

# Reframing the Ramayana through a Socio-Political Lens: An Analysis of Prasanna Vithanage's Movie Paradise

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Ramayana, the ancient Indian epic, has a strong and pervasive influence on the social, cultural, religious and political imaginary of the subcontinent and several other countries in Southeast Asia. The epic celebrates the victory of good over evil by pitting Rama, the pious prince of Ayodhya against the villainous Ravana in the war to retrieve his abducted wife Sita from Lanka. The story of Rama and Sita has, over the ages, served as a moral reference point on how to conduct various aspects of life, both private and public and has set standards for how the ideal ruler, family man and wife should be. Apart from the text written in Sanskrit by Valmiki, which is regarded as the original version, there are many alternate Ramayanas including oral versions, the Jain Ramayaana, Thai Ramakien and Gond Ramayani, to mention a few. Serving as critiques of the epic's central precepts, the alternate texts and subversions shift the focus from the protagonist, Rama and tell the story from the point of view of Sita, Lakshman and even Ravana. There have been feminist versions which criticise the patriarchal leanings of the epic as well as versions that question the protagonist and humanize the villain.

Such subversions and alterations of the epic have existed in different parts of the subcontinent from early times and continue to exist today in various cultural platforms including literature, art, drama and cinema. The legend has been variously transformed and subverted in many Indian films as well: *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008), an animated feminist version, *Raavan* (2010) by Mani Ratnam which portrays a tribal leader inspired by the character of Ravana fighting against state authority represented by Rama and *Adipurush* (2023), which invited controversy for a disrespectful portrayal of mythological characters, are just a few recent examples. Set in Srilanka, which is believed to be the kingdom of the demon king, Ravana and the place where Sita was abducted to by the former as well as the place where Rama waged his war against the evil, the multi-lingual movie *Paradise* directed by acclaimed Srilankan auteur, Prasanna Vithanage, has a place in the long list of Ramayana retellings.

Known for portraying the socio-political issues of his homeland in movies using minimalist plot and techniques, Vithanage is adept at "crafting narratives" that are "at once intimate and politically incisive" (Dutta 2). Casting the Malayalam actor Roshan Mathew as Kesav and Darshana Rajendran as Amritha, who are an upper middle-class Malayali couple holidaying in Srilanka to celebrate their fifth wedding anniversary, the movie *Paradise* dwells on the dynamics of 'othering' that is intrinsic to human nature and institutions. The couple's tour coincides with the Aragalaya movement in 2022, triggered by the economic hardships faced by Srilankans during the presidency of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, leading to widespread anti-government protests of the civilians. Fusing the personal and the political and intertwining the Ramayana legend with the incidents that happen during the trip, Vithanage makes the tensions in the relationship of the couple surface against the background of gross violation of human rights in the small island nation struck by political and economic crisis. The subtle subversion of the Ramayana legend in the movie draws together various strands like the husband-wife relationship, the questions of marginalisation and othering and power asymmetry and injustice. The divine husband-wife trope of Ramayana, comprising a righteous husband and a sacrificing and

submissive wife and the question of the 'other' or the marginalised are identified as the main aspects from the legend that undergo subversion in the movie.

What Sharayu Shejale says in the article "The Ramayana and its Retellings: Deconstructing the Myth" is relevant here:

The Ramayana is political, and always has been.... First, it lays out an aspirational polity of 'Ramraj,' where the king practices absolute justice, and maintains order, prosperity and stability of the kingdom. Second, Rama is depicted as a *purushottam* (ideal man) and is an ideal for not only a king and citizen, but also for class, caste and gender hierarchies. (1)

Kesav, the husband in the movie *Paradise*, is the prototype of Rama due to his class, caste, race and gender privilege. He is the upwardly mobile professional who would be "filthy rich" (01:27:58) very soon on account of the deal he has struck with the OTT giant *Netflix*. Ambitious and focussed in his work, he is the typical upper middleclass man, disinterested in the demonstrations of the ordinary folk that are going on in the streets. Jubilant over the business deal he has struck, he looks forward to starting work on it the next day itself and plans to keep in touch with his team mates in India via zoom meetings. The divide between the privileged tourists and the deprived civilians is established in the beginning of the movie itself -- people are on the streets fighting for basic amenities like electricity and cooking gas and the privileged tourists are separated from the striking civilians through the glass parting of their land cruiser. The superior and patronising stance of Kesav is clear when he tells Amritha, "[T]hese guys are dying for some dollars. We are giving them foreign exchange. We are doing them a favour by being here" (00:52:13-00:52:12).

