

Anthropomorphism employed in retelling of ramayana in amish tripathi's sita: Warrior of mithila

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Abstract

Amish Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* is retelling of Ramayana from the perspective of Sita. The amalgamation of fantasy fiction, Hindu mythic tradition and ancient Indian history in perfect equilibrium have given a new dimension in representing ancient Indian tradition by the author. *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* is an attempt to analyse the dichotomy between divinity and historicity where the former is a matter concerned with faith and latter is of existence. This dichotomy is exposed with the technique of Anthropomorphism which is effectively employed in retelling the Indian epic Ramayana and thus he eliminated the possibility of mysticism in reasoning. The author experimented with multi linear narrative technique (hyperlink) and converts the theomorphic aspect of myth by assigning human attributes to the divine. The blend of religious symbolism and his philosophical ideas (which is derived from ancient texts) along with his concerns about contemporary India is expressed through the advanced quality of storytelling.

Keywords: anthropomorphism, dashavatara, universal aathma, purusha-prakriti, sagun sakaar, nirgun nirakar, varna system

1. Introduction

Amish Tripathi referred to as India's Tolkein and Asia's Paulo Coelho is a renowned contemporary Indian fiction writer (Born on 18th October 1974 in Mumbai). He grew up in a religious household and is an alumnus of St. Xavier's College, Mumbai and Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta. Tripathi worked for fourteen years in the financial services industry, before pursuing his dream of becoming a full-fledged writer. His first book, *The Immortals of Meluha* is followed by *The Secret of the Nagas* and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* which collectively comprise the Shiva Trilogy. Tripathi's 2015 fantasy, *Scion of Ikshvaku*, based on the legend of the King Ram was the highest selling book in India that year, is the first book in the Ram Chandra Series, followed by *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*. While Shiva trilogy is a fantasy re-imagining of the Indian deity Lord Shiva's life and adventures, Ram Chandra Series deals with the re-imagining of the Indian epic Ramayana. Tripathi likes to challenge himself as he believes that if one venture to the edge of their limits, their limit will expand and thus they grow intellectually. His area of expertise is Indian mythological fiction. Mythic fiction is literature rooted in themes and symbolism of myth, legend and folklore and fairy tales. It overlaps with urban fantasy but at the same time, it includes contemporary works in non-urban settings. It refers to the body of contemporary literature that transcend the boundaries between literary and fantasy fiction. Hindu mythology use narratives found in Hindu texts such as the Vedic literature, epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana, the Puranas, the regional literatures – Sangam Literature and Periya Puranam. It does not have a consistent monolithic structure, as the same myth appears in different versions and represented disparately across socio-religious traditions. These myths have been remodelled by philosophical schools over time, which constitute a deeper, as well as symbolic meaning. Mysteries which are not yet revealed are found steeped in the shattered remains of old

manuscripts. These stories were unfolded through the medium of Indian English Literature. Mythological tales were getting modern makeovers and imaginative retellings. First book of Ram Chandra Series begins with a war between Raavan and Dashrath at the fictional place Karachapa. Emperor Dashrath lost to a trader from Lanka who had massacred the Sapt Sindhu Army. Queen Kaushalya, the eldest wife of the Emperor had given birth to a son on the same day he lost the battle. Thus, Ram in Tripathi's series was considered as an ill-omen for the emperor as he had never lost a battle till the birth of the child. In *Ananda Ramayana*, (a Sanskrit text ascribed to the sage Valmiki, who is also credited with *Adbhuta Ramayana*, *Valmiki Ramayana* and *Yoga Vasishtha*) Ravana on inquiring about his death, gained information from Brahma that son of Kausalya and Dasharatha would be the reason for his death. To prevent that Ravana abducted Kausalya before her wedding ceremony and placed her in a box on a deserted island in the middle of the ocean. Dasharatha then brought his army to the shore to rescue her, but his army was annihilated and he barely escaped. With the help of Narada, Dasharatha tied the knot with Kausalya and later they travelled back to Ayodhya where they eventually gave birth to Rama. In Tripathi's *Scion of Ikshvaku*, Ram was blamed for Dashrath's defeat and also Raavan's monopolization of entire trade system in India, leading to economic crisis. Another mythological twist is the introduction of a wealthy trader Manthara, who is richer than Emperor Dashrath. But in the epic, she appears as a maid who manipulates Kaikeyi to banish her step-son from the kingdom. In order to explain her antagonism towards the crown prince, Tripathi tried to weave a plot based on the character Roshni, who lost her life in a horrific gang rape. The head of the gang had been let off by Ram as he was a juvenile. This fuelled Manthara's anger as she could not avenge her daughter's death with the help of law. In ancient Ramayan textures, there is no mention of Samichi, a girl from the slum, after saving Sita's

