



The Wounded King's Accusation: Narrative Management of Ethical Instability in the Vali Episode across Ramayana Traditions

Ms Saishilpa Janamanchi

Research Scholar,
UCASS, Osmania University.
sraavyashilpa@gmail.com

Prof. Y. L. Srinivas

Vice Chancellor,
Sammakka Sarakka Tribal Central University, Mulugu.
<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n3.32>

Abstract:

The Kishkindha Kanda contains one of the Valmiki Ramayana's most anxiously commented-upon scenes: Rama kills Vali from concealment, and Vali, mortally wounded, formally accuses him before dying. That question of justification has been argued for centuries. This paper asks a different one—how different traditions handle the accusation, how long they allow it to slow the narrative, and at what moral threshold each decides it can be set aside. Reading across seven retellings—Valmiki's Kishkindha Kanda, the NCERT Bal Ramkatha, Raghaveshananda's devotional text, Amar Chitra Katha, Pattanaik's The Book of Ram, Sagar's television Ramayan, and Neelakantan's Vanara—as well as digital spaces where sympathy for Vali circulates without institutional mediation, the paper traces how each tradition develops its own formal method for setting the accusation aside. Drawing on Jameson's concept of the political unconscious and Ramanujan's comparative framework, the paper proposes that the length of time each text keeps the accusation active is not merely a formal variable: it is a measure of the institution's capacity to absorb an ethically unresolved episode.

Keywords: Ramayana adaptations, Vali episode, narrative ethics, political unconscious, Dalit reinterpretation, mythological television.

Article History: Submitted-30/05/2026, Revised-12/06/2026, Accepted-22/06/2026, Published-30/06/2026.

Copyright vests with the author. Licensing: Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

I. The Structure of the Hidden Killing

The Kishkindha Kanda contains the episode in which Rama kills Vali from concealment during Vali's combat with Sugriva. The killing itself is brief. What follows occupies far more of the narrative. Wounded by Rama's arrow and brought to the ground, Vali addresses him directly, and the resulting exchange continues across several cantos before the narrative returns to its larger concerns.

Vali's response to the killing is unusually extended. Rather than reacting briefly before the narrative moves on, he addresses Rama directly and returns several times to the circumstances of his death. The speech repeatedly invokes the qualities for which Rama is known—his reputation for truthfulness, compassion, self-control, and righteous conduct—and places them beside the act that has just taken place. Vali's concern is not only that he has been killed but how he has been killed.

One image near the end of the speech has attracted particular attention. Vali compares Rama to “A yawning well with grass o'ergrown” (Griffith 1223). The image appears after a sequence of accusations concerning concealment and deception. A covered well looks safe until someone falls into it. In much the same way, Vali presents the hidden attack as something at odds with the public reputation that precedes Rama throughout the epic.

The accusation remains active for nearly ten cantos, beginning with the killing in Canto XVI and extending to the invocation of Fate in Canto XXV. Vali's formal challenge occupies Canto XVII and Rama's defence follows in XVIII. Tara's lament stretches across XIX and XX and introduces a different kind of pressure into the episode. By this point Vali has already yielded, yet Tara returns to the act itself: “And does no thrill of anguish run / Through the stern breast of Raghu's son, / Whose base hand dealt a coward's blow, / And smote thee fighting with thy foe?”

(Griffith 1241). The question comes from outside the exchange through which the dispute appeared to have been settled. The narrative continues to circle the event until Canto XXV before finally moving elsewhere. The duration is unusual. Ethical tensions elsewhere in the epic are often resolved more quickly than this.

Ramanujan's "Three Hundred Ramayanas" established the scale of the variation and the argument's basic premise: no single version holds prior authority, and each tradition carries its own logic (Ramanujan 22). What the scholarship that followed has done considerably less of is attend to the structural question—how the same difficult scene travels through different institutional contexts. The Vali episode has attracted sustained commentary, most of it organised around justification—was Rama right, do the dharmic arguments hold? The pacing question—how long the accusation remains active before each tradition finds a way past it—has not been the main frame. That is where this paper begins.

