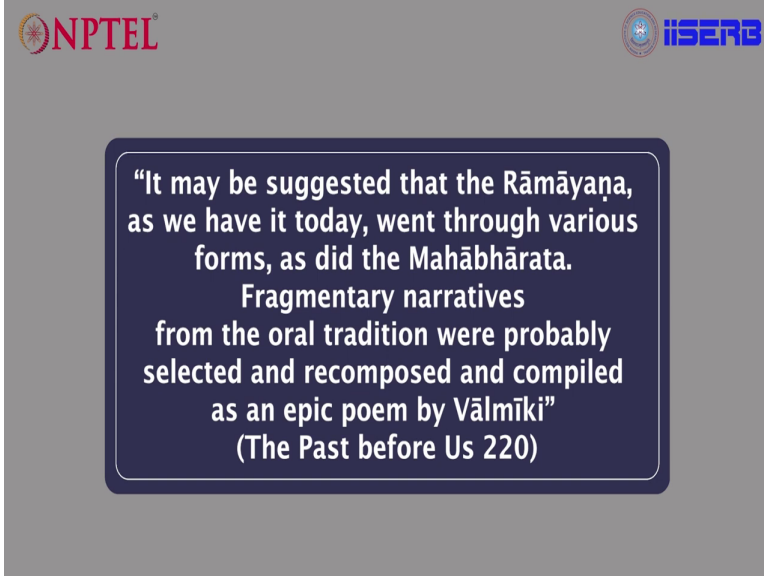


An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory
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Lecture- 02
The Rāmāyana and Sanskrit Literary Theory

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Historians hold the view that the stories which constitute the Ramayana of Valmiki were originally composed at different points of time and were later collated into a single text. Romila Tharapur observed it may be suggested that the Ramayanas we have it today went through various forms, as did the Mahabharata. Fragmentary narratives from the oral tradition were probably selected and recomposed, and compiled as an epic poem by Valmiki.

Scholars like Brockington opines that the stories in book 2 to 6, which constitute the initial version of the story, were composed in the fifth or fourth century BCE. In the two subsequent centuries, that is, in the third and the second centuries BCE, stories in the book 1 and 7 were composed. From the 4th to the 5th century CE, small passages were added.

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The Author of the Rāmāyaṇa

We have seen the story of the Ramayana and the organizational structure of the whole story. Now, what about Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana? We know that Valmiki plays two crucial roles in the Ramayana tradition. First of all, the first rendition of the ram katha is attributed to him. Secondly, he is also a pivotal character in his own text. We know practically nothing about the author called Valmiki.

But Ramakatha gives us a mythological account of Valmiki's life. Ramakatha begins by explaining how Valmiki came to be a great sage. Valmiki's original name was Ratnagara he was born into a robber family. One day, he tried to rob a sage who was going through the forest in which he was residing. The sage warned Valmiki that his heinous actions will result in his destruction, but he confidently told the saints that he is doing it for his family, and they will also share his sins.

The sage asked him to go and inquire with his family if they would share the sins of his action. Ratnagara moved by this question of the sage, went and asked his wife if she would share his sins, but she told him that one has to share the burden of one's own sins. This brought about a crucial change in Ratnagara's mind. He came back to the sage and told him if there is any way to cleanse himself of his sins.

His religious preceptor taught him the mantra, the apparently nonsensical mantra, “Mara Mara”. when Valmiki uttered the phrase repeatedly, the syllabus blended into “Rama Rama”, thereby accruing the meritorious karmic fruits of chanting Rama's name.

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The Mythological Account of the Genesis of Kāvya

Whatever may be the theory of historians about the genesis of *Adi kavya*, the *Ramayana* self-reflexively proposes an altogether different story about its origin. According to the omniscient narrator of the text, the events which led to the composition of the *Ramayana* begin with Valmiki asking the celestial sage, Narada, about the worthiest of all human beings currently living on the earth.

