A Study of the Contemporary Interpretations of the *Ramayana*: Literary Criticism, Magical Realism and the Socio-psychological Impact

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the mythology of *Ramayana* and its relevance in the modern world, exploring the presence and importance of magic realism in both the original and contemporary versions. It analyses the different approaches to literary criticism, including Phenomenological, Structuralist, and Reception theories, and examines the retellings of *Ramayana* by Amish Tripathi and Devdutt Pattanaik. The paper concludes that while Valmiki's *Ramayana* is rich in magic realism, Tripathi's version focuses more on history and politics, while Pattanaik's version balances mythology and philosophy. The Structuralist approach raises questions about the sustainability of individual modern interpretations of mythology in the face of traditional renditions, while Phenomenological and Reception theories support new perspectives and interpretations. Further, the impact of magic realism on the human psyche, and the potential loss of this therapeutic tool if traditional renditions disappear, are also discussed.

Keywords: Contemporary Interpretations of Mythology; Literary Criticism; Magic Realism; *Ramayana*.

Introduction

This research paper aims to explore the mythology of *Ramayana*, and its continued relevance in the modern world. It will also explore the relevance of magic realism in the original and contemporary versions of the mythology. Examination will also be made of the *Ramayana* through the lens of literary theory criticisms of the likes of Phenomenological, Structuralist and the Reception. This paper will attempt to examine the modern

renditions of *Ramayana* by delving into the retellings by Devdutt Pattanaik and Amish Tripathi. Finally, it aims at focussing on the deviations from the original rendition and its psychological impact on the readers.

Definition of Mythology

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a myth is "a traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon." This definition emphasizes the narrative aspect of myths and their function as explanations or justifications for various beliefs, customs and phenomena. Mythology has played a significant role in the cultural and spiritual traditions of societies around the world for thousands of years. It encompasses a wide range of beliefs, stories, and rituals that seek to explain the mysteries of the natural world and the human experience. From the ancient Greek and Roman myths to the indigenous legends of the America, Africa, and Asia, mythology has shaped the way people understand their place in the universe and has provided a framework for their moral and ethical values.

Despite the many advances of the modern world, the enduring appeal of mythology remains evident in the way it continues to influence contemporary popular culture. From retellings of myths in movies and TV shows to the incorporation of mythological themes in music and art, the presence of mythology can be seen in many aspects of modern life.

Relevance of Magic Realism

The term "magic realism" is believed to have originated in the 1920s and 1930s, and was first used to describe a literary style that emerged in Latin America. However, it was not widely used or recognized as a distinct genre until the mid-20th century, when European and North American writers began to adopt elements of the style in their own works. The term was popularized by the critic Franz Roh in his 1925 essay "Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism." According to M. H. Abrams, magic realism is a mode of writing that blends realistic narrative with supernatural or fantastic elements in such a way as to make the supernatural or fantastic seems plausible. He notes that this literary mode often involves the insertion of magical or supernatural events into otherwise realistic settings, and it tends to portray the fluidity of time and the amalgamation of the real and the imaginary.

There is a growing interest in magic realism, as a way to explore the relationship between reality and myth, and to uncover the complexity and ambiguity of cultural traditions. For instance, Payal Nagpal explores how Salman Rushdie uses magic realism to blur the boundaries between reality and myth in his novel, whereas, Karina Eileraas examines how magic realism is used in contemporary mythology to explore issues of identity, tradition, and power. Luis Valdez goes a step further in his book *Myth, Magic, and Farce: Four Multicultural Plays*, where he explores the intersection of magic realism and mythology in four plays that draw on various cultural traditions, including Aztec and Greek mythology, to explore issues of identity, history, and cultural conflict. This paper will examine the relevance of magic realism in one of the greatest Indian mythology of *Ramayana*, and its modern retellings, and its subsequent impact on the human psyche.

A comparative analysis (Valmiki vs Contemporary authors) of the three select incidences from *Ramayana* on the basis of Magic Realism

The first such incident is Sita's birth. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Sita was born from a furrow in the ground that had been ploughed by King Janaka, the ruler of the kingdom of Mithila. According to the story, Janaka was ploughing a field when he discovered a baby girl in the furrow. He took the baby as a gift from the gods and named her Sita, which means "furrow." Sita was raised by Janaka as his daughter and eventually became the wife of Rama, the prince of Ayodhya and the main hero of the *Ramayana*. The story of Sita's birth was described in several versions of the *Ramayana*, including the Valmiki *Ramayana*, the Kamban *Ramayana*, and the Adbhut *Ramayana*. In all of these versions, Sita had been described as being found by King Janaka in a furrow that he had ploughed, and she was then raised as his daughter. The exact wordings of the passage describing Sita's birth may vary depending on the specific version of the *Ramayana* that one reads. Valmiki's *Ramayana*, translated by Ralph T.H. Griffith describes Sita's birth as follows:

A treasure and a pride for aye.
Once, as it chanced, I ploughed the ground,
When sudden, 'neath the share was found
An infant springing from the earth,
Named Sitá from her secret birth.
In strength and grace the maiden grew,
My cherished daughter, fair to view.
I vowed her, of no mortal birth,

