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Subjugation and Identity Crisis in Asura: Tale of the Vanquished

Abstract

Asura, Tale of the Vanquished, The Story of Ravana and His People goes through the life of Ravana, the Asura emperor and Bhadra, an ordinary Asura. Anand Neelakantan adopts a different strategy- he puts forward a counter tale. The first chapter of *Asura* is titled 'The End' and it describes the death of Ravana. The 65 chapters of *Asura* employs the technique of flashback and the characters are not glorified or given superhuman and Godly powers and the author depict every character including Rama and Ravana as human. Ravana occupies the centre stage in *Asura* and the counter narrative brings the other side of the demonic character. This paper explores the subjugation and identity crisis of Asuras and Devas in different occasions including women characters. *Asura* deals with the Brahminical notions and their exploitations of the lower castes. The voice of the female characters is mostly silenced and their inner feelings and expectations are given through the voice of Ravana and Bhadra. The mythical characters attain roles of ordinary human beings and it makes the novel more realistic. The novel portrays the double identity of Ravana both as an oppressor and as an oppressed. *Asura* combines history, mythology and religion, but it is the human, not the divinity occupies the central position.

Keywords: Deva, Asura, Myth, Subjugation, Identity Crisis, Culture Conflict

Indian writing in English has showed the growth of different genres in the post-independence India. East – West conflict, multi-culturalism, gender issues, comic aspect of human nature, ecological concerns, magic realism, diaspora writings became the themes of the post-independence writers.

Indian culture and life are largely associated with mythology. Mythical stories inspired many writers and countless works of art. Myth holds history, customs, ancient faiths and traditions. Indian mythology is part of Indian culture. The Western Literature has a tradition of using myths and folklores in their literary works. They mainly use Greek myths and

Biblical stories in their works. T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, William Golding etc... are some of the writers who used legends and myths extensively in their writings. Likewise Hindu mythology inspires Indian English Writing and writers. The themes taken from Vedas, Upanishad, Ramayana, Mahabharata and various Buddhists scriptures enrich Indian English literature. Myth is a fantasy. It creates a magical world of wonders. Adaptation of myth as a literary device has a long tradition. Greek and Roman myths influenced classics like Virgil, Ovid, Dante etc...

In literature, the myths and mythical characters are compared with modern man and life. Personal, Social and Political issues are addressed through the myths and mythical characters. Myths unify the people of different race, country, culture and religious belief. It reminds the people of their roots and culture. Devadutt Pattnaik puts myth in his *Myth=Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology* (2006) as "Myth is essentially a cultural common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. This understanding may be religious or secular."

Indian mythology is a unique one in the world. Myths, Sanskrit literature, Vedas, Puranas and Epics have influenced authors and readers. Authors like Girish Karnad, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao etc...used mythological aspects in their writings. Myths express the collective knowledge that is passed on for generations. Indian mythology is closely linked with religion.

In the novel, *Asura*, Devas and Asuras are binary opposites. The Devas ill-treated the Asuras. Ravana faced many difficulties as an Asura. Even his father ill-treated Ravana and his siblings. His father was a Deva and his mother was an Asura lady. Thus he faced identity crisis in his childhood. His father handed over all the properties to Kubera, his step brother, thus left them in utter poverty. All these difficulties in his childhood urged him to become a strong and powerful king. In Ramayana, Asuras did many atrocities against Devas. But Anand Neelakantan presents this novel in a different way. He starts the novel with the cruelties done by Devas towards Asuras.

Myths are interrelated to life and literature. 'Myth in contemporary Indian literature' reflects these enquiries from the view point of scholars like Alok Bhalla, Viswanath Kaitre, R Sasidhar and others. These enquiries reveal the epistemological potential that myths possess to unravel many truths. Interestingly these truths make possible diverse interpretations of even the sacred texts such as Mahabharata and Ramayana. Myths help us ask even more basic questions about human meaning and this is what gives them continued relevance in successive ages of men (Satchidanandan XV)

Myths continue to fascinate generations of writers and readers. It gives different meanings and interpretations over the period of time. Writers use myths consciously and unconsciously. T.S. Eliot's *'The Waste Land'* and James Joyce's *'Ulysses'* are examples for the conscious use of myths. In some other works, myths are used unconsciously and the readers and critics can relate the characters and situations with mythical characters and situations.

