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Animating a Postmodern Ramayana:
Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues*

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Ramayana: Metanarratives

"I didn't set out to tell THE Ramayana, only MY Ramayana."—Nina Paley, "Sita Sings the Blues, Just for You"

Contemporary adaptations of the Ramayana present an interesting paradox for critics interested in postmodern culture. If postmodernity is partly defined in formal and aesthetic terms, following Lyotard, as "incredulity toward metanarratives," the Ramayana, as one of the ancient world epics, would seem to represent everything that should no longer be narratively thinkable:

> Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. . . . The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. (Lyotard xxiv-xxv)

The Ramayana has all of the supposedly obsolete narrative "functors" Lyotard enumerates—a "great hero," "great dangers," "great voyages," and a "great goal." It is the metanarrative *par excellence* that defines the post-Vedic Hindu tradition, and its cultural ramifications are so widely dispersed over contemporary society in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia as to be a cliché. Moreover, the values it is popularly thought to espouse, especially the absolute requirement of Sita's wifely fidelity to her husband under any circumstances, are the epitome of cultural conservatism, not to say misogyny.

In Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and in the work of a great many scholars who have followed Jameson, postmodernism is also defined as a mode of historical periodization. If modernism was defined as a self-consciously opposi-

tional and avant-garde rejection of tradition, postmodernist writers and artists drop the avant-garde pose, and freely adopt, without historical fidelity, elements of the past they find interesting. The postmodernist aesthetic is for Jameson, above all, dominated by pastiche, the reprisal and recontextualization of historical styles and modes. This type of periodization might roughly adhere with regards to adaptations or ancient epics like the Ramayana. One finds, in the Indian literary tradition, a number of "modernist" adaptations and translations of the Ramayana, starting with Michael Madhusudan Dutt's anti-Ramayana, and peaking perhaps with E.V. Ramasami's Dravidian, Dalit reversal of the hero-villain relationship in the story. If a small group of writers in the modernist idiom were concerned with frontally challenging the authority of the Ramayana in Indian culture, postmodernists, such as Ashok Banker (*Prince of Ayodhya*) and the makers of a recent Virgin Comics series called *Ramayan 3392 A.D.*, are more comfortable re-deploying the text for their own purposes. While this often leads to creative and progressive results, ironically the postmodern age has also resulted in new forms of cultural conservatism, or more precisely, neo-conservatism, as some groups have used interpretations of the Ramayana to serve a particular contemporary political ideology. These groups, one might argue, are, as a matter of historicity, every bit as postmodern as Ashok Banker, or here, the filmmaker Nina Paley, even if the formal and aesthetic elements of postmodernism are missing from their works.

Of course, the textuality of the Ramayana complicates any simple deployment of postmodernist formal or historical categories to the Ramayana tradition. To begin with, as Ramayana scholars have argued in recent years, there are hundreds if not thousands of variants of the text. As Paula Richman and a diverse group of others scholars have shown, there is in fact no "definitive" or "canonical" version of the Ramayana; the version that is best known today is itself simply the first major written rendition of the ancient oral epic to have survived. Variations of the text, such as the Jain version of the Ramayana—which may be as old as Valmiki's Ramayana, the Tamil version by Kampan (11th century C.E.) and the Hindi version by Tulsidas (16th century C.E.) often show substantively different plot elements and relationships amongst principal characters.[1] Even its social role has changed over time; in its earliest form, the Ramayana was likely recited for Kshatriyas in interstices between battles, by lower-caste bards known as Sutas (Charioteers),[2] who, it is thought, first composed the outlines of the story tradition. It was only later that officially reciting and improvising on the Ramayana became the exclusive province of Brahmins, making the Ramayana first and foremost a sacralized text. In short, though the Ramayana is certainly a kind of *ur*-text (or "meta-narrative") constitutive of Indian society in many ways, it is paradoxically a narrative framework that is

incredibly heterogeneous—and, historically, fairly open to reinterpretation, revision, and individual invention. The story of the Ramayana is, for many Hindus, a sacred "canonical" text, and Rama and Sita are worshipped as gods—even in their heterogeneity. The text plays a cultural role that is sometimes secular, sometimes clearly religious, and sometimes in a grey area in between. And this fluidity is not the exception, but the rule.

