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## REVISITING RAMAYANA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF VALMIKI'S 'RAMAYANA' AND ANAND NEELAKANTAN'S 'ASURA': TALE OF THE VANQUISHED

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### Abstract

The present study focuses on its aim of analyzing the oppositions in the character Ravana in two different stories. The Ravana whom we found in Valmiki's Ramayana stands contrast to the Ravana in Anand Neelakantan's Asura: tale of the vanquished. In Ramayana there were only narratives of Ravana being a demon, being a cruel king, being a culprit but in Asurayana the real side of Ravana has been presented that lacked in Ramayana. Anand Neelakantan, an Indian mythological writer got inspired from the temples, surroundings of his village and took interest in rewriting mythological stories through the perspectives of the negative characters. There had been many researches in the particular topic in distinctive ways. The character of Ravana has been illustrated in both Ramayana and Asura in different ways yet they hold some similarities. But the motive of showing Asura as a tale of Ravana and his life has succeeded.

**Keywords:** Asura, Ravana, Ramayana, Rama, Alteration

### Introduction

Mythology is enrooted in the veins of every human being even though it has not been accepted completely. Mythology is a collection of myths or stories about a specific person, group of people, culture, and religion. Myths are very essential since they emphasize the origin or the particular world view of a society and they are also interrelated to literature and life in common. Myths provide fascination and appeal to the modern generation and modern writers. A basic vitality of Indian mythological stories in their proximity with contemporary reality. As Northrop Frye says, "Writers are interested in myths for the same reason that the painters are interested in still life

arrangements, because they illustrate essential principles of social issues."

Hindu mythology is generally centered around the great epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata. Since time immemorial there have been the system of story-telling and majorly these stories take place around the brave, pious, honest, humble characters of mythological stories and epics. On a general point of view whoever hears any mythological story, it is a truth to know that the particular story holds a particular viewpoint. But in the modern era this policy is going under a significant change through retellings, these tales have created a group of ardent readers. Mythology has become a popular genre in English literature and through serials and movies, the style, approach has

changed while the source has remained as original as ever. The impact of modernity has too touched mythology. The people of this era have started questioning all the basic plot, storylines, role of 'GODs', vitality of their roles in mythological stories. People are persistently in the search of logic, reason behind them. Due to such requirements authors like Devdutt Pattnaik, Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghai, Ashok Banker have taken it upon them to answer the unending questions and mysteries behind the mythical tales. They in their ways have interpreted the epics and revised it in their books be it the HUMAN SHIVA AND SATI of Amish Tripathi's Mehula trilogy, or the rational outcome of Devdutt Pattnaik's characters of SITA and JAYA. Through such writings readers get a different perspective from what have always been in their minds. These bring out the human side of the GODs and make it possible for readers to relate to them in newer ways. Retelling of mythical characters have gained popularity out of literary circulation and story telling that still continues to generate literary responses from renowned writers, research scholars. Modern thinking individuals, intellectuals and writers challenge the ideologies set by myths previously and throw new light on the mythical stories through retelling.

Anand Neelakantan is an Indian author, columnist, screenwriter, television personality and motivational speaker. He is renowned for the mythological fictions and has authored eleven books in English and one Malayalam. He was born in a quaint little village called Thripoonithura, on outskirts of Cochin, Kerala on 5th December 1973. The place was famous for its hundred-odd temples; the various classical artists it produced and its music school. Growing up in a village with more temples than was necessary, it was no wonder that Ramayana fascinated him. Ironically, he was drawn to the anti-hero of the epic, Ravana, its people, the Asuras. He wondered about their magical world. But his life and career continued without any wait yet the asura emperor had not left him alone. For six years he haunted him in his dreams, walked with him, and urged him to write his version of the story. Finally, the most awaited book came out which was the Asurayana. His books have been translated to

different languages. Three of his books have been shortlisted for Crossword Book Award during the respective years. He worked for the Indian oil corporation from 1999-2012, before leaving the corporation for a fulltime career in writing.

