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Breaking the Grand Narratives: Re-reading Ramayana as Asura: Tale of the Vanquished

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Abstract:

The sacred Hindu epics- The Ramayana and The Mahabharata represent the mythical tale from the perspective of the victor and hence the his/her story of the vanquisher's side is reformed, moulded, re-told, twisted and thereby misrepresented in the text. *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* by Anand Neelakantan is an example for one such alternative reading which provides space to the marginalized and suppressed unheard voices that lay buried under the annals of mythology/history. Neelakantan, in a postmodern manner of dealing with myth and history, makes the much celebrated villain of Hindu Mythology, Ravana, occupy centre stage. As the focaliser changes so does the focal point and ideas of right and wrong. The paper critically analyses Ravana and his people's stand points, queries and counter logic as their 'mini narratives' interrogate grand narratives put forward in the celebrated epic. Neelakantan makes a determined effort for a portrayal of the epic character and brings to the surface the broader and deeper aspects of Ravana's mind that lay submerged in the majestic sweep of the grand Ramayana. His character is an interface between literature, myth and culture. The present paper will try to analyze the innermost recesses of Ravana, his misery, his struggle, his suspicions that the epic was silent about. The paper will analyze how the author has tried to break the grand narratives of the past and present an alternative reading of the previous myth. The paper will scrutinize how Neelakantan revisits the myth of the Ramayana and view the character of Ravana in a new light.

Keywords: myth, vanquished, alternative reading, grand narratives, subvert, discourse, subaltern perspective.

Mythical or legendary stories abound in praise of the victorious glorification of all their deeds even if they are inhuman, comes into the fore with the blue pencil of history that sweeps under the carpet the story of the downtrodden. Most of the epics were transmitted through the oral medium thus giving space for additions and deletions of actual or fictitious events. One such tale is that of the *Ramayana*. Throughout Indian history, many authors have produced diverse tellings of the *Ramayana* in numerous media whether in the forms of fiction, poem or drama. The televised *Ramayana* by Ramanand Sagar too had a huge impact on the mainstream national

culture. The whole world is familiar with the heroic Rama and the antiheroic Ravana. Whether it be a human or God, nobody sticks on to the linear character. They can be flat and round. But as it depicts things from the human side, flawless persons are a nullity. All the Intertextual readings fail to connect the humanitarian concern with Ravana 'the other' in the epic. Contemplation of the victorious finds space in the history. Those who are left in oblivion, continues to stay in the clutches of memory as the 'unwanted'. The racial and caste dominated society has always tried to brand the rebellious as the '*asura*'.

Such deconstructive apathies can be cited out of the text, *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished-The Story of Ravana and His People* written by Anand Neelakantan. In this novel, every character including Rama and Ravana is human, only differentiated from the other by their caste and love of power. The study analyses the novel from the perspective of an unsung hero, Ravana. Rendering him into the postmodern context, with a voice of his own, the novelist creates a 'metanarrative' that dissects the age old concept of the powerful antagonist. Juxtaposing the *Ramayana* and *Asura*, one finds the churning out of certain versions, which will theoretically support the creation of centre margin, the superior race and the other in the 'historicisation' of epics and folktales. In an age of deconstruction, multiple identities, and innumerable possible voices, everything under the universe is questioned. Rationality and logical reasoning lead to the emergence of new realities, fictions and narratives in literature. Jean Francois Lyotard's notion of Meta narratives questioning the centrality of the Grand narratives provides us some insights about the human quest to identify the roots. The feel of rootlessness evades the single perspectives of the multiple events.

