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Hanuman in Graphic Avatar: Reframing *Ramayana* in Vikram Balagopal's *Simian*

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Abstract

The epic tales have endured and thrived in graphic versions in multiple guises by intertwining of genres and styles like sci-fi infused, Ramayana 3392 AD, experiments with indigenous art forms like Arni's Sita's Ramayana, and individualistic representations like Amruta Patil's Adi Parva. This article analyses Vikram Balagopal's graphic novel, Simian (2014), to apprehend how the author/artist subverts the central themes of Ramayana by retelling the story from the perspective of Hanuman. Since the mainstream versions of the Ramayan accord an important but a liminal status to Hanuman, it is imperative to examine to what extent does Balagopal probe into the potential that Hanuman's character holds for re-visioning the epic. It's intriguing to discover that a filmmaker by training, Balagopal, instead of employing a cinematic mode, consciously chooses to adapt the Ramayana into a graphic narrative format. This paper attempts to explore the possibilities and challenges that this emerging medium of story-telling poses, and the manner in which the textual and the visual correlate, negotiate, oppose or reaffirm each other to create new meanings within the epic narrative. It further investigates how this recent retelling of the Ramayana in a graphic mode interacts with the pre-existent multi-medial Ramayana tradition.

Keywords: *Ramayana Retellings, Hanuman, Graphic Novel, Retcon, Multi-mediality.*

Introduction

India has a centuries-old tradition of retellings of the *Ramayana*. This tradition is, on the one hand, testimony to the universal reach of the epic tale, its claim to be heard and inhabited across every boundary of region, language, and time. On the other hand, it also establishes the epic's capacity for personalisation, its openness to being made one's own, to being inflected by the particular cultural register of whoever tells it. Over the centuries, as a collective inheritance, this tale has been retold and recreated in every region and language of India, shaped and reshaped in each case according to its own cultural register and the demands of its own historical moment. In the twenty-first century, this living tradition continues to expand with full and robust vigour. In fact, so many retellings of the *Ramayana* have entered the market in just the past two decades that it would not be wrong to say that this is perhaps one of the most popular trends in the Indian publishing industry at present. Among the fastest growing currents within this broader trend is that of English retellings of the *Ramayana*. These new *Ramayana*s are not simple translations of older versions of the epic into the English language or into recently evolved media, they are, rather, transcreations: a process of

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recovering, renewing, and reinventing the tale in a new language, with a new time and context in mind, while simultaneously problematising the earlier renditions (Mukherjee; Lal). These new *Ramayana*s subvert the standard authoritative texts by shifting the perspective away from Ram, while retaining the centrality of his story, and retelling the entire tale from the perspective of other characters, whether significant or marginal. In doing so, these retellings make several intriguing departures in terms of medium, form, and style.

Balagopal's *Simian*, a recently composed graphic novel, is a brilliant addition to this highly popular sub-genre of *Ramayana* retellings. Balagopal's rendition of *Ramayana* in graphic form, retold from Hanuman's point of view, builds upon an existing sub-culture of Hanuman, the monkey-God, that is as ancient as it is capacious. There is a long and winding history of Hanuman in Indian popular imagination. His overwhelming presence in multiple mediums, literary as well as visual, has been well recognised and acknowledged by critics over the last couple of decades (Lutgendorf; Jain). An important character in the epic, one of the greatest warriors in Ram's army and the most ardent of his devotees, Hanuman's persona has expanded and extended beyond the epic so much so that the number of Hanuman statues far exceed those dedicated to Ram himself. In a recent study on evolving trend of creating monumental statues in India, Kajari Jain enlists Hanuman as the most popular deities of this statue-raising culture, not only in the subcontinent but also amongst the Indian diasporan (Jain). That Hanuman, owing to the liminal position that he inhabits in the popular culture, as both devotee and deity, is a figure that can easily lend itself to varied and even conflicting interpretations is apparent in the multitude of stories, iconographies and folk traditions that are associated with the figure in popular imagination. *Simian* appears to have been written with acute awareness of this status of Hanuman, and therefore reframes *Ramayana* with and around this liminality. This repositioning of Hanuman, from subaltern character and divine companion to the principal character and narrator of the tale, is what this article sets out to examine. It also explores how this retelling interacts with, and subverts, the existing popular versions of the *Ramayana* by offering new meanings and directions to the epic. It is both a rare and brave attempt, rare because of the weight of the hegemonic versions of the epic, and brave because of the political valency that the *Ramayana* enjoys in the contemporary Indian milieu. Alongside this, the article situates *Simian* within the domain of graphic novels in India, examining where this novel diverges from and converges with the existing corpus of graphic retellings of the *Ramayana*, and what new formal and thematic strands it introduces into that conversation.

