

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Subversion of the Grand Narrative about Asuras in Anand Neelakantan's Asura: Tale of the Vanquished

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ABSTRACT

This research paper deals with the portrayal of the Asura and Deva civilisations in Anand Neealkantan's novel Asura: Tale of the Vanquished. In the grand narrative of the Ramayana, which is popular throughout popular media and literature, the Asuras are considered barbaric people. The struggle between Asuras and Devas is generally perceived as a battle between good and evil. In this paper, Anand Neelakantan's novel is studied for its portrayal of the Asura community as a counter-narrative to the popular grand narrative. The political conflict between Rama and Ravana is also perceived as the struggle between good and evil. In this novel, Anand Neelakantan counter-narrates the Asura civilisation in order to subvert the Grand narrative about them. By focusing on the progressive and timeless qualities of the Asura Empire, the novelist illuminates the suppressed history of the Asura civilisation. The novelist presents the Asura civilisation as more advanced, progressive, and liberal than the Deva civilisation. Asuras are described as a casteless society which is highly developed and democratic. The comparison of the two civilisations reveals hitherto undiscussed facts about them. This paper aims at a critical analysis of the two civilisations as depicted in the novel Asura: Tale of the Vanquished.

Keywords: Asura; Neelakantan; Deva civilization; Demythification of Asura community

FULL PAPER

Introduction

Asura: Tale of the Vanquished is Anand Neelakantan's groundbreaking novel in English, published in 2012. This novel argues that the grand narrative of the Ramayana needs to be read from the perspective of the loser, or the subaltern. The war between Ravana and Rama is generally considered a conflict between good and evil. However, this Grand narrative needs to be deconstructed. In popular culture, the Deva people are imagined as gentle, civilised, wise, and peace-loving. On the other hand, Asuras are considered to be wild, dark-complexioned, uncivilised, barbaric and evil. This novel by Anand Neelakantan subverts this Grand narrative. This novel advocates that the Asura civilisation was more developed, more civilised, and more egalitarian. The novel is presented through the two characters, Ravana and Bhadra. While one is a mighty emperor, the other is a poor untouchable villager. Seen from the perspectives of these two characters, the grand narrative is effectively subverted by the novelist.

Before the novel is a counter-narrative of the characters, it is a counter-narrative of the two civilisations. The war between the two Kings is inherently a war between two civilisations with different worldviews and socio-political organisation. In the traditional grand narrative, Asuras are the people who are believed to have been uncivilised, barbaric and unethical. Anand Neelakantan noted that "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 contradicts popular perception yet remains believable and relatable. It was tough, but I understood that the Asura world was no different from our present world. Once I started modelling it in present-day India, things fell into place and became easy" (Irin 801a). The victory of Rama over Ravana is generally interpreted as the triumph of civilisation over barbarism and of good over evil. Every year, effigies of Ravana are burnt all over the country by the people in public places on the day of Dussehra, and the day is celebrated as the day of victory over evil. In the TV serials, popular culture, in poetry, dramas and movies the Asuras are shown to be people with dark complexion, half-naked, carrying strange weapons in their hands, having long teeth, horns on either of the head, red eyes and thick moustaches and with untidy curly hair whereas, Deva people are shown gentle, calm, civilized, highly educated, wise and peace loving. Himanshu Parmar notes that, "Mainstream Literature always projected a superior Deva culture in contrast to the inferior and uncivilised culture of the Asuras." (Parmar 129)—the novel attempts to subvert this portrayal of the two civilisations. "And for the first

time in history, this narrative equipped the asuras to communicate their story to the readers” (Arathi 176). At the outset of the novel, Ravana and Bhadra describe the glorious days of the Asura civilisation. Ravana describes how King Mahabali led the Asura civilisation to the highest peaks of development and established it as the largest Empire. Ravana also tells how Vamana banished King Mahabali from his rightful throne and established the rule of the Deva civilisation. Ravana describes. The writer “takes the reader through the history of Asuras, who were a highly progressive and extremely developed, casteless democratic society.” Anand Neelakantan describes the Asura civilisation in the best possible manner. The following quote is self-explanatory.

“The Asura were a casteless Society and a highly democratic set-up where an elected council, instead of a king, held actual power. They were also a roaming tribe, hunting and raiding to survive, but somewhere, perhaps 2000 years ago, they settled down in cities and towns along the riverbanks. It has been said that the Asura kingdoms had roads paved in gold” (Neelakantan, Asura, 21).

He expresses his wonder at the mighty empire built by the past kings: “But what an empire they built! It sprawled from the Indus in the west to the Brahmaputra in the east, and from the Himalayas in the north to the Narmada in the south. It could easily have been the biggest empire on earth at that time” (Neelakantan, Asura, 21). He goes on to claim that, “When the kings of Egypt were busy building great tombs to bury themselves, the democratic council of the Asura kingdom was busy laying roads, building hospitals, drainage systems, and everything they thought was useful for the people” (Neelakantan, Asura, 21). Ravana narrates that the Asuras were democratic, preferring dialogue over dictation. The Kingdom was ruled rather than through a centralised authority, through a Council, like a body. The decentralised power ensured it ran on consensus rather than fear or compulsion. In the Asura empires, “Justice was exact, swift, and the crime rate low” (Asura 72). In comparison to the Deva civilisation, where begging was seen as no crime, the Asuras detested begging. In one incident, a man charged with a crime refused to apologise. He accepted his hands to be chopped off rather than begging. Ravana comments, “In any other country, he would have begged, but as this was a prosperous country, begging was not allowed. Beggars were banished to the interiors or more often taken to the sea and dwnthrodden with stones tied to their necks” (Asura 72).