That is not to say that the heterogeneity of the Ramayana tradition is universally accepted. Postmodernity is inclusive enough a category that it can even contain its ostensible opponents, and in this case there are many. For many conservative Hindus today, there *is* a single Ramayana, which looks rather like the version serialized on Indian television in the 1980s. But this erasure of variance and heterogeneity may itself be thought of as a postmodern artifact—*textual* neo-conservatism—tied to the emergence of a monoculturalist Hindutva ideology. The stakes in the debate are not small ones. In August of 1993, members of the Hindu nationalist VHP destroyed an art and archeology exhibit sponsored by the well-known pro-secularist activist group SAHMAT, which referred to a Buddhist version of the Ramayana (the *Dasaratha Jataka*) in which Rama and Sita are portrayed as brother and sister, rather than man and wife.[3] The claim that such a depiction is offensive to Hindus overlooks the fact that such variant depictions are a real part of the tradition of the Ramayana; to really respect that tradition—and the text itself—one could argue that it is necessary to accept its openness.[4]

Some critics of the idea of an open, "writerly"[5] Ramayana point out that there is a gap between the way modern devotees of Rama and Sita see the text and how academics and left-leaning activist groups like SAHMAT want to see it. While there is undeniably some truth to this contention, in a recent essay, "Lovers' Doubts: Questioning the Tulsi *Ramayana*," Linda Hess demonstrates that even within the Hindu *devotional* tradition there has been a long tradition of questioning elements of Rama's story in a genre called the *Shankavali*, even though the purpose of the questioners is to clarify doubts that serve as hindrances to faith in the sacredness of the story, rather than to diminish the story itself. More prosaically, sociologists like Madhu Kishwar have interviewed ordinary—non-academic, non-activist—Hindu women from different backgrounds, and found that, while many contemporary Indian women accept the moral core of the story, especially as it relates to women, Sita may be thought of as more an unattainable ideal than a realistic model to emulate. Also, several of the women Kishwar interviews are quite open in stating their disapproval of certain key elements of the story—such as, especially, Rama's treatment of Sita. Many devout Hindus, men and women, simply prefer Sita to Rama in their de-

votional practices, finding greater holiness in the feminine aspect of the tradition, a preference that one might presume is linked to the long tradition of Devi/Goddess worship. As a literary example of this, the poet K.R.S. Iyengar, who is not particularly feminist in orientation, showed his aesthetic preference for Sita in his loose English translation of the Ramayana, *The Sitayana*. Advocates for Dalits and other marginalized communities also have a long tradition of challenging aspects of the Ramayana; one thinks again of the example Paula Richman cites of a Tamilian activist named E.V. Ramasami, who in the 1950s courted arrest by promoting a reading of the Ramayana in which Ravana is the hero and Rama is the villain.[6]

