

A Critical Study of Contemporary Dilemmas and Re-Contextualization of Myths in Counter Narratives of Anand Neelakantan

¹Sunita Gonet,

Research Scholar, Department of Arts and Humanities Kalinga University, New Raipur
Chhattisgarh

²Dr Vineeta Diwan,

Assistant Professor, Department of Arts and Humanities Kalinga University New Raipur
Chhattisgarh

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Abstract:

In literature Counter narratives reflect the other side of the coin of an already presumed concept of the protagonist and the antagonist. It tells stories from the perspective of the other in a literary work, the marginalized challenging the dominant by giving voice to the silent hidden experiences and critiquing the already established power structure and prejudices. The narratives keep an important place in literature due to their aspect of validating alternative viewpoints, alternative truths and empowering oppressed communities by letting them define their own realities. Counter narratives are one of the important aspects of the writings of Anand Neelakantan that tell the stories of the vanquished, the marginalized and the 'other' from the epic. Throwing a challenge before the single sided dominant narratives, the works expose biases and foster empathy critiquing the contemporary social issues. The present paper attempts to critically study the aspects of counter narratives in works of Anand Neelakantan that re-contextualize the myths and epics in contemporary times.

Keywords: counter narratives, other, identity, marginalization, subaltern

Counter narratives hail from margins and give voice to the historically excluded beings and characters which include feminine voices, minorities and the colonized who have their own stories hidden and subjugated in their heart. They stand against the simple but biased dominant characters and story concepts that simplify the complex issues and portray certain groups and characters in a negative light.

The Counter narratives challenge dominance and critique the concept of power by revealing the prejudices, injustices and power dynamics embedded deep down in the traditional historical accounts and societal cultural norms. They present varying angles of a story that are often overlooked in the due course of reading and the perspectives of the characters that is often responsible for their nature and conduct in the epic but is hardly highlighted to

defend their action. Hence the labelling of the characters as good or evil is often a play of emotions that are revealed and the ones that are hidden by the writer as he has his own mindset of composition and idea to show that who is good and who is bad.

In the due course of this composition it often happens that the logic behind a character's goodness is highlighted but the logic behind a character's evil nature is often hidden and he is just labelled as evil or bad. The stories of his struggle and injustice are not highlighted and are often treated as unimportant before the sacrifice of the good dominant character. Neelakantan has explored epics in a critical way and his approach is therefore counter narratives, to show the other face of reality that is often overlooked and hidden. By presenting different angles of a character or a story he prevents his readers to be judgemental and broadens their understanding to create more complex and nuanced view of reality by presenting an honest juxtaposition of the narrative and the counter narrative.

In *Asura- Tale of the Vanquished* Neelakantan has focused on the characters who have been traditionally and historically portrayed as evil and villainous and here he is reflecting the character of Ravana. His approach towards the epic Ramayana and the character of Ram and Ravana makes the reader consider those experiences and perspectives that have been historically silenced. *Asura*, he employs a dual narrative structure (e.g., alternating between Ravana, the king, and Bhadra, a common Asura) to highlight the different impacts of grand events on different social strata, further emphasizing the voices of the marginalized within the marginalized structures and prejudices (like colonialism, racism, or gender inequality). These narratives validate alternative viewpoints, offering alternative truths and empowering oppressed communities by letting them define their own realities.

The art of Re- textualization and re examination of the rigid binaries existing between the hero and the villain of s story is yet one of the most striking features of writings of Anand Neelakantan. In the traditional epics the concept of the protagonist is very clear and idealistic when they present Rama, Arjuna or Krishna as the epitome of righteousness, while the figures like Ravana, Duryodhana and Shakuni are the embodiments of evil characters to be portrayed as the antagonists. At this instant Neelakantan critically views the entire simplistic moral framework and delves his researching mind into deeper psychological aspects, motivations and lived experiences of the so called villains.

It has been observed that history is often written by those who are victorious but no one voices the defeated and his anguish. In *Asura*, Neelakantan has placed Ravana in the centre of the tale and presents an alternative perspective on Ramayana where Ravana is not just an individual with demonic traits but a ruler with aspirations, weaknesses and struggles . In his other work *Ajaya series Mahabharata* has been told from Duryodhana's perspective. In the novel Neelakantan has replaced the derogatory 'Duryodhana ' with 'Suyodhana' portraying him as a revolutionary, a loyal friend and a man who values merit over birth. Suyodhana has been presented as tragic hero who is fighting against the rigid caste based social structure. His core qualities are highlighted to reflect that what he actually deserves and where he has been placed in his life. He utterly rejects the caste system and values a man on his merits and

so during the graduation ceremony when Karna is humiliated for his low birth Suyodhana intervenes to say:

"This prince among men deserves the sovereignty of the world, not of Anga only, in consequence of the might of his arm... If there be anybody here to whom all that I have done unto Karna hath become intolerable, let him ascend his chariot and bend his bow!"

