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Myth in/as Biography: A Study of the *Ramayana* Framework in Raja Rao's *The Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi*

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In his literary biography of Gandhi, *The Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi,* Raja Rao employs the mythical technique, overlaying the modern biography with ancient epic form, and thematically and semantically reformulating Gandhi as Rama. Though rooted in the documented evidence of Gandhi's life, Rao's text eschews the conventions of traditional Western biography and presents Gandhi as a modern-day Rama, who fights colonial rule with the weapon of non-violence, thus transforming the anti-colonial struggle into the archetypal heroic quest for dharma. The structure of the biographical text parallels the *kandas* of the *Ramayana* and thematically mirror the eternal values embodied by Rama. The mythic technique is foregrounded in the semiotic choices, the thematic and symbolic motifs, and in the narrative and structural framework of the *Ramayana*. This paper studies how Rao aligns Gandhi's life with the mythic template of the *Ramayana*, thus repositioning the biography from the discipline of historical document to the realm of sacred storytelling which calls for a reading that moves beyond political history or life-writing into the domains of myth theory, narrative emplotment and postcolonial cultural politics. The paper argues that by using the Ramayana as a moral and structural frame, Rao's biography shifts Gandhi from a national leader to the archetypal hero of epic proportions

and repositions him into India's sacred narrative traditions as a response to the cultural politics of the period.

Key words: Raja Rao, Gandhi, Life writing, Ramayana, Myth, Historiography.

Introduction

Life-writing has become, in contemporary times, one of the most marketable genres of popular culture in all media, whether comics, literature, or cinema. 'Life-writing' is a literal translation of the medieval Greek term "biographia", and it was John Dryden who defined 'biography' as "the history of particular men's lives" in his *Life of Plutarch*. Biographies have been written to fulfil a variety of purposes – commemoration, denigration, ethical instruction, documentation, revisionism, self-understanding, national propaganda, etc. – and in a wide variety of forms, such as 'autobiografiction', 'auto/biographic metafiction', thematic biographies, group biographies, graphic biographies (which combine cartoons, history, and life-writing), microbiographies, medical biographies, anti-biographies, etc. As the plethora, purposes, and kinds of biographies on the *same* subject demonstrate, biography does not offer a singular 'truth' but becomes a potent means of ideological and historical representation, a means to reconstruct or deconstruct identities, and reformulate the past. There are narratives and counter-narratives created when the subject is reconstructed in every generation on the basis of different mythologies and ideologies. Therefore, the idea of a 'more authoritative' biography has been debunked, and postmodern theorists of biography question the 'truth' claims of biography, asserting that every biography has its subjective underpinnings in the selection and interpretation of historical material.

Though biography is commonly presumed to be an inherently Western genre and was not considered to be dominant in India until its contact with the West, recent scholarship has uncovered a line of life-writing in India, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Significantly, these biographical writings do not follow the narrative pattern of Western biographies, since they are largely fictionalized, allegorical, and epic. Sandhyakaranandin's *Ramacharitam* (circa 11th-12th CE), for instance, was an allegorical biography: it could be read as the

biographical details of Lord Rama as well as the hagiography of King Ramapala of the Pala dynasty of Bengal. Life histories, termed *carita*, incorporated both history and legend, were written in prose and verse, and followed the common biographical aim of being commemorative and didactic. When these Indian biographers praised their subjects, they placed their narrative in a mythical framework that was part of the structure of the biography and not meant to be 'ornamental'. Even when the early hagiographical traditions of biography gave way to the modern conceptions of life writing in the colonial era, modernity did not completely replace the traditional patterns. The eighteenth-century biography of the South Indian, Ananda Ranga Pillai, written in Sanskrit, contains both pre-modern and modern features. It was with the nationalist movement that biography in the modern form received a momentous impetus, with biographies of prominent leaders being penned, one of the most famous being B. R. Nanda's biography of Gandhi (1957).

