



Complication and challenge in the character of Rama: The case study of Kumbhakarna's riddle in King Rama I's Ramakien

Nipat Yamdate^a, Patcharapan Katakool^{b,*}

^a Department of Oriental Languages, Faculty of Archaeology, Silpakorn University, Bangkok 10200, Thailand

^b Department of Thai Language, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University, Bangkok 10900, Thailand

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Abstract

By studying the narrative presented in Kumbhakarna's riddle episode from King Rama I's Ramakien as a case study, this research paper aims to unveil the complications and challenges in the character of Rama, the protagonist of the dramatic composition. As a result, the riddle could be interpreted as arising out of the complication or the conflict between propriety and morality. This complication affected Rama's thought and decision-making process, which can be seen from the depiction of a situation where Rama cannot answer the riddle. Such failure significantly shakes Rama's image as an incarnation and affects the literary text in terms of character creation but provides a powerful literary device opening up a hermeneutical situation for readers and audiences to have more freedom in interpreting and reflecting on the complications in the character. Firstly, Kumbhakarna's riddle, which Rama could not decipher, challenges Rama's status as the incarnation of a god who possesses divine intelligence. After Kumbhakarna, Rama is instead a mere human being. Secondly, the riddle reveals a critical tension between the positive valuation of knowledge and morality, and the negative valuation represented by intellectual corruption and moral depravity, in which the Thai poet was keen on conveying the duality, at once appreciable and condemnable, in the characters.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: patcharapan.k@ku.th (P. Katakool).

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Introduction

Among the Thai literary heritages, King Rama I's *Ramakien* is one of the dramatic compositions that is regarded as national literature (Fine Arts Department, 2015). This composition, with 116 Thai manuscript books (สมุดไทย), is the longest among the *Ramakien* versions in Thailand. The commissioner, the first King of the Chakri dynasty, gave precedence to the praise of the glory of Rama¹, the delicacy of the literary composition, the detail of characters to support the theme, i.e., 'delusion' and 'ignorance', and the conveying of ethical values. Royal poets, literary scholars and partly the king himself composed the literary work, by the commission of King Rama I, around 2340 BE (1797 AD), as stated in the beginning of the play: "...กระวีวิธหลายหลาก รุ่มลากลากหลาย ฉันท์ นิพนธ์โคลงกาพย์กลอน ภูธรดําริดารัตน์ จัดจ้องทำนองนุก ไตรดาญค นิทาน ตำนานเนื่องเรื่องรามเกียรติ์ เบียนบรรณอักษรพิณาศ..." (Fine Arts Department, 1997) [Translation: Poets, who specialize in prosody and literary composition, by the King's address, composed the epic of Treta Yuga, the *Ramakien*, a story of the persecution of all enemy, the evil yakshas.].

The King's *Ramakien* has played a significant role in reawakening the cultural consciousness in Thai society during the early Rattanakosin period, as pointed out by Sotanasathien (1983) about the context of composition that: "... in the midst of crisis in the country, it was imperative for the King to establish the security of this new city with a variety of instruments. Such an instrument is literature, which is a great way of conveying ideas to society, especially to the elites that consisted of royal family and nobles." The main point is that in comparing between the versions of *Ramakien* in Thailand, King Rama I's version is the only one that represent a well round character of Rama (*Phra Ram*, in Thai), and that the work affirmed itself as the standardization of the literary composition and of the characters of the story. It also reflects the motif of raising awareness and cultivating the audience according to the normativity laid down.

Rama is the most important character in the epic of *Ramakien*. Rama has been depicted as an incarnation of Vishnu (*Phra Narai*, in Thai). The Hindus respect Rama with reverence, naming him "*Shri Rama*" and believe that he is the seventh out of ten avatars of Vishnu or Narayana (Prapandvidya, 2005). When the story of Rama has been adopted into the cultures of Southeast Asian countries,

its ideology, theme, and character's motif have also been absorbed into the taste and cultural consciousness of local readers and audiences. Rama's character has been in the hearts of people for a long time and the adoption of the narrative has also been integrated into Thai society, blended in with the regime of the Thai elite. The characters such as Rama are therefore an exorbitant cultural heritage.

