

Epic Conventions in Tulsidas and Milton : A Comparative Study

Abstract

This paper attempts to study the two great epic poets of the world- Tulsidas and John Milton in terms of their observance of the epic conventions in their respective epics *Ramcharitmanas* (1574) and *Paradise Lost* (1667). Both of these are considered great classics of epic poetry in their languages- the former in Hindi and the latter in English. Written in different cultural and literary traditions, they share certain similarities as well as have some differences with regard to their conformity to the established conventions and characteristics of epic writing. They have, therefore, sufficient grounds for comparative study to facilitate a wider and more comprehensive understanding of the two great epics.

Keywords: Epic Conventions, Comparative Study, Devotional, Fall of Man, Narrative, Argument, Epic Theme, Paradox, Resurrection, Metaphysical, Damnation, Redemption, Temptation, Invocation, Generic Context, Manifestation, Polytheism, Conceptualisation, Classical, Poetics, Rupture, Antithesis, Cosmic Space, Formality, Grand Style.

Introduction

A renowned devotional poet in Hindi, Tulsidas has been acclaimed as one of the greatest poets in Indian as well as in world literature. His works have exercised widespread influence on Indian art, literature, and society. Indian and Western scholars both have very passionately paid their regards to Tulsidas for the enduring beauty of his poetry and its lasting impact on the Hindu society. His *Ramcharitmanas*, for which he is best known, is a retelling of the Sanskrit *Ramayana* which is based on the life of the deity Rama to whom he was most devoted. The poetic beauty of this epic has been widely admired by both native and foreign scholars. Rahim, another noted Hindi poet, has thus described the glory and greatness of the epic in the following couplet :

rāmacaritamānasa bimla santanajivanaprāna
hinduvāna ko beda sama javanahi pragat kurāna

(Shukla : 35)

That is, the flawless and perfect *Ramcharitmanas* is the breath of the life of saints. It is similar to the Vedas for Hindus, and it is the Quran manifest for the Muslims. The famous nineteenth century Indologist Ralph Griffith, who is accredited with translating the four Vedas and Valmiki's *Ramayana* into English, called *Ramcharitmanas* "the Bible of North India".

Milton holds a high place of honour among English poets. He was a devout Christian committed to spread the ideals of Christianity and sing the glory of God. To him poetic talent was a special gift given to him by God. The best use of this talent was writing poems to glorify the greatness of God. He has stated this idea very clearly in his so-called sonnet 'On His Blindness'. He laments for the loss of his eyesight as a result of which he will not be able to serve God by composing poems in his glorification. So his poetic talent will remain unused. But soon he realizes the supremacy of God and the fact that total surrender of one's will to the will of God is the best service : "They also serve who only stand and wait" (Sonnet XVII : 1221).

Paradise Lost is widely regarded as the greatest epic poem in English. Containing and reinterpreting the Homeric, Virgilian, Dantesque, and Spenserian poems which precede it, it enlists their aid in the poetic realization of a perfect state of man, and the fall from that perfection into a state of human reality. It is a concrete realization of Milton's determination to write an epic on the model of the classical epics. As an epic it conforms to the conventions and technical principles of construction established by the great epics of classical antiquity – the Greek epic *Iliad* by Homer and

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the Roman epic *Aeneid* by Virgil. However, Milton made some changes in *Paradise Lost* to suit his theme. Unlike Homer and Virgil, who had national subjects for the theme of their epics, Milton chose a universal one, that of the Fall of Man.

Ramcharitmanas and *Paradise Lost* both derive their story content from their respective mythology. The prevailing myth of Ram, who was believed to be the incarnation of God Vishnu who had descended upon the earth to eradicate sin and evil, forms the plot of *Manas*, whereas the biblical story of the Fall of Man caused by Adam and Eve's disobedience to the authority of God is the central theme of *Paradise Lost*. In following the epic conventions, *Manas* is largely influenced by Sanskrit epics, such as Valmiki's *Ramayan*. The epic conventions in *Paradise Lost* are deduced chiefly from the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*.

