

Bhakti as Semiotic Affect in Folk and Literary Versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

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This study uses semiotics to study the ways *bhakti* is expressed in folk Ramkatha or Ramlila performance and in literary texts of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. More specifically it compares the *Brahmanic* Vedic with the *bhakti* renditions. *Bhakti*, with its emphasis on devotional and mutual relationships rather than hierarchical dominance, emerged in South India with the poetry of the Alvars and became a major reform movement in North India. Regional and folk versions of the Rama story show the influence in the recasting of scenes and in the language itself. In the epic's telling of Vishnu's 7th re-incarnation as Rama and Lakshmi's (or also Devi's) reincarnation as Sita, the narrative episodes, composed of conflict and opposition, strive toward a harmony and reconciliation of human relationships on a higher level. I suggest that the brotherly relations, gender relations, the human-animal relationships, and especially the God-human relations are differently read in brahmanic and folk versions. For example, in Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* the Lord Shiva brings reconciliation when he forgives the transgression against ritualistic worship of his shrine. Another clear example is the controversial episode in which Rama saves Ahalya, the most beautiful woman, from her husband's transformation of her into a stone (or invisibility) for her adultery with Indra. Magical aspects functional in achieving *bhakti* resolutions to conflict will also be compared. In *Other Asias*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2008) has noted the deconstructive parabasis for brahmanic Hinduism in affective *bhakti*. She furthermore notes that the practice of *bhakti* opens up space for the expression of the sub-altern. The many-in-one in ecumenical and allegorical thinking is another of Spivak's concerns; this will be considered with respect to architectural construction and geographical landscape representations in different versions of the epic. Finally, following Spivak's analysis of the agency of the subaltern and the indigenous, I suggest that the human relational content has ample room for further transformation and re-interpretation in the channels of dissemination open to contemporary versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Introduction

For epic scholars it is a fine thing to know how an epic is still being sung. One can imagine the thrill when Parry and Lord discovered the Serbian epics and were able to develop their oral-formulaic theory that was so influential in the studies of the

epic which followed. In India the epics, the praises (Ram Bhagvan) and the enactment (Ramlila) of the Rama story have been sung and read for more than two thousand years judging from the dating of the Valmiki text which would be the earliest extant written one. The existence side by side of both the oral and written tradition, however, gives us a prime example of how versions and interpretations take place. The formulaic characteristics of the Rāmāyaṇa, attributable to Valmiki's invention of the *sloka*¹, suggest a background of oral derivation. In this paper I am going to discuss the oral and written tradition from a folkloristic point of view, noting how important the *bhakti* selfless devotion as a response to the epic tradition has become in the currency of the texts throughout India. How these motifs are configured to express the dualism/non-dualism opposition in Hinduism is a major question I begin to investigate using a semiotic method of analysis and comparison of the versions occurring in different social contexts and channels of transmission.² I find the reconfiguration of motifs expressing the relationships between characters to be creative emotional responses in a different cultural code to a fabula that is increasingly made more sacred³ through the very act of transmission throughout different levels of society. Moreover, the extra-ordinary power of the early textual episodes to evoke not only various interpretations, but entirely new texts, which are subsequently responded to in the creative responses from its readers and new writers is a dissemination of major significance in the history of epic literature.

¹ Freda Matchett notes that "while the *Rāmāyaṇa* introduces its speeches with metrical formulas which are part of its essential structure, the Puranas follow the Mahabharata in using 'prose formula.' (134).

² This approach is similar to that of Stephen A. Nimis, who adopts the theory of Umberto Eco to his study of epic similes in his "Narrative Semiotics in the Epic Tradition: The Simile." The signs in texts themselves are not referentially meaningful but are parts of a set of cultural units that when read or heard are interpreted variously as interpretants. (See Eco, *Theory of Semiotics*). The interpretive codes of *bhakti* devotion are in this manner to be differentiated from those of other cultural codes..

³ Max Müller in his philologically based solar mythology of the Indo-European peoples traced a different trajectory descending from the sacred Vedas into the detritus of heroic legend and then into nursery tales (Dorson 170-171).

