

Valmiki as a Poet

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Excluding Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharata, Valmiki of all the Indian writers enjoys the widest vogue in the world of letters. His original work, the Ramayana, as well as its numerous versions in almost all the languages of the world along with plays, novels, and songs based on its theme form a considerable part of world literature.

A part of this tremendous success can be attributed to the religious importance of the work. Rama is regarded as an incarnation of God and therefore his life is read with religious devotion. But there is ground to suppose that Valmiki's initial success was due to his literary excellence and not to the religious content of his theme. The idea of incarnation occurs prominently in the Balkanda and the Uttarkanda. It has been doubted whether these formed part of the original epic. In the rest of the work Rama appears mostly as a human being. The hold which Valmiki had on his audience was therefore primarily literary.

This is further borne out by the fact that Valmiki is known in Sanskrit literature as Adikavi, the first poet. The Ramayana can be said to be the first Mahakavya or epic in the classical style. This consists of many cantos with a variety of metres. It has a hero with an idealised character and his great deeds form its subject matter. It has to have a variety of Rasas (emotions) such as the erotic, heroic, etc. It is also expected to contain descriptions of nature in all its aspects. The Ramayana fulfils all these criteria. In fact some of these criteria are mentioned in the Ramayana itself. The author says that the Ramayana depicts the life of Rama and the slaying of Ravana in spacious narration and well-balanced metres conveying lofty thoughts.

The greatest tribute to an author is that another great author accepts inspiration from him. In the case of Valmiki, such a tribute is paid to him by no less a personality than Kalidasa. One cannot miss the influence of Valmiki in Kalidasa. The greatest poem of Kalidasa, the Meghdoot or Cloud-Messenger, seems to have been inspired by the Ramayana. Hanuman carrying the message of Rama to Sita in her captivity by flying across the ocean seems to be the forerunner of the cloud carrying the message of the forlorn Yaksha to his wife.

The Yaksha himself says to the cloud: "With your reassuring words, my beloved will take heart as the helpless Sita did from the words of Hanuman." The shadow of Hanuman on the ocean seems to have suggested "the crystal clear waters of the Ganga reflecting the swarthy mass of the cloud, creating an illusion of the river's untimely confluence with the dark streams of the Yamuna."

Valmiki's influence is thus seen even on works which are not directly based on the theme of the Ramayana, not to speak of works which have openly borrowed themes from the Ramayana. Bhasa's Pratima, Abhisheka, etc., Bhavabhuti's Uttarramcharita, and Dinnaga's Kundamala are only a few of the famous Sanskrit plays, and Kalidasa's Raghuvansha, Kumaradasa's Janaki-harana, etc., are but a few of the many poems, based directly on the Ramayana. When the theme itself is borrowed, it is inevitable that the ideas and the style of the original also will show their mark. The gem that is Valmiki's "message of Sita" has been finely chiselled and wrought by Kalidasa into the immortal verses at the close of the fourteenth canto of his Raghuvansha. The same is true of the encounter between Rama and Parashuram at the end of the eleventh canto. Examples like this from other authors can be easily multiplied.

Thus there is no doubt whatsoever that writers, whose primary interests were literary and not religious, freely drew upon Valmiki and regarded him as pre-eminently a literary craftsman.

Valmiki fully deserves this tribute. According to tradition he was the inventor of the metre Anushtubh in which the Ramayana is mostly written. This is supposed to be the first non-vedic metre. If this tradition is to be believed, everything that appears in the Ramayana in classical metres other than Anushtubh should be regarded as interpolation, or otherwise we have to suppose that Valmiki devised other metres besides the Anushtubh. At any rate his inventive genius is seen at work even in the medium he has used.

The invention of this medium came to him in a flash. As the story goes, when he was strolling in a forest he saw a Krouncha bird hit by an arrow, his short spell of life washed away by the blood gushing out of the wound. At this ghastly sight the female of the Krouncha pair cried out in anguish. The poet was touched to the quick by this tragedy, and his feelings flowed spontaneously in a verse which was the very first in the Anushtubh metre, and the precursor of the Ramayana which is a story of the cruel strokes of fate that cut the loved ones apart. The wails of the Krouncha for her departed mate are heard throughout the epic.

Let us now come to the superb narrative craftsmanship of Valmiki. The scene between Kaikeyi and Dashrath is the first powerful episode. The king is looking forward to the coronation of his beloved son and wants to share his joy with his beloved queen. But to his dismay, he finds her lying down with dishevelled hair and soiled garments, her ornaments thrown away all over the floor. The king was still hoping that this might be a mere lover's tiff and a little adroit courting on his part would set matters right. But the matters were far worse than the worst of his fears. Kaikeyi wants nothing less than the banishment of Rama and the coronation of Bharata. Dashrath falls at her feet, implores her not to be so adamant; he even goes to the length of agreeing to the coronation of Bharata, his only entreaty is that the apple of his eye, Rama, should not be taken away from him. Kaikeyi turns a deaf ear to all his prayers. The heart that was once loving and kind was turned into stone.