Rama has many merits, e.g., as the crown prince, the heir apparent of King Dasharatha (*Thotsarot*, in Thai) of Ayodhya city, he is a good son, being obedient and respecting his father's authority; as a "good elder brother", being respectful to his siblings; as a good husband, committing to the marital monogamy, being faithful to his wife, Sita (*Sida*, in Thai); and as a good king, being kind, benevolent, and exercising righteously his authority, etc. (Poonsap & Banklouy, 1982) Rama also has many characteristics as of a "human" being, that is a fallible being that effaces at times the image of an "incarnation of a God, an "Omnibenevolent" being (Dolprasit, 1998). Rama in this sense is ill-tempered, showing the traits of melancholy person, being fearful of his own destiny, proneness to anger, emotional, erratic, and at times representing a silly and laughable character.

What is interesting is: how does the depiction of Rama as a human being, in a negotiating literary situation, critically destabilize the distinction between the good and the evil of the character? To answer the questions, the narrative of an episode in the *Ramakien*, version of King Rama I, should be quoted as a case study, namely, the episode when Kumbhakarna (*Kumphakan*, in Thai) poses a riddle challenging the status of Rama as an avatar. In terms of character background, Kumbhakarna is the second son of king Pulastya (*Lustian*, in Thai) and queen Kaikashi (*Ratchada*, in Thai); brother of Ravana (*Thotsakan*, in Thai) as well as of Vibhishana (*Phiphek*, in Thai), Dushan (*Thut*, in Thai), Khara (*Khon*, in Thai), Trishira (*Trisian*, in Thai), and Shurpanakha (*Sammanakkha*, in Thai). Thai poets have portrayed Kumbhakarna as virtuous, an upright person who speaks and handles affairs honestly. This depiction is different from that of Ramayana, the Indian source of Thai *Ramakien*, in which the Kumbhakarna character has been depicted as evil and relentless (Singto, 1974). In *Ramakien*, Kumbhakarna has been attributed as intelligent. This can be seen from the role of Kumbhakarna as posing an enigmatic riddle to challenge Rama and his followers to ponder the answer.

¹ As the name of the Thai version of the epic implied, that is, "*Rama-kirti*" [รามเกียรติ์], which literally means the glory or the dignity of Rama.

This research paper aims at answering two main questions: (1) How is the riddle of Kumbhakarna important to Rama's status? As the stake of this challenge is that Rama's capability to decipher the riddle of Kumbhakarna means, in the eyes of Kumbhakarna, that Rama possesses the power of Vishnu, and hence he is the incarnation of the omniscient god who has insight into all three worlds. Anyway, as the narrative of the episode depicts Rama remaining in silence, this first question arises, i.e., how do we interpret the image of Rama who could not answer and recognize the significance of the riddle through the eyes of Kumbhakarna?; and (2) What is behind the riddle of Kumbhakarna? Is it possible that Thai poets have relied on such character, as well as of the character's backgrounds and motifs, as a medium to challenge readers and audiences to open-ended interpretations, that is, to have more freedom in the reflection upon the complex characterization of Rama?.

Methodology

The research "Complication and Challenge in the Character of Rama: The Case Study of Kumbhakarna's Riddle in King Rama I's *Ramakien*" is qualitative research. The researcher uses the documentary research methodology and presents the research's findings in the form of analytical description, with the following steps: data collection, analysis, and presentation of the research findings.

Data Collection

1. Studying of documents and researches concerning the *Ramakien*, dramatic composition, version of King Rama I, from the contemporary period of the composition. (June–August 2021)

2. Close reading of King Rama I's *Ramakien*, collecting and categorizing the complicated details of how the figures of Rama, Kumbhakarna and relating character were characterized? How Thai poets created the narrative to provide such hermeneutic situation in reflecting upon the complicate characterization? And finally, compiling the findings into the research paper (August–October 2021).

