

Mythical Metamorphosis: The Transformative Journey of *Ramayana* in Contemporary Narratives

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Within the labyrinthine depths of M. Alan Kazlsev's insight on mythopoesis as expounded in the *Mythopoesis in the modern world*, 'Mythopoesis is the anthropocentric and anthropomorphic representation of the Imaginal as material-physical, historical, and egoic-personal narrative.' (Kazlsev 33). Mythology is not religion or science; it is a category unto itself, providing solace to both the heart and mind or acting as a bridge between emotion and intellect, truth and ideal, human being and nonhuman. Mythology is one of the oldest forms of literature and it lays its foundation on giving pleasure with morality to the readers/listeners. It is a timeless literary form which reinstates the belief of the members of any society into its legends, religion and faith. This fluid form of mythology gave birth to the term 'Mythopoesis', a literary genre that incorporates ancient mythological ideas and archetypes into modern fiction. Myths are anything but static, they evolve with the evolution of society, technology and time. This paper is an attempt to read one such mythological text through the lens of mythopoesis. With the evolution of our society, the way we view the legends and myths changes and mythopoesis plays a major role in it. *The Ramayana*, a cornerstone of Indian society, reflects the enduring essence of Hindu philosophy, reshaped across various disciplines and immortalized in popular culture. It is one of the pillars on which the philosophy and belief of Indian Hindu society still stands and will continue to stand for as long as myths are studied and interpreted. Against the backdrop of India's rich cultural heritage, this study carries significance, shedding light on the dynamic interplay between tradition and contemporary interpretation. The paper

attempts to study the evolution of *the Ramayana* and its characters in popular culture.

By focusing on the Ramayana's evolution, one hopes to reveal the dynamic nature of mythology and its adaptability across different cultural contexts. Methodology involved in this observation is a comparative analysis of various versions of Ramayana, examining how different adaptations have reshaped the characters and narratives. Historical research and textual analysis will be the methodology adopted in this study to trace the evolution of the epic.

In the tapestry of human existence, societies are woven together by the threads of collective beliefs, answering the profound questions of 'What,' 'Why,' and 'How' that underpin the cosmos. William Righter quotes Warren and Wellek in his book *Myth and Literature* (1975) and says, "Myth is narrative, irrational...and comes to any anonymously composed story-telling of origins and destinies, the explanation a society offers its young of why the world is and why we do what we do" (Righter 05) which provide a collective identity to people of different generations. These beliefs, manifesting primarily as narratives, are handed down through generations as oral traditions or written scriptures, forming the bedrock of cultural identity. These narratives unveil the intricate tapestry of religious, political, and social constructs within a society, often establishing unyielding boundaries for its members and are called myths. They provide teachings, morals, and principles that lay the foundation for a society's existence. R. Shashidhar in his exploration of "*Literature and the New Myths*" observes that "Myths have always been powerful tools in managing societies. Myths have helped naturalize social order. Myths have told us that "This is how things have always been" (Shashidhar 08). These foundational narratives possess the uncanny ability to captivate the human imagination, blurring the boundaries between history and mythology. In the realm of India, three monumental texts—the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the Bhagavad Gita—they stand as the pillars of this cultural edifice containing whole landscape of Indian Hindu mythology.

A. K. Ramanujan wrote in his essay “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five examples and Three thoughts on Translation”, “the countless textual and oral versions of the tale of Ram are like little streams that flow towards the mighty river that is Ramayana literature.” (Ramanujan 154). Despite originating in the Vedic age, these texts continue to wield their influence, their original ideals now embedded in the fabric of social, religious and political dogma. The Ramayana, a timeless epic, narrates the saga of Lord Rama and his devoted consort, Sita. Attributed to the venerable sage, Valmiki during the Vedic age, this magnum opus, originally composed in Sanskrit, has transcended linguistic boundaries, finding its expressions in numerous vernacular languages. Various renditions of the Ramayana exist, the Tamil version by Kampan called *Iramavataram*, the Sanskrit version called *Adbhut Ramayana*, the Bengali rendition by *Krittivasa*, Assamese Ramayana by *Kandali*, Odia *Dandi Ramayana* by *Balaram Das*, Kashmiri Ramayana and the Awadhi incarnation penned by *Tulsidas* known as the *Shri Ramcharitmanas* to name a few. The populace of the narrative is immense not just in India but in other major South Asian countries as well, countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, Nepal has their own versions of Ramayana revolving around the same central characters while offering distinctive insights into the social and religious ethos of their respective regions. Despite being a Hindu epic, the Ramayana has extended its roots in other religions as well, Muslims who live in Mappila region of Kerala have adapted the Ramayana and calling it *Mappila Ramayana* making it one of the many Muslim versions of the epic.

