



*The Ramayana and the Iliad: A Comparative Narratological Study of Selected  
Parts*

**Pijush Bhadra**

Assistant Professor

Nabadwip Vidyasagar College, Nabadwip, Nadia, W.B.

India

Email: pijush@nvc.ac.in

**Abstract:**

*A comparative study of The Ramayana and The Iliad in terms of narratological theories will certainly yield rewarding results. Narratology has been developed from the tradition of story-telling which is seen as a universal cultural phenomenon. From Classical narratology to Post Classical narratology, theories and beliefs of narrative techniques, insights have been explored with multidisciplinary and trans-generic applications in epics, novels, lyrics, fictions to non-fictions. A comparative study of selected portions of The Ramayana and The Iliad in terms of Focalisation, Narrative motive, Mimetic and Diegetic narration can yield rewarding results if narratological ideas are minutely applied. It will certainly explore the oral and literary traditions of the two great Occidental and Oriental epics in terms of their narrative technique.*

**Key Words:** *Narratology, Ramayana, Iliad, Mimesis, Diegesis, Focalisation*

**Introduction:**

Narratology simply is a critical discipline which studies the ideas and theories of narrative; since narrative is representation of story, it deals with the literary or non-literary techniques of presenting, composing, or performing stories, events, and characters. Bal defines narratology as ‘the theory of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that ‘tell a story.’ (Bal, 1997). Narrative is essential to human existence and language; human beings have to perform as a narrator to relate himself with space and time in order to build civilization out of wilderness. To refer to different space and time he must narrate whatever others did not witness; thus, ‘everything narrated by a narrator’ is a narrative.(Fludernik, 2009).



Valmiki's Sanskrit *The Ramayana* is considered to be the earliest and most prestigious' versions of hundreds of 'Ramayanas' in South Asia, thinks Ramanujan (Richman, 2001). This text shows narrative features from both oral and literary traditions. The diversity of The Ramayana narratives was multiplied by the diversity of oral as well as literary culture, language, and contexts across South Asia. Homer's *The Iliad*, too was the result of a long oral traditions of 'many Homers'(Jones, 2003). In order to apply Narratological theories one must should select specific texts and methodologies.

Methodology of the proposed research work

The following research methodology could be involved-

- a. A detailed careful study of texts, articles, and essays regarding *The Ramayana* traditions, especially in oral one.
- b. A detailed careful study of texts, articles, essays regarding *The Iliad* traditions, especially in oral one
- c. A focussed study in recent thoughts in narratology is required
- d. Minute study and re-study of the translated texts of *The Iliad* (Book I and II) and *The Ramayana* (Balakanda) from oral narratological views are required.
- e. For comparison and reference , past works on oral aspects of epics or other narrative should be re-examined

### **Focalization and narrators in *The The Iliad, The The Ramayana***

Now, if we apply these narratological ideas upon epics like *The Ramayana* and *The Iliad*, derived from much wider literary genres across different time periods and cultures, we find a continuity of the same narrative strategies that are found in modern or postmodern literary genres. For Genette , Internal Focalization allows the narrative to be 'focused through the consciousness of a character' , whereas the External Focalization allows the narrative to be focused on a character'(Genette, 1980). The first four cantos of Balakando of *The Ramayana* contain subtle blending of Mimetic and Diegetic narrations ; the Focalization in it becomes as complex as a modern or postmodern fiction could become today: both Narada and Valmiki could be the Focalizer ; yet Valmiki somehow manages to become the Reflector or Focaliser of the narrative in these four Cantos; as serious efforts have been made by the poet or poets in Oral traditions to make Valmiki an 'internal focaliser' from external one; gradually making him privy to the narratives , not just as an Omniscient narrator in a Zero Focalization where the unidentified narrator tries to be objective, non-intrusive as a character in the Fabula. This is



what has largely taken place in the *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* of Homeric tradition. This is more surprising since oral traditions tend to compose layers of narrations, frames as the layers of earth-surface throughout centuries; thereby crystallizing until it transfers to written forms. These layers of narration are more evident in the *The Ramayana* of Valmiki than in *The Iliad*.

Whereas *The Iliad* does not show any crystallization, rather an already developed narrative stance or Focalisation; Homer tends to become a ‘camera’, as we find in the introductory comments in Penguin classics of *The Iliad*, trying to be objective, non-intrusive or apparently impartial; we don't find any layers of narrative frame or any blend of Focalization or Zero-Focalization in *The Iliad*;

In this sense, it seems, the *The Iliad* tradition is less akin to the Oral tradition than the *The Ramayana* of the Valmiki tradition. Homer rather shows a strange adaptation to the narrative perception of the character itself, whenever it is possible. For instance the selfishness of Achilles is found through the focalization of narrative by Achilles himself in Book I and II when he quarrels with Agamemnon over Briseis and refuses to fight any more on Greek's behalf; This dramatic re-localization of the ‘action through the eyes of a specific hero in a specific situation’(Jones, 2003)

### **Narrative Motivation**

From the narrative motivation , Homer begins *The Iliad* with an intention to set up the theme of conflict surrounding women , egoism and power ; between Agamemnon and Achilles with Briseis, Chryseis, Between gods, goddesses; we also find the subtle balance with Actorial narrative motivation: for instance we find , the Actorial motivations of both Agamemnon and Achilles in the Book I of *The Iliad* as to what they desire ultimately; one wishes ‘kleos’ or glory another wants supremacy or sovereignty over Troy; Apollo wants his due respect; In *The Ramayana* , narrative motivation in ‘Balakanda’ is to provide the genesis of the story of the central character and present a brief outline of events; while Actorial motivations are found in Valmiki and Lav and Kusha's glory as a narrators of the central story.

