Structural and Narratological Nuances in Anand Neelakantan's Asura: Tale of the Vanquished

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ABSTRACT

Anand Neelakantan, known for his mythological fiction and screenplays for mythology-based TV shows, authored the novel Asura: Tale of the Vanquished, which draws on the Ramayana. True to his style of writing from the perspective of the vanquished, this novel offers Ravana's viewpoint, aiming to rectify his legacy. The novel opens with Ravana on the battlefield, reflecting on his life as he nears death, while another narrative thread is provided by Bhadra, a servant of Ravana. The paper looks at the narrative and structural dimensions with post modern outlook by beginning to look at the battle from the perspective of the vanquished.

Keywords: Mythological Fiction, Narratology, And Asura: Tale of the Vanquished, Anand Neelakantan.

In the Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory*, Matthew Garrett defines narrative theory as "the theory of how stories work and how we make them work" (I). Telling stories is a fundamental human urge. Narratives present events and other elements of the world in a structured format. Narratologists examine the frameworks of narratives because narratology views fictional narratives as having formal and systematic structures. Rather than focusing on individual stories, this theory highlights the study of the common elements that appear across all narratives. Paul Cobley, in his book *Narrative*, elaborates on this idea:

Wherever there are humans there appear to be narratives. It is true that people tellstories about life history (Gee 1991) and about their psyches (Schafer 1983; Spence 1987) ... Pronouncing that certain event in the world of humanexperience 'make a good story' invariably carries with it the contention that thoseevents can be reduced to a few crude principles, that stories are very 'basic' waysof thinking about the world. (2)

The central concept of narrative is that it represents a progression from point A to point B, from start to finish. This transition between the two points constitutes the narrative, with the space in between being shaped by the delays and developments that occur as the story unfolds. Roland Barthes, in his work S/Z (1974), outlines five types of codes that guide this narrative journey: the hermeneutic code, which refers to elements that require further explanation; the proairetic code, which involves elements that build suspense and reader interest; the semantic code, which pertains to parts of the story with additional meanings; the symbolic code, which conveys broader and deeper significances; and the cultural code, which includes elements based on commonly shared knowledge and accepted truths. The combination of the hermeneutic and proairetic codes generates tension and intrigue in the narrative. Peter Brooks describes the delays in the narrative, achieved through suspense, as detours.Narratives can include both mimetic and diegetic elements. Mimetic parts involve direct speech, while diegetic parts consist of summaries of events. Peter Barry explains these terms as follows:

'Mimesis' is 'slow telling', in which what is done and said is 'staged' for thereader, creating the illusion that we are 'seeing' and 'hearing' things forourselves. By contrast, 'diegesis' means 'telling' or 'relating'. The parts of anarrative which are presented in this way are given in a more 'rapid' or'panoramic' or 'summarising' way. The aim is to give us essential or linkinginformation as efficiently as possible, without trying to create the illusion that theevents are taking place before our eyes. (223)

Anand Neelakantan, born in 1973 in Kerala, completed his engineering degree at Government Engineering College, Trichur, Kerala. In addition to being a novelist, he is also a cartoonist and TV screenwriter. He began his novel-writing career in 2012 with his debut work, Asura: Tale of the Vanquished. Neelakantan's novels offer a reinterpretation of well-known Indian myths from the viewpoint of the defeated characters. His Ajaya series reimagines the Mahabharata, and he has authored five novels related to the Ramayana, including his debut novel. His Baahubali series serves as a prequel to the

renowned Indian film of the same name. He has also written screenplays for popular mythology-based TV shows like Siya Ke Ram and Sankatmochan Mahabali Hanuman, as well as for the historical TV program Chakravartin Ashoka Samrat.

Asura: Tale of the Vanquished immerses readers in the world of Ravana and his people. The story begins with Ravana on the battlefield, nearing his end, and reflecting on his entire life. Alternating with Ravana's perspective is that of Bhadra, a servant of Ravana. Ravana's narrative traces back to his childhood, recounting his journey with his siblings to overcome their hardships. They find themselves in the ruins of Asura king Mahabali's court, where Ravana learns both martial skills and religious teachings. Distressed by the decline of the Asuras, who were once prosperous, Ravana starts to assemble an Asura army and unite the commanders of the Asura tribe. He aims to reclaim the ancient Asura kingdom of Lanka from Kubera, his half-brother. Amidst these efforts, Ravana becomes intrigued by Bhadra's enigmatic behavior, eventually seeking his advice in private. Although Ravana suspects Bhadra of being a spy, he is impressed by his intelligence. Bhadra's story unfolds alongside Ravana's, with certain scenes presented from both their perspectives, enhancing the richness of the narrative.

