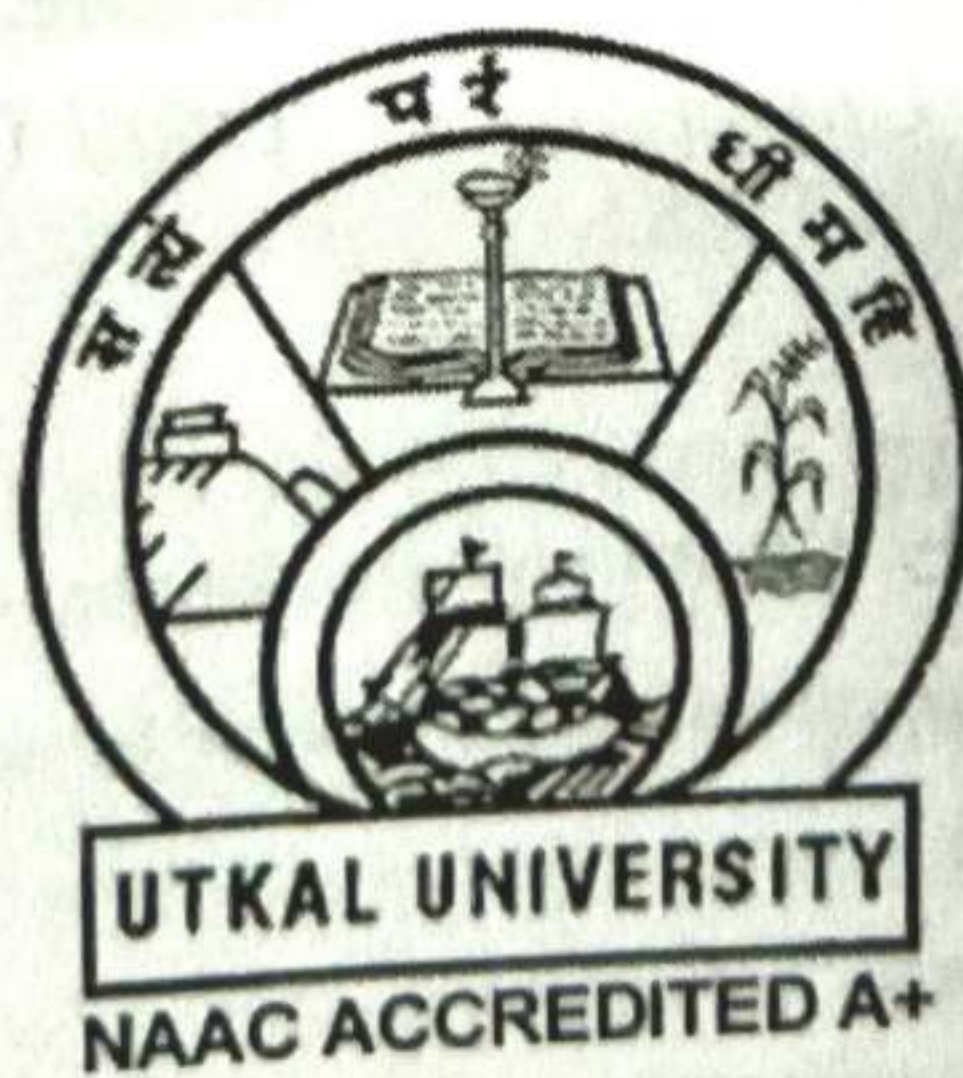


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(DE)CONSTRUCTINGⁱ THE MYTHICAL CANON: A READING OF C.N.SREEKANTAN
NAIR'S THE RĀMĀYANA TRILOGY

Dr Seetha Vijayakumar, Assistant Professor of English, NSS College Pandalam, University of Kerala

Myth is a mode of communication, a form of (mythical) signification, 'a type of speech'.

