

Demonizing the 'Other': Identity, Power, Moral ambiguity in Anand Neelakantan's “Ajaya: Roll of the Dice” and “Asura: Tale of the Vanquished.”

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Abstract

This research is on Indian theology, Mahabharata and Ramayana, my research is on the two books of Anand Neelakantan and have tried to analyse his point of view. Born in a traditional Indian family, my narrative of these epics was fixed but as a literature undergraduate this has helped me to understand a total different point of view.

Chapter -1

Introduction

Traditionally, Indian mythological epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have been organized around strict moral dichotomies that divide gods from demons, heroes from villains, and the righteous self from the condemned “Other.” By elevating the viewpoints of the winners while stifling or denouncing the losers, these stories, which have been passed down through centuries of religious, cultural, and literary retellings have influenced societal moral conscience. By revisiting epic narratives from marginalized perspectives, modern Indian English fiction has started to question these inherited mythic frameworks in recent years, revealing the story from the perspective of morally ambiguous characters whose names have been consistently utilized as negative examples over the years.

“Ajaya: Roll of the Dice” and “Asura: Tale of the Vanquished” by Anand Neelakantan are prime examples of this revisionist tendency. By presenting the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, respectively, through the voices of people often depicted as opposing forces: the Asuras and the Kauravas, both books purposefully subvert the conventional narrative lens. Neelakantan opposes the moral exclusivity that dominates traditional versions of the epics and undermines the traditional heroic rhetoric by emphasizing these other viewpoints.

The process of “demonizing the Other,” which constructs and legitimizes identity and authority, is essential to these retellings. The Asuras and Kauravas are shown as complicated, complex social groupings addressing issues of caste hierarchy, political authority, inequality, and historical injustice rather than simply representations of evil. A significant feeling of moral ambiguity is introduced into the epic framework by Neelakantan's stories, which show how moral judgments are frequently influenced by power structures rather than ethical clarity.

By challenging prevailing mythical tales, this research aims to investigate how Asura and Kauravas alter identity, power, and moral ambiguity. The study attempts to show how Neelakantan's works turn

mythology into a forum for modern ideological discussion through a theme analysis of demonization, othering, and ethical ambiguity.

It flips the coin by examining how the “Other side” was nothing but a morally grey characters choosing a wrong path to prove their point.

Readers are forced to reconsider the moral precepts that underpin epic morality as a result of this perspective shift. Neelakantan aims to reveal the conditions that influence the Asuras' and Kauravas' decisions rather than to glorify them by emphasizing the so-called opponents. Their acts, which are frequently denounced as intrinsically wicked, are reframed as reactions to social injustice, ideological marginalization, and systemic exclusion. In these stories, the "Other" appears as a morally aware agent negotiating a society governed by unequal access to legitimacy and power rather than as a force of chaos. By doing this, the novels expose righteousness as a position based on narrative supremacy, challenging the notion that it is absolute.

Moreover, this thematic inversion turns mythology into a critical arena where moral inquiry takes the place of ethical certainty. The Asuras and Kauravas are portrayed by Neelakantan as morally dubious individuals who use faulty strategies to support their assertions, which challenges conventional ideas of heroism and villainy. Their failures are presented as the sad results of resistance inside inflexible ideological systems rather than as evidence of innate evil. This change invites readers to interact with mythology as a dynamic discourse that can challenge power, justice, and historical memory rather than as a source of predetermined moral messages. By using this perspective, Asura and Ajaya confirm the value of epic stories in addressing current discussions about identity, power, and the morality of othering.

Background Analysis of Author

The work of well-known modern Indian English novelist Anand Neelakantan fits under the expanding genre of revisionist mythic fiction. Neelakantan sets himself apart by continuously elevating marginalized and antagonistic viewpoints within traditional epic narratives at a time when Indian mythology is increasingly being revisited through alternative ideological lenses, such as the feminist lens of Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee in her "Palace of Illusion" and "Forest of Enchantments". His writing demonstrates a deliberate interest in issues of narrative domination, historical authority, and power.

His fictional retellings of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, in which myth serves as a contested cultural text subject to reinterpretation rather than a sacred or static inheritance, are informed by this analytical tendency. His writing contributes to a larger postmodern movement that challenges the presumptive moral certainties ingrained in conventional storytelling and destabilizes great narratives.