From Graphe to Graphic: The Indian Graphic Novel and *Simian*

Graphic novels constitute a burgeoning domain in the contemporary Indian literary scene. Although the medium of the graphic novel is a borrowed one in India—unlike its western counterpart, which is more derivative in nature—it has managed to sustain an independent identity both in terms of its artwork and content (Dastidar 122). While it is true that the label of "graphic novel" continues to be used as a marketing device by publishers in India for all kinds of comic narratives, the country has seen a sizeable number of authors who understand and evoke the potential of the form and have gained acclaim for their work. Graphic novelists like Vishwajyoti Ghosh, Amruta Patil, and Sarnath Bannerjee among others have prepared the ground for the future growth of graphic novel in India. These novelists have brilliantly and innovatively used the burgeoning mode to dwell upon various socio-political issues of contemporary relevance, such as, caste and class discrimination, gender disparity and sexual abuse, nationalism, imperialism, religious fundamentalism among others, in a far more intense and complex manner than what the comic is expected to offer. As a result, graphic novels are often termed as counter-cultural and anti-hegemonic in their approach. For instance, E D Varughese positions recently published Indian graphic novels in the post-millennial moment where rising demand owing to liberal reforms encourages negotiations between Indian authors and Indian counterparts of global publishing houses, who are the biggest players on the scene and are largely in control of events like ComicCon and Litfests that are responsible for garnering support, increasing awareness, generating publicity and encouraging the acceptance for the form/medium itself. She contends that the manner in which images are employed, in conjunction with text in these graphic novels "requires a reorientation towards new ways of (Indian) seeing" (Varughese 10) She theorizes this new way of seeing as "inauspicious," which pertains to non-conformist, counter-cultural, and anti-authoritarian 'ideas of India' and Indianness that serve to problematize the "erstwhile, safe, settled ideas and projections of Indian society, history and identity" (Varughese 16).

Undermining any assumptions that might question the intensity or seriousness of these graphic novels, Pramod K. Nayar underlines their iconoclastic and critical approach, commenting that these novels offer "alternate readings of Indian history, draw attention to the lacunae and follies of our cultural practices and make visible hitherto taboo subjects" (Nayar 7). Moreover, the endorsement of this new medium by international publishing houses in the initial period, driven by the need to cater to a rising domestic market, has also paradoxically encouraged an auteur approach. Penguin, Hachette, and HarperCollins, some of the leading names in the publishing business, have consequently been supporting content that is both iconoclastic and innovative. Although the Indian context is extremely multifarious in its conduits of production, with an amalgamation of global publishing houses, independent artists, and Indian publishers all entering into the fray and diversifying the market with their

experimental art styles, content preferences, ideological underpinnings, and monetary considerations, to thrive independently is still seen as a challenge, as Jeremy Stoll notes in his work on the Indian comics industry ("Comics in India" 88–96).

D G Dastidar maps the evolution of graphic narratives in India and identifies three broad stages: the 'Age of Cartoons and Comic Magazines'; the 'Age of Comic Strips, Syndicates and the Rise of Publishing Houses'; and the 'Age of Digitization, Comic Book Anthologies, the Graphic Novel and Growth of Independent Publishing' (Dastidar 115). Of these, the second stage is inarguably the one most responsible for creating a wider reach for the medium, and it is also the stage most thoroughly with mythology as its content, as evidenced by the vast corpus of texts published by the Amar Chitra Katha enterprise. Though there has been much discussion about the hegemonic politics ensconced in ACK's choice of content, which aspired to project 'Hindu' as 'Indian', as well as its styles of representation, informed by earlier visual practices like calendar art and god posters, that served to bolster ethnic, racial and gender stereotyping in conformity with dominant Hindu beliefs (Chandra) – mythology as a choice of subject still manages to unwaveringly hold the interest of creators and attention of readers alike. This holds true even in the current post-liberal era of publishing, as evidenced by the ventures of Campfire, Virgin Comics, Graphic India, Holy Cow, to name only a few.

This surge in the widespread popularity of retellings of puranic and epic tales in graphic novels can prove quite frustrating for writers and creators who wish to produce novels engaging with contemporary socio-cultural and political issues, because the marketability and popularity of mythological retellings tend to overshadow and discourage their attempts. For instance, in what would seem a fit of frustration, Akshay Dhar, writer and founder of Meta Desi Comics, in an open letter to Indian comic readers on social media, inquired: "Why do only Hindu mythology-based comics seem to attract immediate, rabid support and love?" While his question stems from the difficulties faced by independent publishing houses in sustaining themselves through their largely unorthodox projects and undertakings, it also points to the mythological mania that still holds the Indian reading public firmly in its sway. That the popularity of the epics has survived, and indeed thrived, within the changing landscape of the post-millennial nation, as evidenced by the sheer numbers of books published in recent years, is both remarkable and worthy of serious critical attention. It simultaneously establishes how enduring and generative a topic of interest and study the epics continue to be. Rather than dismissing this phenomenon as a passing cultural bubble, there is a need to situate and understand it within today's cultural and social context. This is not merely a question of retellings for their own sake, it is equally important to view these retellings as a site of constant engagement where hierarchies relating to gender, caste, class, and ethnicity continue to be renegotiated. I would argue that the artists who are experimenting with these

tales, retelling them in new forms and media, and resituating them within today's political and social context, are acutely aware of the role that epic narratives play in constituting identity, shaping social practices, and informing political discourses across the subcontinent.

