

Debt, Power, and Social Signification: A Semiotic analysis of '*Ravunni*' the Malayalam play by PM Taj

Dr. Rajesh M.K

Asst. Professor,

Dept. of Malayalam, MES Kalladi College,

Mannarkkad, Palakkad,

Kerala Pin: 678583

Abstract

This paper examines P. M. Taj's *Ravunni* through the theoretical framework of Semiotics. While the play has generally been interpreted in relation to debt, class exploitation, and social inequality, the present study focuses on the ways in which its characters, events, and dramatic structures function as signs that generate broader social meanings. Drawing on Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the signifier and the signified, Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs, and Roland Barthes' notion of myth, the paper offers a semiotic reinterpretation of the play's principal characters and symbolic structures.

From this perspective, *Ravunni* emerges as a symbolic representation of the exploited human subject; debt functions as a cultural sign of power, dependence, and social control; the family becomes a microcosm of society; law signifies institutional authority; and revenge operates as a counter-sign that challenges dominant ideological structures. The study argues that *Ravunni* transcends the limits of realistic social drama and functions as a complex semiotic system through which social, political, and cultural meanings are continuously produced.

By foregrounding the relevance of semiotic criticism in Malayalam theatre studies, this paper seeks to reposition *Ravunni* as a timeless dramatic text that offers a powerful critique of exploitation, authority, and the politics of debt, while demonstrating the continuing value of semiotic analysis in the interpretation of modern Malayalam drama.

Keywords: Semiotics; Malayalam Drama; Political Theatre; Debt; Social Signification; Symbolism; Power.

Introduction

Malayalam political theatre has long served as a dynamic space for interrogating questions of power, social transformation, class conflict, and ideological contradictions through dramatic representation. The socially committed plays of Thoppil Bhasi, the philosophical radicalism of C. J. Thomas, and the performative innovations of Kavalam Narayana Panicker, among others, have continuously redefined the relationship between theatre and society. Consequently, Malayalam political theatre has attracted substantial critical attention. Most existing studies have interpreted dramatic texts through theoretical frameworks such as Marxism, ideological criticism, caste studies, Subaltern historiography, and cultural materialism. Although these approaches have significantly enriched the field, they have also tended to privilege political content over the semiotic complexity of theatrical representation.

P. M. Taj's *Ravunni* occupies a distinctive position within this tradition. While the play undoubtedly engages with political and socio-economic realities, its dramatic force cannot be fully explained through ideological criticism alone. This article therefore proposes a semiotic reading of the play, arguing that semiotics offers a more nuanced framework for understanding the processes through which meaning is generated within the dramatic text.

Ravunni repeatedly demonstrates that historical experience is not merely narrated through dialogue. Rather, history is embodied, performed, interrupted, and remembered within the dramatic event itself. Such a dramaturgical strategy calls for a critical vocabulary capable of moving beyond conventional political interpretation. This study adopts such a methodological perspective by examining the play as a semiotic system in which signs construct social meaning. Accordingly, *Ravunni* is read not simply as a political drama but as a performative archive of living memory that connects

past, present, and future through symbolic representation. The play is not merely the story of an individual named *Ravunni*; it is a political allegory of how debt, as a socio-economic institution, historically subjugates human life.

Debt as Social Destiny

The central insight of *Ravunni* lies in its refusal to portray debt as an individual's economic failure. Instead, debt is represented as the product of a larger socio-political order. It is not merely a financial obligation to be repaid; rather, it functions as a mechanism of power that gradually deprives individuals of their autonomy. Although *Ravunni* appears as a single character, he ultimately represents countless peasants, labourers, and ordinary people whose lives are trapped within structures of indebtedness. As debt deepens, individuals progressively lose their capacity for independent decision-making and are drawn into conditions of subordination. The play powerfully dramatizes this process.

From the Individual to Society

Ravunni's predicament extends far beyond the tragedy of a single family. The play points toward a society in which indebtedness becomes a collective condition. An individual's debt becomes the family's burden; the family's burden becomes the destiny of future generations; and ultimately, debt becomes part of a people's historical experience. The play therefore raises a crucial political question: Is the debtor responsible for debt, or is responsibility rooted in the socio-economic system that compels people to borrow?