life; she was made to join the police force solely based on her potential. In fact, the very introduction of Radhika as the Ayodhya prince Bharat's girlfriend and Sita's intimate friend from Rishi Shvetaketu's gurukul is a whimsical approach exhibited by the author. Other fanciful incidents include the introduction of Hanuman to Sita by Radhika and the rendezvous between them, which is slightly different from Hanuman's meeting with Sita in Ashok Vatika as seen in Valmiki's versions. On a closer observation there are far more events that draw special attention to author's creativity. The second formula is the Hindu mythic tradition, which is employed by the author from his personal experiences gained from the religious household. His knowledge about philosophy helps him to connect myth with the socio-political issues of his age. In his books, he shares his knowledge about the four forms of divinity-Nirgun Nirakar (casting of Brahma), Sagun Sakaar (describes a God with attributes), Avatar (God is born as a being) and the final form is when one discovers the God within. The exquisite merging of facts along with imagination will result in a story rich in history and myth. Anthropomorphism is the process of assigning human qualities like emotions, intentions or certain behaviour traits to non-human entities. It is believed to be an innate tendency of human psychology and has its ancient root as storytelling. Most cultures which favour traditional fables have anthropomorphized animals as its characters. In theological concept, it can be described as making the omnipotent take the shape or form of a being. The term 'anthropomorphism' has its origin in Greek words 'anthros' meaning 'man' and 'morphe' meaning 'form'. It was coined by the Greek philosopher Xenophanes while elaborating the resemblance between the devotees and their Gods. The demonstration he used to assert the validity of his statement was the description of Greek gods with light skin tone and blue eyes whereas that of African gods had dark complexion with brown eyes. Even in Bible, omniscient is defined as someone with the physical attributes of man, whose action are recorded from Old to New Testament. This enables one to understand as well as associate the Almighty in human terms by comprehending the incomprehensible and measuring the unfathomable. Perception of a non-human entity in human ways makes them worthy of moral consideration, i.e. they are accountable for their own actions like a mundane. This technique has been very effective in simplifying as well as in making sense of complicated entities and set them as an example for leading a standard life. God, animals, natural and supernatural forces etc are incessantly taken as the subject matter of anthropomorphosis. Representing the divine as deities with human form and qualities has been a common practise in ancient mythologies. These deities exhibiting human behaviour can explain natural phenomena and historical events without adding a quality of magic in reasoning. The deities by the virtue of being born on earth, exhibited human behaviour like indulging themselves in battles, wielded weapons and got married. Anthropomorphism has a significant role in moulding religious thoughts particularly seen in polytheistic or monotheistic faiths that comprehend the nature of divinity in terms of human traits. Most of the religious thoughts and beliefs are concentric as their aim is to find the purpose of human existence or the essence of human life. In certain religious system people assumed that existence of the deities prior to their birth is the reason why

