

Nation and Censorship: A Reading of Aubrey Menen's *Rama Retold*

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Introduction

In his Introduction to Aubrey Menen's *The Space Within the Heart* (1970) Graham Hall describes the Indo-Irish author as "a stranger within the gates" so that "in England, he was a brown man, never a fully accepted Englishman, and in India he was always a foreigner—a foreigner visiting India" (viii). Menen's resistance to dominant cultures is a product of this alterity as a brown homosexual whom the Empire readily accepted as a citizen as long as he conformed to the model of a British gentleman. Though Menen despised labels and may not have identified as Queer—a term that gained political currency only in the late 1980s—his critique of metanarratives can be read as a form of queer dissent. His ability to see through the hypocrisy of the narratives of nationalism and colonialism allows him to forge an 'affective community' across time and space as evident from his empathy with Valmiki who is described as a threat to the Brahminical order—the hegemonic "top dogs" of Menen's Ayoda in *Rama Retold* (1954) (3). Recognizing Valmiki's caste position, the author claims that his retelling of the epic is a representation of an alternate Truth—"generations of Brahmins have re-written his (Valmiki's) poem so that in parts it says the opposite of what Valmiki plainly intended.... I shall aim at reviving his attitude of mind" (6). Menen's 'I' is a cumulative product of Nayar hegemony and British education so that his re-reading of Valmiki becomes a means to give up his caste/class privilege—an act of intersectionality rooted in guilt. Since the task of revising myths is often meant to fill gaps and silences, Menen's text posits a counter-narrative by re-imagining the central figures of Dasaratha, Ram and Sita as less than ideal. It not only ascribes sexual agency to Sita but also destabilizes the institutions of family and marriage that were glorified in the nationalist discourse. It is a precursor to his critique of nationalism and Aryan supremacy found in texts like *Dead Man in the Silver Market* (1953) and *The New Mystics and the True Indian Tradition* (1974).

In the course of this paper, I shall analyse how Aubrey Menen's critique of the idealisation of the Rama myth counters a homogenous national identity and more specifically Hindu masculinity that would become the political fodder for communal politics in later decades culminating in the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992. While this was not the first time that books populated with religious figures came to

be censored in the subcontinent, the banning of Menen's book in independent India serves as a precedent for the subsequent attacks on art and literature by religious fundamentalists.

Censorship, Morality and Obscenity

Before we look into the Rama myth and its political currency in the subcontinent, one needs to understand the ways in which censorship laws operate and more often than not end up constructing knowledge about forbidden commodities. Since censorship as a tool is used by the state to regulate speech and representation as well as their influence on the state subjects, it unabashedly goes by vague definitions of 'morality' and 'obscenity'. Thus, in British India, Sections 292 and 293 of the Indian Penal Code 1860, prevented the "dissemination /transmission of obscene matter" while the Indian Post Office Act of 1898 imposed "a similar prohibition on such transmissions through the post" (Bose xxviii). After independence, these laws would culminate in The Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act, 1956 that ostensibly claims to protect "persons under the age of 25" from such "harmful publications" (xxviii). The censor here assumes a monolithic response to a text thereby infantilizing the spectators who are constructed as what Shohini Ghosh describes as "copycats and passive victims" (40). Incidentally, Section 292 defines anything to be obscene as long as it has a "tendency to deprave and corrupt persons who are likely to read, see or hear the matter contained or embodied in it" (Bose xxix). It is a clear adaptation from the 1868 British case—*Regina v Hicklin*—where obscenity is seen as a test rather than an inherent quality of the object concerned. As cited in Britain's The Obscene Publications Act 1857, the author's intention in this regard is immaterial as long as the 'effect' it produces can be deemed 'obscene'.

