

## Vālmīkirāmāyaṇa - A Homodiegetic Narrative

Sreevidya G

Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit General,  
Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, Kerala, India

### ABSTRACT

Vālmīkirāmāyaṇa is a literary work with refined poetic art to illustrate how human minds develop. The characters, including the narrator, in this epic poem are revealed in their evocative dimension. As the story starts in the middle of events, it highlights what happened before the poem's opening. Through the analysis of its narrative structure the goal is to identify Vālmīki as the author, the character and the listener in his presentation.

**KEYWORDS:** *Epic narration, Narration of Vālmīkirāmāyaṇa, Character study of the Rāmāyaṇa*

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### INTRODUCTION

The author, the character, and the listener are the three entities involved in story-telling. The author or the narrator depicts the incidents in speech or in writing. The Rāmāyaṇa adopts a method of narration in which the narrator, Vālmīki himself appears as one of the characters of the story. Vālmīki was very curious to hear from Nārada about the man endowed with manifold as well as rare virtues. Nārada who possesses the knowledge of the three worlds, described the life and deeds of Rāma from his birth until his reign as a righteous king of Ayodhyā. Vālmīki conceived the legend of Rāma exactly as the sage Nārada narrated it to him. He elaborated on it in a manner that was quite appealing to the reader. He also composed the futuristic events in the life of Rāma, in all their minuteness. The incident that truly inspired the poet in Vālmīki was the sad plight of the krauñca bird that lost its mate due to the cruel deed of a hunter. It perturbed his mind so much that his reaction came out as a curse for the wrongdoer. The Rāmāyaṇa might have remained untold if Vālmīki had not raised the question, 'Is there a man in the world today who is truly virtuous? Though Vālmīki's role is equally important in both Bālakāṇḍa and Uttarakāṇḍa of the epic, it is more crucial in the latter.

To put it in simple words, the epic opens and ends with the narrator's character.

### Role of Vālmīki in the Bālakāṇḍa

The Bālakāṇḍa opens with the verse, which is a question put forth by Vālmīki to the sage Nārada<sup>1</sup>. Hearing the appeal of Vālmīki, Nārada out of delight, gives the sacred narrative of Rāma which is capable of purifying the mind. Contemplating the discourse of sage Nārada, Vālmīki went to the banks of the river Tamasā in order to pay the mid-day oblations. The clarity and transparency of the water there appeared to him as the mind of a righteous man<sup>2</sup>. May be he was so much indulged in the righteousness of Rāma. As an ascetic, though he had no inclination to see anything delightful to the senses, he surveyed the extensive forest and saw a pair of krauñca birds moving fearlessly without parting from one another and making a charming noise. While he was looking upon this, suddenly the male of the said pair was struck with an arrow by a hunter who was an embodiment of cruel deeds. Seeing it wounded and tossing itself on the ground with its limbs smeared all over with blood, the female bird gave out a piteous wail, as she was parted from her mate forever. On seeing the sad plight of the bird, whose sole cause

was none other than the hunter, who was full of animosity even towards innocent creatures, there aroused an unmatched pity in the heart of Vālmīki. Out of compassion towards the bird as well as the outpour of anger towards the hunter for his sinful act, he uttered the following words

*mā niṣāda pratiṣṭhāṃ tvamagamah śāśvatīḥ samāḥ |  
yat krauñcamithunādekamavadhīḥ kāmamohitam ||<sup>3</sup>*

His quick response—this verse, which is unparalleled came out of the same anguish that the bird was feeling. Furthermore, the suggestive meaning of this couplet contained the germ of the Rāmāyaṇayaa.

The seer went back to his seclusion and completed the rites while obsessing over the occurrence. He was completely engrossed in his reflection on the couplet he had just pronounced. Then, in front of Vālmīki, the world's creator, Brahma, manifested himself, much to his surprise. He greeted the preceptor appropriately, but despite being in the presence of the creator, he continued to be preoccupied with the incident that occurred on the banks of the river Tamasa. He recited the verse before Brahma and was once more overcome with sorrow for the lost bird and the fowler, whom he accidentally cursed. The omniscient Brahma comforted Vālmīki with his remarks.

*śloka evāstvayaṃ baddho nātra kāryā vicāraṇā |  
macchandādeva te brahman pravṛttemaṃ sarasvatī ||  
vṛttam kathaya dhīrasya yathā te nāradācchrutam |  
rahasyaṃ ca prakāśaṃ ca yad vṛttam tasya dhīmataḥ ||  
taccāpyaviditaṃ sarvaṃ viditaṃ te bhaviṣyati |  
na te vāganṛtā kāvyē kācitra bhaviṣyati ||<sup>4</sup>*

Through intuition, Vālmīki endeavoured to ascertain a thorough biography of Rama. By means of the yogic power that Brahma bestowed upon him, he was able to immediately and clearly observe all that related to Rama in truth and in all of its details. The revered philosopher, who had a catholic viewpoint, subsequently wrote the heart-rending lines that recount the honourable deeds of the wonderful Rama. The advent of Rāma, his superlative prowess, benevolence to all, universal popularity, amiability, and many other wondrous episodes, each and every incident, including the coronation along with how he won the hearts of the people and also the exile of Sītā and more interestingly, whatever deeds were yet to be performed on the earth by Rāma were present in his diction. He uttered 24000 verses in six kāṇḍa consisting of more than 500 cantos, and an uttarakāṇḍa (the epilogue), which deals mainly with the future events in the life of Rāma.

