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Subtle Allegory within the Sacred Text: Political Motivations behind the Ramayana Manuscript in the 16th-17th Century CE Mughal Empire

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ABSTRACT

The Ramayana manuscript is well-known as a text embedded with prominent Hindu religious values. On various occasions, illustrations are added as a visual form that facilitates the narrative of the existing text. This phenomenon is seen in the Ramayana manuscript produced by order of the Emperor, local rulers, also known as Rajputs, or high officials during the Mughal period, where political dynamics are reflected in the manuscript's Illustrations produced in the royal court environment. This paper will use an iconological method that combines a comprehensive formal analysis of an illustration with an understanding of the contemporary socio-political context of the work's creation period. This study found that the depiction of the background, characters, and buildings in the Mughal Empire Ramayana Manuscript is filled with subtle allegorical elements rich in political satire. This work asserts that the Ramayana has a dual position: functioning primarily as a source of wisdom yet subtly hiding an allegorical message corresponding to the context of its creation reflected in the text's visual illustrations.

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Ramayana, Mughal, Mewar, Allegory, Illustration.

1. Introduction

The Ramayana is well known as an essential work strongly related to Hinduism. The Ramayana is considered a literary work that has transcended mere literature. Ramayana has become the basis and the source of inspiration for other art forms, such as temple reliefs, paintings, and performing arts, which are none other than the manifestation of the Ramayana script itself. Given the prestigious status of this literary work, we must not forget to view the work itself in a broader context than the mere context of its creation. Beyond its capacity as a significant religious text and literary masterpiece, Ramayana is not free from the influence of political allegory. It is considered an appropriate medium for expressing subtle satire for its readers. In viewing Ramayana, it is essential to remember that the textual content of the manuscript itself has religious power as a book considered sacred in the Hindu religious concept. On the other hand, Ramayana is also filled with messages of wisdom intended for a leader. It contains moral teachings and human dignity intended for the nobles who can access the Ramayana texts.

In such circumstances, one important aspect often overlooked is the broader event that may have triggered the creation of the work itself. According to Teeuw (1986, p. 192), there are at least six aspects that must be considered in a literary work: the work as a linguistic structure, the work in its synchronic setting, the work in its diachronic setting, the work and its readers, the work and its social context, and the work as a work of art. Ramayana is often viewed as a sacred literary work with a complex linguistic structure. Hence, aspects of its linguistic structure and synchronic setting are always spotlighted in existing studies. These aspects and how the manuscript is viewed will serve as important considerations in the analysis of this paper. The Ramayana text will be analysed based on its artistic aspects through a study of the illustrations within the text itself, the relationship between the Ramayana and its readers, and the social context of the manuscript from both pre-production, production, and post-production perspectives. All aspects that will be discussed in this article will not be reduced to the aspects of linguistic structure and synchronic and diachronic settings. Furthermore, by utilising iconological analysis as a method, this article intends to provide a broader temporal and production context to bridge the structural gap within the visual data from a text.

Among the various Ramayana manuscripts spread throughout the world, the Ramayana created during the Mughal period is an ideal example to see the Ramayana as a manuscript in the abovementioned aspects. This is because the production context of the Hindu epic manuscripts was carried out under the political dynamics of the kingdom based on

Islamic teachings. Despite being an Islamic Empire, the Mughal Empire showed an extraordinary interest in Hindu literary works. This connection was not only done to gain sympathy and understand the religious perspective and essential values of the majority religion in the society they ruled but also served as a tremendous appreciation of the literary works. In carrying out their leadership, the Mughal Empire did not wholly eliminate the Hindu rulers under their authority. The regional rulers, who ruled based on Hindu principles, were maintained as vassals of the Mughal Emperor. The rulers of this region, later known as Rajputs, were subordinate kings of the Mughal Emperor. Amid this situation, the production of literary works preserved in manuscripts experienced an extraordinary increase in production and dynamics. The culture of literary patronage, the perspective of sanctity, and the functional role of a narrative in the manuscript led to the emergence of prominent manuscripts throughout the period and region of the Mughal Empire. The development of the manuscript itself was also supported by a visual culture clearly present within illustrations that further enriched the Mughal literary world in the 16th and 17th centuries.

While placing Illustration in the broader context of the 16th to 17th century Mughal Empire, this article argues that politics played an important role in the development of the literary world in the internal environment of the empire both in the context of depiction and narrative techniques and in the context of production and patronage. Furthermore, this paper looks at the social context of illustrated Ramayana manuscripts to show strong indications of a subtle allegory that reflects intense competition between members and high officials of the empire. These subtle conflicts also developed behind the culture of patronage of literary works, especially the ones ordered and published within the circle of members of the Mughal Imperial Court or the Rajput palaces as regional rulers under the Mughal court. Such an interesting case can be seen in the illustration of the Freer Ramayana and the Ramayana manuscripts from the Rajputs of Mewar. Despite the 100-year gap between the production periods of these two texts, Freer's Ramayana is considered one of the finest examples of Mughal art at the height of its power. In contrast, the art of the Mewar region is often seen as a masterpiece of the dynamics of literary production that took place in the Rajput court, where the satirical content is veiledly directed at the Mewar court. Between these two great works and the ideas of their prominent aspects to gain a holistic understanding of how the Ramayana functions as a text, this work will reveal how the illustrations of two prominent Ramayana texts contain subtle allegories that "whisper" in visual language to those who look at the work with a more thorough understanding of its social and political context.

