

Reexamining the Ramayana: A Comparative Analysis of Valmiki's Ramayana and Anand Neelakantan's Asura: Tale of the Vanquished

Mr. B. Muthukarthikeyan¹, Dr. B. S. Arun²

¹PhD Research Scholar (Part-time), Department of English, Erode Arts and Science College, Rangampalayam, Erode
²Assistant Professor of English, Erode Arts and Science College, Rangampalayam, Erode

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the contrasting portrayals of the character Ravana in two different narratives. The one depicted in Valmiki's Ramayana that contrasts sharply with the Ravana in Anand Neelakantan's Asura: Tale of the Vanquished. The Ramayana presents Ravana solely as a demon, a ruthless king, and a villain, Asura offers a more nuanced view of him that is absent from the Ramayana. Anand Neelakantan, inspired by the temples and environment of his village, sought to rewrite mythological stories from the perspectives of traditionally negative characters. Although there has been considerable research on this topic from various angles, Ravana's portrayal in both the Ramayana and Asura reflects differences while retaining some similarities. Ultimately, Asura succeeds in presenting a comprehensive tale of Ravana and his life.

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

Mythology is deeply ingrained in every human being, even if it isn't fully embraced. It comprises myths or stories related to specific individuals, groups, cultures, and religions. These myths are crucial because they highlight the origins or worldview of a society and are closely tied to both literature and everyday life. Myths captivate and intrigue modern audiences and writers alike. Indian mythological stories, in particular, resonate with contemporary reality. As Northrop Frye notes, "Writers are drawn to myths much like painters are to still life compositions, as they reveal fundamental principles of societal issues." (2)

Hindu mythology primarily revolves around major epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Historically, storytelling has focused on heroic, virtuous, and humble figures from these myths and epics. Traditionally, these stories convey specific perspectives and truths. However, in the contemporary era, this approach is evolving through new retellings, which have garnered a dedicated readership. Mythology has emerged as a popular genre in English literature, and while the core stories remain unchanged, their presentation in serials and films has transformed. Modernity has introduced skepticism about the basic narratives, divine roles, and their relevance.

As people seek logical and rational explanations, authors such as Devdutt Pattanaik, Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi, and Ashok Banker have taken on the task of addressing these questions and exploring the mysteries behind mythological tales. Their works, like Tripathi's "Mehula" trilogy or Pattanaik's interpretations of characters like Sita and Jaya, offer new insights and make the gods more relatable by presenting their human aspects. This renewed focus on retelling has sparked widespread interest and critical responses from both literary figures and scholars, as modern thinkers and writers challenge traditional mythological ideologies and reinterpret these stories in innovative ways.

Anand Neelakantan is an Indian author, columnist, screenwriter, television personality, and motivational speaker, known for his work in mythological fiction. He has written eleven books in English and one in Malayalam. Born on December 5, 1973, in the charming village of Thripoonithura on the outskirts of Cochin, Kerala, Neelakantan grew up in an area renowned for its numerous temples, classical artists, and music school.

This rich cultural backdrop fueled his fascination with the Ramayana, particularly with the epic's antagonist, Ravana, and the Asuras. Despite a busy career, Ravana's story continued to haunt him for six years, appearing in his dreams and compelling him to write his version of the tale. This resulted in his highly anticipated book, Asura. Neelakantan's works have been translated into several languages, and three of his books have been shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award. He worked with the Indian Oil Corporation from 1999 to 2012 before transitioning to writing full-time.

Ravana in Asura by Anand Neelakantan

The figure of Ravana, with his ten heads and twenty arms, is widely recognized in Indian culture as the quintessential anti-hero. The novel opens with the title "The End," depicting Ravana's defeat in battle, and then flashes back to recount his life story. Ravana declares, "I am not afraid of death. I have been contemplating it for some time." Despite his fearlessness, the reality of his circumstances forces him to confront the inevitability of death. Ravana, the formidable king of Lanka, faced numerous challenges on his journey to build and rule his great kingdom. He reflects, "I was born to fulfill someone else's destiny and to allow another to become a god." Alongside his siblings Kumbhakarna, Vibhishana, and Soorpanakha, and his sorrowful mother, Ravana once begged his stepbrother Kuvera for wealth. Ravana, of mixed Brahmin and Asura heritage, found no Brahmin willing to support him for free, and his father even named them after demons. His father had given all his wealth to Kuvera, leaving nothing for Ravana. Ravana contrasts his Asura kingdom's achievements with those of other cultures, noting, "While the kings of Egypt were preoccupied with building grand tombs, the Asura democratic council focused on constructing roads, hospitals, and drainage systems for the benefit of the people." Although he challenged the supremacy of the gods, Ravana still revered Shiva and regarded him as his personal favorite.