One of the play's greatest achievements is its transformation of a private tragedy into a historical and collective one. At the beginning, *Ravunni's* suffering appears to be a personal problem. As the narrative unfolds, however, the audience recognizes that the crisis belongs not merely to one family or one village but to an entire socio-economic structure. Through this movement, the play shifts its focus from the individual to society.

Ravunni does not borrow money out of extravagance or irresponsibility. He is driven into debt by the necessities of survival. Yet from the very moment he borrows, his personal freedom begins to erode. Debt gradually consumes not only his financial security but also his dignity, family relationships, and social identity. Consequently, *Ravunni* ceases to be merely an individual and emerges as the representative of every ordinary person caught in the cycle of indebtedness.

At this stage, the play poses another fundamental political question: Is indebtedness the consequence of individual failure, or the inevitable outcome of an unjust economic order? The play clearly privileges the latter interpretation. Although *Ravunni* is the one who borrows, it is the socio-economic system that produces the conditions under which borrowing becomes unavoidable. In doing so, the play challenges the dominant social discourse that places responsibility solely on the individual debtor.

The consequences of debt also extend to *Ravunni's* family. Debt does not remain confined to one individual; it spreads to his wife, his children, and eventually to future generations. Thus, a single person's financial obligation becomes the destiny of an entire family. At this point, the family itself functions as a symbolic representation of society. The collapse of one household signifies the shared historical experience of countless others.

Accordingly, debt is no longer merely an entry in a financial ledger; it becomes a way of life imposed upon society. Those trapped by debt gradually lose the courage to resist authority and are compelled to accept lives of dependence and submission. The play thus depicts debt as a process through which economic bondage is transformed into social bondage.

At this level, *Ravunni* also invites a broader political reading. Indebtedness expands from the individual to society and from society to the nation. A nation trapped within foreign loans and economic dependency occupies a position analogous to *Ravunni's* own condition. The play therefore suggests that personal debt and national debt are different manifestations of the same exploitative system.

Within this framework, *Ravunni's* act of revenge acquires a deeper political significance. His resistance is directed not against a single individual but against the socio-economic system that perpetuates indebtedness. In the play, Kunjomana Nambiar donates wasteland to poor peasants. After the land is officially registered in their names, however, he deceitfully acquires the title deeds, mortgages them, and establishes various business enterprises. Over time, the peasants unknowingly become trapped in debt and eventually face foreclosure. Many are forced to become labourers in Nambiar's factories in order to repay loans they scarcely understood.

Ravunni, however, refuses to submit to this strategy. After his paddy field is destroyed by fire, he resolves not to surrender to Nambiar's system of domination. Ironically, he adopts the very mechanism introduced by Nambiar—borrowing—as his means of survival. In doing so, he not only binds himself to debt but also prepares every subsequent generation of his family for a life defined by perpetual indebtedness. The result is an inescapable cycle in which generation after generation becomes imprisoned within debt.

The central message of *Ravunni* is therefore not the tragedy of a single individual. Rather, it reveals that every personal tragedy is rooted in a larger social structure and that individual liberation is inseparable from collective emancipation. The play is ultimately not the story of one man but the story of a society entrapped by debt, exploitation, power, and domination. It is this broader vision that establishes *Ravunni* as a timeless socio-political drama.

From Individual to Society

Ravunni's life cannot be reduced to the private tragedy of a single family. The play gradually expands its focus to reveal a society in which indebtedness becomes a collective condition. An individual's debt becomes the family's burden; the family's burden becomes the destiny of successive generations; and eventually, it evolves into the history of an entire people. In doing so, the play raises a fundamental political question: Is the debtor responsible for debt, or is the real responsibility located in the socio-economic system that compels people to borrow?

One of the play's most significant achievements is its transformation of an individual's personal tragedy into a broader social and historical experience. Although the narrative initially appears to revolve around *Ravunni*'s private predicament, it gradually becomes evident that the crisis belongs not merely to one family or one village but to an entire socio-economic order. Through this movement, the play shifts its perspective from the individual to society.