In another shot in the beginning of the film, Kesav proves his limited vision by emphasising his belief in the single traditional view of Ramayana: "Prince Rama conquered Srilanka, killed Ravana and then saved Sita" (1:28:42-32). This comes out in response to an alternate notion of the myth put forth by their Srilankan tourist guide and driver Mr Andrews about Ravana who is still alive and in slumber and who will wake up to save the trouble Lanka. Kesav's inability to permit an alternate reading of the legend proves that he is rigid in his perspective. When Amritha jokingly asks him what will happen if Ravana wakes up from his slumber and kidnaps her, he quips, "the Rama in me will wake up" (01:27:34). Jokes apart, these bits of conversation establish the intertextuality of the movie with the Ramayana and the Indian couple visiting Srilanka become the prototypes of Ram and Sita.

The trip of Kesav and Amritha to Srilanka is akin to the journey of Rama and Sita from the kingdom of Ayodhya to the forest, a mysterious place filled with dark forces like Asuras or demons. Ram and Sita, invaders and intruders in the forest, are nevertheless respected and privileged, just as Kesav and Amritha are revered as tourist who bring in foreign currency to the land in times of economic depression. Sergeant Bandara, who later investigates the case of the stolen iPad and laptop of Kesav tells him, "I'm a dog. I serve my master. And you are my master now" (00:14:56-00:14:59). The entitlement of Kesav, the upper-class traveller to the rustic and wooded land is evident when he expresses his desire to hunt soon after he arrives at the tourist bungalow. He also expresses his wish to eat venison and this is supported by Sergeant Bandara at a later point in the story: "Superb meat sir, makes you strong. When you come next time, I will get it for you" (00:21:25-00:21:12). The dictum that the traveller or invader is authorized to exploit the foreign land and enjoy all its resources is at work here.

The theory of the Aryan-Dravidian divide and hierarchy which regards the Aryans as invaders who came to India and forced the Dravidians, who are supposed to be the original inhabitants further South, is also of interest to scholars who re-read Ramayana. According to this theory, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana come from the North, and the Asuras or demons who are portrayed as non-human, are from the South. The civilized intruders from the city are hostile to the Asuras in the forest and the suppression of the inhabitants of the forests by the former is one that has resonance with instances of injustice meted out to the locals by foreign invaders during colonisation. The locals or asuras were imbued with negative qualities like ignorance, violence and immorality and were to be distanced or controlled as the 'other'. Srilanka, the verdant island

country, has had a long turbulent history embroiled in the violence and conflict between the Sinhalese and the people of Tamil origin and has always been a fertile ground of suppression, marginalization and othering. As director Vithanage puts it, the majority Sinhala Buddhist community of Srilanka has always created an “other”: “First it was the Tamils, today it is the Muslims, and tomorrow, who knows, it could be Christians. We are forever threatened by people who are different from us” (qtd. in Srinivasan). As the upwardly mobile Malayali, Kesav and his wife Amritha tour the nation that is marked by the simmering discontent of its people and widespread anti-government protests, the movie explores various strands of ‘othering’ manifested as racial hostility, class hierarchy, the atrocities of authorities and law enforcers and the anthropocentric exploitation of nature.

In the scheme of the state, rioters protesting the system are the ‘other’ as they disrupt normal life and challenge the law keepers and authorities. They can be the prototypes of the ‘asuras’ or demons who appear in the forests and create trouble for Rama, Sita and Lakshman during their stint of *vanavasa* or sojourn in the forest. In the words of Gurudev Meher and Ankita Mohanty,

A key reason why Asuras are often demonized in mythology is their role as disruptors of the existing order. Unlike the Devas, who uphold tradition and cosmic balance, Asuras frequently challenge authority, introduce new ideas, and seek power in ways that threaten the status quo.... The Asuras can be seen as metaphors for marginalized voices – those who refuse to conform to dominant ideologies and instead forge their own paths. In this sense, their stories become narratives of struggle, resilience, and the quest for identity in the face of overwhelming opposition. (122)

The rioters in the street demanding better facilities from the government are regarded as trouble makers and are demonised by the rulers. Apart from the rioters, many other sections of people like the Estate Tamilians, working class people like Shree, the Tamil caretaker of the resort where the tourists stay, Iqbal, the cook and Mr Andrews, the guide and cab driver who takes the tourists to various sites, are all part of the marginalised group who are easy targets for the othering and demonization by the elite.