Abstract

C.N.Sreekantan Nair's plays based on the Rāmāyana- Kanchana Sita (1958), Saketam (1960), Lankalakshmi (1976) are one of the finest attempts to portray our mythical tradition on stage, even though in a reverse order. Both in its handling of the Rāmāyana theme and application of unique theatrical techniques the Rāmāyana trilogy marks a defining moment in Indian dramatic scene. Dasaratha, Rāma and Rāvana interact with the audience not as characters of stereotypical, mythical stature, but human beings in flesh and blood, which clearly underlines the sole aim to break away from the established/authentic narrative pattern. This paper offers a framework for dealing with two research questions: (a) How do Sreekantan Nair's dramatic reworking of the Rāmāyana unique in its use of the subject, stage setting, visual craft etc? (b) How do these plays provide a background for understanding a plethora of significances relating to the emergence of the new Indian theatre? The paper attempts to understand Nair's contribution to the development of Indian theatre with an end view of explaining its participation in the process of (De) constructing the mythical canon on theatrical space.

Key Words: C.N.Sreekantan Nair, Rāmāyana, Indian theatre, Myth

"Anything which is rare in the three worlds should belong to Lanka. I stole the divine plane Pushpaka from my elder brother Vaishnavanann, so that it will belong to Lanka. Brahma's armour should come to the ruler of Lanka. Siva's sword, Chandrahasta that should decorate the weapon-stores of Lanka... All the beauties, fortune and wealth. Sita also should belong to Lanka. I am not a womaniser; I am a lover of all rare and beautiful objects. All things of beauty this Ravanann will win. They will adorn Lanka and will be a lasting fortune for the clan of Rakshasas"ⁱⁱⁱ (Nair, 88) declares Ravanann in C.N.Sreekantan Nair's 1976 play, Lanka Lakshmi. Such a statement of courage and vindication from the rakshasa lord Ravanann is itself enough to understand the political, ideological dimensions that C.N advocates on stage in writing a Ramayana trilogy. In Lanka Lakshmi, all our preconceived notions about the portrayals of Ravanann are challenged and a 'new' Ravanann who defends himself is presented. Villain from the periphery of one of world's greatest epic is transformed into its protagonist, somebody who is certain of his deeds, its end-product as right and wrong.

Paula Richman in Questioning Ramayana: A South Asian Tradition speaks mainly of two major models of the Ramayana tradition. The older model originated within the academic discipline of philology, with philologists specializing in Sanskrit literature. These Philologists viewed the Rāmāyana attributed to Valmiki as the "ur" or "original" text, as the authoritative telling of the Ramayana story. This view identifies all other tellings in terms of how they deviate from the central Valmiki Ramayana. This model truly recognizes the status of Valmiki's poem as the oldest version of Raman's story in existence written in Kāvya form or with literary embellishments. Most importantly, by considering this historical point of view we can clearly trace how Valmiki's Ramayana has influenced the countless rereadings of Raman's story that developed over the centuries. A.K.Ramanujan developed a substitute model to deal with the Ramayana tradition called "Many Ramayanas Approach". Many Ramayanas approach assumes that each rereading is 'correct' and 'valid', thus maintains a non-hierarchical relationship within the tradition. It also helps us consider how certain rereadings are framed in accordance with certain religious affiliation, region,

language, historical period, literary and gender conventions etc. Reread the Rāmāyana means, questioning that which is regarded as the standard version/ fixed text according to certain norms of antiquity and value. In a way, it won't be an exaggeration to say that it is through the different forms of rereading that the 'authoritative' version becomes legally authoritative. The diversity in treatment of the story not only adds to the richness of the versions that we are already familiar with, but also demonstrates the ways in which the story has been conceptualized. Mainly, forms of questioning based on the Rāmāyana range across norms of rulership, of social relations, of gender constructions and of justice patterns. Rereading Rāmāyana has played a very crucial role in upholding this tradition over the centuries, cutting across social as well as linguistic barriers.

