

Book Review

by

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Manavalan, A. *Ramayana: A Comparative Study of Ramakathas*. Translated into English and Edited by C. T. Indra and Prema Jagannathan, Vitasta, 2021, pp. 416, Rs. 995/-.

The return of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in research and fictional retellings has occupied a significant place in the literary-academic domain in the last three decades. Unlike the early 20th century readings, which either endorsed traditional values or totally rejected them as oppressive, the 1990s and the years that followed offered novel readings, rather re-readings of the *itihasas*, puranas, and myths. It was taken up in the scholarly studies on puranic narratives, the return to roots in the theatre movements, and the retellings of the stories of Ekalayva, Karna, Sambuka, and Draupathi in English and Indian regional languages from a feminist and marginal perspective. Such diverse activities in the cultural sphere made the puranic narratives not just a contesting space but also a spectacle through the nation-wide telecast of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in Doordarshan. It was in that context that Dr. A. A. Manavalan, former professor of Tamil, University of Madras, a renowned comparatist, linguist, Sanskrit and Hindi scholar, Fulbright fellow and a scholar of Epic Studies, undertook this study, *Rama Kaathaiyum*, *Ramayanangalum*, and published it in 2005. In this study, Prof. Manavalan seeks to move beyond his earlier comparative study of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Kamban's *Ramayana*. First, he disengaged with the notion that comparisons needed to be made between the texts/authors of two different cultures. Secondly, he took into account the challenges made in the US universities against comparative studies, especially Gayatri Spivak's declaration of the 'death of a discipline'. He thus moved towards studying literary cultures, eventually publishing a collection of his writings in English under the title *Studies in Literary Cultures*. As a translator of Aristotle's *Poetics* into Tamil and part of *Tolkappiyam* into English, he undertook this study of *Ramakathas* from the perspective of the change in Comparative Literature that foregrounds Translation Studies. He was greatly inspired by Susan Bassnett's treatment of the versions of Guinevere story as translations, which in a way

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drove him to establish the role and function of Ramakathas in tune with the socio-cultural spheres. It is for this wider scope and depth, and for its methodology that this study received the prestigious Saraswati Samman Award from K. K. Birla Foundation, Delhi in 2011.

The English translation of this study (Ramayanas: A Comparative Study of Ramakathas) published by Vitasta in 2021, became part of this continuing interest on Ramayana and Mahabharata research. With the conscientious efforts of Prof Indra - former professor of English, University of Madras and a Fulbright post-doctoral fellow who audited a course with the famous American Comparatist Prof Harry Levin at Harvard and listened to lectures by Prof Claudio Guillen, and a winner of Katha award for translation, and Prof Prema Jaganathan, former Associate Professor of English, Stella Maris College Chennai, with a deep devotion to Tamil literature, this translation has come to us with fine flare of an Indological study. As we get to read this, we also come across a few significant works on Ramayanas: Living Ramayanas: Exploring the Plurality of the Epic in Wayanad and the World (2021), Hikayat Seri Rama: The Malay Ramayana, translated from the original Malay by Harry Aveling, Writer's Workshop, Kolkata (2020), and The Multivalence of an Epic: Retelling the Ramayana in South India and Southeast Asia, ed. Parul Pandya Dhar, Manipal University Press (2022)—to name just a few. What makes Prof. Manavalan's work different from these works is his thrust on the methodology and not just on the object of study. The translators have also been conscious of preserving this. This work undertakes a comparison of 48 Ramakathas from about 22 languages across India and South Asia from 5th century BCE to the 19th century CE. In this work, Manavalan takes up Bala Kaandam, Ayodhya Kaandam and Aranya Kaandam. It is unfortunate that he did not live a little longer to continue his study of the other kaandams. It is important to note here that these researches were later accommodated when he edited the eight-volume Ramayana for the authentic edition of Kambaramayanam published by the Kamban Kazhagam of Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu.

His focus on the 'ethics and aesthetics of comparative study' resisted any possible appropriation of his data regarding contesting versions of Ramakathas. It also made his work non-polemical and demanded objective reflection on the corpus. In his preface, Professor Manavalan has made this very clear saying that his study "stems from the keen interest to do comparative research into how the various Ramayana epics... reveal these transformations in artistic forms... The differences discerned through this study are not used as criteria for

evaluating the relative superiority or inferiority of the linguistic, literary and cultural variations” (2-3). It is this focus on the ‘method’ that keeps the reader from reading it as yet another work on Ramayana. This was highlighted in the translator’s note as well as in the “Foreword” given by the Sahitya Akademi and Saraswati Samman award winner, Dr. Indira Parthasarathy.