These legal notions of obscenity not only validate British responses to Indian culture but also frame the morals of nineteenth-century Indian social reformers and national leaders. Consequently, when Rekhti poetry that represented female desire albeit from the perspective of a male gaze was labelled degenerate and obscene by the colonialist, the Indian nationalist followed the British argument (Vanita 194) to construct a mythic Hindu past as a repository of an ideal Indian cultural ethos. A more scathing reception greeted Pandey Bechan Sharma's 1924 short story, 'Chocolate' which was ironically composed to cleanse the society of homosexuality. No text though garnered as much of international attention as Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927) that was banned not only for being racist but also for attacking the very nationalist agenda of *Swaraj*.¹ Menen's rendition, though hardly in circulation becomes radical after C. Rajagopalachari describes it as "impossible" and "nonsense" ("Is Fun Fun? The Particular Strangeness of Aubrey Menen"). By claiming that such a narration of *The Ramayana* is not feasible and hence not authentic, the text was reduced to a libel against Hindu India and hence unworthy of being in print. Engaged in the act of nation-building,

Rajagopalachari's own 1957 version of the epic can be seen as an anxious response to Menen's irreverent rewriting and a desperate endeavor to restore the legitimacy of the Rama myth. It is ironical that this ban should take place under the tutelage of Jawaharlal Nehru who had once famously declared: "I would rather have a completely free press with all the dangers involved in the wrong use of that freedom than a suppressed and regulated press" (qtd. in Bose xxviii). Incidentally, Zareer Masani contends that "a shamefaced Nehru later apologized to Menen, admitting that it would have been politically too damaging to refuse a ban" ("The Saffron Censorship that Governs India" n.p.).

Ramayana and the Indian Nation

At a time when British imperialism and Christian missionaries ridiculed the Indian Hindus' preoccupations with idolatry and superstition, the nationalist leaders felt an urgent need to look into the pre-Islamic past for a signifier that would fire the imagination of the masses and inspire them to unify against colonial rule.² This symbol came to be the figure of Lord Ram whose "righteous reign" in Ayodhya became the model for Mahatma Gandhi's *swaraj* (Lutgendorf 253). In *Young India*, Gandhi invokes the ancient epic in his understanding of an ideal democracy built upon notions of equality and justice. He clarifies:

By *Ramarajya* I do not mean Hindu Raj. I mean by *Ramarajya*, Divine Raj, the kingdom of god.... Whether Rama of my imagination ever lived or not on this earth, the ancient ideal of *Ramarajya* is one of true democracy in which a meanest citizen could be sure of swift justice without an elaborate and costly procedure. ("Ramrajya" n.p.)

Here, Gandhi not only envisions the British Raj as *Ravana-rajya*, the very prototype of evil and misrule (and hence in need of being replaced with *dharma raj*) but actively re-imagines Ram as a secular figure. As Philip Lutgendorf notes, the use of the figure of Ram with its cultural currency struck

a sympathetic chord in tens of millions, especially in rural areas, for nostalgia for Ram's mythical reign had long persisted, in Norvin Hein's words (1972, 100) as 'one of the few vital indigenous political ideas remaining in the vastly unpolitical mind of the old-time Indian peasant.' (254)

It is this romanticisation of Ram's reign that makes him a rallying symbol around which the collective Hindu sentiment is built; ranging from love towards the monarch to rage against any imagined or real threat, to the socio-political clamouring for 'Ram *mandir*' (temple of Ram). These shifts in the political currency of the figure are significant to understand the ways in which Gandhi's secular Ram becomes a subject of Hindu pride and violence in subsequent decades.

The Indian nationalist's choice of *Ramayana* as a repository of ancient Hindu values is guided by the epic's celebration of family as a