C.N's Rāmāyana Trilogy

In the history of post independent Malayalam theatre, the contribution of a playwright like C.N. Sreekantan Nair will mostly be remembered through his trilogy of plays based on the Rāmāyana. *Kanchana Sita* (1958), *Saketam* (1969), *Lankalakshmi* (1976) are one of the best attempts to portray the mythical canon before common people in a subversive way. Sreekantan Nair modernized Malayalam drama, drawing the basic mythical story from the epic Rāmāyana and brilliantly using them to address certain equations that he found seriously mismatched. Nair's Ramayana trilogy in every sense is an inventive take on the epic Rāmāyana and it opened the public's eyes to a new way of experiencing theater. The Ram-ayana is beyond doubt the journey of savarna/male/maryadapurushottam Raman; but what about the other side of the coin? What about lower cast/female/asura narratives/critiques? Ravana, Bharata, Urmila, Mandodari are characters in the periphery whom never given a chance to stepped on. For the first time in the theatrical space, Raman's orders take a back seat as these characters loud not only what to do with him, but why and how. The transformation of an Ithihasa into newer stage plays presents a variety of arguments and values suitable for a modern context. The primary aim of C.N's stage craft is to depict ancient values of justice, love vs. present-day reality and social justice that can be associated with modern perceptions of these ideas, emphasising diverse voices. The shift in focus away from the maryadapurushottam Raman towards characters of secondary importance is deeply political. In order to achieve this aim, C.N invents weighty dramatic language without losing its ordinary understanding. The very act of choosing a setting from the Rāmāyana for his trilogy springs from C.N's attempt to negotiate the chasm between the ancient and the modern.

Saketham: Encountering a Sin

Saketham, staged in 1969 is the dramatic picture of human sentiments particularly when encountered with the concept of sin. It depicts Dasarathan's dilemma whether to pay for his past sin or to fulfill the present boon for his wife Kaikeyi. Written in three Acts, play moves from the happy news of Raman's crowning ceremony to the sorrowful exile of Raman for fourteen years. Act 1 opens with suthradharan's introduction of Ayodhya's honoured position among the four worlds, its palaces of architectural wonder, affluent castles and contented populace. But he winds up his talk with a dreadful warning, that how Dasarathan forgot about his past deed and the curse upon him by blind saint. He not only introduces situations but takes part in present action. He also mentions about the role assigned to him by his creator/author, thus pointing self-reflexivity of the theatrical space. Minister Sumanthrar brings in the decision to crown Raman as the next king of Ayodhya. The air is filled with happiness for the future of Ayodhya is going to be safe in the hands of the most righteous Raman. Everyone including Kausalya and Vasishthan receives this news with absolute enthusiasm and joy. Main dialogue in this Act takes place between Kausalya and Vasishthan where Vasishthan tries to console the doubting mind of Kausalya. She asks about Dasarathan's promise to Aswapathi, the father of Kaikeyi at the time of her wedding with Dasarathan. Vasishthan calms her by saying that Kaikeyi herself loves Raman more than her own son Bharathan. So, she won't claim the share of Ayodhya when the Raman is selected as the king. Kausalya says it is not herself but Dasarathan who failed to understand her.

Dasarathan expresses his desire to go for hunting to Vasishthan and how his ageing body fails to follow the orders of his mind. One major theme of Sakethamis this paradox of human desire to get engaged in beauty, pleasures of life even when his physical self lacks behind. Play enquires how the aspirations of youth embrace human beings in their old age, leading to a state of 'sin'. Youth and old age are two sides of the same coin, both interrelated but never destined to meet. Dasarathan ignores the sin of killing an innocent child; he says to Vasishthan: Aren't you reminding me about the curse of that Sudra saint? My arrow was not indented to kill the saint's son. He was destined to death. And the curse has outdated now! I no longer bother about that. (Nir, 31)

Even though Dasarathan appears relaxed before other characters, audience gets the impression that his mind is totally disturbed. Act 1 ends with Dasarathan seeing ill omens on Ayodhya's sky and he prays to Lord Vishnu for strength to face all future crisis. The atmosphere of Act 2 is filled with tears, tensions and trauma. Kaikeyi directed by Manthara raises the topic of kingship for Bharathan and fourteen years of exile for Raman. But interestingly, Manthara is not portrayed as a character with an evil tongue, but as someone who boosts confidence in a woman who is blinded by love for her husband, deviates from the path of the responsibility of a mother. Manthara: your beauty can still save your son's future...you are maya, you are sakti, let the world get crushed under your footsteps...you are both good and evil. (Nair, 35)

