Retelling of the epic 'Ramayana' through a Subaltern Reading of *Asura: Tale Of The Vanquished*

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ABSTRACT

"Perhaps no work of World literature, secular in origin, has ever produced so profound an influence on the life and thought of a people as the Ramayana" (Macdonell, 1916). The legendary, majestic, and grand epic tales such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* represent the story being told from either the hero's or the victor's point of view. However, multiple writers have retold and reinterpreted the stories of the vanquished. *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* by Anand Neelakantan provides space for the marginalized and oppressed voices of mythology and history by analyzing the much-celebrated villain of Hindu mythology, Ravana, and critically examining how the Ravanan character and his Asura community were pushed to the marginalized line. This paper will also analyze how Neelakantan's narrative technique tries to break the grand narrative of the original epic by providing voices

to the unheard and how such a devilish character is represented in Mythological dramas and is preferably seen as an anti-hero rather than a villain.

Keywords: *epic, Ramayana, vanquished, alternative reading, Asura community, dramas.*

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Epics, mythical stories, and Puranas are never a single story. A text that is in an oral form or written form is interpreted and misinterpreted by every listener. Laurence Coupe in his book *Myth* emphasizes:

In literary and cultural studies, 'myth' is frequently used as synonymous with 'ideology'...in entertainment, it is used synonymously with 'fantasy'...while it is true that there is some overlap between myth and ideology and myth and fantasy, it is not helpful to use them interchangeably...there is a lot more to myth than deception and distraction. (Coupe 1).

The portrayal of Asuras as subaltern characters are portrayed in the novel *Asura: Tale of Vanquished* written by Anand Neelakantan. Anand Neelakantan is an Indian author, screenwriter, and public speaker. In addition to one book in Malayalam, Neelakantan has published eleven books in English, all of which are noted for their mythological fiction. In a larger work, he delivers tales from the viewpoint of the villains or supporting characters. He is well known for his novels, *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished, Ajaya: Roll of the Dice, Ajaya: Rise of Kali,* and *The Rise of Sivagami.* The epic tale of *Ramayana* has been told innumerable times by different authors giving voice to the victors, from the point of view of every character of the narrative. The oldest version of *Ramayana* which is recognized to be a Sanskrit version is known as *'Mula Ramayana'*, where Narada Muni, a traveling musician, and storyteller, passes on the story to Valmiki, who later wrote *Valmiki Ramayana.* (Srinivasachariar 74).

Valmiki Ramayana has 24,001 verses which are divided into 7 Kandas, including the Uttara Kanda. This grand narrative has been translated and revisioned into different regional languages. It is essential to recognize that India does not have a solitary *Ramayana.* In almost every telling, Dasharatha, king of the Kosala kingdom (and descendant of the Suryavamsha dynasty in Hinduism), has three wives (Kausalya, Kaikeyi, and Sumitra); Rama

(the seventh and one of the popular avatars of Vishnu), the prince of Ayodhya City of Kosala kingdom, is banished to the forest for fourteen years at Kaikeyi's request; Bharatha (son of Dasharatha and Kaikeyi) rules Ayodhya on Rama's behalf; in the woods, Surpanakha (daughter of the sage Vishrava and the rakshasi Kaikeshi), is humiliated by Lakshmana (younger brother of Rama) in response to her love plea; Rama killed Vali (also known as Bali), the king of Kishkinda; Ravana (the rakshasa king of Lanka) hears of Sita's beauty from Surpanakha (his sister); Ravanan abducts Sita from the forest with the help of the demon Maricha; a war ensues; Rama retrieves Sita, but refuses to take her back; rumors force him to abandon Sita. Later in *Uttarakanda of Ramayana* the abandonment of Sita is seen; she under the care of sage Valmiki gives birth to two sons Lava and Kusha.