Thus, completing the task of the composition Vālmīki contemplated upon, recited it before the audience. At

that moment, he cast his glance upon his disciples Lava and Kuśa who were gifted with a musical voice and adept in the science of music. Realizing their calibre to undertake the stupendous task, he taught them the whole of the great poem of the Rāmāyaṇa entitled "Paulastyavadham". The two irreproachable princes chanted it as they had been instructed, with their minds fully concentrated in a concourse of pious men. They equipped with all the good qualities chanted the poem with all the richness of music in both the styles called mārgī and deśī<sup>5</sup>. *Āścaryamidamākhyānam*<sup>6</sup> the assembly bestowed many boons on them praising the poem and the poet. They recite it for the sages and then made their way to Ayodhyā. Rāma too experienced the joy welling out of the poem as he listened to his own story as sung by his sons without recognizing them.

### Role of Vālmīki in the Uttarakāṇḍa

Vālmīki reappear in the Uttarakāṇḍa, which depicts mainly the future happenings in the life of Rāma. When Sītā was banished into the forest due to the ugly remarks made by the citizens, Vālmīki came to her rescue. As he had already known everything by virtue of his asceticism, he consoled her, gave her solace, and allowed her to stay in the hermitage. Sītā's sons were born there, and Vālmīki named them Lava and Kuśa. The composition of the Rāmāyaṇa took place after this incident. The emotionally loaded narration of the Rāmāyaṇa happened when Vālmīki brought Lava and Kuśa to Ayodhyā to attend the horse sacrifice as per the invitation of the king Rāma. Vālmīki spoke thus to Lava and Kuśa - *kṛtsnam rāmāyaṇam kāvyam gāyatām parayā mudā*<sup>7</sup>.

*yadi śabdāpayet rāmaḥ śravaṇāya mahīpatiḥ |  
rṣīṅāmupaviṣṭānām yathāyogaṃ pravartatām ||  
yadi pṛcchet sa kākutstho yuvām kasyeti dāraḥ |  
vālmīkeratha śiṣyau dvau brūtamevaṃ narādhipam ||  
idi saṃdiśya bahuśo muniḥ pṛcetasastadā |  
vālmīkiḥ paramodāratuṣṇīmāsīn mahāmuniḥ ||<sup>8</sup>*

Rāma heard the musical recital and was amazed. The assembly said to each other, Boys are similar to Rāma as a reflection from the original object. Eager to hear about the rest of the poem, he asked them about the composition and its composer, to which they replied, vālmīkirbhagavān kartā. He learned from the poem that Lava and Kuśa are Sītā's sons and dispatched an envoy to Vālmīki to ask Sītā to prove her chastity. Vālmīki acknowledges the summons, and the very next day he goes up to Rāma with Sītā. In the midst of great sages, gods, and thousands of other noble men, he spoke thus -

*iyam dāśarathē sītā suvratā dharmacārīṇī |  
apavādāt parityaktā mamāśramasamīpataḥ ||  
imau tu jānakīputrāvubhau ca yamajātakau |*

*sutau tavaiva durdharṣau satyametaḍ bravīmi me ||  
bahuvarṣasahasrāṇi tapaścaryā mayā kṛtā |  
nopāśnīyāṃ phalaṃ tasyā duṣṭeyaṃ yadi maithilī ||  
ahaṃ pañcasu bhūteṣu manaḥṣaṣṭheṣu rāghava |  
vicintya sītā śuddheti jagrāha vananirjhare ||<sup>9</sup>*

Through his divine vision Vālmīki saw whatever is unknown about Sītā, and he revealed everything before Rāma, who too knew that she was sinless and pure. Rāma opened his heart before the assembly of the great men –

*pratrayo me suraśreṣṭha ṛṣivākyairakalmaṣaiḥ |  
śuddhāyāṃ jagato madhye vaidehyāṃ pṛtīrastu me ||<sup>10</sup>*

Vālmīki made his presence felt here with all his strong feelings. He speaks with such authority that Rāma, accepts Sītā unconditionally. Sītā instead of staying with Rāma returned to the earth from where she came. She took the oath thus

*yathāhaṃ rāghavādanyaṃ manasāpi na cintaye |  
tathā me mādhavī devī vivaraṃ dādumarhati ||<sup>11</sup>*

Rāma laments over her entry into the nether world, and nobody could console her. Lord Brahmā assures him of his reunion with Sītā and asks him to listen to the poem further as it describes everything in detail, including what he will experience in the future. Because it is the first and foremost among the poems that is entirely based on him, with all statements true and nothing concealed. Lord Brahmā attests to the robustness and trustworthiness of the poem by thus