With “Asura: Tale of the Vanquished” (2012), a retelling of the Ramayana from the viewpoints of Ravana and a regular Asura that radically questions the epic's binary moral structure, Neelakantan gained notoriety. “Ajaya: Roll of the Dice” (2013) and its follow-up “Ajaya: Rise of Kali” (2015), which reimagine the Mahabharata from the perspective of the Kauravas, further deepen this revisionist approach. By revealing the ideological processes by which winners mold historical and mythological narratives, these works challenge conventional ideas of valor, dharma, and justice.

In a similar vein, he revisits the character of Tipu Sultan in his historical novel “Tiger of Mysore” (2019), carrying on his discussion of disputed historical identities and narratives influenced by colonial discourse. Neelakantan broadens his focus on marginalization in “Valmiki's Women” (2022) and “Vanara” (2023) by emphasizing female voices and people living in forests within the Ramayana tradition. His ongoing

interest in examining which voices are given priority in epic storytelling and how selective representation shapes cultural memory is evident in these pieces.

When taken as a whole, Neelakantan's corpus of work demonstrates a recurring thematic preoccupation with authority, moral ambiguity, and othering. His writing challenges prevailing narratives and undermines oversimplified notions of virtue and evil, which is consistent with postcolonial and subaltern literary viewpoints. Neelakantan reframes mythology as a vital arena for analyzing identity, authority, and ideological control within Indian cultural heritage by reinterpreting historical and mythological texts from different angles.

Background Analysis of the Books

In India's literary and cultural heritage, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata play a pivotal role as foundational stories that have influenced moral, social, and political ideas for ages in addition to serving as religious epics. These epics, which are traditionally credited to Valmiki and Vyasa, respectively, have been passed down through oral, written, and performative traditions, producing a variety of interpretations that represent changing ideological frameworks. Canonical retellings of the epics, despite their complex narratives, are mostly organized around inflexible moral dichotomies that marginalize opposing viewpoints while elevating heavenly authority and heroic ancestry.

Through the character of Lord Rama, who is frequently depicted as the epitome of moral perfection, the Ramayana tells a story of ideal monarchy, dharma, and divine justice. Characters like Ravana and the Asuras are constantly portrayed in this epic framework as hostile "Others," signifying chaos, transgression, and moral decay. This demonization upholds societal hierarchies pertaining to caste, power, and cultural dominance while legitimizing the supernatural hero's authority. A moral discourse that reduces complicated political and ethical dilemmas to binary oppositions of good and evil has been solidified throughout time by popular renditions of the Ramayana.

Even though the Mahabharata is frequently acknowledged for its ethical complexity, the Pandavas are finally given preference as legitimate heirs and moral winners. Traditionally, the Kauravas have been portrayed as symbols of moral failure and injustice. Even while the epic itself has several ambiguous passages, subsequent readings have a tendency to support a one-sided moral judgment that only associates dharma with the Pandavas. Alternative understandings of justice, authority, and social order are marginalized by this narrative alignment, particularly when it comes to caste exclusion, political legitimacy, and the morality of war.

They help create cultural standards that define legitimacy and deviance by portraying supernatural involvement as a moral justification. In these narratives, the process of "othering" is essential to upholding hierarchical hierarchies, where the marginalized or defeated are largely remembered through the prism of moral failure.

Asura: Tale of the Vanquished and Ajaya: Roll of the Dice by Anand Neelakantan appear as critical reinterpretations within this literary and ideological framework. These books challenge the narrative authority of the epics themselves by retelling the Ramayana and the Mahabharata from the viewpoints of the vanquished and demonized. Neelakantan's writings reveal the ways in which myth creates identity and authority, turning epic literature from a source of unquestionable moral instruction into a forum for ethical discussion.

Chapter -2

Methodology

A qualitative, interpretive research methodology based on in-depth textual analysis is used in this study. Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* and *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* serve as the main texts for this dissertation. They are examined in light of the canonical stories found in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Finding and analyzing the thematic construction of identity, power, moral ambiguity, and the process of "othering" within these revisionist retellings is the main goal of the study.

Neelakantan's stories are contrasted with conventional epic representations using a comparative literary technique, emphasizing changes in perspective, narrative voice, and moral alignment. This contrast makes it possible to examine how popular mythological dichotomies, such as good against evil and hero vs villain, are upended and rearranged in modern reinterpretations.

