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Validating Demons

Recasting Rāvaṇa as a Leader of the Oppressed in Mani Ratnam's Film Version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

Abstract

This article focuses on Mani Ratnam's adaptation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and analyzes the ways in which the film rewrites the epic. The movie criticizes the traditional notion of a sharp opposition between the hero and the villain: Rāma is questioned and Rāvaṇa validated. A contemporary setting is used to comment on ongoing conflicts between the police and oppressed communities. The struggle in remote and poor areas encourages the celebration of the outlaw in the form of a present-day Rāvaṇa. Gender and sexuality also play an important role in the transformation of the demonic other into a more sympathetic character. The vilification and resistance to the demonization of Rāvaṇa are part of a longer history in India's literary culture which is explored and contrasted with the movie in this contribution.

Keywords

Rāmāyaṇa Adaptation, Mani Ratnam, Raavan, Raavanan

Biography

Genoveva Castro received her PhD from the Department of Asian Languages and Literature at the University of Washington, USA. Her research focuses on literary exchanges between Hindus and Muslims and adaptations in South Asian drama. She teaches at Southern Connecticut State University.

Introduction

This article examines Mani Ratnam's reading of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Raavan (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010). As Robert Stam points out, a film adaptation amplifies, ignores, subverts, critiques, and transforms its literary source.[1] In

1 Stam 2000, 69.

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this instance, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is not a source in the singular, but rather an intricate and long tradition that includes literature, performance, and film. Sheldon Pollock claims that the *Rāmāyaṇa* "with its demonizing imaginary provides, as does no other Indian text, a conceptual instrument for the utter dichotomization of the enemy."[2] This article focuses on Raavan (2010) because the film, instead of vilifying the antagonist, transforms the *Rāmāyaṇa* into a morally ambiguous narrative in which the dichotomy between good and evil is overturned. The motives of the villain are validated, the virtues of the hero are understated, and there is criticism of those who are empowered by the state as well as sympathy for the traditional enemy.

In his theory of adaptation, Stam also emphasizes that although the source is central, the context in which the adaptation is made also plays an important role and reveals ideological trends.[3] Ratnam transposes the battle between gods and demons to highlight a contemporary conflict between the police and oppressed forest villagers, thus making a critical statement about modern-day India. Although the movie seems to be realizing a radical reading of the epic, role reversals are not absent in the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. I will provide a summary of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, consider interpretations of the battle between Rāvaṇa and Rāma, and then move to screen adaptations of the story. The analysis will focus on specific scenes in Mani Ratnam's film, contrasting it with distinct renderings of Rāvaṇa in literature.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* Story

The textual richness of the *Rāmāyaṇa* attests to the cultural significance of the narrative.[4] It is important to acknowledge how the literary renderings are reimagined in text and on screen and inserted in a manifold history of adaptation. The story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been revisited by filmmakers for over a hundred years. The "demon" Rāvaṇa has not been fully reinvented by Indian cinema, but rather is nourished by literary traditions that are worth exploring in order to understand how the character has been represented.

On the textual front, the retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are vast and have evolved in multiple directions. In a nutshell, the narrative is frequently

2 Pollock 1993, 281.

3 Stam 2005, 45.

4 See Richman 1991; 2000; 2008.

centered on Prince Rāma who, endowed with all the necessary qualities, is about to be crowned king of Ayodhya in North India by his father. Nevertheless, as a result of the intrigues of his stepmother, he must go into exile in the forest, accompanied by his brother Lakṣmaṇa and his wife, Sītā. Rāvaṇa's sister, Śūrpaṇakhā, tries to seduce the two brothers in the forest, and Lakṣmaṇa punishes her by cutting off her nose and ears. In revenge, the demon Rāvaṇa kidnaps Sītā and takes her to his kingdom in Lanka. With the help of the monkey army, Rāma fights against the demons, kills Rāvaṇa, recovers his wife, Sītā, and goes back to Ayodhya. This story has been retold by Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Muslims across South Asia. Traditionally the *Rāmāyaṇa* is understood as *ādikāvya*, or "first poem", while scholars refer to it as an epic, since it is a long narrative poem describing the adventures of a hero. The Sanskrit text attributed to the sage Vālmīki is not the source from which all retellings originate but is the oldest extant version.

Contextualized Interpretations of the Battle of Rāvaṇa and Rāma

The nature of the main character is a matter of debate. John Brockington considers that Rāma was a martial hero and later became associated with the god Viṣṇu.[5] In contrast, Pollock suggests that the divinity of the hero pervaded the story and was already present in its original core.[6] However that debate evolves, the narrative of a divine warrior has been highly regarded by Hindus in South Asia and beyond.

The struggle between Rāma and the demon has been interpreted in a variety of ways. One explanation is that the conflict with Rāvaṇa in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a newer rendition of the dispute between the older Vedic god Indra and the demon Vṛtra.[7] According to Pollock, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a text of othering in which Rāvaṇa represents the sexually-deviant outsider in the form of the tyrant who threatens. The space of that other, who is the enemy in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, can be occupied by all those who are different, do not fit the norms, or constitute another group. The demons have been identified with

5 Brockington/Brockington 2006, xi.

6 Pollock 2006, 21.

7 Brockington 1998, 51.

many groups, such as cannibals, primitive cave dwellers, shamans, particular tribes, historic ethnic groups, and Buddhists.[8] Furthermore, Rāvaṇa has also been understood in the tradition as "an enemy devotee who seeks liberation at the hands of Rāma".[9] The chief antagonist of the story may be seen as the representative of prejudices, or in other instances as a religious ideal.