sacred unit that binds the Hindu society together. After all it is Ram, the ideal son who protects his father's honor by voluntarily choosing exile, a path of duty and righteousness (*pitri dharma*) where he is subsequently accompanied by his dutiful wife and cousin brother. This institution of the joint family that privileges collective well-being over individual rights (also a perfect model for Nehruvian 'tolerance') came to be "the last independent space left to the independent Hindu" in British India (Sarkar 198). The nationalist appropriation of *Ramayana* is, however, at the cost of denying the same legitimacy to another popular epic, the *Mahabharata* which is the source of the Hindu scripture *Bhagavad Gita*. While Valmiki's text represents the perfect Indian family that during British rule was considerably undermined by the idea of companionate marriage, Vyasa's epic focuses on animosities among kinsmen over issues of property rights and hence rejects the very possibility of constructing an ideal family narrative.³ The choice of *Ramayana* therefore facilitated the construction of the 'enemy' as an 'outsider' to the Indian geopolitical space that in nationalist discourse would be imagined as the only authentic representation of freedom struggle as opposed to the creation of Pakistan that was dismissed as divisive and communal. Consequently, this identification of the 'enemy' as 'unfamiliar' was used to underwrite not only the illegitimacy of 'Islamic' and British rules but also demonize Muhammed Ali Jinnah who envisioned an alternate genealogical tree, not rooted in Hindu scriptures.

The privileging of the *Ramayana* over the *Mahabharata* has at least partly to do with their respective treatments of central women characters. If Sita, the prototype of the silent suffering Indian woman is embraced by Gandhi to "lend credence to his non-violent satyagraha" (Som 36), Draupadi is denied the same authenticity due to her polyandry. Though in both cases the battles are fought over the need to rescue the woman (as in the case of Sita) or avenge her dishonor (as in the case of Draupadi), it is significant that the latter's attempted disrobing is enacted by a fellow kinsman in the presence of her five husbands who fail in their prescribed roles to protect her honor. Since the nation is imagined as a joint family where the patriarch ostensibly looks after the interests of all members, Draupadi's fate undermines the moral authority of both the husband figures and the supreme patriarch, Bhishma. Unlike the *Ramayana* which relies on a monolithic understanding of *dharma*, in the *Mahabharata* the idea of *dharma* is subtle; contingent on the immediate circumstances of the person in question and hence open to interpretation. Consequently, *Ramayana* is a less problematic text for the nationalist who can easily reject Ravana's action as that of an 'enemy' since the latter is not related to the Ayodhya king by blood or race. Sita's momentary lapse of judgment (when she transgresses the law of the threshold) is ignored in the face of her greater and unflinching devotion to Rama. She is the

model of the Hindu wife, united in complete harmony with her husband (and his family) through wilful submission, loyalty, devotion, and chastity. When women did not follow her ideals, it was said, the (extended) family and the family line

were destroyed by the spirit of Alakshmi (not-Lakshmi), the dark and malevolent reverse of the Lakshmi principle. (Chakrabarty 13)

Queer Rage Against Brahminical Hegemony and Family Values

Since nationalism is largely a hypermasculinist majoritarian project, the queer body is often seen as disposable.⁴ However, the assimilationist attempts made by liberal groups in the twenty-first century have ensured that certain sexual minorities find access to privileges designated for the legal bodies. At the face of such an onslaught of homonationalism, it is important to remember that the queer struggle has always been a class conflict resisting not only the repressive state machinery but also their ideological counterparts like the institutions of family and monogamy.⁵ This is of particular significance in India where the queer movement has largely been led by working-class *hijra* people who have remained wary of LGBTQ support groups funded by upper class/caste gay men. It is in this context that Menen's rewriting can be read as an act of queer resistance that questions not only the legitimacy of a majoritarian myth which continues to shape a Hindu nation but exposes the caste hegemony that constitutes its base. In doing so, Menen imagines queer intersectionality not as a coming together of separate identity groups but as a celebration of vulnerabilities across race, caste, gender and sexuality. Towards the end of the text, Valmiki tells Rama: "There are three things which are real: God, human folly, and laughter. Since the first two pass our comprehension, we must do what we can with the third" (276). Humour therefore becomes Menen's chief mode of aggression against a Nehruvian state ironically steeped in notions of socialism and secularism. The author's proclivity to disregard and satirize the sacred can be traced back to his play *Genesis 2* which began with "a dialogue between God and a fertilized egg cell" and resulted in a legal battle on blasphemy and obscenity (*The Space Within the Heart* 31).