The study draws on insights from myth critique and narrative theory as well as postcolonial theory, namely ideas of othering and subaltern representation. These theoretical frameworks direct the examination of how alternative voices subvert hegemonic narratives and how power relations function within mythic storytelling. To put the conversation in context and bolster the interpretive analysis, secondary sources such as academic papers, critical essays, book reviews, and theoretical books are consulted.

The methodology does not involve religious interpretation or historical validation; instead, it is restricted to textual and theme analysis. This targeted strategy guarantees that the research stays within the purview of literary criticism and is appropriate for a succinct dissertation with a central thesis.

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Textual Analysis of *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*

With the radical retelling of the Ramayana, Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) is a notable entry in modern Indian English writing. The novel questions the moral ambiguity and ideological hierarchies seen in canonical renditions of the epic by telling the story from the viewpoints of Ravana and Bhadra, a common Asura. Instead of just reversing the conventional hero-villain dichotomy, Neelakantan's story reveals the ways in which myth creates identity, justifies authority, and demonizes the "Other." *Asura* turns mythology into a forum for ideological debate by focusing on themes of marginalization, power politics, and moral ambiguity.

1. Rewriting the Epic: Subversion and Narrative Perspective :

Asura's intentional change in narrative voice is among its most notable aspects. In order to highlight subaltern viewpoints that have traditionally been suppressed in prevailing epic traditions, the book uses a dual narration, Ravana's autobiographical account and Bhadra's first-person testimony. This narrative technique is consistent with what Linda Hutcheon refers to as "historiographic metafiction," which is the rewriting of established narratives in order to challenge the veracity of historical reality. Neelakantan undermines the presumed moral superiority of the winners by letting the "vanquished" speak.

Ravana is depicted in the classic Ramayana as the epitome of adharma, arrogant, lusty, and unredeemably evil. In contrast, *Asura* portrays Ravana as a visionary leader who was molded by institutional oppression.

He says,

"History is written by the victors. They decide who is god and who is demon."

The creation of moral categories through power rather than ethical objectivity is the novel's main ideological issue, which is summed up in this sentence. By implying that moral judgment is a political act, Ravana's voice questions the epistemic authority of supernatural narratives.

This criticism is made much more forceful by Bhadra's narration. Bhadra is a common Asura who symbolizes the collective pain of a disenfranchised group. His experiences show how the helpless endure anguish as a result of great wars that are hailed as virtuous. This viewpoint is quite similar to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's idea of the subaltern, especially her query, "Can the subaltern speak?"

2. Demonisation and the Construction of the “Other” :

The concept of demonization, the ideological process by which one group identifies itself as righteous by portraying another as monstrous, is central to Asura. Asuras are described in Brahminical discourse as anti-gods who are naturally chaotic and immoral. By depicting Asuras as technologically sophisticated, socially progressive, and culturally rich, Neelakantan undermines this essentialism.

The Aryan-Deva worldview is specifically criticized by Ravana:

"They called us demons because it was easier than understanding us."

The idea that dominating cultures create oversimplified, negative perceptions of the Other in order to justify dominance is emphasized in this statement, which highlights Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. Said's paradigm first deals with colonial discourse, but its application to mythological hierarchies is especially insightful in this context. Asuras are portrayed by the Devas in a way that is similar to colonial myths that justify conquering by portraying native cultures as barbarous.

The Asura values of equality and merit stand in stark contrast to the Devas' reliance on ritual purity, caste system, and divine entitlement. Ravana's Lanka is portrayed as a society based more on labor and skill than on birth. This reversal exposes how moral principles frequently serve as instruments of exclusion, challenging the intellectual underpinnings of caste-based dharma. In line with Louis Althusser's theory that ideology is a system that reproduces power relations by portraying them as natural and divinely decreed, Asura therefore reveals mythology as an ideological machinery.

3. Power, Politics, and Divine Authority :

Asura emphasizes the political reasons behind divine intervention, in contrast to conventional retellings that present the Ramayana as a cosmic conflict between good and evil. According to Neelakantan, Lord Rama, who is venerated as Maryada Purushottam, is shown to be cold, calculating, and emotionally aloof. His divinity serves more as an ideological defense of violence than as a moral idealism.