humans are created in the divine form. God has multitudinous manifestations and has ten primary avatars (Dashavatara) to maintain the cosmic order. The order of Dashavatara, being Malsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Balarama and Kalki, which is interpreted to be reflective of modern Darwinian evolution. The process of creation involves rajo guna (mode of passion), destruction involves tamo guna (mode of ignorance), and maintenance involves sattva guna (mode of goodness) which is under the leadership of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu respectively. The Sagun Sakaar concept describes a God with attributes as seen in Valmiki's Ramayana where Lord Rama is an avatar (God is born as a being) of Vishnu. This concept is contradicted in Tripathi's retelling of Ramayana in his Ram Chandra Series. He tried to interpret the rich mythological heritage of ancient India, blending fiction with historical facts. Instead of considering Lord Rama and Sita as a figment of human imagination, he portrayed them as a person of flesh and blood. A man who rose to become godlike based on his Karma and whose dharmic principles can be taken as a lesson of how to lead a life of moral and aesthetic values. According to Tripathi, there exist four kinds of divinity-Nirgun Nirakar (casting of Brahma), Sagun Sakaar (describes a God with attributes), Avatar (God is born as a being) and the final form where one discovers the God within. He prefers the fourth form that asserts the existence of a potential God in every single human being, if something is treated as a miracle, the only logical reason being its scientific explanation not being discovered yet. Following this tradition, he attempts to create an India of the past whose reflections are seen in political life of the present society. The characters Ram, Sita and Raavan sketched by him are people from ancient past and instead of the magical turn of events, rationality find its stance in Ram Chandra Series. His literature, steeped in philosophy enabled him to distinguish his characters from each other. Scientific explanations supplied by him played a major role in eliminating the religious mysticism possessed by objects and legends. His retelling of Ramayana can be distinguished from Valmiki's Ramayana that is based on the phenomenon theomorphism, a process of giving divine qualities to human. In Hindu mythology Sita is an avatar of Sri Lakshmi (Goddess of fortune, prosperity, success, beauty and happiness) and the consort of Lord Rama, the seventh avatar of Mahavishnu. She is the protagonist in the Hindu epic, Ramayana and the daughter of the earth Goddess, Bhumi. In Jain version, Sita is believed to be the daughter of Ravana and his wife Mandodari. But she was soon abandoned by her parents because of the conviction that the first child of theirs would bring obliteration to the whole clan. That is how Sita was unexpectedly spotted by King Janak in a furrow. This mysterious background of Sita was not taken into account by Tripathi, as in the book he introduces Sita as an abandoned child protected by a vulture in the wild. Apart from being the foster child of king Janak and Queen Sunaina, there is no reference about her true lineage. Unlike Valmiki's Sita, who is a manifestation of God, Tripathi's Sita is society's paradigm of the ideal ruler. His persona exhibit both virtues (like beauty, power, and wisdom) and vices (despicable traits like greed, hatred, envy, and wrath) which are the characteristic features of a human being. Ramayana is not a tale but it's a phase that each individual goes through, i.e. the gunas, the indhriyaas, the search and

the saadhana. Lord Rama in the epic is deduced as the Universal Aathma (the absolute or the Aathma in every being) and Sita is the Muula Prakriti (primal nature). On a philosophical note, Rama is the eternal, unchanging Purusha (spirit), the son of Dasharatha that personifies the physical with ten senses-the five Karmendhriyaas (sense organs of action) and the five Jnaanendhriyaas (organs of perception). The Queens of Ayodhya is the concretization of sattva (mode of goodness), rajas (mode of passion) and tamas (mode of darkness). Kaushalya, Kaikeyi and Sumitra represent competency, jealousy and equanimity respectively. These gunas/attributes are found in everyone in different proportions. Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna, altogether constitute the four goals of life 'Purusartha'- Dharma (righteousness /moral values), Artha (prosperity/economic values), Kama (pleasure/psychological values) and Moksha (liberation/spiritual values). Other interpretation being Rama as the sathya, Bharata as Dharma, Lakshmana as prema and Shatrughna as Shaanthi. Rama the Purusha accepts Prakriti (sita), who is the personification of Brahma-chaithanya (consciousness) and the Prakriti activates the existence of Brahma. When Sita was abducted, the Brahmajnaana (knowledge of supreme reality) was lost. While Rama was searching for her, he was accompanied by Lakshmana or Manas (mind). Mind is a vehicle to achieve liberation as it cannot be strayed. Vaali represents despair, which he overcomes with the help from Sugreeva (viveka or wisdom). Sugreeva sends his representatives in search of Brahmajnaana and Hanuman (courage), being one of the followers is unwavering in his effort to permeate through the darkness. The vanquishment of Kumbhakarna, the demon king of thamoguna (inertia) and Ravana of rajoguna (emotional quality) had led to the enthronement of Vibheeshana (the quality of goodness) by Lord Ram. Sita (Brahmajnaana) was rescued but she later in the history was recognized as the Anubhavajnaana (Knowledge gained from experience). Tripathi did not outline his characters especially Ram as the Maayamaanusha-rupa (illusory human form) and his Sita as Maayaa shakthi (energy present in all matter). He carved the former as the philanthropic archetype of Maryaatha Purushotham and latter as modern woman respectively. First two books of Ram Chandra Series recount the journey and ordeals of both Ram and Sita followed by Sita's abduction of Raavan, towards the end of both the books, which act as the catalyst for the development of the next protagonist in the upcoming book *Raavan: Orphan of Aryavarta*. The catastrophic consequence of Ram's birth was the defeat of Emperor Dashrath at the hands of a Lankan trader in the Battle of Karachapa. The Emperor along with his subjects blamed the child and considered him as an ill-omen as the Emperor had never lost a battle till his birth. This led to the widening of gap between him and his wife Kaushalya and also his resentment towards his first son. He had the notion that the auspicious time of Bharat's birth had prevented him from getting massacred along with the Sapt Sindhu soldiers, which made him worship the ground Kaikeyi walks on. This expose the writer's deviation from the real myth where Ram is an incarnation (seventh avatar of Mahavishnu), whose birth (tithi of shukla paksha of chaitra masa) was celebrated throughout Ayodhya as Rama Navami. The dichotomy between divinity and historicity is reflected in Tripathi's *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, where the former is the matter concerned with faith and latter is of existence. For him

