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Reimagining Itihāsa: Narrative Architecture & Milieu in Amish Tripathi's *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*

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Abstract: The first novel in the Ram Chandra Series, *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*, ingeniously reinterpreted the Indian epic, the *Ramayana*, for Alpha generation, adding an overlay of morality and contemporary issues while maintaining the integrity of Valmiki's original work. In contrast to Valmiki's *Ramayana*, where Ram is an avatar, Amish portrays him as a mortal prince, idealistic and conscientious, who is shaped by hardships. As the plot unfolds, the author skilfully reveals each character gradually, layer by layer. The novel employs a multilinear narrative, which Amish mentions in his note on the narrative structure. Each volume explores a protagonist's backstory, culminating in their union in the final book of the series' conclusion. This paper examines the locales and narrative devices employed in this novel.

Keywords: Amish Tripathi, Narrative Techniques, *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*, Retellings of Itihāsa, Settings.

Introduction

Literature has always been influenced by mythology in all cultures across the globe. Indian literature is no exception to this. Various Indian authors have used the timeless Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, to develop their imaginary worlds. These classics have laid a solid foundation of Indian culture and civilisation. They are known as Itihāsa (the word *Itihāsa*, इतिहास, is derived from the phrase *iti ha āsa* इति ह आस, which means "so indeed it was"). It suggests the core element of truth. Epics like these unveil ideas and archetypes from which society might gain knowledge and insight. These texts are an integral part of the Indian cultural ethos. According to M. H. Abrams,

A myth is one story in mythology – a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives (230-32).

Many authors have given fresh perspectives to these epics through their modern retellings like Sita by Bhanumathi Narasimhan, Asura by Anand Neelakantan, Prince of Ayodhya: Ramayan Series by Ashoka K. Banker etc.

In literature, we have different types of genres, and each genre has a distinct narrative technique. As mentioned by Abrams, a narrative is a tale that involves incidents, characters, and the actions and words of those characters which are either narrated in prose or verse. Some literary genres, such as novels, short stories, epics, and romance in verse, are explicit narratives stated by narrators (173). The study of techniques in narration, devices, and structures to examine the construction, reception, and interpretation is called narratology. The term narratology was coined by the Franco-Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov (1939) in 1969 in his *Grammaire du Décaméron*; it is an anglicised version of the French word "narratologie" (Cuddon 458). It is the study of narrative techniques, methods, and structures used in different genres and media (Prince 3). It traces how narratives are structured, transmitted, and interpreted and explores the relationships between the narrator, the audience, and the narrative itself (Genette 10).

The narrative technique is a method in which some incidents are connected by a sequence of events and are presented in front of the reader for their literary pleasure. Retellings allow an author to present their ideas in different forms and shapes. Every writer has their own technique and style for writing. Right technique helps the reader to interpret the imaginative work and its reality. These devices help the reader to travel and discover different identities, varieties of human experiences, adventures, and societies. As Mark Schorer opines, when we discuss technique, we are discussing almost everything. Since technique is the only instrument available to the writer for discovering, investigating, developing, communicating, and ultimately judging his subject. It is the mechanism by which a writer's experience, which is his subject matter, forces him to evaluate it (67).

Amish's unique storytelling approach, has always grabbed the attention of the diverse audience (TNN). In his first book, *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* of the *Ram Chandra Series*, he retold the story of the *Ramayana* from a human point of view, including the different elements of law, politics, philosophy, human emotions, and human relations. Amish has made the narrative technique peculiar by including Sanskrit-inspired terms and modern scenarios, producing a sui generis reading experience. For example, this Sanskrit hymn from the *Isha Vasya Upanishad* (17th verse), recited during the cremation of Roshini,

वायुरनिलममृतमथेदं भस्मान्तं शरीरम्।
ॐ क्रतो स्मर कृतं स्मर क्रतो स्मर कृतं स्मर॥

Vayur anilam amritam; Athedam bhasmantam shariram (168).

As translated by Sudhir Anand, the soul is always doing deeds. It is not made up of physical matter. It is immortal. On the other hand, this body turns to ashes (102).

Similarly, the gate of Mithila in Amish's novel had this inscription in Sanskrit, which means, A fool is worshipped in his home, a chief is worshipped in his village, a king is worshipped in his kingdom, and a knowledgeable person is worshipped everywhere.

