



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Valmiki's The Ramayana: An Analytical and Critical Overview

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Abstract

The Ramayana is Valmiki's wonderful literary creation that is considered as one of the most celebrated and ancient historical document of India and its surroundings. This paper shed lights on poetic, social and historical perspectives of the Ramayana that attracts the readers and literature lovers of all over the world. In this study, it is depicted that The Ramayana is a treasure house of knowledge for world literature from different perspectives. This paper also reflects the thematic as well as the poetic significance of the epic to illustrate the importance of the study of the Ramayana in modern and contemporary society. Besides, this research article will encourage the passionate literature lovers to explore the Ramayana from new perspective and thus be helpful for further study and research.

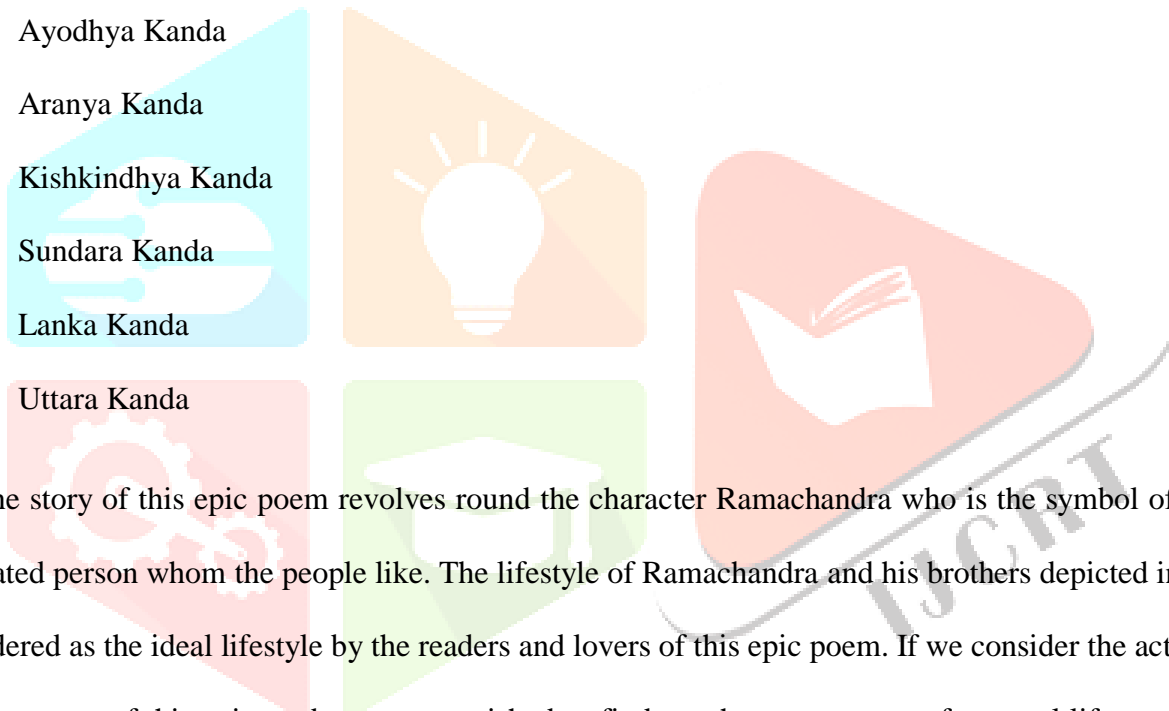
Keywords: Incorporation, Epic poem, Blank verse, Mythology, Allegory, Classics

The Ramayana of Valmiki is a literary and religious epic poem which has created immense popularity all over the world for the poetic quality. It is a literary treasure of India which has become popular in many countries of the world. This epic poem at first was written by Valmiki in Sanskrit language around 300 BCE and after that many vernacular poets have rewritten and translated in different languages. At present we find different translated and rewritten version of the poem. The Ramayana has achieved a great place in the hearts

of religious people as well as literature lovers. It is a historical document where we find social, political diplomatic and religious teachings. The use of language is super and can reach to the mind of literature lovers and critiques. It is a text where we find the incorporation of many characters and their activities. It is a document of Valmiki's poetic genius. In Indian sub-continent, there are many dramas and films and literary writings where the stories of Valmiki's *The Ramayana* have been incorporated. It is such a popular epic poem that children also like the storyline and teaching elements incorporated in different cartoon series.

There are seven parts in this epic poem which are considered as kanda. The seven kandas are as follows:

1. Bala or Adhi Kanda
2. Ayodhya Kanda
3. Aranya Kanda
4. Kishkindhya Kanda
5. Sundara Kanda
6. Lanka Kanda
7. Uttara Kanda



The story of this epic poem revolves round the character Ramachandra who is the symbol of honest and dedicated person whom the people like. The lifestyle of Ramachandra and his brothers depicted in this epic is considered as the ideal lifestyle by the readers and lovers of this epic poem. If we consider the activities of all the characters of this epic we become astonished to find out that many areas of our real life are focused and even in 21 century we can incorporate many elements in our life from this literary contribution of sage Valmiki. The text is a powerhouse of knowledge, language and literary criticism. It is also a poem full of literary terms and mythological elements. But it is a matter of sorrow that in western countries it is not getting its due popularity although it has all the ingredients like famous Greek classics *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Hari Prasad Shastri one of the renowned translator of *The Ramayana* writes in his Introduction that:

“It is little surprising that, although the mighty epics of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are widely known and loved, only a few scholars have studied their Hindu counterparts known as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In fact no good complete modern English translation of the *Ramayana* exists, and the best of those made in the last half of the 19th century are unobtainable outside the larger libraries”.

