



LOOKING BEYOND VALMIKI'S TEXT: REVISIONS IN AMISH TRIPATHI'S *SCION OF IKSHVAKU*

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ABSTRACT

Well-known author, Amish Tripathi, famous for his 'Shiva Trilogy', has shot into fame once again with the publication of his books on Lord Rama. The first book in this series, Scion of Ikshvaku, (2015) is a revisionist rendering on Rama's story, bringing within its corpus several untouched perspectives like the portrayal of Roshni, Manthara's daughter and her gang rape, Surpanakha's infatuation with Ram and Sita's portrayal as the Prime Minister of Mithila and a skilled warrior.

This paper is an attempt to study Tripathi's revisionist text vis-à-vis Valmiki's classical one to explore the various ways that the contemporary text has been used to bring about new perspectives. This paper will also look at Tripathi's conscious move at giving voices to the silent, muffled or stereotypical voices of the women in the epic.

Keywords: *revisionist, stereotype, perspective, relationship, silent, under-represented*

INTRODUCTION

Revisionism as a genre has gained momentum in today's time. The term 'Historical Revisionism' denotes re-interpretation of historical record and includes re-looking at facts, evidence and interpretations. Revisionism in literature is a movement towards fresh interpretations or perspectives on classical texts. In the Indian scenario, several contemporary writers like Devdutt Pattanaik, Sharath Kommaraju, Kavita Kane, Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, to name a few, have presented under-represented voices from ancient



texts in order to subvert mythical stereotyped images of women as well as created new dimensions in the texts.

“Raghukul reet sada chali aayi, pran jaye par vachan na jaye”, wrote Valmiki in his *Ramayana*, and the whole life of Rama is represented in this *sloka*. This *sloka* describes the tradition of Raghukul that one should always keep his promises even at the sake of his life. Because of this tradition Ram went to vanvas to keep the promise that his father Dasrath made to Kaikeyi. We see Ram to be an ideal follower of the rules and a very obedient son. Every mother in his household wants a son like Ram. Ram is seen to be the strict follower of rules and regulations. In Valmiki’s *Ramayana* he is shown as an incarnation of God but Amish Tripathi’s Ram as projected in *Scion of Ikshvaku* (2015) has his own flaws just like any normal human being. On reading the *Scion of Ikshvaku*, readers get a different perception of the image of Ram from that of Valmiki’s text.

If we compare and contrast the birth of Ram in both the books we find two different scenerios. In Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, when Ram is born there is great enthusiasm and happiness among the people of Ayodhya but in Tripathi’s book we see people are not happy when Ram is born, rather they feel he is a curse for the kingdom. And the reason behind this was just that during the birth of Ram, Dasrath was fighting against the troops of Lanka and finally lost the battle of Karachapa. Till then he was unbeatable and the strongest warrior among all but after the loss he put all the blame on that just-born child. Amish Tripathi also tried to show the fact that it’s easy to blame others for your own loss but it is hard to accept our own flaws. People of Ayodhya were not ready to face the fact that Lanka was stronger than their armies rather they find it easy to blame the child for their defeat.

During this war period and the birth of Ram we also see the relationship between Dasrath and his wives, Kausalya and Kaikeyi. While Kausalya was emotional and soft-hearted like most women following what their husbands command, Kaikeyi portrayed herself to be equal to Dasrath because she was a shield for him and had saved his life many times on and off the battle field. During the battle when Dasrath got hurt she was the one who saved his life and this was the reason why she was said to be the closest wife of Dasrath. Amish Tripathi tried to show Kaikeyi not only as someone who wants her son to be the king and who is the reason behind Ram’s ‘vanvas’ but also he shows how strong a woman can be when it comes to protect her rights that she can go to any extent in order to protect her husband or the son.

