

Re-visionism - Exposition of the Untold: A Study of Anand Neelakantan's *Asura, The Tale of the Vanquished*

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Mythology has an eternal influence on the individual, the society and its culture. It has been an element of nation-building. Its reciprocal relationship with history, literature and culture is remarkably significant. There were times when mythologies were subjected to inquiry, but their essence were accepted without any apprehensions. But in the postmodern context, the inquiry extends further, wherein the mythologies are subjected to test of compatibility to the present-day advanced system of thoughts. No doubt that the mythologies do provide an inclusive space for such an inquiry, which in recent days is being done through revisioning. Revisioning is looking into the past through the lens of the present-day context. Revisioning, either represents or re-presents characters and events of the original myth. The purpose of revisioning is to provide an inclusive space for the muted and the lesser known, to acknowledge, approve, and appreciate the contribution of the unsung heroes. In the light of this idea, the article deals with Anand Neelakantan 's 'Asura, The Tale of the Vanquished, the Story of Ravana and His People' as revisionist mythology. Drawing attention to the narratology of focalization, the paper specifically deals with the visibility of Bhadra, a character almost unknown to many. His contribution

towards the preservation of the Asura race and the emancipation of Ravana as Emperor finds prominence which has erstwhile remained unnoticed in the annals of mythology.

Key words: revisionism, representation, visibility, mythology, focalization.

Introduction

Mythology has had its inception since the evolution of mankind. The shaping influence of mythology is significantly large and mythology forms the very rubric of culture and literature. The religious kinship that the mythology shares is unique to Indian ethos. When mythology encompasses within it the power to doctrine and indoctrinate ideas, there arises a need for it, to be given new perspectives through changing times. “We can add that mythmaking is evidently a primal and universal function of the human mind as it seeks a more or less unified vision of the cosmic order, the social order and the meaning of the individual’s life, both for society at large and for the individual. This story generating function seems irreplaceable. The individual finds meaning in his life, by making of his life a story set within a larger social and cosmic story”(Cupitt,1982).

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata have been two of the greatest epics which have had a remarkable influence on the socio-cultural fabric of the society and the nation at large. Every individual inadvertently has been groomed by these mythologies. They are classics, hence meant for all times. “The classics are the books that come down to us, bearing upon them the traces of readings, reviews to us, and bringing in their wake the traces they themselves have left on the culture or cultures they have passed through” (Calvino,1986). But with the changing values of culture and society, the need for the reiteration of the values that mythologies encompass is strongly felt. The same has to be delivered to the present-day generation in a palatable manner, where the epic provides answers to their quest. Thus, there has arisen a need for the revival of revisionism, an age-old tradition, of providing new perspectives to the original myth or reviving the inherent values of the myth to enlighten the contemporary generation.

“Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by culture, the poet is using myth and the potential is always appropriated for altered ends. It is the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet, but ultimately making cultural change possible”(Ostriker,1982). The two predominant purposes of revisioning are representation and re-presentation. Representation provides scope for visibility and re-presentation adopts, adapts and recreates leading to subversion. The larger epic framework has within its confines the scope for such perspectival changes. “Re-vision, the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new direction is for us, more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival” (Adrienne Rich,2008). Thus, revisioning mythologies provides new insights into mythologies, facilitating its accommodation to the present-day social system. In the light of this idea, the paper analyses Anand Neelakantan’s *Asura Tale of The Vanquished The Story of Ravana and His People* as revisionist mythology.

“That is, literary works may be regarded as mythopoeia, tending to create or recreate certain narratives which human beings take to be crucial to their understanding of their world. Thus, cultural and literary criticism may involve mythography or the interpretation of myth, given that mythic is an important dimension of cultural and literary experience” (Coupe, 2009).

Anand Neelakantan’s passion in mythology has to his credit several works on mythology like, *Vanara: The Legend Of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara, Valmiki’s Women, Ajaya: Roll of the Dice and Ajaya : Rise of Kali*.

The narrative in the select text operates at two levels. The first enumerates the context of Ravana’s actions and the second brings to prominence, Bhadra an Asura, whose contribution towards Ravana and his Asura race which have been negated in the annals of mythology. The present study specifically focuses on the second agenda, giving visibility to the lesser-known character Bhadra. Thus Wolfgang’s dictum, “Here situation, self-positioning and positioning by others are as central in the negotiations of belonging. Particular emphasis is placed

on smaller narratives and on positioning within the discursive situation” becomes significant (Wolfgang, 2006).

