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Debunking Negative Stereotypes in MT Vasudevan Nair's '*The Second Turn*' and Anand Neelakantan's '*Asura*'

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Abstract:

What are stereotypes and how are they formed? Who creates the mythological stereotypes of good and bad characters?

The paper explores on debunking the negative connotations in the depictions of characters by exploring such tantalizing questions. Stereotypes are formed as part of improper perceptions or pre-conceived notions. Interconnecting and analyzing the study with Anand Neelakantan's *Asura* with the translated version of MT Vasudevan Nair's '*Random Uzham*' titled as *The Second Turn* -helps to comprehend the aspects on how the mythological characters who were most often given negative connotations could be seen in a positive and promising light. These writers, in fact resurrected the negative impact of certain mythological characters as they strived to understand the characters in a broader perspective. A shift from the conservative stereotypical thinking most often re-builds the much-tarnished image of the characters and also helps to understand the logic behind the human bias and deep-seated prejudices.

Keywords: Stereotypes, Debunking, Categorization, Bias, Cliché, Prejudice, Notion.

Stereotypes refer to general traits or characteristics which are attributed to a group of people. Writers use stereotypes to help connect with an audience and to construct a story. Stereotypes are created with a basic assumption that people share a similar set of characteristics, such as Asians are good in Math and only boys can play sports. Most stereotypes are clichés, which tend to become stale and overuse over a period of time. They are formed out of wrong perceptions or pre-conceived notions thereby tending to castigate certain groups.

Stereotypes are formed, crafted and fabricated to be broken. Most often an author attributes a stereotypical attribute to a character with the intention of developing the character to its fullest possible dimensions. Characters just like normal human beings create good and bad impressions on the readers. We like or dislike a character based on our quick, biased and superficial evaluation. This is known as 'stereotypical thinking'.

A character remains dull, drab, boring and conservative as long as the author engages him with a stereotypical halo. Breaking the stereotype actively engages the readers as it makes them alert, conscious and suspicious about the next move of the character.

Stereotypes are most often formed as part of an unconscious bias, as our vision gets limited to a single camera perspective. When we find that there is no definite version of reality, we tend to perceive things according to our wish, mindset, thought process or authorial bias which can be based on race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation or culture.

Stereotype therefore is an exaggerated belief, image or a distorted view about an individual or a group of persons. Most often, our influences are assumptions formed from our primary impressions based on our influences from the mass media, fables passed on to us by our ancestors, peer group influences or societal, personal or political leanings.

Stereotypes can have a positive or negative impact. In case of positive impact, stereotypes help in easy categorization and it is easy to predict and organize the world. The negative impact of Stereotypes is that most often individuals tend to be unwilling to rethink or reform one's prejudices. Most often we find that, imposing stereotypical traits in individuals or groups hinders their success in certain domains as it leads to over expectations and frustrations.

We use stereotypes as an essential human behavior as it helps in categorization. Categorization is the essential human capability as it helps to simplify, predict and organize our world. This later helps in sub-categorization into smaller categories or tiny groups, which helps in saving time and creates a set notion about certain groups and individuals.

Bias can be defined as a 'preference or inclination that inhibits impartiality or prejudice' (American Heritage Dictionary, 1983). It more often indicated by a favor of one aspect or trait

over another. It is a pre- disposition or pre-conceived opinion that prevents a person from impartially evaluating facts that have been presented for determination.

Stereotype representations could be seen even in literary texts, where one character gets a particular shade – as a positive or negative character, or maybe as a strong, weak, egoistic, or as an introvert or extrovert. Here most often, it is the whims and fancies of the writers that come to play and describes a character with a grand entry as a hero or as a villain. In mythologies which has a rich history of oral traditions, a character attains divine or villainous attributes and it is passed on to generations of posterity through oral traditions or as bedtime stories. This gets ingrained into our system as it creates a perception and bias in thinking. Many times, we hardly question the rationale behind these so- called assumptions.