'Vishnu' is not a manifestation of God but a highly reputed designation that one can achieve only through their persistence. His Ram is more of an inhabitant of earth, named after the sixth Vishnu 'Lord Parshu Ram', who earned the title 'Vishnu' through his own efforts. The unearthly description of Lord Rama by Valmiki is a stark contrast to Tripathi's characterization of Ram. Lord Rama has the radiance of thousand suns, with eyes similar to the petals of lotus and a countenance like that of full moon which makes him more majestic and transcendental in nature. Tripathi's Ram is a tainted warrior who had to strive to clear his name from all the allegations flanged at him. He proved his worth as an administrator by risking his own life to save the emperor from an untamed beast. This incident lifted his curse of being the harbinger of bad luck and earned his share of love and respect from his father. For the betterment of society, he sacrificed a life of comfort and followed the path of dharma. His idealistic views made him the polar opposite of his brother Bharat who is known for his pragmatism and aggression, as for him the end justifies the means. The masculine order of life favoured by Ram requires an amiable ruler who shoulders all the responsibilities of society and Bharat's feminine order is a coalition form of government that consider the opinion of their followers through debates, negotiation and strong arguments. But each system has its own flaws, the exercise of excessive power by masculine order create hatred towards the other group and can lead to war and the feminine order lead to disorientation and factionalism that can weaken the state. The question of whether the law is superior to justice or vice versa is raised through the reference to the Nirbaya incident that occurred in Delhi in the year 2012, about the brutal gang rape and fatal assault of a physiotherapy student. The main culprit, being a juvenile was not sentenced to death along with others. The victim is represented through the fictional medium Roshini, daughter of Manthara, who was molested by the juvenile Dhenuka and his gang. Being a minor, he was not given a death sentence according to the Ayodhyan rule. With perfect diplomacy the author has raised an open-ended question which is based on the contemporary issue through the medium of mythology. Alexander Pope, in his *An Essay on Criticism*, mentioned the statement to err is human and to forgive is divine. People are known for their sins and mistakes they commit. The supreme forgives everyone if they repent. Ram committed the sin of breaking Lord Rudra's rule, the previous mahadev, who banned the unauthorized use of Asuraastra (a weapon of mass destruction). Anyone who breaks this rule will be punished with banishment of fourteen years. In order to defend Mithila from Raavan and his battalion he used the weapon of mass destruction. Ram, being law abiding, accepts the punishment whole heartedly by saying that "A leader is not just one who leads. He must also be a role model. He must practise what he preaches, Sita" (260). He is strong-willed and duty bound to the extent that he decides to spend his fourteen years outside the boundaries of Sapt Sindhu. As he expects his subjects to follow the law, he should set an example by abiding it himself. "I broke Lord Rudra's law. And this is his stated punishment. It doesn't matter whether the Vayuputras pass the order to punish me or not. I must serve my sentence" (260). Tripathi holds the mirror of ancient India with some deviations made from his perception of mythology. He introduces three tribes -The