Suyodhana is against the hypocrisy of the modern cities and during the discussion of the model city of Indraprastha with his wife Bhanumati, he deeply shows his concern for the marginalized who will be refrained from entering the city and will suffer discrimination. He says:

"This is not just about me and my cousin. It is about this country and the future of its people. You have not seen Indraprastha. You have not seen how the poor live in the model city of the Pandavas."

Neelakantan through Suyodhana points Pandavas merely as the facade of Dharma that only benefits the elite and so he visualizes himself as the leader of the powerless and voiceless. He is the one who unveils the reality of so called Dharma and questions its superstitious and ritualistic nature practiced by Yudhishtira. He speaks :

"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... We never knew any of the great teachings... we followed no tradition."

Neelakantan through the narrative justifies the presence of a simple humanistic code of conduct over the complicated and discriminatory divine law often propagated by the various religious sects in order to justify their superiority. Suyodhana completely denies the idea of accepting himself as a victim of fate to speak , "I have lived as Suyodhana and I would die as Suyodhana. I did not intend to become the perfect man... There was no dearth of gods in my country. It only lacked men." His self esteem is highlighted when he chooses to die as a man fighting for his beliefs rather than a king who surrendered his soul for holy victory.

In his counter narrative Asura- The tale of the Vanquished Neelakantan has stripped of the title of a 'ten headed demon' from the character of Ravana and has recasted him as a deeply human protagonist where he represents the marginalized subaltern and the vanquished whose history was not written by anyone between them but by the Devas who were the victors. He has been portrayed as a child of a Brahmin man and the an Asura mother who is living in poverty. The father rejected Ravana and his mother both and therefore they had to spend their life in poverty. The character of Ravana in the novel becomes an allegory for the struggle of the common people against systematic oppression and caste hierarchy. He is the voice of the vanquished and therefore the story of the novel begins with the death of Ravana which immediately establishes him as a man whose story has been hidden and suppressed for millennia. His critical question is that why the defeat is celebrated as the victory of "good over evil" . In this perspective he says

"For thousands of years, I have been vilified and my death is celebrated year after year in every corner of India. Why? Was it because I challenged the Gods for the sake of my daughter? Was it because I freed a race from the yoke of caste-based Deva rule?"

He does not appreciate his identity confusion as he has a hybrid identity, Living with his mother he is identified as an Asura, the people who were looked down by the elite, light skinned ruling class Devas. The Asuras were considered impure by the Devas and Ravana questions this identity crisis: "But wherever I looked, I only saw oppression. Money, caste, rituals, traditions, beliefs and superstitions all conspired together to crush the humble majority. Why couldn't there be a more just way of living?" Ravana encounters the Brahmanical system in Ayodhya, and there through his words he reflects a fierce resentment over the concept of purity.

"I hated the Brahmins, the Devas and their culture or the lack of it... The rituals, the curse of the caste—none of these has the sanction of Vedas nor are they divine proclamations or edicts."

In Neelakantan's re telling of the Ramayana the presence of Ravana's ten heads have not been made physical but they reflect and represent the full spectrum of human emotions and human behaviour varying with time and place. Ravana does not want to achieve the robotic perfection of Ravana and he in fact refuses to suppress the 'marginal' or 'base' feelings of his persona. He speaks, "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."

Ravana leads the marginalized but at the same time he also shows the real truth of the world where too much of power isolates people from their own community and well wishers. Though he is a marginal hero but still he is unable to escape the trap of the system against which he is fighting. This is the biggest tragedy in his character that in his effort to elevate the status of the Asuras, he becomes as haughty as the Devas whom he had overthrown for his people. In the due process he loses touch with the common people who hailed him as a King. Thus Ravana is not merely a demon to be slain but he is a ruler with vision and aspirations, weaknesses and struggle.

Through his remarkable style of retelling of the myths as counter narrative Neelakantan successfully shifts the perspective forces and this develops in the readers a critical sense to question the nature and universality of truth, justice and morality. The presentation also reveals that mythology is not always monolithic in nature but itself it has multiple perspectives and can be retold from multiple angles because every character's story is shaped by their circumstances. His stories critically examine how power operates within ancient civilizations and how these mythological structures continue to find echoes in modern governance and social hierarchies.