As India makes the shift from comic books to graphic novels, which is still in its nascent stages, mythology in general, and *Ramayana* in particular, remain subjects that are impossible to ignore. The centuries old tradition of retelling the *Ramayana* has been creatively experimented and adapted for this new form of storytelling. The epic tales have endured and thrived in graphic versions across multiple guises, through the intertwining of genres and styles, as in the sci-fi infused *Ramayana* 3392 AD; through experiments with indigenous art forms, as in Arni's Sita's *Ramayana*; and through individualistic representations, as in Amruta Patil's Adi Parva. However, while it is true that a certain section of the publishing enterprise focuses on reiterating the popular versions of the epic narratives, there is also an ever-growing number of graphic novelists who ardently explore the creative and innovative possibilities offered by these tales. The new multimodal form of the graphic novel, through its use of image–texts, the juxtaposing of multiple semiotic registers, opens up possibilities for engaging with the epic narrative in ways that have not been explored before. Inter-textual or inter-medial references, visual as well as literary, that already inhabit the popular cultural space not only expand the tools available to the author-artist but also multiply the interventions that these narratives make across disparate discursive practices and cultural spaces. Balagopal's *Simian* is perhaps one of the finest examples of this experimental and unprecedented approach to subverting the popular understanding and style of recounting the epic narrative. Instead of retelling the old tale in a new medium, Balagopal employs the new medium to break away from the earlier renderings, experimenting with new symbols and images not only to contest the popular understandings of the *Ramayana* but also to add newer meanings to it. The graphic medium thereby surfaces as a site for harbouring critical and alternate narratives.

Simian: The Site Where *Mahabharata* Meets *Ramayana*

The epic tales, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata,* although equally well known and well loved by the Indian populace, have come to acquire very different statuses in the popular cultural realm over time. The *Ramayana* is believed to be the older of the two compositions, it is, after all, the Adikavya, the first poem, the originary text of the Sanskrit literary tradition. This antiquity is itself confirmed by the fact that the *Mahabharata* contains its own embedded *Ramayana* within its narrative, an acknowledgement, from within the later epic itself, of the prior existence and authority of the earlier one. The *Mahabharata* thus, from its very inception, interacts and engages with the *Ramayana*, but not in the conventional devotional

register in which the *Ramayana* is typically retold. Rather, it uses the *Ramayana* for a specific contextual purpose: to dismantle Bhima's arrogance and deliver to him a life lesson of enduring significance. The purpose of the retelling is not the traditional one, that is to exalt Ram to the status of a divine being, but to instruct Bhima with hopes of avoiding another tragedy perhaps. The *Ramayana*, thus, appears within the *Mahabharata* in the Vana Parva, in the episode of the Saugandhika flower, which is also known as the Hanuman-Bhima Samvad, the dialogue between Hanuman and Bhima. Vikram Balagopal's *Simian* opens, interestingly, at precisely this point in the *Mahabharata* where the two great Indian epics intersect. Though this kind of intertextuality is not a novelty conceived by Balagopal, the two tales refer to and draw upon each other in many retellings, the unique purpose to which this convergence is put in *Simian* is wholly to the credit of the author's imagination. Balagopal's graphic novel innovatively uses the episode from the *Mahabharata* to initiate the context for his retelling of the *Ramayana*.

The *Mahabharata* gives an account of how, in the aftermath of Draupadi's chirharan, her public disrobing at the hands of Dushasana at Dhritrashtra's court, the Pandavas wait in exile, preparing for a battle against their own kin that now seems all but unavoidable. Bhima, who is known more for brawn than brains, simmers with barely contained anger as he dwells on the injustices perpetrated by Duryodhan upon him and his family, and above all upon his beloved wife Draupadi. One day, during their forest exile, Draupadi encounters a rare, wondrous, and divinely beautiful flower – the Saugandhika – and requests Bhima to seek out more of these celestial blossoms for her. Bhima sets out immediately, driven as much by his devotion to Draupadi as by his characteristic impatience, walking recklessly through the forest in his haste, intimidating its flora and fauna along the way. Hanuman, his half-brother through their shared divine parentage as sons of Vayu, the wind god, sees in this recklessness an opportunity to teach Bhima a lesson in humility. To this end, he dons the guise of an ailing, aged monkey and positions himself across Bhima's path. When confronted with this seemingly bothersome hindrance, Bhima arrogantly demands that the monkey move aside, choosing not to harm it out of deference to its perceived association with the monkey-God, Hanuman, whom he so deeply admires. When the monkey pleads its inability to move, Bhima insolently proceeds to displace it by lifting its tail. When he fails to do so, despite marshalling his formidable strength to its fullest, the realisation slowly and humblingly dawns upon him that he is in the presence of divinity. Repentant and chastened, Bhima acknowledges his folly, asks for forgiveness, and requests a revelation of the monkey's true identity, each of which is indulgently granted by Hanuman, who not only reveals his true magnificent self to Bhima upon the latter's request, but also promises various boons to the warrior to aid him in the battle that lies ahead.