Surprisingly, the rumours that spread across the country about the Asura civilisation are similar to those spread in the Asura kingdom about the Deva people. Ravana mentions the rumours spread in the Asura Empire about Dava: that they have tails hidden in the folds of their dhotis and horns. One of the youngsters says that

these are all older women's tales. What the people concluded about the Deva people was that they are not monsters, as mentioned, but “They are just uncivilised barbarians” (Asura 202).

During the barbaric reign of the Deva people, the cities were destroyed, and innocent people, along with women and children, were slaughtered. “Devas always attempted to colonise Asuras. They even tried to propagate their ideology in the Asura land” (Lekshmi & Nair 763). Ravana describes the brutal wars which destroyed and vanquished the entire Asura civilisation: “Thousands were slain; women, irrespective of age, were gang-raped, children burnt alive, and granaries plundered. Magnificent cities crumbled. A civilisation was destroyed, and the clock of progress was set back by centuries. The Asuras lost everything, and they fled to the south. The Nagas withdrew to the eastern hills... The Gandharva became a wandering tribe and soon got lost in the bylanes of history and mythology.” (Neelakantan, Asura, 22). The racial discrimination and the psychological impact of history on the minds of the people are described. “An entire civilisation and its people had been crushed and their spirit annihilated. A great race had been taught to think of themselves as inferior creatures, to head the colour of their skin and believe that fairness was equivalent to greatness” (Asura, 204). Ravana believes that it was not just a political victory; it was colonisation. The Deva people imposed their religion on the Asura people. After the demolition of the Asura Temple, the people were forced to pray to only one God, “Prajapita Brahma”. The rulers began calling themselves the Deva people. It all happened over centuries. Consequently, “The conquered were called Dasas and made to do all the work” (Neelakantan, Asura,23)

Ravana believes that a culture's progress depends on how women and people with low incomes are treated. In the Deva empires, the caste was rigid, and women were ill-treated. Ravana says, “I cursed the blasted Deva custom of keeping women under a veil. People conversed with each other.”(Asura, 295). The poor people were treated inhumanely. “By such standards, the people of the dusty Northern plains were almost sub-human.” (Asura, 292). Ravana also detests the *Swayamvara* system of marriage. He angrily remarks, “I noticed that the princess and the king assessed her as they had come to a cattle market and had found their prize cow.” He wonders, “What sort of custom was this? An innocent young girl in her prime, exposed to the lustful eyes of older men who could win her in a contest? What about her feelings, her loves, dreams and wishes? Any ruffian who had enough strength to lift that stupid bow could marry her” (Neelakantan 296).

He criticises the teachings given to the children in the Deva empire. They were taught to keep doing the work of their caste for their entire lives. Children grew

arrogant at an early age. Money had the supreme Power in the Deva Empire. What was taboo in society was possible if one had the money for it.

Bhadra describes the city of Ayodhya and is distressed to see that, “There was no concept of plumbing or closed drains in the Deva countries, and we had to relieve ourselves in the open, near the river. The river where everyone defeated, and the buffalo bathed, was considered sacred, and drinking water for the city was supplied from the same place where we wash the dirty laundry” (Asura, 471).

Bhadra describes the rigid caste system observed by the Deva people in Ayodhya. He compares this system with the organisation of Asura societies and expresses his surprise at the inequality and injustice inherent in such an organisation. He describes the areas secluded for each caste in Ayodhya; he gives the example of the Dhobi caste. Even though people of different races, such as “Asura, Nagas, Kinnaras, Gandharvas, coal-black barbarians, yellow-skinned Chinese, yellow-haired barbarians, races from some Cold countries, and people of mixed race” were residing together, they all belonged to the Dhobi caste. Observe that in the Northern Deva empires, the caste was “ancient and deeply entrenched. One belonged to the lowest caste of one's parents, though one may not have resembled either of them. Races had mixed for thousands of years, but one's caste remained the same. The system was established, and a caste headman decided what was best for the whole caste and so ruled like a king” (Asura, 471).

Even though the Asura Kingdom was more developed, it had to suffer subjugation under the Deva rule. Ravana explains, the Devas did not fight the wars fairly and “We Asuras have always lost because we played by the rules when nobody else bothered about any” (Asura. 82). Asuras were thus, “already vanquished. Ravana was their hope. Mahabali saw the promise of freedom and upliftment in Ravana. (Asura, Summary of page No. 30). The common people saw a hope for a strong Asura empire under the leadership of Ravana. However, with the defeat of Ravana, that final dream of the Asura empire is also vanquished. Asuras know that the war between Rama and Ravana is not for power control or for a restoration of any honour only; it has wider and deeper implications: “We were fighting for our culture, our race, our way of life, and our traditions. This was the last battle which would determine if the poor and the downtrodden of India stood a chance to achieve equality; it was a war against heartless Casteism and Untouchability” (Asura, 53).

To conclude, the novelist portrays the conflict between Asura and Deva as a conflict between the two civilisations and the two Kingdoms. In contrast to the grand narrative about Asuras, they are successfully presented as more civilised, egalitarian

and highly developed. Anand Neelakantan claims that the Asura society was egalitarian and therefore casteless. It worked on the principles of democracy and of the welfare state. In contrast, the Deva civilisation is depicted as based on the principles of centralised power, the caste system, and superstition. The struggle between the two civilisations is described not as good versus evil but as a conflict between two ideologies seeking supremacy. Asuras are the vanquished people. The defeat of Ravana heralds the defeat of the Asura civilisation.

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