

Valmiki's *Yoga Vasistha* & Plato's *Republic*: A Study

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Abstract

The paper aims at studying the meaning in the ancient text *Yoga Vasistha* that suggests that a ruler should be objective and philosophical. Also, the discussions in the text take place in a dialectic model between various historical characters similar to the Platonic dialogues. The text can be located in a closed environment of a particular group of people reflecting their ideological search for pure knowledge and understanding of the world. Nevertheless, we notice the traces of the political and sociological thought processes of the age in which they lived. The text carries the symbol of human search for superior and objective wisdom in the process of evolution.

Keywords: *Yoga Vasistha*, Valmiki, Rama, Laghu *Yoga Vasistha*, Plato, *Republic*.

Yoga Vasistha is written as a philosophical discourse with stories as illustrations that were told to Prince Rama by his guru Vasistha. Scholars claim that it is similar to "Kashmir Shaivism" and its main teaching is that "everything is consciousness, including the material world," and that the world is as one sees it. It argues that the world is only a play of consciousness (*Yoga Vasistha* x).

The *Yoga Vasistha* is written in a dramatic dialogic form as a collection of philosophical discussions between Rama and Vasistha. These dialogues are supposedly narrated by Valmiki, the poet who wrote down the legendary story of Ramayana into an epic.

The narration begins like this: Sutiksna, a sage asks Agastya asks for an explanation on the concept of liberation; Agastya narrates to him the legend of Karunya, the son of Agniveshya; Karunya has certain doubts and his father who tells him the legend of a nymph called Suruci; a messenger of God Indra tells her about a sage,

Aristanemi who refuses to accept Indra's invitation to heaven; Indra advises Aritstanemi to take counsel from Valmiki regarding this; Valmiki tells him the dialogue between Rama and Vasistha as an illustration to explain his ideologies. (*Yoga Vasistha* 1) This is the background scenic setting for the future dialogues and dialectics to take place.

Valmiki narrates how the discussion begins: Rama is very depressed and forlorn and looks emaciated; his father King Dasaratha enquires the sage Vasistha for the reason (*Yoga Vasistha* 2); at that time sage Visvamisra visits the palace and requests for the support of Rama in vanquishing the demons who are the followers of Khara and Dusana (*Yoga Vasistha* 3); Vasistha begins to reply to all the queries Rama asks in the King's Court regarding the purpose of life (*Yoga Vasistha* 21). The main characters other than Rama, thus, are Valmiki who is the narrator of the core discussion, Dasaratha, Viswamisra and Vasistha.

Vasistha tells Rama that he would impart the wisdom revealed to him by the divine creator, Brahma. "O Rama, countless have been the universes that have come into being and have been dissolved. In fact, even the countless universes that exist at this moment are impossible to conceive of," he says. "Neither the world of matter nor the modes of creation are truly real, yet the living and the dead think and feel they are real. Ignorance of this truth keeps up the appearance," and thus Vasistha interprets the phenomenon (*Yoga Vasistha* 21).

The concept of 'vicara' or 'looking into oneself' or 'enquiry' is dealt in detail by Vasistha. Accordingly, the wise man learns to enquire into one's self. It is a fool who will not enquire into the nature of things. The mind becomes dull in the absence of enquiry and hence the non-enquiring mind becomes sorrowful. In the light of enquiry, there is a realization of eternal and unchanging reality. A person who has acquired such a mind is free from delusion and attachment. "He is not inactive: and does not "get drowned in action." There is "the blissful state of total freedom." True enquiry is defined as creating a few questions in mind: "Who am I? How has this evil of samsara (repetitive history) come into being?" Asking these questions can bring in a kind of true knowledge which will be followed by tranquility, which in turn can create "supreme peace that passeth understanding, and the ending of all sorrow" (*Yoga Vasistha* 29).

The narrative mode in which these discussions are packaged is dialogic that involves stories, and it is in these storytelling *Yoga Vasistha* differs from Platonic dialogues. There are many stories that are narrated on the lives of Suka, Lila, Sons of Indu, Lavana, Sukra, Dasura, King Janaka, Prahlada, Gadhi, Arjuna, Bhagiratha, Sage from outer space and so on.

