RESEARCH ARTICLE

CASTE, RACE AND COLOR IN ASURA *THE TALE OFTHE VANQUISHED*

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ABSTRACT

Asura: Tale of the Vanquished (2012) is a remarkable attempt by AnandNeelakantan to reconstruct fiction from a viewpoint of a demon from the ever-popular epic *Ramayana*. In a brave attempt, the author portrays one of the most dreaded characters in a unique version of a tale—a vanquished voice of a common man—silenced for eons—now speaking out his survival tale of eternal struggle.

The author by interweaving, religious convictions and historical details employs fiction so as to provide a very powerful social commentary coming from none other than the most hated antagonist ever—Ravana himself. The novel raises several forbidden issues of color, race, untouchability, gender, with a hope that the marginalized and discriminated individuals find a greater acceptance among the masses. The aim of this paper is to correlate the epical interpretations in the novel with that of the contemporary tribulations confronted by the post-modern India.

The author portrays central mythical characters like Ravana and Bhadra as non-Brahmins and as untouchables due to *karma*—a sin committed in the past lives for their wrongdoings that have earned them present caste status. The novel has also balanced the malevolence with the virtue through the most potent villain portrayed—Ravana—the protagonist with human flaws. By exposing Ravana's ruthless ambition and flaws, the novel correlates the unabashed power-lust of today's politicians who rarely care for the common man especially the victimized caste-ridden individuals of the society.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of anti-hero epic works by reading against the grain. It also seeks to appreciate the 'wronged' mythological characters by deconstructing their image. By connecting the dark negative characters to the mainstream fiction, it attempts to address the grave issues that affect the common man in every sphere. Thus, such innovative novels make us re-consider some of the fiery questions of postcolonial India and also offer a positive reconstruction through its perpetually 'silenced' dark characters.

Key words: *Devas, Asuras, color, caste, Brahminical, common man etc.*

I.   INTRODUCTION

Divergent from the traditional retelling—Ravana the ten headed demon known to every Indian, is representative of a very ordinary human being, who with a burning ambition and a grand dream decides to live life fully. As conventionally depicted in myths and legends the writer has projected demon Ravana with many flaws who does many atrocities on his subjects. In an interview to the Newspaper 'The Hindu', the author largely concerned with the portrayal of negative shaded characters like Ravana or Duryodhana remarked:

> I have always found that the villains are more believable and humane than our mythological heroes [. . .] A Ravana or Duryodhana looks refreshingly modern in their values. Their naked materialism, honest ambitions and even their flaws make them likeable. There are two sides to any story. So far we have been spoon fed one point of view only. It is fascinating to see how the same story changes when the view point changes. As they say, there is my truth, and your truth, but the real truth is somewhere in between. (S Devika 5)

Commencing with the plot, the fiction depicts the fabled savior of common man—Ravana who initially vows to avenge the Devas—essentially the Brahmins as the ruling class who believed in senseless rituals and caste hierarchy. Ravana identifies himself as an Asura—of the non-Brahmin caste to usurp the existing class hierarchy. At first he strives to help the underprivileged Asuras to overcome countless barriers they encounter at the hands of the Devas. In a contrasting situation, while entirely covering Ravana's mythical journey in a gripping manner, the writer portrays the ever-idealistic Lord Rama—essentially a God-like personality full of flaws, as opposed to his ideal image in religion and mythology. On the contrary, Ravana, in spite of his negative emotions gains empathy as he is akin to any ordinary human being, surviving in a brutal society. In essence, the plot brings to light how 'Sanskritised' everything is in the Indian context thereby raising problematic issues of gender, caste, race, class-hierarchy etc.

There is an equally important character Bhadra who represents a common man. The fictitious character appears through alternate chapters that vacillate between Ravana and Bhadra. The two characters are eventually juxtaposed as Ravana leads the *Asuras* from invincible victories to the grand Lankan Empire of gold to Bhadra who remains the voice of common Asura and who have blind faith on Ravana as their leader.

The "Death to Brahmins" Slogan by Ravana

Ravana's ethnicity is of mixed races, a Brahmin father and a mother with an unknown Asura caste. Since his formative years, Ravana questions the meaningless rituals dictated by the Devas for their egotistical prosperity.

