



## **RAVANA'S SAGA: A MULTIFACETED EXPLORATION IN *ASURA: TALE OF THE VANQUISHED* BY ANAND NEELAKANTAN**

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### **Abstract**

Anand Neelakantan's work, *Ravana's Saga: A Multifaceted Exploration in Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, explores the Ramayana's literary reimagining from the perspective of Ravana, the antagonist. *Asura* by Anand Neelakantan presents a counter-narrative that emphasizes the complexity of Ravana's character and his civilization, challenging conventional ideas of valour, morality, and dharma. This investigation explores the concepts of identity, power, and cultural struggle, highlighting Ravana's complex representation as a warrior, a ruler, and a person motivated by his convictions. Neelakantan illuminates the politics of storytelling and how tales influence communal awareness by re-examining old mythology from the viewpoint of the defeated.

One of the most intriguing and contentious figures in Indian mythology is Ravana. The faces of Ravana are endless, ranging from demon to human to God. Many questions have been raised about a character with three faces and ten heads, but no definitive response has been received. The primary focus of the paper will be Ravana's character development in popular literature.

**Key words: Ravana, God, Demon, Human**

### **Introduction**

In Indian mythology, the epic Ramayana's Ravana is frequently regarded as the quintessential antagonist. But *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* by Anand Neelakantan retells the tale from Ravana's point of view, providing a complex portrait of the "villain."

Our dharma was based on simple things: a man should be true to his word; he should speak from his heart and shouldn't do anything he considered wrong. One should not cheat even if one was sure to fail. One should honour women and not insult anyone. If there was injustice, we had to fight it at all costs. (Anand 14)

This article questions conventional wisdom by highlighting Ravana's complexity as a leader, philosopher, and fallible person. In order to bridge the gap between mythology and historical imagination, Neelakantan examines the *Asura* culture and their principles, challenging readers to reevaluate the dichotomy of good and evil.

### **Ravana as a Multidimensional Character**

Ravana, as portrayed by Neelakantan, is a complex person with a variety of traits, including goals, weaknesses, and strengths. He is shown as a man of flesh and blood, moulded by personal tragedies, political ambitions, and ideological disputes, in contrast to the demonized figure in the Ramayana. His desire to uplift the Asura culture is rooted in his resistance to Vedic hegemony and his ideal of equality. Nevertheless, his shortcomings—impulsivity, hubris, and moral lapses—humanize him and make his ascent and decline an engaging tale.

Many additional instances of suffering are added to the hero's life in order to achieve the position of Godhood, and the antagonist is typically still the cause of his misery. One such enemy is Ravana, who is notorious for making Rama's life tough, but there are other aspects of Ravana's personality that have been ignored in the imagination of popular culture. In the Indian context, Ravana has been portrayed in this way for a variety of reasons.

In fact, Ravana has been notorious as the villain who kidnapped Sita not only in India but all over the world where the *Ramayana* is a part of the cultural heritage. In the epic, Ravana was considered a demon. However, is this his fate, or is it possible to improve this perception? Teaching people that

the world has two sides is one of the main reasons Ravana is depicted in a negative light. The dichotomies of good and evil contain the two opposed sides. In his "Structure, Sign, and Play," Jacques Derrida even asserted that humans comprehend language in terms of binary oppositions. Everything they know and comprehend comes from something they don't understand.

Epics use this fundamental understanding to make the lessons easy for their audience to absorb since this binary opposition is very simple for humans to understand. However, the reality is that things in human existence are not strictly black or white. We encounter numerous situations in human life where it is difficult to distinguish between right and wrong. It is in these situations that a gray side of mankind emerges. Human nature is represented by the gray shade. There is never a fully nice or evil human being. A person's situation determines whether they are good or bad.

Furthermore, a person's worldview is shaped by their experiences; what is appropriate for one person may not be for another, and vice versa. Therefore, it is necessary to consider a person's story before making a final judgment about their character. Another glaring issue with Indian mythology is that, despite the stories' simplicity and ease of comprehension, which make them appropriate for young readers, they depict life in a way that is too simplistic to be accurate. Youngsters who read, watch, or hear these stories think that life is just as it is depicted in them. However, life isn't really that fair. All of the lessons they have learned from legendary stories are rendered useless as and when they encounter the actual world.

