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EXPLORING THE JOURNEY OF THE RAMAYANA ACROSS DIFFERENT CULTURES AND LANGUAGES: A CRITICAL STUDY OF A. K. RAMANUJAN'S THREE HUNDRED RAMAYANAS

Oliva Roy¹

¹Research Scholar,
Department of Humanities and Social
Sciences
NIT Durgapur,
West Bengal, India.

ABSTRACT

A. K. Ramanujan's *Three Hundred Rāmāya'as: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation* is a ground-breaking, staggering literary essay, written for a conference, which depicts the journey of the Indian epic, *The Ramayana* throughout the last 2500 years and across different languages, cultures and geographical regions. Ramanujan, here speaks of the numerous versions of the epic, *Ramayana* that existed in the last 2500 years or even more. Although Valmiki's Sanskrit version of the epic is the most influential and oldest, there exist 22 versions of Rama's story in the World. *Ramayana* has been translated into twenty-five languages, and the different versions of the epic contain a rich variety of tales. With every translation, the story of the epic underwent a change. Ramanujan's essay is concerned with different varied and diverse tellings of the epic, *Ramayana*. Ramanujan has focused his attention on the five different versions or tellings of the epic, *Ramayana* and concludes his essay with the remark: 'Now is there a common core to the Rama's stories, except the most skeletal set of relations like that of Rama, his brother, his wife, and the antagonist Ravana who abducts her?' (Ramanujan, 1991). This paper is an attempt to study the different 86 tellings of Rama's story in different languages, cultures and different geographical regions, and explore the universality of the Indian Epic, in the light of Ramanujan's essay, *Three Hundred Rāmāya'as: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation*.

KEYWORDS: Translation, Epic, Diverse, culture, *The Ramayana*.

INTRODUCTION

A. MacDonell rightly stated in the twelve-volume work, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, that 'Perhaps no work of World literature, secular in origin, has ever produced so profound an influence on the life and thought of a people as the *Ramayana*'² (Macdonell, 1916). *Ramayana* is the most popular and beloved and most read epic not only in India, but in the whole South-East Asia.

The legend of Rama has influenced every Indian. The enchanting story of *Ramayana* has become a part of the collective unconsciousness of the people of India. The eternal myth of *Ramayana* has made its presence glaringly felt in every Indian Household. *Ramayana* has made a profound impact on every Indian's minds, and that's why, attempts and efforts are continuously made to represent the legendary story of *Ramayana* in literature, theatre

and various different forms of art. These efforts and attempts have led to the creation of almost three hundred versions of Ramayana. A K Ramanujan's scholarly and intellectual essay, "Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation", begins with the question:

How many Ramayanas? Three hundred? Three thousand? At the end of some Ramayanas, a question is sometimes asked: How many Ramayanas have there been? And there are stories that answer the question. Here is one.

Ramanujan's essay was written for a conference at University of Pittsburgh, on Comparison of Civilizations. The essay sparked and elicited much clamour, debates and controversies since its first appearance. The essay became the centre of controversy, in 2011, when Delhi University decided to remove the essay from their History Syllabus. Here in this essay, Ramanujan depicts the complex history and the journey of the Indian epic Ramayana in the last 2500 years or more, across different races, cultures, religions, geographical places, and different time periods. In this essay, Ramanujan details the changes, the Indian epic, Ramayana undergone each time; it was translated and rendered in different languages and different places, in the last 2500 years. In the last 2500 years, the Epic, Ramayana has been translated into a large number of regional languages, such as Tamil, Telegu, Assamese, Oriya, Bengali, Malayalam, Kannad etc. Even a significant number of Sanskrit versions of the Epic also exist. With each rendition, the actual story of Ramayana got moulded to suit the regional practices and traditions of the people. Ramanujan briefs these renditions in his essay. Although there exists more than three hundred versions of the Ramayana, Ramanujan concentrates his attention on the five important versions of the Ramayana, - the original Sanskrit version, the Jain version, the Tamil version, Kampan, the Thai Ramakhen and the South Indian folk versions of the epic. Ramanujan not just depicts the different telling of the Indian Epic, Ramayana, but, explores the difference that exists between these telling and the original version of the Epic. In this paper, I am going to analyse how these four versions, or in Ramanujan's words, "telling" of the Ramayana, differ from the Sanskrit telling of Valmiki, and how each rendition has added something new to the Sanskrit version of the epic. The present paper is divided into the following sections: Introduction, Objectives, Methodology, Literature Review, Ramanujan's Perspective on the different "telling" of the epic Ramayana, Controversy encircling Ramanujan's Three Hundred Ramayanas, Conclusion.