Asura contains 65 chapters. Sita is depicted as Ravana's daughter in this novel. There was a prophecy that she would bring destruction for the Asura race and so she had been thrown to die. But, King Janaka found her and she was grown up as the princess of Mithila. In this novel, the ten heads doesn't give a demonic look for the Ravana. Instead, it is depicted as the ten emotions of man. Common Asuras elected Ravana as king of Lanka, believing him to be their saviour and happiness. However, after his ascension, the Asuras' condition remained unchanged; leading to Ravana's oppression.

Ravana faced much oppression in his childhood. As the son of an Asura lady, he faced oppression from the society. He is even oppressed in his family by his father and all these oppressions inspired him to become a powerful king and the common Asuras like Bhadra helped him to ascend to the throne. Once he ascended to the throne, he started oppressing others, including the people who were faithful to him like Bhadra. Bhadra and Ravana are the narrators of the novel, providing first-person narratives that are intertwined. Bhadra is the sole narrator after the death of Ravana.

Anand Neelakantan looks *Asura* in a different way. *Ramayana* gives importance to Rama and his dharma. *Asura* gives importance to Asura's and Ravana's point of view. Ravana's soliloquy marks the beginning of the novel *Asura*. His soliloquy reveals about himself, his family, his kingdom and his people. Neelakantan then describes how Ravana becomes the King of Lanka, and how the common people see the ascension of Ravana with a new hope.

Ramayana portrays the attack of Asuras against Devas. But, *'Asura'* explains the first attack of Devas against Asuras and how it affected the smooth and peaceful life of Asuras. Neelakantan also describes the state of mixed caste people like Ravana and his siblings and how they are ill-treated. He also describes the training of Ravana and his siblings under the leadership of another great Asura Mahabali. Neelakantan narrates how Ravana, captured the kingdom from Kubera with the help of Bhadra and how he conquered half of the world.

Neelakantan's *Asura* also deviates from Ramayana by depicting Sita as the daughter of Ravana. At the time of birth, there was a prophecy that she would cause destruction to the whole Asura race. So, the ministers of Ravana ask Bhadra to kill her. But Bhadra is unable to kill her and leaves her in the forest. Janaka took her and brought her up as the princess of Mithila. Later Ravana understood that Rama, his daughter's husband and Lakshman behaved cruelly to Shoorpanaka, Ravana's sister. Ravana wanted his daughter to have good husband. He learned that Rama was not able to take care of his daughter because he took her to the forest and her hardships. In order to save her from such a situation, he abducted Sita and this in turn led to the war of Ramayana.

Rama fought against Ravana to bring Sita back. Later, Rama and Brahmin gurus force her to prove her purity. They demand her to do Agni Pariksha. Here Neelakantan presents Rama as a husband who doesn't have authority in the matters related to his wife. He is presented as a mere puppet in the hands of Brahminical gurus. In *Asura*, Rama is portrayed as someone who is not able to do justice. He killed the untouchable, Shambuka and the reason for the murder is that he got educated. As a person belonged to the lower caste, he was not supposed to have education. After acquiring education, he raised his voice against injustices and inequalities existing in society. So, the gurus forced Rama to kill Shambuka. Even though he knew that it was not just to kill Shambuka, he was forced to obey Brahmin gurus. This shows his helplessness. Rama is controlled by Brahmin gurus. He cannot take decisions alone regarding his life, his family, his kingdom and his people. But, Ravana has full authority in his life, his kingdom and his people. *Asura* places Ravana in a better position by showing his attitude towards women. Ravana accepts Mandodari, even after she is raped by his enemies, at the time of war. This shows his virtue. But, Rama asked Sita to be in exile after hearing some foul words of a drunkard. Ravana fought the war in a right way and followed the ethics of war. But Rama and his people deviated from the ethics. Neelakantan has given a human picture for Rama. He is presented as a human with some flaws.