The Ramayana, owing to its sheer length and complexity, interweaves multiple narratives. Yet, at its heart, it revolves around the timeless tale of a righteous king, his unwavering adherence to *dharma* (duty), and his relentless pursuit to rescue his abducted wife from the clutches of a demon king. The central theme of the Ramayana is to provide an ideal example of a King, Son and Man. However, it talks about many other issues in the society, religion and universe present within the discussions carried by various sages in the epic. Over the centuries, this epic has inspired countless works of art and cultural expressions, finding a place

in plays, films, television series, classical dances, and various other artistic forms. From *Ramleela* played in every street corner before Dusshera festival in North India to various forms of classical dance like Kathakali performing various stories from the epic, Ramayana have reached every house and every generation in the country. These artistic adaptations allow for the interpretation and popularisation of the diverse versions of the epic, shaped by the artists' unique perspectives. As researchers across the globe grapple with the intricacies of the original text, a perennial debate persists regarding the interpolation and interpretation of the narrative which in itself becomes complicated and fluid with ever evolving and adapting nature of the tale.

The renowned French philosopher, Roland Barthes, in his seminal work elucidates the concept of myth as a form of communication. Myth, according to Barthes, transcends the subject matter of the message; it is about the manner in which the message is conveyed. He posits, "Mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance." (Barthes 108). Barthes argues that myths are not just stories or narratives but are complex systems of signs that convey and reinforce cultural values, ideologies, and ideals. Mythological communication, therefore, seeks to instil these ideals into the collective consciousness to the extent that they become ingrained in the very essence of society. It reinforces cultural values and ideologies and could be adapted in different ways. Such is the nature of the Ramayana within Indian Hindu society. Along with serving as a guide for ideal behaviour and righteousness the Ramayana also communicate values such as dharma, loyalty, love, honour, and sacrifice. It serves as a repository of ideals, emphasising vigilant masculinity, kingly dharma, and societal order, primarily directed toward the male members of society. It perpetuates conservative dogma, fostering a paradigm of masculine personality—a foundation upon which much political, social, cultural and religious rhetoric and agendas are constructed. Feminist scholars have found time and

again the promotion of subdued femininity and patriarchal submission from the female of the epic. Barthes emphasises the role of symbols and sign system in conveying myths, the Ramayana is laden with symbols and signs through various smaller plots in the epic, for example characters like Sita, Ravana and Hanuman symbolises different aspects of human nature and morality, minor characters like Urmila also symbolises strong emotions such as sacrifice and determination. The traces of the lessons from Ramayana are so relevant that they are very much a part of everyday rhetoric since ages. However, mythopoesis has made the characters and plot lurking in the background in the main epic, stand out. The adaptations and reinterpretations of the Ramayana continue to communicate and adapt the myths with the moving world, making them relevant and ideal.

Mythopoesis as a practice also submits to what Roland Barthes believed, it helps writer to reimagine the myths and yet establish a new myth about the chosen character or plot. It helps to demolish the patriarchal cycle and establish the belief in accordance with modern world. Although the definition of mythopoeia as “a creating of myth” was first recorded in 1846 and the concept of mythopoeia was introduced by J.R.R. Tolkien in the 1930s as the title of one of his poem, the practice of mythopoeia has been started in second century CE. According to Devdutt Pattanaik, as recorded in his book *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramyana* “The *Ramayana* literature can be studied in four phases. The first phase, till the second century CE, is when the Valmiki Ramayana takes final shape. In the second phase, between the second and tenth centuries CE, many Sanskrit and Prakrit plays and poems are written. Here we attempt to locate Ram in Buddhist and Jain traditions as well, but he is most successfully located as the royal form of Vishnu on earth through Puranic literature. In the third phase, after the tenth century, against the backdrop of the rising tide of Islam, the Ramayana becomes the epic of choice to be put down in local tongues. Here the trend is to be devotional, with Ram as God and Hanuman as his venerated devotee and servant. Finally, in the fourth phase, since the nineteenth century, strongly influenced by the European and American gaze, the Ramayana is

decoded, deconstructed and reimagined based on modern political theories of justice and fairness.” (Pattanaik 08)

