

Counterculture and Moral Panic in Anand Neelakantan's *Asura*:

Tale of the Vanquished

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Abstract

Anand Neelakantan is a renowned author of twenty-first century who has deconstructed mythology. In *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, he has shifted the narrative from deified Rama and demonic Ravana to Lord Rama and humane Ravana. Rama is a Deva who strictly adheres to the caste system and Ravana is an Asura who seeks to build a utopian kingdom. The cultural identity between the two races contradicts each other. They view each other as a threat to their tradition. Both the races have their own concept of righteousness and moral codes to justify their deeds. They are perceived as counterculture from each other's perception as they see other culture as unorthodox and outlandish. This paper aims to articulate the difference in cultural traditions followed by both the races which further catalyses moral panic between the races.

Keywords: culture, tradition, identity, codes, conflict.

Mythologies are progenies of multiple years of oral narration and progressively evolved into text which has been further deconstructed to captivate the twenty-first century readers. One of the conspicuous writers, Anand Neelakantan, has deconstructed myth about Rama and Ravana in his most acclaimed book, *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*. Apart from the outline of the well-known story of Ramayana, in which Ravana was defeated by Rama, there are uncountable overarching stories which are called Metanarratives. In Anand Neelakantan's *Asura*, he has deconstructed the major event, which is believed to be the major reason behind Rama waging a war on Ravana, by making Sita the daughter of Ravana. As stated by Michael Sternfeld in *The Ramayana: A New Retelling of Valmiki's Ancient Epic*, "It (mythology) spreads, ceaselessly various,/ One and many at once" (Introduction 7). Even though, there are many branches of interconnected stories, they revolves around a single concept called *dharma*.

There is no authenticated text for the readers to rely on the depiction of the stories in the *Ramayana*, as it has undergone years of oral tradition and, the different versions of it have been altered and modified according to the culture in which it is adapted. For instance, Valmiki's *Ramayana* which dates back to first century BC has variations from Kamban's *Ramavataram* which was written in twelfth century BC. Valmiki's and Kamban's texts depict Rama as a divine being, reincarnation of Lord Vishnu, unlike Anand Neelakantan who has demythologised both Rama and Ravana, from their divine or evil positions, as mortals fighting for earthly powers.

Anand Neelakantan has imbued his perception of the story with the issue of caste system. The characters in the novel classify themselves as Devas (pale), Asuras (deep black), Nagas, Kinnaras (pure white), Yakshas (pitch black), Gandharvas (yellow) and Vanaras

based on their varying skin colours. Among these the Vanaras are the mixed race and they are shunned by the Devas and treated as lepers. Even though, the Devas are believed to be the strict followers of *dharma*, they implement rigid caste system to be followed after conquering Ravana's utopian dreamland, Lanka. Rama categorises people into four castes- Brahmins who are assigned to spread knowledge and the rest should oblige them, Kshatriyas to administrate the land, Vaishyas to trade, Shudras to serve Brahmins and Kshatriyas, and the rest of the people who are left without a job assignation as untouchables. They perceive education to the Asuras as evil and restrict the limits of education to three castes- Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, and they can receive their education based only on their profession. The Devas announces it as Deva *dharma* and believe that defeating Ravana is a form of restoring the social order and *dharma*.

In contrast to Rama's Deva *dharma*, the Asuras followed their form of dharma. Born to a Brahmin father and a Asura mother, Ravana and his siblings were branded as half- castes and never had an education because of their skin colour. Ravana's destitute poverty and humiliation in his childhood at the hands of his half-brother, Kubera, who is "the lord of all wealth, the richest man on earth" (*Asura* 15), has driven Ravana to have the ever-growing ambition of conquering the world. Even though, they have striven during their childhood, they have never deviated from their dharma as stated by Ravana,

Growing up was difficult, a continuous numbing ache . . . and slowly spread its black fingers over one's soul. Yet, we never strayed from the path of righteousness. Our sense of justice differed from what the learned and privileged considered right. We decided our righteousness and we defined our rights in our own way. . . . Our dharma was based on simple things: a man

should be true to his word; One should not cheat even if one was sure to fail. One should honour women and not insult anyone. If there was injustice, we had to fight it at all costs. . . . (17)

