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The Metamorphosis of Kaikasī to Sukesi

Revisiting Opera Jawa, a Contemporary Indonesian Cinematic Re-imagining of the Rāmāyaṇa[1]

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1. Sukesi in the film *Opera Jawa*

Kaikasī is the mother of Rāvaṇa, the primary antagonist in the famous epic *Rāmāyaṇa*. However, Kaikasī remains a minor character in the epic. She appears only in the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, the seventh and final book of the Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* story, and even there, she is mentioned only passingly as the mother of Rāvaṇa and his siblings, although the circumstances of her marriage to their father are intriguingly told.

Nevertheless, she has gained fame in Javanese literature, where she has been known as Sukesi since the 18th century.[2] The story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, along with the *Mahābhārata*, spread across the Bay of Bengal through the process of the Indianisation of Southeast Asia. However, few areas have adopted this process more rigorously than Javanese literature. Javanese literature embraced the stories introduced across the Bay of Bengal and embellished and adapted them within

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was read at the INDOWS Symposium: Currents of Metamorphosis across the Indian Ocean, held 9–10 December, 2023 at Osaka University. I appreciate the valuable feedback from the participants. A seminal discussion on Sukesi in the film *Opera Jawa* appeared in Aoyama (2022). I am grateful to the editors of the book for giving me an opportunity to explore this topic.

[2] Little is known about how the name changed from Kaikasī to Sukesi. However, it is possible to conjecture that her grandfather's name Sukeśa might have influenced later Javanese writers. The use of the prefix *su*, meaning "good", and the use of the suffix *i* for a female person are both well-observed practices in Modern Javanese. Finally, it must be noted that a seemingly transitional "Kaikeśī" appears in the English translation of the Old Javanese *Arjunawijaya* (Supomo 1997: 183), but this seems to be an inadvertent error because "Kaikaśī" is the name used in the Old Javanese text, and only this spelling conforms the metric requirement of the text.

the contexts of Javanese society. The *Uttarakāṇḍa* has captured the Javanese imagination throughout history. Having been introduced to Java by the 9th century, the *Uttarakāṇḍa* was first translated into Old Javanese at the end of the 10th century. At the height of the kingdom of Majapahit in the second half of the 14th century, the birth and exploits of Rāvaṇa were immortalised in an Old Javanese epic poem. In the Islamic era, the story was adapted in Modern Javanese from the end of the 18th century to the early 19th century and subsequently propagated into a repertory of shadow puppet theatre (*wayang kulit*). One of her most impressive incarnations recently appeared in an Indonesian film production, *Opera Jawa*, where she plays a more significant role than ever. This essay begins with this contemporary cinematic adaptation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and further explores her journey of transformation from Kaikasī into Sukesi.

The film *Opera Jawa* (English title: *Requiem from Java*) was directed by the renowned Indonesian filmmaker Garin Nugroho. Commissioned for a cultural art festival in Vienna to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth, the film was first released in Indonesia in 2006. It represents a significant intersection of culture and cinema, blending classical Western, traditional, and contemporary Javanese elements. The film presents choreographed scenes of dancing (both traditional Javanese court dancing and contemporary dancing) accompanied by Javanese *gamelan* music and singing in Javanese. It ends in a poignant final act, which opens with the solemn chanting of a requiem and unfolds into a series of spiritual rites for the deceased. As its English title suggests, Nugroho demonstrates his appreciation of Mozart's works through references to operatic style and the solemnity of the requiem. Beyond these elements, however, the film is distinctly Javanese. In other words, the film has Javanese contents within the framework of a Mozartian requiem.

Garin Nugroho was born on June 6, 1961, in Yogyakarta, a city located in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. Together with Surakarta in Central Java, Yogyakarta is widely recognized as a cultural centre of Java. The city is also home to the Sultan's royal palace.[3] Nugroho studied filmmaking at the Jakarta

[3] The Sultanate of Yogyakarta officially became part of the Republic of Indonesia as the Special Region of Yogyakarta in 1950 after Indonesia's independence. The

Institute of the Arts while studying law and politics at the University of Indonesia. Since his debut film in 1991, he has directed nationally and internationally acclaimed films. After his mother's death, he envisioned creating a work based on Central Javanese culture as a dedication to her memory (Kunang Helmi 2011). Thus, upon accepting the commission, he ventured to adapt the *Rāmāyaṇa* into a cinematic form reflective of his cultural roots.