In *Paradise*, the helplessness and disempowerment of the techie stranded in a foreign island after his I Pad and laptop are stolen is the central pivot of the plot. When the gadgets are stolen by masked men who hold the couple at knife point in the darkness of their bedroom on the very first night of their stay at the tourist bungalow, the privileged professional is brought to the level of the common man, causing a disruption of his progress and his normal functioning both as a professional and a human being. The hunt for the thieves involved in the robbery is an element that moves the plot forward and the trope of wicked ‘other’ who disrupts the progress of the man from the city is played out here. The *Ramayana*, which is “profoundly and fundamentally a text of “othering”” is involved in “the demonization of the Other” and regards “the divine king as the only one capable of combating evil” (Pollock 282-283). The asuras or rakshasas of the forests are portrayed as troublemakers, polluting the scared fires of the *yagas* performed by sages and it is Rama who saves the sages by destroying the Asuras. The natives of Srilanka bring trouble to the tourist by stealing his gadgets, disempowering him and stalling his work, just as the asuras of the forests must have caused nuisance to the invaders from the civilised world. In *Ramayana*, the forest is a place without order and discipline, and calls for a king from the civilised world to control it and the hunt for the asuras is the beginning of such control. In the movie *Paradise*, the hunt is in the form of the search for the culprits who have stolen the gadgets of Kesav, a search that brings out the “asymmetry in power relationships” (Staszak 2) between the “dominant in-group [and the] many dominated out-groups” (Staszak 2), Kesav and Bandara constituting the former group and the Estate Tamils and the workers at the tourist bungalow constituting the latter.

Initially Sergeant Bandara, who is in charge of the local police station, has a lukewarm response to the theft, bowed down as he is by the Aragalaya protests and the crisis in Srilanka, but when Kesav threatens that he will report the issue to the Indian High Commissioner, the sergeant intensifies the hunt for the wrong doer.

Throughout the movie there is no clue about the stolen goods and the focus is on the misuse of power by the authorities and the unjust treatment meted out to the less privileged sections. Fearing the wrath of the Indian tourist and in a move to appease him, Sergeant Bandara arrests three Tamilians from the estate without any solid evidence. The stolen possessions of Kesav assume more value than the lives of any of the Tamil workers. The implicit violence in the intruder Kesav is apparent in the callousness he has towards the suspects, a callousness and inhumanity he shares with Bandara, the police sergeant who tortures the suspects, leading to the hospitalisation and death of one of them. The authority's devaluing of human life is evident in the exchange between the police sergeant and Amritha, Kesav's wife, where she holds all of them including the police, her husband and herself "responsible" for the death of the suspect. Amritha asks the sergeant, "This is human life. Doesn't it have any value?", to which the sergeant answers, "Value? Yes. Election time. One vote" (00:26:09-00:26:02), followed by the callous laughter of the other policemen present there. Bandara exemplifies how the elite classes devalue the lives of the low-class people, and people of other races and religions. He accompanies the tourist couple to the bungalow to assure their safety when the Estate Tamils start an uprising and become violent after the death of the suspect under police custody.

In the bungalow, Bandara continues with his investigation for the stolen good, suspects the role of the caretaker, Shree and Iqbal, the cook in the robbery. He makes snide remarks about the race and religion of the two: "that dark person. He is from the estate. He is one of them" (00:14:41-00:14:38). He intrudes into the servant quarters to and concludes, "Inside job. The boys opened the windows for the thieves" (00:13:15-00:13:13). He further insults Shree, who is himself a Tamilian from the estate with the words, "the estate buggers may be getting a good thrashing by now" (00:19:11). After having caused the death of the Tamil youth from the estate, he now turns his ire on the two servants at the bungalow and starts questioning them and beating them up. His approach is discriminatory and shows the deep prejudice of race and class that is ingrained in those who hold powerful positions in society. It is a reflection of the marginalisation faced by the Tamilians in the estates of Srilanka for decades at the hands of the majority Sinhalese community. Pani Wijesiriwardana and Richard Philips observe that though

*Paradise* contains no footage of the months-long demonstrations in Columbo occurring at the time... The plight of the masses and Tamil plantation workers in particular...and the embedded state-sanctioned prejudices are manifest throughout.... The brief scene of the grieving Tamil mother wailing in the street with the body of her murdered son, or another scene at the local hospital where a young mother screams about the death of her child, are deeply affecting. Their cries echo thousands of others whose children have been killed by police repression and government cuts to public health, or direct military assaults during the 1983-2009 civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. As the film makes clear, police frameup and beatings are not an aberration but the norm. (n.p)