In the face of so much diversity, how can we think about contemporary or postmodern adaptations, translations, and remixes of the Ramayana? It is one thing to merely take a position of principle in favor of the right of writers, musicians, and artists to interpret the Ramayana in their own individual way, whether devotionally or in a secular framework. But there might also be a need to develop, or resuscitate, analytic tools that go beyond merely arguing in favor of "intertextuality"—a concept that works better at the level of generalized polemic than as an actual analytic.[7] A.K. Ramanujan, for instance, proposes three helpful modes of "translation" of the Ramayana: the iconic mode, the "indexical" mode, and the "symbolic" mode. An "iconic" mode of translation is effectively faithful with regards to "basic textual features such as characters, imagery, and order of incidents" (44), though it can vary quite considerably with regards to specific language; Ramanujan point out that Kampan's Tamil Ramayana is "much longer than Valmiki's . . . and it I composed in more than twenty different kinds of Tamil meters, while Valmiki's is mostly in the *sloka* meter" (45). The "indexical" mode again preserves the basic element of plot, but localizes the story in other ways to fit the culture and practices of the region in which the story is being told: "the text is embedded in a locale, a context, refers to it, even signifies it, and would not make much sense without it" (45). Finally, Ramanujan describe a "symbolic" mode of translation, where the basic framework of a source text can be modified to "say entirely new things, often in an effort to subvert the predecessor by producing a countertext" (45). Ramanujan is of course conscious of the danger of using these three modes of translation overly schematically, and goes on to describe some examples where multiple modes may be relevant for a given text. The three modes of translation turn out to be quite useful in the analysis of Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues,* especially as they overlap and interact with one another; this will be explored in greater depth below. While the framing for this reading of Nina Paley's animated filmic adaptation of the Ramayana is postmodernity, the following reading is not so much a "postmodernist" reading but

a new deployment of A.K. Ramanujan's conventional analysis of a translated text that has always eluded the premise that it could be definitive.

Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues*: Dialogue and Bricolage

Sita Sings the Blues is a film that was composed in a rather unusual way, and since the history of its construction plays an important role in the overall impact of the final project, it seems appropriate to allude to the process that led to the final cut of the film. To begin with, as the film itself demonstrates in its autobiographical segments, Nina Paley is an American animator with no particular connection to India prior to moving to join her husband, Dave, who happened to have been offered a job there in 2002. Paley was inspired to create *Sita Sing the Blues* after a difficult break-up with Dave, and her subsequent return to the U.S. The original moment of inspiration occurred after Paley noted an uncanny narrative parallel between the songs of love and heartbreak by American jazz singer Annette Hanshaw and the basic outline of the story of Rama and Sita in the Ramayana. Beginning around 2005, she produced a series of short, animated music videos with Annette Hanshaw's songs animating a series of events in the Ramayana: Rama and Sita's initial exile to the forest; the deception of Rama by Ravana, and Sita's abduction to Lanka; Sita alone in Lanka, while awaiting Hanuman's discovery and Rama's rescue; the battle between Rama, Hanuman, and the *Vanara* army against Ravana and his *Rakshasas*; Rama's rejection of Sita and Sita's subsequent *Agni-Pariksha*; and so on. The visual style of these early song-sequences was cartoonish—Sita bears a certain resemblance to Betty Boop, a cultural reference appropriate to Annette Hanshaw's era, the late 1920s, and Rama appears with an exaggerated, almost balloon-like, musculature. Though the intent of these sequences was clearly largely comic, much of the conventional iconography adhered carefully to traditional visual representations of the characters in the Ramayana.

Releasing these early, fragmentary animated sequences on the internet starting in 2005 led to considerable attention, much of it positive—tens of thousands of viewers downloaded the clips in the first few months they were available. However, the clips also provoked a fair amount of ire from orthodox Hindus regarding Paley's seemingly disrespectful depiction of this sacralized narrative from the Indian tradition. A typical reaction is seen in comments left on Paley's blog in August 2005, by a Hindu who identified himself as "Krishna":

> I'm very disappointed to see this comic "interpretation" of the Ramayana being presented here. Nina says that she reveres the Ra-

mayana and never intended to offend anyone with her "interpreta-tion." Perhaps this is true, but she must have known this would of-fend Hindus in any case and decided to post it anyway. That is frank-ly rude.

For those of us who were raised in the tradition, Sri-Sri Sita-Ram are not mythological figures. They are the very Lord Himself and His Divine Consort. The subject matter of the Ramayana is se-rious, because it deals with the very nature of bhakti, the ideals of dharma, and the complicated interplay of moral expectations when confronted by irreligious villains.