In response to this query, Narada tells Valmiki the legendary story of Rama, the king of Ayodhya. After this, Narada leaves, and Valmiki, along with his disciple, Bharadwaja, goes to the riverside for his prayers. At the riverside, Valmiki chances upon an act of violence, a hunter shooting one of a mating pair of birds. The sage, overcome with pity, curses the hunter, which surprisingly comes out in the form of a shloka. The shloka which comes out of Valmiki's grief goes like this.

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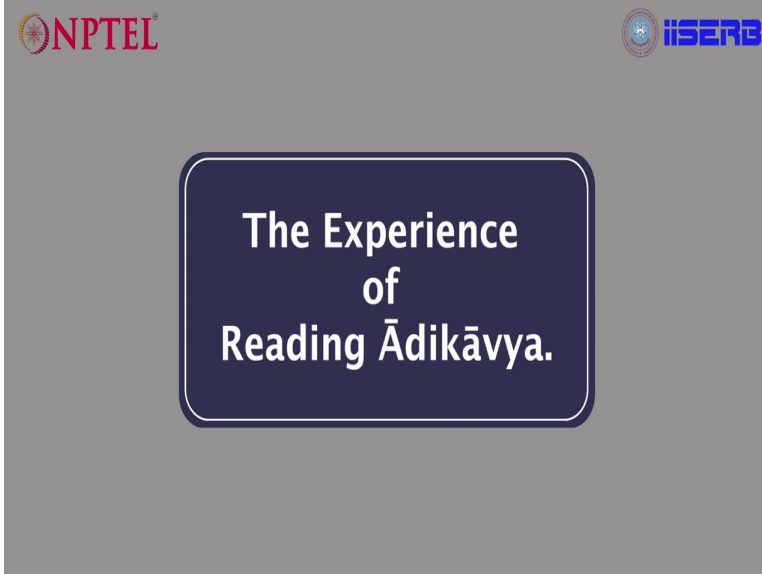
मा निषाद प्रतिष्ठां त्वमगमश्शाश्र्वतीस्समाः ।
यत्क्रौञ्चमिथुनादेकमवध्रीः काममोहितम् ॥

(The Rāmāyaṇa
1.2.15)

[Since, Niṣāda, you killed one of this pair of krauñcas
who were at the height of their passion,
you shall not live for very long]

“Ma nishad pardistham twamgamsashwatisamah, yatkronjamithunadekmavadhi kamamohitam.” It means, since nishada, you killed one of this pair of kraunchas, who were at the height of their passion, you shall not live for very long.

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The first listener of the newly invented shloka is none other than Valmiki's disciple Bharadwaja. Here it is significant that even though the shloka came out of the sage's outburst of grief, what the listener Bharadwaja ultimately elicits from the shloka is ananda or sheer aesthetic delight.

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शिष्यस्तु तस्य ब्रुवतो मुनेर्वाक्यमनुत्तमम् ।
प्रतिजग्राह संहृष्टस्तस्य तुष्टोऽभवद्गुरुः॥

(When the sage uttered those words, the disciple
learnt them by heart with utmost delight (saṁhr̥ṣṭa)
(The Rāmāyaṇa I. II.19))

The omniscient narrator says, “when the sage uttered those words, the disciple learned them by heart with utmost delight.” This scene, in fact, anticipates a notion that kavya sastra was going to set as the rule for literature. That is, kavya aims to provide the readers with aesthetic pleasure or ananda. The whole story of Rama that Valmiki composes in the Ramayana is replete with grief, but what the reader elicits from it is pleasure.

The Ramayana repeatedly mentions this fact. For instance, the omniscient narrator details the expression of the sages who later listened to the story of Rama sung by Lava and Kusha, Rama's sons.

