

## **Divine Force Against the Intensity of Human Desire**

Rooted in the ancient ideology of The Vedas and the aesthetic beauty of Sanskrit literature, The Valmiki Ramayana, blends Rasa and Bhav-- or, atmospheric 'flavor' and human emotion-- to give readers and listeners a poetic experience of the kavya. True kavya is literature in which that meaning is suggested, not directly expressed, it conveys 'universalization' of passions without experiencing them first hand. *The Ramayana*, a Vedic holy book written by Valmiki, was stated to have appeared during 500CE - 700CE, during the 'Classical Period' of Indian history. At the same time, non-Brahmin religions began to appear-- showing contempt for the traditional, ritualistic, religion of Brahmin. Literary counter arguments, such as *Handsome Nanda*, written by monk Ashvaghosha, surfaced as a 'conversion narrative' to influence the emergence of a new religion: Buddhism. The Brahmin religion was threatened internally by Jainism, Buddhism, and other spiritual practices. Seen in the Handsome Nanda, the Buddhist appropriation of the brahmanistic kavya-- or the use of kavya for its own gain-- entices readers through entertainment and narrative while also feeding them Buddhist teachings. Although the Ramayana uses kavya to intrigue the audience into brahmanism, Handsome Nanda is better at convincing others that Buddhism is the way to lead a righteous life by choice, not divine force.

Representing holiness and sanctity, the Valmiki Ramayana aims to depict the image of the perfect follower of the Brahmin religion. Describing the perfect Brahmin worshiper, the text describes a man -- who is later revealed as the protagonist-- who, "exemplifies perfect conduct... self- controlled, mighty, radiant, steadfast, and masterful" (1.9). The man is called Rama. The Ramayana tells the story of a man desperate to retrieve his wife who is stolen by an evil entity. Rama is overcome by grief, also known as soka, due to his strong love and desire for his wife, yet in order to get her back, he has to follow the Brahmin and his teachings. Because Rama is focused on his wife and not the wish of the gods to attempt repelling Rama's emotions. "Enough of this unyielding to anguish, warrior. You should not grieve. Surely you know when a person grieves, all his endeavors fail... you must first put aside your grief and make a firm resolve" (27.43). The gods are shaping Rama to be obedient. Because he is a follower of Brahmin, he should not let 'human' emotions stop him from completing his divine mission. The highlight of the divine

words are “ You should not grieve.” It is almost as if grieving isn’t an emotion he should feel as a follower of Brahmin. Instead of being mournful, he should be grateful that the gods have sent him on this mission, to fight on the gods behalf-- proving himself worthy. His devotion is at the forefront of the story, showing readers that being virtuous will lead to a good, moral life. However, a life in this way is not his own, but a realignment from the gods.

Handsome Nanda, a Vedic heterodoxical story, intertwines ideas and the poetic style of the Ramayana to validate human sentiments, thus making Buddhism more practical to live a free life. Unlike the story of Rama, Handsome Nanda is not necessarily a ‘holy book’ but a story using similar mechanisms of *kavya* to entertain and push the Buddhist agenda. In the tale, Nanda is a man overflowing with desire for his wife, so much so that he ignores all other duties. “For Nanda was fitted for love, and so lived united with his beloved like a *chakra-vaka* bird with its mate. In this situation he was of neither *vaishravana* nor *shakra*, let alone the *dharma*” (1.1). Because of the love for his wife, he did not follow the teachings of Buddha, he did not even welcome the Buddha in his home because he was fixated on ‘love making’ with Sundari, his wife. The woman in this narrative is a vice that prohibits him from being dutiful and following the *dharma*-- therefore, the Buddha wants to change that. The Buddha brings Nanda to a garden of attractive nymphs that challenge Nanda’s love for Sundari, and his lustful desire. Realizing his overwhelming sexual emotions, Nanda begs the Buddha to let him change his ways. Nanda begs,

Please, O sage, firm as the earth, I am sinking, save me who am without firmness. I will give up my life, O man of liberated mind, unless you grant me in my dying moment the ambrosia of your words. For I have been bitten in the heart by the snake of lust, which has worthlessness for its coils, destruction for its eyes.... I take refuge in you who are established in the best refuge (10.55).

Nanda, realizing his intense lust is a temporary feeling, comes to the conclusion that following his *dharma* and listening to the Buddha will eventually allow him to experience a permanent state of enlightenment. Upon finishing the story, readers are given a capricious turning point that acknowledges the desires of man and how Buddha can relieve them of such feelings. Instead of using devotion and virtue to keep the main character going -- as the Ramayana did-- Handsome Nanda plays upon the idea

that there is a freewill and that you can ignore the dharma, but the pleasures experienced are short-term and one will end up living an unsatisfactory life. Seducing readers by introducing free will and blending rasa and bhav used in Valmiki's Ramayana, Handsome Nanda, introduces concepts of Buddhism to convert those who experience the story. Slowly, then all at once, the reader is overcome with the dharma of Buddha.

