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Grotesque Attributes of *Rakshasas* for Hierarchical Establishment in *The Valmiki's*
Ramayana

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Grotesque Attributes of *Rakshasas* as a Pre-eminent Strategy for Hierarchical Establishment in *The Valmiki’s Ramayana*” submitted to the Central Department of English, TU, Kirtipur, by Spandika Rai has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee.

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Abstract

This thesis critiques The Valmiki's Ramayana for its physical representation of god and non-god characters as a strategy to establish hierarchy favouring Aryans and demeaning non-Aryans. It points out the need of awakening of a radical point of view to create different exegesis cross-examining mainstream hermeneutics. It exposes a fact that myths caste spell upon common people which are further validated by modern writers to fictionalise physical representation as the implied metaphor and symbol. It exposes the contentious effort of the author to create the negative image of Ravana. The writer by providing abnormal and distorted physical attributes to demon characters performs the politics of knowledge. Such politics behind something which readers take for granted plays a critical role in inventing the villain and hero to whom readers hate and adore respectively shaping their psychology. Is it a correct way to judge people based on their physical attributes? This paper addresses the question and reaches to a conclusion that the attributes given to each characters carry the strategy to establish Rama as a worthy hero with positive godly features who is to be followed without questioning his supremacy contrasting with rakshasas physical features by using the Bakhtinian perspectives of carnivalesque and grotesque, along with the notion of 'aesthetic nervousness' by Ato Quayson and notion of 'narrative prosthesis' by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder to explore the politics behind creating deformed characters. The physical features are biological, and this has nothing to do with the 'good' or 'bad' morals and supremacy one carries the physical features attributed to rakshasas and heroic figures are rather just the strategies of author to establish a hegemony of tribe to which heroic figure and the writer Valmiki belong.

Keywords: Rakshasas, Aryans, physical attributes, hierarchy, stigmatization, supremacy

Introduction

Taking the Eastern epic, *The Valmiki's Ramayana* translated by Bibek Debroy as the primary text and focusing more on the representation of non-god characters, this paper wonders at the question posed by Lerita Coleman Brown in her article "Stigma: An Enigma Demystified": "Could it be that stigma as a perpetual tool helps to reinforce the differentiation of the population that in earlier times was deliberately designated by marking?" (Brown 152). It sticks to the representation of characters in *The Valmiki's Ramayana* by Bibek Debroy in three volumes. The physical representation of non-god characters, *rakshasas* are scrutinized as such to find out its value and implicit implication in the epic which would be scattered as legends and folklores and would occupy as the bedtime stories for many, if not all the generations to come. The conspicuous physical differences between the godly characters and the demonic characters could be the 'marking' Brown is talking about in her question stated above which reinforces dichotomy between god and demonic characters which creates the stigma valuing a certain group of people and devaluing others. 'Demon' or *rakshasa*, a tribe in Eastern continent has been represented with the binary opposite characteristics compared to god in humane figure, physically otherwise. The representation of non-god characters is seen as the strategy of the author to introduce and establish the *rakshasas* as the 'other' with deformed images attaching negative connotations. The physical differences serve as one of the strategic tools to establish the hegemony of the group of which Valmiki was a part of, assumably Aryan. There are lots of controversial discussions on the Valmiki's caste, some claiming him to be a Brahmin and other claiming him to be a *shudra*, whatever the case, the then Brahmin and *shudra* are supposed to fall under the Aryan race or their physicality matches. Even though some may reason that Aryan as a tribe was connoted in nineteenth

century, the author has used godly humans who possessed more 'aarya' factor who physically represents the group, he belonged to. It made the intended meaning of the author clear. Doomed are *rakshasas* for their 'anarya' behaviours; saved are almost all Aryans because of their Brahmin thoughts. The godly figures in the epic share physicality and somehow high lineages with the established gods which makes them the creators of the Aryans. Given the cultural fact that the epic is recited and watched by the people throughout the subcontinent, it definitely plays a role in formation and reformulation of stigmatization process. Children exposed to notion of superior and inferior race through physicality are sure to develop a similar approach to life and society.

Ravana, is portrayed as unattainably large and strong, having dark complexion in *The Valmiki's Ramayana* and Shurpanakha is portrayed as an ugly demoness whose ugliness made Lakshmana refuse her marriage proposal instantly and disfigure her nose when she does not cease to approach. Such stereotypes play a pivotal role in shaping general public's mind. What is the politics behind depicting non-god figures with physicality that belonged to other races or tribes entirely different from the one the writer Valmiki belonged? Is the author using the differences between these tribes or races, to create strong stigma loading the 'other' physicalities all the negative connotations? If it is so, why?

Literature Review

Shruti Chakraborty, in her paper entitled "Subverting Patriarchal Interpretation of the *Ramayana* through a Feminist Lens: A Critical Study of *Sita's Ramayana*," revisits the androcentric interpretation of *Ramayana* using different narrative medias such as graphic, verse and so, being influential for 500 years in India. She takes the revisionist texts to analyse how the female authors, Arni and Chandrabati through

their scroll painting and verse narrative “have assigned Sita’s character an agency to challenge the androcentric notions that dominate the interpretation of *Ramayana[a]*” (Chakraborty 157). However, this thesis paper as much as focuses on Sita’s perspective, it also focuses on few demonic female characters, and comparing their physical attributions to Sita will be done in plethora, to show the perspective of the author on how a godly female vs. how a demonic female ought to be.

Similarly, E. Balamurali in his work, “Unveiling the Characteristics of Sita to Represent Femininity through Select Works,” presents Sita as the initiator of feminism who despite the era being male dominated stood against the patriarchy. His questioning “[s]he endured every pain and hurdle with serenity and courage. Can women be more ideal than her?” (Balamurali 2), I find not suitable as he claims that Sita stood against the patriarchy, after giving her all the characteristics an ideal woman should hold in that era. Even though he states that Sita is an icon of feminism, his details like being forced to be a single mother as she was accused being impure, does not make me fall for his claims.