Ravana who had an erudite Brahmin father resented his own identity, "I hated the Brahmins, the Devas and their culture or the lack of it" (Neelkantan 212). As a consequence, Ravana eventually decides to cast-off his Brahmin inheritance, his fair skin and proudly embrace his mother's lineage—from an unknown Asura caste— but also a proud inheritor of Mahabali, Hiranya, Hiranyaksha—emperors shaping the Indian civilization.

Vibhishana, one of the younger siblings of Ravana is a contrast of his 'progressive' brother. While Vibhishana favors Brahmnical tradition, Ravana condemns him as he introduces the wretched Deva tradition of the caste system. In a same vein of creating wider rift, the Brahmins started gaining a steady control over people. They began propagating customary rituals such as wearing a sacred thread and looking down on other people. In a persistent attempt to create mass awareness, Neelkantan exposes a grim reality with the upper caste people of India who go to the ridiculous heights and preach untouchability.

> Rowdy elements among us would rush and embrace, or at least touch, the pure Brahmins returning from their purifying baths. No sooner did one of us touch one of the super-pure Brahmins; the entire bunch would curse us […] would return to the *Ghat* to wash us off their bodies. (Ibid 260)

The historians are of opinion that the caste system in India started around 1500 BCE with the arrival of Aryans. Neelkantan too provides a detailed record of a possibility of the rampant spread of *Deva* system which turned out to be detrimental for the nation's progress. Through the fictional account of Ravana, the writer explains that the Brahmins were official priests of the *Devas* who began formulating complicated rituals as opposed to

the *Asura* culture that was founded on individual capability and ample freedom for both genders. Also the Devas—as a race of conquerors started ascribing divinity to their own leaders—calling themselves Gods. Thus the Brahmins occupied a position below their rules and started identifying their community people as *Devas*. Subsequently, as the complexity and meaningless rituals increased, the Brahmins began to gain control of society by conquering the slaves—the *Dasas*(Ibid 23). Thus, centuries together, the Brahmins lived as self-centered community in perpetual contentment. Ravana echoing the angst of a modern day wronged man expresses his contempt that the Brahmins spread the bane of superiority over others. They considered the poor, black, original Asuras as impure—even being refused to be touched. In a scornful tone Bhadra articulates "We wanted to punish them for their arrogance, pride, the insults they heaped on us, for treating us as untouchables and destroying the little dignity we possessed" (Ibid 261).

In a rare attempt, there are few books which question the discerning aspects of great religious texts. Such investigative works challenges the idealism present in popular epics such as Ramayana. One such brave endeavor raises questions on safeguarding diversity and all-inclusiveness in Ramayana. In *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* (2001) by Paula Richman, Shambuka of the southern Dravidian race is invited to debate with the Brahmin priests. However the astute Shambuka refuses this debate unless the king assures him that the judgment will be based on the Veda, the revealed texts, and not *smriti*—texts written by Brahmin sages. Later after the debate, Ram is convinced of his scholarship, is sternly warned by sage Vasistha that Shambuka's policies, essentially Dravidian, will destabilize the Indian empire and ruin both Brahmins and Kshatriyas. This episode results in Rama—the Aryan-Kshatriya king beheading the innocent Dravidian boy Shambuka (161).

In a similar path-breaking work, *SutaPuranamu* (1924), TripuraneniRamasvamiChaudhari defies the verdict of religious traditions and seeks to provide a radical perspective of the legendary themes. He states that Ravana is born in the Dravidian tribe and is a peace-loving King who prohibits animal sacrifice as well as is a great scholar of Vedas as well as a great grammarian. Thus, with his revolutionary effort, Chaudhari jolts his readers by analyzing the reason of the downtrodenness of Indian masses. His work sets out the agenda for the anti-Ramanaya discourse, and for anti-*purana* views. He characterized the Brahmin texts as obscene, immoral, cruel and Aryan. According to him all the Sanskrit *puranas* , mainly the epic Ramayana were written by the North Indian Brahmnical Aryans to subjugate the independent and highly civilized non-Brahmnical Dravidians from the south (quoted in Richman 175-76).

After his conquest, Ravana fails to gain acceptability and is confused of society's reaction. He finds that people are moving away from him not due to awe or respect but due to the fact that he was a *Shudra*—a pollutant in their grand city.