Meet prize for noblest hero's worth.
In strength and grace the maiden grew
And many a monarch came to woo.
To all the princely suitors I
Gave, mighty Saint, the same reply:
'I give not thus my daughter, she
Prize of heroic worth shall be.
To Mithilá the suitors pressed
Their power and might to manifest.
To all who came with hearts aglow
I offered S'iva's wondrous bow. (Valmiki 403)

The secrecy and mysterious appearance of Sita depicted by Valmiki 'Named Sitá from her secret birth' adds magic to the entire phenomenon and thus we can associate it to Magic Realism. It is interesting to note that the miraculous birth of Sita from a furrow is rejected by Amish Tripathi, Although, he does conform to the popular narrative that King Janaka found her in a furrow, Tripathi goes a few steps further in tracing how she came to be in the furrow in the first place. In a non-linear narrative, spread across four books, Tripathi provides a reasonable justification of Sita's timely presence in the furrow, without any trace of magic realism or supernatural intervention. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Sita's birth can be seen as an example of magic realism because it involves supernatural elements, such as the divine intervention of the gods. Sita was born from a furrow in the earth that was ploughed by King Janaka, and it was described in a realistic manner, but it was also attributed to the intervention of the gods. This blending of supernatural and realistic elements created a kind of hybrid reality that is characteristic of magic realism.

According to an article in newspaper *Hindustan Times*, dated 19th May, 2017, and titled "This is Sita's Story where Ram is Just a Character", the correspondent writes:

> Tripathi wanted to shake up the normal understanding that we have of Sita, and hopes that we see her in an entirely new light. "Indians don't know Sita. Many of them don't even know that she was adopted by King Janak. It takes tremendous strength for an orphan to rise to the status of a Prime Minister and then to a goddess. The perspective we have of Sita today, is largely influenced by 1980's television serial, which was influenced by the Ramcharit Manas, a 16th century modernisation of the original Valmiki *Ramayana*." (Palat)

Tripathi writes that Sita was the biological daughter of Vedavati – a resident of Kanyakumari, who was worshiped as a child Goddess in her childhood, and her husband was Prithvi. In Tripathi's version, Vedavati and Prithvi were brutally killed when Vedavati had just delivered Sita. According to Tripathi, Sita is the reincarnation of goddess Shakti, who is born to vanquish a powerful demon and restore balance to the world. The new born Sita was left to die in a furrow in the forest, where she was found by King Janaka, and his wife, Queen Sunayana. Sita was adopted by Janaka and brought up as his own daughter, who later grew up to become the Prime Minister of Mithila, Janaka's kingdom, as well as a fierce warrior.

Devdutt Pattanaik conforms with Valmiki's version of *Ramayana* in describing Sita's birth. He does so by consolidating different versions of *Ramayana*. The story of Sita's birth is described differently in various versions of the *Ramayana*, and it is possible that Pattanaik presents his own interpretation of the story in his writings. According to Pattanaik's *The Book of Ram*:

> As part of a farming festival, Janaka, king of Videha, was ploughing a field using a hoe of gold. To his astonishment, he ploughed a girl child out of the earth. This was the gift of the earth goddess to the childless Janaka. Janaka named her Sita and adopted her as his daughter. She therefore became renowned as Maithili, princess of Mithila, as Vaidehi, princess of Videha, and as Janaki, daughter of Janaka. (Pattanaik 38)

Devdutt Pattanaik's interpretation of Sita's birth is also different from Valmiki's. According to Pattanaik, Sita is not born from human parents, but is a manifestation of the Earth itself. Pattanaik's Sita is an embodiment of the earth goddess, Bhudevi, and she had been found by King Janaka while ploughing a field after performing a *yagna*. This version too falls within the ambit of M. H. Abram's definition of magic realism.

The differing versions of Sita's birth are collated in an editorial in *The Times of India*, dated 10th October, 2016, and titled, "Was Sita Ravana's Daughter?" The article says, "Sita means furrow, which itself gives a hint of her birth story. It is believed that she was found while somebody was tilling the fields" (2016). One of the versions mentioned in the aforementioned article is very similar to Tripathi's rendering of Sita's birth. According to the article:

> Some versions of the *Ramayana* suggest that Sita was a reincarnation of Vedavati. Ravana tried to molest Vedavati and her chastity was sullied beyond Ravana's redemption when she was performing penance to become consort of Vishnu. Vedavati immolated herself on a pyre to escape Ravana's lust, vowing to return in another age and be the cause of Ravana's destruction. She was duly reborn as Sita. (TNN)

These differing versions lend credibility to Tripathi's deviation from the popular folklore by Valmiki.

The second incident to be analysed is the description of the Monkey God, Lord Hanuman. In the Valmiki *Ramayana*, Hanuman is described as a Vanara, which is often translated to mean "monkey." He is the son of Vayu, the god of wind, and Anjana, a female Vanara. However, it is important to note that the word "Vanara" is sometimes translated to mean "ape" or "forest dweller" in some contexts, rather than "monkey." Hanuman is described as a powerful and loyal devotee of Lord Rama. He was born with superhuman strength and the ability to fly. Hanuman was raised by the sage Vriasngi, and received training in various spiritual and martial arts.

In the story, Hanuman is portrayed as having monkey-like features, such as long arms, a tail, and the ability to climb trees, but he also possesses divine power and abilities of a god, he is much more than just monkey or ape-like creature. He is a great warrior, who can fly and change his size. He is also depicted as having a human-like intelligence and the ability to speak.