This book (*Yoga Vasistha*) serves as a ladder wherewith to scale from the Seswara Sankhya doctrine of Patanjali as given out in his Yoga-Sutras to the Maya-conception of the Advaita Pantheists and thus renders possible a reconciliation between them both. Through a study of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, it is clear from Book III, Aphorism I7 that the cause of all pains is the conjunction of the seer with the visual or the subject with the object; the conception of 'I' having been brought about by the identification of the subject with the object (*Laghu Yoga Vasistha* 12-13).

The seer identifies his body and mind with the objects and does not realize that happiness and pain are processes that a 'self' has to go through, as it is the principle of the universe which operates balancing both these experiences. A 'self' cannot run away or escape from pain because it hurts. As it has embraced happiness, it has to embrace the inevitable phase of life which will be surely painful. The 'I' has to be detached from the body and mind, and emotions rising from physical problems lead to mental anguish, and one has to treat them with a little detachment.

Why should you pine like the ignorant, being bewildered in the illusions of son and others who are not your Self? What is this body which is dull and inert? Who is that 'you' which, on account of this body, is drowned amidst pleasures and pains and is ever chafing therein without the least avail? Truly a wondrous riddle is it? You have not cognized these diversified things in their true state of unity. While the self-shining Brahman, which is non-dual and true, is pervading everywhere, this painful and illusory Maya, though uncreate, yet manifests itself. Like a crystal which, though tinged by the five colours, is yet unaffected by them, you should perform all actions by associating with them and yet be untainted by the desires therein. So said at great length Rishi Vasistha. (*Laghu Yoga Vasistha* 229)

The non-dual and true Brahman is pervading everywhere and *Yoga Vasistha* attempts to teach the readers objectivity. The mind has to attain total objectivity and remove itself of sense-based reactions. Valmiki narrates the discussion between the young Rama and the seasoned wise man and guru Vasistha who teaches Rama to detach himself from the opinions that are born out of our limited understanding of ourselves and the selves of others. Appearance is not reality, the text argues. Instead, appearance is illusion or 'maya' or perception. We understand our plights from a particular perspective, and that perspective can be born out of our ignorance, inability to grasp the situation and so on. One has to be aware of the roots or genesis of one's ideologies and its limitations,

which might help in detaching oneself from his bondage to himself. Intellectual development and sophisticated cognitive skills are required to look at oneself as the 'other.'

This discipline of detaching oneself from him also requires a strong mental ability to do psychological work continuously in self review and self-analysis. Detachment is the only way to attain peace, the text suggests again and again, and it emphasizes on the continuous training of the mind that is required to attain this end. It is a solution to drive away human depression and a young boy like Rama has to begin to practice it, so that he will learn to operate his energies well and emerge as a great leader. In Nietzschean terms, it is here that spiritual principles become methodologies to train and shape the superman, who conquers himself.

Amidst this intellectual discussion that aims at the highest purity of thought enters the reality of the existing social order and cultural and political contempt for tribal people from hills, people who are marginalized, and the text assumes the same prejudice is shared by the readers, hinting at and revealing the a limited readership for *Yoga Vasistha*, socially and politically framed. A scene is created and a description of an experience of illusion or 'maya' comes forth: King Lavana sees the Vindya hills through trance. He realizes that in his previous birth he lived there as a tribal. He sees more when he scrutinizes the scene. He observes several places and towns and also sees the huts of outcastes. Women are weeping and are grief stricken (*Laghu Yoga Vasistha* 241). She opens her mouth wide and begins to wail loudly. Many people and some of her children have died. She cries:

