The Criterion: An International Journal in English
Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed Open Access e-Journal
(ISSN: 0976-8165) Vol. 17, Issue-VIII, September 2026
Special Issue: World Literature
www.the-criterion.com

Beyond Indianization: Mythopoeia, Evil and Subaltern Voices from Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* to Thailand's *Ramakien*

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https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n8.12

Abstract:

The present paper discusses the process of retelling and re-rendering of mythological texts from Indian culture to another culture. While there are examples throughout the world of retellings of the Ramayana, this paper will focus on two specific retellings: Asura by Anand Neelakantan and the Thai national epic Ramakien. In both cases, the authors have gone beyond traditional "Indianization" to explore how these two versions of the epic have been reconfigured through the use of various mythic themes and sub-altern voices. While Asura uses a counter-narrative format to tell the story from the perspective of the vanquished and undermine the binary oppositions of good and evil, Ramakien employs a selective adaptation approach to localize the cultural content of the original. Lastly, these two retellings illustrate that traditional works of literature are not fixed entities, but are constantly being reinterpreted and re-created.

Keywords: Mythology, Mythopoeia, Re-creation, Retelling.

Article History: Submitted-29/04/2026, Revised-30/06/2026, Accepted-20/07/2026, Published-30/09/2026.
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Introduction:

Throughout history, the Ramayana has been an epic narrative of a young hero named Rama going to war with a wicked demon king called Ravana; this continues today in different cultures and religions, especially in Asia, where many different versions of the story exist, some of which have been modified by local customs and traditions. So many different interpretations of the Ramayana are presented in contemporary literature that they question its original message and the characters as originally depicted. Through his book Asura-Tale of the Vanquished, Anand Neelakantan offers his own interpretation of the story by presenting it from the point of view of individuals who have been subjugated, particularly by focusing on what we would consider to be the 'bad' side - i.e., those who were defeated in the war between Rama and Ravana - including Ravana himself and his people, known as the Asuras. In one of the scenarios of the text, *Ravana* says,

"I do not care for any king. They are all the same. What is so fancy about the new one? Deva, Asura, Gandharva, half-castes, they are all the same. They only worry about how to glue their fat asses to the throne and screw the people. They talk big about the emancipation of Asuras, getting even with Devas, preserving culture, and all that humbug. But finally, it boils down to the same thing. Screw the people, enjoy a luxurious life in the palace, and cling to power." (Neelakantan 130)

Meanwhile, in Thailand, *Ramakien* is an epic that assimilates the *Ramayana* story into Thai aesthetics and values. This study juxtaposes these texts to analyze how each reframes canonical mythology to express marginal voices or localized worldviews.

Theoretical Frameworks

The term "Indianization," which describes the dissemination of Indian culture and religion in Southeast Asia, has been widely used but increasingly challenged for its

implication of cultural imperialism and one- way transmission. A recent study clearly highlights the aspects of this cultural absorption, localization, and reinterpretation of these traditional epics.

The paper explores these narrative strategies in the following three intersecting frameworks:

Mythopoeia and Rewriting Myth

Mythopoeia is a term for the creative reimagining of myth to create new meanings in different historical and cultural contexts. Mythopoeic narratives re-imagine inherited stories rather than preserve myth as sacred and immutable.

William Indick, in his work *Ancient Symbology in Fantasy Literature: A Psychological Study*, contemplates on Mythopoeia that it drives the " progression of our imagination into the future while simultaneously linking us to the distant past, retaining in [its] essence" the purpose of the primordial human, who first journeyed into the depths of his own psyche and emerged from the abyss with the symbol of insight and wisdom that have been with us since the dawn of humankind, carried forward by his descendants in an unending chain of fantasy and imagination" (Indick 21).

Moreover, in both *Asura* and *Ramakien*, mythopoeia renegotiates concepts such as authority, morality, and identity within the epic *Ramayana* tradition.

