



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**MYTHOLOGICAL MUSINGS IN YOGI VEMANA'S VERSES: ETHICAL INSIGHTS FROM INDIAN SCRIPTURES**

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*(Asst. Prof. of English, Govt. Degree College for Women, Karimnagar.)*Email: meenakshielt@gmail.com<https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2023.10407>**ABSTRACT****Article history:**

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Yogi Vemana, a distinguished poet-philosopher in Telugu literature from the Middle Ages, skillfully weaves the rich tapestry of characters from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata to convey timeless societal, moral, and spiritual messages. His verses reflect the dichotomy between virtue and vice, using examples from legendary personalities like Rama and Duryodhana, highlighting the consequences of one's actions. Through his contemplations, Vemana questions, analyzes, and philosophizes on the complexities of fate, individual choices, and the influence of destiny, as depicted in the lives of characters such as Rama, Dasaratha, Ravana, and various figures from the Mahabharata. Vemana explores a diverse array of characters, such as Parasurama, Karna, Draupadi, and King Nala, revealing the repercussions of their deeds. He lauds acts of charity, sacrifices for others, and truthfulness while condemning vices like greed, lust, and lies, portrayed through characters like Karna, Sibi, Harishchandra, Duryodhana, and Keechaka. He challenges societal norms and prejudices, questioning caste discrimination by exalting individuals not based on their caste but on their virtues. While rooted in mythological narratives, the poet's verses serve as a moral compass, guiding readers toward introspection, moral rectitude, and spiritual growth.

Keywords: *Mahabharata, Mythological Characters, Ramayana, Scriptures, Telugu Literature, Yogi Vemana*

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Vemana, a revered poet-philosopher in Telugu literature from the Middle Ages, exhibited a profound artistic skill in intertwining mythological figures, divine beings, and sacred narratives within his poetry to convey profound moral, societal, and spiritual messages. Vemana's brilliance emerges from his masterful weaving of mythological characters, gods, and stories into his verses. He notably draws from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, both cherished texts embedded in the cultural and spiritual ethos of the Indian subcontinent. Through his work, Vemana skillfully imparts insights, interpretations, and life lessons drawn from these revered scriptures to resonate with the common folk. He effortlessly infuses his verses with reflections on human nature, fate, morality, and the consequences of one's actions as portrayed through these legendary personalities. Vemana explains how the virtuous glorify their race, whereas the vice ruins their race with the examples of the righteous Rama of Ramayana and the sinful Duryodhana of Mahabharata.

Rama glorified the Solar line;
The Kaurava king ruined his race;
So on earth are virtue and sin;
Listen, Vema the beloved one. **(Rangacharya 16)**

Vemana skillfully explores the character of Valmiki, who is known as adi kavi (first poet) in Sanskrit, as he is the author of Ramayana, the first epic in Sanskrit. Vemana condemns the caste system based on birth and asserts the greatness of virtue over caste with the example of the transformation of the decoit Ratnakara into a great poet, Valmiki, due to his penance.

By Repeating the name of Rama, Valmiki the sinner

Became wise as Brahmin, though a hunter;
It is not caste that brings greatness,
But one's own quality in all trueness. ?
(Murty 114)

Vemana reflects on Dasaratha's decisions and the resultant outcomes. He philosophizes on the complexities of fate, highlighting that individual acts and intentions often fall prey to the sway of destiny, irrespective of one's stature or position. Vemana talks about Dasaratha's act of killing Sravana Kumara, a Brahmin boy, assuming he was a wild elephant, which resulted in the separation of Dasaratha from his son Rama due to the curse of Sravana Kumara's parents. He also asserts the predominance of fate with the example of Rama leaving for forests instead of being coronated as the king. "When Dasaratha thought to crown his son Rama king of earth being deluded he bound his head with merely matted hair. Thus intentions avail nothing. For fate rules all." **(Brown, 1993, verse 914)**. Vemana opines that the men with meanness will perish with their acts. He explains it with the examples of Rama's father, Dasaratha and Lanka's ruler Ravana. "Through the words of his wife Kaika, the king (Dasaradha) perished. For the sake of a woman (Seeta) the name of Dasasya (Ravana) was humbled. Surely every mean act, whoever he be shall follow him." **(Brown, 1993, verse 959)**

The poet philosophically says that even the weak can destroy the most powerful man when one's time is not good. To assert this, he gives the example of the destruction of Lanka, the golden city of Ravana, in the hands of the monkey army of Rama.



