

FROM ITIHASA TO INTERVENTION: ADAPTIVE REVISIONS OF RAMAYANA

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ABSTRACT

"History is written by the victors." Winston Churchill, in this quote, emphasized how history is the product of Victor's interpretation. This can be applied to all kinds of narratives, whether history or myth. The dominant always plays a major role while narrating any event. The vanquished are never provided with any voice. Even if some author presents the vanquished voice, it becomes pertinent to understand whether it justifies their voice or not. Also, how the victor's voice superseded the vanquished's voice in the given text. But what happens if a space is provided to the voice of the vanquished? Does the post-modern era cherish that space? This paper will analyse Anand Neelakantan's *Asura* and *Valmiki's women* by applying Linda Hutcheon's idea of adaptation as both a product and a process of creative repetition. These works retell India's great epics by shifting the focus from well-known heroes to figures often ignored or silenced, such as Ravana, and the women in the stories. Through this paper, the researcher would highlight how these revised adaptations reshape cultural memory and break down the division between good and evil.

Key Words: *Adaptation, Ramayana, Linda Hutcheon, Cultural Memory, Vanquished Voices, Retellings*

INTRODUCTION

Ramayana and *Mahabharata*, being the major sources for Indian authors, provide a vast space for the narratives of victors and vanquished. Mythological fiction as a theme is a pathway that brings forth this enormous space of narratives in contemporary Indian English fiction. Intermingling fictional elements with mythic elements provides authors with a space to represent a mythical character in myriad forms. The representation of the various characters shows how society is changing. Myth fulfills an indispensable function in primitive culture: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces practical rules for the guidance of man (Bronislaw Malinowski 101).

The social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski suggested that for him myth was neither explanatory nor etiological, to emphasise the social value of myth. Myth, he argued, is not symbolic but a direct statement of its subject matter, not an explanation in terms of satisfaction or of profound religious desires, moral longings, social subjections, assertions or even practical needs. Hence, he is reflecting on the point of how myth is not just a mere symbol, but rather it shapes and provides a way of living to people. Indian writers continue to experiment with myths by refashioning the meanings and perspectives of their legendary characters. Refashioning as a postmodern technique has been developed and used frequently in literature and other genres of art.

"Whenever I use the term retelling as an equivalent of rewriting, I mean a precise, detailed, deliberate, and ideologically driven retelling of formerly written narratives" (Christian Moraru 17).

Whenever an author is trying to revisit former narratives, they add some elements, experiment with characterization, modernize the theme, etc. A lot of Indian authors are refashioning and creating new texts. Authors such as Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, Aditya Iyengar, and Anand Neelakantan brought new avatars of mythological characters, and their portrayals bear relevance to contemporary Indian Society. Amish Tripathi

has provided a humanized version of god. Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy revolves around the philosophical question, i.e., "What is Evil?" His god, i.e., Shiva, smokes and swears a lot. Author tend to relate the character not to humans but to 'modern man'. Another author is Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni who has told *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* from a female perspective in her novels, '*The Forest of Enchantments*' and '*The Palace of Illusions*' respectively. She has presented the voice of other female characters from these myths, pertinently asking questions about women's position in contemporary society. A similar concern with recovering neglected women's voices is evident in Kavita Kane's retellings. In *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* centers around the voices of lesser-known female characters and raises questions about how the silenced female characters do not get a space of their own. Aditya Iyengar adopts a different approach to mythological retellings. In his novels, *The Thirteenth Day*, *Palace of Assassins*, *The Conqueror*, and *Bhumika*, put the pain and suffering of mythical characters without considering them as supernatural beings but rather as humans. Hardas Ranabhai Galchar, in his thesis, *Rewriting History through Mythological Characters in the Novels of Amish Tripathi*, has studied how all mythical characters are rewritten and how the philosophical concepts are explained to relate to contemporary society. Also, it is an attempt to understand how the author, i.e., Amish Tripathi, experimented with Indian Myths.