स्वगृहे पूज्यते मूर्खः स्वग्रामे पूज्यते प्रभुः।
स्वदेशे पूज्यते राजा विद्वान्सर्वत्र पूज्यते॥

Swagruhe Pujyate Murkhaha; Swagraame Pujyate Prabhu

Swadeshe Pujyate Raja; Vidvaansarvatra Pujyate (219-220).

Taken from *Chanakya Niti*, these lines narrate the virtues of life. Words like *dharma*, *gurukul*, *maharishi*, *angvastram*, *janau*, *pushpak viman*, *suchi vyuha*, '*Ayodhyatah Vijetaarah*', '*Ekam*', etcetera, parse ancient myths with the modern world, making a nonpareil narration. This paper intends to explore the various narrative techniques employed by the author in the novel *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* to make the story interesting.

Narrative Arc

Ram, son of Dashrath and Kaushalya, is born on the day when Raavan defeated King Dashrath in the battle of Karachapa. Dashrath's defeat leads to a frayed relationship between Ram and Dashrath.

It was widely held that all the good deeds of Ram's life would not succeed in washing away the 'taint of 7,032', the year that, according to the calendar of Lord Manu, Dashrath was defeated and Ram was born (42).

Ram grows up as an unloved and unvalued child. Under Sage Vashishtha's guidance, he learns the philosophy of Dharma and techniques of warfare. After returning to Ayodhya, Ram proves to be an excellent administrator. However, misfortune strikes when Roshini, the daughter of Manthara, who is like a sister to Ram, is brutally gang-raped and murdered. He adheres to the law, executing the culprits but sparing the minor named Dhenuka, who is later killed secretly by Bharat, son of Kaikeyi, staining Ram's principles.

Later, Ram is appointed as the crown prince, but his fate changes when Sage Vishwamitra seeks help to combat the asura's attack. During this expedition, Sage Vishwamitra insinuates Ram to be the next Vishnu. In Mithila, Ram encounters Sita, the adopted daughter of King Janak, and they share the common bond of commitment towards Dharma. In the swayamvar, Ram successfully strings the bow 'Pinaka' and wins her, leaving Raavan ferocious about his victory. Later, Raavan attacks Mithila, prompting Ram to use the forbidden 'Asuraastra' to defeat Raavan's army. Violating the divine law, Ram exiled himself for 14 years as an atonement. He said, 'I broke Lord Rudra's law. And this is his stated punishment' (288).

Sita and Lakshman accompany Ram in his exile, where Sita secretly allies with Jatayu, a Naga leader, for protection. Jatayu also provides an anti-ageing elixir, Somras, to them. They encounter Vibhishan and Shurpanakha, Raavan's siblings, in the forest. A conflict arises when Shurpanakha attempts to harm Sita, leading Lakshman to impulsively cut off her nose. Fearing Raavan's wrath, all three relocated themselves. One day, Ram and Lakshman hear Sita shouting for Ram. While returning, Jatayu and his forces were found slaughtered. Jatayu, on his deathbed, reveals that Raavan retaliated by abducting Sita. Fumed with rage, Ram resolves to rescue Sita. The story ends with Ram watching Raavan's Pushpak Viman disappearing into the sky, setting the stage for his epic journey.

Ram looked up and shot an arrow at the Pushpak Vimaan, which was rapidly ascending into the sky. It was a shot of impotent rage, for the flying vehicle was already soaring high above. 'Sitaaa!' (354).

Scenic Backdrop

The novel's plot is set in India, somewhere near the Godavari River, around 3400 BCE. The three characters hiding in exile reside in the Dandak Forest. Amish beautifully paints a word portrait of the forest and its thriving ecosystem before the readers. The act of hunting deer and various interactions of the main lead with nature in the novel play a highly symbolic role, where the specific traits of character development take place. Devoid of royal facilities, they have adopted the ways of hunters and gatherers for survival. Ram hunted the deer for their food; his prayer to the departed soul of the 'beast' reflects the core values of the protagonist and the potential of becoming a great leader.

'Forgive me for killing you, O noble beast,'... 'May your soul find purpose again, while your body sustains my soul'(3).

Across cultures, people searching for self-discovery visit secluded places to identify the true goal of their life, i.e., their ultimate aim, and heavenly enlightenment. Similarly, Ram's journey into exile indicates his movement away from the comforts of the palace and diving deeper into the conflict with his destiny. The dense forest of Dandak is a place of exile where the protagonist's life takes a major turn, leaving behind the stage for the future action in the upcoming parts of the book. The journey of the forest will unfold the real essence of his character and prepares him for the leadership and trials that he will face in the novel (2-7).

