MAKING THE RAMAYANA RELEVANT:

Some Thoughts on Modern Adaptations in 21st Century America

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Abstract

The story of the Ramayana has proved itself elusive to a temporal death and remains the center of continued academic attention. Scholarship has focused on unearthing the vast Ramayana tradition in South and South-east Asia in all its polymorphousness and polysemy. What remain, however, comparatively under-researched and discussed are the mutative forms this great epic has generated and continues to generate on Western shores. This paper has made a preliminary attempt at mapping some of these hybrid births in three distinct artistic forms in the historical specificity of twenty-first century America. The present study has made an effort towards locating the reasons for the universal appeal of this ancient text and examines briefly the specific ways in which the ‘rebirth’ of this narrative takes place through varied artistic media in America. The three artistic hybrids chosen for discussion in the paper are the animation movie “Sita Sings the Blues” by American comic-strip artist Nina Paley, released in 2008; the second is a theatrical performance entitled “The Ramayana”, directed by Allison Arkell Stockman and first performed in 2010, and the third form is an illustration book by animator Sanjay Patel entitled Ramayana: Divine Loophole published in 2010.

Key words: The Ramayana; modern adaptations; unique crystallizations; universality; artistic styles.
Introduction

In how many ways can you tell the same story? If the story is the *Ramayana*, one need only spare a perfunctory glance at monographs like *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, to realize that the question begs a straight answer and finds none. Besides the richness and diversity of the Ramayana tradition in South and Southeast Asia which has prevailed over centuries, what re-introduced this author to the enchanting Indian epic is the fascinating array of modern renditions emerging in the twenty-first century, not only in India1 but also and particularly in America.

At the very outset it must be stated that this paper focuses on the different forms in which a story can be told rather than the differences within the story-telling itself. The three authors of creative works discussed in this paper have adopted the earliest and most well-known Sanskrit ‘telling’ of Valmiki for adaptation into different artistic forms. While scholarship on the different “tellings” (Ramanujan 24) of the *Ramayana* abound, there seems to be a curious lacuna in scholarship relating to para-literary and non-literary modern adaptations of the epic on Western shores. As a humble attempt at such scholarship this paper alludes to three innovative visual representations of the *Ramayana*, belonging to three different artistic media, originating in America. The first is an animation movie by American comic-strip artist Nina Paley, “Sita Sings the Blues” released in 2008; “The Ramayana” a theatrical performance, directed by Allison Arkell Stockman in 2010 is the second, and the third medium is an illustration book by animator Sanjay Patel entitled *Ramayana: Divine Loophole* published in 2010.

The paper begins by exploring the reasons for the timeless and cross-cultural appeal of this ancient Sanskrit epic. By a close discussion of the three art forms the paper attempts to show how each author interprets the story of the Ramayana through the visual medium in his/her own way. The uniqueness of the *Ramayana* lies in its ability to not only speak to but converse with all who come across it, even those who are outsiders to the *Ramayana* tradition, and engulf them by the richness of meaning and depth of articulation. What stands out in each production is a synchronization of Western and Indian styles which render it more relatable to the Western audience. Such modern
“tellings” continuously enrich this age-old epic and make it more relevant in the globalized world of today.

Trans-Atlantic Ripples

Since the formulation of the Adikavya by the divine sage Valmiki around 2500 years ago, every author who has dipped into the sacred waters of the Ramayana has been able to emerge with a “unique crystallization” (Ramanujan 46). The list of languages and cultures in South and Southeast Asia on which the Rama Katha has left an indelible stamp is truly impressive. Add to this the influence it has had on the Western world and the Ramayana presents itself as one that has been able to carve out a comfortable niche for itself in the global spectrum. The question then arises, what enables the Ramayana to defy the decaying sands of time and open itself to such a diversity of perspectives?

