A Comparative Study: The Narrative Structure of The Iliad and The Ramayana

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Abstract

This research paper explores the similar narrative structures used in *The Iliad,* by Homer and *The Ramayana*, by Valmiki, using theories of narratology. The paper also examines the influence of oral tradition on the composition and transmission of both *The Iliad* and *The Ramayana*, highlighting the use of formulas and repetition in their storytelling. Structuralism is applied to identify binary oppositions, archetypal characters, and narrative motifs in both epics, underscoring their fundamental similarities in storytelling. By using theories such as oral-formulaic theory and binary opposition, this paper brings two texts that were distinctively set in two parts of the world under one umbrella. While acknowledging differences arising from language and historical context, this abstract demonstrates how the combination of New Historicism, narratology, and structuralism provides a comprehensive analysis of epic poems across cultures.

Keywords: Oral-formulaic theory, binary oppositions, structuralism, narratology, tragedy and new historicism

Introduction

The Iliad and The Ramayana

In order to get a more comprehensive understanding of texts such as *The Iliad* And *The Ramayana*, new historicism and narratology can be applied together. Despite them being distinct approaches, they are not mutually exclusive, and can complement each other.Essentially, New Historicism explores the larger historical and cultural backdrop, whereas narratology mostly concentrates on the formal components of a tale. When combined, they enable academics and critics to examine how the social, political, and cultural context of a text's writing influences and is itself reflected in the narrative decisions made within it. This dual method takes into account a

literary work's historical significance in addition to its structural elements, enriching the interpretation of the work. *The Iliad* and *The Ramayana* are two epic poems that are not appropriate to combine under one heading due to their significant differences, which range from language to historical context.On the contrary , a primary goal of this paper is to find similarities between these two texts by examining their respective narrative styles. One can draw comparisons between the two epic poems,Homer's *The Iliad* and Valmiki's *The Ramayana* to demonstrate how much historical context influences narrative style. Although the precise era of composition is unknown, Homer's works, such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, are believed to have been written in ancient Greece. While some academics claim an earlier or later date, others contend that these poems were written around the eighth century BCE(1100 - 800 BCE), during the Greek dark age, a time after the fall of the Mycenaean civilization when culture declined. *The Iliad* incorporates aspects of both the Homeric and Mycenaean worlds, and the events it tells take place during the Trojan War. Some of the themes and settings in the epic are believed to have been influenced by the Mycenaean civilization, which fell apart around the 12th century BCE. The decline of organized governmental systems and the decline in literacy rates defined this age. By applying new historicism to interpret the text, the main plot and setting of *The Iliad* are the Trojan War and its aftermath. The battle between the Greeks (Achaeans) and the Trojans, especially the siege of Troy, is the main subject of the poem. The characters' actions and events are placed within the larger context of the war. For the most part, the characters in *The Iliad* are leaders, fighters, and heroes from both the Greek and Trojan sides of the war. Their deeds, intentions, and outcomes are intricately linked to the conflict. The poem emphasizes the heroic mentality of the era, in which fighters pursue honor and glory in combat.

In Hindu mythology and literature, *The Ramayana* is among the most significant and highly regarded books. Its composition is thought to have taken place over several centuries, with various retellings and adaptations in different eras. It is customarily credited to the sage Valmiki. Since *The Ramayana* has been passed down orally and through written texts for centuries, its historical background is multifaceted and spans a great deal of time.Most likely, the later Vedic and post-Vedic eras of ancient Indian history are when *The Ramayana* first appeared. It represents the change from ritualistic hymns to narrative and mythological storytelling during the Vedic to epic tradition.An important part of ancient Indian society was the concept of dharma, or duty and righteousness, which is portrayed in the epic poem. It represents the roles, social mores, and hierarchies that people are expected to play within the caste system.Hindu religious and mythological traditions, which include the worship of gods like Lord Rama (a manifestation of Lord Vishnu) and Sita, are incorporated into the *The Ramayana*. It combines concepts of karma, rebirth, and liberation (moksha) with aspects of Indian cosmology.

Comparative Study

Aristotle, with whom all discussions related to poetry must begin, gives a definition of Epic poetry by saying that it should have a grand and serious theme, poetic diction, structure, poetic diction and it should be written in a narrative style, giving importance to the Hero. In his essay Poetics, Aristotle considers Homer as being pre-eminent from the poets who combined dramatic form with the art of imitation (Poetics, IV-9). The first and the most prominent similarity

between Homer and Valmiki, when studied under the teachings of Aristotle is their need to bring in tragic elements in their works. Aristotle defines tragedy as:

> "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." (Poetics IV)

By incorporating elements of tragedy into epic poetry, Homer and Valmiki show the inevitable nature of Gods by painfully gracing the strings of emotions in the reader's mind. John Gassner in his introduction to Butcher's translation of Poetics writes that "Tragic art predicates the special universality of man's capacity for greatness of soul and mind in spite of his 'hamartia' or the flaw in his nature". In other words an epic increases the essence of tragedy that the author tries to put forth. Here, *The Ramayana* and *The Iliad*, though written in quite different cultural contexts, are united in their portrayal of the fundamental grandeur and nobility of a man set against the utterly tragic circumstances of human existence. Be it the quest to attain the goal of becoming a great Homeric man or to attain dharma, both Homer and Valmiki created characters that either overcome or succumb to the tragic events.

