

VARIATIONS OF THE *RAMAYANA*

The *Ramayana* is a traditional Hindu epic that has been orally passed down through many generations in Southeast Asia. It was originally composed in the Sanskrit language. There are many different versions of the *Ramayana*, however the first composition of the epic in its full written form is attributed to the sage Valmiki (Rao 222). The *Ramayana* is a work of poetry split into seven books (*kandas*) and then further separated into chapters or *sargas* (Rao 222). Valmiki's version of the text includes 25,000 verses and is thought to have been composed between 500 B.C.E to 300 C.E. (Olson 341). The *Ramayana* is still a very prominent part of the Hindu culture in these times as there have been televised performances of the epic in recent years. In the past 2500 years there have been numerous renditions of the *Ramayana* circulating that have had a great influence on South and South East Asia (Richman 1991:24). One can see the vast influence the *Ramayana* has had by examining the many languages in which it can be found. These include: Annamese, Balinese, Bengali, Cambodian, Chinese, Gujarati, Javanese, Kannada, Kashmiri, Khotanese, Laotian, Malaysian, Marathi, Oriya, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Santali, Sinhalese, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tibetan as well as Western language translations (Richman 1991:24). The *Ramayana* has even taken many different forms within India, starting out with Valmiki's version and more recently the production of the *Ramayana* as produced by Ramanand Sagar, which was shown on Indian national television (Richman 2001:3). It is quite clear that the influence of the *Ramayana* is an important part of Indian culture that also reaches far beyond India itself.

Scholars have proposed that the *Ramayana* is not only a written work by Valmiki but is a prominent aspect of the various folk cultures in South East Asia (Bose 2004: 5). The *Ramayana* comes not only in the form of a simple narrative but in the form of dance-dramas, plays, sculptures and poetry (Richman 1991:24). Many Southeast Asian cultures like the Chinese, the Thai and the Balinese have developed traditions encompassing the *Ramayana* and its message into the cultural realms of drama, art and narrative alike (Bose 2004:6). It is thought by some that the *Ramayana* is meant to be somewhat malleable in order to localize and liken the story to the location where it is being told. Scholars believe that when one group or culture deems their version the only correct version then they are misunderstanding the tradition of the *Ramayana* (Richman 2001:21). It has been suggested that many of the cultures in South East Asia use the *Ramayana* as guide for every day conduct and more specifically in India as a guideline for Dharmic behavior (Bose 2004:3). Scholars believe that each regional version of the *Ramayana* is used to understand aspects of the local world including caste, race and gender (Bose 2004:6). In order for people to better relate to this epic in terms of culture and status they will inevitably add their own twists and turns to the story of Rama to make it coincide with their own experiences.

There are two different models in the scholarly world for studying the *Ramayana*. The first model is based on the assumption that Valmiki's version is the authoritative telling of the *Ramayana* and then looks at other versions and how they diverge from the original telling (Richman 2001:3). This view demonstrates how much influence Valmiki's *Ramayana* has had on the many tellings throughout the

centuries. The main focus of this model is genealogy in a linear fashion, assuming that Valmiki's text is the original and all others coming after are branches off of it (Richman 2001: 4). Many scholars believe that this model favors a telling of the *Ramayana* that was exclusive to the upper three *varnas* (including *Brhamins*) who could understand and read the Sanskrit language, excluding the majority of Hindu society (Richman 2001:4).

In contrast to this model, A.K. Ramanujan developed a model called the Many *Ramayanas*. It is based on the assumption that all tellings of the *Ramayana* are valid and should not be seen as variants of Valmiki's *Ramayana* because that implies that there is only one true *Ramayana* (Richman 2001:5). Ramanujan stated that each writer or teller of the *Ramayana* tradition "dips into it [a pool] and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and fresh context" (Richman 2001:4). This model does not follow a hierarchy and it validates all the many tellings of Rama's story despite their variations and includes, not only written versions, but those that are performed in dances and dramas, shown visually through art or sculpture and those transmitted orally (Richman 2001:5). These models were developed in order to help scholars pursue the study of the *Ramayana* in some sort of structured fashion due to the vast number of translations and renditions in various locations.

The main events of the *Ramayana* that are seen in the majority of tellings are as follows: Rama and Sita marry and are sent into exile in the forest, Sita is captured by Ravana and taken to his kingdom. Rama and his brother Laksmana search for her and enlist the help of an ape-like deity named Hanuman. They eventually retrieve

Sita from Ravana's kingdom and she goes through a fire ordeal to prove her fidelity to Rama (Olson 2007). However, many of the different tellings have other additions and may focus on different events that take place. Some end with Rama and Sita going back to the kingdom and ruling, but other tellings continue with Rama banishing Sita because of the critical eye of the kingdom. She then gives birth to his two sons Lava and Kusa who are trained in the telling of the *Ramayana* and return to Ayodha to tell their story (Richman 1991:39). The fact that there are so many variations of the *Ramayana* leads many to believe that they must all be sectioned into parts and studied at once in order to truly understand the meaning of the story of Rama (Bose 2003:2).

