

Reinterpreting Self and Other through *Rāmāyaṇās* and their Multifaceted Rāvaṇās

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Abstract:

For any community, outlining the other appears to be essential for constructing the identity or sense of self, and society. In the Indian context, however, the euro-centric and binarized implications of ‘self’ and the ‘other’ must be seen as non-antithetical. Alterity needs to be redefined in lieu of the integral nature of diversity within India. This paper attempts to make this argument with the help of the *Rāmāyaṇā* tradition.

Believed to be an epic about the fight between good and evil, *Rāmāyaṇā* appears to propagate various binaries parallel to the concept of self and the other, personified in the characters of Rāmā and Rāvaṇā. However, a deeper look at the diverse, and even contradictory, interpretations and functions of the character of Rāvaṇā– the other notes resistance against binarizations. The paper analyses Rāvaṇā’s unique otherness within Valmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇā*, alongside an overview of its contemporaries Vimalasuri’s *Paumacariyam*, and *Lankavatara Sutra*.

Keywords: *Rāmāyaṇā*, Alterity, Binarization, Self and other, Rāvaṇā.

Introduction:

According to GN Devy, a community's sense of tradition is composed of its “sense of self... in relation to the associated sense of the other” (7). Outlining the other appears to be essential for constructing the identity of self and society across discourses, and thus building a society’s idea of the self. It helps determine what the self is made of, and the way a society or a cultural space is divided. The construction of such a useful other is often marked by a selective perspective, and must be studied in the required contexts.

Stories, myths, and the study of myths are motivated to, and effective in, understanding the self and the other, by defining good and evil, or right and wrong, which are value structures necessary for every society, for the so-called common-man. However, it is important to note how binaries such as these do not translate to a neat binary in the context of Indian epistemology of stories or myths. This paper attempts to do so with the aid of the

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Rāmāyaṇā tradition which is a conglomeration of knowledge on and interpretations of the Rāmāyaṇā tale in various forms and mediums. The tale is much more than a myth. It functions as a treatise or way of life within the interdisciplinary and intersectional nexus of Indian mythology, literature, art, religion, history, politics, and philosophy. It is folk and popular; religious and secular; ritualistic and performative.

The tale, however, has also increasingly become more politicized and polarized over the years so that it juxtaposes the acceptable part of the self and society against the ones that are shunned. This paper aims to question this tradition of looking at Rāmāyaṇā with the perspective of, and as a means of, binarizing by analysing diverse, and even contradictory, interpretations and functions of the character of Rāvaṇā—the other, within one of the oldest Rāmāyaṇā tellings in India- *Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇā*, along with brief overviews of its contemporaries Vimalasuri's *Paumacariyam* and *Lankavatara Sutra*.

Self and other:

Across world religions, many Semitic monotheistic faiths such as Christianity, Islam, and Zoroastrianism interpret the self and the other as a binary, in the shadow of the belief of the God against the devil, Allah against Shaitan, or Ahura Mazda against Ahriman, respectively. This is known as Ethical dualism². However, across major Indian religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, the concepts of god and evil are not uniform single categories represented by singular entities. On the contrary, either there are multiple gods (Hinduism) or no gods (Jainism and Buddhism), evoking numerous interpretations and contradictions for both the ideas of good and bad across, and even within, each religion. These multiple and contradicting ethical codes have nevertheless co-existed, and thus, in Indian epistemology, the binarized implications of 'self' and the 'other' must be reinterpreted.

Furthermore, there is no specified being within most Indian religions specially imagined to represent an absolute evil. There is neither a single God nor a singular antithesis to him, but rather both good and evil may be contextual. Among such plurality of the concepts of good and evil, there does not emerge any equivalent of a solitary repository of

² Ethical dualism is a practice (religious or philosophical) of standing by a neat binary of self versus the other where the self is completely devoid of evil and the other, which may refer to person or a group, is replete with evil.

evil– “a demon, the absolute embodiment of evil, who engenders all evil, and... is as coeternal as god, who is an absolute good” (Nayak 61).

This may be called as ‘Ethical pluralism’³, and this manner of looking at the Indian context beyond binaries is a way of thinking best understood through its application within myths, legends and other forms of storytelling. Mythological figures such as Asuras, Rakshasas, Daityas, and Danavs are often associated with wrong-doing, mischief, and immorality but “in Hindu myths,” Nayak writes, “asuras are often more evolved, more ascetic, more adhering to the principle of dharma than devas, brahmins, or honoured kshatriyas...Asuras and devas are not opposite sides of the ethical paradigm– good and evil” (61). Theirs is not a battle “about good against evil... [but] simply a cyclical archetype of a conflict” (61).

