TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN THE MAKING OF *ABOUT RAM*: A CONTEMPORARY INDIAN PUPPETEER AND A RAMAYANA SCHOLAR IN CONVERSATION

Anurupa Roy - Paula Richman

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ABSTRACT: Anurupa Roy, director of a troupe of puppeteers in Delhi, India, discusses with Paula Richman, emerita professor at Oberlin College (USA), various facets in the creation of her puppet play *About Ram.* Roy wanted the audience to experience the diversity of the Ramayana tradition as a tragic love story about a hero (first a prince and later a king) who feels duty-bound to banish his wife with the result that he remains alone for the rest of his life. The play is filled with images of the hero's past life through animation of his memories and weapons on a screen mounted on stage and music with no words but with a percussion emphasis that draws upon different musical instruments from various regions. Over the period of improvisation by which the performance developed, Roy made the war scenes very stylized and the animator contemporized the weapons to include jet propulsion and machine guns. As part of her goal to develop an embodied language for contemporary puppet practice in India, Roy incorporated dances based on martial arts, which led to a grammar of movement for the puppet performance that was contemporary and engaging.

KEYWORDS: Ramayana (India), puppet performance, contemporary puppet, animation, epic weapons; percussive soundscapes

RIASSUNTO: Anurupa Roy, direttrice di una compagnia di burattinai a Delhi, in India, discute con Paula Richman, professoressa emerita all'Oberlin College (USA), i vari aspetti della creazione del suo spettacolo di marionette *About Ram*. Roy voleva che il pubblico sperimentasse la varietà della tradizione del Ramayana nella forma della tragica storia d'amore di un eroe (prima principe e

poi re) che si sente obbligato a bandire sua moglie, rimanendo di conseguenza solo per il resto della sua vita. Lo spettacolo è pieno di immagini della vita passata dell'eroe, rese attraverso l'animazione dei suoi ricordi e delle sue armi su uno schermo montato sul palco, e musica senza parole ma con un'enfasi percussiva che attinge a strumenti musicali diversi, provenienti da varie regioni. Nel corso del periodo di improvvisazione durante il quale si è sviluppata la performance, Roy ha lavorato molto sulla stilizzazione delle scene di guerra e l'animatore ha modernizzato le armi includendo propulsione a reazione e mitragliatrici. Come parte del suo obiettivo di sviluppare un linguaggio del corpo per la pratica marionettistica indiana contemporanea, Roy ha inserito danze basate sulle arti marziali, e questo ha portato a una grammatica del movimento marionettistico contemporanea e coinvolgente.

Parole chiave: Ramayana (India), spettacolo di marionette, marionettistica contemporanea, animazione, armi epiche, paesaggi sonori percussivi

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Paula Richman: I found *About Ram* ingenious, captivating, and elegant. Thank you for agreeing to tell us more about this unique puppet performance. We'd like to hear more about how you, your puppeteers, and your collaborators came to create *About Ram*. Let me begin with an overall question: What were the most challenging parts of creating a public performance drawn from the Ramayana tradition, especially since it is such a long narrative with so many characters?

Anurupa Roy: As you said, it's a very big narrative. Before I even begin to answer that question, first I should tell you that your writings were one of the first sources we read when we started the research for the drama. As a young person – I was quite young back then, it was 2004 when we started working on the Ramayana – it was a real mishmash of having seen the Balinese Ramayana and traditional puppet shows drawn from the Indian Ramayana, such as shadow puppetry, string puppets, and other puppet forms. They all enact stories from the most well-known pan-Indian epics, the Ramayana and

Mahabharata.[1] Then, having read both of your essays was almost like a moment of building a bridge.[2]

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Now turning to the challenges, keep in mind that like most performers drawing from a long narrative, we overcame many of the challenges posed by our production, but not all of them. The first challenge was to consider how a contemporary Indian artist starts talking about an epic which is very strong in the public memory. You know, cricket, politics, and the epics are something every Indian has an opinion about, so the contemporary artist can never get it "right." That was a critical challenge.

The other challenge was how to do justice to all the narratives – all the tellings – because if you compare it to the Mahabharata, you see that the Ramayana possesses a

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[1] Although technically the Ramayana falls into the genre of *kavya* (an extended narrative poem) and the Mahabharata is an *itihasa* ('thus it happened'), a record of events, they are frequently referred to in English as "epics".