> The great monkey Hanumant,
> of the reddish colour of gold,
> has his jaw broken,
> Indras having struck him with his
> thunderbolt and caused him to fall upon a mountain,
> because, while yet a child, he threw himself off a
> mountain into the air in order to arrest the course of the
> sun, whose rays had no effect upon him. (The cloud
> rises from the mountain and hides the sun, which is
> unable of itself to disperse it; the tempest comes, and
> brings flashes of lightning and thunder-bolts, which tear
> the cloud in pieces.) (Valmiki 2636-37)

Hanuman in Valmiki's *Ramayana* falls within the purview of the definition

of magic realism by Abrams due to his supernatural abilities and traits. Hanuman's ability to change his size, fly, and lift heavy objects like mountains as depicted in Valmiki's *Ramayana* can be seen as an example of the use of magical elements in an otherwise realistic narrative, which is a hallmark of magic realism.

On the other hand, in Amish Tripathi's "Ram Chandra" series, Hanuman is described as a Vanara. However, it is important to note that in Tripathi's retelling of the *Ramayana*, the Vanaras are not just mere monkeys, but are actually a distinct race in themselves, that have unique abilities, culture and spiritual practices. They possess great physical and intellectual abilities and have their own society. They are not just the ordinary monkeys we find in nature. Except for the origin, the distinct description of Hanuman in Tripathi's retelling has a resemblance to the Valmiki *Ramayana*.

Tripathi has portrayed Hanumana as one of the main characters and plays an important role in Rama's quest to rescue his wife Sita from the demon king Ravana. In Tripathi's retelling of the *Ramayana*, Hanuman is depicted as a skilled warrior, who is trained in various spiritual and martial arts, he is a formidable fighter and strategist and is known for his unparalleled strength and intelligence. He is also said to be one of the most powerful Vanaras ever to be born. In addition to his warrior skills, Tripathi's Hanuman is also portrayed as a deeply spiritual and devout character, who is completely dedicated to Rama and his mission. He is also depicted as a wise and humble figure, who serves Rama selflessly and without any expectation of reward.

As far as the physical description of Hanuman is concerned, in Amish Tripathi's "Ram Chandra" series, he is described as having a powerful and muscular build, with long arms and a tail, characteristics commonly associated with the Vanara. He is also said to be a formidable warrior in battle. He is described as having a unique appearance, with a face that has sharp features and an intense look, with a strong jawline, broad forehead, and sharp eyes. He has long, thick and dark hair, that is typically tied in a bun, and a thick, bushy moustache. He is also described as having a charismatic personality, with a deep and commanding voice. He is a powerful figure, both physically and spiritually, which makes him a formidable character in the series. In his first proper description of Lord Hanuman in the first book of the series, titled *Scion of Ikshvaku*, Tripathi writes:

> The most intriguing member of this motley group was its leader, clearly a Naga. He too was fair-skinned, just like the Parihans.

But in every other respect, he stood apart from them. He was not dressed like them. He was, in fact, dressed like an Indian: in a dhoti and angvastram, both dyed saffron. An outgrowth jutted out from his lower back, almost like a tail. It flapped in constant rhythm, as though it had a mind of its own. The hirsute Naga leader of the Parihans was very tall. His massive build and sturdy musculature gave him an awe-inspiring presence and a godly aura. He could probably break an unfortunate's back with his bare hands. Unlike most Nagas, he did not cover his face with a mask or his body with a hooded robe. [...] His nose was flat, pressed against his face. His beard and facial hair surrounded the periphery of his face, encircling it with neat precision. Strangely though, the area above and below his mouth was silken smooth and hairless; it had a puffed appearance and was light pink in colour. His lips were a thin, barely noticeable line. Thick eyebrows drew a sharp curve above captivating eyes that radiated intelligence and a meditative calm; they also held a promise of brutal violence, if required. His furrowed brow gave him a naturally intellectual air. It almost seemed like the Almighty had taken the face of a monkey and placed it on a man's head. [Tripathi 215]

It is interesting to note that Tripathi has completely rejected the magic realism that can be associated with Hanuman, and has described him in a very realistic manner. Devdutt Pattanaik's description of Hanuman, on the other hand, is a mixture of Tripathi's and Valmiki's. In Pattanaik's retelling of the *Ramayana*, Hanuman is presented as a powerful, intelligent and fiercely loyal devotee of Lord Rama. He is described as the chief of the Vanaras, a tribe of monkey-like beings who are known for their intelligence and physical strength. He is considered as one of the most important characters in the story and plays a key role in the rescue of Sita from the demon king, Ravana.

Pattanaik describes Hanuman as a complex and multi-faceted character. He is a skilled warrior and strategist, who can change his size and shape at will, and has the power of flight. He is also depicted as deeply spiritual, and is said to have a deep understanding of the Vedas, Upanishads, and other spiritual texts. He also has the ability to access the spiritual realm of the gods, which makes him very powerful. In Pattanaik's retelling, Hanuman is also portrayed as a humble and wise figure who always puts the needs of others above his own. He is deeply devoted to Rama and is always willing to put himself in danger to serve and protect Rama and his mission.

