

**REWORKING OF MYTH: A STUDY OF SRIKANTAN
NAIR'S TRILOGY *SAKETAM*, *LANKALEKSHMI*
AND *KANCHANASITA***

DISSERTATION

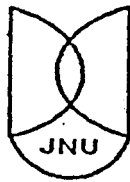
Submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University

in partial fulfilment for the award of the degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

in English Language and Literature

VEENA N M



**CENTRE OF LINGUISTICS AND ENGLISH
SCHOOL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND CULTURE STUDIES
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
NEW DELHI
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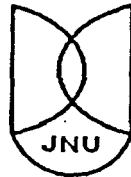
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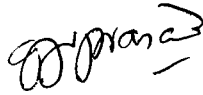
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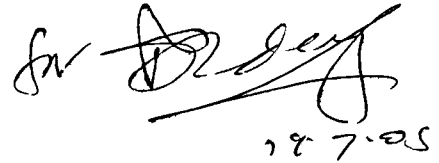
Certified that this dissertation entitled, *Reworking of Myth: A Study of Srikantan Nair's trilogy Saketam, Lankalekshmi and Kanchanasita*, submitted by Veena.N.M to the Centre of Linguistics and English, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy is her original work and has not been submitted, in part or full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other university/institution. This may, therefore, be placed before the Examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Literature at all times has relied on myths and writers in different genres have recast them in new forms. In other words, literature has always created and recreated myths. Thus there exists an inseparable relationship between myth and literature. Writers and critics of myth also establish the universal nature and its relevance in the modern times beyond doubt. Though it refers back to primitive times the significance is always related to the eternal problems and concerns of humanity. Myths, always touch on man's basic relation to his world and his fellowmen, his original roots, his future possibilities and his destiny. The myth unfolds the living chain, which connects the recurrent recognizable scenes of the human drama.

The term 'myth' is derived from the Greek word 'mythos' which signified any story or plot, whether true or invented. In its central significance, a myth is one story in a mythology – a system of hereditary stories, which were once believed to be true by a particular group. Most myths are related to social rituals, but anthropologists disagree as to whether rituals generated myths or myths generated rituals. If the protagonist is a person rather than a supernatural being, the traditional story is usually not called a myth, but a legend. If the story concerns

supernatural beings who are not gods, and the story is not part of a systematic mythology, it is usually classified as a folktale (Abrams 122).

Later the range of applicability of myth was extended to higher and wider levels of meaning such as history and communication. For a mythologist, myths are colourful pieces that constitute the beautiful mosaic of a people's cosmology, which is the totality of the world in which they live their cosmos. Bronislaw Malinowski defines myth, as "a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions even practical requirements" (Feder 6). Myths are thus narratives or stories reflecting the aspirations, ambitions, gains and losses of a particular group, which are preserved through specific rites and observances. It tries to establish rationale for customs and rites that shaped the lives of the people in ancient society and thereby they project the psychic occupations and instinctual drives of men in primitive times.

Myth is also related to man's basic and instinctual drive to search for his roots and to return to it, as it tries to resolve the dichotomy between mutability and immutability. For T.S.Eliot, it is a combination of contemporaneity and antiquity as he observes while speaking of James Joyce's *Ulysses* "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him" (Feder 26). Myth

and literature are the two ways through which we enter the labyrinth of life in order to unravel the intricacies and complexities of existence. Literature is life-giving myth and myth is life-giving literature. In the greatest ages of literature, there has always been a power of preserving a balance between the two opposing elements – the expression of boundless primitive emotions and the subtle representation of life.

In the modern age there has been a rejuvenated interest in mythology and its use in art mainly due to the new insights provided by the studies in different branches of knowledge. All these researches were tinged with sociological, ideological and philosophical nuances. Many writers have even tried to categorize myth in different forms like utopias, dystopias, anti-utopias, surreal-utopias, science fiction etc. Myth is also related to different branches of knowledge like anthropology, psychology, theology and philosophy. It is humanistic as it is concerned with day-to-day life of man. It has got psychological overtones, which are dominant in the studies made by Sigmund Freud and C.G.Jung. It is sociological as it investigates the basic cultural patterns, which are central to its aesthetic appeal. Above all, it is non-historic and eternal as it demonstrates the timeless value of literature, independent of particular episodes. It has got an appeal to humanity as a whole in a work of art.

From the 1950s onwards, myth criticism was in vogue. An archetype, for critics like Frye is not an image derived from Jungian racial memory, but it is a symbol or an image that recurs often enough in literature. Frye is the chief advocate of Archetypal criticism and he says that archetypes give uniformity and integrity to a poem. It often extends beyond a single work and integrates our literary experience. His proto-structuralist approach views genres as archetypes and tries to study the whole body of literature to appreciate the continuity of forms and images across widely disparate cultures. Frye says: "

Myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual and archetypal narrative to the oracle. Hence the myth is the archetype, though it might be convenient to say myth only when referring to narrative and archetype when speaking of significance (Lodge 429).

S.K.Desai and G.N.Devy in their book *An Anthology of Twentieth Century English Essays* observes, "Myth like beauty, dwells among the rocks and a man must wear his heart out before he reaches her. Like beauty it is partly inherited, but most assiduously cultivated"(Desai and Devy 98). The above said statement shows that writer should have a thorough understanding of the myth and this understanding would help him in recreating the myth from a different perspective. Thus myths have always been a source of inspiration for writers all over the world and if we analyze the dominant themes in the Indian literary scenario, we find that

mythology and history forms the two major sources for literary creations. The treatment of mythological themes in modern Indian languages is both a continuation of the earlier traditions as well as new and conspicuous feature that emerged only in the nineteenth century.

Mythological writing undoubtedly form a part of the residual tradition in certain languages but they also emerged as dominant streams in those which were under a strong Western influence and where writers were critical of the traditional themes and forms. Sisir Kumar Das points out that two observations can be made when we examine mythological writings:

The first and foremost feature to be indicated is the pan-Indian character of the myths. If there is any common core of Indian literature, if there are materials that are shared by Indians all over the country is the mythology of India. They have created a deep structure on which are constructed new images and allegories, fables and parables, types and archetypes. These deep structures have become a part of the psyche of the whole literary community, irrespective of the levels of education among them and ideology and religious faith that divide them in varying degrees. Their presence in the sub-conscious of the community is partly manifested in the proverbs and idioms and certain lexical items within which the myths lie dormant (Das 125-126).

Myths are even more strong binding force **than** the materials of history. The history that is used by authors is often **confined** to a particular region to which they are emotionally attached, but the **same** is not the case with myths. The mythological themes, for example, are **recurrent** in Indian drama and poetry, but are rarely used in prose narratives. The historical themes on the other hand are as frequent in prose narratives as in the drama **and** poetry. The two major myths **that** have been used widely by Indian writers in **their** literary works are the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha*. In this dissertation I will focus mainly on the influence of the myth of *Ramayana* on literary creation and its **reworkings**, with special reference to Srikantan Nair's trilogy of plays in Malayalam. The introductory chapter will trace the literary history of Malayalam literature starting from one of the earliest poetic version of the *Ramayana* story, **translations** from other languages, various factors that had lead to the production of serious **plays** influenced by Henrik Ibsen to the time when C.N. Srikantan Nair entered the literary scene with his trilogy of *Ramayana* plays.

According to the most dependable **evidence** now available to us, Malayalam literature is at least a thousand years old. The language must certainly be older, but linguistic research has yet to **discover** unmistakable evidence to prove its antiquity. Historical accuracy has **often been** a problem since the records in most cases show no reference to the exact **date** of their composition. Legends

and folklore have often taken the place of historical facts and chronology has been consciously or unconsciously tampered with. Modern research on scientific lines, however, has gone a long way to explain the origin and early development of the language.

A comprehensive literary history of Kerala should take into account the works produced in the region not only in Malayalam language, but also in Tamil, beginning with the fourth century B.C. and continuing to the end of the first millennium A.D. It should also trace the evolution of the works in Sanskrit produced by writers in Kerala. The contribution of Tamil literature to Kerala, which includes *Chilappadikaram* produced in the 2nd century B.C., should perhaps find its proper place in the history of Tamil literature just as Kerala's contribution to Sanskrit, which includes the works of Sankaracharya and Kulasekhara Alwar of the early 9th century A.D., should come within a history of Sanskrit literature.

The evidence for the beginning of conscious literary creation in Malayalam is to be found in *Ramacharitam*, written in the 12th century and believed to be the oldest extant classic in Malayalam. The language represented here is an early form of Malayalam, which appears to be almost indistinguishable from Tamil, except perhaps for a linguist. *Ramacharitam* is the earliest of the many poetic versions, written in the model of 'pattu' (which literally means 'song') of the story of

Ramayana that have appeared in Malayalam. The work mainly deals with Yuddhakanda of Valmiki's *Ramayana* and thus important from the linguistic as well as the literary point of view. Ulloor Parameswara Iyer who was the first to bring to light long excerpts from this poem, holds the view that it was written by Sri Veera Rama Varma who ruled over Travancore from 1195 to 1208. *Ramacharitam* is also taken to the greatest work belonging to the Pattu School. Cheeraman, the author, as his name is given in the poem itself, has adapted to suit a Dravidian sensibility, a story that is unmistakably of Aryan origin. The work retells the story of *Ramayana* and the author tries to follow Valmiki in all essential details. With the coming of *Ramacharitam*, the story of became the major theme for poems, prose, drama and Thullal.

Malayalam literature passed through a tremendous process of development in the 15th and 16th Centuries. Cherusseri's *Krishnagatha* bore witness to the evolution of modern Malayalam language as a proper medium for serious poetic communication. Thunchattu Ezhuthachan, the greatest Malayalam poet of all time, wrote his two great epics *Adhyatma Ramayanam* and *Srimahabharatam* and two shorter pieces, *Irupattinalu Vrittam* and *Harinama Kirtanam* in the middle of 16th century and thereby revolutionized Malayalam language and literature at once. He is rightly regarded as the 'maker of modern Malayalam' and the 'father of Malayalam poetry'.

The main development in the cultural field in Kerala in the 17th century was the growth of a new form of visual art called 'Attam' or 'Kathakali', which brought into being a new genre of poetry called 'Attakkatha' consisting of the libretto used for a Kathakali performance. The *Ramayana* plays of Kottarakkara Thampuran are not distinguished by literary excellence. However, his farsightedness is clearly revealed in the structure he set up for this new genre. Kilimanoor Vidwan Rajaraja Varma Koyithampuran (1812-1846, also known as Kareendran) is chiefly remembered for his Attakkatha, *Ravana Vijayam*, one of the most popular of Attakkathas. The roles of Ravana and Rambha are particularly suited to the Kathakali style of presentation, and although part of the play represents a rape, the highly stylized gestures and movements and the lyrical quality of the verse considerably tone down its crudity. It was from this new genre of art that drama took its form in the later years.

Nineteenth century was not a very creative period for Malayalam literature, except towards the end, from the point of view of imaginative writing. But the foundations for the great Renaissance that began at the end of the century were laid during this period. The establishment of colleges for imparting English education, the translation of the Bible and other religious works, the compilation of dictionaries and grammars, the formation of the text book committee, the growth of printing presses, the starting of newspapers and periodicals, the introduction of science and technology, the beginning of industrialization and the

awakening of social and political consciousness: all these constitute the giant strides towards modernization. It would appear as if the people's, energies were totally consumed by these activities.

In the history of drama, we find the Indian tradition trying to adjust itself to the growing influence of European drama and the same trend was reflected in Malayalam drama too. The Portuguese brought into Kerala their Miracle plays that supplied the inspiration for 'Chavittunatakam'. One of the earliest examples of this type is *Genoa* (date not known). Among the historical plays that followed were *Caralman Charitam*, dealing with Emperor Charlemagne's exploits and *Napoleon Charitam*.

This period of foreign influence was later followed by a spurt of translation of literary works into Malayalam from other languages. Thus the first translation of a Shakespearean play *Almarattam (A Comedy of Errors)* came out in 1866. The close of the 19th century saw the beginning of the modern Malayalam drama with the publication of the Malayalam translation of Kalidasa's *Shakuntalam* (1880) by Kerala Varma Valia Koil Thampuran and this translation marks the period of Sanskrit influence in Malayalam drama. Kerala Varma represents the confluence of two major traditions in literature, the Indian as represented by the Sanskrit classics and the Western represented by English/European classics. His translation of Kalidasa's *Abhinjana Sakuntalam* (completed in 1882), and of Von Limburg

Brower's *Akbar* (started in 1882) clearly illustrates the historic role of a synthesizer, which he was destined to play on the cultural front of Kerala. In the wake of Kerala Varma's translation of Kalidasa's *Abhinjana Sakuntalam* (which got him the title of Kerala Kalidasa) several attempts were made to translate numerous plays from Sanskrit and English into Malayalam.

Chathukutty Mannadiar translated Ramabadrashita's *Uttararamacharitham* and *Janakiparinayam* into Malayalam in 1889. Thus many plays were translated, but these plays were seldom acted. The stage conditions of those days were crude and unfit to project a performance. Most writers did not care for or know enough of the technique of stage presentation. This delayed the growth of an indigenous dramatic form and structure in the language. Numerous plays on the model of Sanskrit drama- using both prose and verse-came to be written about this time.

It also led to numerous other translations, few of which were put on stage. C.V.Raman Pillai's *Chandramukhivilasam* (1885), Kochunni Tampuran's *Kalyani Kalyanam* (1888), K.C.Kesava Pillai's *Lakshmi Kalyanam* (1893), Kandathil Varghese Mappila's *Ebrayakutty* (1894) as well as *Kalahinidamanakam* (Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*) and Kocheepan Tharakan's *Mariamamma* (1903) were major landmarks in the growth of Malayalam drama. C.V's *Chandramukhivilasam* is a combination of Sanskrit elements and western

elements. *Mariamamma* dramatizes the characteristically Christian domestic problem of the conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The use of dialect is realistic and effective and the play is clearly modeled on western social problem play in prose interspersed with quatrains in verse. As a revolt against such translated plays and with a view to discouraging the plethora of plays of low quality, P.Rama Kurup came up with his comedy *Chakki Chankaram* (1894). The play was in the form of English farce and it was aimed at reforming the taste and sensibility of the upper middle class.

C.V.Raman Pillai returned to the stage in 1909 with *Kurupillakalari* (*A School without a Teacher*), a prose comedy along the lines of the comedies of Goldsmith and Sheridan. In the play, the henpecked husband and the westernized English-educated lady are satirized. The play proved to be an effective social satire. His real contribution to drama perhaps consists of dramatizations of his famous historical novels: they are among the best historical plays still put on stage. K.P. Karuppan's *Balakalesam* (1914) is a play with a message, although traditional in form. It advocates progressive measures of social reform in unmistakable terms and calls upon the government to put an end to caste practices by law and to promote the education and upliftment of the lower classes. The traditional kind of verse used in it may be said to give an added sharpness to its social criticism. It is prophetic in this sense and provoked bitter opposition at the time.

