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Study of Narratives in Anand Neelakantan's Novel *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*

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Abstract:

Anand Neelakantan has authored several works of mythological fiction and has also written screenplays for some mythology-based TV programs. His novel *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* is based upon the *Ramayana* and as is the feature of his fictional writings that he pens from the perspective of the defeated party, this novel also presents Ravana's point of view on the whole matter, who obviously attempts to set his record right. The narration of the novel begins with Ravana counting his last breaths in the battle field and his whole life passes before his eyes. Alternate narration is that of Bhadra, a servant of Ravana.

Keywords: Mythological Fiction, Narratology, *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, Anand Neelakantan.

Matthew Garrett in the Introduction to the book *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory* writes that narrative theory is "the theory of how stories work and how we make them work" (I). To narrate things is a human compulsion. Stories, events and various other aspects of the world are presented in the narrative form. The theorists of narratology study the structures of narratives because narratology considers fictional narratives to be formal and systematic structure. Instead of analyzing particular stories this theory emphasizes the study of those elements which are common in all the stories. Paul Copley in his book *Narrative* writes:

Wherever there are humans there appear to be narratives. It is true that people tell stories about life history (Gee 1991) and about their psyches (Schafer 1983;

Spence 1987)... Pronouncing that certain events in the world of human experience 'make a good story' invariably carries with it the contention that those events can be reduced to a few crude principles, that stories are very 'basic' ways of thinking about the world. (2)

The most important principle behind narrative is that it is a journey from point A to B, from beginning to end. This movement from one point to the other is narrative. It is the space between these two points which is created with the help of delay in reaching from beginning to end. Talking about the journey of the narrative Roland Barthes identifies five codes in his *S/Z* (1974). These codes are: the hermeneutic code, which stands for those elements in a story that needs clarification because they are not explained to the readers; the proairetic code, which indicates those elements in a story that creates interest of the reader with the help of suspense; the semantic code, that means the parts of a story that have connotative meaning; the symbolic code, which is different from the semantic code in that it carries deeper and wider meaning; and the cultural code which refers to those elements of a story which are actually widely shared knowledge and widely accepted truth. Both the hermeneutic and the proairetic codes combine to create tension and mystery in a narrative. Peter Brooks terms detours to those delays which are achieved with the help of the element of suspense.

A narrative can be mimetic or diegetic in parts. The mimetic parts of a narrative are that in which direct speech is used. Whereas the diegetic parts a narrative which are simply told in the form of a summary of what happened. Peter Barry defines both terms in the following manner:

'Mimesis' is 'slow telling', in which what is done and said is 'staged' for the reader, creating the illusion that we are 'seeing' and 'hearing' things for ourselves. By contrast, 'diegesis' means 'telling' or 'relating'. The parts of a narrative which are presented in this way are given in a more 'rapid' or 'panoramic' or 'summarising' way. The aim is to give us essential or linking information as efficiently as possible, without trying to create the illusion that the events are taking place before our eyes. (223)

Anand Neelakantan was born in 1973 in Kerala. He pursued his engineering degree at Government Engineering College, Trichur, Kerala. Besides being a fiction writer, he is a cartoonist and screenwriter for TV programs. He started writing novels in the year 2012 with his debut novel *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*. His novels are counter-telling of popular Indian

mythology. He pens from the perspective of the defeated party. His *Ajaya* series of novels are based on the story of the *Mahabharata*. He has written five novels that are based on the *Ramayana*, which include his debut novel as well. His *Baahubali* series of novels are prequel to the story of famous Indian movie of the same name. *Siya ke Ram* and *Sankatmochan Mahabali Hanuman* are famous mythology-based TV programs for which he has written screenplay. He has also written for a history-based TV program named *Chakravartin Ashoka Smarat*.

Asura: Tale of the Vanquished takes us on a tour to the world of Ravana and his people. The narration begins with Ravana counting his last breaths in the battle field and his whole life passes before his eyes. Alternate narration is that of Bhadra, a servant of Ravana. Ravana starts to tell his story from his childhood days when he travels with his siblings to find a way to end the days of misery and finds himself in the ruined courts of an Asura king Mahabali where he receives an education both in warfare and scriptures. Ravana is much concerned about the present condition of Asuras, which were once the most flourishing lot. He starts to gather an army of Asuras and to bring all the commanders of Asura tribe under one umbrella. With them he starts to design a way to get back an ancient Asura kingdom of Lanka from Kubera, who also happened to be his half brother. During all this a servant happens to attract special attention of Ravana for his mysterious behavior, who later presents his counsel to him in a private meeting. Ravana suspects him to be a spy but he couldn't resist noticing that the guy was smart enough. His name was Bhadra and he has his own story to tell us, which runs parallel to that of Ravana. Sometimes a single scene is presented from these two different points of views which brings the vividness in the narration.