The answer lies buried within the text itself and can be unveiled by an examination of the value-system and philosophy expounded by the religion that derives from it. More accurately defined as a way of life than a religion, Hinduism allows a unique “heterodoxy of beliefs” and an “overarching liberality” of thought, as has been well-documented by K.M. Sen. In keeping with the theme of this paper, the liberality of perspective in the Ramayana will be discussed at two levels. To begin with, most of the meanings in Valmiki’s Adikavya operate at the symbolic level rather than being overtly dictated. This is best illustrated through the representation of Ravana as ten-headed or ‘Dasamukha’. The ten-heads are symbolic of his mental and physical prowess which equals ten men. The symbolism through which the narrative functions enables a freeplay of meanings to take shape rather than enforcing a singularity of perspective. Such an openness of interpretation wherein a signifier accommodates a range of signifieds liberates the narrative from the fixity of an inherent meaning.

In conjunction with this, as Rajiva Wijesinha notes, every character in the Ramayana vacillates between the Manichean categories of good and evil, presenting both sides of the argument and thus giving “tremendous weight to the other side too”. While comparing the Hindu epics with the Greek epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey, he states that the former present a “pluralism” of perspectives. In this context, Wijesinha gives the example of Ravana, the Rakshasa king of Lanka
and Rama’s arch-enemy whose treacherous abduction of Rama’s beautiful wife Sita earns him the latter’s divine wrath. However, Wijesinha continues, “despite the demonization in every sense of Ravana there is a positive side to the depiction of some of the Lankans, not only Ravana’s brother Vibhishana who goes over to Rama, but even of his son Indrajit who fights dutifully for his father”. By portraying the fluidity between the moral categories of right and wrong, good and evil, and by depicting the fallibility of mortals, the epic becomes more relatable to the human condition. As a mortal amongst mortals, Rama is not irreproachable and is guilty of grievous errors of judgment in relation to his blind assassination of the Vanar king Vali and his decision to banish the loyal and chaste Sita post the war in Lanka. Another case in point is the way Ravana’s demonization is never isolated from his unparalleled wisdom and rule as a righteous and illustrious king, which is the source of his being worshipped as the hero in certain Ramayana traditions. The Ramayana is not composed of rigid totalities, rather the moral ambiguities embodied by the characters enable all who encounter the Ramayana to find within it their own tellings, their own voice and most importantly their own story.

Modernizing the Ancient: A Movie, A Book and A Play

Given such a background, it comes as no surprise that the trans-Atlantic journey of the Ramayana has seen the dawn of a new-age ‘hybrid’ that inculcates the best of the East and seamlessly assimilates it with the distinctive elements of the West.

In the year 2008, an American comic-strip artist Nina Paley presented a “sassy” new ‘avatar’ of Sita as a sexy and voluptuous ‘Betty Boop’ prototype, crooning to the sultry Jazz vocals of Annette Hanshaw! The use of typically American elements such as Jazz music which originated in the US in the early 1920’s and the American iconic cartoon persona of Betty Boop from the early 1930’s gives birth to a Sita that has successfully crossed cultural landscapes, not to mention geographical. On being questioned about her choice to use Annette Hanshaw’s vocals for Sita’s solos, coalescing experiences so seemingly disparate, Paley’s response was enlightening and needs to be reproduced at some length,

But the Hanshaw songs were a revelation: Sita’s story has been told a million times not just in India, not just through the Ramayana, but also through American Blues. Hers is a story so primal, so basic to human experience, it has been told by people who never heard of the Ramayana. The Hanshaw songs deal with
exactly the same themes as the epic: but they emerged completely independent of it. Their sound is
distinctively 1920's American, and therein lies their power: the listener/viewer knows I didn’t make them
up. They are authentic. They are historical evidence supporting the film’s central point: the story of the
Ramayana transcends time, place and culture.7