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तच्छ्रुत्वा मुनयस्सर्वे बाष्पपर्याकुलेक्षणाः।
साधुसाध्विति तावूचुः परं विस्मयमागताः

When the sages heard it, their eyes were clouded
with tears and filled with the greatest wonder,
they all said to the two, “Excellent, excellent!”
[sādhu sādhu] All the sages, glad at heart and l
oving righteousness, praised Kuśa and Lava
as they sang, for they were worthy of praise
(The Rāmāyaṇa I.4.15)


The narrator says, “when the sages heard it, their eyes were doubled, with clouded with tears and filled with the greatest wonder, they all said to the two, “sadhhu sadhu” or “excellent

excellent”. All the sages, glad at heart and loving righteousness, praised Kusha and Lava as they sang, for they were worthy of praise.” As a token of their appreciation, one of the sages presented them a water jar. Another one gifted them a bar cloth mantle.

This crucial point that kavya aims to provide joy is something literary theoreticians are going to repeat over and over again in kavya shastra. For example, Abhinava Gupta, in his commentary on Anandhavardhana’s Dhvyanaloka, says that the ontology of aesthetic relish is “alaukika” or supernormal. Vishwanatha, in his Sahithya Darpana, even went to the extent of turning the experience of relishing a literary work Brahmasvadasahodara or the kin of spiritual bliss.

Abhinava Gupta, in his aalochana on Anandhavardhana’s Dhvanyaloka, points out that emotions evoked in aesthetic experience, irrespective of the fact whether it is painful or pleasurable in real life, are so non-ordinary that there is no question of sorrow.

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Nevertheless, of instruction and joy, joy is the chief goal [of kāvya].
Otherwise, what basic difference would there be between one means of instruction, viz., poetry, which instructs after the fashion of a wife, and other means of instruction, such as the Vedas which instruct after the fashion of a master, or history which instructs after the fashion of a friend? That is why bliss is said to be the chief goal. In comparison with [poetry's] instruction even in all four aims of human life, the bliss which it renders is a far more important goal (Dhvānyloka 1.1 e L)

According to Kuntaka, the primary aim of kavya is to provide the readers with happiness or aakhlada.

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शब्दार्थौ सहितौ वक्रकविव्यापारशालिनि ।
बन्धे व्यवस्थितौ काव्यं तद्विदाह्लादकारिणि ॥

(Vakroktijivita 1/ 7)

(Poetry is that word and sense together enshrined in a style revealing the artistic creativity of the poet on the one hand giving aesthetic delight to the man of taste on the other.)

We have been talking about the events which led to the composition of the first kavya. Let us come back to it. So, after inventing the shloka, the sage returns to his hermitage and finds Brahma, the lord of creation, patiently awaiting him. Brahma tells Valmiki that what he has just invented is Shloka and commands him to compose the whole story of Rama in it. He also assures the sage that whatever he says in his poem will be absolutely true.

The omniscient narrator says that the whole story of Rama then appeared to Valmiki in a prophetic vision.

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ततः पश्यति धर्मात्मा तत्सर्वं योगमास्थितः ।
पुरा यत्तत्र निर्वृत्तं पाणावामलकं यथा ॥

(Rāmāyaṇa, 1.3.6॥

(With the power of yoga, the righteous (Vālmīki) saw clearly, like an amalaka fruit in the palm of the hand the entire course of events that happened in the past relating to Rāma)

He says, “tatah pashyati dharmatma tatsarvam yogmastitha, pura yatatra nirvirttam panawamlakam yatha.” It means, “with the power of yoga, the righteous Valmiki clearly saw, like an amalaka fruit in the palm of the hand, the entire course of events that happened in the

