

BOŻENA ŚLIWCZYŃSKA

BRAVERY OF THE *DURĀTMAN* HERO –
THE FIGURE OF *RĀVAṆA* ON THE
KŪṬIYĀṬṬAM STAGE

“I, *Rāvaṇa*, smashed hordes of gods and demons¹ with my celestial weapons;

In the fight my broad chest was scarred with the tusks of the furious elephant in rut as if by thunderbolts.

Sītā of innocent eyes, unable to discriminate² [between] me [and *Rāma*], is not pleased,

[unceasingly] devoted to the worthless warrior-hermit. Oh, it is fate that creates the obstacle!”³

Here he is – *Rāvaṇa*, the great king of *Laṅkā*, a proud hero, self-confident, if not “overmuch self-confident“. But on the other hand, he is a love-stricken being who is uncertain and emotionally shattered; therefore those pitiful words of a neglected suitor in unbearable pain. Such *Rāvaṇa*, of ambiguous complex nature, is a hero on *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* stage.⁴

¹ *Daityās* and *dānavās*.

² *Avivekinī*, f. – “one who cannot distinguish/discriminate” (between truth and untruth, good and wrong); here between *Rāvaṇa* and *Rāma*); ignorant, imprudent, unwise.

³ *Abhiṣeka*, II (*Hanūmaddūta*), 10:

Rāvaṇa

divyāstraiḥ suradaityadānavacamūvidrāvaṇa rāvaṇam

yuddhe krudhasurebhadantakuliśavyālīḍhavaḥsasthalam /

sītā māmavivekinī na ramate saktā ca mugdheḥṣaṇā

ḥṣudre ḥṣatriyatāpase dhrivamahā daivasya viḥṇakriyā //

⁴ I shall concentrate on his usual self, but keeping in mind his infrequent softness.

The *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* theatre (Kerala)⁵ is the only surviving theatre form of once upon a time pan-Indian tradition of the Sanskrit Classical theatre. Luckily it is preserved in the brahmanical orthodox temples up today and it operates in the proper theatre building called *kūttampalam* (literary meaning – “a temple of the theatre“). The *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* theatre refers to principles of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of *Bharata*, however it has developed its very own modes of enacting Sanskrit dramas and presenting them on the stage. A *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* theatre performance is still meant as a temple ritual, usually in the annual ritual cycle.⁶

The basic rule of the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* theatre is to stage a single act of the play/ drama as a complete performance of many days (at the present on regular basis, from 5 to 12 days depending on the act enacted). The performance consists of three segments that must be always staged. Thus we have a *purappātu* (the ritual of beginning) followed by a *nirvaḥaṇa* (a flashback; recalling the acts of a certain drama figure up to the moment the drama text begins with).⁷ Both segments concern the main characters of the play and can be multiplied; both must be presented before the drama text is enacted. The drama text is the third and last segment of the whole performance.

The important feature of the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performance is a recitation mode of the drama text;⁸ what is more, the recitation is only a part of the stage presentation. It is always followed by more or less detailed exposition by “a body language” (*āṅgika-abhinaya*), thus movements of the whole body, face expressions

⁵ For more about *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* theatre see: Rajagopalan 2000, Moser 2008, Śliwczynska 2009.

⁶ In the paper I refer mainly to the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performances on regular basis in the temple premises since they represent a long-term tradition. The *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performances presented in a secular venue create a very new phenomenon, still not much settled in the cultural tradition and not on regular standing.

All my references considering the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performances are based on my research conducted in Kerala since 1998 onwards.

⁷ For more about the *purappātu* see Śliwczynska 2007; about the *nirvaḥaṇa* segment see Śliwczynska 2006.

⁸ A stanza is delivered in full, can be also divided into fragments, and its recitation can be multiplied.

and last but not least by hand gestures that create a full developed language.⁹ In fact in the stage presentation the *āṅgika-abhinaya* predominates, elaborating the idea of the recited stanzas as well as delivering new one that is not found in the drama text proper.