George Hart and Hank Heifetz argue that the South Indian *Rāmāyaṇa* by Kampan, composed in Tamil in the 12th century, reflected local history. They explain that there were two patterns of social organization: the first consisted of small chieftains and armies which fought against each other in the first centuries of the Common Era, while the second was established during Pallava rule in the 6th century. In the later pattern, upper-caste landowners who were non-Brahmins adopted a system of alliances with a more centralized government and North Hindu Brahmanical practices. There was a certain level of co-existence of both old and new structures. Rāvaṇa in Kampan represented the old Tamil king who terrified everyone, was strong in battle, and concerned with pleasure. All elements of Tamil tradition that did not fit in with the new order were assigned to Rāvaṇa.[10] Therefore, a distinct socio-political configuration was represented in the kingdom of the demon.

This political dimension of the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is also relevant to discussions in South India in the late 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. In a literal reading, Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa come from the North, and the demons, who are explicitly not human, are from the South. In a more nuanced reading, the inhumanity could be interpreted as an otherness arising from differences in culture. In South India, people have recognized themselves in that otherness, and Rāvaṇa has become the character with whom they identify. The *Rāmāyaṇa* has been read as a struggle between the Aryan North and the Dravidian South.[11] Thus, the narrative of Rāvaṇa taking a different turn came to represent South Indian identity.

This Aryan–Dravidian reading of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was related to the development of a political movement in South India that sought social justice. In the first decades of the 20th century, there were calls for anti-caste social reforms

8 Pollock 2006, 31–32.

9 Hospital 1991, 86.

10 Hart/Heifetz 1989, 27–29.

11 Richman 1991, 176. The terms "Aryan" and "Dravidian" refer to two distinct linguistic families spoken in the North and South respectively; the terms have also been used to identify different cultural streams.

and for rejection of the myth of the glorious Aryan invaders.[12] E. V. Ramasami (1879–1973), an important non-Brahmin leader, organized a movement to promote respect for Dravidian values and lower castes. He was a prolific writer of short vitriolic essays to convey his radical political messages, thus gaining attention for his strong criticism of the dominant worldview of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and its Brahmanical values.[13] The brief printed texts spread amongst the masses. As Paula Richman discusses, Ramasami published an exegesis of the epic in which he wanted to demythologize Rāma and Sītā and turn Rāvaṇa into a hero. He accused Rāma of improper behavior (treating his wife badly, killing a śūdra and attacking Vāli from behind). Rāvaṇa, by contrast, protected his family, acted courageously, and did not touch Sītā, whereas his sister was mutilated. He abducted Sītā not as the result of lust but rather as honorable retaliation, and he neither disfigured her nor forced himself upon her. The respect for Sītā was one of the arguments in favor of Rāvaṇa.[14] This critique articulated dynamics between geographical areas, caste differences, and gender roles.

Southerners were keen on looking at Rāvaṇa and the demons in a more empathetic fashion. In the Tamil milieu, Rāvaṇa was not a straightforward villain, but a complex tragic hero with many contradictions – harsh and kind at the same time.[15] This notion of the "tragic hero" has been used by several scholars to describe Rāvaṇa. As Clifford Hospital points out, this term is not an Indian category, yet it is present in Rāvaṇa's story in two senses: first, in the inability of the character to deal with a prescribed destiny, and second, as a flaw, in an otherwise good person falling in love with Sītā.[16] Rāvaṇa, his family, and the kingdom of Lanka were admired by Southerners who looked at the antagonists with sympathy.

Rāmāyaṇa on the Screen

There is a complex history of re-creation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* that includes devotional films and loose adaptations. Movies and texts have been interconnected across cultures and languages in South Asia in a non-linear fashion.

12 Krishnamurthy 2011, 119.
13 Ganagatharam 2002, 884–885.
14 Richman 1991, 186.
15 Zvelebil 1988, 134.
16 Hospital 1991, 101.

Since the beginnings of Indian cinema, the epic has been a major thematic source.[17] As Philip Lutgendorf has stated, the devotional plays that tell the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have been influential in the development of movies. The so-called "mythological films" represent the story of Rāma with the emotional piety of the devotional tradition.[18] Dadasaheb Phalke, known as the father of Indian cinema, directed the first Indian movie based on an incident from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Lanka Dahan (The burning of Lanka, Dadasaheb Phalke, IN 1917) combines stage conventions with sophisticated cinematography.[19] In every decade since, many crowd-pleasing *Rāmāyaṇa* movies have been produced.[20] The Hindi movies Ram Rajya (Rule of Rama, Vijay Bhat, IN 1943) and Sampoorna Ramayana (Complete Ramayana, Babubhai Mistry, IN 1961) are worth mentioning because they won great acclaim from audiences. Also noteworthy is the Tamil film Sampoorna Ramayanam (Complete Ramayana, K. Somu, IN 1958), which was a great hit and revived interest for mythological movies in the South.[21] The first television series about the story of Rāma, Ramayan (Ramanad Sagar, IN 1987–1988), became the most popular program ever on Indian television.[22] The series Ramayan (Anand Sagar, IN 2008) was remade again in 2008 and this version, including songs, was dubbed into South Indian languages to win over more viewers. A Hindi TV mythological series, Raavan (Ranjan Singh, IN 2006–2008), explores the character of Rāvaṇa according to the texts of Vālmīki and Tulsīdās. The *Rāmāyaṇa* also figures prominently in films that are not based on the epic, as a referent in character names, motifs, and songs.[23] Therefore, the story of Rāma on screen has had a profound impact on religious experience and popular culture.

