



COMPARATIVE LITERATURE 156

inside the classroom

A GLIMPSE OF A DAY IN THE CLASSROOM THROUGH THE EYES OF A STUDENT

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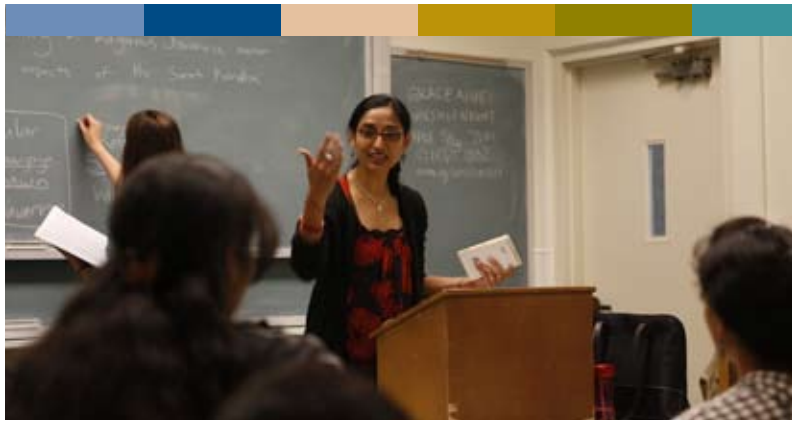
In mid-morning on a sunny Wednesday in March, students trickle into a small classroom in Hoagland Hall. They shift the desks into a circle in the middle of the room, as if routinely, and proceed to settle into their desks. Meanwhile, Archana Venkatesan, associate professor of comparative literature who also teaches in the religious studies department, sets up her desk at the head of the circle and chats with some of the students before calling the class to order at 10:00 a.m. This is Comparative Literature 156 with a focus on the ancient Hindu epic poem the *Ramayana* and understanding its contemporary relevance.

The class begins with Venkatesan passing around twenty comic book covers depicting different characters and conflicts which appear in the *Ramayana* text. She explains that these covers represent modern day artistic interpretations of the *Ramayana* story, which was originally written between the 5th and 4th centuries BCE and did not contain pictures. Venkatesan brings a different interpretive form of the *Ramayana* to each class meeting, including puppets, films and more. She introduces alternative images of the poem “to demonstrate the relevance of the *Ramayana* in day-to-day life, to get the students to touch, feel and interact with

this story on multiple levels. These material objects for students can hold, touch, examine is really important—it engages them in a way that just seeing an image up on a screen via power point can simply not convey.”

The *Ramayana* has been told and interpreted countless times over the centuries, and artists of both Indian and non-Indian backgrounds continue to create pieces based on their imagining of the great Indian epic. The class then collectively sums up the story of the *Ramayana* in only a few sentences per student, which assists them in understanding the over, 600-page text.

A discussion ensues about the assigned reading and topics posted by the students on a discussion board. Keeping up with assigned readings is a must, as failing to complete one section of reading can leave a student in the literary dust as the class races towards finishing the text. The story of the *Ramayana* is a complex and ancient book, however it is hardly outdated. Although the story is about a banished king named Rama and his convoluted quest to escape the forest and return to his homeland to reclaim his rightful place on the throne, its core messages and issues are still relevant. The seven chapters of the



book document Rama's life from birth until his conflict with his enemy king, Ravana, and finally his death. Rama is the upholder of Dharma, or duty and proper conduct, and strives to act virtuously throughout the text. The *Ramayana* epic also discusses issues of chastity, women's roles, the meaning of a good person and other controversial topics.

The centuries-old text is an important one to study due to the many messages it conveys and the ease of its application to modern issues. It has been used in political discussions around the world because of its many interpretations and understandings. Western and Eastern interpretations of the epic poem are often confrontational, bringing up discussions about freedom of education, the press and other old-world standards which are being challenged in the current age. Yet the *Ramayana* is loved by millions of people around the world.

Venkatesan believes the text appeals to students for several reasons, "Some may find that it is powerful because it is an affecting, powerful and ultimately tragic love story. For still others, it is about trying to understand what it means to be an exemplar, to seek perfection and to fall short of the lofty standard. The story addresses issues of gender, class, caste, fate, destiny, free will. It is on the one hand daunting for students because it seems initially so unfamiliar and strange, but like all great stories it

also appeals more universally."

Most of the students who take the course do so out of pure interest and come from a diverse range of majors since it is not a required course for the comparative literature major. The class is a great way for students to escape the piles of textbooks they may have for other courses and to instead dive into a thrilling, thought provoking book and discuss its significance with peers.

Venkatesan is working on a translation of the fifth chapter of the Tamil version of the *Ramayana* text and has an interest in the intersection of literature and performance. "I think the text makes students feel alive and not think that literature is something moldering and far-away, but is alive and it has a relevance to your life day to day. Not only does it have a didactic function, but texts are continually being remade and are continuing to be powerful. It is our job to understand why these texts continue to be relevant because only so few are."

As the discussion of the text in relationship to the comic book visuals winds down, the class period ends. Students resituate their desks, and leave the classroom pondering the *Ramayana* epic, bringing it to life in visual form and ready to dive deeper into the text for next class.