Even the concepts of *dharma* and *adharma* have no single definition. Doniger acknowledges, “...In India, nature, man, and god all consist of a mixture of good and evil. The only wrong, the only “evil,” is to strive against nature” (95). This extremely controversial but fundamental principle called dharma “implies that “should” and “is” are one – that one should do what one’s nature inclines one to do” (Doniger 94). This difference is interpreted as that between the self and the other.

In the context of Hindu philosophy, Kakar writes that “The maintainence of ego boundaries, between 'inside' and 'outside', and between 'I' and 'others', and the sensory experiences of social relations based on these separations, is the stuff of reality in Western thought and yet maya to the Hindus” (Sudhir Kakar qtd. in Devy 145-6). GN Devy re-examines the terms self and other in this context, and in order to make them more nuanced to Indian epistemology, reads them as “swa” and “para” respectively. “Para” is a well-accepted concept within "majority of Indian languages," and is "used to indicate 'otherness' as a psychological phenomenon as well as a spatial term" (143)⁴.

³ Ethical pluralism is an ethical theory which, simply put, emphasizes that moralistic value of right and wrong may differ as per different perspectives and although these values may be contradictory or incommensurable, they hold true and important to their respective context.

⁴ For more on Devy’s interpretation of the self and the non-self, read “Swa and Para: Self and The Other” in his work “Of Many Heroes”.

However, Devy also warns against falling into the trap of such binarization, or in his words, polarities. According to him, looking at self and other as polarities in Indian thought is a "profoundly ignorant act of consciousness" (145) Swa and para, unlike self and the other, are not antithetical. Instead, para may be seen as the transcendental which is both, beyond swa (or its extension) and the inner capability of swa (often an indiscernible part). Swa and Para, then, are separated and intermeshed so that they are both— parts of the self, and more. Thus they do not become parts of a binary, but instead a complex whole. This is not to say, however, that "the Aryan epistemology of the self-other relationship remained unchanged in the long history of India" (Devy 146). But tracing the etymological changes of this concept is beyond the scope of this paper.

Rāmāyaṇās:

The worldview of Rāmāyaṇā tradition is an inherent nexus of mythology, literature, and philosophy. Across most of its scholarship, literary interpretations, and uses as a socio-political symbol, the Rāmāyaṇā story has come to represent a literary canon and socio-cultural hegemony. "Rāmāyaṇā" has come to represent the Hindu Rāmāyaṇā, and mostly the Valmiki *Rāmāyaṇā*. A lot of scholarship within this field of Humanities has claimed (and a lot many has resisted) this hegemony. However, such hierarchical overview of the Rāmāyaṇā tradition is widely popular and accepted, even if often questioned, among various manifestations of the study and telling of Rāmāyaṇā. It imagines the Rāmāyaṇā tellings in power relation to each other, with the Hindu Rāmāyaṇā being at the top.

In his essay "Three hundred Rāmāyaṇās", A.K. Rāmānujan expounds on the multiplicity and context-specificity of the tale. The essay denies the hierarchical and top-down conceptualization of the Rāmāyaṇā tradition where *Valmiki Rāmāyaṇā* is believed to be the ur-telling. He instead propagates the use of "tellings" to understand the phenomenon that is the Rāmākatha to emphasize that every Rāmāyaṇā telling exists both in constant interaction with others and self-dependently in its own context. This argument stands in the way of scholarly conceptualizations that give a few Rāmāyaṇā tellings the pedestal of being dominant and many other tellings the label of marginalised. This further implies that alterity needs to be redefined in lieu of the integral nature of diversity within India.

Believed to be a simple epic about the fight between good and evil, Rāmākatha appears to propagate various binaries parallel to the concept of self and the other, personified in the characters of Rāmā and Rāvaṇā. Besides being “the basis of popular ethics,” it has “vividly described moral principles...which can be easily followed and understood by ordinary males and females (sic)” (Sharma 7). Rāmākatha may be seen as a treatise on the universal and the contextual ethics which may also be understood here as the concepts of *sarvadharmā* and *swadharmā*⁵, which respectively imply duties and righteousness which are common for all beings, and those are particular to a group or person.