The Sanskritised Discourse & the Rise of Caste System

Post the legendary Ravana killing episode in Lanka, Bhadra as one of the common men enthusiastically anticipates the dawn of a new era that would bring justice and prosperity to masses like him. To his displeasure, he finds that the erudite Sanskrit scholars discoursing in Sanskirt were incomprehensible for the masses. Consequently, Vibhishana who had preferred to follow Rama's Deva creed, translated Rama's speech that was marked with idealism—that meant paradoxical to the masses. It was at this point of Asura conquest Rama announced that all the people will be ruled as per the *DevaDharma*. He decreed that the King was made the supreme authority who would be ruling as per the advice of the Brahmins. The supreme God stated that all the subjects would be divided into four castes and a profession would be allocated to each of them. The Brahmins believed to have come from the face of the God would henceforth be a supreme caste—imparting knowledge and calling for obedience. The *Kshatriyas* who came out of limbs would rule over the society as per the Brahminical advice. The *Vaishyas*—merchant class who came out from the thighs of God would perform business and trade under the superior caste people. Finally, the *Shudras*—the artisans, small land owners, soldiers   who were born from the foot of God would serve the other three castes (Neelkantan 452).

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Bhadra who represented the 'blackest of the black, dirty, poor' community of *Asuras*who did odd jobs like cleaning streets, washing or being porters did not find any hierarchical position in the caste system. Not finding a satisfactory answer of which bodily part of the Deva God these people came from, Rama announced that these people would be considered pariahs or untouchables and they must take it as a 'blessing' from God.

Deva Women: the Wronged Women in Indian Mythology

The historical events through Ravana or Bhadra's perspective expose an oppression of women in Deva community. In the episode post-Ravana assassination, the Brahmins are credited for terming Sita, the virtuous wife of Lord Rama as being 'polluted'. In order to prove Lord Rama as fair and just King, Sita is forced to prove her chastity and purity through the Deva's time-honor method.   Even after Ravana's death, the Brahmins dictated that the widows irrespective of any race—should go sati—should not be permitted to be seen in the sunlight.

The only possible way suggested is to ensure that an untouchable pray God with due humility so that in the next birth the individual will be reborn in a better hierarchy in the *varna* system.

In *Feminism in Indian Writing in English* edited by Amar Nath Prasad, writer Dr. Kanupriya exposes the oppression of women since pre-historic times. A general study points out that the patriarchal society through the medium of Indian classical literature, myths etc promotes the husband-wife relationship as the most important of all relationships. It implies that traditionally, a 'good woman' is always synonymous with a good wife and a good wife must be chaste, faithful and virtuous like Sita or Savitri. In Ramayana, Sita's identity is solely estimated in relation to her husband, Rama who abandons her for the societal fear. The image of these virtuous mythological female characters is glorified and they are referred to as "Devi", "Mata" etc. However, for feminists, in scriptures and myths woman like Sita are depicted either as a goddess or a sub-human creator, but never as a complete human being. Where on one hand, she has been described as an object of reverence of worship; on the other hand, she is treated like an object of sexual gratification and considered to be man's property (78).

In the fictional account, when Ravana gets attracted towards a fair-skinned-Brahmin widow Vedavati, he gets to know the brutal treatment meted out to the Deva women.

> We can live a slave's life in the house of our in laws…with our heads shaven…hands and throats unadorned […] purposefully made unattractive. A living corpse[…]no bindis for us[…]no bangles[…]no coloured saris[…]only coarse white[…] no life[…] an unpaid servant[…] a living corpse […].(Neelkantan 217)

The Deva men had a strange custom of finding an eligible suitor for his daughter through a publicized contest. There were also instances where the Deva men would sell their wives as slaves, mortgage them or use them as wages—similar to commodities. The Asura civilization, though with their own share of problems, believed in a different culture. For the Asuras, a society will be civilized only when it treated its women and marginalized people with dignity, resisting the rigid caste structures.

Even Ravana's younger sister Soorpanakha was termed "dark and ugliest creature" by her own Brahmin father. In a contempt towards her son, Ravana's mother sums up the overall attitude people have towards Asura race "Debauchery, sodomy, avarice, you name any evil and this devilish race can easily claim monopoly over it. Black-skinned, ugly creatures [...]."(Ibid 17)

Rituals: a Threat to the Social Order

Neelkantan believes that the Vedas and the philosophical works were in essence created by the supreme intellectuals. Even in the modern era, the caste rift is harbored by the pseudo scholars who continue to recommend strange rituals of animal sacrifices—none of these had sanction of the original Vedas.