Several researchers have worked on these contemporary writers, trying to understand the mythic elements, representation of the female characters, contemporary elements in the text, and space provided to the other. But there is a gap in the study when it comes to the deconstructive reading of the vanquished. The question arises with Anand Neelkantan's *Asura* and *Ajaya*, where we are just not providing the space to one of the biggest villains in mythology, but also changing the narratives. It raises a valid question of whether this reversal of roles in the narrative, where not victors but losers are providing us the narrative, opens areas for the other voice. Are readers accepting these narratives? How does refashioning the meaning of a mythical character reflect contemporary society? How do contemporary situations provide a platform for such narratives? How does this revisionism impact the ethical and moral values of society?

'Adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a double process of interpreting and then creating something new.' (Linda Hutcheon 20)

Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation provides a framework for understanding this phenomenon. She discussed adaptation as "repetition without replication" and how these repetitions are creative reinterpretations influenced by new cultural, ideological, and historical contexts. In her view, adaptation constitutes both a product and a process. The new modern mythological retellings can be studied as a part of the cultural process and should not be interpreted as mere reproductions. In this paper, Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* and *Valmiki's Women* are discussed. These books challenge the epic's moral ideas by showing characters as outsiders or antagonists. It has resulted in questioning the authority of traditional stories and blurs the line between good and evil. Although Neelakantan writes in a narrative style, his works remain aware of the *Ramayana*'s oral and performative tradition which connects readers who already know the cultural background of the epic.

Adaptations, as Hutcheon reminds us, are always shaped by "who adapts, why, and for whom." The ideological shift has emphasized the ethical ambiguity that is told through contemporary mythological retellings. The retellings point out the change in inherited value systems and creates interpretive spaces for marginalized perspectives. Thus, functioning as cultural critique. Hutcheon's *Theory of Adaptation* (2010) provides a useful lens for reading texts like *Asura* and *Valmiki's Women*. Her framework positions the work as dialogical interventions that compare the politics of representation embedded in the *Ramayana*. And also, dramatize the act of retelling as

a form of resistance.

The *Ramayana* and the Politics of Narrative Authority

The *Ramayana* has traditionally been read as a moral epic that upholds dharma through the figure of Ram, an exemplary king and son. In these tellings, Ravan serves as the moral opposite of Ram and a symbol of adharmā. His knowledge, devotion, and political abilities receive comparatively little attention. Within these retellings, the women in the epic- Sita, Surpanakha, Mandodari- are largely confined to roles shaped by patriarchal expectations. Their emotional lives and decision-making remain largely unexplored. As a result, these representations offer an approach to the dominant narrative in which the victor's voice becomes representative of moral certainty. Ravana's fall is celebrated as cosmic justice while women's suffering is treated as an inevitable outcome of heroic ideals. Rather than accepting the epic's ethical framework as self-evident, postmodern retellings expose its historical and ideological foundations. They raise questions about whether righteousness is universal or context-dependent, whether heroic identity necessitates the silencing of others, and whether binary moral frameworks can sustain complexity. The *Ramayana* thus becomes a text that invites multiple readings rather than demanding a single authoritative interpretation.

Asura: Tale of the Vanquished

Asura: Tale of the vanquished is the debut novel of the author, wherein he attempted to reverse the roles of Ravana and Ram. Ravana is not presented as evil. Ram, being an ideal husband, brother, son, fair king, and supreme being, is the protagonist, and Ravana, the chief antagonist of the epic, is considered evil, multi-headed, aggressive, etc. Their characters create binaries. One represents 'the presence,' and another represents 'the lack. At the same time, Ravana is considered a god in some countries. He is an educated Brahmin with knowledge of Vedas and Upanishads and a great devotee of Shiva. As represented in the novel the point of view of Ravana is shown and it makes us wonder about that side of the story. The work comes beyond the binaries. A different meaning is produced when one looks from this perspective. There will be an attempt to understand the discourse of the other's voice. It is prevalent to silence the alternative voice present in a text. But, here the author has made an attempt to help the audience listen to the voices of not only the antagonist of the epic but also the voice of the marginalised. Bhadra's narrative runs parallel to the narrative of Ravana. The marginalised are doubly oppressed, and they are only considered to be commodities used by the main characters of the stories. The term 'Asura' impacts their life in such a way that their self-representation is neglected in narratives. Narration of Bhadra helps to comprehend the life of marginalized in the society. The story is deviated from the traditional telling of the *Ramayana*. Therefore, the story becomes an example of adaptation as a process of cultural negotiation rather than mere retelling. The novel not only offers a counter-narrative to the canonical text but also explores themes such as political power, patriarchy, and caste issues. It highlights modern issues through different type of power struggles. Ravana's belief in dictatorship made him oppose the democratic council in the Asura Kingdom. He believed society needs a strong leader for development. He build a society unaware that he is also exploiting the lower class people.