Influenced by the external influences like colonialism or globalisation and changing socio-political conditions have also impacted how the narrative of/from Ramayana is changed/understood. While colonialism made people look at the epic through a European perspective, it challenges the Indian mythology with western concepts, which generated more terms and confusion and questioned the religious aspect of the epic. One of the most prevalent discussions is to treat these foundational texts as history or myth. Having proven from various architectural, scientific and archaeological findings, Indians treat the epic as history, also the term ‘myth’ is Western to the natives, however disagreeing with each other on this debate, scholars of history and mythology both agree on the immense importance of the text to India and various South Asian countries. Globalisation has also made the epic available to a wider audience to read and learn, it brought to forefront the availability of multiple versions of the same epic. Neena Paley’s adaptation of Ramayana as an animated musical romantic comedy-drama “Sita Sings the Blues” is one of the popular examples of how globalisation has influenced the course and understanding of Ramayana. Paley used the plot of Ramayana using paintings from 18th century Rajput painting tradition mixing it with jazz music and strikingly modern technique of vector graphic animation. Although the movement of figures is minimal but the contrasting silhouettes discussion by three voices about their personal impression and knowledge of epic is ironical, humoristic and yet intellectual.

Manifestation of the Ramayana has happened across genres and disciplines, although in this study the evolution is studied only in few popular adaptations of the Ramayana across genres along with some popular culture references to visual adaptations as well. The first cinematic adaptation of Ramayana came in 1943 called *Ram Rajya*, a film seen by Mahatma Gandhi. Till today there have been hundreds if not thousands of adaptations and reinterpretations of *the Ramayana*. From a silent film called *Sati Sulochana* in 1921 to *Adipurush* in 2023,

the epic has been talked about and learnt from in all its glory. Each reinterpretation has added to the legend, making all of them a part of mythopoesis. Tulsidas, through his *Shri Ramcharitmanas* portrays Rama as a divine being, his actions representing the righteous path ordained by the gods to establish dharma. While *Valmiki's Ramayana* is considered the oldest rendition, if not the original, Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas* achieved equal fame by elevating Rama to the status of the supreme deity. This distinction often leads to confusion among readers and viewers. *Valmiki's Ramayana* presents Rama as "Purushottam," an embodiment of virtue, while *Shri Ramcharitmanas* portrays Rama as the supreme deity. *Ramayana* has been written and rewritten by various writers representing their own ideologies and moulding the characters with the socio-political situation of the writer. From R.K Narayana to Amish Tripathi, *the Ramayana* and its characters are read and re-read, interpreted and reinterpreted, critiqued and analysed in so many different versions and yet the plot, characters and morals are ever evolving.

Lanka Dahan, a silent film is one of the oldest adaptations of the *Ramayana* and was directed by Dadasaheb Phalke. This film featured the first double role in Indian cinema making the same actor play the role of Rama and Sita making it one of the iconic films of Indian cinema. *Ramayan*, another film in 1954, directed by Shankarrao Vyas and Hariprasanna Das was followed by an already successful trilogy - *Bharat Milap* (1942), *Ram Rajya* (1943) and *Ramadan* (1946) which was received well by the audience. This film revolved more around Luv and Kush, Ram's sons and the latter part of the epic. Another manifestation of mythological communication is the television series "Ramayan," directed by Ramanand Sagar. Drawing from various versions of the *Ramayana*, this series first aired from January 25, 1987, to August 1989, and was re-televised in 2020 during the lockdown, garnering record-breaking viewership. Such was its impact that people began venerating the actors and even the television sets themselves. In multiple narrations Ramanand Sagar has communicated that various scenes have been derived from different versions of *the Ramayana*. Whereas for most of the viewers Ramanand Sagar's "Ramayana" holds

the place of original Ramayana. Hence the line between original and popular stays blurry.

Another serial rendition of *the Ramayana* that aired on Zee TV in 2012 stood in a very different light than the previous one. Aligning to the spicy and patriarchal stream of Indian TV serials of presenting women as either a naive personality or cunning negative personality showed Sita, ever accepting her circumstances in stark contrast with Manthara and Kaikeyi who plotted to send Rama to forest for fourteen years. The serial stood out far from any version of these characters written in the texts. It gave unnecessary attention to the character of Manthara from the very starting, making her as not only the creator of a lot of circumstances but also adding unnecessary drama to the plot. The attire of the cast stands particularly away from legend and very near to then prevalent modern style of Indian clothing. The plot seems to set the epic away from morality and near the emotional dramatic turmoil of unnecessary incidents. *Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama (1992)*, an animated film by Yugo Sake and Ram Mohan is an Indian - Japanese film, that attracted a huge younger audience and remains one of the most faithful adaptations of the epic. Although there was criticism about colour in the film, yet it is considered one of the iconic adaptations of the Ramayana.