The word for monkey in the *Ramayana*, Vanara, is said to be derived from 'vana' meaning forest and 'nara' meaning man. Many have therefore argued that the monkeys referred to in the *Ramayana* are not actually monkeys but forest tribes who either worshipped monkeys or had monkeys as their symbols or behaved like monkeys. [...] Of all the monkeys, Ram is drawn to one in particular, one who though an animal demonstrates better behaviour than the best of men. That monkey is Hanuman. Ram first encounters Hanuman in the forest when he enters Kishkindha in search of Sugriva and is suspected of being Vali's spy. [...] Hanuman is no ordinary monkey. He is the son of Vayu, the wind god who could fly anywhere he wished. As a child he knew no fear, much to the exasperation of the other gods. [Pattanaik 63-64]

It is important to note that all three authors, Valmiki, Amish Tripathi, and Devdutt Pattanaik, present Hanuman as a Vanara and a devotee of Lord Rama, but with slightly different emphasis on his physical and mental attributes. Valmiki focuses on Hanuman as a wise and humble servant of Rama, who is a source of knowledge, strength, and inspiration. He is a loyal and selfless devotee who will go to any lengths to serve his lord, including crossing an ocean and fighting a demon army. Tripathi focuses on his warrior skills and abilities. In his retelling, Hanuman is a master warrior who uses his strength, agility, and intelligence to protect and serve Lord Rama. In Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Book of Ram*, Hanuman is depicted as a character with spiritual and supernatural abilities. He is a powerful and knowledgeable being who can communicate with the gods and navigate the realms of the divine. Therefore, it can be concluded that while all three authors acknowledge Hanuman as a Vanara and devotee of Lord Rama, they each emphasize different aspects of his character and abilities, which reflects their individual interpretations and retellings of the *Ramayana*.

The third incident to be compared in this research paper is the construction of the bridge between India and Lanka. In the Valmiki *Ramayana*, the bridge between India and Lanka is described as being built on the instructions of the god Nala, and it is said to have been constructed using the guidance and power of the god Rama himself. According to the Valmiki *Ramayana*, Rama imbued the bridge with his divine energy, which enabled the bridge to float on the ocean.

Additionally, the *Ramayana* states that the bridge was made with the help of Nala, who was said to be an expert in building and engineering,

with knowledge of materials and construction methods. He was able to construct a bridge that was strong enough to withstand the currents and waves of the ocean, and it was said to be stable enough for the army of Rama to cross it and reach Lanka. It's not specified in the *Ramayana* if the bridge was made to float on top of the ocean or if it was anchored to the ocean bed. But it is believed that the bridge must have been able to withstand the currents and waves of the ocean and was stable enough for the army to cross it safely.

> Up sprang the Vánars from their rest,
> The mandate of the king obeyed
> And sought the forest's mighty shade.
> Unrooted trees to earth they threw,
> And to the sea the timber drew.
> The stately palm was bowed and bent,
> As'okas from the ground were rent,
> And towering Sáls and light bamboos,
> And trees with flowers of varied hues,
> With loveliest creepers wreathed and crowned,
> Shook, reeled, and fell upon the ground.
> With mighty engines piles of stone
> And seated hills were overthrown:
> Unprisoned waters sprang on high,
> In rain descending from the sky:
> And ocean with a roar and swell
> Heaved wildly when the mountains fell.
> Then the great bridge of wondrous strength
> Was built, a hundred leagues in length.
> Rocks huge as autumn clouds bound fast
> With cordage from the shore were cast,
> And fragments of each riven hill,
> And trees whose flowers adorned them still.
> Wild was the tumult, loud the din
> As ponderous rocks went thundering in.
> Ere set of sun, so toiled each crew,
> Ten leagues and four the structure grew;
> The labours of the second day
> Gave twenty more of ready way,
> And on the fifth, when sank the sun,
> The whole stupendous work was done.
> O'er the broad way the Vánars sped,
> Nor swayed it with their countless tread.

Exultant on the ocean strand
Vibhíshan stood, and, mace in hand,
Longed eager for the onward way,
And chafed impatient at delay.
Then thus to Ráma trained and tried In battle
King Sugríva cried: 'Come, Hanumán's broad back ascend;
Let Angad help to Lakshman lend.
These high above the sea shall bear
Their burthen through the ways of air.'
So, with Sugríva, borne o'erhead
Ikshváku's sons the legions led.
Behind, the Vánar hosts pursued
Their march in endless multitude.
Some skimmed the surface of the wave,
To some the air a passage gave.
Amid their ceaseless roar the sound
Of Ocean's fearful voice was drowned,
As o'er the bridge by Nala planned
They hastened on to Lanká's strand,
Where, by the pleasant brooks, mid trees
Loaded with fruit, they took their ease (Valmiki 2227-28)

This bridge to Lanka, built by the Vanaras, with advice from Nala, exhibits the element of the fantastic and the inexplicable, which is a key characteristic of magic realism according to Abrams' definition. The bridge is described as being built in just five days, spanning a distance of hundreds of miles, and defying the laws of physics and engineering, creating an atmosphere of the surreal and magical. In Amish Tripathi's Ramchandra series, he is seen taking a leeway in relating his interpretations with that of Valmiki's original writings. According to Valmiki, the bridge was designed by Nala, an architect. However, Tripathi makes Shatrughan, the step brother of Rama, design the bridge. Tripathi establishes at a very early stage of the narrative that Shatrughan's Gurukul name, as given by his Guru, Guru Vashishtha, is Nalatardak, shortened to Nala. He is portrayed as the studious brother, who is brilliant in all domains of knowledge. It is his genius that designs the bridge connecting India and Lanka. Excerpts of the description of the bridge from Tripathi's *War of Lanka*, the final book of the Ram Chandra series is quoted below:

Shatrughan explained. 'To build this bridge, we need wood that sinks in water and stone that floats on water. Lots and lots of such wood and stone.' Shatrughan had now left everyone even more

befuddled. Including Vashishtha.

