

Recapitulation of Valmiki's Ramayana and Ramchandra Series to Unveil the Contrasting Roles of Several Characters

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Abstract

During the course of history, whether it is about! the Greek, India or the British, they have composed numerous scriptures, created various communities, social beliefs and rituals, to promote sustainability and integrity in the society, which led to the making of the great civilization. India is considered to be one of the greatest civilizations in the entire world which was nurtured by countless sources, and became a vast storehouse of scriptures such as Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads, numerous chants, legendary epics, folklores, ancient fables, dance, music, mythologies, plays and poetry. This treasure created the roots of Indian legendary past and hence its values remained sustained and relevant to all Indians. The epics Ramayana and Mahabharata are the classic examples of human action, which became the model of social, moral, political and aesthetic awareness of historical events, also the subject of myth to some extent. These epics gave wings to modern fantasy writing and young authors to foster their artistic abilities. Ramayana is neither a fictional tale nor a mythological story, but the core of Hindu Dharma. The text was written by sage Valmiki. It has undergone various adaptations over the time that provided fresh perspectives on contemporary narratives. While going through these texts, variations in several themes can be found such as narrative techniques, social nuances, representation of the characters, depending on the perspective of different individuals and the passage of time. Even though the Indian epics and scriptures are infinite oceans of wisdom and unsurmountable to be grasped entirely by human intellect, and needed to be churned over and over again, yet they are altered and reimagined countless times to produce a plethora of fascinating stories. At present, new Indian fiction writers have developed a keen interest in ancient texts and a new genre is introduced with a tradition of blending ancient stories with present reality. In other words, mythologies and ancient fables are no longer lines carved on the stone, that cannot be changed. These writers added their own perspective on events, which resulted in providing new connotations. The purpose of amalgamation of past and present situations is the alleviation of modern problems with the right code of conduct and learnings encoded in our epics.

Keywords: Kumbhakarna, Manthara, Shurpanakha, Vibhishana, Sunaina

Introduction

The epic Ramayana exhibit various codes of ethics where each character follows his or her duty and helps in driving the story to perfection. However, many changes can be observed in the interpretations of the epic due to different viewpoints and time periods. Ramayana was written in poetic form in Sanskrit, while

the Amish Tripathi's work is a modern fiction in which he has also introduced elements like fantasy, myth and humour to attract the attention of the audience. He is one of the contemporary writers of this genre, who has tried to blend ancient stories, myth and fantasy and thus modernize the myth. In his interviews, he has mentioned that his fictions are based on the knowledge that he gained through the intensive study of various scriptures, along with the fables and stories narrated to him in his familial environment. During the course of his study, he noticed that, Hindu deities were not probably the part of mythological stories or a figment of foremost imagination. Rather they were the humans with some distinguished qualities. They had encountered various difficulties in human life, but what made them different from the others is their ability of resolving the conflicts by following the right code of conduct. Other than this, Amish has focused on the minor characters which are literally neglected or have a lesser influence in the text. His main concern while portraying these characters was their perspectives over the situations which made them act the way they did, and how people perceive their personality on the basis of their actions. He tried to highlight the importance of the roles of several minor characters in the making of the story, while also focusing thoroughly on their personality traits. Also, Amish has brought out new dimensions to the roles of these characters as figments of his imagination. They are not presented merely as a minor role. Rather, they often appeared as key parts of the puzzles built into the story. However, this portrayal of the characters made them somewhat distinct from those presented in the original story. Both Ramayana and Ramchandra series displays the journey of Rama on the path of Dharma. But Amish has modified some characters to suit his narrative. The purpose of this paper is to exhibit disparities through the comparison of the roles of some characters in Valmiki Ramayana and Amish Tripathi's Ramchandra series. Some of them are:

Manthara

In Valmiki Ramayana, Manthara was a hunchbacked old woman, who was the servant of queen Kaikeyi of Ayodhya. She had been living with her since her birth and was subject to her allegiance. When she came to know about the consecration of Rama, she was raged, and, that wicked woman furiously tried to provoke queen Kaikeyi against Rama. Initially, queen Kaikeyi was very happy after hearing the news of consecration of Rama as she never made any difference between Rama and her own son. But Manthara subjugated the queen's mind by instigating her that as soon as Rama ascends the throne, he would expel Bharata from the kingdom. At the same time, she made the queen believed that, she would be overpowered by Kaushalya once her son became the king. Kaikeyi was provoked by her words and as a result, in a fit of anger and insecurity, she took the promise of fourteen years of exile for Rama, from the king. However, in Ramchandra series, Amish's depiction of Manthara is quite different from that of the Ramayana. She is not portrayed as an evil personality, rather as a powerful and brilliant business woman who could finance the entire realm of Kosala, along with some other kingdoms. The influence that Amish created in Manthara's characterization also emphasized gender equality. In fact, with the storyline, one would pity her conditions and childhood traumas that she had to go through instead of showing hatred towards her. Despite her past experiences, she was very diplomatic as a capitalist in maintaining cordial relations with both Ayodhya and Lanka. But she lost control over her mental health due to the death of her beloved daughter Roshini, who was brutally gang-raped and murdered by Dhenuka and his gang members. She seeks the support of Kaikeyi in order to punish her daughter's culprits because she was aware that only a member of royal family could fulfil her purpose. So, she tried to woo her. Rather than caring about who she is, one would support her for the efforts she took, and be influenced that she wanted to get justice for her daughter. To gain Kaikeyi's support, she paid her a huge sum of money along with the promise to

be able to force Bharata to the throne of Ayodhya, with the help of her influence over the business community. Her pain and struggle can be observed in her conversation with Kaikeyi.