Here we witness in what all ways Dasarathan's fate chains him in Kaikeyi's boon. When Sumanthar questions Kaikeyi's action, she defends pointing that a Kshathriya gains status not through sacrifice but undefeatable valour. To safeguard power at any cost is his only aim...Then why should she sacrifice? Lakshmanan appears angry at Kaikeyi; deviating from the epic tradition we see him openly showing his anger in public for the first time. In Act 3 Raman, Sita and Lakshmanan leave for exile to forest for fourteen years. In the end Dasarathan appears alone on stage contemplating his actions heading towards inevitable tragedy. C.N concludes Saketham with Sri Krishnan's answer in Karmayogam to Arjunan when enquired about the origin of sinful behaviour in human beings. Dasarathan repeats these lines to Kausala. Human beings commit sins driven by a mysterious power. Kama is the ultimate cause of sin and ruin in human life. Dasarathan forgets about earlier sins because of his love towards Raman; but irony results when he is torn between his love for Kaikeyi and Raman. Both in content and form Saketham conveys the unconscious interplay of sin in Dasarathan's life. The theme of Saketham is profoundly rooted in spirituality which later develops into transcendental dimensions. C.N intends to point to the dichotomy of human desires and current will in utmost philosophical manner on stage.

Lanka Lakshmi: A Journey into the Interiors of Ravana's Mind

Lanka Lakshmi staged in 1975 concerns the inner musings of Ravana, the rakshasa 'antihero' from the Rāmāyan who is the emperor of Lanka, focusing on events after the abduction of Sita as its background. Lanka Lakshmi is structured as the inverse of the Rāmāyana; villain as the protagonist/hero defending himself as a courageous warrior. An omniscient Ravana appears on stage speaking thus: You doubt that Lanka's prowess will not be enough? Lanka means..... Kumbhakarna, Meghanadan, Prahasthan, and uncles from Viroopakshan onwards. It also means young men such as Nikumbhan, and millions of Rakshasa soldiers, forts which are impenetrable, moats, divine arrows, magic warfare techniques, the knowledge and the experience of having conquered the three worlds, the blessing of old Malyavan, who is still alive and happy that the Rakshasa clan is dominating the worlds..... the prowess of such a Lanka.... (Nair, 85)

Prologue begins in the main gate of Lanka, with the conversation between Lanka Lakshmi and Hanuman, through which viewers get the impression that Lanka was waiting for a saviour /the coming of Raman to Lanka. She directs Hanuman to asokavani where Sita is kept captive. All the three acts are set in Ravana's court room. The milieu is rampant with Lanka losing major war posts. To make the situation all the more worse, the golden cupola representing strength of Lanka has already broken down. Audience constantly hears from the war front, we feel the tension

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with other characters. Suparswan, Viroopakshan, Atikayan, Prahastan, Indrajit are debating over circumstances that lead to war with Raman.

Suparswan: The language you used is indeed good. But you gave a twist to the topic of our conversation. I also know that you did it intentionally. Still, Leaders of the Rakshasa clan! You have to think of this issue. Should Lanka fight a war for the sake of a woman?

Nikumbhan : Wherever one sees beauty, taking it with or without force is the Dharma of Rakshasas.

Indrajit has doubts regarding war tactics, the future of Lanka: "Today, Lanka has turned into an old woman. King Ravana's famous sword, Chandrahasa has begun to rust. Heroism has become a thing of the past. Victories in wars figure only in stories told by grandmothers to children. People with unimpaired vision can see. Look, that gold cupola may break and fall any moment. That cupola is the symbol of Lanka. It is the flagstaff of Ravana, who flogged and conquered the Devas and the guardians of the four directions. But, now I fear that it may fall down any moment". (Nair,93)

Vibhishanan tries to demoralize Ravana by stating the supremacy of Raman and his monkey companions. But nothing can destroy Ravana. He stands tall.

In Act2, We get a closer look at Ravana's mind while chatting with his wife Mandodari. When Mandodari advises to send Sita back in order to stop war, he invites her attention towards the mutilated image of Surpanakha. C.N here brings in the issue of justice when it comes to people of marginalized caste and gender. Ravana justifies the abduction of Sita as a reaction to the brutality done towards Surpanakha. Vibhishanan's wife Sarama also enters on stage condemning Vibhishanan's act of joining opponent camp. Act2 comes to an end with Ravana losing Kumbhakarna in battle and Indrajit taking up army in charge.