To see traditional narratives of the Ramayana as "dry," "bor-ing," or "emotionless" (thus justifying this comic "interpretation") suggests a frank lack of appreciation for the original. When such people as Nina cannot appreciate the original Ramayana (however much they claim otherwise), it seems only sensible that they refrain from trying to put their own, comedic spin on it. If they did appre-ciate it, they would immediately understand why it should not be tampered with. One does not tamper with sacred art and literature left to us from antiquity. [. . .]

The Ramayana is a beautiful and sophisticated work, and it does not deserve the treatment it has gotten here. Nor do its followers de-serve to see their Divine Lord and His Consort be depicted in such a cheap and degrading fashion. But we aren't allowed to object for fear that we will labeled as fundamentlists [sic] or worse. After all, Nina has plenty of so-called "Hindus" on her side, even though they are not really Rama-bhaktas by conviction.

So it seems, as always, the Hindu community has to just shut up and bear mute witness to their sacred symbolism being dragged into the gutter of the internet and put on display for cheap thrills. And how dare us if we feel saddened by it.[8]

Though the commenter here is incorrect in some of his premises—for instance, the idea that the Ramayana has an "original" text that Nina Paley has "tampered" with—his reaction probably ought not to be dis-missed out of hand. The devotion to Rama is not trivial for many prac-ticing Hindus; the distinction he draws, for instance, between "mythol-ogy" and "divinity," is valid, though probably an oversimplification. The point is, one can easily imagine some moderate Hindus, quite apart from the politicized Hindu right, who might be offended—or at least, repulsed—by Paley's early animated sequences, which can be de-scribed as a comical, outsider rendition of a narrative held as sacred.

Though Paley has not explicitly acknowledged the influence of these early critical responses on the production of the finished film ver-sion of *Sita Sings the Blues,* the final product, released in 2008, reflects a much more sophisticated interpretation of the Ramayana, one which is less likely to provoke comments like the one above. The completed film is sensitive to what might be called the "Indianness" of the Ra-

mayana—the way the text works within Indian society itself—and is al-so iconographically much more complex, and more respectful of the *visual* Ramayana tradition, than the early song-sequences were. Along-side the Hanshaw set-pieces, Paley's finished film has two other main narrative modes, one being a conversation between three Indians of Hindu background who narrate the essential story of the Ramayana from memory, sometimes questioningly, and a series of autobiographi-cal sketches detailing Paley's own traumatic break-up story. The "nar-ration" sequences feature three voices, Aseem Chhabra (Voice #1), Bhavana Nagulapally (Voice #2), and Manish Acharya (Voice #3), who take turns narrating elements of the story. None of the three are aca-demic specialists in the Ramayana, nor are any of the three formally trained as Ram-Bhakts. They do know the details of the story as well as anyone raised as a middle-class Hindu in India is likely to know it, which is to say, they know it well but not perfectly—and the imperfec-tion of their knowledge might be read as a reflection of the Ramayana as a living text that continues to be remembered, and orally recited, im-perfectly. They also question certain aspects of the story, again, as many Hindus do, sometimes challenging directly the motives and val-ues of the main actors in the story. In effect, the primary narration of the story through these three Indian voices blends seamlessly into meta-narratives about the text that is under narration, and incorporates many of the questions about textuality, authority, and cultural dissemination raised in the introductory section of this essay.

Alongside the three narrative modes in the film, Paley employs a wide variety of visual styles to create an overall effect of a kind of fil-mic bricolage. The style of the opening titles, which features the God-dess Laxmi rising out of the waves, and standing next to a broken record player, is in the same cartoonish style as the Annette Hanshaw song-sequences that recur throughout the film ("Style 1"). The autobio-graphical sequences in *Sita Sings the Blue* are in another visual style ("Style 2"), which features a kind of shaky, hand-drawn effect reminis-cent of early "Peanuts" television cartoons. These feature Paley's own voice as "Nina" and Sanjiv Jhaveri as her soon to be ex-husband "Dave." The formal narration and meta-narration sequences blend into one another, with the three aforementioned Indian voices represented by black, Indonesian shadow puppets from the Wayang Kulit tradition ("Style 3"), with more traditionally iconic, multi-colored, "calendar art" type images representing the principal characters in the story itself ("Style 4"). Yet another visual style ("Style 5") is used to represent the characters, generally as they speak for themselves (with Reena Shah as Sita and Debargo Sanyal as Rama); this style, which emulates a hand-painted look, is an echo of 18th century traditions in indigenous, north Indian paintings of the Ramayana.[9]