In *Rama Retold*, he begins with an exposition of the complete authority and impunity enjoyed by Brahmins in Ayoda: "the Brahmins were the top dogs. They made the laws, taught the ignorant, dictated morals, controlled the temples, and terrified the king" (3). In *The New Mystics* where he explores the Upanishads, Menen describes the Brahmins as a "tribe of witches" or rather wizards who were the real wielders of power in the state: "a king ruled with the permission of the gods; but the gods were permissive only at the request of the Brahmins" who were "king-makers" and "king-disposers" (16). The Brahmins therefore came to be the self-professed custodians of *dharma* that governed the actions of the monarch. Menen relies on the Aryan-Dravidian theory of race to understand the fear that led the Aryans to create a social system that would result in the "universal imprisonment" of people across the echelons (21). He explains that the first rebels against Brahminical hegemony were skeptics who

questioned the Vedas. Menen reads Valmiki as one such rebel, an outlaw, who was accused of murdering a Brahmin. He further contends that it was after the death of Buddha—who provided one of the major organized resistances to the religious orthodoxy of Hinduism—that Brahmins felt the need to not only restrain Buddhism but also refashion Valmiki's tale:

Valmiki was not a philosopher: but it is clear from the bare bones of the story of Rama that he was a sceptical realist. With that in mind, I have retold the story, replacing the Brahminical moralising with some tales of my own. (23)

Commending the poet for including himself as a character in the text, Menen gives a detailed description of his serene features particularly focusing on his smile that greeted Rama and initiated the latter onto a path towards enlightenment. Valmiki's abode where Rama and others stay during their exile is devoid of any ritualistic performances and is described as the Hermitage of Gluttons, in total dismissal of any sanctity that may be imposed on the sage. It is here that Valmiki not only rephrases the charges leveled against him by the Brahmins but also acquaints his guests with the palace intrigue that has been responsible for Ram's exile.

Since the chief purpose of Menen's text is to satirize the kind of hold that *Ramayana* has on the imagination of the Indian psyche and attack the institution of family as an heteronormative ideal, in Book I titled 'The Palace of Lies' he relegates the figure of Dasa-ratha to that of a power-hungry and lecherous ruler: "King Dasa-ratha, Rama's father, was loved by all his subjects and he loved certain of them in return, especially if they were women" (29). The Ayoda king is the very symbol of decadence and extravagance keeping both wives and concubines "in profusion" (33). Such a caricature subverts the gerontological authority that forms the backbone of the new nation engaged in the constant retrieval of ancient Hindu values. Unlike Dasa-ratha, the embodiment of misrule; his eldest son, Rama is the very prototype of Kshatriyahood:

He was handsome and the King was not; he was fonder of the hunt than the women's quarters, while the King hunted for the same reason he ate gold leaf, namely because his anxious physicians told him it was an aphrodisiac. Rama's conversation was sober and manly; the King was a gossip. Rama's wife, Sita, was devoted to him; the King was devoted to his wives, a very different thing. (34)

Consequently, the king is suspicious of Rama's motive when the latter gifts him a parrot whose beak is believed to have been poisoned. He prefers to see his son being trampled to death by an elephant rather than declare him as his heir on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday (44). While this denunciation of the celebrated father figure is essential to subvert the very foundation of the institution of joint family, Menen's Dasa-ratha echoes the colonialist's construction of the 'effeminate Indian' which in turn had resulted in the recovery of the Indian Kshatriyahood as the masculine ideal represented in this text by Luxman (and not Rama).