Taking the very instance of Ravana, the powerful demon asura from Ramayana; most often it is by taking cues from imagination and oral traditions that Ravana is described or visualized as an asura or an evil person; but hardly do we realize the true intensions of the person or do we try to understand the reasons behind his villainous motives. In the case of Ravana, it was the injustice meted out to his sister Shurpanaka, which provoked him to most of the heinous acts as seen in Valmiki's Ramayana. Hardly does anyone acknowledge Ravana, as a kind brother or as a good asura.

We hardly fail to notice the good qualities of Ravana, as a loving brother; or as a person with ten heads- representing the six shastras and four Vedas. Ramayana depicts how Ravana brought Rama's wife Sita to exact vengeance on Rama and his brother Lakshmana for having cut off the ears and nose of his dear sister Shurpananka. Hardly does anyone recall the mighty Ravana as the son of Vishrava and Kaikesi; as an extremely powerful and capable ruler, a great scholar, a devotee of Lord Shiva and as a maestro of veena (stringed musical instrument).

Is Ravana known today as the hero or anti- hero in Ramayana?

This is how Stereotypes gets formed in human mind (psyche). These are early accumulated recollections of the individual's notions or first –hand impressions which forms a bias in the way people think and act. Many writers have ventured to remove the notions created by stereotypes. The texts chosen for study includes two texts by Indian authors, one by Anand Neelakantan, who in his novel *Asura: The Tale of the Vanquished*, tries to depict the tale of

Ramayana, from the perspective of Ravana and a common asura, Bhadra. Another novel chosen for study, is a translated version of the Malayalam novel '*Randam Uzham*' written by renowned writer from Kerala (India)- Dr MT Vasudevan Nair. The novel is titled as *The Second Turn*. The novel is an understanding of Bhima, the second of the Pandava brothers in Mahabharata as seen from Bhima's own perspective.

Asura: The Tale of the Vanquished is Anand Neelakantan's debut novel. The novel is a mythological representation of Ramayana, from the perspective of Ravana. The novel voices the condition of the vanquished from their own eyes; rather than from the victor's perspective.

In one of his interviews with the Business Line, Anand Neelakantan talks about the relevance of Ravana or the so called asuras in the present-day scenario.

"Ravana and Shakuni are all among us today. Rather, I would say that they are all within us. I have dedicated an entire chapter to Ravana's ten heads representing ten emotions in my first book *Asura*. Ravana, after all is very much human, with human emotions. So, he will always be relevant. Whatever has manifested around us in this world is a product of emotions, be it ambition, jealousy or anger. Our philosophy says that no one has to control his/her emotion. But man is an emotional being and his actions speak about that fact. Shakuni acted on only one emotion, and that was revenge. He was writing in his own part in the story by vowing to destroy Bheeshma's family, because the latter has ravaged his country. If anyone wrote the story from Shakuni's side, he would emerge as the hero for having avenged his nation. So, in the end, it all depends on perspective".

Most often while seeing a visual depiction of the mythological anti-heroes; we get enticed and enthralled by the super-man antics of anti-heroes like Ravana or Karna. A close observation would help to develop a sense of empathy, as we understand that they are more ethical and high- principled. While the readers are misled by the telltale versions of history, interpretation of history led focus or by a bias in thinking and perception. This evokes feelings of reverence and empathy for the strong and the mighty characters thereby the readers end up feeling Lord Rama or Krishna as a God, but Ravana is more like a complete human being with all his follies and foibles.

Anand Neelakantan presented a realistic picture of Ramayana, where devas and asuras were portrayed as normal human beings. We do not find Rama as a God with a divine figure with a glowing halo and with flowers strewn all over his body, neither does Rama have access to special weapons (astras). The Asuras are also shown as good people, not as monsters who were decked up in black attires and reveled in killing the innocent sages and human beings.

The book explicates Ravana as ‘dasamukha’- the one with ten heads- well versed in Vedas and Shastras and like a haughty youngster who was harsh and arrogant in his youth. The book makes us understand that there are good and bad qualities in each and every person and Ravana was just a good normal human being who had his own share of virtues and vices. The book also draws parallels with the contemporary times, by depicting the power structures that rule us in this world and how history focuses only on victors and conquerors and not on those who strived to succeed.