Although *The Iliad* and *The Ramayana* are epic poems from two very different parts of the world with very little in common in terms of language, culture, or historical context, they are similar in many other ways due to the storytelling devices employed by Homer and Valmiki. There is a significant difference between these two texts when viewed through the lens of new historicism, but narratology only makes a thin distinction between them.

A kind of human communication known as oral tradition, or oral lore, involves the oral transfer of ideas, knowledge, and cultural artifacts from one generation to the next. Folktales, ballads, chants, prose, or poetry are among the forms of communication that take place via speech or song. Oral traditions are "the means by which knowledge is reproduced, preserved and conveyed from generation to generation," according to academics Renée Hulan and Renate Eigenbrod. Oral tradition had ensured that the Greeks knew a great deal about the Trojan war by the time of Homer. They are raised on tales of Achilles and the famous Trojan War. Homer created *The Iliad* by incorporating the oral traditions of the local populace, which emerged around 800 BCE. The transmission of the epic poetry was greatly aided by the oral storytelling tradition of ancient Greece. This oral history that had been passed down for years, if not centuries, before Homer's time was being written down. In the Indian context it is likely that *The Ramayana's* oral traditions predate Valmiki's composition of it. Oral storytelling was most likely how the tale of Rama, Sita, and the other characters was passed down through the generations. There may have been regional variations in the story, and Valmiki's *Ramayana* is regarded as a codified collection and improvement of these extant oral traditions.

Milman Parry, whose research concentrated on the oral composition of epic poetry, is one of the major figures in the development of Oral Tradition Theory. Parry and his pupil Albert Lord carried out pioneering studies on the oral traditions surrounding *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*, two of the Homeric epics. They put forth the "oral-formulaic" theory, which postulates that the repeated

phrases or word groups used in these ancient Greek poems were used in their composition and oral transmission.

This theory was developed by Milman Parry to analyze the works of Homer, but it can also be used to analyze *The Ramayana*. Although the theory of oral-formulaic is more closely linked to Homeric epics such as *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and its relevance to *The Ramayana* is not as clear-cut, there are certain aspects of *The Ramayana* that correspond with specific aspects of the theory. The main feature of oral-formulaic theory is the use of formulas.A formula is a set of words or a phrase that is used repeatedly to express a certain central idea under the same metrical conditions. The theory holds that oral poets in prehistoric times built their stories using formulas as building blocks. These equations offered a versatile and adjustable structure for writing epic poetry in live performances. Many formulas are used repeatedly in *The Iliad* to describe particular actions or objects. For example, the term "swift-footed Achilles" is a cliché that is used frequently throughout the epic to characterize the hero Achilles. This standard and easily recalled way to refer to the character is provided by this formulaic expression. When it comes to *The Ramayana*, Lord Rama is often referred to as "Maryada Purushottama," which translates to "the best among those who uphold righteousness." This formulaic expression serves as a consistent way to highlight Rama's virtuous character.

The second crucial element is the use of repetition. Repetition can be seen in *The Iliad* by the frequent usage of phrases or lines. One formula that appears repeatedly in *The Iliad* is the description of the morning as having "rosy-fingered dawn." This poem's rhythmic quality is enhanced by repetition, which also helps with memorization. Valmiki knowingly or unknowingly uses repetition in *The Ramayana* to construct the story based on the oral traditions that existed.The story of Hanuman's oceanic leap is told in great detail in the Sundara Kanda (Book of Sundara) of *The Ramayana*. The refrain "Bhima Rupa Dhari Asura Samhari" (Bearer of a formidable form, destroyer of demons) is repeated several times in the story, giving it a rhythmic touch. These terms such as "Rosy- fingered dawn" and "Bhima Rupa Dhari Asura Samhari" were terms that people were already familiar with and the use of these in epic poems helps the reader to connect to the text because of the familiarity it radiated.

According to Milman Parry, Oral poets were regarded as adept improvisers who could create and modify stories in the moment during performances using a set of conventional formulas. Even though some set formulas were used, the particulars and combinations. For example, The details of individual fights and the characters' emotions can change in *The Iliad* battle scenes. The poet can modify the details to fit the current context because of the wider framework. Likewise, *The Ramayana's* more inclusive structure permits retellings and adaptations in a variety of cultural contexts. Various regional adaptations of *The Ramayana* may retain the main plot while adding distinctive details or emphasizing particular parts of the story.

According to the theory, oral tradition is a dynamic, ever-evolving process that is influenced by oral performance's communal aspect. Every performance may have changes and adaptations, but the act of performance is essential to the tradition's survival. The fact that different *The Iliad* manuscripts have different versions of the same passages speaks to the oral nature of the

tradition. Variations between different renditions of the same episode may indicate that the poem was passed down orally and changed slightly when it was performed in various contexts. Oral traditions have passed down *The Ramayana* in a variety of ways, such as retellings, performances, and recitations. *The Ramayana* is still performed and altered in a variety of cultural contexts, as seen in the practice of Ramlila, which involves a dramatic reenactment of selected episodes.