The inspiration of the South Indian *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition in film is ongoing. The Tamil movie Kaala (Pa. Ranjith, IN 2018) uses the framework of the epic as well. It is set among Tamilian immigrants in Mumbai who live in slums and are harassed by a gangster who wants to take over their land. Kaala, the Rāvaṇa-like character played by the celebrated Tamil actor Rajinikanth, fights for the protection of the rights of his people and prevents

17 Aklujkar 2007, 42.
18 Lutgendorf 1990, 129.
19 Woods 2011, 97.
20 Aklujkar 2007, 42.
21 Baskaran 1996, 185
22 Lutgendorf 1990, 128.
23 Lutgendorf 2010, 144.

their eviction, although at the end he is killed. Nevertheless, Kaala's legacy lives on in the subsequent protests of the slum dwellers. The film provides an optimistic alternative to the Dravidian counter-myths of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in which Tamilians lose.[24] Thus, the *Rāmāyaṇa* continues to provide a vehicle for storytelling with a political message.

The Production of RAAVAN (2010) and RAAVANAN (2010)

In the remainder of this article, Ratnam's movie will be discussed as an example of a narrative that subverts the stark opposition between Rāvaṇa and Rāma. Mani Ratnam is a renowned and prolific Tamil film director, screenwriter, and producer with over 25 films in his œuvre. Although most of his films are in Tamil, he has directed a handful of movies in Hindi as well. Given the great linguistic diversity in South Asia, choice of language matters in movies. For one thing, it can determine consumption, although many movies are dubbed to reach wider audiences. Film industries are separated by languages and regions, but they also intersect.

Ratnam gained national acclaim with his movie ROJA (Mani Ratnam, IN 1992), a romantic story in which a Tamil couple goes to Kashmir, where the husband participates in a military operation against terrorists. The enormous popularity of the film and the fact that it was made shortly after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by a suicide bomber from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have been widely discussed.[25] Years later, Ratnam started directing movies in Hindi with the great movie stars of the moment. In his engagement with diverse industries, languages, and identities, Ratnam's movies "have squarely placed Tamilians within the discursive and representational framework of the Indian nation".[26] Ratnam has simultaneously shot movies in Tamil and Hindi and perhaps this capacity to work in a diverse framework can be considered one of his main accomplishments.

Collaboration with the celebrated Tamil musician A. R. Rahman, initiated with ROJA (1992), has been key in the success of some of Ratnam's movies. In Indian films, the songs are crucial and can help a movie thrive. Felicity Wilcox describes the work of A. R. Rahman in the following way:

24 Manoharan 2021, 61.

25 Dirks 2001; Benjamin 2006; Devadas/Velayutham 2008.

26 Devadas/Velayutham 2008, 167.

> His ability to blend Eastern and Western musical elements to create strong associations for audiences from both contexts while supporting receptivity to sounds that might sit outside the listener's cultural context is notable, even remarkable, and enriches every film he works on. His sound captures a multicultural aesthetic, drawn from his roots as a Tamil musician, that speaks to global audiences.[27]

Ratnam directed Raavan (2010) in Hindi, and simultaneously Raavanan (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010) in Tamil. The films were designed as a multilingual project and became a culturally diverse effort in which North and South India were both represented. Aishwarya Rai played Sītā in both, and Abhishek Bachchan played Rāvaṇa in the Hindi version. Interestingly, the actor Vikram played Rāma in the Hindi version, but the antagonist, Rāvaṇa, in the Tamil one. The Tamil version seemingly did better than the Hindi version at the box office.[28] The music was composed by A. R. Rahman. The soundtrack was a blend of Classical Indian, African folk, Sufi, and electronic music in the multicultural style that characterizes this composer. Rahman and Ratnam wanted a "groovy, yet folksy tribal feel" for the musical score, to match the story line.[29] Raavan (2010) and Raavanan (2010) were big budget mainstream movies; they were released in theaters and found a place in several online platforms such as YouTube and Amazon Prime. Film aficionados still comment on these films in online publications and videos.[30] The cinematography of Santosh Sivan has been particularly appreciated by online fans.