The above is by no mean an exhaustive list of all of the visual styles used in Paley's film, but these may be the most important for the purposes of studying how Paley's film works as an instance of the Ramayana in translation. That is to say, the different visual styles in *Sita Sings the Blues* might correspond, roughly, to the three modes of translation of the Ramayana named by A.K. Ramanujan, as described above. Visual styles #4 (calendar art) and #5 (hand-painted) are roughly what Ramanujan would call *iconic*, and are often, though not always, accompanied by direct narration and dialogue in the voices of the characters of the Ramayana themselves. Visual styles #1 (cartoonish, with Annette Hanshaw's songs as audio), and #2 (autobiographical) are more *indexical* translations, in that the basic plot features of the Ramayana are adapted by Paley, alternatively, to match jazz-age musical parallels in the songs of the 1920s, and Paley's own life history. Finally, the meta-narration, though it is by no means easy to pin down, is at least somewhat *symbolic*, in that it takes the basic form of the Ramayana, and transforms it to "say entirely new things." Of course, insofar as the meta-narration blends into straight narration at some points, it also has elements of the iconic, and insofar as the characters apply modern, but still Indian and Hindu, values to the story, they are also involved in the indexical as well.

We can also approach the different visual styles in terms of the history of the composition of the film. Style #1 was the first style Paley used in her early song-sequences, released on the internet beginning in 2005. These contain some of the most visually provocative and striking images in *Sita Sings the Blues*—but the cartoonish look of the principal characters, with Sita faintly resembling Betty Boop, might make these sequences also potentially troubling to viewers accustomed to more "respectful" iconography. But styles #3, #4, and #5, which are all new in the final version of Paley's film, are all based in established iconographic traditions for illustrating the Ramayana from South and Southeast Asia. While there are still quite a number of comic moments in the full-length film, the overall goal of these sequences is not so much comedy as it is straightforward narration (Styles #4 and #5), reflection, and analysis (Style #3). Though these three styles sometimes overlap on screen, as a speaking shadow puppet from Style #3 refers to a character pictured elsewhere in the frame from Style #5, they are nevertheless distinct from one another. The line between narration and meta-narration often blurs in the spoken dialogue in *Sita Sings the Blues*, but interestingly the different visual styles allow Paley to ensure that at least visually, the distinctions between narrative modes are still legible. When a narrator expresses an opinion on something in the Ramayana, Paley generally represents the speaking voice using a Wayang Kulit shadow puppet (Style #3), but when a character in the Ramayana

speaks, diegetically, in his or her own words,[10] Paley uses the calendar art style (Style #4) or the hand-painted style (Style #5).

The meta-narration and analysis provided by Aseeem Chhabra, Bhavana Nagulapally, and Manish Acharya are by far the most interesting addition in Paley's revised *Sita Sings the Blues*. As I mentioned, these are generally figured using Style #3 in Paley's film. There are many interesting issues raised in the meta-narration, but for the purposes of this essay, only two examples will be explored. One interesting moment pertains to the voices' characterization of Ravana. Voice #1 (Aseem Chhabra) begins the segment, by describing how he understands that "Ravana was actually an incredibly learned man."