Analysis

Researcher uses the close reading method to read and interpret the behaviour, role, and discourse of the characters Rama and Kumbhakarna with the other main protagonists and antagonists of King Rama I's *Ramakien* story. The researcher uses the criticism of the literary

study's methodology to identify the subject matter of conflictual dialogues between the characters, and to analyze the context and details which led the text to present a profound hermeneutical situation.

Results and Discussion

Findings and Presentation of the Research's Findings

Studying the complication and challenge that Rama's Character faced in trying to answer Kumbhakarna's riddle reveals the complexity underlying the root of the riddle, that is the conflict between propriety and morality. This complexity shakes Rama's thought and decision-making process, and itself became the riddle that tested Rama's virtue. The study also reveals that the literary text shows the duality of the character's intellection between the state of benightedness and the divine intelligence of a noble avatar, by depicting the incapability of Rama to answer the riddle. Can Rama answer the riddle? As the text does not let anyone know if he can solve the riddle, he is then accused as the Kumbhakarna has suspected, of not being an avatar. In any case, because one main purpose of Rama is to preserve his own "dignity" and "pride" as an avatar of Vishnu, the complication presents itself as literary riddles for this article to answer. First, what is the meaning of the riddle? Second, how did Rama respond to such riddle? And finally, is Rama depicted as a human being with an overlaid image of a deity?

1. Kumbhakarna's Riddle?

1.1 The Motif of the Riddle

Kumbhakarna's riddle arose in the conceptual conflict between social propriety and loyalty to the bond of family or blood ties. In the text, Ravana pushed Kumbhakarna to fight Rama despite the fact that Kumbhakarna disagreed with Ravana's action of abducting Sita from Rama. Kumbhakarna suggested that Ravana should return Sita to Rama to end the trouble. "พระองค์จงส่งนางไป ให้แก่พระรามผู้สามี ก็จะได้สันติเสียศึกภัยพาล ไม่วุ่นวายได้เบื่องบพทศรี" [Translation: Your Majesty, you should return Sita to Rama, her rightful husband. (And by this action) the war could come to an end. No more importunity and irritation.]. But Ravana did not listen. Ravana's responses show tenacity and egocentric traits. Alleging that Sammanakkha (*Shurpanakha*) was severely attacked by Rama, Ravana did not want to be friends with him. Kumbhakarna did not agree with that and tried to reason with him that the flirting with Rama by Sammanakkha was an inappropriate

act which ultimately led to the war. This inappropriate behaviour is conveyed in the following: “อันน้องของเรานี้นักทรลักษณ์เกี้ยวขายให้ขายหน้า ชั่วชาติกว่าหญิงทั้งโลกา แล้วกลับมาว่าเอาแต่ดี พระองค์เชื่อฟังคำมัน ให้เสียธรรมเสียศักดิ์เสียศรี สงครามจึงตามถึงบุรี เพราะอื้อปรีภัยจึงไร” (Fine Arts Department, 1997) [Translation: Our sister (Sammanakkha) is immoral in having a bad habit of flirting with men. This puts us to shame. Having done this made her worse than any woman in the world. Still, she lies and turns evil into good. Believing in her words makes you lose your virtue and dignity. Finally, war happened because of this vile woman.].

The disapproval of Sammanakkha's conduct caused Ravana to be angry and to complain that Kumbhakarna should not be born as his brother. Hence the disagreement was considered as not showing empathy to his own sibling. Taking side with his sibling, such as Sammanakkha, to the point of overlooking his own mistake is the characteristics of Ravana. As observed by Puckadhiom (1999) he is loyal and feels a strong connection with his own siblings, not just Sammanakkha, but also to Phiphek, who should be convicted of treason and be executed. But Ravana has a strong bond with him and cannot kill him. In this sense, Ravana is an example of a person who blindly loves his brothers and sisters more than paying attention to the right and wrong of their actions. Kumbhakarna too, despite trying to protest the arguable decisions of his own brother but, in the end, with loyalty and love towards him, agreed to go to war with Rama. However, Kumbhakarna's engagement in the warfare was different from other giants. Kumbhakarna did not use physical strength to fight but used intelligence to attack Rama. And this power of intelligence is the use of his riddle to challenge the worth of Rama.

