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Article

Who Owns the Myths? An Enquiry into Cultural Appropriation and Proprietorship

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Abstract:

Cultural narratives, particularly mythological texts, have long served as sites of socio-political contestations. Questions of ownership, authority, and representation become deeply entangled with legal and cultural frameworks when we look at how adaptations come under the scrutiny of censorship and incite public outrage. This paper explores these questions by examining two animated film adaptations: Sita Sings the Blues and Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama. The paper utilises the concept of cultural proprietorship as a framework to examine the cultural and social forces at work in adapting the Ramayana, which holds a tremendous pull within the public even to this day. By analysing the divergent reception of the two films, it further argues that the existing legal structures of intellectual property rights and ownership often fall short in dealing with the complex questions that arise with the interplay of cultural, political, and social agencies in the case of cinematic adaptations of myths. The paper shows that cultural ownership has become more powerful than any copyright law. This disparity underscores how cultural ownership can function as an exclusionary mechanism that limits creative reinterpretations and alternative readings of myths, reinforcing hegemonic narratives while marginalising dissenting voices. Furthermore, the paper situates this discussion within broader debates on freedom of expression, artistic liberty, and the evolving role of myths and folklore in contemporary societies. This paper argues for a more nuanced understanding of cultural adaptation one that acknowledges myths as evolving, dynamic entities rather than fixed cultural artefacts monopolised by particular groups. By problematising the intersection of law, culture, and myths, the paper contributes to ongoing discourses on intellectual property, media representation, and cultural hegemony.

Keywords: Myth, Cultural Proprietorship, Adaptation, Ownership, Interpretation, Culture, Censorship

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture has assumed dominion over the seemingly unending expanse of overlapping socio-political territories in the open domain of the public sphere. The relevance it holds in the very functioning of societal relations on the ground level makes it a highly contended and convoluted area of discourse, the nature of which often seeps into various other discourses associated with it. In discussing the position of authority it holds in determining how the complex questions of private and cultural ownership are addressed, it becomes imperative to also analyse the nature of power it exercises over media representations and adaptations. This paper shall attempt to explore the area of cultural interpretation and appropriation of media adaptations, specifically cinematic, of myths like the Ramayana. For this purpose, it shall take into account two animated movie adaptations of Ramayana, Sita Sings the Blues and Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama. The former is a critically acclaimed adaptation with a new perspective on the myth, while the latter is an anime adaptation. The paper shall discuss the formal and cultural impact of both works in the context of the cultural and political implications in media representation and interpretation of myths. It shall also critically examine

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the legal framework to which mythological adaptations are subjected, question the private ownership of such adaptations and how copyright laws bend and fall short to account for and accommodate the social impact of such works, and situate culture as the dominant mode of authority in the assessment and appropriation of media representations. The main argument presented in the paper shall be along the line of questioning who owns the myths, especially in link with the structure of modern liberal democracies, and what limitations laws have in assessing the rather sensitive and complex domain of myths and their media representations. Furthermore, laws and culture create a nexus of subsumption of adaptations of myths into the cultural sphere, often taking away the individual liberty of subjective understanding and interpretation of the myth.