This particularly creative eighty-two minute animation movie emerged Phoenix-like from the
debris of Nina Paley’s failed marriage. At the time reeling from the shock, heartbreak and
humiliation of rejection Paley declares, in a series of interviews, that it was “cathartic to re-tell the
story [of the Ramayana]”.8 Having been coldly dumped by her husband Dave, she saw her situation
mirrored in the story of Sita, who despite being the epitome of purity and loyalty is ultimately
abandoned by her husband Rama. It is no wonder then that Paley chose to follow in the footsteps
of the vast ‘Sitayana’, women’s oral tradition in India.9 Just like them she “found a suitable mask
in the myth of Sita”10 through which she was able to “critique patriarchy in [her] own fashion”.11
Nina Paley, like the vibrant Sitayana tradition, rescues Sita from the “footnote[s]”12 of history and
narrates the story not just of the Ramayana but also of her own heartbreak from the woman’s point-
of-view by giving Sita center stage in “Sita Sings the Blues.” Paley’s powerful ‘écriture féminine’13 liberates her and her inspiration from the restrictions imposed by a man’s language.
‘Writing’ against the convention of using a single artistic style for animation, Paley’s near frenzied
combination of diverse animation forms to tell her story hints at the plurality of a woman’s
experiences and the strength of a woman’s language.

Through the eclectic and experimental blend of artistic styles Nina Paley attempted “to hint at [the]
wealth of visual traditions [that] are associated with the Ramayana”.14 Her inspirations include
Indian Mughal miniature paintings, South Asian shadow puppets, ‘fuzzy’ western-style animation
reminiscent of her comic-strip “Nina’s Adventures” for narrating her own life story, flat-colour
animation for the Jazz music solos of Sita (which bring to mind scenes from the Jazz-age inspired
movie ‘Chicago’), the collage of Hindu Gods and a Rotoscoped technique for the song ‘Agni
Pariksha’, resulting in a movie that is an absolute visual feast! The confused, almost argumentative
narration of “the” Ramayana by the shadow puppet narrators, who try to recall the story on the
basis of the versions they have grown up hearing, pays tribute to the diverse Ramayana tradition.
As Paley rightly points out, “There is no one Ramayana”.15
Paley’s tryst with the Ramayana has resulted in yet another “unique crystallization” which becomes evident by the subtitle she uses, “The greatest break-up story ever told”. As a personal project Paley overtly points out that through the movie she is narrating “My Ramayana” not “The Ramayana” and she does this by including scenes from her own break-up story. Her focus on the relationship between Sita and Rama accounts for the absenteeism of the key characters in the story such as Lakshman, Bali, Sugriva, Kumbhakarana, Vibhishana, Surpanakha. The mark of good literature is its ability to be read and enjoyed by a wide audience but the mark of truly great literature is its ability to allow readers to make it their own. As truly great literature the Ramayana belongs to every reader and allows every reader to find ‘my story’ in ‘the story’. Paley’s unique vision successfully integrates tradition with modernity and pays homage to the technological advancements of the twenty-first century.

Interestingly, in an uncanny parallel to Nina Paley, Indian-American illustrator Sanjay Patel was faced with the end of his decade-long marriage while working on his book of illustrations Ramayana: Divine Loophole. However, unlike Paley who drew inspiration from her broken marriage, Patel admits he “couldn’t pick up a pen for six months” which significantly delayed the book’s release to early 2010. This cartoon-book version of the Ramayana, which depicts the defining incidents of the epic through a hundred colourful illustrations, has certainly gained international acclaim. Patel’s parallels with Paley do not stop here and this becomes clear on a closer examination of the artistic style employed by him.

Patel does not shy away from admitting that his sources of inspiration are many and that he regularly incorporates aspects from these in his personal work. Aiming to make the ancient epic more appealing to a “younger generation” of N.R.I.’s, who embody a split cultural identity, Patel creates artwork that is a mix of “mid-century design and ancient myth”. By contracting the twenty-four thousand verses of the original Ramayana to a few compact paragraphs Sanjay Patel makes the story more accessible to a varied audience. The simplistic style of narration accompanied by beautiful illustrations follows the format of Classic Western children’s stories like ‘Aesop’s Fables’ and the European ‘Fairy Tales’ of the mid-19th century. As an artist with the California based Pixar Animation Studios, Patel has worked on a series of features like, “Cars”, “The
Incredibles”, “Monster’s Inc.”, “A Bug’s Life” to name a few. The reflection of these varied styles is evident in his attractive book of illustrations.