The discussion that follows begins from this difference in duration. Later Ramayana retellings do not all respond to the Vali episode in the same way, and some are much less interested in the accusation than the Valmiki text is. What varies from text to text is partly a matter of medium and audience. A children's adaptation has different pressures from a television serial or a contemporary novel. The amount of space available for the exchange changes accordingly. Looking at these differences makes it possible to ask not only how the accusation is handled, but how long it remains part of the narrative before attention shifts elsewhere.

Duration here is not merely a formal quality. Each tradition is unable to hold open what it is held to hold open as a result of institutional and ideological pressure. As Jameson describes the political unconscious, it is what narrative itself is unable to speak, what it must absorb, displace, or manage instead. How long Vali's accusation is held open measures the management itself.

II. Valmiki's Text: Juridical Patience and the Limits of Defence

Griffith's version is useful here for a basic reason: it preserves the structure of the scene faithfully. The Victorian poetic style grows laboured at points, but the narrative line is clear enough. The actual ambush is over quickly—Rama fires from the brush while Vali is locked in combat with Sugriva—but the text does not simply move past the killing. Instead, Valmiki allows the fallout to develop. In his final moments, Vali articulates the breach of ethics, Rama offers a formal defence, Tara gives voice to her grief, and the narrative attends to the political rupture at length. Several cantos pass before the narrative can proceed to Sugriva's coronation and the continuation of the search for Sita.

Vali's speech in Canto XVII is organised around a series of accusations directed at Rama. He begins by recalling the virtues for which Rama is known and then places those virtues beside the circumstances of the killing. Truthfulness, compassion, self-restraint, and royal conduct all become points of comparison. The speech repeatedly returns to the same issue: the discrepancy between Rama's public reputation and the manner in which Vali has been killed. Several specific complaints appear in the course of the exchange. Vali objects to being attacked from concealment, to being struck while engaged in another combat, and to being treated as an enemy despite having no direct quarrel with Rama.

One of the most frequently cited moments in the speech occurs near its conclusion. Vali compares Rama to "A yawning well with grass o'ergrown" (Griffith 1223). The image appears in the context of the discussion of concealment. A covered well gives no warning of danger until someone encounters it directly. The comparison allows Vali to express his sense that Rama's conduct is inconsistent with the moral reputation that precedes him throughout the epic.

Rama's response occupies the following canto. Several different lines of argument appear in succession. One concerns royal authority where Bharata governs on behalf of the Ikshvaku dynasty, and wrongdoing may therefore be punished beyond the immediate boundaries of Ayodhya. A second concerns Vali's treatment of Ruma. Rama cites the authority of Manu and presents Vali's relationship with his brother's wife as a punishable offence. A third concerns the obligation created by Rama's alliance with Sugriva. Having publicly promised assistance, he presents himself as bound to fulfil that commitment.

The final justification differs somewhat from the others. Rama argues that hunters routinely kill animals from concealment and that the method of the kill does not affect its legitimacy. Griffith reproduces the passage and comments upon it in a footnote. His response is unusually direct. He remarks that he finds it difficult to understand why Valmiki places this defence in Rama's mouth, particularly given the status Vali occupies elsewhere in the episode. Throughout the exchange Vali is treated not simply as an animal of the forest but as a ruler whose death has consequences for his family and kingdom. Griffith's discomfort with the passage has often been noted because it comes from an editor who is otherwise sympathetic to Rama.

The episode does not end with Rama's defence. Vali formally accepts Rama's explanation, but the narrative continues to return to the circumstances of the killing. Tara's lament occupies the next two cantos and revisits the same issue from a different perspective. Her grief is directed not only at Vali's death but at the manner in which it occurred. The question remains present even after the formal exchange between Rama and Vali has concluded.