One of the different tellings of the *Ramayana* is credited to Kampan and is a Tamil version of the Rama story. It is thought that Kampan includes regional folklore traditions, weaving them throughout the Rama story and making them part of the epic (Richman 1991: 31). Through studies of Kampan's work, it has also been found that, in comparison to Valmiki, Kampan is much more dramatic and uses vivid, meaningful symbols throughout his work (Richman 1991:31). Another notable difference between the two is that in Valmiki's work, Rama is seen as a combination of God and man who is constrained by his human body. In contrast, Kampan portrays Rama as a pure God who is brought to restore the differences between good and evil (Richman 1991:31). A specific example of variation between the two texts is the seduction of Ahalya. Valmiki portrays the scene as Ahalya willingly being seduced by the God Indra where as Kampan alludes to the fact that Ahalya comprehends that she is doing something wrong but she is unable to resist

the illicit joy of the affair (Richman 1991:31). These are a few examples of how Valmiki and Kampan differ in their portrayal of the Rama story.

One telling of the *Ramayana* that is very unique is the Jaina telling called the *Paumacariya* (Richman 1991:34). The whole focus of the story shifts away from the Hindu set of values and points out how the Brahmins have mistreated Ravana. The focus of the Jaina telling is Ravana. It is with him that the tale begins, telling of his genealogy and history (Richman 1991:34). The reader is provided with an account of the hardships Ravana has faced, and he is cast as a somewhat tragic character that one is meant to pity and feel compassion for (Richman 1991:34). Another unique part of this telling is that Laksmana and Ravana are the eighth incarnations of Vasudeva and Prativasudeva, who have been destined to fight throughout their many reincarnations, the classic tale of a hero and his nemesis (Richman 1991:34). In this telling Rama will not kill Ravana because he is attempting to attain release and so he leaves the task to Laksmana who will be damned for the killing (Richman 1991:35). This telling also depicts the monkeys as a group of celestials who are actually related to Ravana (Richman 1991:35). This is another example of how the *Ramayana* can be told in many different ways, depending on the values and culture of the region where it is being told.

One Southeast Asian example is the Thai *Ramakirti* and many Thai kings have taken the name of Rama due to the story's revered status in Thailand (Richman 1991: 37). The Thai telling of Rama's story depicts the banishment of Sita in a highly dramatic scene where the daughter of Surpanakha seeks revenge on Sita and convinces her to make a drawing of Ravana. Upon finding this drawing Rama is

furious and orders that Sita be killed, however, Laksmana cannot carry out the act and simply abandons her in the forest (Richman 1991: 38). Hanuman is depicted as a very desirable man who has many women while in other tellings he is thought to be celibate (Richman 1991:39). Along with the Jaina telling, this Thai telling leads the reader to view Ravana's actions with compassion and understanding that he is kidnapping Sita because of love (Richman 1991: 39). The focus of the Thai telling is on the war scenes and the weaponry. This is thought to be the result of the Thai history, which is embedded with war (Richman 1991:38).

The South Indian folk telling of the *Ramayana* that takes the form of song and is told in Kannada, casts Sita as the main heroine in the story and much of the narrative is focused on her birth, her wedding, and her exile (Richman 1991: 35). In this telling Ravana is known as Ravula. He has an encounter with Siva where he eats a mango. He was supposed to share the mango with his wife Mandodari so that she may become pregnant. Being disobedient Ravula eats the entire mango and he then becomes pregnant (Richman 1991:36). Ravula has disobeyed Siva and he is punished; he gives birth to Sita as a sneeze and is then counseled to wrap her up and leave her in a field (Richman 1991:36) Ravula ends up leaving Sita in Janaka's field which is where she is found in the soil [This episode of finding Sita in the soil is often seen as the beginning of her life and she is not thought to be the daughter of Ravana in these other tellings.] Sita is seen as Ravana's daughter in this telling and this can be found in some other tellings as well (Richman 1991:37). This telling of the *Ramayana* is much more focused on Sita's genealogy, history and life events

(Richman 1991:37). It is clear that the *Ramayana* has many different meanings and can touch the lives of those who partake in it in various ways (Bose 2003:2).

As all of the previous examples illustrate, there are many variations of the *Ramayana* seen throughout South and Southeast Asia. It is not only a Hindu epic but a story told in many places all over the world and considered to be relevant today. The *Ramayana* can be shaped and molded to the culture of the region where it is being told and that is part of the beauty of the tale.

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