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In his film *Kanchana Sita*, Kerala filmmaker G. Aravindan (1935–1991) portrays Sita not in human form but as a representation of the philosophical concept of Prakriti, the animating force of the natural world conceived as female. In the film, Sita speaks only through movement in nature, such as when leaves rustle or the surface of the river ripples. Although *Kanchana Sita* touches upon several episodes from the final section of Ramkatha, Aravindan's attention to the absence and presence of Sita animates his film.

Aravindan was a painter, cartoonist, musician, and film director who worked most of his adult life as a Kerala Rubber Board administrator. Aravindan's second full-length film, *Kanchana Sita*, contains features that developed into his distinctive cinematic style.¹ He created a visual look of stark purity by filming large vistas in remote Andhra. The film reveals the inner life of characters such as Rama and Lava, rather than focusing on plot. Aravindan's interest in marginalized people led him to cast Adivasas in most of the film's roles. Finally, his incorporation of music to signal the presence of Sita is masterful.²

As Zacharias's essay on Aravindan's *Kanchana Sita* demonstrates, even particular *retellings* of Ramkatha generate their own subsequent retellings. In his original 1960 play, *Kanchana Sita*, C. N. Sreekantan Nair had rewritten the final section of Valmiki's *Ramayana* as a critique of brahminical privilege and political repression. Using Nair's play only as a starting point, Aravindan transformed the script according to his interpretation of Indian philosophy and his minimalist aesthetic. He replaced Nair's crisply articulated exchanges of dialogue with a cinematic meditation on Rama's separation from, and eventual union with, Sita, thus carrying the concept of Sita as Prakriti to its visual limit.

Prakriti and Sovereignty in Aravindan's *Kanchana Sita* film analysis by usha zacharias

Aravindan's unique contribution to world cinema and to the Ramayana tradition emerged out of the creative energy that colored the artistic milieu of Kerala in the 1970s and 1980s. His work related to, and was inspired by, a generation of iconoclastic artists, filmmakers, writers, painters, and sculptors who were deeply disillusioned with post-independence "modernization" and leftist democratic politics. The solitary colours of this generation's rebellion, its self-destructive impulse, and its masculine profile are etched into Aravindan's film as well.

A written commentary that throws light on Aravindan's interpretation of the play precedes his film proper. This opening scroll reads, "This film is an interpretation of the *uttara-kanda* of the Ramayana. Our mythologies and the epics are constantly re-created in retellings. The epic is the

basis for this visual interpretation as well. This film deviates from established norms in how it visualizes the protagonists and portrays the course of events in the epic.” The scroll explains that the film will try to reflect what it calls the epic’s *adi-sankalpam*, “original conception,” of the theme and protagonists. It states that “the inner essence of this film” is that woman is *Prakriti*. Ultimately *Purusha*, here conceived of as the (masculine) self, dissolves into *Prakriti*.

Interpreted in this context, Rama’s journey (*ayana*) follows a compelling narrative path: the dissolution of the self, *Purusha*, into the female animating power of the universe, *Prakriti*.³ Eluttacchan’s *Adhyatma Ramayana*, the classic Malayalam telling of Rama’s story, views Rama as *Purusha* and Sita as *Prakriti*, an interpretation familiar to audiences in Kerala.⁴ However, in contrast to almost all other tellings of the *uttara-kanda* (final section), and in what probably constitutes Aravindan’s single most significant creative intervention in the film, Sita herself is physically absent. The title of C.N. Sreekantan Nair’s play, *Kanchana Sita*, refers to the golden image of Sita that substituted for her presence by Rama’s side in rituals that required a queen. In Aravindan’s film, *Prakriti* takes Sita’s place.