A NOTE ON RAMANUJAN'S THEORY OF TRANSLATION

A translator is 'an artist on oath'. He has a double allegiance, indeed, several double allegiances. All to familiar with the rigors and pleasures of reading a text and those of making another, caught between the need to express himself and the need to represent another, moving between the two halves of one brain, he has to use both to get close to 'the originals.' He has to let poetry win without allowing scholarship to lose. Then his very compromises may begin to express a certain fidelity, and may suggest what he cannot convey³. (Ramanujan, 2011).

Besides being an impressive diasporic poet, A. K Ramanujan is a noted translator too, who with the help of his expertise and masterful artistry, has recreated the aura, grandeur and pageantry of the ancient Indian texts. Ramanujan translated a number of medieval Tamil and kannad Bhakti poetry, classical poetry, 19th century folktales of South India and a number of Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam, Sanskrit and Kannad texts into English, which earned him universal acclamation as a great scholar. As a poet, primarily as a translator, Ramanujan realized and was well-aware of the responsibility and critical work of a translator. Ramanujan 'argued that ... a translator carries over a particular text from one culture into another, he has to translate the reader from the second culture into the first one'. Ramanujan's translated works bear this mark. He has tried to move the entire text along with the target audience to the realm of another culture, and he thought that this can be achieved only through the notes, introductions, comments and prefaces of the translator. He stated in the preface to Ananthamurthy's novel, Samskara, 'A translator hopes not only to translate a text, but hopes (against all odds) to translate a non-native reader into a native one. The Notes and Afterword in this book are part of that effort'⁴ (Ananthamurthy, 1978).

According to Vinay Dharwadker, "In his published work Ramanujan reflected on translation most often in the context of poetry, and conceived of it as a multidimensional process in which the translator has to deal with his or her material, means, resources and objectives at several levels simultaneously". Dharwadker posits that, according to Ramanujan, the work of a translator is:

to render textual meanings and qualities 'literally', to successfully transpose the syntax, design, structure or form of the original from one language to another, and to achieve a communicative intersection between the two sets of languages and discourses. At the same time, the translation has to attempt to strike a balance between the interests of the

original author and those of the translator (or between faithful representation and faithless appropriation), to fulfil the multiple expectations of its imagined readers, and to construct parallels between the two cultures and the two histories or traditions that it brings together⁵. (Dharwadker, 1994).

In order to meet the expectations of the target readers, Ramanujan always focused his attention on the most accurate, reliable and literal translation of the source text. To achieve this, he advocated a rigorous and time-consuming process of – reading, analysing, drafting, editing and refurbishing, as he stated in the preface to the Poems of Love and War, ‘I began this book of translations fifteen years ago and thought several times that I had finished it . . . I worked on the last drafts in a third-floor office of the Department of English at Carleton College where I sat unsociably day after day agonizing over Tamil particles and English prepositions’. The most difficult stage in this process of translation, as Ramanujan says, is the rendition of the style, structure, syntax and design of the source-text into the second language. For a faithful and accurate rendition of the original text or the source text, Ramanujan focused his attention on the different principles or aspects of poetry, like, the definite order of elements, the use of images and their placement, the use of words, the explicit theme, use of space and punctuation, so on and so forth. In his translated works, Ramanujan has always tried to convey the specific order of elements as was in the original text, shape his version properly just like the source text, arrange the poetic elements in just order, without any alteration or variation, and finally, he tried to make ‘explicit typographical approximations to what [he] thought was the inner form of the poem’.