When Rama speaks again in Canto XXV, the emphasis is different from the earlier defence. The discussion turns to Fate: "Yes, all obey the changeless laws / Of Fate the universal cause" (Griffith 1257). The appeal does not revisit the questions raised in the exchange with Vali. Instead,

the event is placed within a larger order that governs human action and suffering. Soon afterwards the narrative turns toward Sugriva's coronation and the continuation of Rama's search for Sita.

Canto XXV is the moral threshold—the point at which the text stops returning to the killing. The appeal to Fate provides the frame that Rama's defence in Canto XVIII could not.

This passage within the Kishkindha Kanda bears so much weight because the text insists on not hurrying past the ambush. Rather than presenting the killing as just another plot turn, the narrative compels us to see right into the heart of its ethical debris. We see Vali spend his dying moments tearing the morality of his killing to shreds, Rama give a weary legal defence, and Tara translate her grief into damning political charges. The story itself seems slow to move past this conflict, only slowly getting around to stitching together Sugriva's precarious new reign and planning the search for Sita.

This provides a useful point of comparison for the texts discussed in the following sections. Not all retellings devote the same amount of space to the episode. Some shorten the exchange considerably, while others retain only selected parts of it. The differences become clearer when the Valmiki version is used as a baseline.

III. The NCERT Bal Ramkatha: The Vali Episode in a Classroom Text

The Bal Ramkatha was published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training in 2006 as a supplementary Hindi reader for Class 6 students. In this version, the events leading from Rama's alliance with Sugriva to Sugriva's restoration are narrated in a condensed form. The Vali episode remains part of the story, but the exchange following the killing occupies only a short section of the text.

The episode remains recognisable, but it is considerably shorter than in the Kishkindha Kanda. Rama and Sugriva reach Kishkindha, the conflict with Vali resumes, and Rama kills him from concealment. Vali questions Rama's conduct and receives a reply. Soon afterwards the narrative turns toward Sugriva's coronation. Material that occupies several cantos in the Valmiki text is reduced here to a brief exchange.

A comparison with the Kishkindha Kanda helps show what has been retained and what has been omitted. In Valmiki's account, the episode continues after the killing through Vali's accusation, Rama's response, Tara's lament, and the later appeal to Fate. The Bal Ramkatha presents a much shorter sequence. Rama's justification centres on Vali's treatment of Ruma, but other parts of the exchange receive little or no attention. Tara's lament does not appear, and the discussion does not return repeatedly to the circumstances of the killing in the way it does in the Valmiki text.

This does not mean that the episode is removed altogether. Vali still raises a challenge and Rama still answers it. The exchange remains recognisable as part of the larger Ramayana tradition. What changes is the amount of narrative attention devoted to it. The discussion occupies only a short section of the text before the story proceeds to the restoration of Sugriva and the continuation of the plot.

The Bal Ramkatha is not just an unthinking container for the story. It is a state-sponsored children's reader, produced by the institution which produces the official national syllabus, aimed at a formal classroom audience aged eleven years. Institutional positioning is not irrelevant to the story's inclusion in, or time spent on, specific episodes. A text produced by an official institution cannot afford to keep an unsubstantiated charge hanging in the air for too long. One sees an

alteration of scale; the scale alteration indicates the sort of book the Bal Ramkatha is, an institutional product, whose institutional aim limits the scope it is able to maintain for the episode.

What changes is the amount of attention given to the aftermath of the killing. In the Valmiki text, the circumstances of Vali's death continue to occupy the narrative long after the act itself has taken place. In the Bal Ramkatha, the exchange is resolved much more quickly and the story proceeds to the next stage of the narrative. The accusation remains present, but it does not remain active for nearly as long as it does in the version used here as a point of reference.