At the present time there are four performances based on the *Rāmāyaṇa* still in a regular *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* temple repertoire: *Bālīvadha* and *Toraṇayuddha*,¹⁰ respectively 1st and 3rd acts of the *Abhiṣekanāṭaka* (6 acts) by *Bhāsa*; *Śūrpaṇakhāṅka* and *Aṅguliyaṅka*, respectively 2nd and 6th acts of the *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi* (7 acts) by *Śaktībhadra*. *Rāvaṇa* – the Great appears as a drama personage (in fact the main one) in the *Toraṇayuddha*. He is also mentioned in the *Śūrpaṇakhāṅka* and *Aṅguliyaṅka*.

A *durātman* figure is bad, of evil-nature, wicked. However, if we consider and follow a basic meaning of the prefix *dur*, we may see him as a personage of different nature. Thus different but not totally bad or evil. He is difficult to be obtained or simply inaccessible. Indeed, he is not easy to define, his nature is difficult to be conceived and understood. He is certainly of the ambiguous nature. The *durātman* hero embodied in *Rāvaṇa* character becomes a *tour de force* in the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* theatre performance. *Rāvaṇa*'s vivid complex nature, though evil-blemished, turns out to be very stage-attractive or "stageable". He appears extremely self-confident, brave, proud (even to the point of being ridiculous), fearless and fearsome, angry, furious and pensive (well, rather seldom), cruel and heartbroken, unpredictable and ferocious in his actions and behaviour, adored and hated. *Rāvaṇa*'s infinite bravery and determination to control the whole Universe (Three Worlds) is proven by enemies and extolled by his allies, and by his own self. No wonder that *Rāvaṇa*'s presence on the stage is made very special, very spectacular.

⁹ The gesture language that concerns all elements of grammar and syntax.

¹⁰ Called also, respectively, *Bālīvadhāṅka* and *Toraṇayuddhāṅka*.

The first stage entry of *Rāvaṇa*

The first appearance of *Rāvaṇa* on the stage is granted with splendour and luminosity. According to the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* theatre rules he is not entitled for the full-fledged *puṛappāṭu* that constitutes one day of the performance. His gardener *Śaṅkukarṇa*, who is in charge of his Master's favourite garden (*aśokavanika*), becomes *Rāvaṇa*'s ritual replacement on the stage before the segment of enacting the drama text proper.¹¹ Indeed, *Rāvaṇa*, though burdened with the nature in dispute, is too important figure to be neglected and to slip on the stage hardly noticed. That is why his first entrance on the stage is elaborated and with some stage rituals behind a curtain. *Rāvaṇa*'s special *puṛappāṭu* happens towards the end of the *Śaṅkukarṇa*'s *nirvahaṇa* when first lines of the drama text are introduced. Thus a curtain is hold in front of the stage-lamp with three burning knots lit with the fire brought from *sanctum sanctorum*, or *garbha gr̥ha*. The rituals behind the curtain are done and *Śaṅkukarṇa*'s lines delivered.

Śaṅkukarṇa:

“His savage eyes are resembling shining white lotuses,
led by burning golden bright torches,
he swiftly rushes towards with rage,
[he is] like the rising sun at the moment of dissolution of
the aeon.”¹²

¹¹ The first entry of the character (*puṛappāṭu*) is meant as a ritual of beginning. Usually it is granted to the main character or characters of the complex performance. For example, in the *Toraṇayuddha* performance there are two *puṛappāṭu* segments – *Rāma*'s and *Śaṅkukarṇa*'s. The latter is to represent *Rāvaṇa* on the stage in the segment of the ritual of beginning and in the next segment followed, that is *Śaṅkukarṇa*'s *nirvahaṇa* in which the gardener presents *Rāvaṇa*'s life and exploits. In fact, according to the rules, *Śaṅkukarṇa* should tell his own life story here. But he is not the main character of the drama text, his role is rather supporting, so his own life story is not important for the action development. Nevertheless, he is granted the both formal stage segments, only to present his Master's history. *Rāvaṇa* due to his nature of the demon should not do it himself in those two segments of the complex performance (though he may in the segment of the enacting the drama text). It is considered ritually improper.