The use of the direct speech makes the narrative slow, more realistic, convincing and interesting. The pace of the narrative is distributed equally throughout the text. So, while reading the text we feel our journey to be smooth. Bhadra's narrative in *Asura* has much less mimetic parts in comparison to that of Ravana's. If certain events of a story travel backwards in time, it is known as flashback and when events travel forth in time, it is known as flash forward.

Sometimes the story will 'flash back' to relate an event which happened in the past, and such parts of the narrative can be called 'analeptic' (from 'analepsis', which literally means a 'back-take'). Likewise, the narrative may 'flash forward' to narrate, or refer to, or anticipate an event which happens late: such parts of the

narrative can be called 'proleptic' (from 'prolepsis', which literally means a 'fore-take'). (Barry 226)

Ravana's narrative in the novel *Asura* is in the form of flashback. Ravana begins his tale from the experiences of a dying man as he is on his deathbed. His whole life, right from his childhood to his last moment, passes before his eyes in the form of a flood of memories.

In dual narrative technique, usually, the point of view changes in alternating chapters between two speakers, which subtly helps us in seeing what both of the narrators know and what they don't. Generally, there are two speakers in dual narrative who present their different perspectives. But a single speaker can also tell a dual narrative at two different points of time, one at a young age and the other being old, for example. Getting the events of a story narrated by two different speakers helps the readers in understanding the characters and events better. Plus, the element of suspense that is created with it gives a rise to the interest of the readers. Alternating narrative gives the readers a feeling as if they are reading two books simultaneously. It may either present two different parts of a story or two different sides of the story and the same events.

Asura by Anand Neelakantan is a dual narrative novel. The antagonist of *The Ramayana* and his not so confidant, namely Ravana and Bhadra narrate the complete story. The text is divided into sixty-five chapters and after the first five chapters, which are narrated by Ravana, and the last five chapters, which are narrated by Bhadra, the rest of the novel is narrated by both of them in alternate chapters, almost. Only the chapter fourteen and twenty-six are shared by both the speakers to present their account otherwise all the other chapters belong to the speaker who begins it. Every single chapter has its distinct title. The speaker is named in the beginning of every chapter to avoid any kind of confusion regarding which part is narrated by whom. Interestingly, the novel begins with the chapter entitled The End and it ends with the chapter entitle The Beginning. This reminds us of Paul Copley's book *Narrative* (2001).

Anand Neelakantan has presented each narrator and their narratives equally interesting and because of that the readers find it hard to skim through one narrative and to enjoy the other one more. One feel compelled to stick to the storyline from the beginning to the end. In the beginning both the narrators start with their separate accounts but as soon as their narratives get linked, when Bhadra becomes a part of Ravana's army, each narrative throws light on the other. Before the both accounts intermingle with each other we feel like we are reading two different

novels. This connection is so subtle that there's no sign of any force used to achieve it. Both the narrators age within the course of the narration. Ravana's account is stretched from his childhood to old age and then up to his death in the battle field and Bhadra's from his early married life to his very old age and both of them age believably. We are also told about the change in physical appearances with the time to make it sound more natural. The breaks in each narrative mark some critical point in the story. Both the narrators in their turn bring forth the theme, forecast the events, and leave hints to set the readers thinking while they are reading. Plus, none of the chapters in the novel is lengthy. Both of these things create cliff-hanging effect for the reader and one keeps turning pages until it is over. The jumps between the narratives are made clear with the help of using the narrator's name in the beginning of each chapter, as we have discussed already. Besides, the setting and the differences in their voices widen the distinction of each narrative. The novelist has juxtaposed a king with a servant, an aristocrat with a poor, a dictator with a downtrodden in the form of two narrators. Thus, both the narratives are different from each other because both the narrators are from different social backgrounds, have different range of feelings and they speak in absolutely different ways. Ravana's narrative has certain passages which are full of poetic imagination, whereas the thoughts present in the narrative that of Bhadra's are not so refined in language and are not so poetic, comparatively. The class distinction between both the narrators is visible in that Ravana's narrative has detailed description whereas Bhadra's narrative lacks much detailing and thus appears to be that of a simpleton. There are certain similarities between them as well. In the beginning of their narratives both are on the same mission, which is taking revenge upon Devas. Both of them belong to the same race, the Asuras. Both of them are unscrupulous and go to any extent to get their things done. There are so many events and events when we get to see their different perspectives on how the same action affects them differently. Thus, the technique of parallel narrative used in the novel works very well.