2. Methodology

The method used in this paper is intended to contribute to solving the problems faced in Philology studies, namely how to integrate a structuralist approach into a historical approach that emphasizes synchronicity and diachronicity as a system that places literary works as the main method but remains related to the socio-cultural context (Teeuw, 1986, p. 192). This idea leaves the impression that one must choose between socio-cultural aspects or literary ideas and values embedded in the text to conduct a deeper study of a manuscript. In this perspective, illustrations function as a bridge to present intrinsic meanings that remain the focus of the study while maintaining the socio-cultural setting of the manuscript given during the analysis process. In other words, this article will place illustrations as an integral part of the text and are a visual manifestation of the text in the manuscript. In Robson's view (2018, p. 10) which states that texts must be placed as evidence of what the author wants to convey as the overall result of their efforts and thoughts, illustrations can be understood as visual representations of texts that are the result of the painter's imagination based on the text provided by the author to broaden the reader's view. This gives it a specific form as a source from which readers can gain a broader understanding of the text itself. In this perspective, which is related to illustrations, this paper will highlight contemporary politics during the creation of the manuscripts as a specific aspect that needs to be explored in a broader socio-cultural setting.

After establishing how the illustrations are placed in broader thinking, this study will consider the illustrations in both manuscripts as objects of art history. Art history itself is a science that starts from the premise that art is not only an illustration of the past but is a key element in narrating human history (D'alleva, 2006, p. 16). The definitional view of the definition of art history is an ideal perspective that can bridge the illustrations with the phenomena of the events that triggered their creation. Here, the illustrations found in the Freer Ramayana and Mewar Ramayana manuscripts are a reflection that can be a gateway to open the narrative of the past political dynamics of the Mughal Empire as a key element in the development of human history. Not only that, the view provided by the discipline of art history is expected to be able to place textual studies in manuscripts as the center of the analysis to be carried out while still including the socio-cultural context in the pre-, during, and post-creation processes of the two manuscripts that are the main studies in this article.

In this context, the illustrations of the Freer Ramayana and the Mewar Ramayana will be seen as symbols that must be deciphered. Although Alpers (1983, pp. xviii-xx) states that visual symbols may not always contain or express

meaning, it is highly unlikely that such an assumption can apply in the case of the Freer and Mewar Ramayana. Given the existing approaches and perspectives from the various methods available in the discipline of art history, the iconological method stands as a suitable medium to bridge the current perspective that emphasizes the holistic critical deconstruction of objects with the context of past production of the manuscript. The method of iconology was preceded by the method of iconography, a method that examines, categories, and interprets images (Draiville, 2018, p. 5). Both iconography and iconology stand as prerequisite phases that help the researcher interpret and analyze an image thoroughly (Wahidiyat and Carollina, 2023. p. 3). Iconology itself serves as a method to decipher the meaning of an object, which can lead to further discourse (D'Alleva, 2005, p. 21). In other words, iconology deals with the production of meaning from in-depth observation and formal analysis of objects. As a method, iconology will not only help to situate the illustrations of the two Ramayana manuscripts under discussion but also, in the words of D'Alleva (2005, p. 21), "help to reveal symptomatic images that need to be understood beyond the limitations of the artwork's space and time." Considering the perspectives and methods explained earlier, this article will utilize the iconological method to develop and answer the challenges posed by Teeuw. In other words, this study will attempt to answer the challenges of philological studies with methods provided by the discipline of art history.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 *Kumbakarna* as a Gateway to Understanding Freer's Ramayana

Following the assessment of students' overall comprehension in both the control and experimental groups during the pre-test and post-test phases, the researcher proceeded with a more detailed data analysis by examining the deviation scores and their corresponding squared deviations for both groups. This analysis aimed to determine the extent of variation in student performance by comparing their scores from the pre-test to those obtained in the post-test. The deviation and square deviation are presented in the table below:

Data 1

Figure 1. Illustration of *Kumbakarna's* death in Freer's Ramayana

Source: https://asia.si.edu/object/F1907.271.173-346/

Illustrations can provide a broader understanding of the political context at its creation. Therefore, the discussion will begin by analyzing *Kumbakarna's* figure in the Ramayana book in the context of the manuscript's creation as a work of art. The illustration in Figure 1 depicts the disgraceful death of the giant *Kumbakarna* in the hands of Rama, the

Ramayana's protagonist. It is visible here that *Kumbakarna*, the brother of *Rahwana* as the main antagonist of Ramayana, was fighting Rama. Understandably, the rampaging monster was performing his deed as a warrior who defended his lands from a foreign Invader. Yet here, *Kumbakarna* is represented as a grey-skinned giant with hideous spots that emphasize the impression of an untamable beast. The severed head clearly expresses a furious emotion of inhuman traits. The fiery orange pupil in front of the green malicious sclera, staring with rage, along with his orange horns, protruding tongue, and bell-tipped elephant ears, give the impression of a villain worthy of death. The hairy tail and arms with sharp claws also add to the impression of hatred. Furthermore, the gruesome portrayal of spattering blood coming out of his body was suppressed by the impression of a barbaric being, with the jewelry, the bright orange sarong that covered the lower part of his body, and the scarf laid proof as the only indications that this deceased monster could be counted as a civilized individual.

