

READING WITH THE ṚṢI: A CROSS-CULTURAL AND COMPARATIVE LITERARY APPROACH TO VĀLMĪKI'S RĀMĀYAṆA. By Robert P. Goldman. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2024. 72 pp.

How does an ancient Sanskrit epic like the Rāmāyaṇa continue to resonate across different cultures and eras? What challenges do modern translators and readers face in comprehending its complex themes and intricate narratives? How can such a narrative be both a reflection of its own era and a source of insight for contemporary society? In *Reading with the Ṛṣi: A Cross-Cultural and Comparative Literary Approach to Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa*, Robert P. Goldman embarks on a cross-cultural and comparative literary journey to explore these questions. This book, which is based on a lecture delivered by Goldman at Jadavpur University, delves deeply into the nature and contents of the Rāmāyaṇa, tracing its transmission and reception from its inception through modernity, as well as examining its pervasive influence on religious, ethical, social, and political thought since its composition across Southeast Asia.

The book begins by grappling with a fundamental question: how should a reader positioned in the 21st century navigate a literary work dating back to the first millennium BCE? Goldman confronts head-on the linguistic and cultural barriers that confront modern readers engaging with the Rāmāyaṇa. The epic's composition in a variant of Classical Sanskrit known as *ārṣa*, the language of the rishis or seers, presents formidable obstacles (2). Hence the title of the book, *Reading with the Ṛṣi*, encapsulates the necessity for modern readers to approach the text with an appreciation of its ancient linguistic characteristics and cultural contexts, urging a nuanced approach to interpretation rather than thrusting upon it the concerns of modern aesthetic sensibilities. Goldman proposes two distinct approaches to interpreting the Rāmāyaṇa: the etic and emic, terms coined by linguist Kenneth Pike (4). Emic entails understanding cultural or religious phenomena from the perspective of insiders, providing insights based on internal perceptions and values. In contrast, etic involves studying these phenomena from an outsider's viewpoint, offering interpretations that may be more detached from the cultural context. This approach is useful in navigating an ancient text as it integrates both subjective (emic) and objective (etic) viewpoints, enriching the understanding of the epic's significance.

In the section titled "What is the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa?", Goldman explores the genre classification of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, questioning whether it should be viewed as a poetic history or a historical poem. He problematises the general tendency to categorise both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* under the generic Western term 'epic'. Goldman further highlights ancient India's extensive tradition of literary classification, analysis, and interpretation, which includes a sophisticated system of genre distinctions (14). Despite this rich tradition, he notes the difficulty in finding precise terms within Indian literary theory that align perfectly with the Western concept of an epic. According to Sanskrit authorities on literary criticism, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is classified under the specific genre of *mahākāvya*, while the *Mahābhārata* is classified as *itihāsa*. However, Goldman points out that even though the Sanskrit lexicon encompasses a wide array of literary types, there isn't a single precise genre term that unequivocally classifies both texts. This nuanced exploration underscores the complexities of genre classification across Sanskrit literary traditions, highlighting the unique challenges posed by the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* within the framework of Indian literary theory.

In discussing the genre classification of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Goldman notes that while the *Mahābhārata* is the prototypical *itihāsa*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, on the other hand, is the archetypal *mahākāvya* (15). However, he emphasises that these genre categories are not rigidly defined, and more often than not their characteristics bleed into one another. Goldman meticu-

lously cites examples where the *Mahābhārata* describes itself as both *kāvya* and *itihāsa*. Similarly, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, while proclaiming itself to be the archetypal *mahākāvya*, exhibits traits of both genres. For instance, it features extensive catalogues of characters, genealogies, weapons, flora, and fauna, which are some of the most common characteristics of *itihāsa*.

Goldman employs the concept of *vyutpatti* to discern the subtle nuances between *itihāsa* and *mahākāvya*. *Vyutpatti* can be translated as edification or cultivation of mind. According to Abhinavagupta, a prominent proponent of the *rasa-dhvani* school along with Ānandavardhana, the purpose of all genres of composition is *vyutpatti*. He states that all texts, regardless of their genre, should provide teaching regarding the four principal aims of human life—*dharma* (duty), *artha* (wealth), *kāma* (pleasure), and *mokṣa* (liberation). However, different genres achieve this edifying function in distinct ways (17). For instance, the *Vedas* teach in the manner of a master, *itihāsa* teaches in the manner of a friend, and *kāvya* teaches in the manner of a wife. Therefore, the distinguishing feature of *kāvya* is that it prioritises pleasure or delight over its instructional and educational obligation. Goldman further explores the *rasa-dhvani* school of Sanskrit literary criticism to understand the core essence of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, moving away from the Western classification of the text as an ‘epic’. According to the *rasa-dhvani* school, “the principal aesthetic-emotive sentiment (*rasa*) of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is *karuṇa-rasa*, the sublimated emotion of *śoka* or grief” (18). This perspective offers a deeper understanding of the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s affective and aesthetic impact, highlighting its unique qualities beyond the generic Western classification.

Goldman undertakes a comparative analysis of ancient Greek and Sanskrit epics, drawing inspiration from Matthew Arnold’s renowned lectures on Homeric epics, delivered at Oxford in 1860 and later published as *On Translating Homer*. In these lectures, Arnold outlines four principal stylistic virtues of epic poetry: simplicity, rapidity, plainness of thought, and nobility (26). Arnold’s framework has long been influential in the study of Western epic traditions. However, Goldman argues that these virtues do not adequately capture the essence of Sanskrit epics, nor perhaps other non-Western epic traditions. He finds Arnold’s criteria too narrow and culturally specific to encompass the rich diversity of epic traditions worldwide. Instead, Goldman proposes alternative points of comparison that he believes offer a more accurate and insightful understanding of both Greek and Sanskrit epics. Metrical differences, narrative breadth, and directness of storytelling are, according to Goldman, more relevant points of comparison between the Sanskrit and Greek epics.

Goldman’s work stands out for its detailed analysis of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a cornerstone of both Indian and world literature, highlighting its exceptional poetic qualities and its enduring impact. He navigates the epic’s rich narrative landscape, addressing the complexities it presents to contemporary translators and readers. Through this, Goldman sheds light on how the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been interpreted and reinterpreted across time, revealing the dynamic interplay between the ancient text and modern sensibilities. By examining the *Rāmāyaṇa* within the framework of both Western and Indian aesthetic norms and tastes, Goldman provides a unique perspective on its literary significance. His comparative approach underscores the epic’s universal themes and its ability to transcend cultural boundaries. This comprehensive study not only reaffirms the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s status as a monumental work of Indian literature but also as an essential component of global literary heritage.

Reading with the *R̥ṣi* is not just an academic treatise but a celebration of the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s lasting legacy. It invites readers to reconsider the epic’s relevance today, offering fresh insights into its role in shaping and reflecting the cultural ethos of India. Goldman’s scholarly yet accessible analysis makes this book an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the intersections of literature, culture, and history, and it promises to deepen our understanding of one of the world’s most enduring and influential epics.

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