Set in a contemporary rural Javanese town, *Opera Jawa* revolves around three main characters: Setyo, the gentle local potter; Siti, his beautiful and loyal wife; and Ludiro, the butcher and influential town boss who controls the townsfolk by coercion. These three characters, formerly fellow actors in a local traditional theatre troupe, find their real lives strangely paralleled with the roles they once played—Setyo as Rāma, Siti as Sītā, and Ludiro as Rāvaṇa. Their love triangle culminates in a tense, violent clash between Setyo's and Ludiro's factions in the town, leading to a dramatic and tragic outcome.

In the film's narrative, two female characters stand out. The first is naturally Siti. As I have already explored Garin Nugroho's visionary adaptation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* elsewhere (Aoyama 2012), I will not need to touch upon this character too much. In the film, Ludiro, who secretly desires Setyo's wife, Siti, tries to attract her by inviting her to dance again as Sinta (as Sītā is known in Modern Javanese) in his presence. In fact, dance is Siti's passion, but she suppresses it for Setyo's sake. She rejects Ludiro's overbearing and sometimes male-chauvinistic advances. She also refuses to conform to Setyo's quiet but obsessive desire to control her, stemming from jealousy toward Ludiro. The tension between Siti and Setyo is vividly portrayed in the scene where she rejects his attempt to mould her literally like clay, underscoring her quest for autonomy. In the end, her determination leads to her choosing death over submission, challenging patriarchal control.

The other outstanding female character is Ludiro's mother, Sukesi, who in the film is a well-off businessperson running a dressmaker's workshop with a group of employees to create clothing. The importance given to her role is apparent in the fact that it is listed fourth in the cast list following Setyo, Ludiro

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Sultanate of Yogyakarta came into existence in 1755 when the Sultanate of Mataram was split into Yogyakarta Sultanate and Surakarta Sunanate.

and Siti, and that her name is taken directly from the original source without change, while other characters' names were altered. In this essay, I will focus on this less-discussed yet important character, whose significance I did not fully explore in my previous paper. This analysis illuminates the film's intricate balance between traditional storytelling and contemporary social themes.

Sukesi plays a significant role in the film in shaping the course of the story by actively supporting Ludiro's desire for Siti. In fact, it is Sukesi's idea to send a letter to Siti inviting her to dance as Sinta again for Ludiro. Sukesi also prepares a long red cloth which magically — the film effortlessly blurs the line between the real and the imagined — extends from her house through a road in the middle of rice fields to Siti's house. The long red cloth lures Siti away from her house to Ludiro's place. When Siti eventually rejects and leaves Ludiro, Sukesi gracefully accepts Ludiro's sorrow and consoles the dejected Ludiro, who reveals he wishes to return to his mother's womb. Thus, Sukesi consistently supports Ludiro's morally questionable pursuit of the love of another man's wife. There is an emotionally strong mother-son relationship between the two characters. However, Sukesi's most crucial role emerges in the film's last thirty minutes.

In the film's epilogue, after the main characters have exited from the main stage, Sukesi, attired in black, emerges as the officiant of a requiem. She initiates the ritual by chanting prayers in Latin, the sacred language: *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis, cum sanctis tuis in aeternum, quia plus es* (Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and may light perpetual shine on them, in the company of Thy saints for evermore, because Thou art merciful.). The requiem text in Latin is taken from Mozart's *Requiem*. Then, there was a long procession led by Sukesi on the sandy beach along the Indian Ocean. After the procession, she conducts a spiritual rite for the deceased, who include Ludiro and Siti and other victims of the violent clash between the two factions who support Ludiro and Setyo in the community. The rite, conducted on the beach along the Indian Ocean, strongly resonates with a traditional Javanese *labuhan* ceremony, where offerings are given to the goddess of Southern Sea, ruler of the spiritual world. However, a question remains. Why is Sukesi's character constructed in such a way that she can conduct a ritual for the deceased, let alone utter words

in Latin, a sacred language? To answer the question, we must go back to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, in particular its seventh book, the *Uttarakāṇḍa*.