When we turn our visual analysis on Rama, we can see the complete representation of the noble main character. He is depicted as a hunter celebrating his extraordinary kill. The right hand of the glorious killer grasps the bow as the killing instrument, and his left-hand reaches through the heavens with the palm wide open. In this sense, reaching through the heavens could be understood as an attempt to reach the viewer and break the fourth wall, proven by the depiction of his hand moving beyond the frame that binds the illustration. The celebrating hunter placed a foot higher than the other in which one of the feet was raising its heel. This gives the impression that Rama is dancing amid his glorious victory. Generally speaking, it could be determined that the illustrators leave little to no room for interpretation nor provide a broader context of what is happening in this scene. The glorious killer celebrates the death of a despicable being not worthy of any sympathy, a simple and straightforward message.

Moving on to the landscaping technique and the surrounding scene's depictions. Contrary to some perspectives that Mughal landscape paintings are not worth studying (Seyller, 1999, p. 195), multi-layered drawings of foreground and background might represent *Alengka* and its capital city. Located in the mountain, it is overshadowed by the mountainous terrain and the yellow land without dense vegetation where the bloody depiction of the glorious deed of killing the monster *Kumbakarna* took place. The green grass was chosen to depict the surroundings where *Kumbakarna's* head falls. Here, a rock that might be interpreted as a mountain was standing upon a darker green color, signifying the presence of a water spring. To the viewers with high visual awareness, this could be a subtle appreciation for the evil character he portrayed. After all, it is a challenge to put *Kumbakarna* as an all-evil entity in the narrative of Ramayana, as he could be seen as a warrior valiantly defending his homeland. Nevertheless, this depiction highly emphasizes a specific level of visual play that influences the reader of this manuscript to make a more profound interpretation to understand the ambiguity of the comparative scale of this artwork. Interestingly, the technique of shrinking space and manipulating foreground and background is attributed to the Jesuit influence on Mughal art (Losty and Roy, 2012, p. 28). In this regard, the illustrations in the Mughal manuscript are considered complex works of art. They are examples of how visual techniques and representations developed and evolved beyond the scope of traditional techniques inherent in the Mughal court.

This curious illustration is one of the pages that make up the Freer Ramayana. The Freer Ramayana received its name after the industrialist cum collector of Mughal art, Charles Lang Freer. He acquired this manuscript in 1907 and donated this momentous work as an important gift to a Gallery established under his namesake in 2020 (Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art, 2023). This particular Ramayana undoubtedly serves as one of the most prominent examples of the peak of Mughal Empire art and, to a more detailed extent, the high court art of the well-known Emperor Akbar of Mughal (1542–1605). One strong indication of the *Moghual* traits present in this manuscript is the vertical page format of the illustration. This curious format has been a long-continued tradition since the time of the Mughals descended during the time of the Persian Court (Dehejia, 2009, p. 159). Even though the Mughals can be seen as an Islamic political entity, they produced the oldest known surviving painted manuscript of the Ramayana. From Akbar's perspective, the text's illustrations, both in the form of paintings and the manuscript itself, helped provide a medium for a better understanding of the culture of the society he ruled (Brockington, 2018, p. 71). Akbar himself was not a radical follower of Islam. Even Akbar did not like the orthodox Muslim view that forbade painting in any form because he believed that painting actually reminded a person of God (Stronge, 2002, p. 14; Asha et al., 2025; Abbas et al., 2024).

Freer's Ramayana was a product of Mughal manuscript production during its height. In the decades of the 1580s alone, there were more or less 1,414 illustrations painted by numerous artists with their own distinctive traits (Beach, 1981, p. 20). Unlike the Jaipur Ramayana manuscript, which was explicitly compiled for Akbar, Freer's Ramayana was not directly related to the Mughal court and the Mughal royal family itself. Rather than royalty, a nobleman was, in fact, the original patron of this work, making it a sub-imperial work in the category of Mughal art (Beach, 1981, p. 128). The patron of the Freer Ramayana was Abd al-Rahim, a figure with a high position in the Mughal imperial structure known by the title

Khan-khanan, whose name literally means the lord of lords. Khan-khan himself was the supreme commander of the Mughal armed forces during the reign of Emperor Akbar (Seyller, 1999, p. 45). As one of the highest-ranked members of the Mughal court during its peak, Al-Rahim served as the ruler of the Deccan region, where he spent his parents' days with extensive autonomy and power (de Bruijn & Busch, 2014, p. 75). In Dekan, he ordered the compilation of the Ramayana Freer as a form of his appreciation for the traditions of the Hindu community he led.

Abd al-Rahim himself was a bibliophile or book lover and reading enthusiast, so to fulfil his hobby, he employed 21 painters as his personal painters, 14 of whom worked in the production process of the Ramayana Freer manuscript (Beach, 1981, p. 134). Although al-Rahim is widely known as a *Persophile* or lover of Iranian culture, al-Rahim is also known as an Indian writer and an essential figure in the development of vernacular styles in painting, illustration and architecture (de Bruijn & Busch, 2014, p. 13). The artist of the Ramayana Freer itself is often attributed to Fazl, who contributed 21 illustrations to this work (Seyller, 1999, p. 85). The differences in artists and discontinuities in the depiction of Freer's Ramayana illustrations are reflected in the differences in depiction, especially in the skin color of *Khumbakarna*, which is visible in Figure 2. Figure 2 itself is an illustration that is displayed directly after Figure 1, and although sequential, the depiction of *Kumbakarna* in Figure 2 is very different from the other depictions in Freer's Ramayana. The uninjured face in *Kumbakarna's* death scene in Freer's Ramayana is also a depiction that deviates from the facial wounds that are clearly depicted in Emperor Akbar's Jaipur Ramayana (Seyller, 1999, p. 195).