Rashmi Prasad and Choodamani Nandagopal claim the important roles of important female characters in the plot development of *Ramayana* from the perspective of *ashtanāyikas* as mentioned by Bharata in his classic text *The Natyashastra*: “The important female characters of *Ramayana* play a pivotal role to the plot and trigger the discussion on the variables of the emotive elements. The emotional changes they underwent with their *nāyikas* can be better understood when seen from the perspective of *ashtanāyikas* as mentioned by Bharata in his classic text *The Natyashastra*” (Prasad and Nandagopal). The term ‘ashta’ means eight and ‘nayika’ refers to the “[h]eroine-[l]over, whose depiction in art varies according to her situations, which in turn are governed by the concept of rasa or the eight sentiments”

(Gautam 120). Even taking the reference of *Natyashastra*, the ancient theory of performing arts by Bharat, authors are claiming the significance of the moods of heroines in the epic *Ramayana*. The number of papers making the interpretation of *The Ramayana* from the feminist perspective are large.

As mentioned, there are numeral papers which claim to reinterpret *Ramayana*, either the original or the revisionist texts, from feminist point of view, taking especially Sita as the prominent character but there exists paper such as “The Politics Of Subversion, Power And Deviance: Sita, Surpanakha And Kaikeyi In Select Feminist Re-Visioning Of *Ramayana*” written by Bhagya Shree Nadamala and Priyanka Tripathi. The authors show difference in the characterization of minor characters such as Surpanakha and Kaikeyi compared to Sita to show the politics behind such characterization. The authors conclude “Surpanakha and Kaikeyi are left baffled and still are clutched to the conventional stereotyping by the hegemonic discourse, and remain as ‘wanting a piece of pie, and not being allowed’ (Spivak, 2015) to speak. Their actions stand ‘cryptic’ and the labels ‘rakshasi’, ‘wicked’, ‘flawed’, and ‘vicious woman’ is further grounded deep with the incapacity to articulate the desires behind their actions” (Nadamala and Tripathi 10497).

Rather than seeing *The Valmiki's Ramayana* through the feminist perspective, this paper takes the chance of seeing the *Ramayana* from the lens of the other ‘Other’ of the text i.e., non-god characters in which domain Surpanakha and also somehow Kaikeyi are included. This paper explores the physical representation of non-godly characters, especially *rakshasas*. The feminist readings of the *Ramayana* in these papers have taken Sita as the main character and the readings revolves around her. The reading which bases its reading on Sita and somehow shows her strongly, conform with the making of an ideal women for the society as imagined. Taking other

female characters like Surpanakha and Kaikeyi however deviates from normal representation of women character in the epic which speaks about the standard of women imagined at that time and the ties they had to hold on to for being an ideal woman of the era.

There has also been quantitative research claiming the myth's role in transforming personal and professional life of Indians, "[t]he creators genuinely trust that current supervisors can utilize this priceless text to discover vital administration replies in their ordinary day-to-day existence. Chiefs of everyday occasions need to engrain in their mind that Lord Rama's victory separated from following the way of nobility, morals, and ethics" (Pallakhadka, et al. 121). They recommend including the lessons of *Ramayana* in the curriculum of Management for teaching students about its messages along with the western approach and studies of management (121).

Harikumar Pallathadka in his paper the "Role of *Ramayana* in Transformation of the Personal and Professional Life of Indians: An Empirical Investigation Based on Age and Regions" claims Lord Rama as a perfect example of virtue or *dharma* and teaches people how to move ahead with ethical living without violating the rules of nature being one of the important teachings of *The Valmiki's Ramayana* (121), the thesis paper sees how the ethical fictional world is being created by giving the believed 'evil' characteristics to *rakshasas*, being tangibly shown through their physical attributes, almost, if not wholly, different than the godly figures.

Madhubanti Banerjee's "*Rakshasas and Asuras in Hindu Epic Tales*" talks about the existing many paradoxes in the *Ramayana* and other Hindu myths but observes that the physical appearances of both groups, *rakshasas* and gods remain the same, "[t]he devas are fair and sometimes have a golden aura (as Sītā was described by Valmiki), with blue eyes and excellent proportions (Valmiki, trans. Tapasyananda,

1983, p. 79). The *rakshasas* and *asuras* conversely have dark bodies, red eyes, and long black hair. They are sometimes deformed, often harmful, and cannibalistic: “a nocturnal power, a demon of darkness, and therefore evil,” wrote E. Washburn Hopkins in his book *Epic Mythology* (Hopkins, 1915, p. 38)” (Banerjee 150).

Even though, this research paper holds the important notion of my thesis paper, the physical representation of the *rakshasa* in *The Valmiki's Ramayana*, Banerjee has treated the epic like the real history of the then India when Aryans came and overtook the civilization of the *asuras*. She concludes her strong paper with statement, “the role of Hindu mythology is enormous because it holds the key to the cultural and social structure of ancient India” (151), this is where my paper deviates. I argue that *Ramayana* needs to be taken as a work of literature. It does not carry the history of the then India. It is rather used as a strategic device to enforce the supremacy of the Aryans through the narrative. Hence, rather than the product of the Aryan supremacy over the *rakshasa* clan, *The Valmiki's Ramayana* is the device being used to justify and enforce the supremacy.

Research Methodology

As per the demand of subject matter and the issue being dealt in this thesis paper, the research is qualitative one. It looks at the characterisation of non-god characters *rakshasas* compared to their counterparts in *The Valmiki's Ramayana*. The physical representation of these characters is very interesting. Along with the Bakhtinian perspectives of carnivalesque and grotesque, this paper also uses the notion of ‘aesthetic nervousness’ by Ato Quayson and notion of ‘narrative prosthesis’ by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder to explore the politics behind creating deformed characters. These theories are relevant to this thesis as there are multiple disabled and distorted qualities given to the antagonists of the text and none to the

protagonists. The power play on the basis of the different physical abilities can be clearly seen in the text applying these disability theories with appropriation. Rather than searching for the disabled figures, distorted or abnormal or the ‘othering’ of the non-god characters physically is seen to have the same effect as described by these theorists. All the notions and theories collaborate to check out the major claim of the paper which is the politics behind deliberate use of distorted physical attributes to the demonic characters.