When Ravana notes that gods "never fought their own wars; they sent others to die for their principles," he casts doubt on this divine authority. This criticism demystifies supernatural authority and is consistent with Michel Foucault's idea that power is institutional and ubiquitous rather than transcendent. According to this theory, Rama's righteousness is created by narrative control and divine approval rather than being innate.

Thus, rather than being a moral crusade, the war between Rama and Ravana is reinterpreted as a conflict between two political systems. Ravana is a menace that needs to be destroyed because he defies Deva's supremacy, not because he is wicked, but rather because he opposes ideological control. In this way, Asura links Ravana with anti-hegemonic characters in postcolonial discourse by turning the epic war into a story of resistance.

4. The Rejection of Binary Ethics and Moral Ambiguity :

Asura's persistent focus on moral ambiguity is among its most important accomplishments. Instead than depicting Ravana as a perfect hero, Neelakantan shows him as incredibly flawed, proud, impetuous, and frequently cruel. But rather than being demonized, these shortcomings are contextualized. The binary ethics that predominate in legendary narratives are challenged by Ravana's moral complexity.

Sita's kidnapping, which is commonly seen as Ravana's worst moral failing, is handled subtly. Even if the deed is unjustified, Ravana's political disobedience and conceit are used to justify it rather than his inherent evil. Martha Nussbaum's ethical criticism, which contends that literature should foster moral imagination rather than impose rigid moral conclusions, is reflected in this treatment.

This moral ambiguity is further supported by Bhadra's story.

"We were told they were gods, but they bled like us,"

he says, expressing his ongoing uncertainty over the moral reasoning behind war. This remark highlights the common humanity of both sides and deprives god of its moral infallibility. Thus, the book is consistent with postmodern ethics, which favor contextual awareness above universal moral truths.

5. Counter-Narrative and History :

Asura presents itself as a counter-narrative to the Ramayana's hegemonic memory. Ravana tries to regain historical agency through his narration. He states,

"Let my story be told, even if it is forgotten again,"

recognizing the strength and frailty of narrative resistance. This focus on memory is consistent with Homi Bhabha's idea of "counter-narratives of the nation," which highlight marginalized experiences in order to challenge prevailing historical portrayals. Neelakantan's book serves as a literary intervention that challenges cultural memory and urges readers to reevaluate morality.

Authorship and authority are other issues that the book discusses. Who is entitled to narrate history? Whose depiction is considered sacred? Asura reveals the politics of canon construction and the manufactured character of myth by reworking a hallowed tale. The novel is solidly positioned within current literary discourse thanks to this metafictional knowledge.

A potent example of revisionist mythological fiction that challenges the ideological underpinnings of epic storytelling is *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*. The work questions the authority of traditional interpretations of the Ramayana by subverting narrative viewpoint, criticizing demonization, and emphasizing moral ambiguity. Neelakantan reveals mythology as a location of power where identity is created through exclusion and dominance, drawing on postcolonial, subaltern, and story theories.

Asura challenges readers to consider the ethics of storytelling itself rather than providing a straightforward reversal of good and evil. The book reclaims mythology as a forum for criticism, compassion, and intellectual discussion by giving voice to the defeated. In doing so, it forces a reconsideration of how cultural narratives influence moral consciousness in addition to reimagining Ravana and the Asuras. Because of this, *Asura* is an essential text for comprehending how myth, identity, and power are addressed in Indian English literature today.

Chapter -4

Textual Analysis of Ajaya: Roll of the Dice

Ajaya: Roll of the Dice (2013) by Anand Neelakantan is a radical retelling of the Mahabharata that upends one of the most ingrained moral myths in Indian culture. The tale traditionally portrays the Kauravas as morally reprehensible foes who are doomed to destruction while elevating the Pandavas as representatives of righteousness. By recounting the epic from the viewpoint of the Kauravas, especially Duryodhana, as well as other marginalized characters like Karna and Eklavya, Neelakantan questions this moral order. *Ajaya* explores the politics of power, the processes of othering, and the moral uncertainty that underlies epic ideas of justice and righteousness through this story inversion.