> Voice 1: Ravana was actually an incredibly learned man, from what I understand. In fact, the only bad thing he did is kidnap Sita. Over time we've been led to believe that he's . . . he's like Mogambo [referring to the villain of the 1987 film *Mr. India*].
> Voice 3: That' true, he even lived on an island!
> Voice 1: He prayed to the right gods.
> Voice 2: He was a devoted Shiva-Bhakt. He plays Veena with his intestines, I think, for Shiva. There's this whole thing about how big a fan he was, and he's asking Lord Shiva for some wish. So he plays Veena with his . . . intestines.
> Voice 3: It might be hard to defeat someone like that in battle. Because at this point, what is pain to a man who plays the Veena with his intestines.
> Voice 1: Nothing much.
> Voice 3: What I was really impressed with was that he was the king of Sri Lanka . . .
> Voice 1: Well, he was the king of Lanka.
> Voice 3: Ceylon, it's the same country, I think.
> Voice 1: Well, that's what we think.
> Voice 3: Well, they built a bridge.
> Voice 2: The bridge still exists, so the NASA images say.
> Voice 1: Really? NASA? Well it must be true then.
> Voice 3: They probably saw it when they were on the moon.
> [Laughter]

There are a number of striking aspects of this conversation. First, there is a certain amount of self-awareness, with Speaker #1 (Aseem Chhabra) asserting that the Ramayana tradition as it is understood today has altered the parameters of the story from earlier versions. Though Speaker #1 may not be entirely accurate that the "only bad thing he did is kidnap Sita" (if our source is Valmiki), he is accurate that Ravana is generally not depicted as someone who was inherently evil, nor was he without his merits in the world of the Ramayana. In effect, Speaker #1 is alerting the audience to the instability of the source-text, and the in-

jection of the reference to a popular movie, *Mr. India*, seems to foreground the fact that how we "know" Ravana popularly is an artifact of a not-entirely reliable mechanism of cultural translation.

A second noteworthy moment in the example above relates to the reference to geography, specifically Sri Lanka/Lanka/Ceylon. While modern readers of the Ramayana have little doubt that "Lanka" of most modern and medieval Ramayanas is the same as today's island of Sri Lanka, Speaker #1 wants to point out that this is only "what we think." The actual geographic referents in Valmiki's Ramayana are rather thin in terms of their specificity; the only two recognizable reference points are the city of Ayodhya, which is a real city in Uttar Pradesh—and the center of much controversy as a result of the connection to the Ramayana—and Lanka itself. The speakers end the segment with a light moment regarding the whole project of attempting to reconnect the present-day geography of the Indian subcontinent with events in the Ramayana. The issue of the putative sacred origins of the geological feature in the Indian Ocean known as "Ram-Sethu" (Ram's Bridge) has been a live controversy in Indian politics in recent years, and all three of the speakers seem to be aware of the almost comical incongruity of the Hindu Right's attempt to use NASA satellite images to support their selectively hyper-literalist reading of the Ramayana.[11]

A second example from the film gets more directly to the heart of the gender issue, which is one of the key themes of Paley's larger interest in the Ramayana. Here, Rama, Hanuman, and the Vanara army have defeated Ravana and his Rakshasas, and Ravana has been personally killed by an arrow from Rama's bow. The voices in the meta-narration try to puzzle out what happens next, while the screen shows the shadow puppets discussing the developments in visual style #3:

> Voice 3: Later, when he [Rama] saw her [Sita] in Lanka, he held her and kissed her.
> Voice 1: No, I don't think so, he was very cold.
> Voice 3: Why was he cold to Sita?
> Voice 1: To be honest with you, I'm very shaky on this point. I'm not sure . . .
> Voice 3: You could make it up . . .

> [Cut to Visual Style #5, and a direct dialogue between Rama and Sita, where Rama rejects Sita because of his suspicions that she must have given into Ravana while being held hostage in Lanka. Then the film returns to visual Style #3]

> Voice 2: He's obviously doubting her, um, pureness.
> Voice 3: I find the whole pureness thing really . . . odd.
> Voice 1: I find it really weird that no one is commending Ravana for not forcing himself on Sita . . .