Biographies of Gandhi abounded from the early 20th century on – appraisals of his life and methods – beginning with Joseph Doke's *M. K. Gandhi: An Indian Patriot in South Africa* (1909) to *Let's Kill Gandhi: A Chronicle of his Last Days, the Conspiracy, Murder Investigation, Trials and the Kapur Commission* (2025). They range from the eulogizing *Mahatma Gandhi: The Man who Became One with the Universal Being* by Romain Rolland (1925) and Louis Fischer's *Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (1950) to the denigrating *Gandhi: Naked Ambition* (2010) by Jad Adams and *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and his Struggle with India* (2011) by Joseph Lelyveld. In India, the biographies follow a mixed critical response, beginning with the hagiographical observations of his associates such as Pyarelal Nanda (1956), the diaries of Mahadev Desai, the eight-volume biography by D. G. Tendulkar (1951), to the more critically appraising historical biography by B. R. Nanda (1958), the critical biography by his grandson, Rajmohan Gandhi (1994), and the assessment of his early experiences abroad by Ramachandra Guha (2013), to the openly hostile works like Arundhati Roy's *The Doctor and the Saint* (2017). Raja Rao's literary biography on Gandhi, *The Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, was published in 1998, in which Rao

deploys the mythic method and configures Gandhi in the archetypal image of Rama. With multiple Sanskrit, folk, and regional versions, the *Ramayana* is one of India's most enduring epics, as attested in the pan-Indian ratings of its televised retelling in the 1987. By inscribing Gandhi's life through the cultural iconography of the *Ramayana*, Rao uses the mythology which is part of the collective unconscious of Indians to glorify Gandhi and his tenets of non-violence in the Puranic manner. This paper argues that Raja Rao's literary hagiography of Gandhi, *The Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, follows the pattern of the earlier conception of Indian biography, by prefiguring Gandhi as Rama, and in the very structure of the biography, which follows the organizational arrangement of the Sanskrit *Ramayana*, thus, transforming the anti-colonial struggle into the archetypal heroic quest for dharma.

Literature Review

While Raja Rao's mythical method has been extensively analyzed, few studies have explored how his biography on Gandhi adheres to the framework of the mythology. The only substantial scholarly engagement with Rao's **The Great Indian Way** appears in the chapter "Meaningful Gurus," by Letizia Alterno (2011), in which the critic discusses the novel's Gandhian ideological framework. The chapter argues that several of the Gandhian ideas explored in the novel were already anticipated in an essay Rao wrote and published in 1969 in an essay that offered a concise account of Gandhi's life and thought set against the backdrop of Indian mythology. Biographers have frequently adopted a mythic narrative by incorporating archetypal structures of heroism such as the rise-fall-redemption pattern or the ideal of providential design, a tendency largely noticed in biopics. Sue Clayton's (2007) work on mythic structures in screenwriting illustrates how mythic themes – including the hero's journey – inform not only narrative and character but also image, landscape, and music, thereby exerting a significant influence on the critical study of biographical form. Similarly, Fazlalizadeh and Ghassemi's (2019) article *"*Biopic and Myth Making*"* contends that biopics mythologize historical figures through selective retelling, showing how filmic representations, such

as those seen in cinematic portrayals of Gandhi, construct culturally resonant modern heroes.

Research on myth and history further underscores the persistence of archetypes such as the hero and martyr, noting that cyclical patterns of exile, trial, and return have become organizing principles in both traditional and contemporary biography. Oshlen (1997) highlights how Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* merges autobiography with myth, and comparisons with Jesus, Buddha, and Faust generates an "automythography" that aligns the trajectory of his personal development with mythic symbols. Similarly, Rowland (2003), discusses Laura Marcus's work on "Autobiographical Discourse," and demonstrates that autobiographies often rely on personal myths to connect individual protagonists to broader collective narratives, thus framing private experience within culturally recognisable symbolic patterns. Building on this notion of myth as a structuring force, Shastina's (2014) reading of Elias Canetti illustrates how myth functions as a mode of self-interpretation, demonstrating how "biographical mythmaking" creates an idealised version of reality. Beyond Western contexts, Fong (1989) and Afejuku (2001) discuss how Chinese and African autobiographical writing draw on indigenous cosmologies and folk legends. Roesler (2006) provides a methodological framework to these literary analyses, and his narratological framework identifies recurring archetypal structures – especially the hero's journey – as organising principles in autobiographical narratives. Taken together, this body of scholarship establishes the deep entanglement between biography and mythic structures.