In an interview, Aravindan stated that “C. N. [Sreekantan Nair] had made clear the *prakriti-purusha* notion in *Ramayana*” but, as director, Aravindan did not think that Sita should be represented in the physical form of a woman. Instead, Aravindan takes the extraordinary cinematic step of representing Sita as *Prakriti*. Aravindan sought to visualize Sita’s emotions—pain, sadness, joy, and equanimity—through the moods of *Prakriti*, and, therefore, describing dialogue as “redundant,” he used it minimally in the film.⁵ Aravindan interpreted the *uttara-kanda*’s ending, when Rama enters Sarayu River, as Rama’s own self-immolation at the end of a journey which has left him truly solitary.⁶

In this essay, I investigate how the relationship of power and sovereignty is thematically unraveled in Aravindan’s *Kanchana Sita*. Aravindan’s film distinctively differs from both the *uttara-kanda* of Valmiki’s *Ramayana* and Sreekantan Nair’s play. If the *uttara-kanda*’s critique of sovereign power is buried in the karmic web of Rama’s life, Sreekantan Nair’s play carries a sharply materialistic edge in its critique of Kshatriya-Brahminical power. In contrast to both, Aravindan’s thematic content is much more directly focused on Rama’s inner conflict between the desire for enlightenment (*moksha*) and the desire for sovereign power (*artha*). Aravindan highlights this conflict through his choice of location and actors, as well as his thematic elaboration of the killing of Shambuka and, most of all, the presence of *Prakriti*.

The film assumes the viewer’s textual familiarity with prominent narratives in the *uttara-kanda*, the final section of the epic text.⁸ The *uttara-kanda* records the waning half of Rama’s sovereign power and divine aura. Earlier sections of *Ramkatha* have affirmed sovereign power and glorified Rama as warrior-king, but the *uttara-kanda* provides a powerful counterpoint to Rama’s authority by focusing upon figures outside Ayodhya: Shambuka, Sita, and Valmiki. Following the advice of Brahmin sages, Rama conducts the horse sacrifice to consolidate the sovereignty of his power.

In *uttara-kanda*’s most dramatic sequence, Valmiki brings the twins to the horse sacrifice, where their singing of Rama’s story forces him to recognize them as his sons. The horse sacrifice will ensure the king’s complete sovereignty over the kingdom and any rival ruler who challenged

the king to a battle by capturing the horse. Yet Rama demands a second trial by fire from Sita, who refuses to prove her purity again. In the final scene, Rama departs from the world by entering the Sarayu River. All this functions as the implicit narrative background for Aravindan's film.

Aravindan, however, selectively focuses on particular events that unfold around the horse sacrifice, creating critical changes in how Sreekantan Nair's play depicts Sita. As Rama proceeds, under the dictates of Brahmin sages, to ensure absolute power through the sacrifice, he enters into a series of dharmic confrontations. Critical among them are his interrogation of and beheading of Shambuka; the conflict between Rama, Bharata, and Urmila over whether the horse sacrifice should be performed; the unexpected challenge from Sita's twins, Lava and Kusha, who capture the sacrificial horse that has been let loose at the beginning of the horse sacrifice; Valmiki bringing the twins to chant Rama's story at the sacrifice; the necessity for Rama to recognize and accept his sons there; and his decision to enter the Sarayu river. What began as a kingly exercise to assert absolute power over and external territory turns into a battle of the self, in which Rama seems to abandon each unfolding chance for enlightened action.

Throughout the film, Rama is caught in a dharmic predicament. The external world, which Brahmin ritualism takes as the place for the proper exercise of Kshatriya royal power, comes into conflict with his own inner self which, detached from kingly power, appears to hear and feel Sita's presence everywhere. In the film (as in the play), Urmila, Lakshmana's wife and Sita's sister, asks why Rama abandoned Sita and why he submits to the dictates of Brahmins. The emotional intensity of these dialogue-dominated conflicts in Sreekantan Nair's play is muted, however, through Aravindan's reticent, subdued cinematic rendering of long, silent takes of Rama and Lakshmana wandering through the dense forests and the ochre river banks, as if on a spiritual quest.