Ravana asserts :

Ravana: (Approaching Indrajit) Son, Ravana is not a short-lived butterfly. Ravana is a generation that survives yesterdays, today and tomorrows. Hathi's son Vidyutkesan, his son Sukesan and his son Sumali, Sumali's grandson Ravana, Ravana's son Meghanathan...(Nair,100)

In Act3, Ravana's great grandfather Malyavan advises him to go for compromise with Raman than indulging more in war. But Ravana disobeys him stating Lanka has still enough people and power to defeat Raman. When Ravana receives the news of Indrajit's death from Suparswan he breaks down. We see Ravana standing totally shattered, all confidence vanished without any idea of the future. This is the most dramatic scene of Lanka Lakshmi. But Mandodari rises to the situation. Mandodari is presented as an optimistic woman with enormous confidence. The epilogue is written as a continuation of the prologue. Hanuman's search is finally over. He meets Sita in Asokavanam with the joyful news of Raman's victory in war. In Valmiki Ramayana it is Raman who rules, but in C.N's Lanka Lakshmi it is definitely Ravana. Lanka Lakshmi certainly leaves one question unanswered; the question of love for one's country; as much as Raman is vowed to protect his ideal ramarajya, Ravana is to Lanka. Ravana's actions are justifiable in accordance with his dharma.

Kanchana Sita: Raman Faces Trial

Play opens with verses from ---adikavya- uttered by Valmiki on watching a hunter shoot down one of the pair of kraunchabirds. Kanchana Sita is the most political of all the three plays in the trilogy for the very reason of its representation of unheard characters like Urmila on stage. Kanchana Sita captures one of the most intense and dramatic moments of the Ramayana story; banishment of pregnant Sita to forest. It is a play that questions Raman's dharma from diverse points of view. Act 1 begins with Urmila eagerly waiting for the return of Raman and Lakshman from Dandakaranya. She expects that Raman will bring Sita back to Ayodhya. In conversation with Kausalya she expresses her anxiety at the behaviour of Raman in the name of glory for Raghuvamsam.

Urmila: So, most probably, if the wife is thrown to the mercy of the forest boars, all the seven continents may come under Aryan Sovereignty.

Kausalya: Child the women of this ancient country need not know about all that.

Urmila: If ordered to jump into the fire-they must jump... (Nair, 136-137)

When Raman arrives Urmila again seeks his attention to the issue of banishment, but nothing really works. Vasishthan advises the need to perform aswamedham for the welfare and stability of the kingdom. As the presence of wife is essential at the time of performing the final ritual Vasishthan asks Raman to remarry. In Act 2 Bharathan also criticizes Raman's banishment of Sita as Raman's 'will'.

The setting of Act 3 is Valmiki's hermitage where a Lavan and Kusan tie up Raman's sacrificial horse. Lakshmanan following the horse comes to the hermitage and meets Sita, Valmiki and the children. Act 4 concludes with Sita's bhoomipravesa, when Raman asks Sita to take oath of chastity. It is very interesting to note how C.N sketches reactions of other characters at this gesture.

Urmila: You are insulting the whole of womanhood.

Bharathan: (Angrily) Maharajan! This Bharathan is ashamed to have been born in Ayodhya.

Kausalya: Can you repeat what you said once again, before your mother... My blessed Raman has insulted a mother. Haven't you? On hearing that I must die... (Nair, 174)

Sita is the absentee heroine in Kanchana Sita appearing only at the end. But each character voices justice for her. Kanchana Sita is a play of subversive voices and it brilliantly articulates several contradictions of the maryadapurushottama Raman.

For C.N. Sreekantan Nair, the Rāmāyana provided a setting that would allow audiences to locate a mixture of emotions in mythology while retaining enough distance in time to provide the epic required contemporary dramatic eminence. Ramayana trilogy also provided C.N with an occasion to subvert a complex set of patterns in the epic, which he reworked exploiting playwright's creative freedom. The Ramayana trilogy deals with the dark psychology of 'insignificant' characters, their hidden emotions, fears, unfulfilled desires that were ignored in the mainstream epic story. C.N enriched Indian theatre by deconstructing the mythical Rāmāyan into a political, social critique for the stage. Ramayana trilogy provides an alternative perspective/ fresh interpretation on characters with imaginative reframing of particular incidents. C.N revisits mythology in way that both shatters pre-existing beliefs and offers a new framework of understanding. Saketham, Lanka Lakshmi and Kanchana Sita are plays of massive subversive quality and strength.

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Endnotes

¹Here '(De) Constructing' broadly means a subversive re-reading

²All quotes including this one are taken from the translation of *Lanka Lakshmi* by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan and Bini BS, published in *Samyukta: Journal of Women Studies*, Thiruvananthapuram.