

DYSTOPIAN TALE OF OPPRESSION IN MYTHOLOGY: AN INTERPRETATION OF ANAND NEELAKANTAN'S ASURA

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Abstract

Gods and mythology pertaining to gods galore in all Indian art forms since time immemorial. The mythological tales are ever fascinating and never cease to offer layers and layers of interpretations. Throughout centuries, artists have been playing gods and writers have been playing with the gods. Myths have sustained their interest by their virtue of being open to myriad interpretations. Of the modern novelists who have made use of mythology, Anand Neelakantan has gained immense popularity in recent times. Anand Neelakantan plays with the characters of Ramayana who are believed to be gods. He presents a Dystopia in the Utopian mythology of Ramayana. This paper seeks to study how the author has accomplished this audacious task.

Keywords: *mythology, humanization, men, perspective, convention*

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Introduction

Gods, especially of Hindu mythology, find their way into all stories through a reference or analogy which can be easily spotted. Even real-life characters and modern life dilemmas find their precursors in ancient mythological figures who have been typecast as stereotypes. Playing with the characters of immortals, celestials and gods have always been part of ancient Indian folklore. What is astonishing is that even in the modern era of space travel and exploration of other planets, in the era of robotics and artificial intelligence when people have started aspiring for an evolution of man into a supreme version of humanoid, still gods and mythology pertaining to them is intriguing to many people. The idea of not losing sight of one's roots in this modern materialistic robotic life has helped in sustaining the interest in mythology. Dr. Syd. K in his foreword to *Semmanthaka: The Second Quest* expresses this idea clearly.

“The Hindu *Puraanas* are fascinating in the sense that regardless of the number of times one narrates its many scintillating tales, the readers / listeners never lose their fascination for them. This is because these tales can be interpreted in myriad ways with varied inferences and conclusions, providing stimulating exercises in intellectual flexibility and out-of-the-box-thinking.” (7)

Hinduism offers a plethora of gods one for every season, one for every element, one for every occupation, one for every geographical territory, one for every family too. Every god is celebrated by its people. When a person is born and brought up amidst these gods and celebrations, listening to the stories of these gods, watching performers stage the stories, listening to hymns sung in praise of them and reading these tales, it's hard not to be influenced by them. Many find these stories of gods fascinating and some writers have been more so. They have taken to reinterpreting the old tales of the gods. Not all have found the stories of gods and

the depiction of the various characters in the stories acceptable or justifying. Tales have only been told by the victors and the powerful. Hinduism is a religion which thrives on the principles of the caste system. Based on the hierarchy in the caste system only the so-called upper caste received education and could read or write. So, all written literature has been their word. It's only from their point of view that the stories have been told. With the egalitarian way of life being subscribed as the evolved lifestyle people wished to look at these mythological tales also differently. After all, how could the oppressor's version of a tale be agreeable to the oppressed?

Though several authors have been toying with this idea, one of the most interesting and inspiring writers in the present day is Anand Neelakantan. He chose to narrate the tale of Ramayana which has been revisited and reinterpreted a hundred million times in all genres of literature in a unique way. Anand Neelakantan achieved the feat of playing with the gods by employing a few techniques.

The Narrative Technique

The shift in the point of view of narration changes the entire contour and colour of the tale. The general accepted version of Ramayana depicted Ravana as a mighty and cruel oppressor which can be seen in *Hindu Mythology, Vedic and Puranic* written by W.J. Wilkins where he has quoted Griffiths.

Mr. Griffiths, in the preface to his translation of the Rāmāyana, says, "The great exploit and main subject of the Epic is the war which Rāma waged with the giant Rāvan, the fierce and mighty King of Lanka or Ceylon, and the dread oppressor of gods and nymphs, and saints and men." (171)

When Anand Neelakantan made Ravana as the narrator, it gave an opportunity to narrate his story from his point of view. The intention of the author is to let the character of Ravana reveal himself rather than be portrayed by others. To add credibility to the narration, the author adds a parallel narrator: Bhadra. Bhadra's narration appears to be closer to ground reality. Anand Neelakantan is a brilliant tactician who successfully employs the strategy of using two parallel narrations. This helps to avoid any accusations of unjustified glorification of Ravana.

Humanization

In the process of reinterpreting the Ramayana, Anand Neelakantan emboldens himself to play with the gods themselves. This is a high-risk prone adventure especially when there is so much of religious intolerance. A writer could not possibly desecrate a Hindu god and live to see its reception. However, Anand Neelakantan does it with elan and gets away with it. One technique which he adopts is the humanization of the gods. This makes the gods mortals and susceptible to mistakes and censure. Since they are depicted and treated as human beings rather than gods it is possible to attribute human qualities and flaws. The novel begins with jackals and rats eating away the flesh of the dying asura emperor. So at the beginning itself the author shows the vulnerability of human body in spite of his being a legend of a person.