E.V.Krishna Pillai (1895-1938) inherited from C.V.Raman Pillai the tradition of social comedy on the one hand and historical tragedy on the other. E.V.'s native comic gift was put to good use in his *Pranayakkammishan* (1932), *B.A.Mayavi* (1933) and *Vivahakammattam* (1934). Since he himself was an actor, he could exploit the devices of stage presentation effectively. The serious side of his personality found expression in his historical tragedies: *Sitalakshmi* (1926), *Raja Kesava Dasan* (1930) and *Iravikutty Pillai* (1934). They are really the dramatic counterparts to C.V.Raman Pillai's fictional representation of history.

N.P.Chellappan Nair, M.G.Kesava Pillai and T.N.Gopinathan Nair pursued E.V.'s comic legacy. His tragic heritage was sustained and improved upon by Kainikkara Padmanabha Pillai with his *Velu Thampi Dalava* and *Kalvariyle Kalpapadapam* (1934) a play based on the life of Jesus Christ; Kappan Krishan Menon with his *Cheraman Perumal* and *Pazhassi Raja*; Kainikkara Kumara Pillai with his *Harishchandran* (1934), *Mohavum Muktiyum* (1938) and Kuttanad Ramakrishna Pillai with his *Taptabashpam* (1934). The part played by Shri Chithira Tirunal Vayanasala, Thiruvananthapuram, in promoting the writing of new plays every year for the annual performance on the Maharaja's birthday is very significant in this regard, although on many occasions the performances had to be satisfied with second-rate or third-rate plays. But it has kept up the longest

continuous tradition in amateur acting in Thiruvananthapuram, which is a rare achievement in itself.

Malayalam drama underwent a significant development in the 1930's. The main reason for this development was the introduction of the Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen to the writers of Malayalam drama. The critic A. Balakrishna Pillai played an important role in popularizing the dramas of Ibsen among the Malayalam playwrights. Thus in 1940 C.Narayana Pillai translated Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*. The dramatists took drama more seriously and used drama as a powerful instrument for social awakening. These characteristic features can be seen in the two plays based on the Brahmin community in Malabar, where human experience was given importance. The play *Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku* (*From the Kitchen to the Scene of Action*, 1929) by V.T.Raman Bhattathiripad is the first play in Malayalam to have a definite and concrete social objective and also traces the history of the liberation of the Namboothiri women. It was an epoch-making play, mainly because of its ideological thrust. *Ritumati* (*The Nubile Maiden*, 1938) by M.P.Bhattathiripad is play with a sociological bias, mainly focusing attention on social reform among Namboothiri Community. K.Damodaran's *Pattabakki* (*Rental Arrears*, 1936) is also significant as it is the first play on a socio-political theme that is different from the conventional type of commercial drama without any serious thought in it.

The historic struggles in the 1940s had far reaching implications in every sphere of life of the Indian people. The works that were produced during this period had strong ideological currents, which is also evident in the works produced in Malayalam literature. New playwrights like N.Krishna Pillai, Pulimana Parameswaran Pillai, Edasseri Govindan Nair and C.J.Thomas brought into the stage in Kerala the much-needed seriousness of genuine tragedy through the front door itself. N.Krishna Pillai had declared his intentions as a playwright in categorical terms: "the ideal play, as far as I am concerned, is one in which some serious and fundamental human problem is realistically analyzed and handled with the utmost concentration, avoiding wastage in words, dialogues, situations and characters. This ideal was instilled in me by Ibsen whom I consider to be the most successful master dramatist of the modern age and hence have attempted to emulate, with discrimination, his dramatic form and technique in my plays" (Cherian 146).

The year 1942 proved to be a landmark in the history of modern Malayalam drama since it saw the production of *Bhagna Bhavanam (The Broken House)* by N.Krishna Pillai, which is believed to have heralded the Ibsenite movement in Malayalam literature. Krishna Pillai's other major works include *Kanyaka (The Virgin, 1944)* and *Balaabalam (The Trial of Strength, 1946)*. Pulimana Parameswaran Pillai's *Samatvavadi (The Socialist, 1944)* is an important work as it

employs the expressionist device with consummate skill. Edasseri Govindan Nair's *Koottukrishi (Joint Farming, 1950)* emphasized the value of rustic realism.

The fifties and early sixties were the period of stage musicals, often with a pronounced socio-political bias. Thoppil Bhasi, N.N.Pillai, K.T.Mohammed, G.Sankara Pillai and Kavalam Narayana Panicker, among others, have kept the theatre active and meaningful during the post-independence period. The credit for the evolution of truly modernist plays in Malayalam can be attributed to the two playwrights C.J.Thomas and C.N.Srikantan Nair. C.J.Thomas focused on events from the Bible to express his views on man and society, while Srikantan Nair turned to *Ramayana* to embody the ideas of love, power and justice. Srikantan Nair was a major innovator of Malayalam drama along with C.J.Thomas.

C.J.Thomas gave a new dimension to the serious problem play with his plays *Crime 27 of 1128 (1954)*, *Avan Veendum Varunnu (He Cometh Again, 1955)*, and *Aa Manushan Nee Thanne (Thou Art That Man, 1955)*. Each of these plays is a masterpiece in a different way: the first play deals with the disabled soldier returning home from the war front only to find his wife carrying the child of his best friend and neighbour; the second play is a mixture of fantasy and realism in the manner of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, but in spirit closer to the absurd drama of Beckett and Ionesco and the third is a costume play based on the story of David and Bethsaba, emphasizing the spiritual

crisis in David's life. C.J.Thomas' experimental urge achieves its magnificent fulfillment in his *Crime 27 of 1128* (1954). C.J.Thomas gave total expression to his concept of drama - neither tragedy nor comedy alone, but both at the same time, each seeking its justification in the other. The only play that could be put on stage during the author's lifetime was *Aa Manushan Nee Thanne*; the other two have been successfully staged since his death in 1960. C.J.Thomas has also translated a few European classics into Malayalam like *Antigone* and *King Odeipus* of Sophocles, *Ghosts* of Ibsen, *The Miser* of Moliere and *The Life of Insects* of the Capek brothers.

C.N.Srikantan Nair made a landmark in the history of post independent Malayalam theatre by making a serious venture in the midst of innumerable populist theatre practice with his trilogy based on *Ramayana*. Srikantan Nair (1928-1976) is one of the modernist dramatists in Malayalam. He was the son of Madavoor Neelakantan Pillai and Chavara Madhavikutty. His father who was an advocate by profession had left the job to participate in the freedom struggle movement and also worked actively with the State Congress. Srikantan Nair completed his schooling from Chavara, Kollam; completed his intermediate from Trivandrum University College and B.A. from Sanathana Dharma College, Alapuzha. He actively participated in politics right from the time he was in college. In 1947 he was elected as the President of All Travancore Students Congress and the next year he became the Vice President of All India Students

Congress. In 1957 he contested in the Assembly election from Varkala, but lost in the election. By 1960, he retired from active politics completely.

He started writing right from his college days and his first short story was published in *Prabodham (Knowledge)* in 1949. In 1959 he started his career as a journalist by working with *Navabharatham*, *Kaumudi*, *Tharapadham* - Film magazine, *Kaumudi* newspaper, *Desabandhu* - magazine and *Kerala Bhooshanam* newspaper. He also worked as the Information Officer in the Public Relations Department of Kerala Government from 1960-1963, but he resigned from the post in 1963.

C.N.Srikantan Nair entered the literary scene in the late 1950s, a time when many people who fought against the system in general have given up their fight and agreed for a compromise with the system. *Nashtakachavatam* was his first play written in 1957, followed by *Aa Kani Thinnaruthu* (1959), *Kanchanasita* (1961), *Eettile Pashu* (1962), *Madhuvidhu* (1965), *Sneham*, *Bhakti* (1968), *Manyathayude Mara* (1975), *Lankalekshmi* (1975) and *Kali* (1977). As a dramatist, C.N had his own theatrical view and he is one of the few dramatist who had a thorough idea of the theatre as well as the visual and folk arts. He also had a better understanding of the importance of visual effects in drama and considered drama as mixture of various art forms like acting, dance, literature, music and so

on. As C.N has claimed that “drama is a visual art and it is been written to be performed on the stage” (Vijayaraghavan 113-114).

The Amateur Theatre in Trivandrum has moulded his theatrical interest initially when he started writing. He started his career as dramatist by writing plays for this theatre group. Before his entry in the literary field, the literary scene was dominated by the farces written by C.V.Raman Pillai and E.V.Krishna Pillai. The farces were popular, which primarily catered to the taste of the educated population only. The immediate need of the time was, however, for plays that would deal more with the issues of life rather than mere farces and comedies. The characteristic feature that underlies his works is his search for a theatrical model of his own. He also believed that drama is contained not in the lives of ordinary people, but in the lives of people of high stature. He was also influenced by the Greek elements of tragedy, which is evident in his play *Saketam*.

The first play in the trilogy is *Saketam*, which deals with the character of Dasharatha, who tries to retain his individuality and lose his ideology, while Rama of *Kanchanasita* lose his individuality in the quest to uphold Rama Rajya, the ideal state. *Lankalekshmi* the tale of Ravana, a character who aspires for power and whose personal shortcomings lead to the inevitable catastrophe, comes midway between Dasharatha of *Saketam* and Rama of *Kanchanasita*. In *Saketam* C.N. initiates a different performance pattern based on the influences from

European and Indian classical theatre **tradition**. The two plays in the **trilogy** written in the seventies, *Saketam* and *Lankalekshmi* have at its rational kernel the major ethnic contradiction, that of Aryan and Dravidian. The tragic trilogy takes Malayalam theatre and performance to a **highly individualistic** plane with **serious** theatrical implications.

Except for the play *Lankalekshmi*, the other two plays in the trilogy *Saketam* and *Kanchanasita* has not been translated to English. So in the dissertation the quotations from the *Saketam* and *Kanchanasita* are my translations.

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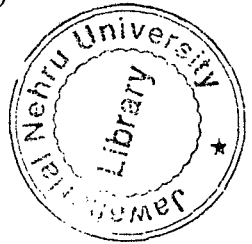
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CHAPTER 2

THE MORAL DILEMMA OF DECISION IN *SAKETAM*

Paula Richman in her book *Questioning Ramayanas* talks about the two major models of Ramayana tradition – one, which belongs to the scholarly tradition and the other model developed by the philologists. In the former model, the Ramayana of Valmiki is considered as the “ur” or the “original”, i.e., it is considered as the authoritative telling of Rama’s story and all other tellings are identified in terms of how they diverge from the original. The philological model applies the metaphor of a family lineage to a collection of manuscripts. The central focus in this model is genealogy and thus it focuses upon discovering which text has developed out of which previous text or texts. Since both these models had limitations A.K.Ramanujan developed an alternative way to conceptualize the *Ramayana* tradition. He argued that we should abandon the binary notion of “the Ramayana” and “its variants”. He claims “no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling”. Thus he brought in the model of “Many Ramayanas”, where each telling of Rama’s is considered to be valid in its own right. Such an approach encourages us to consider how the tellings are in consonance with region, language, historical period, literary conventions and the teller’s social location and experiences. (Richman 3 – 5). Thus if viewed from the model that is put forward by A.K.Ramanujan, Srikantan Nair’s trilogy can be considered as various tellings of the *Ramayana*.

Based on the explorations of the mythology, the subject of Srikantan Nair’s plays reflects the problems and challenges of contemporary life. Thus his trilogy based on *Ramayana* is the representation of the tug of war for power within the

political system. This basic feature that is evident in most of his plays is the reflection of his own political life and experiences. Chronologically, the order of the appearance of the plays in the trilogy is *Kanchanasita* in 1958, followed by *Saketam* in 1964 and *Lankalekshmi* in 1974; thematically, the order of the three plays is *Saketam*, followed by *Lankalekshmi* and *Kanchanasita*. In this dissertation I will be analyzing the three plays thematically which would help to sustain the continuity of the story. When Srikantan Nair started writing *Saketam*, after a span of six years of his first play in the trilogy, he had changed much as a dramatist because his focus had shifted from dramatic composition to stage presentations and techniques. Another shift that is observable in his writing was his renewed interest in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, as he made more detailed and in depth study of the *Ramayana* and this is evident in his later plays *Saketam* and *Lankalekshmi*.

The source of Srikantan Nair's play *Saketam* is from the 'Ayodhya Kanda' of *Ramayana*. A disrupted coronation, the exile of Rama and the death of Dasharatha form the major events of the play. The play is the dramatization of the story of sin, which is presented as something that is the result of the sinful deed committed by Dasharatha against his will. The central character of the play, Dasharatha, is depicted as an individual who is caught up in an environment that is complicated by desire. He decides to crown Rama as the King of Ayodhya without consulting Kaikeyi and Bharatha and this forms the crux of the story of sin. At the time of his marriage to Kaikeyi he had promised her father to give her the kingdom and Dasharatha's transgression from his promise forces him to take a decision against his will that ultimately results in the exile of Rama.

The play begins and also ends with a sloka from the Bhagavadgita. The playwright had taken the sloka from the third section of the Bhagavadgita, where Lord Krishna tells Arjuna about the source of sin, to give emphasis to the central theme of the play:

Atha kena prayukthoyam
Paapam charathi purusha
Anichennapi vaarshneya
Bhalaadhiva niyogita?

(*Saketam 25*)

Later in the play Dasharatha explains the **summary** of the sloka to Kausalya, that “even if humans do not long to do sinful **deeds** in their life, they commit **the same** as a result of the working of some **unknown forces**” and that “man **cannot free** himself from this sin” (*Saketam 54*).

The play has three acts and begins with **the entry** of the narrator on the stage. The playwright gives the narrator a role in **the play** even though he is not a **character** in the play. Thus the first act begins with **the narrator** (Suthradharan) **introducing** himself to the audience and also explains **the reason** for his presence **on the stage**. He addresses the audience by saying that

...the playwright insisted that the **narrator** should also play a **part in the** drama. So I thought of doing the **part too!**

(*Saketam 25*)

He, then briefly gives an account of the **story** that is going to be staged **and the** context - - which includes the remorse and **agony** of Dasharatha for not **having** a child from any of his three queens Kausalya, **Kaikeyi** and Sumitra; how **then three** sons were born to them by taking **sweetened rice**; and also the curse, which looms large in Dasharatha’s mind. The narrator **introduces** the other characters of **the** play to the audience and also explains the **important event** that is going to take

place, which is the coronation of Rama as the successor of Ayodhya. Thus the narrator plays an important role by bringing in the various threads of the story together and making the plot an organic whole.