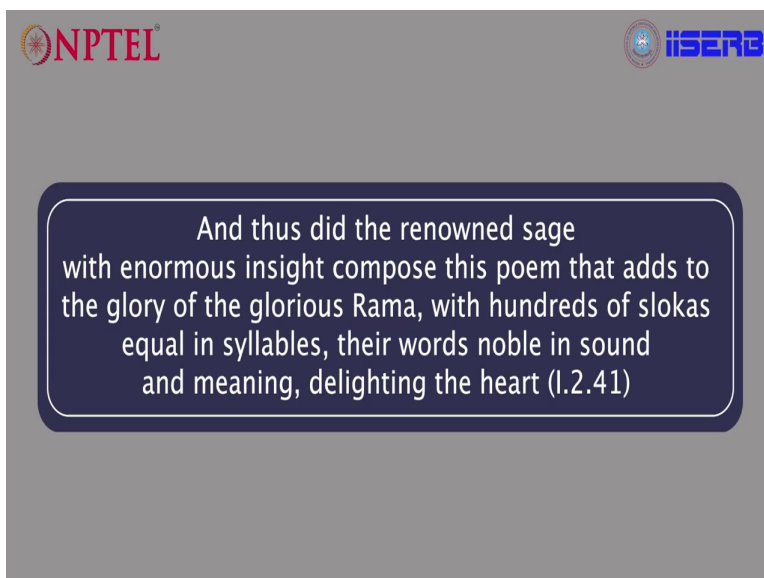
past relating to Rama.” In early India, a poet was always seen as a prophet or seer. So, one can say for certain that the idea of the poet as a seer with a prophetic vision, in fact, begins with the Ramayana.

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We need to note that in the Ramayana, Valmiki is not simply reproducing the story of Rama in the same way he heard it from the celestial sage Narada. He transformed the story of Rama in a unique fashion. The omniscient narrator in the Ramayana talks about the peculiar way in which Valmiki retold the legend of Rama in adi kavya.

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The renowned sage, with his insight unparalleled, thus composed this kavya in a lot of shlokas in order to celebrate the glory of the famous Rama. It contained symmetrically worded verses consisting of beautiful words with noble significations. Listen to the story of

Rama composed in uncomplicated compounds, conjunctions, and conjugations and in delightful words that are expressive. Here we can see Valmiki deviating from the ordinary use of language to produce the poetic language of kavya.

Though this process is unconsciously made. In other words, he defamiliarizes the story of Rama that he heard from Narada. The idea of defamiliarization as the characteristic mark of kavya also begins with the Ramayana. It is also significant that the associative term samskriddha, as an adjective qualifying speech or language, occurs for the first time in the Valmiki Ramayana, which is supposed to be composed in the last centuries before the common era.

The demon king had disguised himself as a brahmana and abducted the princess Sita, and then Hanuman, the monkey scout of prince Rama comes to see Sita at the behest of Rama. But before meeting her, he pauses for a while, thinking about what language he should use. He thinks, “if I like a brahmin, I address Sita using samskriddha speech she may think I am Ravana and will be frightened. Far better to speak a human language, one that will make sense to her.”

Though kavya is often flaunted as a unique product created by Valmiki, it is very much possible to draw a parallel between kavya and the Vedic tradition that antedated it. First of all, the use of defamiliarized language in a versified form, which was later conceptualized as the hallmark of literary language, had already been used to its optimum by many Vedic scriptures such as Rigveda Samahita.

The Vedas and the kavyas also heart shared a common purpose. In other words, both these traditions ultimately aim to transform their readers into ideal subjects. The only difference was that while the Vedas performed this deontic function explicitly, kavya served this purpose implicitly using aesthetic devices. In his commentary on Anandhavardhana’s Dhwanayaloka in the 9th century CE, Abhinava Gupta talks about the different ways in which the Vedas and kavya carry out their deontic functions.

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Nevertheless, of instruction and joy, joy is the chief goal. Otherwise, what basic difference would there be between one means of instruction, viz., poetry, which instructs after the fashion of a wife, and other means of instruction, such as the Vedas which instruct after the fashion of a master, or history which instructs after the fashion of a friend? (I.1 e L)

According to Abhinava Gupta, while *kavya* implicitly instructs after the fashion of a wife, the Vedas explicitly instruct after the fashion of a master. Abhinava's observation about the deontic function of *kavya* is not an isolated instance. We have, in fact, a host of literary theoreticians who agree with the idea that *kavya*, like the Vedic scriptures, has a didactic function to perform.

Above all, the liturgical formulas known as mantras were also referred to as 'sukti' and the Vedic hymns were called 'kavi'. We need to note that *sukti* and *kavi* are the terms that were later employed by critics and creative writers to denote respectively poetry and poet. This shows that both *kavya* and the Veda had a lot in common. Does it mean that the Veda was read poetically to relish aesthetic emotions? The answer is no.