It is during this encounter that Hanuman narrates the *Ramayana* for the benefit of Bhima. In Balagopal's *Simian*, Hanuman openly reviles Valmiki's version as one composed for simpletons, a rendering that undermines and even omits the finer and more troubling points of the narrative. What Hanuman offers in turn is a personal tale wracked with painful reflections, moral dilemmas, and emotional misgivings, the account of one who was in the thick of it all, who lived through every event he recounts and carries the weight of it still. The didactic tone of the conventional narrative is thus muted into a confessional mode in which Hanuman, in direct contradiction to his dominant bhakti role, does not merely summarise the epic tale but provides a soul-searching retrospective analysis of the events recorded therein. Roma Chatterji, in her analysis of mythology-inspired Indian graphic narratives, quotes Wittenberg and comments that "in such cases the problem of 'presentness', the question of a past that is to be reconstituted within the present, becomes a 'literal topos' narrated as an eyewitness account enabling an 'authentic' re-telling which may be different from the dominant narrative" (Chatterji 2). In Vikram Balagopal's retelling, therefore, the moralising encounter, intended to humble Bhima's excessive pride in his strength, also serves to interrogate the follies of the protagonists of the *Ramayana*, who are portrayed as overly assured of their moral authority and the prescriptive codes they embody. Balagopal thus problematises the *Ramayana* narrative and introduces a distinctly subversive tone into it. The deeds of Hanuman, which in other retellings are presented as acts performed with clarity, conviction, and unquestioning devotion, emerge here not from that settled certainty but from a deep internal conflict and a process of painful self-introspection. It is this perspective and this approach that transform *Simian* into something more than a retelling, it becomes a critical reflection on the *Ramayana* itself, a text that looks back at the epic not to celebrate it but to question it, and in questioning it, to open it up to meanings that the canonical versions have long suppressed.

The re-evaluation of a narrative by re-reading the past is a popular technique used especially in serialised comics, and is called 'retcon.' Retcon, or 'Retroactive Continuity,' as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, means "a piece of new information…that changes, or gives a different way of understanding, what has gone before." The term was coined by Frank Tupper in 1973 to describe how, through the use of this narrative technique, one can create a storyline in which "history flows fundamentally from the future into the past" (Tupper 100). This technique, however, cannot be applied to just any narrative in which the story flows pastward from the future, Friedenthal stipulates that "in order for retconning to be a viable option for the story world, it needs to be a long-lasting world, one that has had multiple instalments presented to the audience over time" (Friedenthal 6).

Although developed by Tupper and Friedenthal in different cultural and literary contexts, this technique finds a remarkably apt and precise application in the tradition of *Ramayana* retellings, and these retellings can indeed be seen as among the finest examples of retcon in practice. A.K. Ramanujan gestures toward a somewhat similar conceptualisation when he avers that "in India . . . no one ever reads the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* for the first time" (Ramanujan 158), a formulation that captures precisely the condition of prior familiarity and accumulated layering upon which retcon depends. The revelation of and supplementation with new information, material, or narratives is a practice that can hardly be judged as alien to the epic literary tradition of India, after all, interpolations are arguably constitutive of the epics as we know them today. A retcon similarly "revisits past instalments of a text in order to revise and rewrite them to create new narrative potential in the present, and thus in the future," and in that sense replaces an aspect of the story that the audience has already experienced (Friedenthal 6). Balagopal's *Simian* is perhaps one of the finest recent retellings of the *Ramayana* to experiment with this technique, revealing and recounting the events of the epic tale through Hanuman's perspective without upsetting its narrative continuum.

Besides the nature of the epic tale itself, the character of Hanuman also appears to be an apt choice for retconning. The overpowering presence that Hanuman holds in the popular cultural realm extends and augments his significance over and above the world of the epic tale. As a liminal figure who is meant to exhibit both shakti and bhakti – who is wise yet quiet, capable yet meek, a prized ally and yet a subservient devotee – a multitude of narratives have evolved around the figure of Hanuman that can often contradict each other, and provide a polymorphous template for the author to choose from, while offering greater artistic freedom to flesh out his character. Additionally, the subservient silence associated with Hanuman in the canonical versions of the tale affords precisely the space needed to integrate new narrative strands within the tale without disrupting the continuum. Because Hanuman is already such a versatile figure in the minds of the audience already, it also perhaps makes these additions are perhaps also rendered more enjoyable and readily acceptable as a result.

From Verse to Visuals: Text, Image, and the Reframing of Hanuman in *Simian*

What separates Balagopal's *Simian* from other contemporary English retellings of the *Ramayana*, whether in graphic form or any other medium, is the nature of its verbal and visual representations. Unlike most author-artists who hint towards a vague collection of inspirations occurring across multiple media for their retellings, Balagopal positively identifies his sources in Griffith's translation of Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Ganguli's translation of the *Mahabharata*. Indeed, a comparison of the texts reveals that, true to his own confession, Balagopal has borrowed dialogues from his sources verbatim in instances where, to him, "any

improvement didn't seem possible." The use of Griffith's translation of Valmiki's *Ramayana* as the source of his graphic rendering affords Balagopal's *Simian* the veneer of being more authentic in comparison with other popular English retellings of the epic published recently, retellings that diverge in their use of modern slang, colloquial language, and mixing of ritualistic details, but converge in their adherence to hegemonic understandings of the tale. Further, moving closer to the Adikavya, Valmiki's *Ramayana*, gives the author the chance to pose his interrogations right at the base of the canon itself. Opting for Griffith's translation rather than Goldman's also makes for an interesting choice on Balagopal's part, because the former, being an aesthetic exercise rather than a scholastic one, makes for a more stimulating read, but it also serves the important purpose of reaffirming the primacy of literature over politics. Since translation of the *Ramayana* is heavily overlaid with political implications, choosing Griffith, who, unlike Goldman, has no active role to play in the current political debates surrounding the epic, allows Balagopal to engage with the canonical version of the tale without being drawn into, or constrained by, the politics and political debates that currently surround it.