IV. Swami Raghaveshananda: Devotional Reading and Narrative Resolution

Swami Raghaveshananda's version of Ramayana for Children greatly shortens Vali's story. Even prior to the firing of the arrow the author recaps the generic premise that set up the brothers' conflict, "hitting all the familiar marks of the cave encounter and Tara's protest." However, the most radical cutting occurs in the wake of Vali's death. As opposed to the tremendous, many-canto argument recorded in the original Kishkindha Kanda, the episode's resolution is drastically foreshortened: Rama states his defence, Vali accepts it, and the book resolves the whole question of ethics with little ceremony.

Before the killing itself, the text spends time recounting the background to the conflict between Vali and Sugriva. The cave episode, Sugriva's misunderstanding of what happened inside it, the closing of the entrance, and Tara's warning before the second combat are all included. These details occupy more space than the exchange that follows Vali's death.

The accusation itself, in Raghaveshananda's telling, goes further than the dharma question. Vali calls Rama unfit to be a king—and then makes an offer: "If you had wanted help against Ravana, you could have asked me, I would have brought him hand and foot bound and delivered

him to you” (Raghaveshananda 24). That is the charge that does not get taken up. The entire alliance with Sugriva, the killing—Vali is saying all of it was unnecessary. Rama could have come to him. The argument receives no answer.

Rama's reply goes to the issue of Ruma—the dharma owed a brother's wife—and moves from that directly to Vali's acceptance (24). The Ravana charge simply falls away. In the Valmiki text Rama assembles several defences in sequence; here there is one, and the other argument—the offer of Ravana bound, the alternative that would have made the killing unnecessary—is not revisited.

The discussion concludes quickly. After Rama's response, the text states that Vali recognised his mistake and entrusted his wife and son to Rama's care (24). The movement from accusation to acceptance occupies only a few lines. There is no extended return to the circumstances of the killing and no equivalent to Tara's later challenge in the Kishkindha Kanda.

V. Amar Chitra Katha's Rama: Visual Narrative and Narrative Reduction

Amar Chitra Katha's Rama (India Book House, Issue 504, 1997; reprinted 2005) includes the Vali episode in a highly compressed form. The narrative moves quickly from Rama's alliance with Sugriva to the conflict with Vali and the events that follow his death. The comic follows the broad outline familiar from the Ramcharitmanas, as Anant Pai notes in the introduction, but the exchange between Vali and Rama occupies very little space within the larger narrative.

The specific handling is visible in what the comic does not include. On pages 18 and 19, the story moves from Rama's alliance with Sugriva to Vali's death and then directly to the assembly of the monkey army (Pai 18–19). No speech bubble is assigned to Vali's accusation. The exchange

between Vali and Rama that occupies several cantos in the Valmiki text is simply absent from the comic's visual economy. The space that would carry the dialogue is not there.

Nandini Chandra's *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha 1967–2007* is relevant context. Chandra argues that Anant Pai's editorial decisions across the series were shaped by a particular vision of Hindu cultural identity—what the comics were for, who they were for—and that the selection of which scenes to include was never incidental to that (Chandra). The Vali exchange is absent. The visual vocabulary of the Rama comic—Rama at his bow, the assembled monkey army, the preparations for Lanka—is not. That distribution of emphasis is the editorial argument.

In the context of the medium in which the speech bubble is the only instrument for transmitting ethical argument, its absence is not insignificant. That the page which perhaps would have contained Vali's final statement does instead contain the bow and the army, that is what the visual narrative decrees that the episode means.

The treatment of the episode differs noticeably from the sequence found in the *Kishkindha Kanda*. In the Valmiki text, the killing is followed by Vali's accusation, Rama's defence, Tara's lament, and later references to the event. The discussion continues across several cantos before the narrative moves fully to other concerns. In the comic, the story advances much more quickly. The dispute itself receives little attention, and later stages of the narrative occupy the space that the accusation occupies in Valmiki.

The comic gives more space to some scenes than to others. Several panels are devoted to Rama with his bow, the gathering of the monkey army, and the preparations for the journey to Lanka. The sequence involving Vali is much shorter. The exchange between Vali and Rama occupies only a small part of the episode before the narrative turns to later events.

