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The Shadow of Arrogance: A Psycho-Literary Study of Ravana's Behavioural Complexity in the Ramayana

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Abstract

In the Indian epic Ramayana, Ravana, the ten-headed ruler of Lanka, is typically represented as the epitome of wickedness and conceit. A closer look, however, reveals a very complex personality moulded by moral contradictions, intellectual prowess, and intense passion. This study uses an interdisciplinary approach that combines literary analysis and behavioural psychology to examine the behavioural complexities of Ravana. To understand the reasons for his behaviour, psychological frameworks including narcissistic personality theory, Freudian psychoanalysis, and the Big Five personality traits are used. In order to chart Ravana's psychological development from a learnt scholar and devoted Shiva follower to a tragic anti-hero, the study simultaneously critically examines literary depictions of the character, especially in Valmiki's Ramayana and its subsequent retellings. The study contends that Ravana represents the internal struggle between dharma (duty) and ahamkara (ego) by fusing behavioural science with literary narrative. This provides significant insights into the nature of ambition, the human psyche, and the moral difficulties present in epic literature.

Keywords: *Ravana, Ramayana, Behavioural Psychology, Literature, Epic, Psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud*

Introduction

The ten-headed demon king Ravana from the Indian epic Ramayana has long been associated with wickedness, conceit, and moral failing. Ravana is frequently seen through the prism of villainy as the adversary who kidnaps Sita, standing in for the forces of evil in opposition to Lord Rama's personification of virtue. But such a representation is simplistic and ignores his character's nuance. Ravana is a complex person with intelligence, passion, ambition, and internal turmoil; he is not just a representation of evil. By using behavioural psychology frameworks to examine Ravana's actions, feelings, and inner conflicts, this essay aims to examine the psychological foundations of his persona. At the heart of Ravana's character lies an intense psychological complexity that transcends the binary moralistic framework of good versus evil. *Valmiki's Ramayana* (2006) portrays Ravana as a learned scholar and an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva, juxtaposing his intellectual prowess and spiritual devotion with his eventual fall from grace

due to unchecked ego and ambition[1]. Such a portrayal invites an exploration of Ravana's psychology through various theories of human behavior. Freud's psychoanalytic theory, for instance, offers a lens through which one can examine Ravana's internal conflict between his id (desires) and ego (rationality)[2]. Furthermore, the Big Five personality traits model allows for an understanding of Ravana's behavioral tendencies, such as his openness to experience, extraversion, and low agreeableness. Additionally, Ravana's narcissistic traits—his grandiosity, sense of entitlement, and lack of empathy—underscore the role of narcissism in his psychological profile[3]. This study aims to bridge the gap between literary interpretation and psychological analysis, offering a new perspective on Ravana's character. By analyzing his behavior from both a psychological and literary standpoint, this research contends that Ravana represents a conflict between *dharma* (righteous duty) and *ahamkara* (ego), which mirrors the universal human struggle with ambition, moral ambiguity, and the consequences of unchecked desires [4]. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the paper seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on how mythological characters can serve as a mirror to the human psyche and its complexities.

Literature Survey

Understanding Ravana's behavioral complexity requires an interdisciplinary approach that draws from both literary studies and psychological theory. Existing literature on *Ramayana* and its characters provides diverse interpretations—from religious and moral analyses to modern reimaginings. This chapter explores the evolution of Ravana's portrayal in classical and contemporary literature, and discusses psychological studies that can be applied to his behavior, including psychoanalytic theory, personality frameworks, and narcissism.

Valmiki's *Ramayana* remains the most authoritative version of the epic and presents Ravana as a brilliant but arrogant king whose downfall is a result of his unchecked ego and lust[4]. He is portrayed as a powerful ruler, a Shiva devotee, and a scholar, yet his moral failings overshadow his virtues. In the Tamil version by Kamban (*Kamba Ramayanam*), Ravana's heroism is emphasized more vividly, suggesting a more tragic and sym-

thetic interpretation of his fall[5]. These early texts depict Ravana as complex and layered, providing fertile ground for behavioral analysis. Contemporary authors have reimagined Ravana in more empathetic ways. Neelakantan (2013), in *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, presents Ravana as a misunderstood anti-hero, highlighting the class and racial prejudices embedded in the original narrative [3]. Similarly, Amish Tripathi delves into Ravana's psychological motivations, portraying him as a product of trauma, ambition, and intense inner conflict. These retellings challenge the moral binary of good and evil and focus on Ravana's human struggles, thereby aligning with psychological inquiries into behavior, identity, and motivation[6].