Aravindan's Journey

The cinematic rendering of *Kanchana Sita* seems to have been shaped by the outcome of Aravindan's own serendipitous quest for location and actors. The story of the making of the film detailed below reveals his emphasis on the search for the thematically apt visual landscapes, actors, and mise-en-scene. Aravindan's quest for the realization of these elements is nearly as crucial as the aesthetics of the completed film. Sreekantan Nair's play followed the style of epic presentation that is familiar to Indian audiences used to viewing mythological films and dance-dramas.⁹ The scenes in such renderings would alternate between the visually distinct spatial environments of outdoor forest settings and ornate palace interiors, complete with royal trappings.

In contrast, Aravindan abandoned such alternation in setting by moving Rama's story into the landscape of Adivasis (tribal people), imagining Ayodhya in the forest.¹⁰ Its palaces are forest caves, its streets are tracks in the wilder-ness, and its Sarayu River is the Godavari River winding through rural Andhra Pradesh. Aravindan identified locations 100 miles away from Rajamahendravaram

in Andhra, along the expanse of the Godavari River and its ribbed red earth banks. Such a spatial visualization of Rama's story had not been attempted before: the epic retold as if it occurred in the Adivasi world.¹¹

Relocating the narrative into this spatial and temporal context makes it entirely possible to imagine that the events of the film could be happening now, or thousands of years ago. From the choice of this setting, it would seem that Aravindan's vision of the original conception of the epic reflected the experiential conditions in which Rama's story could unfold as a journey of the self. Stripping the epic narrative of any historical details in the setting that would date the scene allows the viewer and the director to focus on the pure dharmic questions that Rama faces at each turn.

Filmmaker Padmakumar, who worked closely with Aravindan in several of his films, described in an interview how *Kanchana Sita* was shot in less than three weeks during November and December 1976.¹² Padmakumar recounted how Aravindan noticed the Koyas, who believed themselves to be descendants of Rama, in the streets of Hyderabad, and then sought actors among them. Koyas are traditionally nomadic healers who wander the forests and mountains to search for medicinal herbs, and then sell these cures in cities and towns. Koyas who were practicing as healers at the time in Hyderabad play the central roles of Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, Lava, and Kusha in the film.

Aravindan's idea, said Padmakumar, was not to use conventional actors, but to find people who had reached the state of awareness that the role required. So Shambuka was played by a wayside tapasvi, while a destitute woman acted in the role of his wife. Communication with the actors was carried out with the help of Manohar Dutt, painter and lecturer at the College of Fine Arts, Hyderabad. Dutt also accompanied Aravindan and his associate, journalist and filmmaker "Chinta" Ravi, on a preliminary trip to Andhra Pradesh to finalize the locations.

The shooting took place at the time when Congress Party Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had declared a national emergency to suppress the mass democratic uprising against her government. Police were combing the entire area around Rajamundhry in their hunt for the members of the Maoist People's War Group. As a result, recalled Padmakumar, members of the production team were picked up and questioned by the police several times because they looked different from the average person. At a time when the politics of absolute power was playing out in history, Aravindan's film relocated the question of sovereign authority to a narrative in which it played a major role as part of the conflict between the desire for power and the desire for enlightenment.

Shambuka's Significance

The incident in which Rama kills Shambuka plays a heightened role in Aravindan's film at least partially because the Brahminical dictates that sustain sovereign power come into direct conflict with the desire for spiritual knowledge. Aravindan stated that he used the Shambuka episode "to highlight Rama's troubled conscience and evoke within him and the film the memory and presence of Sita."¹³ In Sreekantan Nair's play, Rama seeks out the Shudra tapasvi, finds Shambuka performing penances hanging upside down, and takes Shambuka's life.¹⁴ In contrast,

Aravindan broke Rama's single, fatal encounter with Shambuka into two scenes.