I. Textual Backgrounds.

For the *Rāmāyaṇa* text attributed to Valmiki, John Brockington, after his in depth empirical examination of various recensions has concluded that the development of the work has passed through several stages: first, an oral one in which the exploits of a hero are recounted. Here he takes a euhemeristic view. Then a period of accretion of motifs when stories are added about Rama's encounters with others, as in the forest for instance, and then a period of appropriation in the third century B.C. when the text is Vedacized and not necessarily by Valmiki. The adding of the first and last episode is seen by Brockington as a later addition in which the Brahmanic concepts are reified. Indian scholarship would put Valmiki as living at the time of Rama in primordial times.⁴ (See D. H. Rao trans.)

Besides the development of the extant Valmiki *Rāmāyaṇa*, (300-200 B.C.E.) there is another tradition for the story of Rama, which makes the text a devotional one. The major examples are Kampan's *Iramavataram* in Tamil and the Tulsidas *Ramacaritmanas* (1574) devotional text in the regional language of Alwahdi. According to V. N. Rao, these texts should not be considered epics, but devotional literature (59). Here I treat them as affective responses to the epic. Besides this there are various kinds of folk enactments and literary rewritings, as well as contemporary media revisions.

Underlying the differences between the Valmiki text in its own channels of dissemination and the subsequent devotional texts is a question of religious and sometimes political importance.⁵ In a discussion of Hindu dualism/non-dualism

⁴ According to astronomical dating and a note about the Sage Vishwamitra in the *Mahabharata*, the Ramayanic era would have occurred in the Shravana period of about 7500 B.C. (Vartak).

⁵ The Saint Basava founded Virashaivism (13th Century), which rejected the caste system entirely. Shri Madhvacharya (1238-1317) focuses on Vishnu and a dualistic Vedanta. He was one of the founders of the Vaishnava Bhakti movement.

(*dvaita/advaita*) and the concept of avatarism in *Other Asias*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2008) interrogates brahmanic monism. The deconstructive parabasis for brahmanic Hinduism is in affective *bhakti*. She notes that “Bhakti, creating affective links between the subject and the invaginated radical alterity of the *dvaitin* mindset, inscribes and assigns the subject’s position within a taxonomy of phenomenal affect” (181). The relationship offers “historical possibilities” (the “future anterior”) for the openness and/or closure in response to their negotiation with the profane, at all social levels.” (180). Spivak’s insight may help to explain how versions have developed over time, making the work an inspirational text, inspiring uncountable versions from various religious perspectives, such as the Buddhist and Jaina, and from among all castes from the Brahmin to the Untouchables, and among women. The dualisms suggested by Spivak are found in the bhava devotional relationships: *Bhavas* are different attitudes that a devotee may “take... to express his devotion towards God in some form. The different *bhavas* are: *sānta*, placid love for God; *dāsyā*, the attitude of a servant; *sakhya*, the attitude of a friend; *vātsalya*, the attitude of a mother towards her child; and *madhura*, the attitude of a woman towards her lover” (Allport).

Although Rama was to be recognized as the avatar⁶ of Vishnu, the preserver and protector deity/avatar hero relation was not found in the oldest versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It is from the 4th century that the worship of Vishnu as God, including all aspects of the God, can be documented. The connection to Vishniava and the Vedic tradition was a product of later accretion and interpretation. Making the actions religious is the semiotic interpretant for them. In his distinctions between Buddhist and Jaina theologians, Clooney claims that “Vaisnava theologians seem more open to the idea that God can assume specific bodies, either animal or human, and live over

⁶ Spivak explains that the Sanskrit word for “incarnation” (avatar) – has nothing to do with ‘putting on flesh.’ It means rather – ‘a come-down [being].’ Everything around us is, after all, ‘come-down,’ if we assume an ‘up-there.’” (178).

time within those specific forms” (454). According to Lamb, the Brahmanic versions of the Rāmāyaṇa text rest solidly within the category of *smṛti* or secular texts of “that which was remembered,” rather than in the category of sacred text, or *śrute*, “that which was heard,” (235-237). Ramdas Lamb (236) agrees with Coburn, who establishes the status and function of a text by means of its relationship to the community: it is the community that makes a text sacred. Furthermore, as Brockington has shown, in the versions from the South, the occurrence of the name of the God Vishnu is more frequent there than in Valmiki recensions (229). In general, after a thorough empirical linguistic investigation of texts, Brockington, adamantly holding to the lateness of the connection of Rama with Vishnu, states: “The earliest stage” of the epic’s development “adopted no particular attitude to Rama’s divinity because the question had not yet arisen (234).