¹² *Abhiṣeka*, III (*Toraṇayuddha*), 2:
Śaṅkukarṇa

And here comes *Rāvaṇa* with thunderous roars as said. An idea of the bright (in the literal sense!) and flamboyant entrance is given in the drama text itself. After the stanza quoted above, there are author's (*Bhāsa*'s) stage directions: "Enter *Rāvaṇa* as described."¹³ Definitely, the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* exponents have taken a chance and enlarged an entry portion according to their own stage-imaginary. When the curtain is removed, *Rāvaṇa* appears in all his glory manifesting his nature and emotions, displaying his readiness for a fight – for a military action. The flame and light of the torches are accompanied by sudden dazzling explosions of thrown resin powder. The sounds of *miḷāvu* drums get louder and faster. All this to mark the moment – the great *Rāvaṇa*, a brave and evil-cruel enemy of *Rāma*, arrives. The formal entry can last long, usually about twenty minutes up to half an hour of a stage time.¹⁴ In fact, this is a stage piece very much awaited and enjoyed by the audience and the artists as well.

However, the entrance with the fire bears also another meaning – another significance. The stage of the temple theatre (*raṅga-bhūmi*), ritually purified at the very beginning of the whole performance with the sacred fire and special *pūjā* performed by the main temple priest, has to remain pure. The light (open fire) of the stage-lamp seems to be insufficient, additional lamps-torches must be lit, from the already burning

amalakamalasannibhogranetraḥ
kanakamayojjvaladīpikāpurogaḥ /
tvaritamabhipatatyasau saroṣo
yugarināmasamudyato yathārkaḥ //

¹³ *Tataḥ praviśati yathānirdiṣṭo Rāvaṇaḥ.*

¹⁴ However, it could be much longer. Let me refer to a stage piece called *Udyānapraveśa* that is a part of the *Aśokavanikāṅka* performance (5th act of the *Aścaryacūḍāmaṇi*). In the drama text there are author's (*Śaktībhadra*'s) stage directions:

"Here enter love-stricken *Rāvaṇa* with his retinue";

tataḥ praviśati kāmayaṁnāvasthaḥ saparivāro rāvaṇaḥ; Aścaryacūḍāmaṇi, V (*Aśokavanikāṅka*), the first stage directions after the Interlude (*Praveśaka*).

Thus *Rāvaṇa* is entering his favourite garden (*aśokavanika*) where *Sītā* (kidnapped by him much earlier) stays in the shade of trees and bushes. His entry can take an hour up to two hours on the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* stage! It creates a very spectacular piece of enacting. Nowadays it is presented only outside the temple premises, in the secular venue and it usually constitutes a separate performance. In the past, it was in the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* temple repertoire as well as part of staging the *Aśokavanika* act that took many days to be completed.

three knots, to ensure the stage purity. After all, the evil spirit – the *durātman* hero enters the sacred stage. And what’s more his pitiful future is well-known. The fire sanctifies and purifies all what is to happen. *Rāvaṇa* is to be punished for all misdeeds done. The great Lord of *Laṅkā*, humiliated by a mere monkey (*Hanūmān*) who ruined his favourite garden and betrayed by his own brother (*Vibhīṣaṇa*), becomes an unfortunate creature. His oponent *Rāma*, whom *Rāvaṇa* totally despises and considers as “a miserable human being”,¹⁵ kills him finally. Thus the fire is to remove all the wrong of the *durātman* hero and blood/ death pollution. It is to redeem stage purity for succeeding stage actions.

Bravery and might for display

No doubt, *Rāvaṇa*’s bravery is well-known to all, to his allies and enemies. It is lauded by his subjects and supportes, and by himself as well. *Rāvaṇa*’s courageous exploits are admired or feared by the many. Definitely he is aware of his power, if not infatuated with his tremendous might, that finally will bring him to the fatal end. He often recalls his ferocious fights with and victory over gods and demons (the latters become in his military disposal) as well as the conquest of the Three Worlds – “to me who has made Three Worlds tremble (...)”¹⁶ According to the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* tradition recalling the victorious past¹⁷ can be the moment of presenting a stage sequence called *paṭa-purappātu* (“getting ready for war/battle”). The sequence is a stage interpolation “authored” by the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* artists. A whole

¹⁵ Just to mention, *Abhiṣeka*, III (*Toraṇayuddha*), 17:

Rāvaṇa

[a] *divyāstraistridaśgaṇā mayābhibhūtā (...)*

[d] *bho rāmaḥ kathamabhiyāti mānuṣo mām //*

“Oh, how can *Rāma*, the mortal, confront me [d]; me, who conquered hordes of gods with celestial weapons” [a].