1. Counter-History and Narrative Perspective :

Neelakantan creates what Homi Bhabha refers to as a "counter-narrative" by emphasizing the Kauravas, which challenges the legitimacy of prevailing historical and mythological narratives. The novel presents the Mahabharata as a politically driven story that has been created by the winners rather than as an objective moral source.

As a reformer leader dedicated to social justice and opposition to Brahminical domination, Duryodhana emerges. When he notes that

"dharma was never about justice; it was about control,"

he openly questions the conceptual underpinnings of caste. This quote captures the main point of the book, which is that moral standards in epic traditions frequently serve as tools of authority rather than as universal principles of ethics. Neelakantan ties his story with Louis Althusser's notion of ideology as a system that justifies current power relations by portraying them as natural and holy by redefining dharma as a socially created ideology.

2. Caste, Power, and Social Exclusion :

Ajaya's ethical critique centers on caste prejudice. Neelakantan highlights the brutal effects of caste hierarchies, in contrast to conventional narratives that normalize them as divinely mandated.

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The Pandavas are portrayed as the benefactors of a system that values birth over merit, especially Arjuna and Yudhishtira. It is demonstrated that their caste status and moral power are inextricably linked.

The narrative frequently emphasizes how birth limits one's access to honor, weaponry, and knowledge. In Drona's ashram, where caste establishes value, this structural inequity is made clear. Duryodhana is portrayed as a disruptive character who jeopardizes the epic world's ideological equilibrium because of his antagonism to this system. His generosity for Karna and Eklavya is a political act intended to end caste-based discrimination as well as a sign of personal commitment.

In this context, Michel Foucault's view of power as institutional and dispersed rather than centralized is especially pertinent. Instead of relying solely on physical force, power in Ajaya is exercised through religious authority, ritual purity, and narrative legitimacy. While identical deeds by the Kauravas are denounced as immoral, the Brahmin-warrior alliance guarantees that the Pandavas' actions are seen as good.

3. The Failure of Binary Ethics and Moral Ambiguity :

Duryodhana is presented as conceited and imperfect, but he is fervently devoted to justice as he perceives it, according to Ajaya's insistence on ethical complexity. On the other hand, the Pandavas are depicted using violence, deceit, and manipulation but maintaining their moral integrity thanks to heavenly approval. This moral uncertainty takes center stage in the injustice dice game. Neelakantan presents it as a political tactic within an existing unfair system rather than portraying it as an act of pure evil. In my opinion, Neelakantan's perspective on the dice game was insufficient as he defended Draupadi's disrobement.

"The game was condemned not because it was unfair, but because I won,"

Duryodhana bitterly muses. The narrative implies that the hypocrisy of epic morality is exposed by the Pandava elders' and venerated figures' silence during the incident.

"No one stood up for her because dharma had already decided whose honor mattered," as Neelakantan astutely notes. This sentence reveals the selective morality that underpins epic justice, in which moral judgments are based on results. Nussbaum's contention that literature should foster moral imagination rather than impose strict moral standards is consistent with this ethical instability.

4. Narrative Legitimacy and Divine Authority

The moral cosmos of the book is further complicated by Krishna's presence in Ajaya. Krishna, who is often seen as a celestial leader and the personification of cosmic knowledge, is shown here as a cunning manipulator who puts results ahead of morality. He frequently uses deceit to guide the Pandavas, which he justifies by citing divine necessity.

One of the most subversive aspects of the book is Duryodhana's doubts about Krishna's moral authority. He observes that "when gods choose sides, justice dies", raising the question of how dishonesty becomes dharma when approved by divinity. In line with Jean François Lyotard's postmodern skepticism toward big narratives and ultimate truths, this critique demystifies divine power.

Ajaya reinterprets divine intervention as an extension of ideological power by depicting Krishna as politically astute rather than ethically perfect. Thus, the work asks readers to reevaluate the moral implications of divine justification and questions the purity of epic morality.

5. Karna and Eklavya : Tragic Resistance, Exclusion, and Merit

In Ajaya, Karna and Eklavya play a significant symbolic role, representing the violent results of narrative marginalization and caste-based exclusion. Neelakantan turns both characters into tragic emblems of repressed merit by portraying them as victims of an epic system that prioritizes ancestry over aptitude.