The plot of the play begins with the events in the royal court of Ayodhya. As Dasharatha feels that old age is fast approaching him, he resolves to crown his favourite son Rama, as his successor. Regarding this he asks the family priest Vashishta to make all the necessary arrangements for the coronation. Sage Vashishta conveys the news of Dasharatha's decision to make Rama the successor to Kausalya and she expresses her happiness. But at the same time she is doubtful regarding the reaction of Kaikeyi to this news. She reminds Vashishta of the Dasharatha's promise to Kaikeyi's father at the time of marriage that he would give the kingdom to Kaikeyi. Vashishta comforts her by saying that:

At the time when Dasharatha married Kaikeyi, he was childless and this prompted him to make such a promise to Asvapathi, Kaikeyi's father. Now Asvapathi is no more and moreover Rama is Kaikeyi's favourite too. She would not mind if Rama becomes the King of Ayodhya instead of her own son Bharatha.

(Saketam 28)

To this Kausalya asks Vashishta that:

Is not a promise a solemn oath that one makes? ... And that an oath is a truth that should not be transgressed.

(Saketam 28)

She also inquires whether the news of coronation had been send to Bharatha and Shatrughan. These statements show the **apprehension** in Kausalya's **mind** that something bad is going to happen. While **they** are discussing the issue, **Rama** enters and they wait for Dasharatha to arrive **and** give him the news of coronation himself. The first act, thus primarily deals **with** Dasharatha's decision to make Rama the King and the arrangements for the **coronation** ceremony.

The second act begins with the description of Kaikeyi who is resting on her bed and the description is as follows,

Kaikeyi, who looks beautiful in all her **embellishments**, was resting on her bed. Her youth has not faded yet

(Saketam 33)

The significant action that takes place in the second act is the way in which Manthara poisons Kaikeyi against Dasharatha's decision. Manthara, the hunchbacked maid of Queen Kaikeyi, is the one who gives the news of Rama's coronation to Kaikeyi. She tells her that Dasharatha had cheated her and her son. She incites Kaikeyi by saying that she should prevail upon the King to make her son Bharatha the successor to the throne. The way in which Manthara poisons Kaikeyi's mind is abominable, but then, it is she who helps to cast the dice that reflects the shadow of the coming event. In Kamban's Ramayana and the Thai versions there are explanations regarding the reason for Manthara's grudge towards Rama. According to the Thai version, Rama as child had shot at her hunch so forcibly that it was made to shift back and forth (Thiel-Horstmann 11).

She reminds Kaikeyi of the boon that was promised by Dasharatha when he was fighting a demon and Kaikeyi prevented his chariot from collapsing by putting her finger into the hub as an axle pin. Kaikeyi, at the instigation of

Manthara, decides to ask for the two boons that Dasharatha had previously promised. She forces him to swear on the name of Rama that he will do whatever she wishes. Thus she asks the King that he should send Rama into exile for fourteen years and make her son Bharatha the successor to the throne. The King is now in a dilemma, as he cannot refuse to her as he has promised boons to her earlier, and at the same time he cannot ask Rama to go into exile for fourteen years.

It is because of Kaikeyi, within whom the green-eyed monster groans at the instigation of the wicked maid that leads to the further development of the plot, which paves the way for the final catastrophe. It could also be said that had not Manthara sown the seed of jealousy in Kaikeyi's mind, the latter would not have compelled the old and feeble Dasharatha to banish his son. As a result the epic would not have progressed and would have ended happily with the crowning of the prince Rama. Thus there would also hardly be any scope for the weaving the course of events.

Kaikeyi sets forth the proposition, which Dasharatha eventually accepts, which is an indication of her power over him:

How can you collapse like this and lie on the floor, as though you deemed it a sin to fulfill the promise you made to me? You must perform your obligation.

(Saketam 38)

He repudiates her, yet his rage does not provide him with all he needs to make a dharmic choice. His dilemma seems insoluble, but he decides to keep his promise regardless of the consequences that would create. Dasharatha is in a double bind,

as he had promised the kingdom to Rama which everyone aware of and he had also granted boons to Kaikeyi. He consoles himself by the fact that he must be suffering the karma of his previous actions.

Dasharatha had made arrangements for the crowning ceremony in a hurry, when Bharatha was not present in Ayodhya, and also without letting his decision known to Kaikeyi. The reason behind such a hurried decision by Dasharatha was his affection for Rama and his duty towards the people. Another reason could also be the fear in his mind that Kaikeyi would ask him for the Kingdom as promised at the time of their marriage. Even with all these fears in his mind he behaves, as if everything was normal and functioning smoothly. The only other two characters who know what is going on his mind are Vashishta and Sumanthrar, even then his fears are deductible from his conversations. Throughout the play the phrase 'in the night' is repeated many times and it is also indicative of his helplessness and apprehension. This is evident in the conversation between Rama and Dasharatha when Rama goes to visit him

Rama : Rama greets your venerable feet.

Dasharatha: (shudders from his sleep) Did you tell the news of your coronation to Sita?

Rama : Yes.

Dasharatha: You have to perform all the rituals with your mother's blessings...in the night ...

Rama : I am fasting.

Dasharatha: Yes, Sage Vashishta must have advised you how to perform ...in the night (starts walking uneasily). The time for you to become the King had come the day your brother had left Ayodhya. Bharatha is righteous, good at heart and also my favourite. But you never know the mind of humans, its never

resolute. In the night...(again walks uneasily)

(*Saketam 32*)

When Rama is concerned about the fast that he has to observe in the night, Dasharatha is anxious about Rama's safety. Dasharatha has this inherent fear that someone may attack Rama and this fear is further intensified with the thought of facing Kaikeyi in the night.

Kaikeyi, at the instigation of Manthara, not only ask for the kingdom but also asks for the exile of Rama. One of the reasons that the playwright points out for his decision to send Rama into exile is Dasharatha's desire for Kaikeyi. This is evident in his conversation with Kaikeyi

Dasharatha: If you order, I would bring the most precious pearls from the seven seas and adorn your beautiful neck with those pearls. I would even present before you the scepter of all the three worlds.

Kaikeyi : Would you do anything if I request you to do it?

Dasharatha: You have never requested for anything?

Kaikeyi : If I make a request would you grant me?

Dasharatha: I would give you everything that I have.

Kaikeyi : Is that a promise?

Dasharatha: Yes. I promise, I promise by your lovely lips, by your beautiful body I promise.

Kaikeyi : Then Kausalya's son should go into exile for fourteen years.

(*Saketam 36-37*)

Dasharatha knew that Kaikeyi would ask him something that would be difficult for him to grant. But he is so mesmerized by her beauty that he surrenders before her wishes.

Even Kausalya is not free from the chains of desire, she is the Queen of Ayodhya but she is disturbed when she comes to know about the change in Dasharatha's decision. Her biggest desire is to see Rama to be coronated as the King of Ayodhya and her anxiety is quite evident when Dasharatha makes his initial decision of making Rama the King. This is evident when Vashishta asks Kausalya:

what happened to your control and self-restraint? How come you are in the royal court when you are supposed to be in the chamber?"

(Saketam 27)

These words by Vashishta reflect the anxiety, happiness and the unrest in her behaviour, which had made it difficult for her to control her emotions. This unrest in her mind is caused by the fact that Dasharatha had always ignored her and is also the result of the unhappy marital life that she is leading with him. Kausalya feels that being the Queen of Ayodhya is just a decorative position, which she has received, but in reality Dasharatha is always with Kaikeyi. But all her bitterness and complaints fade when he decides to coronate Rama as the King. The very fact that she is alone and that she has been deprived of her desires and feelings is evident when she talks to Sita, before they are leaving Ayodhya

... Why do you want to swim towards this sea of sorrows? At least I had the position of the Queen of Ayodhya, but you do not even have that? Have you committed more sin in life than me to suffer all these?

On the other hand Kaikeyi, who is proud of her beauty, had never had the desire for kingdom. It is only at the instigation of Manthara that she feels that she should ask for what her son deserves from his father. Thus her fear of Rama getting the kingdom, which would leave Kaikeyi and her son in the lurch, had prompted her to send Rama into exile.

When Rama comes to know about the decision, he obeys his father's order without any hesitation, as he does not want his father to break his word. His mother Kausalya and Lakshmana dissuade him and ask him to stay back for the sake of dharma, but do not succeed. Rama insists that it is his duty to be helpful to his father in fulfilling his promise. Rama's decision presents other dilemmas too.

Rama informs his wife of his decision and asks her to stay back in Ayodhya and to lead a pious and temperate life at the court of Dasharatha, to serve his father and mother obediently and also to be kind to Bharatha. But Sita replies to him in a significant speech about the duties of a wife and that nothing would stop her from following him to the forest. Rama describes to her all the terrors and dangers of the forest in order to dissuade her from accompanying him. But she remains firm in her decision and does not entertain the idea of separation. She insists by saying that "...a wife, and she alone, ...must share her husband's fate" (*Saketam* 45). At last Rama consents to her decision and Lakshmana, his faithful brother, also follows Sita and Rama. Even Dasharatha urges Rama to disobey him because he is convinced that his decision is wrong. To the distress of all people they go into exile clothed in tree-barks given to them by Kaikeyi.

Even Rama is not free from desires, which becomes evident when Dasharatha orders for his banishment. For a moment he is perplexed, as he was

already prepared to become the King, but later agrees to his father's **decision**. Thus all the characters in the play, except for Sita and the narrator, have **their own** desires and biases - - for instance Lakshmana has his loyalties towards **Rama**, just as Manthara has her loyalties towards **Kaikeyi**. Sita comes up, as **the only** character who is free from all the **materialistic** concerns of life and this is **evident** in her conversation with Rama:

Rama: Sita! I apologize on behalf of Ayodhya.

Sita : Lord, to me you are more **important** than kingdom.

Rama: So the news has reached **here** before my arrival?

Sita : I was waiting for my Lord to **arrive** without the retinue so that I can be with you all by myself.

Rama: Does that mean that you would not have been **happy** had I come with my retinue?

Sita : Even then I would have **happy**. Lord, to me you are my **happiness**.

(Saketam 44)

The third act deals with how Dasharatha **undergoes** the whole process of **suffering**. He even refuses Kausalya's company, who is the only one who is there to **console** him, saying that he has committed the **sin** and that he should go through it all alone. The connection between curse and **sin** in Dasharatha's life becomes more significant when viewed from the belief of Upanishads, which instruct to **discover** the reasons for both happiness and grief in **one's** own deed. Thus the **identification** of Dasharatha of his sin in his own deeds **intensifies** his psychological **trauma**. All religions refer to man committing sin, but **what** comes under the purview of **sin** and its interpretation is different in **different** religions. In Ancient Mesopotamian tradition, a person was said to have **committed** sin when he/she went astray from observing duties in his/her life. In **Christianity**, the sin of a person is closely

related to the original sin, and the only way of redemption from sin is through Baptism. In Egyptian tradition, if a person transgressed the divine rules then a person was said to have committed sin. But in ancient Greek-Roman civilizations there existed severe punishments even for those deeds, which were committed unknowingly. For instance, Oedipus did not commit any sin knowingly, but as a result of the workings of fate he murdered his father and married his mother. Even though it was not a conscious action by Oedipus he had to suffer for the sin he had committed. This idea of sin being committed unconsciously is Hinduism (Panickker 15). Thus going by tradition, in the play *Saketam*, Dasharatha had committed a sin unknowingly, but even then he has to suffer for his action.

The basic change that is observable in the treatment of the theme by the playwright in *Saketam* is the spiritual dimension that he adds to it. The effect of the sense of sin is visible in both the characters and their expressions. The playwright says that if detachment from virtue is the reason for Dasharatha's sin, then what controls his psychological and physical actions are his timidity to carry out his duty and his fear of the curse. Thus one sin leads to another, surrounding the person with a sequence of sins from which it is impossible to escape, so what is implied is that every state or condition in sin itself is a new sin.

Dasharatha can achieve salvation only through repentance; even then the whole process of suffering is inevitable. Towards the end of the play what makes him capable of seeing Lord Vishnu is his realization of the fact that he has unknowingly done a wrong deed. What Dasharatha tells Vashishta is significant

How can the curse come true? I did not shoot the arrow at the son of the ascetic to kill him. His time had come and the old ascetic cursed me because he was sad at the loss of his son. The time for the curse to come true had already been expired. Even I have forgotten. In our childhood we

fall down many times, will anyone remember all those incidents all their life...

(*Saketam 31*)

Here Dasharatha is trying to console himself by telling Vashishta that he killed the boy by mistake. He is trying not to remember that something like this had happened in the past and by saying that he had forgotten what had happened itself is an indicator that he has not forgotten the entire incident. The guilt had been incessantly bothering Dasharatha right from the time he had decided to crown Rama as the king of Ayodhya. His restlessness regarding Rama's safety and the feeling that something bad is going to happen is evident in his monologue, which is in the form of a prayer

...I am seeing frightening visions and ill omens in my dream. The sky is been hit by meteors and thunder... the fortune tellers had secretly prophesied that something horrible is going to happen to me...none of the indicators seem to represent good omen...Lord Vishnu! I have not committed any sin. Grant me will power for some more days. I just want to see Rama been coronated as the King, after that I am ready to take up vaanaprastha or face death without any hesitation.

(*Saketam 32*)

Even before Kaikeyi asks for the boon Dasharatha is apprehensive, thinking of the fact that there might arise some hindrance in the coronation ceremony. His foresight is the result of his fear, which arises from his selfishness. He is constantly disturbed by the fear of the unknown, which becomes evident when he tells Lakshmana that

Tonight, let the guard for Rama be really secure. When such auspicious event happens one must be cautious because many hindrances may arise

(Saketam 32)

Truth takes on a terrible form in his life as all his attempts to escape from the sense of guilt end in failure. As he looks at Kaikeyi's mirror he says that

...I have looked at myself in the mirror throughout my life. But have seen my face only at some moment. And the face, which I see, is a terrible figure marked by sense of guilt and shame. It is too late. No Veda teaches one to change such a flaw in one's self...