There has been a vast tradition of epic poetry in Hindi literature. The Sanskrit poeticians from Bhamah down to Vishwanath have laid down the requirements that qualify a work to the title of an epic. They have emphasised various facets of the quality of the hero and the magnanimity of the subject. Keeping in view the opinions of Indian and Western critics, the general features of the epic may be summarised thus : An epic is a long narrative poem that deals with a noble and dignified subject in a grand and elevated manner. It has a vital and well woven plot. It is centred on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the entire human race. It also presents a comprehensive view of the life of the age in which it is written.

Like any typical western epic, *Paradise Lost* also begins by stating its argument, or epic theme. It begins with a clearly defined theme – the Fall of Man which, according to Christian belief, is an important event, not in a nation's history but in the history of mankind. The opening lines of the poem state this theme very clearly :

Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the World, and all our
woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat.

(*Paradise Lost* Book I : ll 1-5)

The poem is a poetic rendering of the story of the fall in such a way as to illuminate some of the central paradoxes of the human situation and illustrate the tragic ambiguity of man as a moral being. Milton narrates the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience, explains how and why it happens and places it within the larger context of Satan's rebellion and Christ's resurrection. Disobedience is crucial to the thematic concerns of the text. His theme is, thus, very ambitious and its vision is cosmic. It has a comprehensive scope, because it deals with the entire human race and indicates the destiny of all humanity through the sin of the first man created by God.

The nature of Man's fall needs to be examined here in a greater detail. In *Paradise Lost* Milton addresses a metaphysical issue- man's responsibility to save himself from damnation. While

Adam and Eve are the first humans to disobey God, Satan was the first to have indulged in an act of grave disobedience. Satan's transgression came from his own choice, while Adam and Eve were lured into disobedience and hence deserve mercy and eventual redemption. The freedom of choice is granted to Christ, to angels, and to man alike. As an archangel Satan is a free agent in heaven and chooses to rebel, fully conscious of the implications of what he is doing. When Adam and Eve fall, they do so by consciously exercising their will. The option to resist temptation and stay in the grace of God is open to them, but they will otherwise. This comes as no surprise to God who is omniscient. God made man perfect, endowed him with reason and free will, but the responsibility of remaining good and faithful rests with man. Raphael explains to Adam the logic of God's creation thus in Book V of *Paradise Lost*.

God made thee perfect, not immutable;
And good he made thee, but to persevere
He left it in thy power, ordain'd thy will
By nature free, not over-ru'd by fate
Inextricable, or strict necessity.

(*Paradise Lost* Book V : ll 524-528)

The Fall of Man, thus, stands justified in terms of exercise of volition by Man. The glory of God is, however, asserted through his decision to restore mankind eventually to Grace.

Turning to *Ramcharitmanas*, we do not find a formal statement of the epic argument, or epic theme. A close reading of the poem, however, unfolds various layers of its purpose and theme. The opening verse of the first canto, *Balkanda*, states the poet's personal motif in writing the epic :

nānāpurānanigamāgamasammatam yad
rāmāyane nigaditam kvacidanyato' pi,
svāntahsukhāya tulasī raghunāthagāthā-
bhāsānibandhamatimāñjulamātanoti.

[In accord with all the Puranas, the Vedas and the Agamas, and with what has been told in the *Ramayana* (of Valmiki) and elsewhere, I, Tulasi, for his own soul's delight, have composed these exceedingly elegant lays of Raghunatha in modern speech.]

(Sri Rāmacaritmānasa : Verse 7)

That is, he resolved to depict the great story of Ram in a beautiful and charming language for his own pleasure. Further, in the same canto he describes the worth of his epic in a rhetorical manner :

kīrati bhaniti bhūti bhali soī,
surasari sama saba kahan hita hoī.