Narrative prosthesis means using the disability in the narrative as an artificial limb to enhance the plot for the desired effect. In this thesis paper, disability is appropriated to the distorted and abnormal features given to *rakshasi* figures most of whom are disabled by cutting of the nose and ears, as the final solution. The distortion, abnormalcy and disability is so powerfully presented in the primary text that it features the prosthesis for the narration. As a classical thirst of the fiction, the resolution is achieved through end of the unruly resistance from the *rakshasi* tribe against the supremacy of the godly figures who represents the state of normalcy.

Aesthetic Nervousness means the nervousness one feels while encountering the aesthetic abnormalcy like distorted figures and disabled figures and it triggers the natural cultural tendency to make circumstances into normalcy. While reading the primary text, it is inevitable to come across abundant feeling of aesthetic nervousness as this is one of the tools which triggers the readers to give final solution to the factors which channel the triggers.

Textual Analysis

The Valmiki's Ramayana is a *smriti* text which is ‘society and context specific’. In the introduction of his translation, Debroy wants to save the text from being judged by today’s value judgement (xxiv). However, this thesis paper rather

captures the essence of the *smṛiti* texts being ‘society and context specific’ and digs out the author’s intention to portray the heroes and villains with entirely different physical attributes. Author’s meta intention is being scrutinised in this paper which is helped by the tangible binary opposite physical features of the heroes and villains. The physical representation of the *rakshasa* or non-god characters are similar if not same, in the anecdotes splattered ubiquitously despite belonging to any culture or religion. What might be the rationale behind giving such grotesque images to those characters? The research paper depicts the author’s intention to create the narration of the epic to create an Aryan society. There is a high debate on the concept of Aryans what is sometimes called ‘the Aryan Question’ (“Foreword: The Search for the Aryan” x) which is ‘probably the most complex question in early Indian history’ according to Romila Thapar in her “Foreword” of the anthology *Which of Us Are Aryans?* In the same anthology, Razib Khan confirms “[a]ncient DNA from Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and South Asia, all seem to indicate that the genetic intrusion of the Central Asia pastoralists dates to the period after 2000 BCE. Culturally this corresponds to the arrival of chariots in the Near East, as well as the attestation around 1750 BCE of an Indo-Aryan group in the Upper Euphrates basin as part of the ruling class of the Mitanni state” (“Genetic Origins of Indo-Aryans” 150-151). This indicates that the Aryans entered the land where *Ramayana* is based on with their physical attributes of the present Aryans lest they be named so or not in that time. Keeping the issue of theoretical Aryans at bay, this paper focuses on rather those section of people whose physical attributes parallel with Rama or the author Valmiki. In this monograph, physical attributes of the protagonist, antagonist, major characters, godly women, *rakshasi* women, apes will be discussed to show how the specific

attributes given to them helped the author to achieve his goal, with support of the theories and claims of research papers of different researchers in similar field.

The beginning chapter *Bala Kanda* of *The Valmiki's Ramayana* starts with Valmiki, the author avatar asking “Right now, who is in this world is valorous and possess all the qualities? Who knows about *dharma* and about what has been done? Who is truthful in his words and firm in his vows? . . . Who alone is the handsome one?” to Narada, the bull among sages. In between the questions about virtue, the narrator smoothly adjusts the parameter of handsomeness which highlights the handsomeness, the physical features as important as the essence of virtue and vice versa. The prominent questions around which the whole epic revolves around, are answered by sage Narada, “He is eloquent and handsome . . . He is medium in size and his limbs are well proportioned. He is pleasant in complexion and powerful. His chest is muscled and his eyes are large” (3).

The narrator takes a great stake for giving the selective physical attributes to Rama, the hero of the epic. When we look at the questions and answers, we find the more stretch in the answers to physical features than in the questions. Only one question is with interest on the physical attribute of such a man, the ‘handsomeness’, but the answers carry the heavy weightage to establish the positive attributes of the heroic figure. After the whole bunch of the features anointed to Rama, Narada continues with the line “[h]e is prosperous and possesses all the auspicious qualities” which ensures the physical features possessed by the heroic figure as the auspicious qualities. By establishing the hierarchy of the physical features, the narrator establishes the Rama’s physicality as a standard for measurement of goodness and badness of the characters yet to be explored.

Additional to the introductory passage for Rama, his physical features are used as similes and major features which is extended throughout all the volumes. In the first volume of the *Ramayana*, his arms are described as ‘thick and auspicious’ (243), his brows are said to be ‘excellent’ (275), his teeth as ‘rounded’ (263), and ‘excellent’ (275), his nose as ‘beautiful’ (275), his complexion as that ‘of a blue lotus’ (315), ‘of a dark lotus’ (159), his voice ‘like that of a maddened swan’ (366), his eyes as ‘large, like the petals of lotuses’ (96) which has been repeated while Vishwamitra introduces them to king Janaka (101). His eyes have been given lotus touch frequently. Repeatedly his eyes are narrated as ‘coppery red eyes like a lotus’ (261, 266, 277, 311, 366). These physical features being repetitive in the epic additional to the “Rama was radiant in his qualities, like the sun with its rays (156) ensures the godly and excellent heroic qualities in the protagonist.

When one closely looks at the physicality of the gods like Indra, those perfectly match with the heroic characters like Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, Brahmins, Dasharatha. Indra is seen by Rama whose form “was resplendent, like the complexion of the sun and the fire. The god dazzled in blazing ornaments and garments”, “He could be seen from a distance, like a young and rising sun, like excellent and white clouds, or like the lunar disc” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana II 8*). The form of the gods is exhibited as “blazing and they seem to be twenty-five years old. For the gods, the age always remains constant and these tigers among men are seen to be handsome” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana II 9*). There is similar physical attributes of the Brahmana and the gods, “He bowed his head down before the brahmana (Rishyashringa), whose complexion was like that of the gods” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana I 29*). Similarly, metaphor of gods is being used to compare Vishwamitra, Rama and Lakshmana, “They were with the great-souled Vishwamitra, thus resembling a three-headed

serpent. It was as if the two Ashvins followed the grandfather, protecting him” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana I 51*). The author’s avatar Valmiki is characterised as ‘[t]he one who knew about dharma’, ‘the controlled Valmiki, the great sage’ (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana I 11*).

