



# The Ideation Of A Subverted Ravana: A Perusal Of Anand Neelakandan's *Asura: Tale Of The Vanquished*

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**Abstract:** This research showcases how the character Ravana of the Indian epic *Ramayana* has been realistically represented by subverting the conventional notion of the so called villainous characters of the epic. The article also looks into how *Asura* could also be read as a critique which challenged the traditional mindset regarding the thwarted 'other side'. As *Asura* being a remarkable reconstruct from the point of view of Ravana, speaks for the silenced entities and interweaves religious thoughts and historical attributes by employing an unusual diversion, pulling out all the stops to provide the narrative an independent existence, on the basis of the contradictory convictions employed in it. This relatively modern construct of the vanquished mythical characters taking rebirths in different tellings have now become a new form of mythology in itself. Hence this study sketches about what the epics really missed while glorifying the victors, their life and deeds.

**Index Terms – Retelling, Subversion, Other, Asura.**

Anand Neelakantan, the distinguished Indian author who created the counter-mythology genre in Indian literature, works on subversive and thought-provoking subjects. Anand's epic retelling of the *Ramayana* titled *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) is his tactic of foregrounding the marginalized groups, making them the heroes. The bi narrative style he has experimented made this novel intriguing, far from being a monotonous chore. Anand's road to literary career was definitely a road that many of the authors never dared to take, explaining why the subaltern figures were provided with a voice of their own in his novel. Hence the wide recognition of his 2012 book *Asura* earned him undying fame and distinction.

Though *Asura* makes Ravana the hero, he is not the typical hero that the readers expect. Instead, he is yet another despotic ruler who by all violent means usurps the power and throne from his half-brother Kubera. A perusal of *Asura*, showcases a realistic representation of Ravana rather than associating him with indomitable powers. Hence Ravana and his empire are portrayed as those defeated entities, silenced deliberately, in order to bring to limelight, names of the victors written in gold in the pages of history. Instead of being righteous, scrupulous, pious and invincible, Ravana tends to be more of a tyrant, vicious and an oppressor. But in certain walks of life, he is depicted as solicitous and tolerant. On the other hand, Rama is a forbearing figure who is often confined and led by the norms and rules of the country. *Asura* indicates that Ravana too had a story to tell as he had been silenced as a loser. This narrative made the Asuras speak for the first time ever in history. Inculcated by various other subplots, *Asura* sways within the torments of the perished and their succumbing to terrible fate.

Rama here depicted is more like an ordinary man with almost all the traits of a normal human being devoid of all sorts of special powerful weapons, magical powers etc. Ravana too is not depicted as an evil demon with black witches surrounded by 'bhoodas' with him to assist in the destruction of everything that hinders his way from doing whatever he wished to. No god is detailed here with showering beams of light as blessings. Instead, all the figures are reproduced as human entities having all sorts of sensations and sensitivities. Each character speaks for a particular clan or creed. Apart from this, the godly figures such as the Indra, Maya, Varuna, Brahma, Mahabali, Prasurama and all portrayed here are not lords with magical potentialities and celestial faculties but men with certain commanding powers. The battles they fought were not spiritual and mighty with heavenly indulgence but terrific and disastrous with aggressive intentions. The narrative's focus was mainly on those incidents that were hidden from the readers. The novel also discloses that Ravana was not the only one who craved for a voice of his own, but certain other subaltern and minor figures too wanted identities. *Asura* could also be read as a critique which challenged the traditional mindset regarding the thwarted 'other side'. But the epic that is available to every Indian unfurls the story of victory and the victors. The story of Rama had been written and rewritten many times. But the story of Ravana, or of losers in general have never been told. *Asura* on the other hand announces to the world that the time has come where the dead and the defeated speak for themselves. It is the tale of the vanquished and the repressed Asura folk, a story which no Asura has dared to tell until now. The novel endorses a narrative style where both Ravana and Bhadra chronicle the episodes in chapters alongside. Bhadra is the everyday man who is symbolic of the insignificant and overlooked characters who has been destined to live under suppression. He is doubly marginalized both as a vanquished asura and as a subaltern asura. Though he has proved himself to be significant in many ways at many times, he has never appeared in public or in the forefront. He always remained as an unknown figure both for Rama and Ravana. Bhadra is thus the other narrator who shares the narrative with Ravana. Hence the whole reading has been established from the mind sets of Ravana and Bhadra. The words of Bhadra depict how their clan had been reeling under the heels of both Rama and Ravana for he is the 'everyday man' who awaits for a better world in vain.