In Rajagopalachari's *Ramayana* King Dasaratha is a mighty warrior who "had fought on the side of the Devas" (6). Impressed with his devotion, the *devas* offer him 'payasam' which when distributed among his three wives, Kausalya, Kaikeyi and Sumitra, lead to the birth of his four sons. This trope of divine births strategically dissociates Dasaratha from any carnal desire which in the course of the epic is used to vilify the Rakshasa clan, particularly Surpanakha's fascination with Rama and Ravana's longing for Sita. In his version, however, Menen interprets these births as a sign of Dasa-ratha's impotence which is revealed to the Junior Queen (Kaikeyi) during the wedding night and subsequently used to secure the throne for Barat. The author places the onus of Rama's exile, not on the traditionally demonized figures of Manthara and Kaikeyi but on the patriarch himself, whose caricature denies him any victimhood that is the hallmark of the king in Tulsidas' version. Manthara, who in Rajagopalachari's text is a confidential servant of Kaikeyi and "the cause of Rama's exile" (50) is here a "half mad" (Menen 43) old nurse who interprets the king's gift of a parrot as an indication of some future task. Menen's Manthara rather than acting out of selfish motives is a self-professed agent of the king and has an informed understanding of the latter's bias against Rama. She says to the Junior Queen: "It's what he wants, don't you see? He wants an excuse. Barat's always been his favourite" (60).

Menen's version also challenges the theme of predestination that underlines the plot of the epic. In Rajagopalachari's text Dasaratha recollects how in his youth he had inadvertently killed a young ascetic whose old and dying parents had cursed him with a painful death in old age as a result of being parted from their son. In Menen this is only a ruse used by the king to keep Rama away from the throne. This is a perfect enactment of the Yayati myth where the old as the custodian of authority consumes the youth, the symbol of change.⁶ While Rama eventually respects his father's vow, he is less of the dutiful son epitomized by the epic narrative. Menen's Rama turns "white with dismay" "protesting that he had always thought that the King had vowed a temple in reparation and that he had built it" (64). He is not averse to the suggestion of returning from exile as a result of a probable "popular demonstration" by the masses (66). With his characteristic sarcasm, Menen dismisses the Hindu god as "a damned fool" (68)—fit only to be a victim of palace intrigue and then cuckolded by his wife.

To advocate the cause of Hindu *rashtra* (kingdom), the *Ramjanmobhumi* movement had relied on the aggressive image of Rama as the "dynamic warrior" as opposed to the "gentle, beautiful (*sukomal*)" Lord in former calendar art (Jain 192). This *rashtra* built on notions of kinship and familiarity is rejected by Menen as a spectacle of violence and majority appeasement. Perhaps anticipating this radical rendition of the figure of Rama in the 1980s, he not only denies the Ayoda prince a stratified rigid masculinity but also posits Luxman as a possible competitor who is not just a better warrior but also privy to Sita's emotional needs. Much like his queer predecessor

Edward Carpenter or contemporary E. M. Forster, Menen's critic of war is an extension of his discomfort with nationalism and racial supremacy. Since the war of Lanka is systematically celebrated by Hindus as a moral lesson where good triumphs over evil, the author refuses to bestow any sanctity on the conflict, reducing it to a cacophony between two masculinities indistinguishable by their lust for revenge:

Both embassies declared that they abhorred war and wished for a just peace. The ambassadors of Rama described a just peace as consisting in the return of Sita to her rightful husband, the execution by plunging into molten lead of Ravan, the demolition of one third of the houses of Lanka, the razing of its walls, the imposition of a tax of one half of the income of all the inhabitants for twenty years, and the life imprisonment of all the Lankastrian generals. (215)

A nation survives through circulation and reiteration of enemies who serve as crucial yardsticks to govern the rules of citizenship. War as a performance of nationalism therefore breaks or makes heroes on a daily basis, catering to the production of ideal citizens who in turn are worshipped by the general public. Though Menen's Rama does not kill Ravan—his contributions being little more than a “street fight”—he is hailed as a savior largely because he is “born to lead” (242). Menen here not only questions the rationale behind predestination but also exposes the caste privilege that allows Rama to be an authentic leader beyond any form of scrutiny. Such a dismissal of the Hindu god as a false hero further undermines the narrative of both Hindutva politics and Gandhian *Ramrajya*.