[2] Richman 1991b; and Richman 2001b. Indian editions were also published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

much more linear narrative. Yet, once you start exploring the diversity within the Ramayana narrative tradition – for example, between the Buddhist narrative, the Tamil narrative, and puppet plays in Odisha – they are telling you quite different stories.[3] For example, in one Rama is the hero, in another Hanuman is the hero. So, for us a pivotal challenge was to pay homage to this diversity, especially in the performed forms of the Ramayana (not just in the orally narrated versions).

In the performed forms, we discovered a pattern which basically brought everything together, namely, that the narrative informs the form. So, everything you see visually – the aesthetic, the colors, the type of puppet, the way it's drawn, painted, or dressed – comes from the narrative itself. We took for granted that people knew the story, and then played with the various aspects that stay in the audience's memory, because we're talking about a recurring narrative across a wide geographical area. Not just in India, but in a number of Southeast Asian countries, the Ramayana is also performed.[4]

Moreover, even just in India, there are maybe 300 oral narratives, and maybe more.[5] If you travel every 100 kilometers in India, something will change in the story. So, the issue is how do you do justice to this? That was an enormous challenge. So, we kept the skeletal narrative and focused on the character of Rama. As the protagonist, he is possibly recalling the entire epic and everything that happened to him or possibly living through it in real time.[6]

PAULA: To follow up on the notion of Rama reflecting on his past, in the *Kutiyattam* and *Kathakali* dramas of Kerala, long before the play starts, the actor playing Rama prepares for his role. He must remain unmoving while the makeup artist meticulously applies color, texture, and designs to his face for at least two hours and usually more. This bodily preparation is paired with mental preparation; he recalls and reflects on stories from mythological texts and dramas about Rama's many deeds so he can immerse himself in

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[3] For Buddhist tellings, see REYNOLDS 1991. For the most well-known Tamil devotional telling, see SHULMAN 1991. For puppetry in PANI 1978.

[4] For tellings of the Ramayana across Asia, see SRINIVASA IYENGAR 1980; and RAGHAVAN 1980. For an in-depth recent study of one Southeast Asian country, see MALINI - KHANNA 2004.

[5] See RAMANUJAN 1991.

[6] Thus, the production shows and affirms the open nature of the Ramayana tradition.

the character. In a somewhat similar way, the multimedia sections in *About Ram* reveal memories of past events that have consequences for the present.

ANURUPA: Yes, and one of the versions we followed, the *Krttibasa Ramayana* in Bengali, starts from the point where Ram, Sita, and Lakshmana have returned from their forest exile to the kingdom of Ayodhya and Lakshmana commissions a scroll painter to display what happened during the fourteen years that they have been in exile. I find this going back and forth a recurring theme in the Ramayana. Even in the Sanskrit *Adbhuta Ramayana*, you hear about Hanuman reminiscing, then Rama reminiscing or Sita reminiscing. The leather shadow puppet versions include this scene. For example, when Sita is asked by Shurpanakha in disguise to draw a picture of Ravana so they can see what he looked like, Sita recalls her captivity and then draws Ravana's big toe, which was all she ever saw of him because she kept her eyes modestly down on the ground.[7] This incident is built into the narrative, which we found to be very exciting in the performance.

PAULA: Every single telling or performance of the story that I've ever heard or watched emphasizes certain episodes more than others. I'm sure you had to make many choices while conceptualizing *About Ram*. What made you pick the specific episodes on which you focused?

ANURUPA: We were looking at the Ramayana as containing features of a tragic love story and about a hero who makes choices – very human choices – that have consequences. The immediate consequence is that after he banishes Sita, he's all alone for the rest of his life.[8] We picked episodes which would highlight such choices while maintaining the theme of everything being scraps of memory in Rama's head. For that reason, the audience doesn't see fully formed elements. The demons, monkeys, and other characters who come into his life are images that are projected onto a screen on stage. The exception is that twice he sees Sita very clearly when he makes the decision to banish her. In addition, the puppe-

[7] The story exemplifies how Sita remained modest and aloof during her captivity in Lanka.
[8] The court ministers advise Rama to marry again after Sita's banishment, but he refuses.

teers who constantly remain with Rama are extensions of him. Hanuman, of course, is a different kind of extension of him. We chose to think very carefully about what would stand out in Rama's memory years later.

PAULA: I found the part of *About Ram* that displayed images of military weapons visually stunning. For example, Ravana's son, Indrajit, wields a weapon called the serpent noose (*naga-pasa*). When he shoots it at Rama and Lakshmana, it transforms into serpents who coil and bind the bodies of the two princes, causing them great pain. A weapon turning into serpents is, by definition, a supernatural form of shape shifting; moreover, the animated weapons which are projected onto a screen (with no one wielding them) move energetically as if exercising agency.