[The only fame, or poetry, or power, that is of any value is that which, like the Ganga, brings benefit to all.]

(Mānasa : p 14)

The poet here moves from individual to collective happiness. Considered in totality, the entire epic has a comprehensive design establishing the supreme noble human values in the society to govern our conduct in everyday life. The need to uphold one's duty is a predominant theme of the epic. It presents before us the infallible examples of highest ideals in every walk of our life : ideal of father- son relationship, husband-wife relationship, master-disciple brother-

relationship, brother relationship, citizen-country relationship, etc. It inculcates great ideals of every kind in us so that we may conduct ourselves in the best manner. Each quatrain of *Manas* is called a mantra and a regular practice of it can sublimate our life to become an ideal human being.

Writing of an epic is regarded as a great task in the literary traditions of both English and Hindi. Such a great task cannot be accomplished without the blessings of divine powers. Invocation to divine power for help, inspiration and guidance, therefore, constitutes a significant convention in the epic poetry of both the traditions. Soon after the statement of theme in *Paradise Lost*, the epic poet begins to invoke the Muse with a prayer to enlighten him on the causes of the event of the poem, and hence he clearly sets his epic in what he considers the proper generic context for it :

Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That shepherd, who first taught the chosen
seed,
In the beginning how the heav'ns and earth
Rose out of Chaos.

(*Paradise Lost* Book I : ll 6-10)

The poet is hopeful that his adventurous song soar "Above the' Aonian mount" (*Paradise Lost* Book I: 15) and pursue "Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme" (*Paradise Lost* Book I : 16). The subject of his poem is designed to be one of eternal and enduring relevance. The Heavenly Muse is in reality the divine inspiration which revealed the truths of religion to Moses and also the spirit of God which dwells in the heart of every believer. Here Milton brings out his faith in the conception of God according to the tenets of Christianity.

The magnitude of the task of Tulsidas in *Ramcharitmanas* is not ordinary. His glorification of Rama and attempt to set all kinds of ideals for the proper conduct of mankind in the world is equally difficult. So, conforming to the epic convention, Tulsidas also invokes divine powers for help and inspiration. He offers prayer to every god and goddess and even the manifestations of divine power in the form of natural phenomena. He differs from Milton only in reversing the order and making an elaborate invocation. He begins by invoking Saraswati, goddess of learning, and Ganesh, god of auspicious and good :

varnānāmarthasamghānām rasānām
chamdasāmapī,mangalānām ca karttārau
vande vānīvināyakau.

[I reverence Sarasvati and Ganesha, the originators of letters and their meaning, of poetic sentiments and metres, too, and of all blessings.]

(*Manas*, Balkanda : 1, 1)

It is followed by a prayer to Lord Shiv and goddess Parvati :

bhavānīśankarau vande
sraddhāvisvāsarūpīnau,
yābhyām vinā na pasyanti siddhāh
svāntahsthamīsvaram.

[I reverence Parvati and Shankara, the embodiments of faith and trust, without which even adepts cannot perceive God who dwells within them.]

(*Manas*, Balkanda : 1,2)

It is further followed by a prayer to numerous other gods, goddesses as well as Guru, trees, plants, rivers, sky and even the wicked who are humbly invoked by the poet to assist him in his great undertaking. This elaborate invocation is a reflection of Hindu polytheism.