The research paper explores the role of anti-heroic epic works by reading against the grain. It also seeks to appreciate the 'wronged' mythological characters by deconstructing their image. By connecting the dark negative characters to the mainstream fiction, it attempts to address the grave issues that affect the common man in every sphere. Thus, such innovative novels make us re-consider some of the fiery questions of postcolonial India and also offer a positive reconstruction through its perpetually 'silenced' dark characters. Divergent from the traditional retelling—Ravana the ten headed demon known to every Indian, is representative of a very ordinary human being, who with a burning ambition and a grand dream decides to live life fully. As conventionally depicted in myths and legends the writer has projected demon Ravana with many flaws who does many atrocities on his subjects. In an interview to the Newspaper 'The Hindu', the author largely concerned with the portrayal of negative shaded characters like Ravana or Duryodhana remarked:

I have always found that the villains are more believable and humane than our mythological heroes[. . .] A Ravana or Duryodhana looks refreshingly modern in their values. Their naked materialism,honest ambitions and even their flaws make them likeable. There are two sides to any story. So far wehave been spoon fed one

point of view only. It is fascinating to see how the same story changes when the view point changes. As they say, there is my truth, and your truth, but the real truth is somewhere in between. (S Devika 5)

Anand Neelakantan's *Asura* opens with Ravana dying on the battlefield, felled by Rama's arrows. His life flashes before his eyes, which unfolds the secret history of the 'other', the 'vanquished' as the author would prefer, from the *Ramayana*. The antagonist of the original hogs the limelight in this newer version. The positive side of Ravana gets more focus in the novel. He is a devotee of Shiva, a great scholar, a talented musician and astrologer. He reminds the readers that apart from that one act of self-destructive madness when he abducted Sita, Ravana was a great and noble king, beloved of his people until Rama and his allies unleashed the genocidal war. According to the author's observation, asuras were highly democratic people with a casteless society. With Lord Siva being their deity, their lineage can be historicised to the Dravidians rather than to the Aryans. Ravana, thus, is devoid of the features of an archetypal villain. The physical rendering of the ten heads gave Ravana a demonic look but the author corrects it as the ten emotions or deeds that are purely human. He wanted to live as an earthly being. He says:

I didn't want the seat Rama has reserved for me in his heaven. I only wanted my beautiful earth (14).

The present paper opens up the possibility of various readings from a postmodern perspective, where both Rama and Ravana are depicted as representatives of two different clans. In the *Ramayana*, Rama occupied the centre, marginalizing Ravana as the 'other'. But in the novel, the centre margin has been thrashed in order to replace it with a humanistic perspective. In the *Ramayana*, one can trace the birth and upbringing of Rama in such a detail that nobody gets bothered to count on the legacy of Ravana. Here the author, clearly states the heritage of the *Asura* clan. Ravana, being the son of the great sage Vishrva and the Daitya princess Kaikesi, spent his childhood in poverty. Ravana, according to the novelist, is not a demon but a king who was insistent upon implementing a casteless society thus ousting the money-minded Brahmanical system of knowledge perpetuation. About the destiny, Ravana says:

"[...] I had been born to fulfil someone else's destiny. To allow someone else to become God" (15).

Asura: Tale of The Vanquished, The Story of Ravana and His People, as its title implies is a unique piece of narrative which describes the plot of *Ramayana* from the perspective of Ravana and Bhadra; one an Asura Emperor and the other a menial, downtrodden Asura who helped Ravana to ascend the throne of Lanka. The novel is a possible narrative of the sacred myth

Ramayana, which offers reason for Ravana's deeds and provides justification from his and his people's points of view. But in between the novel, Ravana, by himself and Bhadra is described as an ambitious and proud King who never cares for the will of his people. *Ramayana*, a story that has infinite multidimensional possibilities, has now narrowed down to a single perspective and is subverted here. Sita becomes Ravana's daughter here, who is the actual cause of his men's destruction. Siva, Vishnu and Brahma are no more Gods but mass leaders who achieved a kind of Godhood. The Devas and the Asuras cause various societal changes when they over run and attack the others' kingdom. *Asura* is the tale about the rise and the fall of the Asura Empire under the rule of Ravana.