2. The impact of Indianisation and vernacularisation

The *Rāmāyaṇa*, one of India's great epics, has profoundly influenced cultures across South and Southeast Asia for centuries. Its introduction to Javanese society is part of a broader historical phenomenon known as the Indianisation of Southeast Asia (Coedès 1968: 15–16), which occurred primarily in the first millennium and influenced regions such as Indonesia, especially Java. This process, facilitated by extensive maritime trade across the Indian Ocean, enabled the rulers of emergent early Southeast Asian states to adopt Indian-style court rituals, titles, and administrative techniques, through the medium of the Sanskrit language.

The introduction of Sanskrit literature and its writing system brought about literacy, at least among local elites, and enriched the vocabulary of local literary production. Stories from the Indian epics like the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* became popular and were locally represented in various art forms. As a result, this period has left not only tangible legacies like the Borobudur Buddhist temple and the Prambanan Hindu temple compound in Central Java but also intangible ones, notably the extensive Hindu-Buddhist literary corpus in the Javanese language. Java, along with other Southeast and South Asian regions, became part of what Pollock (1998) termed the 'Sanskrit cosmopolis' — a shared cultural sphere unified not by centralized authority but by accepting the revered Sanskrit language.

A pivotal development in this cultural integration was the vernacularisation of literacy (Pollock 1998), a process as crucial as the introduction of Sanskrit itself in shaping Javanese Hindu-Buddhist culture. This led to significant socio-cultural transformations within Javanese society, including the use of Indic script, a large number of Sanskrit loanwords, the adaptation of Indic poetry, the adoption of Sanskrit literature, and most importantly, as a result of the combination of these elements, the creation of a rich body of literature in Old Javanese. Old Javanese belongs to the Austronesian language family and is cognate to Modern Javanese and Indonesian. The linguistic distance between Sanskrit and Old Javanese makes it all the more significant that the Javanese

poets successfully adapted the Sanskrit literary genre *kāvya* with an intricate metric system to develop the Old Javanese *kakawin* genre, a group of literary works that generally recount epic narratives in the Indian-inspired metric system.

The earliest extant Old Javanese translation of a Sanskrit literary work is the Old Javanese translation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. This Old Javanese translation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was based not on Vālmīki's version but on the *Bhaṭṭikāvya* (also known as *Rāvaṇavadha*), a 7th-century Sanskrit rendition of Vālmīki's epic (Robson 2015). The Old Javanese *Rāmāyaṇa* is also regarded as the first extant example of the *kakawin* genre. The internal evidence suggests that the translation was completed in the late 9th century. This makes the text, in fact, one of the oldest vernacular translations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* across South and Southeast Asia. The Old Javanese *Rāmāyaṇa* comprises six books, notably excluding the seventh book, *Uttarakāṇḍa*. This omission, however, does not stem from the Javanese perception of the *Uttarakāṇḍa* as an interpolation, about which we discuss more below, but simply reflects the fact that its source text, the *Bhaṭṭikāvya*, itself lacks the *Uttarakāṇḍa*.

3. Hindu-Buddhist era: Adaption of the *Uttarakāṇḍa*

The *Uttarakāṇḍa*, the seventh and final book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is considered by scholars to be a later interpolation, but as Supomo (1977: 18) asserts, when the *Uttarakāṇḍa* was first translated into Old Javanese, the process of incorporation had been already completed, and it was recognized as an authentic part of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. From the viewpoint of contents, the *Uttarakāṇḍa* consists of two related but discrete stories. After Rāma and Sītā's triumphant return to Ayodhya, a group of sages led by Agastya pay a visit to Rāma to congratulate him on his victory. On this occasion, as requested by Rāma, Agastya explains the birth of Rāvaṇa and his siblings and his series of misdeeds before he finally comes across Rāma. This part may be called a prequel to the main story. After Agastya completes his tale and the sages depart, the story resumes its narrative of Rāma and Sītā, which includes Sītā's banishment to the forest and the birth of Rāma's two sons and their subsequent reunion with Rāma. This second half may be called a sequel to the main story. Notably, the prequel part of the *Uttarakāṇḍa* later developed significantly in Javanese literature, and it is precisely in this part that Kaikasī plays a role.

