

## Interrogating Valmiki: Textual Politics in the *Ramayana*

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In ancient India poetry and religion were inseparable. For the rishis religion was poetry and poetry was religion. To them God was the supreme poet. There is a Spanish proverb which means: "One who is living in poetry is living in God". This is especially true of Indian seers who underline a spiritual Unity in a poetic work. Poetry is the spontaneous expression of the One revealed by the Many: "It is the One which expresses itself in creation and the Many, by giving up opposition, make the revelation of the Unity perfect". A seer believes in the spiritual unity of the world of multiplicity.

The Vedic concept of *maya* as illusion becomes the protean changes of form in the Upanishads. Senses are the gateway to experience and wisdom. One who shuts out one's senses shuts out God. The rishis speak of the cyclic procession from the One to the Many and back again to the One. The movement of their narratives is a cyclic one; it moves from the unmanifest to the manifest and then to from the manifest to the unmanifest. But part of this movement alone does not hold the interest of the rishis. They reject the Vedantist quest for unity through the rejection of the concrete. For, a poet cannot do without the concrete world of nature. Nature is transformed as it passes through the crucible of imagination. Nature joins with the human self. This relationship becomes manifest through imagination: "For, the one effort of man's per-

sonality is to transform everything with which he has any true concern into human". Both man and nature participate in infinitude through their inner sense.

To the seers poetry is a vision of *tadadmya*, the total and willful surrender of the individual's will to divine will. God and man, animals and plants are equal manifestations of experience in fact or in fiction, in reality or in imagination. Ancient Indian literature is an expression of the conflict between Nature and human nature on the one hand and between the One and the Many on the other. This conflict can be resolved by invoking the distinction between the phenomenal and the real: "Reality is One. Diversity and manifoldness are only an appearance". Ancient literature, Vedic or Upanishadic, can also be considered an expression of the conflict between *Para Brahman* and *Apara Brahman*. The former is undifferentiated unity. The latter is a sense-manifoldness in which everything appears as a self-subsistent entity. This conflict is seen as an illusion which is a "speculative outcome of the conflict between the phenomenal and the superphenomenal, between the lower and the higher *Brahman*. The sense of manifoldness constitutes a unity in which the One manifests itself in the Many.

According to the sage-poets the division between *Atman* and *Brahman* caused by *avidya* or ignorance is a conflict and their merger is an experience of the highest order. This merger is a kind of self-realization which is accompanied by ecstatic happiness. The Upanishadic poet says: "*Hridayena hi satyam janati*" which means that the Truth is understood only through the heart. The ultimate reality is understood through the heart, and the heart alone. The seers have great skill to reconcile the contradictions between contending claims and to evolve a harmony from the apparent discordance. They postulate that realization can be both experienced and understood. The experience is achieved through the five senses and the understanding is fulfilled through the sixth sense or intuitive power. Nature is an Art of God. As creation man is His Art. As creator man is His partner. Kalidasa expresses this idea in the opening lines of *Kumarasambhavam*. He describes Lord Siva as the Creation, the Creator, the Fire, the Oblation and the Priest officiating as the Night and the Day as the Space and the Time, and as the One encompassing the entire universe alone. For the seers, the apparent world is man's world. In spite of its perpetual Protean changes of forms, Nature is the ultimate reality. The One at the expense of the many is not worth living to them. Yeats interpreted the distinctive ge-

nius of Rabindranath Tagore in a cryptic statement: "Rabindranath is our saint who has not refused to live." This remark is more suitable to the sage-poets of the Upanishads.

The vision of life of ancient seers is geo-centric. Life and contemplation of life with its rich and variegated experiences are fascinating. In this context, Vyasa's advice on Purusharthas is very significant: "Dharmarthakama samam evay sevayah (Pursue dharma, artha, kaama equally)". There should be a balance in the ideals of social life, worldly pursuits and enjoyments of life, internal and external. The man who concentrates on one of the purusharthas leads a poor and unbalanced life. The sages believe that a harmonious life combines enjoyment and renunciation which helped to attain self-realisation. It is a life in which *Bhukti Muktincha Vindati* (enjoyment and renunciation are made in to one). *Moksha* as a release from *Kaama* has no place in the Upanishadic pattern of values.