Bhadra is an ordinary rustic, a farmer belonging to the Asura race. He leads a simple life with his wife and daughter. He followed the ways of his ancestors, blissful, in tending his agricultural lands. Politics was beyond his knowledge. Loyalty was a forte of the Asura race, and they trusted their king Mahabali, that he would protect them from the Deva attacks. Bhadra’s contentment with the peasantry routine could be well discerned from the following lines.

I lived like my father, who had lived like his father. My children would also live like me, growing up in the same street, bathing in the same pond. Falling in love with the dusky beauties of the villages. Procreating and dying quietly mourned by a few and not in the least missed by the world (Neelakantan, p 43)

On an unfortunate day, the village was attacked by the Devas. men butchered, women raped, children murdered and buildings ransacked. Bhadra had no escape from the attack of the Devas. His wife was raped and his daughter was murdered brutally. Having tried hard to save them, he could not for he was lying half dead. Noticing the corpses that were strewn all over the streets, he decides to avenge on the Devas. It is not only for his personal loss that he decides to avenge on the Devas, but for the emancipation of his Asura race. He meets Ravana, who had just returned from the king Mahabali’s tutorship. Ravana has his own apprehensions, since Bhadra’s features are typical of the low caste Asura. Ravana suspects him to be a spy. Bhadra prostrates at the feet of Ravana asking him to lead his people against the Devas. Bhadra is well aware that the mission of revenge against the Devas is possible only under the leadership of an astute king like Ravana. For the very same reason he is loyal to Ravana. When Ravana and his Council plan an attack on Kubera, Ravana’s half-brother, it is Bhadra who charts out the plan of action to Ravana, which Ravana declares to the council as his own. Thus, Bhadra has now become politically astute no less than Ravana himself. Ravana, still nurturing suspicion that he might be a spy, orders his arrest. Bhadra is shocked to learn this, but manages to escape while crossing the

Poorna river. Ravana's men after a thorough search, report that he is dead. But Ravana believes that he is alive for he is no ordinary man to die without achieving his feat.

Bhadra's escape lands him into the hands of Kubera's admiral. Vikrama, who subjects him to the worst of tortures. Bhadra could recognise Vikrama, the one who had slain his daughter. Enduring the tortures Bhadra decides that he should survive to avenge Vikrama and save the Asuras. He decides to help Ravana enter the gates of Trikota. Bhadra manages to escape from the cell, by killing one of the guards. During this time, he befriends a Deva woman of ill repute, Mala, and spends a few days with her. During one of the nights when Vikrama visits Mala, with the help of Mala, he subjects Vikrama to the same torture and burns him to death. Bhadra successfully carries out his intrigues in Kubera's kitchen. He poisons the soldiers and the guards and opens the gates of Trikota for Ravana to enter. He runs towards Ravana's camp to inform this only to be attacked by Ravana. Maricha and Prahasta, knowing well the incredible help of Bhadra inform the same to Ravana. Ravana would not have entered the strongly fortified fort of Trikota, but for Bhadra's Plans. Bhadra had been behind Ravana's growth into an emperor. Though Ravana realises this truth, he remains ungrateful and feels embarrassed being helped by a low caste Asura. At an instance when Bhadra was believed to have been drowned in the sea during the siege of the sea pirates, he was saved by Mala but Bhadra, could not stand the sight of Mala with the rebel Vidyuvjiva. Bhadra was a malcontent and he despised those things that were unattainable or beyond his reach. He was jealous of Vidyuvjiva and was finding ways of getting rid of him. Vidyuvjiva had offered to help Bhadra recuperate back to normalcy.

My limited intelligence refused to grasp the great man's vision. I felt he was a hypocrite like all the others, like me, like Ravana, like every human being I'd ever seen. Mine was a cynical view of the world. A far cry from Ramnath vision of a grand revival of Asura civilization or Vidya Jeeva's dream of an equitable social order where you could play God. The philosophy of the common man. Vidyuvjiva's words could be summarised in six words. What is in it for me? (Neelakantan, p183).

Bhadra's tragic experiences in his life, the discriminations that he has faced, both within and outside his own race had made him even more cynical and materialistic. The reasons for his survival were revenge, sex and food. Bhadra, has by now become Vidyuvjiva's confidant, and he took him along wherever he went. Bhadra followed Vidhuvjiva during one of his secret visits, only to find Vidhyuvjiva with Surpanakha, Ravana's sister. Bhadra, having become perverse, informs this to Ravana, knowing well the consequences of it. He is rest assured that he has retrieved Mala for himself.