Lamb discusses in particular the case of Tulsidas’s North Indian version of the Rama story. Tulsidas put Valmiki’s story into a new worldview, that of the Bhakti tradition. Bhaktas devotees claim that the *Rāmcharitmānas* meaning the "Lake of the Deeds of Rāma" is considered a sacred text, even more sacred than the Vedas. Instead of the story as related by Valmiki and his storyteller, some of the events of Rama-Vishnu are even narrated by Shiva to Parvati, thus shifting the whole frame of the narration, which affects the narrative focalization.⁷ The Tulsidas manuscript without the brahmanic first and last episodes of Valmiki, was at first thought to be a travesty of Valmiki’s. A test was carried out in which the *Ramacaritmanas* was locked up on the altar with texts of the Vedas. The next day the Tulsidas text was found on top of the pile and the work was thereafter sanctioned by the brahmans. The text is of

⁷ In the narrative theory of Mieke Bal, the term “focalization” is how events are presented from a certain perspective or “vision.” She explains that “the speech act of narrating is still different from the vision, the memories, the sense perceptions, thoughts, that are being told. Nor can that vision be conflated with the events they focus, orient, interpret.” “Focalization is a layer between the linguistic text and the fabula” (146).

social importance because, besides being used in devotional worship, the text itself is worshipped in the sect of illiterate untouchables.

Tulsidas has Vishnu-Rama outline instruction in nine kinds of pure devotion:

First is *satsang* or association with love-intoxicated devotees. The second is to develop a taste for hearing my nectar-like stories. The third is service to the *guru* (...) Fourth is to sing my *kirtan* (communal chorus) (...) *Japa* or repetition of my Holy name and chanting my *bhajans* are the fifth expression (...) To follow scriptural injunctions always, to practice control of the senses, nobility of character and selfless service, these are expressions of the sixth mode of *bhakti*. Seeing me manifested everywhere in this world and worshipping my saints more than myself is the seventh mode of *bhakti*. To find no fault with anyone and to be contented with one's lot is the eighth mode of *bhakti*. Unreserved surrender with total faith in my strength is the ninth and highest stage. Shabari, anyone who practices one of these nine modes of my *bhakti* pleases me most and reaches me without fail. (Valmiki “Aranya Kanda” in Wikipedia, “Bhakti” 3; Also see Tulsidas 716-717)

In Brockington’s analysis of the Valmiki texts, he has found in particular that the Tamil Alvar poet-saints had a significant influence upon the worship of Vishnu in South India (Colas 237) and that the movement travelled northward, either through dissemination of text or by individual transmission. Their poems praise the deities of 97 South Indian Vaisnava temples. “These poems exhibit a high degree of learning and literature skill and can hardly be termed as “popular literature” (238).

According to Nancy M. Martin, the devotional or *bhakti* strand of Hinduism is found in the vernacular traditions of narrative and song in North India (183) as well. She states in her definition of *bhakti* that devotion is expressed in sensual metaphors

and an important characteristic is that the intermediary Brahmin priest is no longer essential in the worship. In the Kannada region, there was a community of *bhakti* worshippers that reached 190,00 living without caste distinction. Among these were the 12th century Virasaivas, the saints, including women, as well as lower-caste and untouchables, some whom were still subjected to tests by *brahman* priests (184). The devotion here to Vishnu and Shiva were of great importance in *bhakti* with Vishnu being worshiped as Rama, as well as Krishna. In this worship even the lines between Hindus and Muslims were sometimes blurred. Among untouchable leatherworker communities in Banaras, one was led by the Raidas and his following (188).

Of the textual history, several points then can be made about the social contexts of the versions. The Valmiki text is not only considered to be the original one, but also of more literary value; however, the Tulsidas version, which is a *bhakti* text, has achieved greater popularity among a wider population, including untouchables and Brahmin and non-brahmin women, and finally the folk versions, performed in ritual pilgrimages. The catachrestic combining, making of an epic that dwells on renunciation of kingship and exile in the encounters with fallible human beings and seductive demons into a sacred text, would seem to be a difficult transition from the secular to the divine, but this is precisely what has occurred: dualism/non-dualism of deity and man, deity and animal, nature and culture, wherein deity, souls and the world are identical yet distinct. In the following, I will examine the dualism/non-dualism shifting in the various texts not only between God and man, man and woman and man and animal but including the motifs of illusory identity, recognition of divinity, and resuscitation from death which bring about resolutions of opposites.