For many readers, Amar Chitra Katha provided an early introduction to the Ramayana. The comic therefore became one among several important vehicles through which the story circulated during the late twentieth century. The handling of the Vali episode is part of that larger process. The event remains present in the narrative, but the extended exchange found in the Valmiki text is reduced to a much smaller role within the overall story.

VI. Devdutt Pattanaik's The Book of Ram: Reframing and the Pre-empted Accusation

Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Book of Ram* devotes three pages to the Vali episode (54–56). In the section titled “Death of Vali,” the killing is narrated in a single paragraph, and Vali's accusation is recorded in two words: “Unfair. Unfair.” Valmiki gave the same exchange seventeen cantos. The gap between them is not just a matter of length.

The text arrives at the killing with the conceptual groundwork already laid. Earlier in the same section, Pattanaik introduces *matsya nyaya*—the law of fishes, where the strong eat the weak—as the framework Vali operates inside (55). Vali is described as one who “subscribes to the law of the jungle,” who drives his brother out and lays claim to all the land and his brother's wife. At “Unfair. Unfair.” reader has been positioned inside a framework where the complaint is structurally false. Rama does not directly justify the ambush. Instead he restates the framework “All this land that I walk upon is the land ruled by Bharata and in all the land ruled by Bharata there must be dharma.” You, Vali, who believe might is right, do not subscribe to dharma and so must be killed. He who lives by the law of the jungle must not object when he is killed by the law of the jungle” (55–56). The questions Vali poses in Canto XVII—why from concealment, why while fighting someone else—receive no answer here. The reply addresses who Vali is, not what Rama did.

NCERT and Raghaveshananda shorten the encounter; Amar Chitra Katha eliminates the speech bubble entirely. The technique employed by Pattanaik is different. The accusation itself is not abbreviated or compressed; instead, it is uttered by someone whose agency the text has already consigned outside of the realm of dharmic entreaty. The speech made by Vali in Canto XVII runs on for page after page; in essence, Valmiki grants him, by then the recipient of his interlocutor's grievances, the political status of a wronged monarch and a juridical subject. The speech made by Vali, once Valmiki has already rescinded that status, prior to the ambush itself, in *The Book of Ram*, can be nothing other than the talk of an alpha male rather than that of a juridical inquirer.

After the killing, the text moves quickly into the political settlement. Sugriva is to take Tara as wife and declare Angad as his heir; the old reign's jungle logic gives way to the logic of inherited obligation. This is where Pattanaik's attention goes. The duration that Valmiki sustained for nearly ten cantos after the killing—Tara's lament, the second address, the appeal to Fate in Canto XXV—does not appear. The narrative exits the scene.

Pattanaik's limit is the *matsya nyaya* frame itself. The indictment arrives—two words, "Unfair. Unfair"—because they are already too obvious in the tradition to be entirely ignored. They arrive already filed away, and in the process the legal force Valmiki invested in them already removed. They can be written with such brevity precisely because the framing has accomplished the job the murder could not.

VII. Ramanand Sagar's Ramayan: Television, Devotion, and the Vali Episode

As Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* aired on Doordarshan in 1987-1988, its broadcast had the feel of a national devotional event more than of a television show. Lutgendorf noted that at the time of the series' run, families would participate in the ritual aarti (the Hindu lamp-offering

ceremony) in front of their television set, streets would clear of all traffic and people, and Sunday mornings felt remarkably still (Lutgendorf 134). As Arvind Rajagopal notes of these heightened local responses, such scenes are not just temporal phenomena: they radically restructured the devotional public sphere (Rajagopal 14–15). By the time audiences reached the episodes on Kishkindha, these Sunday gatherings had solidified. As they witnessed Vali's controversial ambush, viewers did not respond to the crisis in a vacuum but within the set cultural parameters that had been carefully constructed over many weeks.