2. THE TWO RECEPTIONS

On August 6, 2018, the San Jose Museum of Art screened the animated feature film Sita Sings the Blues in its 10th year of release. The screening was met with vehement protest by Hindu groups and forums citing that their religious beliefs have been hurt because of the "negative portrayal of Hinduism" (The Times of India, 2011). Several protestors asserted that they felt humiliated by the perverted portrayal of Rama, a figure of great influence and reverence for Hindus all around the world. A month prior to this incident, a screening of the film was cancelled due to protests by the Hindu Janjagruti Samiti and Forum for Hindu Awakening; the film was later screened at the organiser's parents' home. On the other hand, a screening of Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama earlier this year was met with considerable enthusiasm hitherto unseen for an animated feature film in India. The screening was organised to commemorate the 30-year-old production and to celebrate the rich and inspirational journey of the film and its impact on popular culture, which was until that year blissfully ignored. "Animator Chetan Sharma joked that because of the number of dignitaries in the room, the projector had had a 'heart attack.'" (Ramnath, 2018). The production was a matter of pride for its collaborative effort by the Indian and Japanese governments to bring to life a myth in animation form, which initially faced reluctance by both parties regarding the seemingly immature form of animation. Both films share the same media format, animation, and both are adaptations of a revered myth. How then is there such a considerable divide in the reception of both films? It must be noted, however, that the positive reception of the anime was only witnessed this year, a highly opportune time for the government to progress with its religious agenda of glorifying a certain religion for the state elections in Uttar Pradesh. What is it that makes one film a matter of pride and the other of scorn? One obvious reading of the context can point towards the fact that one of the films hurt the religious sentiments of a community while the other was a faithful adaptation of the original text. However, a critical reading plainly points towards the constraints put on any form of adaptation of texts associated with the culture or a religion. This deep association of myths with cultures makes it all the more problematic for adaptations like Sita Sings the Blues to be interpreted and understood as a text of its own merit, examined aside from its association with the myth it draws from. Then, does the commitment to maintaining the originality of the source material matter the most even though it is arcane in its subject matter and utterly problematic in its thematic structure and subjects, something that films like Sita Sings the Blues attempt to bring to the fore?

3. FORMAL ASPECTS AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS

As the first mainstream animation feature with aspects of an anime, Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama was indeed a revolutionary project for enthusiasts of the animation form in India during the 90s. An eminent myth interpreted in an animated format had its own set of challenges, which had to be circumnavigated through deep research and maintaining a balance between the Japanese art aesthetics, which the anime form is known for, and the traditional Indian sensibility, which has been inculcated through decades, even centuries, of popular interpretations and appropriation. This aspect of associating certain ideas of a myth with popular imagery is so deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the public that any deviation from that particular set of markers is seen as denigrating the myth. This is exactly what adaptations like the anime film avoid by keeping the original visual markers intact and experimenting as little as possible with the source material and other aspects of the film medium. Therefore, apart from the animation style and character design, all of which can pass through the radar of cultural appropriators, the anime presents the exact same form and content of the myth as the other adaptations before it. In doing so, the film also stays vehemently attached to even the common tropes and binaries of popular adaptations, like the stereotypical representation of monkeys as semi-humans, minor characters being represented as dark while Sita and Rama are fair-complexioned, the binary of good and evil, etc. All these formal aspects are not only outdated but have never been questioned as well, which is why the critical approach of films like Sita Sings the Blues has met with radical criticisms in the guise of hurting religious sentiments.

Sita Sings the Blues presents a critical feminist perspective of the narrative of the myth by focusing on representing Sita and the consequences of Rama's actions on her life. It questions the culturally normative, even unethical, aspects of the myth, which traditionally have been ignored in popular media representations. It subverts the trope of the all-knowing and all-good characterisation of Rama and makes him accountable for his unjustifiable actions, especially over Sita. It is a unique take on the myth in various ways. For instance, the dialogues that are present in the film are actual unadulterated conversations among peers of Nina Paley, the director, who are NRIs. By doing this, it opens up the questioning of the myth through interpretations by second- or third-generation Indian citizens residing in America or even Indian expatriates. Filled with half-baked knowledge and divergent memories of the Ramayana, the dialogues by these narrative figures bring to focus the multitudinal expanse of subjective understanding and traditions of the myth even by the natives. Furthermore, the main focus of the film is to highlight the universal feminist

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standpoint, which has never been executed in the popular media. It does this by superimposing the similarities in the situations of two characters, Sita and the modern American woman (based on Paley herself), and thus establishes a common ground for the discourse on the representation of women in myths along with their subjugation and associated gender stereotypes. What is strikingly different from other animation adaptations of the myth, like the anime, is its visual representation of Sita. She has been shown to don a saree in a manner that has been interpreted as being overly sexual by groups like Hindu Janajagruti Samiti. Even though the original text doesn't directly depict the physical attributes of Sita or the kind of dress she wears, it has become the main point of controversy with the film along with the questioning of Rama's actions.