Just like Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster, and Chinua Achebe, Amish follows the pattern of introducing political themes, apart from revealing the character and the setting of various places in novels. For example, the story goes back to a flashback from the second chapter where a battle took place, deciding the destiny of Ram.

Thirty-three years earlier, Port of Karachapa, Western Sea, India (8).

The Battle of Karachapa sets the background of the whole novel and foreshadows the protagonist's destiny. Raavan defeats the old king Dashrath, and enraged Dashrath blames his defeat on the newborn Ram for his unfaithful destiny. Thus, locations are crucial in determining the protagonist's fate.

Dashrath knew that he'd lost the battle. He also knew that he'd rather die than face defeat... Don't let me live to bear this, Lord Surya. Let me die. Let me die... (25-26).

Picturesque descriptions of architectural marvels like Ayodhya are crafted adroitly by Amish in his novels, generating a sensory detail of sound and sight. The strokes of the sketch stretch into multiple pages, rendering the magnificence and opulence. For example, the Grand Canal was more than fifty kilometres long and went around the third and outermost wall of Ayodhya. It was also incredibly wide, stretching across the banks for around two and a half kilometres (34-35).

Various geographical settings like Ayodhya and Dandakaranya define and shape the character of Ram. Amish not only gives a glimpse of the setting but also peeps into Ram's psyche and brings out the different facets of his personality depending upon the socio-cultural situations. Ram is not only illustrated as a great son, but he also possesses the qualities of being a great leader of the world. Later on, Amish describes the royal garden of Ayodhya in the following manner.

The garden had been laid out in the style of a botanical reserve, filled with flowering trees from not only the Sapt Sindhu but other great empires around the world as well (104).

Similarly, his descriptions of the imperial aesthetics of Mithila allude to the powerful character of Sita. Brought up in the royal palace of King Janak, Sita enjoyed all kinds of luxuries. She received a good education and became competent in all forms of art.

Beyond the Bees Quarter, the city of Mithila was relatively more organised, with well laid out streets... temporary stalls occupying the centre, offering a low-cost option (228).

Amish creates a world similar to ours, and he briefly refers to actual places like Branga, Saraiya, Isla village, Sankashya, Agastyakootam, South Kosala, Meluha, Dwarka, Dwaravati, Panchavati, and Pariha. He captures the attention of the readers by creating a sense of reality and serenity. While describing the freshwater ecosystem around rivers like the Sarayu, Ganga, Shon, Vaitarni, Gandaki, Narmada, and Godavari rivers, Amish has also vividly outlined the native species of flora and fauna in detail in this novel. The location and character of Amish's novel are always interconnected, indicating the structure of their life and future. His characters are deeply integrated with the setting, and actual behaviour gets revealed around these geographical settings.

Observational Perspective

Various complexities of plot and structure are decoded by point of view, which helps the reader to understand the text in three-dimensional form. Amish has made use of multiple voices in narrating the story of Ram, prince of the Ikshvaku clan. The story predominantly follows Ram's perspective, but Amish has dexterously used the principle of 'authorial neutrality'.

Gustave Flaubert, the first modern theorist, in his letter to Louise Colet, dated December 1852 quoted by John Halperin in *A Critical Introduction to the Theory of the Novel: New Essays* (1974) advocates the principle of authorial neutrality: "The author, in his work, must be like God in the Universe, present everywhere but visible nowhere (2-11)".

Amish uses authorial neutrality to present a steady and impartial retelling of the *Ramayana*, where characters and incidents are portrayed with a nuanced outlook. This technique allows readers to form their own viewpoint instead of enforcing one particular moral or ideology. It encourages analytical thinking among the readers and makes the story more relevant to the modern-day audience.

For example, conflicts in thoughts between the brothers are depicted through multiple perspectives, ensuring that no one's opinion is taken as gospel. When Ram decided not to execute Dhenuka because of the law, Bharat himself took charge of executing Dhenuka, thereby taking revenge for his sister's rape and murder. As both arguments are equally valued, it enables the readers to sympathise with one another. Moral quandaries are left up for interpretation since the story avoids making absolute assessments of good and bad.