Valmiki's Women

Valmiki's Women is another novel by Anand Neelakantan. The novel retells the story of female characters. He highlights the experiences of those who are often not provided a space to portray their narrative. He reimagines figures such as Sita, Surpanakha, Mandodari, and Ahalya as complex individuals possessing desires, fears, and agency. A lot of writers provided space to the women at the center. But, the women at the periphery are silenced. The women who stand

against the stated rules of being an ideal woman are looked upon with contempt and evil. 'Naari dharma' becomes the factor to decide whether a woman's voice should be heard or not. Women who exist outside the sphere of the epic's principal have received comparatively little critical attention. The novel addresses that absence by bringing characters like Shanta, Manthara, Tataka, and Meenakshi from Ramanya. Hence, the novel becomes the space of strong-willed women rather than a minor character ruled by societal norms. They no longer remain peripheral characters. The question is the dominant voice of the traditional narrative. Also, how the narration has given these strong-willed women a platform to express themselves would be analyzed. To interpret the author's discourse, it is essential to examine the peripheral characters. The space is not just a platform for evil's voice but for women's voices that are not heard amongst the dominant voice. The counter-narrative will be revisited, focusing on the themes, motifs, and symbols used in the text. By telling the epic from women's points of view, the novel changes how the story is remembered and questions the original story's values.

Adaptation as Cultural Memory and Intervention

These retellings of Asura and Valmiki's Women by Neelakantan function as interventions in cultural memory. Adaptations play a key role in the process of reshaping the cultural memory. The adaptations has done the same while reshaping the meanings of traditional narrative. However, Neelakantan's works do not seem to replace the canonical text. It rather creates a counter meaning that acts as a dialogical relationship between the traditional text and adaptation. This co-existence is consistent with Hutcheon's assertion that adaptations are inherently relational and derive meaning through their interaction with canonical text. These adaptations encourage audiences to re-evaluate the epics. When the distinctions between protagonist and antagonist, virtue and vice blur it results in expressing contemporary concerns with plurality, empathy and social justice. Another central characteristic of these adaptations is their resistance to binary oppositions. We observe a clear distinction between good and evil to reinforce moral authority in the traditional narratives. But, Neelakanatan's adaptations embrace the ambiguity. For example, Ravana's life from birth to his death is narrated to acknowledge his understanding of power, society, discrimination on the basis of caste and class; also, Bhadra's narrative helps to understand a common Asura view of society. In Valmiki's women, the narrative shifts from moral judgment to the exploration of the emotional and ethical complexity of the characters. These narratives provide a platform for reinterpretation that encourages readers to engage with the mythological tradition.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary adaptations reveal how myth, memory, and ideology remain deeply entangled. Novels like Asura and Valmiki's Women suggest that adaptation is both a product and a process that creates new stories while rethinking the earlier ones. These retellings do not simply oppose the *Ramayana*. They engage it critically and inquire into the authority of the canonical text and intervene in its rigid moral binaries. The voice of marginalized or defeated characters highlights the need for inclusive narratives honoring the richness and complexity of human experience. The works acknowledge the complexity of ethical considerations. Therefore, these adaptations do not question the significance of the *Ramayana*; rather, revitalize the epic and sustain its relevance within a pluralistic and reflective society.

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