Methodology

This paper attempts to decipher how the thematic, symbolic, and structural boundaries of the *Ramayana* are recreated in Rao's biography. It incorporates an integrated theoretical framework combining myth theory, archetypal criticism, and historiographical analysis. The paper analyses the text in two stages: first, a historiographical reading – analysing the relevance of precolonial cultural symbols to modern historical discourse; and secondly, a structural mapping and mythic-thematic analysis – identifying the

correspondences between incidents in Gandhi's biography and the narrative arc of the *Ramayana* and applying Eliade and Campbell to interpret Gandhi as a *dharmic hero*. The text chosen for comparison for studying the structure and thematic content of the *Ramayana* is *Srimad Valmiki Ramayana* published by the Gita Press of Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. The spiritual/religious texts published by the Gita Press are traditionally enormously popular, primarily because of their cheap and easy accessibility, and have thus become a primary force in shaping modern Hindu identity and politics. The study demonstrates that Rao's biography of Gandhi transforms the political and personal life into a national epic by fusing it with India's enduring spiritual/ religious narrative.

Conceptual framework

The concept of the 'mythic method' in literature was articulated by Eliot in his essay "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" (1923) in which he praised Joyce's novel for using Homer's epic as a structural and symbolic framework giving coherence to the fragmentation of modern society. He famously defined it as a means of "controlling, ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." It refers to the deliberate incorporation of mythical patterns, archetypes, themes, symbols, and narratives into contemporary works both to achieve a universal significance and a sense of timelessness, and to suggest that the fundamental patterns of human experience remain constant despite superficial differences and historical change. This broad articulation of mythic integration finds systematic theorization in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), where he traced the universal mythic structures, such as the monomyth or the hero's journey, through the rites of passage represented in the formulaic pattern of separation – initiation – return. In Campbell's hero myth pattern, the hero ventures into a formidable region where he encounters supernatural and redoubtable forces, wins decisive victories, and returns to bestow gifts on his fellow men (Segal, 2004, p. 104), a pattern also seen in the *Ramayana*. Similarly, in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Northop Frye theorizes that "all genres of literature derive from myths – specifically the myth of the life of the hero"

(Segal, 2004, p. 81). Further, Mircea Eliade, in his *Myth and Reality* (1963), conceives of myth as a narrative that provides an exemplar for human behaviour, and the retelling of the myth offers the listeners and participants an opportunity to transcend historical time and reconnect with timeless truths. Another theoretician of myth was Roland Barthes, whose *Mythologies* (1972) posits that myth is a form of signification, and ideologies are concealed by the cultural myths prevalent in societies. Taken together, these theoreticians of myth, thus, claim that the mythic method is not merely an ornamental use of myth, but rather a literary strategy to reframe the present in the universalizing patterns of the past.

Rao's mythic method is his incorporation of mythical, folkloric, Vedantic, and metaphysical elements in his writing by way of allegory and symbolism to explore philosophical and spiritual ideas. By foregrounding Indian mythical material as the structural and thematic resources in his texts, Rao negotiates tradition and modernity and conveys socio-political, nationalistic, cultural, and metaphysical concepts. In his novel, *Kanthapura*, he embeds the story of India's freedom struggle within the structure of the Indian epics, the *sthalapuranas* and oral storytelling techniques. In his biography of Gandhi, likewise, Rao employs the method to describe a political life and ideology, allegorizing Gandhi's life through mythical and historical parallels with the Ram narrative. Ramachandra Guha (2013) also highlights the parallel between Gandhi and Rama in his biography of Gandhi – both travel long distances, spend years in exile, have loyal spouses who are not always well treated, have powerful and charismatic adversaries, and are men of high moral character who have their dark sides (p. 7). The difference, according to Guha, is that the morals the Ramayana sought to establish were "cultural and familial," while the morals in Gandhi's narrative are "more explicitly *social* and *political*" (p. 7, italics mine). Rao's biography of Gandhi fuses the personal and the political, and the biography metonymically identifies Gandhian principles of non-violence with those of Rama.