1.2 The Confrontation between Kumbhakarna and Phiphek and the Posing of the Riddle for Rama

Phiphek explains to Kumbhakarna the truth that Rama actually is an avatar of Vishnu, and the abduction of Sita (Lakshmi) from Rama is considered an insult to the deity. But Kumbhakarna did not believe in Phiphek's words because in his opinion Vishnu has four hands, holding a Tri, Katha, Chakra, and Conch, resting on the great Naga (*Sheshanaga*) throne at the sea of milk (*Kshira Sagara*). But Rama, in having only two hands, armed with a bow and arrow, roaming the forest with monkeys (*Vanorn*) as partisans, is only a man, that is, in Kumbhakarna's eyes, the contrast between the god and man, Vishnu and Rama.

Phiphek continued to negotiate with Kumbhakarna that if he has the army retreat, Rama will give the city of Lanka (*Longka*, in Thai) to him. Kumbhakarna condemned Phiphek as a traitor and disapproved of the

negotiation, and saw that it was unjustifiable for the city of Longka to become the possession of Phiphek or Khumphakan. It is worth considering this condemnation. After all, wasn't Phiphek aware of Rama's deception? From this aspect, Phiphek, a marvelous astrologer, was portrayed as naive and foolish, contradicting the image of a wise and well-informed person. In responding to all these spurious characterizations, Kumbhakarna poses a riddle challenging Rama to answer as follows: “แม่นจริงเหมือนมึงมายกยอ ก็แจ้งในข้อปริศนา คือชี้โศกหญิงโหดมารยา ช่างวารีขายพรชน ถ้าว่าเป็นองค์พระจักรกฤษณ์ ก็จะได้คิดแก้ไขไม่ขัดสน ตัวผู้มีฤทธิ์รณ จะเลิกพลคืนเข้าไประาณี” [Translation: If what you (Phiphek) said is true, he (Rama) could then solve this riddle: ‘Who were the foolish clergyperson and the wicked woman? Who were the unruly behemoth and the treacherous man?’. If it is true that he is the great Vishnu, he will easily solve the riddle. And then I will retreat (the troops) back to my hometown.]. Portrayed in this context, Phiphek is the messenger bringing back Kumbhakarna's riddle to Rama. An interesting point from the conversation between Phiphek and Kumbhakarna is to demonstrate that, while Phiphek refers to Rama as an incarnation of a god who aims to subdue evil, for Kumbhakarna, Rama is no god, but only human, having just two hands, walking mundanely in the forest with his monkey soldiers. In addition, if Rama is really a god, he should be able to answer this ingenious riddle. For this reason, it can be said that Kumbhakarna's riddle is not merely challenging the reception of Rama as Vishnu Avatar. More importantly, it is a challenge of his wisdom that deserves to be regarded for a divine avatar.

2. Rama and his Benightedness and the Trickery to get the Answer

Kumbhakarna's riddle that challenges Rama to answer is rhetoric. Contemplating the complicated rhetorical questions, Rama is in a state of perplexity. The narrative in this episode gives a picture of an aporia, an impasse, depicting the situation of one who is overwhelmed with thoughts. As in the text: “ได้ฟังปริศนา กุมภกรรณ ทรงธรรมนิ่งนึกตรึกไป เห็นเป็นโง่ทวนติดต้อ จะสมข้อปริศนาก็หาไม่ ให้เขียนนวนจนในพระทัย” (Fine Arts Department, 1997) [Translation: After Rama had listened to Kumpakarna's riddle, seeing that it was rhetoric he is unable to solve it lingered in an unenlightened state.] Surrounded by a large number of acolytes, Rama addressed this riddle to the *Vanara* (*Vanorn*, the ‘monkeys’, in Thai) and Phiphek, whom Rama regarded as wise, a sage, to help him find the answer. But no one could enlighten him. Instead, the solution was to send Angada (*Ongkot*, in Thai) to trick