#### **Ravana in Valmiki's *Ramayana***

Ravana was a rakshasa, a demonic character in Hindu mythology, king of the island of Lanka and the chief antagonist of the epic Ramayana. Sage Vishrava and demon woman Kaikeji were his parents. He is portrayed to be an evil character, though he also has many qualities that make him a learned scholar. His devotion towards Shiva can be taken into consideration. In Valmiki's Ramayana, Ravana undoubtedly has secured the position of evil. He is very lustful; keeps many women in addition to his wife, Mandodari for his pleasure, though he's cursed to die if he touches a woman without her consent. He was full of pride and said, "Ravana can be destroyed only by a human being since he never asked for protection from a human being." He is described as possessed of blazing splendence, surrounded by his ministers like Indra by the Maruts seated on an excellent golden throne resembling the sun, shining as it were like a large fire on a blazing sacrificial altar.

He was unconquerable in the battle by GODs, Gandharvas, creatures and the noble souled rishis, heroic resembling death with opened mouth, wounds were caused to him by the thunderbolt of Indra in the battle between the Devas and the Asuras, his chest marked with scars torn open by the pointed tusks of Airavati (heavenly elephant), he had twenty arms, ten necks, was beautifully dressed, of a broad chest, heroic, marked with the royal insignia, was shining, gold, having well-built arms white teeth, a large mouth, resembling, as it were a mountain, whose body had been wounded by the hurling of Vishnu's disk thrown at him hundreds of times in the battle against the Gods, as well as by all the weapons of the Gods, who was a mover of immovable oceans, a quick actor, a hurler of mountain-peaks and a destroyer of the Gods, an extirpator of religious laws, a seducer of other's wives, one who was possessed of all divine astras, one who, after entering the city of Bhagwati and defeating Vasuki,

took away his chariot Pushpaka travelling at one's will, who, possessed of heroic power, impelled by anger, destroyed the gardens of the Gods, the divine caitraratha forest, the Nalini and Nandana forests, who having practised penance for 10,000 years in the forest, possessed of courage, once offered his heads to Svyambhu, who was free from the fear of death in the battle at the hands of Gods, Gandharvas, pisachas, birds, serpents, except from death at the hands of man.

His kingdom was designed by the great Vishwakarma. He was the great grandson of Brahma, the creator, he had ten heads all of which were of varying features and sizes but what they all had in common was the savagery in them. Such was his greatness as a warrior that even Rama appreciated his skills on the battle ground and seeing his greatness, there were moments when Hanuman himself had doubted Rama's victory over Ravana. He had immense knowledge the likes of no one else and he constantly strived to gain more and more. Despite having everything; he was defeated and that too by a human, a kshatriya prince. The king of Lanka was a character of epic proportions and had multiple facets to him. Valmiki depicts Ravana as someone who followed the path of adharma but went at great length to describe the opulence and attractiveness of the demon king. Throughout the epic, his flamboyance has been awed upon and his conquests, wealth, knowledge, dexterity at the battle field and his sexual prowess have been greatly admired. He had ruled for more years than the denizens of the devlok even bothered to keep count of Ravana was goaded on by Surpanakha, his sister, to capture Sita and avenge the insult metted out to her by Rama and Lakshman. Ravana was seduced by the description of Sita given to him. He wanted to capture her for himself and less to avenge his sister. He shared the plan with his uncle, Maricha. Maricha was aware of Rama's powers, having been defeated by him previously, and tried to persuade Ravana not to go ahead with his plan. But he was scared to push Ravana more and he knew that he would die if he followed Ravana's orders. Such was Ravana's fear that none in his court dared defy him. Even his brothers were cautious while trying to make him see reason when he did not wish to give Sita up and

wanted to battle against Rama instead. He constantly compared himself to Rama trying to show Sita that he was greater than Rama or in fact greater than anyone and that he was the best that Sita could ever get and someone as beautiful as her should be with him who was the greatest of all. He exploited his subjects, his family members and all the women in his life to gain personal benefits, a different from each of them. What mattered to him was his gain for which he could go to any extent, even kill the person who was of no use to him. Ravana, with all his wisdom and knowledge was a vain and jealous man. His pride blinded him to see that he was the one who was actually jealous of Rama for Rama had a dotting wife whose love for him never decreased. Had he not considered himself to be above and beyond everything and not underestimated his enemy, the story might have had a different ending.