Data 2

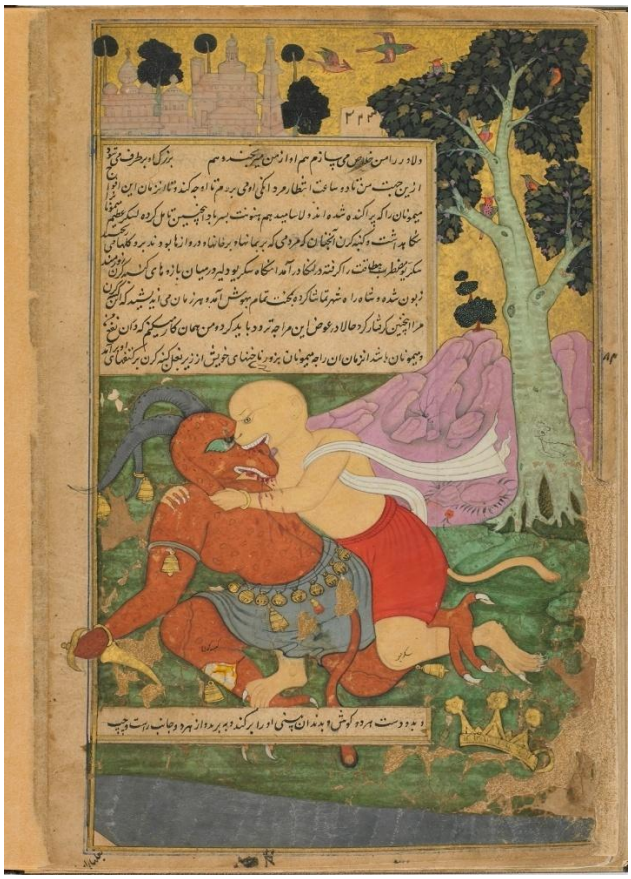

Figure 2. Sugriva injures *Khumbakarna's* face in Freer's Ramayana.

Source: https://asia.si.edu/object/F1907.271.173-346/

Before Freer's Ramayana, the Mughal court had commissioned a Ramayana manuscript on the orders of Emperor Akbar himself. This manuscript is currently part of the Palace Museum collection in Jaipur, also known as the Jaipur Ramayana. The text of the Freer Ramayana shows similarities to the 1594 Mughal Ramayana, intended to be a gift for the mother to the great emperor Akbar himself. However, the artists who worked on Freer Ramayana's illustrations were inspired by a different source, namely the well-known Jaipur Ramayana issued for and dedicated to Emperor Akbar himself (Seyller, 1999, p. 81). Curiously, the Freer Ramayana was created at the same time as the emperor's Ramayana, or the

very least; it was issued when the Jaipur Ramayana was still in completion (Beach, 1981, p. 132). Even though it is visible that a certain degree of autonomy in the Freer Ramayana when compared to the style of illustration displayed in the Jaipur Ramayana, this style is consistent with the broader variety of official imperial artists at the disposal of Akbar's court. This is due to the Emperor's preference for art style, which essentially determined the character of the paintings that were sponsored or issued by the courtiers to please the Mughal emperor himself.

In The Death of *Kumbakarna* of Freer's Ramayana, this illustration omits several details that depict a warrior's or honorable death for *Kumbakarna*. The mutilation of his body parts by the arrow of the illustrious Rama before his head was finally cut off is clearly missing, as is the army of monkeys under Rama's disposal that was devastated by *Khumbakarna's* attack as he rolls over what remains of his body. This absence could be seen as a deviation from the text itself as this part of "heroic" death was an inseparable part of the Ramayana manuscript. As a comparison, the Mewar Ramayana of 1653, from almost a little less than a century later (Losty, 2008, p. 11), has provided a visual interpretation of the text from a broader perspective. Here, the depiction of the illustration of *Kumbakarna* leaves the impression of a warrior who dies for his country (Figure 3). This is further supported by the portrayal of his character shown in the Mewar Ramayana as a giant human and not a human-like giant or anthropomorphic figure like the Freer Ramayana. In the Mewar Ramayana, *Kumbakarna* is depicted as an enormous human who leaves the impression of a warrior. He appears to destroy the enemy army of monkeys who are his enemies, until Rama's arrows finally behead him.

Data 3

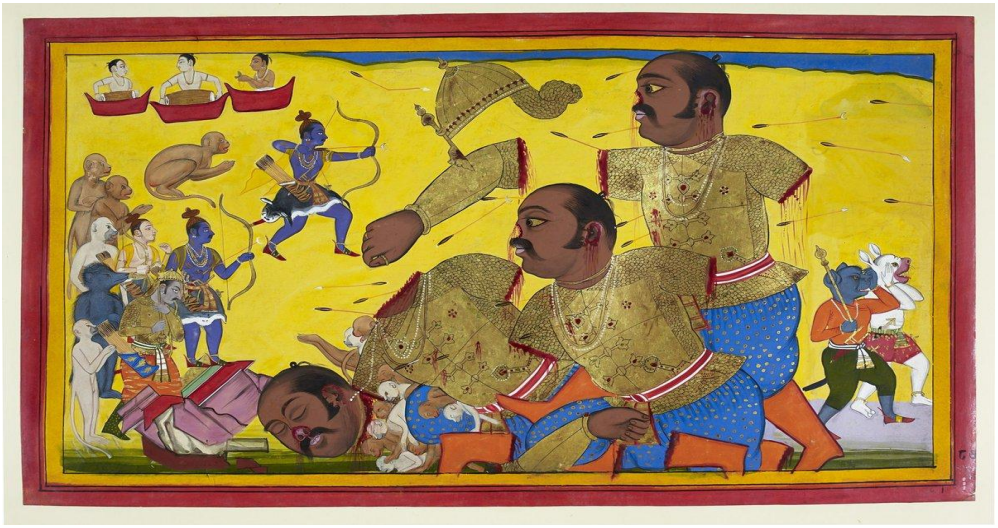

Figure 3. The Mewar Ramayana depicting the death of *Khumbakarna*

Source: https://www.bl.uk/turning-the-pages/?id=a394c2a0-ee97-11dc-95ff-0800200c9a66&type=book