The Ramayana of Valmiki is unique in nature in literary arena which is written in epic poem format and it is quite difficult to produce such literary work with so many characterization and stories. The story is narrated by Valmiki in such a way that we have think elaborately otherwise we can be lost in the poetic garden of Valmiki. Our memory power should be boosted before reading the epic. There are 24000 couplets divided into seven books and it is considered as a cornerstone of classic Hindu Religion. This poem is also popular among singers because of its melodious qualities and Hari Prasad Shastri mentions the following remark:

"The Ramayana is a work of great antiquity attributed to the illustrious Sage Valmiki. Its date of composition cannot be fixed with any certainty, particularly as, in common with other Sanskrit classics, it was not at first committed to writing, but was passed on from singer to singer. This process also accounts for the fact that the various versions (Sakhas) of the poem that have come down to us differ slightly in context. The interesting fact is that the scholars are agreed that the Ramayana is the grandly conceived and executed masterpiece of one poet, and not a collection of stories from many sources, loosely gathered together".

Valmiki's *Ramayana* is written in blank verse which is free in quality. It is an iambic (a short syllable followed by a long syllable is iambic) with few restrictions. It is written in narrated style and this narration in the form of long poem makes the epic unique among the readers and critiques.

The Ramayana is the story of the character of Ramachandra who is popular as Rama. This is the story of the victory of honesty and justice over dishonesty and injustice. In Bala Kanda it is described that Valmiki after getting the instruction from Brahma, (The supreme God of Hindu Religion) starts to describe the story within one sitting. Valmiki has described technically the story of a King Dasaratha whose reign was in Ayodhya who had no sons or daughters. King Dasaratha performs a sacrifice to get son. Dasaratha performs the sacrifice with proper devotion to the Gods and as a result his three wives bear four sons Ram, Bharata and the twins Lakshmana and Shatrughna. Actually these four sons were the incarnations of Lord Vishnu who promised to the gods that he will incarnate as human to punish Ravana. Ravana was a ten headed demon(Rakshas) who became powerful after getting the boons from Lord Brahma and Lord Shiva and because of the boons gods, Gandarvas and rakshasas will not be able to kill him. Only human being will be able to kill Ravana as he did not mention human being when he got the boons. So it was predetermined that

Lord Vishnu will incarnate as human being to kill Ravana. Rama and Lakshmana at the young age travelled and learned a lot with Sage Vishwamitra and they killed many rakshasas to free many lands, sages and people. Almost at the end of Bala Kanda, Ram and Lakshmana with sage Vishwamitra comes to the kingdom of King Janaka where Rama wins Sita after being able to string the bow of Mahadeva which is preserved by king Janaka from ancient period. Two daughters Sita and Urmila of king Janaka and two daughters of king Kushadwaja Mandavi and Shruta-Kirtti are married with Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna. In Ayodhya Kanda, Rama is banished from Ayodhya for fourteen years and Bharata is installed as Yuvaraja because of the envy of queen Kaikeyi. Ram comes to live in the forest with Sita and Lakshmana and King Dasaratha died of grief. Then Bharata goes to Rama to bring back him to the throne and fails to do so. In Aranya Kanda Sita is kidnapped and taken to Lanka by Ravana and in Kishkindha Kanda Ram and Lakshmana is in pursuit of Ravana to rescue Sita with the help of monkey king Sugriva and his chief minister Hanuman. In Sundara Kanda the monkey armies reached Lanka bridging the straits and in Lanka Kanda Ram and Lakshmana captured Ravana after a series of battles and rescues Sita. Then they come back to Ayodhya. In Uttara Kanda we find that the citizens of Ayodhya questions the purity of Sita and compels Rama to banish Sita to Valmiki's hermitage in the forest where she gives birth to two sons Kusha and Lava. At the end, oneday Rama recognized Kusha and Lava and subsequently brings back Sita to share the ruling of the Ayodhya kingdom with him.

The art of Characterization in Valmiki's *The Ramayana* is worthy to praise and has achieved a different place in the heart of the readers. He has given detailed description of each and every character and their activities. It is not only the story of Rama and Sita but also the story of many Gods, sages, kings, humans, rakshasas, Asuras and so on. As a reader we find it difficult to remember all the characters and their connections to the story line. But Valmiki with great attention and perseverance has depicted each and every detail and created a historical document of ancient Indian subcontinent. Most of the critiques and literature lovers agree that it is a daunting task and without extra ordinary talent it is impossible to write such wonderful document in the form of epic poem. According to Hari Prasad Shastri *The Ramayana* is poetry of unsurpassed dramatic power and brilliance.