(Saketam 40)

Dasharatha's meeting with Guhan is significant as it makes him realize the truth. After Guhan leaves he makes a self-introspection and becomes ready to confess and accept the fact that he had committed the crime of killing an innocent boy. The most important part of the play is the skillful narration of the story by Dasharatha. With the confession he is relieved of the burden, which he had been carrying for all these years. From here starts his next journey-- his journey towards death -- with the realization of his affection for his son and ends with the divine vision of Lord Vishnu. The play concludes with the narrator's comment on the salvation of Dasharatha and also with a question on the source of sin:

Dasharatha also followed the way that was taken up by Ikshaku (founder of Surya Dynasty) and Dileep. In his way to death, he wandered around to find a shelter where he could unload his sin...Dasharatha collapses... finally as if he has seen some light and he dies. Death may be it is the final resting place. One could unload one's sin there. But why should man carry the burden of sin?

(*Saketam* 57)

Here the playwright, through the **narrator** is posing the question **whether one can consider death as the resting place where one could unload one's burden of sin.**

In *Saketam*, the other characters around Dasharatha like narrator, Kausalya, Kaikeyi, Vashishta, Manthara, Rama, Sita in the play help to bring out the various facets of Dasharatha's character. They also reflect the internal conflict that is going on within his mind. This is evident when Vashishta tells Kaikeyi that:

You represent the darker side of Dasharatha. He married the three gunas – Satwa guna, Raja guna and Thamo guna –with Kausalya representing truth, Sumitra representing courage and strength and treachery and crookedness residing within you.

(*Saketam* 48)

Similarly Vashishta, Sumanthrar and Guhan represent the spiritual side of his character and the subjects of **Ayodhya** echoes his nobility and generosity. Dasharatha's fear of curse takes the **human** form of Manthara.

In the play *Saketam*, Dasharatha is **the** central character and the **foremost** feature of the play is the grief experienced by him, which is the result of a **mistake** that he commits and his attempt at **redressing** that mistake. The playwright portrays Dasharatha as a tragic character who falls victim to desires, which is evident in Dasharatha's words when he says, "**Where** strong desires control an **individual's** mode of thinking, there arises sorrow **and** disappointment" (*Saketam* 52-53). In the play fate itself assumes an important role and the characters in the play become mere puppets in the hands of fate. It is **the** imminent presence of fate that becomes evident through the presence of the narrator on the stage. The **importance** of fate

as a strange force acting upon people is evident in Dasharatha's words when he says:

... even if humans do not long to do sinful deeds in life, they commit the same in their life as a result of the working of some unknown forces and that man cannot free himself from this sin.

(Saketam 54)

Dasharatha's words show the helplessness of human beings in an environment that is complicated by the workings of fate.

The plot of the story is contained in the three acts of the play, but the dramatic action of the play takes place in Dasharatha's mind. The moral dilemma that is presented in the play is that which of the two values takes precedence – keeping one's word or the welfare of people, for whose sake ideologies may have to be compromised.

One of the notable features is the influence of Greek tragic elements in the play. The playwright was influenced by the Aristotle's concept of tragedy, which is evident in this play. Aristotle in his *Poetics* identifies 'character' and 'action' as the essential elements in a story, and says that the character must be revealed through the action, i.e., through aspects of the plot. He identifies three key elements in a plot – 'hamartia', 'anagnorisis' and 'peripeteia'. Hamartia means a 'sin' or 'fault', which is often the product of the fatal character-defect, which came to be known as the 'tragic flaw'. Anagnorisis means the 'recognition' or 'realization', this being a moment in the narrative when the truth of the situation is recognized by the protagonist- often it is a moment of self-recognition. Peripeteia means a 'turn-round' or a 'reversal' of fortune. In classical tragedy this is usually a

fall from a high to low estate, as the hero **falls** from greatness (Barry 224). This concept of tragedy by Aristotle can be **applied in the play**, where **hamartia would** be the sin committed by Dasharatha in the **past**. The sense of guilt of **having** committed a sin forms the tragic flaw of his character. **Anagnorisis is the** realization of the sin by him towards the **end of the play** and **peripeteia is his fall** – which is Dasharatha's death in the play.

One of the significant aspects that **influence the stage presentation of the** play is the grief of Dasharatha. The **technique** that the playwright had used to present the same on the stage is through the **use** of the narrator (Suthradhara). The play begins with his narration of the past **and ends** with a verse by the narrator. He acts as a signpost directing the attention **and insight** of the audience to the individuality of Dasharatha and also acts as a **commentator thereby underlining the** expressions of Dasharatha. He helps in **providing** a background to the events, an impact to the conversation of the characters **and add colour to picturisation of the** characters.

In the first scene of the play the narrator appears with his headgear in his left hand, which is indicative of the dreams of Dasharatha that remains **unfulfilled**. The narrator next appears when Dasharatha had already ordered for Rama's banishment and the kingdom been handed over to Bharatha. This time **when he** appears there is no headgear in his hand **which** becomes symbolic of the crown that had been taken forcefully from Rama. **In the play we have the narrator talking** directly to the audience, commenting on the **course of the action and actions of the** characters, thereby eliminating the emotional **involvement of the audience with the** stage. This is one of the techniques that are **used** to create the effect of alienation.

The play is thus significant in three ways – as a play of reworking of myth, as a play which deals with the different aspects of human life and a play which deals with the story of sin, curse, process of suffering and finally salvation.

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CHAPTER 3

'RAVANAYANA': PORTRAYAL OF RAVANA AS TRAGIC HERO

IN *LANKALEKSHMI*

Questioning Rama's story has played a generative role in sustaining the *Ramayana* tradition over centuries, across regions, and among different communities. The story of Rama has generated many tellings; most people are familiar with a few authoritative texts, such as those by Valmiki, Tulsidas, or the television serial by Ramanand Sagar. Romila Thapar in her critique of the television production of *Ramayana* calls attention to the plurality of *Ramayanas* in Indian history:

The *Ramayana* does not belong to any one moment in the history, for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places. Not only do diverse *Ramayanas* exist; each *Ramayana* reflects the social location and ideology of those who appropriate it (Richman 4).

It is this very plurality present in *Ramayana* and its universal appeal that has been effectively and skillfully utilized by Srikantan Nair in his play *Lankalekshmi*. Srikantan Nair's play *Lankalekshmi* published in 1976 is the second in the trilogy of plays, which together tell the story of the *Ramayana*. In the trilogy of plays, *Lankalekshmi* is the last play in the chronological order of appearance and

thematically it is appears second. The major deviation that the playwright brings about in the play is regarding the character of Ravana. Ravana who is the anti-hero in *Ramayana* is made the hero in *Lankalekshmi* and in the play the playwright treats the episode taken from the *Ramayana* differently where the perspective of the Raksasas is given importance. The play heavily draws from the Western heritage of heroic stories, but with a difference, that is, the myth used in the play has been reworked in the light of modern perceptions and changes.

The striking characteristic of the play is the characterization of Ravana that reflects recent South Indian interpretations of Ravana as a Dravidian hero, and the story of the defeat of the Raksasas as a veiled account of the domination of the northern Brahmanical culture over the Dravidian people. Srikantan Nair portrays Ravana as a positive figure along with his flaws, thus presenting before us an alluring picture of Ravana, in whom the various emotions like fury, love and valour merges.

In most of the *Ramayanas* the overall perspective is from the side of the hero Rama and his followers or devotees. Occasionally Ravana may receive a treatment, which highlights some aspects of his greatness, or in which his evil deeds are interpreted as those of an enemy devotee seeking liberation or Moksha through death at the hands of Rama. On the other hand, Srikantan Nair presents the story from within the worldview of the Raksasas, shows us their quests and

ideals of the 'vamsas' of Raksasas. He also throws light into the thoughts of Ravana as he attempts to defend his own actions and his attempts to save his people from the difficult situation.

The play *Lankalekshmi* is divided into three acts with a brief prologue and epilogue. The prologue is set in the Tower gate to Lanka, the epilogue in the Asoka grove and all the three acts are set in the 'sabhamandapa' or the assembly hall of Ravana's palace. Thus the major action, which deals with the many battles between Ravana and Rama and their respective forces, takes place off the stage.

The prologue is significant as it delineates the release of Lankalekshmi, a Raksasi who is the gatekeeper of Lanka, from a curse and also gives the audience an indication of what is to follow later in the play. Her name is thus synonymous with Lanka's prosperity and Hanuman is the one who affects her release from the curse. Hanuman had come to Lanka in search of Sita, but is stopped by the Raksasi. He attacks this hideous guardian Raksasi and she falls to the ground. But when she rises she has been transformed and the stage directions are as follows: "When the Raksasi gets up she is transformed into a beautiful and divine figure" (*Lankalekshmi* 197). She explains to Hanuman about her transformation that "Brahma had ordained that one day a monkey would hit me and then I can leave the form of a Raksasi and go back to my old self. My release has come... "

(*Lankalekshmi* 197). In return of her **release**, **Lankalekshmi** tells **Hanuman** where he can find Sita in the Asoka grove.

The incident of Lankalekshmi's **transformation** in the play is **important** as it suggests the change in the fortunes of the **Raksasas**, which also forms the **central** theme of the play. The prologue thus **indicates** the inevitable downfall of the Raksasas and also the theme and situation of **the** play is well established through the prologue itself. Basically the play deals **with** the response of the leaders of the Raksasas to this change of fortune and **they** also discuss a wide variety of alternative explorations of the how they can **retain** their fortunes and prosperity.

The important events in the first act **includes** the fall of the golden **dome**; the discussion between Ravana and Vibhishana and also the discussions **between** Virupaksan, Suparsvan, Nikumbhan, Indrajit and the young Atikayan. Their discussion gives insight into the number of **inauspicious** events that have occurred in Lanka like the rusting of Ravana's **sword**; the destruction of the **palace** by Hanuman, who also sets fire to the **flag-pole**; the killing of Jambumali by Hanuman, the son of the commander Prahastan, and Aksan, a son of Ravana; and the prediction by Indrajit of the collapse of **the** central golden dome of Lanka, a prediction which is fulfilled while their **discussion** continues. The second half of the first act deals with the discussion **between** Ravana and Vibhisanan, and his defection to the enemy.

The second act opens with the reports from the battlefield and with the Raksasas' response to the news of the death of Prahastan; Vibhisanan's hurling of a spear at Ravana; killing of the multitudes of the monkey army and their return to life through the use of the divine herbs. Ravana returns wounded and depressed from the field and he is been comforted by Mandodari. The act ends with the death of Kumbhakarna and Indrajit's final entry into the battlefield.

The third act opens with rays of hope, with the reports of magnificent fighting by Indrajit, but it ends in despair with his death. Ravana and Mandodari comfort each other and at her instigation Ravana goes to Nikumbhila to make an offering to Shiva. He sings the 'Panchachamaram', a hymn to Shiva, which he had composed, but his offering is interrupted by the entry of the monkeys into the fortress. He dons his armour and goes off to the battlefield. Thus by outlining the major movement of the play, Srikantan Nair develops the sense of increasing hopelessness and pathos that pervades the scene. The discussions among his advisors are important, as it ultimately leads to Ravana's own decisions.

Hanuman's meeting with Sita and their conversation forms the epilogue of the play. The three major themes that surfaces through the discussions in the play are the past glory and prosperity of the Raksasas, and the greatness of Ravana in bringing them to present powerful position in all of the three worlds; the present

threat from Rama and his army of monkeys and speculations about necessary strategy of action in the light of the threat, that is, threat from Rama and his army.

The account of the rise of the Raksasas is interesting at one particular point, where it makes the case for peculiar Raksasa propensity for abducting women and bringing them into the Raksasa vamsa. For instance, the abduction of Dhanyamali, an Apsara and the mother of Atikayan Ravana are mentioned. Nikumbhan makes the crucial point when he says, “ wherever one sees beauty, taking it with or without force is the *Dharma* of Raksasas” (Lankalekshmi 202). Virupaksan responds that “ It is the *Dharma* of improving one’s family line” and this is a theme that recurs in various forms throughout the play. The context is important as Suparsvan asks a pertinent question “Should Lanka engage in war for the sake of a woman?” and further suggests, “the germ of improvement and flourishing is one and the same”.

As mentioned earlier, one of the important features of the play is Srikantan Nair’s characterization of Ravana. In the play Srikantan Nair draws a striking contrast between Ravana and Vibhisanan. Traditionally, Vibhisanan is presented as a positive figure, a devotee of Rama. By portraying his character from the Raksasa perspective, the playwright shows him in another light, as a coward and traitor to his family and people. When Ravana asks him to expel the monkey army, he says

... We saw the tricks that he is capable of when he came here as a messenger. There are many more seasoned soldiers in their army. The enemy is not an insignificant one. It is better to be prepared (*Lankalekshmi* 208).

He goes on to highlight the heroism of the monkey leaders, Sugrivan, Angadan and Hanuman and suggests that the strength of Lanka will not be sufficient. He recounts the details given by the spies of the prowess in destroying Kharan, Dusanan and Trisirassu and the Raksasa army of fourteen thousand, and of the enormous army of monkeys building a bridge to Lanka. He gives a description of Rama to Ravana

Rama is not an ordinary foe...In looks he has a great presence. He has strong physique, which seems to be wrought in the fire of unlimited strength. He possesses unknown divine weapons... We can see in him the invisible aura of unconquerable strength (*Lankalekshmi* 208).

Ravana acknowledges Rama's heroism, but doubts his invincibility. Vibhishana goes on to talk of Rama's rare power and acute truth- with further comment: "When unusual strength is combined with undiluted truth it can be felt...and is

sharper than any divine weapon.” He **thus implies** that in **abducting the Rama’s** dharmic wife, Sita, Ravana has himself **strayed** from what is dharmic.

Throughout their conversation, Ravana **concentrates** on the ascendancy **that he has** achieved for his family and race. Gradually it becomes clear that it is the **whole** question of loyalty to the race and kingdom **that has become the major concern** for the Raksasas. Thus the question of loyalty is central to Ravana and he recounts the piteous condition of the Raksasas “**writhing in pathala**” and his own **determined** ascendancy

We have walked from hidden **vaileys** to the hills. We have **trodden the** earth, we have tramped over rocks, we have triumphed, and we have climbed. We climbed and climbed to every mountain peak, and when we arrived at the summit, we saw it was difficult to climb further; but we grasped at the stars, we tramped **among the spheres, still climbing. And as** we ascended, we raised up a **family that had been destroyed. We were** victorious (*Lankalekshmi* 210).

Further points from their conversation **are highlighted** to show the **contrast** between the two characters. When Vibhis**aman** asks for leave, Ravana says

But whom are you leaving? Your brother, though on another occasion that brother won glory for you. Your close relatives, your people, your kingdom. Well, if that is your wish, I will permit it. I allow you to escape with your life. I hope you understand what I am doing. If you were in my position, it surely wouldn't happen like this (*Lankalekshmi* 211).