The screenplay of the movie was also written by Ratnam, who privileged the character of Rāvaṇa. In an interview, Ratnam stated, "The Tamil version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* – The Kampan *Rāmāyaṇam* – makes him [Rāvaṇ] even more dramatic, even more spectacular. If you look at folk arts like *Kathakali*, it is always Rāvaṇ's story that is performed. It is a tradition to narrate the story of the doomed person."[31] Ratnam has been fascinated with this kind of narrative throughout his career. In his movie Thalapathi (Mani Ratnam, IN 1991), he explored Karṇa and Duryodhana, two troubled characters from the other

27 Wilcox 2017, 50.

28 Dundoo 2010.

29 Khurana 2010.

30 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZnkukRyTtk&ab_channel=FilmyHub360; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQv8fA9XcVo&ab_channel=FilmCompanionSouth [accessed 6 June 2021].

31 Rangan 2012, 268.

great Indian epic, the *Mahābhārata*. In Raavan (2010) and Raavanan (2010), he sought to portray the virtues of Rāvaṇa along with his wickedness, and justify part of his ill behavior. The fact that Rāvaṇa loses in the end makes him even more interesting.

Ratnam's *Rāmāyaṇa* Adaptation

Mani Ratnam's adaptation will now be analyzed taking into consideration the way in which the story of Rāvaṇa is amplified and the *Rāmāyaṇa* is used to criticize power dynamics in contemporary India. The movie starts with a scene in which Bīrā (a contemporary Rāvaṇa) is about to jump off a cliff into a river in the beautiful wilderness below. In the next scene Bīrā's sister Jamuniyā (corresponding to Śūrpaṇakhā) appears walking around a village fair with a couple of policemen; soon afterwards we see another scene in which a road in the forest is blocked and policemen are burned alive. Visually, Bīrā is connected to the wilderness, the forest to violence, and Bīrā's sister to the police. Two minutes into the film, the kidnapping of Rāginī (representing Sītā) occurs while she is gliding along a river; her canoe is struck and destroyed by a much larger boat in which Bīrā is standing. This version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* starts with the abduction of Sītā, because it is the part of the narrative in which Rāvaṇa becomes important. The destruction of Rāginī's boat is cinematographically grandiose, and the music dramatic. Ratnam considers that the main point of his film is "the clash of two kinds of people",[32] and this contrast is symbolized by the collision of the boats. The image of the boat tossed in the water depicts the human condition in devotional poetry and is used as an analogy for crisis, birth, and death.[33] Perhaps this kind of boat imagery also influenced Ratnam's choices: the boats might represent the merging of good and evil.

Although the storylines of Raavan (2010) and Raavanan (2010) are identical, the language makes a difference for each version, as is evident from the lyrics of the songs. The first song of the Hindi film is devoted to Bīrā (Rāvaṇa). He is presented as a proud, strong man and compared to fierce natural phenomena. The reference to his birth and caste points to his underprivileged origins yet great qualities. The virtues of Rāma are never high-

32 Rangan 2012, 285.

33 Jackson 1988, 1; Wadley 1977, 144.

lighted; there are no songs describing him in the movie. In contrast, the associations with Bīrā are positive, despite his being a bandit:

> Bīrā has ten foreheads
> Bīrā has a hundred names
> Those who provoke him
> have to face a fight
> Bīrā is a rising storm
> Bīrā is a typhoon
> There is fire upon his breath
> Bīrā is burning life
> Don't ask about his birth
> Don't ask about his caste
> Ask him about his pride
> which is his identifying feature.[34]

In the Tamil version of the same song, the ambiguities of the characters of Rāvaṇa and Rāma suggest they are remarkably similar:

> He is Rāma if you say he is Rāma
> He is Rāvaṇa if you say he is Rāvaṇa
> If you say he is both, then he is both
> He is both Rāma and Rāvaṇa.[35]

After the introduction to Bīrā, the main character, we learn that Dev (representing Rāma) is the Superintendent of Police just transferred to a district called Laal Mati, where people are terrorized and protected by Bīrā. Dev's job is to catch him. He explains that nothing good or bad happens without Bīrā's acceptance. Dev's wife notes, "It is not clear if he is Rāvaṇa or Robin Hood", as Bīrā is an angel for some and the devil for others. "Bīrā is where the blood is shed", remarks Dev. Although Laal Mati is a fictional place, the characters are speaking Hindi in Raavan, locating the movie in a Northern cultural context, whereas in Raavanan the language matches the Southern

34 Raavan (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010), 00:04:04. I have translated all the quotes from the Hindi movie.

35 Raavanan (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010), 00:02:15. I thank Preeti Gopal for her help translating the lyrics in Tamil.

context. Film scholar Selvaraj Velayutham points out that in Tamil movies it is common to conceive India from the perspective of a Tamil male, and films are set in Tamil Nadu even if the locations are fictional.[36] Part of the movie was shot in Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu in South India.

Bīrā's character seems to be partially based on the life of Koose Muniswamy Veerappan (1952–2004), a poor uneducated Tamil man who was born in Karnataka near the border with Tamil Nadu. He knew the jungles of South India very well and became involved in poaching and in smuggling sandalwood. According to the chronicles of an agent of the Tamil Nadu Special Task Force, Veerappan was popular amongst the locals, and a sort of Robin Hood legend developed around him. Veerappan defied the police, kidnapped people, and could not be apprehended for a long time. He was a generous employer in an area in which many were unemployed, and his story captured the imagination.[37] The idea of the forest criminal who confronted the police and was appreciated by the people resonates strongly.