#### **Ravana in Asura by Anand Neelakantan**

The ten-headed, twenty-armed figure Ravana, as the supreme anti-hero is familiar to every Indian. The novel begins with the title The End where great Ravana has lost the battle and the flashback takes us to his story of the past, his history of life. Ravana says, " I am not afraid of death. I have been thinking of it for some time now. " He, the mighty Asura king has no fear for death but the situations have compelled him to accept such a truth of life. The Ravana, whom we recognise as the king of Lanka had undergone through many hardships. To conquer that Lanka, to build that up as a great kingdom, Ravana faced obstacles yet he achieved his dream of being a mighty king. He says, " I had been born to fulfil someone else's destiny. To allow someone else to become God". He, with his three siblings, Kumbhakarna, Vibhishana, Soorpanakha and his morose mother begged before his step brother, Kuvera for wealth. Ravana belonged to a mix caste of Brahmin and Asura and for which no Brahmin was ready to take him for free even if he worked for them. Even his own father named them after demons. His father gave away all his money to Kuvera and nothing was left for him. He demonstrates the power of Asura kingdoms by saying, " When the kings of Egypt were busy in building great tombs to bury themselves, the democratic council of the Asura kingdom was busy

in laying roads, building hospitals, drainage systems and everything they thought was useful for people. " Even though he was against the supremacy of God, still he worshipped Shiva and considered him as his personal favorite.

The great king Mahabali advises Ravana to shun the other nine bases of emotions of anger, pride, jealousy, happiness, sadness, fear, selfishness, passion and ambition. Intellect alone can be revered. But in response to Mahabali, Ravana justified and exulted in the possession of all these ten facets, as they make him a complete man. The first attempt of conquering Lanka went in vain even if a lot of preparations had been made. But finally, he got into the Royal Palace and Kuvera left it for him.

Ravana got married to Mondadori and he described himself as a person who always wanted to have a physical intimacy with his wife but it didn't happen soon. He was considered as an untouchable king for his subjects. When people moved away from him as he passed through the market place, he at first thought that as respect but later realised that it was because he was a shudra. He was polluting their grand city. The brahmins in filthy clothes, thumping their walking sticks sharply on the ground to drive away any polluting castes. Vedavathi, a deva widow woman became prey to Ravana's lusty eyes and cursed for the greatest devastation of Ravana.

The daughter of Ravana and Mondadori got birth as a curse for Ravana and his entire kingdom and for this cause he ordered the soldiers to kill the little girl in the forest. But Bhadra confirmed him about his daughter. Ravana said, " My daughter was not dead. She had been adopted by a kind king, a deva king, but still a king and was now growing up as a deva princess. " He became happy that his daughter was alive but now she was a princess of the enemy and that girl was none other than sati Sita, wife of Rama, foster daughter of king Janaka of Mithila. He even had illegal relation with a low caste maid and to whom Athikaya, the illegitimate child got birth. His legitimate sons, Meghanada and Akshaya Kumara along with Athikaya got their upbringings at the same palace.

The news of Sita's marriage disturbed Ravana to a great extent. He became possessive for her. He

thought his rights upon her, upon her marriage, upon choosing a suitable groom for her but he was helpless. He went to Sita's swaymvara as a participant in everyone's eyes but his motive was to see his daughter and the groom. He got startled that how did those people get hold of Shiva's bow, Traiambaka and the rule of swayambara was the one who would be able to lift and strong the bow, would win Sita. He got angry at the fact that was his daughter a prize and who would win the contest would win her. Ramachandra, the eldest son of Dasharatha of Ayodhya got victory. Ravana doubted for his daughter's safety and doubted Ram to keep his daughter happily. When he learned about vanvas of Ram to fulfil his father's vows along with his younger brother Laxman and wife Sita, he became worried about Sita and decided to keep Sita with him to safeguard her. He using his trickery brought Sita to Lanka. Sita being the curse for Ravana had started to become reality. Lanka was burning when Ravana woke up, the monkey man. Hanuman had entered Ashok van to meet Sita and when he got caught and his tail was burnt. He burnt down the Lanka. Ravana went up to Sita to confess her the truth but she only considered him as a wicked Asura and cursed, " You and all your kin will fir such horrible deaths at the hands of my husband, Rama of Ayodhya. " Being a father, he found back his long lost darling daughter but for her he was only a crooked human.