In simple terms, revisioning is defined as a new version of a story ("Retelling Definition & Meaning"). Revisioning a story hence provides a voice to the 'other' characters of the text. Especially authors retell grand narratives such as *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. "Who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men... I plan on doing other things with my life," (Divakaruni 26) says Draupadi, the lead character of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Palace of Illusions*. Divakaruni's *Palace of Illusions* is a retelling of Mahabharata from Draupadi's point of view. Devdutt Pattanaik, who writes mythological books for younger ages like *The Girl Who Chose, The Boys Who Fought, and Pashu,* says,

You can't change the story, but stick to what the author is trying to tell. The Ramayana teaches empathy and pathos and has the recurring idea of lovers dying or separating. According to me, Ram is the one who is trapped in Ayodhya, as he's born into a royal family as the eldest son and has to follow orders... Sita, the daughter of Earth, is free and makes choices, which is reflected in my book *The Girl Who Chose*, where she makes five important choices in her life. While retelling a story, there must be the simplicity of idea and simplicity of expression. (Pattanaik)

Such authors believe that retellings are important and they come up with characters that speak and give a prominent voice to the unheard. The story does not change, it is only the focus of the story that changes. "Why did I choose to be king? I should have chosen a simpler life on the beautiful shores of the Poorna river, dreamt small dreams, and lived and died like the insignificant millions of the world." (Neelakantan. 349) says Ravana. The aspiration of the character Ravana to lead a simple common life rather than a king with responsibilities is depicted in the novel

Asura: Tale of the Vanquished by Anand Neelakantan. Neelakantan with a fictionalized tale tells the story from the viewpoint of the underclass and is seen as reinventing history.

The original epic portrays Ravan as a blatantly evil person. Or one could only glorify the character of Rama to be good because there existed an evil character like Ravan. If there did not exist a distinction between these characters as 'sur, and asur', as 'harmony and chaos', as 'heroic and villainous', even Rama would be approached as a common man. This confirms that if the original epic portrays Rama as the protagonist, Neelakantan's work brings out Ravana as the tragic hero of the story, rather than the enemy. "My book is an attempt to make the masses realize that everything cannot be black or white. Good and evil, both, co-exist in each of us." (Neelakantan, The Hindu Daily). The triumph of dharma over adharma is symbolized by Rama's victory over Ravana. Abraham and Harpham narrate Aristotle's tragic hero as "He is neither thoroughly good nor thoroughly bad, but a mixture of both, and also that this tragic effect will be stronger if the hero is 'better than we are', in the sense that he is of higher than ordinary mortal worth." (Abrams and Harpham 371).

This paper primarily focuses on the idea of a retelling of the epic *Ramayana* through Neelakantan's novel. This narrative is seen as an opposed narrative of the epic, as it opens up the space of viewing such prominent characters from different perspectives. Such a narrative that is told differently from diverse views makes the text even more interesting. Considering the character of Ravanan as a subaltern character, and reading the text from a subaltern perspective is subjectively done in this paper. Chapter II of this paper focuses on the different narrative styles of the epic *Ramanaya,* and also how the primary text *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* by Anand Neelakantan is a revisioning of the main narrative. This chapter also looks into the facts of how Neelakantan with his narrative style portrays the story that goes unheard. *Ramayana* is a narrative that has multidimensional possibilities of telling the story from the voice of each character. Even though the events are the same, the main focus changes the perspective of the reader.

In Chapter III, the primary text is analyzed through the perspective of subalternity. The main narratives of the text, i.e Ravana, and Bhadra are the marginalized characters who fought against the dominant society. Neelakantan here perfectly introduces such characters in the novel who go unnoticed in the original narrative, like the voices of Bhadra, Mandodari, and Shurpanaka. This makes the readers look at the relentless power structure that prevails in

society through the eyes of the silenced. This chapter also looks into the fact of how the most devilish character in narratives is treated not as an enemy, but as a tragic hero.