Balagopal nowhere detracts from Valmiki in terms of the major events of the plot structure, but probes the politics of the text more subtly in the realm of thought, as expressed in the retrospective commentary offered by the characters themselves. In this manner, his exercise becomes similar to Irawati Karve's analysis in Yuganta: The End of an Epoch (2006), but with even greater immediacy offered by the recollective mode. Where many contemporary author-artists are making a move towards accommodating more cosmopolitan impulses in their texts, Balagopal's turn towards antiquity, rather than a pursuit of the modern, lends his novel a distinctive identity of its own. Not only does it extend the *Ramayana* tradition in a new representational mode, but it also reinvigorates the canon by exploiting the possibilities offered by the graphic medium.

This turn towards antiquity is not, however restricted to the linguistic track of the text alone. The visuals created by Balagopal in the novel also hark back to older traditions while completely disregarding the conventional ways of visualising the epic tale. Rather than borrowing from popular ways of portraying the characters, rooted in calendar art, miniature paintings and such visual inheritances, Balagopal takes us into a world of black and white sketches. Since the use of dialogues is minimal in the novel, the visual component becomes the primary means to communicate in many passages throughout the narrative. With this technique, Balagopal forces us back into the world of instincts where the non-verbal is highlighted over the verbal - compelling readers to analyse the nuances for themselves rather than having everything spelled out for them. An obvious entry point into the text that the title almost seems to suggest is the author's choice of emphasising and accentuating the '*Simian*'

characteristics of Hanuman. Lutgendorf, in his exhaustive analysis of Hanuman's evolving iconography, avers that while many different ways of representing the deity have always co-existed in the public sphere, a slow transition of the "chunky monkey" of local folk traditions into a more "hairless humanised" figure can be traced over the last few decades (Lutgendorf 72, 93). He attributes these changes to the post-colonial anxiety felt by Hindu ideologues and their wish to counter disparaging orientalist interpretations of their culture and religion. Owing to the balancing act between the opposing poles of shakti and bhakti that he performs, Hanuman additionally came to be recognised as the patron deity of akhaadas and his muscularity began to both "mimic real world idealized muscular male bodies and be mimicked to demonstrate the same" (Mitra 12). Added to this, the weight of India's encounter with post-liberal modernity to which Mrinalini Mitra directs our attention led to a change of aesthetics as the body of the Holly/Bollywood hero became an aspiration, a symbol of upward mobility and added another layer of signification to Hanuman's muscularity (Mitra 12). All these became contributing factors for the refashioning of Hanuman as a strong armed, wide chested muscular figure ubiquitously pervading the contemporary public sphere. In view of these debates that accrue themselves around the stylisation of Hanuman, Balagopal's displacement of the hairless humanised avatar to envision Hanuman as a gelada baboon or the bleeding-heart monkey as opposed to the more common usage of rhesus or langur throws open its own set of concerns. The gelada baboon attributed with threatening canines and profuse mane around its head gives an appearance of being far more imposing and stronger than the common langur.

For both Valmiki and Tulsi, however, the vanars were decidedly *Simian* not only in their outward aspect but also in their habits and mannerisms, and lower in hierarchy to men. Yet multiple attempts have been made by Indian scholars, by way of ethnographic studies, to explain away the 'monkey-ness' of the vanars so as to avoid the classification of Hanuman as a "zoomorphic," "totemic," "theriomorphic" primitive god in view of the western intelligentsia (Lutgendorf 12). One way to explain Balagopal's choice lies in acknowledging "a reduced opposition to the west" felt by the creators in the wake of the twenty-first century. According to Suhan Mehta, a primary "cultural side effects of globalization has been that English is being embraced even more readily, and India now sees itself less in opposition to the west than it did in the past" (Mehta 185). The imagery, bold in its choice and confident in its execution, certainly does away with the yoke of postcolonial burden felt by older generations. Moreover, it can be argued that by reframing Hanuman as *Simian* Balagopal reclaims the monkey figure in order to evade the restrictive ways in which communities are otherwise antithetically identified in politically oriented commentaries on the epic tale, commentaries that try to rationalise *Simian* associations of the vanars by reading them

metaphorically and pinning their identities onto specific ethnic groups. Balagopal possibly provokes a much larger debate here by setting up a binary between the animal and the human world at large, and in doing so, not only identifies Hanuman as a monkey but tries to reclaim the symbology associated with the animal by turning the monkey majestic and grand through his artwork and framing.

Balagopal reinvents a more secular and revolutionary Hanuman by alluding to the celebrated marxist rebel Che Guvera. He plays with Korda's Guerrillero Heroico in an ingenious manner on the concluding page of part one of his series, with his portrayal of Hanuman sharing identifiable qualities with the iconic Guevara image. His Hanuman sports the same stoic expression, a distant gaze that embodies hope, dissent and rage all at once, looking towards the future; with a clenched jaw, subtle turn- angled at just the right degree to evoke a keen allusion to his communist predecessor, with even his mane shadowing the hairstyle of the famous revolutionary. The motif of the communist star that has often accompanied reproductions of the iconic photo in its later transmutations is reworked here as the six-pointed Shatkona from Hindu mythology that symbolises balance said to be achieved between Shiva and Shakti/ Purush and Prakriti, a symbol of divine union and source of all creation ("Shatkona"). Here, more than an act of equalising genders, the same is used possibly as a bid to raise the animal at par with human in line with Balagopal's larger framework in his narrative. The image at the same time could evoke association with the star of David, reminiscent of the fate of the prosecuted communities forced to wear it as a mark of identification. Animals are by extension posited as persecuted community in a world overpowered by humans making constant incursions into their environment. The multiple layers of this image, pregnant with meaning through use of both symbolism and allusion, hints at a distinctive way of approaching, perceiving and understanding the identity of Hanuman. Just like Guevara's photo has become a universal image that can be found across cultures throughout the globe and serves as a symbol of hope and rebellion, a non-devout Hanuman is evoked as a symbol of counter-culture in this text.