¹⁶ *Abhiṣeka*, III (*Toraṇayuddha*), 4 a:

Rāvaṇa

yudhi jagatrayabhūtikṛto 'pi me...

¹⁷ Or the moment of preparing for a fight/battle to happen soon.

piece is enacted with the *āṅgika-abhinaya*, not a word is spoken. Thus *Rāvaṇa* commends his soldiers to get ready for a lethal battle. The *paṭa-purappāṭu* describes preparations undertaken by different military regiments: the infantry, cavalry units, chariot units, elephant regiments, squads of spear-fighters, archers, and sword-fighters. All weapons are taken out from the arsenals, checked, cleaned, repaired and finally consecrated. Homage to the weapons must be done by their users. Finally the soldiers' march out is shown. Sometimes a whole battle array is described, even with the army orchestra playing a variety of different instruments. There are drums (*avanaddha*; *ceṇṭa*, *iṭakka*, *maddaḷam*, *timila*) and gongs (*ghana*; *tāḷam* – idiophones), wind instruments (*susira*) like small trumpets (*kompu*), oboes (*kurūṅkuḷal*) and conch (*śaṅkha*). Actually, all those instruments mentioned are temple instruments. The description may be less or more detailed, depending on an actor's imagination and skills as well as the stage moment in the performance. The *Rāvaṇa*'s *paṭa-purappāṭu* also appears in the narrative segment of the performance, in the *nirvahaṇa*. Formally it is the *nirvahaṇa* of *Śaṅkukarṇa*, but in fact of *Rāvaṇa*, as mentioned earlier. *Śaṅkukarṇa*, the gardener of the king of *Lāṅkā*, is telling a story of his Master's life, not of his own life. That particular *paṭa-purappāṭu* is very detailed and long (from a half to an hour or so). Later on in the performance it will be repeated by *Rāvaṇa* drama character. In general the *paṭa-purappāṭu* sequence stresses the hero's great military power and his mighty command over the army as well. Thus his personal bravery has excellent strong support in the military troupes at his disposal.

The *durātman* hero with his ambiguous nature, cruel but soft, evil but noble good¹⁸ evokes a whole stratum of emotions, from fear or disgust up to pathos and admiration. In this drama personage all emotions (*bhāva*) are combined and poetical sentiments (*rasa*) born from: love (*śṛṅgāra*) and laugh (*hāsyā*), anger (*raudra*) and pathos (*karuṇa*), heroism (*vīra*) and wonder (*adbhuta*), disgust (*bībhatsa*) and fear (*bhayānaka*), even

¹⁸ In case of *Rāvaṇa*, one should remember about his ancestry.

tranquillity (*śānta rasa*)¹⁹ can be found.²⁰ In truth, *Rāvaṇa*, and the *durātman* hero in general, is the only drama personage who generates all poetical sentiments prescribed by *Bharata* (*Nāṭyaśāstra*). *Rāvaṇa* as a perfect example of the *durātman* hero becomes a pattern for stage presence of the other drama characters of the similar nature, though definitely, of evil-less intensity. One of them is mighty and glorious, and arrogant Monkey King – *Vālin* (*Bālī*). His first stage entry resembles the entrance of *Rāvaṇa*²¹ – thus furious roars, bright torches, readiness to fight for life (with his own brother *Sugrīva*, a friend of *Rāma*). However, in the drama text proper²² there is no slight allusion to such an entry granted to *Vālin*, contrary to *Rāvaṇa*'s one.²³ *Vālin*'s glamorous first stage appearance is definitely an enacting proposal of the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* artists modelled on *Rāvaṇa*'s flamboyant entry.²⁴

The figure of *Rāvaṇa* fascinates and absorbs the attention even of his foes. The moment he appears is always marked with ecstatic wonder and awe. Here are words of *Hanūmān* hidden in the most famous garden of *Laṅkā* (*aśokavanika*).

