहू ॥४॥ (99)(4)

As Kevat himself says, ‘It is by means of this boat that I maintain the whole of my family; I know no other profession. If, therefore, my lord, you must cross the river, command me to lave your lotus feet’ (Tulsidas 368). Rama is an allegory for the Paramatman, or Infinity. Infinity is both space and time. Thus, Rama needs a boat for his, infinity’s, transcendence. Kevat’s boat is an allegory for transcendence. Transcendence can also be understood as a spiritual passage. Knowing him, Rama first becomes grateful to him and then with devotion, he pays an advance fare for the spiritual passage beyond worldly existence. Lord Rama takes Kevat’s water on his feet. This allegory manifests the devotion itself. As described in Ayodhya Kand-

“छं• - पद कमल धोइ चढ़ाइ नाव न नाथ उतराई चहौं।

मोहि राम राउरि आन दसरथ सपथ सब साची कहौं ॥

In Kevat’s words, I will let you aboard the boat only when I have laved your lotus feet; I seek no toll from you. I swear by you, O Śrī Rāma, as well as by King Dasaratha, that what I tell you is all true” (Tulsidas 369). This Tulsidas story teaches the lesson: do not see the greatness of the people but also see their doings and excellent services.

Vanara Warriors: Hanuman and Angad

In the *Ramcharitmanas*, Hanuman and Angad emerge as notable figures from a marginalized community; the portrayal of Hanuman and Angad highlights their unique and remarkable traits. Hanuman stands out with his unparalleled strength, wisdom, and unwavering devotion to Lord Rama, embodying the ideal qualities of a warrior and a devotee. Angad, the courageous soldier of the Kishkindha monkeys, complements Hanuman's attributes with his exceptional bravery and steadfast loyalty, often acting as a vital link between the human characters and the Vanara community. Together, they exemplify the spirit of heroism and commitment in their quest to support Rama, making their contributions invaluable to the Epic. Hanuman, with his unparalleled strength and divine abilities emerges as a key figure in the

battle against Ravana. At the same time Angad, known for his strategic acumen, plays a crucial role in rallying the Vanara forces and executing pivotal plans that ultimately lead to victory. The description of Hanuman not only showcases his physical prowess but also symbolizes his unwavering devotion to Lord Rama. In contrast, Angad, the son of Vali, embodies nobility and valour, displaying remarkable intelligence and strategic thinking during the battles against Ravana's forces. Together, these Vanara warriors exemplify the diverse qualities that enrich the narrative of the *Ramcharitmanas*, highlighting the importance of loyalty, bravery, and divine purpose. "The oceans quake, beginning to doubt the survival of the expedition to Lanka. Then Hanuman jumps over the bridge and he travels to Lanka. Fire does not scorch him; the ocean does not get him; his form got huge" (Priyanto 14).

Character Analysis

Hanuman is the marginal character who appears very powerful in the narrative, embodying and enacting countless heroics within the broader framework of the epic, frequently supporting and highlighting the central characters. Angad is a key mural character. The contrasting manner in which their characterisations are written enriches and endorses each other's traits. As described in Sundar Kand-

“अतुलितबलधामं हेमशैलाभदेहं
दनुजवनकृशानुं ज्ञानिनामग्रगण्यम् ।
सकलगुणनिधानं वानराणामधीशं
रघुपतिप्रियभक्तं वातजातं नमामि ॥ ३ ॥

I bow to Hanuman, the son of the windgod, the beloved devotee of Śrī Raghunatha, the chief of the monkeys, the repository of all virtues, the foremost among the wise, a fire to consume the forest of the demon race, possessing a body shining as a mountain of gold and a repository

of immeasurable strength” (Tulsidas 621). Hanuman is depicted as exceptionally strong, his aura creating literal winds that spread panic on the battlefield. In addition to this physical prowess are his keen and quick-witted intelligence and ingenuity, which often drive him towards accomplishing complex and unique tasks. Nevertheless, what endears him the most to Rama and all other characters is his pure, undiluted, originary, and steadfast devotion to Rama, as well as his shrewd and often sage-like advice. As described in Lanka Kand-

“कह कपि धर्मसीलता तोरी। हमहुँ सुनी कृत पर त्रिय चोरी ॥

देखी नयन दूत रखवारी। बूढ़ि न मरहु धर्म व्रतधारी ॥ ३ ॥

Said Angada, I too have heard of your 'uprightness,' which is evident from the fact that you stole away another's wife. And I have witnessed with my own eyes the protection you pledged to an envoy. Claimer of rightness, why do you not drown yourself and thus end your life?” (Tulsidas 687).

