The Use of Repetition as a Rhetorical Device in Ancient Religious Texts

Most works of literature die out over time, but ancient religious texts associated with the major religions of the world continue to provide moral and spiritual guidance to billions of people around the world. Works such as the Bible, the Qur’an and the Bhagavad Gita have inspired philosophical elites and illiterates alike, and have even helped shape the political map of the world. It would have been difficult for these ancient religious texts to command longstanding influence without powerful rhetoric that would convince the audience to remember the teachings and pass them down to younger generations. One rhetorical device that has greatly facilitated the proliferation of these religious texts is repetition. Studying the Bhagavad Gita’s use of repetition as a rhetorical device can help us understand how ancient religious texts have been successful in spreading their didactic messages to the masses.

To understand the significance of poetic repetition as a rhetorical device in ancient religious texts, it is important to first understand the historical and culture setting of these texts. The Bhagavad Gita, considered one of the most important texts of Hindu spiritual guidance, is a seven-hundred-verse poem that was added to the sacred anthology of the “Mahabharata” around first century C.E. (Bedford 1:1488). It addresses the conflict between moral responsibilities and caste duties that became increasingly prominent with the emergence of city-states at the turn of the millennium (1488). The Bhagavad Gita was meant as a spiritual guide for people of all walks of life, yet there was one major obstacle between the text and its universal audience: during the first century C.E., only a select few worldwide could read and write. With widespread illiteracy in the populace, the only way the Gita could reach the masses...
was through oral delivery. With successful oral delivery of paramount importance, it is easy to understand why the Bhagavad Gita and other ancient religious texts exhibit strong oral rhetorical techniques. For instance, English translator Stephen Mitchell notes that the Gita uses a loose three-beat line as its rhythm (Beliefnet). The text also addresses abstract philosophical dilemmas as a physical conversation between warrior Arjuna and Lord Krishna upon a battlefield.

Mahatma Gandhi, who was deeply influenced by the teachings of The Bhagavad Gita, explains the use of this dialectic: “with the image of the physical battlefield, Gita makes the ongoing spiritual battle of life clear to us” (Painadath 306). Perhaps even more interesting, however, is the Gita’s methodical and sometimes subtle use of repetition to help in both the oral delivery and understanding of the teachings.

Some repetitions in the Gita help audiences of different backgrounds to understand the teachings. Other repetitions in the text convey and reinforce important teachings that might otherwise be missed during oral delivery. Still other poetic repetitions make the text more coherent by linking sections together. Finally, the Gita uses subtle mnemonic repetitions that make it easier to memorize the religious text and spread it further. Careful study of each of these forms of repetitions in the Gita as rhetorical devices can help us understand how ancient religious texts spread their didactic message so effectively.

One way that the Bhagavad Gita uses repetition as a rhetorical device is by reiterating the same teaching in multiple ways in order to cater to different audiences. Recognizing that philosophers and “men of discipline” understand issues differently, the Gita conveys its basic teachings for the two audiences separately. The Gita even addresses this repetition explicitly: when Arjuna finds paradox between the two types of teachings, Lord Krishna opens the third chapter by explaining his use of repetition:
Earlier I taught the twofold
basis of good in this world –
for philosophers, disciplined knowledge;
for men of discipline, action.

(Gita 3.3)

Lord Krishna comforts Arjuna that discipline in both philosophy and action are important, but individuals who perform their personal dharma (duty) – whether it is philosophical or action-oriented - in effect sustain the laws of the world (Feuerstein 155). By separately addressing each of the two audiences, the Gita uses repetition to deliver its didactic message to a wider spectrum of the audience. The use of such repetition is not restricted to the Gita. In Macbeth, Shakespeare uses repetition to oblige both the sophisticated and the illiterate of his audience when he follows the line “the multitudinous seas incarnadine” with its plain-English equivalent “the green one red” (Watson 613-629). Using repetitions to address multiple audiences clearly shows that the Bhagavad Gita actively sought to deliver its message to people of all walks of life.