Voices in Ram's head/doubts about Sita, *About Ram*, 2010. Photos by Atul Sinha/Adeep Anwar. Copyright - The Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust.

Ram looks at Sita, *About Ram*, 2010. Photos by Atul Sinha/Adeep Anwar. Copyright - The Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust

Sita dreams of Ram, *About Ram*, 2010. Photos by Atul Sinha/Adeep Anwar. Copyright - The Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust

Anurupa: The weapons are rooted in the leather shadow puppets traditional in Andhra (southeastern India) called Tolubommalata. I worked closely with the animator on the project, Vishal K. Dhar, and with the nonagenarian master puppeteer, S. Chidambara Rao, whose family has been presenting puppet shows for generations. Essentially, the two of them sat together looking at composite images of puppets, picking them apart to remove, rebuild, or add elements. I walked into one of their discussions when they were building the Pushpaka Vimana, the aerial chariot in which Ravana captures Sita; they were installing jet propellers onto it.

All the demon puppets were built, scanned, and then animated with Maya, a computer software program used for animation. They even shaved off the demons' hair and provided them with spikes coming out of their heads. They would look at the weapons individually as well. There are a whole set of specific kinds of weapons in the narrative: the guards would carry certain weapons, the demons another kind, and the animals would carry yet another type of weapon—and these would change from story to story. We literally went with the scanner, looked at the types of shadow puppets, and worked with the puppeteer to draw out those elements. It was fantastic that he kept inventing new things. For example, he wanted to include machine guns so the story of the war would include elements found in today's wars. It was very exciting collaborating with such a talented puppet maker.

Paula: From reading accounts of the war in texts by Valmiki and Kamban, I recognized the names of some weapons they mentioned but by just reading their names in the texts, I hadn't been able to visualize their appearance. The images in *About Ram* deepened my understanding of how they functioned. *About Ram* showed the audience images that revealed a weapon's design and how it contributed to a battle strategy.

Turning to another feature of *About Ram*, I was fascinated with how you handled the music or, more broadly, the soundscapes. Some sounds were minimalist and austere, while others echoed sounds of musical instruments characteristic of a specific region. I realized that *About Ram* was one of the few Ramayana performances that did not include lyrics in the music.

ANURUPA: For us, music was really the language of the show because lines from a single text might limit the scope of the performance to a single region or version of the story, thus undermining our homage to the diversity of the story. We stayed with music because it enabled many people to recognize various elements in it. We performed it across the country and no matter where we were located, everybody found something that appealed to them. I think the music makes that possible. We performed it in Chennai and people recognized the ghatam and in Kerala the chenda. The same recognition occurred in Kerala and Kolkata.

Abhijit Bannerji, our music composer, is well-versed in world music, as well as in various Indian music traditions, including both Karnatic and Hindustani classical music. He came from a percussion background himself, which is why the percussive elements stand out in the music so strongly. He used percussive language very well, for example, using the tabla bowl as a vocal form, instead of using words.

The composer used music from Balinese Keechak, Malay gamelan, and the ghatams and mrdangam from Tamilnadu. When you hear the chenta, you think of the Kerala puppetry. Similarly, the sarangi evokes the puppet form of Rajasthan. These instruments are strongly associated with their local forms and different versions. He was using his composition as clues for the audience to think of their local versions. His music helped us to overcome some of the obstacles of performing such a diverse, multi-faceted narrative.

PAULA: The music included many sounds that people could connect to, but it never sounded like a mishmash that would have resulted if the composer had mechanically combined "something for everyone." That would have sounded superficial or tokenistic. Instead, the soundscape contained a style of music that fused with the puppetry in a distinctive way.

ANURUPA: Yes, the challenge for Abhijit Bannerji was huge. He was composing for puppets, yet he also had to look at the language of the epic. He is enormously skilled and remained deeply involved in the process of creating the production, staying with us through lots of the rehearsals. We also sent him lots of video recordings during a year of improvisation to create *About Ram*, which was mostly sketched instead of being fully

written. Parts were enacted through improvisation while the musician and animator were present so they could modify the music when changes developed out of the improvisation. If he had given us very tricky classical music, it would have been difficult for the puppeteers to translate it into movement.

Paula: Also, strictly classical music would have excluded certain people. Instead, the music's sonic resonances enabled them to enter the performance's world.