Although the Vali episode is presented in the series, the dialogue following the killing is considerably shorter than in the Valmiki text. The accumulated devotional atmosphere of months of broadcast has already done its work before the scene begins. By the time the Kishkindha episodes aired, Rama's divinity was not a question the serial was asking—it was the premise through which every scene was being received. The accusation arrives into that context. What Vali says carries less weight when the figure he addresses is already, for the viewer, an object of devotion rather than a defendant.

Music also plays a role. The music in the scene between Rama and Vali follows the use of the established, traditional motifs that are consistently employed by the show's program when addressing themes of adoration and respect; it complements, rather than is set apart from, the dialogue; thus the indictment and response remain within a singular emotional frame. While viewers have seen the series for months when the episode involving Vali airs, Rama's divinity has become a self-evident certainty due to the ubiquity of the show's devotionally saturated nature. Tara's sorrow thus becomes not a direct political affront to Rama's choices, but instead is presented as the unfettered sadness of an impotent victim. While the Valmiki text allows ample space for Tara's complaint and grief after the violent legal argument between Rama and Vali, its continued

development of female lament continually recalls the moral conundrum of the ambushing. This TV program, on the other hand, easily unravels that moral knot.

VIII. Anand Neelakantan's *Vanara*: Caste, History, and the Open Accusation

The first thing Neelakantan's *Vanara* (Westland Books, 2018) establishes is the word itself. “*Vanara* was a slur. It had been used to describe us for so long that we had started using it ourselves” (Neelakantan 4). The observation appears before Rama enters the narrative and before any of the conflicts usually associated with the epic have begun. Baali asks Sage Gautama how fire is made and is told that such knowledge is not intended for people like him (7). He eventually discovers the secret on his own, but the episode is framed less around the discovery than around the restriction that precedes it. Similar distinctions continue to surface afterwards. The narrative returns to the kinds of labour different groups perform, the limits attached to them, and the language through which those limits are explained (11). By the time Rama appears, the structures organising *Vanara* life have already been described in considerable detail. The insult introduced in the opening pages no longer appears incidental. It has acquired a social history.

The recognition is gradual rather than sudden. By the middle of the novel Baali has begun to understand the structure in which he lives and the forms of exclusion through which it operates (56). That development gives particular force to the scene of his death. The speech bears little resemblance to Vali's formal defence and accusation in the Valmiki narrative. Instead Baali says: “I have been killed by a God. I was a selfish man. I mean a selfish animal. A mere *Vanara*.” He then adds, “Garlands are for gods. We're animals, brother” (Neelakantan 279). The sequence matters because of the correction. “Selfish man” becomes “selfish animal” and finally settles on

“a mere Vanara.” The categories through which the Vanaras have been diminished no longer arrive from outside. They are spoken in Baali's own voice.

IX. The Digital Circulation

Video clips of the ambush from the Sagar series have been available on the internet for years now, downloaded, remixed, commented on—in Hindi, in Tamil, in English. The comments are variations on all the questions that Vali poses in Canto XVII, with the same range of stances. Some argue it was justified; the majority insists it was not. We seem, at first, to have travelled no farther than where Valmiki left the story.

The parameters have however changed; there are enough YouTube results showing the killing of Vali that the broadcast era would not have been able to cover them in simultaneous broadcasts. A video by Dharmo Sanatan on "Ram Navami Special | Why Lord Rama Killed Vali?" shows 1.5 million views in two months, and this Ram Navami frame seems to be effective; it naturalises the killing to the annual calendar of devotion, as Rajagopal claims the Sunday morning broadcast did. The question in the title is answered before it is posed. Ranveer Allahbadia's BeerBiceps channel video, Sugriva Vs Vali Battle-Why Sri Ram Killed Vali For Dharma, benefits from the presence of a channel with over 2 million subscribers, and the presence of "Dharma" has already concluded the inquiry. Both of these videos are working within the logic of the Sagar broadcast in that the frame of devotion precedes the accusation.