Some structural similarities and elements can be found when comparing *The Ramayana* and *The Iliad* from a structuralist viewpoint. As a literary theory, structuralism is concerned with locating and examining the fundamental patterns and structures that reshape a story. Binary oppositions, or pairs of opposing ideas or components that add to a text's meaning, are emphasized by structuralism. These binary opposites help to thicken the plot and help in the better construction of the narration. One of the central concepts of Claude Lévi-Strauss's work was the idea of binary oppositions. In his essay "Structural Anthropology" he writes "that mythical thought always works from the awareness of oppositions towards their progressive mediation" and that "the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction" (1955:440, 443). He contended that a great deal of cultural phenomena, including narratives and myths, can be comprehended by means of the analysis of binary oppositions, which are pairs of opposites like raw/cooked, hot/cold, or nature/culture. This idea of binary oppositions can be seen in his work "The Savage Mind" where he writes:

> "The savage mind is, above all, a mind that classifies the external world by applying to it the fundamental dualism of the raw and the cooked, or, to speak a modern language, of the natural and the cultural. In other words, the savage mind is a mind that likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in the form of short and categorical propositions, and it has the art of expressing them in the most violent and, often, the most contradictory terms. Its conception of the world is antinomic, and its manner of reasoning, which is neither by analogy nor by induction, proceeds by the more or less immediate association of contraries."(University of Chicago press, 1966, p. 17)

One can recognize binary oppositions like good vs. evil, hero vs. villain, and divine vs. mortal in both *The Ramayana* and *The Iliad.* The immortal gods and mortal humans are clearly distinguished in *The Iliad*. The gods that live atop Mount Olympus meddle in human affairs and affect how the Trojan War turns out. The divine and mortal realms are highlighted by this binary opposition.The conflict between one's private and public lives is examined in the epic. Characters negotiate the demands of the public (war, honor, glory) and the private (relationships, emotions), Achilles foremost among them. The intricacy of character motivations is enhanced by this dichotomous opposition. The idea of dharma, which stands for moral order and virtuous duty in contrast to adharma, which stands for moral disorder and unrighteousness, is fundamental to *The Ramayana*. The epic examines the conflict between upholding dharma and facing the difficulties brought on by adharma.The characters of Rama and Ravana are at the center of the main conflict in *The Ramayana.* While Ravana represents the antagonist and stands for lust, ego, and adharma, Rama represents virtue, righteousness, and the ideal prince. The epic's storyline

depends heavily on this dichotomous opposition. These contrasts are essential in determining how the story develops.

An examination of archetypal characters and their functions in a story is a common component of structuralism. Archetypal characters can be found in both epics, including the antagonist (Ravana in *The Ramayana*, Hector or Paris in *The Iliad*), the hero (Rama in *The Ramayana*, Achilles in *The Iliad*), and other characters who represent recurrent archetypes. The study of narrative structures and patterns is another component of structuralism. The narrative trajectories of *The Iliad* and *The Ramayana* both feature the hero's journey, epic battles, and pivotal moments
of conflict and resolution. Finding these narrative motifs aids in exposing the epics' fundamental structure.

Analyzing parallel structures in a narrative is one way that structuralism can be applied. Parallel episodes in both epics, such as the different conflicts and difficulties the heroes encounter, add to the overall structure's symmetry and order.The two primary heroes of *The Iliad* are parallel characters named Achilles and Hector. As honorable warriors and the sons of kings, their destinies are linked to the Trojan War as a whole. Similarly in *The Ramayana*, Parallel figures Rama and Ravana stand for the forces of avarice and adharma (Ravana) and the principles of righteousness and dharma (Rama). Their parallel tales come to a head in a pivotal encounter.

Conclusion:

Even though *The Iliad* and *The Ramayana* share many characteristics when analyzed through the lenses of structuralism and oral-formulaic theory, it's vital to recognize the distinctions that arise from the use of various ancient languages, a few narrative devices, and the historical setting. The similarities between the two texts were demonstrated through narratological analysis. On the contrary, one can use new historicism to analyze the differences between the two epic poems in order to provide a more thorough analysis of them.

A comparative study of *The Iliad* and *The Ramayana*, provides significant insights into the universal themes and storytelling devices used by Homer and Valmiki, the respective authors. Even though they came from very different historical and cultural contexts, both epics have a lot in common, especially when it comes to how they depict tragedy and how they use storytelling techniques from oral tradition. Despite differences in language, culture, and historical setting, the themes and narrative devices of *The Iliad* and *The Ramayana* transcend national boundaries. We obtain a greater understanding of the eternal significance and timeless relevance of these epic poems in forming human understanding and cultural legacy through a comprehensive analysis that includes literary, historical, and structural viewpoints.

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