“प्रीति बिरोध समान सन करिअ नीति असि आहि।

जौ मृगपति बध मेडुकन्हि भल कि कहइ कोउ ताहि २३ (ग) ॥

Make friends or enter into hostilities only with your equals: this is a sound maxim to follow. If a lion were to kill frogs, will anyone speak well of him?” (Tulsidas 688). In contrast, Angad epitomizes submission. Indeed, when Rama’s message is rejected by Ravana, he stands to argue in sugared words of wisdom and reason, befitting his royal lineage and his affection for and kinship with Rama. However, Angad is not merely a character of words. When words fail, he is to act moreover in a situation that knows no precedence or guidance. His compatriots hold Angad as a hero himself. Both Hanuman and Angad become emblematic of the warrior companion’s highest ideals of duty, friendship, service, loyalty, dedication and love. Hanuman and Angad essentially embody the fundamental elements of devotion and loyalty to their lord.

At their core, both the characters of Hanuman and Angad reflect and reinforce the moral, pragmatic, and ideological framework of the grand epic.

Contribution to the Epic War

Hanuman and Angad are arguably the most significant of the Vanara warriors. Each plays a key role in the necessary, though extremely difficult, Vanara's attempt to locate the abducted Sita. It is Hanuman who, representing the best of the Vanara troops, finds her. "The scene in which he first encounters her in Lanka's grove of Ashoka trees is particularly moving, and his inner dialogue speaks of love, intense emotion, and a commitment to duty that is quite in keeping with the ideal of a warrior" (Priyanto 16). As described in Sundar Kand-

“चलेउ नाइ सिरु पैठेउ बागा। फल खाएसि तरु तोरें लागा ॥

रहे तहाँ बहु भट रखवारे। कछु मारेसि कछु जाइ पुकारे ॥ १ (17)(1)

Bowing his head, he went forth and entered the grove; and having eaten the fruit, he began to break down the trees. A number of warriors had been posted there as guards; some of them were killed by him, while the rest took flight to Ravana and cried for protection" (Tulsidas 636). His subsequent actions including his demolition of Ravana's gardens and his stupendous leap over the Sagar waters are likewise heroic, at times superhuman. Hanuman who is not merely brave and quick-witted but extraordinarily fast and strong, capable of working miracles. Just as Hanuman is miraculous in his strength and courage, Angad is important for his wit and dignity. He is the Vanara chieftain chosen to speak with Ravana, and it is his powerful words that finish the rakshasas most effectively, evoking the anger that leads to their death and thereby closing off the possibility of further counter-strategy and gambit by this enemy in the war.

However, it is not only the power of his body but rather his intellectual statesmanship that makes Angad a significant warrior. His knowledge of the proper use of words is explicit

during his exchange with Ravana, emphasizes a message consistent with normative dharma and with his character: he addresses Ravana with respect and eloquence despite the anger he doubtlessly feels as a result of Ravana's words and actions, and he warns Ravana against fighting a disastrous, 'wrong' war. As described in Lanka Kand-

“नृप अभिमान मोह बस किंवा। हरि आनिहु सीता जगदंबा ॥

अब सुभ कहा सुनुहु तुम्ह मोरा। सब अपराध छमिहि प्रभु तोरा ॥ ३॥ (19)(3)

Angad says to Ravana "Under the influence of kingly pride or infatuation, you carried off Sītā, the Mother of the Universe. But even now you listen to my friendly advice, and the Lord will forgive all your offenses" (Tulsidas 685).

“जौं मम चरन सकसि सठ टारी। फिरहिं रामु सीता मै हारी ॥

सुनुहु सुभट सब कह दससीसा। पद गहि धरनि पछारहु कीसा ॥ ५॥ (33)(5)

'If you can but stir my foot, O fool, Śrī Rāma will return forthwith, and I shall forgo Sītā as a lost wager'. 'Listen, champions all', exclaimed the ten-headed monster, 'seize the monkey by the leg and dash him to the ground'" (Tulsidas 697). Even when the rakshasas attack the Vanara army, he maintains his composure and berates Ravana harshly. He also helps the Vanaras to rally and shows a courageous determination to avert chaos and defeat in the battle.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the vast and intricate landscape of the *Ramcharitmanas* invites us to embark on several profoundly meaningful and transformative pilgrimages. These journeys allow us to explore the depths of its vibrant tapestry through the exceedingly varied experiences of its key marginalized characters, each offering unique and valuable insights into life and existence. The poignant and deeply compelling stories of Shabari Kevat and the Vanar lords to

illuminate the essence of marginality in a striking manner vividly. These narratives showcase deeply resonant and universal themes of patience, grace, sacrifice, and unwavering devotion to a higher cause. The research paper asks readers to pay attention to those characters who, despite their apparent marginality, can influence the narrative significantly. Each tale resonates powerfully with the reader, transcending their immediate context and revealing broader and more profound insights into the significant roles that marginal characters play within the larger narrative framework. Not only do these essential roles exist within the epic, but they also extend to the broader spectrum of literature and its narratives themselves. By thoughtfully examining these rich and complex characters along with their multifaceted connections to both the narrative and the broader society, we can significantly deepen our understanding of margins and their vital contributions to the overarching themes of the work. These contributions enrich and enhance the central themes of literature, ultimately promoting a more comprehensive appreciation of the *Ramcharitmanas* and its implications well beyond its pages.

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