> Voice 3: But he raped her . . . ?
> Voice 1: . . . But in terms of villains, right? You expect villains to be *villainous.*
> Voice 3: Right . . .
> Voice 1: This is a guy who said to her, 'If you don't come to me willingly, I will not touch you. I will not force you in my house, I will not force myself on you.'
> Voice 3: Oh, he never had sex with her, did he?
> Voice 2: No, as Sita proved over and over again, by trial of fire.

If you don't know, you can always "make it up," and indeed, that is what people who recite versions of the Ramayana are always doing, often shifting various details to suit their own circumstances or cultural norms, what might be thought of as unconscious "indexical" translation, following Ramanujan. The confusion here is one that is not uncommon amongst lay people who know the story of the Ramayana—was Sita actually raped by Ravana, or not? Voice #3 seems to think so, but Voices #1 and #2 contradict him. The differences here reflect real differences amongst Ramayana scholars; in some interpretations of the story, Sita remained absolutely untouched, while in others she may have been physically assaulted, but her soul remained pure—and this is what the subsequent Agni-Pariksha (trial by fire) really shows. Voice #1 continues to push the line that Ravana is not as absolute a villain as he is often thought to be—since, in his understanding, he never touched Sita. Voice #3 says what the feminist audience to the Ramayana is often thinking at this point in the story, that "the whole pureness thing" is "really odd."

Conclusion: "God, they're going to be after me . . ."

What makes Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* such a challenging and provocative film is not so much the mere act of appropriating the Ramayana, as it is the slippage between narration and meta-narration throughout the film. The voices are apparently striving to be faithful to the best possible understanding of "the" story they can muster, but at several moments it is not clear what "the" story actually is. Since, presumably, none of the three speakers have attempted to read Valmiki, Tulsidas, or Kampan in Sanskrit, Hindi, or Tamil (very few people have), "the" story becomes largely the oral version of the story their friends and family may have recited for them growing up, possibly merged with popular visual and mass-media versions of the story, such as Amar Chitra Katha comics and Ramanand Sagar's 1987 serialized *Ramaya* broadcast, to a massive audience, on Doordarshan. When a particular detail is murky, the speakers feel empowered to simply "make it up," based on what seems logical or plausible at a given mo-

ment. At the same time, as this particular dialogical recitation proceeds, it is peppered with meta-narrative comments that are sometimes critical of one or another aspect of the story, "I find the whole pureness thing really . . . odd."

The voices are also sensitive to the current controversies over the Ramayana, referring at one point to the razing of the Mosque at the present-day Ayodhya (in a passage not quoted), as well as the example of the Ram-Sethu cited above. At least one of the Voices (Voice #3) is also clearly concerned about the impact his words might have. When he has some trouble coming up with the name of Ravana's sister, Surpanakha—he is helped by Voices #1 and #2—he comments, "I'm messing up her name, God, they're going to be after me . . . " It is not absolutely clear who "they" are, but it seems reasonable to suppose that Voice #3 is thinking of conservative Hindus who will later be watching the film, and object to any patent inaccuracies as "offensive." Since at least some viewers of the early song-sequences from *Sita Sings the Blues* were already "after" Paley for her putative disrespect to the Ramayana tradition that may be a fair expectation.

That said, as of this writing, the final version of *Sita Sings the Blues* has been screened at many film festivals all over the world, including in some limited instances in India, and has been quite positively received by a diverse group of audiences, including Roger Ebert, who was quite enthusiastic about it. The controversy that might have been predicted after the early song-sequences has not materialized, and it seems fair to read the muted "Hindu" reaction to the film as a result of inclusion of the meta-narration in the expanded film. The meta-narration cuts in two directions at once. On the one hand, it allows Paley to raise quite specific, and carefully articulated, questions about gender-relations in the Ramayana story, via a trio of Indian voices. But the meta-narration also in some sense inoculates the film against neo-conservative, monoculturalist interpretations of the Ramayana, interpretations which are, as I have argued above, every bit as postmodern as Paley's film is; viewers, witnessing the points of confusion and speculation over the exact details of the story, recognize their own confusion and ignorance. Paley has said that she did not set out to make an animated film of *the* Ramayana, so much as *her* Ramayana, but in representing the text as fragmentary, heterogeneous, and shifting, she has created an accurate, if still fragmentary, characterization of the broader Ramayana tradition.