'Let me explain,' said Shatrughan. 'Please do!' said Bharat, grinning delightedly. [...]

'The wood of the ebony tree,' said Shatrughan. 'It's called kupilu in old Sanskrit.'

Vashishtha rocked back, holding his head, his mouth opens with awe at the sheer audacity of innovation. He understood it now. [...] Vashishtha laughed and gestured for Shatrughan to continue. 'Carry on, wise Nalatardak,' he said, calling him by his gurukul name.

Shatrughan resumed, 'So, ebony is one of the hardest woods in the world. It is native to this region of south India and Lanka. The strangest thing about it is that it is stronger when it is wet.' [...] The wooden logs will be the foundation of the bridge. If they erode, the bridge will not last for very long. But since the sea floor is not more than six to seven feet deep in this region, most of the water here is fresh water. The logs will not erode and the bridge will stand strong for a long time.' [...]

'So, what are you saying?' asked Lakshman. 'That this bridge will last for a year?'

Shatrughan leaned forward. 'It's my bridge, Lakshman. It will last for at least one thousand years. If not more.'

'No bridge can last that long, Shatrughan!' said Bharat. 'You know I love you and respect your intelligence, but this is stretching it.'

'It's not,' said Vashishtha. 'That is his genius. The way he is designing it, or at least the way I think he is designing it, it will become almost like a natural feature. It will last a really, really long time.' [...]

'There is a lot of sand in the area. So much that both high tide and low tide move it in from the sandbanks. Since this bridge, with its log foundation, will be the strongest structure in the vicinity, wet sand will naturally collect around it with the tidal movements. It will make the foundations stronger and stronger.'

'Brilliant!' said Ram. 'You intend to use the forces of nature to

reinforce the bridge.'

'Thanks, Dada. There's more, though. We will place small stones atop the wooden foundation, which will serve as a secondary base and help keep the logs below in place.' [...]

'My main question has still not been answered, though,' said Vashishtha.

'The floating stones,' said Shatrughan, smiling.

'Yes, the floating stones. Why? Why not just use normal rocks?' Lakshman cut in. 'And even more importantly, where will we find these floating stones?'

'We'll find them right here,' answered Shatrughan. 'The floating rocks are Platygyra coral stone.' [...] 'Coral stones are very light. Very easy to carve and flatten. And yet, they have tremendous load-bearing strength. We can even construct small buildings with them. They are perfect architectural material. And they abound in this region. We will use Platygyra coral stone for the top layer, and bind it with wet sand. On which our army will march.' [Tripathi 163-170]

With such a detailed description, readers would understand the scientific brilliance of the man-made bridge that appears quite natural. One can notice that although Tripathi has stayed true to the descriptions of the bridge, as far as the orientation, length and breadth of it is concerned when compared to Valmiki's writing, he has taken his own sweet imagination to another level with the detailed scientific explanation of how a man-made structure of such massive proportion be constructed and survive for such a long time. This explanation is totally devoid of any distinctive feature of magic realism. Lastly, Pattanaik's description of the bridge is just a discreet description of an incident without any details, barring one. Pattanaik writes:

Having located Sita in Lanka, Sugriva ordered that an army be raised to rescue her. 'But how will we get to Lanka which is an island in the middle of the sea? Not all of us are like Hanuman, capable of flying so far,' wondered the monkeys. On reaching the southern shore, Ram raised his bow and threatened the sea with a deadly arrow if it did not make way for his army. Varun, god of the sea, appeared before Ram and begged him not to release

the arrow. 'Build a bridge instead with stones. And I will ensure that all sea creatures keep your stones afloat,' he said. Directed by Hanuman, all the monkeys collected rocks to build the bridge to Lanka. On each rock Hanuman engraved the name of Ram so that the god of the sea could identify the rocks easily and keep them afloat. [Pattanaik 70]

Through the lens of Phenomenological Theory

It is common for myths and mythological stories to be set in a specific time period or to be told in a particular language, but some scholars argue that the specific time and language in which a myth is set or told is ultimately irrelevant to the meaning and significance of the myth. This is known as the Phenomenological theory of irrelevance of time and language in mythology. American hermeneutist E.D. Hirsch Jr, in his work titled *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), and German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his work on phenomenology have discussed interpretations of mythology in contemporary times. According to them, the enduring and universal themes that are present in myths, such as the struggle between good and evil, the importance of family and community, and the search for meaning and purpose, are what give myths their enduring power and significance. These themes are not bound by time or language and can be understood and appreciated by people of different cultures and eras. So, from the Phenomenological perspective, Amish Tripathi's re-writing of *Ramayana* has instilled rejuvenation into the story of *Ramayana* which has made it endearing to the general populace.