In the essay “Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation”, Ramanujan has not only elaborated his theory and concept of Translation, but has also commented on the different aspects of ‘three hundred’ translated versions or, ‘tellings’ of Ramayana. Let us now elaborate Ramanujan’s perspective on these ‘tellings’ of the Ramayana, in light of his theory of translation.

RAMANUJAN’S PERSPECTIVE ON THE DIFFERENT “TELLINGS’ OF THE EPIC RAMAYANA

Ramayana is the most read Epic, not only in India, but also in several different parts of this World. In India, the epic has made its way into the Indian culture’s blood-stream. For this reason, the Epic has been translated and retold in a number of languages across South-East Asia. Tulsidas once rightly said – “Ramakatha kai miti jaga nahi”, meaning – “It is impossible to keep count of the ramakathas in this world”. Ramanujan’s essay “Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and

Three Thoughts on Translation” provides a new perspective, a new outlook on these countless versions or “88elling” of the Ramayana. Ramanujan’s essay is about the different 88elling of Ramayana, it raises questions regarding the adaptation of the Ramayana story to be retold in different languages. The age-old tale of Ramayana has been rechanting in myriad ways and using different idioms, in the south-East Asia. Ramanujan’s essay starts with one such version or telling of Ramayana. The telling deals with the last stage of incarnated Rama’s sojourn on this earth. This particular telling or version of Rama’s story makes it poignantly clear to Hanuman, Rama’s trusty henchman, that “There have been as many Ramayanas as there are rings on this platter”. The story suggests that, “for every such Rama there is a Ramayana”. In the last 2500 years, the enchanting story of Rama has been retold in a number of ways, and in myriad forms, like – mask plays, puppet plays, shadows plays, TV-series, popular cinema and also the various literary forms, like – kavya, puranas, story etc. Ramanujan refers to these various forms as “88elling”, not versions or variations of the Ramayana. His reason is “I have come to prefer the word 88elling to the usual terms versions or variants because the latter terms can and typically do imply that there is an invariant, an original Ur-text” (134). This assertion of Ramanujan suggests that in this country of diverse cultures and religions, Ramanujan doesn’t prefer or privilege the Sanskrit version or Ur-text of the epic as superior, and the other versions as inferior. He sees all the versions of the Epic as equally important and significant in representing the age-old legend of Rama.

Ramanujan’s essay focuses on “five 88elling” of the Ramayana – Valmiki’s Ramayana, the Jain version, the Tamil version, Kampan, the Thai Ramakhen and the South Indian folk versions of the epic. After stating his literary aim or objective of writing this scholarly essay, Ramanujan turn to a comparative study of these five “88elling” of the Ramayana. Citing the story of Ahalya, the mythological woman who turns from virtuous to adulterous, which appears in both the Valmiki’s Ramayana as well as in the Kamba Iramavataram, Ramanujan critically analyses the differences that exists in these two texts. By depicting the story of Ahalya that exists in both of the 88elling of the Ramayana, Ramanujan has tried to show the difference between story and discourse, to show how the meaning of a same story gets changed in different historical periods. The very first difference that comes to the notice of Ramanujan is the presence of motifs. In Kamba Iramavataram, Ahalya, seduced by Indra, realizes that she is committing a sin, but instead of repenting, she enjoys the sinful act. Then Indra tries to escape “in the shape of a cat, clearly a folklore motif”. Later on, both of them receive just

punishments for their wrongdoings. Ahalya is turned into a stone, while Indra is cursed to bear a mark of his wrong-doing. These motifs are not there in Valmiki's Ramayana; these are the inclusions of Kampan. According to Ramanujan –

Kampan, here and elsewhere, not only makes full use of his predecessor Valmiki's materials but folds in many regional folk traditions. It is often through him that they then become part of other Ramayanas.

