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Valmiki's Construct of Moral Living as Understood Through the *Ramayana*

As a central text of the Hindu canon, Valmiki's *Ramayana* provides much insight into the moral and ethical code of the religion. The epic follows the life of the titular Rama, seventh avatar of Vishnu, beginning with his fourteen-year exile from the kingdom of Kosala, through his journeys with his wife, Sita, and brother, Lakshmana, and ending with Rama's quest to amass an army to rescue Sita after she is abducted by the evil deity Ravana. Along the way, Rama encounters a host of characters, from humans to sapient monkeys to divine beings, who variously antagonize him or help him along his journey. Valmiki uses the details of these encounters as well as the general narrative of the story to voice a number of moral musings about the ideal Hindu life and society. Four major ethical tenets conveyed in the *Ramayana* are the importance of staying loyal to one's family, the maintenance of purity in women, humility, and offering virtue and respect even to one's enemies.

The *Ramayana*'s plot is set into motion by one of the most brazen acts of familial loyalty in literary history. As we meet his adult self, Rama is about to be crowned king of Ayodhya, enjoying vast popular support and the pride of his father and stepmother, King Dasaratha and Kaikeyi. Things change, though, when Kaikeyi's maid, Kooni, sways her towards jealousy that Rama will enjoy the royal position rather than her own biological son, Bharatha. After all, says Kooni, "'tomorrow this time, he will be a different Rama… [and his] chief hurdle will be Bharatha'" (39). This notion deeply troubles Kaikeyi, who, after a moment of deliberation in her *kopa gruha*, eventually makes her husband promise to '"banish Rama to the forests for fourteen years; and crown Bharatha and celebrate his enthronement with the arrangements you have

already made'" (43). This deeply disturbs Dasaratha, though he respects Kaikeyi's wishes - after all, if he were to reject her demand, he would be the first of his Ikshvahu lineage (descendants of the sun god) to "'go back on a promise for the sake of convenience'" (43).

Eventually, Kaikeyi and Dasaratha come to Rama to bring him the news - it should be noted, on the very day of his coronation. As Kaikeyi informs him, in front of an entire audience of distinguished guests, that he will be exiled for 14 years, Rama's response is: "'I will carry out his [Dasaratha's] wishes without question. Mother, be assured that I will not shirk. I have no interest in kingship, and no attachments to such offices, and no aversion to a forest existence'" (45). This response demonstrates a number of things about Rama's character, most notably his incredible humility (more on that later) as well as his unquestioning loyalty to his family. As Rama comes to explain to his mother Kausalya, "'my father's name is renowned for the steadfastness of his words… I am thrice blessed, to make my brother the King, to carry out my father's command, and to live in the forests. Do not let your heart grieve'" (46). Rama shows no signs of resentment of his father or stepmother at any point in the story, and it can thereby be understood that he is genuinely happy for his brother Bharatha to ascend the throne.

We see that Rama's loyalty to his family extends not only to those with whom he shares a blood relation, but also the people close to him in general, such as Kaikeyi. This loyalty is extended tenfold to Rama's wife, Sita, who accompanies him on his adventures through the forests of the Indian subcontinent (along with his brother Lakshmana) and whose kidnapping by Ravana finalizes the overarching plot of the novel. When Sita is kidnapped by Ravana, Rama instantly puts all of his and his allies' energy into finding her, and the search parties he organizes throughout the latter half of the story form much of the details of its progression. He "grieve[s] that he had not protected his wife," as, in his words, "'even a common stranger when he see[s] a

helpless woman taunted or ill treated will give his life to save her but I have failed to protect my wife, who trusted me implicitly and followed me into the wilderness; and I have failed her woefully'" (96). Rama's guilt is comprehensible (one imagines that the average person would also be distraught if they lost their spouse to an evil demon), but his interpretation of the kidnapping as a deep personal failure suggests, along with his other actions, a deep devotion to his family. His position as the heroic protagonist of the *Ramayana* suggests that his attitudes are heroic in and of themselves, and the story thereby puts an emphasis on devotion to one's family as a component of moral living.

