DECONSTRUCTING THE GRAND MYTH: A STUDY OF ANAND NEELAKANTAN'S
"ASURA: TALE OF THE VANQUISHED"

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Abstract:

Anand Neelakantan become known with his novel "Asura: Tale of the Vanquished" gave voice to Ravana, the Asura king. The Ramayana, the hallowed Hindu epic, depicts the mythical tale from the perspective of a legendary hero Ram who is worshipped as God in India. This novel explores the role of anti-hero epic work by reading against the grain. The present research paper will try to deconstruct the grand myth in the novel "Asura: Tale of the Vanquished". The writer had tried to challenge the dominant ideology of the time and has initiated a new tradition of looking into the tale from another side. This paper will analyze how the author has tried to appreciate the wrong mythical character by deconstructing their image and offer reinterpretation through it silenced dark character. In Asura Tale, Neelakantan had done the opposite brought out virtues of Ravana and questioned certain actions of Rama that has goes unquestioned before. This research paper is to reinterpret the past as well as epic giving voice to the muted. Neelakantan gives alternative voices, it was implied that this distinction would emerge rather than capsizing the conventional notion, but this distinction interprets Ravana as humane rather than divine.

Keywords: Myth, Grand, Deconstruction, Epic, Vanquished, Culture.

Introduction:

India is the repository of the myths and mythological stories. It is true because of India has inherited many things from its ancestors which show their concern with the mythological stories. Myth means the stories which specially deal with the nature, natural aspects, the heroic power of the gods, natural or environmental creation related to human life. Myth, therefore, has been the past and present of Indian literature. The hollowed Hindu epic, *The Ramayana,* represents the perspective of legendary hero Ram who is worshipped as god in India. Indian mythic stories seem that there are some variations in these ancient myths. Ravana is considered as a noble person and protagonist of the epic in Shrilanka. In various states of India, the same Ravana is viewed as one of the most talented and knowledgeable person but place him in the place of villain. In case of the myth it can be happen because since several centuries these myths are orally transmitting from generations and the impact of person's outlook, perspective and understanding capability lays on it directly or indirectly.

The present research paper will try to deconstruct the myth in the novel *"Asura: Tale of the Vanquished"* by Anand Neelakantan. The writer makes much celebrated villain of hindu mythology that is Ravana. He occupies centre stage. Deeper aspects of Ravana's mind that keep submerged under the epic *Ramayana* brings to surface the broader. Character Ravana is communicated between literature, myth and view the character of Ravana in a new light. In an interview to the Newspaper "The Hindu", Neelakantan concerned with the portrayal of negative shaded character Ravana remarks:

> "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 we have 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)

Ravana the ten headed demon known to every Indian. In ancient myth, Ravana is the mythical multi-headed demon-king of Lanka with ten heads and twenty arms. The traditional myth that the ten heads gave Ravana demonic look but author deconstructs that it is the ten emotions: anger, pride, jealousy, sadness, fear, selfishness, happiness, passion and ambition that are purely human. Neelakantan reveals the fact behind Ravana being portrayed as Dasmukha or ten faces, as in the novel narrates that:

> "Traditional Indian wisdom places importance on the control of one's emotions and projects the intellect alone, as being the supreme. The great king Mahabali, advise Ravana to shun the other nine base emotions of anger, pride, jealousy happiness, sadness, fear, selfishness, passion and ambition. Intellect alone is to be revered. But, in his response to Mahabali, Ravana justifies and exults in the possession of all these ten facets, as they make him a complete man. Mythology thus portrays as Dasmukha or the ten-faced one, while his twenty hands denote prowess and power."
> (*Asura*, 5)

Thus, the traditional myth that Ravana's ten faces are nothing but it is the emotions and his twenty hands denote prowess and power.

