

Staging the Demon Minor in Arun Mukherjee's *Mareech, the Legend*

Bidisha Munshi

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Arun Mukherjee's *Mareech, the Legend* as a politically charged revisionist drama that reworks the Ramayana episode of Mareech to interrogate the structures of power hidden within both mythic and modern narratives. In this play, Mareech is not a marginal demon remembered only for his deception as the golden deer, but he is a creature who displays interiority, reluctance, vulnerability as well as moral conflict. Here our attention is shifted from epic heroism to the expendable intermediary as we witness how authority recruits minor figures into systems of violence while disguising oppression as duty, patriotism, democracy, or divine order. Through its jatra-like frame, Brechtian interruptions, songs, chorus, conscience figures, and metatheatrical questioning of Valmiki's authority, the drama unsettles the stability of inherited myth and turns performance itself into a mode of critique. The paper argues that the parallel plots involving landlord oppression, electoral manipulation, American imperialism, and nationalist rhetoric are not incidental modern additions but interpretive doubles of the mythic action. The playwright unmasks the recurring historical cycle in which vulnerable subjects become instruments of power by linking Mareech with figures such as Ishwar and Gregory. Eventually, *Mareech, the Legend* speaks not only of myth and politics, but of the painful human condition of being drawn into

systems of power, struggling with complicity, and still searching for the possibility of resistance.

Keywords: Arun Mukherjee; *Mareech, the Legend*;
Ramayana revision; myth revision; jatra;
Brechtian theatre; subaltern subject;
power and complicity; democracy;
imperialism; metatheatre

Arun Mukherjee's *Mareech, the Legend* can be best read not as a respectful dramatic recycling of a familiar *Ramayana* episode, but as a fiercely interventionist political play that uses mythic material to expose the structures of coercion that organize both ancient kingship and modern democracy. Mukherjee refuses to let epic authority remain unexamined. His attention shifts away from Rama's heroic centrality towards the expendable intermediary, Mareech, a figure usually remembered only as the golden deer whose illusion enables Sita's abduction by Ravana, the Rakshasa (demon) king of Lanka. In Mukherjee's hands, that minor character becomes the hinge that joins mythology to landlord violence, electoral rhetoric, nationalism, imperial pressure, communal manipulation, and self-exculpating moral idealism. The result is a play that asks not simply what happened in the *Ramayana*, but who benefits when stories of duty and righteousness are told in certain ways.

This paper argues that *Mareech, the Legend* is a politically charged revisionist drama that refunctionalizes myth through a jatra-like performance frame, Brechtian interruption, and a subalternist suspicion of elite narrative. Rather than retelling the Mareech episode, Mukherjee transforms it into an inquiry into how power recruits the vulnerable, how ideology disguises exploitation, and how individuals become complicit in systems they do not fully control. In this sense, the play is not merely adaptive but revisionary in the strongest sense: it estranges inherited narrative, relocates moral attention from kings to those sacrificed beneath them, and lets even

Valmiki's authority be questioned from within the stage-world itself (Brecht; Guha; Hutcheon).

The play's politics reflects even in its form. Before Mareech appears as a character, the Ustad enters the stage as mediator, impresario, trickster, and ideological stage-manager. He does not reverently usher in sacred material. Instead, he markets it, dilutes it, embellishes it, and knowingly hybridizes it. When he tells the audience that myths are "not everyone's cup of tea," and that he will therefore "spice it up" with "our joys and sorrows" and "some real foreign stuff" (Mukherjee 536), he announces the method of the play itself: epic will be contaminated by history, and legend will be forced to share space with the contemporary world.

This may be regarded as a crucial formal move. A conventional mythological drama often asks for absorption, but Mukherjee's Ustad asks for alertness. Even when he sounds playful, he instructs the audience in how to watch. His direct address, his teasing of the "babujis," the musical interludes, the festoons, and the abrupt transitions from one representational plane to another all prevent the epic from settling into devotional inevitability. Mukherjee's use of song, placard, interruption, role-switching, and presentational commentary makes the theatrical event analytical rather than immersive in a purely emotional sense. The spectators are not asked to surrender to fate; they are asked to notice structure.

That structure is explicitly shaped by jatra. The note at the end of the play glosses jatra as a folk-theatre idiom of Eastern India in which conscience itself may "speak and sing on stage" (Mukherjee 577). Mukherjee does not merely borrow surface folk texture; he borrows a mode in which theatricality can externalize social contradiction. The Ustad's magic wand, the procession-like entrances, the chorus, and the curtain-borne labels are not ornamental. They create a public arena in which every event is already framed as an argument about how stories are made and how audiences are taught to read them.

The Ustad's authority is therefore two-fold. On one hand, he is an entertainer; on the other, he is the figure who repeatedly tries to police narrative coherence. He wants the show to move on. He wants roles to remain stable. He wants the dead to stop troubling the script. This makes him politically quite interesting: he is not simply the folk narrator but the administrator of permissible meaning. Even his looseness has limits. The frame that appears free, improvisatory, and carnivalesque is also a battlefield over interpretation. That is why the jatra-like structure matters so much. It turns the act of narration into a visible social process.