The historical antagonism of the Sinhalese toward the Tamilians comes out in the movie in the form of the suppression of Estate Tamils, who were brought to work in the tea, coffee and rubber plantations of Srilanka by the British colonial rulers in the nineteenth and twentieth century. They are a community of people who have faced marginalisation, suppression and poverty over the ages. The movie portrays how the authorities have no value for the lives of the Estate Tamils and regard them as the dehumanised 'other'. In a major subversion of the *Ramayana*, the movie presents a reversal in the demonisation and dehumanisation of the disempowered sections. Though the elitist Kesav and the police sergeant Bandara engage in demonizing and dehumanizing the servants of the resort and the Tamil suspects from the estate, what comes out ultimately is the demonized and dehumanized aspect of Kesav, the single-minded professional and Bandara, the upholder of law and order.

Some of the retellings of Ramayana, as already mentioned, refrain from vilifying Ravana and bring out the finer aspects of his character; on the other hand, many subversions and retellings question the character of Rama, especially his treatment of Sita. The persona of Ravana is discussed in one of the very first shots of the

film, with the Sinhalese tourist guide, Mr Andrews, telling the Indian couple that Ravana is not dead, but in a slumber and will wake up to save the troubled Lanka. Ravana is thus seen as a saviour rather than as an evil King and this sets the tone for the whole movie. In the conversation with Mr Andrews while visiting different sites related to the Ramayana, Amritha, rhetorically asks, “Do you think when women face problems, they cry and hope for a man to rescue them?” (00:33:16) She further tells him that in Jain Ramayana “Sita fought Ravana face to face, with Rama as her charioteer and Ravana died in her hands” (00:32:47). There is no character who directly represents Ravana in the movie, but we come to see how Amritha rises to the occasion and saves the wronged people of Lanka by fighting against injustice and oppression, going to the extent of shooting to death her husband, who along with Sergeant Bandara had begun a shooting spree, harming the Tamilians from the estate. Amritha’s character subverts the image of Sita, the silent and helpless Queen, who has to wait for her husband to come to rescue her from Ravana’s Lanka. Rather, the modern-day Sita is seen rescuing a section of the downtrodden people of Srilanka from the oppression of her husband. As Ankuran Dutta observes, “Amritha, through her emotional and moral evolution, can be seen as a modern avatar of Mata Sita, not in the traditional passive role, but as a figure of ethical clarity and resilience. Her journey recontextualises mythological archetypes, prompting viewers to reassess established narratives of duty, gender, and righteousness” (7).

Ironically, Amritha, the modern avatar of Sita, befriends the common people of Lanka, the land of Ravana. Amritha proves that she is different from her husband Kesav who is insulated from the outside world, both natural and human. She instantly connects with her surroundings, be it with nature and with the common folk she meets like the servants at the bungalow, the children selling fruits in the streets and the Tamil boy tortured to death by the police and his bereaving family. If Kesav is immersed in his phone when they are momentarily stopped by strikers as they arrive in Lanka, Amritha is curious and asks Mr Andrews, the cab driver about them. A warm bond forms between her and all the common people she meets in Srilanka, including Mr Andrews, the guide. When Kesav sulks and refrains from leaving the bungalow after the robbery, Amritha continues her sightseeing with the aid of Mr Andrews. She is taken to a mountainous area which Andrews describes as the place where Ravana landed his chariot with the kidnapped Sita. Mesmerised by its beauty, Amritha exclaims, “This rock deserves a legend!” (00:40:25). There is a shift from casting Ravana and everything associated with him as dark and evil; instead, Mr Andrews takes time to express his admiration and respect for Ravana before the Indian tourists; the sheer beauty and charm of the sites supposedly associated with Ravana are highlighted in the movie. Sita had been cast as a *Pativritha*, a woman whose life is deeply connected to her husband and who regards him as a God. But the chasm in the relationship between Kesav and Amritha prove that she is in no way the *pativrata* that Sita was. Amritha is a woman who has her own mind and beliefs, which often clashes with that of her husband. After the theft, Kesav rues the fact that they had chosen that “shithole of a place” (00:52:53) for their anniversary, but unperturbed Amritha continues to enjoy herself there. Kesav is seen admonishing her, “How can you be so happy Ammu?” (00:38:34). At the police station, when Kesav makes a false identification of the Tamil suspects, Amritha questions the veracity of his statement: “are you sure it was them, Kesav?” (00:59:18). Her open expression of solidarity with the suspect who is killed and to his kith and kin is one that defies the stance of her husband and the police Sergeant Bandara.