And although Prahastan suggests that Vibhishana should be imprisoned and Kumbhan moves to kill him as he leaves, Ravana sees that he goes unharmed. This is contrasted with a later event in which on the battlefield Vibhishana hurls a spear at Ravana. Ravana deflects it, but he is clearly depressed at this traitorous act on the part of a member of his family, which makes Ravana say that "Perhaps he will be caught in the net of Rama. Never mind. It is well known that Ravana is not Bali" (*Lankalekshmi* 235). The character of Ravana could be compared to the character of Caligula of Camus, who respects those who directly confront him and who destroys those who resort to attack him indirectly. In the play, Vibhishana points out the flaws in Ravana's character and even takes Rama's side, but Ravana does not harm him and this is indicative of the above said characteristic of Ravana.

The well-known story of the use of Sugrivan by Rama to affect the death of Bali, which has always been something of a problem in the portrayal of Rama's character, is alluded to here. Indrajit picks the same up again later:

It is clear that uncle (Vibhishana) **has betrayed** us. It is strategy of Rama to befriend the younger brother and **to fight** against the elder one. **The weak** can be kept in obedient servitude **as a dependant** chieftain. **He killed Bali** and made Sugriva, the king of Kishkinda. The same trick is **being tried** in Lanka (*Lankalekshmi* 222).

Srikantan Nair here makes a skilful use of **this** point to reverse the **traditionally** positive approach towards Rama and **denigration** of Ravana. It must be emphasized that Ravana does not deviate **from this** loyalty to his **family and his** clan.

Vibhishana's wife, Sarama, is **attacked by** warriors because she goes to the fort at night, and they suspect that she is **spying**, showing the enemy how to **gain** entrance to the fort. She tells Ravana that, **having** heard her husband had **joined the** enemy's side, she hoped to see him in the **distance** and that she has never **intended** to harm her own people. Ravana grants **her** protection by letting her live in Mandodari's quarters. Others in the palace **are not** sure of Ravana's lenient action, as it has already been indicated by Indrajit in a speech following that comparing Vibhishana with Sugrivan, that Sarama "**saw in a dream** the title of kinship and **grinned.**" What this implies is the fact that **if Ravana** is flawed, the flaw arises out of his great love for his people which **leads him** into being too trusting and generous towards even to those who might harm him.

Another aspect that has been taken up by the playwright is Ravana's relationship with his wife, Mandodari. When he returns from the battlefield, towards the middle of the second act, he listens to the music from the veena played by Mandodari and is tended devotedly by Mandodari who rubs oil on his wounds. And as the stage directions put it "Able to find peace for a brief moment, Ravana gazes, full of love, at Mandodari". Ravana's conversation with Mandodari shows him to be a cultured leader, the originator of music and a great lover. Srikantan Nair builds up these pictures together to suggest an atmosphere of aesthetic love in the relationship between Ravana and Mandodari. This also contributes to the general impression prevailing throughout the play, that is, the commitment to culture and love of beauty in the Raksasa society.

In the third act, after the death of their son Indrajit, according to the stage directions "Mandodari enters as if sleepwalking. She sits with her head on the lap of Ravana. Ravana slowly strokes Mandodari's head with his hand", which indicates their attempt to console each other at the loss of their son. It is she who suggests Ravana to make an offering to Lord Shiva "...you must obtain the divine power of destruction in order to transfer to yourself the power of creation and preservation... the eternal Siva will give you his own power..." but his offering is tragically cut short by Angadan's entry.

Another important aspect, which surfaces in the conversation between Ravana and Mandodari, is their discussion about Sita. This brings us to the center of what is traditionally problematic about Ravana's character. In the initial discussion in the court, two points regarding Sita and her abduction have been touched upon - one, concerns with the fact that it is the Dharma of Raksasas to abduct women and other was Indrajit's view that Sita should be killed. Ravana enters the assembly hall at this point and asks the remedy for the calamities they are experiencing. Prahastan gives a solution by saying that "the wife of Rama who has been made to live in the grove..." but he is interrupted with Ravana's question, "To embrace the feet of Rama and beg for pardon?" Prahastan replies, "The suggestion is to kill her". The discussion is further interrupted by the collapse of the golden dome. Indrajit suggests of decapitating Sita and placing her body where the enemy can see her body.

Suparsvan counters with the possibility that this will only double the heroic power of Rama and Lakshmana and opines that the only way out in such a situation would be to hand over Sita to Rama. Ravana asks "I myself should give back Sita" and Suparsvan replies "It is said that one characteristic of women is that they are a classic fetter of the material nature of the Universe. To abandon them is wisdom."

This leads Ravana into a long speech, in which he talks how he has abducted the wives of others and also acknowledges infatuation for Sita. But he is of the opinion that he has not done anything wrong because he considers that women who dwell in his harem, belonging to Yaksas, Devas and Apsaras and who are the mothers of the children are the pride of the Raksasas. With respect to Sita herself, he claims that 'that which is unique and priceless should be in Lanka' and accordingly the chariot Pushpaka, the armour of Brahma and Chandrahasta, the sword of Shiva are all there in Lanka. He argues that all beauties, good fortune and prosperity are present in Lanka; hence Sita herself should also be in Lanka. The inference is that Ravana has concentrated all his energies in raising Lanka to the heights of prosperity.

Ravana and Mandodari also discuss about Sita, where Mandodari expresses concern over the fact that Sita may threaten her well being. To which Ravana says

...The matter of Sita is not a simple one. This story began in an abduction, which occurred because the breast of Surpanakha was cut off. This river of blood, once having begun to flow has continued to flow. Deceit, injury, destruction and death have begun to rain in every direction. And what remains to take place is still carrying out of this.

(Lankalekshmi 238)

Their conversation is interrupted with the news of Atikayan's death and Mandodari goes off to console Atikayan's mother, Dhanyamali.

The question of Sita again arises in a discussion between Ravana and Suparsvan. Suparsvan suggests, "...there is a cost to amassing a whole empire with wealth and happiness. One loses one's peace when one knows that it is a futile expense"(Lankalekshmi 223). He indicates that his concern is that Ravana has lost the protection afforded by his lordly power. The suggestion is to his devotion to Shiva and Ravana protests that he is a devotee of Siva. He asks Suparsvan, whether he will regain the lordly power if he released Sita. Suparsvan says that he can only ask questions, not give answers. His indication is to the general view that Sita is the original cause of decline, but whether he should release her, or what would be the result of releasing her, Suparsvan is uncertain.

The final reference to Sita again comes in conversation with Mandodari, after the death of Indrajit. Ravana contemplates on what Indrajit had suggested earlier that he should kill Sita. But Mandodari says:

Are you going to lower to the level of the youths who cut off the breasts of Surpanakha? ... True, you did once perform such a vile

deed... but Indrajit contemplated that an account of his youth. That is not your duty... you must release yourself from your depressions.

(*Lankalekshmi* 242)

She goes on to tell him that his infatuation for Sita is inauspicious “ The terror of the curse. ‘If you touch her it will rebound on your head’, is torturing you ...you can’t sleep. You forget your daily routines. You forget your responsibilities. Your very power has been lost”(Lankalekshmi 242). She emphasizes that he must protect himself, Lanka and the Raksasas. When he says he still will not compromise, she indicates that it is not what she means; rather she wants him to fight with courage and win. But for this he must obtain the power to win. In his depression Ravana ponders again the encounter with Vedavati, but Mandodari assures him that when he assumes power “ every curse will die like a mist at dawn.” And then significantly, “ On the day Sita came, your worship stopped. The divine Shivalingam lays collecting dust in the puja room. You must begin an offering at once” (*Lankalekshmi* 242). Thus in the play Sita’s absent presence is marked through the references made by other characters in the play.

The use of the words like dusk, sunset and evening in the play is significant, as it indicates the fast approaching doom in Ravana’s life. In the play, the Vermillion colour of sunset is indicative of the coming series of tragic events.

The conversation between Suparshvan and Virupaksan is an example

Suparshvan: When my elder **sister**, Kaikasi entered the abode of the sage,
the hermitage and **its surroundings** were bathed in the evening
sun's red hue.

Virupaksan: It was that twilight **bathed** in a red hue that witnessed the
genesis of the second Raksasa kingdom.

(*Lankalekshmi* 200)

From the entire discussions between **Ravana**, Mandodari and his courtiers gives us a picture that the situation is, as **Ravana** says, not simple. He appears reasonably justified in abducting Sita, given the **treatment** of Surpanakha by Rama and Lakshmana- particularly the fact that **the** latter cut off her breast. This detail Srikantan Nair has taken from the *Iramayanam* of Kampan, since neither Valmiki nor other vernacular versions as those of Tulsidas in Hindi or Ranganathan in Telugu contain it. As one of the critic **Hart** has indicated, female power or 'ananku' was understood particularly to **reside** in the breasts and Lakshmana's act is not just a disfigurement but also a gross **attack** on Surpanakha's femaleness (Balakrishnan 104). **Ravana** says that it is **this** action by Lakshmana that has lead to the flow of blood; and Mandodari in **persuading** **Ravana** not to kill Sita makes it clear that if he were to do so he would be **stooping** to the level of the enemy.

As Srikantan Nair portrays Ravana's character, he appears to be trapped between two incompatible social systems. Ravana has built his kingdom and his people's prosperity in a controlled and determined quest for all that is best. The practice of abducting women has resulted in an expansion of the Raksasa population and therefore its strength. Sita fits into this pattern and in his view the rightful place for such beauty is Lanka. But this apparently legitimate expression of Raksasa dharma comes into conflict with the dharma of the good and faithful human wife.

Another important aspect is Ravana's acknowledged infatuation for Sita. Mandodari sees it as a threat to her relationship with him. Towards the end of the play we become aware of the fact that Mandodari finds his infatuation for Sita as problematic because in his obsession he has neglected his worship of Shiva and this she considers to be the reason for decline in Ravana's power. The decline of power has been a recurring theme throughout the play, and one is certainly left at the end with the possibility that, had Ravana completed the sacrifice, his invincibility might have returned.

The character of Ravana is a complex mixture of strength and learning, hedonism and extreme self-denial, sensitiveness to beauty, fondness of affluence and other good things in life, coupled with crudity, cruelty and selfishness. His death is the result of his acceptance of wrong ideals and rejection of Dharma.

Ravana thus becomes a symbol of **the** whole malaise of a system of governance than individual selfishness, in a **kingdom** that is based on arrogance and **despotic** rule. The army is meant for **aggression** and annexation of territory and the splendour and wealth of Lanka is **not** the result of the labour and effort of the people. In Ayodhya also there is **the rule** of the king, but there is no autocracy. There the king is guided and **controlled** by his council and competent ministers who interpret the law for him and **lay down** the policy. In Ayodhya, the will of the people is held supreme, so much so **that Rama** has to abandon Sita because it goes against the will of the people.

Ravana's cabinet, on the other **hand**, is a collection of flatterers and **anyone** who speaks truth or points to Dharma is **summarily** dismissed. Vibhishana is **thus** compelled to desert Ravana because he **would** not listen to him. In **this play** we can see Ravana as a product of totally **materialistic** world. His tragic end is an indicator of what may happen one ignore **Dharma** and take one-sided view of life trampling upon the rights and welfare of the **people**.

In spite of all his shortcomings Ravana is a grand person with a **great** personality and this is the aspect that is **being projected** by the playwright in **this** play. Srikantan Nair presents the character of **Ravana** as one who is both a lover and an artist. Both the earlier and later **portions** of the epic support the fact **that** Ravana was a great Vedic scholar. The **Uttarakanda** also describes him as

invoking the god Sankara adhering to the Vedic cult of fire worship, engaged in high studies and penances, and gone to the farthest end of Vedic studies (Sarkar 85).

He is the Raksasa, a villain and a fiend as presented in the epic, yet he is the true tragic hero of the epic. In the epic *Ramayana*, Valmiki chose Rama as the hero, the Puroshottama, the man par excellence. Unlike the tragic hero Ravana, Rama succeeds in solving the crisis created by Kaikeyi, by a non-grudging obedience to his father. This is due to perfection of his character, which reveals his intelligence in realizing his self-sufficiency. The tragic hero fails to solve the problem created chiefly by his own narrow-minded, unintelligent and selfish response to a difficult situation. And it is in this respect that Ravana is the tragic hero of the play. Rama suffers for his over-generosity blended with ultra democratic mind. He is too conscious of his subjects who are prone to superstition and hearsay. Ravana, like Hamlet of Shakespeare, is pride intoxicated and he has had to pay the price for it. He gets a chance to choose between right and wrong, but he chooses the wrong path that leads to his downfall. He leads a spectacular life and also faces a similar fall in his life. The fatal flaw in his character is over confidence in his own power, posing himself to be invincible and this overconfidence coupled with pride leads him to his downfall. Along with his pride he was infatuated with extreme passion - passion for women that made him machinate the abduction of Sita. In his passionate desire to win over Sita plays all

viles and trickery, but the excess is **tempered** in the case of Sita, a quality **that** is uncommon for a Raksasa. Thus he is **presented** as a **character** possessing a **unique** personality and a true representative of **the great Raksasa** culture pervading the land of the time. As a matter of fact the **playwright** is also narrating the course of events surrounding the life of Rama and **the movement** of Aryan culture towards the South, by depicting the life of the **Ravana** and the facets of the Dravidian culture.

In the play, Ravana's life and **death** are primarily conflict oriented and becomes an incomparable genius who **cannot but** raise himself to the **unavoidable** destined tragedy. Srikantan Nair's treatment of *Ramayana* in the play **actually** becomes 'Ravanayana', tracing every **event** from the abduction of Sita to Lankadahanam from Ravana's perspective. Each scene of the play has a movement, which is brought about through **the language** used by the **dramatist**, and it also lends it a dramatic quality.

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CHAPTER 4

THE 'GOLDEN' RULES OF DHARMA IN *KANCHANASITA*

In a country like India where there exists diverse cultures, the myth of *Ramayana* moulds into different forms depending on the socio-cultural setting. Among the various versions of the *Ramayana* that exist today, Valmiki's *Ramayana* is considered to be the original. There are various views regarding the existing form of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, especially the sections dealing with 'Balakanda' and 'Uttarakanda', as many scholars claim that some of the parts have been interpolated. The later additions deviate from the original in many aspects, for instance, the characters are attributed with many supernatural qualities, exaggeration of certain events and also in the language.