Oppression is one of the major themes of this novel. Ravana and his siblings were half castes. Their father was a Maharishi and their mother was an Asura woman. As half-castes, they did not get education. The learned men, Brahmins were not ready to teach them. They were considered as inferior by the learned men because their mother belonged to the Asura caste. Here, the learned Brahmins belonged to the higher castes and they considered themselves as superior and the power existed in their hands. In the case of Ravana and his siblings, everything was

decided by others. They were defined by the powerful races, communities as incompetent, buffoons etc... At the beginning of the novel, the great Asura King, Mahabali captured Ravana and his siblings. When Mahabali asked them to introduce themselves they understood that they didn't even have an identity as Asuras. The response of Mahabali at that time is noteworthy. Mahabali responded to them: "It is unfortunate that the Asura tribe produces such useless hotheads as you. I think your mixed blood has got to do with this total incompetence. Stop playing a buffoon and be worthy of the ambition that burns in your heart." (29)

Asuras are considered as great warriors and Brahmins are considered as great learners. But the mixed caste children do not get education and they do not get the opportunity to become a warrior. Thus Ravana and his siblings are doubly subjugated. Similarly Vanara race is considered as inferior by the Devas and also by the Asuras too and in that way they are also doubly subjugated. Here, both Asuras and Devas play the role of oppressors.

When Shambuka started learning, he began to see the world differently. He started questioning the injustice and authority. But Shambuka's father, Shiva was afraid of educating Shambuka because he was afraid of the rule that Asuras were not allowed to be educated. He got education from the disciple of Jabali, a Brahmin, who spoke against the caste system. Jabali and his disciples wanted to educate people irrespective of their caste, class, gender etc. A new awakening came to his mind with education. He talked about freedom and all the lower caste people in that area stood with him. This shows that they craved for independence and even their existence was decided by the higher caste people. Shambuka once met a group of priests, who do not want the lower caste people to pollute the road. The boy questioned them and in turn the priest threatened him with some Sanskrit verses. But, the boy challenged the priests with some other Sanskrit verses. The priests became infuriated and death was the punishment for his questioning. It shows that the common people are subjugated by the evil caste system. Brahminism slowly entered into the Asura society. They considered the poor, black Asuras as inferior and the higher caste even refused to touch them. According to Ravana, Brahminism destroyed the purity of thought and simplicity of the Asura race.

Devas considered Asuras as uncivilized and they thought that it was their duty to civilize them. So, Devas destroyed Asura civilization. They destroyed Asura cities, schools, temples and everything of their own and instead Devas constructed their own school of art and architecture.

Sometimes Ravana wants to consider Bhadra as his friend, but sometimes he considers himself as the master and Bhadra as his slave. The life of the common Asuras remained as the same even after they got the powerful Asura King, Ravana. As the Asura King, Ravana did not remove the tax collection from the Asura society. Instead, he forced further taxes on them. A civilian woman commented on the new King and his rule like this.

“I do not care of any King. They are all the same. What is so fancy about the new one? Devas, Asuras, Gandharvas, half castes, they are all the same. They only worry about how to glue their fat asses to the throne and screw the people. They talk big, like the emancipation of the Asuras, getting even with the Devas, preservation of culture, and all that humbug. But finally it boils down to the same thing: screw the people, enjoy a luxurious life in the palace and cling to power” (130)

This comment shows the sufferings of the common Asuras. Earlier they were subjugated by the Devas. But later they were subjugated by the Asura King. The life of the common Asuras remained as the same even under the rule of Devas and Asuras. The common civilians remained as oppressed even under the rule of Devas and the Asura King. The only change is that the role of the oppressor changed from Devas to the Asura King Ravana. The common civilians expected a new world with the coming of Asura rule under Ravana. But, they lost their hope by seeing the societal changes that occurred under the kingship of Ravana. They were overburdened by taxes and remained in the same pathetic condition.