### **Mimesis or Diegesis**

This narratological terms, popularised by Genette, divide the narrative speeches or events into two broad categories; mimesis is the direct way to dramatise or create a visual effect upon the narratee or audience whereas diegetic is the indirect way to narrate or summarise the events in



brief; mimetic narration generally tends to be subjective, intrusive, dramatic whereas diegetic narrative tends to non-intrusive, neutral, objective. However, this distinction is too simplified since the contrary can occur in a great narrative or lyrical works; in Balakanda of *The Ramayana* by Valmiki , we find detailed and precise descriptions of the Aswamedha Yagna ; the narrator pretends to be diegetic in indirect mode of speeches most of the time, yet we feel the dramatic presence of the Yagna itself being performed in front of the narratee;(Valmiki, 2000) the surprising details make us forget the diegetic narration. Occasionally the narrator returns to the mimetic first person.

In *The Iliad*, Homer is often accused of just being a ‘camera’, relying more on omniscient third person reporters. He is able to summarise the events and chiefly focalises the character whoever and whenever speaks; emphasis is more on oratory and the ability of the characters to convince and inspire the addressee of the speeches with the oration; naturally, this dramatic and mimetic modes easily catch hold or sustain the attention of the audience in oral tradition much easier than what *The Ramayana* could do with its initial mode of diegetic narratives in Balakanda;

Balakanda of Valmiki’s *The Ramayana* is interesting from another narrative perspective. Here Valmiki is himself narrated by another anonymous narrator , probably later additions during its oral transmission; the central narrative story or events are narrated briefly apparently by Narada; Brahma inspired Valmiki to forget the tragic incident of two cranes being assaulted by a Nisada, witnessed by Valmiki; he can’t forget the pain of the creatures as well as the brief verse composed spontaneously by him at the spot; Brahma inspires him to transform his creative skill into a great verse;

The Balakanda seems to have been an interpolation of later age, as it deals less with the life of Rama himself more with the different myths of Ganga, Uma, Viswamitra and myths have been transformed by the later narrators to integrate them into the already , possibly, popular narration of Rama katha; the roles of narrators and narratee often get changed ; for instance, Viswamitra narrates the stories of Ganga , while his own glory is narrated by Satananda, the family priest of King Janaka; all the narrations are being directly addressed to Rama as a new learner as well as to the readers, listeners of the epic ; the chief focal point of is to narrate stories after stories in a relevant and glorifying way; the narrations , like that of Satananda on Viswamitra, foregrounds the transformation of character and souls (Valmiki, 2000); glorification of physical prowess , as in *The Iliad*, has been subtly avoided; the encounters between Vasistha and Viswamitra , like other fierce encounters are bloodless in the sense that



those who are killed are burnt to ashes, most of the time ; the gory details which are found in *The Iliad* are occasional, even rare in *The Ramayana*, particularly in Balakanda; this fact is not in favour of its oral traditions, as Ong claims. However, the ultimate verse of *The Ramayana* being composed by Valmiki now is taught to Lava and Kusha who ,it seems plausible, renders its ultimate effect upon the audience in Ayodhya and sages there; even the hero of their narrative verse is inspired by the oral recitation in Chorus by his own sons; This confuses the chronological sequence and probability of the narration; *The Ramayana* by Valmiki, in its literary form, integrates the oral traditions which paid much attention to the art of recitation, or performance or effect of captivating the audience with sheer singing skills, not just with thrilling descriptions of gory battles , as Western oral traditions seemed to glorify.

### **Mnemonics, Features of Oral transmission**

How oral texts are transmitted orally through memory has been a subject for research for anthropologists as well as for literary historians, linguists. Linguistic and rhetorical features like redundant additives, epithets in known combinations with nouns; in order to remember and reproduce through speech-performance one needs to be continuous in expressions without analytical, retrospective interruptions. The techniques of oratory, singing must be kept in mind to revive what one has heard, seen as performed. The oral society must conserve the crystalized narrations, myths by paying much importance to those who could memorize and repeat them, although with some innovations of their own.

Primary Oral narration emphasises upon the rendition of violence , showing a tendency to make even strange events , events of violence a familiar narration; although intellectual or abstract arguments through speech are enjoyed much in Western or Eastern , oral narration, as far as Western oral tradition goes, tends to prefer ‘portrayal of gross physical violence’, (Ong, 2002). Oral narration tends to be concrete real life based on ‘prelogical’ or magical belief systems , as Ong evinces from the research done by A .R. Luria ( Cognitive Development : Its Cultural and Social Foundations, 1976) and Lucien Levy-Bruhl ; oral narration tends to identify descriptive objects or abstract concepts even in day-to-day terms, objects , not abstract metaphors.

### **Conclusion**

Preliterate cultures had merely their lively lived experience, and situational, present or immediately relevant objects, events to narrate; even their metaphors would hardly seem metaphors or abstract; they would have ignored unknown or uninteresting things as merely abstract; based on these observations, much of the descriptive sections, passages in *The Iliad*



and *The Ramayana* are indeed found to be concrete situations of relevant, day-to-day experience. Yet abstract, strange experiences are abundant in them not only as contrast but also as literary manipulations to strike an awe or ‘defamiliarization’ in the Formalist's notion of literariness. The differences in narratives of Balakanda of Valmiki’s *Ramyana* and Homer’s *The Iliad* are many as the similarities are due to common features of Oral cultures. Focalizations in Balakanda of Valmiki’s *Ramyana* are varied and layered whereas in *The Iliad* they are much more subtle and integrated.



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