The Bhagavad Gita makes further use of repetition as a rhetorical device by consistently reiterating keywords that make up essential teachings. The consistent reiteration of important keywords ensures that the Gita’s audience will not miss essential teachings during oral delivery, and will remember those teachings for a long time. For instance, Lord Krishna in the third chapter of the Gita explains to Arjuna the importance of “Discipline of Action” (Bedford 1:1505). Having explained in depth as to why it is importance to perform one’s duties without worldly attachment, Lord Krishna summarizes his teaching in one stanza with poetic repetition of “perform,” “action” and “detachment” – the three keywords in this chapter:

Always perform with detachment
any action you must do;
performing action with detachment,
one achieves supreme good.

(Gita 3.19)

The first pair of lines uses the words “perform”, “action,” and “detachment” in a didactic teaching. The second pair of lines immediately repeats the same keywords to explain why people should follow this didactic teaching. The three keywords appear repeatedly throughout the third chapter. Other ancient religious texts use this technique of repetition as well. The Qur’an teaches its audience to put their faith in God and help those less fortunate by recounting God’s blessings to Prophet Muhammad:

You shall be gratified with what your Lord will give you.
Did He not find you an orphan and give you shelter?
Did He not find you in error and guide you?
Did He not find you poor and enrich you?
Therefore do not wrong the orphan,
nor chide away the beggar. But proclaim the goodness of your Lord.

(Koran 93:5-11)

Consistent reiteration such as that in the Qur’an and the Bhagavad Gita ensures that the large majority of the audience, which is listening rather than reading the text, is able to locate the essential teachings and remember them.

The Bhagavad Gita employs a more sophisticated form of repetition when it segues between sections and target audience by rephrasing teachings in a different manner. In the second chapter of the Gita, Lord Krishna likens the cycle of life to a man who “discards worn-
out clothes to put on new and different ones” (Gita 2:22). He continues the use of physical analogies to describe the all-pervasiveness of the soul as well:

- Weapons do not cut it,
- Fire does not burn it,
- Waters do not wet it,
- Wind does not wither it.

(Gita 2:23)

Up to this point, Lord Krishna has used physical analogies to describe the immutable soul. He then continues:

- It cannot be cut or burned;
- It cannot be wet or withered;
- It is enduring, all-pervasive,
- Fixed, immovable, and timeless.

(Gita 2:24)

It is noteworthy that the first four properties of stanza 24 summarize the analogous properties of the soul described in the previous stanza. The remaining properties in stanza 24 follow the same rhythm, but switch from analogous to philosophical properties of the soul. In effect, the Gita smoothly transitions its attention from the action-oriented audience to the philosophical audience through artistic repetition of ideas. Such seamless transition is an effective rhetorical strategy that helps capture the interest of a broad spectrum of the audience, which is important for any religious text.

The use of repetition as a rhetorical device is itself an art. Over-use of repetition comes across as wearisome to the audience. Too subtle a use of repetition, on the other hand, fails to underscore important parts of the text. The Gita strikes the balance by blending repetition
into the traditional elements of poetry. Rhymes and rhythm are two byproducts of repetition found in the Bhagavad Gita. Teaching Arjuna about the importance of sacrificial duty, Lord Krishna says:

   Action imprisons the world
   unless it is done as sacrifice;
   freed from attachment, Arjuna,
   perform action as sacrifice!

   (Gita 3.9)

In the original Sanskrit text, this stanza consists of a rhyming couplet with both internal and end-of-line rhyme (Chapple 166). Gita translator Barbara Miller carefully translated the stanza to place the word “sacrifice” at the end of second and fourth lines to create an abcd rhyme scheme. Although the abcd rhyme scheme is different from the double-rhyme couplet of the original Sanskrit, it serves the same function of making the text more poetic and easier to remember.

   It has been around two thousand years since the Bhagavad Gita’s addition to the Mahabharata. Yet it was only fifty years ago that Mahatma Gandhi sought its spiritual guidance as he led his movement for India’s independence. The reason this didactic work has such a strong following is partly due to its powerful rhetoric. The Gita’s rhetoric, especially its skillful use of repetitions, makes it an appealing text whose teachings are memorized and followed by people of all walks of life, and passed down to successive generations. Given its didactic nature and power of rhetoric, the Gita is a prime example of ancient religious works that have touched countless lives across time.
Work Cited


