# Literary Imagination at Work

Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr

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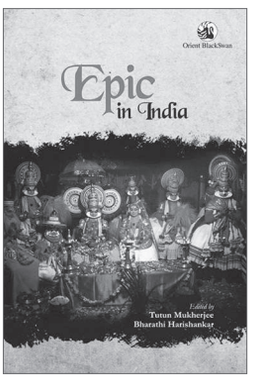
It is always interesting and compelling when there is a contemporary re-reading of older texts and textual traditions because it keeps the connection between the past and present alive and vibrant. It is not necessary to reiterate the truism that in India traditions persist, but instead of remaining unchanged, they constantly change. The text of Valmiki's Ramayana—yes, there is the issue of fixing the critical edition—gets interpreted in innumerable ways. In India, over the centuries, and it will be inaccurate to say that it happens only in India, the writers have used the seed story of the main text and made imaginative changes in the story. The Homeric characters and stories were rewritten in the plays and tales into late antiquity in the Hellenic world.

The essays in this collection are based on a seminar held in 2018 on the epic compositions in India seen from a comparative literature perspective. Harish Trivedi aptly closes his essay, 'The Epic Across Literary Cultures' by quoting the invocatory verse from Kannada poet Kuvempu's *Shri-Ramayana-Darshanam*: 'To Homer, to Virgil, to Dante and Milton/ To Naranappa, to Pampa, to Sage Vyasa/ To elders like Bhasa, Bhavabhuti and Kalidasa/ To Narahari, Tulasidasa and Krittivasa/ To Naranayya, Firdausi, Kamban and Aurobindo/ To the old, to the new, to elders and young, / Without considering the differences in time, space, speech and caste/ To all the art-masters of the world, / Seeing divine greatness, wherever the light is I bow down with folded hands (translated by and cited in Satyanath)'. It sets the tone as it were for the approach to the epic as well, where hierarchies of text need not come in the way.




There is however enough fire and clash of swords. In his essay, 'The Ramayana: Issues and Problems', Mohan Ramanan takes a boldly orthodox stand. He intends to read Valmiki's text as a 'sacred scripture' because he reads it as a 'practicing Hindu'. While acknowledging Sheldon Pollock's 'formidable scholarship' he shows Pollock's reading of the Ramayana as a hegemonic text. Unfortunately, he weakens his strong and sensible view by falling back on the pseudo-scholarship of a Hindutva advocate like Rajiv Malhotra. The position he had articulated in the beginning is a powerful one: 'The dharmic gaze is a pious reading but it is also critical because the dharmic accommodates much diversity and is not monolithic as it is often misunderstood to be.'

The diverse forms the epic tale takes in different languages and literary forms remains the key issue in many of the contributions. Shail Mayaram on the Mahabharata narrative forged by the Mewati Muslims, Sharone K Meeran on the Mappila Ramayanam and how it adapted to the social traditions of the community, and Kriti Nakhare on the Bhil version of the Mahabharata show that the two major traditional epics of what can be called the big tradition or high culture get reflected and refracted in the ethnic and community contexts. While in the Mewati Mahabharata the communities of Islam, Aghora and Nath traditions get intermingled quite unconsciously, there is a self-conscious adaption of the Ramayana story in the Mappila retelling. The many Ramayanas in Assamese then flow over into Khasi, Jaintia and Garo languages in Meghalaya. Each version is different from the other, and the fecund imagination of each linguistic and ethnic version blooms in the telling of the story. It is tempting to be confounded by the rich variety.

What stand apart from these Ramayana- and Mahabharata-oriented versions are the Jain and Buddhist oriented Tamil epics, *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai*. The other distinct feature about these two works is that they portray ordinary folk as the main characters, and the ebb and flow of their fortunes. The tragedy of *Silappadikaram* is overwhelming in its pathos and fearsomeness. Kannagi's cry for justice resounds with a mighty agony: 'Is there no god? Is there no god in this country? Can there be a god in a land where the sword of the king is used for the murder of innocent strangers?

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Is there no god, no god?' Bharathi Harishankar in her essay on *Silappadikaram,* 'Intersections of the Feminine in *Silappadikaram*', shows how the woman protagonists, led by Kannagi as it were, stand out in the epic landscape. This is far more powerful and moving because this is the tribulation of people of flesh and blood, not of heroes and heroines of divine origin. If *Silappadikaram* was Greek in its tragic dimension, *Manimekalai* seems to veer to the other extreme of fantasy on the one hand and disquisition on the other. CT Indra in 'Positioning *Manimekalai* as an a-Vaidiki Epic' deftly opens up the cultural space of the ancient Tamil literary arena. Its concluding canto which is a statement of the Buddhist credo—of a particular school, of the Hinayana variant where the Buddha is the exemplar and not the saviour he became in the Mahayana tradition—shows that the author of *Manimekalai* was open to the Buddhist ideas that had travelled from the north and which the creative writers and thinkers have absorbed even as the Alwars had absorbed the Vedic ideas in their hymns. This is a politically and culturally significant issue that should change the terms of debate about ancient Tamil. And this is a more logical way than what Pollock has suggested. In terms of literary form and content, both the Tamil epics stand apart from any other Sanskrit composition or a Tamil composition impacted by the Sanskritic tradition as in Kamban.

One of the essays towards the end of this collection unintentionally closes the circle as it were by connecting the question raised by Mohan Ramanan about reading Valmiki's Ramayana. Rana Nayar in 'Waris Shah's *Heer:* An Epic or a *Kissa*?' strangely refuses to read Waris Shah's poem as an epic after taking a brief detour through Hegel and Bakhtin, and ends up stating his simplistic position, '…we can say that Waris Shah's *Heer* can only be read as a *kissa*, and not as an epic. It is not merely a question of nomenclature as it might appear to be on the face of it but a far more serious and complex question of ideology and its subtle workings and machinations within the text.' He states the terms of reference of reading an epic while denying the term epic for the text! Conversely, Vivek Sachdeva's 'Shiva Kumar Batalvi's *Loona:* Deconstructing the Feminine' details the modern Punjabi poet's verse-play which shows itself to be a *Kissa* despite the burden of ideology—feminism, modernism and the idea of equality—he embeds in the narrative.

The pleasure of reading literature and discussing it is that it leads to strange bends in the perception of the work, and the intellectual mould of the interpreter/writer and of the text is stretched, moulded, twisted and sometimes even broken. The writers in this volume reveal them all.

**Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr** is a Hyderabad-born, Delhi-based freelance journalist. He is the author of *Rajiv Gandhi to Narendra Modi: Broken Polity, Flickering Reforms* (Sage, 2019) and *The Upanishads: An Introduction* (HarperCollins, 2020).