Through the lens of Structuralist Theory

Vladimir Propp was a Russian folklorist and Structuralist who is best known for his work on the structure of Russian folktales. In his book Morphology of the Folktale, Propp identified 31 distinct functions that occur in the structure of many folktales. These functions describe the actions of the characters in the story and the events that take place. Propp's work on the structure of folktales has had a significant impact on the study of folklore and mythology, and his ideas have influenced the work of other scholars in the field. This paper will first establish *Ramayana* as a mythological narrative by tracing the 31 pointers as identified by Propp in the general structure of *Ramayana*. According to Propp, the 31 pointers are as follows:

1.   The hero is one of the members of a society (Rama, the prince of

Ayodhya)

2.   The hero is not born as a hero, but becomes one (Rama is not initially seen as a hero, but becomes one through his actions)

3.   The hero is often the victim of a plot (Rama is exiled from Ayodhya and his wife is abducted)

4.   The hero leaves home (Rama is exiled from Ayodhya and goes into the forest)

5.   The hero has a helper or helpers (Rama is aided by his brother Lakshmana and the monkey-god Hanuman)

6.   The hero and the donor are separated by a magic threshold (Rama must cross several physical and metaphorical thresholds in his journey, the significant one being crossing the sea to Lanka)

7.   The hero and the princess are united (Rama is reunited with his wife Sita)

8.   The hero and the villain engage in combat (Rama fights the demon king Ravana to rescue Sita)

9.   The hero is branded (Rama is given the title "Maryada Purushottama," meaning the "perfect man")

10.   The hero is married (Rama is married to Sita)

11.   The hero is transfigured (Rama is seen as a divine hero and an avatar of the god Vishnu)

12.   The hero is punished (Rama is falsely accused of wrongdoing and must prove his innocence)

13.   The hero is resurrected (Rama is not literally resurrected, but his honor is restored, as he returns to Ayodhya and establishes Ram Rajya, literally, the kingdom of Rama.)

14.   The hero is recognized (Rama is recognized as the rightful king of Ayodhya)

15.   The hero is the object of a search (Rama is searched for by his subjects when he is in exile)

16.   The hero is a savior (Rama saves Sita and the kingdom of Ayodhya from the demon king Ravana. In this journey, he is seen acting as a savior to several minor characters as well.)

17.   The hero performs miraculous deeds (Rama performs several miraculous deeds, including defeating the demon king and building a bridge to Lanka. He is also known to simply touch a stone and release Ahalya of a curse)

18.   The hero fights with a dragon or serpent (Rama fights with the demon king, who is sometimes depicted with serpentine characteristics. One such instance is when Hanuman first enters Lanka in search of Sita. He sees Ravana's palace and describes Ravana as having a body covered in black robes and ornaments, with eyes resembling the hood of a serpent. Additionally, when Ravana approaches Sita in the guise of a mendicant and she realizes his true identity, she describes him as having ten heads and twenty arms, with a body that resembles a serpent.)

19.   The hero has a wound (Rama is wounded in his battle with Ravana. He is also wounded psychologically, as he has to banish his own wife, Sita, from the kingdom, due to his stringent adherence to maryada, meaning principles.)

20.   The hero is abandoned (In *Ramayana*, it is a metaphorical abandonment, as he is sent into exile for fourteen years)

21.   The hero is trapped (Rama is trapped in the illusion created by the demon Maricha. He is also trapped in the concept of Maryada)

22.   The hero is put to sleep (Rama is put to sleep by the demon Ahiravana)

23.   The hero is awakened (Rama is awakened by Hanuman)

24.   The hero is guided by a wise man (Rama is guided by the sage Vishwamitra)

25.   The hero is tested (Rama is tested by various challenges and obstacles in his journey. Some notable ones are, his exile, and crossing the sea to Lanka)

26.   The hero is pursued (Rama is pursued by the demon king and his army)

27.   The hero is transformed (Rama is transformed into a divine hero through his deeds)

28.   The hero is punished (When Rama is a young boy, he breaks the bow of Lord Shiva while trying to string it. This angers the sage Vishwamitra, who had brought Rama to the location to perform a sacrifice. Rama is forced to do penance to atone for his mistake)

29.   The hero is sacrificed (Rama is not literally sacrificed, but he makes great sacrifices in his journey, for instance, he had to sacrifice his wife and family to meet the demand of the people of his kingdom.)

30.   The hero is resurrected (Rama's exile and abdication of the throne had taken him away from the honour of rightfully enjoying the throne. Fourteen years later when he came back to his kingdom to enjoy his rightful ownership of the kingdom, he was resurrected in a way with this return to the human society)

31.   The hero ascends to the sky (*Ramayana* is established as a mythology in the human psyche. Rama's status is elevated to that of the king, and he establishes Ramrajya, literally, the kingdom of Rama.)

Amish Tripathi's Ram Chandra series is a modern retelling of the ancient Indian epic the *Ramayana*, which can be considered to be a work of mythology, based on Propp's 31 pointers. While Tripathi's series deviates in many ways such as the form and structure, it can still be considered a modern retelling of a mythological story. The plot itself would likely qualify as mythology according to Propp's pointers, as it contains many of the elements that Propp identified as characteristic of folktales, including a hero, a villain, and a quest.