Kumbhakarna to answer his riddle himself. From the point of view of Rama and of his acolytes, “tricking” or “deceiving” the one “who poses the riddle” is fair and appropriate. Angada tries to persuade Kumbhakarna to believe that Rama knows all the answers, but regarding it as a rhetorical statement, not a true worthy intellectual challenge. Therefore, Kumbhakarna should declare the full meaning of his riddle, for them to be able to compare with what Rama has deciphered. Being aware of the trick, Kumbhakarna anyhow gives the answers: (1) Being morally corrupt, abducting the wife of the other, the unruly behemoth is Ravana; (2) Being negligent, imprudent, even his own wife could not be protected, leaving her alone in the forest, the foolish clergyperson is Rama, the husband of a young woman who was abducted by an unruly person. When this clergyman could not find his wife, he had to wander to different places, causing the war that creates chaos to all around him; (3) The wicked woman is Sammanakkha. Too wicked, incomparable to any women, she flirted with men without being ashamed, causing great misery; and (4) the treacherous man is Phiphek, taking the side of the enemy and being ungrateful to all his brothers and sisters, his own family.

Contemplating this riddle, “ชี้ผิด หึงโหดมีมารยา ข้างงารี และชายทรชน” [Translation: “*The imprudent clergyperson, the wicked woman, the unruly behemoth, and the treacherous man.*”], with reference to the literary depiction of Rama’s state of perplexity, being in silence, not responding to the riddle, is it true that Rama does not know the answer? Otherwise, if he could decipher it, why does he not respond? In any of such cases, the riddle could be interpreted as a literary device to portray a complicated picture of the character’s mentality and sentiment, which arises from the dialectical opposition between the image of a noble and formidable deity and the image of a human being prevailed by the enemy’s wisdom.

3. Rama as human being and the contradicting virtues

According to the narrative of the *Ramakien*, King Rama I’s composition, Rama, the main protagonist of the story, is an avatar of Vishnu. Before the incarnation, he previously resided in heaven. At that time, *Nonthok* (or ‘*Jaya*’ according to the *Bhagavata Purana*), the then Ravana, was a gatekeeper having the duty of washing the feet of gods. Instead of doing that, he challenged the power of Vishnu, bringing about the incarnation as a human, Rama, with two hands. And *Nonthok*, incarnated as a powerful giant (*Yaksha*), Ravana, with ten heads and twenty hands. Throughout the text, poets emphasized the image of Rama as Vishnu by calling or identifying him as

an incarnation or directly as Vishnu. The antagonists of the story also recognized his true identity. But in the case of *Khumphakan*, the recognition occurred at the end of his life.

Challenged by Kumbhakarna’s riddle, Rama’s silence is due to his perplexity in deciphering it. Even his acolytes, such as *Phiphek*, who is intelligent and wise, could not enlighten him. And, as the riddle turned out to be a condemnation addressing him directly as an imprudent person (‘the foolish clergyman’), this literary situation creates an opportunity for the characterization of the Rama figure as a well rounded personality, i.e., to be not only an omniscient divinity, but as a fallible human being, lacking the divine intelligence and excellency in ethical virtues. Such literary situation could also be seen from several other episodes, for example, the episode when Rama had been tricked to believed that *Sita* was dead. In this episode, Rama was more preoccupied with love than to behave consciously, being unaware of the deception, which led finally to a tragic situation. Then again, in the episode when he certainly believed that *Lakshmana* was going to die. The narrative is depicting him as being deeply saddened. Or also, when he was angry with his acolytes who were prevailed by the enemy, he scolded them with rage.