Ravunni does not incur debt out of extravagance or irresponsibility. He is driven into borrowing by the necessities of survival. From the moment he becomes indebted, however, his personal freedom begins to diminish. Debt extends beyond a financial obligation, gradually consuming his dignity, family relationships, and social identity. *Ravunni* therefore ceases to function merely as an individual character and becomes the representative of countless ordinary people trapped within structures of indebtedness.

The play further asks whether indebtedness should be understood as an individual's failure or as the inevitable consequence of an unjust economic system. It clearly endorses the latter perspective. While *Ravunni* is the one who borrows, the circumstances that make borrowing unavoidable are created by the prevailing socio-economic order. In this way, the play challenges the dominant ideology that attributes debt solely to individual responsibility.

The consequences of indebtedness also extend to *Ravunni*'s family. Debt is not confined to a single individual; it spreads to his wife, his children, and eventually to future generations. Thus, an individual's financial burden is transformed into the destiny of an entire family. At this point, the family itself becomes a symbolic representation of society, suggesting that the collapse of one household reflects the shared historical experience of many others.

Consequently, debt is no longer presented as a personal financial obligation but as a social condition. Those trapped within debt gradually lose the confidence to resist authority and are compelled to accept lives of dependence and subordination. The play thus portrays debt as a mechanism through which economic domination is transformed into social domination.

It is at this stage that *Ravunni* acquires a wider political significance. Indebtedness extends from individuals to society and from society to the nation itself. A nation caught in the web of foreign loans and economic dependency occupies a position analogous to that of *Ravunni*. The play therefore suggests that personal debt and national debt are different manifestations of the same exploitative structure.

Within this context, *Ravunni*'s revenge assumes a broader political meaning. His resistance is directed not against a single individual but against the socio-economic system that perpetuates indebtedness. His struggle ultimately symbolizes resistance to an exploitative order rather than personal vengeance.

The central message of *Ravunni* is therefore not the tragedy of one individual. Instead, it demonstrates that every personal tragedy is rooted in a broader social structure and that individual liberation is inseparable from collective emancipation. The play is ultimately the story of a society entrapped by debt, exploitation, power, and domination rather than the story of a single man.

History of Debt Across Generations

One of the most profound ideas articulated in *Ravunni* is that debt is not merely an economic transaction but a historical and social structure transmitted across generations. Human beings may die, but debt survives. A father's debt is inherited by his son, and the son's debt is passed on to his descendants. In this sense, debt ceases to be a financial record and becomes a form of social inheritance.

Although *Ravunni* begins as the story of an individual's struggle with debt, it gradually expands into the history of a family, a social class, and ultimately an entire community. The play is therefore not simply about one person's indebtedness; it narrates the historical continuity of debt itself.

From the moment *Ravunni* borrows money, his life no longer belongs entirely to him. Rather than owning the debt, he becomes possessed by it. His labour, time, aspirations, family relationships, and personal dignity all come under the control of indebtedness. The play portrays this transformation with remarkable subtlety. In the beginning, debt appears to be an act of assistance offered in a moment of necessity. It then becomes an obligation, later a source of fear, and finally an inescapable condition that determines the course of life.

This gradual transformation is central to the dramatic structure of the play. Debt evolves from a financial agreement into a form of social destiny. What initially appears to be an economic relationship ultimately becomes a mechanism of domination that governs both individual lives and collective existence. Through this process, *Ravunni* reveals that debt is not simply an economic condition but a historical system through which power reproduces itself across generations.

Semiotic Reading of Characters

Reading P. M. Taj's *Ravunni* merely as a realistic drama would underestimate its artistic and ideological complexity. The characters in the play are not simply individuals; they function as signs that embody social forces, economic relations, and historical processes. A semiotic reading therefore considerably expands the interpretive possibilities of the text. Critical studies on Taj's dramatic works have likewise observed that his plays articulate contemporary social concerns through symbolism and allegorical representation.

In Ferdinand de Saussure's terminology, each character functions as a signifier(1), while the signified is not an individual personality but a broader social reality. Similarly, from Charles Sanders Peirce's perspective, these characters operate primarily as symbols rather than icons(2). Their significance lies not in their narrative roles alone but in the social and ideological concepts they represent.