The Buddhist version of *Ramayana* is believed to have come after Valmiki's *Ramayana* in which Rama is portrayed as an incarnation of Buddha. In that version Rama, Lakshmana and Sita are Dasharatha's children from his first wife and it is after their stay in the forest that Rama marries his own sister Sita. The 'Aranyaparva' of *Ramayana* is believed to have written after this in which Rama is an incarnation of Vishnu. The scholars believe that it is after a number of later additions that we have the present form of *Ramayana*, as it lacks the literary excellence that is present in the earlier sections. They claim that Valmiki has written only sections from 'Ayodhyakanda' to 'Yuddhakanda' (Panickker 119). Although the question whether the 'Uttarakanda' is an interpolation or not continues, the sacrifice of Sita which comes within this section has attracted the attention of people.

Srikantan Nair's *Kanchanasita* published in 1961 is based on certain significant events from the *Ramayana*. The play has received the Sahitya Akademi Award for the Best Drama in Malayalam in 1963; won the first prize in the All India Youth Festival held in Mysore in 1959. The play was also performed in the Summer Drama Festival conducted by the Government of India, in Delhi. The Malayalam director Aravidan has also made the play into a movie with the same title *Kanchanasita* in 1977. *Kanchanasita* deals with 'Uttarakanda' of *Ramayana*, which covers the major events- Asvamedha; the murder of Shambuka, which depicts the conflict between the Aryans and the Dasyus, and the disappearance of Sita. The play basically questions Rama's performance of dharma from different perspectives, through the different characters in the play. Srikantan Nair had explained the theme of the play in one of his interviews thus:

The plot of *Kanchanasita* is not something that is old or new...it basically portrays how man tries to balance between his family life and his interaction with his society...right from the time man has started living in a societal setup, he is imprisoned and chained by many relations. He tries hard to break this bondage, but the more he tries to unfasten himself from the ties, the more he is fastened to it.

(Balakrishnan 90)

The above said quotation by the playwright thus forms the theme of the play. The play starts with a piece of verse from the *Ramayana*, which is considered to be the first ever poem uttered by Valmiki, where the poet protests the inhuman deed of the hunter who kills one of the lovebirds. The implied meaning of the verse is also the objection of the poet to the sin committed by Rama, that is, the abandonment of Sita. Thus the underlining mood of the play is set by the initial verse, which reflects the solitude, despondency and sin.

The play is divided into four acts and **the play** opens with Kausalya waiting for Rama who had gone to the Dandaka forest. Rama and Lakshmana had gone in search of Shambuka to slay him because **he was performing those rituals that were reserved for the Brahmins**. On his return **after slaying Shambuka**, the sages headed by Vashishta suggest Rama to conduct **the Asvamedha (horse sacrifice)** to celebrate the victory of Ram Rajya. As a **part** of the yagna a white horse is let loose to wander at will and the path the **horse follows** by right becomes the king's domain. On this auspicious occasion Sage **Vashishta** suggests that Rama should marry again, since it is necessary for the **queen** to be present in the yagna. Rama devotedly declines Vashishta's suggestion **and asks** to use a golden statue of Sita during the yagna, to which Vashishta **ultimately** agrees. The event of the yagna initiates the conflict in the mind of Rama, **which thus** forms the crux of the play.

The first act is set in the assembly hall, where both Kausalya and Urmila are waiting for Rama's arrival. The important **aspect** of the first act is the depiction by the playwright of the psychological trauma that Rama undergoes. Rama is caught between two sets of powerful forces, **with Urmila, Kausalya, Bharatha, Hanuman and Valmiki** on one side, representing the humaneness in Rama and Vashishta and the sages on the other side, representing strict rules and regulations of governance. Both these sets represents **Rama's own mind** that is divided between his individual will and the will of the **kingdom**. The difficulty he faces is due to the fact that he cannot reconcile the two **and come** in terms with it.

The second act is also set in the **assembly hall** and deals with the consequences and arguments, which follow **with the suggestion** of Rama's second marriage by Vashishta. Urmila and Kausalya **vehemently oppose this suggestion** and they think him to be callous, as he has **rejected Sita**. Although Rama knows that Sita is chaste and devoted to him, there **was no means** by which he could prove it to his subjects. Hence against his **personal wishes** he was forced to

renounce her. In the classical version of *Ramayana*, Rama's rejection of Sita is linked with the notion of the ideal king whose duty (rajadharma) is to respect the wishes of his subjects rather than giving preference to one's own personal wishes. The act reaches its climax with Bharatha's entry, which ultimately ends up in a fight between Rama and Bharatha.

The third act is set in the Valmiki's Ashram and the first part deals with the characterization of Lava and Kusa, where Lava is shown to be brave, courageous and an expert in archery. Lava and Kusa, who are the pupils at Valmiki's Ashram, chase the horse of the Asvamedha and bring it to their Ashram. Lava ties up the horse in the Valmiki's ashram thereby bringing the yagna to a halt. He also make fun of Rama for killing Bali from behind, when the commander who comes to retrieve the horse talks about Rama's valour. He says that Rama won the battle against Ravana because he had Hanuman and his monkey army to help him. He killed Ravana while he was meditating in Nikumbhila and that it is not something to be proud of, as he has killed a devotee of Lord Shiva. He challenges Lakshmana who also comes to retrieve the horse. At this point, Valmiki enters and tells Lakshmana that Lava and Kusa are Sita's sons and clear him of all his doubts. When Lakshmana comes to know that Lava and Kusa are Sita's children he is overcome with affection. Valmiki intervenes and prevent Lava from raising his bow against Lakshmana, and he explains to Lava that only a king has the right to tie the horse. Valmiki tells Sita that he was intending to meet Rama, when he comes to know about the yagna and following this he starts writing the 'Uttarakanda'. In this section Srikantan Nair resorts to *Uttararamacharitham* and *Padmapurana* as his sources rather than Valmiki's *Ramayana* (Panickker 121).

The important event in the fourth act is arrival of Shambuka's wife who accuses Rama of the murder of her husband and curses Rama before she leaves. Rama's test is

not over, as every single incident reminds him of the injustice done to Sita. At this moment arrives Hanuman singing songs in praise Rama and Sita; their conversation is significant in the play. Even Hanuman tries to change Rama's decision, but all in vain, hence he leaves the palace. Later Valmiki arrives with Lava, Kusa and Sita. Rama asks Sita to prove her chastity again for the sake of his country and its subjects. Sita prays to Mother Earth to swallow her up and disappears into the earth - - an end which is most appropriate as she was found in a furrow by her father and named her Sita, which means 'furrow'. In the oral tradition, Sita shows her anger and disapproval of Rama's treatment of her, and her sons are given a matrilineal heritage. While her earlier decision to follow Rama into the forest fulfils traditional expectations of an ideal woman, her role towards the end of the story can be seen as a departure from the traditional norms. The play ends with the words of Valmiki that "Sita cannot be destroyed... Sita is nature".

In the play the focal point is not renunciation of Sita, but the internal conflict that is going on within the mind of Rama during the Asvamedha. An important aspect of the play is the characterization of Urmila, wife of Lakshmana, whose character is normally not given much of importance in the *Ramayana*. She is presented as a character who is an embodiment of sacrifice and selflessness. She is the only character in the epic who is kept away from the company of her husband from the beginning to the end, yet she is calm, patient and all enduring. In *Kanchanasita* Urmila is portrayed as a powerful character, who whiles away her time during the separation from her husband by learning Sastras. She studies the Dharma Sastras and by the time fourteen years are completed she becomes an expert in the Sastras. Thus it can be said she is being empowered and by virtue of which she is capable of questioning Rama about his decisions.

The play begins with the conversation between Urmila and Kausalya, where they discuss the working of administration in general. Urmila prefers a system that gives importance to compassion and kindness, rather than a system, which blindly follows the rules without any regard for emotions and feelings. Kausalya, on the other hand, does not outrightly discard the system, but is definitely against the way in which it works. Thus the expostulations made by Kausalya complement the point of views of Urmila. Urmila doubts whether Rama might have met Sita by chance in the Dandaka forest and hopes that the sight of the primordial nature of the forest would melt his heart and transform the king into a human being. Kausalya refutes her by replying that:

It is the King who had gone to the forest and not Sita's play-mate. No matter where he is, whether in Ayodhya or in the forest, a King will always be a King.

(Kanchānasita 136)

Even Kausalya has become bitter after Dasharatha's death and her son's sacrifice for the country and she tells Urmila sarcastically that perhaps Ayodhya likes sacrifice. She tells Urmila that the rulers of Ayodhya had always exiled fortune and that Rama has also continued this tradition by banishing Sita, who was pregnant.

When Lakshmana arrives Urmila is happy to see him, but at the same time she finds it as an occasion to inquire about the whereabouts of Sita in the forest. When Lakshmana confronts Urmila, he tries hard to hide his emotions when she asks

Urmila : When you came back you might have passed by Valmiki's Ashram?

Lakshmana: yes....may be.

(Kanchanasita 139)

The very fact that he pretends to be unaware of the place where Sita was abandoned shows his deliberate **attempt** to forget the past. Thus when in the courtroom she talks about her **separation** with Lakshmana and he **reminds her** to follow the etiquettes in the courtroom. Urmila becomes sarcastic and says that “True! ... The expertise of this courtroom rests only in ordering **banishments**” *(Kanchanasita 140)*.

Urmila also inquires about Sita **indirectly**, by asking Rama about the **beauty** of the forest where Rama and Sita have **spent** fourteen years together and **about** the singing of the birds. To this Rama **replies that**

The King’s ears have no time to listen to the sweet music. The King’s throne is an altar of fire and **that** political strategy is not easy ... In statecraft one cannot wait for **the** approval of one’s conscience to **kill** or abandon someone... and that **the** heart of the king is secured by the following the law.

(Kanchanasita 141)

His answers to Urmila show that the **soul** of human being as **something that** is destined to suffer.

It is Urmila who makes Rama think of **the** **injustice** he had done to Sita and **puts** him to real test. She questions why he **abandoned** Sita even after she had **proved** her chastity by successfully passing **the** **ordeal** of Fire test? And also why he had fought the whole battle? Rama tries to **defend** himself by saying that

The battle was not for Sita, but to safeguard the Aryans ...Sita was only an excuse. And he banished her, as the people doubted the chastity of Sita.

(Kanchanasita 141)

Rama's dilemma is that even after knowing the fact that it is difficult to rule and confine oneself to the norms, he cannot give up his kingship. Vashishta enters the assembly hall and praises Rama for the deeds that he had done like liberating Ahalya and Tataka, breaking Shiva's bow, teaching Parasuram a lesson, killing Bali and vanquishing the demons; to which Rama says that "he's only a human being". Urmila laughs at their hypocrisy and says that Sage can only ask the king to be pitiless in carrying out 'dharma'.

When the suggestion for Asvamedha is made Vashishta advises Rama to remarry and even suggests the princess of Kasi as the bride. As Rama is reluctant to marry again he asks, "Had not Dasharatha had three wives?". The sages also advise him to observe the dharma of the kshatriya by pointing out the fact that "if you could give up his wife for the welfare of the people, then why cannot he remarry for the same cause?" When Urmila comes to know about the suggestion of second marriage, she asks Rama, as the king, to punish himself for leaving Sita at the mercy of wild animals and planning to have another consort. Rama is shaken but still defends himself by saying that he is the servant of people and hence it is his duty to respect the will of the people. Urmila criticizes the whole concept of Rajadharma and says,

the beginning of rajadharma marks the end of love and that is how it becomes synonymous with hatred.

(Kanchanasita 148)

She also claims that he had made **the life** of women unsafe in his own land by showing a way for men to leave **their wives**. She tries to change **his mind** by reminding of the loving deeds that he **had done** for Sita and also her **suffering** in the forest. She asks Rama to bring **Sita back** from Valmiki's hermitage and not only to beg forgiveness for doubting **her** but also she wants the whole country to apologize to Sita. Even though Kausalya has contempt for the way in **which the** whole system works, she is forced to **act according** to laws of the country. But she vehemently oppose the proposal for **Rama's** second marriage, so that at least in future the rulers of Ayodhya are freed **from** women's curses.

Rama's conversation with Bharatha is also **significant** in the play, as Bharatha also ask some pertinent questions. Bharatha **also has** many doubts and questions for his brother on whose behalf he ruled Ayodhya in his absence. When Bharatha **meets** Rama, he asks Bharatha

Rama : How could you stay away from your brother for twelve years?

Bharatha: (bowing his head) Brother, you must be more aware of the feeling of grief and separation.

(Kanchanasita 153)

Through the above said words, Bharatha is indirectly referring to Rama's separation with Sita. He is not at all happy **with** news of the arrival of the King of Kasi and feels ashamed of the fact that **the kshatriyas** are under the **complete** control of Brahmins. He feels that the king **has** become the slave of the priest. Rama defends the Vedas by saying that it is **the Vedas**, which have given power to the Aryan clan. Bharatha who is still **unconvinced** says, "I do not know the various interpretations of truth, but I know the only **Truth**" (*Kanchanasita 155*). This is

followed by a heated exchange of words between them over Rama's exile and Sita's banishment, both of which were performed in the name of people's will.

Bharatha argues that Rama's decision to banish Sita was wrong and claims that it was more of Rama's will than the will of the people. Rama's reply to the question whether "Sita is chaste" limits to the remark that "she has passed the ordeal of fire" (*Kanchanasita* 155), which shows that he does not trust her completely. Bharatha points out that his very reply shows that the abandonment of Sita was not after all the will of the people, but his own will.

He questions Rama whether he still doubts her chastity and accuses that it was Rama who doubted her first and issued an order to leave her in the forest. Even if he had to believe in the rumours, he could have sent her to Kosala, instead of leaving in the forest amidst beasts and demons. If the whole of Ayodhya had demanded the committing of adharma then he should have left the country and sought refuge in the lap of Godavari.

Bharatha opposes his elder brother and Vashishta, and claims that he prefers to leave the country rather than obeying the orders of adharma. He challenges that he would tie up the sacrificial horse and would not accept Rama's victory. He claims that the battle that would ensue will be one between dharma and adharma and challenges Rama to unsheathe his sword and fight him. Rama even raises his sword against his own brother, Bharatha, who had sacrificed everything for Rama and Rama does all these in the name of and for the sake of political craft. Kausalya's timely intervention stops the two brothers from a battle. All these incidents compel Rama to think, "whether the whole concept of Ramarajyam is an illusion" (*Kanchanasita* 159).

In the play Sita appears only towards the end and she is compared to the light that burns bright just before it is about to go off and this is evident through out her

conversation with other characters. Her **entry** is described as follows “**she enters like the twilight**”, which indicates that **she has also reached the twilight of her own life**.

Valmiki: My beloved daughter! It is not easy to reach the other side of **this sea of sorrows**.

Sita : But your daughter has **already started seeing the other side**.