Like Amish Tripathi's Ram Chandra series, Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Book of Ram* is also a modern retelling of the ancient Indian epic The *Ramayana*. Like Tripathi, Pattanaik too deviates with respect to the form and structure. He also adds bits and pieces from different versions and adaptations of *Ramayana*. Nonetheless, the plot stays true to the original rendition by Valmiki, and therefore qualifies as a work of mythology according to Propp's 31 pointers.

French Structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss considered various myths as variations of a fixed number of themes. He believed that un-

derneath the large number of different myths, lay certain universal standard structures, and application of any reduction process to the myths will bring it down to those very standard structures. He used the analogy of sound bites in language popularly known as phonemes which can be organized in a certain way to create some meaning. He opined mythemes in a similar way are unitary structures which when organized in different ways can create different myths. Strauss felt these mythemes are created by universal human consciousness and cannot be credited to any individual consciousness. The development of mythemes is organic in nature to the universal human consciousness with no conscious interference from any one human. Thus Structuralism removes the individual from the centre of all attention, associated with the source and end, of all meaning. Accordingly, the scientific approach towards myths with the logical base of mythemes emphasized the importance of its partly objective "collective existence" and downgraded the whimsical individual thoughts, which can at best be a mere "function" of the collective consciousness. (1996, 90-91)

Through the lens of Reception Theory

In modern times, the study of mythology has taken on a new importance as a means of understanding the past and the cultural influences that continue to shape the present. From literature and art to psychology and anthropology, the study of mythology has wide-ranging applications and provides valuable insight into the human condition.

Reception theory is a multidisciplinary field that has its roots in literary studies, but has been developed and expanded upon by scholars in fields such as philosophy, cultural studies, and communication studies. The earliest formulation of Reception theory can be traced to the German literary critic Hans Robert Jauss, who in the 1970s developed the concept of "horizon of expectation" in his book *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, to describe how readers' expectations and experiences shape their interpretation of a text. Jauss's work laid the foundation for Reception theory in literary studies, and his ideas have been further developed by other literary scholars such as Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish.

In philosophy, the reception of a text has been studied by Gadamer and his hermeneutic approach, who emphasized the role of the reader's own background and experience in shaping their understanding of a text. In cultural studies, Reception theory has been used to study how texts are received and understood by different audiences, and how the meanings

of texts are shaped by the cultural and historical context in which they are created and consumed. The scholars in this field, like Stuart Hall, have focused on the role of power and ideology in shaping the reception of texts.

Reception theory is a framework for understanding how readers and audiences interact with texts, including retellings of classical myths. According to Reception theory, the meaning of a text is not fixed or determined solely by the author, but is instead shaped by the reader or audience's experience and interpretation of the text. (1996, 64-78) In the context of retellings of classical mythology, this means that the deviations from the original myths can be seen as the result of the author's or re-teller's own interpretation of the myth and their intentions for the audience. For example, a modern retelling of a classical myth might emphasize certain themes or characters that the original myth did not, or it might change certain elements of the story to make it more relevant to a modern audience.

Additionally, Reception Theory also suggests that readers and audiences themselves play a crucial role in shaping the meaning of a text. The cultural, social, and historical context in which a text is received can influence how readers and audiences interpret and understand it. For example, a retelling of a classical myth that is aimed at a contemporary Western audience might be received differently than the same retelling aimed at an audience in India. In this way, Reception Theory helps explain the deviations in retellings of classical myths by emphasizing the role of interpretation, authorial intent, and audience reception in shaping the meaning of the text.

Reception theory can be applied to the versions of the *Ramayana* by Valmiki, Amish Tripathi, and Devdutt Pattanaik to understand how the meaning and interpretation of the original myth has been shaped by the authors' intentions, the cultural and historical context in which the texts were created, and the audiences for whom they were intended. Valmiki's *Ramayana*, which is considered to be the original and oldest version of the story, is likely to have been composed in an oral tradition, it is likely that it evolved over time and may have been shaped by the different audiences and contexts in which it was performed. The original version of the *Ramayana* was likely intended for a Hindu audience in ancient India and its themes and messages would have resonated with them.

Amish Tripathi's "Ram Chandra" series is a modern retelling of the *Ramayana* that is written for a contemporary audience. This retelling emphasizes certain themes and characters that the original *Ramayana* does not

and also changes certain elements of the story to make it more relevant to a modern audience. Tripathi's retelling is aimed at a wider, global audience and the author has stated that the intention of the series is to make the story accessible to a wider audience, rather than just the ones who are familiar with Indian mythology.

Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Book of Ram* is another modern retelling of the *Ramayana* that is written for a contemporary audience. Pattanaik's retelling is also aimed at a wider, global audience, with the author's intention being to look at the story from a different angle, analysing the story's different interpretations, and its social and cultural significance.

In this way, Reception theory helps us understand how the meanings and interpretations of the *Ramayana* have been shaped by the authors' intentions, the cultural and historical context in which the texts were created, and the audiences for whom they were intended. The deviations and variations in these retellings of the *Ramayana* are the result of the authors' interpretation of the myth and their intentions for their respective audiences.

Through the lens of Psychology and Religion

The Latin meaning of myth is "handing over the narration from one generation to another generation". *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (Vol. XI) describes myths as tales of the supernatural world which share the characteristics of the religious complex.