Happiness and sadness are just two eternal truths like day and night. A man of superior intellect is never affected by these emotions. They are not base emotions at all but a reflection of our thoughts, a reaction to our perspective on things we see, hear and do. Equanimity is not only desirable in a warrior, but a must. Without it, you are as good as dead in the battlefield. (Anand 27)

The *Ramayana*, for example, tells us that good ultimately prevails over evil, but it doesn't mention the collateral damage that occurred along the way. It is still challenging to punish evil in real life, whether it be in minor or major issues. This gives young people the impression that epics are dishonest and unreliable. India has long been considered a spiritual country. The pandemic was a recent example of the spiritual faith that runs deep throughout the country. Popular TV networks began airing pre-recorded serials based on religious mythology as soon as the full lockdown was announced. When the *Ramayana* was re-telecasted on a national television channel, the response was tremendous. In difficult situations, people have a propensity to return to their roots.

Our epics serve as our pillars, guiding us through difficult times and revealing our true selves but the pause that the global lockdown compelled us to take a look about life. Uncertainty is still the most prevalent emotion in the air today. People no longer take life for granted as they once did, so each day is an opportunity to learn more about who they are. One method to achieve that is to explore mythology. By creating or living these stories centuries ago, it links us to our ancestors. Even though these epics offer us guidance, they also raise many questions.

These include questions like who makes the decisions about what is good and what is bad and how right and wrong are determined. One issue that is addressed here is who Ravana is, but a long list of other inquiries is pointless. In Sri Lanka, he is worshipped as a godlike figure, while in South India, he is utilized as a political prop. In northern India, he is seen as a demon who should be burned annually. Can we then draw a single conclusion concerning Ravana's identity?

The popular *Ramayana* retellings of today also follow a similar pattern of delving deeper into Ravana's personality. The story is told from Ravana's perspective in *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* by Anand Neelakantan. It's not about a prince saving his kidnapped bride; rather, it's about a king saving his daughter from a poor prince who can't adequately care for her. The Asura king Ravana and his defeated people are sympathetically portrayed in the book. "I think it was the size of the dream and the willingness to act on it. Ravana dreamt big and strove ruthlessly to achieve it." (Anand 194)

Although the narrative has long existed among the underprivileged, it has never made it into popular culture. Numerous ideologies are promoted by the well-known *Ramayana* myth, yet they are so

subtly concealed inside the story that it appears to be politically neutral. It is now the duty of modern writers to expose these political ideologies and offer an objective account from the viewpoints of supporting characters. As "Dashanan," the one with ten heads, Ravana is well-known. "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." (Anand 247).

Anger, pride, jealousy, happiness, sadness, fear, selfishness, passion, ambition, and intelligence are the 10 base emotions that Neelakantan has linked to the ten heads. Only intelligence should be valued among these; everyone else should be avoided. Neelakantan demonstrates that a typical human being cannot avoid the nine primary emotions, and even if Ravana was taught to avoid them as a youngster, he was still unable to do so. Ravana had a grand scheme for his people, as Neelakantan demonstrates.

These base feelings, which grew ingrained in his mentality, proved to be an impediment to his ambition of creating an ideal society where only merit would be valued. These unpleasant base feelings, which he was unable to separate from his life, caused him to suffer and fail in his mission. In his book, Rama is also presented as a human being—a ruthless, tactful monarch who battled only to prevail. Even Asuras disapprove of his army's brutality and treat Sita unfairly. In the book, the Devas disapprove of the Asuras' history, culture, and way of life.

...was shocked to learn that many common Asuras had also begun to believe in Rama's divinity. Making your wife suffer exile in the forest, killing a friendly king through deceit, sending terrorist to cities and annihilating innocent men, women and children...were these the marks of divinity? (Anand 256).