Studies elaborate on the "Robin Hood principle", in which outlaws, either fictional or real, become celebrated heroes and their stories are told in songs, films, and literature in many cultures. Graham Seal claims there is a scripted narrative of the bandit hero: the outlaw suffers injustice, typically from government or local power, winning the sympathy of a resistance community as his bad acts are justified. He never harms women, distributes benefits amongst the poor, escapes from authority, and eventually dies bravely.[38] The commemorated outlaws often appear in contexts in which a group of people consider themselves to be the victims of injustice and therefore there is sympathy for the resistance of the bandit.[39]

As one can clearly see, in Ratnam's movie Rāvaṇa fits this framework well. He is validated because life has been unfair, and he opposes the corrupt police.[40] In the film, the people of the villages bow in front of Bīrā; everyone wants to meet him. He embraces the children tenderly, and many follow him. He is also shown playing with the little ones in a pond. In the jungle where Bīrā lives, there is talk about his virtues and the good things

36 Velayutham 2008, 8.

37 Vijay Kumar 2017, 18–20.

38 Seal 2009, 74–75.

39 Seal 2009, 83.

40 It is interesting to note that Veerappan is also used to illustrate the acclaimed outlaw in Seal's own work.

Fig. 1: Sophisticated Rāginī teaches Indian classical dance. Film still, RAAVAN (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010), 00:37:32.

that he has done. After kidnapping Rāginī (Sītā), he falls in love with her, yet he is always respectful and never touches her.

Although the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition is diverse, "standard" retellings depict Sītā and Rāma as constituting ideals of womanhood and manhood. In Ratnam's adaptation, however, Rāma is pushed to the background, while Sītā and Rāvaṇa are foregrounded through both story and songs. Rāginī (Sītā) is a high-caste educated woman from an urban setting. She is a classical Indian dancer and is shown teaching girls her art (fig. 1). Rāginī's refined nature contrasts immediately with the poor area in the forest to which she has been taken. The villagers are trying to fight for their rights against the establishment which has not helped their development. Suffering in the inclement jungle, Rāginī gains insight into the difficult life in these remote villages. Ratnam thus transforms Sītā into a woman awakening to a different social reality.

The portrayal of female characters such as Sītā and Śūrpaṇakhā is key to the narrative, and in text and on the screen, the relation between Rāma and Sītā is often represented as an example of perfect love.[41] Yet that is not the case in RAAVAN (2010), where the romantic relation between Dev and Rāginī does not take center stage. Instead, the movie shows the humanization of Rāvaṇa, and for that purpose, the transformation of the character of Jamuniyā (Śūrpaṇakhā) is essential. She is the victim of a rape perpetrated by the policemen. Horrifyingly, the rape of women by police in remote forest areas

41 Pauwels 2008 discusses this topic and compares textual sources and the TV series by Rāmānand Sāgar.

where there are political conflicts is part of contemporary social reality.[42] In the film, Dev is trying to do his work by catching Bīrā because he is a high-profile criminal, but he is surrounded by a corrupt and faulty police system. He is also overpowered by his ambition to succeed in this mission, and thus chooses to appear at the wedding of Bīrā's sister, Jamuniyā. The ceremony is interrupted and Bīrā is shot but manages to escape. Jamuniyā is captured forcefully, hauled off by her nose and ears and taken to the police station where she is raped and afterwards commits suicide. In revenge, Bīrā kidnaps Dev's wife. Bīrā painfully narrates what happened to his sister, and Rāginī is touched by this tragedy. Rāginī talks to a Viṣṇu statue after learning about these ulterior motives behind her captivity. When Bīrā arrives at this location, he talks about his love and refers to himself as "an animal, uncouth" and "a worm", a trope to signal otherness. As a policeman, Dev is in a privileged position, whereas Bīrā is a man from the forest. His pure love, however, makes him appear greater. The conversation unfolds as follows:

RĀGINĪ, *talking to God*: You are making me cry. I don't want to cry. Just let me be angry, don't lessen my anger. Don't show me any of the good qualities or innocence of these people. I am not weak, don't make me weak. Can't you do that much for me?

Rāginī sees Bīrā sitting close by.

BĪRĀ: Did I come here at the wrong time? What kind of man is he? Your Superintendent of Police? Just a good man or a very good man?

RĀGINĪ: He is a god! Is that enough?

BĪRĀ: Tell me about your god? No, don't give me an answer. I know. He is great; he has a big heart and is high minded. Does he love you very much?

RĀGINĪ: Yes, he does.

BĪRĀ: And you? I'm burning with jealousy, I'm burning up. Burning as if my damn soul was on fire. Burn, burn, keep on burning and burn even more. Burn so that the whole damn world will say that until today nobody has ever burned like Bīrā. I used to think "I am an animal, uncouth and I desire you. I'm a worm, a worm! Where are you? And, where am I? Where's your lord?" But now that I'm burning up, it seems that nobody is stronger than me. Jealousy is the fate of the fortunate people.[43]

42 Sundar 2019 refers to these issues in Central India.

43 Raavan (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010), 01:28:35.

Fig. 2: Aggressive Bīrā in a masculine dance of combat. Film still, Raavan (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010), 1:08:29.