Historiographical analysis

Historiography, the study of how history is written, examines the ways in which the historian's intellectual, political, social, and cultural

contexts influence what he emphasises, omits, or interprets. Similarly, critics of biography note how in the narrativization of raw facts into a coherent narrative, meaning is mediated through the politico-social-cultural concerns of the author, his milieu, and moment. A historiographical analysis of a biography reveals how historical writing is not merely a record of events, but a constructed narrative shaped by changing perspectives over time. In Rao's biography, the moral imperatives of non-violence and truth serve as the biography's central thematic concerns, and these values are symbolically encoded through the representational motifs of traditional Indian mythology. The biography was published in 1998, when Hindutva nationalism was resurgent in India in the aftermath of political realignments and economic changes. The call for armed masculinity had become strident in reasserting Hindu pride and in wresting Hindu religious and political rights, and Gandhi's ideal of non-violence was disparaged as cowardly and humiliating. On the other end of the political spectrum, the Maoists, who had become politically active in the mid to late-1990s, advocated the violent overthrow of the state and vehemently rejected Gandhian non-violence. The employment of the a myth in Rao's text is doubly effective, written as it was during the rise of right wing nationalism during the mid- and late-nineteen nineties, not only because Gandhi's *ishtadevata* was Rama and his utopia was iterated as a Rama Rajya, but also because Rao's text subverts the aggressive image of Rama as the Hindutva movement's iconic hero.

Hindu nationalism had produced a form of militant masculinity where violence and virility had become virtually synonymous (Alter, 2011, p. 16). The iconography of posters during the agitation for the Ram-temple transformed Rama to reflect the ideals of masculine Hinduism. While traditional artistic impressions of Rama displayed him in the company of Sita, Lakshmana, and Hanuman, smiling in benediction, the posters of the Ram temple agitation depicted him alone and armed, symbolic of a militant crusade (Basu et al. 1993, p. 62). Rao subverts this combative image to make virility synonymous with heroic suffering, though the suffering he highlights is not that of physical endurance and muscular strength as in the West, but that of hardship countenanced with faith and forgiveness. He quotes Gandhi's

view that the highest morality was love, and the "one invariable condition of love [was] the enduring of injuries, insults and violence of all kinds without resisting evil by evil" (Rao, 1998, p. 325). Employing metaphors of struggle and combat, Rao represents Gandhi as a leader who could move masses to heights of courage and self-sacrifice: "The battle of Kurukshetra is ready, brothers, Gandhi-swami the father calls us. Shall we fight?" (Rao, 1998, p. 383). Gandhi is shown as being a "soldier of *satyagraha*," not a weakling who could not fight back (Rao, 1998, p. 303). In this, Gandhi resembles the monomythic hero of Campbell – he undergoes trials in the 'realm of chaos' represented by the imperial oppression of the South African government and emerges with a gift of renewal for his country and community – the boon of *satyagraha*.

Structural-thematic Mapping

The formal parallels between Rao's biography and the Ramayana manifest in the shared narrative structure and the deployment of similar character archetypes. Interestingly, while Rao has followed the mythic method in the corpus of his fiction, the structure of the biography on Gandhi goes further in that it closely approximates the textual arrangement of the *Ramayana*. The chapters in Rao's text approximate the *kandas* in the Ramayana, following the life stages of the protagonist and are narrated by an omniscient narrator. The events unfold linearly, with a marked similarity in content and theme, and with the conclusion showing a manifest parallel in both texts. In the *The Great Indian Way*, Rao focuses only on the early life and South African part of Gandhi's career, and the return to India and the freedom struggle are encapsulated in the single chapter constituting the epilogue. The *Ramayana* too focuses on the childhood of Rama, his growth and the fourteen years of his exile, his triumphant return to Ayodhya, while condensing his 11,000 years as king to the final chapter.