Notes

1. Incidentally, in different languages, the title of the story also changes. The Tamil version is called the Iramavataram, the Tulsidas version in Hindi is *Ramcaritmanas,* and so on. See A.K. Ramanujan's "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation."

2. See Wendy Doniger, 218.

3. For a discussion of this, see: Paula Richman, "Questioning and Multiplicity Within the Ramayana Tradition."

4. Incidentally, since the SAHMAT incident, intolerance over variations of the Ramayana has been expressed with violence many times in India. More recently, in 2008 a group of students ransacked the offices of the History Department at the University of Delhi after students had been assigned an essay suggesting that there are many versions of the Ramayana. See Salil Tripathi, "Will Sita Sing in India?"

5. See Roland Barthes, 4.

6. See Richman, "E.V. Ramasami's Reading of the *Ramayana*."

7. See William Irwin, "Against Intertextuality." Irwin's critique of the term coined by Julia Kristeva and deployed by Barthes does overshoot its target at certain points, but his general frustration with the term strikes home.

8. The comment was posted by "Krishna," in response to Nina Paley's blog post of August 22, 2005, titled "Aw, Shucks." The blog post and subsequent comments can be accessed online here: http://www.ninapaley.com/ archives/2005/08/aw-shucks.html. Krishna's specific comment can be accessed online at: http://www.ninapaley.com/2005/08/aw-shucks.html#1128401285 00675596. Paley collected a number of letters from Indian viewers of the work in progress here: http://www.ninapaley. com/Sitayana/SitaLetters.html.

9. See Choudary and Udayalakshmi.

10. The language used in the film to represent the dialogue from the Ramayana appears to be Paley' own; as far as I can tell, she is not directly citing any particular written translation of the story.

11. See "Hindus Rip Plan to Breach Mythical Bridge."

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Secular Interventions and Religious Otherness: Interstitial Spaces and Liminal Hybridities in *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer*

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In the contemporary world, religion continues to shape lives, to create and even to demarcate nations, as well as to inspire imaginations and thoughts. At the same time, it is tough to ignore the violent incidents that become politically-charged, fundamentalist statements; such incidents, although condemnable acts, force us to rethink the intellectual debate between religion and secularism. While one might argue that a religion deals with one's personal beliefs and another might insist that it deals with hegemonic ideas of power and ideology to control the masses, any representation of religion or secularism entails issues ranging from ethical practices to the authentic meaning of that representation. Likewise, a more nuanced approach to understanding religion's ideological appeal or even blind faith is a necessity in representing religion in fictional medium, especially film.

Often, representing religious discourse itself becomes an ideology-laden strategy, and secularism or secular approaches to religion become a matter of dispute or disagreement. How do we then understand any discourse that addresses religion? Must we always account our own religious affiliations or can we adopt secular approaches in understanding religious conflicts and differences? Is secular humanism a more viable approach in our appreciating religion, especially in the post-9/11 world, wherein to be or not to be of a "particular" religion might be considered a more individual standpoint than being a "universal" secularist? What happens if a religion does not endorse religious tolerance? Is it automatically brandished for fanatic ideals? Likewise, can one distinguish between religious faith and religiosity? Does religion create boundaries and secularism diminish them? Is religious difference only a matter of essentializing difference and conflicting beliefs, or can it become a reflective collaborator of experiences however different from each other?

All of these questions pose valid concerns and have been addressed by many scholars to enable a better understanding of transreligious crit-