That said, Rama's relationship with Sita is far more complex than just that of a husband who loves his wife, and it provides much insight into what Valmiki saw to be a moral standard of conduct between men and women at the time that the *Ramayana* was written. Her duty as Rama's wife and the general duty of women to fulfill a very specific gender role is routinely emphasized throughout the story. When Rama is first banished into the forest at the beginning of the story, Sita pleads for her to accompany him, but he rebuffs her: "'You have your duties to perform here, my father and mother being here. I'll be with you again.'" It is only after he describes her circumstances as "living death" that Rama allows her to come, but the interaction "disturbs" him, as he doesn't believe "this is the life for [her]" (53). This internal dialogue foreshadows some more explicit musings about the "moral life" women should lead. (It is worth noting that Rama even refuses for Sita to live with him after he rescues her at the end of the book, as it would be morally inappropriate to "admit back to the normal married fold a woman who has resided all alone in a stranger's house;" in responses, she self-immolates and Rama welcomes her back, assured of her "integrity in the presence of the world" (148-149). This

passage firmly conveys the moral obligation of women to maintain their purity, but it is adapted from “Valmiki” and is an interlude to the rest of the book.)

These ideas are restated with more blatancy during Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana’s encounter with Soorpanaka, sister of primary antagonist Ravana, in the woods. She is a rakshasa who assumes an attractive form in an attempt to mislead Rama, though her ulterior motives are abundantly clear. She initially proposes to marry him: “‘Now that I have found you,’” she says, “‘my womanhood can have its own fulfillment’” (65). Rama offers three counterpoints to this proposal, all of which reveal some very specific moral standards about womanhood and marriage in Valmiki’s eyes. First, he says, “‘I am of the warrior class, you are a brahmin, and I cannot marry you;’” next, “‘I am a human, and you are of the rakshasa class; and I cannot marry you;’” and finally, “‘a bride of your class should be presented properly, when she happens to be a sister of men of eminence such as Kubera and Ravana. You should not be offering yourself like this in matrimony’” (65). This train of thought emphasizes the importance of purity of caste and presentation for women in the context of marriage, the latter of which is explicitly tied to her relationship with the men in her life. This attitude seems to prevail among all the main characters of the story; Lakshmana spares Soorpanaka’s life when he finds out that she’s a woman (69), and Ravana tells Sita that he would have “crushed and eaten” her if not for the fact that she is a woman and that he will “die if [he doesn’t] have [her]” (87). Finally, just before his final battle with Rama, Ravana considers killing Sita, “the cause of all this misery,” but his councillor tells him plainly: “‘Don’t defeat your own purpose and integrity by killing a woman’” (138). As a whole, maintaining the purity of women is espoused as a moral virtue in every aspect of the *Ramayana*, and it can thereby be understood as a crux of the book’s ethical code.

Rama's personal humility cannot be overstated. As mentioned previously, he accepts a fourteen-year exile on the day of his coronation with no hesitation whatsoever, and is in fact pleased to know that his brother will be king instead for the time being. He also initially refuses his close companion and wife Sita from accompanying him on this exile. To top it all off, he even chastises *himself* for ever accepting the offer of kingship, telling Lakshmana that "'[he] only has [himself] to blame for accepting [his] father's offer of the throne so readily without thinking of the consequences'" (51). Rama understands that fate has decreed his circumstances and thus accepts them unconditionally; after all, he says, "'is… anger, which seeks to destroy all firm relationships, with nurturing?'" (52). Rama's control of his own emotions, cosmic understanding, and complement detachment from worldly concerns is almost unbelievable, and it cements him as the moral paragon of the story and a beacon of virtuous conduct and humility as a whole.

Valmiki conveys this emphasis on the virtue of humility not only through Rama, as someone who exemplifies the idea, but through Ravana, who does the exact opposite. Ravana is braggadocious and self-aggrandizing until the very end of his life, which, deserved as his attitudes may be considering the extent of his power, is punished by the narrative of the story. He shoots down any attempt of civil discussion on Rama's part and consistently demeans him due to his status as a "petty human being" (142). As their final battle wages, Ravana's more hotheaded colleagues make fools of themselves via haste decision-making, such as Mohadara, the "giant among giants," who made straight for Rama on the battlefield as "he wanted to have the honour of a direct encounter with Rama himself;" he is left "lifeless and shapeless on the field" (141). Ravana, to his credit, is less nearsighted, but his "desperation" in fighting Rama leads to his demise as well. As the narration explains, Ravana "had prayed for indestructibility of his several

heads and arms, [but] he had forgotten to strengthen his hearth," and this ended his "great campaign" (146). Ravana's blind hubris ultimately led to his defeat by Rama's humble character, and it is via the resolution of this conflict that the *Ramayana* conveys its message on the moral importance of staying humble.