In the opening sections of the book, Ravana himself soliloquizes by stating:

“For thousands of years I have been vilified and my death is celebrated year after year in every corner of India. Why? Was it because I challenged the Gods for the sake of my daughter? Was it because I freed a race from the yoke of caste-based Deva rule? You have heard the victor’s tale, the Ramayana. Now hear the Ravanaya, for I am Ravana, the asura and my story is the tale of the vanquished”.

The book also focuses on Bhadra, a common asura who was inspired, led and betrayed by Ravana. In an excerpt from *The Hindu*, an article titled ‘*The Enthralling Story of Ravana and his People*’ we find yet another statement made by Bhadra, the asura:

“I am non- entity, invisible, powerless and negligible. No epics will ever be written about me. I have suffered both Ravana and Rama- the hero and the villain, or the villain and the hero. When the stories of great men are told, may voice be too feeble to be heard. Yet, spare me a moment and hear my story, for I am Bhadra, the Asura, and my life is the tale of the loser”.

The novel *Asura* also gives a peep into the age-old caste system prevalent in India which oppressed people for over 3000 years. The novel relates how Ravana carved out an empire for

himself from the supremacy of the Devas and portrays Ravana as a hero who with his will and strong ambitions led his people to success. Ravana is the mouthpiece in the novel and he voices about his hardships in Lanka. Later as a king, Ravana narrates the hardships that he had to face in his life and in carrying out his duties to his subjects. Through Bhadra, we find the life from a commoner asura's mindset. The book describes how history always glorified winners and defamed losers and maybe the same fate had happened to Ravana. The novelist says that evil appears as evil, since it is depicted in such a way. The novel in a way gives a better perspective from the viewpoint of Ravana, as such the readers tend to sympathize and empathize the intentions of Ravana. We do not find any malicious or lecherous desires in Ravana, where the age-old adage by Pope "To err is human; to forgive divine" is equally justified in the case of Ravana as well.

MT Vasudevan Nair's acclaimed novel '*Randam Uzham*' translated into English as *The Second Turn* is another notable novel which has received critical acclaim from readers and critics alike. The novel focuses on Bhimasena, the second among the Pandava brothers in Vedavyasa's Mahabharata.

The traditional perception created about Bhimasena (aka. Bhima) was that he was a dull witted, hefty hero with admirable physical prowess. Bhima is a respectable character in Mahabharata who always endeared to readers with his loyalty and positive vibes. But to a large extent, MT Vasudevan Nair felt that Bhima had not been portrayed to the fullest extent as Bhima later became a synonym for a huge hefty endearing and family-oriented person. To an exceptionally large extent, the author succeeded in transforming this bias in perception and thinking

In *The Second Turn*, Bhima is presented as a highly responsible and agile character, seething with indignation, anguish and rebelling against the injustice meted out to him and his family. Just as in the novel *Asura*, the characters in this novel are also brought to the stature of mortal characters. Though Bhima is the key player in the wars and the dual fights involving the Pandavas, most often Bhima is snubbed and is neither acknowledged of his success nor given due credit. Whenever Pandavas won a victory, it was often accredited to Yudhishtira, the eldest brother who is reputed as 'dharmaputra' (son of justice) or it reverses to Arjuna – the brave warrior. The novel gives a glimpse at the weaknesses of Yudhishtira whose craze for the game

of dice and the silence of his other brothers during the gamble match with the Kauravas led to dire consequences.

The author lashes at the other female characters with scathing remarks as he calls them 'highly manipulative'. To cite the instance of Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas; it was the innocent, yet scheming ways of Kunti which led all the five brothers to share Arjuna's wife. Kunti, though she was a loving soul, played a deliberately blind pose in meditation while commanding to share the newly wed daughter-in-law among her five sons. Her so called innocence was a deliberate move to ensure that her sons lived in unity and harmony. Her actions revealed that she was deliberately blind in contrast to the imposed blindness of the Kuru dynasty queen Gandhari. Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas and the victim of all the pain and crisis, could still have averted a bloody and fearsome Mahabharata war which eventually killed her kith and kin, only if she had a control over her revengeful mindset and indignation.