The difference in social norms that existed between the Asuras and the Devas can be seen in their marriage rituals. Ravana marries Mandodari on behalf of his mother's wish. They followed no tradition other than consulting an astrologer to fix an auspicious day for the marriage. They invited huge number of family members and offered them food and wine. In contrast to the Asuras, the Devas conduct contest in getting their daughters married. It is known as *swayamvara* where the bride chooses a man, who wins the contest, as her bridegroom. It is one of the customs of the Devas, where the father of the bride invites princes from nearby kingdoms and men of marriageable age to participate in the *swayamvara*. Ram marries Sita in *swayamvara* after he won the contest by lifting and stringing *Triambaka*, the bow once used by Shiva. The custom of the Devas seems unusual to the Asuras. This is evident when Ravana on the occasion of Sita's *swayamvara* states,

I noticed that the princes and kings assessed her (Sita) like they had come to a cattle market and had found their prize cow. What sort of custom was this? An innocent girl in her prime exposed to the lustful eyes of old men who could win her in a contest? . . . Any ruffian who had enough strength to lift that stupid bow could marry her. . . . This was uncivilized. (295-96)

Soorpanakha, a vicious and a secular woman, was married to Vidyutjihva, Ravana's enemy. She lost her husband in a battle and later she was exiled to the forest, chasing after men. After being widowed, she followed her own desire and tried to seduce Lakshmana. In

the Asura tradition, a widowed woman can remarry. “If the husband died, she mourns for a decent period and then find another life partner and move on with her life” (217). Their culture allowed women to lead a life of their own. On the contrary, when Sita was in Ravana’s Lanka, she saw the Asura women as women without meekness who dance with men and drink wine. In a Deva culture, the widows are not allowed to roam in the daylight. They should not move around without veil. They are forbidden from witnessing their husband’s funeral. They are forced to live a miserable life “. . . with our (their) heads shaven [. . .] purposefully made unattractive [. . .] an unpaid servant [. . .] a living corpse [. . .]” (217). This custom of Deva women seemed strange and unusual to the Asuras.

The Asuras and the Devas had their own moral codes for respecting women. One of the incidents which humanises Ravana, is his acceptance of his wife Mandodari after being raped by Angada, a Vanara. On the other hand, “the Devas believe in the purity of fire and life” (459). After conquering Lanka, even though, solely for the sake of his wife Sita, Rama suspects Sita’s purity. He abides by Brahmin priests who decide to test her purity through *Agni Pariksha* as they believed that lustful eyes of Ravana roamed over her body. Due to the downpour, the pyre raised for her with sandalwood has went out and she was declared impure. This is contradictory to the *swyamvara* when Sita was exposed to the crowd and it is accepted as a Deva custom. After her years of exile in the forest, with her twin sons, in the hermitage of poet Valmiki, her purity is at stake, again by the Brahmin priests, when Rama decides to live with her. In spite of running into the pyre to prove her purity, she runs into the river Sarayu and vanishes. Rama is more concerned in following self-centred orthodoxy.

Love for power and land is another prominent theme that holds a central position in the novel. The Asuras lived in the south, the Devas in the north, the Nagas in the eastern hills,

Gandharvas lived as wandering tribes and, the Kinnaras and the Yakshas soon lost their kingdom. Each community fought with one another and conquered each other's land to enlarge their kingdom. In the view of the Asuras, the Devas are barbarians in conquering the land as they loot the city, murder women and children. To the Asuras, the Devas are uncivilised people who treat women as a commodity. The Devas, in turn, named people who question their faith in God and their rituals as *Rakshasas*. According to *Asura dharma*, one should not attack an unsuspecting enemy. At once, when Ravana had a chance to kill Lakshmana from behind, when the three were in the forest, he denies to attack him as he considered it as against *dharma*. On the contrary, during the final war between Rama and Ravana, the Devas killed Kumbhakarna, Ravana's brother, Meghanada, Ravana's son and finally Ravana himself from behind.

Culture is a complex term to define. Raymond Williams defines culture as the practices of men and women, that collectively forms culture. In the nineteenth century, the term is equated with the term civilize. To Matthew Arnold, culture is acquiring moral perfection. As Chris Barker defines culture in *SAGE Dictionary*,

Cultures are syncretic and hybridised products of interactions across space and are increasingly thought of as carving roots rather than possessing roots. They are constellations of temporary coherence, or knots in the field of social space that are the product of relations and interconnections from the local to the global (45).

A culture cannot be static as it evolves through time to form a new culture. The culture followed by the Devas and the Asuras can be distinguishable with their *dharma* at the

crossroads. They see each other's culture as a threat that can disturb the organised social pattern. The counterculture between them makes it tougher to justify a particular community's moral codes. The Devas defeating the Asuras is a response to moral panic which involves punishing the Asuras as they thought their culture is deviant. The way Ravana reacts to save Sita from the hands of Rama is his way of reacting to a deviant culture. Thus, where there is a counterculture there will be moral panic, where each culture struggles to accept each other's ideology.

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