The anime feature film was released in 1992, the same year as the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and a few years after the super-popular television series by Ramanand Sagar, Ramayan. The 80s was a pivotal decade for political parties to build momentum for the temple agitation, and "the show's popularity dovetailed into the rising mobilisation around the temple movement, which culminated in a mob demolishing the Babri mosque on December 6, 1992" (Ramnath, 2018). Furthermore, certain media reports during the time of the release of the film also stated that Sako, one of the producers of the film, had to clear the idea of the film with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, an organisation that was at the forefront of the movement (Ramnath, 2018). The film, during its original release in India, did not perform well financially since it was not properly distributed or marketed and suffered losses. It was only after the rights to the film were acquired by the Cartoon Network that it gained popularity among the masses as a holiday-season special. However, its most recent drive into popularity has been brought about by the Prime Minister during his visit to Japan, in which he commended the efforts and passion with which an Indian text has been authentically and reverentially represented by a Japanese organisation. This renewed interest in the film was witnessed in the same year as the state elections in Uttar Pradesh and can be seen as the government's intent to further its religious agenda at a time when there is a restored discourse on the Ayodhya temple. In this manner, the newfound importance that the film is bestowed upon in its celebration as a masterpiece can also be read as political propaganda. On the other hand, Sita Sings the Blues continues to remain a controversial work even more than a decade after its release, indicating clearly that time is not a factor with which an adaptation like it could be well received. The question then remains, what is it that makes adaptations of myths acceptable and appropriate for consumption by the public, and what part of the public has the right to assert its idea of what is appropriate and what isn't regarding a genre that itself has the history of being interpreted differently by different communities at various instances of history? Furthermore, what is the nature of these subsections of the public? Political, communal, nationalist, or cultural?

4. INTERPRETATIONS BY THE PUBLIC

So far, the paper has established that the subjective understanding of the adaptations by communities and individuals influences the impact and reach of the media representations on the public. On one hand, the political use of a generic cinematic adaptation for social mobilisation is welcomed, while on the other hand, a universally relevant thematic representation is met with radical reception. It must be discussed that myths like the Ramayana are deeply associated with religious and cultural aspects of communities, which makes it a highly contended and sensitive text to be interpreted. However, it is precisely due to this long-rooted history of the text in the cultural sphere that different communities have not only interpreted it in various ways but there also exists a great number of versions of the text that could substantially not be denied their status as the original works. In his essay 'Three Hundred Ramayanas', A.K. Ramanujan suggests that there have been more than twenty-five tellings of the Ramayana in Sanskrit itself, and throughout history, the narrative has been interpreted in a great number of languages of Southeast Asia, including Annamese, Balinese, Cambodian, Kashmiri, Santhali, etc. (G et al., 2001). He uses the term 'tellings' in place of 'versions' or 'variants' since the latter terms imply the existence of an original text, which is most commonly believed to be Valmiki's Ramayana. He further explores numerous other aspects of the myth that have taken different forms in different tellings, some of which directly question Rama's actions of subjecting Sita to unjustified trials and gendered stigma. It is even more interesting to note that in Valmiki's Ramayana, Sita addresses Rama's unjustified actions on being asked to undergo the trial of chastity in a direct verbal confrontation. Arshia Sattar's translation of the Valmiki Ramayana depicts Sita's response as, "How could you say such things to me, the kind of things a low, common man would say to his woman?" (Sattar, 2019). The next verse follows: "You judge all women by the conduct of a few. You should know better than to reject me like this!" (Sattar, 2019). The above-presented verses are taken from Yuddha Kanda (Book four) of Valmiki's Ramayana. Several things are evident through this confrontation: Sita herself questions Rama's demand to prove her chastity in very strong words, and also in doing so, Sita herself resorts to gendered remarks on women, suggesting that all women cannot be judged by the actions of the few. Furthermore, Sita's anger towards Rama, which is justified, also uses vocabulary that can be seen as insulting to his ideal figure. Apart from minor changes in syntax, other translations of Valmiki's Ramayana depict the dialogue in the same manner. Hence, it is clear that questioning Rama's actions was an integral part of Valmiki's supposedly original Ramayana, and thus the same line of questioning in Sita Sings the Blues ought not to be taken as offensive. How can then any version or adaptation of the text be said to be wrong in interpretation, as has been the case with Sita Sings the Blues, when, as Ramanujan puts it, "to some extent all later Ramayanas play on the knowledge of previous tellings: they are meta-Ramayanas" (G et al., 2001, p. 143)?