The parallel physical representation of Rama, Brahmins, gods and author's avatar is of the exclusive importance for this thesis paper. As Indra is compared with young rising sun, with lunar disc and white clouds, the comparison of Rama’s appearance with the sun, moon and white clouds are in extreme in the epic, “Rama’s face was pleasant to behold, like the moon. His beauty, generosity and qualities stole the sight and hearts of men” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana I 160*), “His face is like the autumn moon and like a blooming lotus” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana I 275*). As the white clouds, sun and moon are repeated similes in the Ramayana, being delicate and lotus-like are also recurring features of the hero and his company. Bharata is described as ‘[handsome to behold’ (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana I 187*), ‘the lotus-eyed’ (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana I 287*), ‘the delicate one’ (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana II 37*). He is further being narrated, “He is lotus-eyed and dark. He is handsome and great, with a flat stomach”, ‘with large-eyed like lotus petals’ (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana I 312*), ‘face was like a lotus and it began to perspire’ (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana I 339*).

David Smith, in his paper “An Alternative Poetics of the Lotus”, has mentioned Gonda who claims that “for lotus the ‘term symbolism is not correct, because the ancient Indians, like other peoples in their circumstances and of their cultural *niveau*, did not look on a lotus flower as a mere outward sign of a principle or a divine ‘concept’; for them it was a visible representation, the very embodiment of the divine itself” (Smith 212). Hence ‘lotus’ is used as a simile for most of the body parts being mentioned in the text of the heroic figures and as an auspicious symbol

which makes their direct connection with the divine which was established in the then society. By using the lotus having connection with all the godly figures, omniscient narrator is using conventional implicature that the characters having connection with lotus sure must be as delicate and as whole as lotus. Sita validates the auspicious sign of the lotus as she says “Indeed, I have marks of the lotus on the soles of my feet. Because of that, women are consecrated on a throne, with their husbands, who are Indras among men” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana III* 85).

It is mentioned that “the communication of implicatures is not only between characters, but between narrator and reader” (Pragmatic Theories 29). One of the books of Edinburgh Textbooks in Applied Linguistics, *Pragmatic Stylistics* under a topic ‘Higher-level interaction: narrator-reader implicatures’, puts the persuading techniques of narrator used to guide readers as per the desired interpretation of the text, “[w]e may also find that the same incident is told more than once. The motivation can be of many types, but sometimes it may be that an omniscient narrator is showing agreement with an interpretation offered by a character within the fiction. This will increase the credibility of the character, and may affect our overall interpretation” (Pragmatic Stylistics 30). The repetition of Rama belonging to Ikshvaku lineage is noticeable which ensures him as a highborn. His physical features like eyes, ears, face resembling lotus is constant which are also the physical attributes of most of the godly characters like Sita, Lakshmana, Dasharatha ‘[t]he king joined his hands, which were like lotuses, in salutation’ (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana I* 159). Similarly, ‘the red eye’ is the feature of both *rakshasas*, humans, apes and *rakshasis*, however representing the red eye for heroic and villainous characters are different. Rama in the battle with Khara has ‘[e]yes red with rage’ (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana II* 62, 64). The description of the eyes of *rakshasas* and godly figures in rage is red but

the detail like smooth ‘coppery red or lotus coppery red’ or ‘with rage’ to the later fixates the differences between their rage. This implies that *rakshasas* are by default in rage, but Rama’s red eyes are only when he is in rage which is not natural state for Rama. It validates the rage of godly figures while condemns the rage of the *rakshasas*.

The use of indirect value judgement of the narrator which has played enormous role in implementing the physical attributes of the *rakshasas* time and again to enforce his make-believe negative connotation are huge, ‘[t]here is great fear from that *rakshasa*, who is terrible to look at’ (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana I 37*), ‘[t]he *rakshasa* Ravana is stupid’ (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana I 38*). The narrator’s fondness of the godly human characters and his hatred for the non-godly characters are clearly shown in the volumes.

The first chapter starts with the synopsis of the whole Ramayana which tells readers what to expect and how to judge the Rama and Ravana, one as a hero and another as a villain. The Rama in his birth is narrated as “[b]orn as a portion of Vishnu, Kousalya gave birth to the immensely fortunate Rama, the extender of the Ikshvaku lineage and one who possessed all the divine signs” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana I 42*). This quickly establishes the born child with positive attributes unlike Ravana who is narrated as “incessantly harsh and engaged in causing harm to subjects, such was Ravana, fearful to all creatures and to all the worlds” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana II 67*). These are pure narration rather than any character's words, so these sentences clearly show how narrator establishes each of the characters. After the use of all these evaluations, there is establishment of the hegemony by luring the readers with hierarchical achievement if they read the epic: “A brahmana who reads this becomes eloquent in speech, a *kshatriya* obtains lordship over land, a merchant obtains the fruits of trading and a shudra person obtains

greatness” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana I 9*) which is one of the vital politics of this epic which was important in that era where Hinduism related caste based hierarchy and Brahminic tradition were to be flourished.

To compare with the physical attributes of the protagonist, requisite by the spirit of the thesis paper, the physical attributes of Ravana are to be scrutinised. The antagonist is summoned in the epic as “He was naturally terrible and the rage of his fire made him senseless. His form was like that of the angry and unassailable Rudra” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana III 220*). Sita says, “[t]hese eyes of yours are cruel, malformed and black and tawny” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana II 371*). It will be untrue if this paper would claim there’s no positive features given to the king of Lanka as he is one of the richest kings depicted in the epic which can be interpreted as the context readied for the glory of Rama’s victory on such a ‘rich’ and ‘powerful’ *rakshasa* king:

With his twenty arms and ten heads and his accoutrements, he was a sight to behold. The brave one’s broad chest bore all the signs of his being a king. His earrings were made out of molten gold and were decorated with shining lapis lazuli. His arms were excellent. His teeth were white and his mouth was large. He was like a mountain, in hundreds of battles with the gods, his body had been marked by Vishnu’s chakra. (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana II 66*)

Even though the grand narrative is followed with positive attributes believed, the abnormalcy he possesses which is ‘twenty arms and ten heads’ is the highlight which distinguishes him from the godly figures in the epic.

