Is The Ramayana a Work of World Literature? The History, Translation, Anthologization, Circulation, Distribution, and Production of The Ramayana

Scolastica Wedhowerti
wedho.sc@usd.ac.id
Department of English Letters, Sanata Dharma University

Abstract

The notion of world literature (Weltliteratur) was first introduced by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1827. It is a concept which peoples of different nations read each other's works either in their original language or translation. The Ramayana, a great Indian epic, has existed for more than two millennia. It has been a subject of discussion of whether it is a work of world literature or not. There are factors contributing to the concept of world literature, namely anthologization, history, translation, circulation, distribution, and production. This paper aims at answering the question of whether the Ramayana is a work of world literature or not.

***Keywords**: anthologization, translation, production, world literature*

World Literature and The Ramayana

The term world literature (*Weltliteratur*) was first introduced by Goethe in 1827. He suggests that it is a future-oriented concept in which different nations would get to know one another through reciprocal reading of each other's works (Goethe in Carroll, 1996: 5). In an effort of making a local literary piece into world literature, there are some factors to consider. According to Carroll, the three of the most important factors contributing to the concept of world literature are history, translation, and anthologization (1996: viii). Further, Carroll mentions that history means history of civilization, namely the preoccupation with cultural identity and the attempt to clarify and preserve cultural values (1996: 3). In addition to the notion of world literature, Damrosch suggests that world literature encompasses all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language (2003: 4). Moreover, he mentions that a work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read as literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin (2003: 6). Therefore, the idea of world literature involves not only history, translation, and anthologization but also circulation, distribution, and production.

World literature does not just arrive to the actual works but also to the responses of audience. A literary piece is still alive because of the reader or audience. There is a dialog between the reader or audience and the work. Literature means different things to different people. Literary works may be performed, produced or reproduced in non-written form.

About the Ramayana

A great Indian epic, the Ramayana dates back to 1500 BC. There is diversity of Ramayana tradition. According to Richman,

hundreds of tellings of Rama's story exist in India ranging from Valmiki's as the oldest full literary telling of the story to the most familiar telling at this moment (2001: 3). In this paper, the Ramayana appears without italics because it refers to the Ramayana story in general or story of Rama.

The Valmiki's was composed by a poet and sage Maharishi Valmiki in the classical language, Sanskrit. He composed the whole work running to twenty-four thousand stanzas. He poured out his expression into a great masterpiece in Sanskrit verse consisting of 24,000 *slokas* (48,000 lines) and 500 *sargas* (cantos). Thus, Valmiki's is in the form of poem. The term *sloka* refers to a specific meter which Valmiki himself discovered (Shastri, 1962: xvi). The Ramayana is divided into seven books (*Kandas*) of unequal length. The seven *kandas* are Bala Kanda, Ayodhya Kanda, Aranya Kanda, Kishkindha Kanda, Sundara Kanda, Yuddha Kanda, and Uttara Kanda.

It basically tells us about the ancient tradition of two powerful races living in the North of India called the Kosalas and Videhas. They live in two kingdoms named the same as their race, Kosala and Videha. King of Kosala, Dasaratha has four sons. The eldest is Rama, the hero of the epic. King Janaka, the ruler of Videha has a daughter named Sita, the heroine of this epic. King Janaka holds a severe test or competition. Any prince or warrior able to bend the Shiva's bow will be entitled to marry Sita. Rama wins his bride. The story continues when Sita is abducted by Ravana. The battle and effort to free Sita become the subject of the Ramayana.

Is The Ramayana a Work of World Literature?

The question above is answered through the Ramayana's history, translation, anthologization, circulation, and production in order to prove it as a work of world literature. The Ramayana has exerted a tremendous influence on the people of India and around the world. History of civilization which is related to culture and finally arrives at the values of human's life is deeply expressed by the epic. According to Shastri, the Ramayana is not only poetry of unsurpassed dramatic power and brilliance, but also a treasure-house of information on rhetoric, medicine, geology, botany, geography, and every facet of the ancient civilization with which learned scholars may interest themselves (1962: xvii).

The epic spreads the values which operate locally as well as globally (universally). For every Hindu in India and other countries, Rama and Sita are the ideal man and woman, the model of a perfect couple. Rama himself is believed to be the seventh reincarnation (avatar) of god Vishnu, the One all-pervading principle of truth and intelligence. Rama has a higher pattern of life for he is chosen to have perfect virtues such as being a lover of truth and compassionate. Rama and Ravana become the symbol of forces of light and darkness existing in human heart as well as in the world. Rama's virtues of being truthful, benevolent, merciful, and compassionate are the forces of light which are opposed by Ravana's anger, selfishness, greed, and lust. The human's real triumph then conquers the forces of darkness. These values are locally as well as universally accepted.

The universality of the epic's values is also found in it. The various types of situations depicted in the epic are very similar to those which commonly occur in human lives and hence relevant to all mankind. It describes the nine sentiments (*rasas*). The nine *rasas* are love between Rama and Sita, valor in breaking the Shiva's bow while putting the string, pathos on Kakasura when he surrendered, marvel in building the bridge for ocean, humor when Shoorpanakha approached Rama, terror and disgust in the battlefield, fury while slaying Ravana, and peace in interaction with sages.