Mukherjee's boldest revision is his reconstitution of Mareech. In the *Ramayana* tradition, Mareech is remembered primarily for deception. Mukherjee restores to him interiority, reluctance, conscience, and political vulnerability. Far from being a straightforward demonic accomplice, Mareech lives in retreat, outside Ravana's court, and has been transformed by his encounter with Rama. He says, with startling simplicity, "I have offered Him my devotion" (Mukherjee 541). That line alone overturns any easy opposition between divine hero and demonic villain. Mareech is already divided before Ravana's scheme ever reaches him.

Kalnemi and Ravana therefore do not recruit a willing agent; they pressure an unstable subject already estranged from his assigned identity. Kalnemi names precisely what makes Mareech useful: "With your skill in creating illusions / You will lure away the brothers" (Mukherjee 542). Illusion here is not merely theatrical craft. It is labour conscripted by sovereign power. Mareech's talent becomes exploitable technique. In that sense, his tragedy is neither metaphysical nor simply moral. It is political. He possesses a specialized capacity that authority can weaponize.

This is why Mareech's later self-questioning is so devastating: "Why did I master this art / Of working illusions?" (Mukherjee 553). The lament is more than personal remorse. It reveals the play's

larger concern with the disastrous afterlife of skill under domination. Mareech is tragic not because he is ontologically evil or fatefully cursed, but because his abilities become useful to a system he does not govern. Mukherjee thereby rewrites tragedy as coerced functionality. A minor epic figure is made to stand for those technicians, enforcers, functionaries, and intermediaries whose labour sustains larger structures while leaving them morally shattered.

At the same time, Mukherjee refuses to absolve Mareech entirely. The play does not flatten victimhood into innocence. Mareech knows what Ravana intends; he is horrified, but he still participates. His hope that death at Rama's hands will bring salvation later appears as a compromised ethical calculation, not a pure redemption. That complexity is one of the play's major achievements. Mareech is neither villain nor martyr in any simple sense. He is a politically manipulated figure whose tragedy lies in the gap between partial insight and failed resistance. Mukherjee's revision thus displaces the moral center of the *Ramayana* episode: the question is no longer only what Ravana does, but how lesser figures are pressured into enabling what they distrust.

The modern plots are not detachable topical insertions; they are the play's interpretive machinery. Mukherjee builds two contemporary sequences that mirror and refract the mythic action: the rural Bengal plot around Ishwar, Nayeb, Pal Babu, and Raghunath, and the geopolitical plot around Gregory, Macky, Williams, America, and war. In both cases, authority does not simply command. It manufactures conditions under which others internalize, rationalize, or perform the command.

In the rural plot, the landlord-state nexus is exposed with brutal clarity. Nayeb's political logic is not ideological in the abstract; it is agrarian and material. The near-harvest crop must be secured, peasant solidarity must be broken, and communal antagonism must be incited so that class conflict is displaced into riot. Mukherjee compresses the whole violence of landed power into a single obscene principle: when

peasants produce, they may work, but when harvest is due, "the right is solely with the owner of the land" (Mukherjee 544). That line is the play's agrarian manifesto in miniature. It reveals how law, property, and morality are coordinated to convert labor into dispossession.

The parallel with Mareech is exact. Just as Ravana exploits Mareech's illusion-making, Pal Babu's network exploits Ishwar's muscle and social location. The point is not merely that the oppressed are used by the powerful; it is that systems survive by recruiting mediators from among those closest to the violence. Ishwar is valuable because he can translate elite interest into local action. His refusal, like Mareech's reluctance, is what throws the machinery into crisis.

The American plot repeats the same structure in a different register. Gregory's hesitation about war is met not with argument but with patriotic blackmail, professional pressure, and the management of reputation. The play's most concise anti-imperial statement comes when Gregory protests that "It's America that's gone poking its nose around" (Mukherjee 548). The line punctures the inflated defensive language of national honor. America is not the injured innocent it claims to be; it is the intruder that narrates its aggression as moral necessity.

Mukherjee's critique deepens when the discourse turns to democracy. The rhetoric of freedom is never absent, but it is always contaminated by threat. Macky and Williams repeatedly invoke rights, patriotic duty, responsible journalism, and national reputation, yet every invocation carries coercive force. The play shows democracy functioning not as emancipatory practice but as legitimating speech for war, censorship, and disciplinary incorporation. That critique becomes explicit in the grotesquely polite chorus line, "We, the caretakers of democracy," who extend their hands not only for freedom and justice but also "for power and for plunder" (Mukherjee 550). No interpretive gloss is required: democracy is presented as a rhetorical costume worn by predatory power.

In both modern plots, then, Mukherjee attacks the same mechanism. Whether the language is royal command, landlord right, communal protection, or democratic obligation, authority survives by making exploitation appear dutiful, necessary, or sacred. The mythic and modern worlds are not analogies but doubles. Ravana, Pal Babu, and the American state differ in scale and vocabulary, yet they all employ pressure, spectacle, and moralized necessity to conscript others into their projects.