The visible deficiency and juxtaposition between these two great illustrations could signify the patron's perspective as the supreme commander of the Mughal armed forces, in which the moral ambiguity of good or evil is less relevant in dealing with the idea of exterminating any or such enemy. The subtle message also implies that the final strike, which a nobleman is responsible for, was needed to prevent further and prolonged losses. It could be understood as a means by the artist to deliberately present a vivid yet straightforward representation of this epic chapter to his highly regarded patron contents, particularly if the rank of Khan-khana within the military and royal court was taken into account. Given that the patron was a well-known bibliophile, it is conceivable that Abd al-Rahim took this scene as a personal representation of his deed. Furthermore, to please the Emperor, it could be understood that his way of personally choosing and supervising how this scene should be depicted has highlighted his determination to confront the enemies of the empire and celebrate his achievements afterwards, as could be seen by Rama's celebration trying to reach out to the reader. One also needs to emphasize that Rama is considered to be an ideal man who has faithfully fulfilled his duties with sincerity and great devotion (Johari, 2023, p. 2).

3.2 The Mewar Rajput Lineage and the Legitimacy of Their Rule

The Mewar rulers draw the source of legitimacy for their rule and rulers from objects believed to be omnipotent. One such object is the celebrated Eklingji, a Linga standing in the northern Udaipur area. According to the Eklingmahatmyam, a manuscript dating from the fifteenth century but traceable to an older literary source, the Ekling is

the form of Shiva when his phallus fell in Mewar. Every king who would rule Mewar had to visit the Eklingji to receive their royal insignia from the religious leader where the Eklingji was placed. The temple complex itself, on the other hand, is thought to date back to around the 8th century CE, although some of the surrounding structures were rebuilt in later years (Lyon, 1999, p. 253). The Rajput Mewar rulers frequently rebuilt the temple due to the many invading armies and the continuous destruction of Eklingji and its temple to demoralize the source of legitimacy of the Rajput Mewar (Lyon, 1999, p. 270). Even though the temple was highly familiar with destruction from foreign invaders, the process of rebuilding and re-inaugurating from the rulers of Mewar lies hand in hand with the effort to make the temple even more glorious temple than it already had (Lyon, 1999, p. 270p. 271). This action indicates that many Mewar rulers before the 17th century had developed a tradition of creating a legitimate narrative from people's interpretation of an object.

The legitimacy that is contained within the narrative of Eklingji started to form around the later half of the first century CE. At that time, the Suryavamsa, also known as the Sun dynasty associated with the Guhira dynasty, was mentioned in an inscription dated back to 676 CE (Teuscher, 2005, p. 15). Later on, the Sisodias of Mewar claimed the Guhira dynasty as their relative (Hooja, 2006, pp. 328-329). From here on, it is clear why the Sisodia dynasty was obsessed with the character of Rama, as the Guhira dynasty itself was the descendants of none other than Rama himself, who was seen as a great God-king (Talbot, 2007, pp. 15-16). Jagat Singh, considering his position within the Sisodia dynasty, clearly intended to underline his lineage by reviving the tales of his great ancestor through the production of the Ramayana manuscript, thus providing the production context of the Mewar Ramayana in discussion. One proof that legitimizes this idea is the existence of the Sisodia seal in the form of a face inside a sun shown at the upper corner of the page (Asher & Talbot, 2006, p. 209). The Ramayana from the Mewa court could be seen as an attempt at reinterpretation to renew the idea of Ramayana of the Mughal court by reimagining past history to legitimize the reign of Jagat Singh. The production order of Mewar Ramayana could not be seen as a mere glorification of past stories and tradition but also an effort to maintain Jagat Singh's own narrative and legitimacy that kept him relevant and respected during his reign.

3.3 The Ramayana of Mewar and The Politics during its creation

The Mughal Empire held unquestionable authority across South Asia in the mid-17th CE. Although the Mewari rulers possessed several privileges, among other Rajput rulers, they still needed to complete their obligations to the Mughal Emperor. As the descendants of Rama, the Sisodias once heroically resisted the empire's incursion at Chitaur in 1568. In the end, Amar Singh, the grandfather of Jagat Singh, ultimately accepted Mughal hegemony over Mewar polity at the beginning of the 17th century (Talbot, 2007, pp. 21-22). The courage of the Sisodias' who dared resist the empire's influence and fight for their homeland not only in battle but also to prolonged pre-Mughal Rajput tradition and values, has become a tremendous inspiration that establishes a strict criterion of leadership anticipated from a future or present ruler (Gude, 2007, p. 10). Simply speaking, this proud history delineates Mewar as a region of warriors with a very high heroic value where the narrative related to the descendants of Rama who managed to maintain the purity of their bloodline is lived in the daily life of the Mewar Rajput government and its people (Talbot, 2007, p. 13). One thing that can prove the excellent quality of this heroism is the existence of a special decree from the Mughal Imperial Government that exempted Mewar from its obligation to marry one of their members to the Mughal Royal family (Aitken, 2010, pp. 62-66). Hence, it could be well understood how Jagat Singh always viewed himself proudly among the great leaders of the Sisodia dynasty.