Notably, the Rāmāyaṇā story is one of the most used, and useful, tools across Indian history in determining, distinguishing, and problematizing alterity and its contextual ethics. According to Sheldon Pollock, “The Rāmāyaṇā is profoundly and fundamentally a text of “othering”” (282). It is considered a text that not only defines the other there is but also a text that can be used or appropriated to make the other. Pollock believes that within Rāmāyaṇā,

Outsiders are made other by being represented as deviant-sexually, dietetically, politically deviant. Rāvaṇā is not only “other” in his reckless polygyny-“others” always threaten to steal “our” women but is presented without question as a tyrant, perhaps even as a kind of “Oriental despot” constructed by a preform of Orientalism. (283)

However, while such an analysis captures the inherent alterity in the symbol that is Rāvaṇā, it does not acknowledge the ambiguity and multiplicity in the interpretation of this “other”. Simultaneously, Pollock’s estimation of Rāmāyaṇā as a text of othering obscures the vital qualities within Rāmāyaṇā tradition, of plurality, diversity, and self-questioning.

Rāvaṇā the Other:

Rāvaṇā is the infamous antagonist of Rāmāyaṇā who is almost always in the wrong. If Rāmāyaṇā is profoundly and fundamentally a text of “othering,” Rāvaṇā is the epitome of the other. He not only belongs to Lanka or a space that is different but also has different morals and way of life than the ‘self’ or dominant way of life which is why the tale becomes that of victory of one value structure over another. Across different Rāmāyaṇās, Rāvaṇā is described

⁵ Universal and contextual ethics may also be understood here as the concepts of *sarvadharmā* and *swadharmā*, which respectively imply duties and righteousness which are common for all beings, and those are particular to a group or person.

with the help of many terms such as Rakshasa, Asura, demon, monster, and Evil. This further creates association between the character of Rāvaṇā and the idea of the other. Yet, his character's "evilness" is also almost always ambiguous. Anita Shukla believes that

The popular perceptions of the evil in Rāvaṇā have not really existed in the text as much as they have been utilized for the maintenance and sustenance of certain primordial values which have been polarized in society and very often politicized by communities to meet their own ends. (10)

This further supports the need to redefine the other as is created in a mythological context and understand how and why does the other become so. Although Rāvaṇā is demonized in the popular consciousness, he also persists as a highly ambiguous and versatile antagonistic character in the cultural domain. Although his effigies are burnt annually on the festival of Dussehra across India as the symbol of social and spiritual evils he also represents human qualities and potential for good. Rāvaṇā is also respected (and even worshipped in Hindu temples) as a devotee of Shiva, a Hindu God.

Among the various temples dedicated to Rāvaṇā across India, while some worship him as a devotee, some idolize him as an ancestor or a beloved king. For instance, temples dedicated to Lord Shiva in Mandya and Kolar in Karnataka, and Mandsaur in Madhya Pradesh, are also known for Hindu devotees who come to worship Rāvaṇā in idol form. There is a temple solely dedicated to him in Kanpur as well, although it opens only on Dussehra. Among the Maudgil Brahmans of Rajasthan, Dussehra is a day to perform Hindu death rites for Rāvaṇā, whom they consider their ancestor.

The binarization within Rāmāyaṇā and the consequent demonization of Rāvaṇā have seen different trajectories across cultural and political imaginaries in India. Pollock writes that "If one actually plots a history of the Rāmāyaṇā in the two realms of the political and literary imaginations, one finds a stark disparity" (263). But according to him, the tale or "the text" itself, "offers unique imaginative instruments... whereby, on the one hand, a divine political order can be conceptualized... and, on the other, a fully demonized Other can be categorized, counterposed, and condemned" (264). But Paula Richman, in her text *Rāmāyaṇā Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology*, blames "authoritarian texts" like those of "Valmiki and Tulsidas" for polarising their characters into clear heroes and villains (174).

She explains, "If dharmic acts fall at one end of the spectrum, authoritative Ramkatha present the adharmic deeds of rakshasas at the opposite end" (174). Rāvaṇā is thus "demonized and othered...fit only for destruction" (175).

But there is neither a god, nor an antithetical demon in the Indian epistemology of Rāmāyaṇā. There is no absolute good or evil, so that alterity is not absolute either. The concept of a vague, non-absolute, and non-binarized Rāvaṇā the other can be traced back to the literatures of early centuries of the Common Era. The following is an analysis of the character of Rāvaṇā in Valmiki *Rāmāyaṇā*, along with a brief juxtaposition of Rāvaṇā in the Jaina and Buddhist Rāmāyaṇās.