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean Francois Lyotard defines the postmodern condition by its "incredulity towards meta narratives" (xxiv). Postmodernism critiques, interrogates and problematises grand narratives as it regards grand narratives as illusory, which are nonetheless backed by those in power of controlling, dissipating and propagating knowledge to erase "difference, opposition and plurality" (Barry 83). In place of meta narratives, postmodernism advocates for a "series of mini narratives, which are provisional, contingent, temporary and relative" (Barry 83). Thus, Postmodernism 'deconstructs' (to use Derrida's term) ideas of history, absolute truth and up held the postmodern view of the same as perspective based. Through his novel *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, the writer, Neelakantan has tried to break the grand narratives of the dominant ideological myths and has brought into fore the small narratives of the silenced characters. In the novel, the author has tried to challenge the sacred myth of Ramayana and has provided an alternative reading of it by bringing into limelight the point of view of the much celebrated villain of Hindu mythology, Ravana. By bringing into focus the single narrative of Ravana and by making him the anti-hero of his novel; the author has dared enough to subvert the uniliter hegemonic discourse (Brahmanism). The intent of the author is to uphold the narrative from the other side and provide justice to the marginalized class by making their voice heard which has been denied since ages.

The novel highlights the humaneness of the asuras against the verisimilitude of divinity practiced by *devas* under the pretext of social good. Bhadra, in the narrative, serves a polyphonic purpose: the judge of actions of king Ravana in the outside world; and secondly, the conscious of Ravana, the thoughts Ravana could muster and nurture had he been an ordinary human. The character of Bhadra is most pathetic as he has been denied all the rights except being a puppet in the hands of the authority. He is double marginalized- first for the fact that he is a black asura and secondly, he is inferior and a low creature compared to the royal class (king). Neelakantan has shaped Bhadra as a representation of the common man. Bhadra's voice is the voice of the silenced and suppressed majority. Bhadra has been portrayed to draw interest to this fact. The role of Bhadra, then, assumes critical significance as the personalized manifestation of the man that Ravana is shown to be. Bhadra anchors the story. His character gives it a third perspective.

Bhadra is the bridge between the ancient world of the Ramayana and today. He is the window that allows us to gaze at that hazy period through modern eyes.

Like Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* who prefers to reign over hell than to serve in heaven, Anand's Ravana is not ashamed of his fall nor is he repentant.

Ravana was a man who lived life on his own terms, doing what he thought was right and caring nothing for what was written by holy men; a man who lived life fully and died a warrior's death. . . and it is only the small detail of who won, that decided the hero and the villain, in their epic life stories (494).

The narrative of *Asura* deviates from that of *The Ramayana* in the treatment of the central conflict behind the narratives: the abduction of Sita by Ravana. *Asura* constructs a narrative where Sita was abducted by Ravana to save her, from the masculinity rampant in the *Devakingdoms*, because she was his daughter he was forced to abandon because 'the learned' of his kingdom had prophesied disaster. This alteration in the narrative challenges the Rama-Ravana dichotomy by turning it around to Ravana-Rama duality. Ravana distinctly emerges as the hero for his fidelity towards his daughter, his accepting his decisions and his belief in the superiority of his culture that pushed him into the battle with Ram. His virtue shines in full glory when he accepts Mandodari even after she is molested by the forces of Rama during the war. The superior-inferior dichotomy gets redefined when the voice of the other describes the kingdoms of the *Devas* and the *Asuras*. Mainstream Literature always projected a superior *Deva* culture in contrast to the inferior and uncivilized culture of the *Asuras*. *Tale of the Vanquished*, on the contrary, constructs the narrative of culture on opposite grounds, where the *Asura* civilization boasts of an egalitarian society under the leadership of Ravana, brought to destruction by the hierarchized *Deva* civilization. In other words, the narrative of *Asura*, constructs an India that is in direct confrontation with the India of Valmiki and Sankrityayan.

The respect for women, the defining quality of a civilized society, distinguishes Rama from Ravana and the narrative of *Asura* expostulates that it is Ravana, who in spite of being the demon, lives up to this iconic principle of civilized societies. While in *Ramayana*, the 'maryadapurushotam' Rama abandons his wife even after she proves her chastity, Ravana, does not, even once, try to impose himself on Sita, who safely stays in the *Ashoka Vatika* under the care of *Trijata*. Moreover, in *Asura*, Ravana's entire war with Rama works on the one principle: the treatment of women by the *Devas*. He does not want his daughter to face what befalls her in *vanvasa*, as she belongs to a better culture, that of the *Asuras*. Ravana's character, in *Asura* emerges in stark contrast to the character of Rama. Given the alternative voices, it was implied that this distinction would emerge, but this distinction, rather than overturning the conventional notions, constructs Ravana as humane rather than divine. This humaneness of Ravana makes the narrative take cognizance of the limitations and drawbacks in his character and his dream

kingdom. Ravana lives with his own sets of qualities and limitations. “He believed that to be respected in the world, he had to be a secular king, and treat every religion with respect and tolerance” (302)