Rama also extends a great deal of respect to almost everyone he encounters throughout the story. Aside from having perhaps the longest temper known to humankind (again - exiled on his coronation and he had no objections?), there are individual instances of his righteousness which are particularly interesting in that they say something specific about Valmiki's ideals of moral living. Rama's first meeting with Soorpanaka is notable not just for his recognition of her womanhood but his unwavering calmness in addressing her. As Soorpanaka berates Sita and calls Rama her "lover," and even in the face of so-called "incalculable evil," Rama doesn't even threaten the monster, instead offering a gentle plea: "'Do nothing that will bring on retribution and suffering. Please be gone before my brother Lakshmana notices you. He will be angry. Please go away quickly before he comes" (67). Even after she insults him, calling his attitude "thoughtless," Rama simply "[walks] back calmly and gracefully into his ashram" (68). Rama's treatment of Soorpanaka is indicative of at the very least a baseline respect for all creatures, even those who very clearly wish malice upon him and the people he loves.

Notably, Rama extends this same virtue even to Ravana, the ultimate antagonist of the story and the rakshasa who has abducted his wife. The entire latter part of the story's plot is centered around Rama trying to find Sita and eventually amassing an army to wage war against the island of Lanka, over which Ravana rules. At every stage of their battle, though, Rama treats Ravana with absolute respect. He begins their war by sending Ravana a messenger, Angada, who assures him peace and forgiveness if Sita is restored (134). As their direct battle begins, Ravana

demeans Rama ("'This mere mortal Rama is of no account…'" (141)); Rama, however, brings no joy or spirit of revenge into the fighting, but in fact spends his time thinking about if some strategic action might be "one way of saving Ravana… [as] it was possible that Ravana might have a change of heart" (141). Rama understands throughout the entire fight that this battle is only the most extreme action that has to be taken to secure Sita's fate, and it brings him no emotional reassurance. He also has enough respect for Ravana that he acknowledges his foe's "humanity" (whatever the equivalent term for a deity may be) and his positive traits even as he belittles Rama and tries to take his life.

Rama's attitude is further exemplified when Ravana collapses in a faint from a barrage of Rama's arrows. Matali, Rama's charioteer, whispers to him: "'This is the time to finish off that demon;'" Rama, however, puts away his bow, as it would not be "'fair warfare to attack a man who is in a faint…. [I will] let him recover'" (146). Suffice to say, Rama eventually wins the battle, vanquishing the great foe for whom a good portion of the book has been chronicling. He spends a moment admiring the "extraordinary workmanship" of Ravana's armor, and then notices a large scar on the villain's back, to his "great shock." "'Perhaps this is not an episode of glory for me,'" Rama says, "'as I seem to have killed an enemy who was turning his back and retreating. Perhaps I was wrong in shooting the Brahmasthra into him'" (147). When Ravana's brother, Vibishana, explains to Rama that it is an old scar, Rama accepts the explanation and continues: "'Honour him and cherish his memory so that his spirit may go to heaven, where he has his place. And now I will leave you to attend to his funeral arrangements, befitting his grandeur'" (147). It may seem strange at first for Rama to highlight the "grandeur" of the rakshasa who kidnapped his wife and waged war against him and his closest allies only moments ago, but this is just another testament to Rama's own honor. He is virtuous enough to look past

Ravana's many flaws and see the supposed inherent goodness of his character, which, Rama understands, deserves respect.

Rama is clearly a meritorious person by the definition of the book, as he is the protagonist and almost always the "straight man" responding to side characters' morally dubious actions. His forgiveness of Ravana (to some extent) conveys an emphasis from Valmiki on exuding virtue and respect towards even one's enemies and, in fact, all people in general. Similarly, Rama's unwavering humility, understanding of the purity of women, and unquestioning loyalty to his family and ancestry all suggest a consistent moral code hinging upon the idea that one must divorce themselves from the material world to attain spiritual enlightenment, and that this is a good thing to do. This is in line with the Hindu idea of *atman* and the universality of the ability to attain *moksha*, such as that which is understood by the school of Advaita Vedanta. It can thus be said that Rama's universal application of respect and dignity conveys Valmiki's ideals on living an ideal Hindu life in both material and spiritual terms. The *Ramayana* constructs a standard for moral living within the context of Hindu spirituality through its depiction of familial and ancestral loyalty, the upholding of supposed feminine purity, understanding one's place in the universe, and treating all others with this understanding in mind.

Works Cited

Narayan, R. K., and Vālmīki. *The Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic*. Penguin Books, 2006.