The “Meri Baba” sequence radicalizes this critique by condensing America into a comic-devouring deity. Mukherjee’s own closing note glosses “Meri Baba” as indicating “American” (Mukherjee 577), and the song turns that gloss into a symbolic structure of appetite, seduction, and occupation. Meri Baba is not represented first as armies or presidents, but as appetite itself: grab, gobble, take, enter, rearrange. The figure brags about penetration into domestic space and intimate life. Its key boast, “The whole world in my fist” (Mukherjee 549), transforms geopolitical domination into a grotesque salesman’s flourish. Empire appears as portable possession.

What makes the sequence especially powerful is its tonal doubleness. Meri Baba offers lullabies, comfort, and domestic service even as it prepares dispossession. This is not conquest by naked force alone. It is conquest by seduction, assistance, convenience, and dependency. The symbol therefore exceeds a simple anti-American slogan. Meri Baba names a whole political economy in which external power enters the home as helper, donor, protector, or partner, then rearranges the house so thoroughly that the old occupants no longer even know “whom to blame” (Mukherjee 550). Consent and coercion become indistinguishable.

The role of conscience sharpens this analysis. Mukherjee uses the jatra convention of conscience not as allegorical decoration but as counter-ideological speech. Conscience repeatedly interrupts action to name the trap in which characters live. Its most incisive warning

is addressed not to one individual alone but to all who have begun to internalize command: "It's their beat you have to march to, / It's their tune you have to sing" (Mukherjee 552). This is one of the play's most Brechtian moments. The line translates ideology into rhythm. Power does not only issue orders; it dictates tempo, choreography, habit, and repetition. One obeys before one thinks.

This is why illusion is the play's master metaphor. The golden deer is one version of illusion, but not the only one. There are also curtains, placards, masks, cut-outs, patriotic slogans, "rights and duties" chants, democratic lectures, police costumes, and the staging itself. Mukherjee shows that illusion is not fundamentally falsehood opposed to truth; it is the medium by which power organizes perception. Mareech's skill is theatrical, but so is the state's. Political authority and stagecraft converge in the management of appearance.

At the same time, the play insists that theatre can expose the very illusions it also produces. Mukherjee's answer to the misuse of performance is not anti-theatrical purity. It is counter-performance. Songs unmask slogans; chorus comments unmask propaganda; conscience unmasks obedience; metatheatre unmasks mythic closure. The play's formal brilliance lies in this reversal: the same theatricality that enables deception can also become an instrument of cognition.

The final appearance of Valmiki seems to be the play's most audacious gesture because it does not simply reinterpret the epic from outside; it cross-examines the epic's putative author from within the play. The Ustad and assistants summon Valmiki to settle the matter, which means to restore authority, stabilize meaning, and close the scandal opened by Mareech's complaint. But once Valmiki arrives, closure fails. The author is not permitted to remain immune from history.

At first, Valmiki reacts with irritation, impatience, and canonical confidence. He seems prepared to treat death as inevitable narrative order. Yet Mukherjee stages a gradual transformation. Mareech's

question is not whether death exists, but whether his assigned death was the only imaginable one. Gregory and Ishwar extend the question into the modern world: could one have resisted differently, spoken earlier, died otherwise, or refused the script of honorable submission? This is the crucial shift. Mukherjee does not merely ask whether the story was told correctly. He asks whether the story itself has normalized expendability.

Valmiki's most striking concession comes when the argument turns to class and sovereignty. Under pressure, he articulates the logic he is being forced to confront: "Rama or Ravana are both kings: they are bound to be oppressors or exploiters!" (Mukherjee 575). The line is not a flat doctrinal slogan; it is a metatheatrical rupture inside epic discourse. What matters is that such a statement can now be said in Valmiki's presence. Mukherjee does not destroy the canonical poet; he historicizes him. The epic no longer stands above contest. It becomes answerable to the dead and half-dead whom its moral architecture left insufficiently heard.

That final movement clarifies the entire play. *Mareech, the Legend* is revisionist not merely because it sympathizes with a demon, but because it changes the unit of moral analysis. The major antagonism is not Rama versus Ravana, good king versus bad king, or nation versus enemy. It is power versus those it scripts into usefulness. Mareech, Gregory, and Ishwar are linked because each confronts an authority that wants obedience dressed up as necessity. Their differences matter, but their structural position matters more.

The ending refuses neat tragic closure. Valmiki tells the Ustad that this is not the sort of play one should "end in a hurry" because it must "go on through lots of ups and downs, wins and losses and deaths" (Mukherjee 576). That is the play's final political wisdom. History does not stop when performance ends, and moral clarity does not arrive simply because an author appears. Mukherjee's theatre therefore leaves us with an unsettling but urgent proposition: the real danger

is not only tyranny in its obvious form, but the ordinary willingness to perform someone else's script while calling it duty, democracy, patriotism, survival, or art.

Works Cited

- Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Edited and translated by John Willett, Hill and Wang, 1964.
- Guha, Ranajit. *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Duke UP, 1999.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2013.
- Mukherjee, Arun. "Mareech, the Legend." Translated by Utpal Mohanty, *Modern Indian Drama*, edited by G. P. Deshpande, Sahitya Akademi, 2004, pp. 535-577.