The esteemed king Mahabali advises Ravana to renounce the nine emotional states of anger, pride, jealousy, happiness, sadness, fear, selfishness, passion, and ambition, suggesting that only intellect should be revered. However, Ravana responds by defending and taking pride in possessing all ten qualities, believing they make him a well-rounded individual. Despite meticulous planning, Ravana's initial attempt to conquer Lanka failed. Eventually, he succeeded when Kuvera vacated the Royal Palace for him. Ravana married Mondadori and described himself as someone eager for physical intimacy with his wife, though this did not happen immediately. He was regarded as an untouchable ruler by his subjects, and initially mistook their avoidance in the marketplace as a sign of respect, only to later realize it was due to his lowly caste as a shudra, which was seen as contaminating their esteemed city. The Brahmins, dressed in ragged clothes and banging their walking sticks on the ground, would drive away those of lower castes. Additionally, Vedavathi, a widow from the divine realm, fell victim to Ravana's lustful gaze and cursed him, foreseeing his ultimate downfall.

The birth of Ravana and Mondadori's daughter was seen as a curse on Ravana and his entire kingdom. Consequently, Ravana ordered his soldiers to kill the infant in the forest. However, Bhadra informed him that the girl had survived. Ravana learned that his daughter was alive and had been adopted by a benevolent king, a divine ruler, and was growing up as a deva princess. Although relieved that his daughter was still alive, Ravana was troubled to find out she had become the princess of his adversariesshe was Sita, the wife of Rama and the adopted daughter of King Janaka of Mithila. Additionally, Ravana had an illicit relationship with a low-caste maid, resulting in the birth of Athikaya, his illegitimate son. Athikaya, along with Ravana's legitimate sons, Meghanada and Akshaya Kumara, was raised in the same palace.

Ravana was deeply unsettled by the news of Sita's marriage. He felt possessive and believed he had a right over her marriage and the choice of her suitor, though he was powerless to influence it. He attended Sita's swayamvara ostensibly as a spectator, but his true intention was to observe both his daughter and her prospective groom. Ravana was shocked to see Shiva's bow, Triambaka, being used as a contest prize, where the winner would marry Sita. He was enraged by the idea that his daughter was being treated as a prize to be won. When Rama, the eldest son of Dasharatha of Ayodhya, emerged victorious in the contest, Ravana feared for Sita's well-being and questioned whether Rama would treat her well. Upon learning that Rama had been exiled to the forest with his brother Lakshman and wife Sita, Ravana grew increasingly concerned for Sita's safety and resolved to bring her to Lanka for protection. Using deceit, he succeeded in abducting Sita and bringing her to Lanka. However, Sita's presence in Lanka seemed to confirm the curse that had been prophesied.

Ravana's kingdom was set ablaze when Hanuman, the monkey warrior, entered the Ashoka grove, got captured, and had his tail set on fire, which he used to set fire to Lanka. Ravana approached Sita to reveal the truth, but she saw him only as a villainous Asura and cursed him, saying, "You and all your kin will face terrible deaths at the hands of my husband, Rama of Ayodhya." Despite reclaiming his long-lost daughter, Ravana was viewed by her as nothing more than a wicked foe.

As the battle between Rama and Ravana drew closer to Ravana's palace, he was torn between difficult choices. He faced a dilemma of immense proportions: on one side, there was his beloved daughter Sita, and on the other, his subjects and family. He knew he had to sacrifice one for the other, but he was unwilling to lose either. Ravana lacked the courage to reveal to Sita that she was his daughter. He saw the conflict as a struggle for the honor of the Asuras, a fight against the dominance of caste and Brahminical hierarchy. As the enemy forces neared and Ravana's army suffered defeat after defeat, his vision of an ideal world began to crumble. Ultimately, Ravana's time had come, and he met his end at the hands of Rama.

The study examines the novel through the lens of Ravana, often regarded as an unsung hero. By giving him a voice of his own, the author constructs a metanarrative that reevaluates the traditional portrayal of this formidable antagonist. In comparing the Ramayana with Asura, new interpretations emerge, supporting the idea of shifting power dynamics, where one group is central and the other marginalized in epic and folklore narratives. This novel emphasizes Ravana's positive traits, portraying him as a devoted follower of Shiva, an accomplished scholar, musician, and astrologer. The Asuras are depicted as a democratic, casteless society. While the ten heads of Ravana traditionally give him a demonic appearance, the author reinterprets them as representing ten human emotions or actions. Ravana expresses his desire to live on Earth rather than in Rama's heaven, stating, "I didn't want the seat Rama has reserved for me in his heaven. I only wanted my beautiful earth." In the Ramayana, Rama is central, relegating Ravana to the role of 'other.' These novel challenges that central-marginal dynamic, presenting Ravana from a more humanistic angle. He is depicted not as a demon, but as a king loyal to his subjects, who, despite being the son of a Brahmin sage, was marginalized by the caste system. From a young age, Ravana faced caste-based discrimination, which persisted even in his own kingdom, where he was considered untouchable due to his Shudra status.

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