The myths of Mahabali and Vamana are to denote or mean that Asura clan suffered at the hands of Deva otherwise Brahmana, caste. The festival myth of onam is reconstructed emphasizing the Godness of Mahabali who is great Asura king conducted Rajasooya to announce his legend the rest of his period and his goodness is returned with betrayal. In this way on the fifth Avthar, the subversion strategy works that Vamana decided Mahabali. Neelakantan argues for the king Hiranyakashipu was murdered by the fourth Avthar of Vishnu that is Narsimha who increases the decline of Asura dynasty. The focus shifted to the seventh Avthar Parasurama that is:

> "A new menance had entered, the scene-a mad Brahmin called Parasuram- Ram with axe to grind, who formed a group of thugs to start a series of terror raids in the south." (*Asura*, 30)

In the new myth of Neelakantan is deconstructed as the harbinger of Anarchy. The Avthar, which led to the Brahmin upheaval not through intellect but through sword. *Asura Tale* told the difficult situation,

reasons and explanation of Anti-hero of the popular myth *Ramayana* has turned to be the estimation of the Yuga. It brought the seed of revolution from Ravana and his people.

The novel *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* constructs narrative that Sita was abducted by Ravana to save her because she was his daughter. In ancient epic *Ramayana*, Sita was abducted by Ravana. He imprisons her on the island of Lanka until Ram rescues her by defeating the demon king Ravana. However, Ravana abducted her to save from the masculinity rampant in the deva kingdom. Ravana emerges as the hero for his fidelity towards his daughter. Ravana loves as his daughter Sita and tries to see her as his child. He pains at the thought of her child. Everyone believed the proclamation of an astrologer that Sita will bring destruction to the Asura clan. He felt deeply hurt when he realized that he had lost his daughter and that she had been adopted by a Deva king. He wanted to kill himself since he was haunted by regret stricken inner consciousness that:

> "Sita my little daughter! Sita, my little daughter. I turned away and stood with my eye closed. I wanted to kill myself. 'Why had I forsaken her? Why had I forgotten her? I had lost her entire childhood. Why had I not attacked Mithila and taken back?" (Asura, 310)

In these lines, that myth reconstructed that Ravana can be seen as a loving father. The writer explains that Ravana abducted Sita to save her from all sufferings that she would face in her life. He always worried and concerned about his daughter, when Ravana witnessed the sight of a brestless, noseless and bewailing sibling Soorpanakha in his durbar, so Ravana decided to protest his daughter from them. He was struggling for his daughter. Ravana ignored the prophecies of the oracles. He brought her back to Lanka because of which he lost everything that he had one gained, using his mighty power.

The research paper highlights the difference between a Deva woman and Asura woman in the novel *Asura Tale*. Ravana says that Deva woman has no freedom. They were forced to obey the inbuilt rules. Dr. Kanupriya in her works, *Feminism in India Writing in English* expose the oppression of women since pre-historic times. It is highlighted in a general study that:

> "In Indian classical literature, a women is always shown relationship to man; the husband wife relationship is given more importance that the daughter father, sister-brother or daughter-mother relationships traditionally, a 'good women' is always synonymous with a good wife and a good wife must be chaste, faithful and virtuous like Sita or Savitri. In Ramayana Sita's identity is solely estimated in relation to her husband, Ram who abandons her for the social fear. The image of these virtuous mythological female characters is glorifed and they are referred to as "Devi", "Mata" etc. However, for feminists, in scriptures and myths woman like Sita are depicted either as a goddess or a sub-human creator, but never as a complete human being. Where on one hand, she is treated like an object of sexual gratification and considered to be man's property." (Kanupriya, 78)

The respect for women distinguishes Rama form Ravana. The narrative of Asura expostulate that Ravana who in spite of being the demon live up to this principle of civilized societies. In *Ramayana*, Rama leaves his wife even after she proves her chastity but Ravana does not try to impose himself on Sita. She safely

stays in the Ashoka Vatika under the care of Trijata. In the novel, Ravana's complete war with Rama works on the one principle: the treatment of women by the Devas. Sita belongs to a better culture of Asuras. Ravana does not want his daughter to face befalls her in *Vanvasa*. The 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 limitation as in novel that:

> "He believed that to be respected in the world, be had to be a Secular king, and treat every Religion with respect and tolerance." (*Asura*, 302)