Unlike the rakshasas who are summarily debased and demonised, vanars inhabit a peculiar position in the social hierarchy that informs the epic world. Inferior and yet similar to humans, they prove to be the indispensable allies for the god/hero of the epic tale. Multiple scholarly debates attempt to decipher the exact position they inhabit in the narrative and what they may signify. To different scholars looking through varied lenses, the vanars have stood in for tribal communities, lower castes, indigenous people or ancient beings. Monkeys in themselves present a fluctuating relation to humans as a species. Reviled as cursed and ugly; in the wake of Darwin's theory, they had to grudgingly be accepted as our cousins. Lutgendorf states that "in ancient India as elsewhere, monkeys were treated at best as comical subhuman

mimics, and at worst as unclean, lustful, and inauspicious animals" (Hanuman's Tale 39). In the world of the epic tale, they maintain the precarious balance between being wise enough to recognise the wisdom and consequence of Ram, and yet wild enough to serve as a counter example to the 'ideal' represented by him.

At the beginning of his *Ramayana*, Valmiki, the narrator, enquires from Narada, who the ideal human is. Narada, the great sage, declares Ram as the ideal. Thus, the entire epic, as it unfolds, reasserts Narada's Maryada Purushottam title, the ideal human, assigned to Ram through confrontations with the non-ideal, enshrined in the rakshasas, the vanars or even his own brother Lakshaman. A deeper question than the one posed by Valmiki, but with an equally challenging answer that deploys similar strategies to be reached at, and is perhaps the one that Balagopal hopes to pose is, "who is human?" Much like Valmiki's exercise in the epic tale, the answer to this question is sought through a play of difference and contrasts. Before denominations such as race, caste, class, gender and others were conceived, the "original other" against which the cultured civilised human was constructed was the 'animal'. Resultantly, S B Senapati points out that all derogatory terms of undesirable human behaviour were latched on to the animal (Senapati 23). *Ramayana*, thus, forms an intriguing site as one of the earliest explorations of this process of "othering." By bringing humans like Ram and Ravan on a level plain in their mistreatment and misjudgement of the vanars, who are constantly othered by both the factions, Balagopal reignites the question regarding alterity between human and animals and its centrality to defining humanity.

Rupturing the Sur-Asur Binary: The Politics of the Visual in *Simian*

In *Simian*, Balagopal ruptures the already established understandings and binaries that exist in earlier retellings of the *Ramayana*, binaries of good and evil, right and wrong, and above all, sur and asura. The novel displaces the sur-asura binary and projects in its place a new binary, that of humans and *Simian*s. In order to maintain this binary between *Simian*s and humans that is introduced in the novel, it was necessary for Balagopal to first interrogate the Ram-Ravan binary and eventually bring it to collapse in the course of the narrative. This rupture is achieved by Balagopal by refusing to use terms like asura, demon, or rakshasa to identify Ravan, and equally by depicting no humans through animal imagery. Kings in their own right, Ram and Ravan emerge in the narrative as remarkably similar, both are male humans. To begin with, in their understanding of gender relations, even though both posit themselves as protectors or vindicators of women, it is clear that they function only in a patronising manner towards women and are propelled to act primarily by their own insecurities rather than by any genuine concern for those they claim to protect. The attitude of both Ram and Ravan towards Surpanakha is a case in point. Ram refuses to acknowledge

Surpanakha's agency, dismissing her behaviour as "little better than (that of) children," and proceeds to have fun at her expense. Her freedom to choose a partner for herself is respected neither by Ram nor by his brothers, nor is her expression of her sexuality received with any kindness. Ravan, on the other hand, acts on her behalf only to assuage his own guilt after having killed her husband for stealing from his treasury, his intervention is self-serving rather than protective. Further, his abduction of Sita hardly qualifies him as a spokesperson for women. He confesses that his only reason for showing kindness to her is his need to preserve public opinion in his favour, and he hopes for Sita's acquiescence, which, to him, would translate as a complete ideological victory over Ram rather than as any form of genuine relation. The parallels between the two are ultimately made explicit by Ram himself, who comments after having exiled Sita: "I have become my own Ravan. Like him, I too kept her a prisoner away from me."