Ravana's rich capital town
Was ransacked by a band of apes;
When the time is bad, even petty men
Can cause ruin;
Listen Vema the beloved one. **(Rangacharya 75)**

Hindu religious traditions regard sages as being on par with Gods. To state that the power of the sages' curse is equal to the wrath of Lord Shiva, Vemana gives the example of sage Gautama's curse to Indra, the ruler of heaven, for his lust. "The curse of Gauthama is terrible as the wrath of Siva, the poison throated. It made Indra king of Gods, as a debased. The reproach of Gauthama the muni, was an infallible magic arrow (Sanskrit)." **(Brown, 1993, verse 983).**

Vemana explains that anger and enmity result in pain, using the example of sage Vishwamitra. Trisanku, an Ikshwaku king's intention to go to heaven with his own body while living, was denied by sage Vashishta. Sage Vishwamitra developed enmity with Sage Vashishta, and due to this anger, he built a new heaven with the power of his penance for Trisanku. However, finally, he has to lose all the power of his penance. "Gadheyudu (Viswamitra, son of Gadhi) formed a world in imitation of that formed by Brahma and unable to know the truth gained (he gained only his pain). Doth the angry man know himself?" **(Brown, 1993, verse 1021)**

Moreover, Vemana sheds light on the outcomes of various character choices. For instance, Kaika's obstruction of Rama's coronation, Sita's role in Lanka, and even Draupadi's impact on the fall of

the Kauravas illustrate the profound influence of individual actions in shaping destinies.

Kaika has obstructed the coronation of Rama
Sita has successfully ruined Lanka.
Even Draupadi destroyed Kauravas.
Viswadabhirama Vinura Vema.

Kaika putti cherichega Ramu pattambu
Sita putti Lanka cheriche gade?
Kauravulanu cheriche gadaa Draupadiyu
gooda
Viswadabhirama Vinura Vema. **(my trans; Subrahmanyam 92; poem 361)**

Vemana's exploration extends to Panduraju, Dharmaraju, Arjuna, Karna, Duryodhana, Keechaka, Nala, Sibi, and Harishchandra from the Mahabharata, illuminating the consequences of their deeds and further emphasizing the inescapable grasp of fate upon even the most righteous and honourable. He recounts tales from the Mahabharata, portraying the consequences of their actions, often shaped by the hands of destiny. King Pandu, the father of five Pandavas, once killed the sage couple playing in the form of deer in a forest. The sage cursed Panduraju due to his cruel act that he would meet death if he enjoyed sexual pleasures with his wives. Later, King Pandu dies due to this curse. Based on this story of Mahabharata, Vemana talks about Panduraju's fate. "Panduraju, king of earth, slew the couple of animals (deers) through ignorance. Thereby how long did he live in the world, and what did he (eat) enjoy?" **(Brown, 1193, poem 932)**

Vemana deeply contemplates the relationship between human intent, actions, and the



inevitability of destiny, often exemplified through instances from the epics. He reflects on instances where noble intentions might lead to unforeseen and unfavourable outcomes due to the influence of fate. Vemana uses the stories of Dharmaraju, Nala, Harischandra, and many others to underline this aspect of destiny and the consequences of deeds. He opines that Dharmaraju (Yudhishtira), the eldest of the Pandavas, conquered his miseries with goodness and perseverance. He also states that everyone has to face his fate with the illustration of Dharmaraju's services in the court of King Virata as Kankubhattu. Vemana also questions Dharmaraju's lie about the death of Ashwattama, which led to the death of Ashwattama's father, Dronacharya, the guru of both Kauravas and Pandavas.

No one can avoid fate;

God, alas! Made Dharmaraju

Kankubhat in an alien place;

Listen Vema the beloved one. **(Rangacharya 74)**

Vemana gives the example of Arjuna, the middle one of the five Pandavas of Mahabharata, to explain how one loses one's position when one leaves one's place due to the defeat of Pandavas in the Dice game (gambling) with their cousins Kauravas. As per the norms of the game, the five Pandava brothers and their wife, Draupadi, stayed in the forest for 12 years and remained incognito for one year in the court of King Virata with pseudo names. Arjuna, a great warrior, assumed the name Brihannala and served as a dance master to King Virata's daughter, Uttara, who later became his daughter-in-law.