*uttaraṃ nāma kāvyasya śeṣamatra mahāyaśaḥ |  
tacchrūṇuṣva mahāteja ṛṣibhiḥ sārḍhamuttamam ||<sup>12</sup>*

Though Vālmīki is present in both the Bālakāṇḍa and the Uttarakāṇḍa, it is in an entirely different manner. In the Bālakāṇḍa he is a passive participant, as one who desires to hear about the most virtuous man on earth. He recreates what he heard from the sage Nārada in an excellent poetic style with the competence gifted to him by Lord Brahmā. Then he teaches it to his most talented disciples, Lava and Kuśa. The wondrous tale of Rāma itself is prominent in this episode, Vālmīki being one who asks questions, hears, and retells the story of Rāma. It is true that a seed that will become a huge tree is hidden in this canto, which is known only to the author. These unspoken events are exposed only in the last canto. To be more precise, the role to be played by Vālmīki in the future happenings in the life of Rāma are very much present here, though not much light is thrown upon. In the Uttarakāṇḍa, Vālmīki intervenes very consciously, or in other words plays a pivotal role in carrying forward the whole episode. Vālmīki rescues Sītā from her torments, protects her sons, and

teaches them the story of their father and forefathers. He sends Lava and Kuśa, sons of Rāma to sing the poem for Rāma. Vālmīki's divine vision assures him that Rāma would recognize his own sons and there by ask for Sītā. He himself takes Sītā to Rāma and vouches for her innocence, and declares Lava and Kuśa to be his sons. Vālmīki alone knows the pristine, pure character of Sītā through the insight given by Lord Brahmā. In the Bālakāṇḍa Lord Brahmā instructs Vālmīki to depict the deeds of Sītā which are known and unknown. The promise by Lord Brahmā that '*taccāpyaviditaṃ sarvaṃ viditaṃ te bhaviṣyati*' makes more sense when Vālmīki narrates the future of Rāma through Lava and Kuśa. All these point to the fact that Vālmīki has 'visualized' the entire affair along with the task he has to accomplish in it. He worked out the story, participated in it and narrated it simultaneously. He handled the present, the past and the future with utmost care. Vālmīki's rendition goes beyond the one rendered by Nārada. He becomes the instrument to seal the debate about Sītā's chastity as well as to reveal the identity of Lava and Kuśa. It is clear that Vālmīki knows 'everything' without a doubt about Rāma, Sītā and their sons in former phase itself. He also sees how he is going to become a binding factor in the whole episode. The tale of Rāma becomes truly public in every sense when Lava and Kuśa delivered it in the horse-sacrifice. It is in the Uttarakāṇḍa Vālmīki acts, narrates and listens concurrently connecting all the missing points thus substantiating his authorship with the development of the plot. Vālmīki lives inside and outside his epic. He cannot tell the Rāmāyaṇa without being part of it and at the same time the story cannot unfold without being Vālmīki in it.

### Conclusion

The story begins with Vālmīki's quest for the most virtuous man, and he traverses a path in which he realizes his potential presence. But he remains silent about it, and while detailing the known facts, he becomes the narrator, the actor, as well as the listener. As he has a clear idea of what to say, he also has a clear idea of how to present it. The Ramayana employs the technique of frame narrative, a literary device where the core theme is inserted within another story. The poem opens with Nārada telling the story of Rama to Vālmīki. Within a short span of time, Vālmīki is moved to see the grief of a bird that lost its mate. His pain and compassion poured out in an alluring metrical composition. Then, with the encouragement of Brahma Vālmīki knits the tale of Rāma, that he heard from Nārada, in this particular metrical structure and teaches it to Lava and Kusa. As an author, his imagination knew no bounds. It is at its fullest in the Sundarakāṇḍa<sup>13</sup> and Yuddhakāṇḍa<sup>14</sup> All

the characters, including him; intervene with proper timing, which enhances the beauty and simplicity of his poem. Unique knitting can be felt where the author, the participant, and the audience become one, which alone is the sole cause for a marvellous and enthralling poem like Rāmāyaṇa.

*kūjantaṃ rāma rāmeti madhuraṃ madhurākṣaram |  
āruhya kavitaśākhāṃ vande vālmīkikokilam ||*

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- [1] कोऽन्वस्विन् साम्प्रतं लोके गुणवान् कश्च वीर्यवान्? śrīmad Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa I. 1. 2 - 4
- [2] रमणीयं प्रसन्नम्बु सन्मनुष्यमनो यथा || śrīmad Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa I. 2. 6
- [3] ibid I. 2. 15
- [4] ibid I. 2. 31 - 37
- [5] mārgī being the Saṃskṛt version and deśī the Prākṛt
- [6] śrīmad Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa I. 4. 26

- [7] ibid VII. 93. 5
- [8] ibid VII. 93. 10 - 13
- [9] ibid VII. 96. 16 – 24
- [10] ibid VII. 97. 10
- [11] ibid VII. 9. 14 -16
- [12] ibid VII. 98. 21
- [13] ibid V. 1. 45 - 85
- [14] ibid VI. 107. 51 – 52

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