*Asura* is a counter narrative to the *Ramayana*, which Neelakantan claims is the story's victor's account. Everyone is aware of one side's story, while the other was never made public. Neelakantan has attempted to reveal the opposing viewpoint, that of the defeated. It is hard to see epics objectively as they are so well suited to one's life. Modern ideologies that help to distance the listener from the story include post-colonialism, feminism, Marxism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis. The power dynamics found in our epics are made visible by them. The demythologized versions of the *Ramayana*, like *Asura*, open up more possibilities. Stories help people come to terms with the fact that the history they have been taught could not be entirely accurate. After these flaws are recognized, attempts can be taken to fix them.

There is a ritualization process underway in Sri Lanka. Rituals to worship Ravana have been developed, and a shrine devoted to him has been built. Twice a year, processions are held to showcase Ravana's accomplishments and attributes, allowing people to feel proud of him. As the best son Sri Lanka has ever produced, Ravana is held in high regard. He is hailed as Sri Lanka's finest ruler ever.

A sense of national identity is being created via the ritualization process that is currently underway. It will cause one of these tales to become as deeply embedded in Sri Lankan culture as the *Ramayana* is in Indian culture. None of these versions can be considered accurate. After examining Ravana's three facets—demon, human, and divine—it is only appropriate to consider him as a fellow human being with all the flaws that all other men have. He was unique in many ways, yet his negativity overcame his positive traits. The only lesson to be drawn from Ravana's multifaceted personality is that one should never let their bad feelings overcome their innate optimism.

### Themes of Power and Identity

*Asura* explores in great detail how power works and how it affects both individual and collective identity. The story of Ravana's struggle for supremacy is presented as both a warning and a heroic undertaking. Although his techniques and unbridled ambition cause internal riot and eventual collapse, his kingdom is a symbol of innovation and development. Neelakantan examines how leaders become caught up in the dichotomy of power via Ravana, attempting to uphold the greater good while battling moral quandaries and personal shortcomings.



### **Rewriting Mythology: The Politics of Storytelling**

*Asura* challenges the legitimacy and ownership of legendary stories. Neelakantan challenges the winners' monopoly on mythology and history by putting the viewpoint of the defeated front and center. Readers are challenged to consider the prejudices present in conventional narratives by the representation of Ravana as a multifaceted, likable figure and the Asura culture as a community with its own set of ideals. In addition to humanizing Ravana, this alternate narrative encourages compassion for people who have historically been considered "other."

### **Sita's and Bhadra's Perspectives**

Sita and Bhadra are two interesting supporting characters that Neelakantan introduces, and their viewpoints enhance the story even more. Traditionally seen as the embodiment of morality, Sita is shown to possess agency and personality, symbolizing the common cultural heritage of the Deva and Asura civilizations. The socioeconomic aspects of the Asura-Deva struggle are highlighted by Bhadra, a commoner who acts as a conduit between Ravana and the downtrodden populace. When taken as a whole, these personalities help us comprehend the sociopolitical environment of the epic.

### **Cultural Conflict and Relevance**

The tale reflects historical conflicts between oppressed groups and governing powers by contrasting the hierarchical Deva society with the egalitarian Asura civilization. *Asura* is pertinent to current discussions on identity, justice, and cultural pluralism because of this subject, which speaks to current battles for equity and representation.

### **Impact on Readers and Contemporary Literature**

The way that Indian mythology is portrayed in contemporary writing has been completely transformed by Neelakantan's *Asura*. Giving voice to the voiceless inspires readers to embrace different viewpoints and critically analyse inherited narratives. In addition to reviving interest in Indian epics, this reinterpretation advances a broader understanding of history and culture.

### **Conclusion**

A novel retelling of the *Ramayana* from Ravana's perspective is *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*. Anand Neelakantan challenges readers to think beyond the conventional dichotomies of good and evil by presenting him as a complex character and examining the sociopolitical circumstances of his day. The book emphasizes the importance of inclusive narratives that respect the complexity of the human experience and the influence that storytelling has on forming collective consciousness. This article highlights the literary and cultural relevance of Neelakantan's *Asura* through a thorough examination.

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