The custom of finding an eligible suitor for Devas daughter through a publicized contest had very strange. There were also instances where the deva men would sell their wives as slaves, mortgage them or use them as wages similar to commodities. Ravana says that:

> "I noticed that the princes and kings assessed her like they had come to a cattle market and had found their prize cow. I burned with anger. What sort of custom was this? An innocent young girl in her prime exposed to lustful eyes of old men who could win her in a contest? What about her feelings, her loves, her dreams and wishes?" (*Asura*, 296)

Through these lines, Ravana says that freedom denied for Deva women. Any Ruffian had strength to win the bet arranged by the king could marry the girl. A girl is not allowed to meet her husband according to the rules of conducting a *Swayamvara*. Neither there were conversations before marriage nor could she feel the joy of knowing her husband beforehand. According to Ravana, Deva's customs are uncivilized. Ravana collates his own marriage with that of his daughter's. He had an arranged marriage and they had known each other and spoken many times.

The novel highlights the humanness of the asuras though they had their own share of problems their civilization belived in a different cuture. According to the Asuras, a society becomes civilized only when its women and marginalized people are treated with dignity, resisting the rigid caste structures. Soorpanakha's Brahmin father termed her as a dark and ugliest creature. Ravana's mother sums up the over-all attitude people have, towards Asura race in contempt towards her son. Asura is the human that occupies the central position. Through this Neelakantan 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. *Asura Tale* has totally varied the story; hence Ramayana cannot be modeled as a foundational tale. His tale counters and challenges all that conventionally and traditionally accepted.

Deconstruction of myth of twenty first century raises the anti-feministic nature of the earlier myth. Ravana accepted his wife though she was violated during the war, but when the subjects spread rumors again Rama's wife Sita abandoned her even after the deadly ritual Agni Pareeksha. This instance gives Ravana a better position and better value than Rama. In the novel Bhadra says:

> "Rama had sacrificed the two people who he loved the most, for the sake of his *dharma*. He become more and more depressed and withdraws 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, believes, 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." (*Asura*, 493-94)

Neelakantan creates a contrast between the lives of Rama and Ravana. Rama is portrayed as a subaltern husband who does not have the agency to say in the matters relating to his wife. The novel with its politics of inclusion and subversion tells a new story which is not a postmillennial myth in the conventional sense but a montage of postmillennial perspective.

Thus, Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* is an attempt to deconstruct the myth of the original epic *The Ramayana*. In the Vamiki's epic *The Ramayana*, Rama is portrayed as the personification of good and Ravana is considered evil. This novel brings out a different perspective to the familiar epic of the *Ramayana* by narrating the story from the point of view of Ravana. Ravana character is not portrayed as a demigod or a superman. Neelakantan introduces him as a symbol of common man. Through this novel this mythological fiction depicts the tale of *Ramayana* from the view point of Ravana. He reconstructed that the traditional myth of ten heads gave Ravana demonic look but he corrects or reinterprets that it is as the ten emotions or deeds that are purely human. In the epic, *The Ramayana,* Devas were portrayed as fair and decent looking, pursuing an impressive set of moral principles, where as Asuras have been portrayed as ugly looking, dark, vagabond and drunkards. But Anand Neelakantan deviates from all these things. He does not pray Ravana, but he discovers a Ravana who is arrogant, egoistic but at the same time aspires to become a great administrator.

The novel *Asura Tale* is a unique piece of narrative which reconstructs the plot of *Ramayana*. The novel is possible deconstruction of the sacred myth Ramayana which offers reason for Ravana's deeds and provides justification from his and his people point of view. In this novel, the author depicts Sita as the daughter of Ravana. As a result of the predictions of oracles, he lost his child. Neelakantaan deconstructs that Sita was abducted by Ravana to save her because she was his daughter. He abducted her from the masculinity rampant in the Deva kingdom. He tried to bring her back which led to Rama-Ravana war. In the war, Ravana lost all his sons Meganathan, Akshakumaran and Athikayan. Neelakantan highlights the difference between the Deva woman and Asura woman. Ravana entires war with Rama works on the one principle the treatment of women by the Devas.

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