Subaltern Studies and Counter-Narratives

The Subaltern Studies, born in the post- colonial era, aim to recuperate the voices of unseen and repressed classes, to give voice to the marginalized, and to introduce empathy through hegemonic narratives. When applied to mythological literature, this structure enables the interrogation of the perspectives that are validated or suppressed. The narration in *Asura* is through the narration of *Ravana* and *Asura,* who were particularly belonging from marginalized

section. Furthermore, Neelakantan, through this fictionalized narrative, uses the dual narration technique to represent different perspectives of two major characters, *Ravana* and *Bhadra*. He tried to tackle the social conditions of the marginalized class, who are often laughed at, dismissed, or ignored by the elite.

"I thought of the opportunities lost by each poor, black, Asura child; the poverty, the filth, the flies, the shattered childhoods, and a familiar numbing pain started gnawing at my soul. My father's leering face jeered at me, screaming repeatedly that I was a black and good-for- nothing evil- spirited loser who was a burden to the world." (Neelakantan 31).

Indianization versus Cultural Localization

Previous theories about Indianization viewed the Southeast Asian epics, such as Ramakien, as merely derivative of Indian epics. The Ramakien story is an illustration of the transformation of the Ramayana into something that conforms to the Thai ideals of beauty and politics. Modern cultural theory provides new perspectives on these old ideas.

Asura- Reversal of Perspective

This version of the *Ramayana* story is told from the point of view of the people who are usually seen as marginalized. The character of *Raavana* is looked at from all sides. He is a person who believes in an old kind of justice, and he is struggling with the conflicts of his society. The *Ramayana* narrative is also changed by the character *Bhadra,* as he adds a new voice to this text that is not usually heard: *'I'm not a criminal.'* But I was poor, and that was a bigger crime. (319)

In addition, such a narrative technique is essential in the deconstruction of this classical epic. In this classic text of Ramayana, however, the conduct of Rama is never questioned but is instead scrutinized from an ethical standpoint. The novel goes further to show how morality is constructed by the impact of the storyline.

Evil as a Cultural Construct

The “Asura” does not possess evil as a quality; rather, it is an attribute assigned to them by the hegemonic groups. The defiance of Ravana towards the hegemony of the Vedas makes him “evil.”

“I was confident that I could challenge any pseudo-scholars on the Vedas. The real meaning of the sacred texts gave me greater determination to attack evils like caste, animal sacrifices, and other rituals being propagated by the priestly class. I was determined to curb meaningless rituals and sacrifices and put an end to the curse of caste” (35).

In this mythological re-interpretation by Anand Neelakantan, the mechanism of myth is revealed as an ideology through which the legalization of power and marginalization of the opposition takes place.

Myth, Power, and Social Hierarchy

Through foregrounding the writers of this text as witnesses with their perspectives privileged above others and elevating their aims of interrogating the intersections that link caste and power and dominant discourses to an authentic approach to creating valid representations, Asura advances the postcolonial project. Mythology is thus used to build a site of resistance as opposed to a site of worship.

Moreover, there is some debate as to whether this would have made any difference had Ram and Raavan actually fought, since, as Aakirti Garg argues, her research on Demonizing the 'Other': The Role of Identity, Power and Moral Ambiguity in Anand Neelakantan's Ajaya: Roll of Dice and *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* provides evidence for the following statements: "In fact the war between Ram and Raavan is not a moral crusade but rather a conflict between two opposing political systems. Raman was destroyed by Raavan because he was a threat to the ideological apparatus. As such, Asura associates Raavan with the anti-hegemonic character of

postcolonial theory by re-contextualizing the epic war as a representation of resistance." (Garg 5)

Ramakien- Cultural Adaptation and National Identity.