Ordinarily Dashrath could have withstood the importunities of his favourite queen. But something more than the alienation of a young wife was at stake. It was his honour. Kaikeyi reminded him of the two boons he owed her. She was now invoking them. If Dashrath were to back out now, he would bring eternal shame on himself and his illustrious race which regarded a word of honour more precious than one's own life. Dashrath was thus caught completely. He had to acquiesce to the unthinkable, he would not be able to see Rama for fourteen years. His strength was too meagre to bear it. He collapsed and for the rest of his short existence the world was dead to him except for the name of Rama. The period of fourteen years was too long in this ephemeral life. The drama is better ended abruptly than lingering on with its intolerable hours of bereavement.

The echoes of the wails of the Krouncha begin to be fainter as Rama passes his time in the forest in his heroic exploits and the heavenly company of Sita. But before they die out completely the arrow of the hunter is shot again. Sita is taken away by Ravana. On his return to the cottage Rama does not find her. The hills and dales resound with Rama's call. "Where art thou, dear? Have you gone to the bank of the sacred Godavari? No, that cannot be. You never go there without me. Oh, all-seeing sun; all-pervading wind, tell me! Where is my Sita?"

Sita on her part is also entering the elements to carry her message to Rama when she is being forcibly carried away. "Oh mountain Prasrawana! When Rama comes hither, tell him that Sita has been carried away by Ravana. Oh mother Godavari! Rama is sure to look for me in your vicinity. Tell him that Ravana has taken me away. Whoever has witnessed this outrage, whether he be a bird or an animal, to him I beseech, tell Rama what you have seen. Tell him, his beloved but helpless wife has been abducted by Ravana."

In what follows, the heroic overshadows the tragic. But after the restoration of Sita the Krouncha incident repeats itself again. The citizens of Ayodhya cannot reconcile themselves to an abducted woman becoming their queen. There is again a conflict between love and duty as in the case of Dashrath. But Rama rises to the occasion and, instead of succumbing, takes the stupendous decision to abandon Sita. The lovers are separated again. But this second separation is more tragic than the first. The first was temporary, this was to be permanent. In the first, Rama was free to lament, now even that freedom was denied to him. To weep for an abandoned wife was an "unmanly grief".

But the privilege to weep is not denied to woman. The silent suffering of Rama is mirrored in the unsuppressed woes of Sita. When she hears the pitiless command of Rama from the mouth of Laxmana, she is stunned. For a moment all her senses are dead. When they revive it is only to experience the pangs of the worst agony that can befall a devoted wife. "Oh! Laxmana"! she says, "I am born to suffer. The only way to empty this bowl of suffering is to throw myself in the Ganga. But even that escape is closed to me. I am bearing the heir to Rama's throne, and my life is not my own. Be it as it may, tell the King that Sita wishes nothing but that he should never swerve from his royal duties. Farewell".

Laxmana with a heavy heart returns the farewell. But he was constantly looking back with tear-stained eyes while crossing the Ganges until Sita disappeared from his vision. Sita was now alone with her sorrow. The cry of

peacocks in the forest was submerged by her heart-rending cry until it was heard by the self-same sage on whom the wails of the bereaved Krouncha had made a profound impact.

The stirring pathos of bereavement is not the only feature of the Ramayana. The erotic and the heroic also have their place. Rama, separated from his beloved, sees nothing but poignant suggestions of courting and love in the contours of the autumnal landscape. "The waters like garments are receding and the sandy banks of the river like the alabaster thighs of shy maidens are exposed bit by bit." The description of the advent of night that follows defies translation. Sanskrit is rich in words with plural meanings and the poet uses this capacity of the language to evoke an exquisite picture of red twilight ebbing away from the sky with the rising of the moon and the stars and to suggest by resonance the picture of an amorously excited damsel gradually shedding her garments under the embrace of her lover.

The heroic is of course a very dominant Rasa in the Ramayana. Rama is a warrior and the Ramayana is a chronicle of his mighty deeds. Valmiki describes these deeds in a powerful style.

The message of Rama to Sugreeva will give the reader some inkling into this aspect of the poet's genius. After ascending the throne with the help of Rama, Sugreeva forgets him and spends his time in revelry. Rama, running out of patience, sends Laxmana to convey to Sugreeva a bit of his mind. "Oh! Sugreeva, you are the limit of ingratitude! You were put on the throne by Rama, not for wallowing in sensual pleasures, but for helping him in his undertaking. If you forget this, the arrows of Rama will soon send you to meet the departed Vali. The way Vali went is not yet closed. I only hope you do not wish to go that way."