II. Semiotic Analysis

1. The Exiled King / Rama as Vishnu's avatar

Although the epic is concerned with the kingship of Ayodyha, the main narrative episodes are of a king in exile. Rama was forced into exile because of a promise of his father that had to be fulfilled, but contrarily, it was because he was destined to do something kings do not do: have closer contact to other human beings, animals and demons. Even more, what he does in his exile is not to work to get back his kingship, but something rather grander: ridding the world of evil personified in Ravana, who himself has usurped the heavenly architect's splendid city of Lanka. It would seem that Rama is journeying throughout the world to take power over other lands: he helps Sugriva to rule over the land of the monkeys, he gets back his wife Sita by killing the demon King Ravana, and yet these episodes are all well within the context of the exile from his rightful place in the world. Although he is adept at using special weapons,⁸ his weapon that finally kills the Ravana is a special one composed of the five elements, and he is careful about its use. The parallel story of Sugriva, the monkey king, whom Rama helps to regain his rule, anticipates Rama's own return to power 14 years later, after he has destroyed Lanka and its demon king with ten heads. Only with the double-headed king/not king concept is the Rama semiotic workable within the confines of the narrative epic. In the interpretations of the text, the human actions of Rama to assist others and to rid the world of Ravana are the fulfillment of the *dharma* in this incarnation of Vishnu. In his human fulfillment of the *dharma*, to be a king in exile, he assumes the extraordinary powers of Vishnu, of preserver and protector.

The different versions of the Ahalya episode clearly change the semiotic relationships of Rama to women as a subscript to his relation to his own wife Sita. This episode is analyzed in two tellings, one by Valmiki's Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* and another from Kampan's *Iramavataram* in Tamil. First, in Valmiki, Ahalya is married to the Gautama, a religious man, but she is seduced by Indra, who has fallen in love

⁸ In the previous incarnation of Vishnu, Rama is known as the weapon-bearer, but not in this one.

with her. He takes on the shape of a cat in his retreat from the scene when Gautama returns to his hut. Ahalya is cursed so that her beauty is invisible but associated with the ashes of a fire: she will exist only in the ashes until Rama will come to return her to her former self. This is to undo the wrong of her succumbing to the seduction of Indra.⁹ In Kampan's version she is turned to stone. Rama's feet just touch the stone, and she returns to her former shape as woman. As Ramanujan's astute comparison shows, the Kampan Tamil version reorders the narrative sequence so that the mere steps of Rama on the stone allow her to return to her former shape and then the story of why she has become stone is narrated. In the Narayan's translation of Tulsidas he writes, "Her sin is thereby forgiven." This is the importance of the devotional. Since the transformation back to human occurs before the story in Kampan, the focus is upon the miracle itself. As Ramanujan explains, "Ahalya's revival, her waking from cold stone to fleshly human warmth, becomes an occasion for a moving bhakti (devotional) meditation on the soul waking to its form in God" (31). Ramanujan believes that in Kampan's Tamil poem Rama's mission is to save all mankind from their misery and he is a God, whereas in Valmiki, Rama is only a God-man. From the semiotic perspective of king-in-exile, however, it is a man without the human or worldly power who has achieved this feat. So even in Valmiki, the God-like predominates given the destiny of the Rama avatar.

A king can forgive, but often does not in the interests of keeping power. So the transformation back to human of Ahalya, along with her being forgiven of her sin is Godlike. One must remember that Indra has already been forgiven and the curse of Gautama, whereby Indra was given the marks that women bear all over his body, has

⁹ Textual scholars have recognized the obvious presence of Indra in early recensions of the epic and Jacobi goes so far as to claim that the identification of Rama with Indra is stronger than that with Vishnu. (Brockington, 218-191). This, however, would rather complicate the Ahalya episode since Indra is the punished seducer and Rama the chaste savior of the beautiful Ahalya.

already been lifted by the Gods for him, and he is rewarded with a thousand eyes. Thus forgiveness works in tandem with chastity as an underlying theme for the devotion in this episode.