Ravunni: Not an Individual, but the Sign of the Indebted Human

The protagonist, Ravunni, is far more than an individual character. He represents a class, a history, and a social condition. From a semiotic perspective, *Ravunni* functions as a Master Sign(3), around which the play's entire structure of meaning is organized.

Ravunni signifies the indebted peasant, the labourer, the ordinary citizen, the displaced subject of development, and, more broadly, every victim of an exploitative economic order. His life is therefore not merely an individual biography but a collective representation of economically oppressed humanity. At this level, the character transcends individuality and becomes a cultural symbol.

Likewise, the moneylenders are not simply antagonists but symbolic manifestations of capital itself. They represent economic power, ownership, market forces, and mechanisms of exploitation. Their actions and dialogues express not personal motives but the logic of capitalism. Semiotically, they are visual embodiments of an exploitative economic system rather than psychologically individualized villains.

Family as the Microcosm of Society

The family in *Ravunni* is not merely a private domestic space; it functions as a microcosm of society. The disintegration of *Ravunni's* family signifies not only the collapse of familial relationships but also the erosion of social security, the dignity of labour, and mutual trust. In semiotic terms, the family operates as a metonymic sign(4), representing society through one of its constituent units.

Law and Power: The Symbol of an Invisible Authority

Law never appears as an independent character in the play, yet its presence is pervasive. This illustrates one of the central principles of semiotics: meanings are often generated through invisible or abstract structures rather than through direct representation. In *Ravunni*, law signifies the state, institutional authority, social control, and political power. It therefore functions not as an individual agent but as an institutional sign(5) that legitimizes and sustains existing structures of domination.

Debt as a Cultural Sign

Arguably, the most significant "character" in the play is debt itself. Debt never speaks, yet it governs every character and every action. Semiotically, debt may be understood as an absent sign(6)—it is not physically embodied, yet it occupies the centre of the play's meaning-making process. It signifies dependence, fear, subjugation, authority, and the loss of human autonomy. Consequently, debt is represented not merely as an economic condition but as a powerful cultural sign.

Revenge as a Counter-Sign

Ravunni's revenge is more than an act of personal retaliation; it becomes the language of resistance. In semiotic terms, it functions as a counter-sign(7). The dominant ideological order declares that debt demands obedience. *Ravunni* responds by rejecting that logic and refusing to allow debt to define his existence. His revenge therefore reverses the symbolic language of power itself. Rather than expressing individual anger, it becomes a symbolic act of resistance against structures of domination.

From Roland Barthes' perspective, literary texts generate meaning through multiple interacting codes. *Ravunni* exemplifies this process. Each character, action, and dramatic situation contributes to a network of semiotic codes that extends far beyond the immediate narrative.

The Creation of a New Myth

As Roland Barthes argues in *Mythologies*(8), modern societies continually produce new myths. *Ravunni* participates in this process of myth-making. Over the course of the play, *Ravunni* gradually ceases to be an ordinary individual and becomes the myth of debt itself. He no longer represents a single person but every human being trapped within systems of indebtedness. At this point, the character transcends literature and assumes the status of a cultural sign.

Viewed through the lens of semiotics, the characters in *Ravunni* emerge not as psychologically individualized figures but as signs that generate broader social meanings. *Ravunni* symbolizes oppressed humanity; the moneylender becomes the visible embodiment of capital; the family functions as the microcosm of society; debt signifies the cultural logic of power and dependency; law represents institutional authority; and revenge becomes the symbolic language of resistance. Consequently, the characters do not merely advance the plot; they constitute a complex semiotic system through which abstract concepts such as exploitation, power, domination, law, and resistance are translated into dramatic form. This symbolic organization of meaning stands as one of the most significant artistic and political achievements of P. M. Taj's dramaturgy.