In the prequel part, Agastya explains the circumstances of Rāvaṇa's birth. The once-powerful and dominating *rākṣasa*s (ogres) had been nearly eradicated by the god Viṣṇu. King Sumālī, one of the surviving *rākṣasa*s who had taken refuge in a netherworld, emerged one day from the netherworld and witnessed the glorious Vaiśravaṇa (also known as Kubera, and regarded as the god of wealth) on the way to visit his father, the sage Viśrava. Inspired by this sight, Sumālī conceived a plan to make Viśrava his son-in-law, hoping to have a grandchild equal to Vaiśravaṇa who could rival the god Viṣṇu, thus restoring the *rākṣasa*s' former glory and prosperity. Sumālī urged his beautiful daughter Kaikasī to seek to marry the sage Viśrava with intent of bearing powerful children to fulfil his ambitions. The sage accepted Kaikasī's proposal, but because her visit interrupted his daily ritual, their union resulted in the birth of monstrous children: the ten-headed Daśagrīva (also known as Daśamukha, and later as Rāvaṇa), the gigantic Kumbhakarṇa, and the hideous Śūrpaṇakhā. Only the last child, Vibhīṣaṇa, inherited his father's virtuous nature. From a narrative perspective, Kaikasī's primary role is to account for the birth of Rāvaṇa and his siblings.

Although the *Uttarakāṇḍa* is not included in the Old Javanese *Rāmāyaṇa*, its presence in the reliefs of the 9th-century Prambanan temple indicates the contents of the book were known to the Javanese.[4] At the end of the 10th or the early 11th century, the *Uttarakāṇḍa* was translated into Old Javanese prose, which closely follows the story of the Sanskrit version, including both the story of Rāvaṇa's birth and the story of the birth of Rāma's sons (Supomo 1977: 18; Zoetmulder 1974). Subsequently, in the late 14th century, at the height of the Hindu-Buddhist kingdom of Majapahit, Rāvaṇa's life story, highlighting his

[4] The reliefs depicting the story of *Rāmāyaṇa* are found in the central Śiva temple and the Brahmā temple located on the southern side (Aoyama 2018; Stutterheim 1989). The reliefs in the Śiva temple begin with the incarnation of the god Viṣṇu as Rāma and end with the advance of Rāma's army to the island of Laṅkā. The story continues to the reliefs in the Brahmā temple. Although, compared to the Śiva temple, the restoration of the reliefs in the Brahmā temple is in poor condition, it is still possible to identify, among others, the scenes of Rāvaṇa's death and the birth of Rāma's two sons. Thus, from the latter scene, it can be concluded that the final book *Uttarakāṇḍa* is included in the *Rāmāyaṇa* reliefs in the Prambanan temple.

confrontation with the king Arjunasasrabāhu,[5] was made into an independent verse work, the *Arjunawijaya*. It has been established that the author Tantular used parts of the Old Javanese prose *Uttarakāṇḍa*, mainly from sarga 9 (the birth of Daśamukha) to sarga 19 (the defeat of Daśamukha by Arjunasasrabāhu), as the basis for his work (Supomo 1977: 10, 19–26).

4. Islamic era: Sukesi in Modern Javanese literature

The transition of Javanese literature from the Hindu-Buddhist era to the Islamic era, around the late 15th and early 16th centuries, marked a significant cultural shift. This period saw such fundamental changes as the decline of the Majapahit kingdom and the rise of Islamic kingdoms, the establishment of Islam in Java, the linguistic transition from Old Javanese to Modern Javanese, and the change of the medium of writing from *lontar* (palm leaf) to paper. Nevertheless, the cultural legacy of the Hindu-Buddhist traditions remained remarkably resilient in Javanese society. For instance, the Indic script remained in use, although an attempt was made to write Javanese in a modified Arabic script.

These cultural changes were reflected in the literature of the period. Johns (1966: 40) conveniently classifies the literature of the transitional period into three categories: those rooted in Hindu-Buddhist traditions, those distinctly Islamic, and those that attempt a synthesis of both. The *Uttarakāṇḍa* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, belonging to the first category, continued to be preserved both orally and textually. However, with the advent of Islam, they underwent significant transformations in interpretation and cultural significance. Notably, these transformations involve not only increasing Islamic influences but also the incorporation of indigenous elements, recontextualising the stories within Javanese society.