“Oh! Is it a glare of the torches? (Looking around) Oh!
Here comes *Rāvaṇa*.
With gems is set his crown, with large bright eyes of
dark red colour
he struts around joyfully like an elephant in rut.
The Lord of demons surrounded by a flock of young
women
is like a lion in the midst of a flock of gazelles.”²⁵

¹⁹ *Rāvaṇa*'s penance is often recalled and described.

²⁰ For a theory of *rasa* see *Nāṭyaśāstra*, chapter VI.

²¹ And as in *Rāvaṇa*'s case – the fatal end from *Rāma*'s hand.

²² *Abhiṣeka*, I (*Bālīvadha*).

²³ *Abhiṣeka*, III (*Toraṇayuddha*), 2.

²⁴ One more example, though of different character, is the first stage entry of *Hanūmān*.

²⁵ *Abhiṣeka*, II (*Hanūmaddūta*), a prose line and stanza 9;

Hanūmān

aye katham dīpikāvalokaḥ/ (vilokya) aye rāvaṇaḥ

maṇiviracitamauliścārutāmrāyatākṣo

madasalalitagāmī mattamātāṅgalīlah/

yuvatjjananikāye bhātyasau rākṣaseṣo

However, the magnificent Lord of demons, or the great king of the forest, fearless and proud, can be smitten with a single female! Seeing *Sītā* in the hermit forest (while she is in exile with her husband *Rāma*), *Rāvaṇa* goes into raptures over her stunning beauty and passionately desires her. So much love-infatuated, he totally ignores her married status, as well as her husband figure – *Rāma*, his enemy. Nevertheless, he does remember who he is, the mighty conqueror of the Universe, whose bravery is widely admired and feared. Thus a glimpse of *Rāvaṇa* seized with passion:

“When shall I enjoy embracing her entire body of blossom softness in these twenty arms marked with the scars of bravery?”²⁶

Brave he is, both in the battlefield and in the field of love. Indeed, *Rāvaṇa* is mainly defeated by his own fatal infatuation, not by military power of others. In that way, goddess *Pārvatī*'s curse is fulfilled.²⁷

To conclude I must admit that *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* theatre takes an advantage of the complex ambiguous nature of the *durātman* hero and makes him *a tour de force* of the whole performance. He eclipses other drama characters. Thus, *Rāvaṇa*, the model *durātman* figure with his difficult to recognise nature,²⁸ casts his

haririva hariṇīnāmantare ceṣṭamaṇaḥ //

²⁶ *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi*, III (*Māyāsūtan̄ka*), 21, c-d;

Rāvaṇa

(...)

asyāḥ pallavakomalāṁ tanumimāmāliṅgya kṛtsnāmahaṁ

nirveksyāmi kadā nu viṁśatimamūn vīravraṇāṅkān bhujān //

²⁷ That a woman will be a cause of *Rāvaṇa*'s end. On the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* stage a sub-episode of *Pārvatī* cursing *Rāvaṇa* is a part of an episode *Kailāsodharaṇa-cum-Pārvatīviraha*; it is very much elaborated piece repeated in different segments of the whole complex performance.

²⁸ Let me quote an interesting opinion from South India that is in great favour of *Rāvaṇa*. It reflects a Dravidian point of view regarding the *Rāmāyaṇa*-lore that should not be overlooked.

“Considered on every side and viewed from all points, Ravana was supremely intelligent, erudite, mighty, discreet, and amiable, and he was a great and good man, ‘one of the highest and noblest specimens of humanity’.”

Pillai 1928: 71.

shadow upon all, including his great oponent. Therefore *Rāma*, though formally main drama personage, does stay “stage-overshadowed”. Such a treatment of heroes (evil and good) can be considered as a challenge, bravely undertaken by the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* artists, the temple executors of the *nāṭya* ritual, thus the ritual of the performance.

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