The chapter "Fabled India," where Rao chronicles Gandhi's ancestry and early days, corresponds to the '*Bala Kanda*,' which encompasses the description of Ayodhya, the story of Dasaratha, and Rama's childhood and marriage. Rao (1998) begins by describing Kathiawar and Rajasthan, which are "the home of heraldic bards who sing of their heroes" (p.17), just as Valmiki describes how Kusa

and Lava "shall sing from the beginning all the details for the whole of this story" (*Srimad,* p.23). The elucidation of the Gandhis of Porbandar, their residences, and the noble benignity of their conduct closely approximates the description of Ayodhya and the prosperity of the city: "Kaba Gandhi as the head of the family looked after the well-being of every member of his clan …" (Rao, 1998, p.35) just as "King Dasaratha, the lord of the Ikswakus, fully protects Ayodhya on all sides" (*Srimad*, p.27). Rao describes the city of Kathiawar as "always full of movement. Elephants and camels passed by the streets, horses with Kathaiawari caparisonings …" (Rao, 1998, p. 35). The *Ramayana* paints a similar picture of Ayodhya, which "abounds in horses and elephants, cows, camels, and donkeys" (*Srimad*, p.24). Rao depicts the wedding of Mohandas and Kastuba as the "reflections of Rama and Sita" (Rao, 1998, p. 56). Writing on "The epic of the Bharatas", Romila Thapar describes how an epic looks back at the past: "The nostalgia is for a past age of heroes and the clans to which they belonged." By identifying Gandhi metonymically and metaphorically with Rama, Rao's bardic narrative constructs his life in the pattern of the mythical hero, commencing with the heroic ancestry and heritage.

Like the composite hero of the monomyth, Campbell's "personage of exceptional gifts", Gandhi is also initially unrecognized by society. Gandhi's refusal to bow to the dictates of his community leaders infuriates them to excommunicate him and declare that he had "lost his senses" (Rao, 1998, p. 83). However, his defiant determination to cross the Black Waters demonstrates his moral superiority and the intrepidity that Truth and non-violence necessitated: "So young, yet so strong, never had a Modhi-bania boy behaved with such lack-reverence [sic] to the community as this Mohandas Gandhi" (Rao, 1998, p. 82). Rao identifies Gandhi with mythical exemplars such as Rama and Harishchandra, both of whom he invokes at the crucial meeting with the elders who warn him about the temptations of meat, wine, and women in England: "he insisted his vows would see him through them all. . . there is such a thing as truth. And truth protects. Look at Harishchandra . . . 'Rama, Sri Rama,' he chanted" (Rao, 1998, p. 82). By equating him with Harishchandra, the mythical adherent to Truth, Rao situates Gandhi's devotion to truth within the

archetype of Truth and renunciation. Rao describes how Gandhi refused to copy even as a young student, though egged on to do so by his teacher, even if "the British Empire [were] to fall" (Rao, 1998, p. 45). For him, truth was "more important than any earthly power. After all, Harishchandra did it. Why not Mohandas Gandhi?" (Rao, 1998, p. 45). In Eliade's terms, this enacts the "myth of eternal return" whereby historical figures derive legitimacy and authority through their assimilation into the archetypal pattern so sacred history. Gandhi's refusal to engage in the smallest act of dishonesty, despite institutional pressure, is narrated not only as a moral anecdote, but as the repetition of the primordial gesture of the mythical embodiment of Truth.

The *Ayodhya Kanda* or Rama's exile to his forest for the sake of his father's honour is narrativized in Rao's "England of the Fabians" and "South African Genesis." An analysis of both Gandhi and the supporting characters with regard to the formal structure of the biography presents a parallel to the mythical hero archetype and its counterparts. Stories of exile are an important paradigm in the folk narrative in that they instantiate the garnering of knowledge by the hero through his travels and confrontation with the world. Like the story of Rama or the Buddha, Rao's biography is structured as a mythical text with the three steps Campbell identifies – the hero's call to adventure, his tribulations, and his eventual triumphant return after his South African sojourn to deliver to his people the power of non-violence. The call to adventure is mirrored in the "England of the Fabians," where Gandhi travels to England for the welfare of his family. As his uncle suggests, "Your father…had high hopes for you. We felt you would bring lustre to the family name" (Rao, 1998, p.76). In the latter chapter, he leaves for South Africa, again to aid his brother and carve out his career. The "hero-task" has been conceived and like Rama, Gandhi carries it out for the benefit of his family and society. Both the *Ayodhya kanda* and the two chapters of Rao's biography describe the protagonist's travel from one place to another, the people he encounters, and the acknowledgement he receives from benefactors and followers.