Amish, through this novel, raises various political, philosophical, societal, and ethical dilemmas without providing definite answers, leaving the readers to analyse critically. For instance, the masculine and feminine societies are illustrated briefly in the novel. The author maintains narrative neutrality while indicating the results of governance choices in Ayodhya and Mithila.

This novel has a nonlinear narrative structure and multiple viewpoints throughout the series to flesh out the motivations and backgrounds of different characters. The opening lines of the novel are:

Ram crouched low as he bent his tall, lean and muscular frame. He rested his weight on his right knee as he held the bow steady...He didn't want his muscles to tire out. He had to wait for the perfect moment. It must be a clean strike (1).

This is third-person subjective narration describing the character's physical appearance, feelings, and thoughts. As pointed out earlier, multiple voices or hyperlinks are used by Amish. The novel reveals the various layers of the character one by one. Amish himself has mentioned in the note on the narrative structure in this book that he has been inspired by a storytelling technique called hyperlink or multilinear narrative, where different characters are connected, and each part of the series has its own character's adventure and riveting backstory.

George Henry Lewes, in his book *Principles of Success in Literature* (1865), speaks of "dramatic ventriloquism", i.e., how the novelist can make his characters reveal themselves. Amish has employed dramatic ventriloquism and third-person subjective narration to convey the character's thoughts and emotions. Characters' innermost thoughts and feelings are explored while exhibiting their personalities, which aid in understanding their psyches. For example, to present Ram's unshakeable dedication to Dharma, Amish showcases his dialogue with Guru Vashishta.

'One odd example, out of context, doesn't justify lying, Guruji,' Ram wouldn't give up. 'Mother lied once to save me from Father's anger; ... But after that incident, he stopped seeing her completely. He cut her off. (59-60).

Similarly, Ram was awarded the title of 'the Law Giver' by his subjects. The title gets justified on that night when he comes late to the city gate of Ayodhya and is given access by the gatekeeper. He reprimanded the gatekeeper for violating the law, which stated that no one was allowed to enter the gates at night. That night, he slept outside the city and entered the following morning. Being the King's firstborn offspring, he could have easily entered the city, and no one would have stopped him. "Ram himself repeatedly demonstrated that the law applied equally to him" (117). Readers are allowed to empathise with the characters through the presentation of their thoughts, which enables them to form a strong emotional bond. Other characters are also revealed through indirect conversation.

Comic relief as a technique is used in the novel, where Amish has beautifully described the bonding between the four brothers through various humorous scenes while balancing the novel's serious themes like philosophy, governance, law and ethical dilemmas, etcetera. For instance, when Bharat introduced his beloved to his elder brother Ram, the humorous conversation between them humanises these mythical characters,

making it relatable to the readers and dispelling the fantastical atmosphere that mythological characters exude. The brothers' banter and teasing illustrate the normal dynamics of sibling relationships.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that I want a woman who is better than I am; a woman who will compel me to bow my head in admiration...Ram laughed aloud as he pushed Bharat playfully (79).

These instances demonstrate the brothers' sincere love for one another despite their unique discrepancies in temperament and viewpoint. The healthy, brotherly bond is evident in every situation, making legendary characters more relatable and complex.

Conclusion

Amish offers a new retelling of ancient accounts by competently fusing mythological elements with modern narrative approaches. The saga of Ram's journey of duty, morality, and leadership is both familiar and innovatively reimagined, engaging new generation readers while retaining its timeless essence. The use of non-linear and multi-perspective narration is used to amplify the text's depth and interest. Readers are transported to the majesty of Ayodhya, Mithila, and beyond by the vivid setting. This gives the narrative a timeless yet familiar atmosphere and complements the narrative's moral and emotional undertones.

The characters are well-crafted, combining legendary qualities with human fragility, making it both relatable and fascinating. The third-person omniscient point of view offers a comprehensive framework for exploring the character's inner conflicts and motivations. The use of dramatic ventriloquism allows characters to express unique perspectives that resonate with the readers. Additionally, authorial neutrality stands out as a hallmark of Amish's narrative style, allowing the reader to decode the characters and events without overt authorial prejudice. *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* bridges the gap between ancient mythology and contemporary fiction by fusing classical themes with modern storytelling styles. This narrative approach not only preserves the *Ramayana*'s cultural legacy but also ensures its continued relevance for upcoming generations, making it a captivating work that invites contemplation and discourse.

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