The Ram- Ravana war had reached near Ravana's palace. He became confused to go for whom, to opt whom and to sacrifice whom. His decision was like the two sides of same coin. One side was dominated by his beloved daughter Sita and the other one by his subjects and family. He must sacrifice one for the other and he didn't want to lose anyone. He didn't have the courage to convince Sita of being his daughter. " This war is for the honour of the Asuras. A war to stop the spread of casteism and Brahmin hierarchy. "The enemy was so near. Slowly and slowly the armies of Ravana were being defeated and adopting death. Ravana could see his dream of utopia being shattered. The time of Ravana had approached to face Ram and finally he got killed in his hands.

**Comparative analysis of Ravana in Ramayana and Asura**

The study analyses the novel from the perspective of an unsung hero, Ravana. Rendering him into the 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 historicization of epics and folktales. The positive side of Ravana gets more focus in this novel. In both Ramayana and Asurayan he is considered as a devotee of Shiva, a great scholar, a talented musician and astrologer. Asuras were highly democratic people with a casteless society. The physical rendering of the ten heads gave Ravana 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. " In Ramayana, Rama occupied the centre, marginalizing Ravana as the 'other'. But in this novel, the centre margin has been thrashed in order to replace it with a humanistic perspective. He is not a demon but a king truthful to his subjects. Being the son of a Brahmin sage, he didn't completely belong to Brahmin caste and even though he ruled a casteless empire, still he himself was a prey of the caste system. Since his childhood, caste system has humiliated him. In his kingdom even, he was not touched because of being a shudra.

We were never aware of the struggle and hardships that Ravana faced throughout his life till death. 'Ravana was the king of Lanka', this line we all accept but little did we know about the circumstances under what Ravana acquired Lanka. He had no fault in getting birth in a Brahmin family but even his father was not happy with him. Even the kingdom of which he became the ruler was alms for him. The lusty character of Ravana has been depicted in Ramayana as well as in Asura. He even got cursed for his behaviour, got an illegal child but this nature never left him.

Sati Sita, for whom the Rama- Ravana battle took place has two different notion in Ramayana and Asurayan. A heart-breaking truth we got acknowledged with through Asura, that is Sita was the daughter of Ravana. Ravana had asked to kill her because she was a curse to him, to his people and to his kingdom. In Ramayana we know that Ravana abducted Sita to avenge her sister but he actually did so to keep his daughter in protection with him. The fatherly figure in Ravana is illustrated deeply in Asura, he wanted to share the truth with Sita, he even tried this but Sita considered all these as lies. Sita was abducted by Ravana to save her from the masculinity rampant in the Dev kingdoms. This alteration in the narrative challenges the Rama Ravana dichotomy by turning it around to Rama Ravana 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 Rama.

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. " His follies and fallibilities become starker in contrast to the character of Rama in Ramayana. Ravana was the one who followed the dictates of his own conscience and did what he felt right. Ravana is undoubtedly a strong character in Ramayana. He got no love, affection from his father, struggled and faced a lot of obstacles in getting Lanka, his step brother Kuvera too did not support him. When his time approached to stay with his family in his palace, his mother left him. His youngest brother, Vibhishana betrayed him by supporting his enemy, Rama. His daughter, Sita was not accepting him as her father. His powers, his ministers, uncles all sacrificed themselves for Ravana in the battle. He saw the death of his sons in front of his eyes and yet he stood strong against the enemy. At the end, he got killed by Rama.

**Review of literature**

Dais Maria James in his work titled "A Subaltern Reading of Anand Neelakantan's Asura; Tale of the vanquished" has analyzed the novel on

the perspectives of the subalterns. The subalterns were the inferiors and Ravana along with his subjects were considered as the subalterns. The motive of the paper lies in giving voice to the voiceless.