Referring to the Buddhist Jataka tales as the first to name Rama, this study located the birthplace of Rama in Varanasi against the accepted notion that it is Ayodhya. Unlike other scholars who invoked arguments citing the version of Rama and Sita as siblings or the version treating Sita as Ravana’s daughter, Prof. Manavalan makes such observations in a non-polemical sense. He says: “Although the living aspect of a culture sustains the continuous flow of life of a country as a subterranean spiring, it is but natural that the mechanics of existence driven by politics, history, society and external cultural mixing or blending should radically transform it on the surface, modifying it in such a way that it appears to be an entirely different set of cultural features” (2). Those who can compare these words with the Tamil source will definitely appreciate the translators’ assimilation of Prof. Manavalan’s nuanced argument. Prof. Manavalan, who had a life-long passion for comparative study, maintained continuous correspondence with leading comparatists like Ulrich Weisstein, Anna Balakian, and a few others in the West, and chose to produce this monumental work in Tamil with a view to highlighting the virtue and value of the ‘method’ over ‘matter’ for his native Tamil audience. While other works that appeared recently regarded Ramayana(s) as their ‘object’ of study, Manavalan placed the data to raise questions regarding the status of the ‘object’ and its relation to the ‘subject’. This, he claims, helped him to let the corpus speak for itself.

I wish to cite here just two instances of professor Manavalan’s study that holds relevance in the present academic context: one, his comparisons of the Ahalya story as found in the various versions he cites; and the other, his reference to Rama’s birth in Kambaramayanam lending itself to its diffusion from south to northern recensions, leading to the celebration of Ramanavami.

The appearance of the Ahalya story in the southern recension as a cursed being turned into a stone for her apparently unwitting sexual misconduct with Lord Indra, Professor

Manavalan says, has its connection with the ancient Tamil tradition. Expressing his awareness of the debate on this from a feminist perspective, but avoiding taking any stance, he chose to cite the prevalence of this view as part of the earlier Tamil literary tradition. As evidence, he cited Parimelazhagar's commentary on the lines (19:50-52) in the Tamil Sangam text, Paripadal which tells the story of Ahalya's transformation into stone: "They say that this is the one who became a stone as a punishment for lapse of conduct" (115). This focus on the prevalence of 'retellings within the tradition' is very much relevant in the present-day context when scholars privilege one fictional retelling over the other. Unlike the ideological claims of the contemporary retellings of characters from Ramayana and Mahabharata, the retellings within the tradition are self-conscious of their status as yet another version in the continuum. Talking about the reference to Ramanavami, he says:

Professor G. H. Bhatt who edited the Baroda University's critical edition of Bala Kandam, states in a footnote pertaining to this section that slokas relating to the planetary positions at the time of birth of Rama and others are to be found only in the copies of the Southern Recension (G1, G2, G3, M1, M2) and that they are not found in the Northern and North Western Recensions... When viewed on the basis of currently documentary evidence, it is Kamba Ramayanam that provides this information for the first time. (99-101)

In an interview with Prof. Manavalan (appeared in July 2013 issue of Ungal Noolagam) that Prof. R. Srinivasan and I conducted, he told us: "This insertion was done by Sanskrit pundits from Kumbakonam mutt. They had translated from Kambar's text and inserted it into the Sanskrit Ramayana. Scholars proved this as an insertion by citing the fact that Valmiki Ramayana did not travel through oral traditions... It is difficult to find out such insertions in a text circulated in the language spoken by the people (61)."

While his study of the Ahalya story holds significance in the present-day academic interest on retellings, his meticulous study on the diffusion of Rama's birth reflects upon the value of textual criticism and the transactions among traditions, versions, and recensions, and breaks the opposition between the folk and the classical. Here Professor Manavalan's interest was not aimed at proving the diffusion and create polemics, but to establish 'counter-influence' of a text from received culture back to the source culture. He thus made a significant challenge against the notion of 'influence' established in the history of

Comparative Literature in the West. When we asked him whether this could be viewed as a postcolonial gesture, he simply said: “May be. But I cannot claim to have done it consciously” (62).

The translators, by choosing to translate it into English, let the non-Tamil readers both within and outside India know not just the function of Comparative Literature but also broaden the scope of Translation Studies towards enhancing Indology, which depends solely on the scholarship produced in English. What emerges in this translation is professor Manavalan’s method and perspective, which are in tune with Comparative Studies as well as with the tradition of Tamil scholarship. Summing up the scope and perspective of this work, professor Indra says in her “Preface”: “The book’s ideological interests, though deliberately occulted by the erudite professor, also fascinated me much. They are not new, but they refuse to die. I hope this English translation helps to site the Tamil original within such discourse” (xxi). Her comments on the co-translator Prema Jagannathan suggest the challenges involved in translating native scholarship. This includes editing, condensing the material, glossing, and documenting the sources. This is different from the issues involved in the translations of fictional or, in general, creative writings. Thus, Prof A. A. Manavalan’s book on Ramayana in English translation, one may say, opens new avenues in Indology as well as in Translation Studies.