In Ratnam's film, Rāvaṇa is the leader of the dispossessed, an individual who fights against those in power. The abode of Rāvaṇa is not a palace filled with luxuries, as in many narratives, but rather a region where people are destitute. The world of Bīrā revolves around revenge and insurrection, but also seeks fairness. Through dance and music, the song "Ṭhok de killī" ("Hit the nail") invokes a culture of masculinity and combat (fig. 2). The Tamil version of "Ṭhok de killī" is entitled "Kōṭu pōṭṭā" ("If one draws a border") in Raavanan (2010), and the lyrics talk in extraordinarily strong terms about conflict and revenge:

> If one draws a border, kill him!
> If one builds a fence, cut him into pieces!
> Until yesterday, your law prevailed,
> from now on it will be our law,
> We were bent into submission,
> We stood up for ourselves.[44]

As the song "Kōṭu pōṭṭā" shows, both versions of the film evoke a social and political reality. Amit Basole suggests in his review of the movie that the story alludes to the conflict between *ādivāsī*s and the Indian state.[45] Although the film does not give specifics about the agenda of the *ādivāsī*

44 Raavanan (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010), 00:52:09.

45 Basole 2010, 25. The term *ādivāsī* means literally "first dweller" and it is used for minority groups in India.

groups, it does portray a difficult relationship with the police. The social issues that Raavan (2010) highlights are like those of the Naxalite movement.[46] The state repression and attacks of the Naxalite groups have led to tremendous violence. The socio-economic gap is profound in southern and western states such as Andhra Pradesh, where the Naxalites are strong in the pristine hills and forest areas.[47] The oppression and injustice experienced by the communities of the forest are represented in Ratnam's work. The connection between fiction and reality is tenuous, but there is an acknowledgement, even if not extensive, of these issues in the film.

In addition, the violence between the *ādivāsī* groups and the police is graphic and likewise suggested through song lyrics. The film portrays the police's lack of commitment to moral principles and lasting projects in complicated regions. After Dev finds out that one of his subordinate policemen is loyal to Bīrā, he is reminded that his job as Superintendent in Laal Mati is only for six months. Dev's posting in the remote area will soon be over, but the men in the lower ranks remain for life and face the dilemma of either maintaining the law or breaking it. In this context, corruption is extremely common, as the policemen are not held accountable for their transgressions, such as raping women. Thus Ratnam's adaptation highlights the complex contemporary reality in which law and crime are intertwined.

When Dev comes to the jungle, Bīrā has the opportunity to kill him, but for the sake of Rāginī he does not do so, and he lets her go back to her husband. In the end, Bīrā's love for her is greater than anything else and he has no other romantic partner in his life. By contrast, in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāvaṇa, as the other, is hypersexualized: traditionally, he has three wives and his palace is conceived as illuminated by beautiful women.[48] However, Rāma just has Sītā. In Ratnam's adaptation, Bīrā conforms to monogamous ideals and his relationships with other females are ignored. Hence, Bīrā's redemption is his love for Rāginī, as his sexual behavior is no different from Rāma's.

The enmity of Bīrā and Dev goes beyond the capture of Rāginī; Dev has been obsessed with hunting down Bīrā. When Dev and Rāginī return home from the forest, he wants to know if Bīrā touched her. She says he did not, and Dev tells her that she needs to pass a lie-detector test. In some versions

46 The term "Naxalite" is broad and refers to a variety of non-unified movements calling for justice in deprived regions.

47 Gupta 2007, 178.

48 Vālmīki V.7.1–7. All Vālmīki references are taken from Goswami 1969, the vulgate edited by Chimmanlal Goswami.

Fig. 3: Rāginī reaching out to save Bīrā. Film still, RAAVAN (Mani Ratnam, IN 2010), 02:10:52.

of the narrative, such as Vālmikī's, Sītā must go through an ordeal of fire to prove her purity. In the movie, Dev lies to Rāginī, arguing that Bīrā told him that he had touched her. Dev uses Rāginī as a tool to catch Bīrā, acting like Rāvaṇa in that he uses tricks to achieve his goals.

Rāginī leaves her husband in anger; she goes back to the forest to look for Bīrā and finds out the truth. Rāginī asks him if she is the weapon to bring victory over Dev. Bīrā is happy to see Rāginī and he states, "We are cheap men, but we never allow even the wind to touch pure gold." It seems that Rāginī and Bīrā have become close, as she trusted him enough to return to the jungle. This is a departure from the Vālmikī, Tulsīdās and Kampan versions, in which Rāvaṇa is killed before Sītā and Rāma are reunited. Again, the film amplifies the story of Rāvaṇa and emphasizes his good nature.

Dev appears in the jungle with a group of policemen to attack Bīrā. When Bīrā is about to die, Rāginī symbolically reaches out to help him, standing in the middle of the battlefield (fig. 3). Bīrā was an honest fighter and spoke the truth, whereas Dev is portrayed as cunning, mistreating his wife. In the movie, Bīrā is killed, but his evilness is softened by his generosity to the oppressed, his search for justice, and his love for Rāginī. In this instance, the others – the outlaws, the *ādivāsīs*, and the Naxalites – oppose the unjust government and police. At times, Bīrā is transformed into a Rāma-like character. Whereas the demons are humanized, Dev's behavior is criticized. Thus, a take-away from the movie is validation, to a certain degree, of those fighting against power structures.