The immortal passages as far as the heroic sentiment goes, are, however, those that deal with the duel between Rama and Ravana. When Rama sees Ravana on the battle-field, he is overjoyed. "I was anxiously waiting for this moment," he says, "like the thirsty Chataka bird awaiting the first drops of rain. Today the world will have to choose between Rama and Ravana. It is too small to accommodate both. This moment is the consummation of all my labours, the slaying of Vali, the search for Sita, and the taming of the Ocean. Wait and see, Oh warriors! Today you will see the mettle that is Rama." So saying he discharged his flashing arrows at Ravana. Ravana in turn showered his flaming missiles on Rama. The arrows of both the combatants, clashing with each other, joined in a deafening chorus. This was heightened by the resonance of their bow-strings, striking terror in all that lives. Even the seven seas were agitated. "Who can encompass the expanse of space itself? Who can compare the incomparable? Who can aspire to describe the combat of Rama and Ravana?"

Rasasiddhata or the capacity to arouse emotions is regarded as the most important quality in a poet. I have shown so far that Valmiki had it in ample measure. But he is no less a master of other poetic powers, like grandeur of imagery. The jump of Hanuman across the sea is the most eloquent testimony to this. "When the Vanaras were confronted with the impassable ocean, they knew that only Hanuman could cross it. But Hanuman had one fault. He lacked confidence. The Vanaras therefore approached him and started describing his erstwhile mighty deeds, to kindle his confidence. At this, Hanuman began to grow in size just as the little Vaman of yore grew

into the gigantic Trivikrama spanning heaven and earth by his strides. His silence was broken and his roars resounded through the skies. He began to climb a nearby mountain, which trembled under his giant steps, shaking its trees to their roots. From the top of the mountain Hanuman scanned the sea with a look of contempt and shot out into the sky like a meteor. The movement of his titanic frame created such a commotion in the atmosphere, that all the surrounding trees were uprooted and flown into the sky in the wake of his flight. There he was seen in the sky with his limbs and tail stretched out like five-mouthed cobras stretching themselves out of a mountain-top. His great shadow seemed to eclipse the whole sea. At its sight the lowly creatures of the main took fright”.

The beauty and power of description seen in the Sundarkanda is of a piece with many other descriptions in the Ramayana, specially descriptions of nature. It is obvious that Valmiki reacted with profound sensitiveness to nature. His descriptions have a graphic vitality.

Note for example the descent of the Ganga from the skies. “When the unbounded waters rushed down, they formed thousandfold streams of white hue filling the firmament as if with autumnal clouds or a fleet of swans. There were streams within streams, some crawling slowly in a serpentine gait, some speeding straight ahead, some whirling into pools and some soaring into waves. The currents and cross-currents clashing against each other were rising and falling in a common file.”

Note again Rama’s favourite season, the winter: “The earth has taken on the blanket of mist and the fields are teeming with crops. The sun is turning southward and the north is deprived of her kum-kum mark. The moon, like the moisture-laden-mirror, loses her lustre in the veil of mist. The pearl-like dew shines on the far-flung meadows, at the hour of the long-awaited morn. The lotuses are but stalks, their pollens and petals shorn by the unkind frost.”

The rain has its own charm. “The sky is thronged by hill-like clouds. The earth, long scorched by summer, is emitting a fragrant breath with the first showers of rain. The clouds thunder, and the wild elephants trumpet back in reply. The peacocks dance to the drones of bees. The forests are green and the streams are full.”

Rasasiddhata and power of description are only a few out of Valmiki’s many gifts. His deep knowledge of human nature is evident in his immortal characters. Characterisation in the Ramayana is a larger subject and cannot be adequately dealt with in a brief article. Monumental is the moral stature of Rama. According to democracy the people can do no wrong and it was the peoples’ wish that Sita should be abandoned. He could have either abdicated or bowed to the peoples’ wish. But abdication would have meant that in a conflict between duty and love he chose love. His momentous decision to give up what he prized most is thus fully consistent with his character: implicit obedience to the moral law.

Opposed to this is the character of Laxmana. For him persons matter more than principles, devotion matters more than duty. He leaves his wife for fourteen years for the sake of his brother, he wants to imprison or even kill his father for failing to coronate Rama. He was devoted to Rama and for him nothing else counted. Unlike Rama he is easily angered. The interplay of the distinctive characters of these brothers is one of the abiding attractions of the Ramayana.