Despite all these provinces of convergence between the Vedas and *kavya*, Sanskrit literary theoreticians never treated the Veda at par with *kavya*. The Veda was regarded as a form of textuality totally different from *kavya*. The same was the case with the mantra and the other genres of the Veda. They were not performed or read as literature at any point, nor were they selected for inclusion in literary anthologies.

This shows that in early India, the difference between the Vedas and the *kavya* was conceptualized not ontologically but functionally. To put it differently, though the Vedas shared many formal features of *kavya*, the readers of Sanskrit literary tradition never chose to read them poetically. We have discussed a lot of poems in the lecture. So, let us do a revision of the major ideas that we discussed in the lecture.

The first thing that we discussed was the social history of the Sanskrit language. We saw that before the beginning of the common era, Sanskrit was exclusively used for Vedic affairs. While Sanskrit remained a language of dharma, Prakrit was the language of mundane affairs. It was only by the beginning of the common era that Sanskrit came out of the closet of Vedic affairs to be used for worldly communicative practices like *kavya*.

According to the available historical evidence, the first extensive non-Vedic use of Sanskrit is found in the Junagadh inscription from what is now called Gujarat. It was constituted by the western Kshatrapa ruler Rudradaman to mark the reconstruction of a great water reservoir named Sudarshana, which was heavily damaged in a storm. Junagadh inscription is of particular importance in the history of the Sanskrit language.

Primarily because of two reasons. First, it was the first extensive non-Vedic use of the Sanskrit language and secondly, it was the first extensive use of standard Sanskrit in the poetic style. We have also seen that Sanskrit's use for non-Vedic affairs is also associated with the emergence of *kavya* tradition. Scholars often opine that the maximum outer limit that we can set for the beginning of *kavya* tradition is the last centuries before the advent of the common era if that early.

The text that is often recognized as *adi kavya* or first *kavya* in Sanskrit is *Ramayana*. The *Ramayana* is significant in the cultural history of Sanskrit *kavya* not only because it was the first *kavya* in Sanskrit but also because it was a meta-narrative self reflexively talking about its own genesis. In this lecture, we also took a look at the importance of the first chapter of *Ramayana*, titled *Balakanda* or the book of boyhood, as a text anticipating some of the crucial observations in *kavya shastra* about the ontology of *kavya* itself.

The first observation was that *kavya* provides the readers with delight even if the counterpart of that emotion in real life generates uneasiness in the readers in real life. The second observation was that the ontology of *kavya* was considerably different from other uses of language. In other words, the language of *kavya* needs to be distinct from the ordinary form of speech, It is also significant that the associative term, *Samskridha*, as an adjective qualifying speech or language, occurs for the first time in the *Valmiki Ramayana*.

In Sundarakanda, it was Hanuman who used the term *samskriddha*, to refer to the language of brahmins when he went to meet Sita in the Ashoka grove. The last point that we discussed in the lecture was the textual similarity between *kavya* and *Veda*. We saw that both *kavya* and the *Veda* had a lot in common. First of all, both *Veda* and *kavya* used ornate language. Secondly, both *kavya* and *Veda* aimed to instruct their readers about *dharmavidhi*.

The only difference was that while *kavya* performed this function implicitly, *Veda* did it explicitly. This shows that both *Veda* and *kavya* had a lot in common, both ontologically and teleologically. We have also seen that both Vedic hymns and creative writers were called *kavi*, and *sukti* was a term used to refer to both the liturgical formulas known as *mantras* and poetry. But in spite of all these interfaces that the *Veda* and *kavya* had in common, the *Veda* was never read poetically.

The same was the case with *mantras* and the other genres of the *Veda*. They were not performed or read as literature at any point, nor were they selected for inclusion in literary anthologies. This shows that in early India, the difference between the *Vedas* and the *kavya* was conceptualized not ontologically but functionally.