There are certain narratives which focus on the moment of death. There is variety of perspectives in the depiction of feelings of a dying person. This kind of narrative doesn't present an afterlife as the narrative ends with the death of the narrator. Such narrative which focuses on the moment when transition from life to death takes place can be found in the form of *Asura* by Anand Neelakantan. Ravana's part of the narrative in *Asura* is actually accomplished at the moment of his death. The novel, as well as his account, begins with the words:

Tomorrow is my funeral. I do not know if they will bury me like a mangy dog or whether I will get a funeral fit for an Emperor – an erstwhile Emperor. But it does not really matter. I can hear the scuffing sounds made by the jackals. They are busy eating my friends and family. Something scurried over my feet. What was that? I haven't got the strength to raise my head. Bandicoots. Big, dark, hairy rats. They conquer the battle fields after foolish men have finished their business of killing each other. (Asura 9)

Ravana seems to be afraid that readers might forget that he is an 'about-to-die narrator'. So, he repeatedly reminds us of that leaving certain remarks in his narrative, as in the following lines: "Ah, history... it would always be different for different people and take its own course. Perhaps, nothing matters finally. On this battlefield where I lie bleeding to death, I assume I have created a great chapter in history; lived a hero's life; and died a villain's death; or vice versa" (Asura 142). He wants us to realize that he is doing a very tough task of narrating his account when he is suffering various wounds on his body, experiencing the upcoming death and when wild beasts are preying on his body. It is evident in the following lines: "But I am digressing. The jackals have left me alone for now. Why do they not eat my feverish brain and put an end to this? There's so much I have to remember. Oh Shiva, please call me to your abode. That is, if you actually exist. I will soon know. But the images keep coming to me, so many of them" (Asura 270).

In *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* by Anand Neelkantan Ravana not only attempts to present his better image but he also brings in focus the casteist aspect of his contemporary society. Casteism is one of the primary themes in the novel. There are two major caste groups in the novel: one is higher-castes represented by Devas and Brahmins and the other is Asuras, the lower-castes. Skin color is told to be the earliest method of deciding the caste group. Brahmins are told to be the agents of Deva ideology. Throughout the text we find a comparison between the cultures of both the caste groups.

Devas or Gods are humanized in the novel *Asura*. There is an ambiguity in the idea of God in the text. The Trinity of Hinduism, according to the novel, were actually three first and foremost persons of their clans, namely Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma clans. They were started to be worshipped after their death. Asuras started to worship Shiva, though they didn't perform any complicated religious rites, as Brahmins would do. They worshipped their God as father, brother

or son etc. at certain places Asuras worshipped Shiva as phallus, symbolic of fertility. Vishnu clan in the beginning served Gods of Indra clan as counselors, but later one of them established himself as a King and God. The people of Brahma clan were preserver of knowledge. Various artists and scientists of this clan served both the sides of Devas and Asuras. Similarly, Yama is depicted as the lord of drugs. Indra who was earlier the leader of a group of robbers, later became king by destroying Asura civilization. He is introduced as a savage who led a group of robbers and had the title 'Purendra', which roughly translates as 'slayer of cities.' All he and his group knew was to slay, gang-rape women caring less of their age, burning children alive and looting granaries. Further description of Devas' attack on Bhadra's village and their barbarity towards children and gang-rapes of women subverts the traditional image of both of Devas and Asura.

After Mahabali and Brahma taught Ravana Vedas and Upnishads, he came to know that he was wrong at abhorring them. These were the sacred texts of the entire humanity. It was just that Brahmins defiled these texts by adding their commentary. The idea of teaching Devas' ideology by Brahmins on the name of Vedas again occur towards the end of the novel, when Shmbuka is taught Vedas by his Guru. Bhadra says:

As an Asura, I had been taught to hate all that was considered holy by Devas. Shmbuka said that his Guru had taught him the real meaning of the Vedas and they were not the monopoly of any single caste or profession. They were a collection of the thoughts of poets who had lived thousands of years ago, who came from varied professions, such as fishermen, priests, woodcutters, potters, hunters and many more. It was only later that selfish men appropriated the Vedas for their own means and used them as a convenient tool to beat others with.
(Asura 478)