Contrasting Ratnam's Version with Renderings of *Rāmāyaṇa* in Literature

Within the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, there are numerous representations of Rāvaṇa in the North and South. In this section, various retellings will be contrasted to illuminate points of confluence and divergence between these literary narratives and Ratnam's adaptation. In Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāvaṇa is described as "the one who causes the world to roar" and "one who looks like a dark cloud", and one of his common epithets is "the ten necked-one".[49] In Ratnam's movie, Bīrā hears many voices in his head, suggesting some sort of mental illness – here is an actualization of the demon with ten heads. The voices represent the coexistence of good and evil in his mind.

In Vālmīki, Rāvaṇa's palace is depicted as a place where everything exists in excess. There were all kinds of meat: venison, buffalo, boar, deer, peacock, fish, and goat. Men and women got drunk without any shame.[50] His palace is luxurious, with many buildings and extremely attractive vast mansions, and many beautiful women.[51] Here, Rāvaṇa is not in the forest like many demons but inhabits a world comparable to Rāma's kingdom.[52] Rāvaṇa lives a life that is parallel to that of other kings in different locations. By contrast, as already noted, in Raavan (2010), Bīrā's world is in no way glorious nor is his world analogous to that of Dev (Rāma).

Rāvaṇa falls in love with Sītā in Vālmīki's text; he desires her above all, but later is extremely aggressive as he wants to possess her. When Sītā virtuously rejects him, Rāvaṇa tries to pressure her, threatening that if she does not sleep with him, he will eat her. In his harsh and licentious speech, he is depicted as "hissing like a serpent",[53] with frightening animal-like conduct. Again, by contrast, and although Bīrā describes himself as an animal, he never insists on engaging sexually with Rāginī; he just laments that she loves Dev.

According to Vālmīki, Rāvaṇa is warned that the war against the king of Ayodhya will destroy him, but he does not listen to the advice of others: he is arrogant and has a bad temper. He is not a righteous king and is only concerned with his personal interest in Sītā. Since he loves her and wants

49 Vālmīki III.33.1.
50 Vālmīki V.11.13–18.
51 Vālmīki V.7.1–7.
52 Pollock 2006, 32.
53 Vālmīki III.22.30.

to keep her, he will go to war. Rāma is the exact opposite; he listens to the words of his father and sacrifices himself for the sake of his kingdom. He would never be driven by passion. Ratnam's adaptation overturns this opposition between the god and the demon entirely, as Bīrā ends up sacrificing himself.

The character of Śūrpaṇakhā also plays a major role, since she is strongly related to the episodes concerning Rāvaṇa. It is Śūrpaṇakhā who convinces her brother to take Sītā and kill Rāma. Śūrpaṇakhā can be seen in Vālmīki as the opposite of Sītā in the same way that Rāvaṇa is the opposite of Rāma: there is a clear opposition between Sītā's modest behavior and the lustful female demon who is also a blood-drinker and even expresses her desire to consume Rāma's, Lakṣmaṇa's, and Sītā's blood.[54] Demons lack moderation and reasonable behavior. In Raavan (2010), it is Jamuniyā (Śūrpaṇakhā) who suffers at the hands of the police, who are singled out for lack of moderation and bad behavior – mirroring the social reality of women ending up being the victims of clashes between the police and *ādivāsīs*.

In Sanskrit literature, there are other instances in which the character of Rāvaṇa is seen in a different light. An interesting take is found in the 11th-century poet Bilhaṇa. In one of his most important works, entitled *Vikramāṅkadevacarita*, he states, "The fact that the fame of the Lord of Lanka [Rāvaṇa] has been reduced, and that the prince of the Raghu family [Rāma] is a receptacle of fame – all this is nothing but the power of the very first poet [Vālmīki]. Kings should not make poets angry."[55] Not only had Bilhaṇa suggested that the good reputation of Rāma rested on the skill of Vālmīki, but he also showed an appreciation for the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s villain. According to Lawrence McCrea, Rāvaṇa is described as the "sole hero of the three worlds" on several occasions and there are sections of the poem in which the descriptions of Rāvaṇa are significantly more central and extensive than those of Rāma.[56] Rāvaṇa is foregrounded in this text and other later poets also chose to cast his character in a different light.