The Indian concept of poet is that *na rishi kavi* (one who is not a seer is not a poet). A poet is also a *mantra drshta*, a visionary, a keen observer of man and matter. Sri Aurobindo remarks: "Vision is the characteristic power of a poet". The sage-poets are visionaries whose poetry is a quest for *dharma*. Their perspective on dharma is that of a universal principle. Poetry emerges when the poet's "imagination realizes a profound organic unity with the universe comprehended by the human mind". The poetic world is a thing of mystery. It attempts to unravel the greater mystery that is life. The poetic word is born of unswerving faith. Poetry expresses the *dharma* as visualized by the heart. The poetic word is *pasyanti vaak* (the seeing word) and it is the utterance born of vision. A great poet illuminates the mystery that is at the heart of things with the power of his poetic speech born of vision, with his *pasyanti vaak*. Ancient Indian poetry is a flight to the *seeing word*.

Ancient Indian poetry is also a critique of Vedantic humanism. Vedantic humanism is a kind of cosmic humanism involving synthesis (*samanvaya*) and reconciliation (*avirodha*). In this context, the dichotomy between body and soul dissolves; body and soul constitutes an integral whole. Salvation means the liberty of both the body and the soul. Salvation leads to the state of *Satchitananda*. *Sat* (pure existence), *chit* (pure consciousness) and *ananda* (pure bliss) together form a state beyond good or bad, construction or destruction. The person

who reaches this state becomes *jeevanmukta* and attains self-realization.

Ancient Indian poetry can also be considered a manifestation of *Tapo Brahman* which is beyond quietism and activism, beyond life and death. Brahman exists at two levels: *Para Brahman* and *Apara Brahman*. The former is higher, transcendental and attributeless form and the latter is the lower, immanent and attributed form. *Para Brahman* is exclusive and identified by negative methods, *Neti, Neti* (not that, not that). *Apara Brahman* is inclusive and is realized by positive methods, *Iti, Iti* (this is, this is). Both are two forms of *Sat* or Reality. The two aspects of Brahman are present in the same being. *Apara Brahman* undergoes pain and pleasure and is linked to the body. *Para Brahman* is not entangled in the worldly affairs. Through successful practice of *yoga* *Apara Brahman* merges with *Para Brahman*. The merged Brahman becomes the One, the Truth, the real Real or *Satyasya Satyam*. Infinitude and joy are the two qualities of *Tapo Brahman*, the One, and the *advaitam*. The Upanishads teach: "*advaitam* is *anantam* (the One is Infinite) and *advaitam* is *anandam* (the One is Joy).

As ancient Indian poetry is geo-centric, man occupies the centre of poetic is a matter of the right content being represented in the correct realist form". A literary text becomes synonymous with the ideology it portrays. Ideology manifests itself in the personal as well as in the impersonal. It requires, therefore, great skill to endow them interest. The sages believe that man is the child of the Immortal (*Amrtasya Putrah*). Immortality provides equality to the souls. *Purush* and *Prakriti* are mutually dependent principles in Humanism. Vedantic humanism is a system with two centers: a still centre of God and a dynamic and expanding centre of man.

A literary text emphasizes its pragmatic, political value. A text is characterized by the explicit ideology it displays. Aesthetics and politics are not oppositional. They are synthesized in a literary text. Toril Moi points out that "politics is a matter of the right content being represented in the correct realist form". A literary text becomes synonymous with the ideology it portrays. Ideology manifests itself in the personal as well as the impersonal. It requires, therefore, great skill to endow them equally with ideology and art. Rita Felski remarks that the "literary construct" of a text is "endowed with political significance as a subversive...force". So politics tries to subvert aesthetics in a literary

text. The structure and form of literary language is complex. Their complexities question the fixed meanings of ideology. So the literary process tries to subvert the political consciousness of the writer. The political conviction of a writer can be located precisely in his textual practice. Ideological politics manifested through textual politics can be generally called textual politics. The language structures have a subversive power. It depends on the intensity of social struggle and momentum of social change in a society. Literary language has also the capacity to defamiliarise any ideology. The dialectical nature of literature or politics does not affect the defamiliarising capacity of literary language. The dialectical nature of cultural or racial or sexual politics does not create any serious problem for a writer unless they address directly any immediate political issues. Generally these forms of politics are concerned with changes to be effected in the cultural, social or political spheres of life. Literature is a medium that influence individual and cultural self-understanding in every day life. This social function of literature gives cultural prominence to the depiction of human experiences.