The Ramayana is a cultural document of India. We find different cultural ceremonies performed and celebrated in the kingdoms of different kings. India with its cultural diversity has attracted tourists from different countries and Valmiki's Ramayan is one of the authentic document to perceive cultural diversity. This poem is enriched with various kinds of socio-cultural descriptions which shapes the India of twenty first century. We can study The Ramayan as a source of cultural study to know the historical background of multi cultural India.

Valmiki's The Ramayana has all the qualities of being an international literary document. We find many issues including social, political, religious and diplomatic teaching from The Ramayana. It is an epic poem where we find modern characteristics although it was written in ancient period. This text is "a treasure house of information on rhetoric, medicine, geology, botany, geography and every facet of the ancient civilization, with which learned scholars may interest themselves."(Shastri,xvii). The use of languages and poetic diction are superb in quality. The literature lovers open an adventure journey when they read through the lines of the poem and find an amazing kind of feeling which seems like roller-coaster ride. We find all the social, cultural and political perspectives of ancient civilization. We travel through prosperous cities, kingdoms and lands where people live in peace and harmony, where there are sweet sensations and glories. There are many political and diplomatic circumstances from where we can learn techniques for modern political and diplomatic ideals. The text is a store house of knowledge, learning and understanding.

The descriptions of different kinds of weapons by Sage Vishwamitra to Rama in Bala Kanda make this epic as one of the masterpiece in the arena of literature. We do not find any other text where there is the description and use of the weapons. It creates a sense of adventure and unique kind of chivalry for the poem lovers. It is rare in world literature to find so many weapons in a single text. The manner in which Valmiki incorporates different kinds of weapons is bewildering and marvelous which also depicts his poetic genius and unique expertise. Valmiki here surpasses many renowned poets of the world. As a reader we become astonished when we find the descriptions of the weapons like Shankara, Koumoduki, Lahitamukhi, Dharma-

pasha, the Kala-pasha, Shoshka, Ashani, Pinaka, Narayana, Vayuvya, Hayashira, Krauncha, Kankala, Kapala, Kinkini, Vidyadhara, Manava, Prashaman, Soura, Praswaprana, Darpana and so on.

The Indian classic poem Ramayana is full of supernatural elements but presented in a way which creates 'suspension of disbelief' among the readers like British Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. There is suspension of horror, adventures, imagination, feeling and emotions in every page of the classic. It seems that Valmiki is not the narrator of story but a god who knows everything. The Ramayana creates a permanent place among the followers of Hindu religion and they read Ramayana for achieving solace, happiness and peace of mind. It is the story of the victory of a pious man Rama over the evil character Ravana which shows truth will always win in the three worlds Bhur, Bhuvah and Swah.

We can analyze *The Ramayana* as part of Women and Gender studies. The Character portrayal of Sita is modern from different perspectives. There are almost twenty important female characters in this classical and ancient epic. Valmiki besides shedding light on the life of Rama describes the female characters and their psychological journey with great care and being almost neutral. We find the story of the goddesses including Ganga, Uma, Parvati, Lakshmi and Sita. There is supreme kind of balance between male and female characters and they play equal roles and ideals in this narrative. Punit Sharma in his article titled 'Four Courageous Decisions of Sita in Valmiki's Ramayana' makes the following remarks:

"But the other side of coin is tremendously filled with great characters and their dedication towards making this epic so pure and admirable. Especially women's Who were the centre of the story and who also created an ideal image for the rest of the today's women".

He further states in the same article that:

"In the great epic Ramayana, there are many characters, which needs to be studied as whole such as the character of Sita, wife of prince Rama. The lady with bold image for decision making by her own and the women who projected as the dedicated and statue of sacrifice".

The Ramayana is the representation of mythological story of ancient India that attracts the minds of the literature lovers. It is the document of the mythology where we find the descriptions of many gods and goddesses and their evolutions but the setting is not in Greece or Rome. It is the pure mythological story of Asia.

The epic is an allegory and Valmiki incorporates different symbols throughout the poem. The character Rama symbolizes light and the demon Ravana symbolizes darkness or evil. There are many symbolic characters which parallels the characters of Rama and Ravana. Shastri writes:

“The story may also be taken as an allegory. Symbolically Rama and Ravana represent the forces of light and darkness operating in the human heart, as well as in the world. Truth, benevolence, mercy and righteousness are the forces of light which are opposed by greed, lust, love of pleasure and power, anger and egoity. The real triumph of man means conquest of the forces of darkness”.

The epic poem *Ramayana* is a literary masterpiece, a unique creation of Rishi Valmiki that impresses the readers with multi-layered themes and interpretations. It has created a strong vives in the minds of the passionate readers and literature lovers of different areas of the world. It is a matter of sorrow that it has become popular worldwide after 19th century but within a shortest possible time it has attracted the critiques, poem lovers and sagacious personnel of the world. It is now considered as one of treasures of world literature. This text is a store house of knowledge where we find all the issues from family life to socio-cultural perspectives.

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