In the first scene, set at the very beginning of the film, Rama finds Shambuka practicing penances forbidden to Shudras, but Shambuka's wife pleads with Rama not to kill her husband. At this moment, soft music begins to play, Rama looks up as if he discerns another presence, and a gentle wind blows through the tall trees. As if overcome by emotion, Rama spares Shambuka. "A king ought not to dream," Rama tells Lakshmana later, yet we know that he has allowed himself to be guided by Sita, who appears as the force of compassion. The second brief scene shows a Shambuka who has already been cut down by Rama's arrow, his body having fallen into the lap of his grieving wife. The scene precedes an image of the white horse's head, now severed for the horse sacrifice. Both killings reassert the primacy of the desire for sovereign power, and the necessity for such power to assert itself through extremes of violence. The nature of power, it would seem, is not to safeguard itself, nor to counter another, but to extend constantly beyond its own realm.

Scholar V. Rajakrishnan noted that Aravindan had not fully considered the implications of locating Rama's story in an Adivasi community.¹⁵ Shambuka's killing, Valmiki's confrontation with Rama at the horse sacrifice, and Sita's withdrawal into the earth all contribute powerful examples of social critique in the *uttara-kanda*, but all three incidents are muted in the non-dramatic, subdued narrative style that Aravindan used. So too is Sreekantan Nair's reading of the Rama-Ravana war as an Aryan-Dravidian conflict (an interpretation that could be implied by the casting of the Koyas) in which Rama safeguarded interests of the Aryans.¹⁶ Rajakrishnan pointed out that the rigid economy of expression and the subdued acting styles, which appear to render all dialogue artificial, reduce the element of human drama so prominent in Sreekantan Nair's play.

Unlike Sreekantan Nair's play, in which he was committed to developing character conflict, Aravindan consistently and deliberately edits out passionate emotional expressions and outbursts in the play (such as Rama's encounters with Urmila, Bharata, and Kausalya) in favor of a non-dramatic, non-dialogic style of expression that diminishes greatly the centrality of feeling. Indeed, the contrast with Sreekantan Nair's play that Rajakrishnan has noted is one that the filmmaker has painstakingly sought to create through his use of specific cinematic techniques. The Shambuka episode illustrates Aravindan's disinterest in dramatic conflict as a mode either for social critique or for philosophical elaboration. Indeed, the narrative logic for Shambuka's death and an interpretation of it that use it to advocate a progressive politics of caste are absent from the film. This detachment flows from Aravindan's philosophical position as a film maker, and therefore is inseparable from his aesthetics.

In using Shambuka's penance to evoke Sita, Aravindan bypasses the element of caste subordination in the story, which has made it a common example in Kerala of caste hierarchy in Rama's story (which Sreekantan Nair drew upon). Interpreting this episode, scriptwriter P. S. Manu pointed out that Shambuka's upside down body metaphorically challenged the system which ranked Brahminical castes as the highest in the social hierarchy.¹⁷ The inverted body stood Rama's world of security, built on Brahminical manipulation and Kshatriya might, on its head,

challenging the very foundations of its sovereignty. Shambuka's upside down body is also a temporal symbol, one that heralds the imminent demise of the foundation of sovereign power that Rama represents.

In Aravindan's film, it is not caste hierarchy that is the issue, but again, Rama's conflict between the desire for power and the desire for enlightened action. Caste hierarchy, it would seem, is a result of these fundamental drives. The question of power is located not in the external structures of oppression, such as the Kshatriya-Brahmin hierarchy, but within the self. The Brahmin sages who advocate the killing of Shambuka are directly countered by the absent presence of Sita as Prakriti. The Shambuka incident in Aravindan's film is not a social critique. It is, rather, about the instinctual drives for power and their encounter with compassion.

Sita's Absent Presence

Through his aesthetic choices, Aravindan erases the motivating power of human emotion and action that impel ordinary plot structure, not to yield to the supremacy of fate but to ameliorate the centrality of human agency as the cause and measure of events. Indeed, Sita as Prakriti—and Rama's almost inevitable journey into becoming a part of her—is the heart of Aravindan's narrative. Thematically, the detachment from social issues is consistent with the film's focus on the union of Purusha and Prakriti. Sita's physical absence liberates her presence from the limitations of a specific spatio-temporal location or physical form such as a body, a scene, a place, or a voice.