Valmiki *Rāmāyaṇā*:

Valmiki *Rāmāyaṇā* is one of the most popular Hindu Rāmāyaṇās in India dated somewhere between the first century Before Common Era to first century Common Era. It is a sacred text for Hindus and one of the two main classical Indian epics. While Mahabharata attempts to understand the complexities of dharma, Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇā* seems to have a relatively straightforward take on morality. It is popular as a token tale of the victory of good over evil. Moreover, the didactic underlining of the text percolates through its characters so that they are almost divided between good and bad. Rāmā is the great good pillar of the epic. He is an admirable hero who is above any blame or blemish. Rāvaṇā falls on the opposite end of the spectrum. Most of his 'evil' deeds are inexplicable and he inspires fear in the readers. Yet for a text that seems to binarize good and evil, the villain is an interestingly varying character.

Like most Hindu Rāmāyaṇā tellings, Valmiki introduces Rāvaṇā as hedonistic. He is shown to be materialistic, proud, and greedy for power. He is the king of rakshasas, a word which, in most translations of Valmiki *Rāmāyaṇā*, is translated into either demons or ogres⁶. His primary role in the epic is that he abducts Sita after falling for her beauty, and relentlessly cajoles her to accept him. He becomes so blinded in his desire for her that he puts his family, kingdom and even himself at stake, ultimately losing it all. Introduced early on in the epic,

⁶ The words demons or ogres are primarily used to refer to supernatural and malicious creatures, spirits or monsters in west-originating tales or beliefs. They almost always represent unwanted physical, moral, and behavioral aspects of society. There are different types of Rakshasas described in the epic, such as kinkaras, daityas, and daanavs. But like demons, all rakshasas are described as deformed and dreadful creatures who disturb the rishis or ascetics. However, there are good rakshasas too, as discussed in the subsection Evil and the Other.

Rāvaṇā is established as the antagonist of the story. He appears as the ultimate problem that needs to be solved.

Nevertheless, Rāvaṇā is also shown to be extremely learned in philosophical literature, music, astronomy, arts, and various other disciplines. He even has moments of expressing his feelings of shame, fear, hurt and guilt. He is superior to even the protagonist Rāmā in the matter of caste⁷ but because of his vices, his rigorous spiritual currency earned via penance and knowledge is brought to naught in the story. Within the religio-cultural realm, however, he is still praised and worshipped for his knowledge, as proven by examples of multiple temples and traditions mentioned above that honour him. Valmiki sporadically offers explanations into Rāvaṇā's spiritual greatness. He writes, "Rāvaṇā is a great soul... but because of the power of his penance, he was not burnt even though he touched her (Sita's) hand (5.59.3-4)".

Also, as the story proceeds, Rāvaṇā's potential for good and greatness is acknowledged by other characters as well. In the "Sundar Kaand", Hanuman observes: "How great is this demon king, an endowment of all merits. If only this lord of demons was not unrighteous, he could have become even the lord (protector) of gods including Indra (5.49.17-18)". Furthermore, even Rāmā notices Rāvaṇā's "glory," and "majesty," differentiating him from gods and demons altogether:

Rāvaṇā is beaming like the sun with his rays difficult to be gazed, neither can the eye rest on him such is the binding strength of his magnificence! The body of celestial or demonical heroes may not be so radiant in this manner as this body of the king of demons. (6.59)

Rāvaṇā is a plausible example of the complexity of and contradictions within dharma (especially its aspect of social duty). For instance, in Valmiki *Rāmāyaṇā*, he is the son of a Brahmin (the highest caste of learned men), thus making him a Brahmin. His mother Kaikasi, however, is a rakshasa, a race believed equivalent to demons. Even though Rāvaṇā is mostly known as a Rakshasa, his parentage makes him a half- Brahmin and half- Rakshasa. Rāvaṇā is thus a combination of contradictions; of highs and lows. The rakshasas are accused to

⁷ Rama belongs to the Kshatriya caste, which ranks lower than the Brahmin caste. Ravana is a Brahmin on his father's side and a Rakshasa on his mother's.

be "the destroyers of brahmins (3.20.11)" in the texts. Rāvaṇā's dharma, duty, and nature, are in conflict. He is an extremely learned Brahmin who performs *yajnas* or fire rituals, knows all the scriptures, and performs penance for many years which requires severe self-sacrifice, earning him boons from the gods. But as a rakshasa, it is his *svadharmā* (personal duty) to be self-indulgent and make chaos. This state of his being emphasises the oxymoronic blend of good and evil within him.

