Exploring the Concept of the "Canonical Epic" Through the Ramayana and its Legacy

In the Fall 2024 semester, I took the course "Foundations: Nation, South Asia, Diaspora," which explores Global South Asian studies through literature and film. I loved getting to learn more about a world region I hadn't studied before; one of my favorite things about GEM is how it's encouraged me to study regions unrelated to the ones that my major or my language-learning includes. In this course, I read and wrote about works from a variety of South Asian nations, as well as by authors living in the U.S. and U.K. diasporas. One of the first texts we read in the course was the Ramayana, a widely-known epic that is fundamental to the South Asian canon; it became a reference point throughout the semester.

In my midterm paper, "Negotiating Love, War, and Masculinity from the Ramayana to Today," I decided to compare the model of masculinity set by Rama, the Ramayana's protagonist, to other models of masculinity shown in recent books and movies. While the works are very different— *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* is a Bollywood love story and the historical fiction novel *A Golden Age* follows a mother's experience with the war in Bangladesh— both showcase how cultural values adapt to different situations. Ultimately, both portray complex men who choose how to emulate Rama's legendary commitments to honor, courage, and sacrifice in ways that make sense for their situation— and who figure out when trying to follow an ideal of unwavering commitment to these values is unrealistic or doesn't align with their own ideas.

Writing this paper developed my conceptualization of a "canonical text"and its purpose. Reading something that is considered foundational to a culture does provide invaluable context. These kinds of stories affect how people understand and prioritize personal values; create foundations for other artistic works of all kinds in a canon, whether literary or not; and much

more. However, using one epic that has been around for centuries as a way to understand an entire canon, or to presume equivalent current-day cultural values and norms, is also not useful. Rather, the way that "canonical" texts are related to and perceived evolves as time passes and circumstances change.

Later in the semester, we studied two modern-day feminist retellings of the Ramayana that positioned it as an inherently sexist text that would need to be completely retold in order to be redeemed. Indeed, feminist retellings are an increasingly popular phenomenon that I've noticed in other canons as well. While *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and *A Golden Age* choose to repurpose Rama's example for models of masculinity that facilitate healthier relationships with female characters, other works such as *Kaikeyi* choose to tear down the plot of the Ramayana altogether.

While *Kaikeyi* was admittedly a gripping read, the class came to the conclusion that it was in many ways an oversimplification. In my opinion, at times, retellings that condemn the whole original as irredeemably "problematic" in one way or another run the risk of discounting societal understandings that the cultural meaning of epics changes with context. This outlook then risks suggesting to outsiders that an entire culture holds "outdated" beliefs due to the narratives it has canonized— an issue that arises in this specific circumstance when white feminists promote a blanket narrative that all South Asian women are oppressed and powerless without listening to their perspectives and taking time to understand cultural nuances.

However, the genre of the feminist retelling certainly makes sense overall when many older stories inevitably contain sexism, and can be fun and empowering to read. Since this class, I've found myself wondering: how can we explore the feminist retelling genre while acknowledging the complexity of the origin text? What attitudes do we imply by changing the

origin text so drastically? And, ultimately, what actually makes a text "feminist," and a woman "empowered?"