

Resurrecting the Silenced : A Subaltern Reading of *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*

Ms. Sreeja.G

Assistant Professor in English

Department of English

N.S.S.College Nemmara

ABSTRACT

Indian history has long been marked by the conflict between the Aryan and Dravidian races, with the Aryans often symbolizing the Western colonizers who imposed their dominance over Dravidian societies for centuries. This historical power dynamic resulted in the marginalization of subaltern identities in India, positioning them on the periphery while the Aryan colonizers maintained control at the center. In the post-colonial era, literature began to actively challenge and deconstruct these entrenched power structures, giving a renewed voice to the subaltern and redefining Aryan and Dravidian identities. Indian culture and literature are deeply intertwined with myths and legends, which serve as the foundational elements—or the ‘axis mundi’—of the culture. Contemporary Indian mythological fiction often adopts a revisionist approach to reclaim identities lost to cultural imperialism. Anand Neelakantan’s *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* reimagines the Ramayana by centering Ravana as the protagonist, framing the narrative from the perspective of the defeated—aptly termed by the author as “Ravanaya.” Ravana’s voice echoes the subaltern’s experience, representing those marginalized in the post-colonial context. This paper aims to examine *Asura* through the lens of Gayatri Spivak’s theory of the subaltern, exploring how Ravana and his followers embody the subaltern.

Key Words: Subaltern, *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, Gayathri Spivak, Orientalism, Edward Said

For thousands of years ,I have been vilified and my death is celebrated year after year in every corner of India .Why?Was it because I challenged the Gods for the sake of my daughter?Was it because I freed a race from the yoke of caste-based Deva rule? (Asura)

These are the words spoken by Ravana, the notorious antagonist of Indian mythology,

portrayed as the voice of the defeated in Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*. Although marked by failures, Ravana recounts his story—the story of the vanquished—which resonates with the subaltern voices of the post-colonial era. The novel unfolds the untold history of the Asuras, a race destined for defeat and subjugation by the Devas. It challenges the entrenched power structures of society, where the Devas are idolized as divine beings and the Asuras are demonized. Despite the word "deva" having no inherent connection to divinity, the ruling Aryans were revered as godlike, while the Dravidians, who opposed them, were vilified as evil or asuras. "The rituals, curse of the caste—none of these has the sanction of vedas nor are they divine proclamations or edicts" (ATV 35) The Aryans imposed a proper caste system on the Indian society with proper hierarchical patterns and slowly society was cleverly divided as Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras.

G.A. Ghanshyam in his 'The Voice of the Other' said,

Society has always been divided into hierarchical structure of power and powerlessness. Literature being a mirror to society has reflected this lopsided division of power between the 'centre' and 'the other'. In this play of dominance and subjugation, The centre has always suppressed 'the other' into silence. The marginalized voice; low and hardly audible strives continuously to make itself heard and recognized. (12)

In *Asura*, power dynamics exert influence over the subaltern on multiple levels. On one level, it manifests in the conflict between the Devas and Asuras, with the Asuras enduring continuous suppression and forced to reshape their identities. On another level, power operates within the Asura clan itself, as depicted through characters like Bhadra and Shambuka. Bhadra represents the common Asura—one who faces double oppression, first by his own people and then by the Aryans. Within Bhadra's narrative, Ravana stands as the power center, wielding authority over

lower-caste Asuras like Bhadra, highlighting the internal injustice within the Asura community. Bhadra embodies the subaltern, lacking the agency to voice his struggles. Gayatri Spivak, in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” emphasizes the importance of having an agency to express subaltern concerns. The novel also portrays Ram and Sita as subaltern figures; despite Rama’s Aryan heritage, he is occasionally treated as a subaltern by the Brahminical authority of his own people. These layered power structures serve as metaphors that reflect the post-colonial subaltern struggles. Through this retelling of the Ramayana, Anand Neelakantan amplifies the voice of the subaltern, and this analysis aims to explore the ways in which these power dynamics operate at various levels within society.

India's identity was once subjugated under British rule, and the experiences of the poor, women, and broader Indian society under colonial oppression parallel the plight of the Asuras—those compelled to remain subaltern under the rule of the Devas. *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* unfolds over 65 chapters, beginning with the death of Ravana and culminating in the possibility of a new beginning. Ravana, traditionally cast as the quintessential villain, is reimagined as a complex hero with human traits, breaking away from the conventional Asura stereotype. His world and that of his followers serve as a metaphor for contemporary society, depicting him more as a relatable human than an archetypal demon. Rama, the Aryan deity, is portrayed in a diminished and morally ambiguous light. A significant narrative voice is that of Bhadra, who embodies the lower strata of Asura society; his perspective serves as the authentic voice of the subaltern, providing a raw and honest account of the marginalized within the epic.