Mythologies in India are closely knitted to the sense of divinity and supernatural power of the Hindu religion and so in turn a dependence on the powers of the archetypical mythological characters become the objects of worship for the dedicated devotees.

Famous Indologists such as Max Mullar, J. J. Mayer and Bergaigna found strong Hindu cultural associations when they studied the Puranas. Later, famous psychologists such as Jung, Zimmer and Coomaraswami did research on the Hindu myths and concluded that as any other myth, Hindu myths also described a mysterious world, mostly a world of imagination, which covered all aspects of human psychology.

The Indian mythologies depict a world of ethical consciousness rooted in the nature's own laws wherein morality becomes more of a compulsion than a choice. Vedic mythology has not undergone any kind of radical

metamorphosis till date, excepting for the very recent interpretations, because probably "collective memory demanded of it as an indispensable archetype." (Balodhi 1)

> As time passed, the revival of old Vedic thoughts took place in the topography of Hindu mythology. The gods personified in the Vedic age turned out to be moral and ethical guidelines of human beings and in this process, certain new gods emerged and certain old ones dissolved. In this emergence and dissolution of gods, 3 gods emerged on the horizon of Indian scene and they still dominate the Hindu mythological picture. They are: 'Brahma' - the creator, 'Vishnu' - the protector and 'Shiva' - the destroyer. 'Vishnu' in his role of protector is depicted of taking many 'Avataras' or incarnations. these 'Avataras' are playful acts undertaken by 'Vishnu' in the spirit of 'Leela' or 'Maya' in order to save mankind from evil forces from time to time. 'Rama' and 'Krishna' - two 'Avataras' of 'Vishnu' still hold good for their ideological, moral, social and spiritual values. *Ramayana* and Mahabharata two epics still guide the Hindu behavioural pattern. One of the distinct characteristics of Puranic mythology is the fact that gods are not conceptualized as being something divine or mysterious. They are rather depicted as mortals though above anger, malice, boastfulness, jealousy and other temptations. (Balodhi 3)

Having taken into consideration the fact that Indian mythology is highly revered by the Hindus of India, they have been extensively used in Psychotherapy as a mediator between the therapist and the patient. The patients easily identify with mythological situations and characters and consider them as comfortable media to express their innermost conflicts and desires, which are otherwise difficult to express categorically. The therapists in turn find it easier to transplant model behavioural patterns and values from mythology in the patient's sub conscious mind. "Schizophrenics and manics in India, are reported to have their link with these mythological figures." (Balodhi 3)

It had been concluded by many a researcher from the field of Psychiatry that Hindu myths should get incorporated for "understanding the aetiology and management of mental disorder of Hindu patients." (Balodhi 3) Thus the psychological interpretations of mythology have become an inherent component of psycho-analysis and therapy in India.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Valmiki's *Ramayana* is replete with instances of magic realism, from the miraculous birth of Sita to the supernatural powers of Hanuman and then of course the construction of the bridge to Lanka from the main Indian land mass. On the other hand, Tripathi's retelling largely avoids magic realism, focusing more on the historical and political dimensions of the story. Pattanaik's version, while not as prominently as Valmiki's, still incorporates elements of magic and mythology, balancing them with historical and philosophical dimensions. Thus, while all three versions share the same core narrative, the distinctions are on the basis of magic realism, supernatural, and the interpenetration of the real and the imaginary.

The Structuralist approach towards mythology finds similarities in thought and approach to the Psychological study of Indian mythology by such reputed psychologists / psychiatrists as Carl Jung. In India, mythology has always influenced the religious, cultural, social and political life of an individual. Since the human mind always have the tendency to think in terms of archetypes, which is deeply buried in the collective consciousness, Indian mythological narratives had always had powerful impact on the Indian minds. Mythologies like *Ramayana* are only projections of such archetypes.

When we apply Phenomenological theory and Reception theory to Amish Tripathi and Devdutt Pattnaik's re-creation or a fresh outlook towards Indian mythology, we can conclude that it definitely follows the theories to perfection. Going by the theories themselves, there seem to be no problem in subjecting mythological stories to interpretations, according to the varied contextual backgrounds in relevance to time and individuals. In fact, it already gives millions of youngsters a motivation to revisit Indian mythology with a scientific and more realistic perspective. But when we see it from the Structuralist point of view, there are certain questions which arise. According to the Structuralist view point, the whimsical individual interpretations or derivatives of mythologies that the society witnesses might not get eternally sustained and the original renditions following the fixed pattern of mythemes will eventually take over, and make the new interpretations on the lines of scientific, mundane derivatives, a matter to be entertained temporarily but discarded permanently. We need to wait and watch whether the phenomenon described by the Structuralist evolve or dissolve. If it evolves, the psychiatric process of healing with Indian mythology will not be disturbed, as the traditional rendition sustains. It

is well documented that Indian psychiatrists had been working for a long time with magic realism, existent in the traditional Indian mythology. It is the magic in the mythologies which allowed psychiatric patients safe refuges for hope, belief and healing. But in case if the traditional rendition dissolves with time, the psychiatrists will be troubled as they are going to lose out on a major therapeutic tool used to deal with serious mental disorders such as schizophrenia.

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