Psychological interpretations of mythological figures are not new but remain underexplored in Indian scholarship. Carl Jung's theory of archetypes has often been used to examine characters like Krishna, Arjuna, and even Ravana as symbolic representations of universal psychic patterns[7]. The concept of the "shadow self"—the unconscious part of the personality that contains repressed weaknesses and desires—aligns closely with Ravana's behavior, especially in his resistance to self-awareness and control. Freud's psychoanalytic model provides another useful framework. Ravana's actions reflect the dominance of the id (pleasure-seeking impulses), with weak mediation by the ego and superego. His fixation on Sita and need for control demonstrate deep-seated libido drives and unresolved internal conflicts[8]. The Big Five personality traits model can also help to categorize Ravana's psychological profile; he scores high in openness and extraversion, but low in agreeableness and emotional stability[9].

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) offers another relevant lens. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.), individuals with NPD display grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy traits that align closely with Ravana's depiction[10]. His inability to accept counsel, his exaggerated sense of self-importance, and his obsession with control over others reflect a classic narcissistic structure. Scholars have also explored how mythological

leaders like Ravana can serve as cautionary figures demonstrating the psychological costs of unchecked ambition and pride [11]

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this paper will draw on psychological theories to analyze Ravana's behavioral complexities, moral contradictions, and psychological conflicts in the *Ramayana*. By integrating psychoanalytic theory, narcissism, and personality psychology, the paper seeks to provide a multidimensional understanding of Ravana's psyche. These theories are particularly relevant for understanding how the character of Ravana can be viewed beyond mere villainy, instead portraying him as a tragic anti-hero influenced by deep internal struggles.

Psychoanalytic Theory (Sigmund Freud)

Psychoanalysis offers an in-depth exploration of unconscious drives, unresolved conflicts, and the dynamics between the id, ego, and superego. According to Freud (1923), human behavior is shaped by three parts of the psyche:

- The Id: The pleasure-seeking and instinctual part of the personality, which Ravana often embodies through his desire for control, power, and indulgence in lust (for Sita).
- The Ego: The rational part of the psyche, which is responsible for balancing desires with reality. Ravana, despite his intellectual brilliance and devout nature, often fails to regulate his ego, particularly when he becomes consumed by arrogance and desire.

The Superego: The moral compass of the personality. Ravana's constant disregard for dharma and his hubristic behavior demonstrate the failure of his superego to dominate his desires, thus leading to his moral downfall.

By applying Freud's model, Ravana's actions, including his abduction of Sita and defiance of Rama (the embodiment of dharma), can be interpreted as a result of a dominant id and a weak superego, leading to unchecked desires and aggression.

Narcissistic Personality Theory (DSM-5)

Narcissism, as outlined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th edition, DSM-5), is characterized by grandiosity, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy. Ravana displays several traits associated with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD):

- ♦ Grandiosity: Ravana believes he is invincible, deserving of unlimited power, and superior to other beings, especially gods. His arrogance is often apparent in his refusal to acknowledge the power of Rama and his obsession with acquiring Sita.
- ♦ Lack of Empathy: Ravana shows little regard for the well-being of others, particularly his abducted wife Sita, whom he imprisons in his palace. He is also indifferent to the suffering his actions cause to his own people, showing a clear detachment from moral responsibility.

Need for Admiration: Ravana seeks validation through his power and accomplishments, such as his conquests and alliances with other powerful figures, but his self-esteem is fragile, and he fails to recognize his limitations.

Through this lens, Ravana can be analyzed as a figure whose ego is constantly inflated and requires constant validation, pushing him to engage in destructive behaviors without concern for others.

The Big Five Personality Traits Model

The Big Five Personality Traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992) offer a useful framework to analyze Ravana's behavior across five broad dimensions:

- Openness to Experience: Ravana is highly open to new ideas and experiences. His deep knowledge of the Vedas, mastery of astrology, and devotion to Lord Shiva highlight his intellectual curiosity and creativity.
- Conscientiousness: Ravana exhibits low conscientiousness, particularly in his inability to regulate his behavior and adhere to moral standards. His impulsive decisions, such as abducting Sita and waging war against Rama, demonstrate his disregard for long-term consequences.
- Extraversion: Ravana displays high levels of

extraversion through his dominant social presence, confidence, and leadership abilities. He is an influential figure who commands respect, but this often veers into narcissism.