Besides this, in Kamba Iramavataram, the story of Ahalya and her deliverance and liberation from her curse by Rama, has been more dramatically presented with great vividness. Kampan has shown Rama as a 'Tamil hero', a God of fertility who destroys all foes, an epitome of grace, as per the Tamil alvar traditions. While in Valmiki's Ramayana, Rama appears as a god-man with his limited powers, in Kampan's poem, Rama is a God, who is out with the mission of destroying all forms of evil –

Kampan, writing in the twelfth century, composed his poem under the influence of Tamil bhakti. He had for his master Nammalvar (ninth century?), the most eminent of the Sri Vaisnava saints.

Thus, although the two tellings are almost the same in narrating the story of Ahalya, there exist differences in terms of weaving of the tale, its texture, its dramatic representation, its vividness etc. As Ramanujan states –

Part of the aesthetic pleasure in the later poet's telling derives from its artistic use of its predecessor's work, from ringing changes on it. To some extent all later Ramayanas play on the knowledge of previous telling: they are meta-Ramayanas.

In the context of the "Jain Tellings", Ramanujan shows how the stories of Hindu mythology got moulded in Jain Texts to suit their own taste. In Jain Ramayana, King Srenika, with a number of questions regarding Ravana and the other characters of Ramayana, goes to sage Gautama, who can answer his questions regarding the true story of Ramayana and clear his doubts. Sage Gautama tells King Srenika that "I'll tell you what Jain wise men say. Ravana is not a demon, he is not a cannibal and a flesh eater. Wrong-thinking poetasters and fools tell these lies." And here begins the Jain version of Ramayana. The 'Jain Ramayana of Vimalasuri' depicted Ravana as 'salaka-purusa', as a great being. According to Ramanujan, the Jain Ramayana "proceeds to correct its errors and Hindu extravagances" as presented in Valmiki's Ramayana. Vimalasuri, a Jain Ramakatha tradition depicts Ravana as "one of the sixty-three leaders or salakapurusas of the Jain tradition", establishes him as a noble and learned man and "a devotee of Jain masters", misled by a

passion, blinded by love for a woman Sita, and ultimately destroyed by that passion. Vimalasuri portrays Ravana as a tragic figure soliciting sympathy, pity and admiration from the readers. In another version of Jain Ramakatha, Sita has been portrayed as the daughter of Ravana.

Ramanujan focuses his attention on the oral tradition of the Ramayana when he moves to the critical analysis of "South Indian Folk Ramayanas". In the context of the "South Indian Folk Ramayanas", Ramanujan observes that the actual story of Ramayana appears in bits and pieces, not in complete form in various different South Indian Ramakathas. Ramanujan gives us an overview of the south Indian folk Ramayanas, by elaborating a Kannada folk tale. In that particular Kannada tale, sung and narrated by an untouchable bard, details Sita's birth from Ravana's nostril. In Kannada, the word "Sita" means "he sneezed", and that's why Ravana named his child Sita as she took birth from his sneezing. Thus the name "Sita" was given a "Kannada folk etymology", while in the Valmiki's Ramayana, the name carries a Sanskrit etymology. The untouchable bard's tale is divided into a number of separate narrative poems dealing with separate themes, like – Sita's birth, Sita's marriage with Rama, Sita's virginity test, her exile, Lava and Kusa's birth, Sita's descent so on and so forth. In this Kannada folk tale, Ramanujan observes that the actual story of Valmiki's Ramayana has received a new texture and not only that, the story has been narrated from a different perspective, giving emphasis on Sita's birth, her marriage, her abduction, her virginity, her exile and finally her descent into the Mother Earth. Besides the texture, new themes got incorporated in these South-Indian folk tales of Ramayana.