Jagat Singh's great pride was evident around the early days of his kingship. In 1628, he provoked the anger of the Emperor when Mewar attacked Banswara, Dungarpur, Sirohi, and Devaliya. All of the areas mentioned were under Rajput control, which directly fell under the administration of the Mughal Empire (Somani, 1976, p. 267). Although his actions reflected a true Maharana (title of Rajput ruler) who was very much against his position under Mughal rule, he still tried to please the emperor. This attempt was seen when Jagat Singh ordered contingents to march towards Emperor Shah Jahan's sides to assist the Emperor's military campaigns to conquer the Deccan dan Shahji's military campaigns later on in 1633 and 1636 (Somani, 1976, p. 276). Jagat Singh also sent his son, the heir to the throne named Raj Singh, to stay and live in the Mughal court when the emperor was angry about the various problems caused by the Rajputs of Mewar (Somani, 1976, p. 268). Considering these actions, it could be concluded that Jagat Singh was a subordinate who rejected the empire's hegemony while understanding the consequences of taking actions that could cause a great disaster for Mewar.

Jagat Singh undertook a pilgrimage Towards the end of his rule. he visited various religious sites during his journey (Andhare, 1987, pp. 73-74). Upon returning from Omakaresvara in 1648, he directly ordered the creation of the first book of Ramayana, the Bala Kanda, in which the manuscript could completed the following year (Ibid, p. 74). Here, it is possible that the journey actually awakened Jagat Singh's memory of the Ramayana from the Mughal court. Although it is not stated precisely which Mughal Ramayana Jagat Singh saw, this incident reminded Jagat Singh of his childhood with his father,

who had seen Akbar's famous Ramayana along with the manuscript of Razmnama or Mahabarata and Hamzanama, a manuscript with illustrations that are often considered the highest peak of Mughal painting (Topsfield, 2002, p. 54). In the Ramayana, which places him as a patron, it is undeniable that Jagat Singh equates himself with the protagonist, Rama. On the other hand, the Mughal Emperor is placed as Ravana (Dehejia, 1996, p. 303). This is evident in the depiction of the illustration of the scene of Rahwana in the Alengka Palace (Figure 4). In this scene, Rahwana is depicted looking at his subordinates through a Mughal-style Jharoka. Jharoka is a balcony often used to welcome the general public. The Alengka community at the bottom of the palace balcony appears to worship Rahwana, their king. This implies a similarity between this scene and a common Mughal tradition where subjects of the Empire greeted Emperor Jahangir or Shah Jahan when these emperors appeared in the Jharoka of the Mughal palace (Aitken, 2010, p. 66-67). The allegory and satire of the likening of the antagonist characters of the Ramayana to the Mughal Empire also stand out when the Alengka skyline is likened to a Mughal fortress that has many domes, and the representation of Rahwana is likened to the figure of Akbar resting below a shelter that is generally utilized by Muslim Emperors (Aitken, 2010, p. 67) (Figure 4).

Data 4

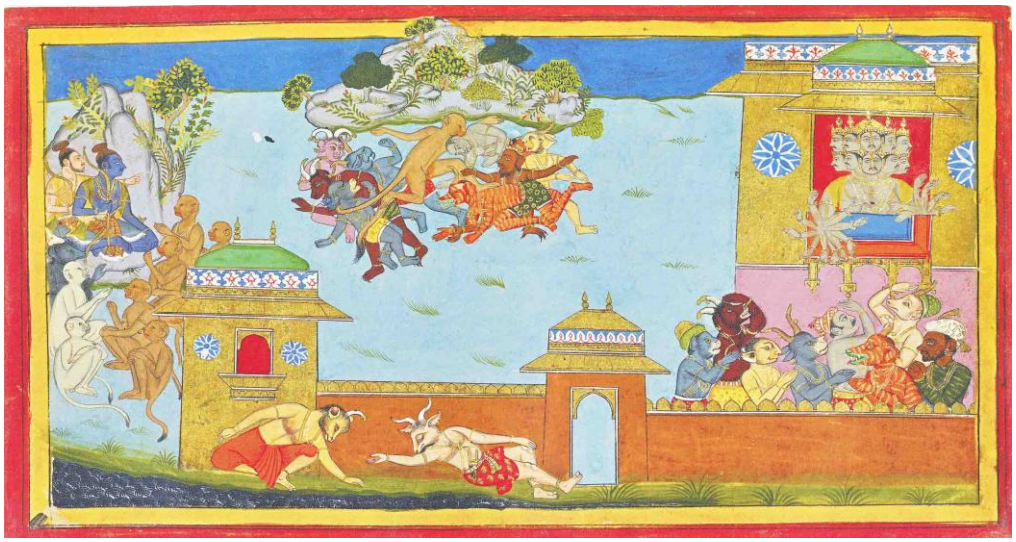

Figure 4. Illustration of Ravana on *Jharoka* in Mewar Ramayana

Source: https://ble.soas.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=27054

