

# Re-tellings of epics trivialising cultural icons

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The recent debate on the movie *Aadipurush* brings to mind the genre of Indian English literature based on stories from our revered epics Ramayana and Mahabharata as also from the Puranas. It should be a matter of pride for us to see such stories getting widely circulated through fictional works of our own countrymen, but sadly, these stories are being re-told in a way that creates a totally different picture of revered characters and their actions. This trend gathered force particularly after the rise of Indian English fiction in the world market. In an attempt to cash in on the surge, many people felt enthused to become authors. Stories from the classics provided ready-made material which had to be tempered with to show the play of imagination without any regard for the cultural and spiritual worth of the original narratives.

Take for example, the novel *Siege of Mithila* by Ashok Banker, published way back in 2002. It starts with the student life of Lord Rama and his brother Laxman, goes on to describe Ram's marriage at the Swayamvar and ends with surprisingly, attack on Mithila by the demon king Ravana. This is not the only surprising deviation from the mainstream narrative, there are scores of other invented stories. In one such story involving the Swayamvar, we read about Ravana breaking the bow and winning Sita who, the writer says, was notorious for turning down suitors by the hundreds! When king Janak resists, Ravana holds him by the throat at which Sita begs for her father's life and agrees to be Ravana's wife. However, the situation is saved by the two brothers and then Sita is won by Rama. Ravana disappears but not before warning of seizing Mithila by the evening and then raping the kingdom and its princess Sita!

Similarly, in Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* published in 2011, Lord Shiva is presented as the leader of a tribe called Gunas, who live at the foot of Mount Kailash in Tibet. Nandi is not the bull on which Shiva rides; rather it is the captain from another clan

who sermonizes an ignorant Shiva on the importance of the word 'Aum'. Shiva is also uncouth and dirty tribal chief who has to be made presentable by a beautician to be brought into the presence of a Suryavanshi king!

In Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* (2017), the story of Surpanakha, Ravana's sister is told. She had a crush on Lord Rama but was diverted to brother Laxman, which is common knowledge, but here Surpanakha is re-born in Dvapara Yuga as Kubja and Lord Krishna is another avatar of Vishnu and so is taken as the reincarnation of Rama. Since he had rejected her in Treta Yuga, he wants to make amends now, and therefore, turns her into a sweet beauty! The story continues into Kali Yuga and it is explained that many centuries later, Surpanakha would be reborn as Phulwati, daughter of the chief of a clan and meet Lakshman who would be in love with PubG!

There are many others who have taken flights of fancy and published novels wherein the hallowed characters from our revered epics have been presented as characters from a fantasy film. In the name of re-tellings, what we find are distortions of narratives into titillating stuff. All sorts of writers are trying their hand at it because this kind of fiction is the fastest expanding genre today and there is big money to be made here.

The denigration of divine characters and the corrupted versions of the hallowed epics surely pinches those who believe in the divinity of Rama and Krishna. Surprisingly, it is only the Hindus who have to put up with this trivialization of their scriptural texts and deities. The question that needs to be asked is if there is no regard for the sentiments of the majority of people living in the country?

The writers take shelter behind the argument that since there have been so many versions of Ramayana after Rishi Valmiki — there are Ramayanas written by Agastya, Kampan, Tulsidas, et al — and so they have every right to present their version. What these people gloss over is the fact that the versions that are venerated are the writings of sages and saintly people who have re-told these stories as devotees, and so their versions do not pinch the believers. The problem lies in the blind application of western yardstick to something that has been produced in a different — here, Indian context. It would be gross reductionism to apply the Marxist theory of discourse to the 'production' of a 'text'. The power relations do not fashion the text here because the sages were not after money. They were spiritual adventurers, who had broken bonds with society in the true tradition of ascetics. Indian myths are also structured on the clash between virtue and vice but ultimately it is the virtue that must win in the Indian cultural context.

The young generation being fed on such deviant versions of epics as also on the stuff like the cartoon serials on TV may start believing Rama and Krishna as cardboard characters like Batman and Superman, and not as our cultural icons. Are we sure there is no need for any icons and ideals at all in a society which is witness to constant degradation of values in every field?

END OF ARTICLE

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