Oh, my darlings, who have forsaken my lap and embrace to only perish in some foreign land, whether have you gone through your bad Karmas? How distressed will you be at the sight of strangers' faces? Oh, my daughter, my daughter, when will you too return to alleviate my scorching- fire of grief with the cool embrace of your arms bedecked with scarlet garlands. Oh, my son-in-law of a King, who came to us through our previous Tapas, like a treasure newly discovered, and led to the hymeneal altar my daughter after having I abandoned his harem containing ladies like unto Lakshmi herself, have you forgotten us? Will you again present yourself before us with your moonlike face in this very spot? Or are you estranged from us through any paltry venial offences committed by my daughter like Lakshmi? Being caught in the snare of Karmas in the great ocean of dire births, you abandoned your regality, accepted my daughter's hand and degraded yourself, a lord of men, into the most degraded

condition of an outcaste through such an alliance. Our lives of rebirths flash like lightning and are as impermanent. Dire indeed are the decrees of destiny. (*Laghu Yoga Vasistha* 242-243)

She continues to mourn, and the reader's mind subtly acquires a superior air and a sense of elite feeling, as the reader definitely belongs to an educated group and the women described are illiterate and foolish and have no self-restraint which is suggested as a sign of superior intelligence. The king asks her for the reasons for her grief and she replies that in that village of Pariahs she lived with a man and gets a daughter. The daughter lived with a King who came to the forest and brought forth three children. The three children died and later there was a famine and the outcaste fled in all directions to escape abject poverty and most of them died too. All these people had dark skin like God Yama. Their suffering never stopped; she tells the king who tries to relieve their pains by providing them with the needed things. (*Laghu Yoga Vasistha* 243) The king Lavana returns to his city or comes out of his trance and begins to think about the mysteries of Brahman and understands that Maya generates delusions and therefore truth will appear like falsity and vice-versa. (*Laghu Yoga Vasistha* 244)

One cannot ignore the way prejudice is gently created in the minds of readers against the dark skinned people who are caught in 'maya' and do not have any means to break through the vicious cycle of poverty, pain, self-illusion and ignorance. The writer of the text juxtaposes poverty of the mind and economic poverty with the richness of the mind and physical riches. The inference a reader might unconsciously absorb is that the dark skinned people are inferior and are caught in lives from which they have no clue to tackle it and they are not aware of the concept of detachment at all. Hence, a future king should avoid living like that. Economic and cultural poverty are illustrations to prove the superiority of living with self-awareness. These illustrations have not become sites for inclusion, training and development, and kept away as the distant and 'the other.' These concepts are attempts at self-purification and do not have social welfare in mind. Rather they assume if everyone practices this self-discipline, social development will automatically take place. They do not aim at including the tribals into their thinking practices, who live outside their neighbourhood in the hills, into this school of thought and mental training. Detachment and objective thinking are intellectual practices that are limited to one group of people only – the rulers and thinkers.

Maya is explained as a mental state that produces diverse ideas and thoughts in human minds. The mind will merge itself through vasanas or different behavior patterns.

Therefore, King Lavana saw as true, on the subsequent day, that illusion which Sambarika, the Siddha imposed on the previous day through his Indra-Jala on him (the king) as a Chandala (outcaste) and so on. That illusion which was wrought on the king's brains in his Jagrat Swapna state, the Chandalas, living on the slopes of the hills, saw to be real through their own intelligence. Now what happened was this. That which dawned on the king's mind (as Jagrat Swapna) was reflected on those of the Chandalas as Jagrat for waking reality; and that which happened among the Chandalas again reflected itself on the mind of the king (as the same Jagrat reality). If this is the work of Maya, who will be able to gauge its tremendous powers? It is only to 'Jnana' light that all the visible 'Mayavic' objects owe their existence in this world. Likewise, are all objects observed through the five organs, nonexistent except through Jnana. Jnanatman occupies (*Laghu Yoga Vasistha* 245)

Jnana or wisdom is the result of self-awareness and cognitive ability to analyse one's thinking processes. Our knowledge of life is developed by our responses to human experiences, and the issue here is, that these responses may be the result of our understanding through the five senses, which might be far away from truth.