One notable example that converges with Ratnam's film is the already mentioned Tamil *Rāmāyaṇa* of Kampan. The work is entitled *Irāmāvatāram*, "The descent of Rāma". The poet is more compassionate towards the emotions of both demons: Rāvaṇa's love is expressed in detail, as is the pain of

54 Vālmīki III.19.18.

55 McCrea 2010, 506.

56 McCrea 2010, 513–514.

the wounded Śūrpaṇakhā. These two episodes are long and clearly contrast with Vālmīki.[57] Thus, Rāvaṇa is described as majestic, and no one has the power to destroy him. All the powerful kings, gods, and demons tremble out of fear, give him all kinds of offerings, and are subservient. He has weapons, jewels, ornaments, and many women who dance and sing. Rāvaṇa enjoys all these things until he listens to his sister explain the killing of the demons and tell him about Sītā's beauty. After hearing of all the virtues of Rāma's wife, he falls in love with her. Kampan vividly depicts Rāvaṇa's longing:

> Even before he went and deceived
> that woman lovely as a peacock,
> the lord of Lanka with high walls
> had set her in the prison of his heart.
> That Demon who fights with a spear
> had a heart now that was like butter
> set out on a day of sun
> and heating and melting bit by bit.[58]

Although Rāvaṇa is one of the best warriors, he is defeated by his emotions, and thus not by battle. Rāvaṇa cannot stop thinking about Sītā and his love for her agitates him. His sister's suffering is also a part of the narrative. Śūrpaṇakhā goes to Lanka to inform her brother of what has happened in the forest. When she is wounded by Lakṣmana, she goes to Rāvaṇa's palace while she is still bleeding. The male demons are also impressed with what has happened. All the female demons look at Śūrpaṇakhā and suffer and wail along with her.[59] The attack on Śūrpaṇakhā partially causes Rāvaṇa's response in taking revenge. In Kampan's text this helps to justify, at least to some degree, the demons' anger. Since Śūrpaṇakhā was dishonored, some action must be taken. Although the female demon sexually assaulted the brothers, she was severely punished. The demons suffer from pain and love, and thus show human qualities.

The political movements of the South have left an indelible mark on the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The engagement of non-Brahmanical Tamilians against the North in the 20th century has seen literary manifestations in which the main char-

57 Hart/Heifetz 1989, 6.
58 Translation by Hart/Heifetz 1989, 177.
59 Hart/Heifetz 1989, 167.

acters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are reversed.[60] Such is the case of the Tamil poem by Puluvar Kulantai entitled *Irāvaṇan Kāviyam*, published in 1946, in which Rāvaṇa is the noble cultured Dravidian protagonist and Rāma the cunning villain. Śūrpaṇakhā is depicted as an innocent maiden molested by Rāma. After rejecting him, she is punished.[61] As in Ratnam's film, the narrative here also requires the transformation of Śūrpaṇakhā in order to make a case against Rāma.

Sympathy for Rāvaṇa's experiences and emotions is still present amongst recent South Indian writers. In 2004, the contemporary poet K. Satchidanandan published a poem called "Come unto me, Janaki", in which Rāvaṇa, who is dead, expresses his intense love for Sītā in heaven.[62] Thus, Kampan's work set an important precedent in the reinterpretation of the villains, accentuating their feelings. We can see that Ratnam's interpretation is based on the devotional literary culture of the South, in which the emotions of the demons are amplified and validated, while also taking inspiration from socio-political interpretations of the epic.

Conclusion

As Stam states, when classical works are adapted, the story is transformed, turned around, and critically rewritten. Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is a narrative in which the rightful rulers fight against pure evil, but where the villain has the same stature as the hero. Although Rāvaṇa is evil in Kampan's text, the demon becomes a suffering lover living a tragic story. Such emotional rendering has proved appealing, especially for a Tamil audience. Motivated by a political aim, Ramasami looked for Rāma's faults and Rāvaṇa's virtues. Tamil *Rāmāyaṇas* such as *Irāvaṇan Kāviyam* transposed the narrative into a contemporary context. Thus, Raavan (2010) did not take a completely new approach, but rather was influenced by diverse readings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the feelings of Rāvaṇa, contemporary political issues, and the celebration of outlaws in a country with profound social divisions.

Ratnam's adaptation criticizes the good/evil dichotomy of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and raises questions about the complexity of issues concerning otherness. It is not clear who is the hero and who the villain. The demon attains at times

60 Zvelebil 1988, 132.

61 Zvelebil 1988, 132.

62 Richman 2008, 215–218.

the hero's qualities, and Bīrā (Rāvaṇa) is represented as a low-caste criminal, the leader of oppressed people, and his kingdom as an underdeveloped forest. The *ādivāsī*s were ignored and are agents of violence, but they are also its victims. Because of poverty and exploitation, there is a parallel government and war with the state. The film condemns police corruption and brutality in the hilly areas and villages near the forests where communist agendas, political movements, and powerful criminals have taken over. This reversal of strong significant characters such as Rāvaṇa serves to emphasize the worldview of the other.

Amongst the multiplicity of interpretations of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Ratnam demonstrates the relevance of the contemporary context for value judgements: his rendition favors the bandit and the perspective of Southerners, and it comments on conflicts in the *ādivāsī* communities. The character of Rāvaṇa is validated by showing goodwill towards others. Despite being an outlaw, he cares for people and is a sort of Robin Hood. The injustice his sister has experienced is amplified to justify his anger, and his love for Sītā is accentuated – two popular tropes in Southern *Rāmāyaṇas*. The policemen are portrayed as greedy for power, abusers of women, and cunning. In this struggle the police win, but without honor. The film thus constitutes a critique of those in power: they are not righteous, they just have the means. As it has been in the past, the *Rāmāyaṇa* remains today a key for understanding India.

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