When he is restored to his power as King of Ahodya, Rama does not forgive. He says to his brother Lakshmana, whom he commands to take Sita into the forest and abandon her, “Lakshmana, consider what is a king. Kings cannot afford blame. Ill fame is evil to kings; they above all men must be beyond reproach.” One could see the semiotic of the Ahalya episode working once more. Rama does not accept the fidelity of Sita and this leads to her being taken to Valmiki’s ashram where she gives birth to Rama twin sons. Culture and the influence of social relations are what alienate Rama and Sita at the end. She herself and her relation to the earth are rejected by the City King Rama. Their pure devotional love is jeopardized at the expense of human public opinion--an obvious threat to the devotional text. Therefore, this episode of rejection of Sita as Queen in the city of Ahodya is not given in Kampan and Tulsidas, both of which end with Rama’s triumphant return to the city.

Not only is chastity demanded of Sita, Rama himself has remained chaste in his separation from her during his exile. He has also withstood the seduction of the sister of Ravana. Ravana’s abduction of Sita is a counter-action to satisfy Ravana’s sister.

2. Lakshmi/Sita: Consort of Vishnu/“Daughter” of Earth;

Prisoner of Ravana/Shadow or Illusion

The code of Earth as one of the Five Elements is the basis of code of interpretation for Sita. The code of woman’s married behavior of fidelity to one’s husband is also working in the narrative, but becomes the focus of Rama’s attention. If we consider Lakshmi/Sita as Nature (*Prakrti*), the relationship of Rama and Sita can be clarified further. *Prakrti*, according to the *Bhagavad Gita* is the basic nature of intelligence by which the Universe exists and functions (K. L. Rao; Chatterjee). Her

abduction by the demon Ravana to the most splendid of cities is taking her from Nature and putting her into an artificial garden. Moreover, Ravana is cursed to be unable to make love to a woman who does not choose to do so. Even in the city of Lanka, she is secluded in a garden as if in a prison and surrounded by demon women who watch over her with a keen eye. It is only the devotee Hanuman, who has the transformative power to reach her and tell her that Rama is coming to save her.

The main plot and several isolated scenes are constructed to show Sita's fidelity to Rama. In Kampan's version, when in captivity Sita becomes a mere shadow, an illusion created by the Fire-God Agni. Her later trial by fire to confirm her chaste faithfulness to Rama throughout the ordeal in the Tulsidas version is sometimes used to cast doubt on Rama's being the Vishnu avatar. As a deity, he should already know of her purity as Lakshmi so why demand the proof of her fidelity? In Valmiki, she says, "Since the adorable sun-God, wind-God, the four quarters and even so the moon-God, as also the deity presiding over the day-time and the twilights and the night and the earth and even others know me to be endowed with good conduct, so let the fire-God protect me" (Verse 28). Brahma and other Gods descend to remonstrate against the ignorance Rama is showing in his doubt. When Sita chooses to enter the fire herself (Tulsidas), one wonders if she is more knowing than he of her Godliness and even of her earthliness. In the prakti or five elements, fire does not conquer earth.

Sita/Lakshmi becomes invisible or her body is only an illusory one when she is taken captive by Ravanna in the Kampan version. In the Valmiki version an illusion of her body is destroyed in front of Rāmā on the battlefield at Lanka. In the last book, after thousands of years, Sita is returned to the Earth from whence she came.

The devotion to Sita found in songs from women as collected in the work of Rao shows the repertoire of 21 songs of women in Brahmin families. They contain titles such as Rama's birth, Sita's puberty, Sita's fire ordeal, Sita's pregnancy, and a

humorous one on Laksmana's laugh in which Rama massages the feet of his little brother (118) in recompense for his anger against his brother over nothing of significance. These songs are contrasted with non-Brahmin songs sung by lower caste women. In these songs, the women take delight in the housework being done by the Gods:

The God of wind sweeps the floor here in Lanka.

The rain God sprinkles cow-dung water to keep it clean.

The fire-God himself cooks in our kitchen, cooks in our kitchen.

Three hundred thirty-three million Gods take

Shovels and crowbars and work for us as slaves,

All the time, work for us as slaves. (Rao 131)

The versions of the story in songs by women sympathize with Sita to the extent that Rama is criticized for his doubt of her fidelity.