Instead she now permeates the narrative through her immediate and all-pervasive presence as Prakriti, the cosmic life-force. Aravindan clearly indicates through visuals that Prakriti is not nature in the passive sense in which the word is often employed; instead Prakriti actively gives life to nature. Thus she appears as the sunlight that marks an everchanging path through the thick forest trees, she is audible and visible as the wind that rustles the leaves, and she moves in the river as ripples in the water. She is the animating principle of nature that energizes all visible life-forms, including the creativity of the poet Valmiki who begins to compose the *uttara-kanda* in her inspiring presence.

Poet and scholar Ayyappa Paniker views Sita's absence as typical of Aravindan's style in which there is a conscious, meticulous effort "not to communicate in order to communicate."¹⁸ Such a style is especially difficult in the visual medium of film. "Sita is not a woman, or an individual, but an eternal concept in the film," Paniker said. Paniker described Aravindan's expressive style using his own concept of *antarsannivesa*, or the poetics of interiorization.¹⁹ In this form of expression, relish (*rasa*), mood (*bhava*) and purpose (*artha*) are withheld, denied overt expression, or negated, in order to draw the reader into deeper and less obvious levels of communication. "In the work as a whole there inheres, like a living inner spring, another work, an inside work," writes Paniker.²⁰

To Rama, Sita in the form of Prakriti also appears as a guide to dharma, indicating the path of action that he must adopt. Signs from Prakriti, presented through the music and images of

nature's movement, stop Rama from killing Shambuka at first sight and from fighting with Bharata. Likewise, the turbulence in nature appears to warn Rama against the performance of the horse sacrifice. For Aravindan, however, Prakriti appears to be primarily a maternal force that heightens Rama's awareness of his own destructive actions. The mood of the music that accompanies the presence of Prakriti, which Aravindan repeats throughout the film whenever Rama experiences the presence of Sita, is nostalgic, compassionate, and tender.²¹ Only in the final scenes does Prakriti begin to consume Rama's universe, as the fire that burns down the sacrificial hall and as the waters of the Sarayu that await Rama's final journey.

For Aravindan, Prakriti also seems to bear no resemblance to woman in her temporal, sensual, and worldly form. The radical role given to Urmila in Sreekantan Nair's play, and her fiery speeches to Rama which expose his own suspicion and betrayal of Sita, are edited down to the bare minimum and shorn of their resonance with the modern idiom of women's rights. The argumentative voice of Urmila, the "real" woman of the film, remains significant but peripheral, her physical presence shadowed in the interiors of the caves which serve as the palaces of Ayodhya. In the refined sensibility of the film that foregrounds the masculine tapasvi's journey to Prakriti, the Sita of the *uttara-kanda*, cast out of the kingdom, the "woman crying aloud in despair" outside Valmiki's hermitage, is not heard.²² To Aravindan, Prakriti's silence is more eloquent than the speeches of her womanly manifestations. The horse sacrifice is not so much an external ritual as a preparatory rite for Rama's final liberation from the self caught in the bonds of phenomenal existence.

The physical absence of Sita also led Aravindan to transform the final scenes of Sreekantan Nair's play, where Sita appears at the sacrificial site and descends into the opening earth rather than undergo a second ordeal of sexual purity at Rama's behest. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, and in Sreekantan Nair's *Kanchana Sita*, a golden image of Sita substitutes for her presence at the horse sacrifice. The golden image which Aravindan uses for the horse sacrifice is traditional South Indian bronze sculpture of the goddess seated in a benedictory posture. To Rama, meditating directly in front of the sacrificial fire, the image appears enveloped in flames, as Sita must have appeared when she entered the fire after the great battle of Lanka to prove her purity. Sita, enveloped in flames, appears to be fire itself, since she is unscathed by the flames. Clothed in fire, yet transcending the flames, she is at once Rama's awareness and the life-force within him which fire symbolizes.