The identity of the writer must be ascertained to outline a textual politics of a literary work. *Ramayana* is the epic by the first poet Valmiki. Valmiki was a common name popular during that period. A few more persons were known by the same name Valmiki. In Taittiriya pratisakya, there are three references to a grammarian called Valmiki. A Vaishnavite *bhakta* who belonged to the suparna clan of the Arya race and *Kshatria* by profession (Karmana Kshatria) was also known as Valmiki. Bhṛigu's son Bhargava Chyavanana was also called Valmiki. His story is described in Bhagavata, Devi Bhagavata, Skandapurana and Padmapurana. These three Valmikis are different from the first poet. The fact that Valmiki was the first poet was mentioned in the *Balakanda* and *Utharakanda* of *Ramayana* and *Dronaparva* and *Santiparva* of *Mahabharata*. The first poet was a Saivite. According to popular belief, he was a robber in his *purvashram*. He told *Yudhishtira* in *Dronaparva* that he was contemptuously called a murderer of Brahmins (*Brahmakhna*) by some *munis* during a debate. Thus sinned, he sought refuge in *Siva*. *Siva* absolved him and blessed him. But the stories of Skanthapurana do not hint at his *Sivabhakta*. Valmiki's stories are narrated, though differently, in Vaishnavakhanda, Avantikhanda, Nagarakhanda and Prabhasakhanda. In these stories he was taught *Ramanama* which ought to have made him a Vaishnavite. The first poet was a hermit, a *muni* and a *maharshi* who was a com-

temporary of *Rama* and instrumental in popularizing *Ramakatha*.

Evolution of Valmiki in to a poet provides context for a split between his natural self and his acquired self. The former is that of a sinner, ignorant and devilish. The latter is that of a *rishi*, mellowed and compassionate. The split between the former and the acquired selves of Valmiki leads to identity politics in *Ramayana*. For, any literary work can be read as a quest for identity, of the author or the protagonist. The split of the selves also leads to further conflicts at the textual level. The division between Valmiki's past and present creates a conflict at the temporal level of the text. The conflict at the temporal level is matched by the division between the sinful environment of his former self and the serene and the tranquil abode of his redeemed self at the spatial level of the text.

Marginalized races like *Vanaras* and *rakshasas* are also portrayed in *Ramayana*. Anthropologically they are the non-Aryan communities, including adivasis of central India. Though the *adivasis* are called *Vanaras*, they have all human characteristics. They are circumscribed by the structures of a sociologically defined community. Scholars like Sivananda Sahai believe that the race come to be called *Vanaras* on account of the figure of Vamara or ape on the flag used by the community. *Rakshasas* are also non-Aryan communities. They are represented as enemies of "human beings" who stand obviously for Aryans. They are an ominous race symbolic of sin and violence. They are portrayed as indulging in cruelty and murder. The description of *rakshasas* in *Ramayana* is comparable to the description of non-Aryan robbers in *Rigveda*. Valmiki seems to distance himself from *rakshasas* and calls them by descriptive labels Dasanana, Vibheeshana, Kumbhakarna and the like. No mother will ever name her son Kumbhakarna. Thus, there are three races got represented in *Ramayana*: the *Aryans*, *Vanaras*, and *rakshasas*. The *Vanaras* represent non-Aryans in friendship with *Aryans* and the *rakshasas* are non-Aryans inimical to both *Aryans* and *Vanaras*. The three races generally represent *sat*, *rajas* and *tamas*, the three *gunas* respectively, though Valmiki does not make any sweeping generalizations.

In the story of *Ramayana*, Rama is portrayed as the perfect man. He is the icon of perfect manhood. He is the crown of his race and the jewel of his dynasty. Valmiki strives to make a cumulative effect of the greatness of Rama through various techniques. Hyperbolic descriptions

of the superhuman feats of Ravana, and Hanuman form one of these techniques. Graphic portrayal of the superhuman physical strength of some of the *Vanaras* and the *rakshasas* only add to the glory of Rama. Consciously or not, Valmiki indulges in a kind of racial politics to ensure the perfection of Rama, the maryada purushothama.

The division between the Aryans and non-Aryans is basically a cultural division rather than a racial one. The term 'Aryan' connotes certain cultural quality which is conspicuous by absence in the non-Aryans. So the racial politics, Valmiki skillfully exploits as part of his textual practice is a kind of cultural politics. The *Aryans, the Vanaras and the rakshasas* are socially oriented in a descending cultural scale in the textual fabric of Ramayana. The Rama-Ravana war is a manifestation of the expanded cultural conflict between Aryans and non-Aryans. It is the external culmination of an internal conflict of cardinal values.