The studying of complication and challenge in the characterization of Rama presented in the narrative of the episode of Kumbhakarna’s riddle shows that poets may intended to portray the image of Rama as a human being who was overwhelmed by the riddle, as a literary device to create a narrative that removes the one and only identification of the character with a god avatar. Most importantly, the interpretative possibility that Rama’s divinity was more or less removed plays an important role in embellishing the episode as being more colorful and realistic.

A complication arising from Kumbhakarna’s riddle, in addition to reflecting the negative image of Rama as an ignorant human being, who is unable to answer the riddle of the virtuous giant, is that Rama’s silence and thoughtlessness also open up a debate on the possibility of a resolute separation, via irreversible distinction, between, on the one hand, the desirable, positive virtues that the text would like to convey, namely, wisdom and morality, and, on the other hand, the negative virtues, cunning and the immoral manners which are hidden in the behavior, speech and thoughts of the protagonists, virtuous characters, that the author inserted into the text, e.g., in the event that Rama tried to trick Kumbhakarna to answer his own riddle.

We could say that Rama has an identity of Vishnu as a background, but not as an infallible, perfect being. The character has also been portrayed as imprudent, ignorant and at times a figure who could not control

his own sentiments. For these latter traits, Rama is not different from any other human being in the actual world. The attribution of Vishnu in the characterization of Rama is then only a back story, but mostly Rama could be seen as a figure who has struggles or complications in life and fate just like all other human beings.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This research paper is an attempt to study the complications and challenges in the character of Rama, examining particularly the narrative shown in the episode of Kumbhakarna's riddle in King Rama I's *Ramakien* version. It can be seen now that the significance of this complicated riddle is to make Rama ponder on the characters who were responsible for negative behaviors, that is, the foolish clergyperson, the wicked woman, the unruly behemoth, and the treacherous man. In other word, the riddle challenges Rama to examine not only a general ethical issue of the other individuals but also his own conduct that led to the conflictual situation and that complicated the merit of being a divine incarnation. For this subject matter, Thai poets have a keen sense in creating a complicated narrative that allows the audience to be able to recognize the complication in Rama's character, questioning the "image" of an incarnation of "Vishnu", conveyed now as a fallible man, because besides the fact that Rama himself turns out to be one of the four persons appearing in the riddle, he is also indistinguishable from these other characters with reprehensible behavior. Even if Rama knew the answer to Kumbhakarna's riddle but just remained in silence to preserve honor and dignity, or that he didn't understand at all the hidden significance of the riddle, the literary complexity of the episode from King Rama I's *Ramakien* sets a riddle not only to complicate the divine status of Rama, but also to present a challenging narrative for the audience to reflect upon the intellection of Rama, now not clearly as possessing a divine intelligence but also turning out to be just an ignorant or a foolish man, conveyed in his response to this rhetorical and ethical problem.

In addition, Kumbhakarna's riddle reveals the complication within the text, i.e., the questioning of the resolute separation between the positive values, namely, wisdom and morality, and the negative values, namely, intellectual and moral corruption (cunning and immorality), that the poet put into the text. At a point, it seems that the evil characters possess positive virtues, and, inversely, the virtuous characters take on undesirable traits. It can be said that Thai poets keenly present the problematics of dualism, i.e., the absolute distinction of

contradicting values, for the readers to contemplate and further interpret.

However, besides the episode of Kumbhakarna's riddle, there are still several other episodes in the *Ramakien*, King Rama I's version, that reflect the characterization of Rama as human being, complicating the divine characteristics of an incarnation, e.g., the episodes when Lakshmana is defeated by Indrajit, and when Rama had been tricked to believed that Sita was dead. In all of these episodes, there are still many aspects that should be studied in detail to further point out the profound literary aspects and the embedded values and beliefs that have a significance role in acculturating and cultivating the audience according to the normativity laid down by this version of *Ramakien*.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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