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Sreevidya G

Assistant Professor,

Department of Sanskrit General,

Sree Sankaracharya University

of Sanskrit, Kalady, Kerala,

India

Tapasvinī: A grandiloquent remoulding of an epic

Sreevidya G

Abstract

Tapasvinī, the Mahākāvya that depicts the Sīta-Rāma tale through Sīta in the backdrop of Oriya culture. Sīta with her dignity and loyalty addresses the ethical dilemmas in the Vālmīkirāmāyaṇa. Sīta narrates the happenings in her life for the hermit girls, where she unfolds the epic. The reader experiences her prominence in its subtlety and in that sense it is Sītayana, the penance of Sīta

Keyword: Tapasvinī, grandiloquent remoulding, Oriya culture

Introduction

Tapasvinī is a literary composition of Mahākāvya genre, translated from Oriya to Sanskrit by Harekrishna Meher. Tapasvinī is the retelling of the Rāmāyaṇa written by Gangadhara Meher from the perspective of Sītā. Every retelling of the Vālmīkirāmāyaṇa asserts its narrative invincibility. Though the development and culmination have their uniqueness, the quintessence of the essential thematic unity is retained in every retelling. The heterogeneous narrative culture in multiple perspectives is made possible through different temporal and spatial settings. The intention of retelling may vary from delving into its culture to traveling through the characters, to analyzing the narrative mode, or even to its critical appreciation. Tapasvinī is one such recreation that unfolds the Rāmāyaṇa in eleven cantos through Sītā, a woman with all divine qualities as envisioned by the poet. It also stands out for the development of the plot which is set in the backdrop of Oriya culture. The poem highlights the post-abandonment of Sītā and her sad plight in addition to her self-introspection. The characterization of Sītā in the Uttarakāṇḍa of Vālmīkirāmāyaṇa, the Raghuvamśa of Kalidasa and the Uttararāmacarita of Bhavabhuti has much influence on the poem.

Sīta in the hermitage of Vālmīki

This Mahākāvya is the portrayal of Sītā as tapasvinī who nurtures the ethical values of human relationship and compassionate feeling towards fellow beings. The poem opens with the benedictory verse to bestow strength to perceive and transcribe about the exiled Sītā ^[1]. The poet presents the pathetic scene of the expelled Sītā in the solitary site on the banks of Gaṅgā and nature is depicted as consoling her daughter ^[2]. The womb-filled queen of King Rāma is left in the hermitage of sage Vakmiki in dense wood under his care ^[3]. Hearing Sītā's lament, the hermit-girls reach the spot and after consoling her, intimate the Sage Vālmīki about it. In Canto-II, the hermitage of Vālmīki is found reigned by Śānti (peace). With the fatherly affection of Vālmīki and the motherly care of the hermit mother Anukampā, which is an invention the poet, Sītā resides in the hermitage. In Canto-III, Rāma's sorrow after Sītā's exile is depicted. Rāma and Sītā, both deserted in their respective places, become engrossed in thoughts of separation. In Canto-IV Sītā, accompanied by Anukampā and the hermit-girls, goes to River Tamasā who expresses all her motherly fondness. After ablution, all enter the garden where the Vanalakṣmī is presented as a friend of Sītā. In Canto-V Sītā enjoys the comfort from trees, creepers, flowers, birds and other various facets of nature. In Canto-VI, a moonlit night of Caitra month, rich with breeze and fragrance of flowers are educed. Here Sītā narrates all the stories starting from her childhood up to the forest-dwelling. She discloses all her life events to the hermit girls. This is something different from the conventional narration of either Valmiki or Kalidasa. The plot of Rāmāyana develops from here to the past, the present and to the future events in Sītā's perception. Canto-VII continues the subsequent part of the story till the deportation.

Corresponding Author:

Sreevidya G

Assistant Professor,

Department of Sanskrit General,

Sree Sankaracharya University

of Sanskrit, Kalady, Kerala,

India

The lamenting Sītā is consoled and supported by the hermit-maidens. Canto-VIII gives a charming view of summer with the beauties of nature so alluring. Coming one by one, Chitrakūṭa, Mahānādī, Godāvārī and Ayodhyā, all, express feelings of their sorrow-stricken hearts before Sītā and depart. In Canto-IX, rainy season is illustrated outstandingly. Nature shows her sympathy and concern for Sītā flagging under pregnancy. Birth of the twin sons, Kuśa and Lava, delights both animate and inanimate. Canto-X speaks of the motherly affection of Sītā, growing up of the twins, their exposure to scriptures, and their melodious recital of Rāmāyaṇa and Sītā's grief filled ecstasy. Canto-XI represents Vālmīki's preoccupation over the administration of King Rāma, suitability of the twins as the heirs of the royal dynasty and invitation from Rāma to attend the horse-sacrifice in Ayodhyā. Nidrā and Yogamāyā come to the cottage of Sītā to take her on their laps. Sītā in her dream sees the royal coronation of King Rāma with herself as Queen, and the deities and demi-gods shower flowers and thus end the poem Tapasvinī.