Sears (2004: 278–283) identifies three Modern Javanese texts that recount the birth of Rāvaṇa, who is known as Rahwana in Modern Javanese literature (similarly, Kaikasī as Sukesi, Sumālī as Sumali, and Viśrava as Wisrawa). The earliest known mention, which reflects oral rather than textual tradition, is found

[5] Arjunasasrabāhu is also known as Kārtavīrya Arjuna. In the Indian tradition the capital of his kingdom is Māhiṣmati, whereas in the Old Javanese text it is Mahispati (Supomo 1977: 117).

in the 18th-century *Serat Kanda* as recorded in Raffles' famous *History of Java* (Sears 2004: 278–279; Raffles, 1817: Vol. 1, 424–426). The theme gained further prominence during the late 18th to early 19th century, a period often described as the era of the 'renaissance' of Javanese literature at the Surakarta court. Two significant works from this era are attributed to the renowned court poets Yasadipura I and his son Yasadipura II. While different in detail, both texts share the narrative of Sukesi's marriage with the sage Wisrawa and the subsequent birth of Rahwana. Yasadipura I and II composed in total three Modern Javanese renderings of the Old Javanese *Arjunawijaya*. Yasadipura I, who died in 1803, wrote the text in the *macapat* style, but the text is no longer extant.[6] This text was composed at the request of Pakubuwana III, who reigned at the court of Surakarta between 1749 and 1788. Yasadipura II first composed a text in the *kawi miring* style in 1803 and later, in 1829, rewrote it in the *macapat* style.[7] This version is probably the best known among the three and most influential in contributing to the popularity of the theme in Javanese society today (Day 1981: 60–77 as cited in Sears 2004: 281).[8]

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[6] *Macapat* is an indigenous form of poetry in Modern Javanese, in contrast to the Indian-influenced poetry of the *kakawin* literature in Old Javanese.

[7] *Kawi miring* is a poetic style in Modern Javanese, which is, compared to *macapat*, 'inclined' (*miring*) towards the *kakawin* texts of the Old Javanese period.

[8] In 1892, ten years after Yasadipura II's work was composed, Sindusastra wrote the *macapat* work *Lokapala* based on the *Arjunawijaya*. This work has also been influential in Javanese society. Although this work incorporated elements of the universal history from the *Serat Kandha*, the story's core closely parallels that of Yasadipura II's work.

Another interesting characteristic of Sindusastara's version of *Lokapala* is the insertion of the character Jambumangli. He is a son of Sumali and is secretly in love with his cousin Sukesi. In this version, one of the conditions of Sukesi's *sayembara* (see the following note 11), beside the teaching of *sastrajendra*, is to fight with Jambumangli, and all of the suitors except Wisrawa fail. This episode recalls a similar event involving Bhīṣma in the *Mahābhārata*, where he goes to the kingdom of Kāśī to attend a *svayaṃvara* ceremony held for the three princesses to choose their spouses. The lover of one of the princesses challenges Bhīṣma, but Bhīṣma easily defeats him and obtains the right to marry the princesses on behalf of his younger half-brother. This episode was known in Javanese society through the Old Javanese *Ādiparwa* (Zoetmulder 1974: 70). The episode of Wisrawa's participation in Sukesi's *sayembara* on his son's behalf and his defeating Jambumangli, who is secretly in love with Sukesi, may have been influenced by the episode of Bhīṣma.