Amritha’s feeling of love and empathy for the deer as against her husband’s wish to kill and eat its flesh brings out the ecofeminist dimension of the movie. The deer that appears in different scenes in the movie is reminiscent of the metamorphosis of Mareecha, Ravana’s uncle into the enticing golden deer in the epic. Sita is attracted by the beauty of the deer and forces her husband to follow and capture it, an event that facilitates the former’s abduction by Ravana. The ecofeminist dimension of the movie is evident when Amritha is repelled by the very thought of harming the sambar deer when her husband expresses his wish to hunt it and remarks, “It’s too beautiful to be killed!” (01:18:08). A reworking of the Sita of the epic is all too obvious – if the former Sita wanted to tame the deer and possess it as a pet, her modern version prefers to set the deer free in its natural habitat. Nature in the movie *Paradise* is not an inanimate backdrop, but another living character.

Just as the marginalised groups are tortured by the elite and the authorities, there are hints that the natural and animal world would be plundered by the invaders, in this case, the complacent and privileged tourists. Kesav is not seen enjoying himself in the lap of nature, given that he is driven more by professional upmanship and monetary benefits, rather he would exploit nature as is proved by his desire to hunt and kill animals. Amritha is an ardent admirer of nature and has a kinship with all that is natural. Her act of leaving the window of their room in the resort open at night signals her openness and connection with the natural world and the ‘other’ as opposed to the cloistered space of the professional techie that Kesav represents. Later it is Amritha who is moved by the death of the suspect and feels “responsible” (00:26:22) for it. In her compassion for mother earth and its inhabitants, both human and non-human, she actually echoes the idea of Sita as the daughter of the Earth, who was saved by Mother Earth when her husband had disowned her in the last episodes of the epic.

Amritha proves to be the opposite of the older version of Sita, the helpless queen, abandoned by her husband on grounds of chastity and Kingly duty. If Ramayana had portrayed the death of the Asura king Ravana at the hands of Rama as the victory of good over evil, *Paradise* ends with the death of Kesav, the prototype of Rama. The death of the arrogant and insensate man at the hands of his own wife happens at the climax of the movie. Amritha shoots him to death when he starts firing the gun haphazardly at the estate people who had come to protest the death of the suspect. The modern-day Sita can save not just herself, but also a whole community of disempowered people against the arrogance and injustice of the privileged intruder. She is absolved of the charge of murder as the different witnesses give different versions about the incident. The incident is summed up by Andrews’s testimony as a “terrible accident” (06:08) in which a scared Amritha fired the gun at the attacking mob while Kesav stepped in front of her getting killed in the chaos. The very last scene shows her going to the airport in Mr Andrews’s taxi for her journey back to Kerala. Having caused the death of her husband, Amritha travels back home all alone as opposed to the legendary Sita who is saved and brought home by her heroic husband in a grand celebration. The question of being ‘saved’ is relevant here once more. As they travel to the airport, a grief-stricken Amritha asks Mr Andrews, “Do you believe what you said at the police station?” (00:05:17), to which he remains silent. The irony is evident: Amritha has saved the innocent estate folk from being shot by Kesav, the prototype of Rama, and in turn has been saved from the legal consequences of the killing of her husband by the testimony of Mr Andrews, an ardent admirer and promoter of Ravana.

The multi-lingual movie, that features English, Malayalam, Hindi, Tamil and Sinhalese, emphasises the fact that multiple perspectives and alterations are possible for an age-old legend and for contemporary socio-political events. The Ramayana which is an intertext for the movie and for several other literary and cultural creations is not a fixed and stable text, but a fluid and changeable one, a fact pointed out by Amritha to Mr Andrews when she speaks about the three hundred versions of the epic. Vithanage’s intense cinematic lens interlinks the legend about the divine union of an ideal king and his wife with the contemporary tale of a marriage breaking apart under the pressure of circumstances. He subverts traditional notions of the pious warrior king who saved his helpless queen from a villainous demon ruler and foregrounds the image of the powerful woman spokesperson and saviour of those in the margins. Vithanage’s movie highlights “the complexities of love, loss, justice, identity, and marginalisation.... [with] profound empathy for the human condition, particularly for those who were voiceless by the systems and historical trauma” (Dutta 2).

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