Not just the appearance of Ravana is highlighted in the *Ramayana*, the physical attributes of the *rakshasa* clan as a whole can be captured in the epic. The brahmanas inform Rama about the *rakshasas*, “they exhibit many terrible, gruesome and cruel forms. Some forms are so ugly that those forms are unpleasant to see” (*The*

Valmiki's Ramayana I 373). Other physical traits given to individual *rakshasas* are also shared by the clan. Dark complexion is attributed to the *rakshasas*, Prahasta having complexion of a dark cloud (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II 17*), the abnormal physicality like Dundubhi in the form of a buffalo (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II 266*). Some *rakshasas'* physical features are grandly narrated. Viradha who introduces himself as the devourer of *rishis* is narrated as:

His eyes were deep and his mouth was huge and horrible. His stomach was also horrible. He was gruesome, malformed, tall, hideous and horrible to behold. He was attired in a tiger skin that was wet with fat and smeared with blood As he roared loudly, the earth seemed to quake. (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II 4*)

Abnormality or disfigurement is used as the traits of the *rakshasas* which is highlighted by the aptronyms delineated for *rakshasas* like Atikaya 'because his body is exceedingly large' (*The Valmiki's Ramayana III 110*), Virupaksha meaning 'one with malformed or disfigured eyes' (*The Valmiki's Ramayana III 233*), Trishira meaning 'three headed demon' (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II 57*), Kabandha who was 'large and was without a head or neck' (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II 143*) and who possess a blazing mouth in the middle of [his] stomach (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II 145*).

David Mitchell and Sharon Synder in "Narrative Prothesis" points out the rebellious nature of human body in the following way:

[w]ithin literary narratives, disability serves as an interruptive force that confronts cultural truisms. The inherent vulnerability and variability of bodies serves literary narratives as a metonym for that which refuses to conform to the mind's desire for order and rationality. Within this schema, disability acts

as a metaphor and fleshly example of the body's unruly resistance to the cultural desire to "enforce normalcy. (223)

Narrative prosthesis means using the disability in the narrative as an artificial limb to enhance the plot for the desired effect. Disability is appropriated to the distorted and abnormal features given to *rakshasi* figures most of whom are as disabled like cutting of the nose and ears, as the final solution. The distortion, abnormalcy and disability is so powerfully presented in the primary text that it features the prosthesis for the narration. The *rakshasis* are the disabled figures like the one without nose, ears and head and neck. The physical traits of *rakshasas* are deformity, abnormality, distortive as well as disabled. Such traits are often shared with readers to connect them with those 'who refuses to conform to the mind's desire for order and rationality'. This also allows the heroic group to 'enforce normalcy' by eradicating the whole *rakhasa's* clan as the final solution without letting the readers to think what the 'normalcy' really is.

Similar depiction of *rakshasi* figures throughout *The Valmiki's Ramayana* can be found in the text. Kumbhakarna, one of the prominent *rakhasa* has form 'like that of a cloud with cranes, raining down at the end of summer', his large eyes are described as 'blazed like giant planets', he looks 'like a cloud full of rain, adorned in armlets made out of gold'. He is 'terrible in appearance and valour', he is 'like a mass of dark collyrium (*The Valmiki's Ramayana III* 121-25). It would take an enormous effort to wake him up. During his sleep, "[t]he hair on his body stood up upright and he sighed like a serpent. He was terrible to behold. As he slept, his great breaths terrified them. His nostrils were horrible and his mouth was as large as patala" (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II* 121). The imageries of grotesque associating with *rakshasas* also helps author establishing the negative villainous character. Kumbhakarna's 'body

became wet with fat, sprinkled with blood' (*The Valmiki's Ramayana III* 141, 145). On seeing him, apes run, and Rama asks Vibhishana, "Who is this extremely large person? Is he rakshasa or an asura? I have never seen such a creature earlier?" (*The Valmiki's Ramayana III* 125). The alienation is not only done with the extra physical features attributed to him, but also through the commentary by Rama, the hero.

Similarly, *rakshasis* are depicted as terrible as their counterparts. They are terrible to behold with abnormal features like:

... with one eye, many ears, with ears covering the body, without ears, with ears like cones and with high noses that stretched up to the head. There were those whose heads were gigantic, others whose necks were long and thin They were short, tall hunchbacked, malformed and dwarfs. The teeth jutted out and the mouths were malformed. There were those with green eyes and disfigured faces. They were malformed and dark in complexion. They were black, angry and quarrelsome. They wielded giant spears, spikes and clubs made out of black iron. (*The Valmiki's Ramayana III* 360)

One of the very noticeable features of *rakshasis* compared to the godly human women is their possession of weapons which is also being narrated as "[t]hey held spears and clubs in their hands. They wielded javelins and spikes" (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II* 329).

The women with weapons are also not welcome in the narrative . That also demarcates the huge difference between *rakshasi* women and godly human women. Amongst the *rakshasi* women, Shurpanakha is one of the significant. The introduction of Shurpanakha is in grand style and it depicts differences between her clan, *rakshasa* and Rama, the godly figure's clan. The distinction is viewed closely,

the physical attributes given to Rama resembles the attributes of present Aryan race, for instance: the large eyes, slender-waisted, non-coppery-coloured hair:

Shurpanakha is aged and ugly. Her stomach hangs down. Rama is like Kandarpa in his beauty. How could she have approached him in the forest? He is delicate and great in spirit. He is engaged in the welfare of all creatures. She should be killed by people. She is inferior in beauty. But she saw him and was smitten with desire. She is devoid of all the qualities. He possesses the qualities and is greatly energetic, his face is beautiful, her face is ugly. How could the rakshasi have desired Rama? These people are limited in their fortune. She is wrinkled and has grey hair. She committed a ridiculous misdeed, condemned by all the worlds. (*The Valmiki's Ramayana III 226-7*)

The similar distinction is given when the Shurpanakha encounters Rama for the first time in volume II. The shocking factor of the given abstract is the gossip of *rakshasi* women against Shurpanakha uttering the same ignominious language and feelings towards their kin and positive thoughts for their enemy hero.