In the novel, the writer has tried to humanize the protagonist, unlike *Ramayana*. This is in contrast to the divinity of Rama and the visible reluctance and rejection of the perfection that comes with that divinity. Ravana says, “...I was always a creature of passion. I had lived as Ravana and I would die as Ravana. I did not intend to become Rama, the perfect man and God. There was no dearth of gods in my country. It only lacked men” (354). His follies and fallibilities become starker in contrast to the character of Rama in *Ramayana & Ramcharitmanas*. Rama is the God incarnate, the divine human of *Tretayugain* human history, a period when all was glorious and perfect. This is highly unlike Ravana, who followed the dictates of his own conscience and did what he felt right. In the mainstream narrative, while Rama made, apparently, no mistake, Ravana, in his *Ravanayana*, has his share of follies and mistakes that he does not try to evade.

The narrative foregrounds a very significant aspect of the narrative techniques used by ‘the self’ and ‘the other.’ Ravana, aware of his imperfections, still is decisive and determined to pursue his actions to the end even in the face of imminent defeat and destruction. Ravana’s character, then, as told autobiographically, is far from being a beautiful picture of his life that is replete with perfections and idealizations. He defines himself as flawed but with dauntless courage to stand for his actions and what he considers just. He grows from a very humble and degraded childhood, albeit belonging to the royalty, under the clutches of *Kuber*, the brother of Ravana and the king of the *asuras*. Commencing his journey from an attached hut on top a mountain, he grows to be the ruler of the vast *asura* empire over a major length and breadth of India and Srilanka. However, through his journey, he admits to having made some rash decisions and mistakes but rather than escaping them, he stands to face the consequences. Moreover, given his conscience, he is also sorry for not being able to do much for the common *asuras* like Bhadra who expected a golden period under his kingship.

The death of Ravana also assumes significance in the narrative. While the traditional texts, like *Ramayana* and *Ramcharitmanas*, project it as desired by Ravana, through the hands of Rama for the attainment of Moksha; in *Asura* Ravana, in spite of all that transpired, says, “

I wanted to start again. I wanted to make the same mistakes, love the same people, fight the same enemies, befriend the same friends, marry the same wives and sire the same sons. I wanted to live the same life again. I didn’t want the seat Rama has reserved for me in his heaven. I only wanted my beautiful earth (13-14).

In the entire narrative of *Asura*, it is the human that occupies the central position. Through this Neelakantan explicitly questions the status of *Ramayana* as the foundational epic of Hindu and Indian mythology and folklore. Neelakantan is not only raising an alternative voice of the vanquished but also questioning the significance of the *Ramayana* as one of the Foundational Narratives of India. Jonathan Culler opines that Foundational Narratives are those whose stories are independent of the narrative in which they are put. *Asura's* narrative has totally altered the story, and hence *Ramayana* probably cannot be iconized as a Foundational narrative. His narrative counters and challenges all that is conventional and traditionally accepted. Consequently, what is believed to be a foundational narrative loses the pedestal.

The novel is a harsh indictment on the traditionally revered and considered sacrosanct. His voices construct a narrative that refuses to toe the line of mainstream literature. Myths, shows the narrative of *Asura*, have for long, dominated our life as the 'Absolute Past', but it is only one-half of the story, told by the 'self' to coerce or hegemonize the 'other'. This imperial 'Other', the 'self' deliberately, by virtue of being the wielder of power, subdued alternative voices, but, in spite of being suppressed, the latter stayed and when space was offered, caught fire. In the present study, the Asuras are considered as the other and inferior by the Devas. Also even the Asura authorities view the common Asuras as the other and the untouchables. Devas consider the culture and beliefs of Asuras as inferior and Devas even make Asuras believe that they are inferior. Vanara race, one of the mixed races among Asuras are being looked down as inferior even by the common Asuras, is just one instance of 'Othering' being done.