The creation of a conflicted core in a character serves the didactic purpose of the epic by giving Rāvaṇā the potential of being a hero. Nonetheless, this potential, his penance, and his life before abducting Sita, for that matter, are never explicitly explored in the epic before Rāvaṇā's death. The Rāvaṇā one comes across in the first six books is the obvious villain with undercurrents of such potential. Still a Rāvaṇā cannot be Rāvaṇā without this unfulfilled potential. Thus Rāvaṇā's ambiguity forms an essential part of the core didactic essence of the tale and the awareness of such coexisting and contradicting multiplicity is an integral quality of the Rāmāyaṇā tradition.

Vimalasuri's *Paumacariyam* and *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*:

The first Jaina Rāmāyaṇā, Vimalasuri's *Paumacariyam* (dated between first to fifth century) is one of the earliest written texts in the Rāmāyaṇā tradition. Not only does it vastly differ from Valmiki's text, it is also one of the first retellings of the tale that directly questions Valmiki's telling on various points. Vimalasuri's Rāvaṇā is not a demon with multiple heads but a rational and believable human. He is a great king and an ardent Jaina devotee who has proved himself worthy through his hard work and penance.

Being one of the main characters of *Paumacariyam*, a substantial amount of space is allotted to the depiction of Rāvaṇā's noble birth, penance, knowledge, adventures, feats, and glorious being. His Carita or character sketch takes precedence to the main narrative. Physically attractive, learned and brave, he is rendered a grand figure and a great king, loved by his family, friends, and kingdom. Although there is no denying that he is in the wrong, there is an attempt to justify and redeem his character, while questioning and countering the beliefs in Valmiki's telling. Vimalasuri depicts Rāvaṇā as a super-human counter-hero; his role explored and expanded upon so that one understands the character more than as a mere antagonist.

The first noted Rāmāyaṇā is believed to be a Buddhist Rāmāyaṇā called the *Daśaratha-Jātaka* but it has no Rāvaṇā. Another Buddhist text, *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (first published in the fifth century C.E.), has only Rāvaṇā and no other Rāmāyaṇā character. It is mainly a philosophical treatise of Buddha preaching to Rāvaṇā and other Rakshasas willing to learn about Mahayana Buddhism. Rāvaṇā, referred to as the “Lord of Lanka” or “Lord of the Rakshasas” throughout the text, is an inquisitive learner here who invites Buddha to teach him the ways of a Buddhist life. Rāvaṇā asks two questions: “(1) what is the distinction between dharma and adharma, and. (2) how could one pass beyond both dharma and adharma?” (qtd. in Vidyābhūṣaṇa 833). One may note how evil exists here only in the way that the characters want to be rid of it, asking for Buddha’s advice. The Buddhist text relates how Rāvaṇā

found himself abiding in the Buddha-knowledge when a voice was heard from the sky, saying, 'It is to be known by oneself.' 'Well done, well done, Lord of Lanka! Well done indeed, Lord of Lanka, once again. The Yogin is to discipline himself as you do. The Tathāgatas and all things are to be viewed as you view them. (qtd. in Hamlin 271)

Conclusion:

In the history of Indian ethics, according to R.N. Sharma, “Rāmāyaṇā has [always] been the basis of popular ethics...right from the Epic age till our own time... It can be, therefore, rightly considered as the most important and valid book of ethics in India” (7). This book of Indian ethics is also used as a meaning-making symbol. In today’s times, Rāmāyaṇā has come to represent socio-cultural hegemony within the context of its association with Hinduism. It is believed to be extremely polarized and politicized so that it is a readymade framework for creating binaries, and specifically creating an other. It is a text that determines or helps determine otherness.

Yet, when studied amidst the crossroads of disciplines like mythology, philosophy, history, literature, and religion, while acknowledging the need of doing so from the context of an epistemology that relies on plurality, diversity, and contextuality, the study of Rāmāyaṇā counters structures of homogenization and hegemony.

By looking at the Rāmāyaṇā tradition from such a perspective, its scholarship stands to gain on its capability of highlighting and sustaining plurality and diversity, in the stead of looking at a text of binaries and “othering”. Rāmāyaṇā tradition must be acknowledged for its capability to hold co-existing contradictions, be they of the tellings, the characters, or even the identities of the self and the other. This paper hopes to highlight the scope of interdisciplinary humanities in re-shifting perspective from looking at our literary traditions and socio-political realities in binaries, to acknowledging plurality, contextuality, and difference.

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