A Reddit thread in r/mahabharata three months prior to this was titled 'Vali's death in the Ramayana is one of the most morally complex situations in ancient literature.' The post was upvoted 435 times, with 144 comments. It is not phrased as a question, but a statement that "The murder of Vali has yet to be concluded," an affirmation the upvote count proves. The comments

reflect canto XVII, almost word for word; the debate on jurisdiction—that Sugriva's kingdom falls under Ikshvaku suzerainty—on hunting rights, that Kshatriya law permits shooting animals from behind,, on the boons from Brahma, and counter-arguments that Vali stole Ruma away from Sugriva, the violation of adharma. One comment concisely describes the situation as follows: "Vali's dying arguments are piercing and logical, accusing Rama of cowardice." Another commenter writes "Rama has already refuted all of Vali's arguments and he himself admits that Rama is correct", that same accommodative action Raghaveshananda undertakes, condensed to one phrase. The discussion in r/mahabharata has no conclusion; the seventeen cantos of argumentative discussion Valmiki wrote out are re-enacted as an online discussion that grows and never ends. One new argument the comments offer is absent from the retellings: the killing of Vali by Rama will not be "fully closed until Jara pierces Krishna with the same arrow in the Mahabharata", karma siddhanta across avatars. Rama's story itself has more difficulty invoking it; a comment thread easily can.

Quora taps into the same debate, but it works towards its closure. The question: "Was it correct when Rama killed Vali from his back" generated fifty answers; the overwhelming tenor is devotional-explanatory: the number one answer states: "... If Vali himself has No complaint about this matter and accepted his Punishment Willingly, How can we raise a Question against it?" This response uses the same Raghaveshananda framework-the king's will settles the accusation. The question is: Quora presents absorptive and contestatory interpretations together on the same page, giving them equal structural weight: no Sunday morning ritual-framing device adjudicates.

The digital does not alter the scale, or indeed even the volume of the exchange. It alters authority. The Sagar broadcast contained the episode in a managed context: a state network, an established time slot, a devotional audience who, according to Rajagopal, had been manufactured

over a series of weeks of viewing the show. That context is entirely removed from the clip circulating today. The score has been removed, the accumulation of previous weeks has been removed, and the framing device that had accompanied and assisted reception had been removed with them. All that is left is the scene, and a scene alone does not manage its own ethical conundrum. Valmiki recognised this when he gave Rama seventeen cantos in which to respond. They do not appear online. The accusation is hurled without the structure that every subsequent tradition has erected around it. The memes force the scene into a binary-two images, two stances, no resolution-and in doing so preserve its conflict-orientation. Every tradition examined here offered a way of moving beyond the accusation: it was either contracted in a classroom text, digested in a devotional broadcast, placed outside the world of visible images in the popular comic, or redistributed through an entirely different ethical query in a modern novel. There is no comparable apparatus working across the whole of the web. A devotional YouTube channel still reproduces the broadcasting model, Reddit keeps the ambiguity Valmiki maintained, Quora attempts Raghaveshananda's brand of closure; yet all these interventions are on the same screen, unfiltered by an institution whose voice alone might have lent authority to a particular interpretation. The accusation persists because there is no designated locus on the internet at which it might be resolved.

X. Conclusion

The traditions examined in this paper do not handle Vali's accusation in the same way. What varies is not only how each responds to the ethical problem the episode raises but how long each permits the accusation to remain active—and at what moral threshold each decides it can be set aside and the narrative can continue.

The Valmiki version spends significant time in narration and dialogue with the charge. After Vali's accusation, Rama is given the chance to offer his defence, and Tara also gets her moments of grief and appeal to Destiny. The episode runs through several cantos until the attention is redirected back to the reinstatement of Sugriva and the search for Sita. While this remains the case in some retellings—the NCERT Bal Ramkatha, for instance—other children's texts reduce it significantly, as Amar Chitra Katha does, while still others, including Raghaveshananda and Sagar, keep the episode but subsume it under a devotional framework in a way that reframes the reader's engagement with it. Even Pattanaik includes a brief acknowledgement of the controversy without giving much narrative space. In Neelakantan's *Vanara*, the topic is even revisited from the other end, and explored as a historical and societal matter of caste and ostracism.