The paradigm of the *Aranya Kanda*, which recounts the forest sojourn of Rama and the kidnapping of Sita, is encoded in the

"Triangle of Facts" and "The Great Indian Way." The *Aranya Kanda* narrates the trials and tribulations of Rama, Lakshmana and Sita from their entry into the Dandaka Forest until they are guided to meet Sugriva and Hanuman in their search for Sita. In the "Aranya Kanda" of the biography, Gandhi's trials include opposition to the Franchise Amendment Bill in Natal, the defense of the traders in Transvaal, and the fight to restore the assaulted self-respect of Indians. In the process, Gandhi attains the spiritual realization that parallels the hero's acquisition of the boon that redeems his people: "non-violence is the path . . . non-violence and service of the poor would change the face of mankind" (Rao, 1998, p. 214). When Kasturba joins Gandhi in South Africa, she is portrayed as Sita following Rama into the jungle: "She preferred to be with her husband. Her husband was Lord … and his home her sanctuary. 'Rama walked in front and Lakshmana behind him wearing with dignity their hermits' dress, and between the two came Sita resplendent as Illusion between the Absolute and Individual Soul'" (Rao, 1998, p. 259). In Eliade's terms, this signals the revelation and reenactment of archetypal truths, thus locating non-violence not merely as a political strategy but as an eternal principle of order.

The *Kishkinda Kanda* – where Rama forges an alliance with Sugriva and Hanuman and sends the latter in search of Sita – finds a parallel in "Towards Rama Raja, the Kingdom of Sri Rama" in the biographical text. Rao's evocation of Rama Rajya in the novel signifies another alliance – an ethical order grounded in Hindu-Muslim unity and non-violence, with Sita functioning symbolically as an embodiment of passive resistance – resolute in her refusal to submit to coercive power, while remaining non-violently steadfast. This ideal is paralleled in Gandhi's political praxis where he mobilizes the Phoenix Indians against the Asiatic Law Ordinance. At the meeting he demonstrates the two instruments of his resistance: *satyagraha* and communal solidarity – as seen in the decision not to cooperate and in the collective vow taken at the Empire Theatre: "We all believe in the same god, the differences of nomenclature in Hinduism and Islam notwithstanding" (Rao, 1998, p. 274). The thematic resonance of companionship, alliance, and the commencement of the search for Sita articulated in the *Kishkinda Kanda* is reconfigured in Rao's depiction of alliances and the initial steps towards *satyagraha*.

The *Sundara Kanda* and *Yuddha Kanda*, the story of Hanuman and the fight with Ravana, are encoded in "The Mountain and the Stream" and "The Processional." In these we find the descriptive eulogies of Gandhi's associates, and his final battle and victory in South Africa. Rao characterizes "the dog-collar tax and the marriage laws" of South Africa as "Kaikeyi's demands on Dasaratha" (Rao, 1998, p. 406). Just as Dasaratha kept the promise he made to his wife, the "Viceroy had kept his word to Smuts" (406). Similarly, there is a comparison between Bharata and Gandhi's follower, Polak: As "Bharata ruled in the name of Sri Rama the city of Ayodhya, the sandals of his elder brother on the throne …Like Bharata, I tell you, was another White, and Polak was his name. And he looked after us when Bapu was no more amidst us" (Rao, 1998, p. 406). "The Processional" which culminates with the return of Gandhi to India through the images of Rama's return to Ayodhya with Sita and Hanuman, celebrates the eventual victory of the Gandhian way. In the march towards Charlestown, the great mass of Gandhi's followers resembles the Vanara army and the fear it inspired:

> And people said, and hilltop after hilltop there liked roving animals – bison, nilgai, panther, porcupine, elk, monkey, the great tiger himself – army after army which the forest fire has driven towards the river – men behind men and women, bundles and babies on their heads and shoulders and children between them . . . Yes, Bapu, we'll walk behind you. And take us where you will, and you'll free Sita Devi who now sits in Volksrust prison, and we'll come back all of us to Ayodhya, and you will fly with Hanuman behind you, in a chariot of all noble flowers (Rao, 1998, p. 405).

The description is reminiscent of Valmiki's description of the strength of Rama's army and the commotion created by it: "…terrifying the birds, dispiriting the deer and elephants and shaking the aforesaid Lanka with their roars, (nay) trampling down the earth with their great impetuosity" (*Srimad,* p.1498).