CHAPTER II

ANAND NEELAKANTAN'S *ASURA: TALE OF THE VANQUISHED* REVISITS *RAMAYANA*

The epic *Ramayana* has been rewritten, retold, and recreated by multiple authors and poets of each era. Though the narrative is based on Rama's life, Valmiki hides multiple voices within. Mythology stays important as it significantly affects our Indian society, culture, values, and personalities. The versions of *Ramayana* prevailing in South Asia are so diverse that the narrative technique resembles primarily. The *Ramayana* story is told in many different ways. It perfectly captures the culture by describing empires, the life of a king, conflicts, loyalty between brothers, the desire to attain the princess, and a male-dominated society. Women speak many contemporary versions of *Ramayana* with Sita being the first-person narrative. *Kanchana Sita,* a play by C.N Sreekantan Nair, a renowned playwright from Kerala, brings forth two kinds of expression: a woman looking at Ramayanam from a woman's point of view; two, a man looking at Ramayanam from a woman's point of view. Sreekantan Nair's best-known Ramayana trilogy includes *Kanchana Sita (1961), Lankalakshmi, and Saketham*, based on the epic *Ramayana.* This play is a re-interpretation of the *Uttara-Kanda,* questioning the discrimination of gender and the portrayal of the caste system. The play's title refers to the role of women in the epic age in a male-dominated society. Women were possessed by men and were restricted from many rights as human beings. Nair portrays this discrimination to showcase that denying their rights was common to all, including Sita, the wife of the king of Ayodhya. Urmila questions Kausalya (the mother of Ram) about why the queen has such disregard. Kausalya says, "But the queen is just a queen. She is not the king. The queen is a woman" (Nair 24). This play which is a re-interpretation of the original text is seen as a revisioning of the original epic.

Consider the *Ramayana of Tulsidas*, also known as the *Ramacharitamanasa*, which is venerated in north India, as well as the *Ramayana of Kamban*, which was composed in Tamil in the eleventh century. The *Ramacharitamanasa* is the supreme Hindu devotional text, even among Hindus who reside in distant regions of the Indian Diaspora such as Fiji and Trinidad. In the Bengali translated version of the narrative, Ravana is portrayed as the hero, and this representation was again implemented by the nineteenth-century Bengali author, Michael Madhusudan Dutt

(1824–73), whose epic retelling of the Ramayana depicts Rama as a feeble and feminine figure indicating a configuration of innocence. Such modern contemporary texts retold from a different perspective not just break these mythological beliefs, but also give the readers a new direction of thought. Neelakantan in his novel, *Asura* depicts the subalternity of Asuras being portrayed. This study explores how the novel can be seen from the perspective of subalternity and as a retelling of the epic *Ramayana*.

Asuras have been portrayed in a particular manner in our Indian tradition and the view has been reinforced by constant retelling through religious discourses, popular plays, films, books, and so on. I had to create a world that is contradictory to popular perception and yet one that is believable and relatable. It was tough but I understood that the Asura world was no different from our present world. Once I started modeling it in present-day India, things fell into place and became easy. (Neelakantan, The Hindu Daily).

 A. K Ramanujan's essay *Three Hundred Ramayaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation* documents various forms of the original epic. Hanuman is made aware that there have been as many Ramayanas as 'there are rings on this platter' in this particular telling of Rama's narrative. According to this narrative, 'for every such Rama, there is a Ramayana'. Ramanujan here brings out different versions of the epic based on *Valmiki Ramayana*. In the 'Jain Tellings', Ramanujan shows how the stories of Hindu mythology and the religious Jain text are interconnected with each other. In the 'South Indian Folk Ramayanas', Ramanujan observes that in South Indian Ramakathas, the actual story appears distorted. Here, the Kannada folk tale captures a particular place. In Kannada, the word *"Sita"* means *"he sneezed "*, and thus the name was given to Sita to claim that she was born when Ravana sneezed. In the Kannada folk tale, Ramanujan observes that the story has taken a different view from the *Valmiki Ramayana* which emphasizes Sita's birth, her marriage, her being abducted by her Ravana, her descent into Mother Earth (A. K. Ramanujan). As the original narrative was told in a male-dominated society, the life of Sita was silenced. This essay by Ramanujan foreshadows the idea that writers could up bring different perspectives and different retellings from the epic.

Neelakantan pictures a royal, mystical world that speaks of the stories of rulers who ruled different kingdoms. *Asura* is a novel that speaks of arrogance, lust, power, democracy, wars, and a caste-divided society. There are no mystical elements present in the novel. Neelakantan ends up calling this narrative *Asurayana* or *Ravayana*. He