“Laws are the foundation on which a fulfilling life is built for a community. Laws are the answer” (SOI 61) - this was the lesson given by sage Vashishta to Ram in gurukul. The time spent in Gurukul was the most important phase in Ram’s life. There he learnt all the lessons of life from his Guru. Tripathi mentioned in the book that because Ram was a curse to his

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kingdom, Dasrath wanted to send him away so that his presence does not bring any more misfortune to the kingdom. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Ram was loved by all his mothers and was closest to Dasrath, there he was sent to Gurukul to learn the universal knowledge and be a great warrior and the future king of Ayodhya. In Gurukul we see how an obedient student Ram was as he listened to the lessons very carefully. As Dr. Sunita writes "Ram had the potential and guru Vashishta believed that Ram would be the next Vishnu rewriting the history of the nation through his noble deeds and idealism." We can see in the book Ram raising several questions to his Guru and receiving the only reason – LAW – as the answer for all his doubts. This concept of law was so much build up in his mind that throughout his life he followed this laws and we can see the different consequences of this.

In this book we also see two different mindsets of Ram and Bharat, Ram is idealistic whereas Bharat is practical and real. Ram blindly follows the path of law; Bharat does not give importance to law. Their view on relationship also varies. In Tripathi's book, Bharat is shown to have many girlfriends. For Bharat, relationship is based on passion and excitement. But Ram's views contrast with that as he says "A relationship is not just for fun, it is also about trust and the knowledge that you can depend on your partner. Relationship based on passion and excitement do not last." (79)

While Bharat wanted a wife to share his life and passion with, Ram wanted a woman to love and respect with. An example of Bharat's immature relationship with Radhika is projected where she leaves him because of her parents. The character, Radhika, does not find mention in Valmiki's *Ramayan*. By introducing this character, Tripathi wanted to show how Ram's view on relationship differs from Bharat. He was devoted to one woman who was going to be his wife.

Roshni, another fictional character by Amish, holds a lot of importance in this book. She was introduced as Manthara's daughter who was not at all mentioned in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. She was beautiful and intelligent in her own ways. She presented herself as an independent woman and holds very strong view point. She was the only rakhi sister of the four brothers. She tied them rakhi on the occasion of Raksha bandhan. But she was not in favor of the trend of getting gold from the brothers because she believed that "accepting anything besides the promise of physical protection during the Rakhi ceremony was an admission of the inferiority of women." (SOI 105) Roshni can be seen as a reflection of modern women who hold the idea that may be we are weak physically but we are capable of doing anything especially when it comes to earn for ourselves.

Roshni was also aware of various herbs and provided medical facilities to the people of Ayodhya. She was not someone who put herself inside the four walls of her house; rather she



was a woman full of dreams and helped people in need. But the society will always hold back the freedom of women by showing their masculinity and overpowering her body. She was raped brutally by Dhenuka and members of his gang. This happened when she went to attend the patients of Saraiya village. While coming back she was surrounded by these men and their mindset that woman is used for fun took away the life of a beautiful soul. This incident brought in a great turmoil in the life of Ram. After everyone came to know about this they were all shaken and were not able to digest that Roshni is no more among them. The culprit was caught and was convicted to be hanged till death. But the main culprit Dhenuka was saved from the punishment because he was underage. This was the law which Ram followed and made everyone angry especially Manthra who now hated Ram for this injustice towards her daughter. But we also see Ram burning his own arm because of the guilt. He knows he is doing injustice but he is bid by rules. By this incident Tripathi tried to show the present scenario of the judiciary system where culprits are saved from the punishment because of being underage no matter how much brutal their crime is. People get the liberty of harassing someone because they know the laws cannot touch them. The incident of Roshni shows the condition of Indian judiciary system and the injustice that happens to the victims.

In later part of the story, Tripathi introduced Vishwamitra; earlier in the episode of Gurukul it is portrayed that Lakshman heard the conversation between Vashishta and an unknown person that he could not identify and he thought that they wanted to kill Ram. But later we came to know that the unknown person was Vishwamitra who told Vashishta to select a boy among the four prince; Ram, Bharat, Lakshman and Shatrughan who is capable of killing the demon Tadaka. Later Ram was selected by Vashishta who he thought can save the life of Rishis that has been harassed by Tadaka and her son Subahu. Vishwamitra visited Ayodhya and took Ram with him along with Lakshman. Till then everything goes same as that of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, the ending of Tadaka is changed, initially Ram hesitates on killing her because she was a woman but later on Vishwamitra command that he kills her. But Tripathi gave a new life to her, she along with Subahu was given second chance by Ram in order to correct their mistakes and start a new life without harassing anyone.