Ravana as Subaltern

Identity crisis is a significant theme in the subaltern reading of *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*. In the novel, Ravana's mixed heritage—as the son of a Brahmin father and an Asura mother—places him in a perpetual state of conflicted identity. The upper-caste Asuras struggle to accept his dual ancestry, resulting in his rejection and mistreatment by his own tribe, including his half-brother Kubera. Brahmins, on the other hand, deny him education, while the Asuras refuse him acceptance. When Ravana introduces himself to Mahabali, he is met with disdain: “It is unfortunate that the Asura tribe produced such useless hot heads as you” (*Asura*, p. 29). This dual marginalization—rejection by both the Asura and Brahmin communities—reflects the oppressive nature of the caste system, highlighting how individuals of mixed or marginalized

backgrounds often face compounded discrimination within society. In his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*, Nayar remarks:

While biological evidence for the superiority of one race over another has not emerged, social and political fields remain exploited within discourses that consistently, if subtly deploy race as difference” (222).

Subaltern Identity of common Asuras

Bhadra embodies the plight of the doubly oppressed common Asura who endures extreme suffering and marginalization. He once lived a tranquil life in his village, but the invasion by the Devas turned his world upside down. Bhadra witnessed horrific atrocities—his fellow men slaughtered, women subjected to gang rape, and children mercilessly killed. Bhadra's experience resonates with Edward Said's concept of 'the Other' in his theory of Orientalism, where Western culture often deems the Orient as uncivilized, uncultured, and inherently inferior. In a similar vein, Bhadra, representing the common man, initially places his hope in the new Asura king, Ravana, who once regarded him as a friend. However, upon gaining power, Ravana begins to mirror the same oppressive behaviors he once opposed, demonstrating that authority often breeds tyranny. Bhadra's subaltern status remains unaltered even under Ravana's rule; his lower caste and poverty render him voiceless and powerless, perpetually silenced by a system that favors the powerful and marginalizes the weak. Bhadra remarks:

We were sure that Mahadev Shiva would not allow evil to triumph. However, in the deepest corner of my mind, I knew we were lesser children of Gods, and even a compassionate and all powerful God like Shiva would look at the colour of our skin and flinch. Perhaps we had been born with the wrong skin colour.(345)

Asura Women as Subaltern

The plight of Asura women in the novel mirrors the conditions faced by Dalit women in contemporary society, as they endure multiple layers of oppression. They are marginalized by the ruling class, mistreated by the upper echelons of their own community, and further subjugated by the men of their own caste. These women face systemic discrimination on the basis of caste, race, and gender, leading to a persistent cycle of injustice at the hands of both

Devas and Asuras. During conflicts, Devas subjected them to brutal sexual violence, while within Asura society, women were often treated as mere possessions by their husbands and male counterparts. Even Mandodari, the wife of the powerful Ravana, is not spared; she endures similar subjugation as Bhadra's wife, including being gang-raped by Devas. The patriarchal structures in the society render women as victims of its power dynamics, reflecting a deeply entrenched gender bias. Despite Ravana's attempts to stand by Mandodari, societal attitudes remain harsh, with common Asuras mocking him and suggesting he abandon her, revealing a callous indifference to her trauma. Ravana's frustration is often misdirected towards Mandodari, and when she resists, he abuses his power by raping a maid. Similarly, Bhadra mistreats his own wife, demonstrating a pervasive disregard for women's dignity. Despite their awareness of the injustices they face, these women, including Mandodari, are resigned to their subordinate roles, accepting their marginalized status in a deeply patriarchal world.

Devas as Subaltern

The subaltern condition is not limited to the Asuras or lower classes; it permeates all layers of society, including the upper class. Even the revered figure of Rama is constrained by the rigid customs and traditions that govern his world. As a king, Rama is often rendered voiceless, subjugated by the Brahminical authorities and the unyielding codes of dharma. Despite knowing Sita's purity, Rama demands that she undergo the agni pareeksha, or fire trial, to prove her chastity, not once but twice—first for himself and then for his people. This portrayal of Rama highlights how he, too, embodies the subaltern identity, silenced by the societal pressures imposed by powerful priests and rigid interpretations of dharma. His compliance with these dictates is evident when he unhesitatingly kills Shambuka and later contemplates killing his own brother, Lakshmana, simply because he was told it was his duty. In this light, Rama becomes a mere instrument of authority, caught in the web of societal expectations and obligations.