The inclusion of direct speech in the narrative slows down the pace, making it more realistic, engaging, and believable. This method helps maintain a steady rhythm throughout the text, ensuring a smooth reading experience. In Asura, Bhadra's narrative features fewer mimetic elements compared to Ravana's. When a story shifts to earlier events, it is referred to as a flashback, while a shift to future events is known as a flash forward.

Sometimes the story will 'flash back' to relate an event which happened in thepast, and such parts of the narrative can be called 'analeptic' (from 'analepsis',which literally means a 'back-take'). Likewise, the narrative may 'flash forward'to narrate, or refer to, or anticipate an event which happens late: such parts of thenarrative can be called 'proleptic' (from 'prolepsis', which literally means a 'fore-take'). (226)

In Asura, Ravana's narrative unfolds as a flashback, starting from his deathbed. As he nears the end, his entire life, from childhood to his final moments, plays out in a torrent of memories.In a dual narrative approach, the perspective typically shifts between two narrators in alternating chapters, providing insight into what each character knows or does not know. While dual narratives often involve two distinct characters presenting their viewpoints, a single narrator can also use this technique by recounting events from different stages of their life, such as youth and old age. This method enhances the reader's understanding of the characters and events and adds suspense, keeping the reader engaged. Alternating narratives can create the sensation of reading two different books or exploring various facets of the same story.

Asura by Anand Neelakantan employs a dual narrative format, featuring the perspectives of Ravana, the antagonist of The Ramayana, and Bhadra, his less trusted ally. The novel is structured into sixty-five chapters. After the initial five chapters narrated by Ravana and the final five by Bhadra, the remaining chapters go between the two narrators. Chapters fourteen and twenty-six are unique as they are shared by both speakers. Each chapter is distinctly titled, and the narrator is specified at the beginning to prevent confusion. Notably, the novel starts with a chapter titled "The End" and concludes with "The Beginning," echoing themes found in Paul Cobley's book Narrative (2001).Anand Neelakantan skillfully makes each narrator's perspective equally compelling in Asura, making it difficult for readers to favor one narrative over the other. This balance keeps readers engaged with the storyline from start to finish. Initially, the two narrators provide separate accounts, but their narratives intertwine when Bhadra joins Ravana's army, allowing each perspective to illuminate the other. Before their stories merge, the novel feels like two distinct books. The integration of their narratives is so seamless that it feels natural rather than forced.

Throughout the novel, both narrators age as the story progresses—Ravana from childhood to old age and death, and Bhadra from early married life to old age. Their physical changes over time are portrayed convincingly. Each narrative's breaks highlight crucial story points, and the narrators reveal themes, foreshadow events, and leave subtle clues to engage readers.The novel's chapters are short, creating a suspenseful, page-turning experience. The narrator's name at the start of each chapter clarifies the shift between perspectives, while differences in setting and voice further distinguish their stories. Neelakantan contrasts a king with a servant, an aristocrat with a commoner, and a dictator with the oppressed. This juxtaposition makes their narratives distinct: Ravana's is rich with poetic language, whereas Bhadra's is more straightforward and less elaborate.

Despite their differences, both narrators share similarities. At the start, they are united in their mission for revenge against the Devas and belong to the same Asura race. Both are ruthless in achieving their goals. The novel explores how different

actions impact them uniquely, effectively utilizing the parallel narrative technique.Some narratives focus on the moment of death, presenting various perspectives on the dying process without exploring an afterlife. Asura by Anand Neelakantan features such a narrative, culminating in Ravana's death. The noveland Ravana's storybegins with the moment of his passing, setting the stage for this narrative approach.