Those who have lost ground

Should pass their time unconcerned;

Having lost his place didn't Arjuna

Serve in King Virata's court;

Listen Vema the beloved one. **(Rangacharya 73)**

Vemana's work does not merely recount stories; it dives deeper into profound reflections on morality, virtue, sacrifice, and societal values. His narratives underscore the significance of sacrifice, charity, truth, and the impact of one's choices on life's journey. He praises Karna to emphasize the importance of charity. Karna is the eldest son of Kunthi and the dear friend of Duryodhana and is well known for charity in the epic Mahabharata. He says that there is no nobler man on the earth than Karna. In this world, nobody recognizes a man who does not do any good to others. "Carnudu was noble; Who in the world is greater? He meditated bestowing gifts; no man knows of the excellence of him who doth no good to others." **(Brown, 1993, verse 676)**. The story of Duryodhana explains the result of wickedness. Duryodhana's greed is responsible for the great war of Mahabharata among the cousins Kauravas and Pandavas. "What king is mightier than (Duryodhana) Dhartarashtra? He and all the rest are dead. All the wicked shall surely suffer a violent death". **(Brown, 1993, verse 930)**

Vemana condemns the atrocities on women, citing the examples from mythological stories, and says such men will face dire consequences. He talks about Simhabala (Keechaka), who dies in the hands of Bhima because of lusting after Pandava's wife Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* and Ravana, who is



defeated by monkeys when he abducts Lord Rama's wife Sita in the *Ramayana*:

What can one say about the death of Simhabala

Who dragged Draupadi by her hair.

As his doom approached, he became wicked.

Viswadabhirama Vinura Vema.

Kori Drupada putri koppu – batteedchina

Simhabaluni chaavu jeppa darame.

Mugiyu kaalamunaku monagaadu neelgada!

Viswadabhirama Vinura Vema. **(my trans; Sastry 1505)**

Vemana describes the destructive results of poverty with the story of King Nala, who lost his kingdom and left for the forest with his wife, Damayanthi. There, they suffered without food, and Nala even lost his garment while trying to catch a bird with it. In Mahabharata, King Nala's story was told to Dharmaraju to console him when he lost his kingdom and stayed in the forest with his wife and brothers. "If poor in wealth a man retains not resolution. By poverty king Nala lost his home, gave his garment to a bird and was ruined." **(Brown, 1993, verse 957).**

Vemana asserts that one who shows charity and sacrifices oneself for others will gain eternal fame, as King Sibi did. King Sibi's story is present in Mahabharata and Buddha Jataka Tales. He is known for his charity. When god Indra, in the form of an eagle and god Agni, in the form of a dove, tested Sibi's charity, Sibi proved himself truthful and generous by offering flesh from his own body to the eagle to protect the dove.

King Sibi offered his flesh mortal

To save a dove and attained fame immortal;

Remembered are the men of sacrifice forever,

The evil doers are thought of never. **(Murty 132)**

Vemana glorifies truth and condemns liars.

He says that truth is the jewel that the kings should wear. He explains the greatness of truth with the story of Harischandra, who sells his wife Chandramathi and son Rohitashwa in the streets of Kasi for keeping his word to sage Viswamitra. Harischandra also sells himself as a servant to a guard in the burial ground. The story of Harischandra is present in many scriptures, such as Mahabharata, Devi Bhagavatham, Markandeya Purana, and the Aithareya Brahmana of Rigveda. Harischandra belongs to the Ikshwaku dynasty and is an ancestor of Sri Rama of Ramayana.

He became uncultured by selling his wife

For the sake of one promise he has given

He became the guard of the burial ground

However, he is the most excellent guru on the earth, Vema!