Sītā, the tapasvinī

Tapasvinī means a woman observing penance. Her penance is to find goodness in anything and everything around her. The poet portrays Sītā as strong and inspirational in a unique way^[4]. Sītā, the adorable daughter of Earth and the devoted wife of King Rāma, appears as a Tapasvinī, in a pathetic phase of her life. Sītā says Rāma is the ruler of the world which includes the forest-regions also. Now she is one of the subjects of the forest and though banished, she should be supervised by his kingship^[5]. Regarding Sītā's devotion to her husband, the poem remodels the epical episode. Sītā reckons three reasons for her hardship^[6]. As Sītā thinks, she reflects that firstly she had mean-mindedly scolded the innocent Lakṣmaṇa and had sent him in quest of her husband, just after hearing the voice "Save me, O Lakṣmaṇa" from the interior of Pañchavaṭī forest. Secondly, while she was captive in Aśoka grove, Rāvaṇa showed an illusory severed head of Rāma before her eyes and she dreadfully bewailed thinking the very head to be her husband's. Further, seeing the head she did not die at the spot. Thirdly, believing the happiness of service at her husband's feet to be insignificant, she became inclined to visit the hermitage near Gaṅgā. All these three sins, as Sītā explains by self-examination, account for the expulsion that is acceptable for her.

Despite the Vālmīkirāmāyaṇa, in Tapasvinī, Sītā does not have any predisposition to bear the life of a suspected wife and daringly invokes her Dharma to enter with herself into the enkindled fire to prove her chastity with the prayer^[7]. Sītā is strengthening more and more her devotion to her husband and her as a tapasvinī expended time in penitent austerity for her husband.

Another incident is when, hearing the message of horse-sacrifice; Sītā distrusts that Rāma might have accepted a second wife; because the presence of wife is necessary for yajamāna in sacrificial performances. Then Sītā secretly and sorrowfully writes a self-effacing letter to King Rāma. In this letter, Sītā earnestly prays Rāma to acquaint her of the secrecy of incantation and penance rendered by the second queen, so that Sītā would practise harder penance than hers to acquire Rāma as own life-lord in the next birth also^[8]. After knowing from the twins the news that Rāma has kept the gold image of Sītā she becomes astounded with beatitude. Keeping her letter secret, she silently makes an apology to her husband. She stabilises pleasure and pain, at the same time brimming with

dignity for herself and even for her tormenters. A courageous fighter and a skilful healer, she forgives even the unforgivable.

Sītā in harmony with Nature

In this poem Sītā is depicted as one who blends with nature effortlessly. In the opening of the poem Sītā is presented as abandoned in the dense woods from where the sage Vālmīki and Anukambā take Sītā to the hermitage. When Sītā falls senseless in the ground out of agony after knowing the banishment by her husband, the sympathetic skies reacts by startling others' eyes with deep and loud rumbling, and by sprinkling soothing drops of water on Sītā's face to revive her. Nature mourns with severe distress and with her army tries to take vengeance upon fate. Nature in its fierce form is depicted remarkably in this instance.

Sītā had a motherly affection for river Tamasā. As a wretched daughter Sītā expresses her feelings thus: *In this land you're indeed my mother dearest incarnate as Tamasā.*

And again she continues to proclaim that Sītā as the true daughter of the earth. *'Mother verily knows her daughter's sorrows. A burnt-faced daughter looks moon-faced in the eyes of mother.'* Nature is always alive and personified during the different stages of her life at the forest. The affinity of Sītā to nature as 'all giving' is brilliantly pictured. The power of poet's imagination brings forth the divinity and the sublimity of nature through various emotions. The interweaving of characters like śāntidevatā and vanalakṣmī are symbolism of nature. The portrayal of forest and river symbolize freedom and strength. In the lap of Mother Nature Sītā through her austerity and penance gains power to get rid of all her anguish. In one context Sītā states that when one's own noble qualities form a divine ornament what can the blemish conjured by the cynics do.

Conclusion

Tapasvinī is a modern poem of nineteenth century. The theme and representation, the style and presentation bears the charm of composition of Classical Sanskrit Mahākavyas. Besides the novel approach in depiction of an epic it sustains the culture and tradition of ancient writing. The Vālmīkirāmāyaṇa in the perspective of Sita takes the readers to a new realm. She remodels the ethical disputes underlying the epic with a philosophic outfit. Her enchantment with nature and her faultless esteem for her husband is the life force of this poem. The tenets of duty and her dignity help her to overcome the conflicting pulls. This work has a symbolic grandeur that persistence and goodness will win despite all odds

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पवित्रतामेतु मनो दर्शनं कृत्वा करस्तु लिखित्वा ||
2. तीरे तस्या गभीर-दुःखभूता विद्यमाना वैदेह-सम्भूता |
आसीन् निरीक्षमाणा प्राचिमभिलक्ष्य पतिप्राणा ||
3. अहो! भीषणा रीतिर्नियतेरियंतः नायास्यति भीतिः कस्य हृदये
पश्यतः?
4. तपस्विनी त्वं दैवस्वभावाज्जाता दर्शनमात्रेण मयापि
नूनंमभिजाता |
5. सहधर्मिणी तवास्म्यहं त्वच्चरणाङ्गे गतिर्मे वर्तते |
6. विधिर्न दोषभाजनं स्यात् मत्कर्मणां कृते |
7. अन्तरेण राघवम् अन्यं प्रति मम चित्ते
यदि किञ्चिदपि प्रणयाकर्षणं स्यात् |
हे ज्वलन ! सर्वभक्षणदक्षस्त्वम्

अस्मिन्नेव मुहूर्ते मां सीतां कुरु भस्मसात्॥

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