Part II: Negotiating Love, War, and Masculinity from the Ramayana to Today

The Ramayana is undoubtedly one of South Asia's most known epics. Millions of children across generations have grown up hearing about the bravery and honor of its protagonist, Rama, as he embarks on a quest to defeat the demon Ravana and rescue his wife, Sita. An idealized male hero, he offers a foundation for cultural standards of masculinity to be constructed. The mythological setting of Rama's journey allows audiences to emulate his core principles and explore varied real-world applications. However, the real world is far more difficult to navigate than Rama's world, and real men far less perfect, leading to questions of realistic models of masculinity. Modern works such as the Bollywood classic *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and the historical fiction novel *A Golden Age* grapple with these questions. By investigating how male protagonists navigate real-world love and war, alternative masculinities that both incorporate and challenge Rama's qualities can be constructed as potential models.

Rama is an incarnation of Vishnu, which allows him perfection and strength beyond the average human; however, it is also stressed that this incarnation is an "ordinary man," the key to defeating the demon Ravana. Rama's exceptionality is quickly established. His early marriage plot shows physical exceptionality; Sita falls for him at first sight, indicating attractiveness, and he is so strong that he breaks a previously "unbreakable" bow to earn her hand. When Rama's father chooses him as successor, he refers to his son as "the embodiment of all perfection:" "he has compassion, a sense of justice, and courage, and he makes no distinctions between human beings," their "best protector from any hostile force" (88). Dasaratha sets expectations for Rama and defines a "perfect ruler:" Rama possesses military prowess, but must be tempered and guided by core morals. His power will be funneled into the role of a brave protector that indiscriminately guards all citizens. After Rama's succession is derailed by his father's wife, another core value emerges: duty. Although he initially accepts the nomination, he quickly renounces it in order to help his father fulfill a promise, responding with: "I will carry out his wishes without question [...] I have no interest in kingship, and no attachments to such offices, and no aversion to a forest existence" (Narayan 104). This dedication to duty sends the message that it is virtuous to be

strong, brave, and compassionate, but one must also act with duty, honor, and obedience. A virtuous young man may be strong and independent, but is still bound to the wishes of their elders.

Rama remains deeply committed to his internal codes of honor, even when they complicate his success. During their fierce battle, Ravana faints under Rama's arrows, but Rama refuses to "finish him off," declaring "It is not fair warfare to attack a man who is in a faint" (253). After killing Ravana, Rama panics when he sees a scar on his back, believing he has dishonorably "attacked a man who had turned his back" (255). This battle, while showcasing Rama's strength, courage, and persistence as "masculine" virtues, also shows that the honor to not exploit these abilities is just as important. His honor is impressive but not unfailing: the narrator steps in to comment on a "puzzling" moral slip. Rama gets involved in a conflict between the monkey kings Sugreeva, who he vows to support, and Vali, who has sworn to kill Sugreeva over a misunderstanding and taken his wife. Rama deems it particularly unforgivable that Vali has taken Sugreeva's wife, and is bound by his vow to Sugreeva, so he "shot and destroyed, from hiding, a creature who had done him no harm, not even seen him" (170). While the text upholds "honorable" masculinity, it also suggests that the intention to be honorable is not infallible, and that one must be vigilant to protect their values as well as continuously learn from their mistakes.

Rama's relationship with Sita constructs masculinity in relation to women. Their relationship begins when he "wins" her through a demonstration of physical strength, establishing his devotion to but also dominance over her. Pleasing and saving Sita are core motivations, fulfilling the role of her masculine protector. However, he also has a preoccupation with Sita's honor. After rescuing her from Ravana, he initially rejects her due to having "resided all alone in a stranger's house," (257) implying she has transgressed by potentially sleeping with Ravana. In desperation, Sita walks through fire to prove her honesty, only after which Rama is willing to embrace her. Sita's honor and loyalty to Rama are portrayed as key to the integrity of his own masculinity, and although he takes the role of her protector, this act also shows a certain possessiveness over her, and a distrust of her own word.

Rama's masculinity can exist in an epic, but what happens when the average young man is called to exercise bravery and strength in real-world wars? *A Golden Age*, a 2007 work of historical fiction by

Tahmima Anam, examines this question in the context of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Both written by a woman and narrated by a female character, Rehana, the novel allows more space for men's fear and "weakness." Rehana's son is a politically engaged young man who grapples with his role when the war breaks out. Although her son, Sohail, initially identifies as a pacifist, watching the army commit genocide in Bangladesh prompts him to realize he "can't sit back and do nothing" (Anam 79). Although his values call him to protect his country, he also struggles with his duty to his widowed mother; Rehana sees "him arguing with himself, calculating the most noble thing to do. The thing that would require the most sacrifice" (81). Unlike Rama, Sohail must weigh the real-world consequences of abandoning his family against protecting his country from destruction. In this scene, we see Sohail guided by the principles of nobility and sacrifice; he knows that no decision can be perfect, and has to decide which "imperfection" he can justify as he steps into the role of a masculine protector.