The visual track of a comic does not simply tell but also shows, visualisation is an integral dimension of graphic narrative discourse. An author-artist "makes strategic choices about what to show and how to show, thus ensuring that the assumptions and beliefs of readers factor into the reading and the making of the visual narrative" (Pedri). While the comic culture associated with the *Ramayana* is old, the visual culture associated with the epic tradition is older still, harking back to folk art and regional performances. Any artist working with the *Ramayana* has a multitude of images to choose from, each carrying a different set of connotations depending not only upon its use in the present but also its location in the past. Balagopal consciously desists from portraying the rakshasas as dark-skinned, horn-headed monsters, marking a deliberate break from the racist and speciesist tendencies perpetuated in several other visual media, most notably through television series and Amar Chitra Katha comics. This is undoubtedly done with a view to keeping Ram and Ravan decidedly human as opposed to the animals featured in the text. He does, however, create visual demarcations, portraying Lankans using visual short-hands often employed to depict tribal and indigenous communities. Yet this difference does not evoke inferiority. In line with authoritative versions of the tale, Lanka is described as the most magnificent city on earth, a classless utopia. In the novel, Sampati describes Ravan as a just king of an island that is "perhaps one of the finest places on earth." The demeaning stereotypes associated with the ethnic other are thus elided, as Balagopal suggests that difference does not translate into debasement, and yet it does not necessarily grant distinction either, since when it comes to their behaviour towards vanars and women, both communities fare poorly. The vanars do not distinguish between Ram and Ravan as god and demon, or sura and asura, rather, both are viewed as mere humans, rivals, representatives of two distinct empires, each alien to the world of the forest.

Balagopal resists any iconographic tendencies in terms of what Ram looks like – costume, gestures, or body language – and how he is framed, in order to puncture the hierarchy between him and Hanuman that perpetuates the epic tradition. He encourages a subversive gaze through his framing and use of angles, no apotheosised figurations are employed to endow the human figures with authority, while the extensive use of top shots gives readers a sense of being more in control, viewing the humans through Hanuman's lens as it were. The first time the brothers come into view of the vanars is a telling example of this style. We get a glimpse of Ram from above, turned away, reduced in size by the growing distance from the viewer. He is under surveillance without his knowledge, and lest one be tempted to revere him despite his appearance, Hanuman's counsel to Sugriva plays in the background, telling him not to be intimidated by the strangers. In a few panels, Hanuman approaches them and addresses them as an equal, preparing the way for brokering a pact between the vanars and the princes on terms of reciprocity, not subservience. Anuradha Kapur postulates that "typically, gods are not shown in action poses, even when portrayed in the heat of battle, but rather hypostasized at the moment when the action has been completed" (Kapur 89). In direct opposition to this conventional mode of representing gods in retellings of the epics and in mythologicals, Balagopal's portrayal of Ram and Lakshman presents them as perpetrators of violence. The episodes dealing with the disfiguration of Surpanakha and the killing of Bali emphasise the actions of the brothers and their culpability, Lakshman's bloody axe makes its appearance time and again during the former, while multiple panels follow Ram's arrow in the latter sequence. Surpanakha's and Tara's reaction of cold shock, paralysing rather than histrionic, further heightens the moral weight of the brothers' actions, foregrounding their culpability in ways that exaggerated hysteria could not.

Reframing Hanuman as the Hero in *Simian*

Simian not only retells the *Ramayana* from Hanuman's perspective but also projects Hanuman as the hero of the epic tale. The story remains faithful to the *Ramayana*, but it is subverted by Hanuman's own story, by his internal conflicts and the evolution of his character across the narrative. Hanuman's reactions to the undertakings of his patrons, both vanar and human, are what lend Balagopal's narrative an additional layer and introduce a new dimension to the text. The overriding identity of Hanuman as a bhakt is deliberately dissolved in order to make way for a more critical and questioning consciousness. The feudal male view that the state and its laws, as they exist, are rational is dispossessed of its stability and concreteness as we witness Hanuman struggling with the choices he is forced to make in fulfilling his call of duty. The monkey problem that had focused on the exterior aspect of Hanuman, for which the Hairless Humanised Hanuman had emerged as a defence, is interiorised in *Simian* as Hanuman's struggle against what he fears are the animalistic impulses within him, impulses

that cogently render necessary both the need for mentorship and an easy acceptance of hierarchy. However, since the imagined mentor figure of Ram is himself under interrogation in the text, and under Hanuman's suspicion not merely for being less than perfect but for being grossly duplicitous on occasions, the easy slippage from the selfhood of the monkey to the selflessness of a bhakt is punctured, rendering such a transition deeply problematic. Hanuman has to find himself, but the path he is forced to take is to delve inwards and confront his own insecurities, rather than depending on the wisdom of, or giving himself over to, a higher authority.