Moksha may be said to be that state in which the objects, their knower or the knowledge are not found but which is yet the source of all three. May you be ever impartite in that Chidananda wherein are unified that, 'the Brahman and you,' the Kutastha, which is the neutral state of the mind when it passes from one object to another, and which is without name, intelligence or inertness. May you rest in your innate self in an illuminated state, having enquired thoroughly through your subtle mind and having eradicated all the conceptions of your mind which makes you falsely believe yourself to be under the trammels of Samsara. (*Laghu Yoga Vasistha* 246)

The mind has to be subtle and sophisticated to observe itself and its workings with a trained sensibility and fine sensitivity. Becoming aware of one's self and detaching from it would require high cognitive abilities, which may not be possible for a non-intellectual. The concept is the proponent of intellectuals who are thinkers with a complex mind and superior intellectual ability. They constantly warned themselves how they should not be caught in the web of samsara and stay out of emotions to concentrate on their work in a peaceful fashion. A leader or a superman emerges out of this tough training of the mind, and Rama is guided well into leadership in this manner. The

multiple narrators and their questions add a touch of reality and authenticity to the text and raises its level to a philosophical engagement.

Plato too engages himself in a similar style of writing – involving multiple narrators and questions. Collobert identifies three types of narrators in Platonic writing – the narrator who is also the author, the primary narrator and the secondary narrator (Sridevi 123).

In *The Republic* by Plato, Socrates is the narrator and Glaucon, Adeimantus, Polemarchus, Cephalus, Thrasymachus, Cleitophon and others are the participants. “The scene is laid in the house of Cephalus at the Piraeus; and the whole dialogue is narrated by Socrates the day after it actually took place to Timaeus, Hermocrates, Critias, and a nameless person, who are introduced in the *Timaeus*” (Jowett’s introduction to Plato’s *The Republic*). Ancient treatises have a common dialogic form of discussion in which ideas are analysed. Also, they have ideas which modern ages have rejected, and we do know ideas are the products a particular space and time.

We cannot allow men to play the parts of women, quarrelling, weeping, scolding, or boasting against the gods,—least of all when making love or in labour...There are in cities whole classes—women, slaves and the like—who correspond to the worse, and a few only to the better...But if women are to have the same employments as men, they must have the same education—they must be taught music and gymnastics, and the art of war. I know that a great joke will be made of their riding on horseback and carrying weapons; the sight of the naked old, wrinkled women showing their agility in the palaestra will certainly not be a vision of beauty, and may be expected to become a famous jest. But we must not mind the wits; there was a time when they might have laughed at our present gymnastics. All is habit: people have at last found out that the exposure is better than the concealment of the person, and now they laugh no more. Evil only should be the subject of ridicule...Women are the same in kind as men, and have the same aptitude or want of aptitude for medicine or gymnastic or war, but in a less degree... One woman will be a good guardian, another not; and the good must be chosen to be the colleagues of our guardians. If however their natures are the same, the inference is that their education must also be the same; there is no longer anything unnatural or impossible in a woman learning music and gymnastic. And the education which we give them will be the very best, far superior to that of cobblers, and will train up the very best women, and nothing can be more

advantageous to the State than this. Therefore let them strip, clothed in their chastity, and share in the toils of war and in the defence of their country; he who laughs at them is a fool for his pains...And so we have arrived at the conclusion, that in the perfect State wives and children are to be in common; and the education and pursuits of men and women, both in war and peace, are to be common, and kings are to be philosophers and warriors, and the soldiers of the State are to live together, having all things in common; and they are to be warrior athletes, receiving no pay but only their food, from the other citizens. (Plato in *Republic*)

Plato too writes for a limited readership, and we can easily notice this as we are reading it after two thousand years and are from a different culture. Philosophers are writers who write for a certain audience as seen in *Yoga Vasistha* and Plato's *Republic*. Plato talks about social welfare in the most challenging manner, and has become a point of ridicule, and so and so, the concept of philosopher king that he recommends loses its credibility. Ideologies are invariably caught up with the paradox of materialism, and it is perhaps impossible to think without subjectivity. The location and gender influence thinkers and they dominate their works, and when we read ancient texts now, we have to remember that we live in another age and also are in a globalised economic structure. Readers have to understand the way societies operated two thousand years ago in small units, and hence writers wrote for a small audience or readership.

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