does not just simply attempt a revisioning of the epic, he rather speaks out the main events through the voice of Ravana so that the readers can view the story from the view of Ravana, rather than Rama. The story is narrated by the characters Ravana and Bhadra. Bhadra is portrayed as a common man of the lower class from Asuras. The Asura clan is depicted as a self-ruling or self-governing society that did not belong to any particular caste. Later in the novel, Bhadra, despite his hardships and struggles, is betrayed by Ravana. Here, Asuras are represented in two different ways. One, through the voice of Ravana, the mighty king of Lanka, who is infuriating, imperious, arrogant, royal, and fierce. To an extent, Neelakantan defends Ravanan by stating that Ravanan is not inherently evil just because he is the enemy of Rama, and thus the enemy of a guy whom we recognize to be a God. (Neelakantan, The Hindu Daily). Two, through the voice of Bhadra, who throughout the novel belongs to the lower class and is loyal to his community. Neelakantan keenly observes to focus more on the good deeds of Ravanan other than the act of abducting Sita. The original epic of Valmiki is being subverted here. Sita in this novel is seen as the daughter of Ravana, who by prophecy was said to be the reason for Asura's demolition. This change in narrative brings in the duality between Rama and Ravana. Ravana in this narrative is given high glory, his actions are seen to be justified. By bringing in the point of view of Ravana, Neelakantan subverts hegemonic discourse i.e., Brahmanism. By doing so, Neelakantan gives voice to the marginalized ones who were unheard of for ages. Unlike the epic *Ramayana*, the author of the novel gives humanized features to the characters of both Asura and Devas. Rama, in the main narrative, was pictured as perfect, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, whereas Neelakantan denies the fact of providing divine features to his characters, so he pictures Ravana in *Asura* with human values. A human who is bound to make mistakes, and face their consequences. These human values are meant to be the center of the plot. Ravana does not intend to be higher than Rama either. He directly quotes: "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" (Neelakantan 354).

Ravana is described in various texts as a fearsome demon, blessed by Brahma (the God of Creation). In *Valmiki Ramayana,* Ravana is created as lustful, who is in an evil position. Mandodari is seen as one of the women who sexually satisfy Ravana's needs. But Neelakantan pictures Mandodari as the queen escort of Ravana, who was objectified by the Devas. Yet knowing what his wife had faced, Ravana stands by her. This gives a heroic image

to Ravana, because on the other hand, in the main narrative, we see a Rama who questions the chaste of Sita and conducts Agni Pariksha. *Valmiki's Ramayana* also speaks for the sorrow faced by Mandodari, which is missed out in the mainstream discussions. Valmiki focuses on this sorrow of hers after Ravanan is killed at the hands of Rama.

Alas! O, king! Your delicate and shining face has excellent eyebrows and a prominent nose. Its beauty and charm are like that of the moon, the lotus, or the sun. The complexion of your face is like that of copper. You were radiant earrings, with radiant crowns at the top. In drinking halls, your eager eyes used to roll with intoxication. You are handsome, wearing many kinds of garlands. Your smile was lovely and your conversation was enchanting. O lord! However, your face is now no longer as radiant as it used to be. Mangled by Rama's arrows, it is red, with flows of blood. It is smeared with the fat from your shattered heads and rough because of the dust raised by chariots. (Debroy)

Mandodari is one of the unnoticed characters in *Valmiki Ramayana*. She is portrayed as the beautiful apsaras (a celestial nymph) who is married to Ravana. Subbulakshmi in her research article "Feminist Reading of Manini J. Anandani's Mandodari: Queen of Lanka", published in 2019 brings in the female perspective of the grand narrative, and how feminism plays an important role in contemporary society. Her character is short, yet important in *Ramayana.* It was Mandodari's choice to be the wife of Ravana, who she knew was a womanizer. Despite all of his flaws, Mandodari loved him. She is the mother of three sons, whom she lost because of the wrong deeds of her husband. (Subbulakshmi). The women of the tale in both the novel and the epic, though they have strong protagonist features, their voices are portrayed only in a minor tone. They become the victims of the cruelty of the man's actions.

CHAPTER - III

A SUBALTERN READING OF *ASURA: TALE OF THE VANQUISHED*

According to Puranic texts and classical literature, Deva, Asura or Rakshasa, Gandharva, and humans were the four races that lived in ancient Bharat. Deva and Asura represent the antipodes of good and evil. *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* is a narrative through the voices of Ravana and Bhadra. Neelakantan brings the limelight to the