As the last scenes of the film unfold, it appears to the viewer that the *agni-pariksha* (fire ordeal) is ultimately for Rama to attain final awareness, not for Sita. As *Kanchana Sita*, the golden image of Sita enshrined in flames, she is the fiery means of his enlightenment, and the goal of his enlightenment as well, since there is nothing that transcends her presence. In the final scene, Rama walks into the waters of the *Sarayu*. He carries the sacrificial flame with him into the waters of dissolution, into Prakriti that waits to absorb all the elements of life back into herself. Collapsing the final sections of the epic into a few minutes, Aravindan merges Rama's recognition of his sons and Sita with his desire for final liberation. The conflict between the

desire for enlightenment and the desire for power now vanishes as the significance of the horse sacrifice changes from attaining absolute power over the kingdom to attaining moksha or enlightenment from the kingdom. The search for absolute sovereign power ends in the failure of the material conquest it sought, even as enlightenment is revealed as the ultimate goal of human life.

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1. He created the cartoon serial “Small Man and Big World” for a major Malayalam newspaper for eighteen years. In the early 1970s, his cartoons emphasized large blank spaces with tiny people at the bottom of the frame, similar to the look of his later films.
 2. For surveys of Aravindan’s oeuvre, see Madhavan Kutty (1981), Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1994: 45), and Robinson (1979: 92).
 3. Prakriti and Purusha, as philosophical concepts, have their genealogy in the Samkhya-Yoga school of Indian philosophy. In Samkhya thought, Prakriti is the generative source of the universe. Through its threefold *gunas* or characteristics of the physical universe, Prakriti binds Purusha, the self (in the minimal sense of awareness or sentience), which itself is not distinct from Prakriti. In this school of thought, detachment and meditation (yoga) are the paths to knowledge, ignorance is the main cause of suffering, and discriminating knowledge removes the bondage of rebirth (Hiriyanna 1993: 267–297).
 4. Eluttacchan (1994: 26).
 5. Aravindan (1992: 26).
 6. Ibid., p. 27.
 7. Aravindan’s film casts the question of power into a philosophical context sharply distinct from, and epistemologically prior to, the theorizing of disciplinary mechanisms of the state, social institutions, and subjects analyzed in Anglo-American scholarship. Following Michel Foucault’s monumental work, in the last two decades members of the Anglo-American academy (especially in cultural studies) have analyzed the mechanisms of power in depth. Yet few of these discussions examine how the idea of power is itself conceptualized in non-western philosophies, mythologies, and texts. Foucault’s decentering of power into micro-political networks and his theory of how power works through both totalizing and individualizing impulses have opened up rich veins of study.
 8. This section is often lacking in popular North Indian versions of the epic, such as *Ramcharit-manas* by Tulsidas, at least partly due to its critique of Rama as sovereign.
 9. The term *Adivasi* (primordial or original inhabitant) is used currently to refer to communities who live now in India’s mountains and forests, often continuing their traditional ways of living, which are closely dependent on and integrated with nature.
 10. Portrayals such as Aravindan’s may no longer be politically possible. Followers of the Bharatiya Janata Party and Hindu majoritarian politics judge such representations as transgressive.
 11. Interview with Padmakumar, August 4, 2001, Thiruvananthapuram. I owe many of my observations here to Padmakumar’s deep understanding of Aravindan’s work.
 12. Aravindan (1992: 27).
 13. See part 2 of this volume for detailed analysis of the Shambuka story.
 14. Interview with V. Rajakrishnan, August 28, 2001, Thiruvananthapuram.
 15. Interview with V. Rajakrishnan, August 28, 2001, Thiruvananthapuram.
 16. See, for example, Richman (1991a: 175–201).
 17. The reference is to the Rg Vedic verse describing the Purusha, the cosmic body. Brahmins (priests) emanate from his head, Kshatriyas (warriors) from his arms, Vaishyas (the productive varna) from his thighs, and Shudras (servants) from his feet.
 18. Interview with Ayyappa Paniker, August 29, 2001, Thiruvananthapuram.
 19. Interview with Paniker.
 20. Paniker (2003: 1–8).
 21. Aravindan (1992: 27).
 22. *Valmiki Ramayana* 7: 49 (1992: 2072).