The conflicts in the Ramayana and Mahabharata are often not just about personal battles but about political power, caste hierarchies, and economic control. Neelakantan's re-textualization of mythology exposes the underlying political dimensions of these epics,

demonstrating how rulers justified their conquests through moral or divine authority. For instance, his portrayal of Ravana in *Asura* challenges the glorification of Rama's conquest of Lanka.

By presenting the Lankan perspective, he exposes the cultural and political undertones of war, showing that one civilization's triumph is often another's devastation. Similarly, in the *Ajaya* series, he portrays the Kauravas as champions of social reform, questioning the rigid caste divisions upheld by the Pandavas. Neelakantan's storytelling thus reframes mythology as a dynamic discourse on power struggles rather than a mere tale of divine justice, urging readers to see mythology as an evolving reflection of societal structures rather than a static set of moral guidelines.

Through marginal characters like Sita, Kaikeyi, Gandhari, and Hidimba, he reconstructs traditional myths to highlight their struggles, intellect, and resilience. In *Asura*, Mandodari—the often-overlooked wife of Ravana—has been given a voice, portraying her as a woman of wisdom and strength rather than merely a tragic figure overshadowed by her husband's ambitions. Similarly, his portrayal of Draupadi in *Ajaya* emphasizes her political acumen and suffering, shedding light on how patriarchal structures used women as pawns in dynastic conflicts. By re-textualizing these narratives, Neelakantan allows female characters to emerge as autonomous individuals with their own ambitions, moral dilemmas, and influence over the unfolding events.

Anand Neelakantan's reinterpretation of mythology underscores the idea that myths are not relics of the past but dynamic, evolving narratives that continue to shape cultural consciousness and individual identity. Through his works, he challenges traditional, rigid portrayals of legendary figures and events, advocating for a more pluralistic, inclusive, and critical engagement with ancient texts.

His re-textualization of mythology serves as both an artistic endeavour and a socio-political critique, questioning historical biases, power hierarchies, and moral absolutism. By reconstructing narratives from alternative viewpoints—often those of the marginalized, the vanquished, or the misunderstood—Neelakantan disrupts the conventional hero-versus-villain framework and instead presents mythology as a reflection of human complexities, emotions, and ideological conflicts.

One of the most significant contributions of Neelakantan's mythological reinterpretations is his ability to deconstruct rigid binaries and offer morally ambiguous, yet deeply relatable, characterizations. By dismantling the glorification of one-dimensional heroes and the demonization of supposed villains, he creates space for a more nuanced understanding of human motives, fate, and the fluid nature of dharma. His works suggest that mythology should not be read as an unchanging moral code but rather as an evolving dialogue—one that adapts to cultural shifts, societal transformations, and the changing perceptions of justice and identity.

This critical re-examination of mythology allows readers to see these narratives not as static stories of the past but as living frameworks through which contemporary issues can be understood and debated.

Furthermore, Neelakantan's exploration of power structures within mythology serves as a reflection of historical and modern governance systems, social hierarchies, and justice mechanisms. His narratives question the divine right of rulers, the legitimacy of authority, and the socio-political implications of war, justice, and policy decisions within epics.

By weaving together myth, history, and contemporary discourse, he highlights how mythology has always been a tool for reinforcing power dynamics but also a space for challenging them. His works push readers to reconsider the impact of dominant narratives on modern-day governance, law, and societal values, demonstrating that mythology continues to shape national identity, cultural ideologies, and moral reasoning.

Conclusion: In retelling stories through the perspectives of female characters who were historically overlooked or confined to stereotypical roles, he presents mythology as a space for reclaiming lost voices. His portrayal of women in myth challenges patriarchal structures and invites discussions on autonomy, resilience, and justice. By redefining female roles beyond their traditional functions of sacrifice or subservience, he offers a more balanced and inclusive interpretation of mythology that aligns with contemporary conversations on gender and equity.

Beyond literary narratives, Neelakantan's influence extends to multimedia adaptations, where mythology is further reimagined for contemporary audiences through television, cinema, and digital storytelling. His contribution to bringing these ancient tales into modern consciousness through various media formats reinforces the idea that mythology is not confined to the written word or religious discourse—it is a continually evolving entity that finds relevance across artistic, intellectual, and popular platforms.

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