Conclusion

Viewed through the lens of semiotics, *Ravunni* transcends its conventional reading as a social drama centred on indebtedness. The characters, events, and objects in the play are not merely narrative elements; they function as signs that generate and communicate social meaning. *Ravunni* signifies the exploited human subject; debt operates as a cultural sign of power and dependency; the family functions as a microcosm of society; law represents institutional authority; and revenge emerges as a counter-sign of resistance. The artistic strength of the play therefore lies not merely in its thematic concern with debt but in the complex semiotic system through which it continually produces meaning.

Such a reading opens *Ravunni* to new critical possibilities. While Marxist and socio-political interpretations remain indispensable for understanding the play's ideological concerns, a semiotic approach extends these perspectives by revealing the mechanisms through which meaning is constructed within the dramatic text. Rather than viewing *Ravunni* solely as an important work of Malayalam political theatre, it should also be recognized as a modern dramatic text that visualizes power, exploitation, and resistance through an intricate network of signs.

This study thus argues that a semiotic reading provides a productive framework for reinterpreting *Ravunni* and demonstrates the broader applicability of semiotic criticism to Malayalam drama. It is hoped that this article will serve as a model for future semiotic studies of Malayalam theatre and encourage further research into the symbolic structures through which dramatic texts generate social and political meaning.

Endnote:

1. This analytical model was developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. It explains how meaning is produced through systems of communication. According to Saussure, a sign consists of two inseparable components: the signifier, the material or perceptible form of the sign, and the signified, the abstract concept or meaning evoked by the signifier.
2. Charles Sanders Peirce classified signs into three principal categories based on the relationship between the sign and its object: icons, indexes, and symbols. An icon represents its object through resemblance; an index signifies its object through a causal or factual connection; and a symbol represents its object through social convention or cultural agreement rather than any inherent or physical relationship.
3. In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, a master signifier is a privileged sign that organizes the symbolic order of a culture or ideology. Its authority lies not in a fixed meaning but in its capacity to structure ideological discourse.
4. A metonymic sign represents an idea through association or contiguity rather than direct resemblance. Instead of depicting the whole, it signifies the whole through one of its related or constituent elements.
5. Institutional signs are the symbols, markers, and representational practices through which institutions establish legitimacy, authority, and social order. They reinforce institutional values and regulate public behaviour.
6. An absent sign refers to meaning generated through what is not directly represented. The absence itself becomes meaningful, producing cultural significance beyond what is explicitly shown.
7. A cultural sign is any object, word, image, representation, or practice that carries a shared meaning within a particular culture or society.
8. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes argues that modern myths function as a form of bourgeois propaganda. He asserts that everyday cultural artifacts, advertisements, and media transform historical and ideological constructs into "common-sense," natural truths. By doing so, myths erase history and reinforce the dominant social order.

References

- Aston, Elaine & George Savona., *Theatre as Sign-System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance*, Routledge, 1992.
- Barthes, Roland., *Mythologies*, (Translator, Dr Annette Lavers), Vintage Classics, 2009.
- Baudrillard, Jean., *The Consumer Society*, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2016.
- Boal, Augusto., *Theatre of the Oppressed*, (Translator, Charles A. McBride), Theatre Communications Group, 1993.
- Bourdieu, Pierre., *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (Translator, Richard Nice), Routledge Classics, 2010.
- Brecht, Bertolt., *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, (Translator, John Willett), Hill and Wang, 1964.
- George, C.J., *Chihnashasthravum Ghatanavadavum*, DC books, Kottayam, 2001.
- Gramaprakash N.R., *Prathyayasasthravum Vatakavum*, Naveena Drishyakala, Thrissur, 1999
- Marx, Karl. *Capital* (Vol. I.), Penguin, 1990.
- Pavis, Patrice. *Dictionary of the Theatre*. University of Toronto Press, 1999.
- Ritzer, George. *The McDonaldization of Society*. SAGE Publications, Inc. 1995.
- Sankarappillai, G., *Malayala Natakasahithya charithram*, Kerala sahithya Academy, Thrissur, 2015
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. Bloomsbury Publishing India Private Limited, 2013.
- Taj, P.M., *Tajinte thiranjedutha natakangal*, Kerala sahithya Academy, Thrissur, 2016.
-, *Ravunni*, Lipi Publications, Kozhikode, 2001.

Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.