Positioning Gandhi as a figure of mythic timelessness serves Rao's ideological purpose in reiterating the theme of non-violence and peace. For example, Rao refers to Bihar when narrating the story of the Bodhisattva as "the same Bihar that almost twenty-four

centuries later the Mahatma came to talk of love to the indigo workers" (Rao, 1998, p. 438). Campbell (1990) refers specifically to the Buddha legend as a "majestic representation of the hero-task, and of its sublime import when it is profoundly conceived and solemnly undertaken" (p. 29). The exploitative practices of the British, which compelled the labour of the impoverished indigo workers exemplify what Campbell characterizes as the "uncontrolled impulses to acquisition" embodied in the figure of the "tyrant monster" (Campbell, 1990, p. 15). The hero, the 'man of self-achieved submission' that redeems society, is the Bodhisattva-like Gandhi, who "vowed that he would not rise till the Truth was found…" (Rao, 1998, p. 15). Gandhi's truth, as the narrative states, is to prepare to be "soldiers of satyagraha" (Rao, 1998, p. 303). In the evocation of Bihar, the narrative situates the locus of Gandhi's activism within what Eliade (1963) terms 'sacred geography', drawing an implicit parallel to Bodhisattva's enlightenment in the same place; thus, historical action is reconfigured as a re-enactment of archetypal patterns and the recurrence of the *illud tempus*, a Latin phrase used by Eliade to denote "that time" which is sacred and timeless.

The *Uttara Kanda*, the story of the banishment of Sita, and Rama's final departure from the world, is paralleled by the 'Epilogue', where the entire Indian sojourn of Gandhi is encapsulated, the focus being on the communal strife and the assassination of Gandhi. Though he writes half a century after Gandhi's demise, Rao concludes the tale at the historical moment of Gandhi's return to India from South Africa and does not follow Gandhi's life into the Indian Freedom Movement where the greater part of his political practice lay. In this, Rao appropriates the structure of the Ramayana, which devotes the bulk of the narrative to the period of growth, exile, and return, and compresses the years of Rama's reign and the banishment of Sita to the epilogue. The hero's return is marked not only by his triumph in glorious rule: "He would for that year be the voice of India … It was his voice that made India" (Rao, 1998, p. 439), but also the eventual loss of Sita, who functions as the metaphor for truth and non-violence in Rao's biography. A vital rationale for the focus only on the early South African years of Gandhi's career could be that Rao could

underscore the success of Gandhism, whereas the non-violent struggle in India was tainted by the kind of failure that Rao highlights – the folly and futility of communal violence.

Conclusion

Thus, Rao's life story of Gandhi is structured as a saga of epic proportions – closely paralleling the *Ramayana* not only thematically and metaphorically, but also in the detailing of the structural framework. The paratextual apparatus of the co-opted myth reconfigures Gandhi within the construct of divinity and locates the socio-political reformulations of Gandhi within an acceptable tradition. Rao mobilizes the cultural idiom of the *Ramayana* for two distinct purposes: first, to counter the ideological appropriation of the Rama narrative by the Hindutva movement, and second, to reframe it as an allegorical conflict between the ethical ideal of non-violence and the destructive forces of tyranny and militarized struggle. Gandhi's message of non-violence is foregrounded by focusing only on the South African triumph of the method and abbreviating the Indian epoch to a final chapter. Eliade (1963) observes how 'myth' means 'true story' in archaic societies and serves as a sacred exemplar, supplying "models for human behaviour" and "giving meaning and value to life" (p. 1-2). He also distinguishes between two categories of myth – those centered on supernatural or divine beings and those concerned with national heroes. Rao conflates the two modes by symbolically identifying the non-violent Gandhi with Rama – and, thus, forges a counter-response to the Hindutva movement. In place of a militant nationalism where Rama became a heroic crusader, Rao inverts the symbolism and constructs the non-violent Gandhi as the mythic-archetypal dharmic hero. During the phase when liberalism and tolerance were deemed cowardice, Rao's mythicizing of Gandhi's biography demonstrates that *The Great Indian Way* is the way charted by the Rama-figure of the novel – Mahatma Gandhi.

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