Karna's humiliation is presented as a systemic wrong rather than as a singular incidence. Because of his alleged low birth, Karna is frequently denied attention despite his unmatched talent. He expresses his agony by saying,

"My crime was not ambition, but being born without a name"

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This statement emphasizes how ancestry, rather than personal value, shapes identity in the epic world. Karna's devotion to Duryodhana turns into a moral protest against a system that ignores him.

The story of Eklavya is even more overtly political. His forced self-mutilation at Drona's orders is presented as a moral obligation masquerading as institutional cruelty.

"They asked for my thumb, but what they took was my future,"

Eklavya muses. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subaltern silencing—in which marginalized people are denied agency under the pretense of moral and cultural authority—is best illustrated by this episode. When combined, Karna and Eklavya serve as moral critiques of the epic order. Their suffering highlights the absurdity of a system that upholds injustice while claiming moral superiority. Neelakantan utilizes their stories to expose caste as a key mechanism of othering and to undermine the Mahabharata's notion of meritocracy.

6. Dialogism, Language, and Structure

In terms of style, Ajaya uses straightforward, approachable writing that stands in stark contrast to the formal language of conventional epic retellings. The novel's ideological commitment to democratizing myth is strengthened by this linguistic decision. In line with Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of dialogism, where several voices coexist without a single authoritative truth, the narrative voice prioritizes experience over supernatural revelation.

No character has total moral authority because of the polyphonic structure. Even Duryodhana's viewpoint is open to criticism, which keeps the story from merely substituting one prevailing philosophy for another. The novel's thematic focus on moral ambiguity and disputed truth is strengthened by this rejection of narrative closure.

Ajaya: Roll of the Dice is a potent example of mythical fiction that challenges the Mahabharata's intellectual underpinnings. The work questions the moral absolutism of epic tradition by its reconfiguration of narrative perspective, critique of caste and power, and insistence on ethical ambiguity. Neelakantan reveals mythology as a politically politicized discourse rather than a storehouse of eternal moral truths by drawing on postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, and narrative criticism.

Ajaya turns the epic as a place of struggle against narrative domination by emphasizing characters like Duryodhana, Karna, and Eklavya. By showing how the demonization of the "Other" is crucial to the formation of cultural identity, the book forces readers to reevaluate the concepts of justice, bravery, and moral authority. By doing this, Ajaya redefines the ethical potential of myth in modern Indian English literature in addition to reimagining the Mahabharata.

Chapter -5

Comparative Literature Review

Asura: Tale of the Vanquished and Ajaya: Roll of the Dice by Anand Neelakantan are notable for their revisionist treatment of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Both works are part of an expanding collection of mythological retellings that aim to challenge established narratives by highlighting underrepresented viewpoints and challenging moral precepts. The demolition of binary oppositions such as hero/villain, good/evil, and divine/demonic through an investigation of identity, power, and moral ambiguity is a shared ideological objective across these novels, despite the fact that each concentrates on a distinct epic tradition.

Revisionist mythology is frequently placed within postcolonial and subaltern literary frameworks in scholarly discussions. By revealing the ideological mechanisms by which myth legitimizes power, these books subvert the authority of prevailing narratives, drawing on Bhabha's concept of counter-histories.

1. Rewriting the Epic: Narrative Authority and Perspective :

Asura and Ajaya's narrative technique of perspective reversal is a crucial area of comparison. While Ajaya reconstructs the Mahabharata from the perspective of the Kauravas, particularly Duryodhana, Asura recounts the Ramayana via the voices of Ravana and Bhadra, an average Asura.

The moral hierarchy of the epics is undermined by this change in narrative authority, according to critics. Since both books alter conventional narratives to challenge the notion of a single, authoritative truth, Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction is helpful in this situation. Asura and Ajaya emphasize the politics of storytelling itself rather than providing a different, "correct" version of events, implying that moral judgment and narrative control are inextricably linked.

2. The "Other" is demonized:

In both texts, demonization is a major theme. In order to justify their defeat and erasure from cultural memory, Neelakantan reveals how these groups are routinely demonized.