5. COPYRIGHT ON MYTHS

An adaptation is eligible to obtain protection under copyright laws unless the source material itself exists in the public domain for the free use of every individual. SSTB (Sita Sings the Blues), as it declares on its website, is freely available for distribution, copying, sharing, and selling, apart from certain restrictions on the songs used in the film. The film is freely available on the website for streaming and downloading and has no restrictions on its interpretation and being used as the source material for any secondary material, as is the case for any text that exists in the public domain. The website boldly states, "From the shared culture it came, and back into the shared culture it goes" (Sita Sings the Blues, 2009). However, TEM, the company that owns the rights to the anime film, places restrictions on aspects that Paley gladly relinquishes. The legal framework of copyright infringement in the case of adaptations refers to a work built upon the original work with the addition of considerable new material to it. The transformative aspect of copyright law makes it essential to question what aspects of the new material make it different from the source material. A derivative work is subject to the exclusive rights of the author unless the new material falls under the 'transformative fair use,' which resides outside of the existing laws of copyright (Newman, 2010, p. 1). The obvious inquiry here then should be along the lines of, what exactly does TEM, or any other company that owns rights to an adaptation, have copyright over? Is it the narrative, characters, or style? Either way, since all aspects of the source material already exist in the public domain, the rights of the adaptation, apart from the distinctiveness of the secondary material from the source material, are questionable. As already discussed, the anime film is a rather conventional retelling of the myth apart from the distinct style of character design. Furthermore, what exactly constitutes the threshold across which the derived work becomes distinct from the source material and thus falls outside of copyright law?

6. CULTURAL PROPRIETORSHIP

Going back to the clauses of the copyright theory, SSTB falls under the category of a transformation since it is essentially novel and just uses the raw material of the original work. The film builds upon the existing text and in doing so adds to it its own creative features, both in terms of form and thematics. But legal ownership is not the major concern for films like SSTB; as is clear above, it is cultural proprietorship and how it is used to limit the individuality of artists by claiming a certain sense of socio-cultural, even political, ownership on works like Ramayana, which already exist in the public domain. Referring to Ramanujan's idea of social creativity with mythological texts, in which he states that "to some extent all later Ramayanas play on the knowledge of previous tellings", it points towards the common tradition across multiple communities that has utilised the previous tellings of the myth to create something new (G et al., 2001, p. 143). This is in conjunction with what Lessig also suggests, that free building upon the creativity of existing works is a crucial facet of society. He extends it to the assertion that no society, free or controlled, demands that every use of or in association with a creative work be paid for (Lessig, 2015, p. 29). In that sense, a majority of the existing works in society are built upon the works that predate them in one way or the other. It is common to encounter or discover that certain aspects of an existing work are either inspired or simply borrowed from another, but it is precisely this unstated borrowing that allows a multitude of new works to take form, which in turn works for the development of the social order. The crucial inquiry, as Lessig suggests, is not whether a culture is free but rather what degree of freedom it allows. Here, culture takes dominance, and the legal framework is rendered insufficient to tackle the scope of these issues, which are rooted in social and cultural spheres. It becomes more assertive than law in controlling the creation and dissemination of works like SSTB and in doing so curbs subjective interpretation by asserting its authority through appropriation and control in the guise of public interest. Another pertinent question is which sections of the public domain hold the authority to assert their influence over the interpretation of the source material, and what is the source of this authority?