Dr. Vrushali Deole in her topic named "Caste, race and colour in Asura; Tale of the vanquished" has tried to reconstruct the viewpoint of the demonic character Ravana in Ramayana. She has attempted to address the grave issues that affect the common man in every sphere. Through the character of Ravana she has intellectually targeted the privileged concepts of Indian society that supports the caste system, racial distinctions.

Vikram Singh, Assistant Professor, Hisar in his work titled "Breaking the ground narratives; Re-reading Ramayana as Asura; Tale of the vanquished. His work 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. It tries to analyze the innermost recesses of Ravana, his misery, his struggle, his suspicions that the epic was silent about. It analyses how the author has tried to break the grand narratives of the past and present on alternative reading of the previous myth. It scrutinizes how Neelakantan revisits the myth of Ramayana and view the character of Ravana in a new light.

Natawan Wongchalard, lecturer at Department of English, Chiang Mai University in his work titled, "Revisiting Ramayana through oppositional telling of Anand Neelakantan's Asura; Tale of the vanquished. His work attempts to represent the identity of Asura and also to demystify Rama's goodness by analyzing the portrayals of the two main characters, Ravana and Bhadra. Through subaltern study approach Rama's goodness is in question.

Sanjukta Chakraborty's work is an attempt to look at Anand Neelakantan's debut novel Asura through the frame of marginalization. It highlights two groups of marginal people; one group is marginalized due to their mixed caste that is represented by Ravana and his siblings. His wife, Mondadori represents the second group. By

mentioning the two groups of marginalized people, this paper calls for attention to the wheel of marginalization in which Ravana keeps rotating first being marginalized himself and then being the oppressor.

### **Rationale**

To change, to break and to newly create the practiced beliefs, rituals, concepts and morals of any individual person or a group of people as well becomes dangerous step to proceed. But that one step by time becomes milestone for billions. The accepted myths stay in minds as prejudices until and unless there comes a fact to attack them. The retelling of mythology as a new genre has emerged only to put an end to the so-called imprinted fallacies. Lord Ramachandra of Ramayana is undoubtedly the hero of everyone who admires, believes him and at the same time detestation arises hearing the name of Ravana who has always been depicted as the villain in Ramayana. But no one strives to know the role that Ravana performed. We have judged Ravana only through the characters of Ram, Sita and other characters whom we worship as Godly figures. There is no doubt that they are noble but it is a fault to predict and assert someone as a villain just because they started enmity with the hero. Through 'ASURA' the Ravanayan, my aim is to assert that the character portrayal of Ravana in Anand Neelakantan's work as a hero contrast with the character sketch of Ravana in Valmiki's Ramayana. How the so-called dangerous villain became a man of honour all of a sudden through ASURA' is the sole aim to represent in my dissertation.

### **Objective**

The Ramayana is the greatest epic in India. There have been many researches, many writings regarding the character analysis of the protagonist in Ramayana, Lord Ram. In every aspect we have witnessed what Ram was but there is little talk about Ravana being a noble character too. The objectives of my work majorly revolve around the zest to iterate the great epic from a completely different opinion and sentiment, to display the oppositions residing in a single character that is to show virtue and vice can be put together, to collate 'Asura' of

Anand Neelakantan with 'Ramayana' of the sage Valmiki and to break the stereotypes prevailing since time immemorial regarding Ravana.

### Methodology

In my dissertation, I have used mythopoeia to carry out the research and its proceedings. First of all, I went through the textual analysis of the renowned novel Asura and the epic Ramayana, studied minutely the character of the protagonist and his contribution to the main plot. Secondly, I focused mainly on how distinctively the same character has been depicted in Ramayana and Asura.

### Conclusion

To have knowledge about the truth of Ravana is a great achievement and it is required for every human being to know the two sides of everything. And Anand Neelakantan's attempt to show the positive sides of a negative character is a much-needed concept to get acknowledged with. Even if another side of Ravana people get to know, still the stereotypes regarding Ravana as a demon will not vanish from the mindsets of the people. It is my immense pleasure to work on such a wonderful novel and after going through it my prejudices regarding Ravana have changed to a greater extent.

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