The novel is written from the perspective of Bhima and it shows his life, struggles and frustration. Though Bhima was the strongest among the Pandavas, he was always decreed as a glutton, destined to be the second and not being given credit for his skills. Most of the characters referred to Bhima as 'blockhead'. The novel begins in a flashback mode from the final journey in Bhima's life. MT comments that Bhima was "never clouded by dharma or karma". He was always willing to sacrifice for his family and for his brothers. Always destined to be the second, Bhima always accepted the '*second turn*' with utmost grace and dignity. He was always overshadowed by Arjuna in terms of prowess and Yudhishtira in his claim to throne; but he never complained or claimed for his right or hierarchy.

In the novel the characters are brought to mortal levels, as the novelist emphatically states that- there is no flowing saree to cover Draupadi's disgrace, there is no Karna adorned with Kavacha kundala and there is no Krishna blocking the sun to bring Jarasandha to open dual. There is also a sub- narrative which runs on casteism and its impact in the novel.

In one of his interviews, MT Vasudevan Nair, states that *The Second Turn* was a new approach in creating a new Bhimasena, which was a result of immense reading and research. The novel was a new attempt in breaking the stereotypes in perception created by literature and media about a powerful mythological hero. Bhima in the novel, is a strong force, who had

unswerving and unflinching loyalty towards his family and who fought his enemies single handedly. The narrative in the novel also comprises of distinct voices of Hidimbi (Bhima's first wife), Draupadi, Balandhara, Kunti and the abandoned sons of Bhima -Sarvada and Ghatotkacha. The perturbed mythological hero also raises his voice against the issues regarding patriarchy, masculinism and casteism.

MT also quotes three instances to prove three traits in the character and will power of Bhimasena. Once Bhima struggled to reach the topmost summit of a cliff to satisfy Draupadi's desire for Sugandha Pushpa (flower of fragrance). This reveals the soft nature of Bhima as a loving and caring husband yielding to the childish whims of his wife. Bhima also regretted since he could not spend more time with his first wife Hidimbi and son Ghatotkacha. He was a caring husband and a doting father, but he could only understand their plight and empathize with them. Since Hidimbi and son Ghatotkacha belonged to a tribal caste, and not a Kshatriya clan, they could not be with Bhima, as the caste barriers prevented them. In the last few chapters in the novel, Yudhishtira wanted Bhima to take up the position of king, but Bhima could not accept due to Draupadi's intervention. All these instances speak volumes as to how Bhima can be figured as a powerful and haunting character in *The Second Turn*.

In the case of both the novels, we find how the authors debunked the stereotypes in the portrayal of characters and how the embalming of a popular character in the minds of readers or viewers creates bias which tends to create stereotypical representations. This bias in thinking and perception can be changed if we view the same picture, but from a different dimension. In both these novels, the novelists have tried a genuine attempt in debunking the stereotypical impressions which were most often caused by a certain bias in thinking and perception.

The only way to move beyond bias based on stereotypes is by understanding a logical connection between ideas, by identifying, constructing and evaluating arguments; by detecting inconsistencies and common mistakes in reasoning; by solving problems systematically; by identifying the relevance and importance of idea; by reflecting on the justification of one's own beliefs and values.

To conclude, it can be stated that bias is not a bad or an injudicious approach; it is only a preferred way of looking at things- maybe how a certain individual assumes things the way they

like. Most often eliminating bias and prejudice is not humanly possible, as it can lead to a self-interrogation and scrutiny to one's own deeply seated and rooted beliefs, passions, assumptions, beliefs and notions. In spite of all this, such an introspection removes all preferences, allots a chance for self-evaluation – a chance to assess one's own deeply held assumptions or beliefs. A critical mindset and thinking provides a farsighted and clear picture and it led to self-discovery and objectivity.

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