silenced characters rather than focusing on the dominant class of society. He takes a chance to not just bring out the Ravanan character who is being marginalized, but also tells the story through Bhadra's voice, which shows that Bhadra is double marginalized as a black Asura common man, and is seen as one belonging to the lower class. The distinction between the Asura characters, Ravana and Bhadra is seen here. Neelakantan portrays Ravanan as a man who lived his life fully and died as a warrior. Just like how *Valmiki's Ramayana* centers the war due to the abduction of Sita by Ravana, the story of Neelakantan too is the same. This brings the fact that though in retelling a story revolves around the same events and happenings, the focus of the story differs. In the novel, the whole idea of war takes place based on the treatment of women. Given the different voices, Ravanan does not want his daughter to suffer her life in Vanvas along with the Devas. Though Sita was brought up as a Deva princess and gets married to a Deva king, Ravanan considers his clan Asura to have a better culture. The novel begins with Ravana dying on the battlefield. The death of Ravana and the whole defeat of the Asura clan differ in both narratives. The original epic describes the death of Ravana by Rama as a desire of him to attain Moksha. Whereas Neelakantan's narrative counters this.

I wanted to start again. I wanted to make the same mistakes, love the same people, fight the same enemies, befriend the same friends, marry the same wives, and sire the same sons. I wanted to live the same life again. I didn't want the seat Rama has reserved for me in his heaven. I only wanted my beautiful earth. (Neelakantan 13).

Ravana was born as a mixed-caste boy. His father's carelessness, a childhood suffering from poverty, and not being given access to education, puts him in a place of subaltern character. Ravanan faced suppression not just from the elite class, but also from his members. Kubera, the prince of Lanka and Ravana's stepbrother is shown as wealthy and has social status. Towards the novel, Ravan reclaims the social identity of Asura by being the king of Lanka.

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 honor women and not insult anyone. If there was injustice, we had to fight at all costs (Neelakantan 17).

Ravana's ambition to "not just get along in this world", but "own it" takes him away to mainland India where he learns the ancient texts and heritage of ancient Asuras and Devas, and trains under the banished Asura emperor Mahabali. (Neelakantan 19). The voice of Ravana, the voice of the subaltern was silenced, tortured, made to feel

helpless, humiliated by the king of Ayodhya, and betrayed by his brother Vibhishana. Unlike Ravana's voice that is being heard, the voice of Bhadra goes unheard. Bhadra is a character that is absent in *Valmiki Ramayana*. Neelakantan forethinks to portray an Asura character other than Ravana because though Ravana's childhood was miserable being born to an Asura mother and a Brahmin father, and being treated as half-castes by society, he fought against his battles and took up the power of Lanka.

My brothers and I never had the education to speak of. No Brahmin was ready to take us for free even if we worked for them. We were wild, black, and naughty. We had learned that we were half-castes. Our father was a famous Maharishi but had little use for us. He was immersed in his world of learning to care about his progeny. He was a Brahmin. My mother was of an unknown Asura caste. He kept the relationship an open secret. (Neelakantan 14).

But on the other hand, Bhadra throughout the novel is seen as untouchable, even by the Asuras themselves. He is double marginalized by his class and caste. In Bhadra's narration, Asuras lived a happy life. Though their village was small, they had everything - the sacred grove, a small shrine for Shiva, a toddy shop, and a school where basic mathematics and other necessary subjects were taught. (Neelakantan 43). However, the war with Devas changed everything. One night Ravanan was woken up from his sleep when a group of strangers broke into their bedroom. The king of Lanka was surprised to see the Devas, but only later did he realize and hear the cries of his neighbors who were being burnt alive. Different narratives, when giving a voice to Mandodari, the wife of Ravanan, portray a woman who was gang raped and humiliated. Ravan stood there helpless, not knowing how to defeat the Devas. This sowed the seed of revenge in the minds of every living Asura people. Bhadra who lived with his wife and daughter also faced the same traumatic experience of his wife being raped and killed along with their daughter. This creates unending revenge on Bhadra who claims his loyal service to Ravanan in destroying the Devas. In Ravana's narration, Bhadra is the last person Ravana speaks to before his death.

Bhadra holds Ravana's badly injured body close and says, "I will complete your work, your highness. Do not worry. Go in peace. I will do it for our race" (Neelakantan 13).