The practice of 'Swayamvar' was common among the aristocracy of the then times. Woman, in this system, was allowed to choose her husband from among a list of suitors that came in her swayamvar. After the Tadaka episode, Vishwamitra took both the kings to visit Mithila and also ordered Ram to participate in the Swayamvar. In Mithila we are introduced with the character of Sita who is adopted by King Janak. But he breaks all the stereotypes and made her the prime minister of Mithila instead of his own biological daughter Urmila. Sita is shown as a warrior, woman of her dreams, strong and independent. Dr. Sunita Nimavat writes "Amish describes her character in highly poetic words." In chapter twenty-one, we see the first meeting of Ram and Sita, where her first impression on Ram is just like the woman he

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always dreamt of. She is also the follower of laws which automatically attracted Ram towards her. He feels that she is perfect to be his wife.

We see a different portrayal of Sita in Tripathi's book; she is not just a princess who dresses up and behaves in conventional manner. She holds her own point of view and fights when needed; she is shown to be mixture of beauty and brain. She is down to earth and knows how to manage all relationships. She is a perfect daughter and wife. She supports her husband in all possible ways. When Ram is sent to exile for fourteen years by mother Kaikeyi as a boon she asked from Dasrath, Sita decides to go along with her husband. She had a choice to live in the luxurious life as she was in her own palace. But she opted to be in the jungle with her husband and support him in all the hurdles of life because she knows the law for wife is to always follow the path of husband and be with him in any circumstance.

In the jungle, we see the beautiful relationship between the husband and wife. Sita finds happiness even in the forest life with Ram. She is not someone who craves for jewels or fineries and a good place to live in. Rather she is happy living in a small hut if only her husband is with her. We also see her hunting skills and love for hunting, she hunted boars in jungle. We also see in the episode where Surpanakha was besotted with Ram and wanted him desperately but he was loyal to his wife and rejected her. Because of hatred she tried to kill Sita but she fought back and to protect Sita, Lakshman cut her nose and later we see Sita was captured by Ravana to take revenge of her sister.

Scion of Ikshvaku ends on a note where Sita has been captured by Ravana; being the first book in the Ram Chandra series we are aware that the story is to be continued. This makes the readers enthusiastic about what will happen next even though we know the *Ramayana*; still the way Amish Tripathi has narrated it is totally different and fresh. Tripathi shows Ram not as a God but as a normal human being with his own flaws. It is not something that we read as a mythological book rather we read it as a contemporary book. In the book review by Urmi Chanda-Vaz, she wrote "The book is full of such fruits of Amish's imagination, but it is for the reader to find them and judge them. The author has played his best stroke – one that he knows works with his junta." Much of the incidents are related to the present world. He gave voices to the peripheral women in his book. Kaikeyi is shown to be the shield of Dashrath, breaking all the stereotypes that only man can protect his wife because he is physically stronger than her. He introduced the character of Radhika, the love interest of Bharat, to show that women have to sacrifice their love for the sake of their family. He introduced Manthara's daughter, Roshni, to show when a woman determines to rise up, it is the man who always pulls her down and subjugates her. He introduces Sita not as a princess of Mithila but rather as the Prime Minister of Mithila. In the second book of the same series *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, he narrated the story from Sita's perspective and Ram is more of a

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peripheral character. In the patriarchal world where woman are not even heard, Amish Tripathi in his books is trying to give women their voices in the hope that one day it will bring in the change in the mindsets of society. In an article in Hindustan Times, Amish Tripathi states that “The way we treat women in our society is shameful. But it wasn’t like this. It’s frankly an insult to our ancestors because they didn’t treat women in this manner. In ancient times, women had a status equivalent to rishis (sage), who had positions even higher than kings. This was the kind of society we had. The rig veda has hymns written by women rishis or rishikas. ”

In short the paper is an attempt to look into Tripathi’s text from a revisionist angle, the way the author has juxtaposed new perspectives to the classical epic. Also this paper studies Tripathi’s conscious move at giving voices to the silent, muffled or stereotypical voices of the women in the epic.

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