‘Sita’s Rape’: Agency and Sexuality

In recent times, there has been a renewed effort in India to celebrate the *Bharat Mata* as a compulsory national symbol. This figure of a desexualized fair Hindu goddess who occupies the map of the country in popular cultures (particularly calendar art) has been resisted for catering to majoritarian sentiments and controlling women's bodies. In his 1916 paper, ‘Castes in India’ B. R. Ambedkar argues that sexuality is inscribed within caste, emphasizing how endogamy is key to the preservation of the caste system. This is enacted as much in the Hindu epics as in the contemporary hate crimes justified within the discourse of ‘Love Jihad.’ While it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the latter development that criminalizes the Muslim male body, I shall focus on Menen's sexualisation of the figure of Sita as a queer feminist attempt to counter notions of endogamy and by extension that of the Hindu joint family.

In *The New Mystics* Aubrey Menen considers women to be “the sixth caste” who, irrespective of the position of their husbands, are associated with impurities and pollution: “killing a low-caste person is considered a light crime: killing a woman is not a whit more serious” (25). The story of Ahalya which precedes Sita's ordeal in the original epic is often seen as running counter to the latter's unflinching fidelity

and endurance, packaging the story as a conduct book for married women.⁷ Consequently, Sita as an ideal wife cannot be guilty of submitting to Ravana's seduction. Wendy Doniger notes that Ravana "never actually rapes Sita or indeed touches her at all" (22) as a result of being cursed due to his prior sexual advances towards other women. According to one version, it is Vedavati who, after being assaulted by Ravana, is reborn as Sita to destroy the demon-king. Doniger suggests that this version "sexualizes Sita by giving her a sexual past" (22, 23). Menen's Sita too is given a past but with a very different narrative aim. The motive of revenge is here substituted by sexual desire as the reader is made aware of Sita's prior acquaintance with Ravana. Contrary to both Valmiki and Rajagopalachari's texts, Menen's Luxman shares an intimate relationship with his sister-in-law who reveals the drudgery of her marital existence.⁸ Sita is conflicted about her roles as a wife:

I ...well, of course, I'm very happy to be here because my husband is very happy to be here, but sometimes I do get tired of ... no, that's silly, because a wife can't get tired of doing what pleases her husband. Still, sometimes I ... (158)

Chewing "the leaf of spices" in a "masculine fashion" (159), she recollects how she first met Ravan and was considerably impressed by the latter's sense of chivalry.⁹ She further betrays admiration for the Lanka king's eloquence and refers to people around her (which may include her husband) as "windbags" (159). Such a confession is damaging, if not blasphemous for the iconicity of the Sita figure as also evident from the *Rangeela Rasool* controversy in the 1920s.¹⁰

Though not heroic, Menen has little doubts over the potential of Valmiki's portrait of Sita:

Whether we take the story as altered by millennia of Brahminical forgery, or whether we take the bare bones of the tale, which is all that we can be sure is original, there is no doubt that Sita is the heroine. (69)

Despite being devoted to her husband, Sita is aware of her husband's frailties and asks Luxman to protect him. In a chapter provocatively titled, 'Sita's Rape,' Sita and Ravan strike a bargain with the former wilfully going away with the Lord of Lanka though only in order to save her husband's life (as we come to know later). Rama remarks: "she was not stolen. I saw what I saw. She went willingly on that blood-soaked monster's horse. I saw her. I say I saw her. What am I to think?" (167). Since Menen's Sita is neither chaste nor submissive, there is no mention of Ahalya or Shurpaneka as possible foils in the story.¹¹ In her essay 'Do Women Have a Country?' Ritu Menon argues that women are not only repositories of 'culture' but also "biological producers of religious and ethnic groups," "signifiers of national and ethnic difference" and participants "in the ideological reproduction of the community" (57). Thus, Sita's encounter with the ultimate 'enemy' Ravan is not just a threat to her husband's honor and chivalry but serves to question the very basis of Hinduism and the chastity of the entire nation within the discourse of Hindu *rashtra*. It is a direct attack on the notion of ideal womanhood propagated by Gandhi who was wary of allowing the Barisal prostitutes into the Civil Disobedience