Asura race is dehumanised in several ways by the Asura authority and Devas. Their freedom is taken away by the oppressors and the oppressors use both physical and mental violence to gain control over them. Devas exert physical violence on the Asura civilians after conquering the Asura kingdom. As a King, Ravana exerts both physical and mental violence on the civilians. Thus they are subjugated both under the Deva and Asura kingdom. The imbalance of power between the authority and the common civilians is the reason for oppression of the Asura race.

Devas behaved badly with the Asura race. In the same way, the so called pure communities behaved badly with the mixed races and Vanaras. Vanaras and other mixed races have the equal rights as other communities. But the pure communities do not consider them as equal. Thus, the Vanaras and mixed races do not have access of public resources and they do not have equal rights as others. In this way they are doubly subjugated. Asuras were like the slaves under the rule of Devas and they did not have an identity of their own.

Bhadra and Ravana are the two narrators of this novel. As a narrator Bhadra represents the common Asuras. His voice is the voice of the silenced and the marginalised. He helps Ravana to become the King. He thinks that the Asura race will be benefitted under the kingship of Ravana. He helps King Ravana at the critical moments and remains firm with him. But he is not thanked or acknowledged for his deeds. Once, he tries to save the kingdom by giving warning about the arrival of Hanuman. As a common low caste untouchable, authorities have not given any attention to him. Instead, he is being beaten up for his sincerity. Here Bhadra is the representative of the common Asuras and his condition indicates the pathetic condition of common civilians.

In the novel, the common Asuras are not allowed to raise their voice against the injustice, inequalities and brutalities. They are supposed to accept everything passively without questioning the authority. Even their voice for the country is also silenced by the authority as in the case of Bhadra. So subjugating the common Asuras is a common theme in the novel *Asura: Tale of the vanquished*.

“The eternal other, the perpetual minor, an occasional and incomplete being, a kind of imperfect man-a woman is everything but a person. She suffers during wartime and she suffers in peacetime. She has to fight in a situation where every revolution has a meaning but feminism. She is tagged along for every protest that concerns the society the society, yet, she has to wage her war in a situation where only empty rights prevail”. (Gaijan 240)

Women are also represented as doubly subjugated in *Asura*. Asura women are considered as inferior by the Devas and other higher castes and they are also suppressed by their husbands in their homes. There are many instances of Asura men attack Asura women when they are in anger. In many occasions, Bhadra attacks his wife physically and mentally in the same way he is attacked by the authorities. He thinks that he protects her and he has the right to hurt her as the authorities exert their power over Bhadra and other common Asuras. Women are represented as weak and they cannot live without the protection of husband and this indicates the subjugation of women. Shiva and Bhadra express their anger and frustrations on the poor women several times.

Ravana’s wife, Mandodari was raped during the war and the responses of different people show the attitude of the society towards women. Even though, she was raped, Ravana decided to stand by his wife.

But his subordinates made fun of their king and queen. Here, Mandodari is merely treated as an object. If she had been treated as a human being, they would have supported her instead of harassing her mentally and physically. The harsh response of the subordinates indicates the power of patriarchy. Mandodari accepts the cruelty done to her and this shows her subjugation in the patriarchal society. The society expects certain behaviour from her and she acts by the notions of the society even when she is molested. It shows that the patriarchal society determines the identity of a woman.

Mandodari and other women characters are silenced in many occasions in the novel. Even if she is aware of the injustices of her husband, she remains silent. Both Deva women and Asura women are forced to remain silent and they are treated as objects of pleasure. Asuras are treated as inferior and untouchables in this novel and they are forced to internalize Deva's opinion. People cannot resist sacrificing their lives for the selfish reasons of Rama and Ravana. They are made victims of the revenge between Rama and Ravana. They are forced to fight and sacrifice their lives to fulfil the king's wishes. Thus violence subjugates people of different caste, class, race, gender, colour etc... The common Asuras are forced to face the discriminations and they are not allowed to express their anger and frustration.