- Agreeableness: Ravana has low agreeableness, often seen in his tendency to disregard the needs and feelings of others, including his own family and subjects. His willingness to harm others to satisfy his desires, such as in the case of Sita, demonstrates his inability to empathize with others.

Neuroticism: Ravana's high levels of neuroticism manifest in his emotional instability, particularly his volatile reactions when his authority is challenged or when he feels disrespected. His insecurity often fuels aggressive actions, leading to his eventual downfall.

Through the Big Five model, Ravana's complex personality can be mapped, highlighting his strengths and weaknesses in a more nuanced manner, which contributes to understanding his moral and psychological conflicts.

Archetypal Psychology (Carl Jung)

Carl Jung's theory of archetypes—universal symbols that are shared across cultures and time—can be applied to understand Ravana as the embodiment of the Shadow archetype. The Shadow represents the unconscious parts of the personality that are repressed or denied. In Ravana's case, his Shadow manifests in his obsession with power and control, as well as his unaddressed vulnerabilities and insecurities. His refusal to acknowledge his limitations and his continuous drive for more power reflect his denial of the Shadow self.

Additionally, Ravana's complex nature aligns with Jung's Self archetype, representing the integration of the conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche. Ravana's journey can be seen as one where his failure to integrate his Shadow (through his pride and inability to change) leads to his tragic end.

The theoretical framework for this study integrates psychoanalysis, narcissistic personality theory, the Big Five personality model, and archetypal psychology to offer a comprehensive psychological analysis of Ravana. These psychological theories

provide a lens through which we can view Ravana not simply as a villain but as a tragic figure shaped by his desires, flaws, and internal conflicts. By applying these frameworks, this paper will explore the multifaceted dimensions of Ravana's character, highlighting the psychological underpinnings of his actions and offering insights into the universal human condition reflected in the ancient narrative.

Character analysis of Ravana

Ravana, the principal antagonist of the *Ramayana*, is traditionally portrayed as the embodiment of evil, pride, and unbridled ambition. However, a deeper psychological and literary exploration reveals a more nuanced character—an individual of great intellect, complex emotions, spiritual inclinations, and moral contradictions. This chapter provides a detailed psychological and literary character analysis of Ravana using Freudian psychoanalysis, the Big Five personality model, Narcissistic Personality Disorder framework, and Jungian archetypes.

Ravana as a Learned Scholar and Devotee

Ravana is depicted in *Valmiki's Ramayana* as an erudite Brahmin with mastery over Vedic scriptures, music, and the arts. His intense devotion to Lord Shiva, exemplified in the composition of the *Shiva Tandava Stotram*, reflects his spiritual depth and emotional sensitivity. This spiritual side of Ravana complicates his portrayal as a mere villain. His scholarship and devotion suggest high levels of Openness to Experience, one of the Big Five personality traits, indicating a curious, imaginative, and intellectual personality.

The Rise of Arrogance and Narcissism

Despite his wisdom, Ravana's growing sense of invincibility leads to narcissistic behaviors. According to the DSM-5 criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is marked by grandiosity, an excessive need for admiration, and a lack of empathy—traits strongly evident in Ravana. His abduction of Sita, despite repeated warnings from his advisors and family members, reveals his sense of entitlement and disregard for others' autonomy, a hallmark of narcissism.

Additionally, Ravana's grandiosity is showcased in his self-perception as the supreme ruler and conqueror of the three worlds. His inflated self-image and refusal to accept Rama's moral and spiritual superiority reinforce his psychological detachment from reality—what Freudians might consider the dominance of the id over the ego and superego.

Ravana's internal struggle can also be interpreted through Freud's structural model of the psyche. His id—the seat of desire and instinct—drives his lust for Sita and hunger for power. His ego, which should mediate these desires with reality, is weakened by his overconfidence and impulsive behavior. Meanwhile, his superego, which represents internalized moral standards, appears underdeveloped or overridden by pride. Thus, Ravana becomes a classic case of ego dysfunction, where his higher reasoning fails to control primal urges, resulting in catastrophic decisions.

Inner Conflict and Moral Ambiguity

However, Ravana is not without moral conflict. His interactions with Sita are mostly non-violent and ceremonial, suggesting a lingering awareness of dharma (righteous conduct), even as he violates it. This contradiction makes Ravana a tragic anti-hero—a character whose downfall is as much due to internal failure as external circumstances.