There is also a stark difference of traditions followed by Devas and Asuras. In one of his incarnations, Lord Vishnu promised that in order to save the *dharma* or social order, he would take birth among humans. In contrast, Ravana as one of the Asuras defied all the ideology and disrupted the social order. His rise in the social order took place solely due to bravery and hard work even though he was of a half-caste origin.

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By making caste system as one of the vices, Neelkantan determinedly reveals the evils of it. Through central characters Ravana and Bhadra, the author provides a glimpse of brutality meted out to the discriminated individuals of Indian society. These men live in a constant fear of oppression from the upper caste men. The main cause being money, caste, rituals, traditions, beliefs and superstitions—all meant to crush the common man. Also, in an analogous situation, the moment Ravana started to question the banal rituals, the Brahmins banished him and termed him as a 'Rakshasa', a demon (Ibid 19).

In addition, by referring to the Brahmins, the author has scoffed at on the age-old *Yajna*or a *Puja* ritual for everything under the sun. "Couldn't the Brahmins conduct a puja so that our heads were cleared of sinful thoughts (Ibid 20)?Ravana was disgusted with Vibhishana adhering to his father's rigid rituals. "Why will you not accompany your Brahmin father? He could teach you all sorts of mantras and make you into a high class robber. You could perform all your usual meditations and have Vishnu or Indra or some Deva God as your personal protector" (Ibid 177). Thus, Neelkantan takes a jibe on the Vedic system as instead of making the sacred verses useful, the Brahmins prayed for selfish reasons and appeal Gods after putting hundreds of assorted twigs into the fire.

In the light of literary criticism, the novel could be analyzed through the theory of new historicism. As per the theory of new historicism, wherein the new historicists employ more 'openness' in interpretation of literary texts, the exploration of Ravana—the most hated demon, can be instrumental in eliminating the 'gray' areas in myths. This heterogeneous approach will enable the modern readers to grasp the oppressing situation of the Asura race without any ingrained bias. According to this hypothesis, if Ravana would have killed King Rama, history would have been completely different. The Asura—as the vanquished race would have been saved—from the clutches of a discriminating religion. Perhaps he would have created a unified country—eradicating darkness—the Brahmins who had imposed subjective views who decided what was pure and impure—splitting its people by language race or affluence.

II. Conclusion

Since times immemorial, a very powerful epic like *Ramayana* with an equally potent mythical heroes and demons, continue to greatly influence all human traditions. Myths and historical data available thorough folklore and ancient scripture reveal how even after five thousand years cultures and communities are unforgiving towards a wronged character like Ravana.   Today, even after many millenniums, the art of story-telling has sustained the hatred towards a character who perhaps was an equally great hero like Rama but lost a great war against the Deva race. Ravana till date continues to be depicted as an eternally ruthless villain until a brave attempt by AnandNeeelkantan's work renders a powerful voice to Ravana.

Neelkantan, as a prudent writer seems to suggest that for a common man in Indian society, caste has become the product of political dominance. It is the biggest vice that creates sorrow and disparity. On a closer examination of the novel, the author seems to be signifying that for advancement of humanity such flawed mindset must be changed and one must be able to appreciate the edifying pluralism that would remove racial discrimination from the people's minds. In the existing political circumstances, a mythical narration such as this novel through a new historical perspective exposes the realities beyond our comprehension—with issues of caste, colour and race. An anti-heroic novel like the *Asura*…is insightful in pin-pointing the existing situation which is plaguing the progressive Indian society.

In a popular usage, though the term myth is usually referred to a fictitious story of Ravana, the term goes deeper than the false beliefs. Scholars of mythology believe that myths can deal with the questions of origin—who you are and where you came from. Thus, a novel attempt of bringing alive an ever-hated negative character like Ravana does venture to enlighten that in order to progress as a culture, one needs to look beyond the issues of religion and caste and only this can ensure a real 'Ramrajya'.

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A short bio-note of Corresponding Author: Dr. VrushaliDeole is currently working as an Assistant Professor at K J Somaiya Institute of Engineering &IT, Mumbai, India, in the subject of English since March 2005. In the quest to pursue her academic dreams she completed PhD program from the English Department, Mumbai University. Her inclination for pursuing a PhD appeared from her most intense fervent to explore unique and creative areas of research. It is for the topic like Gender studies & Indian Mythology that she earnestly look forward to discern its diversified avenues and contribute significantly in this newly emerging area of research especially in India.