3. Hanuman: Son of the Wind (God)/Immortal Animal;

Rama's Double/Healer and Resuscitator

Hanuman's devotion to Rama is of the greatest importance in the Valmiki text, and it continues to be important in *bhajan* songs, sung by devotees. It is Hanuman which makes the work of Rama effective on earth and water; his selfless service of his Rama is a main thread that links Rama to Sita while she is in Lanka and that links Rama and Lakshmana to Life and Death. He brings the herbs to resuscitate them from the Himalaya Mountains all the way to Lanka after his friends have been killed on the battlefield. As the popular Utube site of recorded devotional songs says: "He blesses with anything and everything - knowledge, physical and mental strength, truthfulness, sincerity, selflessness, humility, loyalty, and profound devotion to the Lord" (Jai Jai Jai Hanuman).

The monkey as animal by nature is gregarious, found among his group; he seems

to be unthinking and little considerate of human needs. After reviving Rama and Hanuman from Indrajit's attack which killed them, Hanuman says: "Dear Rama, we are indeed your old good friends from long ago, and your companions of ancient days come here to help you. We are your forefathers. We are your ancestors the animals, and you are our child Man. As for our friendship, why we've known you a long long time, Rama, and the number of those days is lost in Silence. (Buck trans. 315) Hanuman's quality of devotion to Rama is considered is "servantness"; however, his immortality makes him more than a servant breaking down the duality of animal and God, as well as monkey and man.

4. Ravana. Demon King/Secret Culture (Magic); within Rama/within Narayana

Valmiki has made Ravana an arch-villain. However, in some versions of the epic, a reversal has occurred in the response writings so that Ravana has become a positive figure. Notably in Jain countertexts this occurs along with versions in which Sita is the daughter of Ravana and an incest motif is brought into the picture for a tragedy. This tendency toward making Ravana positive is exaggerated in a modernist Telugu play entitled *Sambuka Vadha* (1920) by Tripuraneni Ramasvami Chaudari, which is social in intent. This text reflects the tension between the Vedic Sanskrit tradition and the Dravidian. In the play Rama is part of an Aryan conspiracy against the Dravidians, and Rama kills the innocent Shambuka (Ravana). In some interpretations by women singers, Ravana feels love and always acts honorably towards Sita, whereas Rama's relationship with Sita is perfunctory and even abrasive.

However, in Valmiki, Ravana remains evil to the end. Riding his chariot against Rama, Ravana takes on the form of Indra and his illusory disguise arrests the will of Rama to shoot him: "Ravana was dazed by Indra's false figure." (Buck 347). After the death of Ravana, a stone envelope containing a message from Ravana is read by Rama. It recognizes Rama as God, saying "Lord Narayan, you are the witness...Dear

Rama, Lord of the Worlds –Think and remember how you promised Indra to kill me forever. Nothing is forever except yourself. Except dying at your hand, how else could I make you take me into your own Self.” He continues remarking that Rama does not know who he is – Narayana. That is, he contains, Rama and Sita, Ravana and Hanuman, Lakshmana, Indrajit and Inra, the poet and the Players and the Play. “And born as a man you forget this, you lose the memory, and take on man’s ignorance again” (Buck 349-351).

In the folk performance based on Tulsidas’s version at Ramnagar the death of Ravana and the cremation of the effigy of Ravana is a major final event to which all spectators gather. “After dark Rama shoots an arrow into Ravana’s giant effigy which all day has stood on Ravana’s fort. Five hot-air balloons are released from behind the effigy.. These balloons signify Ravana’s spirit rising into Rama’s mouth. Then the effigy is set ablaze” (Schechner 147).

Underlying the Rama-Sita culture-nature contrast is a contrast between the work of the heavenly architect Viswakarma in the palace of the Rakshasa’s and Lanka and the nature. It is Dharma law that will not allow the Rakshasa “knowledge to perish.” The knowledge is supernatural, just as the palace has its magical aspects. In the treasure house within the palace, Hanuman is shown a room with Mantras of compassion. What Hanuman learns is a mantra to bring his fellow animals back to life (Buck 367-369). This treasure house is locked up and it is only because of Hanuman’s good nature that the architect allows him entrance to the secret chambers and a glimpse of the magic therein. The Lanka secrets, the house of the demons, must remain even after Ravana’s demise.