Localization of the Epic

The localization of the Ramakien is not simply a translation of the Ramayana but is a myth in and of itself within Thai culture. Although it retains all the same forms, it has been given Thai names, Thai locations, Thai styles, and Thai/Buddhist value systems. The themes of kingship, loyalty, and cosmic order in Ramakien are represented as they would be understood within the context of Thai sociopolitical circumstances. In fact, the dynamic of the mythical figure of Rama has evolved into a large body of literature, epigraphy, sculpture, and other art forms and has been built up very gradually and with many variations since that time. The literary form of this myth came later in Thailand and was composed elsewhere in India. Singaravelu Subramaniam, in his book titled *The Ramayana Tradition in Southeast Asia*, comments,

“The Thai people, since ancient times, have believed that the Rama story was set on Thai soil, and consequently, some of the cities, towns, villages, mountains, and lakes have been popularly associated with the legend. Thus, for example, the new city founded by Thai king Uthong in 1350 AD, was called Ayutthaya after the name of Ayodhya, the capital of the city of king Dashratha and his successor Rama” (Singaravelu 50).

Performance, Visual Culture and Myth

Ramakien is the Thai rendition of Ramayana, which means grandeur of Lord Rama. Instead of the effect on texts in the case of the traditional Sanskrit version of Ramayana, Ramakien emphasizes performance modes like Khon dance, mural paintings, and rituals in the

palace. Mural paintings and wall paintings usually depict stories from the Ramakien. They demonstrate the versatility of the myths and their incorporation into daily lives.

"Given the shared tradition of the Rama epic among nearly all the cultures of Southeast Asia and India, the story can serve as a cultural peace ambassador promoting mutual understanding among the people of this region" (Goss 04).

King Rama was the founder of the Chakri Dynasty, and he was the first ruler to make a full interpretation of the Rama story according to the ancient texts and sources. The purpose of this interpretation was to revive those Thai literary works that had been destroyed after the fall of the Ayutthaya Kingdom in 1767; therefore, this can be seen as part of King Rama's goal to preserve Thai culture as well as to create his own unique style of literature.

Rama II's reign saw the further evolution of the original Ramayana into an illustrated variant for theatrical performance called *khon*. Following this, both Rama IV and Rama VI developed their own variations of Ramayana, which are now among the most well-known of Ramayana adaptations.

As noted in "*India- Thailand Cultural Interactions: Glimpses from Past to Present*" by Lipi Ghosh, "Rama VI was the first person to illuminate the Ramayana studies in Thailand by finding links between Ramakien and the Sanskrit Valmiki Ramayana, and proving that Rama VI had previously discovered three sources used for the creation of the Ramakien: the Valmiki Ramayana, Vishnu Purana and Hanuman Nataka." He also discovered that the Brahmans who travelled from Bengal were responsible for the telling of the story of Ramayana." (Ghosh, 157).

There are several versions of the Rama legend in India. Some of the translations of the legend are made into vernacular languages that have their own literary value; for instance, the Bengali translation of Krittibas, the Tamil translation of Kampan, and the Hindi translation of Ramcharitmanas by Tulsidas. Accordingly, Ramakien should be the ideal embodiment of the

Kingship Legend, which is essentially the same as that of the Valmiki and other versions of the Indian Ramayana.

Moreover, Rama, as the ideal king, follows *Dasvidha Rajadharma*, or the ten highest virtues, which consist of charity, morality, altruism, honesty, gentleness, diligence, patience, forbearance, non- violence, and integrity (Poolthupya 35).

Mural paintings in Thailand are thought to be one of the most respected artworks depicting the Ramakien story, along with galleries at the temple of the Emerald Buddha. The presence of this story can also be seen in the modern buildings of Thailand, such as hotels and banks, where you can also see the depiction of Ramakien in the galleries. In addition to that, Ramakien is popularized through the Khon dance, which is the most complicated and is regarded to be the most artistic performing art. There are different kinds of Khon, and they are performed in accordance with special effects and stage form. Of all kinds, Khon Klaeng Plaeng is the oldest type.

Srisurang Poolthupya, through his works based on Thai customs and values in *Ramakien*, comments that: “By the Ayudhya period (1350- 1767), the *Ramakien* must have been composed and become quite popular for performing shadow plays (Nang Yai) and masked dance drama (Khon).” (Poolthupya 2).