According to Yasadipura II's rendering, the story concerning Sukesi is told as follows (Drewes 1966: 356–357): Wisrawa, the king of Lokapala, abdicates to become an ascetic and passes the throne to his son Danapati (another name for Waisrawana, from Sanskrit Dānapati, a name more commonly used in Modern Javanese). Danapati hears that Sumali, the king of *rākṣasa*s in Ngalengka (Laṅkā), has a beautiful daughter Sukesi and wishes to marry her. He asks his father to go to Lokapala and arrange the marriage on his behalf. In Ngalengka, Sumali accepts the proposal of marriage on the condition that Wisrawa initiates him into the mystical teachings of the *Serat Jendrayuningrat*.[9] Wisrawa agrees and, pleased with his newly obtained knowledge, Sumali also asks Wisrawa to initiate his daughter. Wisrawa again concedes, but when he explains the mystical knowledge to Sukesi at night, this unauthorized revelation of secret teachings throws heaven into turmoil. Bathara Guru (the god Śiva in Modern Javanese) and his consort Durga (Durgā) descend from heaven and enter the bodies of Wisrawa and Sukesi. As a consequence, Wisrawa becomes enamored and desires to marry Sukesi himself. News of this marriage infuriates Danapati in Lokapala. He wants to fight with his father but is dissuaded by the god Endra (Indra), who offers him two beautiful celestial nymphs as compensation. From the union of Wisrawa and Sukesi, three monstrous children, Rahwana, Kumbakarna, and Sarpakanaka, and one son, Wibisana, whose nobility equals that of Danapati, are born. This marks Sukesi's last appearance in the story; from this point onward, she is never mentioned again, even as the narrative continues.

Regarding Sukesi's role, Yasadipura II's rendering represents two major common characteristics in Modern Javanese texts and *wayang* performances. First, unlike Sanskrit and Old Javanese texts, the *rākṣasa* king Sumali has not lost his kingdom of Ngalengka, while Danapati is the king of Lokapala.[10] Thus,

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[9] In Modern Javanese, *serat* means "book" and the word is commonly used as a part of the title of a literary work. A compound word *jendrayuningrat* is less intelligible, although the part *ayuningrat* may mean 'the peace and prosperity of the world'. Supomo (1977) suggests that the word is the result of a corrupt reading of an Old Javanese manuscript. In any case, the very obscurity of the title must have contributed to the teaching's mystical status.

[10] In the Sanskrit and Old Javanese texts, Vaiśravaṇa is appointed by the god as one of the four protectors of the world. Thus, he gains the epithet Lokapāla (the protector of the world). This designation must have given rise to the notion in the Modern

as Sumali is on an equal footing with other kings, his daughter is pursued by princes of other kingdoms by means of *sayembara*.[11] Second, the condition for prospective suiters for a successful proposal is to be able to impart the knowledge of the universe and life, the *serat jendrayuningrat*, more commonly known as *sastra harjendrayuningrat*, or simply as *sastrajendra*, which is so secret that it should not be disclosed to anyone other than gods. Wisrawa's disclosure leads to the descent of Bhatara Guru and Durga, resulting in the marriage between Sukesi and Wisrawa. In this twisted way, the Modern Javanese rendition maintains Sukesi/Kaikasī's core role; that is, mothering Rahwana/Rāvaṇa and his siblings with Wisrawa/Viśrava.[12]

Supomo demonstrates that the origin of the expression results from cacography during the translation of an Old Javanese manuscript into Modern Javanese (Supomo 1977: 285–286, note for 1, 11a). In his study of the Old Javanese *Arjunawijaya* manuscripts, Supomo identifies two traditions: Balinese and Javanese. He reconstructed the manuscript from which the existing Javanese tradition manuscripts descended. In this reconstructed manuscript Supomo found a corrupt reading in one place (1.11a) where diacritical marks used in Javanese script for 'ṅ' and 'y' were overlooked, thus resulting in the reading *sastra hajöṅ* ('beautiful book', implying certain mystical knowledge, which Viśrava possesses) instead of the original *saṅ stryāhajöṅ* ('beautiful maiden', referring

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Javanese texts that Danapati is the king of the domain called Lokapala. This change of meaning is another case of creative contextualisation by Javanese writers.

[11] A *sayembara*, from Sanskrit *svayaṃvara*, is a ceremony in which a noblewoman chooses her husband by holding a competition or setting a task for suitors. The winner marries the woman.

[12] The following diagram (Figure 8.1) may help in understanding the difference between the genealogical positions of Kaikasī in Sanskrit and Old Javanese, and Sukesi in Modern Javanese renderings.