Like the Asuras, the Devas are also subjugated in certain occasions. The learned Brahmin pundits demand Sita to prove her chastity by Agni Pariksha because she remained as the captive of Ravana in Lanka for so many days. When the Agni Pariksha has announced, Sita looks at her husband, but he "looked away unable to face her. His hands trembled, yet that wooden smile never left his lips. He was trying hard to contain his emotions. He sat there not like a warrior who had vanquished the most powerful king in the world, but like a man stricken by fate" (ATV 454). He was silenced by the rules of Brahmin pundits and he was unable to raise his voice. As a husband he was supposed to tell whether Sita was pure or not. But he was passive. He remained silent and did not act or say anything to support his wife. "He was looking down and he was visibly shaken and distressed. Yet he did not stand up and say, 'Enough! I trust my wife'" (ATV 459). Before jumping into the fire, she looked at her husband piteously. Then "he averted his eyes, and looked straight ahead, beyond her, beyond his soldiers, beyond us at some distant point on the horizon. Tears welled in his eyes. Beside him and his scowling brother, fat Brahmin priests chanted in Sanskrit, drowning the excited voices of the crowd and the sobs of Mandodari and the other women" (ATV 460). He knows that what they are doing to Sita is not right. But he cannot raise his voice against this

injustice. He cannot support his wife. He is supposed to follow the instructions of Brahmin gurus without questioning. Here, Brahmin pundits are the oppressors and Rama is the oppressed. Brahmin pundits are dominant and Rama is powerless before them. He cannot question the evil laws of Brahmin pundits and thus he is helpless and marginalised. The killing of Shambuka also indicates the oppressed state of Rama. Shambuka questioned the Brahmin pundits for following the caste system and certain other rituals. As an untouchable, Shambuka tried to learn Vedas and Upanishads. It made the priests angry. Since the Brahmin pundits are the advisors of king and the kingdom, he is supposed to obey them. So he obeyed their instruction to kill Shambuka and when Shambuka's mother questioned Rama, he remained speechless.

Similarly Lakshmana questioned the Brahmin priests. He resisted the meaningless rituals that caused sufferings to the people. When Brahmin priests asked him to execute his favourite brother, he obeyed them. All these instances show that Rama is marginalised or oppressed by the Brahmin priests. He knew that what the priests told about Sita, Shambuka and Lakshmana were wrong. But he followed their instruction because a king was supposed to obey the Brahmin priests and they were considered as the ultimate sources of knowledge. He wants to protect his wife, brother and Shambuka, but he is not allowed to do justice to anybody around him. Even though he is a king, he acts like a slave and he is passive. He is guided by the principles and ideas of priests and he is unable to raise his voice against the injustices.

In this novel, Sita is portrayed as an Asura woman, as the daughter of Ravana. At the same time, she is depicted as a Deva woman, as the adopted daughter of Janakan, King of Mithila. Sita is subjugated as a Deva woman and as a wife. As a woman, she has to obey his society and as a wife, she has to obey his husband. Her voice is suppressed without giving representation.

Devas, Asuras, the Brahmins belonging to higher race are different categories of people depicted in the novel. Asuras are depicted as weak, inferior and underdeveloped by the Devas. Devas enforced their culture on the Asura kingdom after conquering them. It shows cultural hegemony. The power hierarchy existed even among Asuras, dividing them as higher caste Asura authorities and lower caste Asuras.

Devas politically exploited the poor and powerless Asuras. In the same way the powerful Asuras politically oppressed the common Asuras too. Women are depicted as victims of sexual oppression in many

occasions in the novel. They are just treated as objects in the hands of men whenever they faced emotional instability. Thus the novel reveals different kinds of oppressions like racial, political, sexual etc... and this work also hints the evils of caste system too.

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