The Shadow Archetype

Using Jungian analysis, Ravana can be seen as an embodiment of the Shadow archetype—the repressed aspects of the self (Jung, 1964). In the context of the *Ramayana*, Rama represents dharma and light, while Ravana personifies adharma and darkness. But the shadow is not inherently evil—it is simply the part of the psyche that is denied expression. Ravana's refusal to confront his limitations, his excessive pride, and his denial of defeat all reflect his inability to integrate his shadow. This failure leads to psychological fragmentation and ultimately his demise.

Personality Traits and Behavioral Complexity Using the Big Five Personality Traits model (Costa & McCrae, 1992), Ravana's character can be mapped as follows:

♦ Openness – High: Evident in his intellectual pursuits and spiritual practices.

♦ Conscientiousness – Low: Seen in his impulsive actions, disregard for consequences, and neglect of sage advice.

♦ Extraversion – High: Charismatic, dominant, and socially assertive.

♦ Agreeableness – Low: Uncooperative, vengeful, and lacking empathy.

Neuroticism – High: Emotionally unstable, easily angered, and defensive.

This combination of traits paints Ravana as a person of great potential who is ultimately undone by emotional reactivity and flawed self-perception.

Literary Evolution and Symbolism

Over centuries, Ravana's character has been adapted in diverse ways across cultures, such as in Kamban's *Tamil Ramavataram*, Tulsidas' *Ram-charitmanas*, and modern retellings like Amish Tripathi's *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta* (Tripathi, 2019). These texts often humanize Ravana, portraying him as a misunderstood genius, a fierce protector of his land, and a complex political figure. This literary evolution underscores the psychological richness of his character and its relevance in contemporary debates around villainy, moral relativism, and identity.

Ravana's character cannot be confined to the binaries of good and evil. He is a vivid example of behavioral complexity, shaped by a confluence of intellect, ego, devotion, and defiance. Through the lens of behavioral psychology, Ravana emerges as a cautionary figure—one who embodies the consequences of failing to regulate ambition, emotion, and desire. His story remains a powerful psychological mirror, offering insights into the struggles that define the human condition.

Conclusion

Ravana, the ten-headed king of Lanka, remains one of the most complex figures in Indian mythology and literature. Traditionally vilified as the antagonist of *Ramayana*, modern psychological and literary analyses reveal a character that defies simplistic categorization. This study attempted to uncover the layers of Ravana's behavioral complexity by integrating Freudian psychoanalysis, the Big Five personality traits, narcissistic personality theory, and literary interpretations from ancient and

modern texts.

Through Freudian theory, Ravana's internal struggle was understood as a conflict between the id, ego, and superego, where his impulsive desires (id) overshadowed reason and morality. His actions were also mapped through the Big Five model, showing high levels of openness and extraversion but low agreeableness and conscientiousness—highlighting the imbalance in his personality traits that drove his downfall. Additionally, narcissistic personality traits, such as grandiosity, a sense of entitlement, and lack of empathy, were pivotal in understanding his inability to perceive moral boundaries or acknowledge limitations.

From a literary perspective, Ravana emerges not as a flat villain, but a tragic anti-hero—one whose talents and virtues are eclipsed by hubris and emotional excess. Various adaptations of *Ramayana* across languages and regions, including reinterpretations by Kamban and contemporary authors, emphasize his scholarly achievements, devotion, and political leadership, thereby humanizing him and reflecting the cultural complexity of morality and leadership.

This research also examined Ravana as a Jungian Shadow archetype, revealing that his destructive tendencies are symbolic of the darker, unacknowledged aspects of the human psyche. He represents the internal conflict between ego and dharma, reason and desire, pride and wisdom—tensions that are not only mythological but deeply psychological.

While this paper draws from classical and modern textual representations, it is limited to literary and theoretical analysis without empirical data. Future studies may explore the impact of Ravana's image on cultural psychology, gender perspectives (especially through Sita's lens), and comparative analyses with other mythological anti-heroes globally. Ultimately, Ravana is not just a mythic figure—he is a reflection of the human psyche's battle between righteousness and ego, insight and delusion. In revisiting his character through both psychology and literature, we gain not only a deeper understanding of Ravana but also a more profound awareness of the universal human struggle for balance between ambition and humility.

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