A helpful essential framework for comprehending this process is provided by Edward Said's concept of othering. The epics depict Asuras and Kauravas as morally reprehensible in order to uphold divine and heroic dominance, just as colonial rhetoric frames the colonized person as inferior to justify domination. Nonetheless, there is a minor difference between the two books' approaches to demonization. In contrast to the ceremonial and hierarchical Deva society, Asura depicts the Asuras as technologically sophisticated and socially egalitarian, emphasizing civilizational conflict more overtly. Ajaya, on the other hand, emphasizes social exclusion and caste discrimination, showing how moral legitimacy is shaped by

inequalities based on birth. When taken as a whole, the books offer a thorough analysis of mythological power systems

3. Ideology, Dharma, and Power :

The way that dharma and divine authority are treated is another important area of contrast. Dharma is portrayed in both Asura and Ajaya as an intellectual construct controlled by elites rather than as an unchanging moral precept.

This criticism is in line with Louis Althusser's theory that ideology is a system that normalizes power dynamics. While Krishna's calculated interventions in Ajaya guarantee that Pandava activities are seen as ethically acceptable, divine authority serves in Asura to justify the conquering of Lanka. Thus, Neelakantan reveals how dharma functions as an intellectual instrument that conceals social injustice and political aspirations. Ajaya emphasizes institutional power, including caste, law, and ritual, whereas Asura emphasizes opposition to divine supremacy. Because of this difference, the two books are able to complement one another thematically by providing unique but related criticisms of epic morality.

4. Ethical Complexity and Moral Ambiguity :

Both books stress on ethical ambiguity rather than oversimplified moral dichotomies. Instead of idealizing Ravana or Duryodhana, Neelakantan portrays them as imperfect, frequently conceited individuals whose opposition to dominant systems is morally challenging.

In a similar vein, historically venerated characters like Rama, Krishna, and the Pandavas are shown as ethically tainted, with their deeds influenced more by political calculation than by moral rectitude. Martha Nussbaum's ethical critique, which contends that literature should foster moral thought rather than uphold strict moral standards, is consistent with this emphasis on moral ambiguity. Asura and Ajaya force readers to consider difficult issues of justice, legitimacy, and historical truth by declining to provide definitive moral answers.

5. Subaltern Voices: Karna, Eklavya, and Bhadra :

The suffering of subaltern characters in both texts highlights the cruelty ingrained in epic structures. While Karna and Eklavya in Ajaya reflect the cruelty of caste-based exclusion, Bhadra in Asura represents the typical Asura whose life is defined by forces outside of his control. Because these actors are denied agency within the prevailing epic narrative and are only remembered through the prism of failure or moral inadequacy, Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern is especially pertinent in this context.

Neelakantan breaks the silence placed on these figures by canonical tradition by giving them narrative voice again. Critics have questioned whether the subaltern may ever properly "speak" within prevailing literary frameworks, pointing out that such narrative recovery is still controlled by the author's point of view.

6. Scholarly Context and Critical Reception :

Asura and Ajaya have received mixed but noteworthy criticism. Neelakantan's bravery in questioning sacred stories and allowing mythology to be discussed ethically is praised by many academics. Others warn against oversimplifying intricate epic traditions or substituting one moral absolutism for another. However, it is widely acknowledged that these texts are essential to the revival of mythological discourse in Indian English literature.

Asura and Ajaya are frequently read alongside works by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Devdutt Pattanaik, and Githa Hariharan in comparative literary studies since they all use similar revisionist techniques. Neelakantan's unique contribution is his persistent attention to opposing viewpoints and his examination of the ways in which power affects moral memory.

Comparing *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* and *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* reveals a cogent literary endeavor focused on revealing the ideological underpinnings of myth and tearing down epic moral hierarchies. Both books undermine the authority of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as sources of unquestionable moral truth through narrative inversion, thematic emphasis on othering, and persistent moral ambiguity. Together, they show how mythology can be reinterpreted as a vibrant literary arena for challenging identity, justice, and power, confirming the significance of epic stories in today's ethical and cultural discussions.

Conclusion

Ajaya: Roll of the Dice and *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* by Anand Neelakantan have been analyzed in this study as potent instances of revisionist mythological fiction that challenge the ideological underpinnings of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Neelakantan exposes the mechanisms by which identity, power, and legitimacy are created within legendary narratives and challenges the moral absolutism typically connected to these epics by elevating marginalized and demonized viewpoints. Both works demonstrate how narrative authority and historical dominance construct moral categories itself, rather than just flipping the roles of heroes and villains.