Hanuman's meeting with Surpanakha in Lanka becomes a turning point and a moment of his realisation of Ram's supremacist behaviour. Ravan brings his veiled sister with him to the prison where Hanuman lies captured. He refers to her by her real name, Meenakshi, rather than the name by which she is known, and which has a negative connotation ("Surpanakha" refers to someone with long nails). When Meenakshi takes her veil off, the panels zoom in on her disfigured face. The gruesome image of a mutilated Meenakshi appears in multiple panels during the meeting, driving home her victimhood in a powerful manner leading Hanuman to reconsider his alliance with Ram. He wonders if Ram chose to "conceal this crime" (against Surpanakha) in order to obtain help from vanars (Balagopal). Flashbacks of Surpanakha's mutilated face are juxtaposed with silhouettes of Ram and Ravan, as Hanuman grapples with the competing narratives presented to him. Despite their own flaws, mistakes and culpability, Ravan and Ram claim superiority over vanars without accounting for it, simply by virtue of being 'humans.' Ravan outrightly calls Hanuman a "beast," a "freak," an "animal," when he realises that Hanuman will not switch sides and join hands with him despite his manipulations. However, he is not the first one to do so. Ram uses similar speech to ascertain his superiority over Bali. He chastises Bali as a lesser being, an immoral creature whose killing need not be justified when he chooses to help Sugriva without listening to Bali's account of the causes of ruse between the brothers. Even Sita is not aloof of such judgment as she continues to derisively call Hanuman a 'monkey' when she meets him in Lanka and refuses to be carried back with his help seeking Ram to come for her (Balagopal). It is only upon reaching Lanka that Hanuman learns the reality of Ram by finding out about his attack on Surpanakha and the details thereof. He also understands the flawed motives of Ravan, who is driven by a will to assuage his guilt by vouching for his sister after widowing her. It is then that he realises, that men claim superiority over animals without truly deserving it while his interactions with them only reveals the opposite – the hollowness of their motives the convenience of their morals and the selfish 'beastility' of their acts.

Hanuman's descent into the war, a war initiated by humans, Ram, Ravana and Sita alike, owing to their guilt, their ego and their insecurities is dubbed as a "loss of innocence" and

descent into beastly behaviour thereby inverting the meaning of humanity and beastility by the conclusion of the narrative (Balagopal). The moments when he uses his abilities to aid the war that turn him into a hero worthy of worship in traditional narratives such as destruction of Ashoka Vatika, and burning of Lanka become fault lines in Balagopal's text that make him question his own actions. Burning down the city of Lanka, a step undertaken by Hanuman in a bid to intimidate Ravan and to avoid war, unleashes its own destructive path and is not interpreted as victorious in context of the narrative. Rather, Hanuman berates himself profusely and blames the "animal within...that thing I try so hard to repress" for his misdirected actions, ironically falling in with the terminology used by the humans (Balagopal). While all he has actually done is to take a step closer to Ram's goal. He faults Ram's intentions and therefore questions his actions that work to fulfil the former's goals, labelling them 'animalistic.' In effect Ram's wishes and project are deemed 'animalistic,' pushing Hanuman to the edge of turning inhumane, something he wishes to distance himself from. In effect he feels like an 'animal' when he is closest to being like humans.

Through the creation of conscientious Hanuman, as the main protagonist of his graphic retelling of the Ramayan, Balagopal not only subverts the appropriation of Hanuman by postcolonial and nationalist factions but also punctures the misrepresentation of monkey as a subhuman and inferior entity. Thus, Balagopal employs the technique of retcon to shift the focus of the narrative towards Hanuman, and the community to which he belongs. It affords the members of the vanar community individuated identities, and evades the caste, class, and ethnicity centred debates by the re-appropriation of the animalistic that is then brought in sharp contrast with the human. In contradistinction to humans, it is the animals, Bali, Hanuman, Sugriva, Sampati, that express guilt, possess the quality of self-reflection and try to make amends for their mistakes thereby inverting the hierarchy between the animal and the human. Sugriva suffers from the guilt of having Bali assassinated. Sampati grieves for his lost brother and supports his friends. Hanuman tries to define what is right.

Conclusion

That *Simian* draws visual echoes between Bhima, Ram and Lakshman reemphasises the animal-human dichotomy it has posited and the inversion it evokes. Bhima had travelled through the jungle, ravishing its resources to fulfil his needs, even to the extent of arrogantly claiming ownership of the banana grove where Hanuman lay waiting. Top angle shots of Bhima making his way through the forest offer visual echoes to Hanuman's first gaze at Ram and Laxman travelling through similar paths in later panels, further equating the two set of human actors. They similarly "fear(ed) no beast" and were consumed by their "mission" as they confidently ventured into the jungle asserting their authority over the territory and the

beings who already inhabit it. This fills Hanuman with a "familiar rage" as he is puzzled over the "man's purpose" (Balagopal). He debates if he should stop Bhima from entering his grove, curbs his anger and comes up with a ploy to halt him and engage with him with hopes of imparting a few lessons to him. His hope of reformation rises perhaps from the knowledge of the respect Bhima is known to hold him in. However, as he narrates the *Ramayana*, and begins his narration, and relives his descent into madness urged by motives supplied by humans, he finds himself doubting if Bhima should receive the entire tale from him. Bali, in his dying moments had made a clear distinction between animals and humans. "We vanars live here in the woods and the only harm we do in life is to the berries and fruit we eat. We don't find joy in blood and slaughter like man" (Balagopal). The conclusion of the novel finds Hanuman puzzled about Bhima's capability of learning the lessons that Hanuman truly wishes to impart. What continues to haunt him are the similarities he can already observe between Bhima, Ram and Laxman and the distinction between animals and humans that he knows too well to ignore. The novel therefore ends on a note of pessimism and internal strife on behalf of the 'animal' while offering no redeeming tokens of change in behaviour in the human entity which appears as self-absorbed across the ages that Hanuman has lived through. As a result, in Hanuman's self-reflection, and through his suffering the meaning of 'beast' gets reclaimed but in Bhima's arrogance and self-assuredness the possibility of evolution of the human yet remains bleak.

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