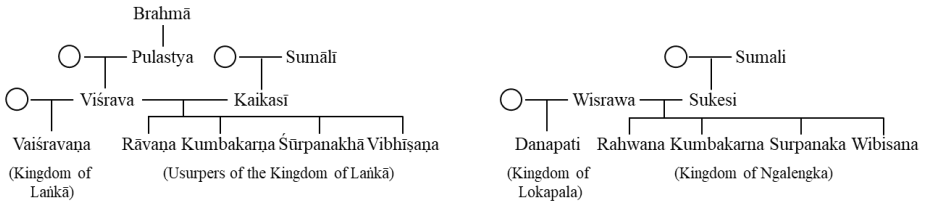

Figure 8.1: Schematic comparison of the genealogies of Kaikasī in Sanskrit/Old Javanese (left) and Sukesi in Modern Javanese renderings (right).

to Kaikasī). This new reading led to a new interpretation that Viśrava possesses a book of specific mystical knowledge (known typically as *sastra harjendra* or *sastrajendra* in the Modern Javanese literature), and that this knowledge is the purpose of Kaikasī's approach to him.

Interestingly, a group of three existing Javanese manuscripts (designated as M by Supomo) are copies of the same manuscript. This original manuscript is not extant, but according to the colophon, it was 'once in the possession of the Crown Prince of Surakarta' (Supomo 1997: 84). The colophon also indicates that the time of copying was 1782. The year coincides with the reign of Pakubuwana III (r. 1749–1788), whom Yasadipura I served. Thus, although we cannot ascertain who this Crown Prince of Surakarta was, this Surakarta manuscript might be the one, or one of those, Yasadipura I consulted when he was preparing the Modern Javanese rendering of *Arjunawijaya*, and the concept of the book of mystical knowledge became part of the text's tradition.

The persistence of this new reading should not be dismissed as a simple misunderstanding by Javanese writers. Rather, its perpetuation and acceptance represent a creative reinterpretation of the text. As Sears (2004: 280) observes, this is a way of 'recontextualization of the stories that made them more understandable to their audiences'. The Javanese phrase *sastrajendra* has become a recurring motif in Modern Javanese literature, particularly in *wayang* theatre (Sears 2004: 284–286). Its significance endures to this day. In the contemporary *wayang* theatre, Sukesi's marriage is enacted in a play titled 'Alap-alapan Sukesi' (the marriage of Sukesi), where the transmission of the secret knowledge *sastrajendra* is a popular theme.[13] Given this cultural context, it is unsurprising that the director Nugroho, born in Yogyakarta and raised in a Javanese cultural environment, is deeply familiar with Sukesi's story.

5. Sukesi as an officiant of the ritual

[13] The story regarding the marriage of Sukesi and the birth of Rahwana continues to be a popular theme in *wayang* theatre. In contemporary performances, *sastarajendra* is typically understood in the context of *kejawen*, Javanese mysticism (Sears 2004: 287). Moreover, there is a trend to adapt the story to modern conditions, ensuring its ongoing relevance (for example, B. Djoko Suseno 2018; Andi Wicaksono 2012).

Garin Nugroho's cinematic work does more than merely recount the *Rāmāyaṇa*; it demonstrates the profound and enduring influence of the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, in particular its prequel part, on Javanese literature and culture. It is important to note that the film *Opera Jawa* is not a literal adaptation of either the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, but rather a creative re-imagining of these stories. The film's characters – Siti, Setyo, and Ludiro – are not straightforward representations of Sītā, Rāma, and Rāvaṇa, but rather human figures whose relationships parallel those in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Particularly, Nugroho's treatment of Sukesi is an original creation. While she is absent in the main part of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, her role in the film takes on new significance. When compared with both oral and written Javanese literary traditions, several noteworthy peculiarities in Nugroho's interpretation draw our attention.

Notably, Ludiro's father, Sukesi's husband, is entirely absent from the film version. As far as the film's narrative is concerned, her husband's absence makes it easy for her to take the role of the officiant of the requiem. The death of the director's mother certainly motivated him to explore a mother character in the film. The absence of the father figure also allows Nugroho to explore the relationship between Ludiro and Sukesi. Sukesi's devastation and despair after her son's death is moving.