This study has shown that Neelakantan's retellings serve as counter-narratives that contest the cultural memory upheld by epic tradition through a thematic investigation of othering, caste hierarchy, and heavenly sanction. Long depicted as symbols of evil, the Asuras and the Kauravas turn out to be morally nuanced individuals whose exclusion is crucial to the establishment of hegemonic authority. As endorsed by divine or elite authority, the books reveal how dharma functions more as an ideological tool that legitimizes violence, exclusion, and social injustice than as a universal moral standard.

Neelakantan's consistent focus on moral ambiguity is further revealed by the study, especially in relation to characters like Ravana, Duryodhana, Karna, Eklavya, and Draupadi. Their stories challenge readers to face the unsettling fact that justice in epic tradition frequently depends more on perception than on principle, shattering binary ethical systems. *Asura* and *Ajaya* support feminist, subaltern, and postcolonial critiques that aim to reclaim silenced voices and challenge prevailing ideologies by challenging heroic holiness and heavenly infallibility.

In the end, this research paper contends that Neelakantan's mythical alterations aim to rehumanize the epics rather than desecrate them. These books reinforce the value of ancient stories in tackling modern issues of power, identity, and social justice by redefining mythology as a site of ethical investigation and ideological discussion. *Asura* and *Ajaya*'s critique of the demonization of the "Other" challenges readers to reevaluate not only the ethical underpinnings of myth but also the stories that societies use to commemorate, defend, and uphold inequity.

These reinterpretations highlight literature's timeless ability to challenge conventional wisdom and create avenues for a more inclusive and critical view of culture.

Ajaya: Roll of the Dice and *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* both make significant contributions to the larger tradition of Indian English revisionist mythology, even beyond their direct narrative interventions. These works appear at a time when issues of representation, power, and moral responsibility are influencing literary interpretations of myth more and more. This change is facilitated by Neelakantan's retellings, which reject epic stories as unchanging moral precepts. They are instead portrayed as culturally produced writings whose meanings have been molded, passed down, and perpetuated by those in positions

of power. By doing thus, the books emphasize the idea that mythology, like history, is not morally neutral but rather intricately linked to the development of ideologies.

This study makes a substantial contribution by examining narrative authority as a location of power. Conventional epic narratives give preference to voices that are heavenly or triumphant, giving them the power to define right and wrong. By decentralizing heroic infallibility and divine omniscience, Neelakantan upends this system. Traditionally seen as representations of moral perfection, characters like Rama and Krishna are portrayed as politically aware individuals. Even if they were successful in winning the battle, their actions pose moral concerns when considered from the viewpoint of those who are affected. The study's main contention—that morality in epic tradition is dependent on narrative positioning rather than being absolute—is emphasized by this narrative reframing.

Furthermore, the novels' ideological critique is reinforced by Neelakantan's handling of caste and social order. Karna and Eklavya's experiences in Ajaya serve as an example of how institutionalized exclusion functions in the name of dharma. Eklavya's forced self-mutilation and Karna's prolonged quest for acceptance highlight the brutality that results from a social structure that links moral value to birth. These episodes show how caste serves as an imperceptible yet potent predictor of legitimacy, challenging the traditional epic justification of inequity. Neelakantan's narrative is in line with subaltern historiography, which aims to restore voices that have been silenced by prevailing cultural discourse, by emphasizing such individuals.

By giving epic antagonists a human face, Neelakantan's writings challenge readers to reevaluate how mythology influences societal ethics. Asura and Ajaya promote ethical contemplation and intellectual pain rather than dictating moral certainty. They force readers to consider the notion that violence and righteousness can coexist, that divinity might act in a way that serves political ends, and that victory is frequently valued over justice in historical memory. Because of these realizations, mythology becomes a dynamic discourse that can adapt to changing social circumstances.

In the end, this study confirms the timeless value of literary reinterpretation in questioning cultural norms. Neelakantan's stories reveal the fallibility of moral dichotomies and the function of narrative in legitimizing authority by demolishing the demonization of the "Other." Asura and Ajaya show how literature has the rare capacity to reexamine inherited narratives with empathy, skepticism, and ethical responsibility—not to eradicate them. By doing thus, these writings pave the way for a more critical, dialogic, and inclusive approach to mythology—one that recognizes pain, challenges authority, and brings humanity back from the periphery of epic tradition.

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