The myth of Ravana and the Asura caste told in the perspective of the marginal reveal the justifications, dilemmas, trauma and helplessness of Ravana, the learned, pious, musician, the loving but shy husband, the loving brother cheated by his brother Vibhishana, led to death by the deeds of immoral sister Shoorpanakha, humiliated by Ananya, the King of Ayodhya, who told Ravana in an arrogant manner on the verge of failure:

Toy untouchable, if your mother is castles so too are you." ... "I will not surrender to a Sudhra"... "I will not demean myself by fighting a Sudhra." (210). Ravana combated this shame with his sword roaring "Then die at the hands of Sudhra" (210).

Thus his voice acquires the strength of the subaltern, who was repeatedly humiliated, silenced, threatened, butchered and made slaves. If he failed in his mission in safeguarding Lanka and its culture from the barbarian Devas and treacherous Asuras like Vibhishana, who wanted to impose caste hierarchy, he is not fully responsible for the rot of Asura dynasty. One reason was that their chances to succeed in the midst of treacherous group are grim. Secondly, the Asuras' view on good and evil is ambiguous and their confidence in themselves as well as their belief diminished by constant struggles and failures as Bhadra rightly remarked:

We were sure that Mahadev Shiva would not allow evil to triumph. However, in the deepest corner of my mind, I knew we were lesser children of Gods, and even a compassionate and all powerful God like Shiva would look at the colour of our skin and flinch. Perhaps we had been born with the wrong skin colour. (345)

Yet another point, the twenty first century retelling of the myth raises is the anti-feministic nature of the earlier myth. Ravana, though his wife was violated during the war, accepted his wife. But the exemplary figure Rama, when the subjects spread rumours against his chaste wife abandoned her even after the deadly ritual Agni Pareeksha. This instance actually gives Ravana a better position and better value than Rama. Neelakantan portrays Rama as a subaltern husband who does not have even have the agency to have a say in the matters relating to his wife. Thus the novel with its politics of inclusion and subversion tells a new story which is a not a postmillennial myth in the conventional sense, but a montage of postmillennial perspectives. The final section of the novel deals with the death of Ravana. The author creates a contrast between the lives of Rama and Ravana. Bhadra, the commentator says:

Rama had sacrificed the two people who he loved the most, for the sake of his *dharma*. He became more and more depressed and withdrawn and finally found eternal solace in the dark waters of the Sarayu. [...] He led an unhappy life and sacrificed everything— his wife, his brother and his conscience, for that *dharma*. [...] Ravana was a man who lived life on his own terms, doing what he thought was right and caring nothing for what was written by holy men; a man who lived life fully and died a warrior's death. Like their lives, beliefs, values and definitions of *dharma*, the manner of their deaths were also contradictory. However, the final truth remains that both were actors in a grand farce and it is only the small detail of who won, that decided the hero and the villain, in their epic life stories. (493–94)

Thus, Rama and Ravana are two social products to assert the dominance of a particular group. When the writer unpacks the ancient product the need to reconstruct the same is being hunted upon. The novel *Asura*, turns out in every sense an attempt to recreate the past as well as the epic giving voice to the muted making it appealing for every reader. The writer has tried to challenge the dominant ideology of the time and has initiated a new tradition of looking into the tales from 'the other' side. The silenced characters have been provided a voice. The novel offers the reader to go through the mind set of different characters especially the silenced one in the *Ramayana*. Ravana till date continues to be depicted as an eternally ruthless villain until a brave attempt by Anand Neeelkantan's work renders a powerful voice to Ravana. Thus, a novel attempt of bringing alive an ever-hated negative character like Ravana does venture to enlighten that in order to progress as a culture, one needs to look beyond the issues of religion and caste and only

this can ensure a real 'Ramrajya'. Thus, such innovative novels make us re-consider some of the fiery questions of postcolonial India and also offer a positive reconstruction through its perpetually 'silenced' dark characters.

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