Bhadra's loyalty for Ravana is relentless, that he is ready to perform anything for Ravana. Thus, he is the one chosen to get rid of Ravana's one-sided lover Vedavathi and his newborn baby. Bhadra knows very well that he is being used by the king's council. Not able to swerver from the orders of Maricha and the council, he takes up the evil deed. Bhadra's instantaneous lust for Vedavati kills her, when she tries to flee away from him. When Bhadra intends to kill Ravana's new born, he feels sorry for the baby. Here is the proof for Bhadra's innate goodness, for he is relieved only when the baby which has accidentally fallen into the swamp is saved by King Janak."

This was a lucky baby, as I hope she would carry that luck through her entire life. She was my master's daughter, a Princess of Lanka and Asura Princess, but born with the curse. A death warrant for a blasted race (Neelakantan, p 226).

No achievements, no conquests, no victory should have been possible for Ravana without Bhadra. He has devised strategies, fought battles and had been with Ravana in all his troubles and, tribulations. On the contrary, Ravana had never been grateful or even seem to acknowledge his services. Bhadra's murder of Vidyauvjiva, Surpanakha's husband at the behest of Ravana adds on to his crime list. Bhadra's role has been prominent in saving the Asura race, for he was the one who warned Ravana of Hanuman's attack on Lanka. When Mandodari was abducted by Sugriva and she lay nude and unconscious, it was Bhadra who found her out and covered her nudeness with his torn shawl. Ravana's acceptance of his wife even

after the mishap had elevated his esteem in the eyes of his subjects, but Bhadra sensed nothing extraordinary.

There was nothing noble about accepting one's wife even if she had been raped. And here there was doubt. If you were a man you stood by your wife (Neelakantan, p 394).

Bhadra's ideology shows him in the light of his goodness. In spite of his abject poverty, Bhadra upheld his pride as an Asura. When Meghnada was killed, along with his half-brother Athikaya, Ravana arranges for the last rites for both of his sons beside each other. Bhadra claims Athikaya's body. He wanted to perform the last rites for his foster son in his own place and he did not want Athikaya's rites to be performed by the ungrateful Ravana.

Everyone who has been a martyr will be remembered until the next meal. Great show, my king. Now more young men will come to die. Enticed by your pretty bones, two minutes of glory and a stone memorial by the street corner, which real dogs will piss on. My son has served your purpose. Now let me take him to his mother (Neelakantan, p 422).

Bhadra had remained loyal till the end. When Ravana lay half dead on the battlefield, Bhadra who was lying by wounded, could not contain his grief. He comforts Ravana, whom he has been looking upto as a saviour of the Asura race.

I would seek revenge. I will complete your work, Your Highness. Do not worry. Go in peace. I will do it for our race (Neelakandan, p 447).

Bhadra's hope for revival and resurrection of the Asura race, through the victory of the war against the Devas shatters, as all Asura heads are killed in the battle. Life for Bhadra has to move on, even after his master's death. He is one among Ravana's subjects, now under the kingship of Rama. Caste systems are introduced and now Bhadra belongs to the low caste Dhobi community. Bhadra's sagacity of wisdom, that he had gained through the hardships of survival well conceives of circumstances which make one a hero or a villain. To him Ravana was the real hero.

Ravana was a man who lived life on his own terms, doing what he thought was right and caring nothing for what was written by Holy men. A man who lived life fully and died a warrior's death (Neelakantan, p 494).

Summary and Conclusion

Anand Neelakantan's first-person narrative shuffling between that of Ravana and Bhadra has brought to the fore Bhadra's sacrifices and loyalty towards his Asura race. The exposition of his character deeply instill the fact that he has been denied his due in the larger epic framework. Bhadra's words of wisdom indicate the sense of practicality to the present-day materialistic pursuits.

“It is not the righteous and the straightforward like Rama or the proud and rebellious like Ravana who inherits the world, but the man who does the bidding of the fanatics, the Man who can kill, maim, fight, and do any animal thing in the name of religion and scriptures. For people like me, those insignificant, irrelevant and dumb nobodies, remembering this lesson is the basic tool of survival” (Neelakantan, p 494).

The study has thus presented revisioning as one of the narrative modes which gives visibility to the lesser known.

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