(Kanchanasita 168)

Other statements in the play also indicates the nearing of her end, for instance Lava says that her “**face resembles the moon of the dark fortnight**” and **that she “smiles like the full moon among the dark clouds”** (*Kanchanasita 168*). **She sighs with relief** says that “**Let God bless him!**” when she comes to know that **Rama has decided to keep the golden statue of Sita, instead of marrying for the second time**.

Valmiki is sarcastic when he **speaks** to Lakshmana and asks him **whether** he remembers the place where he had left Sita in the forest. He advises him “one should not close eyes to human life, as it would keep revealing new **truths**” (*Kanchanasita 166*). Valmiki inquires **who** is the king’s wife in the Asvamedha yagna and Lakshmana says that it is a **golden statue of Sita** (*Kanchanasita*) as Rama refused to remarry again. The **use** of golden statue takes a symbolic meaning and has deeper implications, **which** explains the title of the play. Valmiki puts forward many questions, which **makes** one think that “Is the better half of the king just metal and lifeless? Does that **mean** that even if wife is invaluable, she should not have any consciousness? ...a being without consciousness and thoughts?” He says, “after all, Rama’s **heart** is also metal...even gold melts in fire, but Sita cannot be burnt or destroyed **even by fire**”: here, Vashishta is **referring** to the ordeal and also of the fact that she is **not** a lifeless material, but an **individual**

with thoughts and feelings. When Lakshmana is scared of meeting Sita, Valmiki assures him that she has even forgiven Rama and says that "Sita has a circle of glow like the sun, whereas Rama without Sita is a mere circle of darkness."

The questions that Sita asks Lakshmana, when she meets him after twelve years, reflects her resentment of Rama's decision to abandon her to keep the will of his subjects.

Sita: Are the subjects of Ayodhya happy and leading a life of contentment?

(*Kanchanasita* 167)

At a glance the question made by her seems to be a cordial remark, but at the same time it is marked by a deep satirical tone.

Bharatha even though he had agreed to stay for the yagna on the king's order is not happy and laments, "it is my destiny to praise dharma and tolerate adharma" (*Kanchanasita* 157). The killing of Shambuka, who was a fierce ascetic, looms large over the sacrificial scene and Bharatha thinks that the whole sacrifice could come to a stand still because of the curse of Shambuka's wife. Shambuka's wife had come and interrogated Rama; she asks him to cut her head off with the same sword with which he had killed her husband. Rama consoles her by saying that he understands her sorrow, she retaliates saying "You do not understand the sorrow of a wife who is separated from her husband." He addresses her as sister, to which she replies "I am not your sister ...I do not have brotherly affection for Aryans". She also informs him that Shambuka had not continued the tapas after he had warned him. She questions him that even if he had continued what was wrong in doing so? Do the Vedas say that praying to God is allowed only to the Aryans? She says that if a Brahmin's son had died it was not due to his penance, but it was because of Sita's curse. He had widowed not only her but also Tara and Mandodari and the

curses of all these women will loom large in **his** life. She laughs at the **golden** statue of Sita and says, “his wife is metal **and his heart** is made of stone.” She curses him “that he will never have the **happiness** of living with a wife, **which** comes to be true in the end. You will never **have peace** of mind” and that **no yagna** could save him from the curses of all these **women**. There is lightning and **thunder** in the background accompanied by the **frightening** cries of wild beasts in the forest. Rama is totally shattered and exhausted by **this** final ordeal.

Vashishta acknowledges Shambuka’s **devotion**, but calls him a ‘barbarian’ and does not want him to become powerful **like the** Aryans. Bharatha considers the killing of Shambuka as inauspicious and **wants** to leave the palace. At **this** point Hanuman too enters and is shocked to **see the** golden statue of Sita in the hall. He who has always spoken of Sitaram **cannot** imagine Rama without Sita. He cannot take Rama’s plea that his kingdom **and Sita** are opposing forces, **and he** wants Rama to do away with such a craft of **governance**, which lacks **compassion**. Rama tries to defend himself by saying that **his duty** as a king is more **important** than as an individual. Hanuman is upset **with his** interpretation of statecraft **and** claims that he has become “a lifeless axle **pin in the** chariot of governance.” Rama claims that he was fulfilling his duty towards **his people**.

In the play Hanuman opines that Rama is **giving** a new interpretation to politics:

Hanuman: I fear that it would be curse to have such a political system that does not value any relations. In such a situation man becomes like lifeless axle in the **wheel** of power...becomes a dagger of administration...

(Kanchanasita 177)

Hanuman attacks such a system where the ruler has to transcend all his relations and sacrifice all his wishes for the sake of the welfare of the people. He advises that a person should abandon those rules, which seem to exercise an uncontrollable influence on his feelings.

Rama : My beloved friend! I am a slave. I am like the axle in the wheel of power that is rotating continuously/incessantly. This axle is not supposed to break...it should be like iron.

Hanuman: ...a kingdom without Sita! It would be like a man without the soul...I have not learned this craft, which you are practicing.

Rama : This is the craft of politics and I hope no one ever practice this in their life. Rama is protector ... Rama is just a king.

Hanuman: Does that mean you are not a human being?

Rama : No.

(Kanchanasita 177)

Hanuman leaves by saying that where there is no place and respect for Sita, there is no place neither for Sugriva or Hanuman. He claims that rulers are concerned only about their own existence and that they make the welfare of people as an excuse to cover their own existence. Thus Rama is accused of making the welfare of people as a façade for committing adharma, when he himself proclaims of the importance of exercising dharma.

Urmila also criticizes Rama for resorting to such a political system that brings an end to love, relationships and kindness:

Urmila: ... Love ends where the need for duty towards the country arises.

And that is the reason why such a duty has become a synonym for hatred.

(Kanchanasita 151)

Even the rigidity and lack of **compassion** is evident in the **description** of Ayodhya by the playwright. In his **description** of the city of Ayodhya, the playwright gives emphasis to the stone **pillars**, which is significant, as it **points** towards the rigid rules of the **administrative** system existing in Ayodhya. The pillars constructed out of single stone **become** symbolic of the lack of **fellow** feeling and kindness in the mind of the **ruler** and the subjects of Ayodhya. The description is as follows

The city of Ayodhya. The **assembly hall** of Maharaja Ramachandra's palace...full of stone structures...**the hall** is decorated with pillars **made out** of stones.

(Kanchanasita 135)

Thus the play lashes its whip against **such a political system**, which **makes an** individual insensitive to relationships and **ultimately**, which results in the loss of his own individuality.

When Hanuman leaves the palace, **Lava and Kusa** enter the palace **singing** songs in praise of Sita and Rama. When **Rama** listens to the two children **singing** the story of Rama and Sita, he wonders **why they** choose to sing his sad story. The boys continue to sing the wedding scene of **Sita and Rama**; **Bharatha and Urmila** immediately recognize them to be Sita's **children**. The song by the children **about** Rama's happy days with Sita in the forest **further** deepens his despair. **Vashishta** does not want him to meet the children, as **emotional turbulence** could lead to the downfall of Aryan clan. Rama is startled **with** the questions that they **ask him**: Kusa wonders who cursed Sita to be a **metal statue** and Lava requests him not to allow faithful wives to be turned into **metal statues** in his kingdom. **Valmiki** also requests him to show the children the Sita of **their song**. Thus Rama is put into real

test, as he is unable to answer their questions. Even Rama has been turned into a statue before the tactics of politics, an individual without any will of his own.

Finally Valmiki tells Rama and his courtiers that Lava and Kusa are his children. Urmila asks Rama to make them sit on his lap, so that he is redeemed of all his curses. Vashishta enters again and asks Valmiki not to undermine the strength of the Aryan clan, to which he sarcastically replies, “ Whether the strength of the Aryan clan is going to be upheld by a lifeless statue?” He continues that:

Vashishta may insult him by saying that Valmiki is not an Aryan....he is a hunter....but for Valmiki, human being is important.... And humanity is worth coveting.”

(*Kanchanasita* 182)

Vashishta asks Valmiki not to drown a clan’s growth by involving too much in emotion to which he replies that “emotion is the greatest wealth of a human being and those without emotions are insects or beasts” (*Kanchanasita* 183). Rama orders Sita to come and that she has to take an oath before the people of Ayodhya that she is chaste, only then she can be near him in the sacrificial hall. Vashishta also supports Rama on this matter, while Urmila considers this an insult on womanhood and Kausalya feels that her son has put all mothers to shame. Sita refuses to take an oath where she has to prove her chastity again and prays to Mother Earth to split open and protect her self-respect. Thus the play ends with the disappearance of Sita.

Kanchanasita could be viewed as a political play, because the playwright tries to bring out through his play that side of modern politics that lacks fellow feeling and kindness through the characters taken from the epic. The strength of the whole play comes from the dramatic structure that articulates several

contradictions that sets off to deconstruct **the myth** of Rama. Unlike the Rama of the epic in which he is portrayed as a **man par excellence**, in the play he is portrayed as a weak character whose decision **is influenced** by various characters, as an individual who is in a moral dilemma of **what** to do and what not to do. Sage Valmiki in the play brings out the undeclared **perspective** of the playwright, which gives importance to instincts, emotions and **relations** than to the play of power and soulless statecraft.

The vacillating nature of Rama's mind and **the feeling** of guilt are evident from the various remarks that he makes through out **the play**. Some of the instances are as follows:

The divine peace of Dandaka forest ends **on the banks** of Ganga.

Rocks and thorns are not in the forest, **but in Ayodhya**.

Is Rama Rajya an illusion?

Will the King be felicitated? But the **King** is not a sword or armour, isn't it? He is just a human like anyone **else**...one who is happy when the sun rises and sad when the sun sets...**one** who is born into this earth like anyone else...At this moment if **you also** leaves me? Otherwise... you also go...Rama will stand all by himself...**till** the end. There is death **only** to Rama, who is a human ...but not to **Rama**, who is truth.

Rama's remarks reveal that he is aware of the **heartless** workings of politics, but at the same time he is not able to give up kingship. Through his words the playwright is trying to convey of the fact that man is **invariably** alone in whatever action he performs.

In the play what the playwright does is not to **condemn** Rama, but to show him as a victim of a statecraft that is based on violence **and** racial hatred against the non-

Aryans. He is presented as a tragic victim of totalitarian power that can be sustained only by the creation of the 'other'- represented by Shambuka, Bali and Ravana- and violence against them. In the play the playwright also gives emphasis on the way in which the Brahmins dominate the people belonging to the depressed class. This is evident in the conversations between the various characters regarding the rituals that were performed by Shambuka, who is a Dasyu and which has resulted in his death. Urmila questions Lakshmana regarding the right of an Asura to perform certain rituals:

Urmila : Why an Asura cannot perform the rituals that are usually performed by the Brahmins?

Lakshmana: Excellent! ...Meditation and performing rituals are the exclusive right of the Brahmins

Urmila : But who are the people who judge whether one can perform a ritual or not?

Lakshmana: (replies with doubt) ...the sages and ascetics.

(Kanchanasita 141)

Urmila thus blames that Rama has become a puppet in the hands of power and a servant to the Brahmins following whatever they say, thereby losing his own individuality. The fear of the possibility of the Dasyus becoming powerful is present in Vashishta's mind and which, according to him would become a threat to the very existence of the Aryans. His fear is reflected in his words when he says

If Shambuka is not punished for what he has done, then every Asura will start appeasing God through meditation and performance of rituals. If that happens, then wont the Asuras also become strong and noble like the Aryans? In that case how will the Aryans gain victory against them?

(Kanchanasita 145)

Kanchanasita can also be considered as a tragic play, which shows that an individual's will has no voice in the workings of statecraft. If Rama were to be considered as an ideal model to be emulated, then there would have been no scope for tragedy. The source of tragedy should be one's own character, in that sense the indecisiveness and vacillating nature of Rama forms the tragic flaw of his character. The basic foundation of statecraft is power and recognition and there is no place for values, human relations or even likes and dislikes of an individual. Rama, as the ruler of Ayodhya, abandons Sita just to keep the will of the people and as the king he is not concerned about the individuality of either Sita or himself.

There has always been conflict between an individual and the system. At times the individual comes out victorious or vice versa and in some cases new institutions come into being surrounding the individual. But when the system wins the individual is broken and destroyed, and this is what happens to Rama in the play. Rama is the representative of the system, which does not have a soul, emotions and expectations, but only rules and limitations. An individual is not devoid of a soul, emotions and expectations, and it is this awareness that creates the tension in Rama's life. But as a King, he is forced to follow the rules of the system, which ultimately makes him abandon Sita who represents his soul. Thus when Rama becomes the system, he loses his individuality and is compelled to destroy his soul. We can see the King in Rama, when he says that "the leader of Ayodhya have no individuality...have no mother, father nor any siblings" (*Kanchanasita* 143).

We can see the human in him when he listens to Urmila patiently and when he listens to Bharatha, as an elder brother, to his accusations and Rama tells him "your brother is not a man without feelings" (*Kanchanasita* 144). Even while

performing his duty as a King, he is questioning the whole system within himself. Till the arrival of Shambuka's wife the conflict between the individual and the King is going on inside him. But this conflict comes to an end with the arrival of Lava and Kusa and finally he emerges as an individual.

Structurally, the social identity of a man is defined more in terms of caste status and kinship affiliation than in terms of one's own achievements as a person. The link that bridges the two realms is deftly expressed in the term 'dharma' which is a subject of disciplined learning and inner discovery rather than a matter of rational-social construction and prescription. It is the desire of Rama to perform his duty, which creates the conflict within his mind and the playwright has skillfully portrayed this aspect through the various characters in the play.

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

'Myth' and 'History' are terms, which are used in many ways with different nuances of meaning. Myths deal with the gods and 'events' which may not literally have happened, history deals with past facts and so reports what actually did happen. The impression may be given that myths are, at least in some senses, false, whereas historical accounts are true. The interest in myth is concerned with the human existential questions about meaning, values, sense of identity, causation, continuity and change (Bower 105). It is this quality of myth, that is, the interest of myth in human life, which can be applied to any culture at any period of time, that had prompted the playwright to choose the myth of *Ramayana* as the source for his trilogy of plays.

The various vernacular versions of *Ramayana*, which includes a complex interweaving of narratives, are bound up with issues of both social and political identity. The basic structure of *Ramayana* can be considered as a myth of quest – the quest could be that of quest for self, identity, for one's social status and duties – and also includes various challenges that the protagonist has to overcome like exile, loss, financial ruin and war. Srikantan Nair had taken this very essential structure of *Ramayana* and its various aspects as themes for his three plays.