Purposefully removing every divine aspect of the Ramayana story, *Asura* is narrated alternatively by Ravana and Bhadra. The novel begins with the terrible atmosphere of a bloody battlefield where Ravana lies down badly injured. The entire story is modeled on a flash back where the wounded Ravana starts it by narrating his part of the tale from the battlefield. He begins with his childhood, then the early torments, his explosive growth and uprising, his overthrowing of his half-brother Kubera to claim the throne of Lanka, the abduction of Sita, the arrival of Deva group led by Rama to the territory of the Asuras, their coming to grips with and the demolishing of the Asura empire, burning of the cities and their kingdoms, Ravana's downfall and finally the death of Bhadra, the silent sufferer.

*Asura* being a remarkable reconstruct from the point of view of Ravana, speaks for the silenced entities and interweaves religious thoughts and historical attributes by employing an unusual diversion, pulling out all the stops to provide the narrative an independent existence, on the basis of the contradictory convictions employed in it. The novel questions several dogmas and taboos based on the tragic episodes of social inequity and discrimination. The narrative's varied epical interpretation mirrors contemporary adversities and this resulted in its mass appeal. Ravana's misdeeds in the novel correlate certain contemporary political instabilities and at the same time his voiceless 'Other' exposes the mishaps of the victims.

The purpose of *Asura* was to empower the voiceless by deconstructing the prefixed image of a typical and perfect hero. Its literary potential reaches every nook and corner of the rooms of the subdued ones and brings them to the forefront. The narrative's innovative endeavors bear productive output in the form of rational cognition. Apart from that, the narrative reconsiders each individual of every public sphere as a separate entity while addressing them. This novel has perpetuated its potential of being a realistic narrative in influencing the masses. This significant advancement of the novel is no less prudential than any complete reconstruction of the same kind.

*Asura* seems to be exposing realities beyond one's perception. Its mode of presentation and language breathed life to the creation of an unconventional hero. *Asura* neither defends Ravana nor defies him but speaks about him and makes his voice heard. This pluralism in epical reconstructions has led to the advancement of multiple significations and subtle cues regarding issues of gender, caste and class and this attempt could creatively bring out an ever hated figure alive before the audience. Besides, the narrative has ventured to edify those irreverent practices of enslavement based on social and economic marginalization.

Unlike those retellings that focused only on the heroes or the minor characters of the epics, *Asura* created an urge in its readers to grope in the darkness hoping to see at least a feeble ray of possibility in getting into the lives of the vanquished. The novel proved to be the play of the shadows for nothing can remain forever in darkness and light since the concept of dark and light is temporary based on the angle in which the light falls. Every story, incident, event or situation has got two sides, like the two sides of a coin. And these sides too vary as per the angle at which one perceives. Be it the Mahabharata or the Ramayana, they were all structured on a uni dimensional perspective and were single sided and had only a single point of view when it comes to the 'other'.

This relatively modern construct of the vanquished mythical characters taking rebirths in different tellings have now become a new form of mythology in itself. Such rethinking paves the way for the framing and reframing of old believes on a philosophical basis and enables them to deviate considerably from the angle of conventional perceptions that trivialize them. The tacit awareness that there are dominant and non-dominant groups within a society is the basis for muting or silencing. As a result, the muting process requires a shared understanding of who is in power and who is not. Thus the 'oppressor' and 'the oppressed' are the result of power imbalances. And that is how Ravana and his clan became the oppressed. The process of muting takes place in several forms. One such form portrayed in the case of Ravana is that of silencing and that of Bhadra the common man is control and harassment.

This retelling is a perfect answer to what the epics really missed while they were glorifying the victors, their life and deeds. The question regarding the purposeful negligence of Ravana, such a strong counterpart of Rama has been hovering in the minds of many. This is not the case of Ravana only but also the case of most of the losers in epics. No poet has ever sung about them, nor has any writer ever written about them. No reporter has ever made a write-up on them and no person has ever had an urge to know about them thoroughly or elaborately. They have been remained totally forgotten entities from time immemorial. *Asura* consisted of very highly developed stories from the *Ramayana*. Its pantheon purposely avoided an absolute center by discarding gods. The novel distributed the characters according to the purpose behind its telling and made its intentions and its telling's underlying speculations lucid through the fashion it is retold.

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