Aalinammi bhuvini nachara heenudai

pralu malenokka prathina koraku

aadi tappakunda kadu kachina vadu

vade parama gurudu vasudha Vema! **(my trans; Subrahmanyam 394)**

Vemana does not limit his poetic exploration to the eminent heroes of these epics but extends his contemplation to revered sages, bringing to light their influence and emphasizing their worth and significance. Vemana addresses issues such as caste



discrimination, shedding light on societal perceptions and prejudices while advocating equality and inclusivity. Vemana proclaims that most sages were not born in the Brahmin caste but became dearer to God. Today, the Brahmin caste people relate themselves to the *gotras* (tribes) of these great sages. "Born in the *rishi* tribe, thereafter they are exalted in the *gotra* (tribe). They are not descended from Brahma, how then should they be *Brahmins*?" (Brown, 1993, verse 1036). Vemana composed poems on various rishis like Narada, Vyasa, Vashishta, Arundhathi, Parasara and Sukha. Narada, a great devotee of Vishnu, was born to a washerwoman, and Veda Vyasa, revered as the divider of the Vedas, was born to a fisherwoman. Still, they are great sages due to their virtues.

Vashishta, one of the seven sages of Hindu mythology, married Arundhathi, a girl of the *madiga* caste (a shoemaking community). Her caste used to be considered an untouchable caste. Even today, in Hindu marriages, the priest is customary to ask the newly married couple to see the star Arundhathi, which is present by the side of star Vashishta in the *Saptharshi mandala* seven-star constellation. Arundhathi is known for her chastity and is given equal status with the seven sages. Vemana condemns caste discrimination with the examples of sage Vashishta and Arundhathi.

They say madiga is a low one

Isn't madiga the father-in-law of the Brahmins?

Our Arundhathi is the daughter of a madiga.

Viswadabhirama Vinura Vema.

Maadiga yanagane mari thakkuvanduru

Maadiga yila surula maama gaade!

Maadigakunu bidda mana yarundhathi gada!

(Vinodini 53)

Viswadabhirama Vinura Vema. (my trans; Vinodini 53)

Sukha Maharshi is the narrator of the epic Bhagavatham to King Parikshith. He is the son of Veda Vyasa and the grandson of Sage Parasara. He is known for his extreme purity and asceticism. He has the face of a parrot as he was born to an *apsaras* (celestial nymph), Ghritachi, when she took the form of a parrot.

Though Sri Sukha was born to a parrot

He became prominent among the sages

. Doesn't cotton turn into colourful clothes?

Viswadabhirama Vinura Vema.

Chiluka garbhamandu Sreesukhundudayinchi

Munivarenyulandu mukhyudayye;

Pratthi kaaya, chitrapatamulu puttavaa?

Viswadabhirama Vinura Vema. (my trans; Rajeshwara Rao 343)

Vemana's verses on Boya Kannappa serve as a parable, guiding readers toward more profound reflections on devotion, wisdom, and the consequences of one's belief system. Kannappa is known for his unwavering devotion to Lord Shiva. He was a hunter and offered his own eyes to the idol of Shiva at the temple of Sri Kalahasti. He finally reached Kailasa, the abode of Lord Shiva. He is one of the 63 Nayanars (Shaiva saints), and his story is present in the Tamil book *Periya Purana*. Though Kannappa is known for his devotion, Vemana opines that wisdom led Kannappa to emerge as a great saint. "Through worshipping the three-eyed in ignorant



faith, in former time, Boya Kannappa became a sage. Did this happen through his worship? Wisdom was the cause." **(Brown, 1993, verse 1196).**

Vemana's unique approach to exploring mythological characters and scriptures in his poetry is a testament to his depth of insight, moral teachings, and spiritual contemplations, rendering his work timeless and relevant across generations. His verses serve as a beacon, guiding individuals toward introspection, moral rectitude, and spiritual growth. Vemana's portrayal of the mythological characters and sacred scriptures is not mere storytelling; instead, it serves as a vessel to impart profound wisdom and ethical guidance to his readers, emphasizing the enduring impact of one's deeds, the inevitable role of destiny, and the importance of self-realization in the journey of life. Vemana's poetry scrutinizes the essence of purity, wisdom, charity, truth, and the core values that navigate one's actions, often portraying self-awareness and knowledge of one's true self as the path to understanding the divine. He magnifies the essence of wisdom, devotion, and the innate quality of truth over superficial appearances. Vemana's exploration of these mythological characters and scriptures transcends mere storytelling, offering a timeless repository of wisdom, ethical guidance, and a pathway toward self-realization and understanding the divine.

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