“I want him to suffer. I want him to suffer as much as he made my daughter suffer. I am not interested in a speedy death.”

(Tripathi, *Scion of Ikshvaku* 155)

She also paid handsomely to the executioners to punish the culprits for the agony that she had undergone. After execution, at the time of immersion of the ashes of Roshini's body, she whispered her pain:

“Don't come back to this ugly world, my child; it has not been created for the one as pure as you.”

(Tripathi, *Scion of Ikshvaku* 168)

Kumbhakarna

In Valmiki Ramayana, the Ravana's brother Kumbhakarna was a grand example of Valmiki's hyperbolic manner of portrayal. He was so huge and objectionably fierce that he could devour the entire world, even the gods feared that he would wreak terrible destruction if he was granted powerful boons for his penances. To restrain this fatality, they approached Saraswati, the goddess of speech, and requested her to enter his mouth and select a boon for him by gaining control over his vocal organs, and she chose sustained sleep for him as a boon from the creator. At the time of war, when all the demons of Ravana's army had been slain by the opponents, he had no other option but wake him up. The scene of his awakening was represented in a grotesquely exaggerated manner, requiring extraordinary violence to awaken the giant demon and immense quantities of food and drink to quench his thirst and hunger. Many dancers were performing for his entertainment. Waking up from sleep, he went to his brother Ravana to meet him and requested orders. Knowing the tactics that Ravana had played, surprisingly, he admonished him for his folly ways and absurd statesmanship, and tried to guide him towards righteousness. There is Ravana's only confession at this point in the entire story that it was his fatal mistake to abduct Sita and not returning her, by rejecting Rama's peace preaching. However, as a devoted brother, Kumbhakarna fought against Rama's army to the best of his ability. Before being cut through the arrows of Rama, he ravaged over the army of monkeys. Even the fall of his head and body, according to Valmiki's description, caused enormous destruction.

Whereas, instead of presenting Kumbhakarna as a giant demon, Amish has humanized him as a Naga born with some kind of deformities. He was born with some outgrowth on his shoulders, which caused excruciating pain and bleeding if he did not get adequate medicine on time. His health was deteriorating over time due to the increase in that outgrowth and the consumption of these drugs. However, his affection and fidelity towards his brother was tremendous. He was obliged to Raavan but he firmly stopped him when he followed the path of unrighteousness. Raavan was truly concerned about only two persons throughout his life on whom he had unquestionable trust, his brother and his son.

Shurpanakha

Shurpanakha, the sister of king of the Lanka, played an epic role throughout the story as her dismemberment by Lakshmana and instigating Ravana towards Sita aroused her brother's infatuation with her and he decided to abduct Sita, the wife of another man. She is a central figure in the various versions of Ramayana, as she provided the main motive on which the entire story is based. In Valmiki Ramayana, she is presented as a powerful demonic woman, who tried to lure Rama, and when she was rejected, the despondent abominable woman tried to kill his wife, and then Lakshmana dismembered her by cutting off

her nose. She was well aware that her wounds were not enough for Ravana to take her revenge on Rama. Therefore, she tried to woo Ravana by describing Sita's beauty and her words had the desired effect. Although she was a cunning woman who wanted her brother to take revenge on the man who had rejected her, she still had a strong sense of statesmanship and righteousness. Lakshmana had disfigured her, and the destruction of the demonic soldiers at the hands of Rama added insult to her injury. She rebuked him for his excessive sensual indulgences, negligence towards the affairs of the state and duties of the king. "A king who, having given in to sensual indulgences, become negligent towards the affair of his state, doesn't get any respect from his people.

A king who doesn't establish and maintain a network of spies to remain informed about the affairs of the state, allies and enemies, is eventually betrayed by his own people."

(Ganatra 120)

On the other hand, Amish has presented Shurpanakha as an impressive self-motivated woman who exudes immense grandeur and beauty.

"Her skin was pearly white, and her eyes magnetic. She had a sharp slightly upturned nose and high cheekbones. Her hair was blonde, a most unusual colour in India, and every strand of it was always in place. Everything about her petite frame was elegant."

(Tripathi, *Raavan* 347)

Amish tried to display the humanizing traits in her character and the deceptiveness through which she had questioned the patriarchy. He tried to display the humiliation and double standards that women faced in the ancient times in ancient society.