Sohail's decision to sacrifice himself for something greater than him– an independent Bangladesh– solidifies his courage and persistence: "as with everything else, he had taken it on with a kind of brutal devotion. [...] A man for his country. He would die, if he had to" (101). While Sohail is uplifted by his devotion and courage, his body is also constructed as destructible. The execution of his "noble" choice now must diverge from that of Rama because of its existence in a complex and ugly world. In opposition to Rama's (*almost* unwavering) devotion to honest battle, Sohail and his army employ sneaky guerilla tactics such as sabotaging the city's power grid. However, as the member of a disempowered resistance in the face of a large and evil army, these actions are still indicative of a noble masculinity because Sohail has the courage and intelligence to do what is right, however possible.

The Major is the novel's other key male character. The Major breaks with traditional depictions of masculinity as unshakeable bodily strength by being injured for the majority of his presence in the novel. However, the Major is still able to take on a protector role, serving as a source of emotional support for Rehana, as she finds herself confiding her secrets in him. Rehana stresses how much she loves her children, confessing that she would do absolutely anything for them. Once healed, the Major leaves the house, but he turns towards the end of the novel when soldiers mistake him for Sohail and haul him into

Rehana's house. Remembering Rehana's confession that she would do anything for her children, he pretends he is Sohail, the ultimate sacrifice which he regards as "the greatest thing [he's] ever done" (265). Although the Major is giving himself over to be tortured, a submission that will further the destruction of his body and spirit, this is portrayed as a more realistic expression of masculinity and love. In the Major's case, honor, duty, and protection comes at the cost of his own body; he promotes a model of masculinity as being able to weather difficult decisions and make sacrifices.

A much more lighthearted piece of media, Aditya Chopra's 1995 Bollywood classic *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge,* searches for a real-world healthy masculinity in matters of love. Eighteen year-olds Simran and Raj fall in love on a trip through Europe, but their love affair is foiled when Simran is sent to India to marry her father's friend's son as soon as she returns. Raj's love persists, and he follows her to India to win her back. While his embarking on a quest and his devotion to love may emulate Rama in some ways, he also diverges significantly from Rama's model of masculinity. Raj plans to pose as a stranger and infiltrate the family in order to eventually voluntarily win their favor to marry Simran. While he upholds some aspects of "honor" by seeking to win Simran voluntarily and marry her before they consummate their love, he also violates Rama's definition of honor by being dishonest.

During his time amongst Simran's family, he embraces a "softer" model of masculinity, serving as a pleasant foil to Simran's fiance, Kuljeet. Raj goes out of his way to help Simran's family, often taking duties that have been relegated to the women, even secretly helping a female family member choose what to wear to the wedding. Although these duties may be seen as traditionally "feminine," being unafraid to do them strengthens Raj's own model of healthy masculinity as his helpfulness and grace places him in the traditional "protector" role while also charting room for a new definition of masculinity involving a more equitable division of labor. Raj establishes a daily routine of feeding birds outside of the house, a kind ritual that contrasts with Kuljeet, who expresses his "toxic" masculinity through destruction and violence; a hobby hunter, Kuljeet prefers to shoot and kill birds.

Raj has a complicated relationship to the virtues of duty and respect for elders. Simran's parents have decided that her arranged marriage to Kuljeet makes the most sense for their families. However,

rather than following Rama's example of unquestioning obedience, even when it interferes with one's personal desires, Raj rejects the idea that they "know best" in favor of tricking his way into a love marriage with Simran. Raj's grappling with the values of his parent's generation is reflective of his diasporic experience. He wants to respect and connect with Indian values, telling Simran that he knows "how much honor means to an Indian woman" when she worries that he took advantage of her while she was drunk, and fully participating in all the pre-wedding traditions. However, he has also internalized British ideas about love and marriage, inspiring him to challenge arranged marriage. However, Raj seems to have a change of heart at the end of the movie; he tells Simran's father that he should have trusted his judgment, and will understand if he does not allow Simran to marry him. This obedience, alongside having just taken a beating from Kuljeet, wins over Simran's father, and he lets her go. In contrast to Rama, Raj does not ask Simran to prove her "purity" after "living in a stranger's house," rather trusting her as an equal and treating her with compassion.

By being so deeply enshrined in the South Asian cultural consciousness, the Ramayana upholds an idealized vision of masculinity in line with cultural values and universally appreciated by generations of young men. Existing within a mythological narrative specifically designed for the purpose of showcasing Rama's qualities, Rama embodies strength, duty, and encourage as core parts of masculinity; he is a protector figure, regularly puts aside his own desires for the sake of honor, is undefeatable in battle, and is dedicated to his beloved wife. However, real men are not indestructible, and face real-world challenges that they are not guaranteed to overcome. Although Rama can serve as a theoretical guide, it is impossible to fully emulate him. In modern works, writers define alternative, more realistic models of masculinity. *A Golden Age* argues that Rama's definitions of honesty and honor in battle cannot always be followed, but that this does not have to be "dishonorable" when it is for the right cause. Instead, masculine honor is embodied through sacrifice. Finally, its masculine bodies are not indestructible, but injury does not have to be emasculating. *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, on the other hand, proves that questioning elders, especially in the unique situation of diaspora, does not compromise one's masculine commitment to duty and can sometimes reveal positive change in values. A man can honor bravery and

persistence while rejecting toxically “tough” masculinity in favor for softness and compassion. These more nuanced masculinities prove that masculinity must be an ever-changing construct if it is to serve as a healthy guide to new generations of men– while still honoring a balance between adaptation and traditional foundations.