Movement since it “would jeopardize the pattern of women’s participation” in the struggle for independence and went against his own doctrine of sexual restraint (Som 45). The notion of female sexuality as a corrupting influence would be legitimized in later years by The Indecent Representation of Women Act 1986 which vaguely defines ‘indecent’ as “the depiction of the figure of the woman as to have the effect of being indecent or is likely to deprave or corrupt public morality” (Ghosh 32). In this sense, Menen’s Sita, much like M. F. Hussain’s nude paintings of Hindu goddesses, becomes a threat to the notion of the Hindu woman’s body as a sacred de-sexualized space that needs protection, much like the figure of *Bharat Mata*. In another frank conversation with Luxman, Sita makes the most stunning confession:

‘He made you, Sita. He forced you’.

Sita shook her head : ‘Ravan was cruel and he was a monster when he went on his raids. But with women he was gentle. No; it was in the bargain, but he did not press me to keep it.’ (243)

Her motives to protect her husband notwithstanding, this unapologetic revelation underlines Sita’s agency as a desiring body. In choosing to negotiate with Ravana and killing a soldier in self-defence, Menen’s heroine serves as a more mature successor to Mahakali in *Adbhut Ramayana* where Sita as Gauri, the domesticated goddess, transforms into the nude and fiery Kali in order to destroy the Lanka king. Having transgressed the boundaries of caste, race and sexuality, Menen’s Sita shows promise for further liberation only for the author to remind us of the apparent limitations of satire.

Since Gandhi’s Sita serves as a model against which the chastity and endurance of the Indian wife is constantly measured, Menen makes a mockery of the fire trial (*agnipariksha*) by reducing it through a conjuring trick to an “Egyptian fire” (273) even as she is bestowed with the title of “Most Faithful Wife” to suppress gossip among the citizens of Ayoda (246). Unlike *Adhyatma Ramayana* (that inspired TulSIDAS’ version) where it is the illusory or shadow Sita who undergoes the trial, Menen’s intention is not to justify Rama’s inhumane treatment of his wife. Instead, the Egyptian fire becomes a direct assault on the Hindu nationalist’s obsession with women’s chastity and purity that also anticipates the Hindutva project of controlling women’s bodies through acts of surveillance such as Uttar Pradesh’s Anti-Romeo squads. Menen’s task concludes with the restoration of Rama’s position in Ayoda without any further details about Sita’s exile or her defiant return to Mother Earth. Perhaps in her abandonment, loneliness and final liberation, Valmiki’s Sita offered a more queer resolution to the text. In that sense, Menen’s version enacts subversion precisely when and as it is censored. The ban, therefore, results in and does not necessarily restrain the formation of a radical text.

Conclusion

As the Hindu Right continues to actualize V. D. Savarkar's vision of India as a monolithic cultural space, the nation simmers over acts of intolerance and hate crimes, particularly following the murders of rationalist thinkers like Dabholkar and Pansare or of religious minorities such as Pehlu Khan and Akhlaq by vigilante groups.¹² While censorship measures and 'saffron violence' constitute a lethal nexus in Hindutva politics, my paper has attempted to look at the preoccupation with religious symbols as not being peculiar to the Right-Wing. The banning of Menen's satire reveals an anxiety of contagion and pollution that excludes minorities from the process of nation-building unless they conform to the role of lesser citizens. Menen's text becomes queer as it not only celebrates the rebel in Valmiki but also rewrites a narrative that is culturally appropriated as history by the Hindu majority. This anticipates other instances of organized violence as evident from the attacks on A. K. Ramanujan's essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas," Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues*, Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, and M. F. Hussain's paintings. While in 2011 Ramanujan's text had to be scrapped from the Delhi University undergraduate syllabus after violent protests from the student wing of Bharatiya Janata Party, the screening of Paley's feminist critique of the epic had to be stalled in New York the same year after objections from a local Hindu organisation. Similarly, Mehta was forced to change the name of her sexually non-conforming character from Sita to Nita because of the dictates of Shiv Sena while Hussain was hounded out of the country. These instances of censorships not only highlight the fundamentalists' construction of a compulsory homogenous Hindu identity but also expose their ignorance of a text that they hold to be sacred and absolute. Historian Romila Thapar asserts that it is impossible to restrict the epic in time and space: "*Ramayana* does not belong to any moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places" (72). While Menen's text is not meant to be a faithful reinterpretation of the epic, it significantly contributes to the scholarship of *Ramayana* retellings. By exercising the right to offend, he raises uneasy questions about the essence of an epic as a living text and its contribution in forging or invoking national and religious identities.