Parallels between the Ramayana and Handsome Nanda coincidentally make the latter story more satirical and superior to the story of Rama. Almost paradoxical to the Ramayana, Ashvagosh's appropriation of Nanda makes human emotions and desire more real, which resonates better than the Ramayana. In the Ramayana, the love between the man is 'tormented' by the love for his wife, and upon seeing nature in its mating season, he is overcome by the grief of nature being in love because he does not have it. In Handsome Nanda, the character already has his wife and does not need to lose her and then find her again. Nanda is overwhelmed by eroticism and sensuality in his daily life-- which is comical considering Rama wants what Nanda already has. At this point Ashvaghosh is playing with the idea of how Brahmanism makes religion seem like devotion is necessary to experience sentiments of love and sexuality, while life following Buddhist principles already allow for these emotions-- it just teaches that it is not necessary to have. The dharma that is taught in Buddhism is about following the individual path to freedom, accepting emotions as they are and moving past them. The dharamashatra of Brahmin is about denying emotions, and following the gods blindly. Furthermore, the Buddha actually allows Nanda to experience pleasure, whereas Rama does not. At the end of Handsome Nanda, the Buddha entices Nanda in saying that, "if you wish to win the apsaras, undertake the disciplinary rules joyfully, attentively, and eagerly, and I will stand guarantor that if you are steadfast in your observances you will definitely be united with them" (10.6). The Buddha is quite literally saying that Nanda can enjoy his desire and will be given objects-- or women-- to feed his lustfulness, as long as he follows the dharma. Contrastingly, Rama doesn't necessarily get to enjoy the pleasures of life anymore as he rises to become Brahmin. "Your ritual practices are the ordinance of the vedas. Without you there is nothing. Your body is the world; your steadfastness, the earth... thus have you accomplished our purpose now Rama in your delight, please

return to heave” (106.26). Although Rama successfully retrieves his wife from the evil entity, in the end, Rama must then transcend to become part of the divine realm, giving up his human sentiments of love. Leaving Nanda as human seems more inviting to those who want to experience pleasure in life, instead of having to continue being righteous and virtuous and devoting their life to the gods. Ashvaghosha uses kavya as “a bribe, a sweetener on which his audience can suck while simultaneously digesting less palpable buddhist teachings” (Covill 18). The writer doesn’t entertain, he informs. The poem’s central theme is conversion, a movement away from an inferior condition of worldliness to a superior condition of spiritual perfection and enlightenment” (Covill 18). It is almost common sense to follow Buddha and get what is wanted in the present rather than losing important pieces and people in life in order to be taught a lesson by the gods.

The writing of Ashvaghosha uses style, rhythm, and entertainment to attract intellectual readers and followers of Brahmin. Even choosing to write the Handsome Nanda in Sanskrit, was not only paying homage to the Ramayana as a written Sanskrit orthodoxy, but as a use of the language that is best used for kavya. “ The literary conquest of cosmopolitan space by Sanskrit produced a conception of literature as something able to be embodied only in language that was itself cosmopolitan. This was of course, preeminently Sanskrit... counted as legitimate vehicles for kavya from the first appearance of literary-theoretical reflection in the 7th century” (Pollock 13). Sanskrit was a language composed to have a specific place in the literary genre, specifically in the religious context. It is also important to mention that Sanskrit was never used practically, as it was the language of the gods. It was used in The Vedas and became, “ a form of political consciousness and culture.. A celebration of aesthetic power” (Pollock 14). Handsome Nanda inserted itself into the Vedic narrative as a way to appeal to the Brahmin audience-- almost mocking the Ramayana using the language of its gods. The principles of the Ramayana are to transform one into a holy devout person, even saying in the story, “ A man who reads this Ramayana story, which leads to live a long life, will after death rejoice in heaven together with his sons grandsons, and attendants” (1.78). The allegory reveals the religious nature of the text that transcends into Brahministic values. With a deep history rooted in Sanskrit, Ashvaghosha manipulates the use of Sanskrit

for his own agenda in transforming and appropriating the Vedic language to deride the Ramayana. Using the flavor that is adorned by Brahmin followers, Handsome Nanda reshapes the narrative regarding the Sanskrit language from a religious vernacular to a secular one-- yet still gives a Buddhist spin to the story. Handsome Nanda, is successful in relating to those who read his work, combining language and mastering kavya, Ashvaghosha is able to give people a literary story for entertainment while utilizing Buddhist propaganda, thus allowing for his own ideologies to infiltrate the Vedic narrative, turning Brahmin's followers to Buddhist.

Self realization versus divine force is at the forefront of the argument in deciding what was more valuable in the decision for an individual to follow a faith: blind devotion, or religious self determination. Nanda in Handsome Nanda, had all the pleasures, grief, and emotions all humans had, he was relatable. Bringing to light the misfortunes of desire, and allowing Nanda to willfully beg for the Buddha to save him, Ashvaghosha finally gave followers a choice between divinity and the individual. Rama in the Ramayana did not particularly have a say in his own destiny, but he was used as a protagonist that follows the heavenly way of the gods. The Ramayana alluded to the idea that in Brahmanism, there is no 'free will' but divine force that leads to a joyful experience in life and death. The Buddha's principles revive the idea of human experience in the present-- rendering it more enticing to those invested in the 'here and now.' With an emphasis on humanity and intentional religious epiphany Handsome Nanda utilizes the elements of kavya to give readers an active role in Buddha's teachings-- providing them with a feeling of control in a world that has tolerated the restricted loyalty to the divine.

## Works Cited

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