Though Ravanan somehow disregards Bhadra, Bhadra's anger towards the clan of Devas never faded. He seemed to kill the ones who killed their people, who destroyed their happy life. If Devas had not invaded Lanka, Asuras would have led a happy and peaceful life. The character of Bhadra, subjected by Neelakantan, who is a loyal soldier to Ravana, draws similarities to Aravan or likely known as Iravan, a crucial character of the epic

Mahabharata. "The life of Aravan ends up tragic as he sacrifices his life for the greater good." (Chowdhury). Aravan gave up his life in the Kurukshetra war as a sacrifice. That shows the loyalty Aravan had towards their kingdom and people. Similarly, though Ravana does not recognize Bhadra's constant effort and plans to undertake the Devas, Bhadra is seen to be faithful toward Ravana and the whole Asura community. Despite the disregard, Bhadra had only one motive, to see the Devas ruined. Yet when he tried to help Ravanan to win the war and got held, he called up Ravan for help. But furious Ravan treated him badly. "You traitor, son of a scoundrel! Go rot in hell!" (Neelakantan 101). The political structure of how the Asura elites treated others based on class is seen here. This same treatment by the society was faced by Ravanan before he attained the throne of Lanka. But in his case, Ravan had the power to fight back against the Devas. Bhadra is portrayed as helpless, yet his loyalty is never shaken due to the ill-treatment he faced.

The Subaltern Studies Approach believed that the mainstream historiography, despite being premised upon the Enlightenment rationalism that gives privilege to the narrative of modernity and democracy, fails to take the 'subaltern' or the 'people' into account (Guha 1982). Guha believed that the subalterns have the element of freedom and independence from the elitist people. The characters Ravana and Bhadra are looked at as subaltern characters, it is the upper-class power that gives Ravana more opportunities and limits Bhadra, who is unable to move away from the structural subjugation. In *Valmiki Ramayana,* Rama captures the central character, and Ravana is pushed to the marginal level as the 'Other'. Neelakantan tries his best to portray the image of Ravana in a good light. The narrative of Ravana sees himself in two different phases. One as a subaltern character, and the other as the oppressor. Being the king of Lanka Ravana never believed in the system of democracy. During his childhood, Ravana was banished by Brahmins from society saying that he was possessed by evil spirits and that he was a Rakshasa. "Hybridity is the schizophrenic state of an individual as he seeks to combine two cultures without abandoning each other." (Nayar 197). Ravana's character was called a 'half-caste', 'mixed-blood', who is a hybrid son of an Asura mother, and a Brahmin father. Hybridity falls between the category of the colonizer and the colonized. Here, Ravanan was marginalized, denied access to education, and his own identity was stolen, but later after acquiring the throne of Lanka, he took up the place of the oppressor.

The unique factor of Neelakantan's novel is there are no Gods, and no devils mentioned. Every character is given a humane identity, a realistic one. Neelakantan portrays Rama as vulnerable, weakened, and easily manipulated

by the Brahmin principles. Though Ravana, the main narrative is the protagonist of the novel, it is important to note that there are no antagonists here. In Ravana's narration, he never terms Rama to be his ultimate enemy. It is the treatment of the Devas towards the Asuras that Ravanan is fighting for. Rama's deeds are forgotten when all consider Ram as God, and the actions of God are to be justified. Even when Ram kills Bali, Kumbhakarna, and the Sudhra boy, Shambuka, who was eager to learn the Vedas. This is what Ravana fought for. In *Ramayana,* a duality arises between Rama and Ravana, but Rama sees Ravana as a challenge to be faced. In the narratives, we see, on the battlefield where Ravan is about to die, Rama comes and stands by his head. Ravanan thinks:

One thing I cannot understand is why Rama came and stood over me after I had fallen. He stood there as if he was bestowing his blessings on me. He said to his brother that I was the most learned man in the world and a great king and one could learn the art of governance from me. I almost laughed out loud. I had governed so well that my empire lay shattered all around me. (Neelakantan 10).

The *Valmiki Ramayana* describes Ravana as, "One who has twenty arms, ten faces, and a broad chest." Ravana's famous ten heads symbolize anger, pride, jealousy, happiness, sadness, fear, selfishness, passion, ambition, and intellect. According to Mahabali, all of these are nothing but deleterious human conditions and to achieve greatness, one needs to conquer, then shun all of these, except the last, which is the intellect. (Jain).