These shifts have been caused in part by the narrative needs and context of the various texts. A children's story does not have to contend with all the issues of a long, epic retelling; similarly, a graphic narrative will necessarily have constraints different from a text version or a televised story. With the change in the context and the narrative structure come changes in how much space is devoted to the episode. What persists across the story's telling is that it continues to present a problem, and the explanation of Vali's death continues to elicit argument and response from story-tellers.

What the comparison reveals is not first and foremost an argument over morality but different formal solutions for containment of an ethical issue, the answer of which the story cannot support. The Valmiki text keeps the accusation of the crime longest—at least in the form of Vali's charge and then Rama's response, Tara's wail, and the final admission to Fate, whereas each subsequent solution cuts short the wait, with the classroom one severing the connection quickly, the devotional one dissolving it into a broader realm of affect, the comic one moving it out of the

visual realm entirely, and the modern novel revisiting it at the layer of caste and historical disenfranchisement. No single version can undo, but all show the available alternatives for getting past that which is unanswerable.

The digital presentations discussed in the previous section demonstrate that this is an ongoing discussion. Discussions on web pages repeat much of the content that can already be found in Valmiki's story; they demonstrate that the medium through which we are accessing this story has changed, but the dispute has not completely dissipated. Different traditions of the story of Rama will continue to present different accounts of the Vali episode, and the charge will remain an integral aspect of the story's afterlife.

Works Cited:

- Allahbadia, Ranveer [BeerBiceps]. "Sugriva Vs Vali Battle—Why Sri Ram Killed Vali For Dharma." YouTube, 28 Jan. 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IrLsX2_ujI. Accessed 30 May 2026.
- Chandra, Nandini. *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha 1967–2007*. Yoda Press, 2008.
- Dharmo Sanatan. "Ram Navami Special | Why Lord Rama Killed Vali?" YouTube, Mar. 2026, https://youtu.be/u3lNe_Q9Oiw. Accessed 30 May 2026.
- Griffith, Ralph T. H., translator. *The Ramayana of Valmiki. 1870–1874*. Project Gutenberg, 2008, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/24869>. Verse numbers follow Griffith's original numbering system.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell UP, 1981.

Lutgendorf, Philip. "Ramayan: The Video." *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 34, no. 2, 1990, pp. 127–76.

National Council of Educational Research and Training. *Bal Ram Katha*. NCERT, 2006.

Neelakantan, Anand. *Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara*. Westland Books, 2018.

Pai, Anant, editor. *Rama*. Illustrated by Pratap Mulick, *Amar Chitra Katha*, no. 504, India Book House, 1997.

Pattanaik, Devdutt. *The Book of Ram*. Penguin Books India, 2010.

Raghaveshananda, Swami. *Ramayana for Children*. Sri Ramakrishna Math, n.d.

Rajagopal, Arvind. *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*. Cambridge UP, 2001.

r/mahabharata. "Vali's Death in the Ramayana Is One of the Most Morally Complex Moments in Ancient Literature." *Reddit*, Feb. 2026, https://www.reddit.com/r/mahabharata/comments/1rqq41n/valis_death_in_the_ramayana_is_one_of_the_most/. Accessed 30 May 2026.

Ramanujan, A. K. "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation." *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, edited by Paula Richman, University of California Press, 1991, pp. 22–49.

Richman, Paula, editor. *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. University of California Press, 1991.

Sagar, Ramanand, director. *Ramayan*. Sagar Arts and Doordarshan, 1987–1988.

"Was It Correct When Rama Killed Vali from His Back?" *Quora*, <https://www.quora.com/Was-it-correct-when-Rama-killed-Vali-from-his-back>. Accessed 30 May 2026.