In the trilogy of plays the first play, *Saketam* marks the beginning of Rama's journey and the third play *Kanchanasita* marks the finale of the journey. The second play of the trilogy *Lankalekshmi* is the tale of Ravana, a character who aspires for power, but has to face with his inevitable catastrophe. The notable feature of Srikantan Nair's plays is characterization, he removes the mask of

superhuman qualities that was **donned by the** mythic heroes and **presents them** as purely human. Dasharatha in *Saketam* **is one** who tries to retain his **individuality** and lose his ideology of statecraft, **while** Rama of *Kanchanasita* loses his individuality in the quest for Rama **Rajya**, the ideal state. Midway **between them** is Ravana of *Lankalekshmi* whose **personal shortcomings** lead to his **destruction** and also of his state. The striking **similarity** in all the three plays is the playwright's treatment of the issue of politics **and power**. In his plays he gives emphasis to the essence of politics, which is the tug of **war** for power. This may be attributed to the playwright's political life and its **influence** in his plays.

The factor that seemed to have **attracted** the playwright to use Valmiki's *Ramayana* as the source for his **trilogy** is probably the single-minded concentration of the book and its **poetical quality**. Srikantan Nair's plays **are also** poetical in composition especially **in the play** *Kanchanasita*, in which the description of the forest life of Rama **and Sita** by Urmila, and the songs in **praise** of Rama and Sita by Hanuman, Lava **and Kusa** are poetical. The **similarity** between the two plays *Saketam* and *Kanchanasita* in the trilogy is that **both the** plays are set in Ayodhya and *Lankalekshmi* is set in Lanka. But the treatment of the characters and situations in the three **are different**. *Kanchanasita* and *Saketam* basically deal with the issues that affect **the internal workings** of a family **and of a** nation, while *Lankalekshmi* deal with **the conflict** between two nations and their political systems.

Even though the themes of the three plays are different, the one similarity in all the three plays is that the playwright **primarily** deals with the inner state of the characters. In *Kanchanasita* the conflicts occurring in Rama's life are mostly on the superficial level; in *Saketam* what **haunts** Dasharatha is the sense of sin that he has committed, which is more of an **internal conflict** and in *Lankalekshmi* what we see is the treatment of the character of Ravana from various philosophical

dimensions. The important aspect that surfaces in each of the play is as follows – political administration in *Kanchanasita*; the tug of war between spirituality and materialistic concern in *Saketam* and psychological workings of the mind and philosophy in *Lankalekshmi*. Basically all these plays look into how the character is trapped in certain situations, which ultimately leads the character to lead a life of solitude or seclusion.

As described in the ancient scripts, all human beings have certain basic qualities or gunas - Satwa guna, Thamo guna and Raja guna - and the Indian philosophy attributes to the compulsion to act to these gunas. Satwa guna stands for truthfulness, honesty, ethics and morals; Thamo guna stands for sluggishness, purposeless outlook, laziness and all the negative qualities and Raja guna stands for vigour, valour, ambitions and chivalry (Ramaswamy 3). In his trilogy the playwright tries to project Satwa guna with all its varied aspects in the play *Kanchanasita*, whereas in *Saketam* he deals with the Thamo guna and in *Lankalekshmi* he depicts Raja guna with all its contradictions. In the latter he views the *Ramayana* from a different angle and here the hero is not Rama but Ravana, who commands respect from everybody with his strength and ultimate devotion to Lord Shiva. But his pride refused to submit himself to anybody, not even to the Lord whom he worshipped. The interesting factor that can be noticed in the play is the depiction of the history of Lanka and the proud glory of the race of Raksasa, which was not given importance in the different versions of *Ramayana* written by Tulsidas or Ezhuthachan due to the predominance of Rama Bhakti in these works (Pisharoty 55). In the play, the dominance of Raja guna can be seen in the second act, but in the first and third act the influence of Satwa guna gaining power over the former can be seen with the portrayal of Sita and Hanuman.

There are many similarities in the plays *Saketam* and *Kanchanasita*. *Saketam* marks the beginning of Rama's journey-also the beginning of *Ramayana*-and *Kanchanasita* marks the culmination of the journey. There are many factors, which connect both the parts together, for instance the characters in both the plays. The prominent characters are Kausalya, Rama, Lakshmana, Sita and Vashishta. Kausalya, in addition to representing the perfect embodiment of motherhood in both the plays, also plays the role of a perfect wife in *Saketam*. She is presented as a mature character in both the plays.

The character of Rama in *Kanchanasita* is different from the Rama in *Saketam*, in which his haughtiness can be observed in his comment on Bharatha, "with elder brother in forest and father in old age, he can rule the country all by himself". Both Bharatha and Lakshmana are Rama's favourites, but they are totally different in their character. Lakshmana is portrayed as a character who never questions the decisions of Rama and at times act as his alter ego. On the other hand Bharatha is the one, who with due respect and love for his brother, criticizes the right and wrong in Rama's deeds and actions. In *Kanchanasita* Lakshmana seems to be Rama's shadow who is the only one in the play who tries to understand Rama. The character of Lakshmana in *Saketam* can be seen as a reflection of Bharatha in *Kanchanasita*, who is presented as an embodiment of fury and anger, who shows no hesitation in questioning Dasharatha and Vashishta.

In both the plays Sita is presented as a calm and quiet character, who at the same time keeps up her self-respect and dignity that is expected of a kshtriya woman. Sita appears as more virtuous than Rama in both the plays. In both the plays, Vashishta is presented as one who upholds the ideals of the Aryan clan, but he appears to be more generous in *Saketam* than in *Kanchanasita*. He is the one who seems to understand the workings of Rama's mind and tries to prevent him from deviating from doing his duties. This is evident when Vashishta says:

...how long can a ruler enjoy the support of the people and how many have enjoyed the support? I have never seen any...Maybe, Rama's real test will be that...

(*Saketam* 41)

The central characters in *Saketam* and *Kanchanasita* are Dasharatha and Rama respectively. The central characters in both the plays are different in their personalities, but both of them goes through the same kind of psychological conflict. In *Kanchanasita* even after Sita's disappearance into the Earth Rama is left behind, but in *Saketam* even after Dasharatha's confession of his sin, his journey continues which ends with his death. Dasharatha represents the spiritual side of humanity and is also a link between the spiritual and the materialistic world. Rama discards his individuality to become a philosophy, whereas Dasharatha sacrifices philosophy to become a human being, which brings about the tragedy in his life. The playwright try to show the fact that a person cannot totally discard neither his own individuality nor his philosophy through the two characters and claims that when a person sacrifices one for the other the impact of tragedy becomes more intense. This makes one think whether there is something called the "perfect human being", and if a perfect man exists then tragedy cannot happen in his life because he is "perfect".

In *Saketam* even though the religious and spiritual are highlighted, it also has a strong political undertone, which is the disrupted coronation. Dasharatha's mind takes the wrong path out of his own selfishness. He decides to crown Rama as the king when neither Bharatha nor Shatrughan are present in Ayodhya. When Kaikeyi interrupts the coronation ceremony he becomes totally shattered and this is aggravated by her insistence on sending Rama into exile. The saying that the 'price of sin is death' becomes true in Dasharatha's life. In the play the playwright

also brings out the view that **even** attainment of spirituality is **underlined by the** influence of worldly and **materialistic** aspects.

Rama, the central character in *Kanchanasita* and Dasharatha in *Saketam* are totally different individuals. The main features that characterize Rama's personality are that of inactiveness, **lack** of courage, instability, **apprehension and** anxiety whereas Dasharatha's personality is armoured by truth and **affection**, and he appears to be a stronger character **than** Rama in the sense that **he is more** aware of his duty. Moreover in *Kanchanasita* the other characters like Urmila, **Bharatha**, Valmiki and Hanuman emerges as **much** stronger characters than Rama. This may be the reason why *Kanchanasita* does **not** appear to be the tragedy of Rama, while Dasharatha's situation evokes sympathy in the audience, as he is **aware** of his guilt.

The characteristic feature noticeable in *Saketam* is the use of narrator. The essence of performance is that it has **the inherent** quality of **questioning any** limitation of viewpoint. Generally in the performance of plays, characters like the narrator enjoy the freedom of not only to offer different perspectives on the 'noble' characters and the situations they **engage** in, but also to **communicate in** a different register and a different language. **They** stand aside from the action, **both** physically and linguistically, and they **frequently** use the codes of the contemporary world in order to relocate and **question** the issues **deprived** from the epics.

In *Lankalekshmi* the dramatic temper is **sustained** throughout the play by giving equal importance to both the spiritual and **materialistic** aspects of life. The important feature of the play is the **characterization** of Ravana and the **pomp and** prowess that marks his character surfaces on **the** stage through his eloquent statements and speech. He is the pride of his clan **and** inspiration for **the** subjects

of Lanka. In spite of his brutalities, it is his capability to free his country from the clutches of slavery and other foreign powers that make his subjects forget of the brutalities and forgive him. If viewed from the perspective of international politics, the play traces the liberation of a country from foreign supremacy and the story of their victory and failures. It includes the colonization of a country, devolution of power and war and all these aspects are treated in a skilful manner by the playwright through the composition of the play.

Ravana is presented as a character who is a leader with intense feelings and thoughts. When he talks about the past glory of Lanka that was made possible by his ancestors and himself, he becomes very eloquent. Indrajit, Vibhishana, Malyavan and Suparshvan act as foil to the character of Ravana and reveal the different aspects of his personality. The prologue and epilogue of the play serve as indicators of the rise and fall of the glory of Lanka. The main topic of the three acts that comes in between the prologue and epilogue is war, which is the result of the culmination of the political problems. The play becomes a representative of the performance of Yuddhakanda of politics on the stage. The playwright severely criticizes the harsh, furious and harmful aspect of war through the characters of Vibhishana, Suparshvan, and Malyavan. Thus the play also reveals the political insight and knowledge of the playwright to the audience.

Tulsidas in his *Ramacharitamānas* has typified men and women into two categories – one being the class of ideal seekers of the higher life like Bharatha, Lakshmana, Sita, Hanuman and Vibhishana who have surmounted temptations and enemies of the higher life; the other type is that of the derelicts who have fallen apart from the integral path of the real purpose of human life like Ravana, Kaikeyi, Surpanakha and Manthara. Such derelict characters are portrayed as the villains and are despised for their dereliction. Tulsidas also distinguishes between two types of women in his *Ramacharitamānas* – one which represents 'Maya' (the

power of deception), whose sole object is to seduce man and drive him into peril and the other type symbolized as 'Bhakti' (devotion) to Lord. The notion of 'Bhakti' implies virtues like self-discipline, self sacrifice, devotion to one's husband and family, respect for wise men, pridelessness and above all devotion for Rama. Women possessing negative attributes are construed as the human manifestation of the deceptive power of 'Maya'. Almost all the woman characters in Ramacharitamanas belong to either of these categories, that is, women with virtues and non-virtuous women. In fact if the entire *Ramayana* story oscillates between the two extremes of the two types of women characters, i.e., in dialectic of 'Maya' and 'Bhakti', the other women characters are the different permutations and combinations of these two ideals (Jain and Mohan 117). This appears to be true in the portrayal of the women characters in the three plays also.

Instead of portraying the women as frail and subdued characters, Nair presents them as mature characters that have great commanding power. Each character presents a package of values and idealities to be followed and emulated by every man and woman in the society and refurbishes his or her moral strength and capacity to act correctly with wisdom. Characters like Kausalya and Sita could be brought under the category of 'Bhakti' and Kaikeyi, Manthara and Surpanakha under the category of 'Maya'. The latter characters are shown as overpowered by impulsive actions and temptations of lower self. Such characters are used as negative referents to dissuade people from their excessive indulgence in instinctive pleasures and material life. The characters of Sita and Kausalya are most revered and loved as they represent ideals of self-sacrifice and pure love. They form the foundation to the continuance and harmony of the very institution of family. Self sacrifice in the worldly commitments and quest for the pure selfhood have been the two most persistent aspirations of the Indian tradition and these qualities find a perfect blend in these two characters.

Women have thus played vital roles in the epic and their depiction is so vivid that one is sometimes led to designate the epic as a story of woman rather than of man. A galaxy of women characters is presented in the epic among whom the important figures are Kaikeyi, Manthara, Mandodari, Sita and Surpanakha. There are other characters too like Kausalya, Sumitra, Urmila and Mandavi who have their own importance. The former group consists of such characters who in a sense are the makers and unmakers of the whole trail of the tale. The dynamism of the incidents rests on their deeds and behaviours - deeds that are sometimes noble and sometimes ignoble.

In *Saketam*, the way in which Manthara poisons Kaikeyi's is abominable, but it is her character who turns the table and helps to cast the shadow of the coming event. Kaikeyi, who at the instigation of Manthara, is tempted to assert her selfish interests and which takes the events further and paves the way for the catastrophe. Thus at the outset, Manthara and Kaikeyi jointly turn the course of events.

The same importance is given to the character of Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana. Surpanakha in her revenge for the humiliation and chastisement in the hand of Lakshmana succeeds in poisoning the mind of her brother. She could thus insinuate her brother, who is a victim of pride and passion, to abduct Sita and thereby inviting his opponent for a brawl. Ultimately she helps in bringing ruin to her own family and race. Thus had not she been present in the Panchvadi and experienced the sad plight the story of *Ramayana* would have been totally different. Mandodari, the chief queen of the demon king has her importance in so far as she tried to correct her husband and save the family and the race. But she fails to persuade the proud king who ultimately had to pay for his crime.

Urmila, the wife of Lakshmana, is a character who is the embodiment of sacrifice and selflessness. She is the only character in the epic who is kept away from the company of her husband from the beginning to the end, yet she is calm, patient and all enduring. But in Srikantan Nair's *Kanchanasita* Urmila is given more importance than in the epic and she is presented as a much stronger character. In *Kanchanasita*, Urmila and Kausalya are not only representatives of feminine qualities, but also they are the external manifestations of the internal conflict going on within Rama's mind.

Out of all these women characters the most important is Sita, who acts as a pretext for sealing the fate of demonism. She is portrayed as the paragon of virtue with her selfless love for Rama, her love and affection for Lava and Kusa, respect for Valmiki and affection for Lakshmana. In spite of the numerous trials and tribulations she had to she remains true to her husband. Her heroic endurance of all the sufferings, her proud rejection of the Ravana and her unwavering love for her husband and all these make her an embodiment of the ideal wife.

Myth by its very nature is capable of many kinds of interpretation, as it possesses the dual quality of preservation and transformation. It is also close to religion, in the sense that it describes the relationship between human beings and the cosmos often by means of images of superhuman beings and also it is in the form of political or moral persuasion. The text has crossed many borders had been retold in many cultures with the possibility of multiple interpretation. Thus *Ramayana*, the myth, forms a potential source of entertainment, instruction, speculative thought and dramatic action and it is this very quality that has been efficiently utilized by Srikantan Nair in his trilogy of plays.

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