Ato Quayson's "Aesthetic Nervousness" means the nervousness one feels while encountering the aesthetic abnormalcy like distorted figures and disabled figures and it triggers the natural cultural tendency to make circumstances normal. Further the theorist mentions Rosiemary Garland Thompson who persuasively shows "there are complex processes by which forms of corporeal diversity acquire cultural meanings that in their turn undergird a perceived hierarchy of bodily traits determining the distribution of privilege, status, and power. In other words, corporeal difference is part of a structure of power, and its meanings are governed by the unmarked regularities of the normate" (203). The women of *rakshasi* clan have agreed with the standard of beauty set by the narrator in the world which narrator

feels as the right one or the normal. The physical attributes deviate from the normal attributes of human women possessed by Shurpanakha has given her a status lower to Rama who stands with the great privilege of carrying ‘good’ bodily features that gives him a power to slay her nose and punish her for proposing him which is also non-womanly like in the culture Rama belongs. While reading the primary text, it is inevitable to come across abundant feeling of aesthetic nervousness as this is one of the tools which triggers the readers to give final solution to the factors which channel the triggers like the ten headed Ravana, earless and nose less Surpanakha, among others.

Rakshasi women are different from the godly women like Sita, in resemblance and bravery. Shurpanakha was roaming alone freely when she meets two brothers and Sita. She is a bold female who proposes Rama to marry, “Be my husband for a long time. What will you do with Sita? She is malformed and disagreeable and is not your equal This one is vile and malformed. She is terrible in appearance and has a flat stomach” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana II 40*). The description of Sita as ‘malformed and disagreeable’ shows the beauty standard for *rakshasas* different from the beauty standard set by the non-*rakshasas*.

Rama addresses Shurpanakha as ‘o large-eyed one!’, the description is inconsistent, but this must be Rama mocking her with the standard of beauty established to which she does not meet which is continued by his brother Lakshmana “O one with the unblemished complexion! O lotus-eyed one! O one with the distended stomach!”, he then talks about Sita, “Sita is malformed, wicked, cruel and aged. He will abandon such wife and serve you” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana II 41*). There is mockery made to Shurpanakha by two brothers, about her physical attributes

by ironically giving her attributes which she does not possess, and which is the standard for them.

After some shared mockeries, Shurpanakha gets offended and attacks on Sita when Rama commands his brother, “You should disfigure this rakshasi! which Lakshmana obeys by ‘slicing off her ears and nose’ (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana II 42*). Disabling is used as the tool of punishment or the slogan of victory on several occasions and distorted body parts are features of *rakshasas* which implies that being a *rakshasa* is simply a result of some deeds deserving punishment or a sin committed. Viradha who was narrated as gruesome, malformed, tall, hideous and horrible to behold had deep eyes, huge and horrible mouth, horrible stomach (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana II 4*) revealed his identity after he was defeated by two brothers, “I assumed this rakshasa body because of an extremely terrible curse. I am a *gandharva* named Tumburu and was cursed by Vaishravana” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana II 7*). This implies that being inside the *rakshasa*’s body is a curse. The narration technique used by the author via narrators is exemplary in the epic. We can find shift in point of view among characters like Narada, Valmiki and Hanumat but never a non-god character has an opportunity for keeping their point of view even in the modest. Bakhtin in his infamous paper “Discourse in the Novel” has addressed the ability of every socially significant verbal performance which can be long lasting and among wide circle of people “to infect with its own intention certain aspects of language that had been affected by its semantic and expressive impulse, imposing on them specific semantic nuances and specific axiological overtones; thus, it can create slogan-words, curse-words, praise words and so forth” (675). Belonging to the *rakshasa* clan itself symbolizes horror, cursed, malformed, visibly abnormality in the whole text. As curse, the features of *rakshasa* are given to the figures like Trishanku, a descendent of

the Ikshvaku lineage who wanted to go to the supreme destination in his own physical body (*The Valmiki's Ramayana I 114*). After Vasishtha expressed his inability to help him with his intention, Trishanku approached Vasishtha's sons and was cursed by them, "You will become a chandala" (*The Valmiki's Ramayana I 116*) after which his physical features changed:

He was dark and was attired in dark-blue garments. His form was harsh and his hair stood up, like a standard. He was smeared in the paste and adorned with garlands from funeral pyres. His ornaments were made out of iron.

Seeing this, all the ministers abandoned the person who now had the form of a chandala. (*The Valmiki's Ramayana I 116*)

This establishes the very teaching of this epic as focused on this paper, that the certain physicality is the necessity to be a king that sustain a long reign. When one does not have a certain accepted physical form, one is no longer a leader, no longer a king. Rama submits himself to the gods when he speaks "I am under the control of gods and I must do everything that they want," (*The Valmiki's Ramayana III 484*) which seals the deal with the gods that whoever obeys their deal will rule for eleven thousand years as a king with auspicious traits unlike Trishanku.

Rakshasi women also share features given to their counterparts and the cursed beings like 'malformed', 'disformed', 'disfigured', 'abnormal'. Sen Purobi in her research work "Un-Tamed and Unapologetic 'Rakshasis': A Dichotomy Study of the Polarity of Women in the Ramayana" has discussed about their features:

Rakshasis or demoness are portrayed as robust and cruel. They are described as beings who can change their forms at their will, and it was also clear that they do not abide by the civilized dharmic code of conduct or law of the naras. Demonesses were equally dangerous and destructive as the demons, which

brings us to the point that the sharp bifurcation of duties, behavior and appearance on the basis of gender or sex was missing in the case of the rakshasas in these epics. (147-48)

This establishes the differences between demonic women and godly human women which are especially in physical level. The physical attributes given to each 'tribe' of the women are carefully perused in this paper which are highly valued as 'anarya' or virtue in the text.