Firstly, his simplistic artistic style with little emphasis on intricate detailing echoes the mid-twentieth century ‘Modernist Movement’ in art. It starkly contrasts with the obsession to detail that defines traditional Indian styles of painting like Mughal Miniature paintings and the tribal Gondh art as well as the style popularized by the famous Indian Painter Raja Ravi Verma in the 19th century, inspired by the ‘Bengal School of Art’. Secondly, by choosing a subdued colour palette that consists of pastel shades, Patel offers an alternative to the vibrant and gay colours used in traditional Indian art. The toned-down colour palette stays true to the design sensibilities that hold maximum appeal in Western aesthetics. Thirdly, by using vector-style illustration, (which contains elements of ‘Colour Field painting’ of the 1940’s-50’s) Patel connects with the younger generation as this style developed with the advent of Computers. Finally, the whimsical and angular art is sure to capture the interest of anyone who happens to lay eyes on it. But this last is a characteristic he has in common with the run-away success of a recent theatrical marvel.

The most accurate description of the play, directed by Allison Arkell Stockman, is, “The Ramayana gets a very American make-over”. Based on the book written by British playwright Peter Oswald, “The Ramayana” published in 2000, the transformation of the play on the American stage was a hit with the American audience running sold-out shows in the spring of 2010 and back by popular demand in August 2011. With an African-American Rama (painted a vibrant cobalt blue), a blonde Sita and an all-American cast, the play certainly does not lack ‘Americanness’. If anything, apart from the storyline it lacks the distinct flavour of ‘Indianness’. It can be said without doubt that Allison Arkell stayed true to her vision of “an ensemble play with innovative visual design”, which really highlights America as the ‘melting-pot’ in terms of visual production. This is plain to see in the costume design and music composition. The musical score, developed by Tom Teasley most nearly resembles the genre of ‘world music’ where classical Indian rhythm is synchronized with very tribal African percussion beats. In fact, in one scene Sugriva and his posse of monkeys even break into modern day rap!

Just like the music score, the costumes too have been designed with a global eye, encompassing a whole spectrum of cultures and resulting in a vibrant amalgamation that enhances the star quality
of the performance. The Harem pants and short jackets sported by Ravana and his band of ‘Rakshasas’ remind one more of a scene right out of “The Thousand and One Nights” than the super-human ferocity associated with the demons from Lanka. The embroidered, silk achkans sported by Rama and Ravana as well as the bright pink and blue Sari-inspired gown adorning Sita are more in keeping with the pomp and pageantry of a Broadway performance. The elaborate masks skillfully decked out for Ravana and his partners-in-crime reproduce an atmosphere of the ‘Carnivalesque’ – the by-product of a Brazilian carnival’s chance encounter with the African mask dance.

While the language, which is often rich in sexual innuendoes, and the light-hearted scenes such as the one where the monkeys’ derriere literally becomes the ‘butt’ of jokes have been viewed as irreverent by Hindu nationalists, Gaurav Gopalan, the Indian dramaturge who assisted with the production has said “If it were done the way we do it in India, the cultural references would not convey and the metaphors won’t translate in an effective manner”.19 Stockman revealed that before this production she had not even heard of the Ramayana but once she had embarked on it, she realized that “the truths found in this primordial epic have resonated through the ages and remain relevant, vital and powerful today”.20