The paradigm of race and beauty is seen in the novel. When Shurpanaka comes in wailing that she was defiled by Lakshmanan, Ravanan denies even looking at his sister. Moreover, Ravanan is seen to go behind the idea of 'fair and beauty' and ends up having a sexual affair with every woman he admires. This was heartbreaking to Mandodari, though she tries to lead him on the right path, pride overtakes him by not respecting Mandodari's words. "You are a creature of passion. Irreverent, arrogant, and lustful." (Neelakantan 412). Mandodari is fed up with the actions done by Ravana, who holds on to his pride, and does things if it feels right only to him. This pride of his has destroyed the lives of his family, friends, and his dear subjects. Right before Meghanada's murder by Lakshmana, she requests him to give Sita back to her husband before more is lost, and even though he knows she is right, his pride does not let him accept defeat or the requests of a woman in matters of the state. (Jain). The modern societal idea of considering Ravan as the tragic hero rather than the most celebrated villain of history breaks here. Ravana rapes Bhadra's wife, Mala. Athikaya is born from this forceful union. Ravana hates him, and terms him to be 'dark', and 'ugly'. He could hardly look at his son.

Despite his devilish behavior, the character of Ravana is more significant in Puranas, and our contemporary world. He is a true devotee of Lord Shiva and a skillful leader. Though it was by force that Ravana took control of the Lanka kingdom, later it was his effective dominance that brought economic well-being to Lanka. The patriarchial construction of the society is seen evident when Ravana stands by Mandodari, never leaving her abundant after she was brutally raped by Hanuman. Ravanan faced the worst criticisms for accepting her back. The killing of Ravana by Lord Ram, according to Hindu Mythology, is celebrated in a ten-day-long Hindu festival, called Dussehra. It symbolizes the war between Rama and Ravana to mark Rama's victory over Ravana.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

This study tries to show that even the mythological stories, Puranas, and epics, which consciously or unconsciously are the base of human beliefs revolve around the inevitable structure of political discourse based on class, race, and caste. This marginalizing of the 'Other' persists in our society even today. Though multiple authors speak for the voices of the marginalized characters, there still exists a distinction between the speakers and the listeners. It is always up to the reader to take a stand, whether with the hero or the villain, the God or the vanquished. Neelakantan ends up calling this narrative *Asurayana or Ravayana*. In conclusion, this study justifies the reason why *Ravana* is seen as an anti-hero of the tale and not as the villain. The retellings mold the original storyline by looking upon the fragile, torn, and broken character. The villains of the stories are mostly misjudged by everyone around them. Most of the time, we are not given access to their real tale because if we did, the hero would no longer seem to be so deserving of respect. Monsters are made, not born. (The Villains Story, Wolf Amino Amino). This is where Anand Neelakantan's art shines since he chooses to represent the Asura community rather than the Deva community. Neelakantan's childhood was surrounded by narratives, and folklore about Gods, and demons. He always craved to tell stories from different perspectives.

The retellings by different authors on the same story plot are another area of emphasis in this study. Multiple authors developed their works based on *Valmiki's Ramayana*. The study elaborately advances the notion of a crossover between Ravana's tale and theatrical representation, illuminating how the narrative might have a distinct

tone and structure when it is viewed from Ravana's path rather than Rama's. Future research could examine how Ravana is portrayed in songs and movies for a better understanding. This study provides readers with insight into the fact that there is less chance that the stories they have heard are true. Each person adds their unique perspective when a narrative is passed down. The modern contemporary world looks at Ravana as a tragic hero, rather than a villain of the tale. The responses I got from my close friends when they got to know about my research were all the same, how Ravanan was considered a better man than Rama. This was my initial impression too, which was the motive to do a study on how Ravanan is seen as an anti-hero. Despite Neelakantan's *Asura,* which puts light on the positive side of Ravana, in my depth of research I would conclude Ravana is a character who is flawed, who has sinned, who led a terrible life but is also a scholar, an intellect, a mighty king of Lanka. Ravana accepts the fact that he leads a terrible life, he is well aware that he has made rash decisions, but rather than escaping those actions, Ravanan stands mightly in front of Rama for his actions.

I had heard that the Vanaras believed him to be an avatar of Vishnu himself.

'That is a good piece of propaganda, I must admit.

Claim that God is with you, or better,

you are God, then anything you do,

any adharma you commit, becomes divine play' (Neelakantan. 368).

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