Data 5

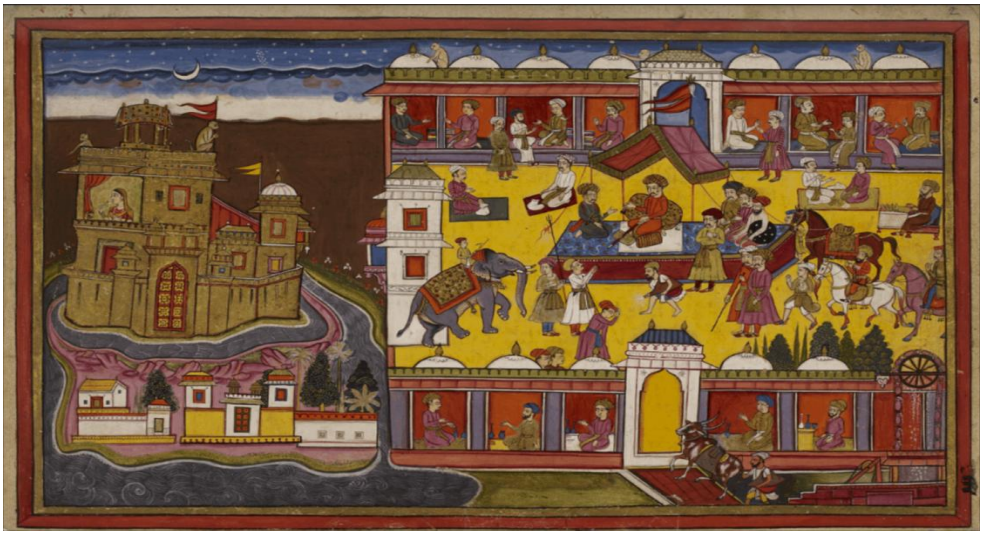

Figure 5. Illustration depicting the scene when Hanuman is monitoring Alengka.

Source: https://www.bl.uk/turning-the-pages/?id=a394c2a0-ee97-11dc-95ff-0800200c9a66&type=book

The Mewar Ramayana served as a tool to "confront" the Mughal Ramayana, which had been produced several times before the creation of the Mewar Ramayana. This older Ramayana has earned a reputation as a statement of the Mughal Imperial family and their central government's hegemonic unity and artistic superiority that still resonates today. One clear evidence that the Mewar Ramayana was intended to compete with the Mughal Ramayana is that the illustrations are drawn in a horizontal format, reminiscent of local palm-leaf manuscripts rather than the vertical book format influenced by the Persian tradition from which the Mughal rulers came. On the other hand, in the context of legitimizing lineage, the Ramayana from Mewar directly competes with the *Akbarnama* manuscript produced by the Mughal court (Asher & Talbot, 2006, p. 209). The fact that the Mewar Ramayana can be compared with the Mughal manuscripts considered to be the "masterpieces" of the Mughal empire emphasizes the idea that Jagat Singh intended to issue an illustrated compilation of the Ramayana text to suppress the general notion of Mughal artistic superiority at the time. Towards the end of his reign, Jagat Singh again soured political relations between Mewar and the Mughal core when he ordered the reconstruction of the walls of Chittor (Asher & Talbot, 2006, p. 208), a Sisodia fortress that had been conquered by the Mughals and had to be abandoned as a compromise between the Mewar king and the Mughal emperor (Somani, 1976, p. 272). In other words, the Mewar Ramayana can be seen as an effort to obtain "psychological legitimacy" that triggers the angry response of the emperor Shah Jahan towards Jagat Singh's disobedience (Dehejia, 1996, p. 324).

The Ramayana of Mewar can be seen as a way to arouse patriotic pride in the ruler's lineage by explicit legitimization to prepare them for the upcoming hostility. The resolve to purposely sour the diplomacy towards the Mughal ruler resulted in disaster afterwards. Ultimately, Jagat Singh passed away before the Mewar Ramayana was completed. After his death, Raj Singh, as the successor to the Mewar Rajput throne, ordered the Ramayana of Jagat Singh to be completed as soon as possible (Topsfield, 2002, p. 86). Raj Singh also deteriorated the relationship with the Mughals. He proceeded to repair the Chittor fort, marching upon the empire's territory with a large Mewar armed forces on a pilgrimage journey without the emperor's consent, and significantly reduced the Mewari contingent to assist the empire's military campaign against Kandahar (Andhare, 1987, pp. 272-273). Through the allegories reflected in the illustrations in the Mewar Ramayana, the manuscript serves as a means to establish the legitimacy of Sisodia as a ruler equal to the Mughals. It also acts as a justification for Mewar's actions against their rulers. Ultimately, the Mughal Empire retaliated against this act of defiance by ordering a devastating invasion of Mewar, destroying the Chittor Fort in 1654 and forcing the young king to surrender (Asher & Talbot, 2006, p. 208).

3.4 Artists, Styles, and Identities Behind the Mewar Ramayana

There are at least three distinguished groups of painters who drew the illustrations in the Mewar Ramayana with three different leaders: Sahib-din, Manohar, and an unidentified figure who is strongly suspected to have come from the Deccan, possibly from Aurangabad based on his painting style (Dehejia, 1996, pp. 303-304). The prominent uniqueness of the Mewar Ramayana is contained in the figure of Sahibdin, a figure who is known as the main artist of the Mewar Ramayana but is a Muslim. The division of three groups of painters with different leadership suggested a work distribution that endeavors to finish the large undertaking as quickly as possible. The hiring of Sahibdin and his henchmen, in which Sahibdin played a prominent role in ensuring the visual narrative could be completed as he envisioned (Kaligotla, 2024, p. 323), could also be seen as an allegorical form of submission of Muslim representatives to the ruler of Mewar as their master. This is possible considering that Sahibdin is strongly indicated to have been an artist at the Mughal Court before the group of painters he led was affected by the reduction in the number of court artists towards the end of Shah Jahan's leadership of the empire (Andhare, 1987, p. 65). Some other sources indicate that Sahibdin was born and brought up in Mewar, where his family members were artists who were accustomed to Mughal and, to some extent, Gujarati paintings (Andhare, 1987, p. 67). However, the presence of artists from the Dekan also suggests that the Mewar rulers wanted the Ramayana they produced to represent diverse cultures as a new identity for Mewar to surpass the multiculturalism of the Mughals. The Maharana of Mewar's effort to identify themselves with their rulers at the Mughal court effectively reflected South Asia's dynamic culture. This was manifested in the cultural representations reflected in the distinctive Mewar art style developed by various artists throughout their region.