Wendy Doniger in his book *Hindu Myths* reveals the nearness of gods and demons to men in the myths. He handled the demarcation with ease by simply labelling stories of men as legends and stories of gods as myths.

“As the Hindu gods are ‘immortal’ only in a very particular sense – for they are born, and they die – they experience most of the great human dilemmas and often seem to differ from mortals only in a few trivial details and from demons even less. Yet they are regarded by the Hindus as a class of beings by definition totally different from any other; they are symbols in a way that no human being however ‘archetypal’ his life story can ever be.” (13-14)

However, Anand Neelakandan feels no compulsion to separate the gods from the men. It appears that he holds the belief that great legendary men were elevated to the status of gods. Sita is a “Deva woman”, Ram, “the Deva Prince”, the word deva referring to a race of people.

Upholding the conventions

Another scheme which he employs is to uphold the conventional gods as the better mortals or superior mortals and in a way justifies their success in life. Thus, the idea of projecting Ravana as a protagonist does not provoke the religious sentiments of the traditionalists. Ravana is the protagonist undoubtedly but he is not glorified either. He is not shown as the good. But, he is shown as the man who had the potential to become a great victorious hero but one who failed in his life as well as failed his people. Still Ravana is the man

who could have become a hero but who unfortunately became villain. This was a convenient way of putting him away in his place which had been reserved for him by the traditionalists.

“Anger got the better of me” (152) says Ravana. “He was too humane to be a god” (393) reveals Bhadra. The popular belief of gods and asuras are kept largely intact with the precept of their nature untouched. The popular belief is mentioned by M. S. Purnalingam which also gives an insight into who created the popular belief.

“The Aryans called themselves Gods, Suras, Yakshas, and their foes Asurar, Arakkar, Rakshasas, Nisa-sarar, Niruthar and so forth. Both were supermen, the former by the force of their penance and the latter by their strong constitution and physical prowess.”

Anand offers some meat to modernists by dwelling on Ravana’s dreams and capabilities. Anand basically flatters to deceive. Ravana is depicted as a dreamer who fails to achieve his dreams. Ravana promises an egalitarian society but does not keep his promise.

“I was a tyrant, maybe a benevolent one, but I was no Mahabali...And I had become blind to the sufferings of the people. When I strove for bigger things...I forgot something simple and basic. I forgot my people.” (426)

The narration of Bhadra runs parallel to Ravana’s and it balances any kind of elevation of Ravana’s character, always reminding one of the ground realities.

Anand Neelakantan plays it safe when he plays with gods, as he is aware of what he has taken up. Ravana is a man of such caliber to be a worthy villain to the heroic Ram. Ravana is still portrayed as a perfect foil. Thus though the novel seems to be an unconventional way of looking at Ramayana, it still conforms to the conventional outlook. ‘Milton belonged to the devil’s party without knowing it’, they said. Anand Neelakantan belongs to the god’s party in all his awareness.

“Rama had sacrificed the two people who he loved most, for the sake of his *dharma*...Rama stuck to the literal words of the scriptures. He led an unhappy life and sacrificed everything – his wife, his brother and his conscience, for the *dharma*.” (493)

Anand does not play against the gods but with the gods and he is definitely on the god's side knowingly. It is this awareness that helps him walk the razor edge confidently. He is determined not to let the gods down. All he does is to raise Ravana to heights and drop him from there. Certainly, it would be a way of pleasing the gods and the traditionalists. It must be heartwarming to them to know that Ravana is a failure not only in Ramayana but also in Ravanayana (the author claimed that he was narrating the Ravanayana). Playing with gods is not what any writer could do and do successfully in a conventional set up. Yet, Anand achieves this feat with the employment of these techniques.

According to Devdutt Pattanaik, myth is also a kind of truth. In his book, *myth = mithya: a handbook of Hindu mythology*, he puts forth the idea that myth could be truth which is subjective, intuitive, cultural and grounded in faith. Thus, though these myths are tales they acquire a kind of validity based on the faith attached to them. Hence it is difficult to negate them all of a sudden. They need to be treated with utmost respect which the author does and he is justified in doing so as well.

Conclusion

Anand Neelakantan has successfully brought out a newer version of Ravana's story from a different perspective. His attachment to the idea of mythology is understandable. His intention to present the tale from the defeated's point of view is laudable. He has been able to accomplish it by the brilliant use of certain techniques. The change in the perspective of narration reveals the hidden side of the story. Humanization helps in treating gods and demons with much more ease and flexibility. Not desecrating the gods by any means and upholding the conventional idea of divinity saves the author from the wrath of the traditionalists who are religious fundamentalists.

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