The Aryan community is especially characterized by chaturvarna, the caste system, which is a social order qualified at once by the rule by consensus and the rule by force as differentiated by Gramsci. It is a social pattern maintained by a consensus among the *Savarnas*, but enforced on the *Sudras* against their will. *Chaturvarna* is operative in Ayodhya, a predominantly Aryan society; but it is not viable in Kishkinda or Lanka, which are non-Aryan societies. As the term Aryan is a cultural indicator, *chaturvarna* is a cultural construct, strategically designed to deny equity, justice and autonomy to the majority of the society, the *Sudras*. It is a strategically perpetuated mode of social subordination arbitrarily enforced with religious sanction attributed to Lord Krishna in the *Bhagavat Gita*. So *Chaturvarna* is a skillfully worked out parameter of marginalization in Ramayana, especially in the *Ayodhyakanda*.

Valmiki skillfully introduces textual contexts to introduce patriarchal prejudices which can be explained in terms of sexual politics. In the *Balakanda*, the relative importance of Kaikeyi among Dasaradha's queens is an instance of relative positions of women in multiple relationships with a man. Women's position is defined in reference to man. When there are many women in identical relationship with a man, their positions become relative in terms of prominence and social security outside the family and in terms of power structures within the family. The story of *Ahalyodharana*, also in *Balakanda*, is a classic illustration of patriarchal prejudice. Though Indra was the offender and Ahalya

was the victim of a case of sexual violence, Ahalya was also punished along with Indra. Indra was cursed to become *Shasranayana* (one with a thousand eyes) and Ahalya was cursed to stone. Though she was the victim, the woman was punished more cruelly and unfairly. Abduction of Sita and denigration of Mandodari are other instances of male tyranny perpetuated against women. Mutilation of Surpanagha by Lakshmana and Baali's relationship with Thara are examples of physical and sexual violence committed against women. As patriarchy was the accepted practice, only Sita's abduction was condemned in detail.

Many scholars express the opinion that the *Balakanda* and the *Utharakanda* are later additions to Ramayana. The style of these two *kandas* is identical; but is different from the style of rest of the text. *Avataravada* is introduced in *Balakanda*. The story that Rama is the incarnation of Vishnu is probably an interpolation. Rama is portrayed as the perfect man rather than the incarnation from *Ayodhyakanda* to *Yudhakanda* that culminates in his anointment. *Utharakanda* appears superfluous after the coronation of Rama. It is textually evident that though Rama is presented as incarnation of Vishnu, he never acts like an incarnation or calls for his natural powers in times of adversity. The incarnation story brings with it the Vaishnavite's stream of thoughts and worship in to text. Valmiki's story as narrated in *Dronaparva*, the ardent *Sivabhakti* of characters like Meghanadha and Ravana, *Sivapuja* performed by Rama before *Sethubandhanam* and the use of *Mritasanjivani* to revive Rama, Laxmana and several other soldiers point out the Saivite streams of thoughts and worship. The Vaishnavite-Saivite conflict is an intertextual conflict in Ramayana.

Valmiki's Ramayana has three different textual versions: The Southern version published by Gujarathi Printing Press, The Bengali version, otherwise called the Calcutta Sanskrit Edition and the North Western Edition published by Dayananda Mahavidyalaya. The textual variants are different forms of *Smriti*, which evolved from a Unified *Sruti*. That is, the Ramayana was initially an Oral text which subsequently took different written forms conditioned by space and time for which the author was not responsible.

Valmiki is a role model for Indian poets. He illustrates the Indian concept of creative psyche: a harmonious combination of *triguna*, *sat*, *rajas* and *tamas*. A person with only one of *gunas* cannot be a creative artist. A Rama or a Kumbhakarna or a Vibheeshana cannot be a poet.

A poet is constituted of all the three gunas. Valmiki has that great quality which Keats termed "Negative Capability". He created different characters governed by one or other of the three gunas with perfect detachment. Still, his sympathies are with the human beings, and especially the perfect example of human beings of all ages, Rama. In a similar manner of detachment he represents micropolitics in his textual strategies in the Ramayana. He unwittingly endorses or presents without comments the different types of micropolitics in the Aryan society and culture in the Ramayana. ■

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