Data 6

Figure 6. Death Scene of Ravana in Mewar Ramayana

Source: https://www.bl.uk/turning-the-pages/?id=a394c2a0-ee97-11dc-95ff-0800200c9a66&type=book

To achieve this goal, like the Mughals, The Mewari redefine their art to gain a new distinctiveness through their paintings. Through this distinctiveness, they hoped to establish a new identity that might serve as a subtle vessel filled with allegory and insinuation to oppose the rule of the empire. Hence, the Mewari Ramayana was one of the smaller parts of building a larger Mewar identity. This argument holds its credibility considering that in terms of sartorial manners, the Mewar Ramayana finds no equivalent compared to Vālmīki's Ramayana, a text believed to be the Ramayana that was closest to the idea of "original" (Kaligotla, 2020, p. 19). This endeavour to gain a reflection of an ideal self is seen in the current art historical narrative. Within this narrative, Jagat Singh shows him as a stalwart of tradition and a protector and patron of painting through illustrations, so his reign marked the peak period of the popularity of Mewar style painting (Andhare, 1987, p. 27). A few sources even indicate that the Mewar Rajput court artisans were officially established in 1628, the same year Jagat Singh ascended the throne (Cummings, 1999, p. 8), although the oldest known Mewar painting so far is the Ragamala of 1605 by Nisaruddin, another Muslim painter (Andhare, 1987, p. 18).

Various literary, artistic, and architectural works during the kingship of Jagat and Raj Singh in the Rajput of Mewar, which they led, can be seen as political manifestos or even propaganda to refute the humiliating losses of Sisodia from the empire (Joffe, 2006, p. 23). The Ramayana of Mewar is no exception. This is manifested through the illustration of manuscript works that function as political allegories created by the court of Mewar (Aitken, 2010, p. 66). The Mewar identity in art and style was a statement of their hegemony of power, and the creation of the Ramayana was a crucial element that shaped the stylistic identity of Mewar art. The emergence of this style of art is also represented in the vertical format in the illustrations of Sahibdin, a configuration that indicates the Mughal influence in pre-Ramayana paintings in Mewar (Losty, 2008, pp. 9-10). The process of "Mughalization" was clearly depicted in the illustration within the Mewar Ramayana (Beach, 1992, p. 120). In fact, Mughal styles and techniques were integrated into the freshly established Mewari style. This particular style in Ramayana subtly leads to a glimpse of Mewari identity and culture, but furthermore, it was complemented with a sense of respect for the Mughals as enemies, which deepens the allegory and meaning interplay within the illustrations (Aitken, 2010, pp. 68-69). This is evident in Ravana's death scene (Figure 6). The scenes are divided into three backgrounds depicted on the left panel with a red theme. Here, Vibishana and the surviving army of Alengka held Ravana's funeral rites under Rama's orders. The deceased corpse of Ravana is shown on the right side. In this depiction, his numerous wives surround and mourn his death. Some monkeys help prepare Ravana's funeral pyre in the upper panel with a yellow background. Here, an allegory subtly formed in how the audience respected Ravana and the other antagonist of Ramayana, who, to some extent, represented the Mughal emperor and their subjects.

4. Conclusion

In this article, it has been shown that manuscript illustrations not only serve as a window for a more comprehensive understanding of the content of the manuscript as a literary masterpiece but also as a way to provide us with many of the events and dynamics that occurred during the period of its creation. Text illustrations place the manuscript at the center of the study without diminishing the social aspects of the text, especially in the context of its creation process. The illustrations of the Mughal Empire reflect how political dynamics triggered the emergence of the manuscript. In this context, the narratives contained in the illustrations of the Ramayana Manuscript from the Mughal Empire "speak subtly" to its readers about various allegories and allusions that cannot be expressed publicly. This argument is in line with the political motivation for commissioning such revered texts, considering that the work containing the subtle message itself was commissioned by someone with a particular political responsibility. Through the illustrations found in the Ramayana manuscript, it is clear that this manuscript functions not only as a literary work that prioritizes aesthetics and religious legitimacy but also as a material form that proves the political dynamics and actions taken by the Mughals and the Mewar royal court as the respected publishers of the Ramayana.

This article has identified and shown how analysis using iconology as a method has successfully revealed allegories in Ramayana illustrations in the Mughal Empire in the 16th to 17th centuries AD. In its development, research related to the meaning of illustrations that "whisper" allegorical or satirical messages from a literary work can still be carried out on other literary works, both in textual criticism and visual analysis methods. This article is expected to have opened up an opportunity to study manuscripts in the context of their production, as well as their socio-cultural contexts and the political contexts that influence the textual and visual content of the manuscript itself. Furthermore, this article has also provided a research framework using iconology methods that can be used to analyze various manuscripts, not limited to Ramayana manuscripts, but also literary manuscripts as a whole, both those produced in the subcontinent and in other parts of the world.

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