"Shurpanakha sniggered, 'So, the great descendant of Raghu let his wife make decisions for him, is it?'"

(Tripathi, *Sita* 342)

"Shurpanakha turned to Jatayu. It had not escaped her notice that, as usual, every man was gaping intently at her; every man, that is, except Ram and Lakshmana. 'Great Malayaputra, don't you think it is in your interest to give us refuge? We could tell you more about Lanka than you already know. There will be more gold for you in it.'"

(Tripathi, *Sita* 342)

Vibhishana

The youngest brother of Ravana, and the only son of Kaikesi who should have been demonic by nature as he was born in the *Rakshasa* clan, but he epitomized the virtues and was devoted to the supreme divinity, Vishnu. As a brother, he tried many times to convince his elder brother to act righteously in the interest of Lanka, since, his lecherous nature and wickedness could have led to the destruction of dynasty and kingdom. However, Ravana never cared for his brother's considerate approach. But at the time of Sita's abduction, Vibhishana desperately wanted his brother to return her, as if he had known of what could Lanka face due to his brother's obstinacy but Ravana's arrogance led him to insult his brother in full court. Notwithstanding his brother's well-meaning advice, he expelled him from the kingdom. Vibhishana's choice was not easy because he had to choose between the path of dharma and his brother. But he was not in dilemma, he knew that Ravana's stubbornness would lead to the destruction of his empire.

However, in Ramchandra series, Amish has portrayed the character of Vibhishana in contrast to the one presented in original story of Ramayana. He is the step-brother of Raavan. Beyond his dislike for his step-siblings, Raavan volunteered them for the kidnapping of Sita. Raavan knew the intricacies of his brother's

nature, but he could not risk the lives of his brother Kumbhakarna and his son Indrajit. He had no other option but to trust him.

“Vibhishan went down on his knees ceremoniously and brought his head down to the floor, paying obeisance to Raavan. ‘You will not regret this my Lord.’

Raavan looked at him. *Pretentious moron.*”

(Tripathi, *Raavan* 349)

He was seeking refuge from his tyrannical brother for which he came to Ram’s camp along with Shurpanakha to win Raavan’s trust but failed to make their intrigue successful. Even during the war, when Vibhishan had allied with the army of Ayodhya against his brother, he wanted them to make an agreement. “‘Yes, of course’. Said Vibhishan, preening some more. ‘A fair trade-off. Victory for your brother, Emperor Ram, and the throne of Lanka for me.’”

(Tripathi, *War Of Lanka* 183)

Sunaina

The character of Sunaina did not get much recognition the Valmiki’s Ramayana. However, Sunaina is one of the central characters in the portrayal of Amish Tripathi that demonstrates female empowerment. In the novel, she transcends the image of ideal femininity as depicted in the ancient tradition and evolve into a liberated woman while showing her efficacy as a true leader. Amish has deconstructed the preconceived notions of ancient period, where women were viewed from an androcentric perspective, and tried to present a balanced perspective through the character of Sunaina. While king Janak was often engrossed in philosophical deliberations, she was determined to manage state affairs as an efficient administrator. Instead of challenging patriarchal notions, he attempted a discourse on women’s power structures to establish balance in the society. As an able leader, she maintained the equations of society and ensured that the charity reached the truly needy, as she understood the problems related to the desperation and anger in the poor community. According to her, desperation brings out the superlative nature of the human, either the best or the worst. If it brings out the best, man displays noble nature. Instead, if it brings out the worst, people become angry. To maintain the stability in the society, the leader should work slowly while avoiding anarchy and help the truly needy and gradually he will become the best. As she said:

“Not everyone has the spirit to keep their character strong when their stomachs are empty.”

(Tripathi, *Sita* 36)

Conclusion

The fusion of fantasy with ancient stories has improved the popularity of traditional epics among the youths. The modern generation has virtually abandoned our traditional values by adopting the western lifestyle. Being inspired by the western lifestyle, the youth are following baseless and unconventional customs in the name of trend. Smoking, alcohol and other addictive activities have become common day by day in the modern generation and the reason behind all these activities is the lack of wisdom and discipline in the life. Due to the competitive and narcissistic environment, youth have become self-centred. As a result of which, they have to suffer from loneliness, and cases of depression, anxiety, panic attacks and suicides are increasing day by day. They are unable to deal with these issues. Because there is a void in their hearts, which can only be filled by the light of spiritual knowledge presented in our epics. These modern fiction writers have introduced the present generation to the ancient Indian history and culture, and its relevance to the modern societies. Along with it, through these retellings, writers in the

contemporary world attempted to display hidden aspects and lesser explored events of the fantastic epics, which resulted in providing new dimensions to the role and importance of several characters. However, the lessons of morality, devotion and accountability inscribed in the epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata remained consistent, including the multi-layered nature of the characters depicted in the different texts.

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