Malayaputras (the tribe left behind by Lord Parashuram, the sixth Vishnu), the Vayuputras (the tribe left behind by Lord Rudra, the previous Mahadev) and the Nagas (people born with deformities). He describes the animal affiliate Hanuman who is a Naga and the leader of Parihans (people belonging to the land of pariahans with long locks of hair and a hooked nose similar to the apes). He is tall; fair skinned with an outgrowth like a tail, jutting out from his lower back and has flat nose and captivating eyes. The Chiranjivi in Valmiki's Ramayana becomes a person with physical deformity in Tripathi's imagination. "It almost seemed like the Almighty had taken the face of a monkey and placed it on a man's head" (47). Nagas are born with deformities due to excessive consumption of Somras, which is a logical explanation provided by Tripathi to make more sense to their physical attributes. The chief of Malayaputra is Maharishi Vishwamitra who had a Naga as one of his soldiers. Jatayu is portrayed as an enforcer in charge of the protection of Vishnu. The unfortunate man was born with a condition that led to deformities on his face over time. His face had so much in common with a vulture; as a result, he was excluded from the social circle. Vishwamitra saw the warrior in him and accepted him in his tribe. Sita meets the owner of the noble soul at her gurukul along with Vishwamitra which is not in alignment with the South Indian epic. Self-aggrandized people like Raavan and Kumbhakarna are both Nagas according to Tripathi's notion. Kumbhakarna seemed like a giant with a massive pot belly and had strange outgrowth on both his ears and shoulders. His elder brother Raavan had a minor stoop which is a sign of advancing age. His battle worn skin was pock marked probably by some childhood disease. His extravagant lifestyle is shown from his interest in gaudy ornaments and other material possessions. "He was wearing a violet coloured dhoti and angvastram; only the most expensive colour dye in the world" (225). Raavan, one of the royalties who took part in the svayamvar of Sita got agitated as he was disgraced in the hall by Vishwamitra. "The first man to compete is not you, Raavan. It is Ram, the prince of Ayodhya" (226). This was a huge blow to his ego and he retaliated strongly. "The King of Lanka had felt insulted. There could be consequences. Raavan's almighty ego was as legendary as his warrior spirit and cruelty. But would he take on the formidable Malayaputras?" (232). as expected by Arishtanemi, Raavan's army marched into Mithila. Ram was tricked by Vishwamitra in firing the Asuraastra that rendered Raavan's army unconscious which resulted in Raavan's retreat. In Tripathi's view Raavan is an ideal ruler for Lankans just like Ram is for Ayodhya. Under his leadership Lanka flourished through trade and people of Sapt Sindhu faced the drain of wealth (an allusion referring to colonial rule of British where resources from India are drained to England). People of modern society have a notion of Ravana being the personification of Evil, to which the writer says that his Raavan is an efficient leader like Bill Clinton (American Politician who lacks moral but have a hand in the country's prosperity). The inventions of ancient times with mystical background are scientifically explained. In case of Somras (an elixir), created by Brahma that reacts with oxidants of the body and thus resulting in its expulsion. The antidote is water and hygiene that absorb the toxins Somras creates. He further explains the functioning of Pushpak Vimaan of Raavan by stating it as a technological advancement (a vehicle that functions on motors which

gives the Vimaan the ability to fly). The Lakshman Rekha in modern sense is The Lakshman Wall, a defensive feature designed by Lakshman to the east of main hut in Panchavati. The concern of modern Indian Society found its voice through the life and deeds of the anthropomorphic deities. He implemented this technique in order to serve the dual purpose of humanizing the deities and modernizing the myth. Tripathi through his characters brought the drawbacks of extremism and discrimination based on Varna system that plagued Indian society. His notion that a society should progress at a slow pace, as taking too much from the rich to help the poor might cause a revolt and doing nothing by letting the downtrodden suffer will make them desperate. One cannot attain perfect equality but should take measures to reduce inequality as much as possible. The caste-based inequalities that decide a person's vocation must be eliminated. A society must always aim for balance. It needs intellectuals, warriors, traders and businessmen. "If it empowers one group too much or another too little, it is headed for chaos" (64). This is the reason why he mentions that a society must be wary of its extremes and should strive to attain a balance between competing ideologies.

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