Conclusion

While truths of the human condition and human life can be found in both the ancient epics of India, perhaps the reason for the universal appeal and popularity of the Ramayana lies in its subject matter. Not only is the Ramayana a story about the insurmountable trials that love is faced with but it also embodies rich moral and spiritual themes which remain unparalleled, making it more relevant to the concerns of the common man. The universality of the human emotions of love, rejection, loss, suffering, juxtaposed with ‘ideal’ values and codes of moral behaviour like unconditional devotion and loyalty, perseverance in doing one’s duty and choosing the path of righteousness at all costs – enables people from any religious or cultural background to relate to the story in terms of their everyday lives. Dr. Bart Mesotten while trying to explain the ability of the Ramayana to “absorb” anyone who comes across it, even western audiences says, “This is partly due to the fact that the Ramayana deals with universal human values, which are thought of as highly in an environment that is imbued with Christian ideas as in a Hindu world. And if these
insights, these attitudes to life are furthermore presented in a literary attractive form, their success is absolutely obvious.\textsuperscript{21}

The stylistic mutations in the mode of representation have further enriched the already brimming repository of diverse forms, styles and narratives into which the \textit{Ramayana} has crystalized. The beauty of the \textit{Ramayana} lies in the fact that each successive generation has undertaken the challenge of re-telling this endearing epic through a range of different mediums whether it be comic-books, songs, poetry, theatrical performances or animation films. The continued interest in this tale of divine love through the ages and across cultures is testimony of its universal and timeless appeal. Another important reason for encouraging such modernized and globalized versions is that had this not been the case the \textit{Ramayana} might have been collecting dust on the bookshelf of time. It seems apt to end this paper with the immortal words of Lord Brahma to the sage Valmiki:

“So long as the mountains and the seas exist on earth,

The sacred history of the \textit{Ramayana} shall endure

And you will enjoy a double life in Heaven and on Earth”\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{Notes}

1 Some of the most popular modern re-tellings of the \textit{Ramayana} in India are the 2010 3-D animation movie \textit{Ramayana: The Epic}, “Ravanayan” a ten-part comic book series by Vijayendra Mohanty released in July 2011, Ashok K. Banker’s \textit{Ramayana} octet which began in 2003.

2 As Ramanujan notes, “Just a list of languages in which the Rama story is found makes one gasp: Annamese, Balinese, Bengali, Cambodian, Chinese, Gujarati, Javanese, Kannada, Kahsmiri, Khotanese, Laotian, Malaysian, Marathi, Oriya, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Santali, Sinhalese, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tibetan – to say nothing of Western languages”. Refer to “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation”.

3 Some non-Asian languages into which \textit{Ramayana} has been translated are English, French, Dutch, and Italian. Refer to \textit{Ramayana: Its Universal Appeal and Global Role}, edited by Lallan Prasad Vyas.


5 “Religion and Culture in the Liberal State,” Chapter 10 of \textit{Liberal Perspectives for South Asia} by Rajiva Wijesinha.

6 As Ramanujan notes, the Jaina Vimalasuri’s \textit{Paumacariya} opens with the genealogy of Ravana, not Rama. He is “one of the sixty-three leaders or \textit{salakapurusas} of the Jaina tradition...[and] is noble, learned, earns all his magical powers and weapons through austerities (tapas), and is a devotee of Jaina masters”. From “Three Hundred Ramayanas...”.


Nabaneeta Deb Sen’s work on the Sitayana tradition ranges from Chandrabati’s, Molla’s and Ranganayakamma’s Ramayana to the “contemporary rural women’s Ramayana songs in Bengali, Marathi, Maithili and Telugu”.


Ibid.

Available on www.sitasingstheblues.com/faq, original article on wp.modernfilmzine.com in interview part 2

“Sita Sings the Blues’ uses Internet to be a smash hit” by Michael Knox, Saturday, January 24th 2009.

Literally translating to “Women’s writing” and coined by Hélène Cixous in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975).

Available on www.sitasingstheblues.com/faq, original interview at http://sepiamutiny.com/blog/2009/03/05/sita_sings_the_1/#more-5661 posted on March 5th 2009 by Taz.


Refer to note 7 above.


Ibid.

Ibid.

www.contellationtheatre.org

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