What do you see as the "take-away" from *About Ram*? Were there insights that you really hoped that the viewers—many of whom already knew the core story—would recall after the performance?

Anurupa: One of our key motivations was for the audience to realize that everybody has their favorite version of the epic, but it is just one of many, many versions. What is powerful about the epic is that everybody owns it and it's still living in the idioms and the sayings of everyday people. The fact that it travelled so far and wide was something that we really wanted people to take away. What they were watching in *About Ram* is only one version and only one rendition. On the next night, the same performer might enact it differently.

Paula: How do you get feedback from your audience? Do people ever stay around and talk to the performers afterwards?

Anurupa: We open the floor to our audiences at the end. They get to "meet" the puppets. It has always been very exciting. Everybody wants to meet Ravana. They see Rama and stand around and watch him for a little bit, but they really want to see the demons. They want to see the demon mask, especially children. They also want to see the backstage area, where the monkey went, what happened to him. That's always one form of feedback.

The other is they ask us what happened in the end, because the most popular televised version in the 1990s did not end with Rama sitting alone. It's hinted at, but you don't see the very tragic ending that appears in *About Ram*. Many people don't seem to

be aware of it. In fact, we also often talk about the way he dies. They don't always know that he finally walks into the Sarayu River.

PAULA: So, it sounds like the production can become an experience that generates new questions in the audience. Some of the most popular visual images of Rama show him being crowned king. At his coronation, one sees him surrounded by Sita, his three brothers, and Hanuman at his feet, but far more rarely does one see visual images of Sita bringing up her twin sons in the forest. The tragedy of the love story manifests itself when people in the kingdom suspect that Sita might not have remained faithful to Rama during her captivity. Everyone knows that Sita suffered when she was banished but *About Ram* shows that Rama suffered, too. In Indian literature, the union and separation of lovers is a major theme. Rama and Sita are lovers, but when Ravana abducts Sita, the two lovers undergo a painful separation. After Rama wins the war, the couple is reunited but when Sita becomes pregnant, Rama fears that his reign will be tainted and banishes her. That is their final separation.

ANURUPA: I'm thinking that in Bhavabhuti's *Uttararamacarita*, Rama and Sita are reunited at the end, but some people are unfamiliar with that play, so I make it a point to tell them that. The couple ends up getting reunited when Rama watches a performance of the story in which Sita is playing the role of Sita. What a fantastic reference to the power and efficacy of performance!

The coronation of Ram, About Ram, 2010. Photos by Atul Sinha/Adeep Anwar. Copyright - The Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust.

PAULA: How different is your use of puppets in *About Ram* from the other puppet performances you've created? It sounds as though you, your collaborators, and the puppeteers invested a lot of time in improvising this production as it developed over time.

ANURUPA: In preparing A*bout Ram*, I was eager to develop a language for modern Indian puppet theater. We have a short contemporary puppet history, if you can call it that. As a company, we were just finding our own contemporary language. We started in 1998 and were registered in 2006, and our early productions used a lot of table-top-inspired multiple puppeteer puppets, but there was always the question: what is the language of the body of the puppet? What does the anatomy say? How does the anatomy move? We were using a lot of what I would say is almost animation, digital animation as language, and then with *About Ram*. The company had two dancers, both trained in Mayurbhanj Chaau, and we had collaborated with a couple of classical dancers, and it increasingly felt like we needed to have our own language for a contemporary Indian puppeteer company.

We started to study dance more and more. Classical dances like Bharatanatyam were not the answer. It was the martial dances, Chaau or Kalarippayattu, which seemed to have an answer for a grammar of movement for the puppets.

We took this very, very stylized approach; the entire fight scene was very stylized. The fight sequences where Rama uses exact compositions from martial dances. If you see our Rama, he doesn't use a bow and arrow, he uses a sword. Most of the epics used swords and we trained with them for almost a year. We worked 365 days that year. It was a very significant year for us. We were working with the dance trainer, a martial artist, and the puppets. In *About Ram*, we discovered the beginning of a language, which we've used or developed more fully since that time.

The fight between Ram and Ravan, *About Ram*, 2010. Photos by Atul Sinha/Adeep Anwar. Copyright - The Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust.

PAULA: So, not just in the narrative sense, but also in your puppetry language, *About Ram* helped you to establish certain foundations that contributed to later productions.

Thank you for sharing your insights about how *About Ram* developed into the theatrical production that we saw. We'll be eager to see your future productions.

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