Outside India, there exists a number of tellings of Ramayana, too. In countries like – Tibet, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, Java, Malaysia and Indonesia, there exist a number of different tellings of Ramayana. Here too, Ramanujan focus his attention on one particular telling – Thai Ramakirti. The people and writers of Thailand have tried to reframe and rework the actual story of Valmiki's Ramayana in a number of different forms, since the legendary story of Rama has influenced them greatly (Desai 1980, 63). One such example of their effort is – Thai *Ramakirti*, also known as *Ramakien*. The Thai version or "telling" of Ramayana "opens with an account of the origins of the three kinds of characters in the story, the human, the demonic, and the simian". The story of Ramayana has been represented as a mythical fairy tale in the Thai telling, depicting a story of the struggle between humans and demons. In Thai *Ramakirti*, the actual story of Valmiki's Ramayana has been narrated with a few differences. In Thai *Ramakirti*, Rama has been presented as an incarnation of Shiva. The Thai *Ramakirti* is not a religious text, and, therefore,

much stress and emphasis has been given upon Rama's war with Ravana, their weapons and techniques etc., not on the moral teachings of the epic. Furthermore, Ravana has been depicted as a person of great knowledge and resourcefulness. Ravana's abduction and his passionate love for Sita have been presented as epitome of passionate love and great courage. Thai *Ramakirtis* influenced by the Tamil 90elling of Ramayana, Kamba Iramavataram –

It has been convincingly shown that the eighteenth-century Thai Ramakien owes much to the Tamil epic. For instance, the names of many characters of the Thai work are not Sanskrit names, but clearly Tamil names (for example, *Ṛṣyaśṛṅga* in Sanskrit but *Kalaikkōtu* in Tamil, the latter borrowed in Thai).

By critically analysing the five 90elling of Ramayana, Ramanujan has tried to show a pattern of difference that exists in these texts. Besides, he has also shown us that in translating or transmitting the Ramayana, writers have quite often depended upon other versions or 90elling of the epic, rather than on the original Sanskrit text –

Vālmiki's Hindu and Vimalasuri's Jain texts in India – or the Thai Ramakirti in Southeast Asia – are symbolic translations of each other.

Ramanujan, by critically analysis the five 90elling of Ramayana, asserts that each and every translation or transmission of the Ramayana, consists of three elements – iconic, indexical and symbolic. The iconic translation of a text means word-to-word exact translation of the original text. But the iconic translations are also indexical in the sense that, “the translation is in English idiom and comes equipped with introductions and explanatory footnotes, which inevitably contain twentieth-century attitudes and misprisions.” These translations are also symbolic in the sense that, “they cannot avoid conveying through this translation modern understandings proper to their reading of the text”.

CONTROVERSY ENCIRCLING RAMANUJAN'S THREE HUNDRED RAMAYANAS

Ramanujan's essay *Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation* has created much debate, controversy and clamour recently when Delhi University, a prestigious Indian University decided to drop the text from their History syllabus, in 2011. At that moment, the essay was accused of demeaning Hindu Religion and full of inaccurate facts. The essay was called “blasphemous”, and “malicious, capricious, fallacious and offensive to the beliefs of millions of Hindus”. The accusations are completely wrong. A number of critics raised their voice in defence of the essay. Nilanjana S Ray, a Literary critic, rightly stated in this context, that the

protests may “have been part of the general climate of intolerance and the battle over who had the right to tell the country's history and its myths that was part of the Indian landscape between the 1980s and the 2000s”. Amardeep Singh, a professor at Lehigh University, USA, considers the essay, “essential reading for anyone who wants to know about the complex textual history of the Ramayana”. Chandrashekhar Kambar, renowned Kannada writer said that “The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are texts which have been re-created many times over by several cultures in India and outside. Intolerance shown towards a scholarly study of these versions should be condemned by the entire academic fraternity.”

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have tried to show how Ramanujan, through an analysis of the different 90elling of Ramayana, has elaborated his own theory and concept of translation and has made some significant commentary on the nature of translation and has given us some unique and significant ideas of translation. Ramanujan has showed us, in this essay, that each and every translation of a text contains three important necessary elements, and that there is no such thing as original Ur-text, nor versions or variations of the original text –

Rāmāyaṇa is not merely a set of individual texts, but a genre with a variety of instances.

In the concluding part of the paper, I would like to state that Ramanujan's essay is a scholarly essay that has delved deep into the various levels of translation and transmission of a singular text, and provides us a new perspective on the various 90elling of Ramayana in India and in South-East Asia. Ramayana is not just an epic, rather it's a “genre with a variety of instances”.

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