Furthermore, she actively supports Ludiro's pursuit of Siti and consoles him after his failure. In other words, Sukesi is Ludiro's accomplice. This portrayal interestingly echoes elements from earlier versions of the *Uttarakāṇḍa*. In both Sanskrit and Old Javanese texts, Kaikasī, mindful of her father's ambitions, urges Rāvaṇa to strive to be equal to Vaiśravaṇa. This encouragement leads Rāvaṇa to undergo severe penance to obtain divine power to overcome Vaiśravaṇa. So, she is not entirely blameless for Rāvaṇa's misconduct. This is a crucial moment where her agency influences the course of the narrative. Interestingly, the Old Javanese *Arjunawijaya* omits this part of Kaikasī's role. Whether intentionally or coincidentally, Nugroho's portrayal of Sukesi aligns more closely with the original *Uttarakāṇḍa*.

In any case, Sukesi's agency is most fully manifested in her role in the requiem part of the film. In this part, while the other main characters – Siti, Setyo and Ludiro – are absent, she alone conducts a ritual for the dead. Sukesi chants a phrase from the Latin requiem and leads a long procession to the beach along

the Indian Ocean, where she conducts a ritual for the deceased, including Siti and Ludiro and other victims of the violence. As the film ends, this dedication appears on the screen: 'This film is a requiem for the victims of violence and natural disasters throughout the world especially for those in Yogyakarta and Central Java'. This message underscores that Sukesi's role as an officiant of the requiem extends from the private sphere to society in general.

Sukesi can assume the role of officiant of the requiem due to her attainment of the mystical knowledge *sastrajendra* in the Modern Javanese tradition. She demands this knowledge from Wisrawa and successfully acquires it. Her action leads to their marriage and the birth of their son, Rahwana. Her attainment of the supreme teachings is thus inseparably connected to her son, resonating with an intimate mother-son relationship in the film. Nugroho's *Opera Java* creatively reinterprets the classic epic rather than merely adapting it. Even Sukesi's familial background is absent from the film's narrative. Her characterization, however, remains firmly grounded in Modern Javanese tradition. Her possession of universal mysteries, as established in this tradition, makes her a fitting leader for such a sacred ritual.

6. Conclusion: The metamorphosis of Kaikasī to Sukesi

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize two key points. First, the *Uttarakāṇḍa* has played a crucial yet often overlooked role in Javanese literary tradition. It has been well known that the *Rāmāyaṇa* has spread to Southeast Asia, including Java, and exerted influence on local culture. However, what is less known is that the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, the final book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, has also taken deep root in and has influenced Javanese society. This leads us to recognize the scope and depth of the influence of Indian literary tradition, both oral and textual, on Javanese society. The Hindu-Buddhist texts continued to survive through the period of Islamic influence, even though the texts underwent considerable transformation.

Equally significant is the evolution of Kaikasī/Sukesi's character in Javanese literature. Initially a minor figure in the Sanskrit and Old Javanese *Uttarakāṇḍa*, Kaikasī briefly appears as Rāvaṇa's mother, mainly to explain why Rāvaṇa and his siblings are born as monstrous *rākṣasa*s. However, Sukesi assumes a more critical role as an agent of higher knowledge in later Modern Javanese texts. Its formative stage is evident in Yasadipura I's reworking of the Old Javanese

Arujunawijaya, where Sukesi learns the universal wisdom *sastrajendra*. Nugroho's work must have taken a cue from this episode and made her the central agent in the requiem part of the film. Sukesi is now portrayed not only as a mother but also as a woman privy to cosmic secrets. This shift in her portrayal reflects a nuanced representation of female agency and knowledge within the continually evolving Javanese literary tradition.

Together with the portrayal of Siti/Sītā, the portrayal of Sukesi/Kaikasī represents a powerful counter-narrative to the traditional patriarchal dominance over women's bodies and minds. Nugroho's *Opera Jawa* thus becomes a site of remarkable literary metamorphosis, redefining female agency and knowledge in a long tradition of Javanese literature and culture, influenced by cultures from across the Indian Ocean. Setting a requiem scene at the end of the story is indeed Nugroho's brilliant idea, using Mozart's requiem as a framing device. However, what is equally essential is the choice of Sukesi as an officiant of a requiem ceremony, which has only become possible because of the director's profound understanding of Javanese tradition, which through successive transformations ultimately goes back to the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, the final book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

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