Movies like RRR derives its fight sequence heavily from Ramayana, with the protagonist wearing saffron dhoti and fighting war with the help of Arrows and having a brother along with him. Adipurush is the latest film based heavily on Ramayana. Directed by Om Raut the film is criticised for its portrayal of characters, plot and excessive influence of western films. The film has been called 'a weird blend of fantasy and fallacy'. The film problematized the representation of epic on so many level- romanticised the forest life of Rama and Sita, Ravana's Lanka shown in black and not gold, use of a dragon like creature in place of Pushpak Viman somehow degrades the venerated legend and components. Although the film is appreciated for its efforts with VFX but one cannot turn his head from the problematics of presenting a celebrated and venerated legend.

The diverse adaptations of *the Ramayana* across various literary works have presented multifaceted dimensions of this ancient epic, leaving a profound impact on readers. From Valmiki's foundational narrative to modern reinterpretations by authors like R.K. Narayan, which the timeless story of Lord Rama has been portrayed. These adaptations have humanised the characters, delved into their inner conflicts, and explored the moral complexities embedded within the epic's narrative. By shifting perspectives or highlighting specific characters like Sita in Devdutt Pattanaik's or Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's work or employing a contemporary narrative style in R.K.Narayan's retellings, these adaptations have engaged readers in thought-provoking ways, challenging traditional perceptions and inviting reflection on moral dilemmas, societal norms, and the universal themes of righteousness, sacrifice, and devotion. They have sparked discussions, evoked emotions and compelled readers to contemplate the relevance of the Ramayana's teachings in the context of their own lives, fostering a deeper appreciation of the epic's enduring impact on literature and culture.

These visual as well as written adaptations of *the Ramayana* moves with the movement of society, not necessarily in a progressive way. Mythopoesis create myth about the physical appearance, attire, language, and the plot itself. Mythology or Mythopoesis is an ever-evolving genre which leads us to stay connected to the legends of the land while still moving forward with the society. It depends on the author how he/she presents the myth. The character of Ram, serving political ideologies since a long time, has been reserved to a conservative, rigid, masculine individual who stands tall for being an ideal man whereas critics have always questioned him about different norms of his characters.

The Ramayana, as an ancient Indian epic, has not merely stood the test of time; it has metamorphosed through centuries, evolving with the changing tides of society, technology, and ideology. At its core, it narrates the timeless saga of a virtuous king, Lord Rama, and his relentless pursuit to rescue his abducted wife, Sita, from the clutches of a demon king. While the foundational narrative remains constant, the Ramayana's adaptability is the hallmark of its enduring influence. This adaptability is

due to its embodiment of mythological communication, a concept elucidated by the renowned French philosopher Roland Barthes, which transcends the subject matter of the message, emphasizing the manner of conveying it.

The Ramayana, deeply ingrained in Indian Hindu society, serves as a repository of ideals, propagating notions of vigilant masculinity, kingly dharma, and societal order. It perpetuates conservative dogma, underpinning a paradigm of masculine personality. Yet, mythopoesis, as a practice, breathes new life into the characters and plots that often linger in the epic's background, instilling fresh perspectives and narratives. The debate over Ramayana being an history or mythology is an ever-going complicated debate yet with every new adaptation of Ramayana one can deduce that the process of mythopoesis is as old as the Ramayana. Every author deconstructs the Ramayana only to add his or her version to the Ramayana literature and make a new myth of his own.

This paper has traced the evolution of the Ramayana across different phases, from its earliest origins to its contemporary reinterpretations. It has explored the impact of external influences and changing socio-political contexts on the narrative, highlighting key adaptations and interpretations that have left a lasting mark on the epic. Whether through literary masterpieces by authors like R.K. Narayan and Amish Tripathi or cinematic and television adaptations, the Ramayana continues to captivate and inspire audiences. Visual adaptations have adapted and portrayed characters to reflect societal trends, for better or worse, sometimes challenging norms.

In a world, where myth and history often blur, *the Ramayana* exemplifies the dynamic nature of mythopoesis. The characters, the plot, and the morals of the epic have remained ever evolving, a testament to the enduring power of myth to shape and reshape cultural landscapes. As scholars, artists, and audiences engage in a perennial debate regarding the interpretation and interpolation of the narrative, *the Ramayana* continues to be a symbol of both constancy and change, connecting the

past and the present in an unending mythological tapestry. This captivating evolution of the Ramayana in popular culture underscores its significance as a timeless and ever-relevant narrative.

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