Notes

1. Mayo's book criticized Indian cultural and religious practices and particularly the demand of the nationalists for independence. It blamed Indian male sexuality for the degeneration of the society.

2. Harbans Mukhia argues how British colonial historians saw religion as the central analytical category in the documentation of ancient and medieval India ("Indian Historiography under Threat"). While this may have led to the foundation of the 'divide and rule'

policy, it ultimately facilitated a Hindu reading of history that rejected Islamic rule as an intrusion and aberration.

3. While the institution of companionate marriage (that celebrates the idea of the wife as a companion) is often seen as a product of colonialism, in the Hindu pantheon, the gods and goddesses always appear together as consorts. Rochona Majumder in fact states that the Indian joint family is a product of modernity, more so because the Hindu code recognizes the family as a “property owning unit” (Sreenivas 190).

4. Much has already been said on the relationship between nationalism as an imagined community (as theorized by Benedict Anderson) or a community of common descent (as understood by Max Weber) on the one hand, and masculinity as a hegemonic order on the other. In contemporary India, one may also look at the ways in which Narendra Modi’s cult status as a Hindu warrior is built against the supposedly timid demeanor of his predecessor Manmohan Singh. However, I am more interested in the exclusion of queer bodies in the post-Darwin state which was made available to only certain alliances that contributed to the nationalist task of breeding. This anticipates the persecution of homosexuals during the Holocaust and even later in 1960s United States. It must be emphasized that the association of nationalism with hypermasculinity does not indicate that nationalist struggles are reserved for men only. In fact, the Indian national movement aimed to retrieve notions of Hindu masculinity through large-scale participation of women (particularly from ‘respectable’ families as against the binary of the courtesan) who de-prioritized questions of autonomy in favor of national self-determination and Hindu pride.

5. Jasbir Puar describes homonationalism as a “facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality” (337).

6. According to the Hindu myth, Yayati, the puranic king was cursed with premature old age and could only get his youth back if one of his sons agreed to swap their ages. Since Yayati’s youngest son Puru is the only one who consents to the arrangement, the king chooses him as the heir apparent. It is only after a thousand years of indulgence that Yayati gains wisdom and returns his son’s youth.

7. In this story, Lord Indra impersonates the sage Gautama to satisfy his lust for the latter’s wife, Ahalya. While there are contrasting versions as to whether Ahalya knew about Indra’s real identity, she is nonetheless cursed by her husband for adultery and is only liberated years later by Rama.

8. By “intimacy,” I do not suggest any sexual liaison. Rather ‘intimacy’ for me verges on close friendship and mutual understanding that is the hallmark of the relationship between Menen’s Sita and Luxman.

9. “The leaf of spices” may be a reference to betel leaves which are believed to act as sexual stimulants.

10. In 1927, the book, *Rangeela Rasool (Promiscuous Prophet)* was anonymously written as a response to a pamphlet published by a Muslim, which depicted Sita as a prostitute. The subsequent murder of the publisher resulted in the enactment of the Hate Speech Law by the British in 1929.

11. In Rajagopalachari, Surpanakha, the “monster of ugliness” (91) asks Rama—“how could you love this girl without a waist?” (93). This reference to Sita as being without a voluptuous waist is an attempt not only to de-sexualize her but also to see her as a contrast to Surpanakha who symbolizes carnal desires.

12. In Savarkar’s Hindutva, religions like Islam and Christianity—which did not originate in the subcontinent—are pushed to the fringes of the nation-state.

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