Two of the major reasons for the backlash on SSTB were the depiction of Rama as cruel and unempathetic and the overly sexualised depiction of Sita. In regard to the second point of contention, there have been influential intermedial traditions that have had their own aesthetics that stand against this argument. Ipshita Chanda, in bringing out these aspects, says, "The frame within which the Sita of the story is fixed visually is represented from the outset by the outlined female form, which exaggerates the heroine's physical attributes. This is drawn from Válmíki's description of a particular form of nayika (heroine) in accordance with a notion of beauty and later enshrined in all classical Sanskrit performance manuals deriving from Bharata's Natyashastra, including the performance of physical desire" (Chanda, 2011, p. 4). The presence of such a tradition in one of the most revered texts of ancient Indian aesthetic literature clearly overrules the point of contention with the visual representation of Sita in SSTB. In fact, it is the case of one subjective understanding of the visual representation overpowering others and taking away from an individual's ability to do so in his/her personal capacity. Furthermore, since they are subjective interpretations and acts of meaning-making, they need to be understood as such, with every interpretation provided equal importance. Rosemary J. Coombe, in her work 'The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties,' understands the act of meaning-making as inherent to practices of culture and states, "The imaginative making of meaning is the quintessential human act, and culture is both this practice and its products" (Coombe, 1998, p. 44). In view of these arguments, SSTB exists as a work separate from the source text of Ramayana, as a transformation that merely takes raw material from the source and builds upon it with its own ingenuity. Therefore, reducing it to an inauthentic and offensive adaptation of the myth strips it away from its original contribution, which makes it so different from other cinematic representations in the first place. Its emphasis on Sita as a subject brings about the subversion of tropes from the normative representations to provide a nuanced and new point of view

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and subjective authority in the framework of the film. This subject position of Sita in the narrative of the film is not only unconventional but also inventive in its addressing of gender issues in media representations of the dominant culture. This point can be understood in relation to how Carl Stychin defines the interplay of culture, identity, and subject formation in the dominant culture: "The constitution of the subject depends upon the ability to formulate cultural meaning from the materials that are available and can be appropriated from the dominant culture… The interplay of culture and identity becomes a thoroughly political matter with no predetermined outcome" (Stychin, 2013).

Therefore, the role of culture in limiting the understanding of a text or its media representations in the public sphere is paramount. In fixing culture to a limited understanding, its interpretations and adaptations also get limited. Putting Ramayana against European myths, it's evident that the cultural and social reproduction of these texts far surpasses that of Ramayana. In that sense, the interpretation of the text in SSTB is stigmatised since it breaches the walls of a conventional, fixed understanding and form. Associating myths like the Ramayana with religion and religious identity, as has been the predominant case, fixates on the sacredness of its form and material, thus limiting its interpretive possibilities. Here two forms of cultures can be distinguished, one that is sacred and dead and the other that is dynamic and alive. The minor anecdote in the production of the anime about securing the approval from an organisation that is neither governmental nor does it hold any official position of authority in the matter is evidence of the gatekeeping and cultural appropriation undertaken by such organisations in the guise of preserving culture and history. The existence of a text in the public domain explicitly means its equal availability to all individuals, yet means of political mobilisation and the altered collective consciousness of the public render individual freedom, one thing that liberal democracies emphasise protecting, useless in front of community welfare and maintaining peace. These social facts are a testament to the reality that the legal structure is inadequately equipped to deal with the crucial and critical examination of cultural forces. Culture thus proves to be more dominant and assertive in dealing with issues concerning itself and tends to ignore the law altogether to create an echo of its own history and functioning and in doing so subjugates aspects of subjectivity, interpretation, creativity, and freedom.

7. CONCLUSION

The public domain, in the case of myths and their media representations, relays the ownership of the text from private to cultural and forms the shift from private ownership to cultural proprietorship. Cultural dominance thus works in the same framework but with a shift in the power dynamic from intellectual property laws to cultural authority and proprietorship. The paper merely touched upon the vast scope of cultural influence over media in terms of ownership and attempted to pose relevant questions in the analysis of the reception and interpretation of film adaptations based on myths. Works like Sita Sings the Blues are subjected to fanatical appropriation and criticism as interpretations of a cultural product that belongs to the public in equity and perpetuity even though they clearly transcend the national and cultural boundaries. The unequivocal ownership of myths by certain segments of the public poses challenges in the very process of creation and dissemination of interpretations and alternative readings, which needs to be questioned.

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