III. The Matter of Promises and Curses

At a level of semiosis more ancient than the Brahmanic Valmiki, the devotional

Tulsidas and even the Banaras folk performances of Ramlila are the promises and curses that lie behind the main actions of the epic. This is often overlooked in the attention on the attributes of the figures themselves, but it is what places them in the predicaments they find themselves in. First of all, it is because of a prose of Dasaratha, Rama's father, to his wife Keikeyu, who saved his life that Rama is put into exile and the kingship bestowed upon Baratha. Whereas the curse on Indra, who seduces Ahalya, seems quite irrelevant to the main plot, just another miracle of disenchantment from a curse, unless one notes that a similar curse is put on Ravana, who has abducted Sita: the curse makes each impotent and/or feminine, a flaw in their prowess. In some versions, Ravana, although he loves Sita, is not lustful. In another he is incestuous, since Sita is his daughter. These vagaries in the versions indicate that the concern for chastity is a cultural code at the core of the plot and is motivating much of the action, a further catalyst for the devotional revisioning of the text. In most cases, these revisionings further define the power of Rama, whose wife is absent from him in Lanka, during which time he remains chaste as she does. Hanuman is also subject to a curse, one from his father, who made him unable to understand his own powers until the meeting with Rama. These magical spells actually, however, are in the service of the Dharma law as it plays out in the narrative, attesting again to the increasing religiosity of the text even in time more ancient than the Brahmanic and Vaishnava periods of dissemination.

IV. Ramlila: Devotion of Spectators in *Darshan* and Touching of the *Murtis*

Rama, Sita, Hanuman as Gods/Human Performers

In Ramnagar, every year for a month there is an enactment of Tulsidas's *Rāmcharitmānas*. The *nemis* or devoted spectators follow day by day tracing the steps of Rama-Vishnu through the surrounding countryside, some of them barefoot as in a

temple, until the final battle against Ravana, after which the effigy of Ravana is burned in a large bonfire. As Schechner's description of this pilgrimage and performance of the scenes from the Rama story that still takes place to the East of the Ganges in Banaras today illustrates, the worship of and social *communitas* is observed in these events, in which the maharaja and people of all walks of life participate. The text of Tulsidas's *Rāmcharitmānas* is sung: "Ramlila...is an extensive cycle of events offering performers and spectators what they are looking for—ranging from devotion to bread, from excitement to meditation, from drama to pilgrimage" (Schechner 157).

The actors or *swarups* are *murtis* (material images as in temple icons). And at the end of each day's performance or *lila*, there is a temple ceremony where Rama, Sita and Lakshman can be venerated and touched (168-169). Important to the common people, is the glimpse or *jhanki* of the divine beings. "*Jhanki* distills from the flow of the action a crystalline glimpse of a cosmic, eternal divinity" (169).

Conclusion: The End or Not the End

In an interpretation of the sculpture of Vishnu *Dreaming the Universe*, in the Temple of the Ten Avatars (Dasavatara Temple) at Deogarh from the Gupta period (A.D. 500), Campbell (6-8) comments upon the importance of dreaming and asks if the universe of the characters of the *Mahabharata* at the base of the dreamer are dreaming of Vishnu or Vishnu is dreaming them. The same could be asked of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and as especially as Rama is the sun-hero. Quoting Karl Jung, "All consciousness separates; but in dreams we put on the likeness of that more universal, truer, more eternal man dwelling in the darkness of primordial night. There he is still the whole, and the whole is in him, indistinguishable from nature and bare of all ego-hood" (qtd. Campbell 7). This is the power of the Rama figure in his kingship, to be ego-less in the king-in-exile role. While Rama is Vishnu's visible avatar engaged in

the worldly matters of ridding the World of evil and married to Earth, Sita, Laksmi's avatar, the devotional retellings of the story connect the divine and the secular worlds in a seeming non-dualism. This is the power of story, as in a conscious dream, to relate the two dimensions, a process that is endless in the imagination of the people of all classes or castes.

The *bhakti* texts of Kampan and Tulsidas, as well as the folk traditional performances, reveal to us the potential of the semiotic relationships between God and man, animal and man, man and man, and man and woman that are first written down in the Valmiki pre-brahmic text. If we don't consider the first and last chapters, special moments in the Rāmāyaṇa inspired the *bhakti* poets to expand in their own affective semiotic on the motifs that are drawn up in the Valmiki text. Although some literary renditions and rewritings debunk the divinity and the devotional in the text of the Rāmāyaṇa, the mainstream tradition has upheld the epic's tale of the immortality of its characters as living Gods to be venerated today in bhagwan literature and performance; immortality of the text is matched to the immortality of the avatars of Vishnu, Hanuman, and Laksmi, keeping their semiotic affective presence in the worldly kingdom.

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