The classical dance drama of the Ramakien (Rama) highlights Phra Ram's (a human manifestation of Vishnu) success in upholding the world with order and justice.

These successful moral acts have value and convey moral messages to viewers through several means, including their entertainment value: ethical value, characteristics of courage, gratitude, the Buddhist principle of change, the concept of karma, strategy during conflict, social hierarchy, and many others that provide important skills to citizens.

Moral Order and Cultural Values

While Rama is still considered to be the most ethical character in Ramakien, his moral character has some changes according to the context in which the story is told. The mythic story defines the unity of society through spiritual order, creating alignment between the mythical aspects of a godly and mortal king via the mythic story. Therefore, the use of culturally appropriate ethical systems creates the opportunity to amplify themes of rightness and wrongness (good and evil).

The triumph of good and evil presented in these stories is the foundation of Thai culture, and the stories and illustrations help individuals understand both their moral responsibilities according to the law, as well as the divinely ordained power of the king and the royal family.

Inside Ramakien, one will find time-honored themes of love and devotion, good versus evil, right versus wrong, presented through intricate plots and subplots with a multitude of characters. The actions and behavior of these characters often exemplify the basic characteristics of traditional Thai society (Goss 3).

Comparative Analysis: Beyond Indianization

The Existence of Many Different Versions of the Ramayana, Asura, and Ramakien provide evidence that the concept of a single, definitive version of the Ramayana is challenged. Asura does this through internal critique, where the ideology expressed in the epic is revealed through the discourse existing in Indian culture. In contrast, Ramakien is an example of the way in which an epic transforms as it is absorbed into another culture (i.e., external adaptation). In other words, while Asura is about subaltern resistance and the ethical ambiguity involved in the act of resistance, Ramakien is about cultural continuity and the localization of the epic.

Reimagining Evil and Moral Ambiguity

Ravana emerges as a major figure of re-reading in this context. In Asura, Ravana is depicted as an extremely human, tragic, ten-headed, and twenty-armed character who is the ultimate flawed anti-hero, whose demonization is indicative of his exclusion from society, rather than any failure on his part. It is seen how he is a complicated king, a loving father, and a brilliant scholar, thus a fully-fledged human character with ten different aspects of his emotions, which are in stark contrast to the divine image of Rama.

"I am sad to disappoint you, but I shall live a man and die as one. I will never try to be a God. I will do exactly as my emotions tell me to. I do not want to be a model man for future generations to follow. My life begins with me and ends with me. But I will live my life to the full and die as a man should. So, borrowing from your words, I shall be a man with ten faces – I am *Dasamukha*" (Neelakantan 41).

Further, as Dais Maria James observes in his master's dissertation on a subaltern reading of *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, Neelakantan was "ironically drawn to the anti-hero of the epic—Ravana—and to his people, the Asuras," noting that Ravana persistently haunted the author's imagination and compelled him to narrate this alternative history (James 19).

In contrast, in Ramakien, Ravana or Thotsakan or Dasakantha is portrayed as a villainous character, whose villainy is a result of his excessive pride, unbridled desire, and lack of respect for righteousness.

David Smyth, in his translation of *Ramakien,* writes that, "*Tosakanth*, Lord of Longka, mighty in strength and unmatched in wisdom, allowed desire to cloud his judgment, thus he brought ruin upon himself and his kingdom" (Smyth 145).

Such differences show that evil is not a fixed concept but rather a narrative construct influenced by culturally constructed values. Mythological ethics thus have to be viewed in terms of their historicity rather than universalism.

Conclusion

Going past Indianization, the present paper highlights the fact that the Ramayana story can be viewed from the perspective of a network of interrelated but independent stories. The story of Asura- Tale of the Vanquished and Ramakien are examples of how mythopoeia works for resistance and adaptation, either via subaltern narratives or localization. The challenge to dominant moral dualisms and the recovery of marginalized voices by such works reasserts mythology as an ever-evolving and contested discourse.

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