The difference between *rakshasi* women and godly human women are accentuated for different purposes. The godly women like Mena daughter of Mount Meru (*The Valmiki's Ramayana I 73*), Ahalya, wife to the great-souled Goutama, Kaikeyee (*The Valmiki's Ramayana I 150*) are described as 'the slender-waisted', Menaka, the supreme Apsara, was "unmatched in her beauty and was like a flash of lightening in a cloud" (*The Valmiki's Ramayana I 125*), Sita's sibling and Lakshmana's wife, Urmila is 'lovely to behold' (*The Valmiki's Ramayana I 379*). The general description of women from the city of the lord: The city of Ayodhya was 'full of large numbers of beautiful women' (18). These characters match with the beauty standard of the women of the 'perfect' world which the author is persistent to establish.

Sita is being described in the text with positive features meeting the standard of beautiful, whole woman of the time. In the first volume of *The Valmiki's Ramayana*, she is described as 'large-eyed' (166, 266, 331, 206), 'black-eyed' (185), 'delicate one' (207, 261), 'one with beautiful face (211), 'one with thighs like an elephant's trunk' (211), 'one with excellent hips' (211), 'beautiful in her limbs' (223), 'beautiful hipped' (226), 'lotus-eyed' (257), one having 'beautiful teeth' (266), 'lovely thighs' (331), 'who possessed a face that was as beautiful as the moon' (331),

‘full moon’ (345). Similarly, even in the volume two of epic, Sita is given positive attributes as ‘the extremely beautiful’ (9), ‘slender-waisted’ (89), ‘gold complexion’ (99), ‘complexion like sun’ (104), ‘hair black at tips’ (103), ‘face like moon beam’ (110), ‘fawn-eyed one’ (159), ‘long-eyed one’ (374), ‘eyes like white lotus, the doe-eyed one’ (224). She further is also described as ‘the one with the complexion of a goddess’ (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana III* 475), and so forth. Sita expresses herself as:

My hair is extremely fine, black and smooth. My eyebrows do not touch each other. My hips are round and possess no hair Those who are learned about the signs of maidens have spoken of me as one who has the complexion of barley, with no gaps in the hands and the feet and one who smiles gently.

(*The Valmiki’s Ramayana III* 85-6)

with the perfect beauty standard she possesses. Additionally, she is attributed with high nose, white teeth, without any injuries, beautiful smile, eyes like lotus petals and a pleasing appearance like the lord of the stars to behold (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana II* 349).

Unlike the positive features given to godly figures and negative features given to the *rakshasas*, the apes in *The Valmiki’s Ramayana* are interesting characters as they share bodily and intellectual features with god and *rakshasa* both. But they carry *rakshasas’* physical features more than the gods’:

All those brave ones were terrible and malformed. With nails and teeth as weapons, they emerged from the city. All of them were like tigers in their insolence. All of them possessed disfigured faces. Some of them possessed the strength of ten elephants, others strength that was ten times more. There were some whose valour was equal to that of one thousand elephants. (*The*

Valmiki’s Ramayana II 230)

The adjectives like ‘terrible’, ‘malformed’, ‘disfigured’, are prominently used for *rakshasa* figure in the entire volumes which are shared by the apes too.

The similar physical features are found to have been given to *rakshasas* and apes. Similar words and syntax are found being used to describe them even though there is inconsistency in description of the apes who resembles godlike features sometimes and *rakshasa*-like at other times. The capability of the apes to assume any form at will is shared with *rakshasas*, “The apes were the sons of gods and gandharvas and could assume any form at will. They were handsome and pleasant in appearance, wearing celestial garlands and garments” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana II* 233). It is not only once that apes are described with blended qualities of gods and *rakshasas*. In the same volume Sugriva, the lord of the apes, puts first-hand description of his fellow apes, “These Indras among apes, those who have the complexion of the great Indra, are the ones who resides in my kingdom. There are many thousands of apes who are terrible in their valour. These terrible apes have arrived and they are like the daityas and the danavas” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana II* 247).

Discussing Bakhtin’s notion of grotesque and carnivalesque is scholar Francisco Benedito Leite who points out that Bakhtin has repeatedly stated that “grotesque realism is not one-sided; its representations are ambiguous, simultaneously serious and comical, not solely related to representations of negative aspects of existence but also to the positive” (Leite 23-24). In *The Valmiki’s Ramayana*, apes are of great significance. The narrator reiterates the semblance between *rakshasas* and apes as similar, if not same, “[t]hey possess hair and are like *rakshasas* and *pishachas*” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana III* 38) which is further established as “[t]hey arrived on earth, assuming terrible forms. They assembled so as to help Rama” (*The Valmiki’s*

Ramayana I 42). So, the apes were introduced as deuteragonists for the sake of Rama's victory who resembled like *rakshasas*, so as to hold capabilities to fight *rakshasas* with terrible valour, strong and abnormally large bodies.

As for individuals, Hanumat's complexion is depicted 'like that of the golden mountain. His complexion was like that of the rising sun' (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II* 213). Nila possesses the complexion 'like the filament of a lotus' (*The Valmiki's Ramayana III* 35), and 'of a mass of blue collyrium' (*The Valmiki's Ramayana III* 75), the other ape called Vinata 'nourishes a body that is ochre in complexion' (*The Valmiki's Ramayana III* 37), Sugriva is described as someone who was pleasant in appearance (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II* 183), the use of aptronym like Sugriva which means 'an excellent neck' (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II* 190). They are given some godly features as they are the supporters of the hero in his 'great' cause. But Sugriva has described Vali as 'cruel-looking brother of mine' (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II* 177) which shows that the physical features being described by the characters are personal rather than indubitable statement as Rama says, "You and Vali were identical to each other in ornaments, garments, size and movements" (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II* 184).