The hero of an epic, in Western tradition, is a figure of great national or even cosmic importance. He must belong to the highest class in his society, and must be raised above the common man by birth, possession, manners and appearance. In *Paradise Lost* the hero is Adam, who incorporates in himself the entire race of man. Or, if we regard Christ as protagonist, he is both God and man. Milton has effected a major shift in his conceptualisation of heroism in *Paradise Lost*. The heroes of the classical epic are figures of great stature : physically large, supremely strong, dauntless in action and matchless in war. They leave a lasting impression on their readers through their prowess, strength and valour. Milton presents Satan in similar heroic dimensions in Books I and II of the epic. But as the narrative progresses, Satan undergoes a physical as well as a moral decline. The primacy of Satan in the early part of the story led some critics to conclude that he is the hero of the poem. If we examine Milton's portrayal of Satan as an organic part of his reinvention of the classical epic, the rupture he effects becomes obvious : Satan is the inversion of the classical hero; he possesses the rhetoric of a warrior but not the abilities of a warrior. Satan's military record is dismal : he loses the war in heaven and is chased out; when he succeeds he does so not through heroism but by guile. In Satan we have the antithesis of Milton's hero who interiorizes Christian virtues such as purity of heart, an upright mind, patience and capacity for self sacrifice. Placing greater value on physical strength and martial power belongs to Pagan times.

Turning to *Ramcharitmanas*, this epic does follow the qualifications of an epic hero as prescribed in Indian poetics which say that an ideal epic hero should be a god or a king or a patient and noble Kshatriya endowed with all the qualities of head and heart. Rama, the hero of *Manas*, is Maryadapurushottam, i.e. the most dignified and perfect man ever. He epitomises the ideal of a brother, a son, a king, a warrior, a friend, a pupil – almost every role that a person may possibly perform in the world. Despite being an 'avatar' of Lord Vishnu, he knows his human limitations and does respect them.

As an epic poem, *Paradise Lost* is also a ceremonial performance and is narrated throughout in a ceremonial style, which is deliberately distanced from ordinary speech and proportioned to the grandeur and formality of the heroic subject and architecture. Hence, Milton's grand style :

His formal diction and elaborate, stylised syntax, which are in large part modeled on Latin poetry, his sonorous lists of names and wide-ranging

allusions, and his imitation of Homer's epic similes and epithets (Abrams : 111).

Milton's poetic style in *Paradise Lost* is the last word of sublimity in English poetry. The poem excels as a poetic work both for the loftiness of its theme and for the grandeur of its style. *Ramcharitmanas* does not follow the protocol of ceremonial style. It is written in the vernacular Awadhi language, one of the dialects of Hindi. Its style is supreme by its own merits and represents the highest form of beauty in simplicity. Just as the poetic style attains its highest pitch in Sanskrit in Kalidasa, so does the epic style in Hindi reach its perfection in Tulsī. *Manas* displays Tulsī's dexterous use of a remarkable number of metres, alliterations, yamakas, onomatopoeias, etc. He excels in the use of similes and metaphors.

In *Paradise Lost* the narrative starts in the middle of the things, at a critical point in the action. It opens with the fallen angels in hell, gathering their scattered forces and resolving on revenge. Not until Books V-VII does the angel Raphael narrate to Adam the events in heaven which led to this situation. *Ramcharitmanas*, however, does not conform to this convention of epic construction. It begins smoothly with the birth and upbringing of Rama and his brothers, followed by his education, exile from the Kingdom of Ayodhya, etc. Many scholars have, nevertheless, commented on its abrupt ending.

So far as the setting of both the epics is concerned, it is almost similar in both the cases. The setting is ample in scale and may be worldwide or even larger. The scope of *Paradise Lost* is the entire universe, for it takes place in heaven, on earth, in hell and in the cosmic space between. In *Manas* also the action takes place in heaven, on earth, in hell and in the space in between. Both the epics also commonly share the characteristic of epic battle.

Conclusion

Paradise Lost and *Ramcharitmanas*, thus, share many characteristics and conventions of epic poetry. At the same time, they differ from each other to some extent in their observance of those conventions because of being the products of different cultural and social traditions. The similarity of epic conventions between the two shows the universality of the spirit of literature.

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Notes

- * This text has been used throughout to cite lines from *Paradise Lost* in the present paper.
- ** This text has been used throughout to cite Romanized lines and their translation from *Ramacaritmanas* in the present paper.