Similarly, Sita's experience reflects the plight of women within a patriarchal framework, irrespective of her royal birth or status as queen. Despite her noble lineage, Sita endures the same silencing and suffering as any other woman in a male-dominated society. When asked to prove her innocence through the fire trial, Sita remains silent, and Rama does not defend her. Later, while pregnant, she is abandoned once more, and again she endures without protest. Sita's story symbolizes the subjugated women of a patriarchal system. Although she is not marginalized by

caste or race, she embodies the subaltern condition through her enforced silence, illustrating how patriarchy suppresses the voices of even the most powerful women.

Contemporary Indian mythological fiction seeks to redefine identities and challenge societal power structures, and Anand Neelakantan's novel "Asura: Tale of the Vanquished" exemplifies this revisionist approach to myth-making. Ram Sharma remarks: "These writers at periphery are trying to subvert, remap, redefine, re-identify, the socio, politico, economic, geographical, historical aspects of life which are deeply rooted in their consciousness with their past, present, and future, which are present in the perpetuity of time" (Ram Sharma 2). The narrative reimagines the Ramayana to resonate with post-colonial themes, exploring how power dynamics manifest on multiple levels. As a post-colonial text, the novel employs the concept of subalternity, depicting characters that symbolize either the powerful or the oppressed. The title itself signals that it is a story of the defeated and marginalized, echoing the subaltern voices of those relegated to the periphery.

Ravana, the novel's protagonist, recounts the struggles of the Asuras, detailing the injustices they faced not only from the Aryan Devas but also from their own Dravidian community. Through his reflections, Ravana reveals the intricate ways power operates along racial, economic, and social lines. Ravana says:

Wherever I looked I only saw oppression. Money, caste, rituals, traditions, beliefs, and superstitions all conspired together to crush the humble majority. Why could not there be a more just way of living? (ATV 19)

The Asuras endure a dual oppression, subjugated by the Devas and betrayed by their leaders, and without an avenue to voice their plight, they embody the subaltern condition. They are coerced into accepting their imposed inferiority, internalizing the societal discrimination as an unchangeable reality. Characters like Bhadra and Shambuka exemplify how the marginalized are treated by the centers of power, demonstrating that even Ravana, once in power, perpetuates the same systemic oppression against his own people.

The women in the novel, from queens like Sita and Mandodari to common Asura women like Bhadra's wife, illustrate the pervasive subjugation of women under patriarchy. Regardless of their social status, they are subjected to violence and silencing, reflecting the universal nature of patriarchal oppression. Each of these women, though situated differently, represents the subaltern condition through their forced silence and victimization.

Characters like Bhadra, Shiva, and Shambuka embody the lower strata of society, serving as symbols of the powerless "other" defined by Orientalist perspectives. They are depicted as uncultured and lacking in agency, marginalized and denied opportunities for self-determination. Shambuka's attempt to reclaim his identity through education leads to his silencing by the upper classes, reinforcing the systemic barriers that maintain social hierarchies. These common Asuras lack a voice in society, even within their own community, and epitomize the true subalterns whose concerns are consistently ignored.

Neelakantan reinterprets the Ramayana myth to offer new perspectives on characters traditionally seen as villains, challenging the binary of good versus evil that often aligns with racial and cultural identities. By portraying the Asuras as subaltern figures, Neelakantan creates new narratives that reflect their struggles. According to the author, those who seek to manipulate religious texts for personal gain view figures like Ravana as a threat, while they use figures like Rama to validate their own oppressive actions. Neelakantan explains that while both Rama and Ravana are significant figures, Rama adheres to societal norms and traditions, whereas Ravana defies them, leading to his portrayal as a demon in contrast to Rama's idealization. Neelakantan suggests that rather than deconstructing myths, there is a need to craft new ones that address contemporary realities, using the Asuras as a metaphor for subalternity and resistance against dominant power structures.

Works Cited

Ghanshyam, G. A., and Prasanta Chakraborty. *The Voice of the Other: Post Independence Indian English Fiction*. Jaipur: Yking books, 2013. Print.

Neelakantan, Anand. *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished, The Story of Ravana and His People*. Mumbai: Leadstart Publishing Pvt. Ltd, 2012. Print.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley, 2010. Print.

Spivak, Gayathri Chakravorthy, and Morris Rosalind C. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print.

Sharma, Rama. *Recent Indian English Literature*. Delhi: Mangalam, 2012. Print.