From the point of view of translation, the epic has been translated into languages other than Sanskrit. The oldest English version was written in 1802 by Kirtee Bass and divided into five volumes. Other English editions were written in 1899 by Rames Dutt (condensed into English verse) and Hari Prasad Shastri in 1952 (appeared in complete seven *kandas*). Another edition is Italian written by S. Goressio and divided into ten

volumes. Around the first century AD, the epic was brought by Indian traders to Java and was translated into Old Javanese or Kawi language with a strong Sanskrit influence remained. There are still many other translations of the epic into other languages although some of them are not the complete version with seven *kandas*.

The Ramayana is also anthologized by Paula Richman in *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology*. This collection brings together, for the first time, modern retellings translated from the four major South Indian languages and from genres as diverse as drama, short stories, poetry, and folk song. This anthology includes translations of 22 primary texts along with interpretive essays that provide background and frameworks for understanding the stories. The question raised by Carroll of whether a work of world literature can be anthologized without destroying the differences within and among cultures is answered by seeing more critical thought in the anthology (1996: ix). In Part 1 (Sita in Context), there are ten stories about Sita showing readers her strength as a heroine of the epic as well as the heroine of India. The cultural aspect of Sita as the model or ideal woman is represented by the ten stories.

In order to introduce a literary work to public, circulation, and distribution are required. The Ramayana has been created new through the use of modern technology. During the coming centuries, this epic has been rewritten in several versions throughout the Asian continent, the Indian sub-continent, and other parts of the world. In the early of its circulation and distribution (the 18th and 19th centuries), it was still in the format of hard copies. Those were circulated and distributed manually (based on the order to the publisher and distributor). Therefore, the means of promotion were advertisements on TV and mass media. Then, as technology especially internet advances, it is now sold on the electronic auction. Moreover, the format is now no longer hard copies but soft ones. People can buy it in its newest e-book format. How about the young generation in India and other people who do not have access to the internet in accessing the Ramayana?

The answer begins with the production and reproduction of the epic. It is reproduced in several forms as illustrated books, films, dramas, dances, and TV series. The first example is the launch of Chandamama's Ramayana which is an illustrated book with 400 pages of rich, hand drawn illustrations presenting the tale of Rama and Sita in full color and in a simple narrative style suitable for children. To accommodate its readers, this book is written in 12 Indian languages and English. The next example is the existence of Kakawin Ramayana in Old Javanese with little variation but bases its story on the Ramayana of Valmiki and is performed in shadow puppet show (*wayang*). In Central Java, Indonesia, the epic is also performed in a dance called *Sendratari Ramayana* in Prambanan Temple. Moreover, this epic also becomes the source of many stories in many countries such as *Ramakien* in Thailand, *Hikayat Seri Rama* in Malaysia, *Reamker* in Cambodia, and *Ramadia Lawana* in the Philippines.

Another reproduction of the Ramayana is in the form of film entitled *Sita Sings the Blues*. This film is directed by Nina Paley. This film displays images such as narrators in the form of shadow puppets and cartoon characters. They function as means by which experience in its richness and emotional complexity is communicated to audience. They also tell us the spirit of the age. Shadow puppets represent the spirit in the ancient times while cartoon characters represent the modern times with animation technology.

In his article, Dodson mentions that the Ramayana has the theme of heroes and heroic codes (Dodson in Carroll, 1996: 179). He includes the Ramayana and sees Rama from western point of view and somehow compares him with other heroes such as Genji and Achilles. He says that Rama possesses many of the usual traits of a Western heroic protagonist: aristocratic birth, piety, courage, great skill at arms, endurance, and singleness of purpose, but to these are added traits not often associated with the Western heroic figure: courtesy, humility, modesty, self-denial, learning, a highly developed ethical sense, and especially compassion (Dodson in Carroll, 1996: 180). This fact is a proof that the Ramayana is

widely recognized. On the one hand, the local colors that Rama has are accepted even though his traits are not often found in Western heroes. On the other hand, Rama also possesses traits which are commonly shared by the Western heroes.

Conclusion

The Ramayana is a work of world literature. This is proven by its history, translation, anthologization, circulation, and production. The history of the Ramayana is identified by its local values which are widely accepted. The process of introducing the values is done through translation. Translation plays an important role in encouraging people to pay attention to a certain literary piece. Translation serves as a bridge connecting peoples from different cultures and languages.

People especially scholars conduct more research by reading the anthology of the Ramayana. It enables them to criticize and disseminate the works in it. It also becomes a resourceful reference for readers to study and give more responses.

The process of production, reproduction, and circulation is done in order to introduce the local colors of great Indian tradition to the world. Therefore, there will always be refraction. The Ramayana with its local colors still becomes the identity of India. However, with the help of technology, it provides us with widely accepted universal values.

References

Carroll, Michael Thomas, *No Small World: Visions and Revisions of World Literature*. Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996. Print.

Damrosch, David, *What is World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. Print.

Griffith. Ralph, *The Ramayan of Valmiki Translated into English Verse*. London: Trubner & Co., 2008. Print.

Narayan, R.K., *The Ramayana*. New Delhi: Vision Books Pvt Ltd., 1987. Print.

Richman, Paula, *Questioning Ramayanas: a South Asian Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. Print.

Richman, Paula, *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. Print.

Romesh, Dutt, *The Ramayana and the Mahabharata*. London: J. M. Dent, 1917. Print.