Tomorrow is my funeral. I do not know if they will bury me like a mangy dog orwhether I will get a funeral fit for an Emperor – an erstwhile Emperor. But it doesnot really matter. I can hear the scuffing sounds made by the jackals. They arebusy eating my friends and family. Something scurried over my feet. What wasthat? I haven't got the strength to raise my head. Bandicoots. Big, dark, hairy rats.They conquer the battle fields after foolish men have finished their business ofkilling each other. (Asura 9)

Ravana seems concerned that readers might overlook his status as a narrator on the brink of death. To address this, he frequently reminds us of his dire situation with comments like, "Ah, history... it would always be different for different people and take its own course. Perhaps, nothing matters finally. On this battlefield where I lie bleeding to death, I assume I have created a great chapter in history; lived a hero's life; and died a villain's death; or vice versa" (Asura 142). He wants readers to understand the difficulty of narrating his story while suffering severe wounds, facing imminent death, and being exposed to wild beasts. This is evident in his reflection: "But I am digressing. The jackals have left me alone for now. Why do they not eat my feverish brain and put an end to this? There's so much I have to remember. Oh Shiva, please call me to your abode. That is, if you actually exist. I will soon know. But the images keep coming to me, so many of them" (Asura 270).

In Asura: Tale of the Vanquished, Anand Neelakantan not only seeks to enhance Ravana's image but also highlights the issue of caste discrimination in his society. Casteism is a central theme in the novel, which features two main caste groups: the higher-caste Devas and Brahmins, and the lower-caste Asuras. The novel suggests that skin color was an early method for determining caste. Brahmins are depicted as upholding Deva ideology. Throughout the text, there is a continual comparison between the cultures of these two caste groups.

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In Asura, the Devas or Gods are portrayed with human characteristics, and their divine nature is presented with a degree of ambiguity. According to the novel, the Hindu Trinity—Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma—were originally the leading figures of their respective clans. They only became objects of worship after their deaths. The Asuras began to revere Shiva, though their worship was simpler and less ritualistic compared to the elaborate rites performed by the Brahmins. The Asuras worshipped Shiva in various roles, such as a father, brother, or son, and in some places, they worshipped him symbolically as a phallic symbol representing fertility. Initially, the Vishnu clan served as advisors to the Devas of the Indra clan, but later, one of them established himself as both a king and a deity.

 The Brahma clan was known for preserving knowledge, with various artists and scientists from this clan serving both Devas and Asuras. Similarly, Yama is portrayed as the lord of drugs, while Indra, who was once a leader of robbers, later became a king by defeating the Asura civilization. Indra is depicted as a ruthless figure who led a band of robbers, earning the title 'Purendra,' which means 'slayer of cities.'

His group was notorious for their brutality, including murder, gang rape of women of all ages, burning children alive, and looting granaries. The novel's depiction of the Devas' attack on Bhadra's village, including their cruelty towards children and women, challenges the traditional, revered image of both the Devas and the Asuras.

After Mahabali and Brahma introduced Ravana to the Vedas and Upanishads, Ravana realized that his earlier rejection of these texts was misguided. He discovered that they were universal sacred writings, though the Brahmins had corrupted them with their own interpretations. This theme reappears toward the end of the novel when Shambuka is taught the Vedas by his Guru, reflecting the ongoing imposition of Deva ideology under the guise of these sacred texts. Bhadra comments:

As an Asura, I had been taught to hate all that was considered holy by Devas.Shmbuka said that his Guru had taught him the real meaning of the Vedas andthey were not the monopoly of any single caste or profession. They were acollection of the thoughts of poets who had lived thousands of years ago, whocame from varied professions, such as fishermen, priests, woodcutters, potters,hunters and many more. It was only later that selfish men appropriated the Vedasfor their own means and used them as a convenient tool to beat others with.(Asura 478)

The novel also explores themes of political power, patriarchy, and the ongoing struggle for religious dominance, in addition to addressing casteism. It raises significant contemporary issues through various forms of hegemonic conflicts. Prior to Ravana, Asura kings favored a democratic approach, but Ravana viewed this method as a weakness, believing that Asuras required a strong leader to command and guide them. Ravana frequently reflects on the ideal way to govern the Asuras, consistently concluding that dictatorship is the solution. Although his advisors recommend maintaining the democratic council for state affairs, Ravana dismisses it to assert his dominance over the Asuras. The novelist tries to deconstruct and then reconstruct the dimensions of epic and myth by bringing forth the justifications nailed by the victim who was supposed to be the victor in vain. Through a intense and concise retelling and detailing of the battle and the order of events the novel achieves completeness for the select work offers views and reflections through the other side of the coin. All these time, Ravana has been hailed and understood as someone who usurped the king Rama and his kingdom by abducting his wife. Nowhere in the epic originally written stands chance for Ravana to justify his stand. The novel gives a counter narrative to the series of events beginning with the battle and ending with completing the incomplete story let loose by Valmiki.

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