The novel also discusses political, patriarchic, and constant struggles to gain religious hegemony besides the casteism and thus important contemporary issues are raised under the umbrella of various kinds of hegemonic struggles. Asura kings prior to Ravana believed in democracy, but Ravana Believes that this mode of ruling made those kings weak because according to Ravana Asuras needed someone to order and lead them. Ravana repeatedly broods over the perfect mode of ruling the Asuras and dictatorship is always the answer. His ministers advise him to continue the democratic council formed by Asuras to discuss the state related

matters, but Ravana dismisses the council in order to claim his superiority over all the Asuras. Ravana believed that public cares not who the king is and what decisions does he make unless their lives are unaffected. For him, all that rich care about is to ensure that they remain rich and it doesn't matter to poor who rules them and in case it does then it doesn't matter anyway. It is only middle class which matters and to whom it matters and a ruler knows how to tackle and treat them right. Mala represents public opinion about the government and rulers when she says that all the rulers are the same. Their caste and creed don't matter. They only care about securing their thrones. No matter that has to talk big about public welfare, culture, tradition, religion etc. in order to rule but in real they care nothing about public. People suffer and they enjoy luxuries of palace. What Ravana believes and what Mala says are actually subtle satirical comments on contemporary rulers and politicians and their attitude towards public.

There is a constant conflict between the devotees of Shiva and that of Vishnu. Devas and Brahmins destroyed Shiva temples built by Asuras and replaced them with that of Vishnu, and vice versa. This conflict is no different from communal riots in contemporary India. Both the Shiva and Vishnu are chief Hindu Gods, but the text attempts to show that these were the Gods of two different communities and the followers of the one was antagonistic to the other. There's one incident where we find that even Deva and Brahmin community respected and worshipped Shiva. Janaka, the King of Mithila put the condition of stringing Shiva's bow for his daughter Sita's marriage. Though, Ravana doesn't believe that it actually belongs to Shiva and his earlier argument that Shiva wasn't worshipped among Devas is sustained by his remark that they were displaying a subordinate object on the name of Shiva's bow.

Brahmins are termed as robbers and thieves, and Asuras are told to be cow-eaters and there's a description of religious riots. All These things hint towards the communal riots in modern India. Mala is gang-raped in these riots and represents the condition of women folk in Lanka.

Both of the narrators in the text, Ravana and Bhadra, attempt to justify the culture of Asuras and criticize that of Devas, quite unsuccessfully though. The Asura kings who were ideologically bent towards Devas are criticized, such as Prahalada and Vibhishana. The attempt is unsuccessful because we do not get to peek directly and much into the world of the Devas, who are accused here and there of being discriminating against Asuras, but the world of the Asuras and their ways are left bare before our eyes and we can see how discriminating Ravana

and his kingdom is against those who are darker in complexion, those who are lower in social status, and against women. Ravana accuses that Brahmins practiced social injustice on the name of the caste. Plight of women in Brahminical society was deplorable according to him. But all this seems to be ironical, because we don't get to see deplorable condition of women in Deva or Brahmin society, until Sita is asked to pass through fire, of course. Plus, the condition of women in Asura society that we get to study in the novel is not at all worth our appreciation. This is reflected through so many things. Kumbha jokes about selling Kubera's wives to make money. Ravana ignores Mandodari most of the time. He treats her rough. He beats his mother. His mother curses and leaves him for that. Ravana promised his sister to take care of her but then he kills her husband for his political benefits. She also abandons him, like his mother. Ravana commits a physical assault on Mala. He accepts that his army murdered Brahmins and robbed their wives but he doesn't forget to criticize them to prove his deeds right. He accuses Deva kings as not being able kings and useless followers of casteism who promoted untouchability. He hates them. But his illegitimate son, named Athikaya, mothered by Mala is always an object of scorn by Ravana. He considers him untouchable. It was Bhadra who brought him up as his own son. Mala confesses before Bhadra that Ravana treated her with supreme contempt after that incident for being a woman of lower social status. Ladies in Asura kingdom lead lives of whores and they are repeatedly gang-raped on the name of religious and communal riots. At certain times, Ravana doesn't care about Asura codes of conduct and customs and calls them superstitions. Ravan disrespects his father for being a Brahmin. His father calls Asura race as greedy, evil and devilish one. A part of the narration presents Ravana as a social oppressor who discriminates against the people of his own race on the basis of their class and skin color. At a place he expresses his disgust towards Bhadra and his own illegitimate son Athikaya.

The novel *Asura* has well-knit dual narrative that unsuccessfully attempts to project the contemporary issue of casteism with the help of reversing the traditional story of Rama and traditional image of Ravana as an antagonist and a devil.

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