The female apes are beautiful and share their features with godly women. Tara, Vali's wife has 'a face like that of the lord of the stars' (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II* 202), a smart use of aptronym again, Hanumat's mother, Anjana shares bodily features with godly women, "[a]s a female ape, she was beautiful in all her limbs" (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II* 298). Her "uncovered thighs, which were well formed. Her round breasts clung close to each other. Her face was beautiful and fashioned well. The illustrious one was slender at the waist, with wide hips" (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II* 299). It can be seen that the author is trying to compose a

realistic epic when he introduces apes in the story who has the physical as well as magical capabilities to tackle with *rakshasas*, the hero's enemy. The physical features of female apes are almost copy of the divine women while the physical features of the male apes are almost none like the gods except complexions and few similes. The female apes have negligible role in the epic compared to the males. The author gives them such physical features so that they fit enough to be devotees to the godly figure. They remained under the shadow cast by Rama's personality. The inferiority complex of the apes is shown when Sugriva says, "O lord! It is great gain for me that you desire to strike a friendship with an ape like me" (*The Valmiki's Ramayana II* 168).

Not only with the apes, but narrator has also used his poetic licence to give physical traits to Vibhishana entirely different from his brother Ravana. Joseph N Strauss in his research paper "Autism as Culture", published in *The Disability Studies Reader*, writes about the medical model which treats autism as pathology which goals are diagnosing and caring:

If the pathology cannot be cured—if the abnormal condition cannot be normalized—then the defective body should be sequestered lest it contaminate or degrade the larger community. In this, medical culture is an aspect of what Garland-Thomson (2004) calls "the cultural logic of euthanasia": disabled bodies should either be rehabilitated (normalized) or eliminated (either by being sequestered from sight in homes or institutions or by being allowed or encouraged to die). (462)

The Valmiki's Ramayana even though is dated millenniums back can be compared to this medical model. This model is being implemented in the narrative level and consequently in the social level of that time. The *rakshasas* are being taken as abnormal being whose whole lineages are almost wiped out, leaving those who are

‘cured’ like Vibhishana. Vibhishana sides with Rama and his company, he announces, “the qualities and conduct that exist in me are primarily those of humans, not those of rakshasas, I find no pleasure in being terrible. I do not take delight in adharmā” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana III* 206).

It is very interesting to see how the *rakshasa* who ally with the godly figures are given human physical attributes. Despite being Ravana’s younger brother, Vibhishana possesses no bodily features like his brother. He is being given adjectives like ‘handsome’ (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana III* 21). His form while meeting with Rama “was like the summit of Meru and he blazed like a flash of lightning” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana III* 22). Hanumat approves Vibhishana, “I do not detect any evil sentiments in what he has spoken. His face is also pleasant. Therefore, I do not doubt him” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana III* 25). Hanumat further says, “Even if one hides it, it is impossible not to reveal something in one’s form” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana III* 25). This quote is one of the main motifs of this epic. Hanumat is not just persuading Rama and his ape army but also the readers and he is validating the narrator for aligning the physical features with the specific characteristics of the characters.

There are tangible differences in physical features of the godly men, *rakshasas*, *rakshasis*, gods, human women, godly women, apes. The author does it to provide different moral grounds for these characters. Employing various techniques the narrator, the creation of the poet Valmiki, sets a high moral ground to Rama. The epic is concluded in its final page of *The Valmiki’s Ramayana III*: “They gave up their bodies as humans and ascended vimanas. Those born as inferior species also approached the waters of the Sarayu. Their forms became divine and celestial. They were as radiant as gods” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana III* 492). Rama has been established being the worthy of being followed and is established as a god to whom

the common people follow to the end of their life to turn themselves into ‘as radiant as gods’. The book preaches the caste hierarchy which is a part of normalcy which is being manured through this epic, “[t]he kshatriyas placed brahmanas ahead of them and vaishyas followed the kshatriyas. The shudras were devoted to their own dharma and served the other three varnas” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana* I 20) to which *rakshasas* do not adhere to as they eat flesh of Brahmanas and disrupt their sacrifices. The destruction of the whole *rakshasa* clan leaving Vibhishana and his company alive who submitted to Rama, says a lot for those who would not acquiesce to Rama and his teachings which comply with the teachings of brahmins to which group Valmiki, the author falls under.

Conclusion

The Valmiki’s Ramayana is filled with distorted, disabled and abnormal physical features which are given to non-godly characters, *rakshasas*. Such attributes show and establish non-godly characters’ ‘obvious’ evil nature, whereas the physical characteristics of godly figures like Rama are close to that of the author, Valmiki’s avatar. This nearing characterisation of godly figures to himself clearly shows the enforced interpretation to the readers, even to the small children who would hear the legend as their bed-time stories, that the clan who carries the physical attributions as the god would be good, godly, the bearer of *dharma*, in short like the god himself. I would like to refer to the awakening of the collective reality as mentioned by Adrienne Rich in her paper “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” “The sleepwalkers are coming awake, and for the first time this awakening has the collective reality; it is no longer such a lonely thing to open one’s eyes” (Rich 18). She continues, “Re-vision- the act of looking back-of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction- is for us more than a chapter in

cultural history: it is an act of survival” (Rich 18). This thesis paper tries hard to maintain the virtue of re-visionist notion and this is one of the notifications for the academia for the awakening of the collective reality. This also is the continuation of the aware reader in new critical direction which unravel the politics of the epic which is shaping the life and psychology of the generations from the ancient time. This also is the appeal to not judge ‘book by its cover’ as believed by Hanumat: “Even if one hides it, it is impossible not to reveal something in one’s form” (*The Valmiki’s Ramayana III* 25). In the era of postmodernism, the focus on supremacy is itself a big question which makes supremacy based on physical attributes nothing but a funny thing. And lastly, this is the ‘act of survival’ for the humans who confronts stigmatization process and deconstructs the ‘marking’ Brown talks about, seeking for the equality with all the physical attributes to flourish and be alive in what they really believe in without being stigmatized and influenced from the very beginning of their comprehensiveness.

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